

Rising Rakhine party looming threat to Myanmar’s Muslim minority

Timothy McLaughlin | Published October 3, 2015



AYE Nu Sein, vice president of Arakan National Party.—Reuters

SITTWE: Myanmar's historic elections next month are likely to worsen the plight of the country's oppressed Rohingya Muslim community, with a new, hard-line Buddhist party on the brink of becoming a formidable force. The empowerment of ethnic nationalists in Rakhine State at the western edge of the Southeast Asian nation could intensify discrimination of the stateless Rohingya, thousands of whom have fled in recent years to neighbouring countries.

The government has barred most Rohingyas from both voting and registering as candidates, drawing sharp criticism from the United Nations and undermining Myanmar's efforts to portray the Nov 8 poll as its first free and fair election in 25 years.

The Arakan National Party (ANP), an organisation of ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, was formed last year.

It lobbied hard to disenfranchise Myanmar's 'temporary citizens', including most of the one million Rohingya living in apartheid-like conditions in Rakhine and maintains that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite many living in Myanmar for generations.



"This is ANP, we see, we come, we conquer," says a sign on a whiteboard at ANP's headquarters in the state capital, Sittwe. The party is handing out leaflets saying: "Love your nationality, keep pure blood, be Rakhine and vote ANP."

Rohingyas make up about one-third of Rakhine's population and many are virtual prisoners in camps or in segregated villages, subject to restrictions on travel and, in some areas, access to healthcare and education.

"For the constituencies where there were many white card holders, we now have a better chance to win," said Aye Nu Sein, the ANP's vice-chairwoman, referring to the now-nullified identification cards issued to 'temporary citizens' under the previous military regime.

The ANP would like to see the Rohingya moved into camps or deported, she said. "We don't accept the term 'stateless' being used by the international community. They came from Bangladesh, they have the same religion, race, perceptions and traditions as people in Bangladesh," she said.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has voiced disgust. "I am deeply disappointed by this effective disenfranchisement of the Rohingya and other minority communities," he said last month. "Barring incumbent Rohingya parliamentarians from standing for re-election is particularly egregious." In the 2010 election, three out of 29 representatives elected to the national parliament from Rakhine were Rohingya. Two Rohingya lawmakers were also chosen to be among the 35 elected members of the Rakhine regional assembly that year.

Clean sweep

But this year it may well be a near-clean sweep for the ANP.

The party is contesting all but one of the 64 seats in the national and regional Rakhine races. It is also running candidates in 14 seats outside the state. One of its aims is to win the powerful post of chief minister of Rakhine.

"If the ANP wins the expected landslide, they will claim a strong mandate to secure the chief minister position and pursue their political agenda — including, potentially, further restrictions on the Muslim population," said Richard Horsey, an independent political analyst in Yangon.

"The ANP would also have a somewhat stronger voice than they do now in national politics, and would form part of a Buddhist-conservative bloc in the new parliament," Horsey said.

However, the Rakhines have a fraught relationship with Myanmar's Bamar majority as well. Although the Bamar are also predominantly Buddhist, Rakhines claim their region has been neglected for decades.

Both of Myanmar's national parties, the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) of Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, are predominantly Bamar.

Suu Kyi is planning a trip to Rakhine in mid-October, but she will not talk about the Rohingya or citizenship issues, Win Htein, a senior member of the NLD, told Reuters.

"If we do so, they would attack us. We'll just say: 'vote NLD'," he said.

He added that the Rakhine people had become "super patriots" and conceded that the NLD faced an uphill battle against the ANP in most of the state's constituencies, where the NLD is seen as pro-Muslim and sympathetic to the Rohingya.

The ruling USDP, which is viewed in Rakhine as unconcerned with development in one of the country's poorest states, also faces long odds except in a few areas that have abundant military populations, experts say.

The ANP's popularity has been fed by a tide of anti-Muslim sentiment that surfaced after reforms started in 2011, erupting into communal violence in 2012. At least 200 were killed and more than 140,000, mainly Rohingya, were displaced in fighting between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine.

Rakhine Buddhists say they have little doubt who will come to power.

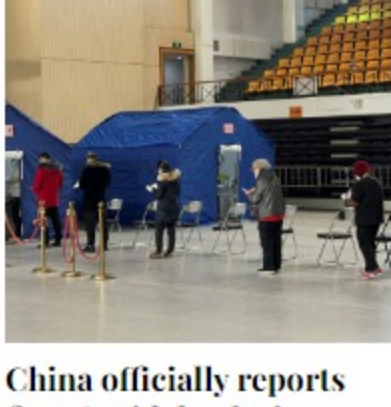
"ANP is the strongest party in Rakhine state," said Kyaw Lwin, a shop owner in Sittwe. "No matter how they [other parties] try, our Rakhine people will vote for Rakhine nationals."—Reuters

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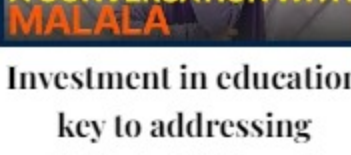
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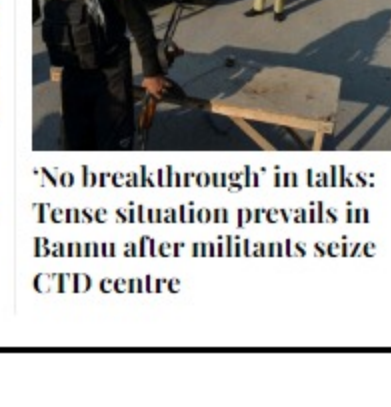
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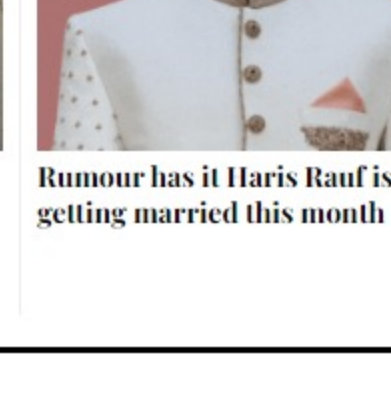
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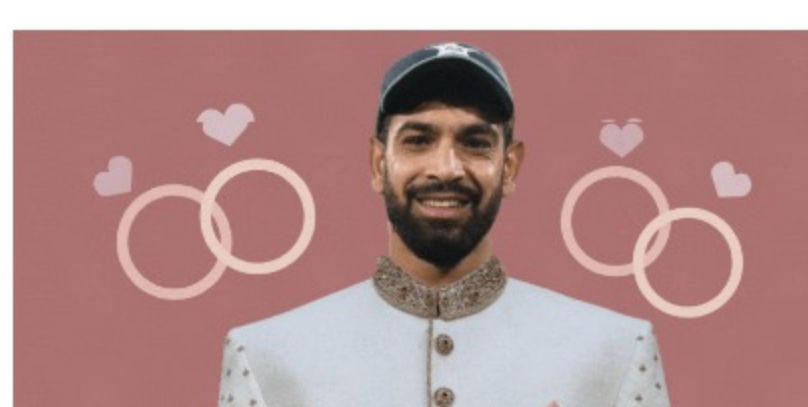


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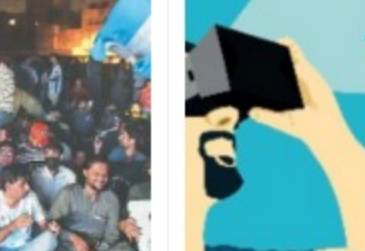


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