Contradictions of Recognition: The Arakan Army, Rohingya Exclusion, and the Crisis of Federal Democracy in Myanmar

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Abstract

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar and the political crisis after 2021 have caused many discussions regarding ethnic identity, self-determination, and inclusive democracy. With regard to this issue, this paper discusses the incongruities between the political strategy of the Arakan Army and the simultaneous struggle for the self-governance of the Rakhine people and the disqualification of the Rohingya people in terms of their legitimacy and political representation. The paper argues that the strategy of the Arakan Army of "choosing the right" people explains the process of exclusion of the Rohingya people. Additionally, the article describes the inclusive approaches of the National Unity Government in terms of the participation of representatives of the Rohingya people in term of having them included in the decision-making process. The methodology used for the research is qualitative and is characterized by critical analysis of literature published in peer-reviewed journals, official documents created by international organizations protecting human rights, and trustworthy media sources. The research findings prove that the selective recognition of ethnic groups by the AA and the obliteration of the Rohingya identity leads to mistrust and barriers to the process of reconciliation and establishment of a truly inclusive federal democracy. They also show that merely providing political inclusion does not help solve the issues of structural exclusion and historical injustice that the Rohingya are facing. The conclusion of the article states that to achieve peace and make federal democracy in Myanmar viable, it is necessary to recognize, protect the rights, and ensure equal political participation of all the ethnic groups, particularly the Rohingya.

Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya, Statelessness, Ethnic Cleansing, International Humanitarian Law, Peacebuilding, Arakan Army, NUG, political exclusion, civil wars, inclusive governance.

1. Introduction

The political history of Myanmar has been marked by long-standing civil wars, military control, and unresolved issues regarding citizenship, ethnic identity, and political belonging. Since the country gained independence from Britain in the year 1948, successive governments have failed to provide an inclusive political framework for the country's multi-ethnic communities. Instead of building an inclusive nation, decades of military governments entrenched discrimination, unequal citizenship, and exclusion from politics, and contributed to ongoing civil wars (South & Lall, 2024). The military coup that took place in February 2021 has aggravated the situation by dismantling democratic institutions and leading to a strong opposition from the National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defence Forces (PDFs), and a number of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) that stand for a federal democracy based on self-determination and equality.

What is noteworthy among these groups mentioned is the fact that the Arakan Army (AA) has emerged as a strong group that uses methods associated with ethnic armed movements in Myanmar. The AA has emerged as a dominating organization that has established the United League of Arakan (ULA). The AA has also developed similar state-like administrative structures, you see, a lot of administrative control over the territory of the Rakhine State. Thus, while it refers to itself as a revolutionary organization advocating for justice and autonomy for the Arakanese population, at the same time, it is criticized for not recognizing the identity of the Rohingya people, the latter being kept out of significant political life (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Fortify Rights, 2025). This makes one think if ethnic nationalist endeavors are compatible with the principles of inclusion and democracy?

The Rohingya are still among the most persecuted ethnic groups in the world and are denied political participation. Despite the fact that they have lived in Arakan for centuries, so to speak, the ethnic group is deprived of citizenship, freedom of movements, and power. Despite international research revealing extensive details of the inhumane deeds inflicted by the Myanmar military upon the Rohingya people, comparatively sparse attention has been directed towards research on how recent ethnic militant groups, in particular, the Arakan Army, engage in exclusionary politics while simultaneously demanding recognition and equality. Likewise, although the National Unity Government has adopted a more tolerant rhetoric, not much has been done to examine the degree of representation of Rohingya groups in the broader anti-junta movement.

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In this light, the paper argues that such selective recognition of ethnic identities of Arakan Army entirely contradicts the ideas of equality, citizenship, and political inclusion that are embedded in true federal democracy. Political recognition cannot be made contingent and given selectively to particular ethnic communities while systematically denying it to others. Absent effective participation of the Rohingya as equal actors in the political process, the promotion of democracies in Myanmar will produce new types of political exclusion.

The following research questions are examined in this article:

1. How does the AA use strategies of recognition and denial regarding the Rohingya's inclusion in their agenda?
2. To what extent do the AA's exclusionary practices and rhetoric hinder the development of inclusive federalism in Myanmar?
3. How successful is the National Unity Government in ensuring the meaningful political participation of the Rohingya throughout the democratization process?
4. What political and institutional reforms, if any, does Myanmar need to institutionalize an inclusive federal system?

By focusing on the ethnic aspect of politics, the study advances the academic discourse regarding the political transformation of Myanmar. By examining the internal contradictions of the ethnic revolutionary movements, the author avoids concentrating on military oppression. The article makes a clear link between selective inclusion and the erosion of democratic legitimacy and peacebuilding.

This article investigates the double strategy of recognition and denial of AA by relating it within the broader challenges of establishing federal democracy in Myanmar. The study explores how ethnic nationalism undermines equitable and inclusive governance by critically analyzing structural inclusions, rhetorical strategies, and selective pragmatism of AA and spring revolution for federal democracy. The analysis further situates these findings within the moral, national and political dimensions of federalism, arguing that recognition of marginalized groups is both a political necessity and a moral imperative for sustainable peace and democracy in Myanmar (Rawls, 1999; Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2015).

2. Research Methodology

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The present research uses qualitative policy and discourse analysis in order to investigate how the political discourse, governance practices and recognition claims concerning the Arakan Army affect the Rohingya people in Myanmar's federal democratic system. Instead of collecting primary data, the study relies on interpretative research based on systematic analysis of secondary sources in order to evaluate contrasting narratives, institutional practices and human rights issues.

The analysis relies on Recognition Theory (Honneth, 1996; Taylor, 1994) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995). While Recognition Theory serves as a theoretical background for studying the way political processes create concepts of inclusion, exclusion, and identity, CDA is used as a tool for analysing the language and rhetoric used by the Arakan Army and other actors. In particular, the research focuses on official statements, policy papers, and public discourse to show how notions of federal democracy, citizenship, self-determination and minority rights are interpreted, and how these interpretations affect the situation of the Rohingya people.

The research is based solely on secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, academic material, reports by organizations and agencies devoted to human rights, policy papers, and identified reliable media outlets. The selection of sources was based on three criteria: (1) institutional or scholarly credibility; (2) direct relevance to the politics and the human rights situation of the country under investigation; Myanmar, and especially Rakhine State; (3) not redundant information, especially with regard to events taking place after the military coup in 2021. In order to make facts and conclusions more dependable and show them from different positions, the author used triangulation methods by using different sources, namely reports from the UN, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, Fortify Rights, and peer-reviewed literature making use of the idea of triangulation.

The insight of the author stems from personal experience as a researcher from the Rohingya community and reveals contextual knowledge needed for thorough analysis. Reflections on the issue are based on relevant and multiple independent sources in order to minimize subjective bias. Using an ethnic-

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political framework combined with policy analysis, the study assesses the interrelations of recognition, exclusion, federal democracy, and minority rights in Myanmar. Since the research utilizes only publicly available secondary literature, the approval of any ethics committee is unnecessary.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Complex Landscape of Myanmar's Conflicts

The country Myanmar (Burma) is a nation deeply fragmented along ethnic, religious, and political lines. The country has faced continuous civil wars involving almost every major ethnic group, from the Kachin in the north to the Karen and Mon in the south since independence in 1948 (Callahan, 2003). These conflicts are rooted due to the decades of political exclusion, systemic discrimination, persecution and military dominance what we can describe as the "authoritarian and discriminatory regime." The Burman-majority central state historically pursued policies of burmanization while ideologically and intentionally marginalizing ethnic minorities economically, politically, socially and culturally (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2024). Among the marginalized ethnic minorities, the most persecuted and discriminated community around the world is the Rohingya and even denied their indigenous status, citizenship and labelled them "illegal immigrants" or "Bengali."

To have the belongings, equal rights, citizenship and political representation, the armed ethnic organizations were established. The ethnic groups such the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), and the Shan State Army (SSA) mobilized to resist what they perceived as systematic oppression by the central military government. Unlike the KNU, which has shown greater willingness to include non-Karen populations in its governance structures. Many of these organizations operate within ethnic nationalist systems, emphasizing the primacy of their own ethnic group's identity over inclusive governance while their stated goal is self-determination and federal democracy (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The 2021 military coup completely reshaped the conflict and political landscape of Myanmar. Due to the violent suppression of dictator military

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government against civilian protests catalyzed the formation of People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and that encouraged cooperation between ethnic armed organizations. However, this alignment against the military is strategic rather than ideological; long-standing mistrust persists among ethnic groups that often lead into violent clashes (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

However, Rakhine State illustrates these complexities starkly different. Rohingya and Rakhine inhabited in Arakan for centuries side by side and Arakan is the homeland of both communities. The state has experienced waves of communal violence, military genocidal campaigns, and mass displacement. The persecution and genocide of Rohingya have been excused as a security issue by both military and local Rakhine political actors in front of the international community just to whitewash crimes and atrocities they committed (Gravers, 2007). The military and Rakhine political actors who often exclude them from political, social and economic processes. Meanwhile, the Arakan Army (AA) claims to represent all Arakanese people but selectively includes certain groups based on strategic considerations and largely excluding and denying existence of Rohingya. This nationalist and Rakhine ideological behavior is creating extra tension and mistrust between both communities (Naing, 2025).

In this context, the historical legacies of colonial rule also contribute to current conflicts and division. The British colonialism is one of the factors in this conflicts. British administrative policies favored certain groups over others, creating artificial divisions and introducing legal frameworks that continue to define citizenship and land ownership. This colonial inheritance with combination of decades of military authoritarianism has made the conflicts of Myanmar not only political but deeply structural and persistent inequalities and historical injustices against some ethnic minorities, specially the Rohingya (IDEA, 2024).

The consequences of this fractured landscape are profound. The systematic and intentional violence cycles, political instability, economic underdevelopment, and discriminatory laws have undermined efforts at national reconciliation and future federal democracy. Interethnic distrust, disagreement and hate remain very high, and the Rohingya; despite being

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indigenous to northern Rakhine; remain one of the most marginalized populations. Due to the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda on social media against Rohingya by Rakhine people and its media is making worst the situation and undermining the peace building effort. This fragmented landscape provides the context within which the AA emerged. Understanding this complex background is essential for analyzing how armed group AA plays political game in front of the world and turned their system same as the military regime in the ground against the Rohingya.

3.2. The Formation of Arakan Army and Its Atrocities Against the Rohingya

The Arakan Army (AA) was established in 2009 as a Rakhine ethnic armed organization in Rakhine State under the leadership of Major General Twan Mrat Naing. They formed it a primary goal to respond to historical marginalization, political exclusion, and violent suppression of the Rakhine Buddhist population by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). The stated objective of AA is to secure greater autonomy for the Arakan people and advocating for a confederate system that they term the "Way of Rakhita," which emphasizes a confederate system emphasizing Rakhine self-rule, dignity, and cultural preservation (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The AA has positioned itself as both a military and political actor from its inception. Militarily, it has engaged in guerrilla operations, ambushes, and targeted attacks against Tatmadaw positions in northern and central Rakhine State and it has completely controlled 14 townships of Arakan out of 17 as of now 2025. It has sought to obtain legitimacy by forming the United League of Arakan (ULA) as an administrative and political body that structures governance in areas under AA influence. The ULA oversees departments for public security, law enforcement, and civil affairs, which includes limited inclusion of non-Rakhine populations (Smith, 2023).

The ideology of AA increasingly reveals exclusive ethnic nationalism despite its broad claims of representing all Arakanese. According to the public statements, media communications, interviews and operational strategies, the AA emphasize the Rakhine identity while systematically marginalizing the

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second largest Rohingya majority and minority groups of Arakan. Scholars and observers note that this selective approach mirrors broader trends in Myanmar, where ethnic armed organizations often articulate principles of self-determination, however, they favor their own community while excluding others (South & Lall, 2024).

The emergence of the Arakan Army (AA) is closely tied to the decline of central military power of Myanmar and the political developments following 2015 and that encouraged increased ethnic mobilization across the country. By 2020, the AA had transformed into one of Myanmar's most organized and structured ethnic armed groups which exercising control over significant areas in northern Rakhine State. Through its administrative systems, the AA established mechanisms for taxation, dispute resolution, and local governance and functioning as a parallel state authority (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Although the ULA/ AA claims to be an Arakan People's revolutionary government representing the Arakan people and includes some Rohingya in its Department of Law Enforcement and Public Security (DLEP), it does not recognize the Rohingya as an indigenous people of Arakan. AA leader Twan Mrat Naing is aware that the Myanmar military has used some Rohingya personnel as human shields in the frontline of the war between AA and military, yet he refers to the Rohingya as “terrorist Bengali Muslims” and “Islamic extremists.” These labels encourage AA and non-Rohingya to fuel hostility against the Rohingya. There are also Rakhine individuals who collaborate with the military. Meanwhile, other Rakhine political actors, such as Dr. Aye Maung’s Arakan Front Party and the Rakhine Nationalities Party, registered to participate in the December general election, and the Arakan Liberation Party signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). There are also Rakhine people who are serving under junta administration. However, Twan Mrat Naing does not label them as Buddhist extremists or terrorists. He consistently uses extremist terms, calling them a terrorist Bengali group and Islamic extremists when it comes to the Rohingya context. Such rhetoric undermines trust, peacebuilding efforts and future federal democracy. After the 2021 the coup, he negotiated with the military regime to terminate the AA from the list of terrorist organizations and it demonstrates

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a selective approach in labeling groups while continuing to marginalize the Rohingya. However, the same flexibility is not afforded to the Rohingya people who continue to face exclusion and hostility. The Rohingya are consistently denied acknowledgment as indigenous citizens and participants in the political process despite their centuries-long historical presence in Rakhine State (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

International observers have noted this duality as a central tension within the political project of AA. Analysts suggest that the AA illustrates a broader pattern among Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, which often resist central domination while simultaneously reproducing internal hierarchies and exclusionary norms. The evolution of AA demonstrates that insurgent movements can achieve significant political and territorial control while still perpetuating social discrimination, a reality that complicates the pursuit of a genuinely inclusive federal democracy (South & Lall, 2024).

Furthermore, the engagement of AA with political processes and negotiations with the military and other ethnic armed organizations, demonstrates its sophisticated approach to power consolidation. After the 2021 coup, on 11th March Twan Mrat Naing successfully negotiated the removal of the AA from the military's list of terrorist organizations and that development highlights the pragmatic flexibility of AA. However, these negotiations did not extend to advocating for the rights or recognition of the Rohingya, reinforcing a pattern of recognition based on convenience rather than principle (Al Jazeera ,2021).

An investigative report was released by Fortify Rights (2025) reveals a brutal and systematic campaign of violence carried out by the Arakan Army (AA) against Rohingya civilians in Rakhine State of Myanmar. The report documents 47 verified incidents of AA abuse between January-October 2025 and is grounded with testimonies from survivors and eyewitnesses and documented horrifying structure of abductions, torture, killings, and beheading by AA in AA-controlled areas. Rohingya civilians mostly young men were unlawfully detained in prisons and military compounds without any crime. They were beaten with bamboo sticks, tortured with wires, and often executed under fabricated accusations of supporting Rohingya armed groups.

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Some victims were found decapitated and mutilated and their bodies dumped in forests and ponds as warnings to others. These acts are not isolated incidents but it is a deliberate, systematic campaign of terror and ethnic persecution.

The crimes that AA committed are considered as war crimes and crimes against humanity under international humanitarian law, including Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Still, even with piles of evidence from witnesses, photos, and verified videos, the AA denies accountability. They call the reports "fabricated" and "politically motivated." Honestly, this denial sounds all too familiar with the old tactics of the Myanmar military and revealing a dangerous cycle of violence and dehumanization targeting the Rohingya without paying any cost.

What this report makes clear is that the AA cannot claim legitimacy as a Arakan people's revolutionary government while committing atrocities against an already persecuted and marginalized community. Myanmar military, Arakan Army and all actors responsible for war crimes must be held accountable. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has both the jurisdiction and moral responsibility to investigate these violations and ensure that those responsible are prosecuted in accordance with law. Justice for the Rohingya cannot remain selective and it must be universal with truth, accountability, and the principles of human dignity (Fortify Rights, 2025). Former Malaysian Member of Parliament and human rights advocate Charles Santiago opening criticized the ongoing mistreatment of the Rohingya and he stated that "Rohingya can't be treated as adopted children and terrorized every time you want to create a problem. That really has to stop." His statement expresses the international frustration with Myanmar's and regional actors' continued marginalization of the Rohingya population.

Fortify Rights (2025) report exposed grave abuses committed by the Arakan Army (AA) against ethnic minorities in Rakhine State such as Rohingya, Hindu, Chakma, and others. The report documented that the AA systematically subjected civilians to forced labor, arbitrary detention, torture, and forced recruitment under threats of violence and death. Survivors

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recounted being forced at gunpoint to porter ammunition, dig trenches, and build military fortifications for months without payment and rest, which is in direct violation of international humanitarian law. The AA imposed punitive fines, restricted movement, and detained those who resisted forced labor, many Rohingya detainees enduring torture and degrading treatment according to the report. Fortify Rights noted that such practices not only contravene the Geneva Conventions and the Forced Labour Convention but may also constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The AA's ongoing exploitation of vulnerable minorities, particularly the Rohingya, exposes a deep moral and political contradiction within its nationalist agenda despite its earlier rhetoric of liberation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Reinterpretation as 'the interpretation'

4.1.1. Symbolic Inclusion and Structural Exclusion of the Rohingya within the ULA/AA Administration

The Arakan Army (AA) and its political wing the United League of Arakan (ULA) formed administrative structures that provide limited inclusion for minority populations, including the Rohingya in lower position. For example, the Department of Law Enforcement and Public Security (DLEP) has incorporated a small number of Rohingya personnel into administrative and security roles. This inclusion might appear progressive and signaling a willingness to recognize the existence of Rohingya and participate in governance at first glance. However, a deep analytical examination reveals that such inclusion is highly selective and instrumental and strategic political calculation rather than genuine commitment to equality and recognition of the Rohingya's status as an indigenous people of Rakhine State (Smith, 2023). Reports from the ground indicate that some Rohingya were forcibly conscripted against their will rather than through voluntary participation. This coerced inclusion serves broader political objectives of AA to present an image of moderation and pluralism to international community particularly those concerned with governance, human rights, and federal reform in Myanmar to gain legitimacy. For instance, in Maungdaw Township, AA forces reportedly conscripted 50+ Rohingya men in July 2024 for frontline duties. The AA is playing political to gains legitimacy without fundamentally

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reforming the entrenched structures of exclusion by selectively showcasing a degree of minority representation.

The approach of AA to include Rohingya to administrative positions is symbolic that do not confer substantial authority or decision-making power and in reality, it is a political trick to show up international community. By allowing minimal participation while simultaneously denying recognition of the Rohingya's ethnic and historical identity, the AA maintains its Rakhine-centered nationalist narrative and preserves its political supremacy over northern Rakhine.

Language plays a critical role in the selective inclusion of AA. Their official communications and statements deliberately avoid the term "Rohingya," and instead called as "Muslims in Arakan." This linguistic choice has significant implications. Muslim is not an ethnic identity of a community and it religious identity. It erases the historical and ethnic identity of the Rohingya and labeling them as outsiders rather than indigenous citizens of State. Scholars argue that such terminological choices are a deliberate form of identity politics, serving to delegitimize claims to land, rights, and political representation (International Crisis Group, 2024). The distinction between forced inclusion in administrative roles and no recognition as an indigenous ethnic group points out the dual strategies of the AA for political utility while maintaining structural exclusion.

Rohingya inclusion in governance and security structures has been minimal historically. Under the British colonial administration, Rohingya communities had limited autonomy, but post-independence Myanmar policies systematically excluded them from political processes. Despite the AA positioning itself as a defender of Arakanese autonomy and it is following the same exclusive structure of military government. The lack of genuine authority and representation of Rohingya in every decision-making reflects continuity with broader patterns of marginalization (Smith, 2023; South & Lall, 2024).

There has consequences for community trust and interethnic relations with Rakhine centric anti-Rohingya ideological behavior. Rohingya individuals

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within AA structures often face complex positionality and they are used as labours and slaves, politically and structurally marginalizing and persecuting. This situation is creating tensions both within their own communities and with the Rakhine population. Inclusion without actual recognition and protection does not alleviate insecurity and long-term political violence instead, it can exacerbate vulnerabilities by positioning Rohingya as intermediaries in structures that ultimately perpetuate exclusion and violence against their communities (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Another strategic policy of AA in forcibly conscripting Rohingya is to create division within the Rohingya community and make them fight each other by sending the conscripted Rohingya in the frontline of the battle against the Rohingya armed groups.

The exploitation-oriented inclusion and structural exclusion of Rohingya within the ULA/AA so-called administration highlights broader challenges for federal democracy in Myanmar. True federal democratic system requires not only decentralization of power but also equitable inclusion of historically marginalized groups in governance, security, decision making and policy-making process. Without such inclusion, federal structures risk perpetuating existing hierarchies under new administrative frameworks and repeated cycles of exclusion and marginalization (IDEA, 2024). The discriminatory and Rakhine nationalist anti-Rohingya police of AA is undermining the trust and creating additional tension central to ongoing struggle for self-determination and federal democracy in Myanmar.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in Arakan depends on justice, equality, and mutual recognition among all communities. There will be no durable and permanent solution without recognizing the Rohingya as an integral and indigenous component of Myanmar, Arakan State and Rohingya must have self-determination and equal rights. Without equal status and shared participation in governance and every sector, peace will remain fragile and incomplete. The path forward lies in the pursuit of coexistence, dignity, and collective harmony between the Rakhine, Rohingya and other minorities.

4.1.2. The Language of Denial, Hostility, and Conditional Recognition

To shape the political realities, social hierarchies, and interfaith relations, language functions as a powerful factor. The Arakan Army (AA) and its

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leadership, particularly Twan Mrat Naing, utilize language strategically to delineate inclusion and exclusion in the context of Myanmar. A consistently employs rhetoric that denies the Rohingya, their historical, ethnic, and political legitimacy while it portrays itself as a defender of Rakhine rights. The labeling of Rohingya as "terrorist Bengali Muslims" or "Islamic extremists" exemplifies this practice, transforming identity into a mechanism for marginalization and promoting societal hostility (Human Rights Watch, 2023; South & Lall, 2024).

The use of such pejorative terminology is strategically employed across Myanmar's political and military institutions. The Arakan Army's narrative of otherization positions the Rohingya as antagonists to the Arakanese governing body by framing the Rohingya as outsiders and security threats (Smith, 2023). This linguistic strategy serves multiple functions. First of all, it delegitimizes Rohingya claims to full citizenship (indigenous), land, and political participation. Second, it consolidates internal support among Rakhine Buddhists by appealing to fears of cultural and demographic displacement. Third, it indirectly aligns with the long-standing propaganda framework of Myanmar military regime which portrays the Rohingya as a destabilizing force (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The impact of such rhetoric extends beyond political will. The language a main tool that shapes public perception, social interactions, and intercommunal trust. The repeated hate speech against the Rohingya with terrorism or Islamic extremism exacerbates existing prejudices, legitimizes discrimination, and creates an environment conducive to violence (Amnesty International, 2023). According to the scholars, verbal labeling in conflict situation often precedes structural and physical violence and create a system what sociologists term a "continuum of exclusion" (Staub, 2013). This continuum of exclusion is evident in Myanmar as the Rohingya have experienced decades of systematic marginalization, exclusion and extremist rhetoric functions to normalize their exclusion from civic, political, and economic spheres.

Through official documentation, social media, and public communications the rhetoric of denial is also reinforced. The AA and affiliated groups

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systematically avoid acknowledging Rohingya historical presence in northern Rakhine in their statements (International Crisis Group, 2024). This linguistic exclusion and hate dissemination functions as a form of violence that Bourdieu (1991) describes as the imposition of a dominant narrative that marginalizes and devalues a specific group. The AA effectively enforces a hierarchy of belonging within Rakhine State by controlling the narrative around Rohingya identity. The consequences of such discourse are beyond hate speech dissemination and incite physical violence. Communities internalize these labels, which influence everyday interactions, access to resources, movement and local governance. Due to the AA rhetoric influence, the Rohingya people inside Arakan encounter discrimination, surveillance, and social ostracization not only from state actors but also from local non-Rohingya populations. This creates a cycle where language legitimizes exclusion, and exclusion reinforces the power of language to marginalize (Amnesty International, 2023).

As global community pays attention in Myanmar for its ethnic conflicts and civil war, the discourse of AA complicates humanitarian efforts and peacebuilding initiatives. International actors seeking to mediate conflict and make an attempt to deliver humanitarian aid encounter the challenge of addressing communities labeled as threats by local power holders. The language of Arakan Army denial and hate is a deliberate and powerful tool that definitely shapes perceptions and sustains systemic marginalization of the Rohingya. The AA demonstrates how discourse can function as a mechanism of political control and social division by labeling the Rohingya as outsiders or extremists while selectively recognizing other ethnic groups. Comprehending the language usage impact in conflict context is critical for addressing the structural inequalities that undermine prospects for federal democracy and interethnic peaceful coexistence in Myanmar.

In political theory, recognition is regarded not only to acknowledgment of existence but to validation of rights, identity, and political representation (Taylor, 1994). The Arakan Army (AA) demonstrates a form of recognition that is transactional and instrumental by selectively recognize to certain groups when it serves strategic interests, while systematically denying recognition to the Rohingya. This phenomenon can be termed “recognition

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through convenience or conditional recognition," which reveals the pragmatic approach of AA to power and highlights the tension between political expediency and ethical responsibility in conflict settings (South & Lall, 2024). In March 2019, the ULA/AA issued an official statement in 2019 that publicly addressed the Rohingya as "Rohingya (Muslim) ethnic group" and recognized them as long-standing inhabitants who had lived side by side with the Rakhine people since ancestral times. The letter urged Rohingya communities to support the revolutionary movement of AA including through financial contributions and described the revolution as a struggle for the liberation of all ethnic groups within Rakhine State. This acknowledgment was one of the rare instances in which the AA publicly used the term Rohingya ethnic group instead of the state-enforced term Bengali. Since 2024, when AA became powerful militarily and strong politically, they started calling Rohingya as "illegal Bengali and Islamic extremist."

Recognition through convenience reflects a tension between moral legitimacy and strategic pragmatism from a theoretical standpoint. Philosopher Axel Honneth (1996) argues that genuine recognition entails the affirmation of individual and collective rights within social and political structures. Recognition fails to meet ethical standards and reproduce structural injustice when it is selective and conditional. The selective acknowledgment of AA to certain groups while excluding the Rohingya exemplifies this failure and reveals how pragmatic politics can perpetuate historical marginalization in the case of Myanmar.

Furthermore, recognition through convenience reinforces social hierarchies by codifying a narrative of who belongs and who does not. The Rohingya's exclusion is legitimized not only through rhetoric but through systematic denial of political participation, legal status, and societal inclusion. This establishes a foundation where denial justifies exclusion, and exclusion legalize the strategic rationale for selective recognition (Staub, 2013; South & Lall, 2024).

The implications for federal democracy are profound. To establish a true federal democratic system, it requires equal recognition of all ethnic and religious groups, and guarantee political participation, cultural autonomy, and

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protection under the law. The foundational principles of democracy; justice, equality, and inclusion; are undermined when recognition is transactional and contingent on convenience. The struggle of Myanmar for federal democracy, therefore, is not only a battle against military authoritarianism but also a struggle to reform the internal practices of ethnic armed organizations and ensure that recognition is principled rather than instrumental (Smith, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024).

As discussed in 4.1.1, the AA's language functions as a powerful instrument of political domination, social exclusion, and intercommunal division in Rakhine State. The AA legitimizes discrimination and perpetuates historical marginalization through a systematic strategy that labels the Rohingya as “terrorist Bengali Muslims” or “Islamic extremists." This practice of “conditional recognition” exposes the tension between strategic pragmatism and ethical responsibility, and revealing how political expediency usually overrides justice, equality and principles. The consequences of language in this context shape public perception, influence daily interactions, and complicating humanitarian and peace building process. All ethnic communities in Rakhine State must enjoy equal recognition, freedom, self-determination, political participation, and legal protection then genuine federal democracy to take place. To Achieve true federal democracy, it is fundamental to confront the manipulative power of language and dismantle systemic denial, and promoting inclusive narratives that affirm shared humanity and coexistence.

4.1.3. Political Exclusion of the Rohingya under the National Unity Government

The most prolonged political, institutional, humanitarian and forced displacement crisis in the Southeast Asia is the Rohingya crisis. The Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority in Rakhine State of Myanmar has faced decades of systematic persecution, institutional discrimination, genocide and violent displacement. The United Nations, United States, International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice declared as acts of genocide, crime against humanity and war crime. The Myanmar’s elected and ousted parliamentarians, activists, ethnic armed organizations and ethnic representatives established the National Unity Government (NUG) following

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the military coup of February 2021.The National Unity Government (NUG) is a federal democratic revolutionary government, and its objective is dismantling the military junta and building a new federal democratic union. The National Unity Government (NUG) issued its "Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State," in June 2021 and this made a significant shift from previous governmental stances of Myanmar. The policy recognizes the Rohingya as a distinct indigenous ethnic group with inherent rights and equal citizenship. It shows commitment to amending discriminatory laws including the 1982 Citizenship Law. The policy outlines intentions to provide reparations for victims and to ensure the full enjoyment of citizens' rights for those who swear allegiance to the Union (National Unity Government of Myanmar, 2021). The implementation of the policy has faced significant obstacles. As the territorial control of NUG is limited and they have very limited ability to enact and enforce policies effectively. Another factor is the reliance of NUG on ethnic armed organizations and some of those have historically been aligned with the Rakhine Buddhist centric anti-Rohingya mindset which complicates efforts to address the Rohingya issue comprehensively. The interests of these organizations may not always align with the stated commitments of NUG to the Rohingya which is leading to inconsistencies in policy application and enforcement.

The diplomatic efforts of NUG to garner international support for its stance on the Rohingya have yielded mixed results. Concrete support for implementation of NUG's policy position remains limited while some international actors have acknowledged it. The geopolitical dynamics and the interests of neighboring countries like China, India and global powers are further complicating the efforts of NUG to advocate effectively for the Rohingya. Critics and Rohingya community argue that the NUG's policy on the Rohingya lacks substantive actions to address the immediate needs of the community. The lack of a solid and actionable roadmap for the restoration of indigenous status, citizenship, equitable participation in government breaks the trust of Rohingya. Furthermore, lack of humanitarian aid delivery and protection against ongoing persecution in Arakan State raises questions about the commitment of NUG to its stated objectives.

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The NUG publicly proclaims its commitment and principles to human rights, equality, and minority inclusion while it is handling the Rohingya issue proves silence, delay, and selective reform. The lack of addressing the structural exclusion and political marginalization against Rohingya remain continue despite NUG's policy statements. The NUG operates in exile with limited territorial control and relies on EAOs for implementation. General Ne Win's military regime enacted Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law that institutionalized ethnic hierarchy by recognizing 135 "national races" and excluding the Rohingya from citizenship. The 1982 citizenship law is the most discriminatory, controversial and genocide law in the modern world history. Due to this legal framework, Myanmar can forcibly call Rohingya "illegal immigrants "and deprived their fundamental rights such as education, property ownership, and freedom of movement (Win, 2023). The military drafted the 2008 Constitution and concentrated power in the Tatmadaw (military) and maintaining rigid criteria for citizenship and political participation (Harvard Law Clinic, 2021).

The record of NUG demonstrates a continuation of selective engagement rather than transformative reform based on democratic principles despite its rhetorical promises of Rohingya inclusion. One of the most pressing concerns is its silence regarding atrocities committed by the Arakan Army in 2024 and 2025 in Maungdaw and Buthidaung. The AA committed serious human rights and international humanitarian law violations against innocent Rohingya civilians such as arbitrary arrests, forced displacement, forced labor, extortion and targeted killings (Human Rights Watch, 2025). (Al Jazeera, 2024) reports indicate that Arakan Army have restricted freedom of movement, imposed curfews, and barred humanitarian assistance to Rohingya villages. However, although all this open violence, the NUG has remained completely silent on these abuses and avoided issuing formal condemnations and demanding accountability.

This silence is politically calculated and advantageous. The struggle of NUG to consolidate legitimacy and secure alliances with major ethnic armed organizations is their major focus so many of those armed organizations maintain ambivalent or hostile attitudes toward the Rohingya. Therefore, it has led it to prioritize pragmatic unity over moral consistency. The AA's

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growing power as an anti-junta force and its influence in Rakhine State make it a strategic partner for the NUG. Consequently, the leadership of NUG has chosen to avoid confrontation and criticism of the conduct of AA because they fear that it could fracture fragile alliances (Ibrahim, 2025). This is the very tactical and immoral act. The NUG implicitly condones patterns of discrimination that mirror the very exclusionary practices it claims to dismantle by failing to speak out against AA-perpetrated atrocities. Silence in the face of oppression is complicity; it is not neutrality in the face of genocide. Another dimension of selective reform lies in the NUG's constitutional agenda. The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH);the parliamentary body that gave rise to the NUG; formally abolished the 2008 Constitution and adopted the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC) in 2021.This FDC pledges to establish a new federal constitution grounded in equality, human rights, and self-determination (International IDEA, 2022).The NUG reaffirmed its objective to permanently abrogate the 2008 Constitution on and denouncing it as a tool of military dominance (CRPH/NUG Joint Declaration, 2025). Although NUG moved to dismantle the 2008 constitutional order, it has not taken any equivalent step to abolish the 1982 Citizenship Law which is the legal foundation of Rohingya exclusion and indigenous citizenship denial.

Delaying abolishing the 1982 Citizenship Law perpetuates structural statelessness and exclusion. The law classifies citizens into three categories: full, associate, and naturalized. The Rohingya are denied political representation, land ownership and property and access to public services without their indigenous citizenship. Their statelessness has broader implications for Myanmar's democratic transition has broader implications because of Rohingya forced statelessness: any future federal constitution that fails to include the Rohingya as equal citizens will reproduce the same hierarchy that fueled ethnic conflict for decades. Citizenship is not merely a legal status but the foundation of political participation and belonging according to the UNHCR (2024). The reluctance of NUG to address this issue reveals the limitations of its federal vision; one that aspires to inclusivity in theory but preserves exclusion in practice.

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The exclusion of Rohingya extends beyond citizenship to the realm of political participation and representation. Rohingya individuals are virtually absent from NUG's leadership and decision-making bodies although it claims to represent all people of Myanmar. The structures of the NUG and its allied ethnic organizations remain dominated by non-Rohingya actors despite the Federal Democracy Charter promises equal rights to all ethnic groups (Irrawaddy, 2023). The NUG appointed a Rohingya human rights activist and politician namely Aung Kyaw Moe as a Dupty Minister of Human Rights in 2023 and it was a positive development and achievement for the Rohingya. Since his appointment, Aung Kyaw Moe has advocated for abolishing the 1982 Citizenship Law and he is dedicated to restore peace for the Rohingya and all population of Myanmar. However, the effectiveness of this appointment is contingent upon the NUG's willingness to empower such positions with the authority and resources necessary to enact change (Fortify Rights, 2023). Such symbolic gestures may not translate into meaningful improvements for the Rohingya community without genuine political will and structural support and amendment. More Rohingya representative must be included in the NUG's political and leadership architecture with genuine political will and sincerity.

This exclusion has tangible consequences. USIP (2024) found that Rohingya communities perceive NUG outreach as 'performative rather than substantive.' Rohingya communities in both Myanmar and refugee camps in Bangladesh express growing disillusionment with the NUG’s promises as documented by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP, 2024). Most of the Rohingya perceive the outreach of NUG as performative rather than substantive. It focuses on securing international legitimacy and support rather than addressing Rohingya's political necessity. The NUG risks alienating a community whose support could strengthen its democratic credibility by failing to integrate Rohingya perspectives into policy formulation and development. Exclusion undermines the own federal project of NUG that try to reconcile fragmented ethnic landscape of Myanmar through shared governance and equality more broadly. A federal union that excludes the Rohingya contradicts its founding principle and vision.

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The NUG's treatment of the Rohingya exposes a paradox at the heart of democratization process of Myanmar at the normative level: that is the pursuit of freedom without equality. Yet the silence of NUG and inaction on Rohingya rights perpetuate the same ethno nationalist boundaries drawn by previous regimes although it has positioned itself as a champion of democracy in across Myanmar. As the ABA noted (2025), 'democracy without inclusion reproduces authoritarian exclusion under a civilian guise.' The international community must confront this contradiction which recognizes the NUG as a potential alternative to the junta. Supporting a transitional authority that fails to guarantee equality risks legitimizing another exclusionary order.

To achieve transitional justice and accountability, the NUG's selective reform strategy has further implications. It has not yet articulated a clear mechanism for justice for Rohingya victims while it has pledged to hold the military accountable for crimes against humanity. Although the ministry of human rights of NUG has occasionally referenced the Rohingya genocide in public statements, it has not taken any measure yet to support international legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court (Amnesty International, 2025). It seems it prioritizes political expediency and interests over moral accountability and justice.

It is also important to acknowledge the constraints NUG faces by analyzing its performance. The NUG struggles to assert control over Myanmar's fragmented territory amid ongoing conflict under limited resources as they operate in exile. Its ability to legislate or enforce reforms remains symbolic rather than practical. However, even the symbolic acts carry political meaning and build trust. The NUG could issue clear condemnations of atrocities, adopt a binding resolution to abolish the 1982 Citizenship Law, and establish consultative mechanisms for Rohingya representation even within constraints. The lack of these actions' implementation proves that it is not only incapability but also a politically advantageous choice. The silence and politically benefited reform showcase structural biases embedded in political culture of Myanmar. Burmanization and Buddhist dominance continues to shape the discourse of nationhood even among pro-democracy actors that long normalized under the authoritarian military regime. Myanmar's transition will remain partial as long as the NUG's vision of federal

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democracy does not include Rohingya by the following the principles of both equality and equity. True democracy cannot coexist with selective inclusion and selective inclusion is against the fundamental principle of democracy. A genuine transformation requires confronting uncomfortable truths about race, religion, and belonging in political imagination of Myanmar.

The process of handling the Rohingya issue by the National Unity Government question reveals a dissonance between ideals and implementation. Its silence on Arakan Army atrocities, failure to abolish the 1982 Citizenship Law, and exclusion of Rohingya from political representation illustrate a continuity of marginalization under a different banner. The NUG's legitimacy as a democratic alternative depends not only on its opposition to the junta but also on its commitment to universal equality. The future of Myanmar's democracy will be measured by how it treats its most persecuted minority. Until the Rohingya are recognized as full citizens, with equal rights and political agency, the promise of a federal democratic union will remain incomplete; a vision deferred by fear, nationalism, and selective justice.

4.1.4. The Contradictions of Federal Democracy in Myanmar

Federal democracy is founded on the equitable distribution of political power across multiple levels of governance. That means enabling all communities; regardless of ethnicity, religion, or historical marginalization to participate meaningfully in political design and social life (Stepan, 1999; Horowitz, 2000). However, the vision of federal democracy remains deeply contested in Myanmar. Many ethnic armed organizations and pro-democracy movements aspire to a shared federal system whereas certain actors and most notably the Arakan Army (AA) pursue fundamentally different political objectives that challenge the very premise of federal democracy. Stepan (1999) argues that federal democracy requires 'demos-enabling' rather than 'demos-constraining' institutions.

Unlike other ethnic groups calling for a federal democratic union, the AA has never truly endorsed federalism or democratic governance. The leadership of AA has consistently articulated an ambition for a confederate or quasi-independent Arakan State where political and military authority is

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concentrated under its own control, separate from both the central government and other ethnic forces. This ideological stance situates the AA outside the broader pro-democracy movement and underscores its rejection of federal-democratic aspirations of Myanmar people. Following the 2021 military coup, this divergence was starkly visible during the nationwide turmoil. The Rakhine State remained notably calm and stable while most of the country was engulfed in resistance; through protests, strikes, and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). By then the AA became the dominant power in Rakhine and actively forbade public participation in anti-junta movements. It reportedly threatened those who protested, suppressing any signs of resistance (The Irrawaddy, 2021). In 2021, AA negotiated removal from the military's terrorist list. Instead of joining the democratic uprising, the AA engaged in negotiations and transactional coordination with the junta to secure its administrative autonomy and preserve its military leverage.

The group reportedly targeted pro-democracy activists and members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in southern Rakhine. The AA forced CDM participants to abandon the movement and resume work as Non-CDM staff. Those who refused were detained and handed over to the police for imprisonment. These actions revealed the pragmatic and opportunistic strategy of AA that helped them to maintain neutrality with the junta to consolidate local power even at the expense of nationwide democratic solidarity. The conduct of AA points out that it cannot be regarded as a reliable democratic actor. Although militarily strong and politically organized, its long-term goal diverges sharply from that of ethnic resistance groups fighting for a federal democratic future. This difference in destination ensures that any temporary cooperation with pro-democracy movements is tactical but not principled.

The exclusionary and discriminatory politics of AA toward the Rohingya community further expose its incompatibility with democratic values. The group systematically denies that same right to Rohingya residents by portraying them as “Bengali Muslims” or outsiders while claiming to represent the Arakanese people’s right to self-determination (International Crisis Group, 2024; South & Lall, 2024). This exclusionary rhetoric and practice replicate the very structures of discrimination long perpetuated by the

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Myanmar military. Through this lens, the AA's project is not a democratic movement for equality, but an ethno nationalist pursuit of dominance within Rakhine State. The AA's administrative institutions reinforce this hierarchy. Its local governance, judicial, and security systems remain largely inaccessible to Rohingya residents, creating a two-tiered order in which citizenship, security, and rights depend on ethnicity (Smith, 2023).

Such practices undermine the moral legitimacy of any claim to liberation if we view it through ethical lens. The rejection of inclusivity and democratic participation of AA mirrors the authoritarian structures it purports to resist. Authentic democracy requires reciprocal recognition; the acknowledgment of all individuals' inherent dignity and political worth argued by Honneth (1996). It reproduces the injustices it claims to oppose when a movement limits recognition to one ethnicity. This contradiction extends beyond the AA itself. The National Unity Government (NUG) continues to struggle with internal divisions and an inconsistent approach to Rohingya inclusion because of the broader pro-democracy opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Myanmar's federal democracy vision risks becoming an instrument of selective empowerment for dominant groups rather than a framework for equality and justice.

The AA's actions during and after the 2021 coup illuminate a fundamental truth that is federal democracy and confederate ethno nationalism are ideologically incompatible. The AA's political ambitions prioritize sovereignty and power, not shared governance or equality. For the democratic future of Myanmar to be genuine, it must rest on inclusive recognition, mutual trust, and universal rights; principles the approach of AA fundamentally rejects. Federal democracy in Myanmar risks remaining an unfulfilled ideal fractured by competing ethno nationalist agendas and moral incoherence unless the contradictions are addressed properly.

4.1.5. The Rohingya Struggle for Identity and Recognition

The Rohingya is an ethnic Muslim minority in Myanmar and second largest majority in northern Rakhine State who have been facing systematic persecution and marginalization for decades under the Myanmar successive military regime and now facing another possible genocide under the Arakan

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Army. The Rohingya have been consistently denied recognition as indigenous citizens by successive Myanmar military governments despite their historical presence in the Arakan State for centuries. Both Myanmar government and majority of the public illegally designated them as “Bengalis,” or " illegal immigrants" and subjected to policies designed to strip them of citizenship, political representation and basic human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2023; United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2018).

Under the Myanmar Union Citizenship Act of 1948 recognized the Rohingya as belonging to one of the indigenous races. However, after General Ne Win’s military coup in 1962 and overthrew the elected government, the regime began promoting Burman-Buddhist nationalism. By then the government started viewing the Rohingya and other minorities as outsiders particularly those who were Muslim and spoke different languages. This led to replace the 1948 Union Citizenship Act and drafting the 1982 Citizenship Law and redefined citizenship in ways that systematically excluded the Rohingya and some other minorities (Human Rights Watch, 2000; Southwick, 2015; Leider, 2018).The 1982 Citizenship Law replaced the inclusive definition with a more restrictive and discriminatory law by listing only 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and excluding the Rohingya from the category of “taing-yin-tha” (indigenous races) (Amnesty International, 2021). This exclusion and denial stripped the nationality of Rohingya and institutionalized decades of discrimination and persecution.

Rohingya people were systematically excluded from the category of "national races" recognized by the Myanmar under the 1982 Citizenship Law that we can describe as "genocide citizenship law.” The Rohingya have been systematically denied land ownership, education, healthcare, social and public services and political participation with consequences of this genocide law which leave them vulnerable to forced displacement and inhumane violence (International Crisis Group, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). The Rohingya struggle for recognition as an indigenous ethnic group has faced further obstacles within the broader political opposition. While the National Unity Government (NUG) and other ethnic alliances have publicly denounced the military junta and advocated for federal democracy, few have taken explicit and consistent positions on the Rohingya’s citizenship and

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political rights. The Rohingya remain caught between a military regime that seeks their eradication and ethnic armed groups that exclude them from political recognition consequently (South & Lall, 2024; Smith, 2023).

This marginalization has severe human consequences. Rohingya community that has endured forced displacement into refugee camps in Cox's Bazar Bangladesh, Malaysia, India and other countries where they have very limited access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods. They are completely dependent on humanitarian aid. International agencies estimate that more than one million Rohingya live in precarious conditions in Cox's Bazar overcrowded camps where disease, and food insecurity are rampant (UNHCR, 2023). The Rohingya remain politically invisible within Myanmar due to discrimination against Rohingya despite global advocacy. This invisibility makes them feel social, political, institutional and constitutional exclusion and fuels cycles of trauma and intergenerational marginalization (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The Rohingya are struggling for the recognition because of the intersection between identity, nationalism, and political legitimacy. For the groups like the AA and the broader Myanmar state apparatus, the denial of Rohingya recognition serves multiple strategic purposes. Designating the Rohingya as outsiders maintains a cohesive Rakhine nationalist identity to consolidate political loyalty among Rakhine centric nationalist Buddhists while avoiding internal dissent is the purpose of AA. The exclusion of Rohingya strengthen the narrative of national homogeneity and legitimizing military campaigns against the Rohingya minority is the purpose of Myanmar military (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2024).

The Rohingya struggle for identity challenges the moral legitimacy of both the state and non-state actors. The principles of federal democracy guarantees equality, justice, and representation for all ethnic groups but all these principles become empty when entire community is excluded from recognition. Philosophical frameworks of justice emphasize that political structures must safeguard the rights and dignity of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups (Rawls, 1999). Myanmar's ethnic movements reproduce structural injustice and undermine their own democratic credibility by failing

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to include the Rohingya in political processes and federal democratic negotiations.

Both structural and moral transformation are indispensable to address the struggle of Rohingya. Structural measures include restoring their indigenous citizenship, political representation including at executive branch, legislative branch, judicial branch, and access to local governance and security institutions. Moral measures demand the recognition of historical injustices, public acknowledgment of the Rohingya's indigeneity, and efforts to integrate them into national narratives of belonging. Federal democracy in Myanmar risks being an exclusionary project without these fundamental measures, where autonomy for some ethnic groups coexists with continued marginalization for others (Watts, 2008; Honneth, 1996).

The Rohingya struggle for identity and recognition is central to any meaningful vision of federal democracy in Myanmar. Their exclusion underscores the contradictions of ethnic federalism and highlights the ethical imperatives of inclusion, justice, and recognition. Federal democracy will remain incomplete, and Myanmar's path to sustainable peace and social cohesion will remain uncertain until the Rohingya are acknowledged as indigenous ethnic group, restored citizenship, and given equal access to political and security institutions. Recognition is a political and institutional necessity for the Rohingya. It is a moral and humanitarian imperative that tests the credibility of both the state and its opposition movements in their pursuit of justice and equality.

4.1.6. Toward an Inclusive Federal Democracy in Myanmar

The aspiration of Myanmar people for a federal democratic system established on principles of equality, justice, and shared governance among all ethnic communities. Interpreting these ideals into practice and to reach into reality remains very difficult. Most visibly excluding the Rohingya and other marginalized minorities exposes deep moral and political failures in democratic transition of Myanmar (South & Lall, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024). It reproduces the same hierarchies of exclusion under democratic guise when federal democracy is reduced to a mere redistribution of power among dominant ethnic elites. A genuine federal democracy must

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therefore go beyond structural decentralization; it must embody inclusive participation, moral and political recognition, and legal protection for every community (Watts, 2008; Rawls, 1999).

- Through the democratic lens, federal democracy is not only about the distribution of political authority but about ensuring equality and participation into the democratic fabric of governance.

Every ethnic group must have inclusive representation in legislative branch, parliament, judicial branch and equitable access to local decision-making. The government must guarantee legal safeguards for minority rights and it is essential factor for building trust among diverse communities. This means institutionalizing proportional political representation and ensuring that marginalized communities; especially the Rohingya; have equal access to governance, justice, and public administration in Myanmar. Belonging property, Land, citizenship, and identity are both administrative concerns and democratic rights. Systematic disenfranchisement of the Rohingya through land confiscation, denial of citizenship, and exclusion from public life (UNHRC, 2018) reveals how the institutions of Myanmar have intentionally failed to uphold universal rights. Federal democracy will remain hollow and empower dominant groups while denying equality to the most vulnerable unless citizenship, land restitution, and resource access are restored within a democratic framework (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2015).

Federal democracy also requires the democratization of the security and administrative sectors. Ethnic armed organizations such as the Arakan Army (AA) now exert significant control over local governance and security structures. Democracy becomes an instrument of domination rather than equality if these remain monopolized by single ethnic factions. The inclusion of Rohingya representation in local and regional security frameworks is therefore not optional; it is fundamental to the democratic principle of equal protection under the law (International Crisis Group, 2024; Smith, 2023).

Furthermore, federal democracy cannot function without a political culture grounded in mutual recognition and respect. Ethnic armed organizations such as the AA's persistent denial of Rohingya identity exposes the moral misconduct at the heart of Myanmar's political discourse. Dehumanizing rhetoric that designates Rohingya as "Bengali Muslims" or "Islamic

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extremists" undermines the very foundations of democratic coexistence (Human Rights Watch, 2023). A democratic system must confront these prejudices, reconciling ethnic aspirations with civic equality, and recognizing that democracy without inclusion is democracy in name only but not in practice (Honneth, 1996; South & Lall, 2024). Moral recognition also involves acknowledging historical injustices and committing to reparative justice. This means public acknowledgment of atrocities including Rohingya genocide, restoration of citizenship, and the facilitation of safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation for the Rohingya. What ethical democracy demands is that every group regardless of power and population size must have equal moral worth and political voice (Rawls, 1999). Myanmar's democratic project risks institutionalizing inequality under a decentralized framework without implementing the genuine democratic principles.

Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) play a dual role in shaping federal democracy such as they advocate for autonomy and self-determination while often perpetuating selective inclusion. EAOs must adopt inclusive governance practices to contribute meaningfully to democratic transformation by establishing advisory councils with proportional representation, integrating all local communities into decision-making, and promoting community-based reconciliation. This kind of reformation would shift their legitimacy from ethnic nationalism toward civic democracy (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2015).

There are also multifaceted challenges to implement inclusive federal democracy because of the opposition groups of democracy such as the Rakhine leader Dr. Aye Maung. For decades of divisions and hates among communities due to the intentional dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, structural racism, and militarization especially against Rohingya (South & Lall, 2024). Both military authoritarianism and ethnic chauvinism systematically portrayed the Rohingya as outsiders. To eradicate and overcome this sort of divisions and hates among ethnic communities, it is indispensable to conduct civic education, inclusive political dialogue, and media reforms that cultivate empathy and factual understanding across ethnic lines. The democratic transitional landscape of Myanmar complicates this further. The fragmented opposition forces and competing

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power centers in ongoing conflict make democratic inclusion contingent on negotiation rather than shared principles (Smith, 2023). Constitutional and institutional reforms therefore must be reinforced with the establishment of fair legal system, international monitoring mechanism and civil society participation to ensure minority rights are protected and enforced.

At the same, both national and international commitment is required to build an inclusive federal democracy. The National Unity Government (NUG) and allied ethnic organizations must institutionalize inclusive policies that recognize the Rohingya and other marginalized minorities as indigenous citizens and legitimate stakeholders. This entails constitutional guarantees for equality, proportional representation, and strong anti-discrimination laws (Watts, 2008; South & Lall, 2024). International governments and organizations such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and global donors can ensure democratic inclusivity through legal guidance, technical support, and conditional aid linked to human rights protections in accordance with the international law. International engagement must ensure that commitments to inclusion become part of the democratic constitution of Myanmar rather than spoken promises (UNHRC, 2018; Amnesty International, 2023). Community-based organizations, including Rohingya women's groups, have pioneered grassroots reconciliation. The most fundamental factors for democratic healing and restorative justice mechanisms require truth commissions, reparations, and community reconciliation. No federal democracy can sustain legitimacy and collective trust without reckoning with historical wrongs (Honneth, 1996; Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2015).

Inclusive federal democracy is both greatest challenge of Myanmar and its only sustainable path to peace. Mac Ginty (2011) argues that 'hybrid peacebuilding' that includes local actors is essential. It demands democratic institutions that guarantee rights, representation, and security for all citizens; especially those long excluded from the political life of the nation. It is also fundamentally requiring moral courage from political leaders, EAOs, and civil society to confront prejudice and recognize equal worth of every community. If the democratic movement of Myanmar fails to integrate these structural and moral imperatives, decentralization will surely repackage old

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hierarchies. However, Myanmar can build a federal democracy that reflects its true diversity and collective humanity if inclusivity becomes the foundation of its democratic identity. Inclusion is not a peripheral ideal in the end, but it is the measure of whether democracy of Myanmar can ever be genuinely federal, just, and free (Rawls, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The Arakan Army's possible crime against humanity, war crime and violation of international law is systematically documented. The systematic denial of Rohingya identity and spreading hates speech only epitomizes the broader challenge of establishing federal democracy in Myanmar. Moral, ethical, and historical dimensions must also be addressed because structural decentralization alone cannot ensure equality. The decentralization of power risks perpetuating old hierarchies and deepening ethnic tensions without inclusive governance. To establish genuine federal democracy requires principled recognition of all communities without any kind discrimination and particularly those historically marginalized. Those marginalized communities must politically voice and equitable participation in overall administration. The path to democracy in Myanmar is not merely a question of power redistribution but a test of the nation's commitment to justice, equality, and coexistence among its diverse peoples (Rawls, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

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