

The Rohingya Insurgents: Myanmar Creates Its Own Frankenstein



Harakah al-Yaqin, a new insurgent group in Rakhine state, is different than its predecessors.

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According to a recent international report, there is a new Rohingya insurgent group active in Myanmar's Rakhine state. In the report, Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY) (Movement of Faith) is described as well-funded, well-trained and linked with some other insurgent groups such as Taliban.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) report, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State," the HaY was behind two attacks in October 2016. The HaY also published several videos online in October and November 2016 highlighting its presence. These videos depict armed training for group members and propagate their claim that they are not terrorists but are fighting for their rights as part of the Rohingya community.

There have been several Rohingya insurgent groups in the past; some of them, like the Mujahideen Rebellion group, were formed before Myanmar's independence. None of the earlier groups were effective; these groups were successfully disbanded by the army.

Most notably, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), formed in 1986, was an active insurgent group in between the '80s and '90s. The RSO has mostly operated from across the Bangladesh border. Small attacks on the Border Guard Police (BGP) over the years have always been blamed on this group, even though the RSO is considered to have been defunct since 2001. Even the October 9, 2016 attack was initially thought to be perpetrated by the RSO; some researchers and the Myanmar government later tried to link HaY to the RSO.

The authenticity of a claimed linkage between HaY and RSO is questionable. The online videos published by HaY are water-marked with the name of the group in Arabic. This could serve a double purpose: to propagate their name to the world and also to disassociate the group from any other insurgents such as the RSO. One reason for the HaY to dissociate itself from RSO is the lack of local support for the latter. The RSO mostly operated from the Rakhine-Bangladesh border, unlike the HaY. The latter is based within this region, especially Maungdaw (according to the Myanmar government) and unlike RSO is locally supported. Indeed, this support is HaY's core strength.

The reason that HaY is locally supported, unlike other insurgent groups such as the Mujahideen Rebellion, Rohingya Patriotic Front, and RSO is due to a recent series of setbacks for the Rohingya people.

In 2012, riots led to mass killings, rapes, and burning of mosques in Rakhina state and subsequently the rise of Buddhist radical groups such as Ma Ba Tha under the leadership of monk Wirathu. The mayhem and the wrath of the radical Buddhists inculcated the idea and laid the platform for an armed group like HaY. The previous government, under the leadership of Thein Sein, proved unable to resolve this conflict and antipathy from the Myanmar authorities and radical groups only deepened the cleavage between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims.

Three years later, the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya in the 2015 election acted as a catalyst. Similar to other ethnic communities in Myanmar, the Rohingya were hopeful about a political resolution with the formation of a much-hoped-for democratic government in Myanmar. Previously, the Rohingya have always negated the use of violence, a primary reason that earlier insurgent groups failed. Until now, groups with a violent push lacked local support. The Rohingya as a community have also ruled out the claims of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (ISIS) taking up their cause. Instead, the Rohingya have always sought a peaceful resolution.

Now, after being disenfranchised during the historic elections and faced with the lack of by the new Suu Kyi government, the Rohingyas feel cheated. This frustration perhaps has paved the way for people to support to the armed organization of HaY, which distinguishes them from earlier groups.

If the atrocities at home continued, their situation abroad was no better. The closures of borders by Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia along with strict patrolling of the maritime route have choked off all Rohingya escape routes. This has made the Rohingya desperate as they see their future vanish. Over the years, refusal by each neighboring country to stand up for their cause or accept them as refugees has left the Rohingya with no more hope.

With no future internally, and no outlet externally, Rohingya desperation has triggered new support for the insurgents and their group. A new generation is coming of age, young people who have lived their lives in the ghettoized camps in Rakhine state, in a homeland where they do not enjoy the basic rights of citizenship and enfranchisement, marriage by choice, education, healthcare, security, and freedom of

religion. This generation, unlike their ancestors, does not cling to hopes of any political and peaceful solution. These youths are impatient and are ready to fight for their rights. HaY's local support mostly comes from these young Rohingyas. This is evident from the videos, which show mostly men in the 20s or younger as part of the group.

According to the ICG report, the local training of HaY local recruits is led by the young mullahs (Islamic clerics) or hafiz (scholar) in villages. The mullahs and hafiz are treated with respect and a cause they support automatically receives the backing of the entire village. Plus a fatwa has reportedly been issued in order to legitimize the attacks. In one of their online videos, the HaY representatives justify their actions by avowing that violence in the course of fighting for one's rights is vindicated in Islam. Adding a local religious connotation to the insurgency has paved the way for massive local support for HaY, something the other insurgent groups failed to achieve.

One thing is clear: HaY is a monster of Myanmar's own creation, an offspring of failed policy and abhorrent treatment toward the Rohingya. If this group becomes a threat the world is afraid of, the credit for HaY's growth and strength should be attributed to the failure of Myanmar's peace initiative and also the atrocities by the BGP and Tatmadaw in the name of preventing conflict.

The present strategy of BGP and the Tatmadaw will only make the situation worse. Burning down Rohingya villages and cutting aid to them may lead to the arrest of some of the local recruits for the time being, but will solidify the determination of the insurgents and their cause. There is a fear that the present situation will lead to a mass exodus similar to 1990, and the lack of any government initiative increases the community's disappointment and desperation — hence strengthening the insurgency.

There are three issues that further hinder the achievement of a peaceful solution for the Rohingya problem. First, Aung San Suu Kyi's powers are limited and Myanmar's military still plays a major role when it comes to defense and home affairs. Second, the Rohingya crisis, as an ethno-religious conflict, is just one of many ethnic conflicts that the country faces. And, relatedly, unlike the Rohingya, other ethnic groups enjoy citizenship and are backed by both political parties and armed groups; thus amid the many ethnic conflicts the Rohingya are not perceived as a major threat (or a priority) by the authorities. Third, the armed forces are used to not taking any new Rohingya insurgent groups seriously, as history has proved that violence directed at the local masses and combat against local militants has easily demolished these groups.

The Myanmar government and the armed forces should understand the seriousness of the situation this time rather than taking the latest insurgent attacks as a short-term problem. Killing, burning, and rape will not stop the insurgency but rather strengthen and nourish HaY.

According to the ICG report, HaY is well-organized, and some 20 insurgents in the group have received training in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The report also claimed the October 9 attack to be professional and well-organized. This statement is questionable, as the attack was carried out by 100 or so men who

were armed with knives and slingshots. However, the nature of the attack does not imply that this group should not be taken seriously, as these attacks (both on October 9 and October 12) and their videos make it evident that if not curtailed, this will be a massive threat not only to the region but also to the country. The fact that this group has time and again strategically planted and used improvised explosive device (IED) and has been fighting with the BGP and Tatmadaw armed forces since October 9 substantiates the threat and bears out reports of their training. Additionally, one should not forget local support, which is the biggest strength of HaY.

Myanmar should realize that the Frankenstein monster it has created has the capability to wreak havoc in coming years. The government and the army should stop the carnage; instead, it is high time they initiate gestures favoring the locals. This will help to break up the local support for the insurgent group, without which HaY will fade into obscurity like its predecessors.

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