

INTRA-ASEAN TIES A KEY FACTOR

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Rohingya crisis at a crucial point for Myanmar's leaders

Myanmar's crackdown on the Rohingya in Rakhine state has been roundly condemned around the world, including by its neighbours in South-east Asia.

The issue could have serious implications for Myanmar's socio-economic outlook and, more critically, increase the risk of religion affecting interstate ties in Asean (the Association of South-east Asian Nations).

While the new government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi faces its toughest challenge yet, there is hope if the country changes course now.

It is ironic that a nation lauded for its smooth transition to civilian rule in 2015 after decades of military dictatorship is now making international headlines for all the wrong reasons. But Myanmar's marginalisation of the Rohingya goes back several decades.

What is perhaps different now is the heightened regional sensitivities towards the persecution of a Muslim minority and what this portends for relations between Myanmar and its closest neighbours, as well as the threat of international terrorism.

Muslim groups in Indonesia and Malaysia have mounted protests against Myanmar in recent weeks, going as far as calling on Jakarta and Putrajaya to sever diplomatic ties with Naypyidaw.

Worryingly, one of the groups pushing for this is the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

FPI was responsible for rallying hundreds of thousands of Indonesians in massive street protests earlier this year against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known by his Hakka nickname, Ahok.

Ahok's crime was blasphemy, but many believe he might not have been convicted if FPI and other Islamist groups had not played up the issue and stirred up raw sensitivities over religion. The Joko "Jokowi" Widodo administration was put in a tight spot, and the danger now is of FPI doing the same thing with the Rohingya issue.

Early this month, President Jokowi called a press conference on a Sunday to deplore the violence against the Rohingya and to announce that he was despatching his foreign minister to meet Ms Suu Kyi.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak had also made known that he had raised the issue with United States President Donald Trump dur-



Rohingya on their way to a refugee camp in Bangladesh on Sunday. The current situation could lead to spillover effects to special economic zones where Thailand, Japan and China have invested billions. PHOTO: REUTERS

ing his much-published trip to Washington DC.

The Malaysian Foreign Ministry has also summoned the Myanmar Ambassador in Kuala Lumpur to express displeasure over its treatment of the Rohingya. For Mr Najib and Mr Widodo, it is clear they cannot risk upsetting key Muslim vote banks as they head to the polls in the next one to two years. We can therefore expect Malaysian and Indonesian leaders to continue to speak out against Myanmar on the Rohingya issue.

The unusually harsh criticism of the Myanmar government by Malaysian Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at an Asean meeting in Manila last week is a case in point.

Yet it is important for the governments in the region to guard against allowing the issue to be defined solely as a religious one. This will only whip up base emotions and feed into the narrative of hardline groups, which will in turn put more pressure on political leaders, resulting in a vicious cycle.

There can be no winner when religion consumes intra-state relations. Already, there are signs of cracks in Asean over the issue, with Malaysia coming out over the weekend to disassociate itself from an Asean statement on the crisis, which Putrajaya had deemed to be too soft.

For Myanmar, the fallout could set back years of efforts in Asean to

manage its integration into the grouping, and could also be damaging for its economy and efforts at promoting growth. Ms Suu Kyi has her work cut out for her, given how she appears to receive domestic support for her stance on the Rohingya issue despite international criticism.

Myanmar may be home to more than 135 official recognised ethnic groups, but the Rohingya were removed from this list in 1982. A reversal of this may seem too much to ask for, but if Ms Suu Kyi's government and the military could negotiate a peaceful transition for the Rohingya, this would create pivotal changes to the country's future trajectory.

Citing a historical example: Consider the treatment of the aboriginals in Australia, who started settling there years before British colonisation in 1788. For more than two centuries, the conflict between two sides was at an impasse, with the contested area by both defined as no man's land or terra nullius, a Latin expression that means "land belonging to no one".

It was not until 1992 that the High Court of Australia ruled that there had never been terra nullius, and that settlers should work out ways to live together with the aboriginals.

The aboriginals won over the British claims and maintained their indigenous land rights. The ruling marked the start of a major cultural phe-

nomena in Australia, as the country confronted some of its most difficult challenges on race, as the rights of the aboriginals were not acknowledged before the court ruling. This issue continues to be a struggle of reconciliation, but is nevertheless a breakthrough in enabling social change.

Creating social change could involve propositions of power and love.

Adam Kahane in his book *Power and Love* has the theory that love without power equals a good connection that is impotent. In the same spectrum, power without love is said to result in "reckless and abusive" actions. Therefore, a reconciliation of power and love in practice would provide the most balanced effect. Whatever the theory is, if the current conflict continues, this will inevitably destabilise the peace and security of Rakhine.

The state holds much significance for Myanmar's business interests, especially in its coastal areas, where interests revolve around the construction of infrastructure and pipelines in the region. Such strategic projects provide local employment and revenue opportunities that, in turn, determine its economic growth and trade between China and India.

If the situation worsens, there could be spillover effects to the special economic zones of Dawei, Thilawa and Kyauk Phyu, areas where Thailand, Japan and China have committed billions towards infrastructure development.

Put together, the risks of destabilisation could increase, and will most likely do so, not to mention the country losing international investor confidence quickly in a matter of months should this situation continue.

But all is not lost. If bold steps are taken to rectify the crisis of confidence by narrowing the vulnerability gaps of the Rohingya and reducing any sort of violence, this will signal the first steps to peace and dignity building.

In the end, this must be a choice that Myanmar leaders must live with for decades. Similarly, more empathy should be given to Myanmar's leadership and its people. Time can heal most things, but lives cannot be taken for granted. As economist John Maynard Keynes put it: "The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds."

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