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Arakan Army: Myanmar's New Front of Conflict

By Iftekharul Bashir

Synopsis

The Arakan Army (AA) is a relatively new addition to conflict in western Myanmar, a region that has seen much unrest in recent years. Singapore's 10 July 2019 announcement of the arrests of AA supporters raises questions about the outfit and its support among Rakhine Buddhists in confronting the Myanmar authorities.

Commentary

ON 10 JULY 2019, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs announced that several Myanmar nationals are to be deported from Singapore after mobilising support for "armed violence against the Myanmar government". Though the announcement did not specify the number of persons arrested, at least one of the individuals investigated reportedly has a direct relationship with a key AA leader.

The AA is an ethnic armed organisation in western Myanmar, founded a decade ago along with its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA). The group claims to be fighting for greater autonomy of the Rakhine Buddhist people. The arrests in Singapore unveil an important aspect of AA's capability: support from Rakhines both at home and overseas. The AA's clashes with the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar military, in the first half of 2019 has seen it using both traditional guerilla and terrorist tactics.

Arakan Dream 2020: Motivations of the Arakan Army

Earlier on 22 June, the group had carried out a rocket attack on a Myanmar Navy tugboat in Sittwe, Rakhine State killing two security personnel and injuring another. According to the Tatmadaw, the rockets were reportedly fired from the shore, and was the first attack on a navy vessel in the coastal state.

The AA has a Rakhine nationalist agenda that includes self-determination, safeguarding Rakhine Buddhist identity and cultural heritage and the development of the state, one of the country's poorest. The AA espouses "the way of Rakhita", a rallying cry among Rakhine nationalists that evokes memories of the once powerful Arakan kingdom that was defeated by the Bamar Konbaung dynasty in 1784.

Commemorating the anniversary of the fall of the Arakan Kingdom has become a new way of expressing Rakhine nationalism. Another rallying cry is "Arakan Dream 2020", in which it aims to achieve self-determination by the end of 2020.

The Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan) was an independent kingdom until it was annexed (1784–85) by the Konbaung dynasty of Myanmar. From the 1950s, there was a growing movement for secession and restoration of Arakan independence. In 1974, to appease separatist forces, the socialist government under General Ne Win constituted 'Rakhine State' from Arakan Division, an acknowledgment to the regional majority of the Rakhine Buddhist people. This did not result in any major change, however.

Rakhine remains one of Myanmar's poorest states – 78 percent of the population live below the poverty line (nearly double the national average). China has been investing heavily in projects within the Rakhine State, including a deep-sea port and a gas pipeline to Yunnan. However, locals have seemingly not seen any positive benefits.

An August 2017 report by a government-backed commission on Rakhine's troubles, led by former UN chief Kofi Annan, echoed alarm about who was really benefiting from the investments. The report stated that, "profit tends to be shared between Naypyidaw and foreign companies, and as a consequence, local communities often perceive the government as exploitative". Hence, the sense of exclusion from socio-economic development has created new grievances, contributing as an additional trigger to Rakhine nationalism. Consequently, the AA enjoys widespread support among the Rakhine majority, particularly the poor.

Alliances and Ties

The AA currently has 7,000 to 10,000 cadres, with a significant portion being women. Many AA troops are drawn from ethnic Rakhine workers in Kachin State. The group has a sleek presence on social media and a strong following among the Rakhine diaspora overseas.

The AA's strength lies in alliances with other ethnic armed organisations, collectively known as the Northern Alliance that brings support in terms of arms, ammunitions, training and sanctuary. The alliance members also have a standing agreement to help each other when under attack. However, since January 2019, the AA has been fighting the Tatmadaw alone as other members seemed cautious about engaging in Rakhine state.

Sources close to the Myanmar government believe that the AA wants to establish a sizeable force in the Rakhine State to emulate the autonomy that the United Wa State Army (UWSA) enjoys in Wa areas near the Myanmar-China border. This has also

been reflected in the remarks by the AA Deputy Chief, Brigadier-General Nyo Tun Aung.

There are reports that the AA often uses Bangladeshi territory due to the inaccessibility of the terrain along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area. The AA has also taken advantage of kinship ties among some members in the area. In Bangladesh, the AA appears to be active in the southeastern districts of Bandarban and Rangamati and has gained traction within the Rakhine population due to kinship ties.

Some reports indicate that the AA had created a shadowy platform named Magh Liberation Party (MLP or Magh Liberation Party) in 2010 to recruit Rakhines based in Bangladesh. In 2015, the Bangladeshi authorities carried out a coordinated operation against the AA, which involved the Border Guards of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Army and Bangladesh Air Force.

Formidable Threat: Funding and Arms

While a portion of the AA's funding is likely provided by their Rakhine supporters both within and beyond the country, Myanmar authorities have accused the AA of smuggling drugs to fund its army. The raw materials for drug manufacturing are sourced from China via the UWSA controlled areas in Shan State.

Reports mention that AA has managed to ensure a secure route for drug-smuggling by exploiting the corruption and inefficiency of Myanmar's law enforcement agencies. The AA uses heavy weapons, IEDs and landmines, with sources confirming that the group is currently receiving weapons from UWSA.

In addition, many of the weapons used by AA are mostly manufactured by the UWSA or of Chinese origin. It also purchases them on the black market at the Thai-Myanmar border, according to sources close to the matter. Analysts also suggest that the AA might purchase weapons from Kuki rebels on the Myanmar-India border.

The AA will remain a formidable threat to Myanmar in the short and mid-term with its continued dependence on the Northern Alliance's supply of finances, weapons and sanctuaries. Myanmar may have better firepower but the terrain, both geographic and human, is favourable to the AA.

While Singapore's deportation of the Myanmar citizens with links to the AA is a decisive action for the security of the city-state, Myanmar needs to find a way to engage the Rakhine population on its concerns, beyond quelling the insurgency. Failing to do so might be fatal for western Myanmar which may remain restive beyond the mid-term.

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