

Anger and anxiety in multi-ethnic Myanmar

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The Bengali Sunni Jameh Mosque which sits opposite the Buddhist Sule Pagoda in central Yangon. (Photo: Hinth / Wikipedia)

Communal tensions are rising in Myanmar almost to a point of frenzy. This development is dangerous. It will—if not checked—lead to loss of more innocent lives and threaten to derail the process of democratic change in Myanmar.

Myanmar is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and secular nation. In 1947, Myanmar was founded upon solid principles of democracy and liberty including religious freedom and gender equality. In fact, Myanmar was far ahead regarding woman's rights even compared to today's standard. Women pilots were serving in the Air Force well before women in other countries were allowed to enlist as auxiliaries in the military.

History provides a cautionary lesson. When led astray from those founding principles, Myanmar and its people descended into 50 years of dictatorial rule and destitution. Now, barely three years after emerging from decades of dictatorship, misguided calls to hostile actions against people of Muslim faith reverberate, and every Myanmar citizen must resist them resolutely.

The proposed ideas of U Wirathu and his '969' movement to boycott Muslim businesses and restricting marriage of Buddhist women to men of Muslim faith are unconstitutional and ill-conceived.

It is a well-known fact that there is a widespread anxiety and anger in Buddhist communities. This anxiety and anger drives the growing support for U Wirathu and his 969 movement. The threat perception in regard to Islam and its impact on Myanmar's society cannot be simply dismissed as primordial hatred or psychologized as self-victimization as if it were a matter of a collective psychological development disorder. To avoid a further escalation and overcome this crisis, it is important to acknowledge the existence of anger and anxieties in Buddhist communities and to understand the underlying economic, social, and cultural problems. Only when the root problems are understood, can they be factored into sustainable, peaceful, and political solutions.

Threat Perception in Buddhist Communities

The threat perception emanates obviously from long-standing communal grievances. Top among them is the notion of forced conversion of Buddhist women to their husbands' religion when they marry Islamic men; hence the recent call for a law that would restrict Buddhist women from marrying a Muslim man.

The conversions are believed to be effected by social and economic pressures on Buddhist women who marry men of Muslim faith. Since Islamic law does not recognize or allow interfaith marriages, non-Muslim women are denied the right to marital property and inheritance once in the event of divorce or death of the husband.

Under British colonial rule, Islamic law took precedence over Buddhist customary law in Myanmar and thus women of Buddhist faith were losing out on their spousal rights provided by the Buddhist law unless they converted to Islam. In fact, the Braund Committee Report on the Buddhist-Muslim riots in 1938 cited this very issue as an underlying cause of the clashes. This injustice to Buddhist women was remedied by the Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Bill, enacted in 1939 and a similar law under the Burmese government of U Nu in 1954. Many women may be ignorant of their rights under existing laws and thus may give in to undue pressure to convert.

What seems also to feed into the anxiety is an increased visibility of Islamization as more Muslim communities appear to be less inclined to integrate into Myanmar society than in the past. There is the perception of a proliferation of mosques, an increasing number of women in hijabs and burqas, men in kurtis (long shirts), long beards and prayer caps not only in larger cities but also in rural villages. This perception is acknowledged by a Myanmar Muslim cleric who recently came forward to call for a better integration of Muslims in Myanmar. He lamented that some Muslim communities contribute to the fear of Buddhists by hanging '786' signs (not commanded by the Koran) and building more madrassas and mosques in villages than are necessary and often in competition with one another.

Some grievances strain rationality but are nevertheless widely prevalent. For instance, it is believed that Myanmar Muslims take their business only to Muslim-owned shops, easily distinguishable by their '786' signs. What made matters worse is that it became received wisdom among the Buddhists that the number 786 when added ($7+8+6=21$) came to 21, denoting Islam's intention to take over Myanmar by the 21st century. The belief in numerology explains also the popularity of U Wirathu's 969 movement designed as a countermeasure to 786.

The examples of Malaysia and Indonesia also loom large in the minds of many Myanmar Buddhists in their perception of threat from Islam. Though much of the history of these regional neighbors may not be known, it is nevertheless a common knowledge among Myanmar Buddhists that the population of these countries was once overwhelmingly Buddhist and Hindu before the arrival of Islam. They are

therefore invoked as examples when people engage in conversations about the necessity to defend Buddhism and their way of life.

As reliable government data and statistics are missing, and systematic political and sociological research has been hampered by decades of isolation and official neglect, these perceptions are usually readily dismissed by international commentators. However, this does not change the fact that for many Myanmar citizens these observations and grievances are a reality indicating a disturbing demographic shift.

Name and Shame strategy does not work

International media, human rights organizations and single issue advocates have so far manifested a stunning ignorance for the complexity of both the Rakhine and the Buddhist-Muslim conflicts in the rest of the country. They have failed to pay attention to underlying causes and the social, economic, historical and political contexts, and have instead relied on the snapshot impressions of advocates and activists. By doing so, it has become nearly impossible for the international public to understand the conflicts as anything other than an expression of primordial hatred or a clash of cultures.

Early on, media outlets and organizations have made moral judgments and adopted a uniform conflict narrative that stigmatized and stereotyped the conflicting parties. They applied a binary code in their reporting that defined good and evil, victim and villain, which reminded of the default coverage of Myanmar politics over the past two decades.

The ‘name and shame’ strategy of international media, activists and human rights advocacy groups has not contributed to a de-escalation of tensions, but has further polarized and hardened the positions of the parties involved. A case in point is the latest coverage of U Wirathu in *TIME* magazine. While the demonizing of U Wirathu has sensationalized the conflict situation for the consumption of an international readership, it has deepened the fault lines in communities in Myanmar and roiled the passions. The government has already decided to ban *TIME* in Myanmar out of fear that it could cause further communal clashes. Such a tense atmosphere makes it even more difficult for voices of moderation and reconciliation to be heard.

In this context, the ‘Rakhine map incident’ comes to mind as it has also arguably contributed to an ethnic and religious mobilization and eventual escalation of the Rakhine conflict last year.

On November 6, 2010, the *BBC* published on their website a map that depicted Muslim immigrant communities, which call themselves “Rohingyas”, as the only population representing Rakhine State. The map had omitted the majority of ethnic Rakhine as well as Muslim communities that identify themselves as Rakhine Muslims and Kaman. The map incident sparked an outcry among the Rakhine and a virtual war on social media sites. The misstep of the *BBC* to literally write the Rakhine out of history and out of the map and seemingly place the Muslim population in Rakhine collectively under the contested, politicized category ‘Rohingya’, became an epitome for poorly researched and biased media coverage.

It also enhanced a long-held resentment among the ethnic Rakhine of being culturally and politically disempowered and marginalized, not only as a minority within Myanmar but also as ethnic group regionally and internationally. While Rohingya groups overseas had built a good rapport with the international media for over a decade and gained support with international NGOs and advocacy groups, the ethnic Rakhines as well as Rakhine Muslims and Kaman had failed to do so for a variety of reasons, and found themselves excluded and voiceless in a globalized [world of single-issue advocacy and lobbyism](#).

BBC's careless approach to the Rakhine conflict, which is one of the most convoluted and protracted conflicts in Myanmar, is a cautionary tale regarding the widespread tendency in international media and the human rights community to focus on a single issue while ignoring the history, context and complexity of the wider conflict. It appears that they adopt and promote the most skillfully marketed conflict narrative, which often happens to be the one presented by the most vociferous and well-funded advocacy groups.

Intentionally or unintentionally, the focus on single issues causes often more division on the ground, contributes to an increase of identity politics and a fragmentation of larger social and political movements. This is lamentable, especially in a political environment as exists currently in Myanmar where full democracy has not been realized. In such an environment a more unified, political movement across religious and ethnic lines is needed to push for major political reforms tackling fundamental problems such as poverty, social and economic injustice, cronyism, land-grabbing, the lack of rule of law, to name but a few.

The foregoing examples of biased reporting are not unique to Myanmar. The International Council of Human Rights Policy based in Geneva has pointed to widespread failures in the coverage of human rights issues in a study of 2002 and [published a catalogue of recommendations for good human rights reporting](#).

However, as governments and politicians all over the world are adapting and developing their responses to counter human rights reports, advocates have likewise escalated their rhetoric by using more frequently threatening terms with legal significance such as 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide'. Yet, this strategy is in the end more polarizing than mitigating the problem, as the current communal tensions in Myanmar show.

Assertive leadership required

It was Niccolo Machiavelli who warned of procrastinating on imminent problems, as these will never disappear but grow bigger "until they have gathered strength and the case is past cure." The situation in Myanmar is not "past cure" and political solutions can be found. The tense situation however calls for more assertive leadership from both the government and the opposition, much more than what has been witnessed so far.

All leaders of the government and the opposition should make clear in repeated statements to the public that mob violence, discrimination on religious grounds, and hate-speech are not acceptable. Myanmar is a secular, multi-ethnic state and accordingly freedom of religion is guaranteed by its constitution.

It has been reported that in the wake of Rakhine and Meikhtila clashes, religious leaders have already come together for interfaith prayer meetings either sponsored by the government or on private initiatives. These are very important initiatives, however, in the face of widely known sectarian grievances that have fueled the conflicts, they are not enough.

Religious freedom means that citizens are free to believe in whichever God or deity in their hearts and heads. However, religious freedom in a secular country like Myanmar also means that religion may not infringe on the freedom of others and dominate public life. Therefore, the government, political and religious leaders must specifically address religious inspired behavior that gave rise to sectarian grievances and tensions. To that end, the government has to initiate interfaith dialogues between religious leaders from the communities on both sides to thresh out the differences and find concrete solutions to allay the fears and anxieties of citizens on both sides of the religious divide. Above all, interfaith understanding cannot be effectuated unless the government ensures the security of all citizens in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

For instance, regarding the issue of interfaith marriage, Singapore provides a viable model. Without going into detail, marriage registries are set up for Muslim couples and non-Muslims separately. Muslim marriages are conducted meticulously in accordance with their religious laws including polygamous marriages. To those who are concerned with forced conversions of non-Muslim women, pre-marital counseling could be required for interfaith couples for the purpose of informing and educating them on pertinent issues including awareness of laws to protect women without infringement on women's rights.

On the issue of proliferating mosques, madrassas, religious attires and symbols including 786 and 969 stickers voluntary attenuation of behaviors should be negotiated on and once agreed upon, implemented by respective communities.

The government should also address and reform the bizarre system of determining the ethnicity of Myanmar citizens that gives reason for grievance on the part of non-Buddhist citizens in particular of those belonging to Islamic faith. A Myanmar citizen may be of Bamar, Shan, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Chin and other recognized indigenous ethnic heritage. However, the official ethnicity status of a citizen of Islamic faith is determined as "mixed blood" on the citizenship card and arbitrarily categorized as (indigenous ethnicity A, B, or C) mixed with Indian, Pakistani or Bengali blood.

The people of Myanmar have suffered economic deprivation and injustice under decades of military dictatorship. During those years, suppression and exclusionary practices based on ethnicity and religion have been institutionalized in the belief that this would eliminate ethno-religious problems that the nation faced. Fifty years later, we know that those problems have not disappeared. Instead they have intensified and have become more complicated. Actions that again call for exclusion will not cure problems but create new injustices and a whole new set of issues.

Religious strife must not be allowed to dominate the public political debate as it undermines solidarity among Myanmar citizens. Solidarity across religious and ethnic divides is needed to further democratic reforms and gain social and economic justice for all citizens. The Myanmar citizens who have barely emerged from oppressive rule cannot afford to discard basic principles of democracy, liberty, and religious freedom before they have even attained full democracy. Building a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and democratic nation of Myanmar will never be easy and straight forward but to keep it lasting, these principles have to be upheld under all circumstances.

The views expressed in this article are the authors' and do not represent Mizzima editorial policy.

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