The Role of Turkey and the Most Destitute Nation of the World, Rohingya

Md. Mahbubul Haque PhD *

mahbuhmu@gmail.com

Abstract:
The Rohingya ethnic Muslim minority are a symbol in today’s world, as hapless victims of heinous atrocities. Due to their indigenous ethnic identity, Rohingyas became stateless in the land of their ancestors. Their Islamic religion and Indo-Aryan appearance does not conform to the “Burmese citizenship standard”. The problem has been a key issue that has dominated Burma politics for more than a century and come under the international spotlight after the mass killing of Rohingyas in mid-2012 communal riots. This paper argues that Turkey is the first country which responded to the catastrophic situation, providing unconditional support for the Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

This paper will present evidence of the Turkish government and non-government organizations’ role in providing assistance to the Rohingyas both inside and outside of the Burma. Turkey played a vital role in OIC and UN, and used various diplomatic tools to activate other countries to work for Rohingyas. It was possible because of the Turkish people’s solidarity and the present government’s deep commitment towards the destitute Rohingya community. This paper will explore the atrocities against the Rohingyas and how Turkey’s present government policy and various non-government organizations worked for them. Moreover, the paper will present how Turkey became the pivotal point for Rohingya support in different ways.

* Lecturer, Faculty of Political Science, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani, Thailand.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya 1 people of Burma 2 are an ethnic group existing in a state of national limbo. They are one of a number of severely affected communities living under a quasi-democratic regime in a country where human rights abuse and suffering is common. The Rohingya have been denied Burmese nationality by the 1982 Citizenship Law. In legal terms, the Rohingya have neither

1 In this article, depending on the grammatical context, the term “Rohingya” is variously used as an adjective, a singular noun to refer to one person of Rohingya ethnicity, or as a collective noun to refer generally to the Rohingya people or to a group of Rohingya people.

2 Burma is now officially called the Myanmar. It was renamed by the then SLORC military government in 1989. Many of the opposition groups including the Rohingya community and Western countries continue to use Burma. They argue that Burma should still be used since it was an undemocratic government (military) which changed the name without the consent of the people. This article uses Burma except for direct quotation and government referral documents on the Myanmar.
nationality nor any ethnic status in Burma. Many international actors and scholars believe that due to lack of legal identity, the Rohingyas have become de jure stateless in their ancestors’ land. As a result of statelessness in Burma, many Rohingya have fled to neighboring countries. While a small number have gone to Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, the vast majorities have sought refuge in Bangladesh (Haque: 2014). The Myanmar Central and Rakhine State governments have made new policies to expel the Rohingya community from their ancestors’ land. Officially, 211 people have been killed in Rakhine State since June 2012 (cited in Otis: 2013). But the exile Rohingya leader in UK, Nurul Islam claimed that the number of deaths more then 1000. Many dead bodies either burned or disappeared (email conversation on March 2016). There are approximately 14,0000 Rohingya now living in different IDP camps in Arakan (HRW:2012). Due to government restrictions, humanitarian agencies cannot work for them and some INGO offices have been burned by Rakhine Buddhist groups. After the communal riot in 2012, Islamophobia was used added against the Rohingya existence in Burma. As a consequence of their statelessness, the United Nations has called the Rohingya “one of the most persecuted minorities on earth” (cited in Aljazeera: 2012).

Turkey is the first country which deliberately raised its voice in favour of Rohingyas and still supports significant humanitarian aid to the destitute Rohingyas inside and outside of Burma. It is almost impossible not to have noticed Turkey’s increasingly prominent role in international affairs, including in its contribution to humanitarian aid. In 2013, Turkey gave $1.6 billion for humanitarian emergencies, making it the third largest governmental donor for such causes, according to a Global Humanitarian Assistance report (Sabah: 2014). As a reflection of its emerging leadership in international development, in 2016, Turkey is to host the first ever World Humanitarian Summit. Regarding the Rohingya Muslim crisis, especially after mid-2012 communal riot in Burma, the Justice and Development Party (hereafter AKP) led Turkish government firstly responded it and sent high level of delegation in the conflict prone areas. Apart from humanitarian assistance, Turkish government, civil society and NGOs played vital role in international arena to address the Rohingya crisis. All these issues will be further discussed in the following parts of this article.

2. Methodology
This paper tries to describe the role of Turkey in the Rohingya crisis. Basically, this paper discusses here the roles of the Turkish government and other non-state actors such as civil society as well as humanitarian and human rights organizations. After the Rohingya situation analysis, it explores the current Turkish foreign policy and how it is works in this context. This article uses here most of the documents from secondary sources such as books, published reports, journals and newspaper articles and few email conversations with the Rohingya leaders. This article also discusses the role of international communities concerned over this issue. Overall, this paper tries to synchronize on narrative method through various reports and comments.

3. *De jure* Stateless Rohingya: Misplaced in Present Nation State Burma

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse and biggest countries of the Southeast Asia. After sixty-eight years of decolonization, Burma as a country is fragile in terms of nation building process. Official nationalist historiography sees that modern Burma was made by the British colonial rulers. It is noted that after first Anglo-Burma war, “the territories of Rakhine and Taninthary were absorbed into the administrative structures in the British India Company through its agents in Bengal” (Taylor: 2007. p.73). Today’s Burma integrated as a province of British India through the third Anglo-Burma war in 1824. After 1937, it was separated from the India and named “British Burma”. The Arakan, ancestor land of Rohingyas found itself at the crossroads of two worlds: South and Southeast Asia, between Muslim-Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia, and amidst Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid races. Throughout the history, Arakan had close relationship with Muslim Bengal in the fields of culture, economy and politics. It is clear that Arakan, western Frontier State of today’s Burma was not part of the Burmese kingdom. From ancient time, it was closer with the Bengal. The geographical position of Arakan explains the separate historical development of its Muslims population until the Burmese king Bodayapaya conquered it on 28th December 1784. While the British expand their territory and after independence in 1948, Arakan transferred in Burma with their any plebiscite or any kind of mass people consultation (Rohingya National Union: 2013). Before enact the 1982 Citizenship Law, Rohingya did not face identity problem regarding the citizenship in Burma. Currently it is the largest single groups of stateless people in the world (*The Economist*: 2015).
The situation of the Rohingya worsened after the 2012 communal riots. The ethnic cleansing of 2012 in Sittwe and in other parts of Rakhine has established a de facto system of apartheid in the state, with the Rohingya rigorously cut off and excluded from the economic and political life of the Rakhine State (The Economist: 2015). Groups of local Buddhist monks have initiated a campaign against the Rohingya. As part of their program, they are calling upon the local Buddhist population neither to befriend nor do any business with the Muslims. During the communal riots, Rohingya properties were destroyed and no one received compensation from the government. On the other hand, Rakhine affected people received hard cash and house renovation materials from the State government (HRW: 2012, Fortify Rights: 2014). This argument supported by the UN Special Rapporteur Ms. Yanghee’s recent statement in the situation of human rights in Myanmar at 31st regular session in UN Human Rights Council on March 2016. Yanghee stated that, “the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State under the radar of human rights abuse from the government and Buddhist extremist” (cited in the stateless: 2016). Saudi diplomat and Southeast Asian specialist Ali Al-Ghamdi’s expressed the similar views in his recent article on Rohingya Muslims: the world’s most persecuted minority. Ghamdi argues that, “Rohingya Muslims have been subjected to persecution and injustice; they have been killed and driven out of their homes. Their houses and mosques have been torched and their properties seized. Those who escaped torture managed to run away to neighboring countries” (Saudi Gazette: 2016). In these circumstances, the Rohingya are fully dependent on aid from humanitarian agencies. It is noted that humanitarian agencies offices and their staff are attacked by Rakhine Buddhists because they have sympathized with the Rohingya Muslims.

It should be noted that, not only did the military support the Union Solidarity Development Party (hereafter USDP), also other democratic forces such as the National League for Democracy (hereafter NLD), 88 Generation were surprisingly silent and sometimes take stand against the Rohingyas. From the beginning, the icon of democracy, Daw Aung Sun Suu Kyi tried to avoid the Rohingya issue and later stated “this is a very complicated and fuzzy matter” (Today’s Zaman: 2012). But upon persistent questioning, she said, “Muslims may be given ‘permanent settler’ status, but they should not be accepted as citizens of the country” (ibid). The Rohingya leader claimed that, Daw Aung Sun Suu Kyi does not want to lose her popularity among the Burman as well as majority Buddhist people in the country (email conversation with U Thay,
President of Union National Development Party in Burma, February 2016). Even after the landslide victory of Suu Kyi’s party in the parliamentary elections, the military still controls the state’s affairs. They consider themselves to be the saviors of the constitution. This means that the military would continue wielding control over the government in future as well. It will not be easy to restore the rights of Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

4. Turkish Government and AKP’s response to the Rohingya crisis

Before going into detailed discussion on the role of Turkey, it is necessary to understand their foreign policy. Despite some failures in foreign policy the AKP government continues to be popular in Turkey and across the globe. Turkey’s ruling party the AKP is concerned about their electoral success. This was possible not only for ideology but also country’s positive economic situation.

The Pillars of Turkish Foreign Policy

The Turkish foreign policy under the Erdogan is discussed in detail in the Zevenep Kosereisoglu article in 2013. Kosereisoglu (2013) stated that, there are three pillars of the Turkish foreign policy. First, Turkey is to act as “neutral arbiter” in the region as well as mediating their role in neighbors, regions and West. Second, the AKP’s emphasis on Turkey’s Islamic qualities is presented as a return to the roots of real Turkish identity. Third, Turkey is to retain, and even enhance its democratic character. It is one of the requirements of Turkey to make alliance with the West, especially integrate with the EU. After the AKP took over the state power in Turkey, it always showed highest solidarity with oppressed Muslim all over the world, including Palestine, Arakan and Somalia.

Turkish Aid to Rohingya Muslims

The Rakhine Buddhist atrocities against the Rohingya in mid-2012 were highlighted in world media. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan brought an agenda during the fast breaking event (August 2012) with foreign ambassador in Ankara. During that time, he urged to world community especially the United Nations to take swift action. It is not the case of Rohingya also one year before (2011), Turkey launched aid campaign for drought and famine in Somalia. The Premier of Turkey, Erdugan by himself started an aid campaign for the Rohingya Muslims. It was published as official gazette, “thousands of Muslims from Arakan are seeking
shelter as refugees in neighboring countries and are living in life-threatening conditions. Turkey will provide every possible assistance and support to the Muslims of Myanmar in the holy month of Ramadan, when feeling of social solidarity and cooperation become strong, in line with the expectations of the people. Therefore, an aid campaign has been launched by the Prime Minister of this end” (Today’s Zaman: 2012). This aid campaign conducted under the Prime Ministry’s Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate (hereafter AFAD). Special bank account also created to transfer the donations. As part of aid campaign, the AFAD has collected TL 3.4 million for Muslims in Myanmar (ibid).

Earlier it was mentioned that, Turkey is the first country who sent their Minister of Foreign Affairs and head of the government Erdogan’s wife and daughter to look at the aftermath of communal violence in Burma. The AKP government attention on Rohingya issue was reflected on their interview after visit in Arakan (officially called Rakhine State). Erdogan’s wife, Emine, said, “If a Muslim community was perpetrators such a massacre [rather than being the victim of it], how would the international community react? But I don’t hear anything now, do you? This is what is striking. We should pay attention to this” (cited in Today’s Zaman: 2012). It should be noted that, Turkish delegation also distributed food in the Rakhine Buddhist camp. It was not ended here; Turkey government continuously supported the humanitarian aid for internally displaced Muslims in Burma. Turkey and UNICEF agreed to send 1.82 million US Dollar for internally displaced people (Trend: 2014). This donation has planned to be used to provide clean water and to improve hygiene conditions for Rohingya Muslims who have been forced live within Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camps. The sum was collected through a humanitarian aid campaign for Rohingya Muslims organized by the Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate.

**The AKP government diplomatic initiative to the Rohingya**

The AKP led Turkish government had taken various diplomatic initiatives to protect the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Turkey is the main architect to form the Myanmar Contact Group on Rohingya under the OIC umbrella in 2012. The Myanmar Contact Group on Rohingya has several objectives; this group will organize Buddhist and Muslim communities’ dialogue, to provide humanitarian aid to the Rakhine state without making any distinctions between Muslims and Buddhists, and restore the Rohingyas citizenship in Myanmar. The members of the Contact
Group are Malaysia, Indonesia (two ASEAN countries), Turkey, Egypt, Djibouti, and Saudi Arabia.

As a neighbor, the pro-secular Bangladesh Awami League led government is very reluctant to take sides regarding the Rohingya crisis. For that reason, Bangladesh is not party to the Myanmar Contact Group on Rohingya, despite its central role regarding the crisis. The AKP government has been trying to build warm relations with the secular Awami League led government in Bangladesh to ensure the Turkish Red Crescent, TİKA and other Turkish relief agencies continue delivering humanitarian aid to the undocumented Rohingya refugee camps despite Bangladeshi authorities’ unwillingness.

Apart from this initiative, the Turkish Foreign Minister asked to the OIC take the lead role in the Rohingya crisis in foreign ministers level meeting. Ahmed Davutoğlu stated that, the Rohingya problem was not adequately addressed in the international arena. The violence against the Rohingya Muslims was state-sponsored and executed with impunity. The Myanmar government did not take any effective measures to protect the Rohingya Muslims. Moreover, the government nurtured anti-Muslim sentiments and promulgated various laws against the Muslims. In this context, the OIC should call the Myanmar government to be vigilant against the repetition and further spread of acts of violence targeting Muslims in the country to take all necessary steps to prevent the alienation of the Muslim and Buddhist communities. Turkey government is willing to be host of the Alliance of Civilizations, who can organize the dialogue between Buddhist and Muslims in Burma.

Simultaneously, Turkey emphasizes the bilateral treaties and legal foundation for Turkish investment in Burma. It may create more friendly space for Turkish government to work in Burma. It was started after Turkish Foreign Minister first visit in Burma on August 2012. During that visit, Turkish Minister Davutoğlu met with the Burmese President Thein Sein in their capital city Naypyidaw. As a concrete result, there was a decision to restore a cemetery of Ottoman POWs captured by the British military during WWI. The meeting also paved the way for further international aid towards Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist groups as well. Turkey had established an embassy in Yangon on 2012 (Colakoglu: 2013). The counterpart Myanmar government is going to open their embassy in Ankara very soon. The second time, Turkish Foreign Minister, Davutoğlu was accompanied by a delegation from the Myanmar Contact
Group led by OIC General Secretary Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, in his second time visit in Burma, remarked that “Turkey attaches great importance to enhancing its relations with Myanmar” (Trend: 2014). The Turkish International Development and Cooperation Agency (TIKA), the Turkish Red Crescent and the Anadolu agency are also expected to open their offices in Burma.

The most recent phenomenon is the Rohingya boat people crisis. Due to random oppressive policies of from the Myanmar Central and Rakhine State government, the Rohingyas have no choice but to leave their ancestral land. The Human Rights Watch and Fortify Rights clearly stated their various report that, IDP camps became recruiting center for traffickers. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the total number of boat people confirmed landed since May 4, hit 3,200. Reportedly 1,395 of them landed in Indonesia and 1,158 in Malaysia. Around 4,000 are still at sea awaiting rescue (Sabah: 2015). In this situation, the Prime Minister of Turkey announced that the Turkish navy ship was dispatched to the coast off Thailand and Malaysia where thousands of Rohingya Muslim were stranded at sea. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also pledged to provide $1 million dollars humanitarian aid to UNHCR and IOM to assist for this Rohingya boat people (Sabah: 2015). Above this discussion prove that, present Turkey government heart and soul trying to resolve long standing Rohingya crisis in Burma. For that reason, they are applying formal and informal diplomacy among the stakeholders of this crisis. Many cases, it was not success yet, but Turkish initiative is still carry on without any hesitation.

5. The Gulen Movement

The Gulen movement (sometimes called the Hizmat movement) is one of the wider networks among the Turkish Muslim in the world. This movement named after Fathullah Gulen, a Turkish Muslim spiritual leader currently in self-exile in the U.S., combines Islamic practice with such progressive values as tolerance, democracy, education and service. One of the major objectives of the Gulen Movement is to organize dialogue among the conflicting parties. The exile Rohingya leaders stated that, Gulen movement is trying to develop qualitative education system for protracted displaced Rohingyas in different countries (email conversations, February 2016). They provided scholarship to some Rohingya youth for higher studies in abroad and trying to arrange dialogue between Buddhists and Muslims in Burma.
6. Turkish NGO’s Humanitarian Work on the *De Jure* Stateless Rohingya

Besides from the government, many Turkish NGOs have been working for the oppressed Rohingya Muslim minority in Western part of Burma. The Turkish Red Crescent, IHH Humanitarian Aid Agency also launched aid campaign as Turkey was the largest relief supplier to Rohingya Muslims. While the United Nations Food Programme reduced their food supply, Turkish support provided hundreds of thousands of people who were starving to have a new life (Yenisafak: 2016). Turkish NGOs also provided full scholarships to the Rohingya students at various universities in Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep. Earlier, it was mentioned that, Turkish NGO’s have been working on undocumented Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh since many years.

7. Turkish Civil Societies Addressed the Rohingya Issue

The Turkish civil society groups strongly condemned the killing and discrimination against the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Human rights groups gathered in Ankara to make a common roadmap for Rohingyas. This group formed by the Civil Servant Trade Union, the Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Union and the Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People (Mazlumder). These organizations have strong commitment and wanted to do whatever is necessary to help Rohingya Muslims. The trade union groups donated TL 100,000 and trying to develop network among the OIC oriented civil society members (*Today’s Zaman*: 2012).

The Turkish efforts are highly appreciated by the Rohingya and other ethnic Muslims leaders in Burma (email conversation with Nurul Islam, President of Arakan Rohingya National Organization and U Tahay, President Union National Development Party, February 2016). As a result, now the Turkey became hub of the Rohingya solidarity movement. Turkey has recently opened the first center specializing in supporting Rohingya Muslims under the name of “Rohingya Muslims Association for Support”. The objectives of this center are to accommodate different humanitarian associations and institutions those are interested in providing logistic, material and moral support for the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. President of the Global Rohingya Center (GRC) Abdullah Maruf stated in Istanbul, it is positive step towards resolving
the issue and alleviate the sufferings of Rohingya Muslims and thanks to the Turkish government to hosted this center in their country (GRC:2015).

A delegation of Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU) led by Director General Dr. Wakar Uddin paid a visit to Turkey at the invitation of former Secretary General of OIC, Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs (DIYANET), and Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Wakar Uddin and his community leaders gave a brief ongoing violence against the Rohingya people and the activities of ARU carried out in various sectors in the international arena. Ekmeleddin expressed his dismay at the apparent lack of progress in stopping the violence against the Rohingya and Muslim population in Burma and concerned that the continuation of such critical situation in Arakan may fuel more instability (GRC: 2015). Subsequently, ARU delegation visited the headquarters of DIYANET (Ministry of Religious Affairs) in Ankara. The president of DIYANET expressed his deep sympathy on Rohingya and assured the delegation that his office is fully dedicated to welfare and development of Rohingya and other ethnic Muslim minorities in Burma.

8. Conclusion:

In conclusion, various reports and conversations with Rohingya leaders and data, suggest that the ethnic minority Rohingya Muslims have had a long presence in Arakan from their independent kingdom period. Before militarization, Rohingyas had a strong presence in government. The situation became worse for Rohingyas after the mid-2012 communal riots. The international community, especially ASEAN, has repeatedly failed to address the Rohingya Muslims’ plight. This failure is inconsistent with the spirit of ASEAN and its vision, one identity and one community and the desire to show collective solidarity, compassion and the will to help each other. In this context, the AKP led Turkish government played vital role for stateless Rohingyas in Burma. The whole discussion proved that that AKP government takes various initiatives to stop violence against the Rohingya as well as provide significant humanitarian aid after the UN. This article found that, this was possible due to AKP government’s foreign policy and commitment to the oppressed Muslims. Therefore, Turkey is now the pivotal place for Rohingya’s institutional and material supports. Due to Turkish diplomacy, the present Bangladesh government allowed the aid agencies to work for undocumented Rohingya refugees. The OIC formed Rohingya Contact Group in Myanmar is another contribution of Turkish
diplomacy. This group has close contact with Myanmar government through their two ASEAN members (Malaysia and Indonesia). Apart from government, Turkish civil societies raise their voice and try to enhance their network among the Muslims countries to work for the Rohingya.

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