

THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN MYNAMAR: THE CASES OF ROHINGYA ETHNIC GROUPS

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Executive Summary

This study has been conducted to analyze the root causes of ethnic conflict regarding especially the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. As Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is a contemporary and crucial issue not only in South and Southeast Asia but also in the world; that is why, it has been selected as a research topic. This study is conducted in qualitative approach through employing explanatory research design. In this study, secondary sources have been used for data collection which is based on content analysis. Journal articles, published and UN published articles, television and newspaper reports are the main sources of data.

In this study it has been found that the Rohingyapeople are considered as the world's least wanted groups. They are the world's most persecuted minorities and also a large number of Rohingyas are now stateless refugees who are too much vulnerable. The main focuses of this paper is to examine the context, the root causes of ethnic conflict, and how these are linked with the interest of the different stakeholders like: the Military junta of Myanmar, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), ASEAN, Bangladesh, the Indian government, China, the UN, etc. To understand the causes and the effects of the conflict this paper is use the 'conflict tree' and the 'conflict onion' as tools to understand the positions, interest and needs of different actors.

1. Introduction

1.1 Back Ground of the study

Worldwide 70.8 million people were powerfully displaced from their home because of armed conflict, generalized violence and human rights violations. These millions of stateless people have been denied national identity and fundamental rights (education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement) (UNHCR, 2019). According to UNHCR, 67% (Two-thirds) of all the refugees worldwide belong to only five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia (UNHCR, 2019).

The Rohingya ethnic minority group is among some of those stateless people who used to live in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Myanmar is a multiethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country which has 135 official ethnic groups. All of these ethnic groups aggregated in eight major ethnic groups where Bamar's (32% of the total population) are the majority, and intrastate conflicts are often recorded between the Burmese military force and other ethnic arm groups (Stokke et al., 2018; Strömberg, 2018; François and Souris, 2018; Mithun, 2018).

In contrast, compared to the other ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, "The Rohingya conflict is highly unbalanced in terms of power, resources and military assets as the Rohingya population as a group has very few resources, military or otherwise". It is more like systematic discrimination, denial of human rights and violence, specifically against the Rohingya civilians (SIDA, 2019).

Although the conditions of the Rohingyas were not always like this. They were the citizens of Myanmar before 1962. Even they were elected as the members of the parliament, worked in the government offices and military once (Martin et al., 2017). But, the situation deteriorated periodically, and now they are not even recognised as the citizens of Myanmar (Cheesman, 2017).

The Rohingya people have a long history of being victims of mass violence and military crackdown. It occurred in different periods, notably in 1978, 1991, 1992, 2012, 2015, 2016 and 2017 (Habib, M. et al., 2018:2). These violent incidents ultimately forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to abandon their houses in the Rakhine state (UNHCR, 2018a; IOM, 2019; MSF, 2018).

However, one point to be noticed in here is that the violence of 1978, 1991, and 1992 occurred under an economically sanctioned military government where factors relating to ethnic and religious differences played the pivotal role in the conflicts (Rahman, 2015; Mithun, 2018).

So it is analyzed that Rohingya crisis is a burning issue in the world. Therefore, to understand the causes and the effects of the conflict this paper would use the tool of 'conflict tree' and the 'conflict onion' would be used as a tool to understand the positions, needs, and interests of different actors.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

According to Sassek's (2017) opinion "The world's coverage of the Rohingya ethnic group crisis has focused entirely on the religious/ethnic aspect, characterizing them as religious discrimination". Nevertheless, recently, some scholars addressed the geopolitical economic aspect of the recent Rohingya conflict in their writings (Bepler 2018:9; Fair, 2018; Ware and Laoutides, 2018:201; Sassek's, 2017).

Though, some aspect of this conflict can still be seen as under researched. Especially the resources and economic opportunities that present in Rakhine state needs in-depth assessment concerning the recent Rohingya conflict, which forcedly displaced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people from the Rakhine state. Therefore, this study is approaching the recent Rohingya conflict by determining the major causes of conflict in Myanmar in cases of Rohingya ethnic group.

1.3. Objective of the study

The objective of the paper is divided into general objective and specific objectives.

1.3.1 General Objective

The general objective of the paper was to analyze the root causes of the conflict in Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group;

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

In order to attain the general objective the paper put out to accomplish the following Specific objectives.

- To analyze the context of conflict in Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group;
- To analyze the interest of Actors who involved in the conflict of Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group;
- To analyze the major causes of conflict in Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group;

1.4. The Research Questions

In order to fulfill the objective and purpose of this assessment, the paper would attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the contexts of conflict in Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group?

- What are the interests of Actors who involved in the conflict of Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group?
- What are the major causes of conflict in Myanmar in case of Rohingya ethnic group?

1.5 Methodology of the study

The study is an explanatory type of research design that has been conducted in qualitative approach. Secondary sources have been used for data collection which is based on content analysis. Journal articles, published and unpublished researches, record of government and nongovernment organizations reports from web site, media (newspaper and television reports are the-sources-of-data.

2. Theoretical literature review in conflict causing factors

Rahman (2015) analyses the conflict in the lens of primordialism theory where the primordialist argue that people's ethnic and religious identities have profound social, historical and genetic foundations which create separate psychology, culture and values inside their ethnic and kinship surroundings. Further, he used the term 'ethno-political' to describe the Rohingya conflict. He mainly indicated on the political factors of the conflict and claimed that the political authority of Myanmar patronizing the Buddhist against the Muslim Rohingyas. According to his view, ethnic and religious differences added extra value to push this conflict beyond.

In the context that political factors influence the conflict, Ibrahim (2016) in his book *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* explained that, for the political gains the major political parties USDP, NLD are supporting the extremist Buddhist organization such as 969 movements and MaBaTha which are the heart of intercommunal violence. Likewise, the ethnic regional parties are also allied with these major political parties and extreme Buddhist group.

Notably, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (previously known as Arakan League for Democracy) whose manifesto was anti-Rohingya from the beginning has closely linked with NLD and the extreme Buddhist groups (Ibrahim, 2016).

According to Haque (2017:454), the 1982 citizenship law deprives the Rohingya nationality and fails to meet the international standard. Because of this law, the Rohingya people do not qualify for full citizenship. The enactment of 1982 citizenship law makes the Rohingya people stateless, whereas the Union Citizenship Act 1948 recognized Arakan

Muslim citizenship (Haque, 2017). Moreover, Cheesman (2017) in his writing emphasized that the idea of 'taingyi' or national races is so complicated in Myanmar which exclude the Rohingyas from the 135 ethnic groups.

Kipgen (2014), emphasised that, from the beginning of the Rohingya crisis, the Myanmar government denied all accusations and claimed that these violent incidents were the result of mistrust and religious differences between the Muslims and Buddhists.

Further, Russia suggests that other countries should not label this ongoing violence as 'ethnic cleansing' or 'genocide'. However, observing the whole situation countries like the UK, USA and France addressed the ongoing violence as 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide' (Strömberg, 2018).

According to Ware and Laoutides (2018), the political economy makes this conflict more complex and poses new significant dangers, but it is not the primary driver of the conflict (Ware and Laoutides, 2018). However, Bepler (2018) argues that complex political and economic reasons are underlying factors behind the recent violence.

According to him, the ethnic and religious view is not sufficient enough to explain the recent Rohingya conflict (Bepler, 2018). Fair and Bepler (2018) also highlighted the economic interest of China and India in Rakhine state. According to Bertil Litner, the Rakhine state becomes a strategic competition between China and India in Southeast Asia. Further, he addressed the problems as a 'The Great Game East' (Cited in Fair, 2018). Bepler's (2018) and Fair's (2018) analyses are much-related work regarding my objectives.

2.1. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The Rohingya conflict is very complex in nature; it can be explained and analyzed from different perspectives such as **an ethnic identity, religious identity, political interest, economic interest, foreign investment and natural resource extraction view**. Moreover, the conceptual and analytical framework of was utilized as a tool to analyze this study. The reason for choosing this analytical framework is to understand the main causes of conflict, actors involved in the conflict, the effects of the conflict.

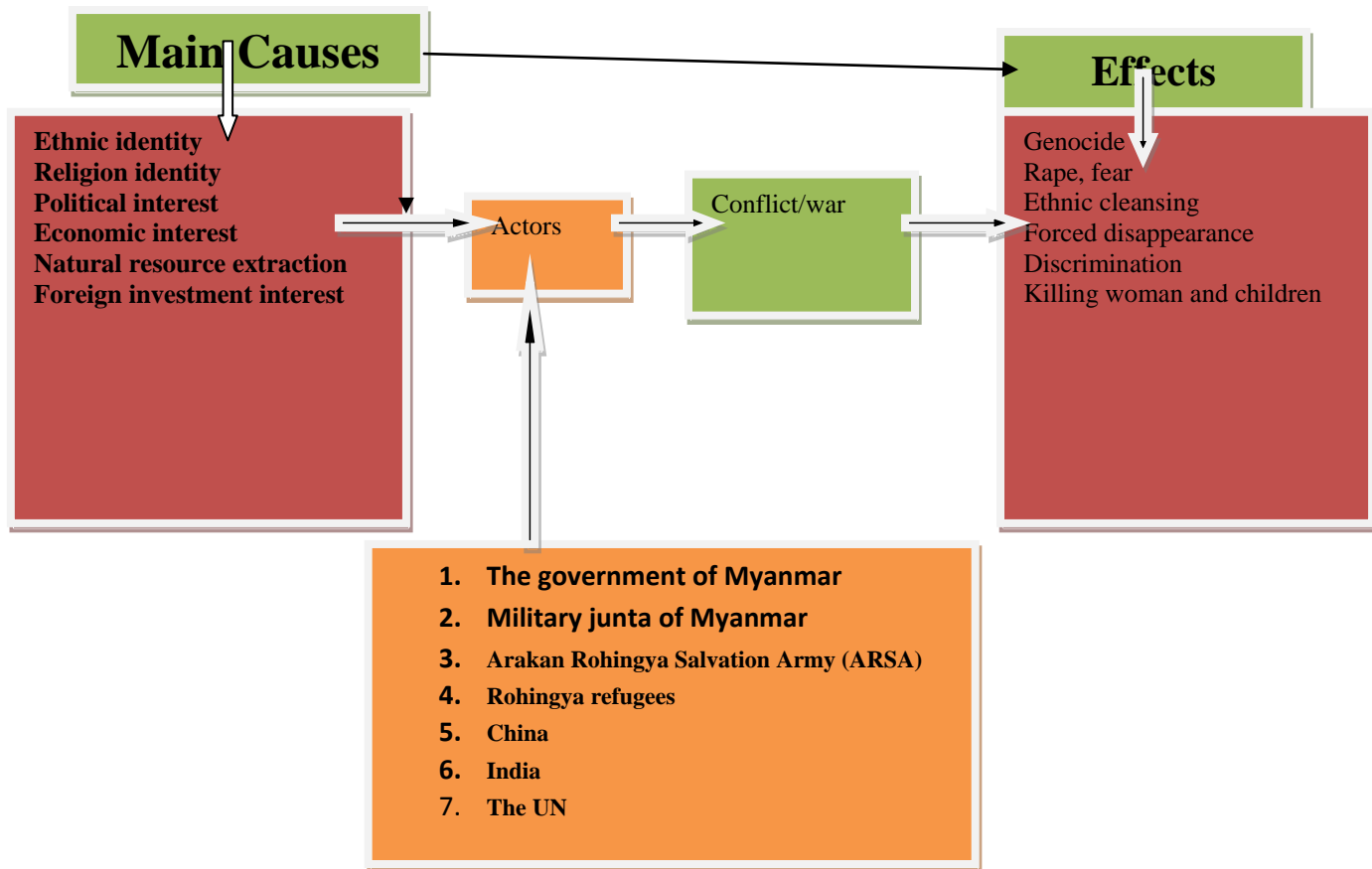


Figure 2.1. Conceptual framework

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Contextual conflict analysis and discussion of Rohingya ethnic group

The persecution against the Rohingya community has its long roots which started to grow in the 1970s and since then due to the discriminatory policies of the government of Myanmar, they were forced to leave from their homeland to Bangladesh.

A crisis started to unfold again in 2017 which resulted in the displacement of 700,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh (BBC 2018) and in total, the number is 1.3 million. It is widely considered that they were persecuted based on their religious and ethnic identity (Forino, von Meding, and Johnson 2017) but this is far away from the fact of economic and political reasons which is always sidelined in the mainstream media and scholarly works.

During this recent crisis, according to the BBC (2018), at least 6700 Rohingyas were killed among whom there were 730 were children who were under the age of five. It is also reported that Rohingya women and girls were raped and abused by the Myanmar military (HRW 2018). Based on this reports the Myanmar military responded by stating that they are fighting against the militants, not the civilians (Aung and Naing 2019).

Economic and political factors should be taken into consideration to understand the root causes of this persecution, forced displacement, and vulnerability against the Rohingya people. The poor state of Arakan is blessed with natural resources which are enough to understand why the authority of the state is so much interested in this part of Myanmar. Land grabbing in the name of development projects like: the expansion of the military base, the exploitation of the natural resources, agricultural projects, infrastructure, and tourism (Conversation 2017) is quite common in Myanmar which in turn is responsible for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas.

The strategic importance of the position of Myanmar in the world map also helped to intensify the violence against the Rohingya people. China is exploiting the timber, rivers, and minerals in the northern state of Shan since the 1990s (Mirante 2016). China has also built a transnational pipeline which connects the Sittwe (the capital of Rakhine) to Kunming (China) to transport its oil and gas to Guangzhou, China (Dhaka Tribune 2017).

India is constructing the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project through the Rakhine state of Myanmar which will connect the northeast of India through the Bay of Bengal (The Hindu 2018). According to Jason von Meding, "Myanmar had designated 3 million acres in Rakhine state for the development of the area's rich mineral resources" (Dhaka Tribune 2017). It is very evident if we see the role and the interest of India and China in this part of the world which can't deny the fact that besides religion and ethnicity the political and economic interest of Myanmar and other stakeholders are also responsible for the displacement of the Rohingya people

.3.2 Analyzing the Needs, Interests and Positions of actors in case of Rohinyga ethnic conflict

'Actors' in this paper is defined as groups or parties who have vested interests in the issue, the power to influence and a role to play (GSDRC 2017). Given the complexity of the issue, there are multiple actors' involved especially regional and international actors.

Military Junta of Myanmar: since the 1990s onwards the juntas have been taking away land from small landholders without giving any compensation from different ethnic and religious groups. The land which has been claimed to be acquired in the name of 'development' has been the work of military juntas which includes expansion of military bases, natural resource exploitation projects, agricultural projects and to foster infrastructure alongside tourism.

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA): The aim and goal of ARSA is in line with the self-defense of their people and protecting the Rohingya people against state oppression (BBC 2017).

The government of India: Along with energy interests and plans to build cross-border pipelines, India also has a connectivity interest to link its landlocked north-eastern region with the Bay of Bengal through Rakhine State under a joint project with Myanmar that includes development of port at Sittwe, inland waterway in the Kaladan River, and road construction to connect it with India's Northeast (Yhome 2018).

The government of China: China has economic interest that means she invested US\$2.45 billion to construct the pipeline from Rakhine to China's Yunnan province to import crude oil from the Middle Eastern countries to China (AFP 2017).

The United Nations: The UN has advised the Security Council to pressurize Myanmar to end the sufferings of the refugees as "The United Nations Human Rights Council stepped up pressure to punish Myanmar's military commanders for a brutal campaign against Rohingya Muslims" (Bruce 2017).

The role of ASEAN: Different ASEAN members like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar are yet to ratify the refugee convention of the UN or its protocol (Albert and Chatzky 2018) and they lack a coordinated effort and an established legal framework to deal with the refugee crisis.

To sum up, the "**Onion framework**" method is applied to illustrate the complexity of conflict and to analyze the actor's positions, interests and the most crucial needs of parties.

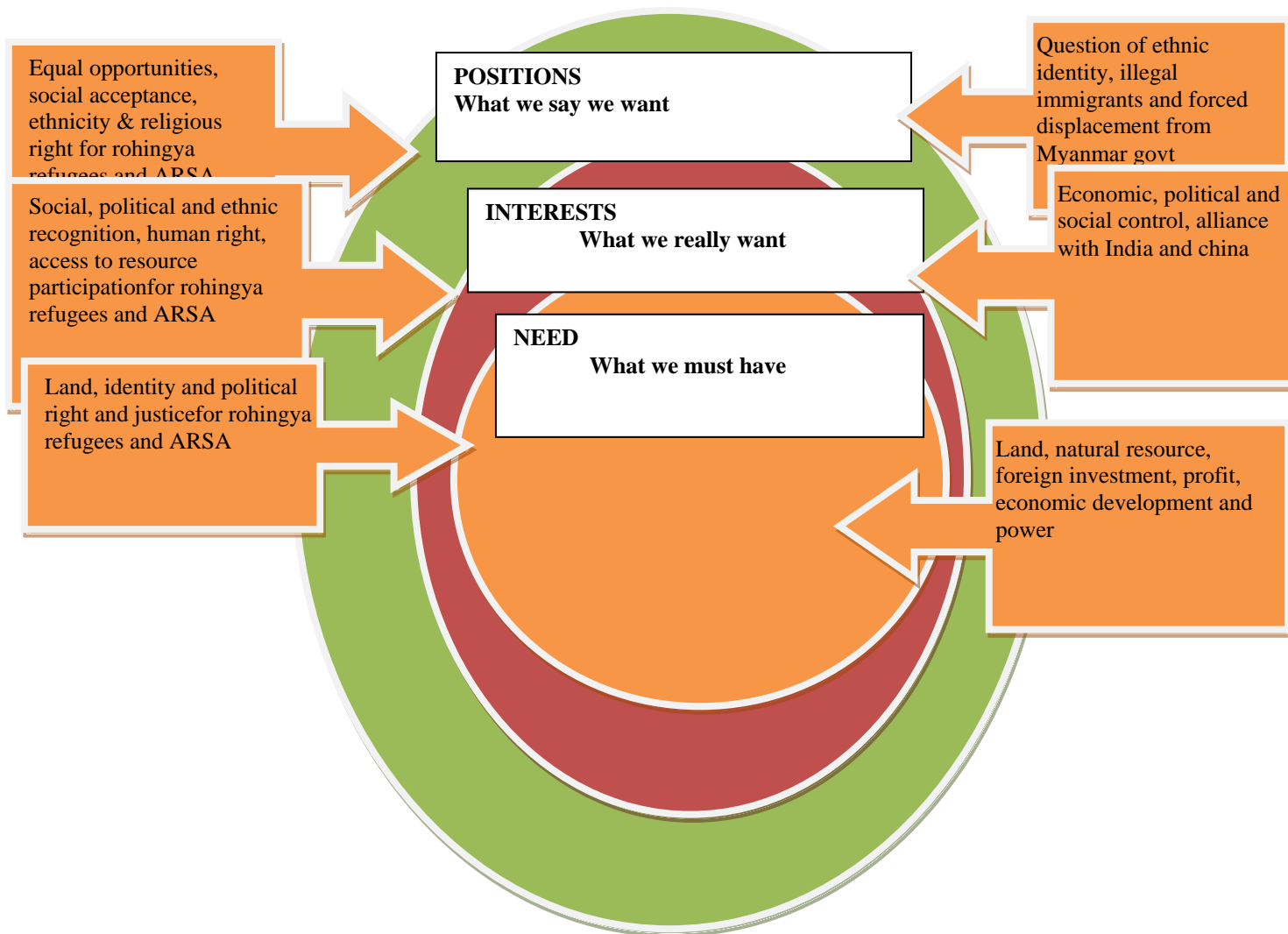


Figure 3.1: Onion actor analysis- Actors' positions, Interests, and needs

3.3. Analyzing and discussing the causes of conflict in Rohingya ethnic group

3.3.1. The structural causes of the conflict

The structural causes of the conflict are mainly religious and ethnic differences. The Rohingya crisis first came to the forefront in 1977-1978 which was the beginning of the forced displacement against this ethnic community (Doctors without Borders 2017). Since then the crackdown on the community has taken place at regular intervals; early 1990s to the recent mass exodus from August 25th, 2017. But why has the community been targeted time and time again? What is the cause behind the Rohingya crisis?

The UN has called the crisis a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". This is a targeted crackdown on an ethnic and religious minority group. After Myanmar won independence from British rule in 1948 the Muslim population began a rebellion in the Rakhine State to

seek equal rights and autonomy of the region. This was strongly pushed back by the government and is believed to have further cemented the point of contention between the two major religious groups within the region.

Rising Islamophobia also gave the Buddhist fundamentalists a reason to further the agenda of how the Rohingyas were a threat to the predominantly Buddhist culture of the country. The fact that neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia are also predominantly Muslim helped to further their point of how they had to protect their own culture from the Muslims. Attacks by the ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) are also being used to prove how dangerous Rohingyas are to Myanmar. The last crackdown on Rohingyas on August 25th was also started after an ARSA attack on 30 security posts of Myanmar. Based on the religion and ethnicity of the Rohingyas the Myanmar government is continuing to discriminate and target them to kill them or scare them into leaving the country. Human Rights Watch's Thapa agrees, arguing that what makes this new wave of anti-Rohingya attacks worse than in previous years is how coordinated they are. "It feels like a program designed to drive out everyone finally," she said (Persio 2017).

3.3.2. Proximal Reasons for conflict

So, it is safe to say that religion and ethnicity of Rohingyas are the reason that the Myanmar government has been targeting them. However, is that the only reason? Myanmar has a total of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. The Rohingyas were taken out of this group only in 1989. A deeper look into the matter unveils an even more complicated reason behind the recent attacks on Rohingyas. A fight for resources and development of Myanmar seems to also be making matters worse for the Rohingyas. Rakhine state is one of the poorest (the second poorest) of Myanmar's states despite being natural resources rich.

When the new government came to power, Myanmar's zeal for economic development also came in the forefront. It is stuck between two very competitive rising economic powers, China and India who are both in need of natural resources to expand their economies. Land is one of the major factors of production and since 1990s Myanmar has been acquiring vast stretches of land from smallholders using threat and no compensation. Interestingly, the allotment of lands in the Rakhine region has gone up to a 1,268,077 hectares (3,100,000 acres) in the Rohingya's area for corporate rural development compared to the first such formal allocation which was in 2012, for just 7,000 hectares (17,000 acres) (Sassen 2017).

The first is, expelling them from their land is a way of freeing up the region's land and water. By burning their homes this process is made irreversible. Secondly, a focus on religious difference mobilizes passions around religion, rather than aiming, let's say, at creating pressure on the government to stop evictions of all smallholders, no matter their religion (Sassen 2017).

Furthermore, the “**conflict tree**” is used to analyze the underlining causes, core problems and effects of the conflict

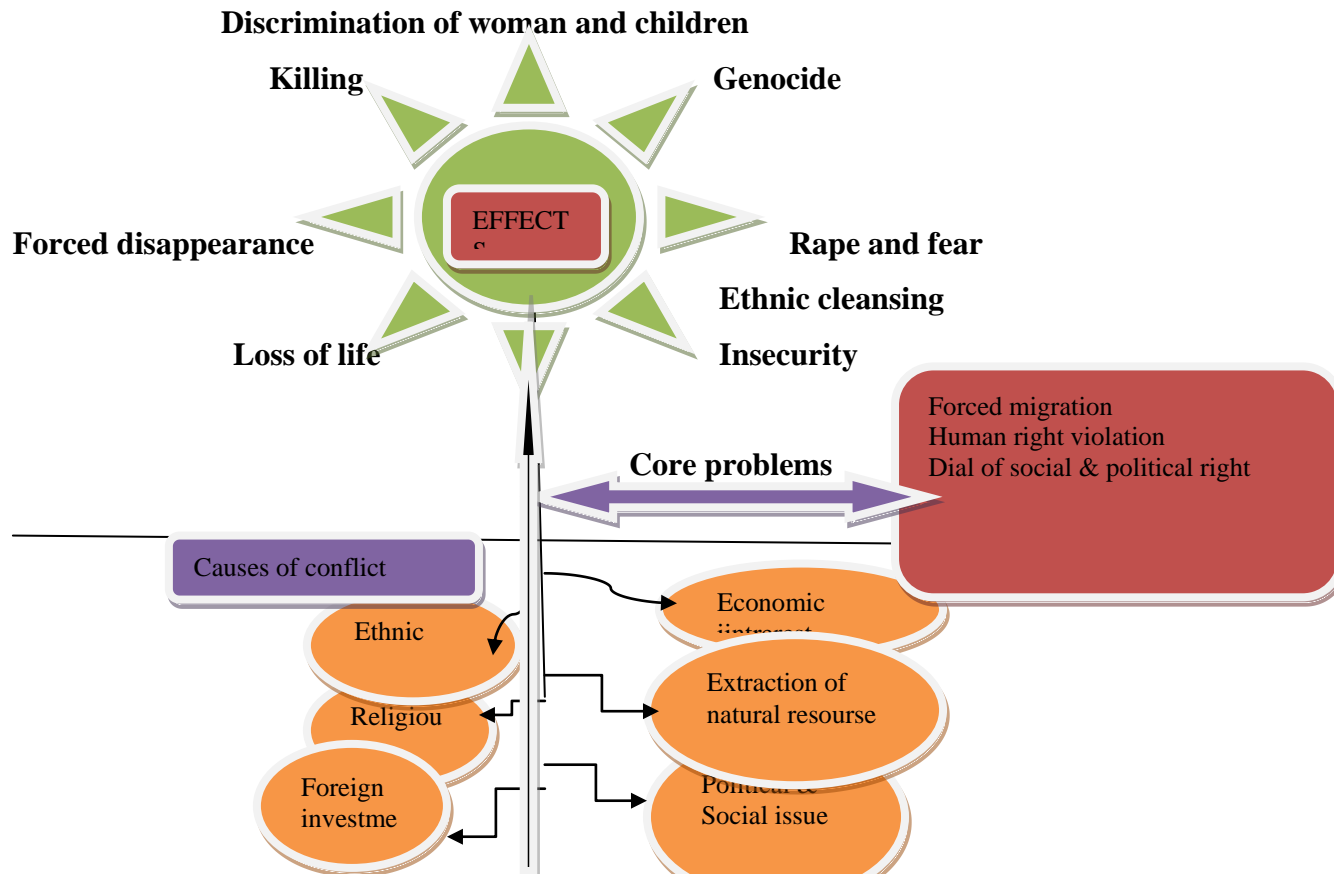


Figure 3.2: Conflict tree to visualize the reasons of the conflict

4. Results and Conclusions

4.1. Results

Several outcomes have been identified from this study. These are: (a) The Rohingya People have been considered as among the world's least wanted and one of the world's most suppressed ethnic groups; because they are deprived from their fundamental rights (citizenship) both in their motherland and refugee camps. (b) Rohingya crisis starts with the denial of their self identity and security. (c) A large number (about 3, 40,000) of the Rohingya people have been stateless refugees and their future are on to uncertainty. Among the refugees, about 80 percent are unregistered and 24 percent of them are in

extreme malnutrition in the camps of Bangladesh and Thailand. Besides, about 60 percent of the refugees are almost in miseries from adequate legal, employment and aid facilities.

4.2. Conclusions

There have been stated that the Rohingya people had been considered as one of the world's most persecuted minorities. It is studied that they are not well assisted and supported from the aid organizations around the world. They have been deprived of humanitarian rights from their state and social authorities. The international human rights organizations are concerned of their humanitarian needs, but they are not adequate. Security is an important issue in the world.

So, it is suggested that the Rohingya crisis is to be well resolved by global authority shortly. Conflict resolution training, reconciliation and forgiveness education, conflict transformation, diplomacy, forming various organizations by the Rohingyas may be solution paths of their problems. Rohingya refugees are one kind of burden for Bangladesh as it is a populated developing country in the world. However, it tries the best to do something for the sake of the refugees. In these situations Myanmar should come forward to resolve the problem responding the claims of global communities.

Moreover, it is tough to say that what kind of scenarios can be developed to improve the situation and the lives of the Rohingya. Pressure from the international community on Myanmar should be continued and actions should be taken by the General Assembly instead of the Security Council to deny the veto power of China and to pass a resolution against Myanmar. This will enable the UN to establish peace (**'capacities for peace'**) through which they might be able to restore the rights of the Rohingya people. In the worst-case scenario, ARSA might attack the security forces again to take revenge which might lead the Myanmar government to be more ferocious against the remaining Rohingya people in Myanmar.

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