Ethno-Demographic Dynamics of the Rohingya-Buddhist Conflict

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Ethno-demographic grievances define the conflict between Buddhist and Rohingya-Muslim populations in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Nationalistic Buddhist leaders, such as the controversial monk Ashin Wirathu, maintain that the Rohingya population’s rapid growth and high fertility rates threaten to overtake local Buddhist populations, reflecting local Rakhine State sentiments. This study seeks to identify quantitative and qualitative differences between the Rohingya and Buddhist populations in Rakhine State and to elucidate the theoretical and practical implications for Buddhist-Rohingya relations. Due to the government’s decision to avoid the enumeration of self-identifying Rohingya, this study has relied on several recent local surveys to reconstruct a local demographic description of the Rohingya. The “Demographic Security Dilemma” theory, which specifies expectations for minority-majority conflicts and their resolution, will be used to discuss the relevant forces that underlie the Buddhist-Rohingya conflict.

Conflict between Buddhist and Rohingya-Muslim populations in Rakhine State, Myanmar are defined by ethno-demographic grievances. Nationalistic Buddhist leaders, such as the controversial monk Ashin Wirathu, maintain that the Rohingya population’s rapid growth and high fertility rates threaten to overtake local Buddhist populations; the Myanmar government has responded to related concerns by targeting the Rohingya with oppressive policies, including childbirth restrictions for Rohingya women. This study seeks to identify actual quantitative differences between the Rohingya

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and Buddhist populations in Rakhine State and to elucidate their theoretical and practical implications for Buddhist-Rohingya relations. Due to the Myanmar government’s decision to avoid the enumeration of self-identifying Rohingya, this study relies on several recent local surveys to reconstruct a localized demographic understanding of the Rohingya population and finds that the Rohingya population is growing at a rate 1.5 times greater than that of most other ethnic groups in Myanmar. The “Demographic Security Dilemma” theory, which outlines expectations for minority-majority conflicts and their resolution, will be used to discuss the forces that underlie the Buddhist-Rohingya conflict.²

Introduction

Recent communal conflict in the Rakhine State of Myanmar has culminated in the displacement of the Rohingya community—a Muslim minority living in the northwestern regions of the Rakhine State. Related communal violence, including the Rakhine State riots in 2012, have resulted in the destruction of Rohingya homes and have led to a recent wave of Rohingya “boat people” seeking refuge along the shorelines and coastal waterways of neighboring Southeast Asian nations. Along with communal conflict, the Rohingya are routine targets of oppressive governmental policies. While many of Myanmar’s 135 ethnic groups have been on the receiving end of related policies, the Rohingya have been especially affected due to their singular religious minority status and perceived immigrant origin.

Studies on the Rohingya and ethnic conflict provide insight into the dynamics of communal conflict in Rakhine State. Studies focused on the Rohingya population reveal that governmental policies cause marginalization,³ with communal conflict fueled by a competition for natural resources⁴ as well as a desire to protect the Burmese Buddhist identity (communalism).⁵ More general ethnic studies reveal that concerns over safety,⁶ migratory flows, and the legacy of colonialism are also ingredients for ethnic conflict.⁷ Although these studies provide cogent insight and support the discussion of this analysis, they inadequately address a key concern of regional demography. In Myanmar, the majority Buddhist population perceives the Muslim minority as a security threat based on differentials in population growth. Particularly acute in the Rakhine State, where

² A previous version of this paper was first published in the Georgetown Security Studies Review.
the Rohingya occupy approximately thirty percent of the total population, nationalists and locals alike support claims that high fertility and rapid population growth rates threaten to overwhelm local Buddhist communities. Such fears highlight the relationship between ethnicity and demography.

The interplay of demographic and regional ethnic relations reflects significant differences between Rohingya and Buddhist communities in the Rakhine State. A quantitative representation of these relations will contribute to previous Rohingya-focused scholarship and provide additional insight toward addressing communal violence in the Rakhine State. In examining demographic differentials between Rohingya-Muslims and Rakhine-Buddhists, this study asks the following question: “How do the total fertility rate, age structure, and rate of growth of the Rohingya compare to that of Rakhine citizens, to Myanmar’s total population, and to other distinct ethnic groups in the country?” To answer this question, this study seeks to verify whether the Rohingya’s total fertility rate and population growth rate are statistically different from those of other ethnic populations in Myanmar, as the claim that the Rohingya’s fertility rate exceeds that of the rest of Myanmar’s citizens is often used as a basis for perpetuating anti-Muslim sentiment within Myanmar.

A paucity of available data poses a significant challenge to the development of a comprehensive demographic study of the Rohingya. For example, previous restrictive governmental policies limited access to demographic data in Myanmar, and the country’s 2014 census did not include detailed information on the Rohingya (the census merely provided estimates on the number of non-enumerated persons in each state). However, for the purposes of this study, a rough estimate of Rohingya fertility and age structure can be constructed through the use of published estimates on the minority population’s birth rates and death rates.

This study uses age structures (established and reconstructed) to determine demographic changes (i.e., crude birth rate, total fertility rate, growth rate) among the Rohingya and similar youthful populations, finding that the Rohingya have a younger population and are growing at a rate 1.5 times faster than that of both Myanmar as a whole and of the total population of Rakhine State. Based on the “Demographic Security Dilemma,” a political-demographic model advanced by Christian Leuprecht, this study argues that as the Rohingya population growth rate outpaces that of other ethnic groups, the perceived threat of absolute and/or cultural extinction can escalate into a cyclical relationship of fear and response among regional stakeholders.

This paper consists of the following six sections: background, theoretical framework, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion. The background section provides a brief historical account of conflict in the northern Rakhine State since Myanmar’s declaration

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of independence. The next section provides an overview of the field of political demography and expounds upon the Demographic Security Dilemma. The second, third, and fourth sections present methods, findings, and a discussion in which an ethno-demographic analysis of the Rohingya population elucidates differences between Rohingya and Myanmar citizen age structures, thus providing insight into the social, political, and economic consequences of Rohingya demography. The last section of the paper identifies potential shortcomings of this analysis, areas for future research, and policy implications.

It should be briefly noted here that the objective application of terminology related to ethnic relations in Myanmar requires specific definitions that preclude contentious biases. To respect the views of ethnic groups and opposition parties, yet resist the sway of obfuscating political changes, references will employ terminology from authoritative international bodies, including the United Nations and the World Bank. Myanmar officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, which are dispersed throughout the nation. However, large concentrations of ethnic minorities live in their namesake ethnic states of Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. A comparative study on all ethnic groups is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, this study assumes that ethnic composition coincides with regional ethnic designations (i.e., people of the Karen ethnicity live in the Karen State, people of the Mon ethnicity in the Mon State, etc.).

Background

Widespread persecution since independence in 1948 and the subsequent restriction of citizenship rights have contributed to Rohingya suffering. In a manner similar to other ethnic groups at the time of independence, the Rohingya sought regional autonomy, either in the form of secession or as a separate administrative state. Initially, Rohingya political activists pursued succession from Burma via unification with the newly formed Pakistan; however, agreements between the leaders of Pakistan and Burma prevented this aspiration from being realized. While moderate Rohingyas tried to engage with the government, extremist Rohingya groups formed an armed group (a mujahideen) that threatened the relationship between the Myanmar government and Rohingya moderates. By 1954, the government initiated Operation Monsoon, which factionalized the mujahideen by assassinating its leaders and imprisoning its supporters. By 1961, Rohingya leaders agreed to the formation of the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) as proposed by Prime Minister U Nu. The MFA was to govern

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13 Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 51.
townships in the northern Rakhine State and to create a separate administrative division controlled by Muslims within the Buddhist Rakhine administration. However, the coup of 1962 ended Muslim hopes of self-administration, thwarting further political engagement and significantly restricting the armed activities of the Rohingya.\(^{14}\)

In 1962, General Ne Win implemented a Burmanization policy that was designed to centralize and legitimize the government while uniting the country under a single national identity. This policy intertwined social and economic mobility with assimilation into the Burmese culture, thus dismantling the successes that minority ethnic leaders, including the Rohingya, achieved under former Prime Minister U Nu.\(^{15}\) At this time, citizenship rights were also lost as the new administration issued Foreign Registration Cards (FRC) to the Rohingya.\(^{16}\) Operation Naga Min (Dragon King) of 1978, a demographic campaign aimed at discriminating between citizens, foreigners and illegal foreigners, further restricted Rohingya citizenship by identifying them as illegal foreigners.\(^{17}\) The government cemented its anti-Rohingya stance with the 1982 Citizenship Law. This legislation anchored discrimination against the Rohingya in national systems—political, social and economic—by formally establishing their status as illegal foreigners.\(^{18}\) In 1991, the government launched Operation Pyi Thaya (Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation) in response to political demonstrations in the Rakhine State.\(^{19}\) Operations Naga Min and Pyi Thaya triggered widespread persecution against the Rohingya, resulting in mass refugee migration across the Bangladeshi border. Recent communal violence has also contributed to the ongoing flight of Rohingya refugees from the northern Rakhine State.

**Theoretical Framework**

A preliminary analysis of the ethnic tensions in the Rakhine State correctly attributes the plight of the Rohingya to widespread persecution and denial of citizenship rights from both government and civil actors; however, an in-depth assessment uncovers additional government involvement that has contributed to the struggles of the Rohingya minority. Reports from the Irish Centre for Human Rights\(^{20}\) and Amnesty International\(^{21}\) identify governmental policies as a key contributor to human rights abuses against the Rohingya. The focus of these policies include—but are not limited to—forced labor, restrictions to movement, the confiscation of land, population control,

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16 Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 56.
17 Ibid., 55.
20 Schabas, "Crimes against Humanity in Western Burma."
and the curtailment of religious practices. Simpson argues that the exploitation of natural resources in the Rakhine state exacerbates insecurity, as disagreements over the distribution of natural resources undermine attempts at peacebuilding between the government and minority groups.\textsuperscript{22} Related disputes in turn lead to a perceived lack of resources among the Rakhine minority, thereby increasing resource competition and conflict among minority groups in the Rakhine State. Walton and Hayward explore the relationship between “religious” conflict and monastic mobilization in Myanmar as well as the role that anti-Muslim propaganda from groups such as U Wirathu, the 969 Movement, and the MaBaTha play in the conflict.\textsuperscript{23} The authors find that ethno-religious violence in Myanmar, rooted in communalism, belies the defense of religion; rather, the preservation of Burmese Buddhist identity explains the violence. In terms of studies on ethnic conflict, Lake and Rothchild posit that fears of safety instigate inter-ethnic conflict, aggravated by political activists and misinformation.\textsuperscript{24} Finally, Fuller et al. develop a method to measure and assess the potential for ethnic conflict and identify three “global megatrends”—the intensification of migratory flows, higher population growth rates of minorities vis-à-vis majority ethnic groups, and the legacy of colonialism—that intensify the threat of ethnic conflict.\textsuperscript{25}

Although some recent studies touch on the correlation between demography and ethnic conflict,\textsuperscript{26} few focus on that relationship within Myanmar. One study that does address Myanmar, conducted by David Dapice, attributes the inaccurate perception of a growing Rohingya population to the reality of rural-to-urban migration among young Rakhine citizens, which has increased the concentration of the Rohingya in rural Rakhine.\textsuperscript{27} However, the crux of his study focuses on the benefits of converting to a federalist form of governance and does not present an in-depth analysis of the demographic composition in the Rakhine State. Even outside of Myanmar, demography remains underrepresented in political science and foreign policy despite the influence that demographic factors have on politics, internal conflicts, and economic changes. Political demography, defined as “the study of the size, composition, and distribution of

\textsuperscript{22} Simpson, “Identity, Ethnicity and Natural Resources in Myanmar.”
\textsuperscript{23} Walton and Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist narratives.”
\textsuperscript{24} Lake and Rothchild, “Containing Fear,” 41-75.
\textsuperscript{25} Fuller et al., “Measuring Potential Ethnic Conflict in Southeast Asia,” 305-331.
\textsuperscript{27} David Dapice, “A Fatal Distraction from Federalism-Religious Conflict in Rakhine,” Department of Economics, Tufts University (October 2014): 5.
population in relation to both government and politics," identifies patterns of political identity, conflict, and change through statistical analyses of human populations. A thorough understanding of such patterns stemming from influential demographic factors (e.g., data and statistics on birth, death, fertility, and population growth) would aid in formulating social policies for the public good in areas such as early childhood education, maternal health, and the empowerment of women.

Political-demographic models, therefore, are highly pertinent to voiced demographic issues in Myanmar. One particularly relevant demographic framework, Christian Leuprecht’s “Demographic Security Dilemma,” can be applied to the situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar. This model incorporates a phenomenon known as the “youth bulge,” revealing the probability of tensions occurring between populations at the sub-national level based on differentials in population growth. Typically, a “youth bulge” occurs as high fertility rates result in a growing population that in turn places stress on national political and economic systems. “Youthful” nations (i.e., nations with a median age of ≤ 25.0 years) face a proliferation of intrastate conflict and civil war due to an excess number of restive young men who are prone to violent behavior and political activism. Based on the “youth bulge” concept, Leuprecht’s model analyzes the interactions of a politically dominant low-fertility population and a large, more youthful minority, using the Israel-Palestine conflict as a case study. Leuprecht finds that this demographic relationship results in a cyclical action-reaction relationship of fear and response between two distinct populations.

The dilemma posed by Leuprecht can be represented through the following four stages (see Figure 1). First, the minority population maintains a higher fertility rate than the majority population. Second, the politically dominant majority perceives that the “youthful” minority population will overtake and possibly displace the majority. This perceived threat takes one or more different forms: fear of extinction in absolute numbers, fear of extinction in relation to surrounding ethnic groups, fear of cultural extinction, and/or fear of subjugation to other ethnic groups. Third, the majority’s fear of displacement triggers vocal and/or physical reactions toward the minority amid calls for government action. At this point, the government may either implement welfare policies—such as family planning or women’s education—and thus end the cycle, or

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30 The youth bulge family at the subnational level analyzes the relationship between the age structure of the majority and the age structure of an ethno-religious minority. Conflicts among subnational groups can occur when one of three circumstances are met: (1) both the majority and minority are youthful; (2) the majority is youthful and the minority is intermediate/mature; or (3) the majority is intermediate/mature and the minority is youthful. The Demographic Security Dilemma is an example of the third listed circumstance.
Figure 1. The Cycle of the “Demographic Security Dilemma”

The Demographic Security Dilemma is a cycle of action and reaction between various stakeholders (e.g., a marginalized minority group, a politically-dominant majority, and a national government). As the cycle progresses and grievances remain unanswered, violence—and even civil war—may break out among different ethnic groups.


continue with the fourth step: the implementation of stringent population-control policies (e.g., limiting the number of children per woman). If more stringent policies are enforced, such a response leads back to the first phase of the cycle, as these policies limit opportunities for women and reduce access to healthcare, thereby ensuring sustained high fertility and population growth rates. As this cycle progressively repeats and the minority’s grievances remain unanswered, marginalization of the minority could escalate into violence and/or civil war. Leuprecht suggests that the cyclical relationship of conflict between a young, marginalized minority population and an older, politically dominant majority population can only be resolved through the enactment of welfare policies, a policy option which will be discussed later in this paper.

Methods

To determine demographic differences with limited available data, this study establishes a possible Rohingya age structure based on the factors of crude birth rate (CBR),
crude death rate (CDR), total fertility rate (TFR), and median age; utilizes various sources of data and demographic tools (as enumerated below); and compares Rohingya data with that of the Union of Myanmar and that of individual states in Myanmar. In terms of demographic data, the 2014 Myanmar Census provided country-level data as well as related information on individual states, and a series of publications from the UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) extrapolated Rohingya demographic data from a single urban locality (Maungdaw Township) in the Rakhine State. Additionally, a table of stable populations reflects a possible Rohingya age structure based on statistics from the aforementioned CEDAW publications. Model life tables and tables of stable populations (populations with an unvarying age structure growing at a constant annual rate), as presented by Coale and Demeny, provide life and growth rate tables based on a cross-boundary data collection that can be used to examine trends in birth and mortality rates, in which mortality and sex-age structure remain constant. These tables aid in understanding population changes for situations in which there is a lack of information on a specific population.

Population pyramids, the primary demographic tool used for this study, are often used to represent age structures. An age structure measures the distribution of a population based on age and gender, and it can also reveal the median age of a population. Age structures are divided into five-year birth cohorts (people born in the same year or period), with each cohort—divided by gender—representing a proportion of the living population. Past analyses of “youthful” age structures have shown that if a population has a large proportion of young people (≤ 25.0 years), then that population will continue to grow even during periods of fertility decline as the proportion of women in childbearing years remains high.

CBR (number of births per 1000 people) provides a measure of growth based on the total number of births within a population; CDR (number of deaths per 1,000 people) denotes the rate of decline based on the total number of deaths within a population.

32 CEDAW identified Maungdaw Township, the primary township in northern Rakhine, as having a total population of 511,785, of whom 90.4 percent were identified as Bengali. In the 2014 Census, the Union of Myanmar identified the Rohingya as “Bengali.” The CEDAW publication described this “Bengali” population as Muslims in the northern Rakhine State; thus, these Bengali are assumed to be Rohingya.


While these two factors alone reveal little about the dynamics of a population, in the case of this data-limited study, the application of CBR and CDR to a stable-population table will be used to construct an estimated population age structure for the Rohingya.\(^{38}\)

Total fertility rate (TFR)—a common parameter in political demography which provides a more robust assessment of population growth and change than CBR and CDR—measures “the total number of children that a woman would be expected to have if she lived out her entire child-bearing years and had the average number of children at each stage of her life as the overall average experience of all women in her society.”\(^{39}\) Thus, TFR describes population growth and fertility based on the potential for women to have a certain number of children under the strictures of extraneous variables, such as family planning, contraception, women’s education, etc.

Finally, the median age of a population—“the age at which exactly half the population is older and half is younger”\(^{40}\)—is a parameter that can be used to sort a population into one of the following categories: “youthful” (e.g., the Rohingya), “intermediate” (e.g., Myanmar at the national level), or “mature” (e.g., the United States). As there is no available median age data on the Rohingya, this study yields an estimated median age for the population based on an extrapolated Rohingya age structure.

The combination of age structure, TFR, and median age can be used to generate a more nuanced interpretation of the Rohingya population. To assess the robustness of these measures, this study utilizes two methods of verification: (1) winsorizing and trimming of a linear regression of the TFR as a function of CBR and (2) a cluster analysis of age structures for Myanmar states (see Figure 6). The linear regression of the TFR from Myanmar states identifies trends and extrapolates a possible range for the Rohingya TFR. Winsorization and trimming techniques limit extreme values in the statistical data to reduce the effect of outliers. The linear regression of the dependent variable TFR as a function of CBR utilizes trimmed data (p=10%) of TFR and CBR for Burmese states (n=16). The six iterations of the regression of trimmed data combinations omits possible outliers, yielding the six respective coefficients of determination (R²) ranging from .89851 to .96734.\(^{41}\) Additionally, cluster analyses verify similarities and differences within a dataset of age structures of Myanmar states. The clustering for similar characteristics of 16 variables (Myanmar States and Rohingya for TBR and CBR) employ the Nearest Neighbor (Single Linkage) Clustering Method utilizing the Euclidean Distance Metric. The procedure identifies each variable as a separate group and then combines the two closest variables to form a new group. After recomputing

\(^{38}\) In an ideal case, in which accurate demographic records were available, actual age structures, TFR, and/or growth rates would be used to understand relationships between populations.


\(^{40}\) Haupt et al., PRB’s Population Handbook, 4.

the distance between the groups, the clustering algorithm then combines the next two closest groups. This process is repeated until only three groups remain.42

Results

This study determines a Rohingya age structure, TFR, and possible rate of growth vis-à-vis other populations in Myanmar. Past UN statistics on the northern Rakhine State determined the Rohingya CBR as 27.2 in 2012 and the CDR as 12.4 in 2008.43 The CBR parameter reflects population growth to a greater extent than CDR, as CDR data may not correlate with “youthful” populations due to extraneous variables (e.g., availability of health services, prevalence of disease). Therefore, this analysis focuses on CBR correlations to determine the Rohingya TFR. The extant Rohingya values of CBR and CDR (27.2 and 12.4, respectively) are used to derive the Rohingya age structure for 2012 utilizing the table of stable populations identified as the Model Growth Rate Set of male and female in the South set44 with the mortality level of 17 and a reproductive rate of 1.5 (R=15.00),45 in which “r” is defined as the rate of increase, or “the basic index of variation for a given mortality schedule” as established by Coale and Demeny.46 The rate “r,” denoted as a percent, is essentially the rate of increase of a stable population over one year as a difference between CBR and CDR; “r” as per thousand population specifies “R.” Thus the Rohingya CBR and CDR, approximating R=15 for the designated Model Growth Rate table, is used to render the Rohingya age structure for 2012.

The derived Rohingya age structure resembles a pyramid with a wide base and a narrow apex (Figure 2), indicative of a large proportion of younger cohorts (i.e., a “youthful” population). This result is expected based on the relationship of CBR (27.2) with that of the reproductive rate (1.5) as indicated in the model growth rate table. Owing to the fact that it is a reconstruction, this age structure of cohorts forms a smooth and continuous contour; in comparison, most age structures derived from actual data form discontinuous progressions in which discrete increases and/or decreases of contiguous cohorts are not always gradual or incremental.

44 In their study, Coale and Demeny developed four families, identified as North, South, East, and West sets, which highlight patterns among similar countries based on variations of mortality rates. The South set includes data from 1876-1940 and includes the countries of Spain, Portugal, and Southern Italy; these countries had high mortality rates under the age of five, low mortality rates around the ages of 40-60, and high mortality over the age of 65.
45 Coale et al., *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*.
46 Ibid.
Based on the reconstructed age structure, the median age of the Rohingya is within the cohort of 20–24 years of age. A winsorized and trimmed linear regression of TFR as a function of CBR for the states of Myanmar produces an estimated Rohingya TFR of 3.8, the significance of which is described below.

Figure 2. Rohingya Age Structure in 2012

The age structure, divided by gender, represents the number of individuals in each age cohort as a percentage of the total population, ranging from 0–4 years of age to 100+ years of age. The reconstructed Rohingya age structure shows a large percentage of the population in cohorts below the age of 25 years, thus indicating a youthful population.


According to Myanmar’s 2014 Census,⁴⁷ the Union has a demographic structure of an “intermediate” nation with a somewhat older age structure (i.e., a proportionally older

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population having a median age of 27.1 years); the “youthful” Rohingya age structure may have matched the Union in 1993 (Figure 3). The age structure and birth rate of

**Figure 3. Comparison of Regional Age Structures**

When comparing the age structure of regional stakeholders (Rohingya, Rakhine, and Myanmar), the Rohingya age structure most resembles Myanmar in 1993, when the United Nations Population Division classified the country as a youthful population. The Rakhine age structure, while still a youthful population, more closely resembles the modern day, intermediate age structure of Myanmar.

Note: Estimated number of persons not enumerated: Myanmar: 1,206,353; Rakhine: 1,090,000.

the Rakhine State (median age = 26 years), although reflecting populations younger than that of the Union as a whole, still exceeds that of the Rohingya. Similarly, all non-ethnic minority states in Myanmar, such as Yangon (median age = 28.3 years) and Tanintharyi (median age = 24 years), have age structures older than that of the Rohingya and appear to demonstrate the trajectories of maturing populations. Tanintharyi presents a relatively young age structure and is thus a slight outlier as compared to other non-ethnic minority states. Most ethnic minority states appear to have “youthful” populations; however, the Rakhine State and the Mon State resemble an “intermediate” age structure. Furthermore, all ethnic minority states, with the exception of the Chin State, have an older age structure than that of the Rohingya (Figure 4).

TFR trends of Myanmar states are in close alignment with their respective age structures. A TFR of 2.1 is generally understood as necessary to maintain a population at a replacement level. The Union (TFR = 2.3) and the Rakhine State (TFR = 2.2) both have TFRs near replacement level, while the Rohingya population shows a TFR of around 3.8, about 1.5 times higher than that of the Union and that of the Rakhine State. Compared to other state-level populations, the Rohingya have one of the highest TFRs and CBRs in Myanmar (Figure 5). A cluster analysis of age structures for Myanmar states reveals three distinct groups: Cluster 1 (states with TFRs near 2.1) includes all non-ethnic minority states and half of the ethnic minority states; Cluster 2 (states with TFRs near 3.5) includes Kayah State (TFR = 3.3; median age = 22.9), Kayin State (TFR = 3.4; 23.6), and the Rohingya; and Cluster 3 includes the outlier Chin State, which has a TFR of nearly 4.5 (Figure 6). This analysis finds the Rohingya age population—as well as the populations of Kayah State and Kayin State—to be “youthful.”

Deviations in the differentials of minority and majority populations in the Chin State, Rakhine State (excluding the Rohingya), and Mon State could be attributed to various factors. Differences in accessibility of services at the township level and the state level possibly account for the Chin State (TFR = 4.37; median age = 20.1 years) being the only region with a CBR and TFR higher than that of the Rohingya. Among ethnic states, recent development projects, such as the creation of model villages designed to improve the livelihoods of the Rakhine ethnic group (at the expense of Rohingya rights), may have led to a decrease in non-Rohingya birthrates and thus explain some of the demographic divergence in the Rakhine State.

In sum, the reconstructed Rohingya age structure, TFR, and median age portray a relatively “youthful” population that will continue to grow and surpass that of most other Myanmar ethnic populations if the Rohingya fertility rate continues on at its current level; the age structure of the Union and the majority of its states, on the other hand, will continue to mirror the trajectory of nations with maturing populations.
Figure 4. Age Structures of a Sample of States in Myanmar

When comparing populations across Myanmar, age structures demonstrate a trend in which minority states have age structures with a larger percent of the population under the age of 25, as compared to the relatively older populations of non-minority states.


Figure 5. Total Fertility Rate and Crude Birth Rate of States in Myanmar

As represented in a linear graph, the Rohingya Total Fertility Rate and Crude Birth Rate is one of the highest in Myanmar. In addition, this graph supports the observation that ethnic-minority states have higher growth rates than those of non-minority states.


Figure 6. Cluster Analysis of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and Crude Birth Rate (CBR) of States in Myanmar

The cluster analysis, as represented in a linear graph, divides populations into three categories based on similarities in TFR and CBR. The cluster analysis grouped the Rohingya with the ethnic-minority states of Kayah and Kayin, based on similar TFR and CBR. Like the Rakhine State, these states have experienced elevated levels of conflict.

Source: Same as Figure 5.
Understanding a country’s demographic landscape can provide many important insights. Demographic factors, such as age structures, TFR, and median ages, can be used to help estimate a country’s potential for economic success or the threat of economic stagnation. For example, relatively young populations, such as those found in many developing countries, have great potential for economic growth as young members of society enter the labor force; aging populations, such as those of Japan or Germany, face the threat of economic stagnation due to their shrinking, aging workforces. In other cases, demographic data, including fertility and birth statistics, can be used to shed light on human rights violations. For example, since TFR designates the number of children a woman may have over the course of her childbearing years, this measurement may reveal the efficacy of family-planning programs (if they exist), levels of education attained by females, and the quality of women’s rights. Additionally, subnational demographic factors could be used to portray a country’s prospects for democracy, potential for ethnic conflict, and the existence of minority human rights abuses.

Understanding divergent age structures in Myanmar sheds light on a number of different issues. These age structures signal the results of discrimination and oppressive policies in the state and highlight the plight that many Rohingya face as they struggle to gain citizenship rights and improve their livelihoods. The Rohingya age structure mirrors trends that typically characterize youthful populations: low education levels, poverty, religiosity, and the maintenance of traditional family patterns. Yet current Myanmar policies offer little hope for escape from an unsatisfactory lifestyle, as the cycle of fear and response dominates ethnic relations in the Rakhine State.

As the Rohingya population continues to grow and the Rakhine-Buddhist population stabilizes, Rakhine-Buddhists fear extinction in both absolute and relative numbers to the Rohingya, as the minority group occupies approximately ninety percent of the northern Rakhine State. The close proximity of these two ethnic groups as they compete for limited resources further aggravates this fear. Like the Rohingya, the Rakhine-Buddhists have historically faced land confiscations, persecution, and cultural restrictions at the mercy of the Burman-dominated regime. For example, the government has confiscated land from the Rohingya and Rakhine-Buddhists alike in order to house a large military force used to monitor conflict in the Rakhine State. The Rakhine-Buddhists have thus faced limited socioeconomic opportunities and have perceived the Rohingya as a growing ethnic out-group in direct competition for already scarce resources.

Rakhine-Buddhist fears of cultural and physical extinction (as well their ethnic subjugation by the Burman-led government) have led to unresolved grievances in which violence appeared the only recourse. Consequently, riots broke out in the Rakhine State.

in 2012, and these riots further damaged the heretofore tenuous relationship between the Rakhine-Buddhists and the Rohingya. Locals attributed the cause of the 2012 riots to the raping and killing of a Buddhist woman by a Rohingya-Muslim man, yet the Rohingya, the main target of the conflict, ascribed the cause of the riots to ongoing discrimination. During this period, hundreds of thousands of displaced Rohingya fled across the Bangladeshi border following the destruction of their homes, villages, and temples.

As disputes in the Rakhine State continue to fester and Rakhine-Buddhists’ grievances remain unanswered, Buddhist compatriots have sympathized and vocalized their support through nationalistic propaganda and anti-minority rhetoric. Echoing the apprehensions of local Rakhine-Buddhists, politicized Buddhist monks and associations—such as Ashin Wirathu, the MaBaTha, and the 969 Movement—regularly exploit demographic fears by espousing anti-Muslim rhetoric. Ethnocentric Buddhists often claim that the Rohingya, sustained by high fertility and rapid population growth rates, threaten to overwhelm local Buddhist communities in the Rakhine State. Pejorative phraseology such as “Islamisation”, “Bengali landgrappers,” and even “terrorists” are typical references to the Rohingya in anti-minority discussions. The vocalization of grievances, combined with the lobbying power of nationalistic groups, places pressure on the Myanmar government to address this perceived demographic problem.

Although anti-Muslim rhetoric increases the spread of discrimination against the Rohingya, it is not the Rakhine-Buddhists who are culpable for the conflict with the Rohingya; rather, responsibility lies with the government of Myanmar. Since the emergence of modern Myanmar/Burma in 1948, the national government has not provided adequate support to the Rohingya, merely implementing restrictive policies that directly and indirectly affect all aspects of Rohingya life. These policies—which date back to 1962 with the Rohingya’s loss of citizenship rights—restrict access to education, limit economic opportunities, maintain high levels of poverty, and prevent women’s empowerment, thus reinforcing traditional gender relationships that support higher levels of fertility and larger families. Significant anti-Rohingya policies include: Operation Naga Min of 1978, the Two-Child Policy of 2013, and the Population Control Healthcare Bill of 2015. Operation Naga Min, a singularly prominent population control policy in which the government systematically identified illegal residents in

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problematic regions such as the northern Rakhine State,\(^{56}\) led to mass persecution and marginalization of the Rohingya that included widespread rape, destruction of villages, and arbitrary arrests.\(^{57}\) More recently, the Two-Child Policy of 2013, which primarily targeted the Rohingya and was designed to address the 2012 communal violence, implemented a two-child family planning program that has led to unsafe abortions and unregistered births.\(^{58}\) Lastly, the Population Control Healthcare Bill of 2015, designed to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates by mandating that women residing in areas with high population growth rates engage in a 36-month period of birth-spacing,\(^{59}\) serves as a particularly severe detriment to women’s rights in Muslim-majority areas and fuels tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine citizens.\(^{60}\)

On the present course, Myanmar’s demographic dilemma will only worsen as the Rohingya sustain high growth rates and Rakhine-Buddhists continue to fear cultural and absolute extinction. A complete reversal of policies, from stringent population-control to welfare policies, might be they only way to reverse course. Welfare policies—such as family-planning services, increased access to education, access to public health, and women’s rights—can help reverse the progression of the current fear-response cycle. For example, related welfare policies have been shown to decrease fertility rates and thereby lower growth rates.\(^{61}\) Furthermore, if economic and social opportunities are increased, women can play a greater role in the economic activities of their families, and they may therefore be incentivized to have less children and smaller families. By maintaining the present stance toward the Rohingya, the Myanmar government will likely continue to escalate the conflict to new levels of intensity, which poses the risk of civil war. As the Rohingya population continues to expand under Myanmar’s present policies, young Rohingya and Rakhine-Buddhist men alike will physically express their intensifying grievances, which will produce conditions of unrest that challenge the course of democratic nation-building in Myanmar.

### Conclusion

Myanmar’s demographic characteristics and their ties to communal violence and gov-

\(^{56}\) Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 55.


Government policy highlight the importance of understanding demographic structures in a variety of research disciplines. As demonstrated by this study, a demographic analysis of the Rohingya (focused on factors such as age structure, median age, and TFR) can provide quantitative information about a local population that may have been overlooked or expressed in less straightforward qualitative argumentation by research conducted in other disciplines. Related studies in political-demography can be used to effectively augment the research methodologies of other disciplines, such as economics, politics, and even religious studies. Of course, additional demographic studies based on more complete Rohingya population statistics will provide a fuller understanding of the effect that differential population growth has at the subnational level in Myanmar. Nonetheless, this investigation of the demographic situation of the Rohingya, while restricted by a lack of demographic data, does provide a new understanding of tensions in Myanmar that can be of use to decision makers and policy planners.

This analysis disproves that the Rohingya’s total fertility rate and population growth rate are not statistically different from the local Myanmar citizens and therefore demonstrates that Rakhine-Buddhist fears of cultural/absolute extinction are not irrational. Consequently, as the Rohingya population continues to grow at a rate 1.5 times faster than that of other groups in the country, other ethnic groups (specifically, the Rakhine-Buddhists) will have increased fears of displacement and cultural extinction, thus escalating the ongoing cycle of discrimination and violence (as outlined in Leuprecht’s Demographic Security Dilemma). These fears will reinforce repressive government policies that may aggravate the racial conflicts and exacerbate the already high Rohingya fertility rate. Myanmar’s unabated differential age structures could spiral the country into more destructive outcomes, including that include civil war. Civil war in Myanmar could create a massive transnational issue as violence spills over the borders, increases the flow of refugees, and creates security challenges throughout Southeast Asia. As the new NLD-led government builds its credibility as a democracy, conflict in the Rakhine State and the rights of the Rohingya will remain in the forefront of the international community’s views. As such, the NLD must develop solutions that account for the plight of the Rohingya by developing inclusive policies designed to increase the socioeconomic well-being of Rakhine citizens—especially the Rohingya—while phasing out policies that contribute significantly to the marginalization of minority ethnic groups.

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Research


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