



Conflict Analysis with a peace perspective:

Myanmar

WHERE? In which country/region is the conflict taking place?

Myanmar, South-East Asia



*Image 1 Location of Rakhine State in Myanmar, Status: 2010
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*Image 2 Location map of Myanmar
Myanmar: The World Factbook 2021*

WHO? Which parties are involved in the conflict?

In Myanmar there is a key line of conflict between the military government which came to power in a coup in 2021 and civil democratic groups. In addition, there continue to be armed conflicts between minorities (many of which also have their own armies) and the government troops. One area which is especially affected by the conflict is Rakhine State in the west. The Muslim Rohingya minority is suffering violent persecution at the hand of the military. Many people are fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh. Also, there continue to be violent incidents within civil society between the Buddhist majority population and the Muslim minority. The



conflicts are primarily internal. Since many Rohingya are fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh the conflict has attracted significant international attention. Until now other states have been holding back.

WHEN? What are the key events in the conflict?

1948: Independence of Burma from the United Kingdom

Armed conflicts continued to take place in the country since its independence, in which different ethnic minorities fought for more autonomy and political participation. Many people did not feel they were adequately represented in the newly established country.

1982: Citizenship law with 135 recognised ethnicities

In 1978, the systematic persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority had already begun. At that time, the military junta had already expelled around 250,000 people. In 1982, Burma passed a new citizenship law which only recognised 135 ethnicities and thus made the Rohingya stateless.

1990: Democratic elections, military coup and expulsion of the Rohingya

Although the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election, the party was declared invalid by the military regime. As in the past, peaceful protests were violently suppressed and the regime remained in power. Continuing military operations against the Rohingya forced them to flee again.

2016: NLD became the party in government, escalation of violence in Rakhine State

Violence had been escalating in Rakhine state after the establishment of a "Rohingya liberation army" which claimed to represent the Muslim Rohingya. There were violent clashes between government troops, as well as the majority Buddhist population, and the Muslim Rohingya. The United Nations described the actions of government troops as "ethnic cleansing", i.e. systematic persecution and extermination of members of other ethnic groups.



2021: Military coup

Following the victory of the NLD in the parliamentary elections of 2020, it was accused of electoral fraud by the army. In February 2021, there was another military coup and the leaders of the NLD were arrested. The army then declared a nationwide state of emergency. Since the coup, there has been further widespread violence. The military regime is cracking down hard on its critics and significantly restricting press freedom.

2021/22: Since the coup, violence spreads even further. The population protests with rallies, civil disobedience and strikes. The military regime is cracking down on critics.

2023: In March, the military junta dissolves the NLD (National League for Democracy) party, claiming it had not re-registered as required. The NLD announces that it will not take action against the dissolution. A total of 40 political parties are dissolved.

HOW? What means are used in the conflict?

Military regime and government troops

- Severe human rights violations, ethnic cleansing
- Military violence against minorities (especially the Rohingya, but also Christian minorities such as the Karen)
- Expulsion of around 1 million Rohingyas to Bangladesh
- Systematic discrimination against minorities (e.g. denial of citizenship for Rohingya and birth control)
- State violence against the civil democratic movement: arrests
- Strict controls in civil society: restriction of freedom of expression and freedom of the press



Various armed groups of ethnic minorities (including the Kachin Independence Army, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, Karen National Liberation Army)

- Attacks on state structures such as the police or military installations
- Racketeering: some involvement in the drug economy and human trafficking

WHY? How can the conflict be explained?

The struggle for a political voice in Myanmar, an ethnically diverse country (power-based explanation)

Shortly after independence, there were already disputes, especially in areas inhabited by minorities, over political participation and autonomy. Many minorities did not consider themselves to be represented in the newly established country, Burma, and sought political independence. The idea of a centralised state with the Army as the most powerful player was not compatible with reality, specifically the country's diverse ethnic groups. Thus, in Rakhine State, Buddhist/nationalist groups were fighting for independence, in the north, ethnic groups fighting against government troops included the Kachin, the Karen and the Shan. Parallel state structures emerged, especially in remote areas such as the mountainous north. Federalism was considered dangerous both by military governments and by the democratically elected government – the Rohingya, for example, continue to be discriminated against and persecuted by the state during the civil government. They are not recognised as an official minority and are considered as stateless in their own home. They are also forbidden from having more than two children due to concerns about a growing Muslim population.

Systematic suppression of the Muslim Rohingya minority (cultural explanation)

Throughout Myanmar, minorities have been systematically oppressed and discriminated against, both Christian minorities such as the Karen in the north and Muslim Rohingya minority in the north-west. Discrimination against the Rohingya is especially violent, and may also be understood as a consequence of the colonial past. After the withdrawal of British occupation and the Japanese invasion, violence increased considerably in Rakhine State between the



Buddhist and the Muslim populations. There were continued violent attacks against the Rohingyas by the majority Buddhist population, who felt threatened by the Muslim minority. In 2012, violence escalated, e.g., even Buddhist monks were inciting violence against Muslim Rohingyas.

POTENTIAL FOR PEACE

Which peace initiatives have already been implemented?

International: Condemnation of violence against the Rohingya and appointment of a UN special envoy

Kofi Annan, former UN General Secretary, was the Chair of an international commission whose brief was to guarantee the social and economic wellbeing of the majority Buddhist population and the Rohingya. On the day the report was published, there were outbreaks of violence again between both population groups, resulting in the mass expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, and thus, a humanitarian crisis. As a result of China and Russia's veto, the UN Security Council remained powerless. Due to increasing international pressure, the civil government of the time led by Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to implement the demands of the commission. However, these demands were not ultimately implemented. Moreover, in 2018 the United Nations appointed a Special Rapporteur to oversee the human rights situation.

International: Investigation of crimes by the International Criminal Court

Since 2018, there have been preliminary investigations against Myanmar. However, as Myanmar is not a state party to the International Criminal Court, the only crimes that can be investigated are those that relate to Bangladesh (which is a state party to the ICC). Due to lack of cooperation on the part of Myanmar, it can be assumed that those responsible for crimes will not be sentenced.



International: Sanctions and suspension of development aid funds

After the military coup of 2021, the EU imposed sanctions against the military and military-controlled companies. Moreover, Germany reduced its development aid due to the violent expulsion of the Muslim Rohingya.

What kind of approaches to peace are currently under discussion?

Resocialisation of the displaced Rohingya to Myanmar

There is still discussion regarding bringing the Rohingya back to Myanmar, many of whom are in overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh. However, as they are still considered to be stateless, they live in fear of oppression and re-expulsion there too. The Rohingya's status as stateless is especially traumatic as no country feels responsible for their welfare.

Civil society initiatives such as the civil disobedience movement

The Civil Disobedience Alliance, the largest protest movement in the country, calls for a refusal to work. As freedom of the press and freedom of assembly are, however, severely restricted, there are increasingly fewer possibilities for action by civil society. People continue to be arrested or their options for freedom of expression limited, e.g. by blocking social media accounts.



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Images

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Image 2: The World Factbook 2021. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021. Available online: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/locator-map> (18.08.2022).