

# Multi-faceted Challenges and Positive Adaptations of Burmese Muslims in Myanmar: A Conceptual Framework for Conflict Resolutions

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## Abstract

Burmese Muslims have encountered multi-dimensional challenges in their political, social, economic, and personal well-being of their lives for many years in Myanmar. Throughout the political history of Myanmar, the incidents such as religious riots, and ethno-religious discrimination have been occurred under different political regimes. The focus of this study is to explore what kind of the challenges that Burmese Muslims encounter under successive governments and how they are adapting to evolving challenges in Myanmar. This study is based on the qualitative research, and case study method. This research explores the perceptions of selected nine Myanmar Muslim political leaders to enhance the understanding of why and how Burmese Muslims have been utilized in the political landscape of Myanmar and what are the possible conflict resolutions. The source of the data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews on face-to-face as well as virtual platform of communications. The findings of this study reveal that Burmese Muslims in Myanmar have gone through the socio-political challenges due to the weak rule of laws, and religion has been utilized in politics. Burmese Muslims in Myanmar have proved to be trying to adapt to the challenges with their resilient attitudes and assistance from community networks. A conceptual frame work for conflict resolutions is presented to explain how to help the people from conflicted-affected communities in order to reduce social fragmentation and promoting a sense of community. This study reveals that considerations of human rights for all citizens, as well as rule of law is fundamental to peace and security of any nation. The findings of this study can give insights for policymakers, government officials and social welfare department to come up with a strategic plan for race and religious integration in developing countries.

**Keywords:** Burmese Muslims, Conflict Resolutions, Myanmar, Socio-political Challenges

## **Introduction**

People live in ethnically, religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse places in the world. Many of the ethnic minority groups different countries have complicated histories and relations within the nations or states, as international borders and policies of different states or countries have influenced over the centuries. Ethnic minorities are referred to the groups of people who are culturally, linguistically and ethnically divergent groups, living within the boundaries of the country (United Nations, 2008). It has been estimated that there were 29.84 million ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia Region (United Nations, 2008). Burmese Muslims, one of the religious minorities in Myanmar have encountered a wide variety of challenges such as ethno-religious discriminations, human rights abuses, social and economic problems and many more for many decades. According to the international research studies on Burmese Muslims, they have been regarded as one of the persecuted ethnic groups in the world (Fortify Rights, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2013). According to the historical records of Myanmar, Burmese Muslims have been utilized in the sphere of politics for many decades. Commonly, they have been denied the basic needs, limitations in freedom of speech and freedom of movement. Burmese Muslims feel that they have been unprotected and neglected by the state authorities under successive governments (Benesch, 2013).

## **Literature Review**

Racial conflicts, religious discriminations and social struggles in developing countries of Southeast Asia are not new phenomena (United Nations, 2008). Based on a wealth of researches, more than seventy five percent of the world's population resides in countries where religion has been utilized as a political tool (PEW forum, 2012). A number of human rights scholars and advocates state that religious freedom has been an essential component of modern political and civil freedoms. The international community has expended in humanitarian aid as well as scholars from multidisciplinary fields have yielded recommendations to address the underlying causes of the conflicts by addressing the facts about human rights violations, enhancing regional stability, and enhancing global security (Allchin, 2011). Myanmar, one of the countries from Southeast East Asia region has been ruled by successive repressive authoritarian regimes since 1962 until 1988. Since the establishment of the Military Junta in 1962, people from religious or ethnic minority background have been suffered from religious-based discriminations, human rights abuses and social, political and economic problems that tens of thousands of people were suffered from not only violence but also many of them were forced to flee to the neighbouring countries and become political refugees (Solomon, 2016). Many studies on the challenges of Burmese Muslims in Myanmar under the military regime have been commonly portrayed in the political context of Myanmar as the discriminated population in their native country. Critical analysis of the previous research reveal that Burmese Muslim communities have been living in conflict-affected society for generations after generations and make positive adaptations. Many international researches on challenges and adaptations of ethnic minorities are identified as 'conflict resilience' that has been explained as having the ability to face the incumbent challenges with resistance and have different views on critical issues (Hamilton, 2018). Since the world ethnic or religious-based problems are getting complicated and emerging new issues, most of the studies on ethnic-based or religious-based issues call for many studies that have been under-researched.

**Methodology**

The focus of this study is to explore and understand the multi-faceted challenges upon Burmese Muslims in Myanmar and how they adapt to these stressors. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher has employed a qualitative research design in the form of a case-study research method. Case study research method is suitable for this study because the focus of this research is to make rich descriptions of the complex issues in the real-life setting (Yin, 1989; Merriam, 1994). In this study, the researcher has used purposive sampling method to include nine representatives of Burmese Muslim community leaders, irrespective of geographical locations of the world in order to gain deeper understanding of a particular issue (Neuman, et.al., 2017). Due to the advancement of technology, the researcher was able to collect the required data without the time and locational constraints. In this study, face-to-face interviews as well as virtual data collection tools were included (James, 2007; Denzin, 1999). The researcher has participated in the study as an interviewer, an observer, and a community helper. Since the researcher is from Myanmar, who has shared the same language and cultural background, Myanmar language has been used as the medium of communicating the participants. The researcher has taken the stand as the insider-outsider role (Hellawell, 2006). For the data analysis of this study, the researcher has applied Braun and Clarke (2006) step-by-step thematic analysis guidelines. The researcher has verified the research data in line with dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability of the research findings (Guba, 1981; Schwandt et al., 2007). Data triangulation has been developed by making the participants checked the collected data, and by comparing the data from different participants in the same study. The nature of the research is related to sensitive issues, security so that confidentiality of the data has been maintained in every step of the research processes.

**Findings**

Based on the analysis of the interview data and data from document analysis, Burmese Muslims in Myanmar experienced a wide variety of stressors and challenges generations after generations. The state policies and practices of successive governments of Myanmar have a negative impact on unity among different religions and ethnics by discriminatory laws and policies. The religion has been identified to use as political tool in transitions from authoritarianism to democratic rule in the political context of Myanmar. Their interview data, and the data from the document analysis reflected a wide array of challenges in Myanmar.

**Multi-faceted Challenges upon Burmese Muslims in Myanmar**

The analysis of the data clearly demonstrates that in Myanmar there have been intercommunal conflicts not only between people from different religious backgrounds but also different ethnics and these issues have complicated historical roots. The different military regimes have practiced authoritarian rules and policies and applied divide-and-rule policies by promoting Buddhism and discriminating against alternative religious identities. Moreover, Buddhist nationalism has been widely utilized in politics and resulted in the instability of political situations, rising economic, social and political problems. There are a variety of society-based challenges upon Burmese Muslims such as social inequality, deprivations of basic needs and rights, degradation of humanity, and cause uprising riots. All the participants commonly state that faith-based discriminations should be eliminated from the country in order to rebuild the peacebuilding within the inter-faith communities. Moreover, the participants in the study have addressed that problems related to intercommunal conflicts

have been taken effective actions by the government and there are a wide variety of restrictions on the ethnic minorities' rights. As the central government in the history politics in Myanmar has taken the top power of the country. Ethnic and religious minorities have encountered a lot of human rights violations such as religious discriminations, suppressions, limitations in freedom of speech, restrictions on freedom of movement, and freedom of faith.

In this study, the data related to Islamophobia were identified as the anti-Muslim sentiment and hate speech. The concept of anti-Muslim sentiment has propagated through the hate speech that could be clearly seen in electronic media, print media, and on social media in Myanmar. The hate speech that has been spread among the public has directed to the collective violence as well make the public accept, and commit violence against Burmese Muslim communities. The data from this study proved that Burmese Buddhist nationalists, political elites, and religious leaders have spread the misinformation about Islam by campaigning for boycotts against Muslim businesses and denying inter-faith marriages. Lack of political representations were discussed by participants in the study that Burmese Muslims have experienced limitations in taking part in political activities as well as taking up the important roles in Myanmar different governing bodies. Based on historical records and the data from this study shows that religion has been used in Myanmar political context and ethnic or religious minorities have lost human rights as well as political rights.

### **Positive Adaptations**

According to the interview data of the participants, most of the Burmese Muslims have realized and accepted that the challenges are part of their life experiences. They have tried to build their lives and deal with day-to-day challenges with strong wills. They make the meaning of their lives amidst these challenges. They have accepted the negative situations as normal and make emotional and psychological adaptations to insurmountable difficulties. Adaptations of Burmese Muslims to conflicted-affected environment has been identified as relating to many factors such as their personal resilient attitudes, community protective factors and organizational protective factors. Through reports of the participants, they accept the political, social, emotional and psychological challenges are inevitable circumstances for them in their own country, they have developed particular survival skills and adaptive qualities.

The informants from this study also mentioned that in the multi-ethnic society, if civic engagement is not present or weak, conflicts are likely to flare up. They all emphasize the fact that conflicts and violence are destructive to not only religious community but also the dominant community, too. All the religious minorities in Myanmar have suffered from the negative consequences of the conflicts, generations after generations. They continue to address that peacekeeping of the different ethnic groups should be carried out by government officials, religious organizations and communities. Through the interview data, Burmese Muslims community expect the peaceful coexistence in their native country. They further explained that these conflict resolutions can be achieved through working hand-in-hand with inter-faith communities.

## Conceptual Framework for Conflict Resolutions

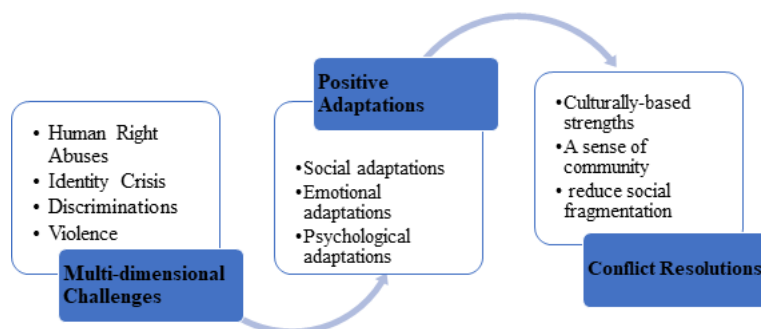


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework of the study

Conflicts have regarded as a risk factor for every healthy community. Based on the review of the literature, there are many forms of conflicts in different countries around the world, this conceptual framework represents that conflict resolutions for intercommunal conflicts between majority Buddhist groups and minority Burmese Muslims community in Myanmar. Myanmar Muslims have encountered a wide variety of challenges related to human rights abuses, discriminations, identity crisis and violence in their native country, Myanmar (Yegar, 1972; Kyaw, 2017). According to the extensive review of the literature, religion has been used in politics to be the main cause for the ethnic and religious-based conflicts. Muslims in Myanmar face multi-dimensional challenges for many decades but they can make positive adaptations within the native country under a lot of circumstances.

The conceptual framework as shown in the figure (2.1) indicates that Myanmar Muslims encounter a multitude of negative experiences in Myanmar (Solomon, 2016; Skutsch, 2005). Myanmar Muslims suffer from the negative experiences in their home country such as persecutions, violence, civil wars, ethnic cleansing and discriminations. Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory explains that the root causes of communal conflicts are related to human rights denial, traditional disputes over territory, deprivation of human need and lack of security and many more (Azar, 1990). In regard with communal problems in Myanmar are found to be a deep linkage with Azar's theory of Protracted Social Conflict.

Myanmar Muslims directly and indirectly receive the social capital from the social networks such as and organizational and community support. These individuals receive the 'bridging', 'bonding' and 'linking' of social bonds from formal and informal support from community members, and religious organizations and other social networks. Bonding social capital helps to bring people together and promotes positive changes for individuals from exclusive or intra-groups. Moreover, bridging social capital can blur social divisions for or interfaith interethnic communities. Strong bridging social capital plays an important element in peacebuilding mechanism, as well as it is crucial in post-conflict or multi-ethnic societies (Varshney, 2001). The positive adaptations that Myanmar Muslims develop are directly linked to the social relationships that exist between 'individuals and their community' and 'individuals and intra-communities'. The two elements of social capital are the positive relationships between individuals and their surroundings and resources they receive from the surroundings that they are living in (Burt, 1992; Mc Fadyen & Cannella, 2004).

Social Capital Theory is useful in exploring why Myanmar Muslims are able to adapt in their country in spite of having a lot of challenges. Solorzano and Yosso (2006) conceptualize 'social capital' as 'community cultural wealth' or 'culturally-based strengths. High social capital can help the people from conflicted-affected communities reduce social fragmentation and promoting a sense of community. In cohesive communities, individuals are more likely to build cross-ethnic networks, finding ways to manage tensions between groups and negotiation rather than resorting to violence (Lapsley, et.al., 2001).

### **Discussion**

Based on the collected data, all the informants in the study mentioned that Burmese Muslims have face faced a wide array of problems based on human rights deprivations. There significant challenge in Myanmar concerning with Burmese Muslims are; social exclusion, non-recognition of social identity, discriminations because of non-recognition-policy, and loss of basic rights due to denial of human rights. This study sheds light that Burmese Muslims are leading their lives as socially and educationally disadvantaged individuals. All these kinds of political instabilities and intercommunal conflicts lead to not only the humanitarian crises, but also threatens the safety and security of the nation. These findings are aligned with many findings on religious and ethnic minorities that they face potential risks in the other countries. According to the findings of this study, human rights violations have been recorded both under military regimes and under civilian governments along the political landscape of Myanmar. International organizations have examined Myanmar's human rights abuses and they have been described it as "crucial for democratic transition and national reconciliation" (Amnesty International Report, 2022). There are many Burmese Muslims who have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as well as many have been forced to flee from the native country and become refugees. Especially in the neighbouring countries of Myanmar. They have been regarded as the people who need international humanitarian assistance.

One of the objectives of this research is to identify the adaptations of Burmese Muslim community under various challenges in their unwelcoming environment. This study highlights that people from disadvantaged society can develop coping mechanisms and make positive adaptations in life. There are many overlapping findings from the previous researches that protective factors that promote the coping mechanisms for refugee individuals or ethnic minorities in dominant cultural society. The protective factors for these kinds of individuals are categorized under three domains such as 'personality attributes', 'family characteristics', and 'environmental influences. The findings from this study shows that the bonding between the same ethnic communities help them to improve their social adaptations. Another fact that has been discovered from this study is ethnic identity is significantly associated with bonding social capital and community spirit. The closeknit community gives the participants and the people in the same community a sense of empowerment and a social support. Conflict resolutions in the study have examined in line with the suggestions given by the informants in the study as well as based on the concepts of conflict resolutions suggested by the international research on ethnic conflicts or religious conflicts. Ethnic conflicts and religious conflicts, especially in developing countries have been covered under a wide array of angles and examined a variety of possible conflict resolutions for different contexts. The utterances of the interviewees state that it is essential to find ways for 'the reasons of becoming victims', the issues of the nature of the conflicts and the role of "justice" in peace process, and also the characteristics of support in obtaining resolutions have been the key components of the conflict resolutions for ethno-religious conflicts. The possible conflict

resolutions have been identified from the study. Firstly, structural change within the governing body needs to be made in terms of demolishing the religious-based identity card system, incurring hate speech and spreading anti-Muslim sentiment and recognizing self-determinations and freedom of religion and language. Secondly, there should be some reforms that are based on the principles of democratization such as the release of political prisoners, ceasefire agreements with ethnic minorities, laid plans for economic growth and greater freedoms. Thirdly, it is essential to build the positive communication and constructive relationships through developing inter-faith networks and platforms for the peacebuilding dialogues and forums. Lastly, the international pressure on the government is also needed to make changes of the policies of the country by demanding the application of laws and policies in line with the international standards, especially with regard to citizenship laws, conflict-resolution mechanisms, constitutional reforms and protection the rights of each and every citizen.

### **Implications of the Findings**

Based on the findings from disciplinary researches on religious or ethnic minorities and with the facts drawing from the present study, people from religious or ethnic minorities have been dealing with multiple challenges under discriminatory laws and policies of the country. Their challenges are linked with human rights violations, deprivation of basic needs, social conflicts etc. This research makes it clear that the negative life experiences and the stressors make these individuals resilient and are able to adapt to them to some extent. The ethnic minorities need community assistance and social support to adapt to the socio-political challenges. This study also highlights that racial, ethnic or religious issues cannot be solved by one-size-fits-all solutions. It is also need to develop policies and practices for considering each and every right, safety and security of the people in the country. In most of the developing countries in the world, people from religious minority background, including children are suffering from discriminations, inability to meet the basic needs, and fewer support systems. According to the data from this study, religious organizations, community leaders, and policymakers should find constructive solutions for peacebuilding, conflict resolutions, peaceful coexistence between different religious communities and social equality. This research sheds light that discriminatory acts upon ethnic and religious minorities should not be overlooked and there is a burning need of caring international community that gives substantial support to the lives of people from discriminated society. This study illuminates that policymakers, social scientists, and politicians need to work hand-in-hand in addressing the issues of social injustice, and human rights deprivations. This study proves to be relevant and suitable to fill the gap of the studies as more research studies on Muslims in Myanmar because some researchers state that there are a lot of issues remain unresolved and under-researched in Myanmar context (Fox, 2016; Zakariah, 2019; Kyaw, 2017).

Further researches should be undertaken to for developing constructive strategies for peacebuilding and social justice in accordance with the complex issues of countries across the globe.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the life experiences of Burmese Muslims, especially the timeframe between 2010-2020 in Myanmar. Generally, Burmese Muslims in Myanmar have gone through the challenges due to the weak rule of laws, human rights abuses and inter-religious conflicts. Even though there have been multi-dimensional challenges upon them,

they try to adapt to the challenges and the environment for many years. They face socioeconomic challenges and limitations in basic rights. Their social status is not recognized and full citizenship rights have been denied so that they face social inequality and uncertainty of lives under successive governments. Through the semi-structured interviews on the participants, and the data on document analysis, the researcher has found that the lives of religious minority in Myanmar are like the ethnic or religious minorities from developing countries of the other parts of the world. According to the previous research findings, the people from conflict-affected countries have faced hardships and difficulties but some of them are able to resist the challenges and become resilient. These individuals are identified that they make social adaptations, emotional adaptations and psychological adaptations to the incumbent challenges. The informants in the study have discussed about the possible conflict resolutions to make the country improve and develop in future. This study sheds light that the lives of ethnic or religious minorities or captive population need to be explore from multiple research angles, under different context, under different research methodologies. The data from this study reveal that the religious minority or ethnic minority population in Myanmar as well as people like them from other countries need the support of inter-faith communities and international pressures on the governments. Burmese Muslims in Myanmar are regarded as vulnerable population in the global context. The people from discriminated background have proved to be adapted well with their own sets of capabilities and assistance from the external support networks. This study represents the unique case because the lives of Burmese Muslims, including Rohingyas in Myanmar are different from the lives of people from religious minority background from other contexts and under different countries with different laws and policies. This study highlights that people from ethnic and religious minority background need protection and support. The findings from this study demonstrate that protection procedures for these religious or ethnic minorities are directly linked to the policies of country they are residing. In a large body of research on Rohingyas in Myanmar and other ethnic minorities but there are not a lot of Burmese Muslim representations in Myanmar. Most of the researches have conducted upon Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities under context-based situations. There is the scarcity of researches with recent the time frame 2010-2020, the most political changes in Myanmar political landscape. This study has filled the gap in literature by exploring the life situations of Burmese Muslims between 2010-2020 and suggesting the possible conflict resolutions. This study also gives a clear message that it is important for policy analysts, policymakers, and social scientists to find ways to bring about social justice, applications of the globally-accepted human rights principles and to eradicate discriminations on religions, races, ethnics, gender and skin colours in the world.

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