Securitization of the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Several studies have highlighted the Rohingya refugees as a threat to the national security of Bangladesh, but very few studies have analyzed the process of securitization of the Rohingyas in the country. This paper examines the process of securitization by applying securitization theory and makes two key arguments. First, contrary to the studies which presented the securitization of Rohingyas in Bangladesh as a recent phenomenon, we argue that the securitization process began in the 1990s and widely expanded in the 2010s. Second, the securitization of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has been done by employing both discursive (speech acts) and non-discursive securitizing practices. A qualitative investigation of official statements, policies, and available scholarly insights helps make sense of these arguments.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Rohingya, securitization, speech act, refugee

Introduction

In late 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingyas (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2021), members of an ethnic Muslim community of western Myanmar, entered Bangladesh as refugees to escape a deadly crackdown by the Myanmar military. They were received with open arms and treated with compassion in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that despite having overpopulation and not being a rich country, Bangladesh will host the refugees, fleeing persecution. In her words, "If we can feed 160 million, we can also feed others. We are ready to share our food [. . .] We see people as human beings, so we are assisting them" (Michelle, 2017). Bangladesh's humanitarian efforts were globally applauded but by 2020, the compassion has not only run out, but the refugees were also described by Prime Minister Hasina as a "burden" (Tharoor, 2019). Along with this change, statements such as, "Refugees have created a pressure on the economy and overall security of Bangladesh"; "Bangladesh is overwhelmed with the influx which is causing socio-economic problems"; "The Rohingya issue has posed external

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and internal security threats to Bangladesh" (The Daily Star, 2017b, 2018)—have become the staples of political elites in Bangladesh. These types of statements of government and political elites clearly indicate that the Rohingya refugee crisis is a security problem for Bangladesh and poses threats to the country's national security. Several studies have explored the potential of the Rohingya refugee crisis to menace social, political, economic, and environmental security of Bangladesh (see Bashar, 2017; Rahman, 2010; Singh and Haziq, 2016). Nevertheless, the question of how the Rohingya issue is securitized in Bangladesh is investigated by very few studies, which have either explored why securitization of Rohingyas has occurred in Bangladesh (O'Driscoll, 2017) or explained securitization as a post-2017 influx phenomenon (Faruque, 2020), without clearly analyzing the process of securitization.

While the nature and the types of security threats are important to understand why securitization occurs in a specific context, at least partly, it does not explain the process of securitization or how securitization occurs in such context. What does then explain the process of securitization of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh? While realist and liberal theories of International Relations (IR) explore the adverse impacts of the influx of refugees and migrants on economy, public order, and social harmony in the host state (Karyotis, 2012: 391), the constructivist theories, more specifically securitization theory, explain the securitizing tools and the securitization process (Balzacq, 2011: 1). Therefore, this study employs securitization theory to examine of the process of securitization of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

To analyze the securitization process, we will draw on two schools of securitization theory—the Copenhagen School and the Paris School. As per the Copenhagen School, in the securitization process, the securitizing actor uses security discourse to transform an issue into a security problem and convinces the audience to adopt exceptional policies to tackle the problem (see Balzacq et al., 2016). In contrast, the Paris School, acknowledging the importance of discursive aspects, stresses on the non-discursive securitizing practices in the securitization process which offer a detailed understanding of the role of securitizing actor, audience, context, and the interaction among them (Balzacq et al., 2016). While the former is credited with establishing the field and known to emphasize discursive practices during securitization, the latter challenges the emphasis on linguistic and discursive tools and focuses on non-discursive securitizing practices in the securitization process. Blending these two approaches, we argue that the securitization of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has been done by employing both discursive tools and non-discursive securitizing practices.

In addition, as opposed to the previous studies which described the securitization of Rohingyas as a post-2017 influx phenomenon (see Faruque, 2020), we argue that the securitization process began in the 1990s, but it has substantially increased after the 2012 influx and again after the 2017 influx, indicating the securitization process as a matter of degree. A qualitative analysis of the discursive and the non-discursive practices helps make sense of these arguments.

Four sections follow the Introduction section. The first section highlights the securitization process drawing upon securitization theory. The second section explores the influx of the Rohingya refugees and national security threat in Bangladesh. It also traces the origin of securitization of Rohingyas in the 1990s and explores the reasons behind this construction. The third section analyzes the relevance of the theoretical framework in the context of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The final section provides a conclusion and implications of the research.

How is an issue securitized? Theoretical insights

Securitization is a process by which a state actor transforms a politicized issue into a security issue. According to Balzacq (2011: 3), securitization is

"an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions etc.) are contextually mobilized by a *securitizing actor*, who works to prompt an *audience* to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a *referent object* that concurs with the securitizing actor's reasons for choices and actions, by investigating the *referent subject* with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized *policy* must be undertaken immediately in this context to block its development".

This definition underscores five core elements of securitization—securitizing actor, referent subject, referent object, audience, and policy. The *securitizing actor* (e.g., government, political elites, military, civil society, media, and trade unions) is the agent who presents an issue as a threat through a securitizing move (Emmers, 2013: 133). The *referent object* (e.g., state, national sovereignty, ideology, national economy, collective identity, species, or habitats) is the entity that is seen to be existentially threatened and has a legitimate claim to survival (Emmers, 2013: 132). While the *referent subject* means the entity (such as refugees, illegal immigrants, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking) that is posing a threat, the *audience* refers to the entity (such as public opinion and politicians) who confers an intersubjective status to the threat (Balzacq et al., 2016: 495). Finally, the *policy* indicates the adoption and implementation of extraordinary policies and practices (which are located outside the usual bounds of political procedure and practices) in the relevant context to tackle the threat urgently (Balzacq et al., 2016: 495).

The securitization process remains an issue of contention between two schools of thought. The Copenhagen School, represented by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and De Wilde, argues that an issue can be securitized through an act of securitization which follows a two-stage process. The first stage portrays a specific issue as an existential threat to the referent object and the securitizing actor then uses the language of security (speech act), along with power and influence, to transform the issue into a security question (Emmers, 2013: 134). In the second stage, the securitizing actor convinces the audience about the nature of the existential threat to the referent object by the referent subject (Emmers, 2013: 134). This is the crucial stage for the success or the failure of the act of securitization, which depends on whether the audience accepts the discourse produced by the securitizing actor. Buzan, Waever, and Wilde suggest that "the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such" (Buzan et al., 1998: 25).

In contrast, the Paris School, advanced by Thierry Balzacq and Didier Bigo, claims that the Copenhagen School's approach is too narrow. Balzacq (2005: 172) stated that securitization is best understood as a pragmatic set of securitizing practices that occur within a context, in which a disposition of the audience and the power relations bring both speaker (the securitizing actor) and listener (the audience) into an interaction. Scholars of this school do not discard that speech acts can modify a context by transforming an issue into a security problem, as they (speech acts) are performative and have the capacity to do things (Balzacq, 2011: 1). They further argue that speech acts, however, do not cover securitizing practices such as population profiling, risk assessment, and behavior of security professionals, which go beyond the speech acts (Banai and Kreide, 2017: 907). In addition, the routinization of securitizing practices is implemented by regulatory and capacity instruments. While the regulatory instruments (using policy regulation, constitution etc.) influence the behavior of social actors (e.g., media, security professionals, institutions) by promoting certain perceptions of threat and permitting certain practices to reduce the threat, the capacity instruments (using skilled agencies and manpower) impose an external discipline upon individuals and groups (Balzacq, 2011: 17).

The Paris School also insisted that the outcomes of securitizing practices mainly depend on three factors. First, the acceptance of the security discourse by the audience makes securitization

successful. The enabling audience, the one which empowers the securitizing actor to act, can serve two different functions—providing moral support and delivering formal mandate (such as vote by the legislature), without such, no policy can be adopted to address the threat (Balzacq et al., 2016: 500). Second, an act of securitization is conditioned by the power of the securitizing actor to make effective claims about an existential threat (Balzacq et al., 2016: 501). As Wæver (1995: 54) said, "something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so". Third, contexts can either empower or disempower the securitizing actor by either receiving or rejecting securitization moves, respectively, meaning that security is contextually shaped (Balzacq et al., 2016: 504).

While the Copenhagen School has been criticized for overly emphasizing the speech acts, the Paris School has been criticized for its exclusive focus on the securitizing practices and the routinization of such practices (Bourbeau, 2014: 190). In this article, we blend these two approaches to examine the securitization process of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. We argue that the securitization of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh has been done by employing both speech acts and securitizing practices. The relevance of the speech acts and the securitizing practices in the securitization process of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is discussed in the fourth section. The next section discusses the influx of Rohingya refugees, refugee-led security concerns, and the origin of securitization of Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

Influx of Rohingya refugees, refugee-led security concerns, and securitization in Bangladesh

Rohingyas, the world's "most persecuted minority" (Kingston, 2015: 1163), have been experiencing severe ethnic discrimination and state-perpetrated violence in Myanmar for decades. Having citizenship denied in their own country of origin, the Rohingyas have faced massacres, ethnic cleansing, rape, torture, extrajudicial killing, destruction of property, and various other forms of human rights violations (see Ibrahim, 2016: 97–103; Kipgen, 2013). Myanmar's treatment of Rohingyas has been labeled as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (United Nations (UN) News Centre, 2017). Due to such treatment, Rohingyas were forced in several waves in the past decades to flee their homes and find shelter in their neighboring country, Bangladesh. More than 200,000 Rohingyas in 1978 and over 250,000 in 1991 fled to Bangladesh due to serious state repression in the northern Rakhine state of Myanmar (Ashraf, 2021: 186). Bangladesh perceived the influxes from humanitarian grounds and provided temporary shelters and other support for the refugees. In 2012, an eruption of inter-ethnic violence, which was described by international observers as an attempt at ethnic cleansing seeking to drive the Rohingyas out of their country (Ibrahim, 2016: 97), displaced over 100,000 Rohingyas in Myanmar and forced approximately 200,000 Rohingyas to take refuge in Bangladesh (Martin et al., 2017: 5). Again, due to the attacks of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Myanmar's security outposts in the 2016–2017 period (Amnesty International, 2018), an estimated 700,000 Rohingyas were forced to flee Myanmar who took shelter in several refugee camps in Bangladesh (Alam, 2019: 11). In the beginning of 2018, the number reached nearly 1 million (Khuda, 2020: 8). Such mass exodus of Rohingyas raises significant security concerns for Bangladesh.

Linking the influx of Rohingya refugees with the national security concerns of Bangladesh is nothing new. In fact, all international refugees add a new dimension to the host state's national security and have the potential to pose political, socio-economic, and environmental security concerns to the host state (McColl, 1993: 175–176). In case of Rohingya influx in Bangladesh, broadly four types of security concerns are often highlighted in the scholarly studies, organizational reports, and security and media analyses.

First, given the presence of many Islamist militant groups (with transnational connections) in Bangladesh, concerns exist on whether the Rohingya refugees can be potential recruits to the extremist groups (Chandran, 2017; Haque, 2018: 13; Rahman, 2010: 235). Previous instances of cooperation between the Bangladeshi Islamist militants and the Rohingya insurgent organizations (see Riaz, 2008), the Rohingya Solidarity Organization's (RSO) attempt to take control of the Nayapara refugee camp in 1998 (Human Rights Watch, 2000), and the presence of violent extremist groups (such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HuJI) of South Asia and Jemaah Islamiah of Southeast Asia) and their eyes on the refugee camps as grounds for potential recruits (Rahman, 2010: 235), are often referred to justify this perception. The calling of transnational terrorist groups, such as the Indonesia-based Front Pembela Islam's (FPI), the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and the Islamic State (IS), for recruits and their declaration of a "humanitarian jihad" in Myanmar on behalf of the Rohingyas (Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), 2017; Mahzam and Ansar, 2017) have added concerns to this perspective. Bangladesh government's position on the alleged links between the Rohingyas and the militant groups has bolstered after the Islamic State's attack to a restaurant in Dhaka in 2016 leaving 20 hostages dead and the RSO fighters' attacks on the Myanmar border forces in 2016 and 2017 demonstrating their strength (Aljazeera, 2016; Beech, 2017).

Second, there are concerns that existing arms and drug trafficking networks may manipulate the vulnerable Rohingyas to engage in trafficking. The use of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) as key arms trafficking routes, the existence of several clandestine arms factories and arms markets in the bordering areas of Cox's Bazar and CHT run by local and regional arms smugglers and insurgents (see Sakhuja, 2007: 47; Rana and Nesa, 2018), and the existing drug trafficking networks in Bangladesh–Myanmar border that smuggle "Yaba" into Bangladesh (Pressley, 2019) inform this concern. Since the onset of the Rohingya crisis, there has been an apprehension that local drug traffickers may abuse the Rohingyas in their illicit trade and distribution which may further endanger the security circumstance in Bangladesh (Bhattacherjee, 2017).

Third, the influx of Rohingyas has changed the demographic composition of Ukhia and Teknaf (two sub-districts of Cox's Bazar) where Rohingyas now outnumber the local Bangladeshis by two to one (Alam, 2018). Rohingyas' entrance in local labor market and their offering of all kinds of low-skilled jobs and services with a cheaper rate (Khuda, 2020), underpin a concern about increasing hostility between Rohingyas and local communities (Arafat and Khanam, 2019: 24–26). Instances of attacks against the Rohingyas (McPherson and Uddin, 2019) and reported incidents of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, including the 2012 attack on Buddhist temples and monks in Ramu (Cox's Bazar) which was blamed on Rohingya Muslims (Ahmed, 2012), inform the potential of the Rohingya influx to deteriorate social and cultural harmony in the local areas (Islam, 2019: 264–265).

Fourth, concerns regarding the influx of Rohingyas causing serious environmental security problems for Bangladesh have long been raised by many. According to a joint report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Women, the influx has significant negative impacts on ground water, surface water, acoustic levels, indoor air quality, solid waste management, soils and terrain, natural forests, protected areas and critical habitats, vegetation, wildlife, and marine and freshwater ecosystems (UNDP and UN Women, 2018: 44–54). Identifying groundwater depletion and contamination as the most critical impacts, another assessment argues that groundwater levels have been falling in Teknaf coastal zone and the available groundwater in various refugee camps has been contaminated at a large scale (Khuda, 2020: 11–12). In addition, the influx has deforested 4818 acres of forest reserves worth US$55 million (UNDP, 2018: 25) and cleared vegetation in over 4000 acres of hilly lands in the Teknaf-Ukhia-Himchari watershed area

(UNDP and UN Women, 2018: 41), which have caused genuine harms to the environmental balance in Bangladesh.

Although the actual degree of threat deriving from the above political, social, economic, and environmental security concerns is difficult to comprehend, it is understandable that the Rohingyas have been associated with negative connotation of security lens, which paved the way for Bangladesh government to adopt efforts to securitize the Rohingya refugee issue. The following section traces the origin and growth of the securitization of Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

Securitization since the 1990s

Evidence of the securitization of Rohingyas in Bangladesh through discursive and non-discursive tools can be traced back to the 1990s, from when Bangladesh began seriously considering the Rohingya refugees as a security threat (see Parnini et al., 2013). Two possible reasons can provide explanations for this stance of Bangladesh. First, unlike the first influx of 200,000 Rohingya refugees in 1978 after which the government of Bangladesh succeeded in repatriating almost the entire batch of refugees within a span of 16 months through a bilateral deal with Myanmar's military junta (Ashraf, 2021: 192), the repatriation after the 1991–92 influx was not straightforward. Although Bangladesh provided "refugee status" to 250,000 Rohingyas and allowed UNHCR and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for material assistance in refugee camps (Rashid, 2020: 180), it also prioritized a quick repatriation of the refugees to Myanmar (Ashraf, 2021: 192). At this point, UNHCR insisted on an increased role by directly facilitating the repatriation of refugees, but the repatriation was stalled in December 1992 due to UNHCR's withdrawal from the process over the concerns that Bangladesh was forcibly returning the refugees (Dock, 2020: 14). After the withdrawal, Bangladesh fearing larger security implications continued forcibly returning refugees without consulting UNHCR and was widely criticized by the international community (Estriani, 2018: 366–367). Although UNHCR reengaged in the repatriation process by signing a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 1993, began interviewing refugees in 1994 asking their opinion on voluntary repatriation, and refused to return unwilling Rohingyas, Bangladesh government criticized UNHCR for intentionally slowing down the process and insisted on quick repatriation including the involuntary ones (Dock, 2020: 14–16). Fearing further possible delay in repatriation and their subsequent implications, Bangladeshi authority began applying coercive measures, such as torture and imprisonment in camps forcing them to agree to return (Dock, 2020: 16), and eventually succeeded in returning around 230,000 refugees by the end of 1997 (Ashraf, 2021: 192).

Second, due to Myanmar's persistent abuse and inhuman treatment to Rohingyas preceding the 1991–1992 influx, several Rohingya militant groups emerged in the 1990s, which fed into Bangladesh's stance in viewing the refugees through security lens. Armed groups, such RSO and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), both of which jointly formed Rohingya National Alliance (RNA) in 1996, became vibrant in refugee camps and allegedly began recruiting people (Ahmed, 2010: 71–72). Reports indicated that these Rohingya armed groups allegedly maintained strong linkages with active Islamic militant groups in Bangladesh (such as HuJI) and other insurgent groups operating in Bangladesh–Myanmar borders (such as the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA) and the Arakan Army) (Ahmed, 2010: 72). These situations led to the fear of militarization in refugee camps and possible armed conflicts in Bangladesh–Myanmar borders (Ahmed, 2010: 72–73; Murshid, 2012: 105–107), which not only contributed to Bangladeshi authority's view of Rohingyas as a security threat, but also bolstered its stance for quick repatriation.

Therefore, the delay in the repatriation process and the fear of possible linkages between Rohingya armed groups and cross-border insurgent groups after the 1991–1992 influx shaped

Bangladesh's perception of Rohingyas through security lens. This perception opened up the securitization efforts in Bangladesh, which were reflected in discursive and non-discursive practices. Throughout the 1990s, Bangladesh government continued describing Rohingyas as "aliens" and "illegal immigrants" and implemented a series of restrictive measures, including slowing down the construction of refugee shelters and several occasions of forced repatriation (Ragland, 1994). On several incidents of small-scale influx throughout the decade, Bangladeshi authority refused "refugee status" to the newly entered Rohingyas, instead maintained the Rohingyas' status as "illegal economic migrants" and continued restrictive measures, as stipulated by Refugees International, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch (United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2001). Bangladesh's perceived threat from Rohingyas and restraining actions were reflected by the unfolding of several legal and bureaucratic responses. Immediately after the 1991–1992 influx, Bangladesh government set up the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) providing it the authority of camp-in-charge, which performed coordination and supervision of all camp-related activities (Ashraf, 2021: 192). In addition, the evidence of securitization was also reflected by the fact that out of 20 refugee camps, which were constructed in 1992 in the southwestern region, only two remained in 2002 –Nayapara camp (Teknaf) and Kutupalong camp (Ukhia) (MSF, 2002: 12). However, the expanse of securitization of Rohingyas during the 1990s was limited, but such efforts became momentum after the 2012 influx.

The influx in 2012 and the following years, leading to over 200,000 Rohingyas entering Bangladesh, was caused by a flare-up of sectarian violence in the Rakhine state between Buddhist and Muslim communities. During the May to October 2012 violence, both Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists hacked each other, leaving thousands of people killed in both sides and their homes, mosques, monasteries, and schools burned (Kipgen, 2013: 298–310). Although the Rohingyas took most of the blows in the violence, their ability to inflict violence alarmed Bangladesh government as it showed a little compassion for Rohingyas and followed a "push back policy" (Rashid, 2020: 180). In addition, in September 2012, thousands of Muslims in Bangladesh went on rampage in predominantly Buddhist areas in Ramu (Cox's Bazar), setting ablaze in Buddhist temples and monasteries, which caused dozens of pagodas and houses burned, while also alarmed Bangladeshi authority (The New Humanitarian, 2012). Although the Ramu violence was triggered by a photo posted on Facebook allegedly insulting Islam, perceptions existed that the attacks on Buddhists in Ramu was an act of retaliation against the attacks on Rohingya Muslims by the Buddhists in Myanmar. Such perceptions gained strength when the then Home Minister of Bangladesh accused Rohingyas of their involvement in the attacks on Bangladeshi Buddhists, which was reflected into the increasing restrictions on the Rohingya refugees' movement in camps and push backs (The New Humanitarian, 2012). The minister not only blamed Rohingyas along with political opponents for the attacks, but also equated them with "radical Islamists" (Ahmed, 2012), providing a clear message to Bangladesh government's security lens. While the Ramu violence in September triggered fresh Buddhists' violence against Rohingyas in Rakhine in October (Rahman, 2012), it began shifting Bangladeshi public attitude toward Rohingyas from a humanitarian to a security lens (Ahmed, 2012), both of which contributed to Bangladesh government's securitization efforts.

The 2012 influx unveiled not only Myanmar's reluctance to take back Rohingyas, as reflected President Thein Sein's words "the Rohingyas be resettled to any country that would accept them," but also failure to prevent violence creating further forced displacement of Rohingyas that led them into Bangladesh in several small-scale influxes in the following years (Kipgen, 2013: 305–307). Bangladesh, therefore, maintained its view on the Rohingya refugees through security lens. While Bangladeshi security forces continued "pushed back policy," government's stance was clarified by Prime Minister's own words, for example, "we do not want any more refugees

coming," and "Bangladesh is already an overpopulated country, we cannot bear this burden," and her warning of possible terrorists' connections among the refugees, as captured by her interviews with *The Express* (Jeory, 2012). Both land and sea borders were sealed and Rohingya intruders were arrested and sent back, while the then Foreign Minister justified this position saying that Bangladesh is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its Protocol 1967 (Parnini, 2013: 295). The government also adopted a strategy paper in 2013 titled "National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals," known as "The Rohingya Refugee Strategy," which further highlighted government's position of denying refugee status to fresh arrivals due to security concerns (Ashraf, 2021: 192).

However, during the 2017–2018 influx, although Bangladesh government opened its border to accept around 700,000 Rohingyas, it continued its security discourse against Rohingya refugees and widely expanded securitization practices. Bangladesh government's securitization moves were indicated in the statements of top-level officials, such as Foreign Minister's identification of Bangladesh becoming "hostage" to Rohingyas' demands and State Minister for Foreign Affairs' suggestion to take a "tougher stance" against issues arising from Rohingyas (Faruque, 2020: 37–38). The 2017 influx also caused the most profound transformation in Bangladesh's bureaucratic and legal response against the Rohingya refugees, reflecting Bangladesh's adoption of several non-discursive securitizing practices. Examples include the creation the "National Committee on Coordination, Management, and Law and Order" under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) to manage overall activities regarding refugees and to maintain law and order of Rohingyas (UNHCR, 2021a: 11), the handing over the responsibility to Bangladesh Armed Forces to manage emergency relief distribution and to take a lead in security affairs, and the creation of a National Task Force (NTF) coordinating different government bodies and security agencies on the matters of refugees (Ashraf, 2021: 192–193).

The above discussion highlights that the efforts of Bangladesh government to securitize Rohingyas mainly appeared in degrees. Although began in the 1990s, the securitization moves gained sufficient strength in the post-2012 influx, which largely expanded after the post-2017 influx. In this sense, securitization is a matter of degree. The section also demonstrates that the Rohingya refugee crisis entails significant identifiable security concerns for Bangladesh. However, securitization is not just mere identification of a security issue, rather, it is a negotiated process between securitizing actors and audiences within specific structures (Buzan et al., 1998: 25; Karyotis, 2012: 391) that aims to understand "who securitizes, on what issues, for whom . . . why, with what results, and . . . under what conditions" (Buzan et al., 1998: 32). In addition, not all actors can label an issue as a security issue, but as securitization is a political act, only actors with political and institutional power (for example, state leaders) have the authority to securitize an issue (Wæver, 1995: 55). It then calls for understanding how securitizing actors in Bangladesh have securitized the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The next section examines the securitization process by analyzing discursive and non-discursive securitizing practices.

The process of securitization of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Bangladesh government's attitudes and actions toward the Rohingya refugees represent a significant case of securitization. The referent objects in this case are alleged security threats, impacting the national security of Bangladesh at political, social, economic, and environmental level. While the referent subject here is the Rohingya refugees, the securitizing actors include Sheikh Hasina's government and political elites. The audience consists of public opinion and the legislature (politicians and parliament members). In the present context, we find that the securitizing actors have

employed both discursive tools (speech acts) and non-discursive practices to securitize the Rohingya issue in Bangladesh. In the process of securitization, the use of speech acts by the securitizing actors has formulated a security discourse to convince the audience of the threat posed by the Rohingya refugees and the adoption of securitizing practices and extraordinary policies has been meant to prevent the threat from escalating. The section below provides a detailed discussion on speech acts and securitizing practices in the context of Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

Speech acts

According to securitization theory, no issue is essentially a threat, something becomes a security problem through discursive politics, for example, speech acts (Balzacq, 2011: 1). As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh government began using speech acts to formulate a security discourse around the Rohingya refugees in the post-1991–1992 influx, describing Rohingyas as "aliens" and "illegal immigrants" (Ragland, 1994: 301–314). However, the official statements of Sheikh Hasina's government and political elites on the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh give reference to the threatening character of the crisis. The linguistic rhetoric forms the basis of the security discourse which legitimizes government's decision to adopt and implement restrictive practices and regulatory policies. Since Myanmar's atrocities on the Rohingyas in 2012, Bangladesh government has been blatant that it is not interested in accepting any more Rohingya refugees in its territory. The official statements from the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) on this matter indicate Bangladesh's decision to adopt restrictive policies in the border area:

> "I already have 160 million people in my country [. . .] I can't take any other burden. I can't take it. My country cannot bear". – Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; (Kipgen, 2019: 71).

> "Our position is clear that we won't accept any more refugees in Bangladesh. There are already five lakh Rohingyas here and we can't allow anymore". – a senior official of Foreign Ministry (Imran and Mian, 2014: 237).

> "Bangladesh would no longer be in position to accommodate more people [the Rohingyas] from Myanmar". – Bangladesh's former Foreign Secretary (The Guardian, 2019)

Former Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque also told the UN Security Council (UNSC) that Bangladesh is "paying the price by showing empathy to a persecuted minority" (The Guardian, 2019). Former Foreign Minister Dipu Moni spoke with a similar tone and elaborated how Bangladesh has been paying the price. In her many statements, she held the Rohingyas responsible for many problems in Bangladesh and claimed that they have been hurting the country's national interests:

> "Bangladesh is a densely populated country and the Rohingyas have impacts on our society, law and order, and environment. Considering all aspects, it will create serious problems for us". (The Daily Star, 2012)

> "[T]he recent Rohingya influx does not help our interests. We are in consultation with Myanmar to send back the Rohingya refugees to their homeland [. . .] The presence of Rohingyas is taking its toll on society, environment, and the law-and-order situation". (The Equal Rights Trust, 2012)

While Dipu Moni's statements show a direct link between the refugees and the national security of Bangladesh, another ex-Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali's statement in the National Parliament has elaborated national security concerns:

"Among the Cox's Bazar population, 20-25 percent people are now "Rakhine Muslims." Such huge "Rakhine Muslims" may become a threat to national security [. . .]. The "Rakhine people" have got engaged in various misdeeds, including drug smuggling, arms and human trafficking, manufacturing drugs on the border, and contributing to a law-and-order slide [. . .]. "Myanmar intruders" are harming Bangladesh in terms of social, economic, political, and environmental aspects". (The Daily Star, 2017a)

Ali's use of "Rakhine Muslims," "Rakhine People," and "Myanmar intruders" insist on the division between "us" (the Bangladeshi citizens) and "them" (the Rohingyas). This persuasive technique assists in defining the refugee issue in security terms. In addition, Ali's pointing out of various criminal activities and their contribution to deteriorate the law-and-order situation, play on the local people's fear and insecurity against the Rohingyas and indicate the mobilization security professionals to maintain order. A statement from Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Shahriar Alam, clarifies this stance of the government:

"Bangladesh is an independent and sovereign country, but we have challenges in maintaining our own law and order. If we have any issues arising from them [Rohingya], we must take a tougher stance". (Kamruzzaman, 2019)

In addition, an official statement from Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina views the Rohingya refugees as causing serious environmental insecurities in Cox's Bazar area, which evoke the need for adopting restrictive policies and controlling mechanisms:

"For this (Rohingya presence), natural equilibrium is being destabilized in that area, settlements are being established in that area clearing forests and hills, as a result, those areas are becoming insecure and risky too". (The Financial Express, 2019)

Moreover, another statement of Bangladesh's Prime Minister upholds the gravity of the Rohingya refugee crisis in terms of national security. In response to a question of how to pressurize Myanmar, she has suggested imposing an arms embargo and tougher sanctions, and declared,

"The problem with Myanmar is that they don't listen to anybody. I don't want to fight with anybody. I want a peaceful solution because they are my next-door neighbor". (Tharoor, 2019)

Hasina's statement reminds us of the security discourse of large population movements (e.g., a huge influx of migrants or refugees) which may lead to events like war and conflict (Karyotis, 2012: 396). Her statement has also clarified that the Rohingya refugee crisis has significant potential to threaten the national security of Bangladesh and if the situation goes beyond control, she will not have any option but to fight Myanmar which she does not want to.

In summary, the above statements of key political elites have referred to the Rohingya refugee crisis as a serious concern in the security discourse of Bangladesh. The reiterated utterance of the Rohingya issue as a security threat at different levels constructs an image of the nature and extent of the threat and gives reference to the need for urgent actions to tackle the threat. In addition, these linguistic expressions are meant to legitimize the securitizing practices and extraordinary policies that the government may take to neutralize the threat.

Securitizing practices

According to securitization theory, speech acts are performative, thus their performances can be measured by locating non-discursive securitizing practices. This section focuses on the following

two non-discursive pragmatic securitizing practices: institutional configurations and policy regulations.

First, the institutional configurations represent the deployment of extra security forces and demonstrate a high degree of militarization of the refugee crisis. The MOHA and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) are responsible for defending the land and the sea border of Bangladesh. Security agencies under these Ministries, such as the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the Bangladesh Coast Guard (BCG), the Bangladesh Police, and the Bangladesh Army, are ordered to remain vigilant and enhance patrolling in the border areas (Abedin, 2018: 32). The deployment of over 100 heavily armed BGB forces in the Saint Martin's Island for the first time in 22 years further proves the government's vigilant and strong stance of denying any more refugees to enter Bangladesh's territory. The purpose of this deployment is to send a clear message to Myanmar about Bangladesh's realist attitude on the issue and the country's insistence on the repatriation efforts (Rashid, 2019). The government has also deployed thousands of police and the army in the Rohingya camps to maintain law and order after the unexplained killing of 19 Rohingyas in 2018 (Siddiqui and Paul, 2018). In addition, at least 27 army and police checkpoints have been established on the roads of the Cox's Bazar district to prevent the refugees from moving into the town as well as to maintain public order (Human Rights Watch, 2018: 43). The incidents of police and army randomly street checking and arresting the Rohingyas to send them back in camps not only create mobility restrictions but also instill fear and anxiety among the public. This form of militarization tends to evoke mass concerns about the existence of a serious security threat and therefore reinforces securitization.

Second, Bangladesh's policy regulations toward the Rohingya refugees include the policy of repatriation, the policy of non-acceptance, and the policy of encampment. After the influx of over 250,000 Rohingyas in the 1991–1992 period, Bangladesh signed a MOU with Myanmar in 1992. Following the MOU, Bangladesh government undertook the policy of repatriation, which led to the repatriation of 230,000 refugees by the end of 1997, as mentioned in the previous section (Ashraf, 2021: 192). However, of late, Bangladesh's repatriation policy has significantly failed as the refugees are refusing to go back to Myanmar (Ellis-Petersen and Rahman, 2019). While there have been several allegations against Bangladesh government for forceful repatriation, Bangladeshi authority denied such allegations (Farzana, 2017: 69).

After 1997, Bangladesh adopted the policy of non-acceptance and forcibly sent back the refugees from the bordering areas. In the 2008–2009 period, BGB forces arrested thousands of Rohingyas and pushed them back (Yesmin, 2016: 79). Since Myanmar's military crackdown over the Rohingyas in 2012, Bangladesh government continued to follow the push back strategy and to deny the Rohingyas from entering its territory. Media reports showed that around 1500 Rohingya refugees had been forcibly turned away by Bangladesh on 12 June 2012 (The Equal Rights Trust, 2012: 18). Against the policy of non-acceptance, although Bangladesh opened the border in 2017 for the Rohingyas on a humanitarian ground and offered them shelter in the refugee camps, it simultaneously expanded bureaucratic and security wings to manage refugees and handle security concerns (Ashraf, 2021: 192–193).

Bangladesh has also adopted the policy of encampment, which imposes significant restrictions on the movement of the refugees. Refugees are rarely allowed to go out of the camps without prior approval of the security officials, and any law breakers face beating from the police (Parnini, 2013: 288). The government has decided to set up barbed wire fences around the Rohingya camps to restrict their movement (Asia Times, 2019). With the assistance of UNHCR, Bangladesh government has been conducting biometric registration of the Rohingyas, which will enhance government's surveillance and monitoring of the camps (UNHCR, 2019). It has also banned mobile phones, cut Internet access, and imposed restrictions on the operation of jewelry, computer shops, and pharmacies in the refugee camps (Emont, 2019). Bangladesh government has further planned

to relocate around 100,000 Rohingya refugees in Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal, where security officials have prepared housing. A local journalist has described the island as a "prison," which would risk lives and livelihoods of the refugees (Adams, 2019). Despite warnings from Human Rights Watch that a relocation would restrict the refugee communications and freedom of movement, Bangladesh government has built embankments around the island to implement its plan (Human Rights Watch, 2019: 69).

These types of restrictive routinization of practices through regulatory and capacity tools, help visualize the Rohingya refugees as a menace to the state and view them in security terms. Media have also played a crucial role, as regulatory instruments, in constructing threat images of the Rohingya refugees by regularly framing the news from a security lens. For example, Bangladesh's most circulated English newspaper, The Daily Star's coverage of the Rohingya news has broadly manifested the Rohingya refugees as "intruders," "social contagion," "threat to law and order and national security," and "reputational damage to Bangladeshi state identity" (Ubayasiri, 2019: 270). Although the placement of these types of news is consistent with the wider narrative of Rohingyas' alleged involvement in anti-social and criminal activities (Ubayasiri, 2019: 272), it portrays the refugees as a national security threat and fuels concerns and anxiety among the public. At the same time, Sheikh Hasina's government and political elites have used their power and position to securitize the Rohingya refugee issue by characterizing the nature of the threat through discursive tools, and by seeking to reduce the threat through the adoption of non-discursive securitizing practices. In addition, Hasina government's stay in power for a third term and weak political opposition have enhanced her capacity to deploy capital and security professionals to implement securitizing practices.

Securitization theory suggests that securitization largely depends on the "enabling audience." In this context, the enabling audience includes both the public and the legislature that have provided moral support and formal mandate, respectively. Public opinion is marked by their silence on the restrictive policies of Bangladesh against the Rohingya refugees, as no major protests have been reported against these policies. Available evidence suggests that there has been a growing negative attitude among local Bangladeshis against the Rohingyas, even though they are sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingyas (UNDP, 2018: 29). For example, the "Xchange Foundation" conducted a survey on 1700 local Bangladeshis living in the Cox's Bazar district (where most of the refugees reside), which showed that 85% of them do not feel safe having the Rohingya community nearby (Xchange Foundation, 2018: 38). Another survey, conducted by UNDP in Teknaf and Ukhiya, has demonstrated that 80% of respondents in Teknaf and 50% of respondents in Ukhiya have security concerns due to the Rohingya influx (UNDP, 2018: 127). Therefore, the silence of Bangladeshi public against the restrictive policies toward the Rohingyas and the increasing security concerns of local Bangladeshis regarding the Rohingya influx have provided moral support to the securitizing actor. Similarly, the securitizing actor has also received a formal mandate to implement securitizing practices. For example, the Bangladeshi parliament has approved the "National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals" in 2013 (Yesmin, 2016: 80), which basically led to the adoption of several restrictive policies against the Rohingya refugees.

Conclusion

This article investigates the process of securitization of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It employs securitization theory to analyze the securitization process and finds the relevance of the theoretical framework in this context. The article finds that the securitizing actors in Bangladesh (e.g., government and political elites) have used both discursive (speech acts) and non-discursive practices to securitize the Rohingya refugee crisis. The speech acts by government and political elites have

highlighted the Rohingya refugees as a threat to national security, while also provided justification for restrictive policies against the refugees. The non-discursive securitizing practices, such as institutional configurations and policy regulations, are adopted ostensibly to reduce the perceived threats from spreading. In addition, Bangladesh government's application of discursive and non-discursive policy tools are facilitated by the audience (e.g., public opinion and the legislature), providing moral support and formal mandate in the process of securitization of Rohingyas. The article also demonstrates that through the application of discursive and non-discursive practices, the securitization of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh began during the second wave of influx in the 1990s, which was widely increased after the post-2012 and the post-2017 waves of influx.

This article has important theoretical and policy implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the debate between the Copenhagen School and the Paris School regarding how securitization of an issue occurs in a specific context. Evidence from this article shows that while the discursive approach of the Copenhagen School helps understand how government and political elites in Bangladesh used speech acts to construct a threatening character of Rohingya refugee issue, the non-discursive approach of the Paris School is useful to understand the implementation of restrictive policies and institutional changes to neutralize the threat deriving from the issue. However, neither the discursive approach nor the non-discursive approach alone can explain the process of securitization of the Rohingya refugees. Instead, a blending of both approaches better explains the securitization process. The theoretical framework of this article would broaden the understanding on how refugees, migrants, and illegal immigrants are securitized in Asia and beyond. At the policy level, although the Rohingya refugee crisis involves potential security threats for Bangladesh which evoke the need for securitizing the issue, however, government and political elites need to rethink to what extent the securitization of the issue can contribute to the long-term solution to the problem. Merely brining the issue into security discourse and implementing restrictive policies have the potential to further exacerbate the Rohingya refugee crisis, which might take a toll on Bangladesh's social, political, economic, and environmental situations.

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