Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar: Case Study of the Mandalay Riots


Let me be able, upright, and straightforward, of good speech, gentle, and free from pride. Let me be contented, easily satisfied, having few duties, living simply, of controlled senses, prudent, without pride and without attachment to nation, race, or other groups. May all beings be well and safe, may they be at ease. Let none deceive or despise another anywhere. Let none wish harm to another, in anger or in hate.

Excerpt from Metta Sutta

In the Name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful: Praise be to the Lord of the Universe who has created us and made us into tribes and nations that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. If the enemy incline towards peace, do thou also incline towards peace, and trust in God, for the Lord is one that hears and knows all things. And the servants of God Most Gracious are those who walk on the Earth in humility, and when we address them, we say, Peace.

An Islamic Prayer for Peace
Acknowledgements, Dedication

Justice Trust is a human rights research and advocacy organization that works closely with local lawyers and activists to support communities fighting for justice. As part of its Myanmar program, Justice Trust publishes policy reports on important current events. These reports have two main goals: to advance the rule of law at the domestic level by exposing violations and promoting policy reform, and to address common misperceptions at the international level by presenting local knowledge of these events.

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This report is dedicated to the memory of U Tun Tun and U Soe Min Htwe, respected husbands and fathers, who participated in humanitarian and social work for their communities, yet lost their lives to senseless violence. May their families find peace and justice!
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I. Executive Summary

This policy report examines the riots that shook Mandalay on July 1-2, 2014, killing two men, one Buddhist and one Muslim, and damaging scores of properties in Muslim neighborhoods. This was the latest in a series of attacks that have fueled religious tensions across the country, strengthened ultra nationalist forces, and undermined the democratic opening.

The report has three sections:

I. The extended executive summary describes how the Mandalay riots were instigated by hidden hands - hardliners linked to the former junta - and recommends steps to avoid the trap of religious violence.

II. Section II provides further analysis and context, describing how the former junta’s “roadmap to democracy” laid the tracks for the political transition, and how the outbreak of communal conflict in Rakhine led to anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila, Lashio, Mandalay, and surrounding areas.

III. Section III presents additional information about the Mandalay riots, based primarily on witness accounts, including from the widows of the murdered victims.

a. Mandalay riots in historical and political context

The report’s main finding is that the Mandalay riots were designed to appear as a spontaneous outbreak of mob violence, but in fact were perpetrated by an organized gang of armed men brought in from outside Mandalay to enact a pre-determined script written and stage-managed by hidden hands for political ends.

This is a familiar strategy in Myanmar. Since General Ne Win’s coup in 1962, successive military regimes have pursued a consistent policy of Burman ultra-nationalism, using the dual threat of external intervention and internal disintegration to consolidate centralized control. Especially in times of political crisis, these regimes made a habit of scapegoating minorities. Notorious examples include the anti-Chinese riots in the early 1970s, at a time of rising public anger against the government over a severe country-wide rice shortage, and the Buddhist-Muslim tensions that flared up following the democratic mass uprising in 1988. These regimes also commonly deployed plainclothes units rather than uniformed soldiers to carry out repression that was particularly offensive to the wider public - for example, using Swan Ah Shin (Masters of Force) to brutally attack thousands of monks during the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

"For people who don’t know the true history of Myanmar, these riots may seem to have sprouted out from nowhere. But for those of us who have lived through the different military regimes, we can see their fingerprints all over it. Myanmar’s history is littered with these kinds of incidents. It is good to distract the public because it keeps them from thinking about the real, important problems facing our country at this juncture. If you’re busy thinking about the so-called Muslim threat in Myanmar, you probably won’t be worried about the widespread land grabs taking place, resource extractions by multi-national corporations, the upcoming 2015 elections, and much-needed reforms to the Constitution. To this day, I believe that this is not a Buddhist vs. Muslim conflict. The rocks of racial and religious tension may land in our homes, but we must think critically and see the hidden hands throwing these rocks, and the political reasons behind it."

— U Thein Win Aung, scholar and writer from Mandalay
It is no secret that these regimes were ruled according to the whims and dictates of a handful of senior generals whose opaque decision-making served to maximize personal power and shield their actions from accountability. This system of dictatorial governance gave rise to crony patronage networks able to amass wealth and power while operating behind the screen of formal politics. The current strategy is a continuation of these time-tested methods, adapted to the new political conditions. The goals are to maintain the unofficial power of hard-liners and their crony networks, to divert and re-direct popular frustration with the lack of political and economic reform, and to weaken pro-democracy forces.

It is important to recognize that these influential figures continue to exercise significant power, even if formally removed from politics. In fact, their power is built into the former junta’s “roadmap to democracy”, a strategic plan developed in 2003 which established the blueprint and pathway for the current political opening. The roadmap ensures military control over the civilian government through an anti-democratic Constitution that cannot be amended without the military’s express consent.

Understanding this context is essential for understanding the role of hidden hands in stoking religious hatred and violence. It is equally essential to separate the initial explosion in Rakhine state, which arose out of genuine communal antagonism, from subsequent incidents, which reflect a deliberate strategy to manipulate these tensions to inflame populist passions.

b. Role of hidden hands in stoking communal violence

The violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine, one of the least developed regions in Myanmar, has deep roots involving longstanding conflicts over land, resources, and the interpretation of history. These divisions would remain regardless of religious difference. But religion is a convenient polarizing lens that serves as a lightning rod to organize prejudice and amplify anger in the rest of the country. Extremist Buddhist groups like the 969 movement have exploited this sentiment to fan the flames of anti-Muslim prejudice. The international community’s one-sided support for the Rohingya narrative, without appreciating the underlying political context, adds further fuel to the nationalist fire.

The violence in Rakhine started in June 2012 with organized massacres by both sides. But in October the violence morphed into systematic one-sided ethnic cleansing of Muslim neighborhoods, enabled by state inaction and at times complicity. Subsequent anti-Muslim riots hit other areas of the country that had no history of communal conflict. The fact that all these episodes showed the same recurrent pattern - including speaking tours by Wira Thu, controversial leader of the 969 movement, just before the outbreak of violence - indicates a deliberate strategy to foment such violence.

** I am in court defending many young men simply because the authorities said they violated curfew or were somehow deemed to have been part of the riots. Everyone in Mandalay knows the truth: the riots were instigated and carried out by people who are not from Mandalay. And yet how is it that our community members must pay the ultimate price of being rounded up to face charges and trials? M

— Yweh Nu Aung, lawyer from Mandalay
Analysis of these riots demonstrates the following common features:

1. Misuse of social media by extremist forces to publicize rumors of rape or other honor crimes committed by Muslim men against Buddhist women.
2. Riots carried out by violent gangs - rumored to be outsiders - who blame Muslims for starting the conflict and incite locals to revenge.
3. Failure of law enforcement to take timely preventive or protective measures despite police deployment at the scene.
4. Failure of legal process to credibly investigate and punish perpetrators, deepening community mistrust of the justice system and fueling the cycle of impunity.
5. Timing of riots to divert attention and momentum from popular demands for justice and democracy.

The Mandalay riots faithfully followed each element of this pattern:

1. Facebook campaign on June 30th by Wira Thu blaming Muslims for the alleged rape of a Buddhist woman (later proven false).
2. Sudden appearance on July 1st of an armed gang of about 25-30 men brought in from outside to incite mob attacks against Muslim neighborhoods.
3. Failure of local authorities to protect people and property despite deploying a large contingent of riot police at the scene before the violence had even started.
4. Belated arrest and eventual conviction of alleged culprits long after the actual criminals had fled.
5. Suspicious timing of the riots just before National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi was scheduled to address a major public rally in Mandalay to reform anti-democratic provisions of the Constitution.

The scripted sequence that played out in Mandalay was similar to the pattern of previous outbreaks of violence, but with one crucial and telling difference - local people refused to join with the rioters. Appeals for community support to fight the “kalars” (derogatory term for Muslims) fell on deaf ears. Faced with this initial failure, the rioters visited two well-known monasteries after midnight, hoping to recruit resident monks, but were turned away empty-handed by senior abbots. Meanwhile, activists from a local multi-faith alliance called the Mandalay Peace Committee and monks from the All Burma Monks Union responded quickly, alerting their networks and establishing a presence on the streets, thereby helping to limit the scope of damage.

As a result of their isolation, the gang of outside agitators was deprived of the protective cover of a sympathetic crowd, and, crucially, the stage-managed nature of the riots was made visible to the public, including journalists. The case of Mandalay therefore provides the clearest evidence yet of a deliberate political strategy to foment anti-Muslim violence, as well as the best example of countering this strategy through a local early warning system to mobilize an immediate on-the-ground response.

"I saw a group of maybe 25 people, on motorbikes, yelling, singing the national anthem, throwing stones, and damaging parked cars. The violence was not targeted; they were indiscriminately destroying whatever they could. By then there were 200 or so riot police within view down the street. They could not have been more than 10 meters away, doing nothing as these rioters went on a rampage. It was just one roving band of 25 guys, and if the police had arrested them, everything would have been over. I still can't believe the mob was allowed to continue what they were doing."

— Mindin, journalist and Editor-in-Chief of the Mandalay Khit Journal
The conclusion that the Mandalay riots were planned and instigated is supported by facts on the ground as confirmed by multiple eyewitnesses, extensive on-site investigation, and informal discussions and meetings conducted over six months with a wide range of stakeholders by Justice Trust’s team of local and international lawyers.

"I was nervous but I wanted to know where the mob was going so I followed their motorbikes from a distance. The Mandalay community is quite tight knit so we generally recognize familiar faces. I have never seen these rioters before and they were clearly from out of town because I overheard them asking each other directions. A few actually stopped trying to read road signs and some map that they brought. They drove quite unsteadily and I think a few guys were under the influence of some kind of narcotics."

— Harry, a youth community worker from Mandalay

This raises important questions: who funded and organized the armed gang? What are their political objectives? Who gains and who loses? How can future riots be prevented?

According to the standard narrative of the communal violence, the political opening has removed the lid from the pressure cooker, allowing deep-seated anger between Buddhist and Muslim communities to boil over. This explanation is partially true but incomplete. Latent divisions certainly exist and are being exploited and exacerbated by hate-mongering nationalists and opportunistic politicians. But to make the leap from hate speech to wanton murder and destruction requires an additional factor - armed groups funded and trained to commit criminal violence for political ends.

For this political strategy to succeed, it is not enough to instigate riots. It is also important that the violence be interpreted and portrayed as an uncontrollable conflict driven by entrenched hatred between communities, rather than a targeted campaign against a scapegoated minority.

"The rape of Ma Soe Soe on June 28, 2014 at the hands of Sun Cafe owners Nay Win and San Maung is not just a criminal offence but an offence aimed at instigating violence in our country. The July 1 and 2 incidents in Mandalay are not a clash of religions or races but a Jihad. They are gathering in mosques in Mandalay under the guise of Ramadan but in reality they are recruiting and preparing for Jihad against us. The government of Myanmar must deal with these Islamic extremists and raid all suspicious mosques and homes. All Burmans must be ready and not fall into these Muslims’ traps."

— Facebook post on July 3rd by Wira Thu

In this regard, the spread of misinformation and propaganda by the 969 movement, which reverses reality by blaming Muslims for the violence, provides the perfect cover story to deflect attention from the dirty work of hidden hands. In the case of Mandalay, however, the facts are clear and speak for themselves: the outside rioters did not act from spontaneous uncontrollable anger; they were organized and unleashed by influential figures with a political agenda.
The overwhelming consensus of people interviewed for this report agree that the riots were the handiwork of military hardliners, particularly loyalists to former junta supreme leader Than Shwe, an infamous expert in psychological warfare. Their broad purpose in fomenting anti-Muslim violence is to undermine the transition to democracy and maintain their behind-the-scenes power. While it is beyond the mandate and expertise of this report to identify responsible individuals, it bears mentioning that most respondents singled out U Aung Thaung, member of parliament for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), as a likely ringleader due to his open financial and political support for Wira Thu and his alleged role in organizing previous violent attacks using plainclothes thugs, including the attempted assassination of Aung San Suu Kyi during the Depayin massacre.

c. Impact of communal violence on the political transition

The strategy of instigating riots and portraying them as uncontrollable outbreaks of religious hatred has had far-reaching adverse impacts. The mood of giddy optimism that prevailed two years ago has given way to the politics of fear and division. This is partly due to exaggerated expectations brought on by the government's unprecedented reforms in 2011-12: freeing political prisoners and welcoming exiles, ending press censorship, allowing multi-party elections, pursuing peace talks, and proclaiming respect for the rule of law - leading to the end of sanctions. Such momentum could not be sustained, however, in the face of entrenched unaccountable military power.

But the recent backsliding on reforms is also partly attributable to the rising tide of religious and nationalist chauvinism, which has silenced voices of tolerance and moderation. The focus on communal violence has also sidelined other human rights issues such as corrupt land grabs and resource exploitation. Police repression of activists has intensified, while progress towards political openness has stalled. Meanwhile, the perceived bias of Western countries and the United Nations (UN) regarding the conflict in Rakhine state has further exacerbated public anger. In short, the trajectory of the political opening has been re-directed from reform to reaction.

This dramatic change in popular mood benefits those calling for law and order to protect nation and religion, i.e. hardline elements in the military and the USDP, and weakens those calling for rule of law to protect people's rights, i.e. pro-democracy forces and the NLD. Senior military and government leaders are now talking openly about delaying national elections past 2015 if the violence continues. But the threat goes well beyond upcoming elections. Fueling communal hatred and religious violence is a high-risk move that can easily spin out of control. Examples from India and the Middle East show that sectarian conflict, once unleashed, cannot easily be controlled. It is therefore crucial for Myanmar's future that this strategy be exposed and challenged.

"When Obama visited in 2012, American prestige was so high. Everyone supported democratic change and thought the rule of the generals would finally end. Now people don't expect much from democracy; they say that America only cares about the Rohingya. And the military runs the show just like before, but no one talks about it."

— anonymous member of NLD party
The role of hidden hands in shifting the political narrative from a hopeful story of democratic change to a dark tale of communal violence has received scant public attention. While much talked about in private settings throughout the country, the topic remains off-limits to serious policy analysis. This silence obscures the real power dynamics in Myanmar and makes an accurate diagnosis of current political crises, let alone potential solutions, more difficult to achieve. Understanding these dynamics is an essential precondition for shifting the political narrative and developing an effective counter-strategy.

The lack of public discussion and debate ends up ceding the field to extremist voices and reinforcing the divide and rule strategy of those behind the violence. Consider the growing divide not only between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, but also between domestic and international narratives. The standard domestic narrative places primary blame on the Muslim demographic and cultural threat to majority values; the standard international narrative blames rising Buddhist chauvinism unleashed by the political opening. The one area of agreement is that the violence is deep-rooted and intractable. This appears to leave no short term alternative but to impose order by military means while seeking to change entrenched mindsets over the long term.

d. Recommendations to avoid the trap laid by hidden hands

This should not be the only way forward. National and local authorities are responsible for upholding the rule of law and protecting all people equally, regardless of race and religion. In principle, the government has the capacity to address these riots through standard law enforcement. After all, the police show no hesitation arresting peaceful activists. In practice, however, the failure of state action and lack of political will are difficult to overcome - especially given the democratic opposition’s reluctance to challenge the 969 movement and the ruling USDP for fear of being labeled unpatriotic and losing electoral ground.

It is therefore crucial that civil society actors take up this issue, press government to fulfill its duties, reach out to the media, mobilize public opinion, and share strategies. Urgent actions should include developing an early warning system with capacity for rapid response, and mobilizing local networks to document and deter riots as they occur.

"The police can act to crack down on these instigators but they don’t. It’s as simple as that. When we monks spoke up against them during the Saffron Revolution, they crushed us. When more monks rose up in solidarity with the people of Letpadaung, we got firebombed. Whenever an activist speaks up against the government, they are arrested and put on trial. They ultimately wield power in this country. And even though they know exactly who is spearheading the movement spreading hate in our country, they choose not to act."

— Bawa Alinyaoung, monk from Mandalay
Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar

Recommendations to the Myanmar government:

• Publicly condemn hate speech and communal violence against Muslims. In a televised speech shortly after the Mandalay riots, President U Thein Sein warned that “stern action” would be taken against those who incite hatred and violence. But this promising statement has not been followed up. Senior leaders of the executive and legislative branches, including democratic and ethnic parties, should speak out in a clear unified voice against the climate of religious hatred, which threatens long-term damage to the fabric of Myanmar society. As the ultra-nationalist agenda attracts the support of opportunistic politicians seeking short-term electoral gain, it is crucial that this effort be multi-partisan to reflect a common commitment.

• Investigate Wira Thu and the 969 movement. Free speech is protected in both international and domestic law, but inciting violence is a serious crime. Wira Thu personally engaged in anti-Muslim preaching events and social media campaigns just prior to major outbreaks of rioting against Muslim communities in Rakhine state, Meiktila, Lashio, and Mandalay. The close nexus between his speech and ensuing criminal violence in these specific events is prima facie evidence of incitement. Failure to conduct an impartial investigation and take appropriate legal action will further encourage extremists to break the law.

• Provide effective law enforcement to stop mob violence. Police in Myanmar have a well-documented capacity to use force against peaceful activists, yet in Mandalay and elsewhere, they have stood aside and observed as a handful of rioters commit murder and mayhem. These riots can be stopped on the spot though professional law enforcement. The problem is not one of training or capacity but basic political will. The President and Home Affairs Minister should issue clear public orders to all subordinates that effective action to prevent rioting is mandatory and that their careers depend on achieving results.

• Investigate the hidden hands. The masterminds responsible for instigating communal violence operate above the law and work through proxies to ensure plausible deniability. The standard method of uncovering such criminal conspiracies is surveillance and intelligence-gathering by independent law enforcement, and cutting off sources of funding. However, the main agencies with such capacity, military intelligence and special branch police, are themselves subject to undue influence, and may harbor elements directly involved in communal violence. Investigative journalism is another avenue, but presently that practice carries high risk of not only false imprisonment, but threats to physical integrity. Under these circumstances, the government may consider establishing a special law enforcement unit mandated to investigate this sensitive issue, with international support as needed.

"The reason the riots in Mandalay were not out of control like in other cities, even though it is Wira Thu’s base of operations, is because the people and monks here have good principles and know the truth. I have lived in Mandalay for all of my adult life and I can tell you that we do not have a problem between Buddhist and Muslim communities. It is political theatre started by a small group directly aimed at disrupting Myanmar’s move to democracy."

— U Khe Mar Nanda, senior abbot at Maha Wi Thoat Ta Monastery in Mandalay
Recommendations to civil society actors:

• Develop a counter-strategy through meetings and dialogue. Civil society should convene multi-stakeholder discussions with the goal of sharing information and strategies to counter the spread of religious division and violence. Thus far only women’s groups have taken the lead, leaving them vulnerable to threats and intimidation by extremist forces. Participation from a broad range of actors, including pro-democracy activists, Buddhist associations, media leaders, and student groups, would break the atmosphere of fear, and enhance the prospects for strategic cooperation.

• Establish a national network to protect democratic space. While Muslims are the immediate scapegoats of the hidden hands strategy, the broader target is all those seeking to advance a democratic power-sharing agenda. This is too large an issue for any group to address on its own. An effective response therefore requires a shared understanding and broad strategy that pools the resources of many groups and facilitates loose national coordination. This coordination should develop through an ad hoc network that monitors extremist groups to enable a timely response, provides research to expose perpetrators, and develops advocacy positions to press for Government action.

• Support local teams with quick response capacity. The effective response of the Mandalay Peace Committee demonstrates the critical importance of ground-level capacity to anticipate and react quickly to an outbreak of mob violence. Local networks with active communications and information sharing can serve as an early warning system, documenting the facts and reporting in real time to national actors and media outlets. This can not only contain the spread of violence, but also provide practical examples of community-level interfaith cooperation to counter the discourse of division propagated by extremist groups.

"I just want the truth. I want justice. I don’t want an eye for an eye, it is forbidden in our religion [Buddhism]. They’ve arrested four men for my husband’s murder. But I don’t know if they are the real culprits. It has been months since his death and I don’t know anything. The police and courts never gave me any information about the progress of their investigation or trial. I am hearing about the case’s development just like you, from newspapers."

— Ma Nwe Ni Hnin, widow of U Tun Tun
Recommendations to the international community:

- Adopt a balanced approach on a wider range of human rights issues. The spread of human rights violations related to communal conflict in Myanmar is a legitimate cause for global concern. But to avoid falling into the trap set by hidden hands, the international community should eschew one-sided condemnation of Buddhist nationalism and speak out on a broader range of human rights prioritized by popular and democratic forces - for example, land rights and Constitutional reform. Support for government and civil society initiatives to combat communal violence should be given carefully and discreetly to avoid unintentionally compromising or undermining them.
II. Hidden Hands in Myanmar Politics

In Western countries, political analysis that gives credence to the role of hidden hands manipulating current events is dismissed as conspiracy theory - this remains true in the United States even after the revelations of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden exposed the degree to which state policy relies on covert illegal practice. Throughout Asia, however, it is commonly understood that influential figures operate patronage networks outside of official channels, and that political leaders often serve as fronts for the real power brokers. This is especially well known in Myanmar, where unaccountable military regimes headed by secretive dictators ruled for decades, and extensive patronage networks developed around senior military figures. This phenomenon remains under the current political transition, and continues to shape the country’s move towards limited electoral governance.

The persistent influence of hidden hands and crony networks does not negate the extraordinary changes that have transformed Myanmar’s political landscape. The present level of civil and political freedom, particularly in the major cities, was inconceivable only five years ago. However, developing a more democratic culture with a viable institutional framework is a long-term proposition, especially given that previous regimes dismantled all forms of political and social organization outside of the military, and exercised control over all aspects of politics, economy, law, and administration. It will take many years to rebuild the independent institutions necessary to support democratic government based on power sharing and rule of law.

At the same time, the long-term challenges facing Myanmar should not be used as a pretext to delay the reform process. Continued progress depends upon recognizing, and counter-acting, the enduring power of unaccountable forces operating outside the official political system. Such enduring power is not an accident; it was built into the strategy and structure of the former junta’s seven-step roadmap to democracy.

a. Military control through the roadmap to democracy

Developed in 2003 as a comprehensive strategy for maintaining military control over the government, the junta’s carefully planned roadmap has not been subjected to critical scrutiny despite laying out the blueprint and pathway for the current democratic opening. Examining the roadmap and its political context is important to understand the power of hidden hands to stir the cauldron of internal conflict.

While democratic forces inside and outside the country played an important role in pressuring the junta to loosen its grip on absolute power, it cannot be forgotten that it was the junta itself that designed and implemented the political transition. The roadmap was the brainchild of Senior General Than Shwe, who started in the department of psychological warfare and rose through the ranks to rule as dictator for 20 years, and General Khin Nyunt, his prime minister and chief of military intelligence (before being purged). The roadmap can be considered a brilliant piece of political manipulation. In effect, junta leaders designed a safe and lucrative retirement plan. It enabled them to avoid being ousted by successors (the fate of previous military leaders), secure blanket amnesty for past crimes, end the country’s international isolation and sanctions, reduce overdependence on China, and reap the financial benefits of increased trade and investment, all the while maintaining military control over the government.
“Everyone recognizes that the real power behind the government is the military, and behind the military is the former junta leaders. Just because their role is invisible to the public does not mean that they have no influence. That is a misconception that many Western observers have based on how things work in their own countries. Than Shwe and his crony network are like the black holes of Myanmar politics. You cannot see them directly, but you can clearly understand their immense power by observing how objects around them are influenced.”

— U Zaw Oo, policy analyst and Director of Lokha Ahlin

The junta accomplished this by literally dividing itself into two parts, a military power and a political power. Most top generals kept their ranks and uniforms and continued to exercise command and control over the Tatmadaw. Those with a moderate public image, who appeared presentable to domestic and international audiences, switched into civilian clothes and established a political party, the USDP, to exercise command and control over the newly formed government. Whereas previous political incarnations of the junta, such as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), failed to gain either domestic or international legitimacy, the USDP has succeeded as a result of the roadmap’s patient and well-designed step-by-step approach.

The USDP’s political echelon is not monolithic, and has quickly sub-divided into factions aligned to different leaders, including President Thein Sein and Speaker of Parliament Thura Shwe Mann. These factions have different short-term interests and varying degrees of autonomy. These differences will increase over time, as will the divergence between government and military interests. But in general, the military mindset remains deeply entrenched throughout the USDP, and in any case, the Tatmadaw’s leading role in politics is guaranteed under the Constitution.

The crown jewel of the junta’s roadmap was the creation of a new Constitution in 2008 to define and delimit the new body politic, much as a straitjacket defines and delimits a human body. According to Chief Justice Aung Toe, chairman of the drafting commission: “In drafting the constitution, the commission adhered strictly to the six objectives, including giving the Tatmadaw the leading political role in the future state.” Allegedly approved by 92.4% of voters in a referendum held only three weeks after Cyclone Nargis had devastated the country, the Constitution expressly subordinates the government to military control through the creation of “a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system... enabling the Defence Services to participate in the national political leadership role of the State.”

Recognized as “the sole patriotic defence force which is strong, competent, and modern,” the Tatmadaw enjoys complete independence from the government (“the right to independently administer and adjudicate all affairs of the armed forces”). The Commander-in-Chief exercises unilateral authority to appoint the Ministers of Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs, thereby bringing all armed units, including police, under direct military chain of command. He also appoints, without consultation, 25% of the members of both houses of parliament. These MPs do not enjoy the typical perks of political independence; they are serving military officers who can be removed and replaced at the pleasure of the Commander-in-Chief.

Since under Article 436 a super-majority of 75% is needed to amend the Constitution, the guaranteed 25% quota allows the Tatmadaw to fulfill its “main responsibility for safeguarding the Constitution” by locking the supposedly transitional political arrangements into permanent place. Were a unified opposition to win 100% of available seats, they would still be unable to change even the most universally unpopular Constitutional provisions without the consent of at least one military MP, which means, the Commander-in-Chief.
When Aung San Suu Kyi delayed taking oath of office under the 2008 Constitution, she was criticized for being inflexible. Now people understand that the Constitution is a trap. It was presented as part of an interim political transition that could be changed by popular demand, but in reality it maintains the whole political system under strict military control and cannot be amended without their approval. The military is even threatening to charge those who oppose this Constitution through peaceful means as criminals! How can we progress towards the rule of law when the highest law of the land is against the interests of the people?"

— U Aung Thane, lawyer and member of Justice Trust steering committee

Within the restricted space granted to multi-party politics, the roadmap was rolled out in stages to ensure direct military control over government at least through 2015, if not beyond. The first round of national elections was held in 2010 while opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was locked up under house arrest, ensuring that the NLD, the most popular political party, would boycott the elections. This calculated move allowed the USDP to secure 58% of seats in both houses of parliament, to complement the military's 25% quota.

After Suu Kyi's release in 2011, the NLD entered the political arena and swept the 2012 by-elections, winning 43 of 44 seats contested. This landslide victory raised euphoric comparisons to the 1990 elections. However, such comparison is misguided. The crucial difference is that, in 1990, the NLD won almost 80% of parliamentary seats and would have controlled the government had the military not intervened to abolish the results. In 2012, the party won just over 6% of seats, giving it negligible legislative power. Even more important, the new round of national elections in 2010 and 2012 effectively nullified and superseded the results of the 1990 elections, thus accomplishing a longstanding political goal of previous military regimes.

Under the current administration, the USDP and the military completely dominate the executive and legislative branches, constituting the overwhelming majority in all government bodies and committees. Thus, the USDP-led parliament appointed Aung San Suu Kyi to chair the Committee on Rule of Law and Tranquility, and President U Thein Sein appointed her to chair the ad hoc Letpadaung Investigation Committee, but both committees are still dominated by the USDP-military majority.

As an example, the NLD and allies collected over five million signatures in favor of amending the most unpopular Constitutional provisions, including Articles 436 and Articles 59(f), which disqualifies Aung San Suu Kyi from serving as president or vice president. However, the current government is not bound by public opinion; on June 6, 2014, the 31 member Joint Committee to Review the Constitution voted 26-5 against considering changes to Article 59(f).
As their last official act under the roadmap, a handful of top leaders, including Than Shwe, formally retired before the 2010 elections. But it goes without saying that they continue to exercise influence over active military and political bosses, all of whom served faithfully their entire careers under these junta leaders, were hand-picked for their current posts by these junta leaders, and continue to pay regular visits to the private residences of these junta leaders seeking their advice and blessing. Moreover, these junta leaders established the military holding companies (such as Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings - UMEHL) that continue to serve as the primary gateway for foreign (especially Chinese) investment and continue to monopolize the major wealth-generating sectors of the national economy, including gems and metals, oil and gas, and mega-development projects. These companies continue to be operated by the junta’s crony networks. With the value of land and natural resources in Myanmar skyrocketing under the political opening, their wealth and power has only increased.

A number of hardline loyalists to Than Shwe have been officially purged and sidelined in recent years by the more reformist-minded President Thein Sein. These influential figures no longer belong to formal military or government structures. They do not operate from a clear chain of command, but rather share ideology and exercise personal authority over a loose network of individuals and groups bound by common interests. They own significant resources and enjoy impunity by virtue of their powerful status, their influence over key elements in government, military, and intelligence, and the overall weakness of rule of law throughout the country. These are some of the hidden hands believed to be exploiting nationalist passions and instigating anti-Muslim riots as part of a political strategy to limit the democratic transition and maintain their power.

b. Communal violence in Rakhine state

To understand how communal violence has spread across the country, it is important to separate the first explosion of communal violence in Rakhine state, which has deep roots and arose out of genuine historical antagonisms, from subsequent incidents in the rest of the country, which reflect a deliberate strategy of manipulating these tensions in order to inflame populist passions.

The conflict in Rakhine state, one of the least developed regions in Myanmar, involves longstanding grievances between two communities living next to each other geographically yet separated by culture, ethnicity, and language. The ethnic Rakhine, who controlled the territory for centuries until losing sovereignty to Burmese forces in 1785, are Buddhist and comprise almost two-thirds of the overall population. The Muslim population has expanded in recent years to over one million through both natural growth and cross-border immigration from Bangladesh. Some Muslims are recent arrivals and some have lived in Rakhine for many generations; however, all are denied citizenship. As a result they face a host of discriminatory measures and are denied fundamental rights. The only Rakhine Muslims granted citizenship are Kamans, whose ancestors arrived in the region before the British raj, and who are considered an ethnic group under Myanmar’s legal classification.

The two communities have engaged in periodic conflict since World War II, when Muslims sided with the British Empire and Rakhine, Buddhists backed the invading Japanese. In one of the worst incidents of violence, thousands of Buddhists were killed in Maungdaw and Buthitthaung in 1942, and many others driven from their homes. This event is imprinted in the historical consciousness of Rakhine Buddhists and taken as the first evidence of a Muslim plan to set up an autonomous zone. Since then, periodic clashes and massacres on both sides have led to an increasing separation between the two communities, with Muslims concentrated in the northern area bordering Bangladesh. At the same time, most of the conflict in Rakhine state was not communal but rather resulted from the Burmese military’s heavy-handed repression of both Rakhine Buddhist and Muslim independence movements.
"The global media and international human rights reports have only focused on the humanitarian situation of the Rohingyas. Due to the greater number of Muslim victims, the origin of the violence has been generally attributed to widely spread Rakhine xenophobia. The one-sidedness of the representation of the issue has hampered the prospects of a wider conversation about the core issue of Rohingya identity and community formation. From a historical point of view, the "Rohingya" category and been constructed by Muslims in northern Rakhine to legitimize their claims to be recognized as a culturally distinct community with a project of political autonomy.

— Jacques Leider, diplomat and scholar of Rakhine history

The two sides remain bitterly divided not only by competing territorial claims, but also by conflicting historical narratives. Rakhine Muslims stress systematic government discrimination that treats them as stateless interlopers and ignores their continuous presence in the area for many generations. Since 1960, they have increasingly adopted the term Rohingya - once associated with militant groups seeking Muslim autonomy in Northern Rakhine - as an assertion of pride and a common claim on ethnic identity needed to qualify for under the restrictive 1982 Citizenship Act. For their part, Rakhine Buddhists (and most of Myanmar’s population) use the term Bengali and stress the demographic and political threat caused by a recent wave of illegal immigration abetted by corrupt border officials. They view Rakhine state as their historic homeland and feel that their sovereignty is doubly besieged by the political and military dominance of ethnic Burmese (Buddhists) and the encroachment of ethnic Bengalis (Muslims).

Much media reporting and international commentary has cast the Rakhine community as a whole as violent extremists, ignoring the diversity of opinions that exist, the fact that they themselves are a long-oppressed minority, and rarely attempting to understand their perspectives and concerns. This is counter-productive: it promotes a siege mentality on the part of Rakhines and obscures complex realities...

Prior to 2012, many Muslims with the same ethno-linguistic background as the Rohingya declined to identify as such, particularly those in Sittwe and further south. These communities were more socially and economically integrated into Rakhine society than those living in northern Rakhine State, and they were disinclined to highlight their difference by associating with what was seen as an activist political identity. This changed rapidly after 2012, when the violence affected even those who were well integrated.


The important point is that deep divisions over land, resources, and the interpretation of history drive the current conflict; these would remain regardless of religion. However, religious difference has served as the organizing principle enabling the emerging Buddhist chauvinist movement to rally support across the country, and whip up prejudice against the small Muslim minority outside of Rakhine. Uncritical international acceptance of the Rohingya narrative, without appreciating the political and historical context, adds further fuel to the nationalist fire.
The communal conflict in Rakhine state burst onto the political scene in mid-2012 with a series of massacres committed by both sides. The initial spark was supplied by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Muslim men on May 28th. The news spread quickly throughout Rakhine state. In revenge, a Buddhist mob in Taunggoke killed 10 Muslim passengers in a minibus. This led to a wave of violence after Friday prayers on June 8th, as crowds of Muslim worshippers gathered in mobs, killed several Buddhists, and burned entire villages to the ground. This in turn unleashed a frenzy of organized massacres and burning of villages on both sides. By the time the army managed to restore order on June 19th, 192 people had been killed, 8,500 homes destroyed, and more than 100,000 people displaced, according to a comprehensive government survey and report.11

The communal violence in June galvanized an aggressive response by Rakhine nationalist parties, who stepped up anti-Muslim organizing with support from the 969 movement and Buddhist ultra nationalists throughout the country. Just before a second wave of violence, Wira Thu visited Thandwe and areas of southern Rakhine calling for militant action against the Muslim threat. When the riots started on October 21, the situation had morphed into one-sided ethnic cleansing. For several days, thousands of armed Rakhines, including monks, rampaged through Muslim neighborhoods while local authorities did nothing to prevent scores of killings and burning of entire villages. Historically integrated areas like Sittwe and Thandwe were attacked. Kaman Muslims, who are ethnically Rakhine and Myanmar citizens, were also attacked. International groups reported instances where local police actively assisted the Rakhine mobs. This wave of violence resulted in more than 80 deaths and 35,000 displaced.12

c. Spreading hate speech and instigating riots

The events in Rakhine fed into a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment that spread across the country, spearheaded by the 969 movement.13 It is led by Wira Thu, a radical monk who was imprisoned in 2003 for his lead role in inciting a Buddhist mob to kill 10 Muslims in his hometown of Kyaukse. After his release in early 2012, he was appointed head abbot of Masoyein monastery in Mandalay. He soon established the 969 movement, launching a campaign to boycott Muslim businesses and build up Buddhist strength and pride, with the stated goal of protecting Myanmar’s majority race and religion from the threat of Muslim domination.

The 969 movement calls for a Burman14 Buddhist nationalist ideology and espouses taking militant actions against religious, cultural, and territorial encroachment by “foreigners”. All Muslims - comprising up to 10% of Myanmar’s total population of about 60 million - are labeled foreigners, despite many having roots in Myanmar that stretch back generations. The 969 movement’s propaganda depicts Muslim men as sexual predators who prey on Buddhist women, using trickery to marry and convert them as part of a larger Muslim strategy to displace Buddhism as the dominant culture and religion in Myanmar.

As the 969 movement gained a higher profile and attracted mass support, the wave of anti-Muslim violence began to spread to areas of the country that, unlike Rakhine, had no history of communal conflict. These episodes followed a similar recurrent pattern. The common trigger event is an allegation of rape or other honor crime by Muslim perpetrators against Buddhist victims. Once the allegation has been made public, regardless of veracity, it is rapidly spread through 969’s extensive social media network. The 969 movement’s pamphlets and DVDs are also widely distributed throughout Myanmar.
The second common trigger is a public rally to whip up popular anger. These events, which appear designed to spread hatred and incite violence against Muslims, draw passionate crowds supporting the anti-Muslim message. It is noteworthy that almost every major outbreak of communal violence since October 2012 in Rakhine state has been preceded by a 969-sponsored preaching tour in the area, usually by Wira Thu himself. This includes the riots that spread from Meiktila and Lashio to affect Sagaing and Magway divisions as well as Mon and Shan States, devastating Muslim quarters in numerous towns.

Interviews conducted by local lawyers with Justice Trust suggested that violent gangs were being brought into these areas to provoke and instigate the riots. In Meiktila, where Buddhist mobs committed especially savage acts of violence, including hunting down and murdering schoolchildren, several witnesses reported seeing armed men arriving in minibuses. However, Justice Trust was not able to confirm this information with sufficient confidence, primarily because enough local residents participated in the violence that it was not possible to separate and identify outside instigators. Video of the Meiktila riots shows large crowds cheering as Muslims are attacked and their neighborhoods set ablaze. Wira Thu described the carnage at Meiktila as “a show of strength.”

The 969 movement is well funded and well organized, and enjoys support in the senior ranks of the government and military. Even those who oppose the racist propaganda are cowed into silence by 969’s grassroots popularity, which derives partly from the high esteem in which monks are held by Burmese Buddhists. As a result, Wira Thu and other 969 leaders are able to travel and deliver anti-Muslim messages freely throughout the country, despite being directly linked to the incitement of specific acts of criminal violence. In fact, the government has provided an enabling environment for 969 to openly preach communal hatred, while at the same time forcefully cracking down on activists working to protect human rights. The 969 movement has been given free rein by authorities to hold provocative rallies and spread divisions between religious and ethnic communities, whereas police routinely deny permits to civil society groups seeking to peacefully express their political opinions.

A favored tactic of the 969 movement is to intimidate and disrupt public events that feature interfaith cooperation, especially cultural events in which Buddhists and Muslims share the stage. A warning on Facebook with the threat of mob protest behind it is usually sufficient to achieve their goal. For example the 969 movement succeeded to remove “Open Sky” from the first Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival competition through a social media campaign threatening violence against the organizers, filmmakers, and the cinema, along with behind the scenes interventions by powerful politicians. The film documented the friendship between a Buddhist woman and a Muslim woman in Meiktila following the riots. It was deemed too sympathetic to the plight of Muslims. Similarly, the 969 movement disrupted a February 2014 literary event in Yangon for featuring Muslim speakers and raising the issue of hate speech.

"It is ridiculous that women’s bodies are used as a bargaining tool and political instrument in Myanmar’s current climate. Every time an alleged rape can serve a larger political agenda, an extremist movement exploits it fully to incite violence and oppress minorities. They may paint it as protecting “our women” or demanding justice, but they are very selective and self-serving. The reality is that there is widespread sexual violence perpetrated against women with impunity and little uproar from these groups."

— Zin Mar Aung, former political prisoner and women’s rights activist
Myanmar’s Constitution states: “Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion...” Although the 969 movement’s anti-Muslim campaigns and Wira Thu’s speaking tours directly challenge this right, and President Thein Sein has warned that “stern legal action” will be brought against those inciting hatred and violence, authorities have taken no concrete measures to limit or challenge the 969 movement’s aggressive actions - not even a public statement, let alone a criminal investigation.

On the contrary, authorities are working closely with religious ultra nationalists. The 969 movement is part of the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion (Ma Ba Tha). The government of Myanmar has cooperated with Ma Ba Tha’s recent efforts by drafting the Race and Religion Protection Law (Myo Saunt Upaday). If this draft legislation is enacted, it will limit the fundamental freedoms of all women in Myanmar, as well as Muslims and other minorities.

d. 969’s attack on women’s rights in the “race protection” law

One of the biggest impact of the 969 movement has been as part of Ma Ba Tha, which pushed the government to draft a set of laws that will erode the fundamental rights of minorities and women. The Myo Saunt U Pa Deh refers to a set of restrictive laws on inter-faith marriage, religious conversions, polygamy and family planning. And while on its face the language is neutral regarding religion and gender, activists have little doubt that the law is specifically aimed at preventing Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.

"Women are very much second-class citizens in Myanmar and yet instead of finding ways to empower and advance women’s rights using rule of law, the government of Myanmar does the opposite: it enact laws that take away our rights. I think it is telling of where their priorities are when a much needed comprehensive law on violence against women has yet to be drafted, but Myo Saunt U Pa Deh, which will having irreparable lasting effects on the minorities and women in Myanmar manages to be drafted so quickly."

— Zin Mar Aung, former political prisoner, political and women’s rights activist

Wira Thu has been quoted in the media saying that Myo Saunt U Pa Deh is needed because “Muslims are breeding so fast and they are stealing our women, raping them”. And while President Thein Sein has spoken out against hate speech, claiming, “severe action will be taken against those who intentionally spread hate speech”, the government has never taken action against Wira Thu or the 969 movement for well-documented hate speech. In fact, President Thein Sein and the speaker of the national assembly, Thura Shwe Mann endorsed the controversial Myo Saunt U Pa Deh, instructing ministries and departments to convert the Ma Ba Tha’s proposals into government-endorsed bills.

The draft law on religious conversions was released in May 2014 for public review. Under the draft law, any Burmese citizen who plans to change religion must seek a series of permissions from local representatives of government departments, including the Ministries of Religion, Education, Immigration and Population, and Department of Women’s Affairs, and wait 90 days for permission to be granted. Women’s groups have pointed out that the law confers enormous power to local government officials. The government argues that Myo Saunt U Pa Deh is gender neutral, but the fact that the Department of Women’s Affairs, a governmental organization, is listed as an approval body indicates that the proposed laws will restrict only women’s freedom to marry.
"What is most offensive about the Myo Saunt U Pa Deb is that it infringes on our fundamental rights as guaranteed under international law. Burma has obligations to uphold the rights to freedom of religion, conscience, and expression under international law. The proposed restrictions on conversion, is against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and women’s rights under Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Myanmar has signed. And it is not just international law violation because Myo Saunt U Pa Deh infringes rights guaranteed under Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution. Article 34 provides that citizens may ‘freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health,’ and article 348 ensures that the state ‘shall not discriminate against any citizen ... based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth’. So requiring government approval to change one’s faith and marry a spouse of a different faith definitely infringes on Myanmar citizen’s right to freedom of religion and is discriminatory towards minorities and women."

— Thin Thin Aung, journalist and women’s rights activist

Women’s rights groups have vocal in their criticism. Over 100 groups and community organizations signed a joint petition to the government decrying Myo Saunt U Pa Deh. These women’s rights activists and other opponents of the inter-faith marriage bill have been derided by Wira Thu as “race traitors” akin to “lice that live under the skin,” and have received death threats via anonymous phone calls and online messages. Activists have approached authorities to take action against those threatening them. They presented taped evidence of threatening calls and texts but there have been no investigations and not a single charge has been laid those responsible.

Figure 1: Texts from the 969 movement against women’s rights activists opposing Myo Saunt U Pa Deb

Translation of Figure 1:

Sluts like you deserve to be kalar wives and have female genital mutilation performed on you. You deserve to live under sharia law. — message to Htar Htar, women’s rights activist

If you dare come to Mandalay, you will be dead when we see you. — message to Khon Ja, women’s rights activist

The kalars are bad but what is worse is race traitor whores like you. Mark our words, we will kill those who work to destroy the race. — message to Zin Mar Aung, women’s rights activist
III. Mandalay Riots

a. Brief overview of the Mandalay riots

On June 30, Wira Thu, the controversial leader of the 969 movement, posted on Facebook a report that two Muslim brothers had raped their Buddhist maid, Ma Soe Soe. Although the alleged victim later confessed to fabricating the story at the behest of a local criminal, the false rape rumor served as an effective pretext and trigger for unleashing the violence.

The next evening, a roving gang of 25-30 young men armed with sticks and knives rampaged through Muslim neighborhoods, damaging vehicles, homes and mosques. According to corroborated eyewitness reports, they were outsiders, unfamiliar with local landmarks, appeared visibly drunk, and shouted anti-Muslim slogans while moving in a group from one location to the next. Hundreds of well-armed police in full riot gear arrived at the scene even before the rioters did, and yet stood by and watched the violence unfold for hours over two days without intervening or making a single arrest.

The rioters tried to recruit local support, spreading false rumors that Muslims had attacked Buddhists, visiting two prominent monasteries, and appealing - without success - for resident monks to join the fight. They left after being confronted by senior abbots. By the morning of July 3rd, when the mayhem was finally over, U Tun Tun, a Buddhist, and U Soe Min Htwe, a Muslim, had been murdered, and scores of properties damaged.

Despite imposing a city-wide curfew, local authorities allowed U Tun Tun's funeral on July 4th to be turned into a public spectacle. Residents could not recall the last time a funeral was permitted to circle the old city along Mandalay's historic moat. Grisly pictures of his body were circulated amongst the crowd, as speakers called for revenge. Police stood by as angry mourners invaded a nearby cemetery and vandalized Muslim graves.

In the following weeks, police conducted a shambolic investigation, failing to interview key witnesses, meeting only once with the families of the murder victims, and detaining scores of the usual suspects. None of the lawyers interviewed by Justice Trust had any confidence that the men arrested and eventually convicted were actually guilty of committing the crimes of which they were accused.

On December 31, 2014, 11 Muslim men were convicted of murdering U Tun Tun and sentenced to 10-13 years imprisonment with hard labor. On October 15, 2014, four Buddhist men were convicted of murdering Soe Min Htwe and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment with hard labor. On February 25, 2015, 15 Buddhist men were sentenced to one to two years for vandalizing Muslim graves during the funeral procession.

b. Testimonies from witnesses

The Mandalay riots followed what has become a familiar script from previous outbreaks of violence. This section provides witness accounts for each of these five elements:

1. Misuse of social media by extremist forces to spread rumors of rape or other honor crimes committed by Muslim men against Buddhist women.
2. Riots carried out by violent gangs - rumored to be outsiders - who blame Muslims for starting the conflict and incite locals to revenge.
3. Failure of law enforcement to take timely preventive or protective measures despite police deployment at the scene.
4. Failure of legal process to credibly investigate and punish perpetrators, deepening community mistrust of the justice system and fueling the cycle of impunity.
5. Timing of riots to divert attention and momentum from popular demands for justice and democracy.
1. Misuse of social media

The majority of the riots, including the first clash in Rakhine State in June 2012, have been precipitated by an allegation of rape of a Buddhist woman by Muslims. In the case of Mandalay, the riots were triggered by a false charge that two Muslim brothers, U San Maung and U Nay Win, owners of Mandalay’s Sun Cafe teashop, had raped their Buddhist maid Phyru Phyru Min, also known as Ma Soe Soe.

Figure 2: Taken from a Facebook post of the alleged victim and her rapists

Translation of Figure 2:

Sun Cafe owners
Left: San Maung, age (44), father - U Maung Maung
Right: Nay Win, age (45), father - U Maung Maung

Reporter of alleged rape
Ma Phyru Phyru Min (aka) Ga Done Ma, age (30), father - U Aung Min

Facebook is extremely popular in Myanmar and is the primary platform used to engage people. Wira Thu posted about Ma Soe Soe's alleged rape on Facebook a day before the riots took place. The post included information about the owners of the Sun Café and its location, and called on people to hold the perpetrators accountable. Below is a screen shot of the Facebook post before it was later redacted by Wira Thu.
Figure 3: A Facebook post by Wira Thu sharing Thit Htoo Lwin’s story on alleged rape of Phyu Phyu Min

Translation of Figure 3:

Facebook post title: Two Muslim brothers, owners of Sun Cafe, rape their Buddhist worker

Figure 4: Facebook post by Wira Thu about Mandalay riots posted July 3, 2014

Translation of Figure 4:

Soe Soe on June 28, 2014 at the hands of Sun Cafe owners Nay Win and San Maung is not just a criminal offence but an offence aimed at instigating violence in our country. The July 1 and 2 incidents in Mandalay are not a clash of religions nor race but a Jihad. They are gathering in mosques in Mandalay under the guise of Ramadan but in reality they are recruiting and preparing for Jihad against us. The government of Myanmar must deal with these Islamic extremists and raid all suspicious mosques and homes. All Burmans must be ready and not falls into these Muslims' traps. A warning to overseas Burmans to safeguard their homes and lives against extremist Muslims.

Posts like the above are often paired with call to extrajudicial action on part of Burmans to demand justice on behalf of the victim. A day after Wira Thu’s post on Phyu Phyu Min’s allegation of rape was published, a gang of 25-30 men armed with knives and sticks appeared in the Muslim neighborhood where the Sun Cafe is located, and started to riot.
2. Riots by outside agitators

The attack on Chan Aye Thar Zan township, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, escalated with rioters attacking shops and mosques, hurling stones at residences, and setting buildings and vehicles ablaze. Numerous injuries are reported after the first night of rioting but there were no reported fatalities. However, the second night of violence on July 2nd resulted in two deaths: U Tun Tun and U Soe Min Htwe.

U Tun Tun, a 36 year-old mechanic and part-time volunteer for a local charity Shwe Kyeh Zee was killed around midnight on July 2. U Tun Tun is survived by his wife of fourteen years Ma Nwe Ni Hnin and their three children ages 11, 8, and 4 years old. Ma Nwe Ni Hnin describes U Tun Tun as the main provider for the family and a good father and husband.

Ko Htwe (Ko Tun Tun’s friend and eyewitness to his murder) in his interview stated that the two of them were on motorbike heading to 84th street around midnight. Ko Tun Tun was driving and they had spent their evening transporting injured people to the hospitals when they came across a mob of approximately 25-30 men. The men had knives and sticks and demanded them to hand over their money and phones. Ko Tun Tun and Ko Htwe did as they were instructed. Shortly after Ko Tun Tun was struck in the neck with a long knife causing the bike and Ko Htwe to fall to the ground.

Ko Htwe describes being beaten with sticks and almost struck with the long knife. He grabbed it, cutting his hand, and was able to wrangle a stick away from one of his attackers with the other hand. He then fought his way out and ran to the nearest main street. He came across a group of people on 35th Street who accompanied him back to where Ko Tun Tun was. They arrived ten minutes later to find him dead and the motorbike gone along with their attackers.
U Soe Min Htwe, a 49 years old local businessman and community activists was killed around 4am on July 2. He was born in Mandalay and lived there all his life. He owns a repair shop. His is survived by his wife Margaret and their two daughters ages 12 and 10.

Members of the Mandalay Muslim community and friends of U Soe Min Htwe described him as a generous person who had dedicated his life to helping others. He was one of the founding members of a multi faith organization: Mandalay Barthar Paung Zone Gayunah Shin Abwya. The organization was set up to assist people affected by Cyclone Nargis. U Soe Min Htwe contributed not only financially to the organization, but allowed people in dire need to stay with him and his family. Many interviewed said that he was saddened by the anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar, but that they also made him determined to discourage extremism and retaliations within the Muslim community.

According to his wife, the riots in Mandalay kept U Soe Min Htwe up until 2am calling friends and community members. He ate his pre-fast meal around 3:30am and left his house around 4am to go to the mosque, when he came across a mob of approximately 40 men on motorbikes. He was struck with a long knife and beaten with sticks. According to the family, the morgue logged his death as an accident instead of murder. The body was released to the family around 1pm; they gave him a proper Muslim funeral that same day.

Almost everyone interviewed described the roving mob responsible for the death and destruction in Mandalay as comprised of men from outside Mandalay. Many witnesses reported that they actively tried to recruit monks and community members from Mandalay employing a variety of appeals and misinformation tactics.

Interviews with senior abbots at two of Mandalay’s prestigious monasteries show that the rioters visited one after the other on the first night, trying unsuccessfullly to recruit monks to join their fight.

A crowd of about 30 men came to our monastery around 12:30 a.m. on the first night of the riots. They parked their motorbikes and said, ‘we have seen monks being killed by Muslims and we saw Buddhists being dragged into mosques, you have to come and join us to fight the kalars’. They had knives and sticks and their shouting frightened our young monks who ran into the main building. I went down with 10-15 senior monks to meet with the mob I noticed the men were quite drunk and out of control. In fact, only one managed to use the proper term to address monks. I told them they needed to leave as they were disrupting our peace and frightening the children. They stayed for another thirty minutes or so and then left around 1 a.m. when they realize no one from our Monastery were coming with them.

— U Dama, senior abbot of Moe Khaung Monastery
On the first night of the riots I was woken up around 7 a.m. by the sound of motorbikes in the monastery and people yelling, “Help us Sayadaws, the kalars are killing us Buddhists and we must do something!” I went out to take a closer look and saw there were about 25-30 men all very drunk, loud and aggressive. They were trying to recruit monks from my monastery to join them. I ordered all the monks (716) under my charge to not leave the premises. I informed the mob, “we will not be coming along so don’t waste your time here; you all should leave.” The men were definitely not from Mandalay because I overheard some of them asking each other if the monastery was Maha Wi Thoat Ta[6].

I saw among them a few people dressed as monks but they are not “real” monks as they were drunk and brandishing knives and sticks. I don’t want the world to think that Buddhist monks are violent, because they are not. None of the religious actors in Mandalay believed what they were saying nor did they participate. And the ones that are doing harm are not true Buddhists. Wira Thu and 969 represent a tiny minority with a lot of money, with ties to powerful people power that is doing a lot of harm to not just our country but also Buddhism. The reason the riots in Mandalay were not out of control like in other cities, even though it is Wira Thu’s base of operations, is because the people and monks here have good principles and knows the truth. I have lived in Mandalay for all of my adult life and I can tell you we do not have a problem between Buddhist and Muslim communities. It is political theatre started by a small group aimed at directly disrupting Myanmar’s move to democracy.

— U Khe Mar Nanda, senior abbot of Maha Wi Thoat Ta Monastery

I can see why they were trying to get monks out on the streets. Having monks on the street would give them legitimacy and also help encourage people of Mandalay to join the riots. Good thing our monks and people didn’t join them or else our city would have been in ashes.

— U Thein Tan, a journalist and former political prisoner from Mandalay

The reason the riots in Mandalay were not out of control like in other cities, even though it is Wira Thu’s base of operations, is because the people and monks here have good principles and know the truth. I have lived in Mandalay for all of my adult life and I can tell you that we do not have a problem between Buddhist and Muslim communities. It is political theatre started by a small group directly aimed at disrupting Myanmar’s move to democracy.

— U Khe Mar Nanda, senior abbot at Maha Wi Thoat Ta Monastery in Mandalay

I overheard one driver say to the rest of the motorbikes ‘Let’s head to 84-85 Street’ only to then drive off in the opposite direction of where he needed to go! That’s how I know they’re not from here.

— Nyi Nyi Kyaw, a former 88 student activist from Mandalay
I saw two groups come through my neighborhood that second night. What stood out for me were two things: one, I’ve never seen them before and two, they all had these red bands on their wrists and arms. I don’t know if it is to identify themselves to each other or something... but it was bizarre.

— Win Myint Htun, a community activist for Metta Campaign in Mandalay

Respondents from the Muslim community also revealed that unknown people tried similar tactics to provoke them into anger and trick them into joining the riots.

Some of our brothers who were praying in our mosque heard people coming through our saying that a mosque in the next township had been attacked by the Buddhists and that our people were getting killed. We didn’t recognize them or know who they were so we phoned our brothers instead. They told us they were fine. This sort of misinformation is so dangerous. Imagine if someone in our community had believed it and reacted violently the next time they came across someone they viewed as an aggressive oppressor?

— U Thant, a Muslim community elder from Mandalay

These accounts were not the only examples of what seems to be a coordinated strategy of misinformation aimed at inciting violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities. After two days of rioting in Mandalay, another victim of rape came forward. This time the alleged victim, Hay Mar Kyaw, was a young Muslim woman who accused a Buddhist court clerk Tin Maung Win. On the surface, Hay Mar Kyaw and Phyu Phyu Min’s cases appear to be unrelated, but a police investigation later revealed that the two women had both fabricated the rape allegations at the behest of the same man, and that their cases were strategically used to incite riots in Mandalay. Both women fled to Thailand together and were arrested at Mae Sot and returned to Mandalay.

Shortly after Hay Mar Kyaw’s case came to light, I saw two Muslim men that I have never seen before in my neighborhood speaking to others. I overheard them saying: “We need to retaliate against these Buddhists. Look what they did to us in Rakhine, Meiktila, and now here in Mandalay over the rape of their Buddhist women! We have poor Hay Mar Kyaw, a 17 year old girl whose life is going to be ruined because of some 50 year old corrupt court clerk raped her. Imagine if she was Buddhist, what would they do to us!” They were trying to incite us to anger. People ignored them and I minded my own business, so they eventually left.

— An anonymous Muslim community member

3. Failure of law enforcement

A common theme that emerged from the riots in Meiktila, Lashio, and now Mandalay is that local authorities were unable to stop rioters or maintain order despite a significant police presence. There are reports that in some cases the police even helped facilitated human rights violations.

Families and friends of both U Tun Tun and U Soe Min Htwe are at a loss as to why their loved ones’ death could not have been prevented given that they were both killed within a block of police stations. Eyewitnesses interviewed by Justice Trust were highly critical of the authorities and their actions leading up to, during, and after the riots. A journalist who witnessed the entire course of the first night believed that police presence further added tension rather than maintaining order and enforcing the law.
I had received news of instability in the area so I went to Sun Café after 6pm on July 1. I was there from the very beginning and saw how everything developed. I was tipped off by a source that the police were in the area and were expecting trouble, but when I got to Sun Café, everything was quiet. The police shortly after my arrival told the Sun Café manager to close up her business. She was unhappy as it was Ramadan and she gets the most business in the evening when people break their fast.

Her anger was understandable and her reaction drew the attention of some passers-by. But what really drew people’s attention was that soon after, officers in full riot gears entered from the opposite side of the street where Nay Café was. The police presence drew a large crowd and people began to gather to look at what was happening. I asked one of the officers why they were there and he said that they had heard the owner of Sun Café and alleged rapist was praying in the nearby mosque, so they were waiting to arrest him. But the police never went in to the mosque at any time. Instead they stood guard outside creating a spectacle.

The police also decided to block off traffic on 82nd and 26th Street, a main road, which created a bottleneck and diverted more people towards the Sun Café area. They said they were offering protection but their presence served to frighten the neighborhood and added tension. I was there at 10pm when I saw a group of maybe 25 people show up on motorbikes, yelling, singing national anthem, throwing stones and damaging parked cars. The violence was not targeted: they were indiscriminately destroying whatever they could. By then there were 200 or so riot police within view down the street. They could not have been more than 10 meters away, doing nothing as these rioters went on a rampage. It was just one roving band of 25 guys and if the police had just arrested them, everything would have been over. I still can’t believe the mob was allowed to continue what they were doing.

— Mindin, a journalist and Editor in Chief of Mandalay Khit Journal

Many Mandalay residents expressed shock and dismay over the fact that the authorities did not intervene as the violent gang went through the city on motorcycles destroying properties and trying to instigate violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities.

The police can act to crack down on these instigators but they don’t. It is as simple as that. When we monks, spoke up against them during the Saffron Revolution, they crushed us. When more monks rose up in solidarity with the people of Letpadaung (in 2012), we got firebombed. Whenever an activist speaks up against the government, they are arrested and put on trial. They ultimately wield power in this country. And even though they know exactly who is spearheading the movement spreading hate in our country but they don’t act.

— Bawa Alinyaoung, monk from Mandalay
Do you not find it strange that there are some 30 rioters going around Mandalay destroying things and killing people and there were several hundred police officers out there on the streets during the riots. How is it that these hundred something officers cannot arrest a handful of troublemakers? My own assessment is that if police had bothered to arrest these few instigators on the first night of the riots, we would have avoided the second night altogether and two people from Mandalay wouldn’t have lost their lives.

— U Dama, senior abbot of Moe Khaung Monastery

The government has all the power. They determine all things in Myanmar. The law is in their hands and in their mouth. If they really want peace it is easy. During the riots, there were 30 people driving around on motorbikes armed with knives and sticks. A block away there are several hundred armed police officers. Why can’t they deal with this? What is the point of having a police force if they can’t deal with this?

I saw the township administrator, district administrator and Mandalay regional director for religious affairs. All three were there observing the mob at Maha Wi Thoat Ta Monastery but they didn’t do anything. I told the head of Mandalay Division after the first night of the riots to do something. He assured me that he would order all police to maintain order and confront future rioters. But when I inquired with a few police officers I knew if such an order had been issued, they said no.

— U Khe Mar Nanda, senior abbot of Maha Wi Thoat Ta Monastery

U Khe Mar Nanda also believes that local authorities mishandled U Tun Tun’s funeral procession after the riots, causing the desecration of Muslim graves:

The authorities should never have allowed that funeral procession to go around the entirety of the Mandalay moat. Two nights of rioting had already taken place and a 144 curfew was already issued. The funeral truck bearing grisly images of U Tun Tun was paraded around for all to see and a large crowd was allowed to follow its route. I have never seen this sort of treatment (a funeral parade around the entire moat) even for national heroes from Mandalay. This sort of procession can’t happen without the blessing of the authorities, so they must have permitted it for whatever reason. And when the people from the funeral went out of control and destroyed other’s sacred graves, the police stood by and yet again did nothing.
4. Failure of legal process

After failing to detain any suspects despite observing the riots from a close distance, the Mandalay Divisional Police Force announced, a few days after calm had returned to the city, that 56 people had been arrested on various charges, 36 others suspected of riot involvement remained at large, and 1,400 people faced legal action for violating the curfew.

Police detained suspects, prosecutors argued the cases, and courts convicted suspects for both murders, as well as for property destruction. On December 31, 2014, 11 Muslim men were convicted of murdering U Tun Tun and sentenced to 10-13 years imprisonment with hard labor. On October 15, 2014, four Buddhist men were convicted of murdering U Soe Min Htwe and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment with hard labor. On February 25, 2015, 15 Buddhist men were sentenced to one to two years for vandalizing Muslim graves during the funeral procession.

But those arrests, trials, and convictions have failed to convince many in Mandalay that justice was done. On the contrary, families of the deceased and lawyers involved in the various cases uniformly expressed grave concerns over the lack of information and evidence throughout the judicial process. They were concerned that the real culprits remained at large, whereas innocent people were being swept up by the justice system in order to demonstrate to the public that some action was being taken. However, these actions only deepened people’s doubts about the lack of rule of law.

I just want the truth. I want justice. I don’t want eye for an eye, it is forbidden in our religion [Buddhism]. They’ve arrested four men for my husband’s murder. But I don’t know if they are the real culprits. It has been a month since his death and I don’t know anything! The police and courts never gave me any information about the progress of their investigation or trial. I am hearing about the case’s development just like you, via newspapers and journals. I am constantly fearful for my safety and my children’s and ever since I lost Ko Tun Tun, I don’t know whom to turn to. I can’t exactly turn to the authorities or the monks who are using my husband’s death for their cause either. I just know I don’t want to suffer anymore and I want to be at peace.

— Ma Nwe Ni Hnin, widow of U Tun Tun, deceased Buddhist victim

I’ve opened a police file on my husband’s murder on July 8. The police said that they are investigating and will let us know soon but that was the first and last time we saw them. I believe there was only one eyewitness to Ko Soe Min Htwe’s murder. His name is U Myo Thein and he’s a security guard at a store. The police worked with him directly and we didn’t get any information about the investigation or how they found 4 of the 1 men allegedly responsible. I was asked to appear in court so I went with two male relatives and we spoke about my husband and the night of his murder. At this stage, I don’t really know when the trials will be over and how the case will progress.

— Ma Margaret, widow of U Soe Min Htwe, deceased Muslim victim
The real tragedy in all this is that we’ve got two families who’ve lost their loved ones. Five children who will never grow up with their fathers and hundred more people from Mandalay who have been arrested on charges relating to 144 curfew violations and alleged murder of U Tun Tun and U Soe Min Htwe. I am in court defending many young men (majority of them Muslims with some Buddhist) simply because the authorities said they violated curfew or were somehow deemed to have been part of the riots. Everyone in Mandalay knows the truth: the riots were instigated and carried out by people who are not from Mandalay And yet how is it that it is our community members who must pay the ultimate price of being rounded up to face charges and trials?

— Yweh Nu Aung, lawyer from Mandalay

These riots reveal just how much rule of law is lacking in Myanmar. In other countries, when an allegation of rape emerges, the authorities take the necessary actions to investigate and prosecute the wrongdoer. But here after decades of a failed criminal justice system, people have very little faith in the law. Rape is a crime under the law and should be addressed in a judicial arena. Instead it becomes an extrajudicial matter for the ultra nationalist movement to exploit and champion. No matter how many people the authorities charge and claim were responsible for the riots or the number of sham trials they hold, at the end of the day, justice and rule of law have yet to arrive in Myanmar.

— Robert San Aung, lawyer from Yangon
5. Diversion from democracy

Civil society groups and political activists in Myanmar have long held that the riots are not primarily about race or religion, but rather, are strategically coordinated and deliberately planned by hardline military elements to sow fear and division, and distract public attention during the political transition.

For people who don’t know the true history of Myanmar, these riots may seem to have sprouted out from nowhere. But for those of us who have lived through the different regimes, we can see their fingerprints all over it. Myanmar’s history is littered with these kinds of incidents. It is good to distract the public because it keeps them from thinking about the real, important problems facing our country at this juncture. If you’re busy thinking about the so-called Muslim threat in Myanmar, you probably won’t be worried about the widespread land grabs taking place, resource extractions by multi-national corporations, the upcoming 2015 elections and much needed reforms to the Constitution.

This isn’t the first time a minority group has been demonized and scapegoated. Back in the 70s when there was a rice shortage due to government mismanagement and people’s anger towards the authorities was at an all time high, they created the Chinese-Burmese riots. Then during the 1988 uprising, they tried to incite similar Muslim-Buddhist (Kalar-Bama Ayehkhn) riots but people didn’t forget who the real enemy was so they didn’t succeed. It is important to teach peace to our children so that they don’t fall prey to extremism.

I know in my heart of hearts that real monks, true Buddhists are not part of this movement calling for violence and oppression of us Muslims and our way of life. To this day, I believe that this is not a Buddhist vs. Muslim battle. The rocks of racial and religious tension may land in our homes but we must critically think and see the hidden hand that is throwing these rocks and the political reasons behind it. One simply needs to look at the timing of the riots to see how they fit in distracting people from the larger picture. Prior to the Rohingya concern in Rakhine State, the communities there were focused on protesting against Shwe Gas Pipeline. Nowadays, the pipeline is barely on people’s radar in Rakhine State. And I don’t think it is a coincidence that Meiktila and Lashio occurred just when people’s focus was on demanding accountability for Letpadaung and firebombing of monks was reaching a fever pitch.

He is not the only one who has looked at the timing of the riots as evidence of political motivations. The Mandalay riots unfolded amid a nationwide signature campaign for constitutional reform organized by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. The riots occurred just days before the NLD was set to announce the preliminary results in Mandalay, causing many people from Mandalay, including Thein Than Oo, that the violence was a political ploy to distract public interest from the NLD campaign:
The riots were probably planned in time just as NLD was about to hold a major signature collecting event. It was scheduled for July 2-3 with Daw Suu herself attending. But with the outbreak of the riot, they’ve been cancelled. The riots have definitely had a negative impact on this campaign. These days, the forces behind the scenes have made religion such a sensitive issue in Myanmar, so by creating the riots, you kill two birds with one stone: distract the country from constitutional amendments that would allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to potentially become the country’s next president in the 2015 elections.

I have no doubt that these riots will increase in frequency in the lead up to the 2015 elections, if the 2015 elections even take place. They’ve already managed to cancel the 2014 by-elections so who can say more riots and instability wouldn’t be sufficient grounds to postpone national elections?

The most dangerous effect of the riots is that I’ve already heard on a few occasions, people discussing whether a return to military rule would be best to maintain order in Myanmar. Anyway you look at it, these riots are a good thing for hardline military elements that wish to remain in power. Myanmar’s transition into democracy is not in their interest. It is just a tragedy that they would use violence, killings, and riots to further their goals.

— U Thein Than Oo, lawyer from Mandalay, member of Justice Trust steering committee

The people of Burma are like ants in a glass of water. We are trying our best to climb out of the glass and slowly making our way up the spoon to democracy. But every time we are nearing our destination or are close, the spoon swirls, new problems emerge to disorient us and we fall back down into the same liquid that’s drowning us. One turn of the spoon and here comes Rakhine State and its so-called Rohingya problem; another turn of the spoon, it’s Letpadaung and fire bombing of monks and civilian protestors; one more swirl we’ve got more riots in Meiktila and Lashio. Now that hand is at work yet again for Mandalay.

— U Zarni, former political prisoner and democracy activist

Civil society groups and political activists in Myanmar are not alone in their assessment of forces manipulating the riots to achieve their political goals. Even President Thein Sein has alluded to an unseen group working to incite violence and riots in Myanmar. In his nationally televised speech on July 7, 2014, he stated that the riots in Mandalay were not the handiwork of people in Mandalay but rather “the intentional and deliberate acts of a group or organization.”

The challenge facing Myanmar society is to act on the clear evidence that hidden hands are fomenting violence in order to derail progress towards democracy. Implementing the recommended actions set forth in the Executive Summary for the government, civil society, and the international community would contribute to overcoming the agenda of the hidden hands, and ensuring that the country’s transition to greater power-sharing is allowed to continue.
Endnotes

1. The Mandalay Peace Committee is a grassroots multi-faith organization with 23 members, including former political prisoners, community organizers, environmentalists, journalists and lawyers. It was established at the outset of the riots in an effort to maintain order and prevent violence from spreading across the city. It remains active in order to be able to respond to any future episodes.


1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996.
2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system.
3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with basic principles and detailed basic principles laid down by the National Convention.
4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum.
5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution.
6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution.
7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw.


8. "The Lady’s Losing Game," Mizzima, 26 June 2014


13. The movement is named after the three numbers symbolizing the virtues of Buddhism. Buddha has nine special attributes. There are said to be six special attributes to Buddhist teachings, and Buddhist monks, too, possess nine special attributes.

14. The dominant ethnic group making up approximately 2/3 of Myanmar’s population and many Burmans are practicing Buddhists. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith nation.


20. President Thein Sein’s television address aired on July 7, 2014.

21. This law consists of 4 parts: anti-interfaith marriage law, anti-conversion law, population control law and law against polygamy.


24. The poster had hacked her Facebook account and posted the message along with grisly images of female genital mutilation was posted on her wall for all to see.


26. According to the abbot, the monastery he oversees is one of the most well known monasteries in all of Mandalay. It has a historical significance and has served as a gathering point for numerous political gatherings and movements.


34. A joint venture between Beijing’s state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Burma’s national petroleum company Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise to transport oil purchased in the Middle East to China.

This policy report documents the use of organized gangs of armed men to commit anti-Muslim riots under the guise of spontaneous mob violence.

Drawing on six months of research by a team of local and international lawyers, the report analyzes the riots that shook Mandalay in July 2014 - the latest in a series of communal attacks across the country - and places these riots in the context of previous waves of communal conflict carried out under past military regimes.

The report’s analysis of major outbreaks of communal violence reveals a common underlying pattern with a five-step sequence of events:

1. Misuse of social media by extremist forces to publicize allegations of rape or other honor crimes committed by Muslim men against Buddhist women.
2. Riots carried out by violent gangs - rumored to be outsiders - who incite locals to take revenge.
3. Failure of law enforcement to take timely preventive or protective measures despite police deployment at the scene.
4. Failure of the legal process to credibly investigate and punish perpetrators, deepening community mistrust of the justice system and fueling the cycle of impunity.
5. Suspicious timing of the riots to divert attention and momentum from popular demands for democracy.

The Mandalay riots followed each element of this pattern. The stage-managed nature of the riots was exposed when local people refused to join with the armed gang of outside instigators, depriving them of the protective cover of a sympathetic crowd. The case of Mandalay therefore provides clear visible evidence of a deliberate strategy to foment anti-Muslim violence.

Unfortunately, the hidden hands strategy has thus far succeeded - widening communal divisions, fostering national insecurity that threatens upcoming elections, and undermining Myanmar’s political reforms.

Justice Trust calls on the Government of Myanmar to fulfill its duties to uphold the rule of law and protect all people equally, regardless of race or religion.