The dehumanising portrayal of the Rohingya community through ICTs: how it legitimised their persecution in the second decade of the 2000s
The post-truth era through poststructuralist lenses

by Alessandro Castellani

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Alessandro Castellani

Abstract: Rohingya people are a Muslim ethnic group who reside in the coastal state of Rakhine, a western region of Myanmar. The community has been facing systematic oppression by the Myanmar authorities since the 1970s. However, their harassment has dramatically intensified in the last decade. Several interconnected factors contributed to the process of 'othering' through which the existence of this community has been progressively rejected. The debatable descent of this minority, the discriminatory laws and the denial of their right to citizenship are just some of the historical, normative and social elements that constituted a breeding ground for shaping a discriminatory society. In addition, the impact of the Internet's arrival in the country worsened Rohingya's plight and generated a variety of undesirable political consequences. The internet strengthened and multiplied the spill-over of propagandistic narratives, a weapon of un-precedent potential, employed to strike the Rohingya community. The paper adopts the post-structuralism lenses to analyse the post-truth politics of Myanmar society and investigates which factors mostly contributed to the denial of Rohingya citizenship and identity and, as a consequence, to the plausible genocide they suffered.

Rohingya people are a Muslim ethnic group who reside in the coastal state of Rakhine, a western region of Myanmar.[1] In 1982, the Citizenship Law adopted by the government denied them the right of citizenship. Since then, Rohingyas are not present on Myanmar's official list of 135 ethnic groups eligible for full citizenship;[2] as a result they have been defined several times as a state-less community. The origin of this attitude is, probably, the rooted belief among the Buddhist majority that Rohingya seeks to undermine Myanmar's dominant identity.[3] Therefore, the community is frequently depicted as a threat to the security of the State. However, according to the 2014 census, the entire population distribution accounted for 4.3% people of Islamic religion,[4] of which Rohingya are just a component.

Many scholars, especially Siddiquee,[5] affirm that the Rohingya ethnic group has been facing systematic oppression by the state of Myanmar since the 1970s. However, the issue came to the world's attention overwhelmingly after the violent acts of 2012 and, especially, after Rohingya persecution by the Myanmar government in 2017. The 2017 military operations launched against them were publicly criticised both by the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, and by the UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. Respectively, the former defined this campaign as a "potential genocide",[6] while the latter as an example of "ethnic cleansing".[7] The tragedy is far from being archived. In effect, as reported by the

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[1] This paper uses the term Myanmar to refer to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the formerly 'Burma'. In 1988, the military regime changed the name in Myanmar.

[2] Al-Rawi, A, "Twitter Influentials and the Networked Publics' Engagement with the Rohingya Crisis in Arabic and English". In K. Smets, K. Leurs, M. Georgiou, S. Witteborn & R. Gajjala, *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration* (2019), pp.192-204. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526476982, 192.

[3] Fair, C.C., "Rohingya: Victims of a Great Game East". *The Washington Quarterly* 41, (2018): pp. 63-85. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1519356, 63.

[4] The Republic of The Union of Myanmar. (2016). *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census.* The Union Report: Religion. Census Report Volume 2-C. Retrieved from: https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNION_2C_Religion_EN.pdf

[5] Siddiquee, A. Md., "The portrayal of the Rohingya genocide and refugee crisis in the age of post-truth politics". *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 2, (2019): pp.89-103. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119864454, p.89.

[6] OHCHR. (2018 March 12). *Statement by Ms. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar at the 37th session of the Human Rights Council*. Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22806&LangID=E

[7] UN (2017, September 11). *UN human rights chief points to "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" in Myanmar*. Retrieved from: https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar

UNHCR,[8] since 2017 around 745,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh. Furthermore, in early 2020, the International Court of Justice ordered the Myanmar government to preserve evidence of past attacks for further investigation.[9]

This paper aims to provide both an original and a constructive interpretation of the causes that led to Rohingya's tragic persecution, which intensified in the second decade of the 2000s. While the role of representation is often underestimated by researchers, the dehumanising portrayal of a specific State/Community/Person, in a digital and interconnected world, can be employed as a dangerous weapon to strike a minority. This is particularly relevant in a society such as Myanmar, where the first media landscape freedoms were granted in 2011, in a context of high media illiteracy levels among the population. Given these premises and the relevance of the topic described, the paper tries to answer the research question *"How does the representation of Rohingya as 'Other' legitimised their persecution (and the ensuing exodus)?"*. In this regard, it has the following structure. Firstly, the lenses of post-structuralism theories are adopted as an instrument to examine the post-truth era. Secondly, some historical background of the Rohingya community relevant to the analysis are presented. Lastly, the post-truth theoretical background is applied to the case study of Rohingya people and its de-humanizing representation by the government of Myanmar and by influential non-state actors. The findings focus on how these practices legitimated the atrocities experienced by this community beyond 2012 and, particularly, since 2017.

Theoretical Framework: Post-truth politics through poststructuralist lenses

"Poststructuralism is a critical attitude, approach, or ethos that calls attention to the importance of representation, the relationship of power and knowledge, and the politics of identity in an understanding of global affairs".[10] Representation and identity are becoming more and more relevant elements of the digitally-connected world. Over recent years, the complexity and scale of

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[8] UNHCR (2019 July 31). *Rohingya emergency.* Retrieved from: https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/rohingya-emergency

[9] Bowcott, O., & Ratcliffe, R. (2020, January 23). *UN's top court orders Myanmar to protect Rohingya from genocide.* The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/international-court-to-rule-on-rohingya-genocide-safeguards

[10] Campbell, D. "Poststructuralism". In: Dunne T, Kurki M, and Smith S (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (2013): pp. 223-244. Oxford: Third Edition, 225.

information pollution have become an unprecedented challenge[11] and some scholars affirm that we are living in a post-truth era.[12] The term "post-truth" was elected word of the year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary, where it was defined as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".[13]

Poststructuralist theories of International Security Studies (ISS) have been frequently blamed as one of the major causes of this process, when treated as a dogma that demands the rejection of facts. However, according to Crilley and Chaterje-Doody, poststructuralist theories, rather than be condemned, should be adopted to recognise how particular ideas and practices become 'facts' as a result of how they are represented and interpreted. A relevant example is Trump's strategy during his presidency to ban Muslims from certain countries entering the USA.[14] Policies like that have become socially plausible largely because of the representation of Muslims as threats.[15] These representations "construct knowledge, shape identities, and serve to legitimise certain forms of politics".[16] The success of 'post-truth' politics is largely a result of this process.

In this respect, three main poststructuralist theories are considered. The choice is a result of a research after which the theories of Dillon, Campbell and Agamben are acknowledged as the most suitable to interpret the case study in relation to the post-truth society characteristics.

The first author considered is Dillon, inspired by French poststructuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. It is notably relevant Dillon's idea according to which no materiality is able to present itself outside of a discursive representation. This belief led to a concept

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[11] Wardle, C, "Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making". Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09, (2017). Retrieved from: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c, 10.

[12] Crilley, R., & Chatterje-Doody, P., "Security studies in the age of 'post-truth' politics: in defence of poststructuralism". *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 2, (2019): pp. 166–170. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1441634, 1.

[13] Oxford Languages (2016). *Word of the year 2016*. Retrieved from: https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

[14] Crilley, R., & Chatterje-Doody, P., "Security studies in the age of 'post-truth' politics: in defence of poststructuralism", 2.

[15] Said E. W., "Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World" (Fully Revised Edition edition. London: Vintage, 1997)

[16] Crilley, R., & Chatterje-Doody, P., "Security studies in the age of 'post-truth' politics: in defence of poststructuralism", 3.

that can be defined as discursive-threat. Dillon argues that the constitution of something as threatening consists in invoking 'discourses of danger and security', and to situate that 'something' as of particular importance to the threatened Self.[17] In this regard, the central objective is no longer the definition of security but rather to enquire "how an order of fear forms a people".[18]

Campbell adds to this logic another complementary dimension; the concept of identity. In effect, according to the Poststructuralist theorists, security politics is both about the construction of a radically different, inferior and threatening other, but also about the identity of the self. Thus, "Security [...] became an ontological double requirement: the state needed to be secure, but it also needed the threatening Other to define its identity".[19] In other words, Campbell argues that security presupposes trust and identity between members of a community, while it relegates indeterminacy, fear and anarchy to an imaginary foreign locus, not part of the social order. The other is depicted as dangerous, abnormal, or risky "faceless faces".[20] Moreover, Campbell states that security policies are directed not only against external 'other' such states or alliances but also against internal others 'located in different sites of ethnicity, race, class, gender, or locale'.[21]

The reinterpretation of Schmitt's 'friend-enemy' relationship,[22] and the state of exception by Agamben can be considered a further and conclusive step of this logic. The author states that security is an exceptional practice that draws boundaries between political life, defined as *bios*, and abject, disqualified, or bare life, defined as *zoe*. Bare life is "a life that can be killed without impunity [...], the point of internal exclusion".[23] In this regard, "the imaginary of societal

[17] Dillon, M, "The Alliance of Security and Subjectivity". *Current research on Peace and Violence* 13, no. 3, (1990): pp. 101-124. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40725154?seq=1, 102.
[18] Dillon, M, "The politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy on Continental Thought" (London: Routledge, 1996), 74.
[19] Buzan, B., & Hansen, L, "The Evolution of International Security Studies" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 218.
[20] Campbell, D, "Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity" (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
[21] Campbell, D, "Global Inscription: How Foreign Policy Constitutes the United States". *Alternatives XV* 15, no. 3, (1990): pp. 263-86. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/030437549001500302, 270.
[22] Schmitt, C, "Il concetto di 'politico'". In *Le categorie del 'politico'*: pp. 87-183. (Bologna: Mulino, 2017).
[23] Aradau C., & Van Muster, R, Post-structuralism, continental philosophy and the remaking of security studies. In M. D. Cavelty & V. Mauer, The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies (2010): pp.73-83. Routledge: London, 75.

homogeneity that is advocated by traditional understandings of security is rendered possible only on the basis of a constitutive violence and de-politicization of the bare life".[24]

These poststructuralist theories, instead of being considered as a prominent cause of the post-truth politics challenge, can be embraced as an instrument to critically interpret security issues in this new era.

Analysis: The case of Rohingya

These poststructuralist theories fit perfectly with the Rohingya case study, since this Muslim ethnic group has been widely depicted as threatening the security of Myanmar. Several major country's actors represented the Rohingya community as 'other', depoliticised and enclosed in the Agambenian category of 'bare life'. The massive use of media (most notably social media) channels contributed to the overwhelmingly spread of these discriminatory discourses.

The next part of this paper will analyse how these practices legitimised the ensuing persecution perpetrated by the government of Myanmar beyond 2012. Firstly, it will be provided a historical overview of the main critical events particularly relevant to the analysis. Secondly, the poststructuralist theories, in the light of the historical, normative and political background outlined, will be applied to the post-truth society of Myanmar.

Historical, normative and political implications

Poststructuralist frequently criticised Strategic Studies' adoption of a state-centric military conception of security. The main lack of this approach, according to the Poststructuralist theorists, is the absence of a critical analysis of the historical, normative and political implications. However, these aspects are deeply embedded in the concept of security.[25] Thus, according to Campbell, "post-structuralism is concerned with the state's historical and conceptual production, and its

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[24] Aradau C., & Van Muster, R, Post-structuralism, continental philosophy and the remaking of security studies. In M. D. Cavelty & V. Mauer, The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies (2010): pp.73-83. Routledge: London, 75.

[25] Buzan, B., & Hansen, L, "The Evolution of International Security Studies", 218.

political formation, economic constitution, and social exclusions".[26] The history of Myanmar is full of significant and explanatory events. Despite the complexity of such interrelations, the analysis focuses on the occurrences that are considered the most appropriate and impactful for what concerns the Rohingya community.

Rohingya's origin

The descent of the Rohingya ethnic group is broadly disputed both among scholars and society. While some scholars confirm the presence of a Muslim population in the Rakhine region long before the British colonisation started in 1823,[27] other researchers state that South Asian Muslims, including many Bengali Muslims, migrated to Myanmar in the 19th century and early 1900s[28]. In an even more extreme view, according to Leider, the concept Rohingya "embodies an ongoing process of identity formation that has unified Muslim communities in the North Arakan region with a similar cultural profile, but a diverse historical background".[29] Along with this dispute, while Rohingya people claim descent from Islamic merchants who landed in Arakan[30] from the VIII century, Myanmar's authorities consider the group to be colonial era arrivals or illegal post–Second World War migrants from Bangladesh. This is the reason why they are commonly labelled as Bengali.[31] In this regard, the populist hatred can be traced back to the Second World War when the Rohingya sided with the British coloniser.[32]

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[26] Campbell, D. "Poststructuralism". In: Dunne T, Kurki M, and Smith S (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (2013): pp. 223-244. Oxford: Third Edition, 226.

[27] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis". *International Journal of Communication* 13, (2019): pp. 3203-3224. Retrieved from: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10123, 3205.

[28] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention." *University of Winchester* (2015): pp. 1-47. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/29939461/Religion_hate_speech_and_social_media_in_Myanmar_analysing_methods_of_intervention, 20.

[29] Leider, J, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar". O*xford University Press USA*, (2018): pp.1-35. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.115, 2.

[30] Rakhine was formerly termed Arakan.

[31] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3205.

[32] Siddiquee, A. Md., "The portrayal of the Rohingya genocide and refugee crisis in the age of post-truth politics", 89.

Despite the contrasting theories outlined, the origin of Rohingya shall not be absolutely treated as a justification or reasonable explanation of the atrocities committed by the Myanmar authorities. However, these assertions about the group's heritage are imperative to frame the next steps of the historical analysis.

Rohingya's citizenship and discriminatory laws

The origin of Rohingya community relevance is strictly determined by Myanmar's constitution and citizenship law. In effect, collective citizenship rights are solely guaranteed to groups present in the country before the start of the British colonial period in 1823.[33] After the independence of 1948, when National Registration Cards (NRCs) were widely used as proof of citizenship or nationality, Rohingya were treated as citizens by the Burmese authorities.[34] However, Rohingya's rights were eroded throughout the country's decades of military-led rule after the 1962 military coup.[35] Their citizenship rights were definitely denied following the Citizenship Law of 1982. Under this new regime, people had to relinquish their identity papers to obtain Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CSCs), and most Rohingyas were merely given Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs), that certified they were not full citizens, as they still are not.

As a consequence, the exclusion from citizenship and rights restrictions damaged every aspect of the Rohingya's lives. Myanmar's military and authoritarian state governments massively began to describe Rohingyas as a political and demographic threat. In this regard, over the years the discrimination intensified. In 2012 a project was launched to repopulate North Rakhine with Buddhist settlers, including former prisoners.[36] Furthermore, the government between 2014 and 2015 passed four laws banning polygamy, restricting interfaith marriages and religious conversions, and enforcing birth control measures.[37] This was the result of the perception that Muslim families

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[33] Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (1982). *Burma Citizenship Law.* Refworld. Retrieved from: Refworld | Burma Citizenship Law

[34] Leider, J, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar", p.13.

[35] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3206.

[36] Leider, J, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar", p.13.

[37] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", 25.

should have outnumbered Buddhists, a threat to the Self-identity.[38] Therefore, Rohingya were

progressively denied their human rights to nationality, education, health care, and even to move

freely.

Myanmar and the media environment

The third crucial point to examine concerns Myanmar's media environment. This will prove

to be relevant in the ensuing analysis of Rohingya representation, particularly in the light of the

definition of post-truth society already illustrated in the theoretical section.

During the military government period, Burma had one of the world's most inflexible and

restricted media environments, and public political expression was severely downsized.[39] Despite

the maintenance of post-publication censorship, several changes shaped Myanmar's media

landscape in the second decade of the 2000s. Firstly, the 2011-2012 decisions to unblock access to

foreign media and to end pre-publication media censorship.[40] Furthermore, the Media Bill and the

Printers and Publishers Regulation Bill, passed in 2014, enshrined media rights and responsibilities

and gave media greater freedoms for the first time.[41]

The impact of the Internet's arrival on the country had some critical outcomes and

undesirable political consequences. In this regard, Holland affirms that media freedoms granted

chances for divisive voices to foment an ethnic and religious conflict that had long been suppressed

by Myanmar's military-led government.[42] This is confirmed by the researcher Cynthia Wong in the

film *The Social Dilemma.* She takes into consideration the case of the Rohingya community

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[38] Dolan, T., & Grey, S, "Media and Conflict in Myanmar: Opportunities for Media to Advance Peace", *United States Institute for Peace*, [Peace-works] no. 92, (2014): pp. 1-15. Retrieved from: https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/01/media-and-conflict-myanmar, 13.

[39] The Irrawaddy. (2004, May 1). *Chronology of the Press in Burma*. Retrieved from: Chronology of the Press in Burma (irrawaddy.com)

[40] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3208.

[41] Parker, E. (2017 September 11). *What is the Future of the Media in Myanmar?: Myanmar's media is making progress, "two step forward, one step back.",* The Diplomat. Retrieved from: https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/what-is-the-future-of-the-media-in-myanmar/

[42] Holland, H. (2014, June 14). *Facebook in Myanmar: Amplifying hate speech?* Al Jaazera. Retrieved from: Facebook in Myanmar: Amplifying hate speech? | Asia Pacific News | Al Jazeera

concerning the massive increase of social media employment. In this regard, Wong claims that "some of the most troubling implications of governments and other bad actors weaponizing social media, is that it has led to real, offline harm".[43] The author convincingly affirms that the spread of social media such as Facebook gave the military and other bad actors in Myanmar a new way to manipulate public opinion and to help incite violence against the Rohingya community.

The phenomenon, which can simplistically be defined as propaganda, is far from new. However, the development and massive use of these tools and channels have rendered cheaper, faster and more effective in their wide-reach results the spread of these messages. In this regard, the policies of media liberalisation adopted by the Myanmar government deeply contributed to a rise in the extreme speech against Rohingya by non-state and state actors.[44] This aspect was dramatically worsened by the general media-illiteracy present in the State, where several citizens had no capabilities to distinguish real information from disinformation and propagandistic narratives.

Post-truth politics' techniques applied to the Rohingya

The tactics of post-truth politics played a major role in shaping an adverse representation of the Rohingya community. In the hypothesis of research this contributed, significantly, to the dramatic persecution of the ethnic group, which intensified beyond 2016. In this regard, two main works are taking into consideration as a basis for the ensuing analysis.

The former is the categorization of post-truth politics by Siddiquee. The author, in this regard, accounts for five main characteristics of this theoretical concept: lies as a daily practice, the wilful and conscious act of denials and deceit (escalation of the process through the Internet), the appeal to emotions and personal beliefs (often provoked by fear and anxiety) rather than the appeal to objective facts, the repetition of core motifs and, lastly, the criminalization and vilification of a community.[45] These categories are then applied to the society of Myanmar. In effect, the ethnic

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[43] Orlowski, J. (Director). (2020) "The Social Dilemma [Film] Exposure Lab". .

[44] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3204.

[45] Siddiquee, A. Md., "The portrayal of the Rohingya genocide and refugee crisis in the age of post-truth politics", 90-92.

identity of the Rohingyas has been for a long time denied. To this aim, they have been frequently depicted as 'illegal Bengali immigrants', 'pests', 'dogs', and even, generalising, as a group of 'Islamist extremists'. The dehumanisation of this community has been perpetrated through the exploitation of emotions, personal beliefs, religious sentiments and ethnic hatred, as well as through the denial of their rights as citizens and the criminalization of the entire community.[46]

However, these characteristics, which undoubtedly were present in Myanmar society, are not sufficient to demonstrate that they could have legitimised the atrocities committed against the Rohingya. In this respect, four categories outlined by Susan Benesch in his work *Dangerous Speech: A Proposal to Prevent Group Violence* should be considered as entirely complementary to the work of Siddiquee. While the former focuses on the essence of post-truth politics, Benesch considers how the characteristics of this type of politics can become effective and particularly threatening. This is more likely to happen under determined assumptions. Firstly, the wilful lies originated from a powerful speaker with a high degree of influence over the audience. Secondly, the speech act is clearly understood as a call to violence. Thirdly, the social or historical context is propitious for violence (for instance longstanding competition between groups for resources or previous episodes of violence). Lastly, there is a means of dissemination that is influential in itself, for instance because it is the sole or primary source of news for the relevant audience.[47] To these categories, it should be added a further one: messages are more likely to spread faster and more efficiently vis-à-vis a population that has no knowledge about the means of dissemination considered, or that is more specifically media-illiterate.

Representation of the Rohingya

Powerful speakers

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[46] See note above, p.93-98.
[47] Benesch, S. (2012 January 12). *Dangerous Speech: A proposal to Prevent Group Violence*. World Policy Institute. Retrieved from: http://worldpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Dangerous-Speech-Guidelines-Benesch-January-2012.pdf, 2.

Dillon, as examined in the theoretical section, states that discourses of in-security are produced through the constitution of something antagonist to the Self.[48] In the case examined, the practices of indoctrination against the threatening Rohingya were perpetrated both by official Myanmar authorities and by influential non-state actors. The relevance of the first category is intrinsic. In effect, State media dominates Myanmar's broadcast sector, television channels and radio stations, which are most State-owned. Likewise, the State controls the most far-reaching newspapers. A considerable example regards the Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM), the country's oldest newspaper, which is directly published by the Myanmar Ministry of Information.[49] For what concerns the second category, the major non-state actors to be considered are related to Buddhist nationalist movements. Two of the most influential groups are the anti-Muslim '969 Movement' and the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, commonly known as the 'Ma Ba Tha'. These organisations, whose spiritual and political leader is the outstanding Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, played central roles in inciting hatred against Muslims, advocating the discriminatory laws formerly described, and promoting an exclusive ideology of Burman-Buddhist identity.[50] The Buddhist monk was an extremely influential user of social media, especially Facebook (more than 500.000 followers), where he used to post discriminatory and brutal messages against Rohingya.[51] In this regard, particularly emblematic is the cover of the TIME magazine[52] when Wirathu was portrayed as "The Face of Buddhist Terror". In that circumstances, by contrast, the former President of Myanmar Thein Sein[53] strongly supported the Buddhist monk, referring to Wirathu as a 'noble person' and a 'son of Buddha'.[54] This proved once again the mutual relations

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[48] Dillon, M, "The Alliance of Security and Subjectivity".
[49] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3212.
[50] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", 25.
[51] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3209.
[52] TIME Magazine. (2013, July 1). *The Face of Buddhism Terrorism: How Militant Monks are Fueling Anti-Muslim Violence in Asia.* Time Magazine. Retrieved from: http://content.time.com/time/covers/asia/0,16641,20130701,00.html
[53] President of Myanmar from 30th March 2011 to 30th March 2016.
[54] De Hart, J. (2013, June 25). *Ashin Wirathu: The Monk Behind Burma's "Buddhist Terror".* The Diplomat. Retrieved from: Ashin Wirathu: The Monk Behind Burma's "Buddhist Terror" – The Diplomat

between the central authorities and the Buddhist clerics, defined by Wolf as the "state-temple alliance".[55]

<u>Propitious historical context and violent speech as a call to violence</u>

Buddhist nationalists' construction of Rohingya as the dangerous 'other' relied, mainly, on identity matters. The threatening religious transition to Islamism of the neighbouring countries boosted this narrative. In effect, areas that once belonged to the ancient Brahman-Buddhist kingdoms such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Afghanistan became, over time, Muslim states.[56] This has been regularly presented as a major threat to Buddhist Myanmar. The construction of a threatening internal community, according to Campbell, is a key step along with the strategy of enhancement of one's own identity. Thus, "the process of othering and excluding one particular group can be enhanced by the promotion of a sense of national identity that the group does not fit into". Furthermore, scapegoating a group diminishes responsibility and shape and strengthens an identity from which the 'Other' is excluded.[57]

In this regard, since 1962 the Myanmar authoritarian military regime launched a program of measures aimed at the "cultural homogenisation, marginalisation, assimilation and the isolation of ethnic enclaves".[58] This strategy, which has been widely defined as 'Burmanisation', was a means of 'National Reconsolidation' through a repressive cultural policy that explicitly fostered the major ethnic group of the country, the Burman.[59] To this end, Myanmar's authorities, as analysed, increasingly restricted the Rohingya's rights and denied their citizenship claims. This was justified through the portrayal of Rohingya as temporary residents, illegal migrants and as a looming cultural, political, demographic,[60] and economic security threats. In this regard, the Rohingya

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[55] Wolf, S. O., "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis". *South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) WORKING PAPER*, no .6, ISSN 2506-8199, (2017): pp. 1-42. Retrieved from: https://www.sadf.eu/sadf-working-paper-6-genocide-exodus-exploitation-jihad-urgent-need-address-rohingya-crisis-siegfried-o-wolf/, 13.

[56] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", p.22.

[57] See note above, 41-42.

[58] Wolf, S. O., "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis", 9.

[59] See note above, 2.

[60] Leider, J, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar", 2.

community has been commonly depicted as an undesirable competitor for resources[61] and even generalised as an "Islamist extremists" group.[62]

State sources, such as the GNLM, contributed to fostering these adverse representations. This is confirmed both by an analysis of Lee carried out between the period from July to September 2017,[63] and by the work of Siddiquee.[64] The former argues that Rakhine State matters were overrepresented in the GNLM. The newspaper aimed to establish a positive image of the State's authorities, as either provider of economic opportunities and as the defender of Rakhine State from Muslim terrorists, since Rohingya were frequently compared to the extremist component of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). In other words, despite the awareness of the conflict between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine, the central authorities exploited the conflict to split the local opposition.[65] This strategy undoubtedly contributed to the construction of Rohingya Muslims as an existential threat, in comparison to the Buddhist majority, vulnerable and needing protection.[66] The alliance between extremist Buddhist monks, military regime' elements, and the contribution of the government, probably legitimised the idea that any actions against this dangerous threat were justifiable to protect the religion and the Self-identity.[67]

Mean of dissemination and media illiteracy

The Internet made faster and more efficient the spill-over of the narratives perpetrated by these influential actors. This impacted on the Rohingya and, undoubtedly, aggravated their plight. To deeply grasp the extent to which the internet and, most notably, social media's use changed the experience of Rohingya people in Myanmar, below are two explanatory graphs.

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[61] Wolf, S. O., "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis", 8.
[62] Al-Rawi, A, "Twitter Influentials and the Networked Publics' Engagement with the Rohingya Crisis in Arabic and English".
[63] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3211-3214.
[64] Siddiquee, A. Md., "The portrayal of the Rohingya genocide and refugee crisis in the age of post-truth politics", 93-94.
[65] Wolf, S. O., "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis", 9.
[66] See note above, 13.
[67] Ibrahim, A, "The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar 's Hidden Genocide" (United Kingdom: Hurst & Company, London, 2016), 104.
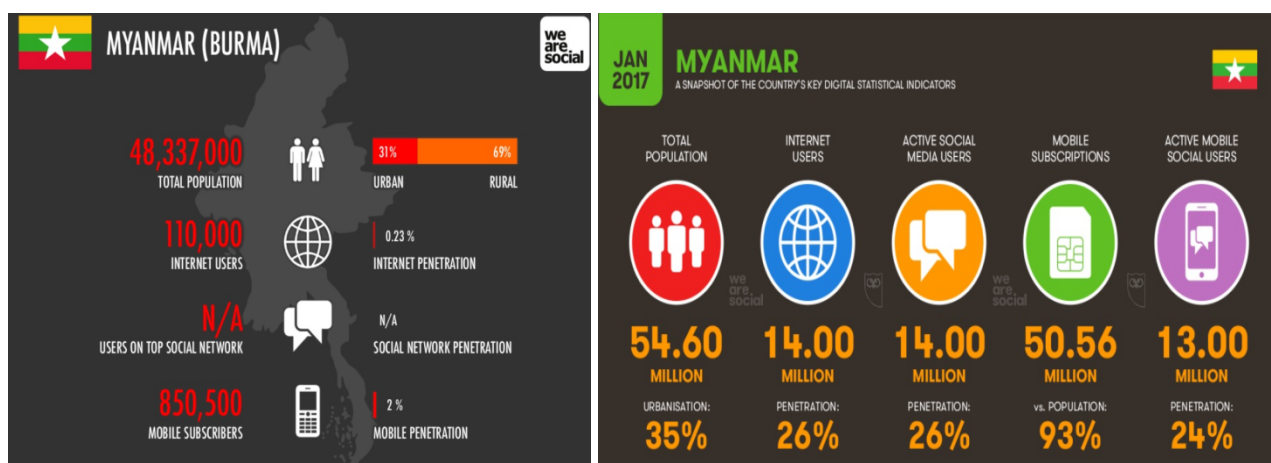
In both images are represented the Myanmar's key digital statistical indicators. <u>Figure 1</u>: Data for Myanmar in 2011. Retrieved from: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2011-myanmar. <u>Figure 2</u>: Data for Myanmar in 2017. Retrieved from: <u>https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2017-myanmar</u>. (Source: DATAREPORTAL).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how the use of social media dramatically increased between 2011 and 2017. While in 2011 Myanmar accounted for 110.000 Internet users, in 2017 they became 14.000 million. Likewise, in 2011 the internet, social media and mobile penetration levels were extremely low or almost null. By contrast, in 2017 internet penetration reached 26%. Similarly, the level rose sharply for what concerns social media users and mobile subscriptions penetration. The former reached a percentage of 26%, while the latter an astonishing amount of 93%.[68]

These data show the sudden and unexpected influx of the Internet among the Myanmar population. This development made it very challenging to become literate in using the new technology, and "the growing popularity of social media, especially Facebook, allowed the further exposure to [...] fake news".[69] Facebook is absolutely both the most used social media platform in the country and the main source.[70] This is confirmed by the 2018 report of a non-profit organisation, the Business for Social Responsibility (BRS), that was directly commissioned by Facebook.[71] It concluded that "in Myanmar, this social media represents essentially the internet — and, by

[68] DATAREPORTAL, "Digital 2011: Myanmar" (2011). Retrieved from: <u>Digital 2011: Myanmar — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights</u> DATAREPORTAL, "Digital 2017: Myanmar" (2017). Retrieved from: <u>Digital 2017: Myanmar — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights</u>

[69] Al-Rawi, A, "Twitter Influentials and the Networked Publics' Engagement with the Rohingya Crisis in Arabic and English", 193.

[70] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", 39.

[71] Warofka, A. (2018 November 5), *An Independent Assessment of the Human Rights Impact of Facebook in Myanmar.* Facebook. Retrieved from: <u>https://about.fb.com/news/2018/11/myanmar-hria/</u>

extension, the only source of information — for some 20 million people". The report explained

how Facebook entered a country where technological means were mostly unknown, after decades of

censorship. In this regard, Facebook failed to prevent its platform from being used to "foment

division and incite offline violence" in the country.[72] In effect, Nationalist Buddhist groups

including the staunchly anti-Muslim 969 Movement and the Ma Ba Tha, used them to pursue

anti-ethnic minority and anti-Muslim political agendas.[73] Similarly, this tool was employed with the

same purpose by members of the Myanmar military. This has been confirmed by Facebook itself, as

reported by a New York Times article. It argues that military components "were the prime

operatives behind a systematic campaign on Facebook that stretched back half a decade and that

targeted the country's mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group".[74] Moreover, while several

researchers affirm that the attempt to erase the Rohingya ethnic identity has been continuously

rejected by Myanmar officials,[75] others attribute them much worse guilt. Ibrahim argues that

Facebook has often been used by officials and authorities themselves to attack Muslims and vilify

them.[76]

This was definitely aggravated by the extensive use of these tools. Indeed, the 'process of

othering' through social media provides no chance for the minority group affected to effectively

counteract. Perpetrators of these violent act speeches present subjective arguments as objective

truth, violating the standards of argumentative integrity. These practices ignore "the dignity of the

target group - whom many people never encounter face to face; arguably, that group is eventually

perceived as an abstract idea based on words and rumours, rather than as people in the

community".[77] It is exactly what Campbell defined as 'faceless faces', one of the hate speeches'

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[72] Stevenson, A. (2018 November). *Facebook Admits It Was Used To Incite Violence in Myanmar*. The New York Times. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/myanmar-facebook.html

[73] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3209.

[74] Mozur, P. (2018 October 15). *A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military.* The New York Times. Retrieved from: A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

[75] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", 20.

[76] Ibrahim, A, "The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar 's Hidden Genocide" (United Kingdom: Hurst & Company, London, 2016).

[77] Davis, B, "Religion, hate speech and social media in Myanmar: analysing methods of intervention", 37.

most serious consequences for the Muslim community in Myanmar: "the dehumanisation of a group based on their religion, used as a means to permit persecution".[78]The perception of a threat to security legitimised the construction of boundaries between the Agambenian *bios* and *zoe*. In this regard, Rohingya community became "the point of internal exclusion", an abstract but threatening minority that could be "killed without impunity".[79]

Conclusion

The paper showed the crucial role that the dehumanising representation of Rohingya by Myanmar officials and influential Buddhist nationalists non-state actors played in legitimising their persecution. The Rohingya community has been facing systematic oppression by the Myanmar authorities since the 1970s. However, their harassment has dramatically intensified in the last decade. Several interconnected factors contributed to the process of 'othering' through which the existence of this community has been progressively rejected. The debatable descent of this minority, the discriminatory laws against them and the denial of their right to citizenship are just some of the historical, normative and social elements that constituted a breeding ground for shaping a discriminatory society.

The impact of the Internet's arrival in the country worsened Rohingya's plight and generated several undesirable political consequences. The internet strengthened and multiplied the spill-over of propagandistic narratives, a weapon of un-precedent potential, employed to strike the Rohingya community. This could happen both due to the general digital-media illiteracy among the population, and as a result of the post-truth politics' process. Objective facts became less influential in shaping public opinion than the appeals to emotion and personal belief (for instance, Buddhist religious motifs). In this regard, wilful lies became a daily practice, repeated as core motifs and aimed at the criminalization and vilification of the community. Some characteristics made these narratives powerful and particularly threatening; namely, the wilful lies originated from speakers

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[78] See note above, p.37.
[79] Aradau C., & Van Muster, R, "Post-structuralism, continental philosophy and the remaking of security studies", 75.

with a high degree of influence and the speech act was understood as a call to violence. In addition, the internet and the massive increase in the use of social media in Myanmar made it easier and more efficient the dissemination of these messages vis-à-vis a population that had no knowledge about that innovative means of dissemination.

These factors undoubtedly contributed to the denial of Rohingya citizenship and identity. As a consequence, this legitimised what has been repeatedly defined as a plausible genocide. The events in 2012 and the horrors of the Rohingya's 2017 persecution demonstrated how "a largely ungrounded fear has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the defensive actions [...] generates the threats that motivated their actions in the first place".[80] In other words, it demonstrated how extreme speech against a specific minority can generate devastating real-world consequences, when it has been made acceptable and mainstream.[81] The adoption of post-structuralism lenses, in this case, demonstrated to be an efficient instrument when it came to examining the post-truth politics of Myanmar society.

The refugee crisis that followed the persecution of Rohingya is something that should attentively be taken into consideration for further research. In effect, countries like Bangladesh, where the majority of Rohingya fled after their persecution, "started to perceive the illegally immigrated [...] as a threat towards internal security and a critical determinant in international relations". Consequently, "there is a growing number of government officials and analysts who identify the Rohingya refugees as a so-called 'non-traditional security threat'".[82] Thus, the tragedy of this minority seems endless and it needs countermeasures to be rapidly implemented.

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[80] Dolan, T., & Grey, S, "Media and Conflict in Myanmar: Opportunities for Media to Advance Peace", 14.
[81] Lee, R. "Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis", 3211.
[82] Wolf, S. O., "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis", 14.

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