

India and the Rohingya issue: the problems of a new minority approaching Kashmir

2016 ended with an open letter signed by eleven Nobel laureates who have openly accused their "colleague" Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Myanmar, of overlooking the ethnic cleansing that the Burmese army is carrying out against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

The Rohingya are an ethnic group of Islamic religion that fled from Bangladesh decades ago and was never welcomed and recognized in Myanmar, where it remained confined in the Western State of Rakhine. Over the years, about a million Rohingya settled in Myanmar. According to the estimates of United Nations' experts, in a few months at least 50,000 Rohingya have fled the country to escape the attack of the Burmese security forces and about a hundred people were killed in military attacks. Officially, the government is defending the actions of its soldiers, justifying the raids in the villages as security operations against extremist groups who are hiding there. Nevertheless, in early January, the contents of a video made by a Burmese blogger sparked lots of discussion, as it shows a group of soldiers beating young boys in the village of Kotankauk.

The attack dates back to November 5, and the video has forced the government to open an official investigation.

Terrorism exists in Myanmar and it represents a worrying issue also for its neighbouring governments.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) is a well-known terrorist organization founded in 1982 and active in strengthening ties with Pakistani and Bengali radical groups, in an attempt to create a new inter-regional terror network to "revive the Jihad from Bangladesh to Baghdad". If they were to succeed, the security of the entire South Asian region would be obviously endangered.

That being said, the Rohingya issue is not limited to the fight against the radical group that bears that name, and must be seen in a wider context. According to media reports, the current crisis came out as a result of an accident that occurred on October 9, when many Burmese policemen were killed. The first attack was conducted against a checkpoint at the border with Bangladesh, where six officers and eight terrorists were killed. In a second attack on the police station of the village of Kyeedangauk, another agent was killed, while two other policemen and seven militants were killed in a gun battle in the town of Buthidaung.

The Myanmar army accused the RSO of plotting all these simultaneous attacks, and, according to the international press, intended to use these attacks as "an excuse" to repress the Islamic minority, already persecuted for decades, with more rapes and summary executions. It is very difficult to find out the truth: journalists and humanitarian workers have been banned from the war zone and, to date, the RSO did not claim responsibility for any of the three attacks. In contrast, satellite images show hundreds of houses on fire and thousands of refugees who are slowly moving towards Bangladesh.

There are more than one million Rohingya in Myanmar, and they arrived from Bangladesh in the 70s. The army has always considered them terrorists to be sent back home and never gave them any legal rights. In 2012, after the rape of a Buddhist girl, whose responsibility was attributed to three Rohingya boys, there were a number of clashes between the local Buddhist and Islamic communities. The sudden escalation of violence forced the government to declare a state of emergency.

Since then, over 120,000 Muslims are kept in camps for "security reasons" and with even fewer rights than the remaining Rohingya who are "free" in the Rakhine State.

Today, the official estimates indicate that about one hundred Rohingya and twenty government soldiers have been killed between October and December, whereas the government propaganda asserts that the military are moving from village to village to "cleanse" the country from the rebels. As the areas where the army is operating are inaccessible, it is not possible to assess the real impact of activities that could create further unrest. The most serious concern is the mass exodus that could create new spaces for infiltration of radical elements in the region and raise the terror alert.

The fury of the press against the alleged "indifference" of Aung San Suu Kyi is paradoxically limiting the space of manoeuvre to solve the crisis. Until now, the Burmese leader has merely confirmed that the army is moving in Rakhine in accordance to the law and even Kofi Annan, who has been appointed by Aung San Suu Kyi last August as Special Commissioner for the Rohingya issue, reiterated that speak openly about "genocide" is not only exaggerated but even dangerous. Aung San Suu Kyi has also used the press to urge the international community to endorse the leadership with "trust and time" because thinking to resolve the current crisis in a short time would be unrealistic, if not counterproductive.

When the National League for Democracy (NLD) has won the elections in 2015 and Aung San Suu Kyi, after spending over ten years under house arrest, has become the country's leader, expectations for a "democratic transition" or at least for the opening of a new era "of freedom and opportunity" was very high. Caught by the enthusiasm generated by the hope of a more liberal Myanmar, many international observers did not give enough weight to the fact that the Constitution guarantees the army enough seats in the Parliament to avoid changing the laws that protect their privileges and maintain control over the National Council of Defence and Security, an organ that has the power to authorize them to suspend the government in case of "emergency".

India and China, Myanmar's neighbouring countries, care about stability at their borders, at least in order to avoid compromising their own national interests in South Asia. Both are aware of the precariousness of Aung San Suu Kyi's position and the difficulties of her Government and have chosen to deal with the current crisis by avoiding any direct confrontation.

According to the Indian press, the expectations laid on Aung San Suu Kyi have always been exaggerated, and collide with a complicated reality. Although the best solution may appear the one of opening the Bangladesh borders and allow Rohingya to seek refuge in their country of origin (though doing so would risk giving the green light to the military to complete the ethnic cleansing, killing anyone who fails to reach the border), by doing so, families that have been living in Myanmar since the 70s would be eradicated. Another factor to be taken into consideration is that the Burmese people, mostly Buddhist, do not look at the Rohingya sympathetically, further limiting any action by Aung San Suu Kyi. The stability of her government depends on the military and the people would never forgive any initiative that could put the current transition at risk to promote the rights of a minority considered dangerous and hostile.

Meanwhile, the situation is getting worse for three different reasons:

- 1) Abuses against the Rohingya keep drawing the attention of the international press over the region, making it difficult to reach a compromise at the national level (according to the Indian press, for example, in late November Dhaka sent back 150 Rohingya to Myanmar, and some fled back to Bangladesh. where they denounced that part of the group had been killed in an ambush of the army);
- 2) India and China fear tensions along the border (China) or in Bangladesh (India). In Bangladesh, in particular, a government that is already trying to isolate ISIS elements, could be under attack by radicals on several fronts, forcing India to intervene;

- 3) Both India and China have important economic interests in Myanmar and would like to avoid that an excessive activism in the Rohingya issue is perceived as direct interference on national issues by the Burmese army, prompting the latter to cancel rich business agreements, as it already happened before.

India has always been very sensitive to the Rohingya issue and, in recent years, the government has begun to monitor the Rakhine area carefully for two reasons: to understand the weight of the RSO in the region, given that, although some independent analysts consider the movement defunct, the Indian intelligence believes the group has been recently reactivated due to infiltration of Bangladeshi radical elements associated to the Islamic State; and because of the exponential growth in the number of refugees interested in settling in India.

Reliable estimates confirm the presence of about 36,000 Rohingya in India. They are located in the New Delhi area and six other states: Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Assam and Jammu-Kashmir. Completing an accurate estimate of the number of Rohingya living in India is very difficult for at least two reasons:

- 1) Rohingya reached Myanmar through different migration waves. The first goes back to 1982, when the military junta of Myanmar approved a new citizenship law which definitively ruled out the possibility for this minority to get the Burmese citizenship. By doing so, the government officially denied to over a million people the right to attend schools and hospitals, to find work, to see a marriage recognized and to obtain birth and death certificates, forcing them to flee. The second wave took place after 2012 riots, when an unknown number of people fled to Thailand, Bangladesh and India.
- 2) The second reason why it is difficult to calculate how many Rohingya are currently living in India is related to the legislation regulating political asylum in India. Being considered a paradise in an extremely unstable region, India has emerged as the favourite destination for people escaping from Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, China and Myanmar. Given the number of potential asylum seekers, New Delhi has for years refused to approve a specific legislation to regulate refugees' status and rights in the country, taking instead extremely discretionary ad hoc decisions on the various groups. In this case, while both Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tibetans have been granted, in general, greater protection, the Rohingya never achieved their privileges, possibly because of their Muslim background, which made them be perceived as a source of internal instability. At the moment, only 9,000 Rohingya have been officially granted refugee status in India. All the others either have received an ID card by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' officers, which do not guarantee them any legal right in their host country, or are considered illegal immigrants.

New Delhi is very reluctant to approve a "generous" legislation for refugees not only because it is afraid of being flooded by applicants, but also because a very high percentage of potential refugees come from countries with which New Delhi has not a cooperative relationship. However, most of the officials who work directly with refugees believe that the ambiguity of their legal status leads them to be more vulnerable to extremist propaganda. This is the reason why, today, New Delhi should take advantage of this new crisis in Myanmar to change its attitude, at least towards the Rohingya.

It is no coincidence that, besides New Delhi, most of the Rohingya are concentrated in Kashmir. Fleeing from Myanmar, this minority, which has been denied all rights on grounds of religion, is well received in the only Indian state with a Muslim majority. Many of them have found a decent place to live, a job, friends, and have been able to lean on the health and education facilities run by various non-governmental organizations operating in the area. This type of integration is however very problematic for at least two reasons. First, numbers: it is clear that, by virtue of the crisis that broke out in October, the Rohingya refugees are now more interested in moving to Kashmir where

their presence may soon become unmanageable, both because it can affect the delicate balance between Hindu and Muslim population, and for the need to rely on the limited resources of the region.

A mass migration, especially if illegal and uncontrolled, could bring along new infiltrations of extremist militants in an area that is already problematic. Furthermore, the creation of a network across India putting together the extremists based in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Kashmir could help them fulfilling the dream of “reviving the Jihad from Bangladesh to Baghdad”.

To avoid this, New Delhi must act in three different directions. First, remaining aware of the enormous obstacles to reach an acceptable compromise in such a sensitive and unstable context, it should negotiate with Myanmar a way to resolve the crisis. Secondly, it should increase the level of alert on the borders with Bangladesh and boost bilateral anti-terrorism cooperation with it. Finally, it should better monitor the flow of Rohingya migrants towards India to try to divert them towards less problematic states than Kashmir and, simultaneously, to avoid a new escalation of tensions in the northern valleys.