

What is behind Myanmar's ethnic unrest?

By AlJazeera

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As sectarian tensions run high in the country's west, we ask how it will impact the government's fragile reform plan.

Myanmar is on a very uneven and fragile road towards democracy but around 25 people have been killed and 41 others wounded in five days of riots in the country's western region.

The coastal state of Rakhine saw Buddhists once again fighting Muslims, including Rohingya migrants - most of whom are stateless. They are described by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

The violence seems to have started after a Buddhist woman was raped and murdered last month.

The Rohingya were blamed and since then, more people have been killed on both sides of the religious divide.

In response, the government has imposed a state of emergency in the area and the UN is relocating its staff.

But for a country that has been under military control for five decades, the latest clashes could threaten some of the democratic reforms that President Thein Sein has been introducing since taking office last year.

In April, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi of the NLD party was elected to parliament in a landmark by-election. And the EU has agreed to suspend most sanctions against the country, as have the US and Australia.

But how the government handles the latest crisis will be a test of its fragile reform programme.

So what does the fighting mean for the future of Myanmar and what is behind this ethnic tension? Is it religious - Buddhist against Muslim? Or is it a case of the minority being persecuted for being stateless? Could attempts at reform be halted because of this unrest?

Inside Story, with presenter Stephen Cole, discusses with guests: Nurul Islam, the president of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation; Nyo Myint, a spokesman and head of foreign affairs at the National League for Democracy; and Wakar Uddin, a Rohingya from Myanmar and director general of the Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU) - a group supported by the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

"What is currently happening in the Rakhine state is about putting grievances, hatred, and desire for revenge at the forefront based on racial and religious grounds and that's why anarchic actions are becoming widespread."

Thein Sein, Myanmar's president

FACTS ABOUT ETHNIC TENSION IN MYANMAR

The government has declared an emergency in Rakhine state after seven people were killed during riots

The alleged rape and murder of a Buddhist woman last month led to the initial attacks

The latest unrest is reaction to the killing of 10 Muslims by Buddhists

Government troops were deployed to Rakhine to help the police keep order

Many Muslims in Myanmar are ethnic Rohingya from Bangladesh

The minority Rohingya Muslims are denied citizenship in Myanmar

Many in Myanmar consider the Rohingya to be illegal immigrants

The Rohingya are not recognised by either Myanmar or Bangladesh
800,000 Rohingya live in Rakhine, with another 200,000 in Bangladesh
There are concerns that the unrest could derail Myanmar's recent democratic reforms
Myanmar's new civilian government was elected in 2010

Source:
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