



Dr Lionel Bopage



to their homeland in the north and east and then overseas.

Historical circumstances that led Myanmar to the current quagmire have many parallels in Sri Lanka. Like Sri Lanka, Myanmar was under the British colonial rule. The strategy of domination in both was "Divide and Rule". Since their respective independence from colonial rule, both Sri Lanka and Myanmar have traversed along similar paths. Uniting diverse communities for building a harmonious nation was never attempted. Measures were taken that some ethnicities like Tamils and Muslims regarded as discriminatory such as disenfranchising estate workers, colonising land, making Sinhala the official language while disregarding

greater Indo-European language family. It is related to the Chittagonian language spoken in the southernmost part of Bangladesh bordering Myanmar. Both Rohingya and Chittagonian are related to Bengali.

Arakan (now known as Rakhine) for a very long time.

the British colonial policy encouraged Bengali inhabitants from adjacent regions to migrate into Arakan as farm labourers. The waves of migration were primarily due to the requirement of cheap labour for superimposing capitalist economics on the feudal set up that prevailed in Myanmar. In the 17th century, many Rohingya may have entered Myanmar because of these policies. Most of the 'natives' saw migration of labourers negatively. The Rohingya contend that they are indigenous Arakans of western Myanmar influenced by the Arab, Mughal and Portuguese cultures. The Rohingya language is considered part of the Indo-Aryan sub-branch of the

the tribes of the Tibeto-Burman-speaking Pyu people, who began migrating to Arakan through the Arakan Mountains in the ninth century and established several cities in the region. Burmese forces invaded the Rakhine cities in 1406. This forced Rakhine rulers to seek refuge in Bengal. After remaining in exile, they regained Arakan in 1430 with Bengali military assistance. The Bengalis who came with Rakhine formed their own settlements in the region. In the early 19th century, thousands of Bengalis settled in Arakan seeking work. It is not clear whether the new Bengali migrants were the same as those that were forcefully deported to Arakan during Burmese conquests and then came back later due to the British policy, or they were a new migrant population with no ancestral roots to Arakan. Although Rohingya trace their ancestry to Muslims who lived in Arakan in the 15th and 16th centuries, most of the Rohingya may have arrived under the British colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to the International Crisis Group, these immigrants were Rohingya who were displaced by the World War II. They began returning to Arakan after the independence of Burma but were rendered as illegal immigrants. Many were not allowed to return.

The impact of immigration was particularly acute in Arakan. It boosted the colonial economy, but the local Arakanese bitterly resented it. The Burmese, who lived under the British

To Page 43

Introduction

The Rohingya are the world's largest stateless community. Most of them live in the western coastal state of Rakhine, one the poorest states in Myanmar. The majority of the Rohingya are Muslims and have for centuries lived in the majority Buddhist Myanmar. The Rohingya speak Rohingya or Ruaingga, a dialect that is distinct from other dialects spoken in Rakhine State and Myanmar. They are not considered one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups and have been denied citizenship in Myanmar since 1982, which has effec-

Myanmar A Good Example for Politics of Polarisation

tively rendered them stateless. Since August 2017, more than half a million Rohingya have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh alone.

Recently several Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka protested outside a shelter housing 31 refugees, mostly women and children. The Sri Lankan Navy had rescued these refugees from a boat in Sri Lankan waters in April this year. Myanmar's situation can be compared to, but is much worse than the situation that existed in Sri Lanka for almost five decades. The well-known Black July riots was a well-planned "response" to the killing of 13 Sri Lanka Army soldiers in July 1983 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The violence unleashed not only helped the LTTE to swell its ranks, but also internationalised the conflict with mass exodus of Tamils

Tamil, standardising education and discriminating in recruitment and promotions. Disunity, polarisation and exclusion of the other were its bitter fruits.

British Colonial rule

During more than 100 years of British rule, Myanmar was administered as a province of India. No international boundary existed between Bengal and Arakan, and there were no restrictions on migration between the regions. Muslims appear to have lived in Myanmar since as early as the 12th century. Rohingya have been living in

Muslim settlements

Arakan was a key centre of maritime trade and cultural exchange. From the eighth century onwards due to Arab missionary activities many locals appear to have converted to Islam. The Rohingya practice Sunni Islam. As in Sri Lanka, there are different versions of history playing out in Myanmar. In one version, other than the conversions, Arab merchants married local women and settled down in Arakan, which made the Muslim population grow. The Rohingya believe they descended from these early communities.

In another version, the Rakhines are said to be one of

