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# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND DISPLACEMENT OF ROHINGYAS AND UYGHURS

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## INTRODUCTION:

Identity politics has long played a significant role in shaping the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, often leading to their marginalization and displacement. In recent years, the Rohingyas in Myanmar and the Uyghurs in China have emerged as two of the most persecuted groups in the world. While the Rohingyas, a stateless Muslim minority, have faced mass displacement due to systematic violence and denial of citizenship, the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim group in China's Xinjiang region, have been subjected to mass surveillance, forced internment, and cultural erasure. Both cases illustrate how governments use identity politics to justify exclusionary policies, leading to forced migration, statelessness, and human rights violations. Both cases underscore the devastating consequences of a state leveraging identity politics to solidify political control, ultimately targeting marginalized communities and attempting to erase their cultural and religious presence.

This study examines how identity politics has fueled the displacement of these two communities, comparing the state policies, international responses, and long-term consequences of their persecution. The Rohingya crisis stems from Myanmar's exclusionary citizenship laws and military violence, resulting in mass displacement to neighboring countries. In contrast, the Chinese government's policies towards the Uyghurs involve large-scale internment camps and forced assimilation rather than direct expulsion. Despite these differences, both groups face severe human rights violations and limited avenues for justice.

By analyzing these cases, this paper aims to highlight the broader implications of identity-based exclusion and state-sponsored persecution. It seeks to answer the following questions: How do identity politics influence the forced displacement of the Rohingyas and Uyghurs? What similarities and differences exist in state policies and international responses? What are the global consequences of these crises?

The paper is structured as follows: The first section explores the historical and political foundations of identity politics in Myanmar and China. The second section examines the specific policies that have led to the displacement of the Rohingyas and the repression of the Uyghurs. The third section analyzes international responses and the challenges of addressing these crises. The fourth section provides a comparative analysis, highlighting both similarities and differences between the two cases. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications for global human rights and policy recommendations for addressing ethnic persecution.Together, these cases illustrate how state and nationalist actors can distort and weaponize identity politics—transforming it from a potential tool of empowerment into a mechanism that deepens exclusion, erases cultural diversity, and perpetuates cycles of discrimination and violence.

## Literature Review :

Scholars have long debated the dual nature of identity politics—both as a tool for empowerment and as a mechanism for exclusion. **Kaufman (2001)** conceptualizes identity politics as the process through which personal and group identities are politicized, asserting that the recognition and affirmation of these identities should be central to political engagement. This perspective has been expanded by later theorists, such as **Hawley (2022)**, who argue that mobilizing social identities carries a moral imperative to challenge systemic oppression. Research by **Bernstein (2005)** and others highlights how emphasizing social identities can empower marginalized communities to assert their rights and resist inequities. In this sense, identity politics has historically been instrumental in advancing civil rights, feminist, and indigenous movements (**Taylor, 1994; Mansbridge, 1999**).

However, a growing body of literature also warns that identity politics, when co-opted by state and nationalist forces, can be weaponized to justify exclusionary practices (**Brubaker, 2017; Brown, 2019**). In Myanmar, for instance, a significant portion of the scholarship examines how Buddhist nationalist rhetoric has transformed Rohingya identity into a marker of foreignness. Despite their deep historical roots in the region, the Rohingya have been labeled as "illegal immigrants" by both state actors and nationalist groups, a portrayal that has paved the way for exclusionary citizenship laws and military interventions (**Ibrahim, 2016; Leider, 2018**). **Farzana (2017)** explores how the construction of Rohingya identity as an "outsider" group has legitimized state-led persecution, including ethnic cleansing and forced displacement. This framing not only dehumanizes the Rohingya but also provides a convenient pretext for denying them citizenship, political rights, and basic protections (**Amnesty International, 2019**).

Similarly, studies on China's Xinjiang region reveal that the state has systematically manipulated Uyghur identity by linking cultural and religious practices with terrorism and separatism (**Clarke, 2018; Roberts, 2020**). **Zenz (2019)** documents how this conflation has enabled the Chinese government to implement extensive surveillance, forced internment, and cultural erasure under the guise of counterterrorism. **Byler (2021)** examines

how advanced technologies, such as AI-driven facial recognition and predictive policing, have facilitated large-scale repression in Xinjiang. The state's framing of Uyghur identity as inherently destabilizing has served to delegitimize dissent and accelerate policies aimed at forced assimilation (**Human Rights Watch, 2021**).

While the literature on each case is robust, there remains a notable gap in comparative analyses that examine how identity politics, when distorted by powerful state actors, drives forced displacement and marginalization across different contexts. Most studies analyze the Rohingya and Uyghur crises in isolation, with limited scholarship directly comparing the mechanisms of exclusion, the role of state narratives, and the long-term consequences for displaced populations (**Eck, 2021; Callahan, 2022**). This research seeks to bridge that gap by examining the exclusionary state policies in Myanmar and China, analyzing their similarities and differences, and exploring their broader international ramifications.

Through this comparative lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how identity-based exclusion perpetuates cycles of violence, forced migration, and statelessness. Additionally, it engages with broader discussions on how authoritarian regimes manipulate ethnic and religious identities to consolidate power, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of global human rights frameworks in addressing state-sponsored persecution.

In summary, the reviewed literature illustrates a critical tension: identity politics holds the potential to empower marginalized communities, yet it can also be subverted by dominant political forces to enforce systemic exclusion. This duality forms the theoretical backbone of the present study, which investigates the distinct yet overlapping trajectories of Rohingya and Uyghur persecution.

## Background and Contestations of Belonging

The Rohingya and Uyghur communities each possess deep historical roots in their respective regions; yet, modern state narratives have consistently portrayed them as outsiders. This constructed outsider identity serves as a justification for exclusionary and repressive policies, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and forced displacement.

## The Rohingya in Myanmar: Historical Roots and the Politics of Statelessness

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority who have lived in Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) state for centuries. Historical records indicate that Muslim communities were established in the region as early as the 15th century, and their numbers were further bolstered during British colonial rule when the area was part of British India( Leider,2018)[1].Despite this longstanding presence, the post-independence governments of Myanmar began to redefine who belonged to the nation. Over time, especially after 1948, the Rohingya were systematically excluded from the official list of Myanmar's ethnic groups(Yegar,2002).[2] By 1989, when the country was renamed from Burma to Myanmar, the government had adopted a narrative that cast the Rohingya as recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh—even though many families had been established in the region for generations.

This process of exclusion was not only reflected in legal statutes but was also embedded in societal attitudes. Dominant Buddhist nationalist discourses have framed the Rohingya identity as inherently foreign, emphasizing differences in language, religion, and cultural practices(International Crisis Group,2016).[3] Such politicized portrayals have justified a wide range of repressive measures—from the denial of citizenship and basic civil rights to violent military campaigns that have forced hundreds of thousands to flee(Human Rights Watch,2017).[4] The Rohingya's historical ties to Rakhine are thus overshadowed by a powerful narrative of outsider status, which has been central to their persistent marginalization and the humanitarian crisis that followed in recent years.

## The Uyghurs in Xinjiang : Cultural Identity and State-Controlled Assimilation

In China's vast Xinjiang region—a land historically known as a "new frontier" or borderland—the Uyghurs have maintained a distinct cultural and religious identity for centuries. Their Islamic traditions date back to early Turkic influences and the era of the Karakhanids, and the region has long served as a crossroads along the ancient Silk Road(Brophy,2019).[5] However, the modern Chinese state has contested this historical narrative. Since 1949, and increasingly over recent decades, Beijing has claimed that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of China, a view that many Uyghurs dispute by highlighting the region's history of shifting borders and diverse cultural influences.

Under the current regime, identity politics is employed to depict Uyghur cultural and religious practices as a threat to national unity. Policies introduced since the early 2000s—and intensified from 2017 onward—have linked Uyghur identity with extremism and separatism. These policies include mass surveillance, extensive detention in "vocational training centers," forced assimilation, and even measures aimed at controlling population growth(Roberts,2020).[6] The influx of Han Chinese settlers further dilutes the indigenous Uyghur presence, reinforcing the state narrative that the Uyghurs are an alien element within their own homeland. As with the Rohingya, the construction of the Uyghurs as outsiders serves as the ideological basis for repressive measures and cultural erasure.

[1] Leider, Jacques. *Rohingya: The Name, the Movement, the Quest for Identity*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

[2] Yegar, Moshe. *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*. Lexington Books, 2002.

[3] International Crisis Group. *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State?* Report No. 283, 2016.

[4] Human Rights Watch. *"All of My Body Was in Pain": Sexual Violence Against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma*. Report, 2017.

[5] Brophy, David. *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

[6] Roberts, Sean R. *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

## Contesting Belonging Through Manipulated Narratives

In both Myanmar and China, the struggle over belonging is a central element in the use of identity politics. Despite clear historical evidence of indigenous settlement, the Rohingya have been systematically cast as "illegal" or transient, while the Uyghurs are portrayed as relics of a bygone era whose distinctiveness poses a threat to modern national unity. Such narratives are strategically deployed by state and nationalist actors to rationalize policies that strip these communities of citizenship, cultural autonomy, and basic rights.

Understanding these historical contexts is essential. It reveals how competing narratives of belonging are not merely academic debates but serve as potent tools in the hands of state power. By constructing both the Rohingya and Uyghurs as perpetual outsiders, governments have justified a wide array of exclusionary measures—from violent military campaigns and forced displacement to systematic surveillance and cultural suppression. This contest over identity and belonging continues to shape the lives of these communities, making it a critical area of study for understanding modern ethnic and religious persecution.

## State Policies and Identity Politics: Discrimination, Exclusion, and Forced Displacement of the Rohingya

Myanmar's state policies have long been intertwined with a politics of identity that systematically dehumanizes and excludes the Rohingya. Despite evidence of settlements dating back to the 15th century—and reinforced by migrations during British colonial rule—the post-independence government has persistently recast the Rohingya as "illegal immigrants" and outsiders. This constructed narrative,deeply embedded in both legal frameworks and societal attitudes, forms the ideological basis for policies that strip the Rohingya of citizenship, render them stateless, and deny them basic human rights.

The legal framework in Myanmar is a critical tool in this process. The 1948 citizenship law, already exclusionary in nature, was compounded by subsequent measures enacted after the military junta seized power in 1962. These laws have systematically deprived the Rohingya of full citizenship and legal recognition. In practice, this has meant that Rohingya communities are denied the rights to vote, access education, secure employment, and even travel freely (residents must obtain official permission even to travel locally, effectively confining them to isolated, impoverished areas ) -- measures designed not only to control their population but also to undermine their cultural identity(Human Rights Watch,2000).[7] Bureaucratic restrictions on marriage and family planning further erode their traditional way of life, forcing couples to adhere to regulations that conflict with their religious customs and reinforcing their image as outsiders.For eg-  Rohingya couples in northern towns such as Maungdaw and Buthidaung face oppressive family planning restrictions that allow no more than two children, and marriage is heavily regulated through bureaucratic procedures that force them to abandon key religious practices—such as wearing headscarves—thereby undermining their cultural identity.  In Rakhine, where poverty rates exceed 40 percent, these policies not only strip the Rohingya of economic opportunities but also deepen their social exclusion.

## Societal Prejudice and the Outsider Narrative

Beyond formal legal mechanisms, deep-seated societal prejudice further reinforces the Rohingya's marginalized status. Widespread anti-Muslim sentiment among the majority Buddhist population, bolstered by nationalist rhetoric, frames the Rohingya as a dangerous, foreign element in Myanmar. For example, during Myanmar's first UN-backed national census in 2014 – it's first in 30 years, Buddhist nationalists vehemently opposed allowing the Rohingya to self-identify, pressuring authorities to register them as "Bengalis"(International Crisis Group,2016).[8] This narrow definition of "Myanmar-ness" excludes anyone who does not conform to the dominant ethnic and religious narrative, further entrenching the Rohingya as perpetual outsiders. Identity politics has played a crucial role in shaping this discriminatory stance. The Rohingya's Muslim identity has often been framed as a threat to the predominantly Buddhist nation's cultural and national identity. Political leaders and groups have capitalized on these fears to consolidate power, using the marginalization of the Rohingya as a rallying point for nationalist sentiment. As a result, the Rohingya have been systematically othered, both by the state and the society, stripping them of their rights, recognition and dignity.

## Escalation of Violence and Forced Displacement

The cumulative effect of these exclusionary policies has been catastrophic. The state's systemic repression has not only confined the Rohingya to impoverished, isolated communities in Rakhine State but has also set the stage for violent confrontations. In August 2017, after attacks on police and military posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Myanmar military launched an all-out crackdown marked by widespread massacres, rape, and arson. Entire villages were torched, and thousands of civilians were killed in a brutal campaign that forced over 600,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh(United Nations Human Rights Council.2018).[9] Survivors recount harrowing experiences of soldiers indiscriminately firing on fleeing people and deploying landmines near border crossings, underscoring the extreme nature of state-sponsored violence.

## The Cycle of Oppression and the Terrorism Narrative

Critically, the oppressive state policies do not exist in a vacuum; they actively contribute to a cycle of resistance and repression. The extreme restrictions imposed on the Rohingya—whether through legal disenfranchisement or everyday harassment—have not only fostered deep resentment but

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[7] Human Rights Watch. *Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution*. Report, 2000.

[8] International Crisis Group. *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State?* Report No. 283, 2016.

[9] United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, 2018.

have also driven some to take desperate, sometimes violent, measures. The emergence of groups like ARSA can be seen as a response to decades of state-sponsored marginalization and brutality. However, rather than addressing the underlying grievances, the Myanmar government seizes on any protest or act of resistance to label it as terrorism. This narrative of anti-terrorism is then used to justify even harsher crackdowns. Every act of dissent is branded as an attack on national security, allowing the state to maintain and escalate its repressive measures under the guise of countering extremism. In doing so, the government not only suppresses legitimate demands for justice and equality but also creates an environment where even peaceful protests are met with violence and further persecution.

## Humanitarian Consequences

The repercussions of these policies are profound. Rohingya communities, already suffering from decades of economic and social exclusion, are now forced into conditions akin to an open-air prison. In Rakhine State, pervasive poverty, malnutrition, and lack of access to essential services have left the Rohingya dependent on humanitarian aid for survival. The mass displacement following the 2017 military offensive has resulted in a refugee crisis of staggering proportions, with over 1.1 million Rohingya forced to flee into precarious camps in Bangladesh and other Southeast Asian countries. These camps, often characterized by overcrowding and inadequate facilities, serve as a stark reminder of the human cost of a state policy rooted in exclusion and dehumanization.

Myanmar's use of identity politics to construct the Rohingya as perpetual outsiders is at the core of their systemic repression. By denying them legal recognition and basic human rights, and by fostering an atmosphere of widespread societal prejudice, the state has justified a vicious cycle of violence, forced displacement, and further marginalization. This deliberate manipulation of identity not only perpetuates the Rohingya crisis but also highlights the broader dangers of politicizing ethnic and religious identity for state control. Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the root causes of such crises and for developing effective international responses to protect the rights and dignity of vulnerable communities.

## The Failure of Aung San Suu Kyi's Government: Identity Politics and the Denial of Rohingya Justice

Myanmar's brief democratic experiment that began in 2016 with the election of its first civilian-led government was heralded as a turning point for justice and reform. However, for the Rohingya and other marginalized groups, the promises of democracy quickly proved hollow. Despite initial hopes for a more inclusive state, Aung San Suu Kyi's administration failed to address the deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions that have long defined Rakhine State. Rather than challenging the entrenched narrative that casts the Rohingya as foreign interlopers, the civilian government consistently sided with Buddhist nationalist sentiments—a political calculation rooted in vote-bank considerations and the fear of alienating a dominant electorate.

In the wake of the August 2017 crisis—where coordinated attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army prompted a brutal military crackdown—the government's response was marked not by accountability, but by denial and deflection. The military's vicious campaign of massacres, rape, and arson forced over 600,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, yet Aung San Suu Kyi repeatedly dismissed international criticism. In public statements and even during her 3,379-word speech at the International Court of Justice, she avoided referring to the persecuted minority by name, thereby reinforcing their otherness. Instead of condemning the atrocities, she defended the military's actions as a necessary response to a so-called internal conflict—a stance that deeply betrayed the trust of the Rohingya, who had long looked to her as a symbol of hope.

Furthermore, her government's reluctance to address or rectify these repressive policies has emboldened the state. By prioritizing political expediency over genuine reform and by tacitly endorsing a narrative that the Rohingya are a dangerous, alien presence, Aung San Suu Kyi's administration not only failed to protect a vulnerable community but also perpetuated the cycle of marginalization and violence. This failure is emblematic of how identity politics, when harnessed by state and nationalist actors, can transform an issue of civil rights into a tool for exclusion and repression—leading to a humanitarian crisis that continues to haunt Myanmar and the wider region.

## Conditions of Rohingya Refugees in Host Countries

The plight of Rohingya refugees extends far beyond the violence in Myanmar—it continues as a multifaceted humanitarian crisis in host countries, where policies and political stances often exacerbate their suffering. In Bangladesh, the majority of Rohingya refugees live in overcrowded, flood-prone camps such as Kutupalong and Leda. Although officially labeled as "temporary migrants," these refugees face severe restrictions on their rights and live in conditions that neglect both their dignity and cultural identity(Refugees International,2021).10 The education systems in these camps rarely support the Rohingya language and heritage, while legal and economic barriers force many into illegal employment or complete reliance on humanitarian aid, which has been rapidly declining in recent years.

Conditions in Bangladesh have deteriorated markedly in recent years. International funding for life-saving services has dropped dramatically, leading to significant cuts in food and medical assistance. With aid budgets slashed by as much as one third, refugees now receive only minimal rations—barely enough to meet basic nutritional needs. The Bangladeshi government's stringent policies, including the forced relocation of tens of thousands of Rohingya to the flood-prone island of Bhashan Char, have further isolated these communities and exposed them to additional risks, such as cyclones and infrastructure failures. Additionally, some neighboring countries, including India, have refused to accept Rohingya refugees, leaving the displaced population with even fewer options and intensifying their precarious situation.

In Malaysia, the situation is similarly grim. Under a 'resettlement' policy that treats Rohingya refugees as temporary migrants awaiting future relocation to Western countries, they are systematically excluded from legal rights and access to essential services such as education and healthcare. This policy of non-inclusion reinforces their status as outsiders and contributes to their ongoing marginalization.

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[10] Refugees International. *"No Safe Haven: The Plight of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh and Beyond"*, 2021.

The harsh living conditions in these refugee camps are compounded by a particularly devastating gendered dimension. Rohingya women and girls face an elevated risk of trafficking, sexual abuse, and exploitation. In the overcrowded and insecure conditions of many camps, they are frequently vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual violence. Disturbing reports indicate that some are lured into trafficking networks or forced into prostitution under the guise of employment or protection. The lack of effective legal protection and adequate support services leaves these vulnerable groups with little recourse for justice, further entrenching their suffering.

Overall, the conditions of Rohingya refugees in host countries reflect the long-standing state-sponsored marginalization they have endured in Myanmar. The denial of long-term legal status and adequate support not only perpetuates their vulnerability but also deepens their isolation. From restricted mobility and economic exploitation to the acute dangers faced by women and girls—and with some regional players like India refusing to take them in—the Rohingya crisis remains one of the most severe humanitarian challenges of our time. Addressing these issues requires urgent international attention, increased humanitarian aid, and a fundamental reassessment of policies to ensure that the rights and dignity of this marginalized community are upheld.

## China's Treatment and Policies Against Uyghurs: Identity Politics, Repression, and Forced Assimilation

China's approach to the Uyghur population in Xinjiang exemplifies the dangerous use of identity politics to justify and perpetuate a systematic campaign of repression and cultural erasure. The Chinese government has constructed an ideological narrative that labels Uyghur cultural and religious practices as inherently dangerous, linking them to terrorism and separatism. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, this narrative has been mobilized to enforce a rigid version of state-sanctioned "Sinicization" that imposes a uniform set of cultural, religious, and political norms on all ethnic minorities, effectively subordinating them to the ideals of the Communist Party(Zenz,2019).[11]

### Reeducation Camps and Mass Detention

Central to this campaign are the reeducation camps—officially designated as "vocational education and training centers"—where nearly one million Uyghurs have been detained(Adrian Zenz,2018).[12] These facilities have become synonymous with mass detention, forced labor, and ideological indoctrination. In these camps, detainees are subjected to harsh conditions including sleep deprivation, physical torture, and psychological abuse. They are forced to renounce their religious beliefs, learn Mandarin, and recite propaganda that glorifies the Communist Party and Xi Jinping. The system of detention is highly organized, with detainees classified by a scoring system that determines their treatment and the possibility of release. Minor infractions, such as speaking in the Uyghur language or engaging in traditional religious practices like fasting or prayer, can result in severe punishments. In some cases, individuals have been detained solely for attending religious events or even for maintaining a beard—a practice considered by the authorities as a marker of religious extremism(Human Rights Watch,2019).[13]

### Forced Assimilation and Cultural Erasure

The Chinese government's policies extend far beyond detention. Through an aggressive campaign of forced assimilation, it has systematically sought to eradicate Uyghur cultural and religious identity. Authorities have demolished thousands of mosques, removed Islamic symbols from public spaces, and banned the use of Arabic in both private and public contexts. Traditional practices—such as wearing headscarves or using religious names—are strictly prohibited, and Uyghur families are compelled to adopt cultural practices that align with Han Chinese norms. The state's directives are clear: all religious expressions must conform to a standardized model that supports the CCP's ideological framework. Xi Jinping has consistently maintained that religion in China must be "Sinicized," meaning that all religious organizations and practices should adapt to and reinforce the tenets of Chinese socialism. This imposition of a homogeneous cultural model not only strips Uyghurs of their unique identity but also serves to delegitimize their historical claims to Xinjiang.

### Surveillance, Arbitrary Detentions, and the Terrorism Narrative

China's surveillance apparatus in Xinjiang is among the most sophisticated in the world. Advanced biometric systems, widespread CCTV coverage, and digital tracking technologies are deployed to monitor every aspect of Uyghur life (including regulating halal food availability and prohibiting Uyghur families from observing traditional customs such as fasting during Ramadan) The Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) aggregates data from multiple sources to flag individuals for their "suspicious" behaviors, such as receiving foreign phone calls or engaging in activities deemed "extremist"(UN Human Rights Office,2022).[14]Under policies like "unite as one family," Han Chinese officials are even placed within Uyghur households to monitor and report any deviation from state-approved behavior.

Arbitrary detentions have surged, with individuals being arrested for vague charges such as "inciting ethnic hatred" or "picking quarrels and provoking trouble." Notable case studies include prominent activists like Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur academic sentenced to life imprisonment for separatism, and countless others who have been detained for merely practicing their religion or expressing their cultural identity. Activists such as Rushan Abbas have

[11] Zenz, Adrian. *"Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang."* Journal of Political Risk, 2019.

[12] Zenz, Adrian. *"New Evidence for China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang."* Jamestown Foundation, 2018.

[13] Human Rights Watch. *"Eradicating Ideological Viruses: China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims."* Report, 2019.

[14] United Nations Human Rights Office. *"Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang."* 2022.

drawn international attention when family members, including sisters who publicly advocate for Uyghur rights, mysteriously vanish, underscoring the risks faced by those who dare to challenge the state's narrative.

### *Denial, Justification, and the Imposition of Ideology*

Despite overwhelming evidence from leaked documents, testimonies of former detainees, and reports by international human rights organizations, the Chinese government consistently denies all allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Officials dismiss these accounts as "foreign propaganda" and argue that the measures are necessary to combat terrorism and maintain stability in the region. The state justifies its actions by portraying any expression of Uyghur cultural or religious identity as a threat—a tactic that effectively rebrands all dissent as extremism. For instance, policies such as the "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" were launched following high-profile attacks, and have since been used to broadly target Uyghurs, even those with no connection to any militant activity.

Xi Jinping's administration has thus deployed identity politics as a tool to impose a rigid, homogenized vision of Chinese identity. By branding Uyghur practices as inherently extremist, the CCP not only rationalizes its repressive measures but also seeks to assimilate religious minorities into a state-sanctioned version of culture. This strategy of forced assimilation, mass surveillance, and arbitrary detention forms part of a broader effort to "Sinicize" all religions, ensuring that no belief system exists outside the parameters of Communist ideology.

### *The Gulja Massacre and Historical Repression*

The repression of Uyghurs by the Chinese state is not a recent phenomenon. A key historical example is the Gulja Massacre of 1997, which remains one of the most violent crackdowns against Uyghurs in recent history. The massacre occurred on February 5, 1997, in the city of Gulja (Yining), when thousands of Uyghurs organized a peaceful demonstration demanding religious and cultural freedoms, as well as the release of political prisoners. Chinese security forces responded with brutal force, opening fire on protesters and arresting thousands. Eyewitness accounts describe extrajudicial killings, widespread torture, and forced disappearances(Congressional-Executive Commission on China,2018).[15] Many detainees were subjected to extreme mistreatment in custody, with reports of deaths due to abuse. The crackdown not only silenced political activism but also set a precedent for future repression, as it reinforced the Chinese government's zero-tolerance approach toward Uyghur dissent. This pattern of state violence continued with the Yarkand and Elishqu (2014) massacres where security forces killed hundreds during protests against police brutality during Ramadan.

China's treatment of the Uyghurs is a stark demonstration of how identity politics can be manipulated to enforce systemic repression. By constructing a narrative that casts Uyghurs as a dangerous, alien minority, the Chinese state justifies a wide-ranging campaign of mass detention, forced labor, and cultural erasure. The ongoing abuses—ranging from the demolition of mosques and forced sterilizations to the suppression of everyday religious practices—are not isolated incidents but part of an overarching strategy to impose a homogenized national identity. The denial of these abuses, despite extensive evidence gathered by international human rights organizations, further underscores the regime's commitment to maintaining control. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending the full scope of the crisis in Xinjiang and for mobilizing international efforts to hold the Chinese government accountable for its actions.

### *Conditions of Uyghur Refugees Abroad and Transnational Repression*

The persecution of Uyghurs does not end at China's borders. Chinese authorities actively pursue a policy of transnational repression that tracks Uyghur asylum seekers around the world, forcing many to return to an environment of systematic abuse or subjecting them to detention in host countries. In numerous instances, officials have forcibly repatriated hundreds of Turkic Muslim asylum seekers. For example, in March 2014, a night raid in a remote rubber plantation in Thailand resulted in the detention of over 200 individuals who identified as Turkic Muslims. While some were eventually allowed to depart for Turkey, many were instead returned to China, where their fate remains shrouded in secrecy(Radio Free Asia,2019).16This relentless approach extends beyond arbitrary deportations. In early 2017, Chinese authorities demanded the return of Turkic Muslim students living abroad, and there are credible reports that family members of these students were detained as leverage, further demonstrating the regime's willingness to use kinship ties as a tool of coercion(Human Rights Watch,2017).17 In July 2017, following discussions between Chinese and Egyptian officials, at least 62 Turkic Muslims in Egypt were arrested and deported back to China without any explanation, highlighting a coordinated international effort to suppress dissent and maintain control over the Uyghur diaspora.Host countries themselves are often pressured by Chinese diplomatic efforts to curtail Uyghur asylum activities. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, there have been instances of quiet deportations despite international legal protections against refoulement. These nations, facing their own economic and political challenges, sometimes prioritize bilateral relations with China over the rights of Uyghur refugees, leaving them in a precarious legal limbo.

For those who remain in host countries, the challenges are profound. Detention centers in places like Thailand are characterized by overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and insufficient food and medical care. Refugees live under constant surveillance and severe restrictions on communication, while the threat of forced repatriation looms large. The disruption extends to family life, as authorities systematically separate relatives to break community ties and enforce compliance. Such measures create an environment of pervasive fear, where even routine interactions with family or neighbors can result in punitive actions.

The consequences of these policies are especially devastating for Uyghur women and girls. Reports indicate that sexual violence is rampant in detention centers and reeducation camps, with survivors recounting experiences of rape, forced sterilization, and other forms of gender-based abuse. These acts of

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[15] Congressional-Executive Commission on China. *"Crackdown on Uyghur Protesters in Gulja."* 2018.

[16] Radio Free Asia. *"Thailand Repatriates Uyghurs to China."* 2019.

[17] Human Rights Watch. *"China: Families of Uyghur Students Held Hostage."* 2017.

violence, coupled with coercive measures to control reproductive rights, not only inflict immediate physical and psychological trauma but also aim to suppress the demographic and cultural presence of the Uyghur community.

Beyond the immediate physical abuses, Uyghur refugees face a bleak future characterized by a complete lack of opportunities. In host countries, policies and practices often deny them access to education, legal employment, and healthcare. The resettlement policies in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia treat Uyghur refugees as temporary migrants, leaving them in a state of limbo with minimal support and few prospects for integration. This denial of basic human rights forces many into illegal employment or dependence on humanitarian aid, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that offers little hope for self-reliance or long-term improvement.

In sum, the plight of Uyghur refugees abroad is marked not only by the harsh conditions in detention centers and refugee camps but also by the far-reaching reach of China's transnational repression. Through aggressive surveillance, forced repatriations, and the use of family ties as leverage, the Chinese state ensures that its policies of forced assimilation and cultural erasure extend well beyond its borders. This comprehensive strategy serves as a stark reminder of the lengths to which the regime will go to silence dissent and enforce its vision of national unity, underscoring the urgent need for robust international safeguards to protect the rights and dignity of the Uyghur diaspora.

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### Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences in State Policies

Both Myanmar and China employ identity politics and counterterrorism rhetoric to justify state repression against Rohingyas and Uyghurs, respectively. However, their methods and objectives differ significantly.

In Myanmar, the Rohingya are systematically denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, restricting their rights and reinforcing their status as stateless outsiders(Human Rights Watch,2019).[18] The state frames them as illegal immigrants and potential extremists, using this narrative to justify military crackdowns, such as the 2017 operations following ARSA attacks, which resulted in mass killings, sexual violence, and large-scale displacement. The government defends these actions as counterinsurgency measures, despite overwhelming evidence of ethnic cleansing (UNHCR, 2018).[19]

In China, repression is more institutionalized, relying on mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, and forced assimilation under the guise of combating separatism and extremism. Policies include internment in so-called vocational training centers, forced labor, and restrictions on religious and cultural practices(Zenz,2019).[20] Unlike Myanmar, China leverages international platforms such as the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)** to legitimize its actions, framing them as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy. The SCO's framework reinforces China's claim that its measures align with global security efforts, shielding it from stronger international scrutiny.

While Myanmar's policies result in mass displacement and the creation of a refugee crisis, China's approach focuses on forced assimilation, seeking to erase Uyghur identity within its borders. In both cases, state-sponsored repression is justified through security discourses, demonstrating how identity politics and counterterrorism narratives are instrumentalized to suppress minority populations.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ROHINGYA CRISIS

### Legal and Diplomatic Measures

UN bodies have played a pivotal role in documenting abuses against the Rohingya. The UN established an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Myanmar in 2017, which produced a 441-page report detailing systematic human rights violations—including mass killings, rapes, and village burnings—committed by the Tatmadaw (armed forces of Myanmar)(UNHRC,2018).[21] This led to the creation of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), tasked with gathering higher-standard evidence to build criminal cases(United Nations General Assembly,2018).[22] While these initiatives have generated robust documentation, efforts within the UN Security Council have been muted. Geopolitical interests—most notably the veto power of China and Russia—have prevented the adoption of targeted sanctions or a comprehensive arms embargo, thereby limiting political leverage against Myanmar's military.

Parallel to these UN mechanisms, legal avenues have been pursued in international courts. In November 2019, The Gambia filed a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, accusing it of breaching the Genocide Convention(ICJ,2019).[23] In January 2020, the ICJ ruled unanimously that Myanmar must take emergency measures to protect the Rohingya and preserve evidence of genocide. Concurrently, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been investigating allegations of crimes against humanity, and in November 2024, the ICC prosecutor Karim Khan sought an arrest warrant for Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (current Prime Minister of Myanmar) on charges of crimes against humanity which includes deportation and persecution of Rohingyas(ICC,2024).[24]These judicial efforts signal an increasing reliance on international law to hold Myanmar accountable, yet they also reflect institutional fragmentation as multiple legal proceedings run concurrently without a unified enforcement mechanism.

[18] Human Rights Watch, *An Open Prison Without End: Myanmar's Mass Detention of Rohingya in Rakhine State*, 2019.

[19] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Report on Rohingya Crisis*, 2018.

[20] Adrian Zenz, *"Brainwashing, Police Guards, and Coercive Internment: Evidence from Chinese Government Documents about the Nature and Extent of Xinjiang's Re-Education Camps,"* Journal of Political Risk 7, no. 11 (2019).

[21] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, 2018.

[22] United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution 73/264: Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar*, 2018.

[23] International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)*, 2019.

[24] International Criminal Court (ICC), *Prosecutor Requests Warrant for Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing*, 2024.

*Humanitarian Response and Funding Challenges*

On the ground, humanitarian organizations led by agencies such as UNHCR and IOM are providing life-saving assistance to nearly one million Rohingya refugees, primarily in Bangladesh(UNHCR,2023).[25] Joint Response Plans have been developed to address urgent needs like food, shelter, and healthcare(IOM,2023).[26]However, chronic underfunding remains a severe impediment; for example, the UN's 2023 Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan secured only about one-third of its targeted funds (ReliefWeb,2023).[27] This shortfall not only hampers immediate relief efforts but also undermines longer-term initiatives aimed at facilitating safe, dignified repatriation, which remains elusive without guarantees of citizenship rights and security reforms in Myanmar.

*Geopolitical Dynamics and Muted International Response*

A key factor in the muted international response is the interplay of strategic interests. Major powers such as China, India, and Russia maintain strong ties with Myanmar—often prioritizing economic investments, arms trade, and regional influence over human rights considerations. China, for instance, has actively blocked robust measures in the UN Security Council while advancing its Belt and Road Initiative, which depends on stable relationships with Myanmar. Similarly, India and ASEAN nations have largely refrained from taking strong stances citing geopolitical interests and a preference for non interference. India's strategic reliance on Myanmar for intelligence and counter-insurgency efforts further constrains its willingness to support aggressive actions against the Tatmadaw. In contrast, while later U.S. administrations imposed targeted sanctions, the earlier decision—under Barack Obama—to lift sanctions in 2016 in the name of democratic progress was widely criticized for reducing pressure on Myanmar and contributing to a muted response overall.

*Civil Society and NGO Impact*

Beyond state and intergovernmental responses, a vibrant array of civil society organizations and grassroots activism has emerged, significantly contributing to international awareness. Independent human rights groups—such as Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights, and local Rohingya-led initiatives—have documented atrocities, provided testimonies, and mobilized public opinion. These organizations have filled critical gaps in the international narrative, pressuring both governments and international bodies to address the crisis despite the fragmented institutional landscape. Their advocacy has underscored the urgency of accountability and the necessity of sustained humanitarian intervention, even as they operate in challenging conditions with limited resources.

*Transitional Justice and Accountability Mechanisms*

While international legal proceedings at the ICJ and ICC represent key steps toward accountability, critics argue that these fragmented processes fall short of addressing the full spectrum of justice required for the Rohingya. There is a pressing need for a cohesive transitional justice framework that goes beyond criminal prosecution. Such a framework should integrate truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reforms aimed at ensuring lasting accountability. This unified approach would help bridge the gap between immediate legal remedies and the long-term goal of reconciling divided communities, ultimately providing survivors with not only recognition but also meaningful redress for decades of systematic persecution.

*Criticism of Policy Decisions and Institutional Constraints*

The international community's response has been further complicated by conflicting policy choices and institutional constraints. Critics have argued that the lifting of sanctions by the Obama administration weakened pressure on Myanmar at a critical juncture, allowing the military to intensify its crackdown on the Rohingya. Additionally, the lack of coherent political will—exacerbated by competing global crises such as conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza—has diverted attention and resources away from the Rohingya issue. This environment of selective engagement has led to a reliance on judicial and humanitarian measures that, while morally significant, lack the rapid impact of comprehensive political or economic sanctions. The fragmented nature of international legal responses, combined with entrenched geopolitical interests, illustrates why efforts to end the persecution of the Rohingya have been incremental and, in many respects, insufficient.

*International Response to the Uyghur Crisis*

Western governments and international organizations have taken a series of legal, economic, and diplomatic measures in response to China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The U.S. was the first to officially label China's policies as genocide in January 2021—a designation soon echoed by Canada and the UK. In reaction to findings from the UN and independent groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, which document mass detention, torture, cultural persecution, and forced labor, many Western nations have imposed targeted sanctions on Chinese officials and entities involved in these abuses(Human Rights Watch,2021).[28] For example, in 2021, the EU sanctioned Chinese officials—the first such measures since 1989—to signal its growing intolerance for human rights violations in Xinjiang.

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[25] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Report*, 2023.

[26] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis*, 2023.

[27] ReliefWeb, *Funding Gaps in Myanmar's Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan*, 2023.

[28] Human Rights Watch, *China: Crimes Against Humanity in Xinjiang*, 2021.

Economic measures have also been prominent. To counter widespread forced labor practices, the U.S. enacted the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, banning imports from Xinjiang unless companies certify that their products are not produced using forced labor. Similarly, in September 2022, the European Commission proposed a ban on imports made by forced labor from the region, reinforcing international economic pressure on China. These policies are underpinned by detailed reports from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' 2022 report, which described the abuses as so severe that they "may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity."

However, the international response is far from uniform. While Western nations have led with strong condemnations and policy actions, many countries—especially those with significant economic and strategic ties to China—have not only remained silent but have actively supported Beijing's stance. In June 2022, a statement signed by sixty nations, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, declared Xinjiang's issues to be China's internal affair, opposing what they see as the politicization of human rights. This support is often rooted in shared economic interests, diplomatic alliances, or ideological alignments, and it has drawn sharp criticism from human rights groups for failing to condemn widespread abuses.

Debates within the UN Human Rights Council further highlight this global divide. While some member states have pushed for the establishment of an investigative mechanism to scrutinize China's actions, political and economic considerations have led to muted responses at the multilateral level. The overall landscape thus reflects a complex interplay of robust legal and economic sanctions by Western countries alongside proactive support for China by many of its allies, underscoring the challenges in achieving a cohesive international strategy to address the crisis.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP THE ROHINGYA AND UYGHURS

The international community could adopt a comprehensive, multifaceted strategy that not only responds to the immediate humanitarian needs of both the Rohingya and Uyghur populations but also addresses the root causes and long-term accountability challenges associated with these crises. In the case of Myanmar, for instance, sustained diplomatic pressure is needed to compel the military junta to respect human rights. Countries and international bodies could work together to condition economic and military cooperation on measurable improvements, such as ending violent clearances in Rakhine State, providing safe repatriation and legal citizenship for Rohingya, and reforming discriminatory policies. By coordinating targeted sanctions, arms embargoes, and travel bans—supported by alliances like the G7, ASEAN, and the European Union—the international community would be able to isolate the perpetrators while incentivizing reform. These efforts, coupled with initiatives to facilitate indigenous investigations into past and ongoing human rights abuses, would not only signal a firm stance against impunity but also create a legal pathway for transitional justice measures that could include truth commissions and reparative programs.

Similarly, in addressing the Uyghur crisis, a robust response must go beyond mere condemnation. Western nations have already taken significant steps by imposing sanctions on Chinese officials and enforcing laws like the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. However, a broader, more unified approach is required to hold the Chinese government accountable. This might include harmonizing trade restrictions that target products produced under conditions of forced labor, as well as implementing comprehensive audits of global supply chains using advanced monitoring technologies. In addition, countries should work in unison—through institutions like the UN and under frameworks such as universal jurisdiction—to investigate and, if warranted, prosecute those responsible for the systematic abuses in Xinjiang. Such coordinated legal action would ensure that allegations of crimes against humanity are not confined to isolated national responses but are part of a broader international effort that pressures China to grant unrestricted access to independent human rights observers.

Moreover, humanitarian responses should be expanded through enhanced support for refugee populations. For Rohingya communities living in overcrowded camps, particularly in Bangladesh, sustained funding for education, healthcare, and economic empowerment is crucial. Host countries should be assisted with additional financial resources and capacity-building measures to improve living conditions and facilitate safe, voluntary repatriation when conditions allow. For Uyghur refugees, especially those in transit or settled in third countries, establishing reliable asylum procedures, facilitating family reunification, and providing comprehensive legal, medical, and psychological assistance would mitigate the severe long-term impacts of forced displacement.

Finally, an innovative element of the solution involves leveraging new technologies and public-private partnerships. Governments and international organizations could collaborate with tech companies to create transparent, blockchain-based tracking systems for supply chains and humanitarian aid. This would help ensure that both the economic and humanitarian measures are effectively implemented and that companies contributing to forced labor or mass surveillance face escalating consequences. Such technology-driven transparency, combined with vigorous civil society activism and global media advocacy, could help shift the narrative, holding all actors to universal human rights standards and reinforcing the credibility and strength of international legal and humanitarian systems.

## CONCLUSION :

Identity politics has been weaponized by authoritarian regimes to marginalize and control minority populations. In Myanmar, nationalist narratives have been manipulated to depict the Rohingya as illegitimate outsiders—despite their deep historical roots—thereby justifying their exclusion from citizenship and exposing them to state-sanctioned violence and mass displacement. Similarly, in Xinjiang, the Chinese government has constructed a narrative that portrays Uyghurs as a threat to national stability, enabling policies of mass internment, forced labor, and cultural assimilation. Both cases illustrate how the deliberate dehumanization of these communities not only facilitates severe human rights abuses but also sows seeds of hatred and intolerance among the wider population.

Such identity-based rhetoric is particularly dangerous because it infiltrates the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens, turning prejudice into an accepted part of social discourse. When governments and political leaders exploit identity politics, they create an environment where discrimination is normalized, and hate becomes a tool for consolidating power. This not only leads to immediate, tangible violence—as seen in ethnic cleansing or systematic surveillance—but also undermines the very foundations of pluralism and democratic governance. The resulting social fragmentation can have long-lasting consequences, intensifying conflicts and hindering efforts at reconciliation and justice.

Going forward, meaningful progress demands that the international community not only reinforce legal accountability and humanitarian support but also challenge the very narratives that enable such abuses. A unified global effort is needed—one that transcends geopolitical and economic self-interests—to impose coordinated sanctions, enforce trade restrictions, and facilitate independent judicial investigations under universal jurisdiction. Equally crucial is the empowerment of civil society and human rights organizations, which play a vital role in exposing these discriminatory practices and advocating for a rights-based approach.

Ultimately, addressing the crises of the Rohingya and Uyghurs requires a recalibration of international priorities that includes a concerted commitment to dismantling identity-based repression. By transforming the discourse around ethnic and religious identity and holding all state actors to universal human rights standards, the international community can pave the way toward long-term justice, reconciliation, and the protection of dignity for all marginalized communities.

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