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Violent Monks in Myanmar: Scapegoating and the Contest for Power

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This article seeks to understand why monks played a central role in anti-Muslim violence in transitional Myanmar (2013–2014). We argue that scapegoating is one of many strategies used by monks to gain visibility, to strengthen their autonomous networks, and to increase their social credentials. By analyzing two episodes of monks’ participation in religious violence (1930s and 2013–2014), we identify two factors that make scapegoating strategies more likely: (a) decentralized religions foster a multiplicity of organizations and provide incentives for leaders to be entrepreneurial and compete for followers; while (b) the rapid pluralization of the public sphere explains the timing, because it intensifies competition among religious leaders and between religious and secular leaders for social ascendency and power.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, religious violence exploded in the Rakhine state of western Myanmar.1 Thousands of Buddhists participated in attacks against the Rohingyas, a Muslim ethnic minority. Rakhine nationalists contested the status of Rohingya and claimed they were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The conflict led to a large outflow of refugees and internally displaced more than 150,000 people.2

But in 2013 and 2014, the violence took an unexpected turn. Riots spread to more than 20 different towns in central and lower Myanmar, much beyond Rakhine state. The targets were Muslims, rather than Rohingyas per se, and had little to do with the ethnonationalist conflict in the Rakhine state.3
Monks played a key role in turning the localized conflict into a broader anti-Muslim movement. They aimed at promoting and protecting Buddhism against what they perceived as a Muslim invasion. Exploiting and fanning fears, they stirred up anti-Muslim sentiments while condoning and even participating in the violence. Why did monks use a somewhat localized, if already dramatic conflict in the Rakhine state to create a larger, anti-Muslim one?

We argue that scapegoating is an important, and neglected, aspect of monks’ participation in religious violence. It is one of many strategies to strengthen their appeal and to justify their leadership position. Fomenting fear of minorities, protesting against an oppressive state, or providing welfare for victims of tragedy can all contribute to enhancing their social and political status. Targeting vulnerable religious minorities is one way to gain visibility, to strengthen their autonomous networks, and to increase their social credentials.

Two factors condition why and when scapegoating becomes a useful strategy. First, it is effective mostly in decentralized religions. With no central institution that grants authority or creates hierarchy, leadership and influence rest more directly on each religious leader’s capacity to remain relevant and to attract new followers. There are few checks on leaders’ interpretation of scriptures or their investment in social and political action. Competition arises among religious leaders seeking to gain power relative to their peers or other social elites. Entrepreneurial leaders might target the state or a regime deemed to be causing harm to their flock, thereby exploiting popular grievances for moral gain. Alternatively, they might target minorities by tapping into popular fears, anxieties, and stereotypes.

Second, the political environment shapes the strategy that religious leaders adopt, with liberalization being particularly prone to scapegoating. Under authoritarian rule, antiregime coalitions often arise with religious leaders well positioned to lead them. Yet, in a liberalized regime, such broad coalitions dissolve. Religious leaders become only one of several competing elites, and their moral and social authority is challenged by rising, alternative sources of societal values and education.

We demonstrate our claim, empirically, by analyzing two episodes of monks’ participation in religious violence. As we will show in the following sections, there are striking parallels between the violence of the 1920–1930s and more recent violence against Muslims. We compare the most recent wave of mobilization, which started in 2007 with the Saffron Revolution, with another wave in the 1920s, when monks were leading actors in the nascent anticolonial and nationalist mobilization in colonial Burma. While they originally targeted the colonial government (1920s) and the authoritarian regime (2007), some monks then shifted the target to minorities, mostly Indians, Rohingyas, and Muslims.
Scapegoating strategies combined with other factors to fuel violence against Muslims. As argued by Kyaw San Wai, the narrative of a Muslim threat is deep seated in Myanmar, with widespread beliefs that Buddhism is destined to disappear. Recent international news coverage of terrorism and Muslim extremism have provided additional fear material and normalized even further the negative characteristics attributed to them. Furthermore, the narratives have tapped into broader, global networks of Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka and elsewhere that exacerbate xenophobic views. In Sri Lanka, for instance, Buddhist monks led organizations such as the Sinhala Ravaya, Ravana Balaya, and Bodu Bala Sena, which all promoted hostility against minority religious communities. These shared perceptions form the backdrop of scapegoating strategies, but liberalization and interelite competition explain the timing of the violence and why Muslims became the targets. Shifting patterns of violence are traced to greater competition for ethical and moral status with rising secular elites and among monks themselves.

SCAPEGOATING AND COMPETITION FOR POWER

Scapegoating does not occur without grievances that fuel suspicion, or a sense of threat. As with language, tribe, or race, religion differentiates groups that, through comparisons, have come to mobilize against one another. Factors such as differences in status and power, electoral contests, or institutional boundaries and representation solidify group boundaries around a particular attribute and intensify group conflict. The participation of religious leaders in such volatile conflicts might reflect such grievances but, when they are at the forefront of mobilization, they give it moral legitimacy. In many contexts, leaders intervene to calm the violence and defuse the conflict. In others, however, they are the instigators.

Like instrumentalist uses of ethnic mobilization, some religious leaders might instigate violence to further their personal interests. At minimum, they seek followers and resources to build or support places of worship. M. A. Nuhman notes that in Sri Lanka militant Buddhist nationalism resulted in a large increase in the number of temple goers and of students attending Buddhist religious schools. But in some contexts, religious leaders seek to gain power and prestige in their role as societal leaders. In these cases, they can be in fierce competition with other social elites also seeking to shape popular beliefs, values, or behavior. Such competition can originate from genuine religious convictions or from instrumental interests. For instance, religious leaders might seek to protect their communities out of a sense of responsibility for their followers. As Stanley Tambiah argues, the Mavbima Sukarime Vyaparaya (that is, Movement for the Protection of the
Motherland) in Sri Lanka supported violence against Tamils to protect Buddhism and Sinhala culture against the erosive effects of secessionism. They even targeted Catholics, which they also linked to the betrayal of Buddhism. Yet, monks might also be trying to safeguard their position within communities or to gain religious influence in order to acquire personal power and wealth. Young recruits in Sri Lanka are often “attracted by the educational opportunities and material support provided by the sangha.”

This is also the case in Myanmar.

Scapegoating is a powerful tool because it creates or enhances a sense of threat, and it uses a vulnerable minority to strengthen the cohesion and sense of common purpose among the majority. It builds on stereotypes and on widely held grievances: “groups are scapegoated because they are (often falsely) perceived to be powerful and malevolent.” Religious leaders who mobilize majorities often tap into what Arjun Appadurai calls the anxiety of incompleteness, the idea that one majority could be turned into a minority unless another minority disappears. The rhetoric of threat from a minority is often implausible and disproportionate to the minorities’ numerical representation, as is the case with Muslims in Myanmar. However, it is often “the smallness of the gap between national totality and minority presence that produces the anxiety of incompleteness” and helps fuel the frustration and rage that drive these religious leaders.

The degree of institutionalization of religion is one of two conditions that contribute to scapegoating. Institutionalized religions keep strong control over religious authority, which is granted to an office, not an individual. Authority is routinized and even banalized. Catholicism stands at one end of a continuum with its high degree of hierarchically organized structure and incentives to abide by its rules. Such bureaucratization shuns alternative extraintitutional sources of authority and legitimacy, such as fame or charisma. In weakly institutionalized religions, such as Buddhism or Islam, however, authority and legitimacy are decentralized. They are concentrated in individual congregations, mosques, churches, and monasteries or around individual charismatic figures. Individual leaders have considerable autonomy with respect to their interpretation of scriptures and their recruitment of worshippers. They obtain income from their followers’ contributions, as no formal bureaucracy provides salaries. In the absence of a hierarchy, coordination mechanisms are weak and in-group policing is often nonexistent. As a result, religious office and knowledge provide some form of authority, but charisma and fame can also provide religious legitimacy.

Decentralized religion also increases competition among leaders. As argued by Roger Finke, they rely on their followers for resources, they must therefore cater to their needs, almost as “clients,” in order to survive: “the messenger is […] judged more by his personal appeal to the people, rather than his professional qualifications […]”; and the message is judged by its
application to the practical life […] and not by the professional standards of a well-trained clergy.”

Finally, the boundaries of the acceptable are less defined, more fluid, and prone to appropriation. As Rogers Brubaker notes, in such religious environments, entrants or marginalized leaders will often resort to outbidding, showing that they are truly more religious than others, and provocation intended to gain visibility and recognition. To attract followers, they will use different forms of capital, such as notoriety, fame, or media exposure instead of their knowledge of sacred text. Together, these characteristics of decentralized religion increase the incentive to use scapegoating as additional capital to recruit followers and gain influence.

The second condition is the liberalization of a political regime, which allows a greater degree of freedom of speech and mobilization and therefore diversifies the capital available to religious leaders, especially through more open media. Scapegoating is more likely to be used as rumors and verbal attacks can circulate more effectively and more rapidly. When a political regime liberalizes, religious leaders often need to readjust their strategies as they cope with the emergence of alternative, often secular, elites.

The space for religious practice, recruitment, and mobilization is dictated by the state’s policies toward religion. State leaders, particularly under authoritarian rule, often reduce the autonomy of religious leaders and create institutions to manage and restrict their influence, unless they seek to use them as part of their ruling strategies. They do so by creating officially recognized religious bodies, even for decentralized religions. They often regulate, sanction and recognize particular religious leaders while excluding other aspiring ones. Common state strategies include the imposition of national examinations, official registration, control over preaching, and the banning of sects that are deemed to be outside the recognized religious field. All these tactics officialize religious authority and legitimacy while preventing the rise of unpredictable religious leaders. The state is rarely able, however, to entirely eliminate their autonomy. Repression and control are always uneven, thereby leaving some alternative spaces for mobilization.

Liberalization changes the incentive structures and constraints on mobilization. It fosters a realignment of expectations, challenges officially sanctioned religious institutions and provides opportunities to create new coalitions and to redefine relations with the state. Previously powerful religious leaders might lose influence if they were closely associated with the authoritarian regime. The state itself and new secular elites often challenge the sphere of religious authority. With liberalization, new elites arise and the state often gains greater legitimacy. Previously unchallenged areas of religious leaders’ authority might face new competitors and alternative sets of values and ideas and ultimately threaten their position and influence. For education, enhancement of social justice, or mobilization to protect rights,
citizens often turn to the government, unions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a democratic space rather than seeking support from religious leaders.

Under a rapidly changing political environment, therefore, religious leaders often seek new strategies to remain relevant, including scapegoating. By rising to the defense of the majority religion, or seeking to fend off the threat (real or perceived) of other religions, they can increase or retain their following. They might use incendiary language that triggers violence against religious minorities or give their support to rioters. Whether opportunistic or defensive, tapping into fears and grievances, religious leaders resort to scapegoating as a strategy, among several others, to retain or increase their following.

We show in the following sections that such factors partly explain why monks in Myanmar mobilized against Muslims. These factors complement alternative explanations that emphasize broadly shared perceptions of a Muslim threat in Myanmar and the particular resentment against Rohingyas in the Rakhine state. We argue that the involvement of monks in 2012 was dictated in part by some leaders’ competitive attempt to recruit followers and a defensive attempt, among others, to protect some of their status in a rapidly changing political environment where other sources of authority, such as the National League for Democracy and new NGOs, work for the advancement of social justice and the redress of grievances from decades of military rule.

THE BURMESE SANGHA AS A DECENTRALIZED RELIGION

In Myanmar, Buddhism has been relatively decentralized, as the state attempted, but had limited success, at structuring the sangha. During colonial times, when the British colonial authorities abolished the monarchy and the position of Thathanabaing (that is, state-appointed head of the entire sangha), the sangha lost its main patron since Burmese kings had built shrines and temples and ensured that monks were well fed. It also lost ecclesiastical authority that could enforce discipline and safeguard the purity of the faith. As a result, the Burmese sangha remained relatively decentralized for most of its modern history. It was mostly organized around village monasteries with little hierarchy.

In postcolonial Burma, a number of attempts were made to impose new structures. Most were unsuccessful and attracted little participation from monks. Yet, in 1980, the government convened the state-sponsored Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders and successfully created the Supreme Sangha Council (Sangha Maha Nayaka), a 47-member unified and hierarchical organization, which cut across sectarian and regional boundaries. Officially, the council was instituted with the aim of “unifying, purifying,
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developing, and stabilizing the Burmese Buddhist religion or church.”

Monks were forced to register, to obtain identification cards, and to pass government-sanctioned examinations. Finally, the regime also hoped to extend its control by creating sangha councils at the village, township, city, and district levels. It appointed retired members of the military to newly created monasteries and pagodas’ board of trustees in order to manage finances and donations from the public. The state expected local sangha councils to expel dissenting monks who failed to abide by the new rules.

With the Supreme Sangha Council, the state promoted a certain type of monastic elite. It hoped “to impose control by both rewarding as well as confining […] monks to their scholarly and other-worldly pursuits.” Institutionalization was meant to prevent “uncontrolled manifestation of charisma” and to reduce the space available for alternative means of legitimation, that is, the search for authority outside of that of the office.

But the reform was only partly successful. First, popular opinion tended to see official monks as opportunistic, while many monks were suspicious of the Supreme Sangha Council. Through the council, the state imposed severe restrictions on monks, who could not openly discuss any political issues in their monasteries nor could they choose the leaders of their own orders. Monks and the population considered official monks to be out of touch, as a group of old monks who hold their position of prominence and influence due to close links to leaders of the military regime and who search for titles and other benefits.

Second, institutionalization did not entirely foreclose independent sources of authority. Aside from that acquired through holding office, other scholarly monks could still claim authority based on their knowledge and academic achievements and preaching monks could still draw large crowds through public preaching (dhamma talks) and widely attended sermons. Preaching monks are hugely popular in Myanmar and have reached wide audiences, from illiterate villagers in the remote corners of the country to educated Myanmarese in the diaspora. These preachers can generate mass movements when they appeal, inspire or even mobilize their followers.

Third, it also did not sever the deep connections linking the sangha with the laity. In contrast to Christian monks, Buddhist ones are connected to the laity in many ways. Under the junta (1990–2011), the regime tried to monopolize merit-making activities by becoming the main provider for the sangha, building pagodas, giving money to charities and organizing Buddhist ceremonies. However, monks are not paid by the Supreme Sangha Council or the government and rely, despite institutionalization, on donations for daily subsistence. It is also true for monastic schools, which do not receive systematic provision of funds from the state. Some monasteries received donations from the state, but most continued to rely on contributions from local communities to survive. Patronage from the
state did not remove the need for the sangha to find patrons among the laity.

In sum, the Burmese state’s attempts to structure the sangha met with limited success. While some monks are recognized because of their position in the Supreme Sangha Council, many still operate outside of the state’s control. Given that official monks are seen as cooperating with the regime, it creates space for autonomous monks to retain deep connections with the laity and to acquire authority activities such as scholarly recognition or preaching.

MOBILIZATION TARGETS UNDER SHIFTING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Monks have occasionally mobilized against the state but, at other times, have targeted religious minorities. The 2007 Saffron revolution, for instance, occurred under the military regime with very constrained conditions for political action, which gave monks the occasion to take the moral high ground. With the loosening of restrictions on associations and political mobilization, however, monks faced greater competition for influence from alternative, secular elites. They also could no longer claim societal leadership against a repressive state. It was the combination of Buddhism’s relatively decentralized institutional structure in Myanmar and the new liberalized regime that provided incentives for scapegoating. Incentives, as well as corresponding targets, shifted with the political opening in 2010. A similar shift from antigovernmental mobilization to scapegoating also occurred at the time of independence.

Antiregime Mobilization in a Constrained Environment

When the political environment is constrained, religious leaders are particularly well positioned to oppose a repressive regime. They are often the only nonstate actors who can escape state repression. When their interests, or those of their followers, are threatened they sometimes openly mobilize. Such oppositional action requires, however, that a broad antiregime coalition be mounted in order to protect themselves against repression. Monks in Myanmar occupied this oppositional space and built broad protest movements on several occasions, against the colonial as well as the military regime.

In the early 20th century, monks became increasingly concerned with the loss of authority and prestige they experienced under British colonialism and the colonial regime’s management of monastic education. In contrast to Burmese kings, the British colonial regime refused to be the patron or
promoter of Buddhism. It also sought to integrate monastic schools into their secular educational system but, instead, almost completely eradicated traditional monastic education once government, missionaries, and Buddhist lay schools became more prominent. A new secular educated class emerged, filling positions of influence in the professions, government service, and politics, while undermining monks’ social leadership role. By the 1920s, it was clear that

foreign rule [had been] rapidly eroding the status and prestige of the monk. There was no place for him in the new western-oriented social hierarchy, his educational functions were assumed by other agencies, and unknown foreign language prevented him from understanding what was going on, and westernized Burmese laymen increasingly regarded him as irrelevant to modern life.

Beforehand monks seldom took part in politics, but as “they strove to win back their waning glory,” they became a dominant actor in the nationalist movement. Various factors helped them achieve political prominence. First, with the British abolishment of the position of Thathanabaing, the Burmese sangha had become less centralized; weak ecclesiastical authority meant that the sangha was not able to exercise effective internal discipline, which opened space for political monks to oppose the British. The sangha was mostly organized around village monasteries and had low levels of hierarchization both within and across individual monasteries, but extensive ties linked one monastery to another.

Second, monks were in a good position to become key nationalist leaders at the village level because “if nationalist politicians in Burma wanted popular backing, they had little choice but to line up with the political [monks], who alone swayed the village [associational life].” Nationalists could neither rely on an indigenous middle class, which was almost non-existent, nor on village headmen, who were forbidden to participate in politics and had little legitimacy in the population’s eyes. In contrast, monks were present in every village and could also mobilize rapidly through public meetings, processions, or demonstrations. As a result, monks established a quasi-parallel state structure with about 10,000 village associations, which became an alternative source of authority to that of the village headmen. In addition, monks formed new national associations all over Burma or took control of existing ones such as the General Council of Burmese Associations and the General Council of Sangha Sametggi.

While they were dominant, monks directed demands and political actions against the British colonial regime, not minorities. For instance, U Ottama, the first popular nationalist hero and martyr, toured the country calling for home-rule. His preferred methods were nonviolent and included the nonpayment of taxes and noncooperation with the British
administration. Yet, U Ottama was careful not to allow Buddhist religious appeals to become a divisive force. He articulated a cosmopolitan and modernist nationalism and urged the unity of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.57

Similar motivations pushed monks in 1988 and 2007 to participate in antigovernment protests. Both Ne Win’s Burmese Socialist Program Party (1962–1988) and the subsequent military regime (1990–2011) strongly repressed the Burmese population and sought to reduce the sangha’s autonomy and influence. In both instances, monks led the antiregime movements. The sangha was much more structured in 1988 and 2007 than it was in the 1920s but, nevertheless, its partial institutionalization under the government-sponsored Supreme Sangha Council did not put a check on their leadership role in the protest movement.

In 1988, harsh economic conditions and the government’s decision to withdraw the 100-, 75-, 35-, and 25-kyat bank notes triggered the protests. Monasteries were used as bases for the protest movement. But some monks also sought to regain some autonomy from the Supreme Sangha Council, by organizing alternatives such as an independent Monks’ committee (Sangha Sametggi).58 Others formed the All-Burma Young Monks Union, which “aspired to mobilize the sangha politically outside of traditional seniority hierarchies.”59 Some sought to regain prestige by aligning with popular protesters, maintaining law and order and delivering social services such as rubbish collection or water supply when the state suspended them.60 Finally, a group in Mandalay, the Radical Buddhist Monks United Front, called for a democratic order and an end to political and religious persecution.

The regime announced elections in 1990 but, in the absence of true liberalization, monks still played a key oppositional role. In August 1990, they staged a number of demonstrations in Mandalay and Yangon, leading some monks to call for the military’s excommunication.

In the end, after the government reneged on the election, monks were not spared the regime’s broad crackdown. Hundreds of monasteries were raided and approximately 4000 monks were arrested. In October 1990, the government dissolved all independent Buddhist organizations, making the Supreme Sangha Council the only sangha organization in Myanmar. It deployed military personnel to surround monasteries and destroy buildings that could be used for meetings and mobilization.61 Monks were arrested, disrobed and placed under surveillance.

Yet, they continued to play a social role in the absence of alternative leadership. Monastic schools were the last bastion of civil society in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In some villages, they were often the only educational institution available, offering free food, accommodation, and education to poor children and orphans.62 While the state’s neglect of welfare policies strengthened monks’ social ascendancy, it also stretched their financial resources.
The last episode of monks’ antiregime mobilization, the Saffron Revolution, took place in 2007. Triggered by the government’s decision to end fuel subsidies and in the absence of alternative leadership, monks once again led the vast antiregime demonstrations in defense of the aggrieved population.

As in 1988, beyond the duty to side with the impoverished and persecuted population, monks also had other incentives to participate. As the population felt financially squeezed, donations to monks and monasteries declined. Since monks depend on alms, the deterioration of living conditions led to a sudden impoverishment of the sangha: In the run-up to the demonstrations, many monks could barely get a meal a day; and service and education provisions to the poor were starting to crumble. It is not surprising that monks felt personally compelled to step in and demonstrate against the regime.

Monks who took part in the protests mostly came from private monastic schools, which were the most harshly affected by the decline of the population’s wealth. State-sponsored monastic schools generally remained silent and monks from the Supreme Sangha Council remained aligned with the regime and strongly condemned monks’ mobilization.

To protest the regime, monks set up new organizations, such as the All-Burma Monks Alliance, which was quickly declared illegal. Yet, through its large representation, the organization aimed to gain broad legitimacy among the sangha and to guarantee the existence of a united front against the regime. Following the beating of monks in Pakokku, some of its members threatened to boycott alms from members of the government. Using the All-Burma Monks Alliance as a base for mobilization, they coordinated numerous demonstrations involving broad segments of the population. Before the crackdown began, more than 50,000 monks and nuns had participated in the protests. The junta tried to make high-profile donations to calm down the sangha. But monks rejected these offers and carried out their threat, by coordinating a boycott of alms from the military and the members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association and government workers. In the end, the regime cracked down on the protesters. It arrested more than 1,000 monks and hundreds remained in prison for many years.

These three cases of mobilization in a constrained environment illustrate monks’ powerful mobilizational role. Partly motivated by self-interest, monks were able to lead or acquire a decisive position in the opposition movement, as they sought more autonomy and a renewed, central leadership role in Burmese society.

Antiminority Mobilization in a Liberalized Environment

During two periods of Myanmar’s history, a more liberalized environment created incentives for entrepreneurial monks to mobilize against minorities. Having lost some of their prominence, and with the state no longer a target,
such a shift offered an opportunity to regain their influence. From the 1930s onwards, when secular leaders gained the upper hand over the nationalist movement, monks started to target Indians and Muslim minorities. In a similar way, from 2011 on, when politicians, civil society, and ethnic leaders started to gain prominence in a rapidly liberalizing Myanmar, monks started to target Rohingya and Muslim minorities.

In the 1930s, the dominant position of the nationalist monks began to weaken. The adoption of the Government of Burma Act (1936) shifted the struggle for independence to constitutional and legislative channels. Monks’ unity fragmented, and they became increasingly discredited by corruption scandals and by their involvement in politics. At the same time, younger secular nationalists gained in popularity and replaced monks as leaders of the nationalist movement. These emerging nationalists also challenged Buddhism’s relationship to the state. For Aung San, there was a “clear line [to be drawn] between politics and religion” and Buddhism was not to be recognized as state religion. Nationalist leaders shared the view that monks should abandon active political life and, by the 1930s, important segments of Burmese public opinion even considered that monks should be barred from voting and running for office.

When monks’ political influence started to wane, their target also changed. New sangha organizations took a more active role in “cleansing the sasana.” The target was no longer the British colonial state but internal enemies of Buddhism. These organizations “struggled to gain leadership of the people” but this time by orchestrating anti-thin-jacket campaigns against women and buy-Burmese-only campaigns. The Young Monks Association adopted a quasi-militaristic approach as it became a kind of cultural police attempting to set standards of dress (non-Western) and stringent rules for society.

Some monks also instigated and directed riots against Indians and Muslims, as they tapped into rising Burman hostilities. In 1938, the riots began in Rangoon (now Yangon) and then spread to most cities and larger towns, killing 181 people, almost all Muslims. As Moshe Yegar argues, the riots were motivated by nationalistic sentiments but were targeted at Muslims and Indians to avoid British repression. After the separation from India (1937) and later from Britain (1948), monks continued mobilizing against Indians and Muslims and started to vehemently oppose the extension of equal privileges to other faiths.

Secular leaders remained dominant during the early days of independent Burma but sangha organizations continued to mobilize throughout the period of parliamentary democracy. Burma’s first constitution established a secular state with no government-supported religious institutions. During its whole first mandate, the U Nu government showed very little support, or even interest, in Buddhism and the sangha. The Parliamentary Elections
Act of 1948 (s. 27) barred the Buddhist clergy and members of every religious order from standing for and voting in elections. Nevertheless, sangha organizations continued to push for the instauration of a sangha parliament and the constitutionalization of Buddhism as the state religion.

While monks gained a brief victory in the last years of parliamentary democracy, their hopes were dashed after Ne Win’s coup. To gain greater political support in the face of growing instability, U Nu gradually changed his stance and increasingly presented himself as the protector of Buddhism. Ahead of the 1960 elections, the parliament adopted religious legislation aimed at strengthening the sangha and, in 1961, adopted a constitutional amendment recognizing Buddhism as the national religion. Monks were nevertheless resentful that the government also introduced constitutional guarantees protecting the freedoms of religious minorities and attacked mosques in Rangoon in the 1960s, once again using Muslims as scapegoats in their conflict with the state. In the end, Ne Win’s 1962 coup reversed the gains as the new government abandoned Buddhism as a state religion and sought to reimpose control over the sangha.

The marginalization of the sangha in the nationalist movement and the period of parliamentary democracy, in sum, had important effects on the choice of mobilization strategies. The absence of a repressive regime removed incentives for monks to organize a broad coalition against the state. Instead, monks targeted internal enemies such as people wearing Western clothing, women dressed too lightly, as well as Indians and Muslims.

The liberalization of 2011 produced similar changes in choice of mobilization targets. Monks’ political influence declined as new, secular civil society organizations, such as unions, farmers associations, political parties, and student organizations, were created. “All of a sudden, monasteries were not the only space available for civil society. Monks saw that with the changes [brought by the liberalization], their role has been diminished. They started, at that time, to develop a new discourse.” For the first time in many decades, monks saw their status as primary societal leaders challenged.

Opportunities also increased for religious competition and autonomy. In the final years of the junta, some monks had tried to break away from “the official networks of the national economy of merit” and sought to “compete against official authorities in gaining access to religious donations.” Monks used various means to regain autonomy from the official sangha and to increase their respective following. They created NGOs or foundations to increase donations and deliver education, health care, funeral services, or other welfare needs. Mass preaching was a second strategy to gain more autonomy. Some monks were able to attract new followers and to build independent networks; they could then compete both with the official sangha and with monks from the NGO sector.

With liberalization, however, the number of mass sermons and NGOs dramatically increased. Competition for influence and donations sharpened.
Greater freedom of expression meant that monks could seek new strategies to demarcate themselves from others and to increase their following and alms.

Scapegoating, and the exploitation of majority fears against a minority, was a powerful tool because it allowed monks to position themselves as guardians of a Buddhist national identity against a perceived threat from Muslims. Social action — the formation of religiously based aid organizations and mass preaching — still formed the backbone of monks’ quest for autonomy and access to religious donations. Yet, fear created a sense of urgency cutting across partisan lines that could be much more effective. In central and northwestern Myanmar, some monks tried other means of showing their social relevance by joining protesters against copper mining operations, the pollution of rivers, and forced evictions of villagers. But they were much less capable of garnering widespread support and effectively cutting across other cleavages.

Competition and the search for influence and followers in this liberalizing context help explain the timing of large-scale support for anti-Muslim violence and some monks’ enthusiastic involvement in the 2012 Rohingya conflict. Initially related to ethnicity more than religion, monks contributed to reframing the conflict in religious terms. The 969 Movement started locally in Mawlamyine but quickly spread to every region of the country in 2012. Originally, monks used the 969 symbol in their mass sermons in response to the Number 786, a numerical representation of Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim, which identified Muslim shops and restaurants. The 969 Movement distributed stickers, flags, DVDs, and CDs and encouraged followers to “Buy Buddhist.” But when the 2012 riots against Rohingyas began in Rakhine, other monks across the country started to use the symbol as a rallying call for the defense of Buddhism. Some spread alarming messages such as “We [Buddhists] are digging our own graves,” and “we will build a fence [against Islam] with our bones.” U Wirathu, the most prominent monk associated with the 969 Movement, called on the government to expel Rohingyas and Muslims from Myanmar. He and other 969 monks often gave sermons and incited violence in areas where, a few hours later, anti-Muslim riots took place.

Using the 969 network, a number of monks convened a large monastic conference in January 2014. Around 10,000 monks attended and founded a more permanent organization called Ma Ba Tha (that is, Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). Ma Ba Tha expanded beyond the 969 Movement by combining its efforts with Buddhist NGOs involved in free funeral services, schools, welfare, and alms food circles. Its local branches provided media and law training for anti-Muslim activists, ran cultural classes and afterschool lessons for kids and published monthly magazines. Ma Ba Tha also engaged in political lobbying and worked with small political parties to introduce four bills in parliament to ban interreligious marriage,
religious conversion, polygamy, and to ensure (Muslim) population control. It circulated a petition and collected approximately 4 million signatures in support of the four bills. The latter were adopted by the parliament and received the presidential sanction only a few months before the 2015 elections.

At some level, the 969 Movement and the Ma Ba Tha could be seen as instruments of the Union Solidarity and Development Party in its bid to win the elections. Even sections of the government and the military supported 969 monks to undermine Aung San Suu Kyi’s credentials or to slow down the democratic transition. Rumors linked regime hardliners, such as Aung Thaung, to vocal anti-Muslim monks like U Wirathu. But while many members of the sangha certainly campaigned against the National League for Democracy and in support of Union Solidarity and Development Party candidates, Ma Ba Tha’s electoral support for Union Solidarity and Development Party candidates was selective. Their electoral mobilization therefore was suggestive of a temporary alliance rather than the old regime using it as its instrument.

Through its active campaigning, Ma Ba Tha certainly gained stronger influence over all parties’ agendas. If its goal was to discredit Aung San Suu Kyi’s party in the elections, it failed as the National League for Democracy won a sweeping victory. But it did manage to pressure all parties to become more anti-Muslim. In order to appease Buddhist nationalists, the National League for Democracy (like the Union Solidarity and Development Party) did not field any Muslim candidates at the regional or national levels. In addition, the government disqualified 61 candidates, under the pretext that their parents were foreign born. Of the 6,074 candidates competing in the November poll, only 28 (0.5%) were Muslims. Finally, about 700,000 temporary identification holders (white-card) holders, mostly Rohingyas, were allowed to vote in the 2010 elections. But in the months leading to the 2015 elections, the parliament amended the electoral laws to remove their voting rights, a measure later confirmed by a constitutional tribunal ruling. For the first time in the history of Myanmar, Muslims were not represented in parliament.

Links between the Union Solidarity and Development Party and some radical monks do not explain why other monks, beyond the hardliners’ own personal networks, so enthusiastically participated in anti-Muslim mobilization. The 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha were convenient tools for other entrepreneurial monks to carve out new space in a competitive field where the official sangha was still powerful and other monks also sought to increase their following. They also increased their access to religious donations. In a liberalized environment, where mass preaching was frequent and widespread, nothing rivaled the popularity that using the 969 symbol achieved. Monks became quickly popular, their status rose, and their followers increased rapidly. Thousands of people watched and followed 969 and
Ma Ba Tha monks on social media. As a result, many monks became enthusiastic supporters simply to boost their monastery’s fundraising efforts.

Despite its unitary nature, Ma Ba Tha’s structure provides opportunity for local monks to gain recognition and prestige. About 241 townships, out of a total of 330, have a registered Ma Ba Tha branch. Each branch has its own chairman, secretary, and several other positions that reward local monks by giving them organizational recognition and a label. The division of Ma Ba Tha into Upper and Lower Myanmar branches was, in itself, a way to elevate U Wirathu’s official leadership status in Mandalay, while maintaining a single organization with headquarters in Yangon.

Furthermore, Ma Ba Tha has attracted mass participation. Large numbers of people have provided material support. As Gerard McCarthy observed:

[A] notable feature of all Ma Ba Tha-aligned monasteries in Taungoo is the active role that laity play in offering their time and money for activities broadly seen to propagate and put into practice Buddhist virtues of the “value of life”, including volunteering at clinics run out of the monastery, the coordination of flood appeals, or teaching at, cooking for, or managing Dhamma schools.

Other monks received land or money to open new schools or clinics. For instance, in 2016, Ma Ba Tha opened a five-story school in the outskirts of Yangon on 5.7 acres of land donated to the organization. Monasteries associated with the movement opened community centers and a Sunday-school program said to reach around 60,000 children nationwide.

Finally, Ma Ba Tha even obtained de facto and explicit support from some of the Supreme Sangha Council’s leaders, in spite of lacking their official endorsement. Even otherwise moderate monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw and Galon Ni Sayadaw, who regularly participate in interreligious dialogue or preach peace and tolerance, also joined the movement. Others chose to remain silent in order to avoid dispute or public disgrace as opposing Ma Ba Tha became synonymous with opposing Buddhism. For instance, when a coalition of 180 NGOs opposed the interfaith marriage bill, Ma Ba Tha unequivocally condemned them as traitors on national affairs.

In sum, beyond the genuine, widespread belief that monks needed to defend Buddhism, Ma Ba Tha and 969 were instrumental in a broader competition for popularity, social ascendancy, and access to donations. By scapegoating the Muslim minority, Ma Ba Tha and 969 monks cut across other social or political divisions and were able to reconfigure the political environment. They challenged the authority of the Supreme Sangha Council by creating a mass organization without its official endorsement, “an act of remarkable independence.” Ma Ba Tha became so strong that “the [Council] could not afford a direct confrontation with a segment of monks
that [...] had significant and widespread popular support."\textsuperscript{101} Ma Ba Tha monks, in turn, also avoided a direct confrontation with the council despite mounting tensions.

When the council later distanced itself and declared 969 illegal, many monks rejected the ban and U Wirathu, again speaking in the name of 969, called the council undemocratic.\textsuperscript{102} When the council publicly reaffirmed its distance in 2016, U Wirathu denounced it once more for lacking legitimacy and being controlled by the government. Nevertheless, over the course of the following months, Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement lost some of their appeal, and more monks dared to publicly condemn their activities. In spite of a resurgence of conflict against the Rohingyas in Rakhine state, there was little evidence of Ma Ba Tha, 969, or other monks resorting to previous scapegoating strategies against Muslims more broadly.

**CONCLUSION: SCAPEGOATING AS COMPETITIVE STRATEGY**

In this article, we have argued that scapegoating is a neglected but important aspect of explaining religious leaders’ participation in antiminority movements. Religious leaders tap into deep-seated resentment or fear of minorities for their self-interest.

Monks in Myanmar participated on several occasions in political mobilization, including antiregime mobilization and scapegoating against minorities. We have shown that, in both cases, they did so when their status, power, or even material interests were challenged at times of rapid political change. In the 1920s, 1988, and 2007, monks allied with lay social leaders to openly confront the colonial and authoritarian regimes. During these periods, they held important leadership roles.

In the 1930s and 1940s and since 2010, however, the emergence of new social and political elites caused a relative decline in the monks’ prestige and status. During these two periods, some monks used scapegoating strategies to extend their influence and to acquire autonomy from the state’s officially sanctioned organizations.

Two conditions make scapegoating strategies more likely. First, decentralized religions, such as Buddhism, foster a multiplicity of organizations, with each claiming to speak on behalf of the whole community. Religious leaders often depend on their followers to retain their leadership role, to enhance their influence, and to obtain funds for their survival. Decentralized religions are thus particularly conducive to intrareligious competition in the absence of a common political opponent, such as a colonial regime or an authoritarian government. Also, in decentralized religions, no official religious authority or other form of in-group policing has the power to implement control and reduce the influence of radicals. The Supreme Sangha Council
precisely aimed at structuring and policing the sangha. However, it came so closely associated with the authoritarian regime that, lacking legitimacy, it was unable to cooperate with moderate leaders and to tame more radical ones. Ma Ba Tha was created in spite of the Supreme Sangha Council’s ban of the 969 movement, with which it had close affinities.

Second, when the political environment liberalizes, religious leaders might use scapegoating as a means to increase their legitimacy and power. When facing an authoritarian regime, they can yield much social influence and enhance their leadership role by building large coalitions of monks and attracting vast popular support to mobilize against oppression. But such strategy is lost when a regime liberalizes. To stimulate alternative networks and to build up or retain influence, some monks tap into discontent, misperceptions, prejudice, and suspicion aimed at a vulnerable minority such as Muslims in Myanmar; they offer legitimacy to antiminority mobilization, to the majority claims that are made, as well as to solutions that they often propose. Through this process, religious leaders seek to regain influence and to strengthen their base of power.

Monks’ participation in antiminority mobilization in Myanmar, as elsewhere, requires explanation because they often wield broad social influence and can legitimize political action. Deep-seated resentment against Rohingyas and Muslims certainly fueled much of the violent mobilization after 2012 but religious leaders played a crucial role in legitimizing and expanding the mobilization beyond the Rakhine state. They turned a relatively localized conflict into a broader, anti-Muslim one. We contend that part of these actions, as evidenced in previous involvement in mobilization, requires that we analyze how some monks act opportunistically or defensively to also serve their interests, to gain influence, to increase their following, as well as to seek new donations through such political acts. Minorities become scapegoats in the quest to satisfy those interests.

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NOTES

1. In this article, we use both Myanmar and Burma, reflecting the country’s official change of name in 1989. We use Myanmar post-1989.


5. The authors conducted research and interviews in Myanmar in 2014 and 2015. The research design is comparative and diachronic.


19. Ibid., 325.


28. Ibid., 12.


36. Ibid., 416.


40. Ibid., 231.


43. Kawanani, “Charisma, Power(s), and the Arahant Ideal,” 214.

44. Matthews, “Buddhism Under a Military Regime,” 419.


48. Ibid., 39.


52. Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma and Social Order*, 84.


64. Ibid., 36–37.


70. The term Sāsana is used by Buddhists to refer to their religion and its teaching and doctrine. See Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255, 238.


74. Matthews, “Buddhism Under a Military Regime,” 34.


76. Larsson, “Monkish Politics in Southeast Asia,” 60.


78. Ibid., 353.


80. Authors’ Interview, Sai Ya Kyaw Swar Myint (People’s Alliance for Credible Elections), June 2015, Yangon, Myanmar.


82. Ibid., 16.


84. The origin of the use of a numerical representation of “Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim” on shops in Myanmar is unclear. The use of the Abjad numeral system is not unique to Myanmar. If it is not a universally accepted practice by all Muslims, it is quite common in South Asia. It is believed that this numerical representation originated from a desire to avoid writing the name of God, or other verse of the Qur’an, on material that can become unclean. It is not clear whether this practice by Myanmar Muslims responded to government regulations or to social pressure regarding the public display of their Islamic identity.


91. Authors’ interview, Ma Ba Tha activist, 24 June 2015, Insein, Myanmar.

92. Authors’ interview, U Tilawka, 26 June 2015, Insein, Myanmar.

93. Authors’ interview, Young Ma Ba Tha Monk, 29 June 2015, Yangon, Myanmar.


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