



Indonesia can assist Myanmar to find a long-term solution for peace in Rakhine state. Reuters

After years of refusing to protect ethnic Rohingya from persecution, Myanmar's government is seemingly showing signs of change.

Following [reports of massacre, arson and rape](#) targeting ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state late last year, the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi [set up a panel to resolve conflicts in that state](#)

. The government also held a closed-door meeting for ASEAN foreign ministers to discuss aid for ethnic Rohingya. This followed a visit by Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur on human rights, to Myanmar in mid-January.

But the investigations and political peace processes are only taking place at the government level. There is no grassroots participation, even when the problem exists at the community level.

Unless reconciliation efforts involve people at the grassroots level, persecution of ethnic Rohingya will not stop. The Indonesian government should look into supporting dialogues between communities in Myanmar.

Institutionalised discrimination

To understand the root of violence against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, we must understand the narrative that fuels the majority prejudice against them.

Following Myanmar's independence from the British, the military regime [propagated a view that equates Muslim Rohingya with colonial rule](#)

. They associated Muslims with the exploitation of Burma by foreigners because the regime perceived that the Rohingya arrived in Rakhine state during the British colonial period.

The public bought the idea of Rohingya as foreigners and supported systematic discrimination against them. Under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, Rohingya is not recognised as one of the nation's ethnic groups. They are barred from serving in public offices and the military.

The majority Buddhist community in Myanmar supports the discrimination against Muslim Rohingya. They did not protest the Citizenship Law as the government associated it with "Buddhist nationalism". Thein Nyunt, chair of the New National Democracy party, [affirmed that this law was intended “to protect” the Burmese race](#)

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Even though the military regime has collapsed, the perception of Muslims that it fostered persists.

To this day, there is almost no facilitated discussion or dialogue between ethnic Rohingya and the Buddhist majority to dismantle inter-ethnic prejudices.

How Indonesia can help

Following the reports of violence in Rakhine, Indonesia, where the majority of the population is Muslim, [donated humanitarian aid in December](#) . In 2013, Indonesia donated US\$1 million to build school buildings in the state.

If the Indonesian government is serious about assisting Myanmar to deal with ethnic violence, its aid should include a project designed to foster inter-ethnic cooperation in Myanmar. Indonesia, a multi-ethnic and multi-faith country, can share with Myanmar programs that can help deal with the complexity of multiculturalism.

Indonesia has more than 350 ethnic groups, 700 local languages and six religions that are recognised by the state. Indonesia has its share of experience of ethnic violence and a number of community initiatives have been carried out to support reconciliation.

In Ambon, the capital of Indonesia's Moluccas islands, the local government, security forces,

religious and community leaders re-introduced *pela*, a traditional inter-village friendship agreement, after the conflict between Christians and Muslims ended in 1999.

Pela was utilised to foster cooperation between Christian and Muslim villages. Various projects were introduced, such as mosque or church constructions, which require workers from different faiths to become partners in building houses of worship.

The government and other stakeholders have also established interfaith dialogue. This includes forums such as MADIA (Society for Interreligious Dialogue), Dian Interfidei, Interfaith Women's Forum in Bali, and the Young Interfaith Forum in Bali.

The partnership of Heru Karyanto, a Chinese Indonesian community leader, and K.H. Thaifoer, a Muslim religious leader, offers a successful example. They initiated a communication forum (FKML) in Lasem, Central Java, to strengthen relationships between Javanese and Chinese Indonesians.

The two set up the forum as a precaution after seeing ethnic Chinese being targeted during riots in Jakarta, Surabaya and other big cities following the end of Suharto's rule in 1998. Due to the relationship-building by Karyanto and Thaifoer, Lasem, with its significant Chinese community, was free from ethnic violence.

Indonesia has initiated bilateral interfaith dialogue forums with several countries, such as [Italy](#) and [Serbia](#)

. Indonesia can create a similar forum with the Myanmar government.

Indonesia should also engage various stakeholders, such as humanitarian NGOS in Southeast Asia. NGOs incorporated with the SEAHUM (Southeast Asia Humanitarian) committee network, for example, may be able to design and run community-based programs in Myanmar.

Through a grassroots, multi-stakeholder approach, Indonesia can assist Myanmar to find a long-term solution for peace in Rakhine state.

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