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Cohesion in the Time of Conflict: An Analysis of Social Cohesion in the Context of Ethnic Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State

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ABSTRACT

Social cohesion initiatives have so far been limited in their effectiveness at resolving inter-communal tensions in Rakhine State. The outbreak of armed conflict between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar Military have added other dimensions to the situation of inter-communal conflict; not to mention, complicated evaluations of cohesion-oriented programming. In particular, the decline in expressions of anti-Muslim sentiments or hate messaging may be assumed to indicate an improvement in inter-communal relations. However, the prominence and the volume of anti-military and anti-government discourse should not be mistaken to have replaced local contentions against the Muslim population. Although fewer than during the period prior to the violence in 2017 (or even 2012 and 2016), there continue to occur physical clashes as well as social exclusionary behaviour targeting primarily Muslims.

The case study of Rakhine State, and specifically situations surrounding the recent ethnic armed conflict, provides important insight into the implementation and the evaluation of social cohesion programming. The analysis of information—gathered from primary and secondary sources, through interviews, surveys, and the regular monitoring of news and social media—about local contexts and evolving inter-communal dynamics seeks to provide a fair assessment of social cohesion activities, to aid in the development and implementation of such initiatives in the complex conflict environments common across Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

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BACKGROUND

On 25 August 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked approximately 20 police outposts in northern Rakhine State and killed 12 members of the Myanmar Military (hereafter referred to by its local name, '*Tatmadaw*'). This event was the catalyst to widespread violent crackdowns against Muslims and led to the mass exodus primarily of the community which self-identifies as Rohingya. Although significant in its scale and intensity, this incident marks but one in a longstanding history of tensions (and the outbreaks thereof[1]) between Buddhists and Muslims particularly in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

There are a number of precedents that likely contributed to the entrenchment of this religious divide. In the mid-1990s, the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas

and National Races (locally termed '*Na Ta La*') enacted a 'model village scheme', which aimed to resettle Buddhists in areas with a sizeable Muslim population to address a perceived "demographic imbalance".[2] A privately-funded Ancillary Committee for the Reconstruction of Rakhine National Territory in the Western Frontier also supported the establishment of a "Muslim-dry" buffer zone between the state capital of Sittwe and the formerly Muslim-populated Maungdaw Town.[3] It should be noted, however, that independent individuals—and not the Na Ta La nor the Ancillary Committee—were the ones who had taken advantage of the displacement of Rohingya Muslims from villages across northern Rakhine State following the violence in 2017 and attempted to resettle on the newly emptied lands. These individuals were later made to leave by local authorities.[4] In 2015, four 'Race and Religion Protection Laws' had successfully been passed at Myanmar's Union Parliament. Human Rights Watch, along

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[1] There have been a number of violent incidents between Buddhists and Muslims prior to 25 August 2017. Some notable incidents occurred in 2012, as well as the first appearance by ARSA on 9 October 2016. Though not as great in scale as the attack in 2017, the 2016 incident also marked the first instance that the issues in Rakhine State had been brought to the attention of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by a Myanmar Government.

[2] Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim*

'Other' (London: Zed Books, 2017), chap. 5, Kindle.

[3] AFP, 'Rakhine Seek Muslim-Free "buffer Zone" on Bangladeshi Border', *Frontier Myanmar*, 16 March 2018, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-seek-muslim-free-buffer-zone-on-bangladeshi-border/.

[4] This information was conveyed to the author by a local analyst with reliable knowledge of the issue, in May 2021.

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with other similar organisations, had argued that these laws risked discrimination on religious grounds—disproportionately affecting the Muslim community—and serious inter-communal tensions. [5] The prominence of actors such as the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion ('*Ma Ba Tha*') and the renowned preacher Wirathu furthered the rise of Buddhist nationalism in the country, deepened perceptions of vulnerability among the Buddhist population, and reinforced the notion of the fearsome "Muslim Other".[6]

In September 2016, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State was established to examine and propose solutions to the complex challenges in the region. Among its recommendations were five that targeted the improvement of social cohesion between communities, through the facilitation of inter-communal dialogue,

the building of local capacity for mediation, the promotion of meaningful interaction and understanding between communities, and the combatting of hate speech.[7] In line with this, the Union Government facilitated and supported the formation of township-level Committees for Sustainable Peace and Development, the first of which was established in Maungdaw Township in June 2019. This Committee provides a space to dialogue for all ethnic members of the township including women and youth representatives, thereby building trust among the diverse communities as they work towards peace, reconciliation and development for all resident ethnic and religious groups. Maungdaw Township was also later designated a 'Model Township for Social Cohesion'. This initiative is part of the broader reform program of Myanmar's General Administration Department, which then required pilot projects to develop a particular township per State/Region. [8] Furthermore, in the period from 2017 to 2019, local non-

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[5] As cited in Shameema Rahman and Wendy Zeldin, 'Burma: Four "Race and Religion Protection Laws" Adopted', Library of Congress, 14 September 2015, //www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/burma-four-race-and-religion-protection-laws-adopted/.

[6] Veena Das, 'Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumour, and the Social Production of Hate', *Social Identities* 4, no. 1 (1 February 1998): 109–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504639851915.

[7] 'Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State', August 2017, https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf.

[8] 'Union Minister U Min Thu Meets GAD Staff Of Shan State (South, North)', *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 8 February 2019, https://www.gnlm.com.mm/union-minister-u-min-thu-meets-gad-staff-of-shan-state-south-north/.

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governmental organisations and civil society groups conducted an estimated 200 social cohesion-oriented activities. Some examples include community dialogues, cultural festivals, sports tournaments, vocational trainings, and youth camps.

The impacts of these social cohesion activities were however complicated by the re-emergence of the Arakan Army (AA) in November 2018 and the escalation of its armed conflict with the Tatmadaw. The two armed groups clashed over 960 times in the two-year span they had been fighting, and caused approximately 464 deaths of the Vcumulative 1,118 casualties. [9] Nearly 240,000 persons had additionally been displaced. [10] The very real effects of the conflict on the socio-economic conditions of the broader population in Rakhine State—regardless of their ethnicity or religion—thereby shifted popular discourse away from the previous focus on anti-Muslim sentiments to tensions between the

ethnic majority in 'mainland' Myanmar and the ethnic minorities at its periphery.

Public outrage at the Tatmadaw and the government for their roles in perpetrating atrocities and declining conditions in the region compounded long-held grievances by the ethnic Rakhine and translated the resentment against institutions into anger towards the generality that is the ethnic Bamar. Bamar rulers had seized the autonomous and self-governing Arakan Kingdom in 1784 and exercised control over the region for approximately 200 years. Attempts by rebel groups, such as the Arakan Independence Army and the Arakan Liberation Party, to challenge the status quo and regain autonomy for Rakhine State in the years since have not had much success. Enter the AA. The AA's slogan "the way of Rakhita" brought to the forefront of public memory the deep-seated feelings of oppression by the Arakanese and called on the Rakhine to pick up arms and fight for their renewed self-determination. [11] In addition, the AA maximised the political vacuum after the

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[9] Figures based on independent monitoring by the author from 15 November 2018 to 28 November 2020.

[10] As of 2 November 2020, a total of 236,229 persons were reported displaced, with 82,217 residing in formal camps and 154,012 in informal settlements. See: Rakhine Ethnics Congress, 'စစ်�‌�‌ေဘးသင့်/ စစ်ဘဘေးဒုက္ခရသည့် အေရအ‌တ‌ွက်ပြုစုပျ‌ုခ့', *Facebook*, 2 November 2020,

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=972846993240493&id=250589055466294.

[11] ထွန်းထွန်းနိုင်, 'ရခိုင့်ဘဘတွ AA ကို ဘာလို့ ‌ေထာက်ခံပ့ရကသလဲ', *The Irrawaddy*, 7 February 2019, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/viewpoint/2019/02/07/182604.html; Kyaw Linn, '"Way of Rakhita": Dream or Nightmare?', *Asia Times*, 28 February 2019,

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arrest of charismatic and popular Rakhine leader, Dr. Aye Maung. Many locals had become disenchanted with the Union Government, especially after the 2015 General Election when the winning National League for Democracy (NLD) party chose and appointed as the State Chief Minister its own member instead of a member of the ethnic Rakhine Arakan National Party (ANP), which had won the majority of seats in Rakhine State. The State Government was therefore viewed as a 'puppet' of the Union Government and unlikely to ensure the rights of the ethnic minority population. At the same time, ANP leaders lost substantial support as they

were seen by the public to prioritise their personal economic interests and engage in corruption. Although a former member and founder of the ANP, Dr. Aye Maung was the exception. However, a police crackdown on demonstrators in Mrauk-U Town on 16 January 2018 led to his arrest,[12] subsequent sentencing to 20 years in prison under Section 122 [Offences against the State] and Section 505(b) [Defamation of the State] of the Penal Code,[13] and the revocation of his status as a Member of Parliament (MP) and prohibition from future political participation.[14] Even though Dr. Aye Maung's son had established and headed the Arakan Front Party, which won a seat in the Rakhine State Parliament following the November 2018 By-Election,[15] he was considered an inefficient

https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/02/opinion/way-of-rakhita-dream-or-nightmare/.

[12] မင်းအောင်ခိုင်, 'ရဲက ပစ္စတူးရဲ့ပိမ္မးရဲ့င့်းမးေဖျကာင့် ေျမာက်ဦးတြင့် လူ ၇ ဦးေသဆုံး ၊ ၁၂ ဦး ဒဏ္ဏ ရရှိ', *The Irrawaddy*, 17 January 2018, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/01/17/149818.html.

[13] Development Media Group, 'ေဒါက္တာေအးေမာင့်ရဲ့င့် စာေရးဆရာေဝဟင့်ေအာင်္ကို ပိုင်ငံေတာ် အန္တရာယ်ပိကုေစမး၊ ပုဒ္ဒ ၅ဝ၅(ခ) ျဖင့် ေထာင့် ၂ ရဲ့စ၊ ပိုင်ငံေတာ် ပုန္နး ပုဒ္ဒ ၁၂၂ ျဖင့် ေထာင့်ဏ္ဏ ရဲ့စ ၂ဝ ခ်မွတ္လိုကွသ္သညု', *Facebook*, 19 March 2019, https://www.facebook.com/dmgnewsagency/posts/1337590749726666.

[14] 'ျပည်ေထာင်စုေရွးေကာက်ပွဲ ေကာ်မရှင်', *Union Election Commission*, 20 May 2020, https://www.uec.gov.mm/news_preview_detail.php.

[15] 'Announcement For The List Of Region Or State Hluttaw Representatives', *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 5 November 2018, https://www.gnlm.com.mm/announcement-for-the-list-of-region-or-state-hluttaw-representatives/; Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 'By-Elections: A Wakeup Call for the NLD', *The Myanmar Times*, 5 November 2018, https://www.mmtimes.com/news/elections-wakeup-call-nld.html; Corazon H. Ignacio et al., '2018 Myanmar By-Elections: Building the Foundation for Successful 2020 Elections' (The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), 2018), https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018-BE-report-English-version-PDF.pdf.

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leader and so a poor substitute for the political champion the people desired. The AA took advantage of these situations and stepped up as both the political and military leader of the ethnic Rakhine. It led the charge against primarily the Bamar, foregoing other issues including with the Rohingya Muslims in favour of solidifying efforts against a 'common enemy' in the Tatmadaw and the government.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Social cohesion is generally viewed as a key variable to conflict prevention and mitigation measures, and the effectiveness of related initiatives at reducing inter-communal tensions depends on a variety of factors. Previous research has often focused on the actors, namely donors and implementing institutions as well as stakeholders who facilitate or hinder the conduct of social cohesion activities. This paper aims to analyse social cohesion in light of the situational context, in particular during active armed conflict. Using western Myanmar as a case study, the author seeks to provide concrete links between the changing inter-communal dynamics and the

effectiveness of social cohesion initiatives. Have social cohesion activities in Rakhine State contributed to the mitigation of inter-communal conflict, in spite of ongoing fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw? How have inter-communal dynamics changed since the escalation of conflict between the two armed groups? What are the implications of these changing dynamics on social cohesion initiatives as well as conflict management measures? And, what are the consequences of social cohesion in Rakhine State on the broader inter-communal—not to mention, political—context of Myanmar? In answering these questions, the author hopes to assist efforts to improve the development and implementation of such measures especially amid the complex conflict environments common across Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

This paper makes use of primary and secondary source data collected, encoded, and evaluated by the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) over the relevant timeframe, especially from November 2018 to 2020. The analysis focuses strongly on anecdotal evidences by key informants with good knowledge of the ground situation. Where possible, this information is supplemented with quantitative data from surveys and cross-referenced with sources such as official

government, Tatmadaw, and organisation websites; local and international news agencies; and selected social media accounts and pages. Certain key assumptions were made in the encoding of relevant data; these assumptions will be detailed where appropriate in the text.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social cohesion does not yet have a universally accepted definition either within the academic community or among the organisations that implement these activities. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, social cohesion will be understood as "the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other".[16] Two points to be highlighted in this definition are "moral community" and "trust". Trust, whether in an individual

or in a community, is facilitated by a shared understanding and agreement of 'acceptable'—or, 'moral'—actions. This common understanding that what is 'right' should take precedence and that what is 'wrong' is penalised minimises, if not eliminates, opportunities for conflict. At the same time, the absence of latent social tensions, as well as the fostering of trust, depends on deeper social bonds formed through dynamics of communication, interaction, cooperation, and reciprocity.[17]

Cohesion as well as communal-thinking does not occur in a contextual vacuum, just as individual behaviour is shaped by the environment as well as the person.[18] In particular, the socialisation of individuals to understand and accept the norms, beliefs, values, and expectations of the society in which they live contributes in large part to the idea of 'morality' they bring to the community.[19] Moreover, history—and the actors that take part in it—plays a role in developing and reinforcing societal norms and expectations. The narratives of

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[16] Christian Albrekt Larsen, 'Social Cohesion: Definition, Measurement and Developments', n.d., 45.

[17] Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier, 'Social Cohesion Revisited: A New Definition and How to Characterize It', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32, no. 2 (3 April 2019): 231–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2018.149748
0.

[18] Kurt Lewin, 'Behavior and Development as a Function of the Total Situation', *Manual of Child Psychology*, 1946, 791–844, https://doi.org/10.1037/10756-016.

y[19] William Little, 'Chapter 5. Socialization', in *Introduction to Sociology*, 1st Canadian Edition (BC Campus, 2014), https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontosociology/chapter/chapter5-socialization/.

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historical events and experiences perpetuated by influential actors may further serve to solidify past beliefs and traditions and make the societies they influence resistant to change. Social cohesion initiatives must therefore consider the path dependence of socialisation as well as of underlying inter-communal tensions.

There are arguments for the interdependency of conflict management approaches, of which social cohesion is a part. In light of broader and evolving contexts in which contemporary conflicts occur, there is seeming value in analysing and evaluating prevention, mitigation, and reconciliation initiatives to account for their temporal and spatial connections to not just similar approaches but complementary activities. The proliferation of (particularly social) media, for instance, necessitates an examination of the diffusion of ideas across geographic space and the ways such analysis may be used to better understand and subsequently address inter-communal divides.[20] At the same time, a broader, more comprehensive approach to peace building must be tempered by conflict sensitivity considerations and aim to minimise unintended negative consequences especially from external interventions.[21]

ANALYSIS

The armed conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw has shifted public discourse away from anti-Muslim narratives towards more anti-Bamar (and anti-Tatmadaw and anti-government) sentiment. This shift may mistakenly give the impression that relations between the Rakhine and the Rohingya communities are improving, especially given the simultaneous increase in social cohesion initiatives being implemented in northern Rakhine State. While there has indeed been some improvement in this regard, it is by no means sufficient to say that the two communities do not continue to suffer tensions and are ready and willing to cohabitate peacefully within the same state.

Social cohesion-oriented programming may be credited, to an extent, for the

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[20] Paul F. Diehl and Patrick Regan, 'The Interdependence of Conflict Management Attempts', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, no. 1 (2015): 99–107.

[21] 'Social Cohesion and Conflict', in *Research For Social Change* (Switzerland: UNRISD, 2003), https://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/2E3C00CD605CC744C1256E35004BBB9B/$file/chap3.pdf.

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improvement in relations particularly between the Muslim and the non-Muslim communities. For example, inter-community sports tournaments, which had required each team to comprise members of different ethnicities and religions, were effective at promoting social, and later business, interactions among previously estranged communities. [22] On the other hand, some positive developments in inter-communal engagement are less easily attributable to the implementation of organisational activities. In May 2019, Sittwe Township saw a slow resumption in business interactions between Rakhine and Muslims. Some Rakhine business owners contracted Muslims for manual labour,[23]

while vendors at the Bu May Market in Sittwe Town were again selling goods to Muslim customers.[24] It would be easy to assume that the recommencement of

business transactions between the communities is a product of social cohesion programming. However, it is just as likely that the preoccupation with the armed conflict has made locals ambivalent, if not tolerant, to Muslim engagement.

To exemplify the latter point: In March 2020, a local women's forum organised simultaneous anti-hate speech campaigns in all 17 townships of Rakhine State.[25] Hate messaging has historically targeted ethnic Rohingya and Muslims, while individuals or organisations who attempt to counter such activities are accused of being "Muslim-lovers" or "traitors to the Rakhine". The scope and general acceptance—or at least the lack of strong opposition—to the aforementioned event may therefore be seen as a success for social cohesion initiatives. It is further notable that organisers of the event included members of all ethnic and religious groups.

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[22] This observation came about during an interview with an ethnic Thet community leader in August 2019 and was echoed by 10 Muslim and 19 non-Muslim community leaders across Maungdaw District. It is further supplemented by a survey of 200 Muslim and 300 non-Muslim respondents, of whom 74% had noted an increase in comfort level when interacting with communities different from their own following participation in such social cohesion activities.

[23] It should be noted that wages paid to Muslim labourers remained less than those

paid to similar level wage-earners of Rakhine ethnicity.

[24] This information was conveyed in verbal communications by local Muslims and vendors to CDNH staff in May 2019.

[25] Soung Hnin Wai, 'သံတွဲချမ်ိဒ္ဓနယ့္ "ချစ စ့ေသာတ့လက္ခမ်ိသီမီးအဖြ့" မွဖိတ့ေခၚပါတ ယ့္', *Facebook*, 9 March 2020, https://www.facebook.com/soung.hninwai.102 97/posts/785812718609100.

An initial analysis of hate speech on social media however reveals indication that inter-communal tensions remain unabated. In analysing hate speech, encoders defined and disaggregated 'hate speech' in three

denotes incitement to (often physical) acts of violence. [26] Although little of the recorded hate speech had been active calls to violence, the amount of insults and derogatory terms do not suggest an improvement in inter-communal relations (see Fig. 1). Furthermore, the target of messaging towards institutional actors— namely, the Tatmadaw, the government, the AA, or even the international community— supports the idea that public focus is on the state-nonstate conflict of the period (see Fig.

types. These types suggest increasing levels of severity. 'Insults' comprise rude words, phrases, or expressions used in reference to a group or based on one's belonging to a group. 'Sub-human' refers to the use of explicit and derogatory language, for example the comparison of humans to animals or 'lesser beings'. 'Call to violence

2). An ethnicity-based analysis of online hate messaging also supplements the shift away from Rakhine-Rohingya hostilities and towards Rakhine-Bamar frictions (see Fig. 3).[27] Perhaps summarised best by one hard-line anti-Muslim community leader: "[The Rakhine] are now preoccupied with the fighting. … The Tatmadaw is treating all of us badly. … [W]e don't have time to talk about the 'Bengali' (referring to the Rohingya)."[28]

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[26] Some key assumptions had been made in the encoding of social media commentary. These include: 1) In cases wherein it is difficult to determine the identity and the location of commentators within or outside Rakhine State, such commentary has been disregarded in the encoding. 2) Rohingya commentators on social media were assumed to be members of the community in diaspora. This is in light of knowledge that most resident Rohingya have limited access—in means or ability—to social media. 3) Online commentators may have used 'government' as a catch-all term for the Union Government, the Rakhine State Government, any of the Parliament bodies, and/or a collective of any/all of the above. Specificities are noted when possible. 4)

References to 'Bamar', 'Tatmadaw', and 'government' may have been made interchangeable. Specificities are noted when possible.

[27] Certain incidents or events, such as violent confrontations between members of particularly the Rakhine and the Rohingya communities, nevertheless provoke the occasional resurgence of former religion-based tensions.

[28] This quote is taken from an interview with a hard-line anti-Muslim community leader. The interview was conducted by CDNH staff in August 2020.
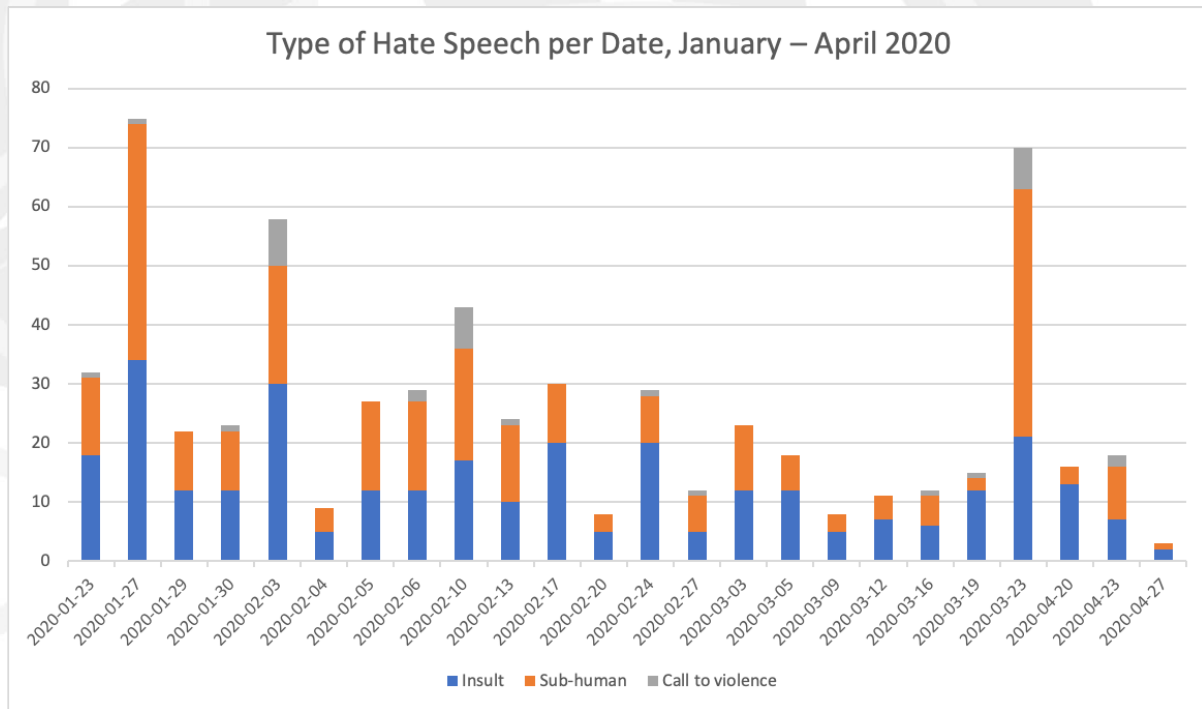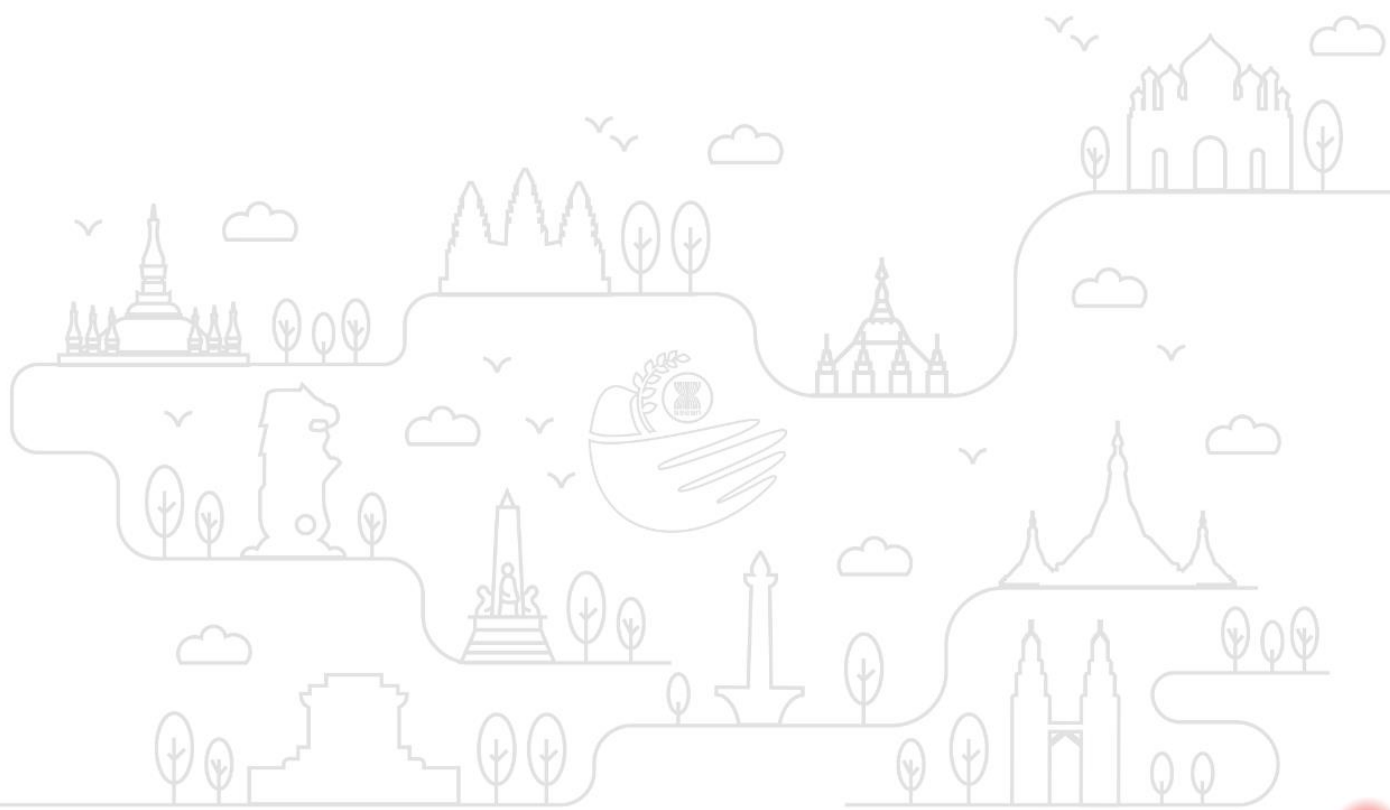
Figure 1. Type of Hate Speech per Date, January–April 2020. Figure uses data from the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH
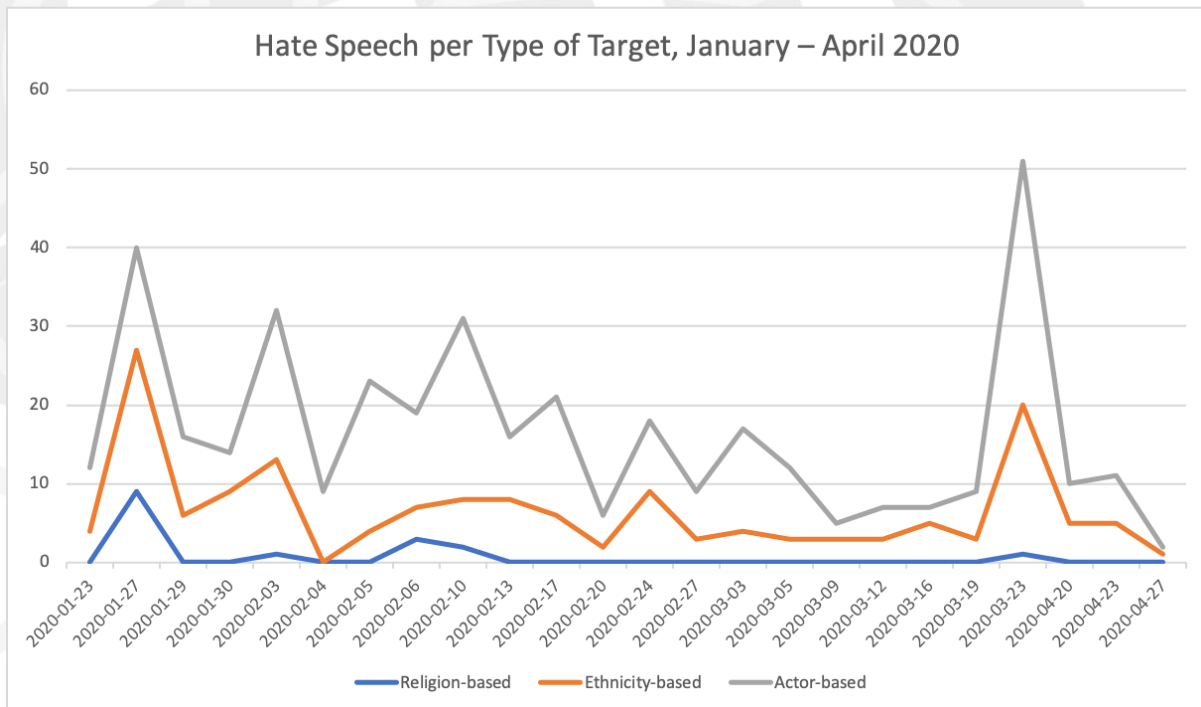
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Figure 2. Hate Speech per Type of Target, January–April 2020. Figure uses data from the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH)
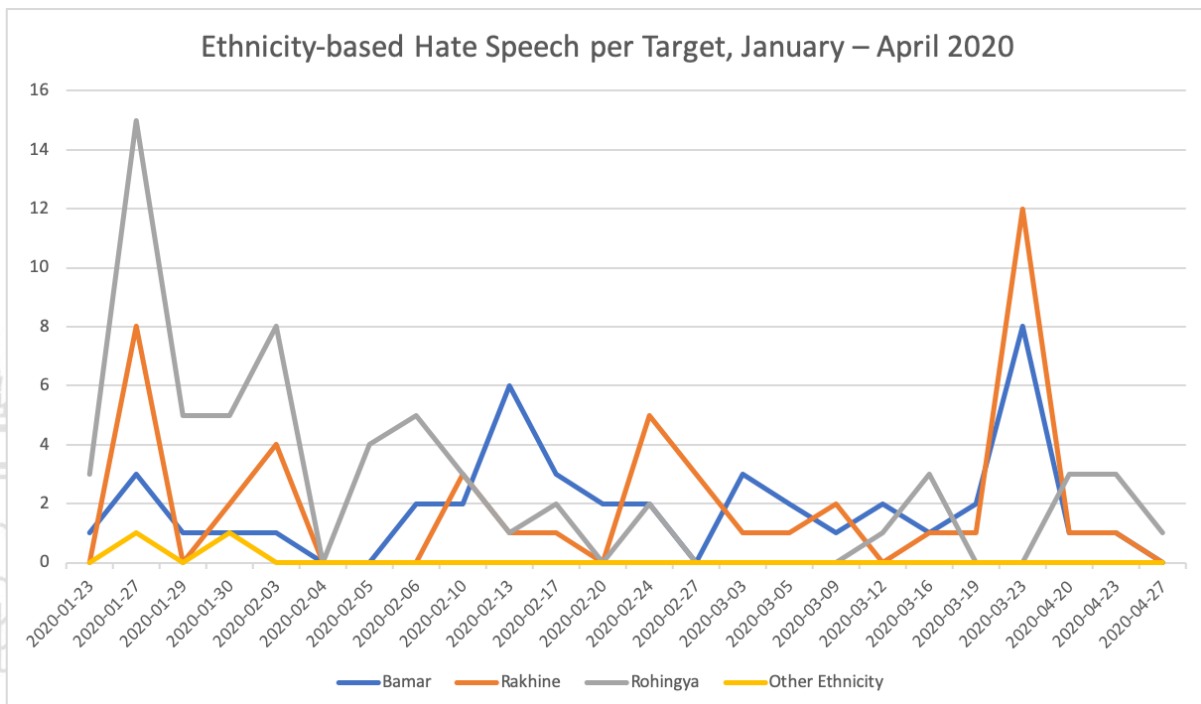

Figure 3. Ethnicity-based Hate Speech per Target, January–April 2020. Figure uses data from the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH).

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The continued existence of inter-religious tensions is further revealed by incidences of violence not directly related to the armed conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw. [29] Although the few and sporadic physical altercations between grassroots communities since fighting escalated in November 2018 (see Fig. 4) is in marked contrast to situations prior to the widespread violence that led to the 2017 mass exodus of the predominantly Rohingya Muslims, it is significant that majority of the incidents occurred in the northern part of Rakhine State, namely

Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships as well as Sittwe Township (see Fig. 5). These areas are the locations of most of the remaining, albeit displaced, Rohingya Muslim population. Separate to this is the involvement in recent violence of the Christian community in Ann Township. The Christian community in Rakhine State is mostly ethnic Chin, with whom the AA (and its Rakhine supporters) faces a dispute regarding control over the territory of Paletwa Township. Paletwa Township is currently delineated as part of neighbouring Chin State. Although it cannot be clearly determined, it may be inferred that the spike in Buddhist-Christian tensions in Rakhine State is in fact related to the armed conflict.

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[29] Encoding of 'violent incidents' followed a few key assumptions: 1) Incidents involving persons with official positions—whether Tatmadaw, police, government, or local administration—were attributed to the AA, unless otherwise mentioned. This assumption is based on the occurrence of incidents following threats by the AA against similar persons-with-positions. 2) Incidents involving persons without positions were encoded under 'violent incidents' and not immediately linked to the state-nonstate armed conflict, unless explicitly mentioned. 3) The arrests of Muslims for human trafficking and/or unauthorised travel were not included in the encoding, either as 'violent incidents' or as indicators of 'inter-communal conflict'. Such incidences were assumed to indicate broader institutional and/or legal issues, beyond the scope of the research.

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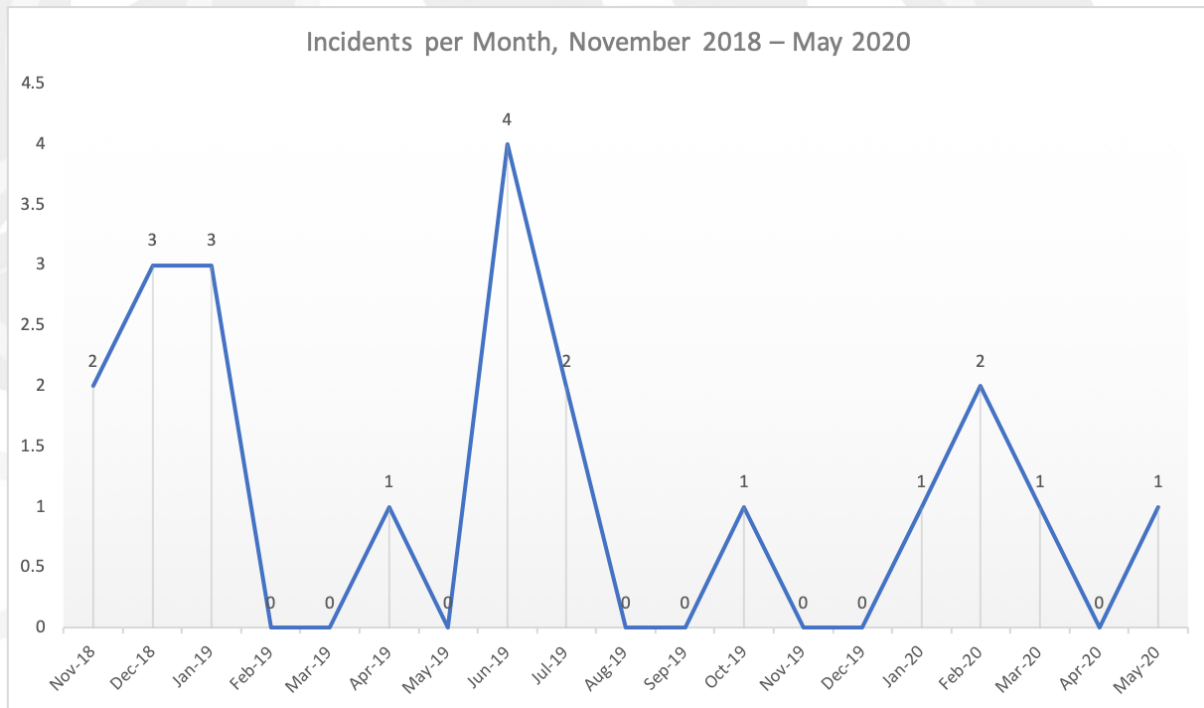**ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation**

Figure 4. 'Violent Incidents' per Month, November 2018–May 2020. Figure uses data from the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH).
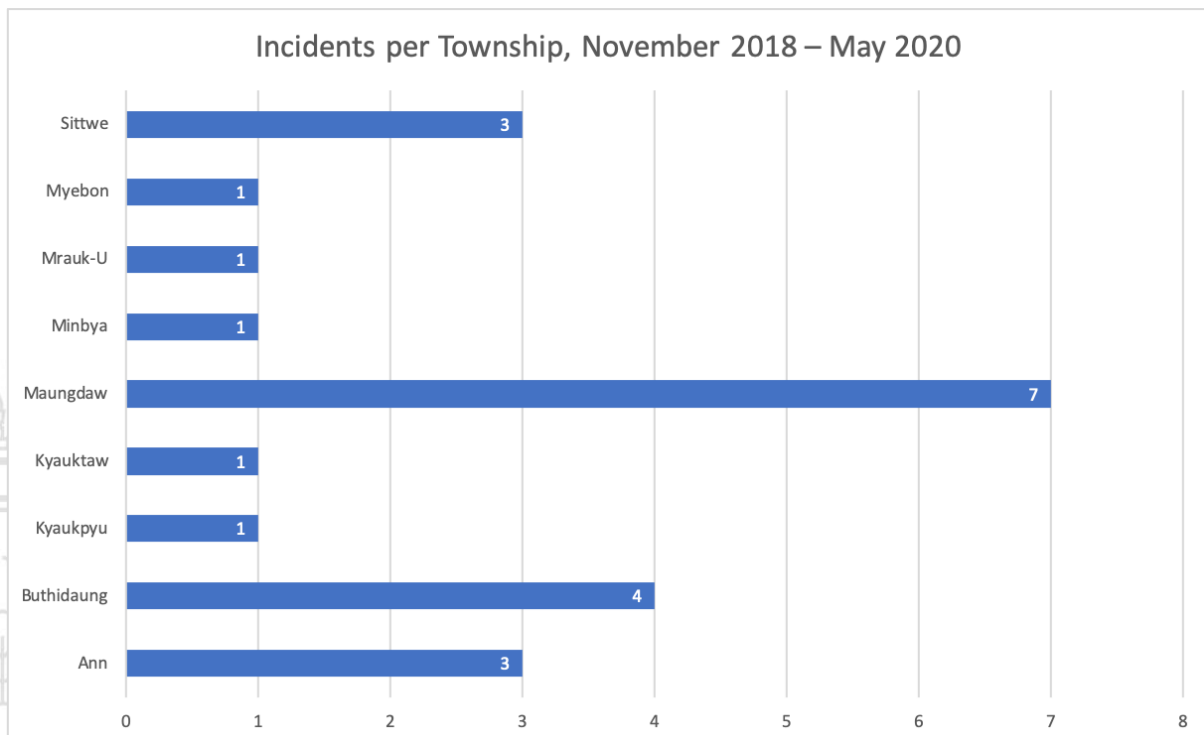

Figure 5. 'Violent Incidents' per Township, November 2018–May 2020. Figure uses data from the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH).

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Other evidence of underlying tensions are visible in the implementation of activities by civil society organisations. Civil society organisations, in general, tend to cater exclusively to their ethnic or religious communities.[30] Few Rakhine organisations provide humanitarian or social welfare assistance to non-Rakhine communities,[31] not just Muslims. Any non-Muslim organisation willing to help Rohingya often does so discreetly, to avoid reprisal from their respective ethnic or religious communities.[32] Furthermore, organisations refrain from conducting activities openly promoting social cohesion and reconciliation; locals are also reluctant to

attend events and trainings marketed as such. This is largely due to fear of potentially violent response by anti-Muslim hard-liners. In addition, there is a common misconception by both hard-liners and community members that participation in social cohesion activities equates to acceptance of the return of Muslims to their locales. Opposition to social cohesion programming therefore suggests a persisting unwillingness to cohabitate with the Muslim community.[33] More explicitly, progress on the repatriation of internally displaced Muslims in Kyaukpyu Town has repeatedly been hindered by disagreements between the displaced and the host communities. The displaced Muslims have argued that they be allowed to return to their original homes in the urban centre, but

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[30] It should be noted this is the case not just in Rakhine State but across Myanmar.

[31] Rakhine State comprises various ethnicities and religions. Majority of the ethnic groups are Buddhist, including the Rakhine, the Bamar, the Daingnet, the Khami, the Maramagyi, the Mro, and the Thet. The Chin are predominantly Christian, though there are some Buddhists among the community as well. The Rohingya as well as the Kaman are Muslims. The Hindu are considered both an ethnic and a religious group.

There are few resources that detail the list and numbers of ethnicities across Rakhine State. A potential reference for the population by ethnicity in 2017 may be found at: Rakhine State Government, 'Population by Ethnic Group in Maungdaw District and Rakhine State' (Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), July 2017), https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Population_by_Ethnic_Group_in_Ma

ungdaw_District_and_Rakhine_State_Jul2017.xlsx.

[32] This information has been conveyed by a number of individuals and organisations, including one local women's network, to CDNH at various points over the reporting period (November 2018 to November 2020).

[33] Only 25% of non-Muslims, in a sample of 300 persons, admitted even minimal readiness to cohabitate with Muslims. Notably, 60% of the Rakhine who expressed willingness to live with Muslims are residents of Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships. While this may be an indicator of success for social cohesion activities, given their proliferation in the aforementioned townships, the lack of broader acceptance for Rohingya residents may lead to unintended negative consequences—for example, a decline in intra-communal and not just inter-communal relations—not to mention, will inevitably fail to address societal and institutional barriers to cohesion.

Forging and Fostering Peace
**ASEAN Institute for
Peace and Reconciliation**

resident Rakhine are opposed to the former's resettlement in villages and lands the Rakhine claim the Muslims have no legal ownership.[34] A few moderate Rakhine have expressed openness to the gradual reintegration of Muslims into the community. However, any public acknowledgement or statement to this end risks the very real threat by the majority hard-line community to the physical security of moderates.

There are a couple of additional instances which may mistakenly be construed as positive developments in inter-communal relations. First, locals in Rakhine State are increasingly calling for an end to segregation between communities, but few (if any) admitted a willingness to send their own children to mixed schools. Second,

some Rakhine—and significantly, supporters of the AA—demanded that the Union Government grant Rohingya citizenship and subsequently ensure the latter enjoy full freedom of movement. Underlying these demands however is local desire for the Rohingya to leave, rather than enjoy equal rights within, Rakhine State.

Finally, the armed conflict, and particularly the influence exerted by the AA on the political mindset of the people, has similarly complicated evaluations of social cohesion programming. For instance, the decline in explicit anti-Muslim sentiment may have been a consequence of the AA's public statement in support of the case by The Gambia against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice. [35] The ongoing trial sees the Tatmadaw accused of committing genocide against the Rohingya

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[34] သီဟထွန်, 'ကျောက်တစ်လုံး မွတ်စလင်ဒုက္ခသည်စခန်း ရွှေ့ပြောင်းရေး အငြင်းပွားဖွယ်ဖြစ်လာ', *Radio Free Asia*, 21 May 2020, https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/contro versial-kyauktalone-refugees-camp-relocation-05212020080026.html.

The issue of citizenship for Muslims, and especially the Rohingya, is a complex issue that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Interested parties may avail of the various articles and reports that have already tackled this issue, perhaps beginning with: Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH), 'Myanmar's Citizenship Law: An

Analysis' (Yangon, Myanmar, August 2018), https://www.cdnh.org/publication/myanmars-citizenship-law-an-analysis/.

[35] ULA / AA, 'ျမန္မာ့တပ္မေတာ္အား အျပည္ျပည္ဆိုင္ရာတရားရုံးမွ အေရးယူရန္ကိုးဝိစိပြဳးအားေပးထားကွံေဖးကာင့္းသေ ဘာထားထုတ္ျပန္က္', *ARAKAN ARMY*, 28 November 2019, https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/မန်-မ-တပ-မ-တ-အ-အ-ပည-ပည-ဆ-င-ရ-တရ-ဂ-မ-အ-ရ-ယ-ရန-ဆက-ပမ-မ-အ-ထ-က-ခ-ဖွက-င-သ-ဘ-ထ-ထ-တ-ပန-ခ-က.

Forging and Fostering Peace
ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

community during events in 2017; the Myanmar Government and specifically the State Counsellor had been leading the legal defence. [36] Perceptions of a 'common enemy' have therefore caused an albeit shallow expression of unity between the

Rakhine and the Rohingya. [37] However, there is little evidence to suggest this solidarity will last beyond the resolution of either the trial or the armed conflict. In addition, the decrease of anti-Muslim messaging may be explained as attempts by local Rakhine to curry favour and thereby receive support from international donors.

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[36] Since the military coup on 1 February 2021, the State Counsellor has been in detention and faces a number of charges (see: 'ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ကို နေပြည်တော်တွင် အမှုတစ်ခု ထပ်တိုး', *The Irrawaddy*, 12 April 2021, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2021/04/12/240714.html; Khit Thit Media, 'ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်အား အကြမ်းဖက်လူ့သတ်ဖက်ဆစ် စစ်ကောင်စီက နိုင်ငံတော်သစ္စာဖောက်မှု၊ အာဏာ သိမ်းရန် ကြံစည်မှု၊ တပ်မတော်ပြိုကွဲစေမှု အပါအဝင် အမှုများ ထပ်တိုး တရားစွဲပြီး အစိုးရခေါင်းဆောင်များကိုလည်း အမှုအများအပြား ထပ်တိုးတရားစွဲဆိုထားသည်။', *Facebook*, 1 April 2021, https://www.facebook.com/khitthitnews/posts/1162135807557097.). It is therefore unlikely— at least for the duration of the coup—that she will continue in her role as part of Myanmar's legal defence team at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This situation does not, however, preclude the case at the ICJ from continuing. At the time of writing, the military junta has yet to make public any intentions or actions with regard to the case. More detailed analysis of the implications following the coup may be considered for future research.

[37] Free Rohingya Coalition, 'ရခိုင်လူငယ်နှစ်ဦးနှင့် ဆွေးနွေးခန်း', *Facebook*, 8 June 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=287611582285519; Ro Nay San Lwin, 'FRC Genocide Podcast Series မြန်မာပိုင်းအစီအစဉ်', *Facebook*, 8 June 2020, https://www.facebook.com/nslwin/posts/3651558821527334?__xts__[0]=68.ARATwq3oP5s GUGWvI08SJOV4LetRpIyV7erk68W4t4U8V43hgox0_YfOku4rDaxiapzZDGA21-Ob07uWBCCe4zHu3YSvhe35vjghVUqBIXpsEExpqdqQ1Kw2rmGi-rbtvCPmsBIl6A2j5xL48GNyejccZVmrp7eeinXos6XmmFgja35DwLJzlxaeNMRF6wv-ZbYJpvrqlOp61GF8TWgcGinjAEVcWR5_-DurbyiOA5wR0-tTlq7445gaxeaHPAGF5bESp6wC_o1Vn5YgRxjAbuNV95a3psnXUjV_sm753mHTKZUyC2gMhYs6wR9A6-YihV6chuwliokrwOyQ4SUDY6mKplj2gFYI70_W; Tun Tun Naing, 'ရခိုင် နဲ့ ရိုဟင်ဂျာ ခေါင်းဆောင်တီ Ro Nay San Lwin ရို့၊ ထွန်းခင် ရို့ နဲ့ ပူးပေါင်း အဖွဲ့ တစ်ခု ဖွဲ့ဖို့ယာ။', *Facebook*, 18 May 2020, https://www.facebook.com/tuntun.naing.9/posts/2925836400863738; Aung Tin, 'ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေး သေသွားပြီ။ လက်နက်မကိုင်ရသေးသူတွေလည်း လက်နက်ကိုင်ကြရတော့မယ်။', *Facebook*, 11 February 2020, https://www.facebook.com/AungTinBMA/posts/2744925408918646?__xts__[0]=68.ARCi78F7qY9pcTmeY2nkYt4cR8wd6_me4W2MYswmyLDfhtxe06vSfqo2S-zpVUzAO7-PZVlgsVhLStnoG-HOqpATbQu_HjF_4WwMAXU9f5VlHd0Y-s9gTclQd4MnL2--FVcWc64_EiRmkXOSOur3bjjT06lsRD-wxX1xZfgD82P_y-J7tuLCZTbkRfmMA-ThYemRX-KZPQrc8FFaT76wCUdwAfnaKHu_fSEL7vdkeACLiVkUyv1FMUOa9cqpl1eyO7wvg17MV00UmNPofjTeEaKKNdQgDXRsXbxC2NOi4jY8OOmR3r11kABUNX8-0LYG0tobOu2vmeObG5otQc-nK_8ay_fIuexZaQ.

Forging and Fostering Peace
ASEAN Institute for
Peace and Reconciliation

There remains scepticism among the non-Muslim population that international aid disproportionately benefits the Rohingya, especially following the violence against and subsequent displacement of the community in 2017.

CONCLUSION

In spite of declining incidences of inter-religious violence and hate messaging during the period of armed conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw, social cohesion activities have so far had limited effectiveness at reducing underlying tensions between the Rakhine and the Rohingya. Social cohesion programming has succeeded at providing opportunities for increased social and business interaction among communities. However, the ethnic Rakhine—not to mention the Khami, the Hindu, and the Mro—continues to be resistant to cohabiting with the Rohingya.

Moreover, there remain two significant gaps in social cohesion programming in Rakhine State. One is the limited occurrences of such activities in the southern part of the region, which hosts among others the ethnic Kaman Muslim population. Vehement opposition by anti-Muslim hard-liners in Kyaukpyu Township not only hinders the repatriation of the displaced Muslim community, but also deters broader societal cohesion in the state. The strength of inter-religious tensions with an ethnic community that is nevertheless officially recognised as indigenous serves as an almost pessimistic forecast for resolution of tensions with the Rohingya, who continue to be perceived as 'foreigners' to both Myanmar and Rakhine State. Therefore, it is important that 'low-hanging fruits' are addressed in conjunction with the greater ambitions for state cohesion.

Two, social cohesion initiatives have focused on building relations between the Rakhine and the Rohingya communities but have so far neglected the growing divide between the Rakhine (and other ethnic minorities) and the Bamar as a consequence of the armed conflict. There is a conflagration of inter-communal tensions, secessionist aspirations, and armed insurgency within the state, due to long-held feelings of resentment by the ethnic Rakhine against the majority Bamar. It is therefore imperative that in-roads are made, immediately and simultaneously with Buddhist-Muslim and Rakhine-Rohingya cohesion activities, to address the

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ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

grievances of the Rakhine as well as of other ethnic minorities in Rakhine State, to promote reconciliation among all communities, and to ensure that all locals regardless of ethnicity or religion enjoy— as well as believe that their fellows should enjoy—full rights and the full benefits of development.

A final point for consideration: The political turmoil of 1 February 2021 has little impacted pre-existing tensions in Rakhine State, both between the Rakhine and the Rohingya and between the Rakhine and the Bamar. Although there has been a cessation of active fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw since the November 2020 General Election,[38] the status quo of that period remains. Public discourse continues to focus on the narrative of self-determination for the ethnic Rakhine—in

the words of some nationalists, a "Rakhine Fatherland"—rather than on tensions with Muslims or Rohingya. Some social cohesion activities have also successfully been conducted in northern and central Rakhine State, with the participation of both Rakhine and Muslims.[39] However, there is still a dearth of support for the repatriation of displaced Muslims to Kyaukpyu Town. Furthermore, ethnic Rakhine have tended ,lto distance themselves from any who acknowledge and/or apologise for the plight of the Rohingya especially in 2017.[40] These include national-level actors such as the "anti-coup" coalition 'General Strike Committee of Nationalities' and the alternative government formed by elected MPs known as the 'National Unity Government'.[41] The more vocal commentators strongly criticised and condemned the recognition of the Rohingya

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[38] ULA / AA, 'တစ္ကၠတၱပစၥတၱပဲြေရးအားထပ္ၿပီသကၠမ်းတိုးျမ၄ငၣ္ သည္၄ထုတု၄ျပၢနေဖ်ကညာခ္ကၠ', ARAKAN ARMY (blog), 11 November 2020, https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/တစ-ဖက-သတ-အပစ-ခတ-ရပ-စ-ရ-အ-ထပ-မ-သက-တမ-တ-မ-၎-သည-ထ-တ-ပန-ဖ်ကည-ခ-က.

[39] As of writing, there have been at least ten social cohesion-oriented activities conducted by civil society organisations in northern and central Rakhine State since February 2021. These activities include inter-communal sports tournaments, youth camps, and trainings on rumour management, civic education and social cohesion.

[40] This information was conveyed by local observers and political analysts in May 2021.

[41] 'Formation of the National Unity Government of Myanmar', Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) (blog), 15 April 2021, https://crphmyanmar.org/formation-of-the-national-unity-government/.

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ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

as an official, indigenous ethnic group, teither to Rakhine State or to Myanmar.[42]

This situation may also explain, at least in part, the AA's refusal to participate in the National Unity Government. [43] Some sources have privately suggested that the AA intends to protect the basic human rights of all residents of Rakhine State, but not to recognise nor legitimise the Rohingya as rightful residents. Similarly, senior members of the Tatmadaw, hard-line Rakhine nationalists, Rakhine politicians and community leaders have (at least verbally) acknowledged that all human beings, regardless of ethnicity or religion, deserve basic human rights. However, it should be emphasised that this definition of 'basic human rights' is so far limited to aspects of social welfare such as education, health care and livelihoods; these rights do

not yet extend to any form of political participation. [44] At the same time, even some Rohingya activists who have expressed appreciation for apologies by ethnic Bamar are more sceptical about similarly contrite statements by certain ministers of the National Unity Government, [45] which are viewed as propaganda at best and excuses at worst. In conclusion, conflict situations and political crises may complicate but not diminish inter-communal tensions. Due consideration of the situational context— most especially the nuances that point towards the actual problem, its root causes, and a potential solution—is important for the effective development, implementation and evaluation of present and future social cohesion programming.

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[42] This information is based on relevant data gathered through regular monitoring of the Myanmar social media environment by CDNH, in the period from February to May 2021. For example, see comments in: University of Medicine 2, Yangon Student Committee, 'တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးစုဝင်များထံ အပြစ်ဝန်ချတောင်းပန်ခြင်း', Facebook, 26 March 2021, https://www.facebook.com/universityofmedicine2.studentcommitte.ec/posts/3945714242171162.

[43] Western News, 'ကိုယ့် ရပ္ရြည္က ႏွင့္ ကိုယ့္ NUG �
တ ြင္ ပါဝင္ ၍ AA ေျ ပ ာ ', Facebook, 16 April 2021, https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/272267117913133.

[44] This information was conveyed during informal conversations between CDNH and local sources in May 2021.

[45] 'Dr Win Myat Aye Said National Wide Myanmar', 30 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8YEBaHnRKQ.

COHESION IN THE TIME OF CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS OF
SOCIAL COHESION IN THE CONTEXT OF
ETHNIC ARMED CONFLICT IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE

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COHESION IN THE TIME OF CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS OF
SOCIAL COHESION IN THE CONTEXT OF
ETHNIC ARMED CONFLICT IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE

Forging and Fostering Peace
ASEAN Institute for
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