

The Rohingyas of Myanmar and the biopolitics of hunger

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

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Submitted June 19, 2015 / Published online September 10, 2015

Citation: Nair, T. (2015). The Rohingyas of Myanmar and the biopolitics of hunger. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(4), 143–147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.023>

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Abstract

The Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar have faced discrimination due to their ethnicity and religion from the majority Burmese-Buddhist population and have been subjected to biased policies governing citizenship. This has resulted in prejudicial behavior on the part of the state in terms of movement, employment, education, and, consequently, access to food. Such discrimination has led to the Rohingyas being one of the most food-insecure communities in Asia. Using concepts of biopolitics and governmentality, I discuss how acute hunger in the community is a state-created construct—one of many strategies to isolate and control the Rohingyas.

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Keywords

food insecurity, citizenship, biopolitics, Rohingyas, Myanmar, development

The Rohingya Muslims of northern Rakhine State in Myanmar¹ are a minority group in the country. This community has faced discrimination from the majority Burmese-Buddhist population as a result of their ethnicity and religion, and have been subjected to biased policies governing citizenship. This has resulted in prejudicial behavior on the part of the state in terms of movement, employment, education, and, consequently, access to food. Years of this entrenched inimical behavior has resulted in the Rohingyas having diminished capacities in all the seven categories of human security, as defined in the Human Development Report of 1994 (U.N. Development Programme,

¹ Formerly known as Burma. Both names feature here and are used interchangeably.

1994, pp. 24–25). As a matter of fact, this has led to them being one of the most food-insecure communities in Asia. There is a condition of systematic legal, administrative, and social discrimination that has resulted in their exclusion and prejudicial treatment.

Recent events in the South China Sea and the actions of some Southeast Asian nations have brought them to the forefront again. Abandoned ships with human cargo including Rohingya women and children and mass graves of Rohingya men who were trafficked have made headlines. *Time* magazine had a cover photo of a two-year-old Rohingya toddler, crying his eyes out while held by two social workers and being “processed” at an Indonesian camp. But as all headlines do, they will eventually fade from our collective memory while the world pursues more “current” news. The world’s silence on their plight is notable, notwithstanding the occasional release of statements or comments. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has remained very careful in commenting on the issue and has not placed enough pressure on its member states to address this refugee crisis. Myanmar itself is a member state, but very little is discussed with respect to “Myanmar’s problem” in regional meetings. Sadly, this mirrors the reaction of the international community.

Notwithstanding these biases, life does go on for the Rohingyas, albeit mostly in a state of hunger and malnourishment as a result of outright discriminatory practices.

The Archaeology of Systematic Food Insecurity

The Rohingyas are an ethnic group that descend from Arakanese Buddhists, Bengalis from Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Arab sea traders (Mathieson, 2009). Under the British Raj, centuries of peaceful co-existence were compromised when the national boundaries of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar were demarcated, with the majority of the Rohingyas ending up in then Burma, in 1948 (Mathieson, 2009). When the British took over Burma following Japanese occupation of the country, they agreed to establish a Muslim area within the Rakhine state (Yegar, 1972). This

politically motivated the Rohingyas, who then requested the merger of northern Rakhine with East Pakistan (current Bangladesh) (Cook, in press). This attempt at breaking off Burma’s territory to merge with Bangladesh is one of the key reasons for Burman Buddhist animosity toward the Rohingyas (Coursen-Neff, 2000, cited in Cook, in press).

In the 1960s a massive nationalization program saw the expelling of thousands of South Asians from Burma. Since then, every successive military government has subjected the Rohingyas to harsh treatment characterized by neglect, exclusion, and scape-goating (Human Rights Watch, 2002). In the late 1970s, an “ethnic cleansing” campaign drove more than 200,000 Rohingyas into neighboring Bangladesh, only to have them return after a year. The squalid conditions in Bangladesh saw 10,000 Rohingyas die from starvation and disease as Bangladeshi authorities withheld food aid, and survivors had no choice but to go back (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997).

A discredited census in the 1980s resulted in further alienation for this community when Rohingyas were not included and as a result were classified as “stateless.” The 1982 Citizenship Act further entrenched this status, creating two classifications: full citizens (including most ethnic minorities) and “associates” (those of South Asian and Chinese descent). Rohingyas could not prove their lineage as “associates” prior to 1948 and as a result were disqualified as citizens (Berlie, 2008). In the 1990s the Burmese military drove more than 250,000 Rohingyas out of Burma and into the districts of Teknaf and Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh; in 1995 the Bangladesh government forced most of them back across the border in a U.N.–supported repatriation exercise. These moves were marked by violence against the Rohingyas by both the Bangladeshi forces pushing them out and the Burmese troops receiving them (Human Rights Watch/Asia, 1996). Violence against the community escalated with the establishment of the NaSaKa (a border security force constituting the police, army, and customs and immigration offices), which violated the Rohingyas’ human rights by detaining and raping women, taxing marriage registration multiple times, confiscating

land, and encouraging Buddhist migration into these lands (Islam, 2007, cited in Cook, in press).

Examining the food insecurities of the Rohingya is a study in the exercise of biopolitics (or power over lives) on both individuals and the group. Increasing state surveillance on those who lack legality removes political rights from lives and creates subdued, “empty” lives that can be surveyed, detained, and used. The body is the site for the exercise of this biopolitics. Illegality works with other structural vulnerabilities, such as economic insecurity and increasing poverty, that push the individual to “disappear” from society. Such illegality also allows the individual (simply by her or his state of existence) to participate in some aspects of social life but not in others (Gonzalez & Chavez, 2012, cited in Carney, 2014, p. 3). Therefore the Rohingyas are still allowed to work for food (as long as their work is required) or are deployed by the NaSaKa as forced labor. Since 1948 or earlier the state has paid great attention to the biological life of the Rohingyas in order to power their expulsion from Myanmar. By controlling access to food (through limiting economic activities, for instance), and reproductive processes through marriage authorizations and birth registrations in family lists, the state has created norms by which the community lives. The exercise of this biopower over the Rohingyas is complete as now the state has access to their bodies through these norms, which have been internalized by the community and pervade their society. The daily struggles of the Rohingyas in trying to meet their nutritional needs are just one way that represents how the state has systematically, through decades of discriminatory practices, created an uneven form of governance that reveals a biopolitics of food insecurity and hunger. And this biopolitics of hunger is just another aspect of the state’s biopolitics of citizenship and governmentality over this community.

The Biopolitics of Hunger

Earlier moral economies of hunger, which linked both personal responsibility and social obligation to ensure food security, have been replaced by a political economy of exclusion and violation of the Rohingyas’ right to food. The community’s efforts to meet nutritional needs often take place outside

of established norms and through mechanisms that are further hindered by biased policies that deny them access to economic security and the ability to produce their own food. The search for food then requires ever greater creativity or innovation. Food, for example, is often sourced by borrowing from neighbors (if there are quantities to spare) and/or by studying and working in the World Food Program’s (WFP’s) paddy schools (Arakan Project, 2012).

Needless to say, the community, and especially the women and children, suffer from chronic malnutrition. According to the Arakan Project, a human rights organization that has been monitoring the situation of Rohingyas since 1999, food insecurity is a direct marker of forms of discrimination such as forced labor, restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrests, and extortion. These technologies of governance keep Rohingyas “in their place” and allow easier control through their vulnerabilities. Food security for this community is a gossamer web of controls; reported incidences of violence and abuse are flashes of light that occasionally reveal to the world this control over their bodies. Once the media attention fades, the Rohingyas are still left to face the technologies of governance that limit their capabilities in meeting their nutritional needs. One study indicates a food insecurity situation in northern Rakhine state in need of immediate humanitarian attention (FAO & WFP, 2009). This same document reports that the Rohingya in northern Rakhine are highly vulnerable due to restricted mobility, inadequate access to land, and lack of casual labor opportunities. The forced taking of land (the landless being the most food insecure), the restrictions on travel that hinder employment and educational opportunities, especially for women and girls, and forced labor that takes children away from schools (Arakan Project, 2012) and men away from their families and work opportunities, have created a milieu of insecurity and deprivation in this community.

The exercise of biopolitics is almost necessarily racist in that such governance is broadly understood as an “indispensable condition” that grants the state the power (Taylor, 2014), in the case of the Rohingyas, to create methodical structural vulnerabilities, including food insecurity. This

justifies state actions in managing what are perceived as problematic groups. Such governance is best reflected in census-taking. Such an exercise of data collection gave the state vital information about the population that would assist in managing people. The population census of the 1980s and the subsequent dismissal of the Rohingyas' citizenship status legitimized the state's discrimination.

Future Scenarios

The Rohingyas spend almost 70 percent of their meager incomes on food, a stark indicator of food insecurity in the community. The need for greater economic security sees them desperately searching for opportunities, including paying exorbitant rates, to move to "greener pastures" elsewhere. Such desperation makes them easy prey for human traffickers. This is exactly what recent events in the South China Sea reflect. Rohingyas' willingness to suffer the long and perilous journeys indicate the level of disenfranchisement faced at home.

Illegal movement into Bangladesh in search of family and/or work creates competition for limited resources that can expose the Rohingyas to resentment in the host country. This is already happening in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, where massive deforestation is threatening food security for the local Bangladeshis and Indigenous hill tribes, as well as the Rohingyas refugees (IRIN, 2012). Increasing population pressure on forest resources has resulted in communities having no choice but to sell wood to feed families. There is great resentment against the Rohingyas from locals who feel that the refugees are already being fed by the U.N. and therefore should not encroach upon their source of livelihood. However the malnutrition rates in the two refugee camps and numerous makeshift camps are acute. Often locals attack the Rohingyas and forcefully take away the wood they have gathered (IRIN, 2012).

Climate change scenarios and their potential effects on food production add to increased food insecurities. Future climate variability can affect food production, which will further stress already-stressed resources and deepen vulnerabilities. This might cause mass movements of people toward resource-rich areas, something the Rohingyas will not be able to undertake easily due to their lack of

resources on top of their restrictions on travel. This could severely affect their already precarious situation *vis-à-vis* food security.

There is also the ever-present danger of radicalization. The great suffering of the Rohingyas could push them toward Islamic radicalization, aided by groups seeking to recruit disenfranchised people for their own agendas. However, despite hardships faced by this community, no mass jihadist intents have arisen from the group, which might in itself speak for their wish to live in peace. There are several other factors that explain this seeming lack of organization, but I will not attempt to explain them here. Suffice to say that it is important to understand that there are very human limits to enduring atrocities. When we are no longer able to tolerate and resist, we either perish or ultimately seek to "punish."

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