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WHO REALLY SPEAKS FOR THE ROHINGYA?



When the Arakan Rohingya National Council (ARNC) unveiled itself on July 13, Bangladeshi and other news sites obligingly reproduced its press release almost word for word. The self described “most inclusive and unified platform ever” promised to speak for Rohingya refugees, the diaspora, and those still trapped in Myanmar. Supporters hailed a breakthrough. Skeptics saw déjà vu.

2025 has already been billed as decisive. Fighting between Myanmar’s junta and the

Arakan Army has redrawn front lines in Rakhine; a caretaker government in Dhaka is tightening its grip on the camps; deep cuts to the World Food Program’s budget have pushed rations to breaking point; and a high stakes UN pledging conference is set for New York in September. For the million plus Rohingya who depend on aid, every year is billed as pivotal -- yet new groups with fresh acronyms keep appearing, each claiming to speak for them. “We now see a repeated cycle: Fragmentation, new group

names, personal ambitions replacing real strategy,” warns lawyer and activist Razia Sultana. Sultana, who has briefed the UN Security Council on conflict related sexual violence and written landmark reports on atrocities against Rohingya women, says she was never even approached during the Council’s so called “wide consultation.” Her frustration frames the central question: why do the same leaders keep rebranding, and what does that mean for people who cannot afford another false start?

Dhaka is keen to prove that 2025 marks a new chapter. In March, UN Secretary General António Guterres toured the camps, praising Bangladesh’s “pivotal” moment and its pledge to curb criminality. Days later, police paraded Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army chief Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi in handcuffs -- evidence, officials said, that they were dismantling criminal networks. The administration has since

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promised to “break Rohingya crime gangs” through a series of refugee camp elections with selected voter lists. Refugees, however, see opaque ballots quietly seating proxies of armed factions rather than genuine community leaders. The disconnect worries diaspora critic Ambia Parveen, vice-chair of the European Rohingya Council. “We in the diaspora dominate the organisational landscape,” she says, “but we’re not the ones facing daily risks. Instead of fighting our enemies, we compete with each other.”

Launch by press release

Against this backdrop, the ARNC rolled out a thin manifesto asserting its sole legitimacy. Its stated aim is “to overcome decades of division and establish a unified political voice for the Rohingya people.” The language echoed the ArakanRohingyaNationalAlliance (ARNA), launched in 2022 with many of the same personalities -- including veteran activists TunKhin and NaySanLwin.

“Creating new names without substance risks confusing allies,” RaziaSultana cautions. The Rohingya Consultative Council (RCC), formed last year after months of

camp level meetings, is blunter still: “Legitimacy does not come from social media presence and press releases; it comes from sustained, democratic engagement.”

Within hours of ARNC’s debut, an entirely different body, the ArakanRohingyaNationalCongress, cried foul. In a July 14 statement, former MP ShweMaung blasted the newcomers for “deliberate deception ... using a name and logo strikingly similar to ours.” He believed the move intended to “sow confusion and derail years of painstaking diplomacy.” The Congress, chartered in 2021, says it already unites 39 senior figures and has logged 496 registrations for a Washington basedRohingya Round Table ahead of the UN conference. In an interview, ShweMaung added that ARNC’s claim of delegates from every township is not true. “They never consulted with them (inside Arakan),” he said. “This is a time for unity, not confusion,” his public statement pleads, warning that such tactics risk sabotaging the community’s limited credibility on the global stage.

In the same statement, ShweMaung stressed that the Congress sits inside a three part structure -- Congress, Council, and

Conference -- governed by a charter first ratified in2021 and updated in2025. By launching a new entity with the same four letters and claiming exclusive legitimacy, the July 2025 ARNC, he argues, has not only duplicated the name but pre-empted an entire political structure already in place.

The new Council has offered no public rebuttal. Three individuals listed as its media contacts ignored requests for comment, leaving its reasons for striking out on its own unexplained. ARNC allies privately dismiss the row as “turf war theatrics” by an aging diaspora elite. What is clear, however, is that the acronym ARNC now sits in limbo -- claimed by both camps, yet effectively held hostage by the break away Council, which shows no sign of sharing the stage.

Past failed umbrella groups

This habit of clashing acronyms did not begin in the 2020s. In 2011 the Organization of Islamic Cooperation helped broker the ArakanRohingyaUnion (ARU), fronted by US based academic Wakar Uddin, and gathering 25 diaspora groups under one banner.

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■ Source: dhakatribune.com