

The futile and violent search for ‘authenticity’ in Burma

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The recent conflagrations of [sectarian violence in Burma](#) have shocked the country and the world, having left thousands displaced, scores dead, and millions of kyat of property damaged.

They have also left a series of fragmented analyses, as commentators struggle to make sense of the slaughter. On one hand, some – incapable of seeing beyond a ‘big-bad Burma state’ paradigm – believe that [the state is behind the current violence](#), and/or that [disgruntled generals](#) are orchestrating attacks from [behind the scenes](#) to legitimate the military’s institutional role. On the opposite end of the spectrum others argue that [a deep-seated racism](#), fomented under the long years of the military regime, [is now being ‘unleashed’](#) as the military relaxes controls.

Both of these perspectives draw from evidence that is partially correct – the military-state *has* spurred internal divisions and [likely has orchestrated violence](#) in the past; there *is* racism in Burma society against dark-skinned people. But neither encompasses the entire story.

The Buddhist-monk-led [anti-Muslim campaign](#) that has generated much collective hatred cannot be construed as emerging from a conspiratorial state elite. Likewise, such hatred cannot be imagined outside of the context of state institutions which insist upon eternal racial and religious differences: ID cards demand that babies at birth be given either – but not both – a “Muslim” or a “Burmese” identity; [state-enforced birth-limits](#) directed only at certain Muslim communities present them as second-class citizens and demographic threats.

But understanding the spontaneous explosions of violence requires a consideration of the socio-economic context in which these attacks are occurring. Increasing economic stratification can help explain the growth in anxieties generated by concerns over resource distribution. The exclusion of perceived foreigners can be interpreted as an inter-class attempt to construct a community of legitimate claimants to this finally-growing – but unequally distributed – pie.

But this exclusion may not stop with these particular “others”. These intensifying feelings of being left out, combined with the failures of citizens and political leaders to articulate a conception of an inclusive Burmese civil political community, creates opportunities for a violence that may be uncontainable and may continue to attach to others who may seem suddenly or irreconcilably ‘foreign’. The risk is that Burma tears itself apart in its search for its ‘authentic’ core.

The Instability of Scapegoating

When Arakanese Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims [first clashed](#) in western Arakan state last summer, the violence was a regional issue. But it did not remain there. Discourse across Burmese society about the Rohingya soon exploded, with Buddhist monks, political leaders, and even other ethnic minority groups weighing in. They were all in agreement: the Rohingya were threats to the nation, were not part of it, and must be expelled.

A tiny ethnic minority [kept in concentration camp conditions for years](#), periodically targeted for mass abuse and expulsions was suddenly imagined as [a threat to the entire polity](#)? How to make sense of this? Could this violence – and the violent discourse surrounding it – be interpreted as a tactic for building a collective ‘in-group’? Indeed, as the long years of the military regime gave way to a new,

more ‘open’ society, the violence seemed to work as a way of trying to establish the definitions and limits of that new society.

This was especially true given the long-standing historical animosity between the majority Burmans and Burma’s *other* ethnic minorities. These ethnic minority groups, who scholar [Matt Walton has identified as](#) seeming “to enjoy only conditional membership in the national community... always subject to suspicion of disloyalty”, were suddenly being hailed as ‘indigenous races’ connected to the blood and soil of the nation.

These ethnic groups played their part, quickly drawing a distinction between themselves and the Rohingya. The National Democratic Front, a coalition representing eight nationality parties, was unequivocal: [“‘Rohingya’ is not to be recognized as a nationality.”](#)

But as “the inside” was apparently being established through the process of eradicating “the outside”, violence overflowed. From its initial scapegoat, violence began to be directed at Burma’s other “others”: in the [central town of Meikhtila](#), in [environs north of Rangoon](#), and in [the northeastern city of Lashio](#), respective mobs have turned on Muslim citizens, burning property and murdering scores.

Critically, these Muslim citizens have been integrated into Burma society for generations, and so it is more accurate to say that they are being turned into “others”. Muslims in central Burma — who have no connection to Bangladesh — [are now being called “Bengali”](#). This is also the name Burmese [state security agents](#) insist Rohingya call *themselves*.

Similarly, a Chinese Muslim (Panthay) colleague – whose light skin means she does not ‘look’ like the Muslims that Burmese often derisively refer to as *kalar* – told me last month in Rangoon that she is afraid that the violence will spill over to them as well. Days after our conversation, Panthays had their cinema burned to the ground in Lashio.

This progression of violence suggests that scapegoating is potentially uncontrollable – from Rohingya to *all* Muslims, from Rohingya to *all* dark-skinned people, and potentially beyond.

For instance, in Rangoon I came across a number of propaganda pamphlets urging Buddhists to protect their race and religion. While the covers are adorned by fetuses (invoking Muslim population threat) and prehistoric beasts (invoking the supposed Muslim desire to consume the Burma nation), the texts implore readers to beware “the other races”, or the “evil other-race husbands”, which are terms eminently re-deployable to *any* group constructed as “other”.

But this cuts both ways: once one group is identified as “not part of” Burma, or “incompatible” with “our traditions”, Burmese citizens or traditions themselves are put into question, are even potentially undermined.

From animosity to violence

All of this animosity still does not explain the move to sporadic, spontaneous violence. Looking at [economic indicators](#) as a proximate cause provides helpful insight. Stanley Tambiah, [in a study close to the Burmese case](#), shows how as far back as 1910 Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka were justifying violent attacks against non-Buddhists through the language of economic victimisation.

Tambiah cites a tract written by a Buddhist monk that argues that “the ‘merchants from Bombay and peddlers from South India’... trade in Ceylon while the ‘sons of the soil’ abandon agriculture and ‘work like galley slaves’ in urban clerical jobs.”

A similar phenomenon occurred in Burma and remains relevant today. Many Burmese still reference how Chettiers – money-lenders from Tamil Nadu – expropriated hundreds of thousands of hectares of

land when the Great Depression undermined the ability of Burmese borrowers to repay agricultural loans.

While Sean Turnell, [author of a book on the period](#), tells me that these Chettiars were mostly non-Muslims (either Hindus or Christians), their South Asian physiognomy has largely been conflated with Muslim identity, especially given that today, as a 2002 Human Rights Watch [report illustrates](#), “many Muslims are businessmen, shopkeepers and small-scale money changers.”

HRW argues that this position in the economy “means that [Muslims] are often targeted during times of economic hardship.” The difference now is that while the whole economy is still poor, there are signs that small swathes are improving drastically. As I’ve [argued elsewhere](#), there is a palpable sense of anxiety in Burma today deriving from the speed of change and the feeling of missing out on the spoils associated with those changes.

And while there is no time-series data tracking increasing inequality in Burma over the past years, rapid growth that is concentrated in [extractive industries](#) will often accrue to narrow elites – especially when [rampant land-grabs](#) attend it, and when compensation – [if given at all](#) – considers only the [market price today](#), not what it will become in a changing Burma.

Given all this, when political leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi tell [poor farmers in places like Latpadaung](#) that they have to respect contracts written by the previous military regime and so must hand over their land to Chinese companies *in the name of a rule of law* that [she has always insisted](#) did not exist when those contracts were written, average people may begin to suspect from this utter nonsense that ‘democracy’ means nothing more than their freedom to continue to be exploited.

Thus abandoned, people take matters into their own hands. This does not mean that sectarian violence is inevitable (it has not occurred in Latpadaung, for instance), but rather that some in these situations lash-out at what they misperceive as their exploiters (and with the potential aim of looting the resources and appropriating the market positions of those one rung above them).

Within this logic, it is not surprising that the city of Meikhtila, long deeply-impooverished but now sporadically-growing by dint of its increasing importance in linking Rangoon with Mandalay, has become a site of sectarian strife. It is no wonder the Rohingya are being displaced and contained in an area where [a Special Economic Zone](#) is being built. Most convincing here is that the [Buddhist ‘969 movement’](#) is above all an *economic* boycott that targets Muslim businesses.

Matt Schissler’s exploration of working-class Burmese Buddhist anti-Muslim sentiment shows how [economic grievance](#) fuels the legitimacy of that movement: whereas Buddhists can observe how Muslims do not always convert wives or children, that they often respect Buddhism, etc, demagogues and average people alike perceive Muslim wealth. In this context the [786 symbol](#) that adorns Muslims shops signifies to Buddhists not only *halal* food but also a desire to dominate the economy.

As [Maung Zarni](#), visiting fellow at London School of Economics, puts it, “some militant Buddhist preachers... effectively scapegoat the country’s Muslims for the general economic hardships and cultural decay in society, portraying the ethnic Burmese as victims at the hands of organised Muslim commercial leeches and parasites.” Commentator [Sai Latt points out](#) that economic exclusion is not a mere pretext for physical violence and exclusion, but rather directly leads to it.

This is particularly relevant now given that the conventional wisdom in Burma today assumes that economic development will act as a panacea for Burma’s internecine problems. It may do precisely the opposite.

Four weeks ago, I spent the latter part of an evening with the local commander of an Irrawaddy-delta town chatting with him and other friends. He ultimately asked me – and effectively the group – to

define this “open society” that was meant to be coming to Burma, and to explain how the country is supposed to manage it?

He indexed the recent violence as a gaping question mark, providing it as an example of people losing discipline. A rambunctious party fell silent and debate ensued for the next hour.

That these kinds of discussions are occurring is remarkable and positive, and it is important to highlight them as examples of Burmese Buddhists (in this case) struggling with these issues. It also illustrates that people are not merely seeing the “other” as a threat, but are trying to figure out how to navigate – and even embrace – difference.

Indeed, these conversations can be interpreted as nascent attempts to confront scapegoating violence with a *positive* politics, with citizens articulating inclusive conceptions of community that base inclusion not on the violence of the [colonial encounter](#) of all things.

This positive politics must include elaborations of economic justice and inclusive political membership. The first can be achieved through a combination of legislation, advocacy and pedagogy around the importance of directing support to the 70 percent of Burmese citizens who toil in or around the rural agriculture sector.

A team of Harvard professors has highlighted the [economic sense](#) in supporting small-holder plots, something that is a far cry from Aung San Suu Kyi telling farmers that they will be fine without their land.

Luckily there are signs that such pro-poor orientation is emerging from the National League for Democracy as well. The NLD’s new in-house research team is focusing on the agricultural sector, working to synthesize research and data from constituents so as to develop policies that allow growth to come from the bottom.

A missing piece is Suu Kyi using her immense social capital to infuse her [empty rule of law rhetoric](#) with these kinds of meanings. Indeed, it is not enough to say “[rule of law](#)” without telling people how these ideas will actually affect their lives in positive ways.

A “rule of law” that guarantees that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor is one that is not only unjust but which breeds potential conflict, as those who feel excluded – at any level – can find scapegoats to target or victims to violate. A “rule of law” that ensures that some are citizens and some are not puts the lie to the NLD’s plea for universal human rights and justice for which the party has putatively advocated for so long now.

Second, political leaders must articulate policies and political narratives that elaborate a more capacious understanding of political membership. Here, changing the exclusionary [1982 citizenship law](#) and [developing a federalist system](#) that devolves power to ethnic states will certainly be necessary.

Moreover, there are positive voices which can be magnified: [a collection of inter-faith youth organisations](#) in particular have made courageous statements against racial violence and a group of [moderate monks have repudiated](#) the claims made by the bigoted ones.

But neither policies nor rejections will be sufficient because they do not positively articulate why people like the Rohingya, Muslims, ethnic minorities, Christians, etc belong. This will require pedagogy about how all of these peoples have shared collective struggle (living through the military regime), often share bonds of family and culture, and most importantly, share a desire to be part of the nation’s future.

If Burma examines its society, they will see that denizens of all stripes – ethnic minorities, Muslims, even Rohingya – can make and have made those kinds of commitments. Fortunately, there is a model for this – Suu Kyi’s father and namesake Aung San, Burma’s founder.

Anthropologist Gustaaf Houtman has analyzed [Aung San’s speeches](#), and finds Aung San continually searching for a political liberation that applies to all of Burma’s peoples and which is expressed through the idiom of socio-economic justice: “[Aung San] described ‘new democracy’ as ‘although not entirely free of capitalism, is not capitalistic’, is ‘somewhere betwixt and between’ ... If the old democracies had succumbed to underhand manipulation by ‘capitalists and big business discreetly assuming power’ the constitution of this ‘new democracy’ would ‘place power in the hands of the masses through their elected representative from top to bottom.’”

Drawing on Aung San, who is still seen as a multi-ethnic unifier, and his historical demands for equality may address the lingering and ever-displaced issues of multi-ethnic belonging in a majority-Burman state.

This can be done by imagining a [‘politics of the daily’](#) and basing policies and narratives on the struggle of everyday life in a changing Burma. When such a politics is imagined, it must conjure – in the minds of policymakers, activists, and citizens alike – not only the stylised ‘average Burmese’ (who undoubtedly is Burman and lives in central Burma), but rather expand to consider the experiences of the various classes, ethnicities, and religions in Burma.

This takes unique experiences seriously without flattening difference into a narrative about simple socio-economic concerns, and without insisting that all non-Burmans – or Burmans for that matter – have the exact same experiences.

Such a politics can re-orient the futile search for the timeless ‘authentic’ Burma subject. It can help develop a sense of a new authentic subject: anyone who has struggled through the long years of the regime and who is now willing to work for a better collective future.

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Tags: [anti-Muslim violence](#), [aung san suu ky](#)i, [ethnic minorities](#), [federalism](#), [national league for democracy](#)