

The Politics of Repatriation: Analyzing Myanmar Military Junta's Rohingya Return Initiative in 2025

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Abstract: This article examines the Myanmar military junta's April 4, 2025, announcement regarding the repatriation of 180,000 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. By analyzing territorial control dynamics in Arakan (Rakhine) State, historical patterns of state behavior toward the Rohingya population, and international relations considerations, this study argues that the announcement represents a strategic political maneuver rather than a substantive policy commitment. The research demonstrates how contested sovereignty in Arakan State between the junta and the Arakan Army fundamentally undermines the feasibility of the proposed repatriation plan, while contextualizing this initiative within broader patterns of performative governance for international legitimacy.

Keywords: *Myanmar, Rohingya, repatriation, Arakan Army, contested sovereignty, legitimacy politics*

Introduction

On April 4, 2025, Myanmar's military government (the State Administration Council or SAC) announced its willingness to accept the repatriation of approximately 180,000 Rohingya refugees currently residing in camps in Bangladesh (Al Jazeera, 2025). During the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok, Myanmar's Foreign Minister U Than Swe reportedly informed Dr. Khalilur Rahman, Chief Adviser (CA) Dr Yunus's high representative, that the authorities had identified these individuals as 'eligible' for return from a list of 800,000 Rohingya sheltered in Bangladesh, according to Myanmar's own figures (Alim, 2025). This figure represents roughly 20% of the estimated total Rohingya refugee population that fled Myanmar following military operations in 2017 that the United Nations characterized as demonstrating 'genocidal intent' (UN Human Rights Council, 2018). The announcement has generated significant discourse among international observers, humanitarian organizations, and governance scholars regarding its feasibility, motivations, and implications.

This article examines the repatriation announcement through an analytical framework that centers territorial control, administrative capacity, and political legitimacy. By assessing the current geopolitical realities in Arakan State, where the Arakan Army maintains substantial territorial and administrative control outside of the military junta's reach, this study interrogates the fundamental disconnect between the junta's pronouncements and its capacity for implementation. Furthermore, this analysis situates the repatriation announcement within established patterns of the military government's deployment of performative policy declarations designed primarily for international consumption.

Historical Context of the Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya community in Myanmar has experienced decades of systematic discrimination, including the 1982 Citizenship Law that effectively rendered them stateless (Cheesman, 2017). The crisis reached its pinnacle in August 2017 when Myanmar's military launched operations that resulted in approximately 750,000 Rohingya fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh, joining previous influxes of Rohingya who fled the country in the 1970s and 90s (UNHCR, 2019). The United Nations Fact-Finding Mission concluded that the military operations exhibited 'genocidal intent,' leading to the Rohingya being recognized as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world (Canal, 2017; UN Human Rights Council, 2018).

Previous repatriation agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar have failed to produce meaningful results. On November 23, 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement titled the "Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State," concerning individuals who fled to Bangladesh following the violent events of October 9, 2016, and August 25, 2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2018: 47). The agreement, framed around the return of "residents of Rakhine State," was drafted without consultation with either the UNHCR or the Rohingya refugees themselves (*ibid.*). Notably, it omits any mention of the widespread violence—including killings, sexual violence, and the systematic burning of villages—carried out by Myanmar's security forces that led to the mass exodus. Furthermore, the agreement avoids identifying the displaced as Rohingya or recognizing them as refugees (*ibid.*). This bilateral agreement proposed returning Rohingya refugees, but implementation stalled due to refugees' well-founded fears of returning to unsafe conditions and Myanmar's failure to create environments conducive to sustainable return. Similarly, a 2018 memorandum of understanding between Myanmar, UNHCR, and UNDP yielded minimal progress (UNHCR UK, 2018).

Territorial Control and Administrative Reality in Arakan State

The most significant obstacle to the junta's repatriation announcement is the reality of territorial control in Arakan State. Since the 2021 military coup, the Arakan Army (AA) has solidified and expanded its control over substantial portions of Arakan State, establishing parallel governance structures that function as *de facto* administration in many areas (International Crisis Group, 2022). This includes regions where Rohingya populations historically resided before the 2017 exodus. The Arakan Army has fought the Myanmar military since its founding in April 10, 2009, with particularly intense fighting following the 2021 coup. By early 2025, military analysts estimated that the AA controlled nearly the entire territory of Arakan State, including critical border areas with Bangladesh and coastal regions (International Crisis Group, 2025). The junta's military presence is largely confined to major urban centers and strategic facilities, with limited projection capabilities beyond these locations.

This territorial reality creates a fundamental implementation problem: the junta lacks the administrative capacity to process, resettle, or provide services to returning refugees in areas it does not control. Moreover, the Arakan Army leadership has explicitly stated that any repatriation process must include their participation and consent (Ibrahim, 2025). The junta's unilateral announcement therefore represents a claim to territorial sovereignty that contradicts the empirical realities on the ground.

The Arakan Army's Conditions and Complexities

The Arakan Army's position on Rohingya repatriation extends beyond mere participation requirements. The AA has articulated specific conditions that include meaningful consultation on repatriation frameworks, involvement in security arrangements, and integration of their administrative structures in refugee processing mechanisms. The organization has indicated that sustainable repatriation must address historical grievances and include comprehensive reconciliation programs that acknowledge both Rakhine and Rohingya communities' experiences of displacement and persecution (Ibrahim, 2025).

However, the relationship between the Arakan Army and potential Rohingya returnees is complicated by historical tensions. The ethnic Rakhine community, which the AA represents, has itself experienced marginalization by Myanmar's central government and has sometimes viewed the Rohingya presence as competition for limited resources and political representation. During the 2012 communal violence and the 2017 military operations, some Rakhine civilians participated in attacks against Rohingya communities, creating deep intercommunal mistrust. The AA's current leadership has acknowledged these historical complexities and has indicated willingness to facilitate dialogue between communities, but the practical challenges of ensuring Rohingya security in areas under Rakhine control remain substantial. These dynamics add another layer of complexity to any potential repatriation process, as sustainable return would require not only military security guarantees but also comprehensive community reconciliation programs that address decades of intercommunal conflict.

Analysis of the Junta's Strategic Motivations

The timing and content of the junta's repatriation announcement align with several strategic objectives that explain why the military government would make commitments it lacks capacity to fulfill. First, the military junta has faced extensive international isolation since the February 2021 coup. The repatriation announcement appears calculated to present the regime as a responsible actor addressing an international humanitarian concern, potentially creating leverage for diplomatic recognition or easing of sanctions (International Crisis Group, 2025). This approach follows a pattern established by previous military governments in Myanmar, which similarly used performative gestures toward democratic reform or human rights improvements to mitigate international pressure (Selth, 2021). Second, the announcement serves immediate regional diplomatic objectives, particularly regarding Bangladesh, which has grown increasingly frustrated with hosting over one million refugees (Rahman, 2024). By appearing receptive to repatriation, the junta may seek to prevent Bangladesh from shifting diplomatic support to the Arakan Army or Myanmar's National Unity Government, both of which have made overtures to Dhaka regarding potential Rohingya repatriation frameworks (International Crisis Group, 2025). Third, the announcement represents a 'paper sovereignty' claim that challenges the Arakan Army's *de facto* control. By publicly declaring authority over repatriation processes in territories it does not control, the junta attempts to reinforce its claim as Myanmar's sole legitimate government (Anderson et al., 2023). This performance of sovereignty carries particular significance as international actors evaluate which authorities to engage with regarding humanitarian initiatives in Arakan State.

International Strategic Calculations

The repatriation announcement may also be strategically designed to influence key international actors who maintain significant economic and strategic interests in Myanmar and have stakes in

regional stability. China, as Myanmar's largest trading partner and investor, has consistently advocated for stability in Rakhine State due to its substantial infrastructure investments, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone. The junta's announcement signals to Beijing that the military government remains capable of addressing regional humanitarian issues, potentially reinforcing Chinese support for the regime against international pressure.

Similarly, India, which shares borders with Myanmar and has invested heavily in connectivity projects through Rakhine State, has expressed concerns about refugee flows and regional instability. The repatriation announcement may be intended to reassure New Delhi that the junta can manage humanitarian crises that might otherwise spill across borders. ASEAN member states, particularly Thailand and Singapore, which have maintained cautious engagement with the junta while facing international criticism, may view the repatriation announcement as evidence of the military government's capacity for responsible governance, potentially justifying continued diplomatic relations.

Conditions for Sustainable Repatriation

For meaningful repatriation to occur, several conditions must be met that remain absent in the current context. Returning refugees require credible security guarantees that cannot be provided by a military that conducted the operations causing their displacement. Neither the junta nor the Arakan Army has demonstrated capacity to protect returning Rohingya from potential communal violence or persecution. The fundamental issue of citizenship and legal recognition for Rohingya remains unaddressed in the junta's announcement. Without amendments to the 1982 Citizenship Law or alternative legal frameworks granting rights and protections, returning refugees would face the same structural discrimination that precipitated previous crises (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017; Parashar & Alam, 2019). Given the divided control of Arakan State, any viable repatriation would require coordination between multiple actors: the Bangladesh government, international organizations, the Myanmar junta, and the Arakan Army administration. No framework for such coordination currently exists, nor has the junta acknowledged the necessity of engaging with the Arakan Army on this matter (International Crisis Group, 2025).

Multi-Stakeholder Framework Requirements

A sustainable repatriation process would necessitate unprecedented cooperation between competing authorities and international actors. Such a framework would require the establishment of joint mechanisms for refugee registration, security provision, and service delivery that acknowledge the reality of divided territorial control in Arakan State. International organizations would need to develop operational protocols that engage with both junta and Arakan Army administrations, potentially requiring formal recognition of the AA's administrative capacity in its controlled territories. The complexity extends to ensuring adequate infrastructure and livelihood opportunities for returning refugees. Many Rohingya villages were completely destroyed during the 2017 operations, requiring extensive reconstruction efforts. The current security environment and administrative fragmentation make large-scale infrastructure development nearly impossible without cooperation between all controlling authorities. Moreover, sustainable return would require addressing land ownership disputes, as much Rohingya-owned land has been redistributed or repurposed during their absence. International funding mechanisms would also need restructuring to channel resources through

multiple administrative systems while maintaining accountability standards. Traditional bilateral aid relationships with the Myanmar government cannot address the practical realities of service delivery in AA-controlled territories, requiring innovative approaches to humanitarian programming in contested governance environments.

Conclusion

The Myanmar military junta's announcement regarding Rohingya repatriation represents a strategic political maneuver rather than a substantive policy initiative. By placing this announcement within the context of territorial control realities in Arakan State and historical patterns of junta behavior, this analysis demonstrates how the repatriation declaration functions primarily as a performance of sovereignty and legitimacy for international audiences. The fundamental disconnect between the junta's claim to implement repatriation and its actual territorial control capabilities exposes the announcement as primarily rhetorical. For refugees, international organizations, and neighboring states, this analysis suggests maintaining skepticism toward unilateral declarations by the junta and recognition that any sustainable return process would require the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including the Arakan Army administration that controls much of the territory in question. The complex intercommunal dynamics between Rakhine and Rohingya populations add additional layers of challenge that simple repatriation agreements cannot address. Future research should examine evolving governance arrangements in Arakan State and potential frameworks for multi-stakeholder approaches to addressing the Rohingya crisis that acknowledge the complex realities of contested sovereignty in post-coup Myanmar. Particular attention should be given to innovative governance mechanisms that can operate across competing administrative systems while maintaining accountability to refugee communities and international humanitarian standards.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the OP JAC Project “MSCA Fellowships at Palacký University III.” CZ.02.01.01/00/22_010/0008685, run at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic.

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