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## **Rumours, Riots and Retribution: Horizontal Inequalities and Sons of the Soil Conflict in Myanmar**

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**Rumours, Riots and Retribution**

Horizontal Inequalities and Sons of the Soil Conflict in Myanmar

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## Abstract

Sons of the Soil (SoS) conflict refers to clashes between indigenous and migrant populations from state-sponsored population resettlement schemes (Fearon & Laitin, 2011; Weiner, 1978). Socioeconomic competition and horizontal inequalities (HIs) play a fundamental role in fomenting grievances between ethnic groups (Cederman et al., 2011). Through the use of theory-testing process tracing, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the role socioeconomic HIs play in the emergence, progression and outcome of SoS conflict. This paper will show how in the case of Myanmar, the politicisation of HIs, precipitants, ethnic riots, rumours, state involvement and pogroms underpin the evolution of the June and October 2012 communal conflict between the Muslim Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists culminating in the pogroms of August 2017. The paper will perform a qualitative assessment of state policies, human rights reports and media publications to map the politicisation of HIs and the subsequent onset of communal conflict. It concludes that long-standing socioeconomic competition between ethnic groups in the background, amplified by the politicisation of socioeconomic and demographic HIs in the foreground is fundamental to the onset of SoS conflict.

Keywords: *SoS conflict; socioeconomic competition; horizontal inequalities; politicisation; Myanmar*

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## 1. Introduction

A third of all internal conflicts are considered migratory Sons of the Soil (SoS) conflicts (Fearon & Laitin, 2011); namely conflicts between an indigenous regional ethnic group and migrants from other parts of the country sponsored and encouraged by the state through resettlement schemes (Weiner, 1978). The state's role is fundamental in the evolution of communal conflict from ethnic riots to pogroms which can be situated in the progression of SoS conflict (Barter, 2020; Brass, 1996; Horowitz, 2001). Communal conflict is, therefore, a process rather than a product. This paper will draw on the causal mechanism and framework for analysis of SoS conflict proposed by Fearon & Laitin (2011). The politicisation, precipitants and perpetrators of communal conflict need to be situated and linked to understand the process of SoS conflict.

Weiner (1978) states that conflict arises from socioeconomic competition for occupation and land rights, whereas Stewart (2008, 2016) states that conflict arises from inequalities between ethnic groups. SoS conflict constitutes ethnic, demographic and socioeconomic horizontal inequalities (HIs) among ethnic groups. Stewart (2016, p. 12) describes HIs as "severe inequalities among culturally defined groups." Through state-sponsored resettlement schemes of SoS conflict the politicisation of socioeconomic HIs are subsumed on indigenous populations. Socioeconomic competition and inequalities subsequently amplify grievances among ethnic groups triggering collective action through a process of group mobilisation (Cederman et al., 2011). It is necessary to map this process of mobilisation and confrontation between ethnic groups to understand the emergence of SoS conflict. The research question for this paper is: "How do horizontal inequalities (HIs) lead to Sons of the Soil (SoS) conflict?" This paper explores the contribution of demographic and socioeconomic HIs on territorially-related ethnic tensions arising from SoS conflict.

The case of Myanmar is central to my research question. The events in Myanmar from June 2012 to August 2017 can be conceptualised through the SoS framework and causal mechanism using process-tracing. In northern Rakhine State, the competing claims of indigeneity between the Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists and the state-sponsored resettlement schemes significantly increased ethnic tensions that culminated in ethnic riots in June and October 2012. Centrally, the 2012 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Land Management Act and the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Race

(“NaTaLa”) population resettlement scheme have considerably affected the demographic, ethnographic and territorial environment within Rakhine State. The emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in August 2016 and the indiscriminate and unrestrained repression from August 2017 have been described by the UNHCR (2019) as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” It is therefore necessary to map and analyse the causal links between the politicisation of HIs and SoS conflict to understand the scale and scope of such pogroms.

## **2. Literature Review and Central Concepts**

Conflicts with ethnic dimensions comprise both secessionist and communal conflicts (Fox, 2004; Kauffman, 1996; Sambanis, 2001). While a body of literature has centralised on conflicts with secessionist and separatist underpinnings, research on communal violence remains in its infancy (Tambiah, 1996). This is largely because secessionist conflicts have an international dimension with the territorial devolution of politically, culturally and ethnically distinct groups entering the global arena, whereas internal communal conflicts remain inter-group nationally curtailed by the state. Although communal conflicts can pivot into separatist civil wars, there are instances of the state resolving these incidents as seen in the 2009 military defeat of the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Ealam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the granting of territorial autonomy to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the Philippines in 2018 (Kingsbury, 2021; Vatikiotis, 2017).

There are similarities between secessionist and communal conflicts including ethnic dimensions, state response and threats, territorial implications and the scope of conflict (Walter, 2006). Yet there are also some notable differences, most importantly the actors involved. In secessionist conflicts, a particular community within the nation-state rebels against the regime, while in communal conflicts communities rebel against each other as well as either against or with the support of the regime. In the latter case, the state is always involved in some way (Barter, 2020). This highlights the complexities of communal conflicts due to the number of actors, events and processes involved compared to more organised types of ethnic violence (Brosché & Elfversson, 2012).

## 2.1 The Revolving Door of Communal Violence

This section will focus on literature addressing the types, progression and connections of communal conflict, evolving around ethnic riots, pogroms and migratory SoS conflict. The preceding initiators, instigators and ignition of communal violence will follow, covering the subsequent politicisation, precipitants and perpetrators in the evolution of communal violence.

Communal violence is an all-encompassing concept including ethnic riots, pogroms and migratory conflicts and can broadly be defined as “violent conflict between non-state groups that are organised along a shared communal identity” (Elversson & Brosché, 2012, p. 33), essentially, conflict between two shared communal identity groups of similar ethnicity, religion and language. This definition does not, however, elaborate on the conflict’s sporadic and irregular nature (Cheesman, 2017), the proximity of communal groups (Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018) and the state’s role in favouring one side of the communal divide (Barter, 2020). Existing literature focuses on different types of communal violence; most notably, ethnic riots, pogroms and migratory conflicts.

Firstly, ethnic riots refers to an “intense sudden, though not necessarily wholly unplanned, lethal attack by civilian members of one ethnic group on civilian members of another ethnic group, the victims chosen because of their group membership” (Horowitz, 2001, p. 6), essentially mass intergroup civilian violence demarcated by ethnic group membership. Horowitz (2001) stresses the explosive nature of communal violence, as ethnic riots have the potential to pivot into other forms of destabilising, deadly and destructive violence due to the mass hostility embedded, and the revelation of intergroup sentiment. Much literature has therefore centralised on communal violence as both a breeding ground for brutality and for collective ethnic group mobilisation with separatist and secessionist ambitions (Cederman et al., 2010; Che Man, 1990). Separatist demands, however, only reveal demands on the state from communal groups rather than demands between communal groups. Ethnic riots are additionally seen as a cause, and the succession of events leading up to and after the incident are overlooked.

Secondly, pogroms refer to sustained ethnic riots with unequal sides (Barter, 2020). There is a dominant group aimed at massacring, cleansing and expelling the other helpless communal group, where state encouragement or inability to halt the violence escalates its scope

(Brass, 1996; Horowitz, 2001). Selective targeting epitomised in ethnic riots is evident in pogroms, where ethnic boundaries inhibit identifiable target-group attributes (Horowitz, 2001). Brass (1996, p. 32) confirms that “the state and/or its agents are implicated to a significant degree,” when pogroms occur. Holsti (2000) further argues that state violence has more often than not been the initiating cause of conflict, therefore revealing the state’s precipitating effects. Additionally, Kingsbury (2011) notes that the context of limited state capacity results in governments resorting to authoritarian tactics when excluded ethnic groups seek redress. Pogroms can therefore be viewed as an outcome of communal violence introduced by ethnic riots, whereas migratory conflicts can be seen as a process.

Thirdly, territorial implications of communal violence are best described through migratory conflicts. Weiner (1978) coins migratory conflicts as “Sons of the Soil” conflict in which clashes between migrants and indigenous groups occur from state-sponsored population resettlement schemes and the subsequent competition for socioeconomic resources. Fearon & Laitin (2011) proposes an escalation sequence to SoS conflict, where ethnic riots are the cause, to the outcome of indiscriminate violence of pogroms. There is a further focus on the states processes and its agents, most notably (a) police (in) action and (b) subsequent involvement of the state army. Brass (1996) further elaborates on the role of the state and its agents, confirming that police inaction and incompetence reflect the design of state authorities. Barter (2020) however, reveals criticisms of SoS conflict, namely that it is both a gendered concept and does not specify the initiators of the violence. These three forms of communal conflict overlap and are not exhaustive, but this categorisation is useful in understanding intergroup conflicts.

## 2.2 Initiators, Instigators and Ignition

The outbreak of intergroup conflict has been associated with profound HIs (Cederman et al., 2011; Stewart, 2008). HIs refer to “severe inequalities between culturally defined groups or groups with shared identities” (Stewart, 2016, p. 12). This takes a grievance-based approach in which inter-group relative deprivation is central (Gurr, 1970). A number of scholars, however, state that the primary driving-force of conflict is unequal individual wealth distribution and the pursuit of individual economic advantage, through a greed-approach (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Whereas Stewart (2008) and Wood (2003) centralise on the group-level accounts of inequality, through a grievance-approach, concerning the socioeconomic positioning of the entire marginalised group relative to others. Political HIs



additionally address political exclusion to participation and access to central decision-making authority within the state. This refers, however, only to the political leadership of political parties and makes socioeconomic grievances a significant talking point concerning large-scale group-level mobilisation and conflict embodied in communal violence (Stewart, 2016).

Contrarily, Weiner (1978) states that conflict arises in times of economic competition from the economic division of labour due to preferential treatment of migrants in occupational and land rights, rather than from inequalities. Socioeconomic HIs are, however, evident here where the removal of access to and ownership of assets (financial, land, livestock and human and social capital) may lead to the relative deprivation and grievances of indigenous ethnic groups as stated by Stewart, 2016), who further notes that socioeconomic inequalities mean that the population as a whole has strong grievances along ethnic lines and are thus likely to be more readily mobilised through communalism. The perspective of HIs alone performs rather a static explanation of the causes of conflict by stating them as severe inequalities between groups. It is therefore not procedural and does not state the evolution, progression and outcome, particularly when it comes to SoS conflict. To understand the emergence of SoS conflict, it is necessary to combine both socioeconomic inequalities and competition, which are largely interrelated.

### 2.3 The Relativity of Ethnic Boundaries

Conflicts between ethnic groups take place in severely divided societies (Horowitz, 1985). Toft (2012, p. 582) describes multiethnic states as “territorially bounded political units, composed of a people or nations, and often ruled by a single government with sovereign authority.” Multiethnic societies are therefore environments in which conflicts erupt, making group membership pivotal and culturally defined groups the primary actors of communal violence. The exacerbation of group grievances from minoritisation policies adds to the sense of marginalisation among peripheral populations according to Brown (2008). Subsequently, cultural and ethnic familiarity occurs when ethnic groups provide the locus of expressions of grievances and protest (Kingsbury, 2011). This makes ethnic cleavages and group identity lines both a delineation for group mobilisation and a common bond in which groups can share their grievances and motives, rendering them a driving force for conflict (Stewart, 2016).

Ethnicity also has a territorial base (Weiner, 1978). Territorial claims of indigeneity from ethnic groups have addressed grievances, such as political recognition, through federalism and territorial devolution. There is, however, an exclusionary and tension-fuelling potential of political mobilisation based on indigeneity which can significantly escalate intergroup tensions (Kuper, 2003; Thawnghmung, 2016). Particularly, inter-ethnic competition over access to land, state power and resources have significantly contributed to ethnic frictions (Balaton-Chrimes, 2016). Territory therefore centres on both an ethnic symbol and source of material wealth (Barter, 2020). The economic exploitation of peripheral areas benefiting the central government can be seen in the natural resource exploitation of oil reserves off the Aceh coast (Brown, 2008). Populations of resource-rich regions therefore find themselves relatively poor in terms of living standards and resent the redistribution of their resources to the rest of the country (Murshed & Tadjoeiddin, 2009). This ultimately reveals that when there is an amalgamation of group differences, land rights and ethnic HIs a particularly explosive situation will commence. These ethnic boundaries can therefore be aggravated when the politicisation of HIs and permissive strategies occur.

#### 2.4 Politicisation, Precipitants and Perpetrators

When these HIs are politicised significant ethnic unrest follows (Brown, 2008; Stewart, 2016). The politicisation of HIs can be separated and identified through three schemes associated with the fomenting of group tensions in regards to SoS conflict; namely (a) state-sponsored population resettlement schemes (b) historical postcolonial legacies and (c) brooding national assimilationist programmes in which ethnic groups are marginalised. These policies significantly exacerbate grievances among ethnic groups by hindering the minorities against the majorities. The point HIs are politicised, additionally complements Horowitz's (2001) description of junctures of ethnic violence as "precipitants." These are particular flashpoints in time in which ethnic unrest arises, motivated by alterations of relative ethnic status, for example. Grievances, therefore, trigger collective action through a process of group mobilisation (Cederman et al., 2011).

Considering the territorial aspects of communal conflict, many studies have revolved around the politicisation of state-sponsored resettlement schemes and demographic engineering of ethnic groups central to SoS conflict (Morland, 2014). Weiner (1978) states that the erosion of ethnic homogeneity by population movements has made indigenous populations unable to

compete economically, leaving them significantly politically marginalised by the central government. Central to these studies, the cases of the Mindanao region in the Philippines (Tigno, 2006), the Pattani region in Southern Thailand (Che Man, 1990) and the Acehnese in Indonesia (Brown, 2008) have revealed that resettlement schemes have fomented group mobilisation. These migration schemes are essentially demographic movements and population dilution of particularly “disloyal” peripheral ethnic groups influenced by postcolonial ethnic delineations (Kingsbury, 2011). This, furthermore, constitutes ethnic HIs, in which there are severe inequalities between indigenous and migrant populations (Stewart, 2016). Although contemporary migration resettlement schemes may be in the foreground, there are other marginalisation schemes working in the background such as postcolonial legacies and national assimilationist policies.

A wide body of literature has acknowledged the influence of historical postcolonial divide-and-rule legacies on contemporary ethnic group relations and cleavages (Christie, 1998; Furnivall, 2014; Morrock, 1973). These colonial legacies emphasised ethnic stratification or “ranked ethnic systems,” as described by Horowitz (1985), in which ethnic groups are hierarchically organised and socially integrated within the same socioeconomic and cultural institutions resulting in minorities becoming more cohesive entities, disregarding pluralism or excluding ethnic participation. This predication of a monoethnic state orientation leads to ethnic nationalism of distinct minority identities and demands on the state for specialised rights creating ethnic segmentation, instead of stratification, in times of decolonisation (Christie, 1998). Vogt (2018) therefore reveals that the susceptibility of contemporary ethnic conflict is heavily dependent on the historical structure of ethnic group relations resulting from specific colonial legacies. For example, colonial favouritism of specific ethnic groups transitioned into perceived disloyalty to contemporary postcolonial states further invoking ethnic cleavages. This is seen in the invention of the ethnic differentiation between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda by colonial powers for the convenience of administrative purposes (Lemarchand, 1994).

In order to manage opposition, contain assertions of differences, strengthen internal cohesion and prevent a crumbling nationhood evoked by ethnic violence, postcolonial national assimilationist policies are further undertaken to force social, political and cultural homogenisation among members of the nation-state (Miller, 2011). This ultimately creates a sense of compelled inclusion which relegates subordinate ethnic groups to a sense of

inferiority, marginalisation or alienation from the dominant group (Kingsbury, 2011). These policies are essentially ethnic domination through the cultural and linguistic capture of the public sphere, which can additionally constitute cultural status inequalities (Elischer, 2021; Stewart, 2016). These include the refusal of cultural and legal autonomy, dominant language policies and the refusal of religious artefacts as seen in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Myanmar.

## 2.5 Literature Gap

It is therefore evident that the imposition of the state siding with an ethnic group is central to the progression of communal violence. More research is needed on the role of the state in fueling and/or preventing the outbreak of these conflicts where state actors play decisive and complex roles in shaping diverging outcomes (Côté & Mitchell, 2017). Additionally, Cederman et al. (2010) reveal that many approaches do not take account of the state as an actor in conflict processes. Additionally, demographic HIs through state-sponsored resettlement schemes are a relatively understudied phenomenon. Although it constitutes socioeconomic HIs it should be a concept in itself as there is significant potential for conflict to arise in times of territorial dispossession and population dilution through territorially specific discriminatory policies against ethnic groups.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The politicisation, precipitants and perpetrators of communal violence must be situated to understand the process of SoS conflict. It is evident that the politicisation of HIs can be far-reaching, longstanding and brooding years before the commencement of communal conflict, particularly in instances where postcolonial legacies are apparent. HIs additionally provide rather a static explanation of the causes of inter-group conflict and do not explain the social processes preceding and succeeding the onset of conflict. To explain instances of ethnic violence, there are therefore several demographic, ethnographic and socioeconomic “conditioning” factors in the background, with relationships of confrontation, precipitants and triggering incidents evident in the foreground (Brass, 1996, Brubaker & Laitin, 1994). Smelser’s (1962, p. 253) “value-added” model of collective behaviour further reveals a set of “conditions” that accumulate into a sequence of increasing determinacy - structural conduciveness and strain, generalised beliefs, precipitating factors, mobilisation for action and failure of state control.

Critical juncture theory, therefore, reveals a presence of (a) distal historical causation and (b) the occurrence of a rapid, discontinuous change (Cappacio, 2016; Munck, 2022). Distal historical causation is described as the “events and developments in the distant past (...) that have a crucial impact on outcomes later in time” (Cappacio, 2016, p. 96). An approach of critical juncture theory revealing the importance of the antecedent structural conditions highlights the impersonal factors such as the socioeconomic conditions, class and social alliance and diffuse cultural orientations which influence the institutional outcome of the juncture (Cappacio, 2016). The underpinning logic of distal historical causation can be associated with the historical institutional development of public policies, such as the long-standing placement of the politicisation of HIs subsumed on ethnic groups. The institutional outcome of junctures can be envisaged in the precipitants that evolve into the commencement of communal violence, for example. When critical junctures take place, instances of a divergent institutional path can be seen in the “locked-in” trajectory, continuation and unleashing of communal violence and unrestrained repression,

Brubaker & Laitin (1994) highlight the centrality of the inductive approach to ethnic conflict, in which there is an identification of patterns, mechanisms and recurrent processes. These are implicated from the differing drivers, dynamics and magnitudes of ethnic violence across regions. A number of scholars have recognised frameworks such as relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970), HIs (Stewart, 2008), historical institutionalism (Elischer, 2021) and greed and grievance (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), in order to understand the commencement, continuation and connection of group discrimination and mobilisation. The causal logic of critical junctures additionally accommodates the cause-effect of the commencement of communal violence from the politicisation of HIs, which can be described through process-tracing as addressed in the next section.

## **4. Research Design**

### 4.1 Case Selection

The study will employ a singular case study of Myanmar which Gerring (2008) considers an extreme case. The scale of retribution when the army got involved has been described as “ethnic cleansing” and with “genocidal intent” (UNHRC, 2019). As Stake (1995) observes, case study research is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case

in question. This will allow an examination of the complexity and intricacies of communal conflict including the actors involved, actions committed and processes unfolding. The Myanmar government was able to curtail several incidents of communal conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in 1984, 1988, 1994 and 1998 (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2013). It was, however, unable to control another outbreak in June 2012, making this a significant event to study. The communal violence in Rakhine State is acknowledged as the largest communal violence between 2012 and 2013 in Myanmar (Kipgen, 2013; Walton & Hayward, 2014), revealing that state involvement and authority is a central prerequisite to either foment or curtail communal violence.

A wide range of literature has addressed other HIs in Myanmar including political HIs of the removal of citizenship and voting rights of the Rohingya (Than, 2017), cultural status inequality of cultural heritage destruction in Rakhine (Lee & Zaradona, 2020) and the economic HIs of educational and occupational restrictions of the Rohingya (Wah Win et al., 2021). No study has conducted a focus on the land ownership laws constituting socioeconomic HIs subsumed and politicised on the peripheral areas of Myanmar. The paper argues in the analysis below that the onset of SoS conflict is not limited to state-sponsored migration resettlement schemes but encompasses territorially specific discriminatory policies introduced by the state. The SoS framework proposed by Fearon & Laitin (2011) has additionally been relatively understudied and applied to only a few cases such as China and Sri Lanka (Côté & Michell, 2017). Despite Fearon (2004) acknowledging that many ethnic conflicts in Myanmar can be considered SoS conflicts, there has been no study that has employed the SoS framework used to analyse the progression of the conflict between the Muslim Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists.

Additionally, Fearon & Laitin (2011) highlight that most SoS conflicts occur in Asia due to the region's physical and social geography, where a large lowland plain area is typically overpopulated by members of the dominant ethnic groups and surrounded by peripheral hill areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. This is evident in Rakhine State, where peripheral hills in Maungdaw and Buthidaung in the north are associated with Rohingya constituting around 90% of the population whereas the central plains of the province's capital, Sittwe, are associated with the dominant ethnic Buddhist group (Thawngmung, 2016) (see Appendix A for Map of Rakhine State). There are, however, competing narratives of indigeneity of the region between both ethnic groups where the Rohingya have been identified by a number of scholars as being

indigenous to northern Rakhine (Berlie, 2008; Lee, 2021; Thawnghmung, 2016), while the government and the Rakhine Buddhists have been historically adamant that the Rohingya are foreigners and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Green et al., 2015). The analysis would consider that the Rohingya are indigenous whereas the in-migration of Rakhine Buddhists and the dominant Bamar ethnic group into northern Rakhine are migrants. The time frame of the progression of communal violence in Rakhine State will be from June 2012 to August 2017, which will allow the paper to identify whether the causal mechanism is present.

#### 4.2 Theory-testing Process Tracing

To answer the research question, the methodology applied for the analysis will be theory-testing process tracing (Beach & Pederson, 2013). This will test the causal mechanism proposed by Fearon & Laitin (2011) to identify if it is present in the selected case. This causal mechanism ultimately addresses the causes of SoS conflicts from the in-migration of the central dominant ethnic group and the progression of events following this politicisation to the outcome of pogroms. The analysis would therefore provide an in-depth description of the case which allows for the differentiation between causal and contextual factors. The generalisability of the causal mechanisms can be applied to other cases rather than Sri Lanka as centralised in Fearon & Laitin's (2011) study. The causal elements and observable manifestations will be identified from state-owned local newspaper publications, human rights organisation reports, such as Amnesty International, and government reports, legislations and publications.

#### 4.3 Sons of the Soil (SoS) Conflict Causal Mechanism and Framework

To complement the revolving door of communal violence, Fearon & Laitin (2011) propose an escalation sequence for SoS conflict. There are two fundamental characteristics of SoS conflict; namely (a) clashes between territorially concentrated minority ethnic groups and ethnically distinct migrants and (b) competing claims of indigeneity and the rightful possession of the minority group's ancestral land. It is therefore necessary for SoS conflict to encompass the fundamental factors of an indigenous group, a regional base and competition for vacant land. As highlighted in the literature review, the central concepts of the politicisation of HIs, precipitants, ethnic riots and pogroms will be incorporated into this framework to easily identify the causal elements in the evolution of communal violence, although this is not stated in the original causal mechanism.

As mentioned, Fearon & Laitin (2011) argue SoS conflicts begin from the politicisation of socioeconomic HIs of state-sponsored resettlement schemes by introducing migrants to peripheral indigenous areas. This is then accompanied by ethnic frictions and low-level clashes between communal groups in the form of ethnic riots precipitated by rumours of abuse such as rape, theft, insults or protests. State forces then intervene to control the ethnic riots and restore order. Firstly, the police are considered ineffective, even siding with communal groups, or are deliberately inactive. The army and state forces then intervene siding with migrants and unleash indiscriminate and unrestrained retribution against the indigenous populations which can be perceived as pogroms. There are few cases where the state sides with indigenous populations which does not lead to internal conflict. The causal mechanism can be proposed as below:

Table 1: SoS Framework and Causal Mechanism

Cause	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Outcome
<b>Activity:</b> Politicisation of horizontal inequalities	<b>Activity:</b> Precipitants	<b>Activity:</b> Ethnic riots	<b>Perpetrators:</b>		<b>Activity:</b> Pogrom
→	→	→	<b>Activity:</b> Police ineffective	<b>Activity:</b> Army involvement	→
<b>Actor:</b> State	<b>Actor:</b> Ethnic groups	<b>Actor:</b> Ethnic groups	<b>Actor:</b> State	<b>Actor:</b> State	<b>Actor:</b> State

#### 4.4 Operationalisation

The exact number of Rohingya cannot be verified as they were excluded from participating in the 2014 census unless they registered as ‘Bengali’, which very few did, making the demographic figures of the in-migration of the migrant ethnic group skewed (Thawnghmung, 2016). An assessment of the demographic HIs subsumed unto Rakhine State is therefore necessary through the qualitative assessment of state policies that encompass state-sponsored resettlement schemes and territorially discriminatory state policies. Centrally, the 2012 VFV Land Management Act and the “NaTaLa” resettlement schemes from the 1990s will be analysed to understand the effect these policies had on the outbreak of communal violence in 2012. Although the Rakhine Buddhists are not considered recent migrants, the historical contextualisation of these policies will have implications on the outbreak of communal violence starting in June 2012. The emergence of communal conflict will be assessed through instances of ethnic riots and state involvement as seen through instances of pogroms.



Table 2: Observable Manifestations of SoS Framework and Causal Mechanism

Cause	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Outcome
<b>Activity:</b> Politicisation of horizontal inequalities	<b>Activity:</b> Precipitants	<b>Activity:</b> Ethnic riots	<b>Perpetrators:</b>		<b>Activity:</b> Pogrom
			<b>Activity:</b> Police ineffective	<b>Activity:</b> Army involvement	
<b>Actor:</b> State	→ <b>Actor:</b> Ethnic groups	→ <b>Actor:</b> Ethnic groups	→ <b>Actor:</b> State	→ <b>Actor:</b> State	→ <b>Actor:</b> State
<b>Observable manifestation :</b> 1. 2012 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land (VFV) Management Act 2. “NaTaLa” Villages 3. “Burmanisation” programme	<b>Observable manifestation :</b> Rape and murder of Buddhist Rakhine woman Ambush and mass murder of busload of Rohingya Muslims by Buddhist Rakhine	<b>Observable manifestation:</b> Ethnic riots between Rohingya and Rakhine in June and October 2012	<b>Observable manifestation:</b> Deliberate police ineffectiveness and inaction, further spread of ethnic riots to other parts of Myanmar in October 2012	<b>Observable manifestation :</b> Emergence of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in August 2016, subsequent state army involvement	<b>Observable manifestation :</b> ‘Scorched earth’ campaigns and ‘clearance operations’ of August 2017

## 5. Analysis

Before the progression of communal violence, the politicisation of HIs imposed by the state of Myanmar will be outlined. This is followed by the precipitants of the communal violence before June 2012, the (in) effectiveness of the police, the involvement of the state army in August 2017 and finally the outcome of pogroms.

### 5.1 Cause: Politicisation of Horizontal Inequalities

The politicisation of HIs in the years leading up to the communal violence of 2012 can be situated within Myanmar’s wider national assimilation “Burmanisation” programme. From the 1962 military coup, President Ne Win enabled a nation-wide campaign attempting to engulf Myanmar’s ethnic, religious and cultural minorities into a hegemonic Bamar State (Berlie, 2008; Lee & Zaradona, 2020). Following the coup, to counter the fear of internal fragmentation, substrate nationalism and ethnic segmentation of the peripheries resulted in subsuming national unity and ethno-religious uniformity onto a nation-state to cultivate loyalty on an already resentful population (Wade, 2019). This was amplified again in 1988 following another military coup; among these national assimilation policies would be territorial dispossession and demographic dilution.

Territorial dispossession and land confiscation are central to Myanmar's "Burmanisation" programme to obtain ownership of the country's ethnic peripheries. Most notably, during the year sectarian communal violence in Rakhine State erupted, the government implemented the 2012 VFV Land Management Act (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012). This act was an updated version of the 1991 "Wastelands Law," which demonstrated the "government's continued refusal to recognise ethnic customary land tenure systems, and grants the right to reallocate land without official title to domestic foreign investors" (Lertchavalitsakul & Meehan, 2021, p. 213). The difficulties for ethnic groups to register land, made land confiscation seamless for the government. For example, minority ethnic groups were given six months to apply for landownership permits that were designated as "vacant, fallow or virgin," by the government (Yueng, 2019). Failure to reach the deadline risked evictions, fines and imprisonment (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012). This created a profound sense of land insecurity for the majority of ethnic groups in the peripheral areas.

The Rohingya in Rakhine State were, however, the worst affected by the 2012 VFV Land Management Act. The act covers around one third of Myanmar, only in ethnic minority peripheral areas, with 42 percent of Rakhine State considered VFV land (Yueng, 2019). Despite historical evidence of the Rohingya's indigeneity to Rakhine State, under the 1982 Citizenship Law the Rohingya were removed from the list of the 135 officially recognised ethnic minorities (Lee, 2019). These restrictive land laws therefore prohibited the Rohingya a rightful claim to their territory. According to the Human Rights Council (HRC) "under the VFV Law, Rohingya cannot apply for permits for their land as they are not recognised as members of a "national race." This could result in the confiscation of the land owned by nearly one million forcibly displaced and deported Rohingya" (2019, p. 31). The communal violence that would later ensue would, therefore, be on land previously confiscated from the Rohingya (Wade, 2019).

The significantly underdeveloped economic situation in Rakhine State has considerably influenced inter-communal and minority-majority relations. Rakhine State is considered largely agrarian and is Myanmar's second poorest province with 43.5 percent living under the poverty line (UNDP, 2011), despite an abundance of natural resources and its strategic geopolitical location, both of which are exploited by foreign powers. For example, considerable natural gas deposits, the Shwe Gas project, have been located in the Bay of Bengal off Rakhine State's coast and foreign companies have been in negotiation and contracts with the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise where oil pipelines have been constructed from

Rakhine State to Yunnan Province in China (Green et al., 2015; Lertchavalitsakul & Meehan, 2021). It is unlikely that the extraction of natural resources have benefited the Rakhine communities considering the centralised military government's intentions and the lack of territorial and federal economic devolution. The absence of economic redistribution and allocation among the communities of Rakhine State, significantly influenced minority-majority ethnic tensions.

The 2012 VFV Land Management Act is considered to repurpose land for economic gain at the expense of ethnic minority groups. China in particular is influencing this trend through its One-Belt One-Road initiative through Rakhine State to Southern and Central Asia (Xinhua, 2017). An integral part of this initiative is the link of the Kyauakpya deep-sea port in Rakhine State to Kunming, China through the Chinese-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) (Xinhua, 2020). Between 1988 and 2018 China invested more than USD 20 billion in Myanmar representing one of the largest foreign development injections in Myanmar in recent times (Lwin, 2018). Territory is therefore seen here as a material symbol and cements that “backward groups in backward regions,” are susceptible to separatist ambitions due to the exploitation of the peripheral areas to benefit the central government (Barter, 2020; Horowitz, 1981, p. 173).

Historically, demographic HIs through population dilution have been endemic in Rakhine State adversely affecting the Rohingya. After the formation of the border guards (“NaSaKa”) in 1992, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) intensified a state-sponsored resettlement scheme introducing and relocating Rakhine Buddhists and the majority Bamar ethnic group to traditionally Rohingya concentrated northern Rakhine (Amnesty International, 2018). These migrants would be situated in model “NaTaLa” villages, named after and established by the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Race (“NaTaLa”). According to the 1988 SPDC “Rohingya Extermination Plan,” the “NaTaLa’s” aim was to strategically reverse the population of northern Rakhine by outnumbering the peripheral Rohingya population with the Buddhist majority from different townships (Green et al., 2015, p. 36). There are estimates of around 30 to 100 model villages in Northern Rakhine before the communal violence of June 2012 with each village housing 100 families (Amnesty International, 2004). These model villages would be forcibly constructed by the Rohingya on agrarian land previously confiscated from them, removing their source of income and wealth and place of residence (HRW, 2018).

These systematic demographic and territorially specific discriminatory policies translate into socioeconomic HIs against the Rohingya. Considering the unequal positioning of the Rohingya in regards to land and occupational rights in comparison to the Rakhine Buddhists, significant tensions between the two communities would arise based on territorial and socioeconomic claims to their land. As seen in Sri Lanka, state-sponsored resettlement schemes were the foundation for the emergence of SoS conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2011). There are therefore stark similarities in the development of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and that seen in Rakhine State in which a series of cultural violence perpetrated by a succession of ethnocratic governments precipitated and encouraged episodic riots and more continuous state violence in response (Brubaker & Laitin, 1994). It is evident here that background distal historical causation and antecedent structural conditions would position the precipitants in the wider array of the politicisation of HIs. In the foreground, these precipitants, flashpoints and junctures are necessary to reveal the onset of SoS conflict.

### 5.2 Part 1: Precipitants

A procession of precipitants in the foreground occurred that was fomented by these historical discriminatory laws. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012, a Rakhine Buddhist was raped and murdered by three Rohingya men (HRW, 2013). The act of rape carries significant symbolic biological weight among Rakhine, where Krause (2020) mentions that rape and sexual violence is seen as asserting biological supremacy in times of conflict. This explains the explosive reaction from the Rakhine Buddhists, as they feared that Rohingya Muslims were growing in number, diluting the concentration of the Buddhist population, overwhelming their resources and deemed an existential threat to Buddhism (Wade, 2019). The rape and murder escalated latent anxieties about the intentions of Muslims living among them leading to the massacre, lynching and ambush of a busload of 10 Rohingya by a mob of Rakhine Buddhists (Kipgen, 2013). Similarly, ambushes by the parallel ethnic group that sparked ethnic riots can be revealed in Sri Lanka and the Philippines precipitating the separatist insurgencies from the LTTE and the MNLF (Kingsbury, 2021; Vatikiotis, 2017).

### 5.3 Part 2: Ethnic Riots

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 2012, prayers for the victims of the bus attack spiralled into uncontrollable ethnic riots between civilian Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya mobs (Kipgen, 2013). The lack of mobilisational capacity and economic positioning led the Rohingya to turn on their

neighbours rather than becoming a separatist organisation and turning on the state (Vogt, 2019). This reveals the clashes between territorially concentrated minority ethnic groups and ethnically distinct migrants as epitomised in SoS conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2011). As migrants are typically more mobile than the indigenous in times of conflict, migrants are therefore able to retreat (Weiner, 1978). The ethnic riots are associated both with the claims of Rakhine State being the ancestral homeland of the Rohingya and also their inability to migrate elsewhere in Myanmar due to severe movement restriction laws (HRC, 2019). The state's response was therefore to segregate the communities, placing the Rohingya into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with estimates of 120,000 to 140,000 inhabitants (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2013). These camps have been described as detention camps and prison villages (Amnesty International, 2017).

Competing claims of territorial indigeneity by the inhabitants translates into competition over socioeconomic resources in the Rakhine region. Historically, the Rohingya have been perceived as foreign and labelled illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Lee, 2019). In July 2012, President Thein Sein stated “we will take care of our own ethnic nationalities, but Rohingya who came to Burma illegally are not of our ethnic nationalities and we cannot accept them here” (Green et al., 2018, p. 25). According to Simpson & Farrelly (2019) Rakhine Buddhists are concerned that official recognition of the Rohingya would lead to socioeconomic resources, including land ownership, being awarded at the expense of Rakhine Buddhist communities. As mentioned, in an already agrarian and poverty-stricken region, perceptions of the infringement and competition for access to scarce traditional land, water and natural resources between two communities is evocative of waging a war (UNDP, 2011). The desire for the segregation and rejection of Rohingya citizenship among the Rakhine Buddhist population therefore ultimately stemmed from socioeconomic considerations in a setting with limited economic opportunities for people of Rakhine ethnicity (HRW, 2013). Above all, the competing claims of indigeneity and the competition for the rightful possession of the minority groups' ancestral land between the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists lay central to this SoS conflict.

The pivotal role of rumours in fomenting and extending the (re)occurrence and duration of communal violence must be stressed (Das, 1998; Fearon & Laitin, 2011; Tambiah, 1996). Radical racial, religious rhetoric and rumours from the Buddhist monkhood, Rakhine Buddhist political parties and civic groups aided the resurgence of ethnic riots. In July 2012, the Buddhist

monk association of Mrauk-U in Rakhine State announced: “The Arakenese (Rakhine) people must understand that Bengalis (Rohingya) want to destroy the land of Arakan, are eating Arakan rice and plan to exterminate Arakenese people and use their money to buy weapons to kill Arakanese people” (HRW, 2013, p. 26). This instigated panic resulting in Rakhine Buddhists convinced: ‘We are now in danger of being overrun by these Bangladeshis’ (Green et al., 2015, p. 29). In August 2012, President Thein Sein admitted that “political parties, some monks and some individuals are increasing the ethnic hatred” (HRW, 2013, p. 16). Like many other ethnic minorities in the peripheral regions, the Rakhine Buddhists have been historically persecuted by Myanmar’s central government. It can therefore be seen as the Rakhine Buddhists diverting their oppression by the state onto another ethnic group rather than themselves to gain socioeconomic opportunities. Additionally, there are efforts by the Myanmar government to switch the oppressor from the government to the Rohingya. The extent of rumours led to a perceived sense of cultural, religious and economic “genocide” by the Rohingya from the June 2012 ethnic riots (Green et al., 2015, p. 29).

With democratisation, one door opens and another door closes. Despite Myanmar’s democratisation process from 2011 and the development of democratic institutions such as the electoral system, other forms of media liberalisation resulted in the spread of hate speech from the state media towards the Rohingya which subsequently fomented animosity between the two communal groups (Lee, 2016; Lee, 2021). For example, following the rape and murder of 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012, the spread of photographs revealed the ethnicity and religion of the perpetrators accompanied by derogatory comments. As mentioned by Horowitz (2002) this allowed selective targeting to make it easier for the participants of the ethnic riots to identify their targets. The rapid communication from the presence of a state-owned national press fuelled the riots into “waves” throughout Myanmar and prevented the riots’ locality. These ethnic riots, however, were not a pogrom carried out on one particular community considering both communal groups inflicted mass interpersonal violence towards each other. Pogroms are therefore dependent on the involvement of the state and its agents, namely the police and army as revealed below.

#### 5.4 Part 3: Police Ineffectiveness

There are multiple accounts of the police’s deliberate inaction in containing the ethnic riots in June and October 2012 in Rakhine State (Green et al., 2015; Green et al., 2018; HRC,

2019; HRW, 2012; HRW, 2013). Multiple incidents of significant pre-planned and organised police complicity with the Rakhine Buddhists have been noted, and there is a subsequent lack of accountability of the police's human rights violations throughout the riots. Wade (2019) and HRW (2013) note instances of police disarming the Rohingya to render them more vulnerable. On 28<sup>th</sup> October 2012, during the massacre of Yen Thei Village, police were noted to have aided the killing of around 70 Rohingya by Rakhine Buddhist mobs (HRW, 2013). Although there are some instances of state security forces intervening and protecting fleeing Rohingya, more frequently they stood aside or directly supported assailants committing killings and other abuses (HRW, 2013). This resulted in the commencement of the vulnerability of an ethnic group for the onset of a pogrom to take place.

The volatile timing of ethnic riots is revealed in the instances of resurgence in inter-ethnic religious violence throughout Myanmar. Although the sectarian violence was largely contained by 12<sup>th</sup> June 2012 in Rakhine State following the imposition of a state of emergency by President Thein Sein, the inability of the police is revealed by the scale of the second wave of riots that commenced on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2012, this time across nine townships, instead of four, and lasting over a week (HRW, 2013; Kipgen, 2013). This reveals the police's ineffectiveness in containing the ethnic riots and the role of rumours in the riots' resurgence. In the eyes of the state, it was therefore important for the army to get involved.

#### 5.5 Part 4: Army Involvement

Although there was a build-up of the military after the October 2012 ethnic riots, it was not until 2016 and 2017 that successive state retribution and military reprisal towards the Rohingya population commenced. From August 2016, the emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a militant Muslim terrorist group, portraying themselves as the defenders of Rohingya civilians against mistreatment by Myanmar's military, was used as a scapegoat for the legitimisation of violence by the state army (ICG, 2016). Egreteau (2021) states that the Rohingya faced increased persecution after an armed group pretending to represent the Rohingya cause started off a rebellion in October 2016. ARSA's first significant action on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2016, a simultaneous attack on three security posts killing nine police officers, precipitated a brutal crackdown from the military that forcibly deported around 90,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh (Lee, 2021). The army-led repression turned even more brutal after renewed attacks by ARSA on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017, where 30 police stations and an army base in

northern Rakhine were attacked (Amnesty International, 2017). As seen with Myanmar's government generalising a whole ethnic group in the past, this resulted in the transition of labelling the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to designating them as terrorists, and subsequent pogroms and "clearance operations" to commence aimed at eradicating terrorists among the Rohingya population (Lee, 2021).

### 5.6 Outcome: Pogrom

UNHCR (2019) has described the scale and scope of unrestrained, indiscriminate and unshackled retribution as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" and embodying "genocidal intent." According to the HRC (2019), by the start of 2020, over 740,000 Rohingya had arrived in neighbouring Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar refugee camp since 2017 leaving around 600,000 Rohingya in Myanmar from an initial population of 1.3 million. Through satellite imagery, Amnesty International (2017) has discovered the destruction of 80 villages through the military's orchestrated genocidal systematic "scorched earth" policy. From August 2017 to April 2019, more than 416 Rohingya settlements were completely or partially destroyed through military "clearance operations" in northern Rakhine (HRC, 2019, Amnesty International, 2018). This constitutes around 75 to 90 percent of Rohingya settlements in northern Rakhine State, with the burning of villages and the destruction of property being the most common strategy of military attacks (Rohingya Survey, 2017). Levelling crowds, arson and destruction of property have also been used as tools of ethnic riots and pogroms. This can be seen as an attempt by the government and Rakhine Buddhists to completely remove people who were once there and seize back what was considered their rightful property.

Subsequently in July 2019, the 2012 VFV Land Management Act allowed the construction and return of the "NaTaLa" villages to host relocated "Burmese and Arakan people" on land confiscated in the Maungdaw township in northern Rakhine State (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2017). This was part of a scheme to demographically remodel and reappropriate land and ethnically re-engineer northern Rakhine State in areas where the Rohingya were a majority (FAO/WFP, 2018). HRC (2019) has also described this as the government's four-pronged strategy of eliminating the Rohingya by clearing, destroying, confiscating and building on land. This can be seen as the historical "eviction from below," through the politicisation of demographic HIs and territorially specific discriminatory policies was considered inadequate for the removal of the Rohingya population by the state. An



“eviction from above” was therefore necessary through the state’s “scorched earth” campaigns and “clearance operations.”

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Significance and Discussion of Causal Mechanism**

The term “migratory” conflict reveals both the emergence of conflict through migratory state-sponsored resettlement schemes and the “migratory” characteristics of the progression of conflict from ethnic riots to pogroms through state involvement. The causal mechanism proposed by Fearon & Laitin (2011) ultimately reveals the revolving door of communal violence. It is necessary to include both state-sponsored population resettlement schemes and more broadly territorially specific discriminatory policies in regard to the emergence of SoS conflict. Despite other significant political, cultural and social long-standing laws against the Rohingya, it was ultimately the 2012 VFV Land Management Act and the “NaTaLa” population resettlement schemes that significantly contributed to the onset of communal violence between Muslims and Buddhists in 2012. Long-standing socioeconomic competition between ethnic groups in the background, amplified by the politicisation of socioeconomic and demographic HIs in the foreground, resulted in the fundamental onset of SoS conflict. This therefore reveals the centrality of socioeconomic background and grievances among an ethnic population in instigating group mobilisation (Cederman et al., 2011).

The SoS conflict framework proposed by Fearon & Laitin (2011) discloses that the causal mechanism is present and that socioeconomic HIs considerably lead to the emergence of SoS conflict. As the state sided with the migrant Rakhine Buddhists, this framework reveals the Rohingya as indeed indigenous and “Sons of the Soil” of northern Rakhine State and subsequently Myanmar, compared to the historical discourse that Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The fundamentals of territorial sovereignty have disallowed the Rohingya any political, economic and cultural rights in the peripheral areas of Myanmar. In the already centralised state of Myanmar, particularly after Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s February 2021 military coup, the prospects of territorial devolution and autonomy for Myanmar’s many peripheral ethnic minorities are bleak. As Min Aung Hlaing made clear in his September 2017 Nay Pyi Taw address, the government is determined to eliminate the

Rohingya not only from northern Rakhine State but from the country as a whole (Green et al., 2018).

## 6.2 Limitations

This paper experienced issues with conceptualising communal violence due to its ever changing and overlapping nature. As Horowitz (2001) notes, pogroms are a subcategory of ethnic riots rather than a complementary species of interethnic violence. Horowitz (2001) does, however, state that his definition does not turn on the outcome of ethnic violence whereas Fearon & Laitin's (2011) conceptualisation of SoS conflict does. Although pogroms were labelled by the indiscriminate and unrestrained retribution from state forces from August 2017 in Myanmar they can be considered originating during the deliberate inaction by the police forces in the ethnic riots of October 2012. Additionally, there are significant pitfalls with the grievance-approach as there are little measurable indicators of this concept. The skewed demographic classification of the in-migration of migrants is additionally difficult to assess in regards to the emergence of SoS conflict.

## 6.3 Policy Implications and Academic Recommendations

It is therefore necessary to conceptualise and classify the incidents of the progression of communal violence to reveal the warning signs of the onset of genocidal intent by the state, particularly when the police are ineffective. As ethnic riots are a revelation of ethnic group relations and have the potential to pivot into other forms of deadly ethnic conflict, a decisive response from the state during the onset of ethnic riots is necessary. This is, however, difficult when the state and its agencies are heavily implicated by nationalist motives. The role of the politicisation of demographic and socioeconomic HIs is further an inference of indirect repression which can culminate in direct repression against an ethnic group at a later stage. Further research can reveal the influence of foreign investment in the politicisation of socioeconomic HIs and the subsequent onset of SoS conflict.

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## Appendix A

### Map of Rakhine State, Myanmar (MIMU, 2017)



Northern Rakhine State of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships are predominantly inhabited by the Muslim Rohingya, whereas the rest of Rakhine State including the capital, Sittwe, is predominantly inhabited by the Rakhine Buddhists (Thawngmung, 2016).