

# Religious Majoritarianism and Commercial Interests drive the attack against the Rohingyas

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his visit to Myanmar from 5-7 September 2017 assured India's support to the government of Myanmar despite the continuing government and army driven ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, the majority of whom are Muslims. The Government of India, through an affidavit before the Supreme Court, has also labelled the 40,000 Rohingyas as illegal immigrants in India, calling them a threat to national security and hence to be deported .



**NTUI**

## The Attack on Rohingyas in Myanmar

Following weeks of silence on the issue of ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in the State of Rakhine, Myanmar's 'democratic rights' crusader, nobel peace prize winner and State Counsellor (de facto Prime Minister) Aung Sang Suu Kyi in her first national address on the recent crisis, said there had been no clashes or clearance operations in the western coastal state since 5 September and that that all refugees would be allowed to return after a 'verification process'. More than 1,000,000 Rohingyas have been forced to flee and have become stateless since 2012, their villages have been razed to the ground by the Myanmar army, their settlements burnt, and women raped and denied access to even humanitarian aid. Nearly all Rohingyas live in Myanmar's western coastal state of Rakhine.

Central to the chauvinistic and racist persecution of the Rohingyas is the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively denies citizenship to them by excluding them from the list of recognised "national races" that would entitle them to full citizenship. This law requires every person to provide "conclusive evidence" that their ancestors settled in Myanmar (Burma) before independence in 1948. The government considers Rohingyas to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh with official government statements referring to them as "Bengalis".

The transition from military rule to parliamentary democracy initiated in 2011, was followed by waves of cold blooded communal violence in 2012, forcing the 1.4 million Rohingyas into camps which they are forbidden to leave ostensibly so they can be given protection. Most Rohingyas held temporary citizenship documents, commonly known as 'white cards'. Following these attacks, in December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution urging Myanmar to provide "full citizenship" to its Rohingya Muslim minority and to allow them freedom of movement within the country and called upon the Myanmar government to address the root causes of violence and discrimination and to promote peaceful coexistence.

Responding to international pressure, on 10 February 2015, Myanmar parliament granted 'white card' holders the right to vote in the referendum on the country's constitution. The President however revoked this right the very next day in response to protests, led by Buddhist monks, taking away even the temporary citizenship right of the Rohingyas. The only serving Rohingya MP in the bicameral parliament from 2011 to 2016 was first denied candidacy by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and then barred from contesting the election by the

Election Commission in 2015, on the ground that his parents were not citizens of Myanmar, when NLD won an overwhelming majority, ending military rule.

### **Attack on Natural Resources**

Apart from majoritarian politics, the beneficiaries from the attack on the Rohingyas are the corporations exploiting Myanmar's natural resources. From the 1990s onwards the Rohingyas have been displaced as a result of expropriation of land. The transition government gave sanctity to land grabbing by changing land acquisition laws in 2012 as part of economic policy aimed at attracting foreign investment.

With the discovery of massive natural gas and oil deposits, concentrated in the Rakhine state, in 2004 both China and India have sought to enter into drilling and purchase agreements with Myanmar. Estimates suggest that natural gas deposits in the Myanmar maritime zone equal nearly 25% of India's reserves making this of strategic interest.

Since 2013, India's leading private enterprises including Reliance and Essar gained entry along with already existing public sector ONGC and GAIL in offshore oil and gas blocks. Poor infrastructure in Myanmar and access barrier created by Bangladesh inhibited India's capacity to pump the gas into India even though it has invested in a petrochemical complex, in the upgradation of the Sittwe port and set up an SEZ in the Rakhine state.

Hence as part of BJP Government's Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for the North-Eastern States, India is negotiating a plan to lay 6,900 km of gas pipelines from the Rakhine state to West Bengal and the North eastern states through Bangladesh. Myanmar's Rakhine state, if freed of its people, would make this expansion easier.

### **India's Role**

The statement issued jointly on behalf of Prime Minister Modi and State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi on 6 September 2017 "... condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and agreed that the fight against terrorism should ... (include) entities that encourage, support or finance terrorism, provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups, and falsely extol their virtues. Myanmar condemned the recent barbaric terror attacks during the Amarnath Yatra in India ... India condemned the recent terrorist attacks in northern Rakhine State.... They called on the international community to end selective and partial approaches to combating terrorism".

Both before and after Prime Minister Modi's visit to Myanmar, India has welcomed chiefs of the Myanmar's Army and Navy. During these visits India has renewed its commitment to supply Myanmar defence equipment including for surveillance to combat Islamic terror.

The joint India-Myanmar statement makes the position amply clear that, both governments view all people of the Islamic faith, especially in the state of Kashmir in India and in the state of Rakhine in Myanmar, as terrorists and directly associated with terrorists groups or at the very least supporters of such groups. This is a clear instance of governments employing peoples'

religious identity to define their political choice and branding an entire people by such association.

The BJP government in New Delhi is determined to push India to its majoritarian understanding of Hindutva and drive divisions in the sub-continent against those of the Islamic faith. It presses this position through a chauvinistic politics alongside militarising both India and the sub-continent through its 'internal security doctrine' undermining democracy both at home and across South Asia.

The view of the BJP government is echoed in the annual Vijay Dashami address by Mohan Bhagwat, the Chief of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh when he termed all Rohingya muslims as infiltrators chased away by Myanmar as people who engage in continuous, violent and criminal separatist activities and linkages with the terrorist groups. The BJP, the RSS and their cohort are seeking to advance the view that every person of the Islamic faith is a terrorist and every person who does not ascribe to the Sangh Parivar's view of majoritarian Hindutva is anti-national.

Singling out one community or people of a particular faith and branding all members as violent, criminal and terrorist is rooted in a majoritarian politics that view peoples as unequal and predetermined by their birth is both unscientific and undemocratic. All forces of equality, social justice, democracy and progress must stand up this simply divisive and reprehensible politics.

**The NTUI calls upon the Government of India to:**

- Recognise that the attack on Rohingyas in the Rakhine State of Myanmar amounts to state led ethnic cleansing and therefore it must cease immediately,
- Employ its diplomatic relations with the Government of Myanmar to bring the attack on Rohingyas to a halt, to take measures to ensure that the Rohingyas can safely return to their communities, to ensure that they receive immediate humanitarian relief and create conditions for "full citizenship" to the Rohingya Muslim minority,
- Place an arms embargo on Myanmar until such time as the forgoing are not dealt with,
- Recognise the Rohingyas in India as refugees and have them registered as such with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and ensure that they are treated as such,
- Convene a Myanmar-Bangladesh-Pakistan-China-India summit to deal with the humanitarian crisis of Rohingya refugees.