

Why the Rohingya Muslims are fleeing Myanmar

by [Brian Pellot](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

An estimated 800,000 Rohingya Muslims live in squalor in Myanmar's western Rakhine State. But that number has been falling fast as thousands flee by land and sea in search of better lives and basic survival.

The Rohingya people are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group. An additional million Rohingyas are scattered across Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, and elsewhere. Most practice a unique blend of Sufi-infused Sunni Islam.

Since regional conflicts in 2012, more than 120,000 Rohingyas have fled across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border to escape violence, persecution, and economic hardship. The United Nations has called the Rohingyas one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

Myanmar is between 80 and 90 percent Buddhist. Despite being in the majority, many Buddhists fear that their faith is on the decline. They point to Muslim business owners' practice of posting the number 786 outside their stores as evidence of a plot for Muslim domination in the 21st century. The number 786 is an abbreviation from the Abjad numeral system for the Arabic alphabet for the phrase "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim" ("In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful"). The concern for the 21st century comes from the sum of seven, eight, and six—21.

Buddhist nationalists such as the Mandalay-based monk Wirathu, whom *Time* magazine has called the "face of Buddhist terror," are amplifying these "Islamic invasion" fears and inciting anti-Muslim violence through unsubstantiated Facebook posts. Economic and other political factors are also at play, and Myanmar's government is only making things worse.

Government officials categorize the Rohingyas as "Bengali," implying that they are in Myanmar illegally from neighboring Bangladesh. A 1982 law excludes Rohingyas from citizenship, leaving most stateless. Their ethnicity was left off last year's landmark census. The government has long denied Rohingyas access to basic public services, education, and health care. Burdensome laws restrict their travel,

marriage, and childbearing rights, and the government has even blocked them from receiving humanitarian aid.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a report in May titled “They Want Us All to Go Away: Early Warning Signs of Genocide in Burma,” using another name for Myanmar. The report documents how the Rohingyas are subjected to dehumanizing hate speech, physical violence, segregation, dire living conditions, restrictions on movement, land confiscation, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, voting restrictions, loss of citizenship, extortion, and countless other human rights violations. Other ethnic minority groups also face persecution in Myanmar, but Rohingyas seem to have it the worst.

Aung San Suu Kyi, a former political prisoner and 1991 Nobel Peace laureate, still leads Myanmar’s main opposition party, the National League for Democracy. National elections are scheduled for later this year.

When pressed on the Rohingya issue, Suu Kyi has made vague declarations about the rule of law. She hasn’t uttered the word *Rohingya* at press conferences. A political analyst quoted her as saying, “I am not silent because of political calculation. I am silent because whoever’s side I stand on, there will be more blood. If I speak up for human rights, they [the Rohingyas] will only suffer.” —Religion News Service