

The Rise of Anti-Muslim Hate Speech Shortly Before the Outbreaks of Mass Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar

Ye Myint Win (Nickey Diamond)

M.A. Student, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

Anti-Muslim sentiment is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar but it is deeply rooted in its pre-independence history. Throughout the military junta in Myanmar, the escalation of anti-Muslim hate speech aimed to instigate Buddhist-Muslim riots in order to deflect the people's anger and exasperation away from the military regime. Since 1988 when the military ruled Myanmar, anti-Muslims hate and dangerous speech have been mainly circulating in the print media, and nowadays particularly on social media in Myanmar although most of the people in rural areas cannot access the internet. Anti-Muslim hate speech and propaganda such as pamphlets, leaflets, DVDs, VCDs, CDs, posters and others have been distributed in some parts of Myanmar right before outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims such as the anti-Muslim riot in Mandalay (1997), the anti-Muslim riot in Taungoo (2001), and the anti-Muslim riot in Meikhtila (2013). Based on interviews and documents such as pamphlets, leaflets, DVDs, VCDs, and CDs, and sermons, as well as interviews given by nationalists and nationalist Buddhist monks, this paper analyses speech acts that promote anti-Muslim sentiment, which is a precondition for instigating anti-Muslim violence. This paper argues that promotion of anti-Muslim sentiment has always escalated shortly before the outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims in Myanmar. The contribution of this paper is to call attention to a dynamic that could lead to atrocities against Muslims in Myanmar.

Key Words: Anti-Muslim Hate Speech, Anti-Muslim sentiment, Anti-Muslim Violence, and Myanmar.

Introduction

Contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment along with the hate and dangerous speech espoused by Burmese Buddhist nationalists derives from experiences during the colonial era when Burma was a part of British India. After first Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, the British occupation of Burma opened the door to migration of Indians into Burma. As a result of the unregulated immigration policy of the British in Burma, large waves of Indian migration occurred particularly after 1852, again after the opening of the Suez Canal and also following the blooming of Burma's delta as one of the kernels of rice production and export (Kyi, 2006). The migration of Indians such as investors, workers, civil servants, soldiers, police, construction workers, traders, etc. brought socio-economic structural changes into Burmese society that challenged and threatened the Burmese majority's security, culture, religion, identity, homeland, and livelihood. According to Khin Maung Yin (2005), "These Indian migrants had technically taken control of almost all sectors of Burmese society: they were dock labourers, transport workers, municipal employees, rickshaw pullers and were actively participating in trading, brokerage, services, banking, milling, contracting and shop keeping, communications, mining, oil, wholesale trading, medicine and money lending, with high interest rates." The historical evidence shows that entire businesses were under the domination of Indians in Burma.

Economically, the domination of all business by Indians and Indian-Muslims also generated the hatred and fear that those Indians and Indian Muslims will overwhelm the country (Burma) where Burmese Buddhists are the majority. In the 1930s, a well-known song of lyrics said that Indians and Indian-Muslims were “exploiting our economic resources and seizing our women, we are in danger of racial extinction” (Yi, 1988). Nowadays, the framing of anti-Muslim sentiments and propaganda are conspicuously similar to the terms that were used in the past and history of pre-independence Burma.

This paper begins with a brief history of the anti-Muslim sentiment from the pre-independence Burma, followed by a brief discussion of contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment and theatrical assumption of hate speech. Later, this paper analyses pamphlets and leaflets, interviews and sermons recorded on DVDs, VCDs, and CDs have been distributed in some parts of Myanmar right before the mass violence against Muslim outbreaks such as the anti-Muslim riot in Mandalay (1997), the anti-Muslims riot in Taungoo (2001), and the anti-Muslim riot in Meikhtila (2013). This paper fully pays attention to the relationship between the rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and the anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar. This paper argues that the anti-Muslim hate speech has been escalating before the outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims in Myanmar. The escalation of anti-Muslim hate speech is a presentiment or sometime precondition for the mass violence against Muslims, in which those anti-Muslim hate speech is required to instigate the violence.

Research Method

For this paper, the data and information are drawn from the 20 in-depth interviews with key informants (who are identified by snowball sampling), interview transcripts, documents from the field trips, reports from international organisations, scholarly articles, and academic journals which were gathered during the study of the anti-Muslim sentiment. This study is to understand the nature of anti-Muslim sentiment which has a high potential to catalyse the atrocities against Muslims in Myanmar.

The Rise of Anti-Muslim Sentiment before the anti-Muslim Violence Outbreaks in Myanmar

The contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment has fuelled the hate speech that has been circulating in the electronic media, print media, and particularly on social media in Myanmar. The inflammatory speech can be described as “dangerous speech,” as it has capacity to catalyse collective violence by conditioning its audience to accept, condone and commit violence against members of a group. According to Benesch (2013), inflammatory public speech commonly escalates right before outbreaks of mass violence. It is a portent or even a precondition for instigation of violence even when the rioters and groups of killers do not organise spontaneously. Benesch (2011) articulates that the “hate speech” is remarkably broad to include (1) speech aimed to hurt directly by insulting or offending the person or people it asserts to describe, and (2) speech aimed to produce direct hurt, by inciting one person or group against another. Benesch (2013) has coined the term “dangerous speech”, which she defines as a subset of hate speech that has the capacity to catalyse violence. When an act of speech has a high potential of catalysing or expanding violence by one group against another, given the contexts in which it was made for circulation, it becomes dangerous speech (Benesch, 2013). According to Beseech (2014), the integrant of speech alone does not make speech “dangerous” and she has mentioned five integrants such as content, speaker, means of dissemination, context, and audience that in amalgamation of them deepen the capacity of speech to enable collective violence. The content of all hate and dangerous speech commonly accuses the target

community of conspiracy to harm the audience by highlighting the target group as an existential threat to the audience, in which collective violence against every member of the target group is justified as necessary self-defence to protect the audience group's survival (Benesch, 2014). When the relationship of the target audience to the speaker is significant, the power of dangerous speech colours its target audience. Besech (2014) articulates "When such speakers communicate the views of dangerous speech, audiences are more likely to accept, internalise and repeat those views, which can in turn create a norm that it is logical and acceptable to endorse and express those views." The impetus of "dangerous speech" upon an audience is enriched by its means of dissemination (Benesch, 2014). Besech (2014) articulates "When outbreaks of collective violence have been preceded and accompanied by dangerous speech, a key means of dissemination has commonly been the principal source of information for the audience, such as state-controlled media." Some examples of contextual factors enhance the probability that dangerous speech will catalyse collective violence such as a history of group-targeted prejudice and savagery, deep-rooted conflict for resources, and a lack of institutions that people trust to resolve injustices fairly and peacefully (Benesch, 2014). Actually, hate speech cannot be dangerous without an audience that is coloured by its message to accept, condone, and commit collective violence against the group that the hate speech targets (Benesch, 2014).

The Buddhist-Muslim violence is not a new phenomenon; it is deeply rooted in the history of pre-independence Burma and continued throughout the socialist regimes and the military juntas. Burmese Buddhist nationalists, political elites, and religious leaders have been accused of intensifying the intolerance and hatred by campaigning for boycotts against Muslim businesses and criminalising inter-faith marriages (Newsdesk, 2014). The prohibition of "intermarriage" is a way to oppress a religious minority. Kyaw (2013) claimed in "*The Huffington Post*" that Buddhist monk Ashin "Wirathu" leads national campaign for violence against Myanmar's Muslims. Global Post claimed that the '969' campaign (which is spreading anti-Muslim sentiment) has been quickly spreading in Myanmar (Winn, 2013). UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office officially states that the spread of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence has simultaneously occurred with the rise of the Buddhist nationalist '969' movement (which is locally called "MaBaTha"). Actually the '969' movement portrays itself as a peaceful movement committed to promoting and protecting Buddhism through establishment of the "National Network to protect Buddhism" led by nationalist monks. Thompson (2013) claimed that the fundamental message is the view that Islam and Muslims are threatening and plotting to occupy. Buddhist nations like Myanmar and all Buddhists must be mobilised to stand up and save their way of life from Muslims. The growing influence of anti-Muslim hate speech is increasing the perception that "Muslims" present challenges and threats to the security of the state and their host societies, and stoking Islamophobia and xenophobia. Burmese Buddhist nationalists seek to protect their "Religion, Race, and Motherland" from "threats" by means of preaching intolerance, urging a boycott of Muslim businesses, and criminalising inter-faith marriage. In this circumstance, Muslims have been violated by the Burmese Buddhist nationalists.

"Hate" is a dangerous weapon of the mind. Dozier (2002) stated that "the detonation of hate can blow apart the social order and plunge nations into war and genocide. It shatters relationships, leading people who once loved each other into bitterness, violence, even murder. Blasts of hate sweep away civility and tolerance, spurring individuals to commit acts of savagery and pitting group against group in combat that can grow vicious and deadly." As we have seen, human beings prosecute the most traumatising and revolting acts imaginable in the name of hate such as *oppression, torture, genocide, and terrorism* (Dozier, 2002). Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner said that "Hatred is at the root of evil

everywhere. Racial hatred, ethnic hatred, political hatred, religious hatred, and all seems permitted in its name.”

According to Dozier (2002), “Hate is a primitive emotion that marks for attack or avoidance those things that we perceive as a threat to our survival or reproduction, which are the prime directives of evolution.” Additionally, a lot of studies show that “Hate” also comes from another powerful sentiment called “Fear”. Hate is a powerful form of antagonistic dislike that reflects an extreme form of fear, another word is “phobia”. This article demonstrates that the mass violence against Muslim stems from hatred that is blended with fear which is particularly phobic fear. Very interesting to note that “Hatred”, when oriented towards individuals or communities, is a product of a imagined threat or pain-producing condition that causes us to typecast the genesis as the enemy in order to reject the others. Anderson (1991) explains how state and non-state communities’ identities are built and how group identity discerns the ‘self’ from the ‘other’, and how this notion of sense of belonging can lead to conflict with ‘others’ and be manipulated by elites. Precisely, “us-them” segregations always have the potential to thrive on “hatred”, especially in the divided society. Human nature has a tendency to create a distinction between us and them and this us-them binary has a fearsome potentiality to turn off empathy (Dozier, 2002). The intense dislike, negative binary stereotyping and association of threat to a particular group promotes a cardinal sense of hostility that can trigger antagonism which would be the fight reaction (Dozier, 2002). Dozier (2002) stated that “A wide variety of emotions and feelings can be the source of hatred: frustration, envy, grief, pain, fear, anger, disgust. Intense dislike in the context of hate means that the primitive neural system has marked a phenomenon as a significant threat to survival and/or reproduction.” The wisdom of Buddha teaches us that one needs to manage or get rid of the three poisons in our human being such as “Greed, Anger, and Delusion”.

According to the history of pre-independence Burma, views of hatred towards the Muslim population lie at beneath the surface of more than a few Burmese which is caused by the British invigoration of Indian immigration that resulted in Bengalis and Indians expeditiously attaining wealth and predominant positions in Burma (Fink, 2001). However, the greatest threat to Burmese Buddhists is the idea of Muslim men marrying Burmese women and converting them to Islam. Fink (2001) stated that “Throughout military rule in Burma, successive regimes have used the spectre of a Muslim takeover to whip up nationalist sentiments. In particular, when anti-Regime tensions are running high, incidents of intolerable behaviour by Muslims always seem to pop up and are used to channel anger into conflicts.” Some evidences show that in July 1988 pamphlets supposedly written by Muslims which encouraged fellow Muslims to marry Buddhist women unexpectedly turned up in “Taunggyi” during time when anti-military sentiments were flourishing after the student demonstration in Rangoon. As expected, Muslim-Buddhist riots flared up, and the shops and homes of Muslims were attacked and looted Fink (2001).

In 1997, there was a noticeable incident that happened in Mandalay when one of the well-known holy Buddha images in Burma was inexplicably devastated. The Buddha sculpture in the “Maha Myatmuni” pagoda which is originally from the “Arakan” State, was delivered to Mandalay by King “Bodawpaya” after he conquered “Arakan” in 1784 AD. He had had the titanic statue “Mahamuni” Buddha image divided in pieces and relocated to a place nearby Mandalay where it was rebuilt and accommodated in a new pagoda. The sculpture of “Mahamuni”, which has become the image of Arakanese national identity, was worshipped by Arakanese, Mon, and Burmese alike for centuries (Fink, 2009). It was believed to contain a precious ruby called the “Padamya Myetshin”, which is a legendary ruby that assures success in war to

those who possess it (Houtman, 1999). The authorities of Mandalay region insisted to renovate the “Mahamuni” pagoda. During the redecoration, a mysterious hole appeared in the belly of the bronze of Buddha, where the “Padamya Myetshin” was thought to be found. After this incident happened, some senior Buddhist monks tried to investigate the situation, rumours quickly spread out that one of the two Buddhist monks who had a key to the building had been pressurised by a military officer to open the building at night. As a result, the meeting of discussion on the situation was called by a senior Buddhist monk and Buddhist monks from all the major Buddhist monasteries in Mandalay participated in that meeting. During the course of an all-day long meeting, the group of monks had sought unsuccessfully for answers about what had happened, a Buddhist monk and another man unexpectedly came into the room to announce that a Muslim man had raped a Buddhist woman (Fink, 2009). On 16 March 1997 beginning at about 3:30 p.m., some of the already exasperated Buddhist monks made a decision to take action and headed to the Muslim man’s house. There were a mob of 1,000 up to 1,500 Buddhist monks and others squawked anti-Muslim slogans. One of the witnesses said that “The mob firstly aimed at the mosques for their attack, later damaging, destroying, looting, trampling, burning Muslim businesses, shops, houses, and transportation vehicles in the vicinity of mosques. They were also responsible for the acts of impiety. The place where the acts of harm, damage, destruction, and looting were perpetrated was “KaingDan” in Mandalay.” As the news spread to different parts of Myanmar, an agitation of attacks on mosques broke out in Mandalay and other major cities. The Buddhist monks could be seen wielding long sticks and desecrating mosques over next few days. Very interesting to note that the police passively watched the scene from distance while the violence took place in Mandalay. Fink (2009) stated that “There were also several reports of people seeing monks with walkie-talkies under their robes, and a few had very shiny heads indicating they had just been shaved. In other words, it was widely believed that military men dressed as monks were involved, although many real monks did most of the damage.” Meanwhile, the hype surrounding the damage that happened to the “Mahamuni” Buddha statue was forgotten, and its belly was mended. Later, the reports of an attempted rape of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men that instigated the unrest in Mandalay proved to be false and this led to speculation that the military regime may have organised the incident to divert rage from the damage to the Buddha statue. As for the ruby stone, no one knows if it really was in the stomach of the Buddha statue, and whether or not the thieves succeed in obtaining it. Prior to the 1997 riot against Muslims, the leaflets were circulating earlier than the the violence against Muslim outbreak, urging Buddhists to boycott Muslims’ shops and not to marry Muslims (ICG, 2013).

In 2001, four years after the riot against Muslims in 1997, a book was published titled “Myo Pyauk Hmar Soe Kyauk Sa Yar” which means “Fear of the Elimination of Race and Faith,” and that the book concerns racial purification as well as religious purification. This book is a strong source of anti-Muslim sentiment and propaganda and was supposedly written and distributed by the department of military intelligence. According to hearsay, this book has been written by a Rakhine Buddhist who dislike Rohingyas and Muslims, but there is no source to prove it. However, most of the people believe that it came out of the military intelligence for promoting “intense dislike” towards Muslims in Myanmar. Right after the distribution of the book and its copies, anti-Muslim riots erupted on 15 May 2001 in “Taungoo” which is in “Pegu” division, considerably lower part of Myanmar that resulted in the deaths of about 200 Muslims, in the devastation of 11 mosques and the burning of 400 houses were destroyed by fire (Ahmed, 2012). The HRW (Human Rights Watch, 2002) reported that the March 2001 destruction of the Buddhist images in “Bamiyan” in Afghanistan seem to have instigated the violence. However, HRW (2002) claimed that “Myo Pyauk Hmar Soe Kyauk Hla Tai” (Fear of the Elimination of Race and Faith) was widely circulated in 2001,

often by Buddhist monks in whom the anti-Islam feelings had been goaded by the destruction of Buddha images in Bamiyan in. Very interesting to note that the distribution of anti-Muslim pamphlets in 2001 was conducted by the “Union of Solidarity and Development Association” (USDA) which later became USDP (Union of Solidarity and Development Party), a government-sponsored organisation that carries out social and political affairs for the military (HRW, 2002). According to the HRW’s report (2002), Buddhist monks steered a mob of more than a thousand people who attacked shops and restaurants owned by Muslims in central and downtown “Taungoo” city. Sadly, nine Muslims were murdered during the riots, including three children (HRW, 2002).

Since 2001, “Myo Pyauk Hmar Soe Kyauk Hal Tai” has continued to inspire anti-Muslim sentiment. The HRW (2002) reported that many anti-Muslim pamphlets and leaflets have been distributed in Burma claiming that the Muslims want to establish supremacy through intermarriage. This kind of claim has been part of the racial purification movement ever since pre-independence Burma. The intense dislike of Muslims is based on “intermarriage,” which is seen as eroding Buddhists’ racial and religious purification. Traditionally, Burmese Buddhists are proud of their blood line which they call “Thargi Twe”. It is racial superiority in that our blood line is considered superior to others. This is mentioned in the “Myo Pyauk Hmar So Kyauk Hal Tai”. Empirically, this book has been used as a tool to provoke Burmese Buddhists and nationalist Buddhists to get involved with anti-Muslim violence. According to facts and data, Buddhism and racism play a great role in the anti-Muslim movement throughout history. The state actively or passively sponsored the anti-Muslim sentiment and propaganda in order to maintain their power or redirect anger and frustration from the people. By manipulating and escalating anti-Muslim sentiments that instigated the mass violence against Muslims, the military had a chance to show their importance for the country’s security.

Since 1938, the anti-Muslim pamphlets and leaflets have shown up right before the outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims in Burma. In October 1996 in Rangoon pamphlets and leaflets showed up that said in part:

“Burmese Citizen - Beware!

The Muslims living in Burma are attempting to expand their religion while destroying Buddhism in Burma by using the following ways:

- 1) Land: All the land in the country shall be owned by the Muslims.
- 2) Money: To organise Buddhists to become Muslims using the power of money.
- 3) Women: To organise Buddhist women to get married with Muslims using money and other-ways.
- 4) Doctrine: To preach Muslim doctrine in every place.
- 5) State power: After successfully using these above methods and [the] majority of the people become Muslim, to take state power (Fink, 2009).”

Throughout the military regime in Burma, these pamphlets and leaflets are intended to incite unrest, in which the anti-Muslim sentiment is always evident. A lot of researchers pay attention to anti-Muslim sentiment and propaganda which has been spreading on social media such as Facebook but most of people in Burma cannot access the internet. Normally, the pamphlets and leaflets which are inciting anti-Muslim hatred have been distributed across the country, including by monks and monasteries. Example of pamphlets and leaflets are follow:

(1) A Letter circulated in Meikhtila right before the outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims in March 2013; Translation:

“To,
Ashin Bawana Thunama
(Agah Mahar Panita)
(Agah Mahar Ganta Wasaka Panita)
President of Township Sanga Organisation
Meikhtila City.

Subject: We are writing to report you that the Burmese Buddhists have been living under the threat

1. According to the above subject mentioned, Muslims in Meikthila, those “Tiger Kalar” are wearing their Kalar Mosque’s Dresses and going around in the town more than ever before.
2. In those Muslim people (Kalar), there are some Stranger Kalars who we have never seen before.
3. Although the time is not for Kalar’s Eid al-Fitr or Eid al-Adha period, they have been attending meetings at mosque (day and night).
4. Using money from Saudi which has been distributed to mosques, Muslims have been buying lands, farms and houses both in and out of the city with incredible amount of money under the Burmese broker’s names.
5. Two Burmese women from North Pyi-Tharyar were married off to two Kalar under the responsibility of a mosque.
6. Furthermore, Kalar are urging each other that only “Halal” labelling branded kids products such snacks, fizzy drinks and tea are edible for Kalars.
7. With the money they received from Saudi, construction materials shop (Kalar Shop) is selling construction materials to the City’s officials with credits.
8. Some of the officials from government offices that happened to buy from the Kalar’s shop are pretending that they do not see those Kalar’s activities.
9. The officials who have been tied by those credits are not investigating the guest lists of the meetings carried out at mosques.
10. Military Power lookalike mosques are willing to become a power over Burmese Buddhists’ monastery.
11. The religion should be destroyed by bribery.
12. We are very terrified whenever we see a big crowd of Kalars who go to mosque everyday. Therefore we would like to ask support from Buddhist monks who wouldn’t take bribery.
13. Please investigate the above problems.

(Buddhists who feel helpless)
Meikhtila City (Burma UK Campaign, 2013).”

Above translation of the letter which was distributed right before the outbreak of mass violence against Muslims in Meikhtila shows the common claim that Buddhists from Meikhtila have been living under the Muslim threat. This is a serious problem right now in Myanmar that the Muslims have been considered as existential threat to the Buddhists. One common claim in the letter concerns the dress of Muslims which looks like the appearance of Muslim terrorists around the globe. It is also discerning historic Burmese Muslims’ dress and the current transformation of religious dress. The appearance of Muslims wearing

religious dress generates a fear for the local Buddhists, because they look like “Islamic Terrorists”. “Tablighi Jamaati” which means “society for spreading faith” that is locally known as “Tablig Movement” among Muslims in Myanmar favours wearing traditional Arab religious dress. Some Burmese Muslims rejected this religious dress code. The letter above mentioned the claim that Muslims from Meikhtila are buying lands, farms and houses both in and out of the city by receiving money from “Saudi”. By contrast, that is totally not true. Almost all Muslims invested in busy lands and property because Muslims are not religiously allowed to save their money at the banks except “Islamic Banking”. Another reason is that all banks in Myanmar are not reliable in the belief of Muslims. One of the biggest profitable investments in Myanmar is investing in real estate. By those reasons, Muslims are likely to buy lands like others. Another common claim is that Muslims only eat at Muslims’ shop. For religious reasons, Muslims are allowed only to eat “Halal” foods. Obviously, if the Buddhists can provide “Halal” foods, Muslims can eat at the Buddhists’ shop. Another common claim highlights that some Muslims who are doing construction materials business in Meikhtila sell their materials to local authorities on credits in order to influence the local authorities with money supported by “Saudi” or Islamic rich counties from Middle East, and so “Buddhism” will be destroyed by bribery and Muslims’ influence. This sort of claim may be generated by the jealousy of Buddhist construction materials business owners. Another common feature of anti-Muslims sentiment found in the letter is the anger it expresses about Buddhist women marrying Muslim men without acknowledging that Muslim women marry Buddhist men. Both communities, Buddhists and Muslims have tried to convert their wives into their religion. However, the Buddhists only pay attention to intermarriage between Buddhist women and Muslim men. Another common feature of the letter is its implication that Buddhists are threatened by the Muslim practice of holding the five required daily prayers in a mosque. All in all, the above translated letter claims that the Buddhists are under threat from Muslims and that religious leaders or authorities like Buddhist monks should pay attention to these kind of issues and protect the Buddhists who live in Meikhtila.

- (2) A pamphlet circulated in Meikhtila right before the outbreak of mass violence against Muslims in March 2013. Translation: “All Buddhists should be aware of these:
- (a) Muslims are egotists and setting up their personal economy.
 - (b) Muslims are ardent to have authority and power.
 - (c) Muslims are avid to monopolise all businesses.
 - (d) Muslims are eager to monopolise lands, property, and mineral resources.
 - (e) Islam is justified to eliminate all Buddhists according to the Quran.
 - (f) Islam promote violence and terrorism to kill all Buddhists according to the Quran.”

This leaflet presents the Muslims as the demons with claims about business practices, domination, and monopoly, their of relationship with local authorities, sense of entitlement to the lands, property, and mineral resources, their association with “terrorism” around the world. The letter promotes a fear based on perceived threat, claiming all Buddhists will be wiped out soon in Myanmar and the nation of Myanmar will be become an Islamic country. These are the commons claims which have been urged ever since colonial era.

- (3) A speech has been given by Buddhist Monk “Wirathu” right before the outbreak of mass violence against Muslims in Meikhtila. His speech was recorded on DVDs, VCDs, and CDs which have been distributed in different parts of Myanmar as well as mainly in Meikhtila (Burma UK Campaign, 2013).

“Whatever you do, do it with nationalist’s vision. When you are looking, look at with nationalist’s point of view. When you are listening, listen with nationalist’s ears. When you do business, do it with nationalist’s vision. We are very weak at that at the moment.”

Ashin Wirathu delivered a sermon to the public in the City of Meikhtila right before the Buddhist-Muslim violent outbreaks. In his sermon, he aroused “nationalism” in order to influence the public and his call of nationalism aims to castigate Muslims in Myanmar. This was a very powerful speech act by a religious moral authority goads Buddhists into hatred and animosity towards Muslims. Evidently, intense dislike of Muslims and anti-Muslim sentiments increased in Meikhtila after Ashin Wirathu’s articulation of anti-Muslim sentiment blended with “Buddhism” and “nationalism”.

“But for them (which refers to the country’s Muslims), they (Muslims) are very good at it. Before this government, military was in control. They (Muslims) worked together with the military for the sake of their wellbeing, and now they control the construction market in Yangon. Don’t think they (Muslims) love the military but they (Muslims) worked together for the benefit of their own people (Muslims). Now when the time is good under this USDP government, they all became members and do politics with nationalist vision (For the sake of Muslims’ wellbeing). They (Muslims) do politics not because they understand or love democracy and respect human rights but they do it for their own people (For the sake of Muslims’ wellbeing). They (Muslims) are the people who have been breaking human rights. They (Muslims) have been brutally breaking rules of freedom of belief.”

Ashin Wirathu has tried to accuse Muslims that work with the military for their business development and permission. In this point, cronies from different religions work with the military for their profits. Not only some Muslim cronies are working with the government authorities but also well known cronies of Myanmar are Buddhists. Cronyism and nepotism have been evident ever since the Burmese Kingdoms were established. The cronies have been making business and profits regardless of their religion and ethnic identity. Also the various types of elite have come from different communities in Myanmar. In this regard, the accusation of some Muslim businessmen for being cronies is not fair but it is pure bigotry. The view of all Muslims as demons or wickedness based on one single case is serious bigotry. According to Benesch (2014), the collectivisation of the fault of one or a few people in a group to every member of a group is a fundamental tactic of hate speech. Almost all of Muslim communities in Myanmar do not support any forms of violence and terrorism even through some Islamic extremists from other countries have been involved with suicide-bombing and killing innocent people. Almost of all of Muslims in Myanmar reject and condemn Islamic extremism and terrorism. Throughout the contemporary history of Myanmar, there is no sign of Islamic terrorism. However, Ashin Wirathu keeps claiming that Muslims are a potential threat and danger to the Burmese Buddhists. He normally draws this argument on the life of “Buddhism, Race, and Motherland” which have been under the threat of Muslims in Myanmar. In fact that the emergence of “transnational characteristic Islamic terrorism” around the globe has impacted on his line of argument and thinking. Muslim communities in Myanmar do not deny and ignore the fact of Islamic terrorism that has emerged in some Muslim communities on the world stage. By contrast, Ashin Wirathu does not pay any attention to the local context and local knowledge of Muslims (which is complying with Islamic teachings and philosophy) who condemn and denounce “Islamic Terrorism” from Myanmar.

“Now NLD is in a better position so they are in NLD. If you look at NLD offices at any towns, you will see bearded people. When I went to Meiktila, one of the local people told me, “the NLD peacock is no longer peacock but a “Mootdaung” (meaning a Muslim person) NLD party is full of Muslims”. Now that they (Muslims) have places, they (Muslims) can work for their people and religion.”

Ashin Wirathu also attacked NLD (National League for Democracy), which is the party of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, during his sermon in Meikhtila. He mentioned that the NLD’s peacock is no longer peacock but a “Mootdaung” which literally refers to “Muslim-Peacock”. Basically, he said that the NLD office of Meikhtila is being run by Muslims. Sooner or later, the NLD will be swallowed by Muslims. Obviously, he is attacking the NLD using racial and religious sensitivity. Most of the liberal Buddhist monks considered as Wirathu created a sense of fear and directed the hatred towards Muslims by attacking the NLD in Meikhtila. After the Buddhist-Muslims riot in Meikhtila, some Muslim members of NLD have face direct and indirect discrimination by some Burmese Buddhists.

“When I went to Meikhtila, a lot of monks told me that they were not allowed to hold a Buddhist ritual on Martyrs day. I was really furious and thought how rude the authorities to do that. But they replied that it was coming from the Kalars from the NLD office and they (Muslims) own the property! Just think about it, they are from NLD and they (Muslims) didn’t allow us to perform Buddhist rituals just because they own the property, what is going to happen when they (Muslims) become leader of the party or minister or leader of the country. It is really scary. It gets scarier the more you think about it.”

Ashin Wirathu claimed during his sermon in Meikhtila that Muslims do not allow “Buddhist ritual on Martyrs day” because the NLD office is owned by a Muslim. And he continued his assertions that Muslims will become leaders of a party or ministers or even the leader of the country, which is encouraging a sense of fear. He is saying that if Muslims take part in the politics and political leadership of the country, Buddhists will be oppressed and the Buddhism will be abolished. This situation is scary and he called on Buddhists to be proactive to prevent it.

“They (Muslims) do everything in nationalist’s way and that’s why they (Muslims) keep buying lands and properties. They (Muslims) carried bags of money to propose girls for marriage, and they (Muslims) use those to manipulate girls. If they (Muslims) have power, even the “Ka Htein” which is Buddhist charity will be gone from our country.”

Historically, nationalist Buddhists have presented intermarriage and miscegenation as threats in Myanmar. Throughout the history of Buddhist-Muslim riots, the rumours of Muslim(s) raping Buddhist woman played great role in triggering the violence against Muslims in Myanmar. As the result of the intolerance of intermarriage and miscegenation, the law locally known as “Saving Race law” was adopted in order to prevent intermarriage which is demanding racial and religious purification. Ashin Wirathu articulated that the power should not given to the Muslims, or the Buddhist charity which is called “Ka Htein” will be perished in Myanmar. This claim also encouraged a sense of fear that the Buddhists need to protect “Buddhism”.

“Buy only from our (Buddhists) shops. If our (Buddhists) money goes to enemies’ hands, it will destroy our (Buddhists) whole nationality and religion. They (Muslims) will use that money to manipulate women, forcefully convert those women into their religion, and the children of them will become enemy of the

state. They (Muslims) will destroy the whole nation and religion. When their (Muslims) population grows, they (Muslims) will do the same thing as they (Muslims) did in Rakhine state: invading. They (Muslims) will take over the whole county. That is why by looking long term, use only places with the sign 969. So if we win this one event, our people will win the future events. We need to target one by one of those to protect our religion.”

Ashin Wirathu encouraged a “Burmans for Burma Campaign” which is known as “Dobamar Movement” and is based on the anti-colonial and the anti-Indian sentiment that emerged during the British colonial era. He urged that Buddhists buy only from Buddhists’ shops. The basic idea is that if Buddhists only buy goods from Buddhist’s shops rather than buying goods from Muslims’ shops that can prevent Muslim influence in the economy. His ‘969’ Movement calls for boycotting Muslim business. The argument is that buying goods from Muslims shops will put profits into the hands of Muslims, and as a result Buddhism and the race will be eliminated or extinguished by “enemies”. Muslims use those financial profits to manipulate Buddhist women to marry Muslim men. He did not pay any attention to the rights of women drawing from the CEDAW which was already ratified in 1997. Civil Society Organisations and particularly Women rights organisations from Myanmar have rejected and condemned the law known as “Saving Race Law” which has been supported by ‘969’ Movement and “MaBaTha”. Ashin Wirathu claimed that Muslims use their money to persuade Buddhist women to marry Muslim men and their generations will be the enemy of the state. Again, this point is also going back to the colonial period that Burmese Buddhists condemned miscegenation out of concern for racial and religious purification. He also provoked fear over the security of religion by claiming that Muslims will overrun the country and Buddhism will be wiped out soon, and so the Buddhists have a righteous responsibility to eliminate an existing threat to the security of religion. Ashin Wirathu referenced a case of “Rohingya Muslims” in his sermon that those Muslims have been invading our “Rakhine” State and he said again and again Muslims will take over the country, in which he has tried to construct the Muslims as threat to the Buddhist society and country. Finally, he highlighted ‘969’ sticker campaign that all Buddhist businesses have to use the sign of ‘969’, in which the Buddhists can easily recognise those signs and buy goods at the Buddhists’ shop. The underlying idea of the ‘969’ sticker campaign is boycotting Muslims’ businesses.

Conclusion

The rise of anti-Muslim hate speech is a warning sign for anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. Although this article cannot prove the causation of the anti-Muslim riots, it demonstrates that there is a solid nexus between the rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and the anti-Muslim riots. This paper mainly argues anti-Muslim hate speech has been always escalated shortly before the outbreaks of mass violence against Muslims and has catalysed the anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. The nature of their relationship is strong and shows hate speech is a warning sign or sometimes precondition for the instigation of anti-Muslim riots. The distribution of anti-Muslim hate speech and propaganda such as pamphlets, leaflets, DVDs, VCDs, CDs, posters and others have shown us that the mobilisation of the anti-Muslim campaign should be restricted by law or the state’s security forces in order to protect the Muslim citizens who deserve their freedom and civil liberties. Establishing “Early Warning” or “Early Response” based on identifying and monitoring anti-Muslim hate speech is required to prevent possible atrocities against Muslims. Countering or counter narrative of the hate and dangerous speech, particularly anti-Muslim hate speech is also needed for the prevention of violence against Muslims in Myanmar.

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