

As Bangladesh Hosts over a Million Rohingya Refugees, a Scholar Explains What Motivated the Country to Open Up Its Borders

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Asia-Pacific Research, December 18, 2020

[The Conversation](#) 6 October 2020

Region: [South Asia](#), [South-East Asia](#)

Theme: [Justice](#), [Politics](#), [Society](#)

Over [1.1 million Rohingyas continue to remain stranded in crowded camps](#) in Bangladesh while the international community fails to provide a resolution to the crisis.

When in 2017 this lower-middle-income, majority Muslim country opened its borders to the Rohingya fleeing [ethnic cleansing in Myanmar](#), they were largely welcomed. Bangladesh's **Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** [stated](#) back then:

"We have the ability to feed 160 million people of Bangladesh and we have enough food security to feed the 700,000 refugees."

It wasn't just the government. [Many private citizens](#) came forward to offer assistance. Existing [data](#) indicates that 86% of residents in Teknaf, which is the closest administrative region to the Rakhine state from which most Rohingya originate, were involved in providing emergency relief and housing to the new arrivals.

In an era when many rich nations have tried to stop the entry of refugees, Bangladesh's decision to accept refugees in the early days of the crisis could seem puzzling.

A [scholar of refugees and forced migration](#), I spent the summer of 2019 in Bangladesh to understand the forces that shaped this initial humanitarian response.

Faith and morality

My [ongoing research](#) indicates that many factors played a critical role in Bangladesh's political decision to host the Rohingya, including the country's cultural and religious identity, which centers around ideas of community and responding to those in need.

Interviews conducted with political leaders, NGOs and local volunteers revealed that the shared Islamic faith and the Muslim identity of many of the Bangladeshis and the vast majority of the Rohingya galvanized humanitarian assistance in two specific ways.

First, the Islamic concepts of "[zakat](#)," obligatory charity, which is one of the [five pillars of Islam](#), and that of "sadaqa," or voluntary charity, played crucial roles in motivating private citizens to offer emergency assistance. Both these concepts emphasize the imperative to

give to those in need.

Religious leaders also used these concepts to encourage donations. In her 2019 address to the United Nations, Prime Minister Hasina referred to [humanitarianism in Islam](#) to explain her border policy.

Second, the fact that the [Muslim Rohingya in particular were being persecuted because of their faith](#) compounded the sense of urgency among those who identified as Muslim to assist the Rohingya.

While the vast majority of the Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh were Muslim, smaller numbers of [Hindu](#) and Christian Rohingya who arrived with the influx also received emergency assistance and shelter.

However, not all those who were interviewed invoked religion to explain their actions. A medical volunteer interviewed for the research said, “Why did we respond? Because it was ... the moral thing to do, the humanitarian thing to do. Why shouldn’t we? The crisis had literally arrived at our house. How could we even think of turning them away?”

Role of culture and history

A recurrent theme in my research was the emphasis around Bangladeshi culture with its focus on sharing one’s resources with others in need. Furthermore, like many other countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, which are commonly referred to as the [global south](#), Bangladesh has historically had a fluid border – with Myanmar and India.

People move across these borders for agricultural purposes. Marriages between Rohingya and Bangladeshis have been common, and the local population and the Rohingya are able to [understand one another’s languages](#).

According to a 2018 [survey](#), 81% of respondents believed that the local integration of the Rohingya is possible given that the vast majority of the local population and the Rohingya share many religious, cultural and linguistic practices.

Memories of past trauma

The legacy of a painful past also played a role for many Bangladeshis. In 1971, during Bangladesh’s war of independence from then West Pakistan (now Pakistan) [10 million Bengalis sought refuge](#) in India to [escape a campaign of genocide by the then West Pakistan military](#).

A number of those interviewed for my research underscored the historical memory of this event as being a catalyst for explaining Bangladesh’s decision to open its borders.

Prime Minister Hasina [invoked this history](#) in her 2017 address at the United Nations. She talked about her [own experience as a refugee](#) following the 1975 [assassination](#) of her father, [Sheikh Mujibur Rahman](#). Known as the “[Father of the Nation](#),” Mujibur Rahman played a key role in Bangladeshi’s independence movement.

A researcher of Bangladesh’s independence struggle stated, “The loss she suffered with the assassination of her whole family except her one sister who was abroad at the time, and the inability to return to her country following the tragedy has had a lasting impact on her life ...

something about the desperation of those people connected with her on a very personal level and she wanted to do something to help.”

Leadership in uncertain times

In recent years, Bangladesh has demonstrated a growing interest in matters of international peace and security. It has received awards from the United Nations for [fighting climate change](#) and meeting goals of its [immunization program](#), and it remains the [largest contributor to U.N. peacekeeping operations](#).

Since 2017, Bangladesh has submitted three proposals at the United Nations General Assembly to address the Rohingya crisis, [including in 2019, drawing support from Rohingya activists](#).

Bangladesh, however, is [not a state party](#) to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), the post-World War II legal document that defines the term “refugee,” the obligations of states to protect them, including not returning any individual to a country where they would face torture, or degrading treatment.

Instead, Bangladesh refers to the Rohingya as [Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals \(FDMNs\)](#). This means that, officially, the Rohingya do not have a legally protected status in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, low-and middle-income countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, [which are not state parties to the convention](#), are among the [largest refugee-hosting countries in the world](#).

Disproportionate burden

However, in recent times, as the Rohingya situation becomes more protracted, Bangladesh is starting to [face internal tensions](#) as prospects for repatriation become less likely.

The large refugee population has imposed significant infrastructural, [social, financial](#) and [environmental](#) pressures and has raised concerns about land insecurity – a serious issue in an overpopulated country.

My research further indicated that the significant presence of international NGOs in the Cox’s Bazar area, home to the world’s largest refugee camp, is [impacting the local economy](#) by driving up prices. Local tensions have emerged over [government and international aid](#) that has been largely geared toward the Rohingya.

In a change of tone, at a three-day Dhaka Global Dialogue in 2019, Prime Minister Hasina referred to the Rohingya as a “[threat to the security](#)” of the region. In 2020, Bangladesh began [building barbed-wire fencing and installing watchtowers](#) around the camps, citing security concerns. A restriction on access to high-speed internet in the camps was imposed but [recently lifted](#).

With the emergence of [COVID-19 in the camps](#), additional challenges have emerged. These have included the spread of infection [in cramped camps that lack access to water and testing as well as limited understanding about the virus](#).

Meanwhile, [Myanmar’s reluctance](#) to ensure a safe return for the Rohingya, and the realities

of COVID-19, have made the prospects of repatriation increasingly dim.

As Bangladesh grapples with the pandemic while serving as one of the world's largest refugee host countries, it serves as a reminder of the [disproportionate responsibility](#) carried by low-income countries of hosting refugees and the challenges therein.

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