



## **Obama Approach to Rohingya Plight has Important Implications on Islam-West Relations**

by Fuadi Pitsuwan

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Thomas Donilon, President Barack Obama's national security advisor, says President Obama will raise concerns over the plight of the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine state during his meetings with President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw. Following through with this pledge will be critical not only to resolution of the conflict in Rakhine state, but it could also have great implications for relations between Islam and the West.

In the latest clash last month, sectarian violence between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority in the westernmost state of Burma claimed 89 lives, according to official reports. While much of the world sees the situation as 'merely' a clash between Buddhists and Muslims, it is much more complex. At the heart of the conflict is the Rohingya's lack of protection from state security because they are not considered citizens of Burma, despite having lived in the area for several generations. Buddhist Rakhines view the Rohingya with suspicion, as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who refuse to speak the Burmese language and embrace local culture. To be fair, many who claim to be Rohingya are illegal immigrants and it is extremely difficult to determine who are real Rohingya and who are illegal settlers from Bangladesh.

Muslim countries are very interested in seeing better treatment of the Muslim Rohingya by the Burmese authorities who are accused by international human rights organizations of favoring Buddhists in the conflict. Turkish First Lady Mrs. Emine Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited the Rakhine State in August, which led to widespread international media coverage of the conflict and pushed the Islamic world to pay attention.

Jusuf Kalla, former vice president of Indonesia and current chairman of the Indonesia Red Cross, made it a personal crusade and led Indonesia's effort in negotiating with the Burmese government to settle the Rohingya issue. Saudi Arabia labeled the conflict as 'ethnic cleansing' against the Muslim Rohingya and King Abdullah reportedly ordered \$50 million in aid to be sent to the Rohingya community. Iran also spoke out against the treatment of Rohingya and called on all Muslim countries and international organizations to take swift actions to stop the 'genocide' in the Rakhine state.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a bloc of 57 Muslim countries, led a high-level delegation to Burma and has continued to be vocal on the issue. According to its

secretary general, the OIC sent a letter to the White House encouraging President Obama to raise the Rohingya issue with the leadership of Burma during his visit to the country, the first ever visit for a US president.

This solidarity within the Islamic world is unprecedented. Muslim nations are speaking with one voice and that voice favors the protection of human rights. While some of these Islamic countries may be using the issue to deflect the attention from their own flawed human rights policies, the plight of the Rohingya is pushing the convergence of the positions of these Muslim countries. More importantly, these interests coincide with the values traditionally espoused by the Western world.

It is imperative that the White House recognize this opportunity of emerging shared norms. The US may equivocate when questions related to the Arab-Israeli conflict arise. Turkey would rather avoid questions when asked about the government's harsh treatment of its critics and Kurdish political activists. Indonesia dissembles when asked about discrimination against its Christian minority. Saudi Arabia would rather not talk about women's rights at home, while Iran continues to speak out against intervention in Syria despite mass killings by the Assad regime. But all these countries agree that the Muslim Rohingya deserve basic human rights and better treatment from the Burmese authorities.

US concern for the plight of the Muslim Rohingya will demonstrate that it is in no conflict with the Islamic world. The US can use this opportunity to work with Muslim countries to promote tolerance and respect for human rights in the Rakhine state. President Obama's expected public speech at a university in Burma should contain not only encouragement for ethnic and national reconciliation, but also address the larger implications that this issue has within the Islamic world. The president should elaborate on the emerging shared values evident in the world's response to this conflict. (Of course, he must do so delicately without making the Buddhists feel like scapegoats.)

Islam and the West can find common ground in the Rakhine state. It could well be that the road to reconciliation between Islam and the West will pass through this abject region in the westernmost part of Burma.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*