# THE ROHINGYA HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND RESPONSES IN COX'S BAZAR: FIVE YEARS ON



**A refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.**
Photocredit: Centre for Peace & Justice, Brac University, July 2022.

**By Azizul Hoque and Tasnia Khandaker**

In August 2022 it will be five years since the start of one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, yet the political and security dynamics surrounding Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh remain unstable. Persecution and targeted attacks against this minority community by Myanmar's military led to the forced displacement of over 730,000 refugees across the border into Bangladesh in 2017. Five years on, their lives continue to be marked by struggle.

Bangladesh's own history of war may have influenced its government's openness to refugees, but growing uncertainty in a post-Covid world, anti-Rohingya sentiments amongst the population, security concerns, and pressure on resources are cited as reasons for a recent rise in restrictions on residents of the 34 refugee camps along the border. These restrictions relate to refugees' access to education, employment, movement, and civic participation in their host country. Underdevelopment, poverty, crime, and trafficking in people and drugs affect both the Rohingya and the host communities adjacent to the camps.

Despite vocal demands by Rohingya to be able to return to their home villages, organised repatriation attempts have been hindered by lack of political will in Myanmar. Today, global humanitarian aid is on the decline as the international community contends with the need to address competing crises. Refugees and local communities are angered by the limited efforts of global powers to compel Myanmar to accelerate Rohingya repatriation. Increased frustration amongst Bangladeshi authorities has translated into harsher policies and limited opportunities for the refugees. Amid pressure to uphold refugee rights, and the need to maintain safety and adequate infrastructure within the camps despite a persistent funding shortage, actors involved in the response face increasing challenges around sustainable solutions for Rohingya populations.

> ## *Who is making decisions and why are they unknown to our community?*
> **– a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh**

The Asia Foundation's partner in Bangladesh, Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University, (CPJ) has worked to address emerging concerns amongst Rohingya and host communities, and analyse social differences and political dynamics through various research initiatives that aim to understand and elevate voices on the ground. This article summarises viewpoints of Rohingya refugees on their current predicament and outlook, compiled by CPJ researchers since 2018.

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

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**Camp governance and decision-making mechanisms** have been criticised by human rights groups for being unclear, restrictive and ad-hoc. With an ever-shifting regulatory dynamic, limited direct access to policymakers, and a national refugee policy vacuum that allows lower-level officials to apply rules at their own discretion, the governance environment in Cox's Bazar remains opaque, complex and exclusive of community voices. Humanitarian agencies focus on maintaining permission to work in the camps and are hesitant to intervene and probe officials about policies. It is unclear to communities how decisions about refugee policy are made within government and by whom, resulting in a power gap and lack of accountability toward stakeholders.

**Livelihood possibilities** in the camps are extremely limited. Rohingya are restricted from moving from one camp to another and have no right to formal employment or access to markets. Even the need to travel for medical attention requires the permission of camp authorities. Hundreds of makeshift shops have been destroyed by authorities in recent months, limiting refugees' access to basic necessities not provided as aid, including many cooking ingredients as well as clothing.

**Perceptions of the Rohingya** amongst host communities are generally negative even though, according to CPJ's research, only a small percentage of host community residents have personally interacted with a refugee. Local people fear the assimilation of refugees and the increased pressure on already-stretched resources. Negative impacts on wage rates and over-saturation of the labour market have been contentious issues.

**Education gaps** among Rohingya children and adolescents remain unresolved. Approximately 400,000 school-aged refugees are not enrolled in formal schooling, and although a pilot formal education programme was recently launched when schools reopened post-Covid, it serves only a small percentage of learners and many will likely never return to their studies. Moreover, private learning centres organised by the Rohingya have been restricted by authorities, eliminating educational access for thousands more children.

**Global attention** has been fleeting. The spotlight that brought attention to the Rohingya crisis after the 2017 exodus has shifted elsewhere, and Rohingya feel that they are isolated from the international community. Bangladesh continues to be praised for hosting persecuted Rohingya and undoubtedly saving thousands of lives, but refugees are frustrated with the lack of public discussion around their current situation. Many claim that living conditions within the camps have deteriorated, leading to desperate attempts by refugees to escape, akin to their pre-exodus state of vulnerability in Myanmar. High-profile international delegations have resumed visiting the camps, but few visits have resulted in tangible action toward the necessary changes.

Sustainable, long-term solutions for displaced Rohingya will require a comprehensive refugee policy in Bangladesh, built on accountability to affected populations and effective coordination amongst national and international actors. Such a policy will need to address concurrent needs for good governance, refugee rights and participation, humanitarian service provision, and security-related factors, grounded in robust data reflecting the evolving needs and perspectives of refugee and host populations. Political economy analysis can be used to assess the current policy environment, highlighting gaps that need to be addressed, an understanding of how decisions are made and enforced, and identifying areas for innovative approaches to refugee governance. For example, Rohingya participation in labour markets could be approached in a way that benefits refugees and impoverished Bangladeshis alike. Such a coordinated, inclusive approach may yet yield opportunities for improvement.



Locations of refugee camps in Bangladesh

## IN THE WAKE OF THE MILITARY COUP, SUDAN'S REBEL GROUPS LEVERAGE SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL POWER

**by Rift Valley Institute**

In October 2020, Sudan's transitional government – a coalition of military and civilian politicians – signed the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) with several of the country's armed rebel groups (collectively known as the Sudan Revolutionary Front). The peace agreement gave some leaders of these groups powerful positions in the transitional government or state administrations, thus providing them with a tangible stake in Sudan's evolving political order following the fall of long-time president Omar al-Bashir. When the military launched a coup against the leadership of the civilian government in October 2021, some of the rebel leaders sided with the country's generals, rather than its civilian leadership, many of whom had been their allies in opposing the previous regime. Why did a collection of long-time opponents to Sudan's military-led dictatorship do this?

### BORDERLAND REBELS

Most of Sudan's armed movements originated in the country's peripheries, where wealth has been systematically drained through decades of exploitative and violent rule by an elite from the country's metropolitan centre, enforced by a system of rural militias, armed and backed by the government. The main rebel groups originated in Darfur, Sudan's expansive western region bordering Chad and Libya; and the borderlands between Sudan and South Sudan, specifically South Kordofan and Blue Nile states (known as the 'Two Areas').

In the latter years of the Bashir regime, the wars in Sudan's peripheries had effectively ground to a standstill. Previously, the rebel groups in Darfur and the Two Areas had received significant support from neighbouring countries (mainly Chad, South Sudan and Ethiopia), but this had dried up. While the remaining rebels were not a large threat to the government, they also couldn't be completely defeated and these long-running conflicts stuttered on with little prospect of resolution while Bashir remained in power.

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When Bashir was deposed by his generals in 2019 after months of mass civilian protests, the new government developed plans to end the conflicts in Sudan's peripheries with one, overarching peace agreement that was split into several regional tracks. Drawing on earlier 'pay-roll peace' deals, notably the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended Sudan's north-south civil war in 2005; and the Darfur Peace Agreement, which attempted the same in 2006, the Juba Peace Agreement was born.

## DESTABILISING THE PERIPHERIES

While the designers of the peace agreement had ambitions to craft a national, all-inclusive arrangement that would solve all of Sudan's festering conflicts in one go, the reality was somewhat different. The peace agreement has shifted the balance of power in various local contexts and, as a result, has at times fuelled more conflict. For example, in Darfur, after the fall of Bashir, the (mostly Arab) groups that had generally benefitted from his rule feared that they would lose out. Particularly in North Darfur, the peace agreement has contributed to an increase in violence as Arab, mostly cattle herding communities have sought to strengthen their positions to avoid losing out in any political reorganisation.

In the Two Areas, the Bashir regime's collapse created a power vacuum. Before the former president's fall, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North, which had been fighting the government since 2011, had acrimoniously split into two factions (one in South Kordofan and the other in Blue Nile). While the South Kordofan group rejected the peace agreement, the (weaker) Blue Nile faction chose to sign, and its leadership sided with the military during the coup in October 2021. The peace deal further entrenched splits in the group and isolated the South Kordofan faction, which has shown no serious inclination of signing.

In Eastern Sudan, military leaders have played divide-and-rule with the different communities in the region. In the run-up to the coup, they looked to exploit communal differences by securing the allegiance of the dominant Beja community through promises to renegotiate parts of the peace agreement. As a strategically important region that hosts Sudan's largest sea port, its political elites have significant leverage over the Khartoum government and have not been afraid to use it – for example, during the blockade imposed on Port Sudan in 2021, which further damaged Sudan's struggling economy.

## REBEL REALPOLITIK

The peace agreement has emboldened opportunistic rebel leaders from the peripheries who had been on the political back-foot for years to trade their support for positions of power in national and regional administrations. This has helped buttress the country's military leaders, who have side-lined the civilian members of the transitional government and appear determined to remain in power for the foreseeable future.

Sudan's pro-democracy coalition, whose mass rallies and street protests were central to the removal of Bashir and his regime from power, expected that the returning rebel leaders would help tip the balance of power towards the civilian component of the transitional government, helping to off-set the creeping authority of Sudan's military appointees. However, during the months that led up to the peace agreement, the Sudanese military successfully imposed itself on the process, signalling to the rebel leaders that it was in a better position to grant access to political power than the civilian members of the transitional government.

With the civilian administration unable to govern effectively, the economy in free-fall, and the military showing no desire to relinquish power, much of the rebel leadership took the practical political position of siding with the group most likely to help it assert its own interests. The political deal-making of rebel leaders in the wake of the coup reveals their calculations and objectives to safeguard their own positions within Sudan's future governance arrangements. While some leaders share the pro-democracy agenda of the civilian government and the revolutionary movement that fuelled its rise, others are led by local political interests and may feel little connection to the urban-based revolutionaries. For many, the military appeared to be a more powerful partner in asserting, or protecting these interests, even if this is little more than a marriage of convenience.

# SAUDI ARABIA'S SPLIT-IMAGE APPROACH TO SALAFISM

**By Ahmed Nagi**

The modernisation policies in Saudi Arabia supervised by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have brought about a number of transformations in the structure of state institutions and Saudi society. One of the foremost domains in which change has been visible is religion. It is common to hear that the kingdom's political-religious system was built on an alliance between the ruling Al Saud family and Wahhabi Salafism. However, Prince Mohammed appears to be moving away from this approach, as he seeks to mobilise the youth by reducing the religious and social constraints imposed as a result of that alliance.

These transformations raise an important question about Saudi ties with Salafism, a branch of Sunni groups that defines Islam as anything the prophet Muhammad said or did and that was upheld by his first three generations of his followers, which Saudi Arabia helped to spread over recent decades. Support for Salafism was one of the instruments of soft power that the kingdom used to expand its influence in Muslim societies. One place where this happened is Yemen. In 1982, Muqbil al-Wadi'i, a Salafi scholar who had been residing in Saudi Arabia, established Dar al-Hadith in the northern governorate of Saada. This is seen as the starting point for the Salafi movement in the country. By backing Wadi'i, the Saudis sought a counterweight to the Zaydi Shia community in Saada, leading members of which supported Iran's revolution of 1979.

Saudi Arabia benefited from the Salafi expansion in Yemen. The Salafis' discourse portrayed Saudi Arabia as the primary protector of Islam, and Salafi teachings were largely based on the ideas of Saudi Salafi scholars such as Abdel-Aziz bin Baz, Mohammed bin al-Uthay-

meen, Mohammed bin Ibrahim Al al-Sheikh, and other figures. Subsequently, the religious divide in Yemen was driven by transnational ideas, with the Saudis influencing the Salafis and Iran influencing the Zaydis, a situation that later fueled the ongoing Yemeni civil war.

While Salafism appears to be reducing in importance within the Saudi state, the kingdom has reinforced its alliance with Salafis in Yemen, even expanding cooperation in some areas as conflict rages on. Given their ideological differences with the Iran-backed Houthis, Salafi groups have become a significant force supported by the Saudi-led Arab coalition. Several military brigades dominated by Salafis were able to alter the balance of power on vital military fronts. For example, the Salafi Giants Brigades, which are supported by both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, spearheaded the operations to control Yemen's western coastal areas in 2017 and 2018. They again made major gains in the more recent battle for Shabwa.

The changing relationship between the Saudi state and Salafis in Saudi Arabia has been accompanied by transformations in the Salafi environment in Yemen. Traditionally, Yemeni Salafis are divided into three categories: Salafi-jihadis; political Salafis, who have Salafi roots but follow the path of political Islamist movements by involving themselves in politics, such as Al Rashad Union Party and the Peace and Development Party; and traditional Salafis, which encompasses most Yemeni Salafis. While the traditional Salafi schools have historically abstained from engaging in politics, prioritizing obedience to the ruler (*wali al-amr*), this principle was shaken by the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in 2014. The Salafis woke up to the fact that the Zaydi Houthis, whom they opposed, had become the dominant military force in Yemen.

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This change in the political context prompted many followers of traditional Salafism to reconsider their quietist principles, as they found themselves at the center of a war effort, leading armed groups. Alongside Mohammed bin Salman's transformations in Saudi Arabia, this reconsideration led to a new relationship between the two Salafi communities—one centered on Saudi support for Salafis who were engaged in a political conflict, not simply spreading their religious doctrine.

Saudi Arabia has three fundamental motives for strengthening its ties with Yemeni Salafi groups. First, there is deep enmity between Salafis and the Houthis, whom Saudi Arabia is also fighting. The clash between the Salafis and Houthis is not only one over doctrine, but also has a military dimension. In 2014, the Houthis took over the Saada-based Dammaj Center, the first Salafi school in Yemen, and forced the Salafi community to leave the area. The sense of grievance among Salafis was revived when the Houthis expanded into other areas in which Salafis were present. When the Saudi-led coalition began its military operations in March 2015, the Salafis proved to be reliable partners in the coalition's ground operations.

A second motive is that the Salafis have no specific political agenda. Their primary aim is to combat the Houthis, based on a religious rationale, particularly after the takeover of the Dammaj Center and the expulsion of Salafis from Saada. This gave the Salafis pride of place among other Yemeni groups that were fighting alongside the coalition, including the Islah Party and southern separatists, who have political agendas that conflict with those of the Saudi-led coalition.

A third motive is to maintain Saudi religious influence in Yemen, which Salafi groups have helped to sustain in the past four decades, and to prevent Salafis from engaging in any compromises with the Houthis. To the Saudis, the agreements that some Salafi leaders signed with the Houthis in areas of northern Yemen in 2014 were alarming. These called for peaceful coexistence, an end to hostile rhetoric, and direct communications between the sides to deal with any issues. The kingdom is providing the Salafis with military and financial support, and at the same time is continuing to fund their religious centers. Although the Yemen conflict has impaired educational institutions in Yemen, Salafi schools continue to operate and are even expanding in several parts in the country, including Aden, Dhaleh, and Mahra.

For the Salafis, having regional backers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, is important. Receiving financial support is only part of the reason. The Salafis also seek some sort of legitimacy in their fight against the Houthis, especially after concerns emerged about ties between the traditional Salafis and Al-Qaeda groups. Fighting under the Saudi-led coalition has helped to water down such apprehensions, not least because Salafis have joined the Yemeni government. Indeed, the eight-member Presidential Leadership Council, the executive body of the internationally recognized government, includes the Salafi leader Abu Zara'a al-Mahrami, who is also the leader of the Giants Brigades.

Considering the political and military context in Yemen, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Salafis there will remain strong, despite the religious changes inside the kingdom. While Saudi Arabia pursues its battle in Yemen, Salafis will remain their preferred partners and a key part of the kingdom's network of influence in the country. The role of the Saudi-backed Salafi groups in Yemen has been shifting over the past years. While it was a soft power spread through religious teaching till last decade, Salafism today is becoming a part of Saudi hard power, transforming its students into fighters on the battlefield. This is not only the case in Yemen, but also in other areas such as Libya, where the Saudi-backed Madkhali Salafi groups witnessed similar transformation. The case of the Salafi groups underscores the complex evolution of cross-border exchange of religious ideas, with external powers able to grow influence amongst local communities.

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