

Maximilian Wegener mit seiner Masterarbeit: „ **When Extermination Is Encouraged From Above: Ideological Elite Discourse and the Justification of Mass Atrocity Crimes Against the Rohingya in Myanmar**” an der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen



Since the world witnessed the tragedies in Rwanda and Bosnia in the mid-1990's, much has been written on the root causes and risk factors of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. While scholars have identified numerous drivers, catalysts, and predictors of mass atrocities over the years, there is still substantial disagreement as to why and under what circumstances such instances of systematic mass violence against civilians occur. One of the most prominent structural risk factors identified by comparative atrocity research is termed 'large-scale instability' or 'political upheaval', including the presence of armed conflict as consistent predictor for genocidal mass violence. A history of deeply entrenched discrimination and violence against certain societal groups, underpinned by a culture of impunity for perpetrators, seems to be equally important to understand under which conditions atrocity crimes are committed. Exclusionary ideologies like Khmer nationalism in Cambodia or Hutu Power supremacism in Rwanda are also regarded as key drivers of mass atrocities, insofar as they potentially justify the perpetration of inhumanities against civilians. Scholars thus consider certain ideologies to create a socio-political hotbed on which atrocity crimes appear permissible, desirable, necessary, and legitimate in the eyes of (future) perpetrators. In his thesis, Maximilian Wegener builds on the state of research by focussing on the atrocity-justifying role of exclusionary ideologies in scenarios of genocidal violence. By empirically concentrating on the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, he argues that idea-systems become particularly dangerous when (1) they are broadly embedded in, carried by, disseminated through, and impacting on public discourse while being (2) fuelled and used by political and symbolic elites in a top-down manner.

Based on theoretical insights from fields as broad as political science, social psychology, political sociology and critical linguistics, Maximilian Wegener introduces the concept of ideological elite discourse to adequately capture the complex interrelations between axiomatic idea-systems and violence-encouraging elite language. Through processes of discursive-rhetorical interaction and epistemic dependence, ideological elite discourse not only influences norms, values, attitudes, behaviour, and intergroup-relations; it also justifies social practice. In scenarios of large-scale violence against civilians, this justificatory potential primarily unfolds through "dangerous speech and dangerous ideology" (Leader Maynard & Benesch, 2016). Methodologically guided by Critical Discourse Studies, Maximilian Wegener builds on this conceptual foundation to identify several justificatory categories of ideological elite discourse that are used to collectively justify the state-orchestrated Rohingya genocide. The analysis of

150 discourse fragments (political speeches, Burmese state media, parliamentary debates, government announcements, propaganda magazines, party manifestos, and radical Buddhist sermons) coined by more than 60 elite individuals and organisations reveals that political and symbolic elites invoke these categories to motivate, legitimise, rationalise, and relativise anti-Rohingya atrocities in the eyes of their adherents. While political elites overtly engage in threat-construction, guilt-attribution, dehumanisation, virtuetalk, future-bias, and the destruction of alternatives (dangerous speech), their political counterparts primarily employ more subtle strategies like invisibilisation, deracination, selective classification, and inter-elitist framing (dangerous silence). Deeply rooted in the hegemonic ideological environment of Burman-Buddhist extremism and based on the socially pervasive narrative of Rohingya as illegal immigrants and Jihadist terrorists, these justificatory categories fall on the sympathetic ears of in-group members, that is, the Burman-Buddhist majority. These analytical insights are not only relevant academically, politically, and morally; they might also be of concrete value for existing atrocity prevention efforts.



Maximilian Wegener legte im August 2021 seine Masterprüfung im Studiengang „Peace Research and International Relations“ an der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen ab. In seiner Masterarbeit *„When Extermination Is Encouraged From Above: Ideological Elite Discourse and the Justification of Mass Atrocity Crimes Against the Rohingya in Myanmar“* knüpft er an Fragestellungen und Inhalte aus seinen Studienstationen in Düsseldorf, Belfast, Tübingen und Brisbane

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