

**EXCELLENT OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHT IN 1949
BY BRITISH OFFICER PETER MURRAY -
ON RELIGION, THE SITUATION, AND ETHNIC CHARACTERISTICS**

by Rick Heizman, May 21, 2018, San Francisco

Peter Murray was a British administrator in Burma before World War II, and then he served as a Civil Affairs Officer (CAO) with the British Army in Northern Arakan during the Second World War. He had learned and spoke fluent Burmese.

Following are excerpts from a memo he wrote in January 1949, to the Foreign Office, outlining and explaining the so-called race/religious troubles in Arakan due to the Bengali Muslims' relentless intrusion into Burma.

FOREIGN OFFICE, S.W.1. 26th January, 1949.
(F 1323/1015/79) SECRET

Letter to RWD Fowler, Commonwealth Relations Office

Dear Bob,

As some anxiety is being felt about the disorders in North Arakan and as little seems to be known of the factors involved, I have thought it worthwhile to put on record what I know of the background.

The People:

The **Arakanese** are Buddhists, speaking a strongly differentiated form of the Burmese language. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Arakan was a powerful and important kingdom, stretching to Chittagong in the north, where there was an Arakanese Viceroy, and preying on the shipping of the Mogul Empire in Bengal. The kingdom was subdued by the Burmese at the end of the 18th century, and came under British rule in 1825. Before the war [WWII] there was a small but powerful and influential Arakanese aristocracy who provided many of Burma's ablest politicians and civil servants, and most of her few successful native business men.

The **Chittagong Moslems** are an off-shoot of the Bengali race, speaking a debased form of Bengali interlarded with Portuguese, Arabic and Arakanese words. They are much more hard working and prolific than the Arakanese, and **fanatically religious**. For the last several hundred years, they have been moving southwards, **gradually displacing and over-running the Arakanese**.

*[Most of these Bengalis were influenced, at that time (mid and late 1800s), by the Islamic Faraidi movement in Bengal based on the **ideology of the Wahhabis of Arabia** (pre Saudi Arabia). Wahhabism was, and is, one of the most fundamental and intolerant sects of Islam advocating strict Sharia Law and the elimination of all other faiths].*

The Situation:

Eventually [after the 1942 Maungdaw Massacre of 30,000 Buddhists, and the burning of over 400 Buddhist villages, and the chaos of WWII], in March and April 1948, the area appears to have got out of control altogether, and since then the Burmese garrisons have maintained themselves with difficulty in the midst of a hostile Moslem population. The leaders of the revolt called themselves **'Mujahid' (Arabic: holy warrior of jihad for Allah and Islam)**; their numbers have been put at 3,000 – 5,000, but they undoubtedly have the sympathy and probably active support not only of the Moslem population of the area, which I suppose must be 100,000 – 120,000, but also of the Moslems across the frontier in the Chittagong district, **with whom they are connected by the closest ties of race and religion** – the frontier is in fact quite artificial at this point. They may have allied with Arakanese Communist rebels against the Burmese administration in the hope of establishing an independent state in Arakan after the overthrow of the Burmese Government's authority by means of such an alliance.

The Future:

It seems unlikely that the Burmese Government will be able to restore order in Burma proper in the near future, let alone in Arakan. The people and the minor officials in Chittagong Division cannot be expected to watch unmoved the struggles of their [Muslim] brothers across the frontier against an alien and infidel administration, and will no doubt continue to support them.

Yours sincerely, P. Murray

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