

# **A Long Way to Peace:**

## *Identities, Genocide, and State Preservation in Burma, 1948-2016*

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Following independence in 1948, the Burmese state has fought continuous wars against ethno-religious minorities living on the periphery. The following paper analyzes these conflicts through the lens of prospect theory. According to this perspective, regimes are highly sensitive to relative losses and may employ genocidal policies as a means of state-preservation. Our framework applies this theory to three sub-national cases of genocide perpetrated against the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya ethno-religious groups. Specifically, this study examines how the decentralized nature of the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Armed Forces) resulted in a variety of sub-national tactics employed by regional commanders against the aforementioned minority groups. Through qualitative case analysis, this paper unpacks multifaceted processes of violence perpetrated against civilians and non-combatants in Burma. Based on our findings, this paper argues that the *Tatmadaw* engaged in genocidal policies, including forced displacement and labor, slash-and-burn tactics, ethno-religious co-optation, and political killings as an instrumental means of preserving the state. We also conclude that these genocides were not a result of pre-planned, systematic extermination attempts on behalf of the state, but emerged as a function of the ongoing civil war and corresponding secessionist movements. This study contributes to the growing body of literature within genocide studies by linking macro-level theory to sub-national case studies.

Keywords: Burma, Myanmar, Genocide, *Tatmadaw*, Ethnic Conflict, Karen, Rohingya, Kachin, Ethnic Cleansing, Political Violence

### **1. Introduction**

On the morning of October 23, 2012, thousands of Arakanese ad-hoc “militia” men wielding small arms and homemade Molotov cocktails, launched a coordinated attack on Muslim communities across Arakan State.<sup>3</sup> For nearly 11 hours, Arakanese mobs, supported by local police and army personnel, disarmed Rohingya Muslims, looted and burned houses, beat and macheted entire families, including children under the age of five, and proceeded to enact

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<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, “All You Can Do is Pray”: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State,” (United States of America: Human Rights Watch, April 2013), 7.

vigilante “justice” throughout the province.<sup>4</sup> These acts, though instigated by local political entrepreneurs, are but a piece of the Burmese State’s genocidal policies directed toward sub-national ethno-religious groups like the Rohingya, which pose an existential threat to Burmese culture or directly to the *Tatmadaw*’s (Burmese Armed Forces) reign.

Genocide and genocidal policies in Burma are not the product of a master plan developed in the corridors of Naypyidaw decades ago. They have been contingent upon the variable strength of domestic opposition. Over the years, several prominent ethno-religious minorities have exerted varying degrees of civil and militaristic stances against the Burmese regime. In response, the *Tatmadaw*, has engaged in a long campaign of genocidal policies that stiffens or weakens depending on the level of threat posed by these oppositional forces in a given year. In this sense, Burma’s genocides have been functions of its politics and not from intentionalist actions, meaning policies enacted for the purpose of murder, but rather policies enacted to suppress, coerce, and subdue rival forces. Mass murder and political violence are instrumental to preserving the Burmese state and its regime’s control over her subjects.

Within the interdisciplinary field of genocide studies, few scholars focus on peripheral cases. Most of our theoretical explanations for understanding why and how genocides occur, have originated from studies of the Holocaust, Armenian and Rwandan genocides.<sup>5</sup> This triad represents, by far, the most “popular” cases to study and has been the breeding ground of theories for decades. All three are cases with extreme violence, large body counts, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, widespread social support for killing, and involve the state as primary perpetrator. However, the uniqueness of our study, resides in our application of theories developed to explain the Holocaust, Armenian and Rwandan genocides to lesser known episodes in Burma. We offer two explicit methodological and investigative reasons for this case selection. First, using Burma, allows us to qualitatively examine macro-level theories of genocide, developed to explain large-scale, systematic campaigns of mass slaughter in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa to Southeast Asia. Can these theories stand the test of time and geographic substitution? Burma is a hard test case for such theories, as it resides on the periphery of genocide studies. Second, in addition to providing a hard test to existing theories, by exploring genocidal violence against three sub-national populations, the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya, this study unpacks domestic country level variables to observe variations in genocidal acts perpetrated by the government. By surpassing country level analysis, we uncover variations in how the *Tatmadaw*’s perception of threat differs by group, which in turn shapes the strength of genocidal policies enacted. Together, these two features allow us to develop a more nuanced approach to the study of genocide, which can further refine our theoretical insights at a macro-level.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Laban Hinton, Thomas La Pointe, and Douglas Irvin-Erickson, *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 6.

What follows next is a discussion of genocide and problems of political and legal conceptualization. Section three reviews the logic of genocide with an analysis of precipitating factors. In section four, we unveil our theory of state preservation as the driving force of genocide's onset and magnitude, which is followed by the case studies of the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya populations. Finally, section six provides the reader with concluding remarks on the process of violence, the role of the state, and our thoughts on implications for theory building moving forward.

## 2. Genocide: A Conceptual Problem

This study is primarily concerned with a distinct kind of conflict: genocide as public policy. A crime, perhaps, so unfathomable, that its official etiology extends mere decade's into our past. Drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter, referred to as, Genocide Convention) was adopted by the United Nations in 1948.<sup>6</sup> The Convention sets forth, in our view, a minimalist definition, which reflects the era of its conception. It is important to remember, international laws, treaties, and conventions, particularly of wide ranging magnitudes, are products of their social-political environment. In this case, the Genocide Convention was an artifact of much debate between democratic and non-democratic states, of which many of whom previously engaged in campaigns of mass slaughter (e.g., Joseph Stalin's political purges and mass deportations of eight national groups from the Caucus region before the Second World War<sup>7</sup>).

Significantly, however, Article 2 of the Genocide Convention bestows protection against this crime to four social groups: ethnic, racial, religious, and national groups who confront the following:

- a. "Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group;"<sup>8</sup>

The Genocide Convention's single greatest achievement was the codification of such crimes into international law and the recognition that the international community, at least in spirit if not action, would work to *prevent* and *punish* systematic attempts to exterminate a population that are based solely on its communal characteristics. Despite this substantial

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<sup>6</sup> The General Assembly adopted Resolution 260(III) A on December 9, 1948, and after obtaining the requisite twenty ratifications by member states, the Convention entered into force on January 12, 1951. "Audiovisual Library of International Law," retrieved January 30, 2017, <http://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cppcg/cppcg.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (Mishawaka, IN: The Macmillan Company, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948,) Article 2, 1.

improvement to international law there remains significant drawbacks to the Genocide Convention. We focus our attention on two specific limitations.

First, though drafted in response to the Holocaust, not all social groups who faced mass murder at the hands of Nazi perpetrators were selected for protection under the Convention. Noticeably absent, were the mentally and physically impaired, of which nearly 275,000 people faced extermination at the hands of Nazi “doctors.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to the impaired, groups facing mass murder on the basis of sexual orientation were barred from inclusion, a particularly tragic restriction, given about five to seven thousand homosexuals perished during the war, with roughly half in concentration camps.<sup>10</sup> Finally, for reasons elucidated above, groups targeted on the basis of political affiliation were stricken from the final draft. Limiting protection to only ethnic, racial, religious, and national groups has led to heaps of university professors earning tenure on the basis of coining their own substitutive term for genocide (e.g., mass murder,<sup>11</sup> nuclear omnicide,<sup>12</sup> ethnic cleansing,<sup>13</sup> democide,<sup>14</sup> politicide,<sup>15</sup> mass political murder,<sup>16</sup> mass killing,<sup>17</sup> extreme violence and mass violence,<sup>18</sup> collective killing,<sup>19</sup> mass atrocity,<sup>20</sup> and mass categorical violence.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding dozens of alternative definitions of genocide provided throughout recent decades<sup>22</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> Nikolaus Wachsmann, *A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015) 204-258; Doris L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust, Second Edition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 128-133.

<sup>10</sup> Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 202-203.

<sup>11</sup> R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Jay Lifton and Erik Markusen, *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat*. (Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Rummel, *Death by Government*.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, “Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases Since 1945.” *International Studies Quarterly* 32:3, (1988) 359-371.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Yang Su, *Collective Killing in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Some describe a “mass atrocity” as 5,000 civilian deaths within a 12-month period (Bellamy) and others have lowered the threshold to 1,000 civilian deaths per year (Ulfelder and Valentino). Alex Bellamy, “Mass Atrocities and Armed Conflict: Links, Distinctions, and Implications for the Responsibility to Protect” Stanley Foundation, (2011), <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/resources.cfm?ID=445>. Jay Ulfelder and Benjamin Valentino, “Assessing the Risks of State-Sponsored Mass Killing” Political Instability Task Force, Washington, DC (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Adam Jones lists in chronological order 22 scholarly definitions of genocide provided by authors between 1959 and 2009. Adam Jones, *Genocide; A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Second, the Genocide Convention is unusually vague in defining the constitution of a “national group.” This confusion has led to the development of two distinctive legal understandings for this protected category (c.f. the Akayesu and Jelisić cases). The Akayesu Case of 1998, tried in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), defined a national group “...as a collection of people who are perceived to share a legal bond based on common citizenship, coupled with reciprocity of rights and duties.”<sup>23</sup> Under the ICTR judicial ruling, one could conceivably prosecute episodes of politicide that target individuals holding a common citizenship and belong to a particular political party, even though representatives to the Genocide Convention specifically removed this category. Thus, providing a potential backdoor to the Convention’s shortcomings.

Our second understanding of a “national group” emerged a year later in the Jelisić Case, tried in the ICTR’s sister court, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). This case defined “a national, ethnical, or racial group from the point of view of those persons who wish to single that group out from the rest of the community.”<sup>24</sup> This legal understanding is perhaps fuzzier in comparison to the former judicial decision, yet allows courts flexibility in hearing a variety of cases that *may* qualify as genocide under the Convention.

How we in the international and scholarly communities define genocide, and specifically its victims, (i.e., a national group) is specially apropos this study’s research into whether the *Tatmadaw*, Burmese Armed Forces, have engaged in genocide or genocidal policies against the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya ethno-religious-national groups. Defining the scope and conceptual boundaries of victim populations is vital to answering this question, and one which we believe falls squarely within the legal realm of the Genocide Convention.

### **3. The Logic of Genocide: Contributing Factors to Onset and Magnitude**

In this paper, we investigate three episodes of state-led genocide or genocidal policies enacted against three sub-national populations in Burma. Our framework draws from three research camps in political science and genocide studies—prospect theory, mass murder as strategy, and ethnic conflict—to form the basis of our theoretical framework. Each research agenda explains a key aspect of the logic employed by the *Tatmadaw* against these ethno-religious minorities. What follows is a brief summary of these three research agendas as they relate to this study.

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<sup>23</sup> International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, *The Prosecutor versus Jean-Paul Akayesu*, Case No. ICTR-96-4-T, (1998): 132.

<sup>24</sup> International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *The Prosecutor v. Goran Jelisić*. Case No. IT-95-10-T, (1999): 22.

### 3.1. Prospect Theory

Prospect theory originally evolved out of a dissatisfaction with existing explanations of decision making behavior, most prominent of these being expected-utility theory.<sup>25</sup> Expected-utility theory assumes individuals generally make decisions based on benefit-cost analyses, thus placing heavy weight on the assumption of economic rationality.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, because of an individual's preference for avoiding loss, people tend to be more sensitive to relative losses than the prospect of gain; therefore, the pain of losing X exceeds the pleasure of gaining Y. This calculation has come to be known as "loss aversion."<sup>27</sup> Consequently, when elites face domestic political or military opposition, the threat of loss at the hands of an ethno-religious sub-national population holds greater impact than any potential gains that may be won through cooperation with said group.<sup>28</sup> These negative effects of loss are particularly heightened when the domestic opposition stems from peripheral areas of the state to challenge the regime's dominance.

Since Jack Levy's formative application of prospect theory to international relations in the early 2000s, Manus Midlarsky and others, have conducted similar investigations into the theory's usefulness in explaining the Holocaust, Rwanda, Cambodia, and other geno-/politicides.<sup>29</sup> Midlarsky found the onset and magnitude of genocide was most pronounced when states feared a contraction in socio-economic space (territory plus economic hierarchy).<sup>30</sup> This fear of loss leads policymakers to perceive these acts as threats from a domestic audience, which generates a rally around the flag effect, in support of regime policies that target the opposition, including to the point of genocide.

Central to Midlarsky's theory is that small events, may snowball into larger events, which culminate in state-directed killing, based upon a perceived threat to regime preservation or the status quo. The tipping point in the process of violence often relies on the severity of elite perceptions of loss and their ability to minimize risks to their policy goals. Here, Midlarsky's application of prospect theory to the field of genocide studies has yielded substantial influence.

### 3.2. The "Strategic" Perspective

Similar to Midlarsky's application of prospect theory to extreme violence, Benjamin Valentino developed an alternative explanation of why senior political and military elites order genocide. The strategic approach, suggests leaders will order genocide "when they perceive it to

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk." *Econometrica* 47:2 (1979): 263-191.

<sup>26</sup> Milton Friedman and L.J. Savage, "The Utility Analysis of Choices Involving Risks" *Journal of Political Economy* 56 (1948): 279-304; Kenneth J. Arrow, *Essays in the Theory of Risk-Bearing* (Chicago: Markham, 1971).

<sup>27</sup> Jack Levy, "Loss Aversion, Framing Effects, and International Conflict: Perspectives from Prospect Theory" in Manus Midlarsky, eds. *Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Farnham, *Avoiding Loss / Taking Risks: Prospect Theory and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Midlarsky, *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

be both necessary and effective, not when it is actually so.”<sup>31</sup> This means, *if* leaders perceive a threat from a domestic population, they may order perpetrators to initiate genocidal violence against this opposing group, even if it is economically and physically costly, insofar as they can achieve their desired outcome through the use of violence.

Valentino and Midlarsky’s theories of genocide contradict the long standing rational choice doctrine in political science writ large, that is, undergirded with the assumption that individuals make decisions based on their calculation of the benefit-cost analysis. The elite decision-making structure is likely to choose genocidal policies when confronted with a political opportunity to achieve elite policy objectives.<sup>32</sup> When power is concentrated in the hands of few and decision-making elites ignore moral, legal and social constraints on the legitimate use of force, they are susceptible to perpetrating genocidal behavior, even if it diverts resources away from war fighting or other policy goals.

Perhaps, the most useful contribution of the strategic perspective, is that it allows theorists to understand why génocidaires employ systemic genocidal violence even when it is not within their immediate interests to do so. For example, Valentino’s theory allows us to understand why Hitler’s Third Reich continued to divert a vast array of resources from war fighting efforts on the Western and Eastern fronts, in order to continue to mass murder of Jews, Roma, political prisoners, and others. The diversion of such a vast quantity of human and material resources surely contributed to German military defeats at the fronts, but nevertheless, were “strategically” rational according to Nazi anti-Semitic ideology. In this example, the goals of Nazi elites were the elimination of European Jewry, even to the point of losing the war. Here the strategic perspective allows us to rationalize a seemingly irrational behavior.

### **3.3. Weaponization of Ethnicity**

The final subset of genocide literature that applies to this paper, centers on the role of ethnicity in generating ethnic atrocities. Here, the literature on ethnic conflict is well known and disaggregated into three schools: the instrumental, primordial, and integrative approaches. These schools require little introduction as they have existed within the discipline for years.

For instance, instrumental scholars argue, when genocides develop, they are largely functions of post-colonial or domestic power politics between rival ethnicities.<sup>33</sup> For example, in post-colonial Rwanda, Hutu elites enacted discriminatory, divisive, and exclusionary policies against the Tutsi minority.<sup>34</sup> These policies exacerbated a bedrock of frustration and aggression

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<sup>31</sup> Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Krain, “State-Sponsored Mass Murder: The Onset and Severity of Genocides and Politicides” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41:3 (1997): 331-360.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Kiwuka, “Democratization and Ethnic Politics: Rwanda’s Electoral Legacy” *Ethnopolitics* 4:4 (2005): 447–464.

<sup>34</sup> Zachary A. Karazsia, “Developing Hearts and Land: A Case Study of Reconciliation, Governance, and Development in Rwanda,” in Louis A. Picard, Terry F. Buss, Taylor B. Seybolt, and Macrina C. Lelei, eds.

between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority over decades, which ultimately culminated in the 1994 genocide. Contrarily, Primordialists scholars of Rwanda, contend a lack of intergroup exchanges and fossilization of ethnic tensions overtime, raised perceptions of “mutual fear” which became irreversible.<sup>35</sup> The integrative approach has attempted to morph pre-existing tensions with group dynamics (the role of agency) in explaining the onset and magnitude of conflicts.

This study, relies on the instrumental approach to ethnicity, which was largely developed within the field of genocide studies to explain African genocides. Particularly of interest, is Scott Straus’s conceptualization of ethnicity and its unique role in spurring perpetrator involvement in the Rwanda genocide. Straus argues, ethnicity matters, but not by way of establishing ethnic prejudice, reinforcing the “ancient hatreds” hypothesis, or by the manipulation of propaganda. It was elite hardliners, in control of government, who “equate[d] “enemy” with “Tutsi” and to declare that Rwanda’s “enemies” had to be eliminated.”<sup>36</sup> This “collective ethnic categorization” allowed the perpetrators to aggregate Tutsi rebel soldiers in the north with the Tutsi civilian population throughout Rwanda, thereby legitimizing the killing of any Tutsi civilian as an act of patriotism in support of eliminating the “enemy” and RPF rebellion. This paper transports this concept of “collective ethnic categorization” from the hills of East Africa to the jungles of Southeast Asia for comparison.

#### 4. Theory and Method

Our theoretical framework begins with the most likely perpetrators of genocide and genocidal policies, that being, senior political and military elites in control of government. This framework explains why states implement policies of mass destruction against civilian populations under their care. This framework is not directly applicable to episodes of extreme violence which emerge from below (i.e., sub-state or non-state armed groups) but places the state as the primary referent. In other words, we aim to explain state-led genocides, but not organically developed, grassroots campaigns of mass murder.

Our theory begins with *regime dominance*, a subjective interpretation of elites’ control over governmental actions, territory, and society. Regimes may experience threats to this dominance from domestic and international audiences. Domestic opposition may manifest itself in traditional ways, such as mobilization of ethno-religious groups on the basis of kinship, ideology, or common fear from the central government. The second dimension of elite perceptions of regime dominance is concerned with the role of international actors in their sovereignty. Pressures put upon elites from global international organizations (e.g., the United

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*Sustainable Development and Human Security in Africa: Governance as the Missing Link* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015): 237.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Uvin, “Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence” *Comparative Politics* 31:3 (1999): 58.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006): 9.



Nations or the International Criminal Court) as well as regional organizations (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). International organizations or unilateral states wielding substantial political power (e.g., the United States) can apply pressure from above and test the durability of the regime. This includes influential transnational advocacy networks embedded within this international regime.<sup>37</sup>

We assume senior political and military leaders of a given state place their self- and state preservation above all else. Therefore, we argue, if the subjective assessment of one’s regime dominance minus both domestic and international pressures are perceived to be less than a sustainable level of state preservation, elites will implement genocidal policies to counter such threats.

**Figure 1:  
Elite Decision-Making Process for Implementing Genocidal Policies**



In our framework, the use of violence is instrumental, not inevitable, or a result of some primordial feeling toward an out-group. The state (meaning, its most senior decision-making leaders) do not need to obtain or possess complete control over every segment of society, territory, or require unequivocal obedience from her residents. However, the regime must maintain its place as the dominant domestic player by far without fear of rivalry or competition to its legitimacy. When these fears rise to the level of threatening state preservation, we expect to see elites implementing genocidal and political violence policies targeting the origins of such threats to their domestic dominance.

As a result, each threat is assessed and responded to on its own merits. Practically speaking, “reactive” violence from the state to these perceived threats, and in most cases these are imagined threats to state preservation and not objectively determined fears, regime toppling concerns, result in genocidal policies of varying degrees. Specifically, designed to target and eliminate the “threat” before the regime and preserve its control over the levers of power.

In order to qualitatively assess our framework, we employ a single country case study, Burma (Myanmar), and unpack variation in genocidal policies directed at the Karen, Rohingya, and Kachin populations. By using three sub-national case studies we are able to assess, at the meso-level of analysis, the multifaceted nature of the *Tatmadaw’s* policies toward these “rivaling groups” by illustrating the implementation of its genocidal policies.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink. *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Changes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 5.

## 5. Case Studies

Ethno-religious violence in Burma is inextricably linked to the divide and conquer strategy applied by the British against the indigenous population. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial administration deliberately favored ethnic minority groups in the northern and eastern regions of Burma. These groups, composed of the Kachin, Karen, and smaller hill tribes like the Karenni, received disproportionate educational and employment opportunities in the colonial bureaucracy at the expense of the substantially larger Bamar<sup>38</sup> population, the latter concentrated mostly in Burma's geographic center. Strategically, the British intended to empower small, disproportionately Christian groups for the purposes of containing the threat of a nascent Bamar independence movement. Ultimately, the British policy was thwarted by the onset of World War II, and Japan's invasion of Burma. Forced by necessity to arm select Bamar militias, the allied forces successfully drove Japan out, but at the price of empowering groups that would eventually play a large role in the independence movement.<sup>39</sup>

In 1948, Britain, weakened by the war and no longer able to maintain control over its vast colonial empire, relinquished Burma, and chose to focus its attention on neighboring India. Almost immediately after the British departed, it became clear that many ethnic groups who were historically independent from Bamar rule would come under the authority of a new government. Anticipating the difficulties arising from this new arrangement, Burma's new parliamentary democracy sponsored an ethnic reconciliation conference in Shan State's city of Panglong. Competing claims between government and ethnic minority representatives were never fully resolved. While the Karen refused to participate directly, others were more willing to work within a tighter federal framework. Specifically, the Kachin had agreed to join the union of Burma under the stipulation that they would be able to vote on full independence within ten years.<sup>40</sup> The failure of these negotiations, in part, explain the legacy of conflict between Burma's center and periphery.

The resulting political instability of the 1950's amplified inter-group distrust, ultimately leading to a decisive military coup in 1962. Under military rule, the vast majority of citizens, Bamar included, suffered terrible political and economic hardships. For the purposes of this research, a more thorough exploration of Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya human rights violations is intended to show how the military regime specifically targeted these groups in the interest of state preservation. As a historically weak state, Burma has not been able to successfully assimilate its minorities. Sensing threats emanating from the periphery, the military regime has

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<sup>38</sup> As Burma's largest ethnic group, the Bamar compose roughly 68 percent of the population. This estimate is subject to debate, as problems of self-identification complicate the classification of ethnic groups. For a more thorough discussion see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. (London: Zed Books, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> For a particularly insightful history of Burma's armed insurgencies please see Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma" *Asian Survey* XLVIII: 6 (2008): 900.

pursued a bloody, yet thus far unsuccessful, set of strategies intended to break the spirit of ethnic minority groups.

### **5.1. The Karen**

Eastern Burma's Karen population developed its distinct cultural and political identity during the British colonial era. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, American Baptist missionaries were successful in converting large numbers of Karen from Animism to Christianity. Foreign educators also helped the Karen develop their own written language, further solidifying their unique ethnic identity. While the Karen remain a majority Buddhist group, their historically close relationship to the west continues to shape their identity in important ways. During World War II, the Karen fought alongside British and American troops, successfully repelling the Japanese invasion. The British were also instrumental in helping the Karen develop their own national political organization, the Karen National Union (KNU).

Conflict between the Karen and Burma's central government began shortly after independence. As the failure of the aforementioned Panglong Agreement became evident to all concerned parties, high-ranking Karen officials began to exit the military and state bureaucracy, forming the KNDO (Karen National Defense Organization). The KNDO, a military organization fully independent from the state, was instituted with the sole intention of promoting and defending Karen interests. Violence between the KNDO and the central government increased in 1948, culminating in massacres committed against Karen civilians in December of that year. Hundreds of Karen were killed by government and irregular forces in the waning months of 1948. By 1949, Karen forces had advanced on Rangoon only to be repelled four miles from the city center.<sup>41</sup> The KNDO were ultimately forced back into Karen state, but not before significant military and civilian casualties were inflicted on both sides.

During the chaotic parliamentary period (1948-1962) sporadic conflict between the Karen and the Burmese government was accompanied by a protracted war against internal and external rivals. Following the death of independence hero Aung San, communists and other leftist splinter groups fought for control of government. Simultaneously, an invasion from China's retreating Kuomintang army tested the viability of newly independent Burma. Skirmishes between the Karen and the Burmese military intensified over time, as the fragile Burmese government continued to perceive Karen armed forces as an existential threat to the state.

The brief and tumultuous parliamentary period in Burma was characterized by factional conflicts between the central government and smaller pocket armies. Coinciding with the new mobilization of ethnic minority armies in the north and east were challenges to authority from within ministerial Burma, as splinter groups who broke away from the initial independence movement asserted themselves. In 1958, the civilian government requested that the military step in to serve as a temporary caretaker government. General Ne Win, a prominent army officer

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<sup>41</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 133-37.

during the independence movement, eventually turned power back over to the civilian government, though this arrangement proved to be short-lived.

In 1962, Ne Win and his army launched a successful coup, taking a hardline approach to all dissidents. Following the coup, the new regime instituted the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, a program intended to place economic justice above ethnic divisions.<sup>42</sup> In reality, the military regime’s efforts to create a unifying national identity failed spectacularly. The promotion of Burmese language education in the minority states, accompanied by state-sponsored missionary activities designed to convert Christians and Animists to Buddhism have created animosity within these areas. During the 1960’s and 1970’s, Burmese troops launched more military offensives, resulting in long periods of *Tatmadaw*<sup>43</sup> occupation. Ne Win’s reign was also infamous for its institution of the “Four Cuts” policy, ostensibly designed to halt food, supplies, intelligence, and recruits to Karen forces. Civilians often bore the brunt of this policy, as the Burmese armed forces suspected all Karen of collaborating with combatants.

During Ne Win’s reign, there are numerous corroborated reports of *Tatmadaw* burning down Karen villages, forcing civilians to engage in slave labor, and murdering non-combatant village leaders. One of the more harrowing elements of the “four cuts” has been the implementation of what is termed the “living off the land” policy, whereby Karen civilians are forcibly relocated to military-controlled areas, so *Tatmadaw* soldiers can take advantage of free labor, food, and other basic supplies.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, it is well documented that Burmese troops have used Karen civilians to clear mine fields. Mines have also been used to destroy villagers’ crops.<sup>45</sup> The conflict in Karen state from 1962-1988 was characterized by patterns of low-level violence, interrupted by intense periods of fighting.<sup>46</sup> While this dynamic has kept the casualty count relatively low, it has resulted in mass civilian displacement. Since the initiation of the conflict, the best estimates show over 200,000 Karen have fled to Thailand, with thousands more internally displaced in Burma.

Atrocities committed against the Karen population intensified during the 1990’s as intermittent cease fires were violated by the *Tatmadaw* and Karen defense forces. In 1995, the Burmese army launched a major offensive in Karen state, leading to the fall of ManerPlaw, and Karen National Union headquarters. The offensive, resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties,

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<sup>42</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009) 304.

<sup>43</sup> “*Tatmadaw*” a Burmese word, denotes the Burmese armed forces.

<sup>44</sup> Burma Link, “Patterns of State Abuse,” Accessed: February 15, 2017, [www.burmalink.org](http://www.burmalink.org).

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Burma: U.N. must act to end attacks on Karen,” Accessed: February 12, 2017, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org). Also see, Human Rights Watch, “Burma: Landmines Kill, Maim and Starve Civilians,” Accessed: February 12, 2017, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Harff has described the conflict in Burma during January-December 1978 period as a geno/-politicide, that claimed approximately 5,000 lives. She argues, the victim populations are the democratic opposition, Karen, Shan, and Mon. Barbara Harff, “No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955” *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (2003): 60.

leading to the immediate exodus of 9,000 Karen refugees into neighboring Thailand.<sup>47</sup> The Karen journey across the Salween River has historically been perilous due to government forces laying mines as a deliberate strategy intended to prevent further migration across the Thai border.<sup>48</sup> After the 1995 offensive, the violence magnified, as the KNU splintered into rival factions. The newly formed DKBA, which was effectively coopted by the Burmese state on account of their Buddhist identity, fought alongside the Burmese army against the KNU. The DKBA has been charged with many of the same crimes attributed to the *Tatmadaw*.

During the 2000's, the Burmese military and the KNU continued to clash. While formal military operations slowed after a 2004 ceasefire, sporadic, yet intense violence has persisted. In 2006 alone, 200 villages were reportedly destroyed by government forces.<sup>49</sup> In recent years, active conflicts in Shan and Kachin states have led the Burmese army to allocate more of its limited resources toward fighting these groups. Most recently, Karen state has been the target of government sponsored land grabs. According to Human Rights Watch, government and military officials have used tactics of "intimidation and coercion" to displace landowners along the Burma/Thai border without providing appropriate compensation.<sup>50</sup> Local farmers typically lack the resources or legal aid necessary to combat powerful business interests targeting Karen land for extraction. Recently, construction of the Hatgyi dam and the Asian highway have been particularly contentious development projects.

With the recent and overwhelming electoral victory of the pro-democracy NLD, there was a great deal of optimism within Karen state. Aung San Suu Kyi's message of inclusion and political reform were intended to offer a fresh-start to a country worn out by nearly 60 years of war. Unfortunately, the recent transfer of power has not resulted in substantive policy changes toward the ethnic minority groups. As the military still retains a tremendous amount of formal and informal power within Burma, it now appears as though they are pursuing their own prerogatives in Karen state. Central to this equation is the number of large business interests controlled by the military, and the abundant natural resources available for extraction on the geographic periphery.

## 5.2. The Rohingya

The Rohingya form Burma's largest Muslim ethnic group, and have endured a long history of discrimination.<sup>51</sup> While there is much controversy surrounding Rohingya settlement in Rakhine State, most historians argue that their presence in western Burma precedes the colonial

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<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Abuses linked to the fall of Manerplaw," Accessed: February 14, 2017, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch, "U.N. must act to end attacks on Karen."

<sup>49</sup> Project Ploughshares, "Armed Conflicts Report," [www.justice.gov](http://www.justice.gov).

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch, "The farmer becomes the criminal: Human rights and land confiscation in Karen State," Accessed: February 3, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Hart, "Is Myanmar on the Path to Genocide?" *The Diplomat*. January 18, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/is-myanmar-on-the-path-to-genocide/>.

era. As British supporters, many Bamar anti-colonial riots were targeted at the Muslim Rohingya. Race riots in the 1930's were instigated with the assumption that the Rohingya were part of a broader Indian mission to control Burma. Rohingya ethno-nationalism grew in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in The Rohingya Mujahideen rebellion (1948-1961), a failed secessionist campaign.<sup>52</sup>

During World War II communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya resulted in the death of roughly 100,000 Rohingya and displacement of nearly 80,000.<sup>53</sup> This further cemented ethnic animosity between the two groups. In 1977, in response to the military government's attempt to identify illegal immigrants, some 200,000 group members sought refuge in Bangladesh. During the 1970's and 1980's episodes of communal violence erupted between the Buddhist Arakanese and the Rohingya, with civilian casualties reported on both sides. During the 1990's, Rohingya migration to Bangladesh accelerated. It is estimated that over 250,000 Rohingya were living in refugee camps, before the Bengali government repatriated large numbers back to Burma. While most of them subsequently returned, in 1981-82 there was another exodus as the Burmese government implemented a new citizenship law requiring residents to prove that their family had been residing in the country before 1824. Since Rohingya had citizenship records dating back to the colonial era, the new policy effectively disenfranchised an entire ethnic group.

More recently, communal violence broke out in Rakhine state in 2012, and 2016 respectively. In the case of the former, the alleged rape of an Arakanese woman at the hand of a Rohingya man led to the formation of angry mobs, who committed direct violence against Rohingya citizens and willfully destroyed villages.<sup>54</sup> In 2016, violence erupted at a police checkpoint between Rohingya militants and border guards resulting in dozens of casualties.<sup>55</sup> The subsequent military operation has resulted in over a thousand homes burnt to the ground, as well as allegations of rape undertaken by Burmese forces against Rohingya civilians.<sup>56</sup>

The persecution of the Rohingya is inextricably tied with the politics of ethno-religious identity. In the early years of Burmese independence, though temporarily recognized as a legitimate group, the Rohingya were not formally included in ethnic reconciliation efforts. During the years of the Ne Win regime, the Rohingya were subject not just to physical violence, but also revocation of all citizenship rights. In 1974, the government initiated the Emergency Immigration act, whereby all residents of Burma were provided with ethnic identity cards. While other minority groups were given cards indicating Burmese citizenship, the Rohingya were only

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<sup>52</sup> Elaine Coates, "Sectarian violence involving Rohingya in Myanmar: Historical Roots and Modern Triggers," *Middle East Institute* (2014) Accessed, February 3, 2017, [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

<sup>53</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (UK: Hurst Publishers, 2016) 27.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch, "All you can do is pray."

<sup>55</sup> The Guardian, "Myanmar violence: dozens killed as army clashes with Rohingya in Rakhine," Accessed: February 15, 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>56</sup>The Associated Press, "Myanmar says army ends operation in troubled Rakhine state," Accessed: February 16, 2017, [www.abcnews.go.com](http://www.abcnews.go.com).

entitled to foreign registration cards.<sup>57</sup> This battle culminated in the 1982 Citizenship act, which determined that the entire group was composed of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and as such, were not entitled to the privilege of Burmese citizenship.

As alluded to earlier, this claim, repeated frequently by the military regime, is more indicative of propaganda than historical fact. Much of the violence in Rakhine state has also been fueled by extremist rhetoric emanating from ultra-nationalist monks, who have called for the removal of the Rohingya from Burmese territory. Ma Ba Tha, led by infamous monk Wirathu, have compared Burmese Muslims to animals and have published online propaganda linking Burmese Muslims to radical jihadist groups abroad. While the monks have not been directly linked to violence committed against Rohingya, their rhetoric serves to stir up animosity against a traditionally persecuted group. Ma Ba Tha was successful in pressuring outgoing president Thein Sein to sign the Race and Religious Protection laws, which among other things, prohibits polygamy, restricts marriage between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, and requires women in certain regions to space out childbirth by 36 months.<sup>58</sup> The passage of these laws has its most direct impact on Burmese Muslims, the majority of whom are Rohingya.

While Burma's standard of living remains one of the lowest in the world, conditions are particularly harrowing for members of the Rohingya community. As large numbers of Rohingya have attempted to escape the country on rickety boats, or through the Bangladesh border crossing, the Rohingya that remain in Burma face severe restrictions of their freedom of movement. In refugee camps, only recently accessible to international aid organizations, many Rohingya contend with disease and starvation. Many international human rights organizations have labeled the situation as an emerging genocide, with the United Nations identifying the Rohingya as the "most persecuted minority in the world" in 2013.<sup>59</sup>

Discrimination against Muslims in Burma is widespread, and negative stereotypes about the Muslim community are dispersed across society. While the military regime was particularly brutal in its treatment of the Rohingya, the NLD has not been much more accommodating. NLD leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has shied away from addressing the Rohingya question publicly. In the latest parliamentary elections, neither the NLD or the pro-military party fielded a single Muslim candidate for office. Elite-sponsored Islamophobia is yet another obstacle to national unity in Burma, and is making conditions for the Rohingya increasingly perilous.

### **5.3. The Kachin**

Kachin State, though sparsely populated, is home to Burma's largest Christian population. Prior to British colonization, the Kachin operated outside land traditionally claimed

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<sup>57</sup> Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Library of Congress Global Legal Monitor, "Burma: Four "Race and Religious Protection Laws," Accessed: February 5, 2017, [www.loc.gov/law/](http://www.loc.gov/law/).

<sup>59</sup> The Economist. 2015. "The Most Persecuted People on Earth?" Accessed March 21, 2017 at [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

by Burmese kings. In 1948, they agreed to enter into the new Burmese state, but only did so with the caveat that they could have the option to secede within 10 years. The Kachin were concerned not only with territorial control, but also the protection of their Christian identity. During the parliamentary period, Prime Minister U Nu's very public endorsement of Buddhist religion and culture posed a symbolic threat to members of the Kachin community. U Nu's declaration of Buddhism as the official state religion in 1961, appeared to heighten these concerns among Kachin leaders.<sup>60</sup> After the 1962 coup, all prospects for ethnic self-determination were effectively extinguished as the Kachin joined other minority groups in open rebellion.

Conflict with the Kachin group is historically linked to the Burmese military regime's desire to incorporate the ethnic border regions into the state. Like the Karen to the south, the Kachin fought alongside the British during World War II. In 1962, responding to Ne Win's coup, the Kachin formed their own defense forces, known as the Kachin Independence Army. In recent years, the KIA has splintered into a number of smaller organizations, making ceasefires difficult to enforce, while limiting the long-term prospects for conflict resolution.<sup>61</sup>

Military operations against the Kachin have persisted throughout the post-independence era. The stakes of this battle are heightened through competition over key natural resources. Kachin state is mineral rich, containing Burma's most valuable stock of jade. The state also sits squarely in southeast Asia's "golden triangle", serving as a global hub for opium cultivation and trafficking. Conflict over both legal and illegal goods, has led to the displacement of many Kachin civilians. Specifically, illegal timber and mining operations have forced Kachin villagers from their land, while exposing them to dangerous air and water pollution. The refugee crisis stemming from over-development and ongoing military conflict has led large numbers of Kachin to seek refuge in neighboring China.

Human rights violations committed against the Kachin bear strong resemblance to those endured by their Karen counterparts to the southeast. Throughout the course of this conflict, the burning of villages and churches have been reported. There is further documentation suggesting that the Kachin are being targeted specifically for their Christian beliefs, including forced conversions and exemption from forced labor for promises of conversion and forced intermarriage.<sup>62</sup> While the Kachin conflict has traditionally been marked by low-level conflict, interrupted by intense fighting, violence over the past few years shows no sign of abatement. KWAT, a local Kachin advocacy organization documents crimes committed against civilians at the hands of *Tatmadaw* troops. Recently, they reported, "Burma Army troops have deliberately set fire to villagers' houses and property, and shot indiscriminately into civilian areas, causing death and injury. Another recent event is recorded as, "On October 1, 2016, Burmese troops

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<sup>60</sup> Minority Rights Group International, "Myanmar/Burma Kachin."

<sup>61</sup> See John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar" *The Asia Foundation*, Accessed: February 15, 2017, [www.asiafoundation.org](http://www.asiafoundation.org).

<sup>62</sup> Minority Rights Group International, "Myanmar/Burma Kachin," Accessed: February 15, 2017, [www.minorityrights.org/minorities/kachin](http://www.minorityrights.org/minorities/kachin).



from LIB 217 fired six shells into the village of Puwang, Muse township, killing a two-year-old girl and badly injuring two young boys aged three and four.”<sup>63</sup>

As suggested by the preceding reports, 2016 has been a particularly dangerous year for Kachin civilians. Frequent aerial bombing raids undertaken by the *Tatmadaw* have resulted in more casualties.<sup>64</sup> The conflict has been accompanied by patterns of threats and intimidation aimed directly at Kachin Christian identity. The recent disappearance of two Kachin pastors remains unsolved, despite pressure from international human rights observers.<sup>65</sup>

#### 5.4. Summary Findings

The aforementioned Karen and Kachin case studies illustrate a deliberate assimilation strategy undertaken by the Burmese government. The government’s attempt to coerce ethnic minority groups into cooperation has only increased ethnic polarization. Lacking the military might and bureaucratic tools needed to effectively assimilate minority groups, the outcome has been protracted conflict with minority groups resulting in large numbers of military and civilian casualties since 1948. In the current political arrangement, the military retains a considerable amount of de facto and de jure power. Under the new NLD-run government, the military is guaranteed 25 percent of all seats in the national legislature, thus making constitutional change without military approval all but impossible. There is currently no civilian oversight of military affairs, thus limiting its accountability to the popularly elected government.

The military’s commitment to “disciplined democracy” means that radical policy changes vis a vis ethnic minorities remains highly unlikely. Since independence, the vast majority of state resources have been dedicated toward constructing and modernizing the military. As of today, it is the only viable institution in Burma, and is by far the largest consumer of state funds. Despite the military’s size, numbering over 400,000 troops, it is hampered by corruption and low troop morale. There is also little oversight in the military chain of command, making it difficult for the observer to distinguish between state-sponsored violence, and those undertaken by particularly cruel regional commanders. Despite this kind of limitation, overall patterns of violence do suggest deliberate state-driven policies aimed at punishing ethnic minorities on the periphery.

The treatment of the Rohingya population has been substantively different than that of the Karen and Kachin peoples. Different strategies are indicative of the way the government understands and classifies identities. While the Burmese government has formally recognized the Karen and Kachin as legitimate ethnic groups, the Rohingya have not shared in this distinction since 1962. Substantively, this means different objectives on the part of the military. In one

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<sup>63</sup> Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand, “A Far Cry from Peace: Ongoing Burma army offensives and abused in Northern Burma under the NLD government,” Accessed: February 12, 2017, [www.kachinwomen.org](http://www.kachinwomen.org).

<sup>64</sup> Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint and Nang Seng Nom, “Burma army airstrikes bombard Kachin, Shan States,” *The Irrawaddy*, Accessed: February 14, 2017, [www.irrawaddy.com](http://www.irrawaddy.com).

<sup>65</sup> Amnesty International, “Urgent Action: Kachin pastors missing after assisting journalists,” Accessed: February 15, 2017, [www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org).

sense, strategies geared toward the Karen and Kachin groups are based on assimilation, or fears of losing control, albeit however tenuous, over these groups. Conversely, policies taken against the Rohingya have been done in the spirit of exclusion. By making life intolerable for the Rohingya, the government at certain times has aimed to push them out of the state, while taking accompanying measures to restrain population growth in the short-term. While the Burmese military has had little interest in conducting widespread military operations through Rakhine state, given its large population of Arakanese Buddhists, it has also shown little interest in stopping communal violence against Rohingya. As Human Rights Watch reports, local police and military have been complicit in episodes of communal violence, standing by while Rohingya civilians were attacked, and villages burned<sup>66</sup>.

The preceding case study analyses indicate that state preservation genocide has likely been perpetrated against the Karen and Kachin ethnic groups. State preservation as a motivator for genocidal violence seems to matter when the targeted groups pose a perceived immediate and existential threat to the regime. Similarly, since Burma recognizes the Kachin and Karen as legitimate ethnic groups, the military would prefer to include these groups within the bounds of the territorial state. Conversely, groups posing a longer term socio-cultural threat to the regime are likely attacked for other reasons. The Rohingya do not pose a direct physical threat to the regime, nor is the regime (past and present) interested in assimilating this group into Burmese society. Rather, exclusionary policies applied against the Rohingya seek to remove them from the state. As opposition to the Rohingya has been cast in almost exclusively racist language, alternative theories of genocide may have greater explanatory power in this case. Ideological or Xenophobic genocide can explain why Burma persecutes the Rohingya population based solely on its ethno-religious characteristics, while a Developmental genocide account suggests that the military intends to reconquer what is perceives as lost territory. The specific applicability of these theories to the Rohingya case is beyond the scope of this project, but should be a fascinating avenue for future research.

Finally, while we argue that domestic factors are the largest determinant of genocidal policies, the international context appears to shape the types of strategies regimes take toward ethno-religious minorities.<sup>67</sup> In the Burma case, while the international community has condemned the persecution of ethnic minorities, there have been no alterations to the military's overall strategy against these groups. This particular issue was discussed in detail during meetings between former Presidents Thein Sein and Barack Obama in 2012. In this summit, Sein agreed to meet certain democratic benchmarks in exchange for the U.S. lifting regime sanctions. While Sein made token changes, by releasing certain political prisoners, and removing some press restrictions, the overall treatment of ethnic minorities went unchanged. The plight of Burma's Rohingya is well documented by international human rights groups, with a proposed

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<sup>66</sup> Human Rights Watch, "All you can do is Pray," Accessed: December 12, 2016, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>67</sup> For a thorough discussion of this subject see Mylonas, Harris. 2012. *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

U.N. investigation recently declined by the Burmese government<sup>68</sup>. For the meantime, it appears that the military-run government can detect the important difference between rhetoric and action, and has responded accordingly.

## **6. Conclusion: Using Meso-Level Case Studies to Revise Macro-Level Theorizing**

All three episodes of genocides against the Karen, Kachin and Rohingya populations have been carried out in the context of elite measures of state preservation. Common to all three episodes is the government's willingness to embark upon public policies designed to subdue, cleanse, or destroy domestic ethno-religious and political rivalries. It is the tactics employed in the execution of such policies that differ, not the objectives themselves. We contend, the state preservation model of genocide onset and magnitude, best explains variations in regime tactics against the Karen and Kachin but not as clearly Rohingya Muslims. This analysis leads us to draw four key takeaways.

### **6.1. Implications for Theory Building**

From the analysis above, we draw four conclusions, which have a direct impact on theory construction and theory testing in genocide studies. First, state preservation is a prime motivator for genocidal violence, when the victim population is *perceived* to pose an immediate existential threat to the regime's dominance and control over its territory. There are two central aspects worth noting. The threat perception of elites does not necessarily need to reflect actual, empirical competition to their power for violence to ensue. Rather, all that is required is the belief that an ethno-religious-national population does pose this threat to governmental control. Coupled with this belief in threat, is the feeling by elites that their very existence and regime's ability to sustain itself teeters on the brink. These challenges to regime dominance often come from organized and monolithic movements, possibly centering on secession such as the Karen or Kachin. Any organized sub-national movement that includes political and military cohesion would potentially rise to the level of threatening state preservation and require action.

Second, we suspect this type of genocidal violence is more common in weak states, because regimes have yet to establish a monopoly on the use of force within its territory. It is valid to argue, irrespective of regime and state capacity, governments may engage in campaigns of slaughter against population groups within or beyond their territory. That being said, we argue, states undergoing regime consolidation in the developing world are more likely to resort to intrinsic political violence when threatened, compared to established governments in strong states. Weak states, by definition, have limited resources and policy options available to their elites. As a result, these governments may be more likely than strong states to resort to measures of political violence and genocide.

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<sup>68</sup> Weng, Lawi. 2016 "President's Office rejects UN Call for Action on Alleged Rights Abuses in Arakan State." *The Irrawaddy*. Accessed March 16, 2017 at [www.irrawaddy.com](http://www.irrawaddy.com).

Third, when the victim population poses a long term social-cultural threat to the regime's vision of statehood, it is not state preservation that matters, but ideology, xenophobia, and territorial acquisition which drives mass violence. These factors were seen as the main drivers of violence against the Rohingya in comparison to the Karen and Kachin who threatened state control. In the case of the Rohingya, the *Tatmadaw* does not appear to fear a Rohingya secessionist movement or rebellion in the near-term. This leads to the important question, what is driving the violence? We conclude, the violence is driven by three factors: an implicit ideology that Burma is only for certain groups (loosely defined, to include ethnic groups historically located within the territory, which would also include the Karen and Kachin). Closely connected to this utopian vision are xenophobic ideations extending decades into the past, intimating that "foreigners" have come to take resources and jobs from locals. And, finally, there exists a belief that while Rohingya Muslims occupy territory within Burma, that the Burmese and other "legitimate" ethnic groups cannot adequately control their land and territory. Therefore, we have seen *Tatmadaw* policies designed to drive the Rohingya out in order to re-conquer the area. This aspect of genocidal violence is not unique to Burma. We would argue, the National Socialist movement in Germany that targeted Jews, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, United States policies against Native Americans, and possibly the Guatemala genocide against indigenous populations, were all, in part, motivated by ideology, xenophobia, and territorial conquest in lieu of threats to state preservation. In these cases, it is not *realpolitik* that matters, but these three intervening factors that determine the onset of mass violence spurred on by state elites.

Finally, our findings suggest domestic level variables are predominant indicators of violence against ethno-religious groups, but we must stress the importance of international actors in shaping elite beliefs towards such populations. Revisiting Figure 1, it is the threat from domestic oppositional groups coupled with their direct and indirect support from outside agitators that determines the regime's perception of viable threats to their sustainability. In the case of the Kachin, the Chinese government has funneled weapons across the northern border lands in support of this population. This action on behalf of the Chinese was viewed by the *Tatmadaw* as a legitimate threat, therefore this international action influenced, in real terms, state policies directed at the Kachin. Juxtapose this with the United States' rhetorical support of Rohingya Muslims. The United States offered tongue and cheek press releases on the treatment of Burma's Rohingya population but failed to follow through with tangible financial, material or otherwise crafted support. This facet of international involvement elicited comparable token changes by the *Tatmadaw* and failed to accomplish tangible shifts in its policy preferences. By contrast, the United States and Thailand have delivered both material support, and sanctuary to Karen refugees, thus heightening the threat perception for *Tatmadaw* leadership.

The conclusions generated by this analysis allow scholars within genocide studies to incorporate meso-level perpetrator actions into grand theories of mass violence. The uniqueness of this study allows us to provide summary findings on the violence against three sub-national populations in Burma while retaining limited capacity in generalizing toward comparable case

studies. In our view, future studies of genocide theorizing should focus on incorporating peripheral case studies from the outset in hopes of creating more comprehensive and analytically rich explanations of mass murder.