

Fostering Inclusive Political Participation in Myanmar: Challenges and Opportunities for Muslim Minorities



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Contents

Abbreviations	6
List of Glossary	7
Executive Summary	8
Introduction	10
Research Objectives	12
Significance of the Study	12
Presentation of the report	13
Defining Political Participation	14
Literature Review	14
The Historical Context and Evolution of Political Participation in Burma .	15
Political Participation of Muslim Women	20
Electoral Participation of Muslims After 2010	25
Participation of Muslims in the Peace Process	26
Methodology	27
Finding	33
(A) Identity Crisis	33
(B) Societal discrimination	42
(C) Democracy, meaningful participation, and prevention of violence .	45
Challenges from Within	52
(D) The Current Political Landscape	57
(E) Struggle for opportunities	60
Conclusion	66
Policy Recommendation	67
References	71

Abbreviations

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
BDA	Burma Defense Army
BMC	Burma Muslim Congress
BMWO	Burma Muslim Women Organization
CRPH	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
CSC	Citizenship Scrutiny Card
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations (The term which the successive Myanmar governments called Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations)
EROs	Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations
FDC	Federal Democracy Charter
GCBMA	General Council of Burma Muslim Association
NGOs	Non-government Organizations
NLD	National League for Democracy
NRC	National Registration Card
NUG	National Unity Government
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
PDFs	People Defence Forces
RNDP	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
SAC	State Administration Council
UN	United Nations
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party: the military-backed party, formed by former military generals

List of Glossary

- “**Bagan Kingdom**” is the first Kingdom in Burma’s history which emerge at central Burma, lasted from A.D 849 to A.D 1297.
- “**Burmese Muslim**” refers to all Muslims in Independent Burma who are citizens according to BMC’s definition.
- “**Cholia**” is an ethnic name of Indian descendent Muslims originating from Southern India.
- “**Hadith**” is one of the main Islamic Teachings which is the documentation of Prophet Muhammed’s teachings and sermons
- “**Kalar**” is a derogatory term or a racial slur, used against the Muslims, Hindus ,Nepalies,etc in this era.
- “**Mixed-Blood**” is the term used by Immigration Department upon Muslims, Hindus, Indian descendants, Chinese descendants to discriminate in citizenship and other identity documentation processes.
- “**Pathi**” is one of the ethnic identities of Muslims residing in Burma Kingdoms, called officially by Burmese Kings.
- “**Sunni**” is one of the two main Islamic sects, followed by majority of Muslims.
- “**Shia**” is the of the two main Islamic sects, followed by minority of Muslims
- “**Sufism**” is an Islamic sect, followed by many Muslims who mostly follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammed and his descendants and Saints(Sufi).
- “**Urdu**” is one of the Indian languages which spreadly used among Indian Muslims in Northern India.
- “**Zerbadee**” refers to the offspring of mixed marriages between Indian Muslim men and Burmese Buddhist women. The term “Zerbadee” first appeared officially in the population census of Burma in 1891.

Executive Summary

The research focuses on the complex dynamics of political participation among Muslim minorities in Myanmar, exploring the evolution of their political participation from historical times to the shifting landscape following the 2021 military coup. This study examines the historical, social, and political barriers that have long influenced the meaningful participation of Muslim communities in the country's political processes. Through an extensive literature review, historical analysis, and qualitative interviews with 68 diverse participants who are both Muslims and non-Muslims, the study highlights the systemic exclusion and identity crises that influence meaningful participation. The research identified the challenges to political engagement and proposed strategies for fostering inclusive political environments by dealing with 5 main themes: identity and recognition, societal discrimination, communal violence, current political situation, and the way forward for Muslims in Myanmar.

1. Ethnic status remains central to political participation in Myanmar, and Muslims are facing an internal identity struggle characterized by differing standpoints and a lack of recognition by both the state and society. This identity crisis, shaped by historical contexts and current dynamics, presents a significant challenge for Muslims as they attempt to participate in the political process, and their collective rights are blurred in contrast to National races within the current frameworks.

2. The pervasive legal and societal discrimination against Muslims in Myanmar further exacerbates this identity crisis. These discriminatory practices not only marginalize Muslims in the political sphere but also unite them through a shared experience of struggle, despite their internal conflicts.

3. The communal violence during the semi-democratic era of 2010-2020 highlights the deep-seated Burmese Buddhist nationalism and the failure of institutional designs to prevent violence, even with the limited numbers of Muslim representation in U Thein Sein's government. This period underscores the inadequacy of democracy alone in addressing the discrimination and violence faced by Muslims in Burma.

4. The political landscape in Myanmar has undergone dramatic changes, with a bottom-up approach to federalism beginning to take shape. However, Muslims in Myanmar continue to struggle with longstanding issues while attempting to participate in the new frameworks. Although opportunities for political inclusion are emerging, significant barriers remain, hindering their full participation.

The research recommends implementing gradual political reforms that shift the focus from ethnic identity to citizenship, recognizing the identity of every individual. It advocates for intensive negotiations with various ethnic communities to build consensus on a new citizenship law, which would be more inclusive and reflective of Myanmar's diverse population. Additionally, the research calls for the opening of political spaces for Muslim minorities in both regional and central political processes. Comprehensive recommendations are provided for each stakeholder group to enhance the political participation of Muslims in Myanmar, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights are protected in the evolving political landscape.

Introduction

Myanmar has passed through critical political transitions in recent years, deeply affecting its social and governance structures. In February 2021, the military coup played a critical disruptive role against the fragile advances of democratization that the country was experiencing, with the entry of new political actors and stakeholders into the already complicated picture of politics in the nation. Within this framework, the Muslim minority communities in Myanmar are at this crossroad, dealing with old challenges and the newly arising dynamics of power and exclusion.

The extensive body of literature on Rohingya Muslims and Burmese Muslims has thoroughly examined various aspects of their identity, historical backgrounds, and the conflicts and violence that have marked their existence in Myanmar. Notable works include (Lee, 2021), who explored the identity aspects and statelessness of Rohingya Muslims leading to genocide; (Swazo et al., 2022), who assessed the moral and philosophical issues of the Rohingya; and (Yegar, 1972,), who provided comprehensive historical accounts on the Muslims of Myanmar.

Muslim minority communities in Myanmar are at this crossroad, dealing with old challenges and the newly arising dynamics of power and exclusion.

Additionally, research focusing on the Burmese Muslim community highlights the complexity and construction of their identities. (Ayako, 2014,) investigated the indigenous claims of Myanmar Muslims, while (Kyaw, 2015,50-59) explored the categorization and systemic alienation of Muslims in Myanmar. From various challenges faced by unofficial minorities in Myanmar, (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023,) explored different aspects of Human rights, health, asset and financial inclusion, gender, and local governance.

Despite the diverse and detailed exploration of historical, identity, and discrimination issues, as well as the communal violence culminating in genocide (Kipgen, 2013, 234-247), there remains a significant research gap. Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth studies on the political participation of the various Muslim communities in Myanmar. This gap is critical as political participation is a vital aspect of addressing the socio-political marginalization faced by these communities.

Understanding the challenges and opportunities for meaningful political participation of Muslims in Myanmar is essential for developing comprehensive strategies to promote their integration and representation in the political sphere. Addressing this gap will provide insights into the structural barriers and potential pathways for enhancing the political inclusion of Muslim communities, thereby contributing to broader efforts toward social justice and equity in Myanmar. This research fills the gap by exploring the issues of identity, societal discrimination, and communal violence in the eyes of political participation. Moreover, navigating the current political situations in the interviews with participants from different backgrounds revealed the possible ways forward for Muslim communities in Myanmar.

The research aspires to contribute to the creation of a political framework that embraces diversity and promotes equal participation for all citizens.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to identify and analyze the underlying challenges that hinder the participation of Muslim minorities in the political process of Myanmar. By thoroughly examining these obstacles, this study aims to develop strategies that can foster a more inclusive political environment in Myanmar. In addition, this research seeks to explore and recommend initiatives for inclusive policies that ensure Muslim minorities achieve substantive equality in all sectors, including government institutions. Through this comprehensive approach, the research aspires to contribute to the creation of a political framework that embraces diversity and promotes equal participation for all citizens.

Significance of the Study

Understanding these dynamics is a must for developing informed and operative inclusive policies that encourage democracy in Myanmar. It creates a good foundation from which policymakers, advocacy groups, and international organizations can better address the problems faced by the Muslim minorities within Myanmar. It cultivates a more inclusive political dialogue that respects and involves all the diverse identities of the country without any barriers concerning identities.

Presentation of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of the available literature, with a focus on previous studies and the identification of gaps in current knowledge. Following that is the methodology section, which will explain the process of collecting and analyzing data. The subsequent sections will present the findings, discuss the findings, and conclude with specific recommendations for future policy and research.

Literature Review

Defining Political Participation

“Citizen participation is at the heart of democracy. Indeed, democracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely in the governing process” (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995).

Democratic theorists, following Rousseau, have either advanced or accepted that a proper system of government without opportunities for political participation by ordinary citizens is unlikely to consolidate as democracy (Birch, 2007). Even the most basic definition of democracy supports the notion of political participation as a fundamental part of it (Kaase & Marsh, 1979). The classic study of Verba mentioned that political participation includes a broad range of behaviors directed toward influencing the political scene. Beyond voting and standing for office, political participation can include joining a local or issue-specific action group, volunteering to support a political campaign, writing to a Member of Parliament or raising funds for a political campaign (Verba et al, 1995). This study will use the definition of political participation, by (Ekman and Amnå, 2012) as “actions directed toward influencing governmental decisions and political outcomes”.

The Historical Context and Evolution of Political Participation in Burma

In the Burmese context, the idea of political participation has evolved significantly.

Pre-Colonial Period

In the kingdoms of Burma, political participation often meant service in the royal administration or military, where Muslims notably held positions that influenced governance and policy.

Colonial Period

The introduction of British administrative structures transformed the political landscape, offering new forms of participation while also realigning power dynamics. During this period, political participation expanded to include engagement in colonial governance, anti-colonial movements, and emerging political parties.

Post-Independence Period

After the 1948–1962 military coup, political participation could be defined as voting rights, participation in governance, organizing the association, and involvement in political parties.

Military Regime Period (1962- 2010)

During the military regime that dominated Burma from 1962 to 2010, political participation was highly restricted and tightly controlled by the ruling junta. For most citizens, especially for ethnic and religious minorities like Muslims, political participation did not include conventional democratic mechanisms such as voting, standing for elections, or openly expressing dissent against the government. Instead, political participation took on involvement in the various democratic struggle movements from 1962 to the 2007 saffron revolution.

Semi-democratic Era (2010 - Before 2021 Coup)

This era saw the reintroduction of general elections, which were held in 2010, 2015, and 2020. The political landscape became somewhat pluralistic, allowing for the formation of new political parties and civil society organizations. Muslims and other minorities participated more actively in the elections, both as voters and, to a limited extent, as candidates.

After the 2021 Coup

Political participation has transformed significantly, with many citizens, including Muslims, participating in widespread civil disobedience movements (CDM) and protests against the military junta. Participation has become more about resistance than engagement with formal political processes.

The History of Muslims in Burma

The history of Muslims in Burma is rich and complex, characterized by periods of migration, integration, and conflict. This review synthesizes historical accounts and scholarly studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the Muslim presence in Burma from the earliest settlements to the colonial era and through to modern times.

Early Settlements

The roots of Muslim communities in Burma trace back to the days of the Bagan Kingdom when Arab, Persian, Chinese, and Indian traders first made contact with the region. These early Muslim settlers played pivotal roles as traders and were instrumental in the establishment of Islam in the coastal areas of Burma. Over time, these communities grew, especially around major trading ports, integrating into the local socio-economic structures (Yegar, Moshe).

The Colonial Impact

The British annexation of Burma in the 19th century marked a significant turning point for the Muslim population. During this period, there was substantial immigration of Indian Muslims facilitated by the British administrative policies, which integrated Burma into the Indian Empire. This migration had profound effects on the demographic and socio-economic landscape of Burma, significantly increasing the Muslim population, especially Indian Muslims. This migration in history is one of the reasons behind the formation of the “Burmese Muslim” identity (Lay, 1998, 94-100).

Communal Tensions and Formation of “Burmese Muslim” Identity

The increase in the Indian Muslim population during the colonial era led to heightened ethnic and religious tensions. Notably, the 1930s saw the rise of communal violence triggered by economic competition and cultural differences between the Burmese and Indian migrants. This period also marked the beginning of a more pronounced identity crisis among the mixed “Zerbardees”¹, who were culturally Burmese but religiously Muslim. The tension was further intensified by intermarriages and the resulting socio-cultural integration issues, highlighting the complex dynamics of identity and belonging in colonial Burma (Yegar, Moshe).

The internal relationship between Indian migrant Muslims and Muslims who have lived in the country for years is an integral point in understanding the formation of the “Burmese Muslim” identity and the subsequent rise of various “Burmese Muslim” political organizations, from the GCBMA (General Council of Burma Muslim Associations) to the Burma Muslim Congress.

The Burmese nationalist movement, which emphasizes Burmeseness and Buddhism, is the core ideology of the independence movement. Most Burmese people harbor hostility toward Indian migrants (both Muslims and Hindus) due to the perceived political oppression by the elite groups of

¹ The term “Zerbadee” refers to the offspring of mixed marriages between Indian Muslim men and Burmese Buddhist women. The term “Zerbadee” first appeared officially in the population census of Burma in 1891.

Indian migrants and competition in the economic and labor markets. The colonial governments benefit from promoting “Hate” between these two communities for divide and rule political gain.

For the Burmese Buddhist community, assuming that all Muslims in the country are “Kalar” has contributed to a rise in violence against the Muslim population, significantly impacting the Burmese Muslim community. This situation, combined with cultural differences between the Burmese Muslim community and Indian Muslim migrants—from dress codes to disputes over whether to teach Urdu

in schools—led to the construction of a distinct “Burmese Muslim” identity. This identity underscores that they are not Indians and that they will fight for freedom alongside the Burmese Buddhist people (Lay, 1998, 94-100).

Identity Formation and Politics of the Burma Muslim Congress

The Burma Muslim Congress (BMC) defines Burmese Muslims as all Muslims in independent Burma who are citizens according to the 1947 Constitution. The BMC stated that one reason behind denying minority rights to Burmese Muslims in 1946, by asserting their rights as part of the majority Burmese population, was to stabilize the country as it neared independence. The BMC believed that by affiliating with the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), they could negotiate and implement policies promised to Burmese Muslims since the AFPFL controlled both the parliament and the cabinet. Thus, politically, it was more advantageous to

Burmese Muslim identity underscores that they are not Indians and that they will fight for freedom alongside the Burmese Buddhist people (Lay, 1998, 94-100).

align with the AFPFL rather than claiming a minority position. Despite some leaders of the Burmese Muslim community urging the BMC to negotiate with the AFPFL to legally recognize the “Burmese Muslim” identity, the BMC preferred to recognize “Islam” under the broader Burmese identity, viewing it as no different. The BMC’s political goals were primarily focused on securing citizenship rights for Burmese Muslims (Burma Muslim Congress Headquarters, 1950).

Political Participation of Burmese Muslims in the Post-Independence Era

Under Prime Minister U Nu’s government, some Muslims managed to attain notable positions, including ministerial roles between 1948 and 1962.² Muslims also had the right to participate in the constitutional drafting process of Independent Burma’s first constitution in 1947 (Lay, 1998). However, the overall political environment became hostile, especially after 1956, and their participation was limited compared to the pre-independence period.

After the 1962 coup, Burmese Muslims faced increasing restrictions on their political movements. The coup marked the end of significant political participation for all minorities, including Muslims, as the new regime sought to centralize power and suppress minority movements.

The BMC believed that by affiliating with the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), they could negotiate and implement policies promised to Burmese Muslims since the AFPFL controlled both the parliament and the cabinet.

2 U Khin Mg Latt (Minister, Ministry of Justice), U Rachid (Minister, Ministry of Housing and Labor (1952) , Minister for trade and development (1954) , Minister of Mines (1956) , Minister of Commerce and industry (1960)

Political Participation of Muslim Women

During the Burmese Muslims' political movement in the pre- and post-Independence Era, Muslim women played a crucial role by actively participating both individually and through associations within various Muslim political organizations like the Burma Muslim Renaissance Organization and Burma Muslim Congress. Their involvement extended beyond these Muslim-specific groups to mainstream political organizations such as the Asia Youth Association, Doe Bamar Association, and AFPFL, where they fought for Burma's independence. The formation of the Burma Muslim Women Renaissance Organization in 1939, during the first Assembly of the Burma Muslim Renaissance Organization in Taungoo, marked a significant step toward addressing the social and cultural inequalities faced by Burmese Muslim women (Min Naing, 2011). This organization sought to empower women to actively engage in the independence movement, promote self-identification, and challenge the oppression perpetuated by foreign capitalists (Lay, 1998).

Additionally, the Burma Muslim Women Nursing Organization, formed by progressive women from the Burma Muslim Women Renaissance Organization, played a vital role during WWII by caring for injured patients. Following the war, the anti-fascist movement continued, with the Burma Muslim community forming the Burma Muslim Congress (BMC) in 1945. Muslim women activists were instrumental in establishing the Burma Muslim Women Organization in 1946, encouraging women's political participation under the BMC's agenda. Despite their active involvement and notable executive roles in these organizations, Muslim women were not appointed or elected to top leadership positions, reflecting the ongoing challenges of gender inequality within these movements.

In the Myanmar Political dynamics, the political participation of Burmese Muslims is not complete with the participation of Muslim women. However, the highest, notable position of Muslim women in Myanmar politics is that of a member of parliament. There were two Muslim women MPs in both parliaments (Upper and Lower Hluttaw) during the first democratic era of Burma from 1948 to 1962. Daw Saw Shwe, the founding member and chairperson of the Burma Muslim Women Organization, was elected as a

member of parliament from 1947 to the 1960s. After the National Assembly, she participated in the Constitutional drafting committee as a member of the natural rights sub-committee (Lay, 1998) and played a vital role in demanding women's rights and basic principles to be added to the Constitution (Min Naing, 2011)³. Another Muslim Women MP is Zura Begum @ Daw Aye Nyunt from Arakan State. She was elected from the Maungdaw constituency ② at the 1951 Election of Burma along with her father, a veteran politician and former parliamentarian U Pho Khine from the Akyab (Sittwe) constituency, and her husband Sultan Ahmed from the Maungdaw constituency (1) (News and Analysis of the Arakan Rohingya National Organization, Arakan (Burma), 2009). During the Independence movement, she participated in the Doe Bamar Association, and she worked as intelligence for the BDA(Burma Defense Army) in the sector of the armed struggle for independence (Aung Zaw, n.d). Another famous Muslim woman who was notable for independence is Daw Pu, also known as Hajima Pyinmana Daw Pu. She was a famous merchant and worked as a chairperson for the Asia Youth Association of Pyinmana township during the Independence movement. During the post-independence Era, she participated in the economic sector of Burma and made many contributions to Burmese society. However, the participation of Muslim women in the political process was also limited after the 1962 military coup as all the minorities were suppressed by centralization, Burmanization, and military dictatorship.

Despite their active involvement and notable executive roles in these organizations, Muslim women were not appointed or elected to top leadership positions, reflecting the ongoing challenges of gender inequality within these movements.

3 According to her great-grandniece, Dr Daw May Yu's speech during Daw Saw Shwe's 118 years Celebration organized by Islamic Academic Center

Arakan Muslims in the Colonial Period

The British colonial administration significantly influenced the socio-political dynamics in Arakan. The migration of Indian Muslims, encouraged by British policies, led to an increased Muslim population, particularly in northern Arakan. This migration was driven by economic opportunities in agriculture and trade, reshaping the demographic landscape of the region. (Moshe Yegar) Political engagement during the colonial period included roles in local governance and participation in the administration. Arakan Muslims, benefiting from British inclusion policies, held various administrative and civil positions. The economic and social tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan were exacerbated by competition and cultural differences. During World War II, the region witnessed significant communal violence, with atrocities committed by both sides. This period of conflict deeply entrenched the divisions between the communities.

Arakan Muslims in the Post-Independent Era

After Burma's independence in 1948, the political landscape changed drastically for the Arakan Muslims. The newly formed government, dominated by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), replaced many Muslim officials with Arakanese Buddhists, exacerbating feelings of marginalization and leading to acts of resistance by the Muslims.

The Mujahid Rebellion in northern Arakan was a direct response to these policies. The Arakan Muslims, driven by both political and religious motivations, sought to create an independent Muslim state or annex the region to Pakistan. This rebellion was marked by significant violence and was a clear manifestation of the political discontent among the Arakan Muslims.

The Burmese government conducted military operations against the Mujahideen, leading to prolonged conflicts. Despite occasional negotiations, the conflict persisted, reflecting the deep-seated political and social issues in the region (Moshe Yegar). The Mujahid movement significantly influenced the political dynamics in northern Arakan. Emerging in the late 1940s, the movement represented the aspirations and grievances of the Rohingya Muslims.

Post-Independence Challenges and the Modern Era

After gaining independence in 1948, Burma faced numerous challenges in integrating its diverse populations. Muslims, in particular, found themselves navigating a landscape marked by nationalist policies and sporadic outbreaks of religiously motivated violence. The situation for Muslim communities, especially for the Rohingya in the Rakhine state, deteriorated significantly over the decades, culminating in the 2017 military crackdown, which led to genocide and a massive refugee crisis.

Diverse Muslim Communities in Contemporary Myanmar

Today, Muslim communities in Burma are diverse, comprising Burmese Muslims in central Burma, Chinese-Muslim Panthay in the North who migrated from Yunnan Province of China, Kaman Muslims in southern Arakan, and generations of Indian descendant Muslim migrants spread across the country, and Rohingya. It is estimated that Muslims constitute around 4.3% of the total population in Burma according to the 2014 census. Although it is well known that there are diverse communities of Muslims in Burma, there is a gap in the literature on the differing identity of communities and a lack of census data identifying the data of these different groups. Each group has a unique history and faces distinct challenges in a country where Buddhism is the dominant religion and where ethnic and religious nationalism have often influenced political and social policies.

Analysis of the Census Data

1931 Census

Under British colonial rule, the classification of Muslims largely depended on their origins and perceived racial identities, as indicated by categories like “Indians born in Burma,” “Indians born outside Burma,” and “Indo-Burman Races.” This approach reflects the colonial policy of racial categorization, where identity was constructed primarily around race and place of birth. (J. J. BENNISON, 1933) The Burmese Muslims engaged with the British government to collect their identity as categories “Burmese Muslims” in the racial categories, but the British government denied the request (Lay, 1998).

1973 Census

Post-independence, the 1973 census showed a shift toward ethnic and racial identities with Muslims categorized under “foreign races.” This categorization likely stems from a nationalist perspective that views Muslims as non-indigenous or not fully Burmese. Such a perspective reinforces the exclusion of Muslims from the national identity, affecting their recognition and rights as citizens.

1983 Census

By 1983, the reinforcement of the stereotype of the seven main national races signified a further institutionalization of exclusion. Muslims being identified as “foreign” or of “mixed blood” underlines a pervasive view within governmental and societal narratives that Muslims are “others”—not fully part of the Burmese national fabric. This has profound implications for how policies are crafted and how Muslims are treated in terms of legal rights, social services, and political participation. The lack of disaggregated and reliable data remains a fundamental challenge to political participation in Myanmar, which has made it difficult to track and monitor the levels of participation and representation of disadvantaged groups. (Ebead and Hirakawa 2022)

Electoral Participation of Muslims After 2010

The table illustrates the representation of Muslims in Myanmar's Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the Assembly of the Union) across three election cycles: 2010, 2015, and 2020. In 2010, out of 664 total representatives, there were three Muslim representatives, making up 0.40% of the Hluttaw, despite Muslims comprising 4.20% of the population. The 2015 election saw a decline in Muslim representation, with no Muslim representatives elected, resulting in a 0% representation. In 2020, the number of Muslim representatives slightly increased to two, representing 0.30% of the Hluttaw, which is still disproportionately low compared to the 4.20% Muslim population. The fact that only one Muslim woman was elected among the five Muslim MPs in 2010 and 2020 elections shows the significant challenges that Muslim women face in political participation. This disparity highlights the broader issues of gender inequality and the obstacles that Muslim women continue to encounter when seeking representation in the political arena. During the 2015 and 2020 General elections, Muslim candidates from some political parties and individual Muslim candidates were rejected from the application as candidates based on the documentation of their parents.⁴ This data highlights the persistent underrepresentation of Muslims in Myanmar's political landscape, showing the significant barriers to political participation and inclusion.

Election	Hluttaw	Total representatives	Muslim representative	% of Muslim representative	% of the Muslim population
2010	Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	664	3	0.40%	4.20%
2015	Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	664	0	0	4.20%
2020	Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	664	2	0.30%	4.20%

⁴ Candidate U Hla Win from the Democratic Party for a New Society(DPNS) was rejected for the reason that his father had just an NRC card (which issued before 1982) and did not have a CSC card (which issued at 1990)

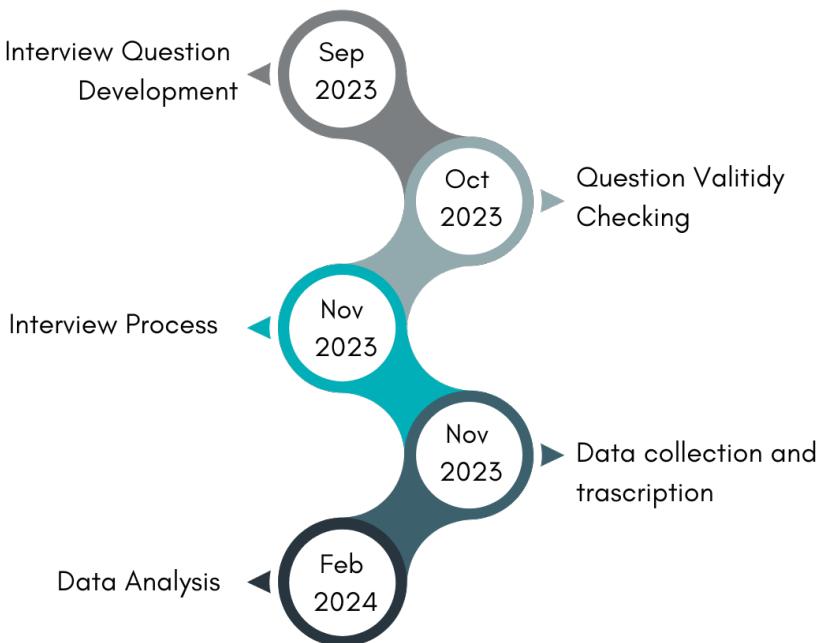
Participation of Muslims in the Peace Process

Between 2010 and 2020, Myanmar experienced significant communal violence, particularly involving Muslim communities and Buddhists, with major incidents occurring in Rakhine State, Mandalay, and Yangon. Despite these events, Muslims were notably excluded from the formal peace process during this period. Interfaith dialogues and workshops were held, but there is no substantial evidence showing direct involvement in formal peace negotiations or committees. There is little Muslim participation in the sideline or informal events of the peace process (e.g. Workshops, youth forum, women empowerment) organized by CSOs and NGOs according to the notable exclusion of Muslims as mentioned above. Although the participation of a few Muslim women activists can be seen during these events, efforts to restore peace, such as the establishment of committees and interfaith dialogues, were largely ineffective. International bodies, including the UN, frequently urged the Myanmar government to address the humanitarian crises and promote the rights of the Rohingya and other Muslim populations. However, the government's response was criticized for failing to address the root causes of the conflict and for its exclusionary practices in the peace negotiations (Burma News International, 2015).

From the perspective of political participation, the above literature review section highlights the historical facts and events that affect the different forms of political participation of Muslim minorities in Myanmar. Our research methodology will be based on choosing the specific interview group that can reveal the current barriers to political participation.

Methodology

This study aims to identify and analyze the barriers to political participation faced by Muslim minorities in Myanmar and to explore ways to make the political environment more inclusive. The methodology section outlines the processes of data collection, respondent selection, and data analysis.



Interview Question Development

The interview questions were designed to cover five main themes as follows.

- (A) identity and recognition
- (B) societal discrimination
- (C) communal violence
- (D) current political situation, and
- (E) Way forward for Muslims in Myanmar.

These questions aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Muslim minorities.

(A) Identity and Recognition

Questions for Muslim respondents explored how individuals identify themselves, their experiences with state and societal recognition, and their feelings about their identity. Questions for non-Muslim respondent exploring how they recognize Muslims.

(B) Societal Discrimination

Questions for Muslim respondents on their personal experiences of discrimination in various aspects of life such as education, employment, social interaction and ways to overcome this discrimination. For non-Muslim counterparts, questions on knowledge on these discrimination and addressing how to prevent these discrimination.

(C) Communal violence

The question aims to explore the relationship between the democracy, meaningful participation and communal violence that happened between 2010 and 2020 in Myanmar from both muslim and non-muslim perspectives.

(D) The Current Political Situation

The questions assessed both Muslim and non-Muslim respondents' views on the current political climate in Myanmar, their experiences with political participation, and their perceptions of political inclusivity.

(E) Way Forward

The questions aimed to gather the suggestions and opinions of both Muslim and non-Muslim respondents on what steps should be taken to improve the political inclusion of Muslim minorities in Myanmar.

Respondent Selection

A total of 68 Participants were chosen using a combination of snowball sampling methods to ensure a diverse and representative sample. Of these 68 participants, there are 41 male respondents and 27 female respondents. The respondents were categorized into seven distinct groups: each group had 10 participants, apart from the Senior Muslim politicians group and members of parliament groups where there is 9 participants in these groups.

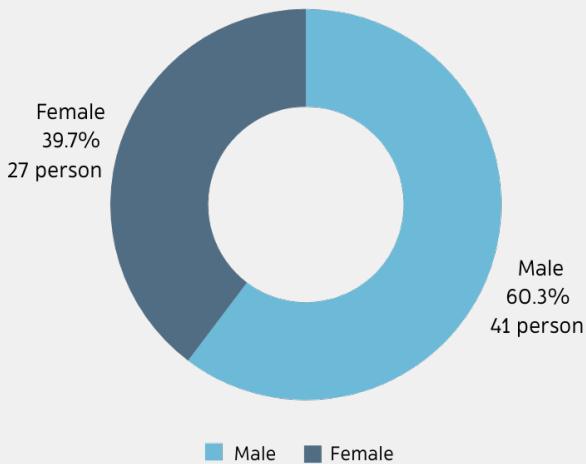
(A) identity and recognition
(B) societal discrimination
(C) communal violence
(D) current political situation, and
(E) Way forward for Muslims in Myanmar

Group	Group Category	Number of Participants
1.	Muslim students studying at Islamic religious schools in Myanmar	10 males
2.	Muslim students at higher education levels in Myanmar, including high school and university students.	6 female and 4 male
3.	Senior Muslim politicians and activists in Myanmar	1 female and 8 male
4.	Former Muslim government officers in Myanmar	6 female and 4 male
5.	Non-Muslim political activists from various fields	7 female and 3 male
6.	Members of Parliament in the 2020 general election in Myanmar	1 female and 8 male
7.	Workers from trade unions	5 female and 5 male

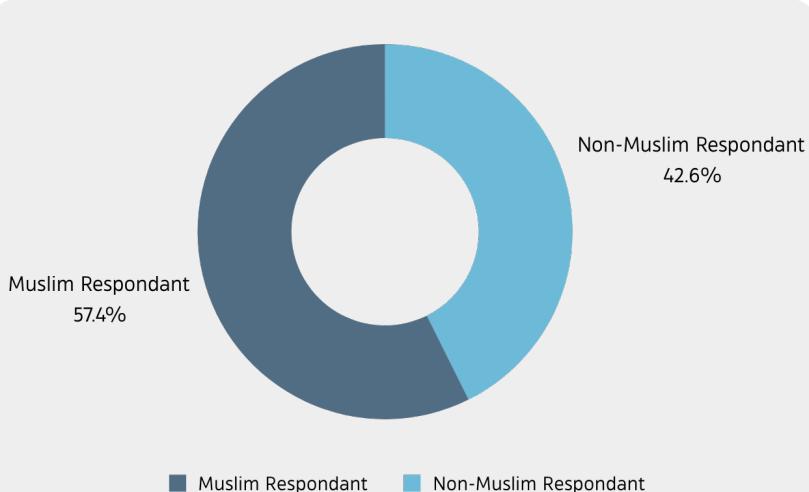
This approach ensured that the study captured a wide range of experiences and perspectives from different segments of the Muslim community and their interactions with non-Muslims. The study focused on the perspectives of different people from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities but not looked at through a gender lens. Although the interview questions did not include gender perspectives, the findings were analyzed in gender-disaggregated ways.

Data Collection

Data were collected through online interviews, in-person interviews, and focus group discussions. Given the sensitive nature of the research and security concerns, written consent was not obtained; instead, verbal consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were explained the research by a brief explanation document. The safe and secure places where respondents were comfortable to answer the questions were used



Graph Showing the Total Number of Participants Disaggregated by Gender



Graph Showing the Total Percentage of Participants by Religious Affiliation

for the interviews. The online interview method was used for those who were unable to conduct in-person interviews. The duration of the interview process was one to 2 hours. The interviews were conducted using a dialogue frame to maintain consistency and comprehensiveness across different respondents.

Data Storage and Analysis

The interviews were recorded and securely stored in a Google Drive accessible only to the research team. According to the consent of the respondents, the recorded data were stored with respective code names. The recordings were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis. The coding process involved identifying key themes and patterns related to the five main themes of identity and recognition, societal discrimination, communal violence, the current political situation, and the way forward.

Limitations

The scope of the research is covered from 2010 to 2023 (which was called the democratization period and post-coup era, respectively). The historical analysis is described in this paper to portray the political participation of Muslim minorities and the political situation before 1962 to be comparatively understood. Therefore, this research will not specifically cover the period between 1962 and 2010, which had no inclusive political space under military dictatorship. The participation of Muslim women in the political process was also limited to find out during that period and the high level of participation of Muslims including women could not be seen. The data charts in the findings section are constructed based on the interviews to clearly see and understand the challenges and struggles of Muslim minorities for political participation. However, this does not mean that the charts will cover all populations because these are based on the qualitative data of 68 interviewees. This research mainly focuses on the political participation of every Muslim minority in Myanmar from the area of identity crisis to ways forward for inclusive participation of Muslim minorities, but limits the specific analysis of each Muslim minority group from different perspectives.

Finding

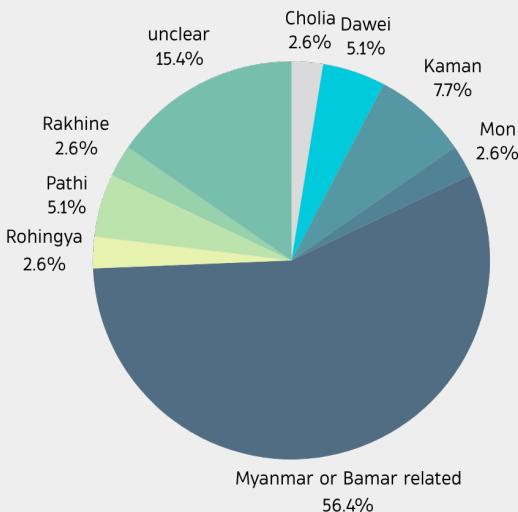
(A) Identity Crisis

From the historical analysis, the linkage between the identity formation of Muslim communities and their political participation is one of the underlying root causes that needs to be studied. For this reason, we constructed different questions for Muslim and Non-Muslim groups to understand the identity status of Muslims and the recognition status of their non-Muslim counterparts.

We attempted to reveal the self-identification status of the 39 Muslim respondents by asking the question “How do you identify yourself”. Most of the respondents, 56.4% identified themselves as Burma or Myanmar-related identity ranging from “Myanmar Citizen”, “Myanmar National”, “Bamar” to “Myanmar Muslim”. The significance is 15.4%, who are unclear about their identity and all of them are from the group of Muslim religious students who are studying in full-time religious schools. Analyzing the data from the gender lens shows that there is no significant difference between the identity status of male and female responses. We can categorize the

Question: How do you identify yourself ?

Respondent: 39 Muslim Participants



responses into three categories: Indian descendent identity like Cholia, Ethnic identity from recognized ethnic nationals in Burma like Dawei, Kaman, Mon, and Bamar, or Myanmar-related identity categories. This finding shows the different identity standpoints of Muslim respondents, where more than half of them favor Burma or Myanmar-related identities, one-third of participants identified themselves as other ethnically related identity, and the remaining 15% face difficulty in identifying themselves.

The subsequent question to these Muslim respondents was “Are you able to openly describe the identity you want, for example in the citizenship card”. Unsurprisingly, 61.5% were not able to describe their identity in the state institution-related documents and 20.5% answered they could describe their identity in the state institution. Although this 20.5% can describe their identity, the conditions of their generation are challenging as the state institutions only recognized their offspring as “Mix-blood”.

The findings suggest that it is difficult to simplify all the Muslims in Burma into a single identity like the Burma Muslim Congress's efforts to unify all Muslims in Burma under the "Burmese Muslims" identity, and the "Pathi Movement" where some of the academics tried to unite Muslims under "Pathi" identity. After demolishing the BMC on 30 September, 1956, some Muslim politicians formed the (new)BMC on the next day 1 October, 1956, and then, the leaders of (new)BMC changed the name as "Burma Pathi Congress" to stand on the ethnic name "Pathi" (Thein, 2014).

One respondent stated, "I have to write my identity in the citizenship scrutiny card as India-Bamar. Actually, we are Cholia. If I have to self-identify with no interruption, I would identify myself as Cholia."⁵ We also noticed more than one answer to the identity question. One female muslim participant answered, "I am of the Rakhine ethnicity. I am Kaman and also Rohingya." ⁶One participant shared her personal experience: "I am Bamar in my NRC (National Registration Card.) However, only three of my family members (my father, mother and me) were described as Bamar. We were described in our NRC as Bamar in racial status and Islam in religious status. We got the NRC in that situation before the 1988 Uprising. (After 1988) My younger brothers and younger sisters weren't described like us and they got as India + Bamar and India + Pakistan + Bamar, respectively. My

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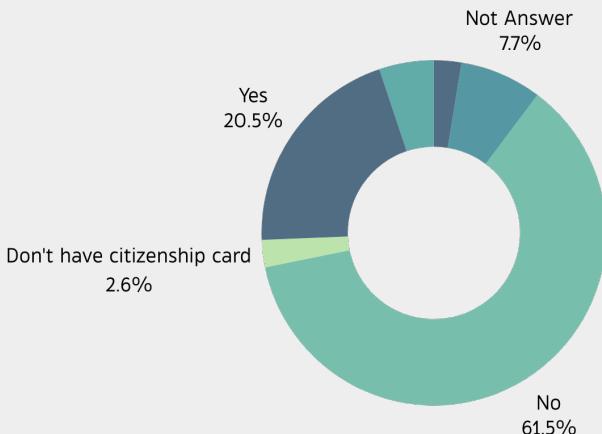
“ If I have to self-identify with no interruption, I would identify myself as Cholia. ”

5 Participant Code G4-05

6 Participant Code G4-02

Question: Are you able to openly describe the identity you want, for example on the citizenship card?

Respondent: 39 Muslim Participants



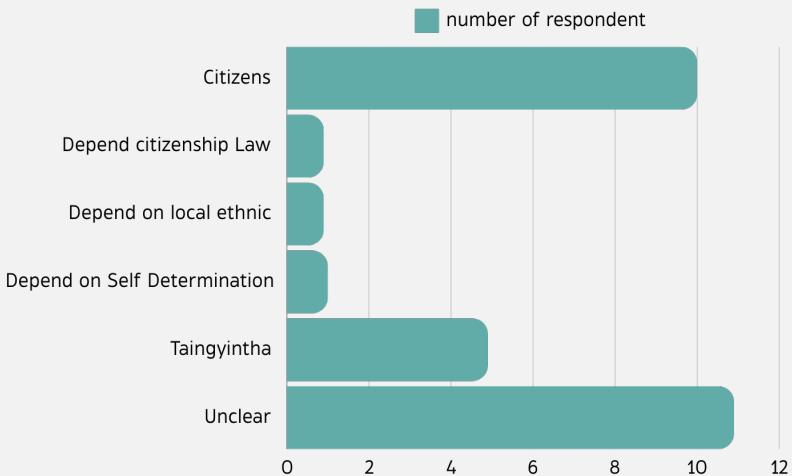
sons got only the racial status in NRC as only “India” and the identity “Bamar” is not included. In their NRC cards, the racial status is India and the religion is Islam.”⁷

The question “How do you recognize Muslim?” was asked to 29 non-Muslim participants to probe the general status of recognition from non-Muslims in relation to the country. The data reveal that 34.5% of non-Muslim respondents recognized Muslims as “Citizens” and 17.2% recognized them as national race “taingyintha”. The significant is another 37.9% who cannot give a clear answer to this question. One non-Muslim participant responded, “The obvious ethnicities (Lu-Myo-Gyi) in Myanmar are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bama, Mon, Rakhine, Shan. From these ethnic people, there are other ethnic

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We read about
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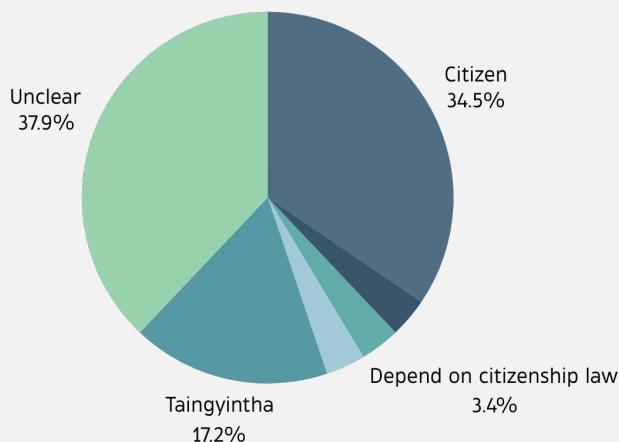
Question: How do you recognize Muslims ?

Respondent: 29 Non-Muslim Participants



Question: How do you recognize Muslims ?

Respondent: 29 Non-Muslim Participants



people (taingyintha) living together with the above. It is difficult to count all of these. We read about Muslims in history from the Min-don King to King Si-paw. Muslims are not unusual for us.”⁸ Another one answered, “There are 135 officially recognized National Races (taingyintha) in Myanmar. Muslims are citizens (Naing-Gan-Thar) if they are in line with the existing laws.”⁹ In comparative analysis of the responses, there is no significant difference between the male and female participants in recognition status.

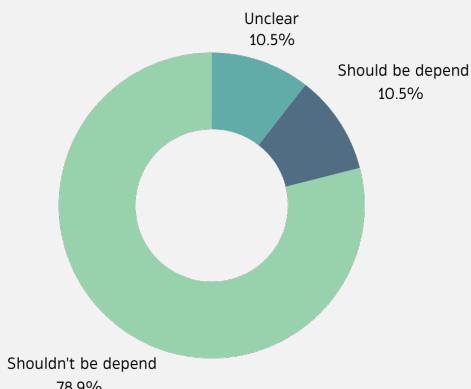
Responding to the question answering whether National Race “taingyintha” or Citizen highlights the centrality of race and ethnicity in Mynmar’s political landscape. The next question is “Should citizenship in Myanmar depend on being a member of a National Race (taingyintha)”. As this question is more relevant to politically active participants, we asked this question to non-Muslim political activists and Members of Parliament. Out of 19 respondents to this question, 78.9% answered “shouldn’t be depended” and 10.5% think citizenship should be depended on being a member of a National Race (taingyintha). From the gender point of view, this 10.5% who think the citizenship should be depended on being a member of National Race (taingyintha) are all female participants where the deeper study will

8 Participant Code G6-01

9 Participant Code G6-04

Question: Should citizenship in Myanmar depend on being a member of a National Race (taingyintha) ?

Respondent: 19 Non-Muslim respondent who are political activists and MPs



be needed from the women's view on citizenship. Overview of this data shows somewhat openness to future citizenship law that must introduce naturalization after a period of residence and citizenship on birthright (Brett & Hlaing, 2020).

A comparative analysis of the above data shows that there is an internal identity crisis of "Who I am" in the Muslim community and it is also struggling to get recognition from the legal aspect of citizenship to the non-legal societal aspect of belonging. To speak of the political community of "Myanmar" is to refer to the taingyintha, and to engage with the political community means addressing its members primarily as national races rather than simply as citizens (Cheesman, 2017). The crisis of Myanmar's citizenship problem lies in the confrontation over the "National Races" problem. Political participation in democratic norms, like voting rights, requires primarily whether an individual is a "Citizen" or not. However, the membership status of recognized "National Races" is one of the primary requirements for citizenship according to the 1982 Citizenship Law. Another issue is that there is no reference in the 1982 Citizenship law on the list of "National Races" that promote the denied citizenship in marginalized communities, especially Muslims. Compared to the former 1948 Citizenship Act, in which being a member of a National Races "taingyintha" was not an essential

criterion for citizenship, the 1948 Citizenship Act granted citizenship to anyone residing in Burma during its independent time (Cheesman, 2017).

In the federal democracy charter, the current political framework for today's struggle for the federal democracy movement, the keyword "taingyintha" is used in the rights section, but there is no clear definition of National Races "taingyintha" in FDC. Echoing the concepts of ethnic identity and citizenship from previous constitutional arrangements, these areas of conflict need to be discussed in the ongoing political process (International IDEA, 2022,15).

There is an internal identity crisis of "Who I am" in the Muslim community and it is also struggling to get recognition from the legal aspect of citizenship to the non-legal societal aspect of belonging.

Identity crisis and meaningful political participation

While thinking about the participation of Muslims in the political process, especially in the emergence of modern political institutions starting from the pre-independence areas, the aspect of identity and recognition is in the central discussion. The construction of the “Burmese Muslim” identity by the Burma Muslim Congress along with recognition by the leading political party AFPFL led to the recognizable participation of Muslims in the political process. From the legal aspect, the 1947 constitution and the 1948 Citizenship Act, which surpass the “Citizenship” based identity to participate in the political process, help political and social integration. Unfortunately, the recognition of the “Burmese Muslim” identity was coming to blur during the period of the dissolution of BMC with the forcible pressure from the U Nu government. The question and answer session between the BMC members and Prime Minister U Nu at the last countrywide Burma Muslim Congress event held on December 29, 1955, highlights the identity crisis Muslims faced at that time. One member of the BMC asked, “Till now, the members of the BMC are asking the question of “Who I am”. Some think that they are “kalar”. Give us some time to make these members know who they are (before the dissolution).” U Nu answered, “It takes only 2 minutes to think about the question “Who you are”. If they pretend they don't know, I don't know that. Ask Minister Rachid. it takes only 2 minutes to think “Who you are”. Rashid hurts a lot when he is called “Kalar, Kalar” (Lay, 1998, 250-251).

“Ask Minister Rachid. It takes only 2 minutes to think “Who you are”

U Nu (Prime Minister)
1948-1962

Under General Nay Win's "Burmese way of socialism", all the political movements from the civilians were terminated after the 1962 coup, including political movements of Muslim communities. In the 1988 uprising and further democratic movements beyond this, several Muslims, like Major Ba Thaw and U Aung Maytu, took part in the political movements as a leading role in the NLD. There are several prominent Muslim politicians involved in the democratic struggle of Myanmar from the 1988 uprising to the 2010 transition till now, Ko Mya Aye who is a respected politician, and U Ko Ni, who is a famous legal advisor to the NLD, assassinated on January 29, 2017, Daw Win Mya Mya, a member of the NLD party and elected member of parliament in the 2020 election and several others. However, most political activists, even if they are Muslims, rather than standing on the issue of "Muslims in Myanmar", prefer to stand on a wider liberation movement of people from the military and struggle for democracy. Although there are Myanmar-Muslim-based parties such as the National Unity Congress Party and the Democracy and Human Rights Party, several candidates from these parties were disqualified from standing in the 2015 and 2020 elections by the election commission. This was

due to Section 8(e) of the election law, which bars candidates if their parents were not Myanmar citizens at the time of their birth, and Section 10(e), which requires candidates to have lived in the country for the past ten years. And there is no significant public support for these parties (Schmidt-Leukel et al., 2021).

Our research findings, which reveal the varying identity standpoints among Muslims and the uncertain recognition they receive from non-Muslim counterparts, highlight the historical struggles that Muslims in Myanmar face in gaining recognition. This challenge is further compounded by both legal and non-legal discriminations imposed by successive military regimes, which have perpetuated the narrative that Muslims are foreigners. These actions have significantly hindered their efforts to achieve recognition, meaningful political participation, and even the enjoyment of civil rights.

(B) Societal discrimination

Discrimination in society beyond legal matters is a second crucial factor in understanding the challenges to political participation. This discrimination and marginalization further isolate the affected communities from others. From a different perspective, these shared experiences of marginalization among marginalized community foster resentment and a collective struggle to regain their lost dignity. We explore the societal discrimination experienced by Muslim respondents and the perspectives of their non-Muslim counterparts.

All 39 Muslim participants answered “Yes” to the survey question “Do you have experience with discrimination while living in society, for example, education, doing business, or any discrimination because of being a “Muslim”. One respondent shared “I face discrimination in every place. In doing business, (they said) don’t buy from this Kalar¹⁰. Like this, there is discrimination in other places. When I go to school, the teachers discriminate against me because I am from a different religion.”¹¹ Another participant said that “ From the job opportunity aspect, I was not promoted due to being a “Muslim”. (They) force us to extreme work and make us return home late. I also face discrimination in health care service.”¹² Another Muslim student shared her experience: “I was chosen in the essay contest in my school life because the teacher told me that you don’t have higher status personals (doctors and engineer) in your familial background and you are from a different religion. And

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I face discrimination in every place. In doing business, (they said) don’t buy from this Kalar. Like this, there is discrimination in other places.

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¹⁰ The term “kalar”, which is primarily oriented from calling all the foreign people to migrate to Burma in the history, the word now is considered as hate speech to Muslims.

¹¹ Participant code G1-01

¹² Participant code G1-03

reassure me to stay only at No. 4 in the competition.”¹³ One female Muslim participant told that the behavior of her non-Muslim friend changed when she started to wear a headscarf. She said “ I have one friend. At first, we were very close friends. Later on, she stopped talking to me after I wore a hijab (headscarf) because I am a Muslim.”¹⁴

To the non-Muslim counterpart, we asked “Do you know there is discrimination against Muslims in Myanmar”. From 29 participants who answered this question, 75.9% answered they “Know” the discrimination, 13.8% answered “Don’t

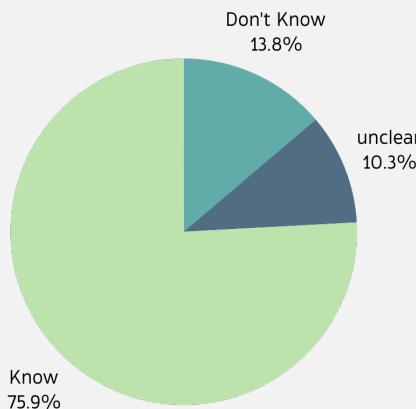
know” the discrimination, and 10.3% gave an unclear answer. One non-Muslim respondent explained “In the past 14 or 15 years, for Muslims, I believe that there is real discrimination on the basis of religious belief, especially in schools, either in workplaces, in legal matters, in terms of participation in politics, these discriminations are real.”¹⁵ One participant shared her life experience: “(I am non-Muslim) and I married a Muslim. There were many difficulties after our marriage. The people from the village where my parents lived can’t accept this marriage, neglect us, and don’t even talk to us. They want us to break up.”¹⁶

13 Participant code G2-01
14 Participant code G2-06

15 Participant code G5-01
16 Participant code G7-05

Question: Do you Know there is discrimination against Muslim ?

Respondent: 29 Non-Muslim participants



Societal discrimination and political participation

The discrimination suffered by the Muslim communities in Myanmar is unique to them and this shared experience led to the struggle in collective actions toward political participation in history, especially in the Burma Muslim Congress's effort in the independence movement. Fukuyama said in his famous book "Identity: demand for dignity and the Politics of Resentment", that the lack of recognition and partial recognition can lead to identity politics where these groups demand equal recognition within broader society. The internal identity crisis described above, combined with the failure to recognize marginalization and discrimination, is central to understanding the building of Muslim identity in Burma and their political involvement.

When the impact of societal discrimination was viewed in the eyes of belonging to the country, this discrimination urged the marginalized Muslim communities to feel less belonging to the country. The lack of belonging, an essential element in building the national identity, can negatively impact the political participation of the Muslim communities. These views were discussed by some respondents in our interview and we will discuss them in the coming "Challenges from within" section.

The lack of belonging, an essential element in building the national identity, can negatively impact the political participation of the Muslim communities.

(C) Democracy, meaningful participation, and prevention of violence

For the study of what constitutes meaningful participation in democratic institutions in the context of Myanmar politics, we emphasized the communal violence that occurred from 2010 to 2020, targeting Muslims. Since the start of the political liberalization in 2011, Myanmar has been troubled by an upsurge in extreme Buddhist nationalism, anti-Muslim hate speech and deadly communal violence, not only in Rakhine state but across the country (International Crisis Group, 2017.). During the 2010-2015 period, the presence of three Muslim MPs in Myanmar's USDP-led parliament symbolized initial steps toward inclusivity in democratic institutions. However, as Chit Win and Thomas Kean detail in their research, their participation proved ineffective in preventing or mitigating communal violence due to significant institutional constraints and political suppression. The USDP's strategy to suppress discussions on communal violence within the legislature prevented meaningful debate and action, limiting the MPs' ability to advocate for their communities. This lack of effective legislative response, despite the presence of minority representatives, highlights the broader issues of political control and suppression that characterized the era. As such, the participation of Muslim MPs, while

symbolically important, was rendered ineffective and could not be truly "meaningful" in the context of preventing and mitigating communal violence (Win & Kean, 2017).

Leading up to significant communal violence, political parties, including the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) led by Aye Maung, proposed amendments to election laws aimed at excluding naturalized and associate citizens, as well as Temporary Registration Card (white card) holders, from political participation. These amendments

The participation of Muslim MPs, while symbolically important, was rendered ineffective and could not be truly "meaningful" in the context of preventing and mitigating communal violence.

targeted Muslims in Rakhine State, many of whom held white cards. Enacted in September 2014, the amendments led to the expulsion of white card holders from political parties, severely impacting Muslim-dominated parties. The National League for Democracy (NLD) expelled approximately 8,000 of its members who held white cards although some were later reinstated after obtaining formal citizenship documents (The Myanmar Times, 2015). Subsequent legislative actions sought to remove voting rights from white card holders. Despite initial resistance, the white cards were invalidated by May 2015, disenfranchising many Muslims and fulfilling the demands of Rakhine lawmakers, while drawing significant international condemnation (Chit Win and Thomas Kean, 2017). The loss of political participation for white-card holders, predominantly Rohingyas residing in northern Rakhine State, coupled with the rise of populism among NLD leaders, resulted in the historic 2015 parliament in Myanmar having no Muslim representation. One of the participants, a senior Muslim politician, explained that the military always uses “Dirty Politics” and the NLD was fearing of losing “Popularity”. He said “They(military) always play dirty politics. On the other hand, NLDs think that if they are popular, they will be able to overcome the difficulties. They are also very worried that it will affect their popularity. In the 1990 election, there were Muslim MPs and there was no problem. They were so afraid that they removed all the Muslim candidates in the 2015 election.”¹⁷

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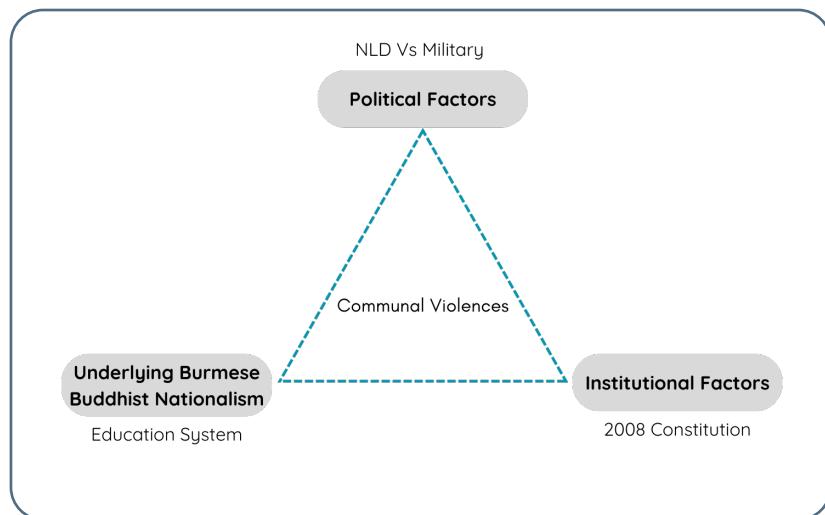
The military
always uses
“Dirty Politics”
and the NLD was
fearing of losing
“Popularity”.

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The question “During the period from 2010 to 2020, Myanmar experienced a certain degree of freedom, with the establishment of democratic institutions like parliaments, allowing people to express their opinions through these platforms or free media. However, communal violence targeting the Muslim community occurred during this time. “Despite not being an ideal democracy, why do you think this violence happened in a relatively free environment?” was asked to four groups (Muslim politicians, Muslim former government officers, non-Muslim political activists, and members of parliaments). One Muslim respondent explained the underlying ideology of Burmese Buddhist Nationalism on these communal violences: “The ideology of Burma being a Buddhist country has been instilled throughout the ages. Because people were obsessed with religion, they were taught that other religions were not as good as their own. From there, they created conflicts between the religion of the majority and the religion of the minority to maintain their power.”¹⁸ One non-Muslim participant who is a worker from a factory thinks that citizenship is based on religion, sticking to the Burmese Buddhist ideology, “I think Myanmar citizenship is related to religion. I think it's defined like that, I'm telling you my thoughts. I think citizenship is related to religion and ideology.”¹⁹

18 Participant Code G3-01

19 Participant Code G7-10



Thematic Analysis Map showing the underlying factors leading to communal violence referencing to participant responses

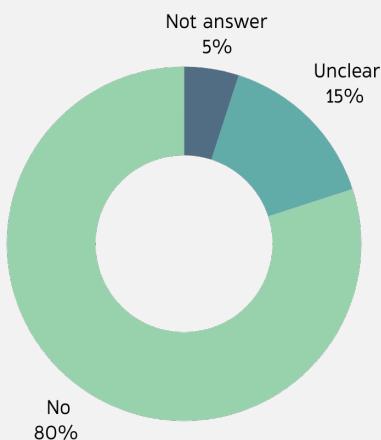
Most of the participants who are members of parliaments highlight the constitutional barriers of the 2008 constitution that limit the power of elected civilians. One of the members of parliament explained, "It was democracy, but it was not democracy. Important departments are under the military. But people's concept is (also) wrong. This is because they lived under a dictatorship, so they don't know the true news. The important role of the country was taken by the military and the civilian government had no authority"²⁰ The thematic analysis of the participant narratives shows that the root ideology of Burmese Buddhism, promoted through education aimed at Burmanization, forms the foundation of the violence. On this ideological and procedural foundation, the 2008 constitution and other legal arrangements, including the parliamentary quota for military personnel, create channels that prevent the passage of laws to prevent violence. Above these institutions lies the political landscape, where the military engages in "dirty politics" and the NLD pursues populist politics.

20

Participant Code G6-09

Question: It is easy to take park in political decision-making level?

Respondent: 20 Muslim students



To understand the challenges faced by Muslims in Myanmar regarding their participation in political decision-making, we conducted a survey with 20 Muslim students. We asked the question, “Is it easy to take part in the political decision-making level for Muslims in Myanmar”, to 20 Muslim students. Data revealed that 80% of the respondents answered “Not easy”, 15% gave an unclear answer and 5% did not answer this question. One participant stated, “It will be easy for us if there is a real government without corruption. It is impossible with this government.”²¹ Another respondent answered, “It’s not easy at all. In the past, after independence, there were rarely one or two like that. After the first military coup since then, it was quite rare. It’s almost as rare as not. If you want to enter the level of decision-making, you have to hide your religious Islam. It’s not an easy place at all.”²² The findings highlight the significant barriers faced by Muslims in Myanmar in accessing political decision-making roles. The overwhelming perception that participation is “not easy” underscores systemic issues such as corruption and religious discrimination. These challenges reflect broader institutional and societal constraints that hinder the full and meaningful participation of minority groups in the political process.

To explore the perceived relationship between democracy and minority rights in Myanmar, we posed a critical question to four distinct groups: Muslim politicians, former Muslim government officers, non-Muslim political activists, and members of parliament. We asked, “Is there a direct relationship between democracy and minority rights?” If we can build a democratic country, is it possible to prevent conflicts between communities, like communal violence”. Out of the 38 respondents who answered this question, 60.5% said “No relationship”, 28.9% said “Direct relationship”, 5.3% gave an “unclear answer” and 5.3% did not answer this question. This indicates a prevailing skepticism about the ability of democracy alone to address minority rights and prevent communal violence and highlights the complexities and challenges of achieving social harmony through democratic means alone. One Muslim participant explained, “If the revolution is successful, Even if the federal democratic system is achieved, it will be a little difficult to end these problems. This is not only in Myanmar, but even in India, which is going with a federal democratic system, the problems among the ethnic groups have not been resolved well.”²³

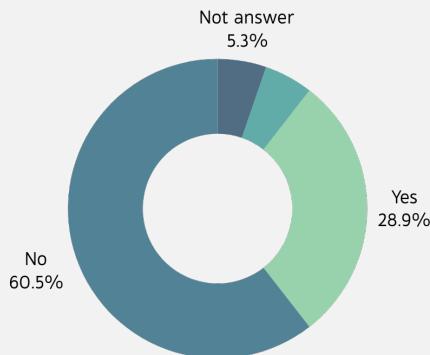
21 Participant Code G1-08

22 Participant Code G2-04

23 Participant Code G3-01

Question: Is there a direct relationship between democracy and minority rights ? If we can build a democratic country, is it possible to prevent conflicts between communities, like communal violence ?

Respondent: 38 Participants (Muslim politicians, Muslim former government officers, Non-Muslim political activists and Member of parliaments



Another Muslim participant answered, “This is what we always say. We are fighting big tyranny. I am totally trying to completely root out the fascist system. In the meantime, after all this is over, there will definitely be the issue of having to re-revolutionize the petty dictators.”²⁴

One participant discussed another aspect: “If I have to answer whether Muslim minorities could get rights in future democracy, we Muslims should request the rights specifically when we are given the democracy. Citizenship rights that are not related to a national race. We are religious minorities; a Muslim can be a Burmese or a Muslim can be a Karen. Left behind the religion. If they give us democracy, which includes freedom of choice, freedom of religious belief and citizenship rights. From

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After all this is over, there will definitely be the issue of having to re-revolutionize the petty dictators.

”

the citizen's side, he has his rights, and from his side, if he fulfills his responsibilities to the country, I think that he will feel the same whether he is a Muslim or any other religion.”²⁵ From the aspect of the political system that has tolerance to prevent conflicts, one respondent stated, “In my opinion, conflicts will exist in any system. However, I think that a country built with a real democratic system is the best system to overcome religious and ethnic issues.”²⁶

One participant discusses that the conditions of religious minorities may be even worse in the democratic system, highlighting the grassroots understanding of democratic values. “Our people are not aware of democracy. The definition of democracy is simply wrong (in the people’s understanding of democracy). As things are like that, if we have democracy, religion, Ethnic conflicts will not decrease as much as you think.”²⁷

The eruptions of communal violence and ethnic cleansing genocide between 2010 and 2020 highlight a dark chapter in Myanmar’s transition era. These events underscore that establishing democratic institutions without simultaneously promoting

and developing democratic values and principles within society can lead to violence, even in a democratic context. For Muslims in Myanmar, foundational societal discrimination fueled by long-standing Burmese Buddhist nationalism, coupled with institutional and legal frameworks designed to prevent their political participation, presents complex challenges. Additionally, the dirty politics of the military and the populism of the NLD further exacerbate these difficulties, making meaningful political participation for Muslims exceedingly difficult. These intertwined issues illustrate that without comprehensive reforms and a genuine commitment to inclusivity, the goal of building a truly democratic and harmonious society in Myanmar remains elusive.

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**A Muslim can
be a Burmese
or a Muslim
can be a Karen**
”

25 Participant Code G4-04

26 Participant Code G5-01

27 Participant code G6-09

Challenges from Within

The internal challenges within the Muslim community in Myanmar significantly affect their political participation. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of unity among different Muslim groups. Muslims in Myanmar are ethnically and culturally diverse. Adding to the complexity are the various sects within Islam itself. Myanmar's Muslim community includes followers of different Islamic traditions, such as the Sunni, Shia, and Sufi sects. Sunni Muslims form the majority, but significant Shia and Sufi communities exist as well. These religious distinctions often lead to differing religious practices, beliefs, and priorities, from religious conservatism to modernism. This division often results in conflictual relationships and a fragmented community that struggles to present a united front in political matters (Yin, 2005). One respondent stated "The internal challenge is that we all need to be united in our community."²⁸ One Muslim political activist emphasized the need for strong leadership within the Muslim community, highlighting the presence of five Islamic organizations in the country that support the State Administration Council (SAC). He said, "The most important thing is that there are five organizations that support the dictator. No one elected them. What they do is not good for Islam. The Islamic religious organization must think for the Muslims in Myanmar. To change number one, the five big groups must be changed first."²⁹

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The internal challenge is that we all need to be united in our community.

”

28 Participant Code G4-05
29 Participant Code G3-06

When asked about the challenges of political participation, most Muslim students studying in full-time religious schools expressed concerns about their security and their families' basic living needs. This indicates the current political climate in which involvement in political campaigns could pose a threat to their lives. One participant said, "If there isn't a proper government, there will be obstacles in the way of business. Life is not safe. It can even affect the family to the point of losing our homes."³⁰ Another Muslim student who is studying at a higher education level explains that the narrative of "Becoming a Kalar Country" is the main challenge while Muslims are trying to participate in politics. She said "As for the uneducated person group, when they bitterly hate Muslims, if they come with Muslims, they will start to oppose everything after the narrative of the country will become a Kalar country".³¹

Some Muslim activists and politicians highlight the cultural and religious practices in the Muslim community that marginalized itself from the broader community. One Muslim activist explained, "There are many challenges in the Islamic community, religious practices, and ethnic practices. Even though the Muslims in Myanmar were born in Myanmar, they have a low feeling of belonging to Myanmar. Muslims have been involved in this (politics) for generations since before independence. Until recently. But for some (Muslims), this issue (politics) is not our issue. (They think) It doesn't belong to them."³² Another Muslim respondent stressed, "From the internal side of the Muslims, they are also being discriminated against, and they are staying with their own religious group. They are like that, even with basic social circles, there is less cohesion and cooperation. The wrong teachings of some religious teachers in living and eating, false teachings that are not Islamic teachings, and preventing friendship with people from other religions, are hate speech, of course. There are (Islamic) religious teachers who promote their own religion and give hate speeches that speak ill of other religions."³³

Regarding the Islamic religious education system, one student shared his life experience about conservatism in religious schools. He said, "When I was young, I had to go to Arabic school, so my teacher hit me with a stick. The

30 Participant Code G1-08

31 Participant Code G2-07

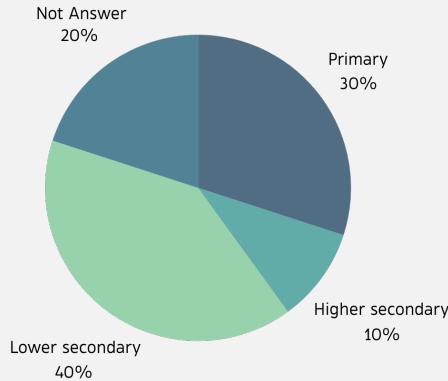
32 Participant Code G3-01

33 Participant Code G3-04

mind set is installed, the place where you with the teacher's stick will not burn in hell. That's when my whole body was beaten. I was scared of them and didn't complain. I dare not say anything. Because of that, the courage to complain was shot down from those schools. When I reached the higher education level, I realized that freedom of speech was suppressed in the religious school when I was a child. Those who encounter a fully educated religious teacher become excellent with good mindsets. Those who encounter someone who is not good, become a false mindset. For example, encouraging domestic violence. If it's a girl, she must stay home and not be educated. Girls suffer a lot because they don't get an education.”³⁴

According to Islamic perspectives, men and women have the same spiritual nature; both genders are dignified and trustees of ALLAH on earth. See Quran (4:1), (17:70). According to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), education is not only a right but also a responsibility of all males and females. The quote from one of Hadiths (which is the teaching of the Prophet) stated that “Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim (“Muslim” is used here in the generic meaning which includes both males and females). (Badawi, n.d.) The internal challenges within the Muslim community in Myanmar, such as lack of unity, weak leadership, fear of persecution, and conservative cultural practices including gender-based oppression, greatly hinder their political participation. Understanding Islamic religious education institutions is important when considering the political participation of Muslim minorities in Myanmar.

Islamic education in Myanmar, primarily provided through madrasahs, presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the Muslim community. The data from the ministry of defense in 1997 show there are a total of 759 Madrasahs in Myanmar. These religious schools, deeply rooted in the community, offer essential religious education focusing on the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence. However, the curriculum in these madrasahs often lacks modern subjects like science and mathematics, limiting students' broader educational and professional opportunities (Skidmore & Wilson, 2008). This educational gap significantly impacts their ability to engage effectively in political processes and public affairs, as a well-rounded education is crucial for informed and active political participation.

Education status of Muslim religious student respondents

When asked about their formal education status, our participants, who were students in full-time religious schools (madrasahs), revealed the following: 30% had only completed primary education, 40% had completed lower secondary education, 10% had completed higher secondary education, and 20% did not answer the question. One student shared his thoughts, “I attend government education to the 4th standard (Grade 5). The reason why I dropped out of the government schools was to attend a religious school. The students who passed the 10th standard (Matriculation) did not have a proper job provided by the government. Even after finishing their university degrees, they could not get the opportunities. If they get a job, the salary is only 2-3 lakh. So I don't want to attend formal education.”³⁵ Another student also explained the reason behind shifting to a religious school. He said, “I went up to the 8th grade in government education. “The reason why I left is that we cannot sustain our lives with this government education system.”³⁶

The findings from our participants highlight significant challenges within the Islamic education system in Myanmar and its impact on broader educational and professional opportunities. According to data from the Ministry of Defense in 1997, there are a total of 759 madrasahs in Myanmar, which provide essential religious education focusing on the Quran, Hadith, and

35 Participant Code G1-07

36 Participant Code G1-01

Islamic jurisprudence. However, these madrasahs often lack modern subjects such as science and mathematics, creating a gap that significantly impacts students' abilities to engage effectively in political processes and public affairs. This gap is evident in the formal education status of these participants, with 30% having only completed primary education, 40% completing lower secondary education, 10% completing higher secondary education, and 20% not responding. According to some alumni of Madrasahs offering advanced Islamic education, only about 50 to 80 of these schools admit girls. In these schools, female students and teachers are often limited to teaching and learning under the oversight of male principals, with only a few schools being managed by female principals. Students shared that the limited job opportunities and low salaries offered by the government for those with formal education discouraged them from continuing in the government education system. Instead, they shifted to religious schools, believing that the education provided there was more valuable for their personal and community needs. These insights underscore the urgent need for a more inclusive educational framework that integrates both religious and secular subjects to equip students with a well-rounded education, enhancing their prospects for meaningful political participation and socio-economic advancement.

One Muslim student who is in a university education explains an opportunity to incorporate hybrid education for Muslims. She said, 'I like that the hybrid education model is emerging. I want to study modern education and religious education together. There are women who want to study modern education but are not allowed to study, but only study religious education, so that it would be more convenient if you study together.'³⁷

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Participant Code G2-10

These madrasahs often lack modern subjects such as science and mathematics, creating a gap that significantly impacts students' abilities to engage effectively in political processes and public affairs.

(D) The Current Political Landscape

The political landscape of Myanmar dramatically shifted following the 2021 coup. On February 5, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) was formed by 15 MPs authorized by 398 elected parliamentarians from the November 2020 elections.³⁸ Subsequently, on March 8, 2021, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was established, comprising 28 various political entities, including the CRPH, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), political parties, and newly emerged political forces such as strike committees, youth and women's organizations, federal units, and nationality-based consultative councils.³⁹

The NUCC formed the interim National Unity Government (NUG) on April 16, 2021. The NUG announced the formation of the People's Defense Force (PDF) on May 5th, 2021, and declared a people's defensive war against the junta on September 7th, 2021.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Federal Democracy Charter, which outlines core values for a future democratic country in Part 1 and a roadmap to federal democracy in Part 2, was published on March 31st, 2021, and ratified by the First People's Assembly held in January 2022.⁴¹

Prior to the coup, the political dynamics were primarily characterized by a triangular interaction between the National League for Democracy (NLD), the military, and Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs). This pre-coup structure has been fundamentally altered in the post-coup environment, which now includes a broader array of stakeholders. In the aftermath of the coup, various new groups have emerged, contributing to a more multifaceted political scene. These include People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and ethnic coordination bodies such as the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team and the Karen State Consultative Council. These groups, which have risen in response to the coup, play significant roles alongside long-established EROs in resisting the military junta and advocating for governance reforms.

38 <https://crphmyanmar.org/history-and-formation-of-crph/>

39 NUCC announcement 2/2021 (Nov,2021)

40 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/myanmar-shadow-government-launches-peo-plies-defensive-war>

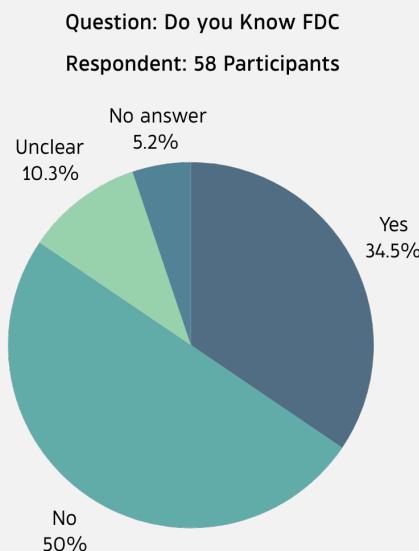
41 Federal Democracy Charter Part(1) and Part(2)

The approach to federalism is also evolving. Historically, federalism in Myanmar has been discussed as a top-down process, often focusing on constitutional changes imposed from above. However, the current political turmoil has highlighted the potential for a bottom-up approach to federalism. This emergent model is driven by local governance practices and the administrative frameworks established by EROs and new resistance groups. These entities are increasingly seen as the building blocks for a future federal structure that is more inclusive and reflective of Myanmar's diverse ethnic composition. This shift toward a bottom-up approach to federalism marks a significant departure from past practices. It emphasizes the importance of local governance and the need for a decentralized political framework. The post-coup period presents a unique opportunity for reimagining Myanmar's political future, with a more democratic and federated system that accommodates the interests of a broader range of stakeholders (South, 2022).

The widespread resistance across the nation raises questions about whether this resistance translated into improved national solidarity or further deepened ethnic divides. It was found that there was a significant improvement in ethnic relations in the immediate aftermath of the coup. This shift was characterized by a notable increase in positive themes and a decrease in negative themes regarding ethnic relations, as measured through changes in themes, ratings, and vitality of the social media posts. The political shock of the coup led to a temporary enhancement in ethnic solidarity, challenging the common perception that regime change invariably exacerbates ethnic conflicts (David et al., 2022).

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Politically, the coup itself delegitimized the 2008 constitution and the subsequent abolishment of the 2008 constitution by the CRPH opened the door to a new political sphere for the country. The Federal Democracy Charter serves as an interim political framework, rather than a legal document, due to its vagueness and lack of enforceable constitutional provisions. It emphasizes political consensus over strict legal application (International IDEA, 2022). To gauge public awareness of the Federal Democracy Charter, we conducted a survey among six groups, comprising a total of 58 participants. The results revealed that 50% of the participants were unaware of the FDC, while 34.5% acknowledged their awareness of the Charter. Additionally, 10.3% of the participants provided unclear responses, indicating a lack of definite knowledge or understanding of the FDC, and 5.2% did not respond to the question at all. These findings highlight the need for greater dissemination and education regarding the FDC to ensure broader public engagement and support. The lack of awareness among half of the surveyed participants highlights a significant challenge in the implementation and acceptance of the Charter's principles and objectives. Effective communication strategies and inclusive educational campaigns are essential to bridge this knowledge gap and foster a more informed and participatory political environment.



(E) Struggle for opportunities

The Spring Revolution, with its primary objective of system change rather than merely a regime change, embodies the hope of the people of Myanmar.⁴² This brought about significant shifts, particularly in the perceptions and treatment of ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities.

Before the coup, the Rohingya and other Muslims were frequently depicted negatively in social media and public discourse, often referred to derogatorily as “Bengali” intruders. This terminology underscored a broader societal rejection fueled by nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, which viewed these groups as foreign threats to the nation’s identity and security.

In the aftermath of the coup, there was a noticeable shift in the discourse among political figures and the general public. Notably, key members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), including Dr. Sasa, began to express solidarity with the Rohingya, acknowledging their shared victimhood under the military regime. This newfound solidarity was marked by public apologies and calls for justice, reflecting a growing awareness and empathy toward the plight of the Rohingya and other Muslims. This shift was not purely value-driven; it also had instrumental motivations as the opposition sought to gain broader support against the military junta by promoting a more inclusive approach toward ethnic minorities (David et al., 2022).

The Spring Revolution, with its primary objective of system change rather than merely a regime change, embodies the hope of the people of Myanmar.

⁴² <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/this-revolution-is-about-more-than-who-governs-myanmar/>

One of our participants, a Muslim student, expressed optimism about this movement, believing that it offers a chance for Muslims to gain their rights by participating hand in hand with others. He said, “The current situation is a good opportunity.” I think we have to work together with everyone and claim our rights (Wearing headscarf, Citizenship, and equal rights). The current political situation is doing the revolution. Therefore, we consider it a good thing out of a bad thing for our minorities. I think it will be easier to claim our rights.”⁴³

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The current situation is a good opportunity.
”

Another Muslim participant, who worked formerly as a teacher in a government school, sees optimism in the FDC but expresses worry about its effective implementation. She said, “If they implement FDC as planned, it will be convenient. If not, we will try on our side.”⁴⁴ She continued, “Steps must be taken to prepare to participate in the (political process) as a group. If they implement it according to the agreement (FDC), we will get it. If not, we have to recruit people with the same purpose to claim (the rights) and monitor. We have to collect people who are experts in the three government institutions.” Another participant, who is a member of parliament, also highlighted the country’s past failures in implementing laws and expressed a strong desire to address this issue moving forward. He said, “By 2008 (Constitution), there must be racial and religious equality. It was good. However, the law did not include how to

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Steps must be taken to prepare to participate in the (political process) as a group.
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Participant Code G2-02

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Participant Code G4-03

protect it in case of violation. There is a Ministry of Religion in Myanmar. There is a right in the mother-law, but it is not given in the by-laws. These must also be taken into account in the future federal state. whether a transitional constitution, a permanent constitution, or a federal constitution. The arrangement of the constitution is the most important. We have to push the plan.”⁴⁵

One method of political participation, inclusion in parliamentary bodies, also serves as a mechanism for advocating the rights of marginalized communities, such as Muslims. One of the Muslim political activists said, “In the federal system, when there is the House of Nationalities, we must be included. We must also be included in the Assembly of the Union (pyi-daung-su Hluttaw) and the Regional Assembly. If we can't do this, we can't get a chance.”⁴⁶ Another Muslim activist who is actively involved in the revolution hopes for proportionality in the future. She said, “We participate meaningfully in this revolution from all sides against the tyrant. Does It will be a meaningful parliament in the future, if they told that you(Muslims) are not worthy of this position and you have to stay aside, even if we actively participate in this struggle? They must grant minority rights for us

with proportionality. It would be convenient if we could build trust with each other and develop these mechanisms.”⁴⁷

One senior Muslim politician commented on the need for the representation of Myanmar Muslims in the current political process. He said, “FDC is framework and not law. In NUG, which is organized according to FDC, there is no muslim representation. There is no representation in NUCC either. Because of that, the NUG and NUCC's attitude toward Myanmar Muslims are still questionable.”⁴⁸

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46 Participant Code G3-06

One of the members of parliament identified the current political stalemate as a constitutional crisis. He said, "Even though NUCC has made it all inclusive, should we call it a Charter crisis? charter 1 is the map of the future; charter 2 is work; The charter was not legally binding. There was little political agreement. The intended NUCC's all-inclusive is not increasing; moreover, there are some groups leaving the NUCC. This is the weakness of the charter."⁴⁹

During this spring revolution, different Muslim communities actively participated in different areas in the struggle against military rule. There is also a recognizable quantity of Muslim youths participating in the armed struggle.⁵⁰ However, it is hard to find the political involvement of Muslim minorities at different political levels in a well-institutionalized way. Muslims are also struggling to have a seat in the NUCC for their voice heard. Muslim activists, youths, and politicians are involved in the different political organizations in their respective positions. Some include the higher level political decision bodies like a Rohingya activist, Ko Aung Kyaw Moe as a deputy

minister of human rights in NUG, Ko Si Thu Maung, an NLD candidate from Yangon, as a spokesperson of CRPH and Daw May Pearl Thwal as an advisory board member to the MOHR,NUG. However, comparing the BMC's involvement in independent time with AFPFL, Muslim politicians and youths are struggling to participate in politics in a collective institutionalized way. According to credible sources, there are many Muslim women and girls participating in pro-democracy movements; there are around 20 Muslim women in the arm-struggle movement and about 3000 Muslim women in non-violent movements including CDM.⁵¹

51 According to a female Muslim activist who formerly worked in a people defense force

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49 Participant Code G6-02

50 <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-ababil-are-flying-myamars-muslims-fight-for-change/>

However, there are only two Muslim women, an advisory board member in the Ministry of Human Rights, NUG, and a NUCC member representing one of the women's rights organizations. A former government officer is concerned about the uncertainty regarding whether to participate in parliament as a member of a mainstream party or through a Muslim political institution. He said "This problem exists as two parts; Do you participate under the mainstream party, (supported by majority groups), or do you participate as a specific party or specific society?"⁵²

During discussions on how to promote the issues of ethno-religious minorities in a future federal democracy, a non-Muslim political activist proposed the formation of a citizen-based political process. He said, "Mainly, if I have to say in one word, it is clear if we focus on Citizenship."⁵³ He continues, "The approach on federalism is different even between the different ethnic (organization). Our firm determination is that we do not like federalism based on Ethnic nationalities. If federalism is based on Citizenship, the problem of the minority within the minority can be solved. However, when talking with some ethnic groups, there are complaints."

From the data of the 2014 census, Muslims in Myanmar are generally dispersed throughout the country, with no significant concentration of Muslim

populations in any single region, except for Rakhine State. In Rakhine State, Muslims constitute more than 30% of the population, making it the region with the most substantial Muslim presence (UNFPA Myanmar, 2017). This widespread distribution across various regions means that Muslims often find themselves as minorities within minorities, further complicating their socio-political standing and challenges in a federal system. This unique demographic and socio-political dynamic highlights the need for inclusive policies that address the specific needs and rights of Muslims across the country, particularly in regions where they are a minority within other minority communities. A member of parliament expressed

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 in one word,
 it is clear if
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52 Participant Code G4-08

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his opinion on the importance of a regional political structure that is open to the participation of marginalized communities. He said, “The rights of communities and the rights of individuals must be promoted in the same way. In order to promote such a thing, everyone in every state must have a platform that can promote it so that people can participate. whether LGBT community or minorities, It needs to be a platform that people can participate.”⁵⁴ Another member of parliament believes that the opportunity to abolish the 2008 constitution opens the political arena for a new system. This new system would involve developing regional constitutions, which would require negotiations to ensure alignment with the Federal Constitution in the protection of minorities within minorities. He said “ We have to discuss with ERO in developing process of regional constitution, not to conflict with mother law (Federal Constitution).”⁵⁵

The post-coup reduction in public discourse surrounding Muslim minorities, along with the emerging calls for inclusivity in the political process, signifies a notable shift in Myanmar’s political landscape from the perspective of Muslim communities. This shift has generated a sense of optimism among many Muslim participants, who perceive these developments as opportunities to gain recognition and rights within the broader national framework. However, this optimism is tempered by significant concerns regarding the effective implementation of inclusive policies and the need for robust mechanisms to ensure their enforcement.

The concept of a “charter crisis,” as mentioned by some stakeholders, underscores the need for a strategic shift toward greater inclusion, which is crucial for building strong legitimacy in Myanmar’s evolving political environment. Without this strategic shift and a commitment to inclusivity, the potential for lasting positive change remains challenging.

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Conclusion

The situation of Muslims in Myanmar is complex, with many scholars discussing human rights violations, discrimination, hate speech, and the genocide of Rohingya Muslims. We emphasized the perspective of political participation by exploring the challenges and opportunities that Muslims in Myanmar face in engaging in the political process. The inherent identity crisis, marked by internal identity instability and a lack of recognition from both the state and the people, has led to ongoing identity conflicts. This crisis, along with societal discrimination and communal violence, has greatly limited the political engagement of Muslims in Myanmar. The political participation of Muslims and democratic institutions during the 2010 to 2020 era, when communal violence occurred, provided valuable insights into the underlying Burmese Buddhist nationalism, restrictive institutional mechanisms, and the political polarization between the military and the NLD, all of which significantly affected Muslims. This study emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms in legal frameworks, societal attitudes, and educational systems to foster meaningful political participation among Muslim minorities. It provides recommendations for various stakeholders, including the international community, civil society organizations, Muslim communities, and political institutions at both the central and regional levels. These recommendations are designed to help create a more inclusive political framework in Myanmar that embraces diversity and ensures equal participation for all citizens.

This study emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms in legal frameworks, societal attitudes, and educational systems to foster meaningful political participation among Muslim minorities.

Policy Recommendation

The political and social exclusion of Muslim minorities in Myanmar represents a significant challenge to the nation's efforts to build a truly inclusive democracy. As highlighted throughout this study, the systemic barriers faced by these communities ranging from identity crises to societal discrimination underscore the need for comprehensive reforms. The recommendations in this section are designed to address these challenges by proposing actionable strategies that can foster greater political participation and integration of Muslim minorities into Myanmar's evolving political framework. By exploring insights from the extensive research and interviews conducted, these recommendations aim to inform both national and international stakeholders in their efforts to create a more equitable and just society for all citizens of Myanmar.

Central Political institutions

1. To conduct intensive negotiations with various ethnic communities to build consensus on the new citizenship law to facilitate the process of abolishing the current 1982 citizenship law. Ensure that the new citizenship law drafting process is inclusive and considers the concerns of all ethnic groups and marginalized minorities, including Muslims.
2. Implement gradual political reforms that shift the focus from ethnic identity to citizenship. This process should include educational campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits of an inclusive citizenship policy and promote national unity and cultural diversity.

3. To establish a transitional constitutional drafting process that includes representatives from all marginalized minorities, including Muslims.
4. To draft and enforce comprehensive anti-discrimination laws that protect against both legal and non-legal discrimination and hate speech. Ensure that these laws have clear enforcement mechanisms and penalties. An example of such a law is the UK race-relation Act 1976.

Regional Political Institutions

1. To develop initiatives that build social cohesion and mutual recognition among different minorities within a region while ensuring the political participation of marginalized groups regardless of their different identities.
2. Integrate universal human rights principles into all levels of policy development, ensuring that the rights of all citizens, including minorities within minorities, are protected while respecting the local norms and traditions of ethnic communities.
3. To ensure the inclusion of Muslim community leaders, including women leaders, in the regional interim and transitional political arrangement process in areas with significant Muslim populations.

Civil Society Organizations

1. To organize community dialogs and workshops where Muslim communities, including Muslim women and other ethnic communities, can discuss their unique identities and challenges. This will help foster mutual understanding and solidarity.
2. To organize workshops involving different ethnic groups, marginalized communities, and political actors to discuss common ground on future citizenship laws. This will help build consensus and promote inclusivity.
3. Mobilize community members to actively participate in the constitutional reform process to demonstrate an inclusive constitutional arrangement.

Muslim Communities in Myanmar

1. To recognize the self-identification of muslim minorities from diverse communities and embrace their struggle for political participation.
2. To establish initiatives to develop unity among the different Muslim communities and to form political action committees or interest groups to advocate for the rights and interests of Muslim communities at all levels of government.
3. To modernize the curriculum in madrasahs by including subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies alongside religious education. This will provide students with a well-rounded education and improve their future career prospects.
4. Launch initiatives to reform cultural and religious practices that contribute to internal marginalization and gender-based oppression. This includes promoting interpretations of Islamic teachings that encourage cooperation and integration with the broader society and empowering Muslim women to participate in the socio-political environment beyond the long-term conservative stereotypes and intersectional oppression.
5. To provide training programs for young Muslims on political processes, rights, and responsibilities, civic engagement, and public administration and encourage active participation in local and national elections.

International Community

1. Use international platforms to advocate for the recognition of the self-identification of different identities of Muslims in Myanmar. Facilitate programs that bring members of different Muslim communities to international forums. This can help raise awareness of their distinct identities and challenges, promoting better awareness and support.
2. To fund detailed research projects; the one which is similar to the Sachar Committee Report (Rajindar Sachar Committee, n.d.) in India, to investigate the social, economic, and educational status of different

Muslim communities in Myanmar; and gender-specific research to explore the barriers to political participation of Muslim Women in Myanmar.

3. Offer technical expertise to support the drafting of a new constitution that is inclusive of all ethnic and religious groups, ensuring equal rights for Muslim communities regardless of their self-identification.

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