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## **The Rohingya genocide through ASEAN's stories: How role conception affects responses to grave violations of human rights**

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**The Rohingya genocide through ASEAN's stories: How role conception affects  
responses to grave violations of human rights**

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**Abstract**

How does regional organisations' role conception – the understanding of the norms, duties, and behaviour they should uphold regarding a certain issue – influence their response to grave violations of human rights? Which self-understanding translates into human rights advocacy, and which lends itself to non-interventionism? This project aims to analyse regional narratives and show how ROs' role conception ultimately dictates their reactions to humanitarian crises. Specifically, I review official statements and communiqués by ASEAN representatives and juxtapose them against Amnesty International's reports of human rights abuses perpetrated against the Rohingya in Myanmar. I find that the RO adopts three overarching self-understandings throughout the Rohingya crisis. Initially, ASEAN embraces a non-interventionist role that conditions its de facto indifference towards the Rohingya's plight. Later, as the emergency stretches on, the RO constructs a leadership role for itself where it assists the return of Rohingya refugees, despite reports of apartheid conditions waiting for them in Myanmar. Lastly, ASEAN pushes the limits of its historic non-interference and openly takes the role of a protector of liberal values after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. However, the RO's concern for democracy seems to exceed and even run parallel to the cause of Rohingyas' human rights.

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## **The Rohingya genocide through ASEAN's stories: How role conception affects responses to grave violations of human rights**

### **1. Introduction**

Today, as the world acts on Ukraine, it waits on Myanmar. As the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide is still at the back of our minds, the atrocities of the Rohingya crisis fade from collective memory. The international community has a duty to act against gross violations of human rights anywhere, but not all instances captivate its resolve and empathy equally. That is why, researchers and practitioners should focus on regional responses to humanitarian crises. Regional organisations (ROs) have the local knowledge and, increasingly, the capability to offer first aid to suffering communities in their member states. The reasons behind their (non-)interference must be elucidated and optimised towards localised solutions to human security crises.

The research question guiding this thesis is: *How does regional organisations' role conception influence their response to grave human rights violations?* Differently put, how does RO's self-understanding affect their reaction to atrocities like genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. Researching ROs' role in humanitarian and security crises is part of the effort to recognise them as consequential actors in international relations. Acharya (2018) predicts a multiplex world order in which multiple modernities emerge around regional configurations (p. 8). The complexity of recent internal conflicts also highlights the importance of the regional dimension for solving security issues (Carment & Fischer, 2009, p. 262). ROs are said to have become "self-confident about playing leading roles in conflict management especially in providing legitimacy for wider international action" (Crocker et al., 2014, p. 3) and the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle cites them among the actors entitled to authorise humanitarian intervention (Bellamy, 2008, p. 621). Despite these

developments, ROs are considered marginal to the international community's responses to humanitarian crises and their successes and failures in this sense are indiscriminately attributed to member states' interests. I disagree with the rationalist and sceptic stance on ROs' response to gross violations of human rights and propose a constructivist, role-centred explanation on the matter.

To substantively understand ROs' response to grave human rights violations, I look at their role conceptions and the narratives that constitute them. I believe that the way an RO narrates itself is revealing of its policy preferences. Whether it understands itself as a protector of sovereignty or human rights, determines its (non-)interference. I look at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) narrative role construction during the ongoing Rohingya crisis as a qualitative single case study to substantiate my theoretical argument. ASEAN's response to the Rohingya plight constitutes a typical case of a regional response to mass atrocities and can be generalised across the population of ROs. To do so, I employ a narrative analysis. This method allows me to reveal how ASEAN interprets its role towards humanitarian crises and, in return, I systematically analyse these interpretations. I expect ASEAN to act in line with its role conception.

In the following, the thesis turns to the literature on the role of ROs in international relations and their response to humanitarian crises. I delineate its shortcomings of treating ROs as irrelevant and missing out on the social construction of their identities. Next, in the theoretical framework, I formulate my theoretical argument and expectations based on insights from constructivism, role theory, and narrative identity. I propose narrative analysis as a method of data analysis and justify my case selection in the methodology section. The analysis and discussion apply my argument to the data sources primarily comprising ASEAN's official statements and communiqués. The conclusion looks back on my findings, answers the research question, and suggests avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature review

This project is interested in ROs' response to grave human rights violations. Therefore, the topic engages two literatures - a broader one on the role of ROs in international relations and another on their response to humanitarian crises. The former body of knowledge stems from the 1995 debate between Mearsheimer (1994/95) and his critics on the value of international institutions. On the one hand, realists believe that international norms, rules, and organisations are epiphenomenal of state power and interests and ultimately do not matter in international politics. On the other hand, institutionalists argue that institutions can change state behaviour and are consequential in political matters. I adopt the latter's position but point out its lack of concern for the social construction of interests and identity considerations. The scholarship on the international response to gross violations of human rights treats ROs as marginal actors who lack capabilities and are mere tools of their member states' interests. I argue for the centrality of ROs to the study of human security and plan to substantiate it through an analysis of their narrative identity.

### 2.1. Do international institutions matter?

Since its great success in the aftermath of the Second World War, realism has been heralded by its proponents as "the most powerful theory of international politics" (Grieco, 1998, p. 487). The paradigm is concerned with states as rational unitary actors seeking survival in an anarchic international system dominated by uncertainty and fear (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 30-31). Norms, ideas, and international organisations are marginal to this understanding of the world. Realists believe that international institutions cannot overcome the constraints anarchy poses to cooperation and are merely a reflection of state power and self-interest (Grieco, 1988, p. 487;

Krasner, 1995, p. 340; Mearsheimer, 1994/95, p. 7; Mearsheimer, 1995, p. 82). The realist argument extends to Southeast Asia, where ASEAN's successes and failures are indiscriminately attributed to the regional balance-of-power, demounting the organisation to an 'imitation community' (Emmers, 2003, pp. 29-30; Jones & Smith, 2002, p. 99). While it accurately underlines the enduring primacy of national sovereignty and power considerations in regional politics, realism's neglect of international institutions is simply not fit for explaining the contemporary world. Therefore, this project treats ROs as relevant and consequential actors whose identity and practices continuously shape reality.

By rejecting the realist stance on international institutions, I side with the critics of Mearsheimer's 1994/95 position paper on the false promise of international institutions. They do not represent a unitary theoretical camp, but unanimously contest realism's short-sightedness. Institutionalists believe that norms, rules, and international organisations act alongside state interests to facilitate international cooperation and peace (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p. 50; Kupchan & Kupchan, 1995, p. 60; Ruggie, 1995, p. 62). Concerning ASEAN, institutionalism highlights its contribution to regional stability through information sharing and trust-building among member states (Acharya, 1999, p. 5; Jetly, 2003, p. 55). While they do argue for RO's relevance, institutionalists embrace the realist assumption about rational states making decisions based on pre-determined interests and only seek to supplement it. I fundamentally contest this rationalist outlook on international relations because it portrays identity and interests as given, limiting regimes' explanatory power as tools of change (Wendt, 1992, p. 393). Instead, I focus on the social construction of interests and roles. Moreover, because institutionalists write in response to realist manifests, they largely address the same military and economic aspects of state security. Instead, I analyse ROs' response to grave human rights violations, a topic largely ignored by the aforementioned literature unless it has cross-border consequences.

## 2.2. Regional organisations and grave human rights violations

The legal, political, and moral realities in place after the Cold War displaced the previously sacrosanct principle of state sovereignty. The tragedy of the Rwandan genocide elevated the discussion of whether humanitarian intervention is justifiable to who should undertake it and under what conditions (Pattison, 2010, p. 3). Humanitarian intervention presupposes military intervention towards human protection ends and the international community codified its commitment in this regard by endorsing the R2P principle. This means that states have the duty to protect their citizens, and if they are unable or unwilling, the responsibility devolves to the international community.

The R2P principle cites ROs as actors entitled to authorise humanitarian intervention if the host-state, the UN Security Council and General Assembly fail to do so (Bellamy, 2008, p. 621). This hierarchy, however, determined the literature on the topic of humanitarian intervention to only marginally discuss ROs. The focus has been on the UN and the veto powers in its Security Council, who have the immediate authority to legitimise multilateral humanitarian missions (Finnemore, 1996, p. 16; Pattison, 2010, pp. 203-206). Of course, NATO was extensively researched in this regard and even considered as the most suitable body to conduct humanitarian interventions (Pattison, 2010, pp. 201-202). However, it was treated separately from other ROs in virtue of its role as a military alliance with a global mission. Where other ROs were considered, their lack of legitimacy and capabilities rendered them virtually irrelevant (Crocker et al., 2014, p. 15; Pattison, 2010, pp. 206-208). Although this research is right to point to the primacy of the UN, ROs, despite their limited capacities, embody the localised solutions to security problems and should be researched as a relevant element of the international society responding to humanitarian crises in their member states. Hence, I study the role conceptions behind ROs' response to grave human rights violations.

Despite the sceptical view on ROs' role in responding to grave human rights violations, international relations scholarship cannot overlook factual evidence of RO-led interventions. Nevertheless, it has no issues borrowing from the realist tradition and treating ROs as venues of their member states' interests or as pieces in the game of external great powers (Carment & Fischer, 2009, p. 287; Grünfeld & Vermeulen, 2014, p. 21; Haugevik, 2009, p. 361). In Southeast Asia, ASEAN's lacklustre response to gross human rights violations has been similarly attributed to its member states' interest in prioritising their sovereignty, the US' indifference towards the fate of people in the region and China's geostrategic objectives (Caballero-Anthony, 2022, p. 543; Lee & Ducci, 2020, pp. 1582-1586; Narine, 2005, p. 466). National sovereignty and non-intervention are indeed crucial to ASEAN's activity. However, I treat these principles as constitutive of the RO's role conception and not externally imposed by its member states. I am interested to see how ASEAN's self-understanding regarding gross violations of human rights determines its humanitarian (in)action.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

This project is interested in ROs' response to grave human rights violations. I argue that their role conception, constituted through the stories ROs tell themselves and influenced by those told by their member states, ultimately determines their reaction to humanitarian crises. I follow the main assumptions of constructivism and role theory to build my theoretical argument and expectations. Adapted to the purposes of this study, an RO's role conception entails its understanding of "the appropriate orientations or functions" it has towards a grave violation of human rights (Holsti, 1970, p. 246). At the same time, member states can have divergent opinions on what an RO's role should be in relation to a particular crisis. Lastly, I argue that ROs' role conceptions are created through narratives. Therefore, I can attribute ROs' response to gross abuses of human rights to the stories they and their members tell (Somers, 1994, p.

624). This belief further contributes towards my choice of discourse analysis in the methodology section.

I use the constructivist understanding of identity and role theory's concept of role complementarily and apply them to the study of ROs. The core tenet of constructivism is the social construction of reality (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 902; Wendt, 1992, p. 397). Actors' identity—the “relatively stable, role-specific understanding and expectations about self”—and interests arise from collective meanings assigned to objects in the process of social interaction (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). In the case of ASEAN, a constructivist outlook holds that, as part of their interaction, member states converged upon the norms of non-interference and consensus decision-making to form a collective identity (Acharya, 2001, p. 24; Busse, 1999, p. 53; Kivimaki, 2001, p. 17). This ASEAN identity, in turn, contributed to peace in the region. For the purposes of this study, however, I will not use ROs' identity as a singular concept. One interpretation of an entity's identity cannot universally explain its behaviour. Instead, I will look at the specific role conceptions ROs formulate when confronted with grave violations of human rights. Roles and identities are closely related, where an actor “operates in choosing behaviours within the confines of the role, while this behaviour is both influenced by identities and feeds back on them” (Nabers, 2011, p. 83). For the purposes of this study, I leave aside overarching identity considerations and focus on the specific roles ROs narratively build for themselves when reacting to mass atrocities in their member states.

As with the concepts of power or identity, the notion of role has landed itself to multiple interpretations and applications in political science. An expanded definition would see roles as sets of norms, identities, rights, duties, and patterns of behaviour pertaining to a particular social position or foreign policy stance (Bates & Harvey, 1975, p. 106; Holsti, 1970, p. 238; Rüländ, 2019, p. 754). An actor's role conception, then, refers to its own understanding of the norms, duties, and behaviour it must uphold regarding a certain issue; what Nabers (2011) calls

the “ego part of the role equation” (p. 78). The EU, for instance, is known for its role conception as a normative great power. This means that it adheres to liberal norms like freedom, democracy, and human rights both internally and in its interaction with others. Therefore, the EU is expected to and, indeed, behaves in line with its values and the obligations that stem from them. ASEAN, on the other hand, is deemed a non-interventionist organisation. The ASEAN Way, a set of procedural norms and rules of conduct guiding ASEAN's overall activity, is based on the principle of non-interference and consensus decision-making among member states (Taku, 2018, p. 299). In other words, the norms that inform ASEAN's role conception and, thus, behaviour regarding mass atrocities, favour indifference to human rights. Nevertheless, I will not hurry to dismiss ASEAN's role as such. Besides the emphasis on sovereignty and non-intervention, the ASEAN Charter includes commitments to liberal principles of “democracy, the rule of law and good governance, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (ASEAN, 2021a, para. 2). Moreover, the organisation has previously acted in line with these values and in an interventionist manner when responding to un-democratic developments in member states (Davies, 2012, p. 7). The ASEAN Way started losing ground in the late 1990s and it no longer single-handedly motivates nor explains the RO's behaviour (Taku, 2018, p. 310). The most accurate way to uncover the ways in which ROs' self-understanding determines their response to grave violations of human rights is to listen to what they have to say about the crisis and their role in it.

Political actors make sense of the social world and themselves through the stories they tell (Somers, 1994, p. 606). Similarly, ROs verbalise their role conceptions regarding a specific issue by narrating expectations of appropriate behaviour and the norms that underline them (Nabers, 2011, p. 92). For instance, ASEAN narrated the early phases of the Rohingya genocide through the lens of the non-interference and national sovereignty norms. Its discourse is denotative of a bystander role, an RO who prioritises its member states' interests over human

rights. The analysis will delve deeper into how ASEAN's role conception revealed itself throughout the long tragedy of the Rohingya people. At this stage, however, it is important to clarify what "ASEAN" is. This project focuses on ROs as autonomous actors that generate a singular narrative on their role conceptions. This self-narrative is relied by those speaking in the name of the RO, mostly members of its Secretariat. ASEAN's stories are narrated by its Secretary General and Chairman.

It is important to remember, however, that there are also external role expectations for actors, what Nabers (2011) calls the "alter part" of the role equation (p. 78). In the case of ROs, their singular narratives are also collective, reflecting a consensus reached among member states. RO's members can and do come up with individual discourses demanding that the RO takes a more prominent role, a step back, or an entirely different standing on an issue. Even in the case of ASEAN, an organisation who makes decisions by consensus, the additional narrative input of its ten member states matters. Malaysia, for example, disassociated itself from ASEAN's initial communiqués on the Rohingya crisis and demanded it takes a more active role in ameliorating the situation (Anifah, 2017, para. 2). Therefore, I will consider the discourse of individual member states on the role the RO should take as relied by their direct representants, like Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Anifah, but only when it constitutes a relevant addition to or contestation of the unitary RO narrative. Such contributions will always come in reaction to the RO's statements, and I expect them to eventually contribute to the RO's self-understanding as the internal consensus shifts. Ultimately, I will focus on ROs' role conceptions and consider role expectations only insofar as they might influence the former.

In conclusion and to answer the research question of this paper, I believe that an RO's role conception explains its response to grave violations of human rights. If it takes up the role of "protector of sovereignty", the RO is likely to adhere to non-interference principles. If it embodies the role of "regional protector of human rights", the RO is likely to intervene to

ameliorate the situation. Intervention here spans a range of possible actions, from leading a humanitarian intervention mission, to supporting one with resources, and condemning human rights abuses through diplomatic means (Narine, 2005, p. 479; Pattison, 2010, pp. 207-208). To empirically reveal how RO narratives create their role and it, in turn, influences regional responses to grave human rights violations, I turn to narrative analysis as my method of data analysis.

#### **4. Methodology**

This project is interested in ROs' response to grave human rights violations. Namely, how their role conception influences their reaction to humanitarian crises. Therefore, I conduct a qualitative single case study to research this relationship. A qualitative case study draws on extensive information around an outcome and seeks to reveal its causes (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Mahoney & Goertz, 2006). More specifically, I employ narrative analysis to reveal how ASEAN's role understanding shapes its response to mass atrocities. I have selected ASEAN and its reaction to the Rohingya crisis as a typical case of an RO's role conception affecting its practices (Gerring, 2008, pp. 648-650). I analyse official statements and communiqués by ASEAN's representatives – Secretary General and Chairman – and supplement them with those of member states' delegates. My data analysis method consists of open-coding narrative analysis.

As previously mentioned, this paper is based on the belief that ROs' roles are constituted through the stories they tell about themselves. To study these stories, I conduct a narrative analysis. This method of data analysis is meant to uncover how a story is constructed and the purpose it seeks to achieve (Subotić, 2013, p. 306; Trahar, 2009). In this thesis, I employ narrative analysis towards figuring out the reasons behind ROs' responses to grave

human rights violations. Narrative analysis allows me to see how ASEAN interprets its role towards humanitarian crises and, in return, I systematically analyse these interpretations.

As I have already exemplified through my paper, I chose ASEAN and the Rohingya genocide as a typical case of an RO's role understanding affecting its response to grave human rights violations. A typical case embodies a typical set of characteristics, given some general perception about a phenomenon (Gerring, 2007, p. 7). It is also a representative case, rendering the findings of the current project generalisable across the entire population of ROs reacting to mass atrocities. I picked ASEAN as a typical case of a full-fledged RO because it officially and effectively organises a security, economic, and socio-cultural community of neighbouring member states (Haugevik, 2009, p. 359). At the same time, Southeast Asia has witnessed grave violations of human rights perpetrated among ASEAN countries. While unfortunate, these abuses offer me the space to analyse ASEAN's subsequent role conceptions and responses. Particularly, I chose the Rohingya crisis as an instance of grave violations of human rights. The Rohingya are an ethnic and religious minority inhabiting the Rakhine State in Western Myanmar. The group has been subjected to decades of systemic discrimination and are currently the largest and most endangered stateless community in the world. Since 2016, the Rohingya are the victims of a *de facto* genocide, their persecution by Burmese military amounting to grave violations of human rights under international law. Thus, the Rohingya's plight is a burning example of contemporaneous mass atrocities demanding regional solutions.

To apply narrative analysis to the case of ASEAN and the Rohingya crisis, I will look at official statements and communiqués made by ASEAN's representatives. These sources are most often published in the aftermath of regional summits – the main decision-making venues inside ASEAN. Thus, they are a good indication of the RO's role conception and a sign of its upcoming behaviour. I will also supplement ASEAN's position as an autonomous RO with public contributions of its member states, but only when they constitute a relevant addition to

or contestation of its narrative. To uncover a unified story from disparate ASEAN speeches, I will juxtapose them against Amnesty International's reports on the humanitarian situation of the Rohingya. An understanding of the real-time information coming out of Myanmar will allow me to credibly interpret the RO's role conception regarding the crisis. In doing so I will use open coding, assigning labels to segments of relevant data as I analyse it. I will allow codes denotative of ASEAN's role conception like "non-interventionist RO" or "protector of human rights" to naturally emerge from the primary sources. In virtue of ASEAN's status as a consensus-based RO who is very diplomatic in its public outings, this approach will allow me to analyse what the organisation talks about as well as the things it is silent about.

## **5. Analysis**

This project is interested in ASEAN's response to the unfolding Rohingya genocide, arguably the most glaring episode of mass atrocities since the Rwanda tragedy. The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group inhabiting the Rakhine (Arakan until 1989) state in Western Myanmar (Burma until 1989) – a majority-Buddhist country that joined ASEAN in 1997. For decades, the Rohingya have been subjected to violence stemming from religion and ethnicity-based nationalism. They face persecution from both the military state and the intolerant Buddhist majority. Over the years, the expectations have grown for ASEAN to act in line with its human rights commitments by condemning Myanmar's conduct and intervening to save the Rohingya. This section undergoes a chronological and descriptive analysis of ASEAN's narrative about the genocide and its role in the crisis. Throughout the years, the organisation narrates the genocide as a humanitarian crisis, but never mentions the Rohingya by name. It builds a story about concern, leadership, and impartiality that is never too demanding on the human rights violators.

### 5.1 Historical background: Decades of persecution against the Rohingya

Historical records attest that the Rohingya's origins likely stem from the earliest settlers of Arakan and precede the Rakhine's 9<sup>th</sup> century arrival to the currently eponymous region (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 21). While the Rakhine state was always a multi-ethnic and multi-religious territorial unit, Buddhist Rakhine took over the Rohingya as the dominant group around 1000 AD (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 23). Since then, Rakhine and Rohingya's joint history in Arakan has spanned experiences of peaceful coexistence as well as violence perpetrated by the Buddhist against their Muslim cohabitants. At the time of British colonial overtake in 1826 the Rohingya's long-term presence in Arakan as well as the religion and ethnicity-motivated persecution against them were abundantly documented (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 25; Ibrahim, 2022, p. 257). When Myanmar gained its independence in 1948, it did not manage to channel its diversity into a secular and democratic state. The military, animated by a "sectarian, exclusivist definition of what being Burmese meant", got quickly entangled in several civil wars and eventually staged a coup in 1962 (Ibrahim, 2016, pp. 36-37). Since the 1970s the military regime mobilised the state apparatus and used its authority to institutionalise discriminating practices against the Rohingya. Most gravely, the group was stripped of citizenship rights, making it the biggest stateless group and one of the most endangered communities in the world (Mutaqin, 2018, p. 2). Burmese chauvinistic nationalism resulted in repeated bloody episodes in 1978, 1992, 2001, 2009, and 2012 (Karim, 2020, p. 35).

The Rohingya genocide that started in 2016 and has reverberations to this day is the latest and most outrageous manifestation of Myanmar's religion-based ethno nationalism. The killings, rape, forced migration, torture, detention, scorching of villages, and looting of property perpetrated against the Rohingya amount to the gravest crimes under international law. The UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission concluded that the Myanmar military is guilty of committing genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in the Rakhine state

(UNHRC, 2018, pp. 16-17). Additionally, Amnesty International (2017c; 2018c; 2018d) has repeatedly qualified the conduct of Myanmar forces as ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. Adding to the Rohingya's plight, Myanmar underwent a military coup in February 2021. The country is now in the hands of the direct perpetrators of mass atrocities, trampling the hopes of a better fate for the Rohingyas in their homeland.

Against this grim background, ASEAN had the imperative responsibility to act. The waves of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar to neighbouring countries gave rise to a regional crisis demanding regional solutions. Political scientists make compelling arguments on how ASEAN's centrality and legitimacy are at stake unless the organisation acts in line with its human rights commitments and firmly stands up to Myanmar's abuses (Barber & Teitt, 2021, p. 473; Mutaqin, 2018, p. 5). At the same time, it is easy to absolve ASEAN of such responsibility by referencing its founding principles of state sovereignty and non-interference. A regional organisation whose decisions are taken by consensus and with utmost deference to the concept of non-intervention should not be expected to act in such circumstances. The enshrined ASEAN way of keeping out of member states' domestic politics, however, has been previously flexibly interpreted, especially in relation to Myanmar. In the early 2000s, ASEAN made "public pronouncements of displeasure" concerning Myanmar's less-than-democratic domestic practices (Davies, 2012, p. 7). Moreover, its words aligned with its actions when it barred Myanmar from taking over the chairmanship of the organisation for the 2006/7 term. The seriousness of the Rohingya genocide combined with ASEAN's history of flexibly interpreting its guiding principles open the door for a comprehensive reaction by the organisation to its member state's violations of human rights.

## 5.2 The Rohingya genocide through humanitarian reports and ASEAN's stories

The Rohingya crisis started in October 2016 when a group of Rohingya militants led an attack on several border outposts, killing nine policemen (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 259). The instigators were part of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Muslim militant group with terrorist ties per Myanmar's statements (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 259). In response, the Myanmar army launched a four-month long counter-insurgency campaign exhibiting overt genocidal intent. By the end of October 2016, reports coming out of Myanmar attested to extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and sexual violence deployed against the Rohingya (Amnesty International, 2016a, para. 2). Moreover, evidence of scorched-earth campaign in the Rakhine state landed to claims of crimes against humanity unfolding in Myanmar (Amnesty International, 2016b, para. 4). This first phase of the violence saw at least 27,000 Rohingyas fleeing across borders and hundreds of others missing at the hands of security forces (Amnesty International, 2017a, para. 1).

ASEAN did not come up with any coherent role conception during the initial stage of the crisis. The Chairman's Statement after the 30<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in April 2017 made no mention of the Rohingya's plight when discussing the organisation's mission for a peaceful and prosperous region. ASEAN's silence, while outrageous, can only be attributed to its non-interference dogma. In contemporaneous bilateral talks between Cambodia and Myanmar, at least, the former's Prime Minister argued against the internationalisation of the Rohingya issue and for treating it as a domestic matter of a fellow state (Niseiy, 2017, para. 4). As a justification, the Cambodian statesman referenced the ASEAN Charter which "prohibits the interference in the internal affairs of each Member State" (Niseiy, 2017, para. 5). All in all, ASEAN fell short of responding in any way to the initial reports of atrocities in Myanmar.

ARSA's small-scale attacks on Burmese forces continued throughout 2017 in line with its demands for protection of the Rohingya's rights. Escalating tensions culminated on August

25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, when the Myanmar Army launched a full-scale attack on all Rohingya living in Northern Rakhine (Amnesty International, 2017e, p. 6). In seven weeks, the Burmese forces killed hundreds of Rohingyas, massacring the men, raping women and girls, and burning those unable to flee in their own homes (Amnesty International, 2017e, p. 9). Official statements under-reported the casualties while labelling the victims as “terrorists” (Amnesty International, 2017c, para. 10). In that same period, more than 520,000 Rohingya crossed national borders in search for safety from systematic and coordinated attacks (Amnesty International, 2017c, para. 15).

The second phase of the genocidal campaign against the Rohingya community prompted international outrage and regional struggle. ASEAN itself released its first acknowledgment of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar at the end of September 2017. The tone of the statement is ambiguous. On the one hand, ASEAN (2017a) condemns the violence causing “loss of civilian lives, destruction of homes and displacement of large numbers of people” (para. 1) and “urges” Myanmar to follow the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (para. 5), an impartial international body chaired by Kofi Annan. On the other hand, the RO “welcomed” Myanmar’s less-than-credible claims of taking immediate action to end the violence and continuously directed its concern to “all the parties involved” and “affected communities” (para. 2). In this crisis, there is only one disproportionately affected group targeted in a unilateral and systemic attack – the Rohingya, and ASEAN does not mention in by name at any point in the publication. Its statement is lacklustre against the humanitarian reports coming out of Myanmar. The organisation creates a story about concern, leadership, and impartiality but fails to as little as name the victims.

Individual member states reacted differently to ASEAN’s stance. Singapore, for example, urged all parties to end the violence and pledged humanitarian aid to the affected civilians in line with the RO’s narrative (The Straits Times, 2017a, 2017b). During an official

meeting, the representatives of Laos and Indonesia similarly agreed to “help solve the problem in Rakhine” (Sheany, 2017, para. 2). These seemingly benevolent attitudes, however, show no signs of addressing the roots of the crisis – Myanmar’s systemic discrimination against the Rohingya. Instead, the countries’ statements feed into ASEAN’s story about harmony and peace without accountability for mass atrocities. Malaysia broke this mould of alignment with ASEAN’s official position and shattered the illusion of consensus within the organisation. Through an official statement, Minister of Foreign Affairs Anifah (2017) expressed Malaysia’s desire to “dissociate itself with the Chairman’s Statement” because of its “misrepresentation of the reality of the situation” (para. 2). The statement goes on to acknowledge the disproportionate violations inflicted upon the Rohingya and labelling them as “atrocities” (Anifah, 2017, para. 4). It urges Myanmar to “stop the destruction to life and properties” and “resolve the Rohingya refugee problem” (Anifah, 2017, para. 5). Beyond revealing ASEAN’s lack of consensus, which is one of its founding principles, Malaysia’s response exposes the RO’s story as a distorted, partial, and harmful account of the facts. It reveals ASEAN’s understanding of its role in the crisis as insufficient and biased. ASEAN itself later justified its position as reflecting “the general sentiments of the other foreign ministers” (Kyodo News, 2017, para. 10). While it is clear even at this early stage of the genocide that ASEAN is building a narrative that is defensive of states’ sovereignty and not human rights, this choice seems to simultaneously harm its identity as a regional organisation based on consensus among member states.

After ASEAN’s initial acknowledgement of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Myanmar, the situation for the Rohingya got even worse. Amnesty International (2017d) attested in October 2017 to Burmese authorities keeping “Rohingya women, men, and children segregated and cowed in a dehumanising system of apartheid” (para. 4). De facto apartheid in Myanmar meant constant violation of Rohingya’s human rights and prompted renewed flows

of refugees to neighbouring countries. Myanmar also opened talks with Bangladesh for returning close to a million Rohingya refugees despite continuing ethnic cleansing (Amnesty International, 2017f, paras. 1-3).

Amid growing proof of genocide in Myanmar and heightened international scrutiny, ASEAN got another chance to put out a unitary statement at its 31<sup>st</sup> Summit in November 2017. Its discussion of the Rohingya crisis, however, is a bland repetition of the September publication (ASEAN, 2017b, pp. 18-19). The RO fails to mention the Rohingya by name again and is insisting on its support for a benevolent Myanmar who wants to put things right. ASEAN's story is completely dismissive of the grave crimes under international law unfolding in the Rakhine state and of the concerns of its fellow member state, Malaysia, in this regard. Three days later, Cambodia made clear its stance on the issue by invoking the non-interference principle (Chowdhury, 2022, para. 22). It gives a glimpse into ASEAN's internal interpretation of the situation, although the organisation itself did not mention any national sovereignty considerations in its comments on the genocide.

In the first half of 2018 incriminatory reports about the conduct of the Myanmar security forces against the Rohingya kept arising (Amnesty International, 2018a, para. 2). Security forces were starving, robbing, and abducting Rohingya individuals in an orchestrated genocidal campaign (Amnesty International, 2018c, pp. 2-4). At the same time, Myanmar was in close talks with Bangladesh to repatriate the thousands of refugees who managed to escape since the start of the clearing campaign (Amnesty International, 2018b, para. 5). In this context, pressure was mounting for political leaders to address the Rohingya genocide at the upcoming Australia-ASEAN Summit (Amnesty International, 2018d, para. 4).

Disappointingly, the official statement after the Australia-ASEAN Summit made no mention of the Rohingya crisis. Although the parties mentioned their "resolve to promote and protect human rights", they failed to refer to the gravest violations of human rights unfolding

at that same moment in an ASEAN member state (ASEAN, 2018a, p. 8). The Chairman's Statement of the 32<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit that happened soon after, however, addressed the humanitarian situation in the Rakhine State. ASEAN's narrative is still benevolent towards Myanmar, welcoming its arrangements for humanitarian relief and the return of Rohingya (ASEAN, 2018b, pp. 6-7). In a slightly more assertive tone, the RO mentions that it looks forward to a "safe, secure, and dignified" return of the Rohingya and stresses "the need to find a comprehensive and durable solution to address the root causes of the conflict" (ASEAN, 2018b, p. 7). This could be considered as an improvement in ASEAN's stance if not for its hesitance to name the actual root of the violence – discrimination, and to condemn Myanmar for its crimes rather than praise it for dealing with the aftermath. Encouraging reports also arose from the informal meeting of Southeast Asian foreign ministers at the UN General Assembly. The consensus, as relied by Singapore's PM was that a "man-made humanitarian disaster" was unfolding in Myanmar for which all those responsible must be held accountable (Reuters, 2018, paras. 5-6). The change in ASEAN's story might be caused by a shift in member states' perceptions about the situation in Myanmar. Around that time, the Philippines referred to the Rohingya crisis as a "genocide" (Romero, 2018, para. 1) and Indonesia called for "the criminals who are involved in the Rohingya issue to step down and be tried in the International Criminal Court" (Antara, 2018, para. 4). It seems that the consensus for non-interference within ASEAN is eroding and the organisation is trying to adapt its story to fit it.

In 2019, Amnesty International kept reporting on crimes committed against the Rohingya. A new military operation saw shelling on Rohingya villages, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions amounting to war crimes (Amnesty International 2019a, para. 1; 2019b, para. 2). At the same time, Burmese authorities have not made genuine efforts to implement the recommendations issued by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, although it was urged to do so by ASEAN on several occasions (Amnesty International,

2019c, p. 1). Instead, Myanmar escalated the violence against the Rohingya in 2019 and shut down internet access in affected areas (Amnesty International, 2019c, p. 2).

In 2019, ASEAN's statements on the Rohingya crisis focused primarily on assisting the repatriation of those who fled persecution in Myanmar since 2016. The organisation emphasised that the return should be voluntary, conducted in a dignified manner and into a sustainable and equitable environment in Rakhine state (ASEAN, 2019a, para. 7; 2019b, pp. 10-11; 2019c, pp. 18-19). The requests are appropriate, but they seem to be made in a vacuum where Myanmar's follow-up is not imperatively required. Despite its poor record in improving the conditions for the Rohingya within Rakhine state, ASEAN praises Burma's declared efforts and does not question the renewed violence. The RO is more interested in creating a story of leadership where its logistic support facilitates the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from its concerned member states to a homeland that refuses to even recognize them as citizens.

Year 2020 brought much of the same struggle for the Rohingya with the added threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amnesty International (2020a) revealed that the minority ethnic group were "still denied their rights to nationality, freedom of movement, and access to services, including healthcare" (para. 3). The Burmese military also conducted indiscriminate airstrikes over Rohingya villages amid continued internet blackouts, displaying "utter disregard for civilian suffering" (Amnesty International, 2020b, paras. 1-2; 2020c, para. 4). ASEAN itself maintained its restrained rhetoric that makes no mention of the Rohingya community. Slight differences in its statements, however, show the RO creating a story of its growing role in solving the crisis. The organisation seeks a "visible and enhanced role" in helping the humanitarian situation in Myanmar and the repatriation process (ASEAN, 2020a, p. 20; 2020b, p. 21; 2020c, p. 22). ASEAN also dropped the "urging" towards Myanmar that previously gave a sense of imperativeness to its statements. It now only mentions supporting Burmese efforts to redress the situation while building the story of its significant contribution.

The complete disregard for Rohingya lives ultimately prevailed when the main perpetrators of violence, headed by General Min Aung Hlaing, came to power in Myanmar through a military coup in February 2021. Criminals under international law now got the uncontested authority to infringe on the freedom and human rights of Burmese people, especially the ethnic minorities previously targeted (Amnesty International, 2021a, para. 4). Ensuing protests and their silencing garnered international scrutiny and condemnation. ASEAN's Chairman wasted no time in issuing a statement but kept its language rather reserved when calling for a "return to normalcy" without mentioning the crimes or the perpetrators (ASEAN, 2021a, para. 4). He mentioned, however, "adherence to the principles of democracy" and "protection of human rights" as principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2021a, para. 1). Thus, ASEAN as an organisation is prioritising liberal principles in its narrative about the military power grab. It is quite a difference from its tacit upholding of non-interference baselines when commenting on the Rohingya crisis.

Even though the coup marked a serious escalation in violence, the individual responses of ASEAN member states were rather inert. Those who thought of the Rohingya genocide as a domestic affair also characterised the coup as an "internal matter" and subscribed to ASEAN's cautious initial statement (Al Jazeera, 2021a, para. 8; Auethavornpipat, 2021, para. 6; Phonevilay, 2021, para.3). Those who saw the Rohingya crisis for what it was, a grave violation of human rights, spoke against the military takeover and even called for Aung San Suu Kyi's release (Al Jazeera, 2021, para. 8). Malaysia went as far as suggesting that ASEAN should informally engage with the ousted National Unity Government in Myanmar regarding humanitarian relief (Al Jazeera, 2022, para. 4). The Malaysian narrative tries to remodel ASEAN as to take a more interventionist role in instances of mass atrocities in its member states.

To end this chronological account of the Rohingya plight and ASEAN's stories about it, I look slightly further into 2021 when the organisation finally seemed to be pushing the limits of its historic non-interference. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that ASEAN's recent statements on the situation in Myanmar speak more to the toppling of democracy and less to the ongoing suffering of the Rohingya. As the violence in Myanmar mounted, pressure grew for ASEAN to intervene. Amnesty International (2021b) qualified the episode as an existential crisis for ASEAN, where inaction would render a fatal blow to its credibility as an RO (para. 3). The ASEAN secretariat released a statement after its Leaders' Meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, acknowledging the "fatalities and escalation of violence" in Myanmar (ASEAN, 2021b, p. 3). The organisation also published its Five-Point Consensus (5PC) calling for "immediate cessation of violence" (ASEAN, 2021b, p. 4). The 5PC underlines ASEAN's role as a mediator and humanitarian as sustained unanimously by its member states. This marks a significant change in the RO's narrative, where it does not shy away from condemning violence and demanding tangible actions while inserting itself at the core of the issue.

In late 2021 and moving into 2022, ASEAN maintained its harsh tone when discussing the situation in Myanmar. Moreover, the organisation's words finally matched its actions when, in an unprecedented move, it denied General Min Aung Hlaing's access to its upcoming summit. Considering that the ASEAN summits are its main policymaking venue, the RO heavily undermined the military regime's legitimacy. In its explanatory statement, Brunei – presiding over the ASEAN chairmanship at the time – based the decision on Myanmar's lack of effort and commitment in fulfilling the 5PC (Al Jazeera, 2021, para.19). To this day, ASEAN itself is publicly criticising the continuing violence and insistently calling on Myanmar to honour the 5PC (ASEAN, 2021c, p. 26; ASEAN, 2022a, para. 3; ASEAN, 2022b, p.6). The RO even acknowledges the calls for the release of political detainees and talks about striking an "appropriate balance" between the principles of non-interference and democracy (ASEAN,

2021c, pp. 26-27). Thus, ASEAN is slowly but surely building a story about accountability where it plays the role of an external scrutiniser concerned with the human rights of Burmese people. Ironically however, in the same statements it expresses distress over the violence in Myanmar, ASEAN continues to praise and support Rohingya repatriation efforts (ASEAN, 2021c, p. 26; ASEAN, 2022b p. 6). In other words, while the RO is worried about the fates of pro-democracy protestors, it sees no issue in returning Rohingya refugees to a homeland ruled by their executioners. The tragic death of 1,800 activists weighs heavier in the story of the organisation than the massacre of over 24,000 Rohingya. The change in ASEAN's narrative to include human rights considerations alongside enshrined non-interference principles is positive and surprising, but unfortunately, it overlooks the mass atrocities systematically perpetrated against the Rohingya.

## **6. Discussion**

I analysed ASEAN's understanding of the Rohingya genocide and its role in the crisis by looking at the stories the RO tells. To understand the relevance and momentum of these narratives, I studied them alongside real-time reports by Amnesty International of the grave violations of human rights unfolding in Myanmar. ASEAN's explicit and implicit narrative provided insights into its role conception – the functions, duties, and norms it invokes to inform and justify its behaviour in response to the violations. The data showcases a gradual shift in the RO's stance, from initial silence and non-interference to overt condemnation of the 2021 coup in Myanmar. The persecuted Rohingya, however, never get ASEAN's recognition or help proportionate to their plight.

ASEAN's role conception as relied by its narrative evolved throughout the ongoing Rohingya genocide. The data is illustrative of three phases in ASEAN's response. Firstly, ASEAN was slow to react to the initial and bloodiest counter-insurgency and clearing

campaigns perpetrated against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. The organisation's implicit subordination to national sovereignty norms and the principle of non-interference, as well as its explicit support for Myanmar's official position, is denotative of a non-interventionist role. Consequently, ASEAN did not act in any substantive manner to save Rohingya lives. Secondly, from 2018, when most Rohingya have fled Myanmar and those remaining were subjected to apartheid conditions, ASEAN started to harshen its narrative. The RO's insistence on the safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees, alongside its calls for addressing the root causes of the crisis, create a "visible and enhanced" humanitarian role. As a result, ASEAN assisted Rohingyas' return to Myanmar. This response, however, proves too little and too late for the still unnamed survivors returning to a homeland that does not recognise them as citizens. Lastly, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar was the turning point for ASEAN to take a clear stance against mass atrocities. The RO's concern for the fate of Burmese democracy, its ceaseless calls for the military to end violence and comply with the 5PC, established its role as a protector of human rights. This role conception translated into the organisation's banning of Burmese top general from its upcoming Summit, questioning the military regime's legitimacy. While ASEAN finally pushed the limits of its non-interference in favour of human rights, the question of whose human rights the RO cares for still stands. At no point during the Rohingya genocide did ASEAN take the role of protector of *Rohingya* human rights and, as a result, it failed to protect them.

All in all, I managed to show that ASEAN's stories create its role conception and it, in turn, determines its response to the Rohingya crisis. When the RO thinks of its duties as consistent with non-interference norms, it does not intervene. When it understands itself as having a responsibility to uphold human rights and democracy in its member states, it pressures them on internal matters. This is consistent with my theoretical expectations while introducing more nuance. The findings point towards multiple role conceptions, where ASEAN's stories

evolve and change beyond unidimensional verdicts of (non-)interventionism. The dynamic conceptions of role can be explained by the influence of time, space, and power considerations on narratives (Somers, 1994, p. 621), as well as the fact that an actor can concomitantly assume multiple roles (Nabers, 2011, p. 76).

## **7. Conclusion**

This project was interested in how regional organisations' role conception affects their response to grave violations of human rights. How the stories they tell about their core norms, principles, and duties translate into behaviours addressing mass atrocities. It treated ROs as consequential actors in international politics who increasingly possess the capabilities and willingness to act in defence of human rights. The theoretical argument centred around constructivism and role theory. ROs self-understanding, as relied through their narratives, was expected to offer a viewpoint into their (in)action in times of humanitarian crises. It refused to outright dismiss an RO like ASEAN as non-interventionist and, instead, openly, and systematically analysed its stories, role conceptions, and activity vis-à-vis the Rohingya crisis.

In conclusion, and to answer the research question of this paper: RO's role conception directly determines their response to grave violations of human rights. A non-interventionist role understanding translates into inaction. A humanitarian role perception leads to the proactive support of the affected communities. Ultimately, the more an RO sees itself as having the duty to uphold liberal values and protect human rights, the more tangible actions will it undergo to prevent, cease, and ameliorate mass atrocities. ASEAN's stance throughout the Rohingya took several places on this continuum. The organisation created a story about concern for humanitarian crises without mentioning the main victims. It portrayed itself as a regional leader promoting peace and equality, while failing to hold the perpetrators of violence accountable. It even talked about its respect for democracy and liberal values, but never in the context of the

Rohingya tragedy. In the end, this led to an insufficient regional response to the Rohingya genocide.

This project's contribution to the research on regional responses to grave violations human rights consists of a descriptive analysis of the ways in which RO's role conceptions influence their behaviour. At the same time, ASEAN's narrative was at times ambiguous and always careful towards Myanmar's government. The RO did not once mention the Rohingya by name, so even its most explicit manifestations of concern for human rights can be questioned on sincerity grounds. Additionally, ASEAN seemed to adhere to a hierarchy of liberal values where democracy takes precedence over the human rights of minority groups. Future research can look more into how ROs' role conceptions change, accommodate the interests of their member states, and build around certain norms and values instead of others.

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