

How violence radicalised a generation of Rohingya

From its start four years ago as a small-scale effort to organise a Rohingya resistance, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has managed to stage two deadly attacks on Myanmar's security forces: one in October and the other last month.

But in lashing out against the government, the militants have also made their own people a target. And they have handed Myanmar's military an attempt at public justification by saying that it is fighting terrorism, even as it has burned down dozens of villages and killed fleeing women and children.

This radicalisation of a new generation of Rohingya, a Muslim minority in a Buddhist-majority country, adds fuel to an already combustible situation in Rakhine, Myanmar's poorest State.

Localised struggle

Increasingly, there is also concern that both the relatively few Rohingya who have taken up arms and the broader population — hundreds of thousands of whom are crowded in camps in neighbouring Bangladesh — will be exploited by international terrorism networks, bringing a localised struggle into the slipstream of global politics.

ARSA's attempt at insurgency politics has been disastrous — a ceasefire they declared this month was rejected by the military, and they are reported to have suffered lopsided casualties compared with the government's. But the men caught up in the cause insist that resistance is worth the steep cost, even to their families.

"This fight is not just about my fate or my family's fate," said Noor Alam, a 25-year-old insurgent whose family was sheltering in a forest in Myanmar after their village in Maungdaw Township was burned. "It's a matter of the existence of all Rohingya. If we have to sacrifice ourselves for our children to live peacefully, then it is worth it."

Myanmar's military, which ruled the country for nearly half a century, has systematically persecuted the Rohingya, subjecting them to apartheid-like existences and stripping most of their citizenship.

The nation's civilian government has justified the recent violent crackdown in Rakhine as a counterstrike against "extremist Bengali terrorists."

Although the Rohingya claim long-held roots in Rakhine, the official narrative in Myanmar holds that they are recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

ARSA does not yet have the kind of firepower that can pose a serious threat to one of Asia's biggest armies.

By contrast, other ethnic rebel forces, which have battled the state for decades, have clashed far more violently with the Myanmar Army.

The Arakan Army, an insurgency fighting for ethnic Rakhine rights, killed at least 300 soldiers in the first half of last year, according to a military document.

Unlike ARSA, neither the Arakan Army nor other ethnic militant groups have been designated terrorists by Myanmar's government. NYT

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