The Deadly Logic of Nationalism

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Since 2016, 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar following a military campaign targeted at driving them out of the country. Evidence of this includes countless eyewitness testimonies and the discovery of mass graves. Outrage from the international community has resulted in the Gambia, with the backing of the global Muslim community, taking the Myanmese government to trial over the atrocities. This is an important time to revisit the darker side of nationalism, which is its connection to ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Nationalism doesn’t just mean the feeling of belonging to a nation. Taken to the extreme, the logic of nationalism (that one and only one culture or nation should exist within a piece of territory, which is thought of as a “nation-state”) leads to the policy of “ethnic cleansing.” In order to maintain a nation’s “perfection”, entire groups of people perceived as impure elements are targeted for removal. This is where ideologies of nationalism and racism dovetail to put innocent lives at risk. Ethnic cleansing requires forceful and severe policies, meant to remove the “unwanted” populations either by threat or use of physical violence. In the case of the Rohingya, Myanmar’s military “systematically shot, killed, forcibly disappeared, raped, gang-raped, sexually assaulted, detained, beat and tortured Rohingya civilians” and burned down Rohingya communities. Ethnic cleansing is not the result of a burst of passion. It is rooted in deep nationalistic sentiment, resulting in firm and long-lasting systematic hostilities.

There is satellite evidence that Rohingya villages were being destroyed as recently as four months ago. Ethnic cleansing benefits from powerful political support. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Myanmar, has refused to condemn the systematic persecution, harassment, murder, and expulsion of Rohingya from Myanmar’s Rakhine state. She has suggested that terrorists are behind a misinformation campaign that exaggerates the seriousness of the genocide. Additionally, she intends to personally defend the actions of Myanmar’s government to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Although the ICJ lacks the power to enforce its ruling, its decision, as well as Myanmar’s official reaction to the decision, will significantly shape the discussion of nationalism and ethnic cleansing going forward.

‘Genocide’ is an extremely charged and controversial word, and it poses a challenge that must be overcome when it comes to the ‘justification’ portion of geopolitical codes. For example, India and China have both invested heavily in Myanmar’s economy, resulting in them taking up a posture of defending Myanmar’s government and military, pointing to incidents of terrorism to support their stance. As far as their geopolitical codes are concerned, Myanmar is an ally—and their justification for maintaining that relationship in the face of the Rohingya refugee crisis is security against terrorism, a topic with broad international appeal.