

Report

Muslim Minorities in Peril: The Rise of Buddhist Violence in Asia

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Some 140,000 people, mainly Rohingya, have been trapped in grim displacement camps since they were driven from their homes by waves of violence between Buddhists and minority Muslims four years ago [Reuters]

Abstract

A xenophobic revival of Buddhist nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka has threatened the well-being of Muslim minorities. Violence against the minority group has resulted in hundreds of Muslims dead and thousands displaced from their homes, languishing in refugee camps. This paper will attempt to identify those responsible for the recent backlash in these Buddhist-majority nations and to examine the role played by local and foreign governments.

Introduction

In June 2012, an outbreak of violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state of Burma led by saffron-clothed monks showed the world that some Buddhists had a darker side. Buddhists are generally viewed as the least violent of people, especially when compared to their monotheistic contemporaries.⁽¹⁾

Provoked by Buddhist monks, the violence resulted in dozens of mostly Muslim people killed and over two thousand homes destroyed, the majority of them belonging to the Rohingya Muslim community. Since then other Buddhist nationalist organizations have emerged in Buddhist-majority nations such as Sri Lanka, stoking anti-Muslim sentiment in the region.

This report will explore the increasing violence against Muslim minorities by the Buddhist majority in the past few years, using Burma and Sri Lanka as case studies. It will focus on the main actors involved in the conflict and their objectives, their association with their respective governments, and the response of the international community to this surge in xenophobic Buddhist nationalism across Asia.

Buddhist violence in Burma

Buddhist-Rohingya Conflict

Although the violence in Rakhine in 2012 besieged all Muslim communities, the primary target was the Rohingya, who consist of 4% of the total population and are the largest Muslim group in the state.(2),(3) According to human rights organizations, the Rohingya are one of the most persecuted populations in the world. The group is not recognized as an official ethnic entity in Burma, despite the Rohingya presence dating back to the 15th century.(4)

Tensions between the Rohingya and the Buddhists in Arakan can be traced back to as early as the 19th century, back to the period of British colonialism when labourers from neighbouring India and Bangladesh were encouraged to move in to work on fertile lands – especially those from close by Chittagong.(5) The animosity between the two groups continued well into the 20th century.

Matters got worse for the Rohingya when the military took over in 1962(6). In 1978 the military government led violent campaign in Arakan to push out Rohingya insurgents resulting in over 200,000 Rohingya being displaced, many seeking refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh.(7) In 1982 the Rohingya were officially declared as illegals and remain so to this day, whilst also facing periodic violence over the following few decades.

The past four years have arguably been the worst period in Buddhist-Muslim relations in recent memory. Following the first outbreak of violence in June, on October the 23rd Buddhist mobs attacked Muslim towns and villages in Rakhine displacing approximately 22,000 people (mainly Rohingya), and inflicting eighty casualties including seventy Rohingya Muslims in a Rakhine township.(8) Based on numerous interviews from Muslim and non-Muslim victims who fled the violence in Rakhine, the report concludes there was little doubt that the violence was planned and organized by Buddhist monks and 'local Arakan political party operatives' who were in some instances supported directly by the state's security forces.(9) Since June, the total number of people displaced is estimated to be 125,000.(10)

Several clashes between the Buddhists and Muslims have occurred since then, most notably in March 2013 when forty people were killed after an argument broke out in a gold shop, which then led to whole neighbourhoods being razed.(11) In June 2014, rumours spread through a Facebook post that a Muslim man had raped a Buddhist woman in Mandalay, leading to riots and the destruction of Muslim businesses, which left two people dead.

Due to being constant victims of violence and displacement, leading human rights organizations have called the treatment of Burmese Muslims, especially of the Rohingya Muslims, an ongoing ethnic cleansing project.

969 Movement

Leading the charge against the Rohingya and Burmese Muslims are the ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks who have become the face of the riots and violence in Rakhine. They enjoy a large following throughout the country.(12) The 969 movement first came to national prominence after the 2011 elections in which the first democratic government was elected after nearly 50 years of military rule.(13) The group which posits itself as grassroots and non-violent has been roundly accused of using the language of ethnic cleansing and have been described as 'Burma's fastest-growing neo-Nazi 'Buddhist' nationalist movement'. The group's large public gatherings, frequent media appearances and religious conferences have put them in the spotlight.

The movement, whose headquarters are located in the monastery in Moulmein in southern Burma, has one objective: curbing the alleged spread of Muslim influence in the country that is supposedly undermining the Buddhist character of Burma. As a result, they oppose mixed marriages between Muslims and Buddhists and encourage the boycotting of Muslim businesses.

The most prominent figure leading the movement is Ashin Wirathu, a controversial monk who is known as the 'Burmese Bin Laden'(14). Prior to taking a leading role in the 969 movement, the military government jailed Wirathu in 2003 for 25 years for his role in inciting anti-Muslim hatred. Wirathu was released nine years later in 2012 as a new civilian-led administration came to power.(15)

During the 2012 riots and violence, he became the face of the movement with his inflammatory speeches. Professor Ronan Lee at Deakin University asserts that in the aftermath of the democratic transition, media reforms and liberalization has afforded Wirathu and others the means to spread their message more widely.(16) Wirathu's speeches and sermons are readily accessible on social media channels such as Facebook and YouTube.(17)

"We are being raped in every town, being sexually harassed in every town, being ganged up on and bullied in every town," Wirathu said to the Guardian in 2013 in an interview from his home monastery in Mandalay.(18) Furthermore, he said, "In every town, there is a crude and savage Muslim majority." Wirathu has also called for the Buddhist majority to boycott Muslim-owned businesses. "Your purchases spent in their shops will benefit the enemy," Wirathu said in a 2013 YouTube video.(19) "So do business with

only shops with 969 signs," he added. 969 is a religious counter symbol to the popular Islam-based 786 signs regularly used by Muslim business owners.

Such incitement and violence against Muslims in the past has some analysts, including Holocaust researchers, suggesting a prelude to genocide in the country is already in place.(20)

Burmese Government: Links with the 969 Movement

Many human rights groups have condemned the Burmese government. These groups have accused the previous administration of facilitating the violence against Muslims by Buddhist mobs.

Whilst the former Sein government did not explicitly endorse the 969, some state officials have professed support for the two anti-Muslim groups. In an interview with Reuters, former religious minister Saan Sint said, "Wirathu's sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions".(21) Furthermore, he added, "It is impossible he is inciting religious violence." Sint also admitted that he found no issues with the call to boycott Muslim businesses. "We are now practicing market economics," he said. "Nobody can stop that. It is up to the consumers."

The report contends that the origins of the movement can be 'traced back to an official' in the former dictatorship preceding the government of Thein Sein. The report asserts that the 969 also enjoys the support of some of the members of the incumbent government of the National League for Democracy, the party of Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

The controversial 'interfaith marriage bill' was passed by the Burmese parliament in June 2015 and signed in August(22); it comprises of a set of four laws supported by the 969 movement. According to the law titled 'Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law', Buddhist women under the age of twenty were to obtain their parents' permission when choosing to marry a non-Buddhist man. Phil Robertson, deputy director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch said, "They set out the potential for discrimination on religious grounds and pose the possibility for serious communal tension".(23)

For many the biggest disappointment has been the relative silence of Kyi, the leader of the NLD. Kyi, hailed a champion in the west, has been relatively quiet on the Rohingya issue, offering vague condemnations during her stint as opposition leader in the last government. During her party's run for election in 2015, she banned any Muslims running on the party platform, a move that made the NLD the first party in Burma's political history to have no Muslims running for political office.(24)

In June this year, Suu Kyi rejected the use of the term Rohingya, a move most likely calculated to please nationalists in her government.(25) This step is, however, unlikely to calm the tense relations with the country's Muslim population, while it further discredits the Burmese government and its most celebrated personality, Suu Kyi.

International Response

In the west, the treatment of the Rohingya and Muslims in Burma has not received the level of urgent attention that would be expected.(26) Aside from statements condemning the treatment of Rohingya and Muslims in Burma from President Obama and the US State Department, there has been no firm action to push the Burmese government into a response.

Suu Kyi's muted reaction to the crisis has not been addressed by her supporters in the west, for whom she was a key player in their efforts to push Burma towards democracy. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton credits herself in playing an important role in helping Burma transition to democracy, citing Suu Kyi as an ally.(27) Clinton praised Suu Kyi after her party won the 2015 elections, without requesting Suu Kyi to do more on the Rohingya issue and without challenging her ban on Muslims from running on the NLD platform.(28)

Since they are taking credit for Suu Kyi's success, it is unsurprising that the US and other western nations have been cautious about putting consistent pressure on the ruling government to address the issue more actively.

Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka

Violence Against Muslims

In June 2014, four people were killed and eighty injured in an outbreak of violence in the highly-Muslim populated towns of Beruwala and Aluthgama after some Muslim youth were accused of attacking a Buddhist monk's driver.(29) After the incident, Buddhist nationalists such as the BBS rallied through Muslim cities, which led to violence and a subsequent curfew installed by the government. According to some eyewitnesses, Muslims were pulled from local buses and beaten.(30) During the two-day episode, sixty homes and Muslim businesses were destroyed.

These events are only the latest in a rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka's political history. Muslims make up approximately 8% of Sri Lanka's population.(31) In 2011, a group of Buddhist monks destroyed a 300-year-old Muslim shrine.(32) The monk who led the destruction said the land had been given to Sinhalese Buddhists over 2000 years ago. As early as 1915, riots against Muslims led by Buddhist nationalists resulted in a familiar scenario as witnessed in 2014, where the main targets of the rioting and looting

were Muslim shopkeepers and businesses. The Muslims were denounced as 'alien' to the island country and they were accused by Buddhist nationalist leaders and monks of exploiting 'illiterate villagers'.(33)

Bodu Bala Sena

Registered as a non-profit and identifying as a non-violent organization, the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) is led by Buddhist monks who parted ways from Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), another Buddhist monk-led political group.(34) The group arguably first received worldwide attention during the riots of 2013, and was criticized for playing a chief role in inciting anti-Muslim hatred. Similar to the methods of the 969 in Burma, the BBS has organized public rallies and conferences to grow its support, and also relied on the extensive use of social media.(35)

Based in the Sambuddha Jayanthi Mandira, a Buddhist cultural center in the capital Colombo(36), the group has advocated a ban on burqas, hijabs, Halal certification and Muslim family planning. The group has previously attacked the Christian minority as well, but appears to have a special focus on Muslims – a mere 10% of the population(37).

The face of the movement is Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara, co-founder and current Secretary General of the BBS.(38) In a public rally attended by 16,000 people, Gnanasara spoke of the 'Sinhala Buddhist' nature of the government and that 'democratic and pluralistic values' were a threat to the 'Sinhala race'. He encouraged the crowd to be 'an unofficial civilian police force against Muslim extremism'.(39) Gnanasara has previously stated that Sri Lanka faces a threat from 'Islamic' terrorism, an accusation mirroring the War on Terror narrative made popular since the 9/11 attacks.(40) This is seen as a ploy to attract sympathies abroad from the west and regionally where many countries employ such language in their own struggles against Muslims locally and abroad.

Collusion with the State – Association with the BBS

It was widely believed the previous government of Mahinda Rajapakse tacitly supported the BBS until its removal from power this year.(41) Defense Secretary Goatabhaya Rajapakse, the former President's brother, has attended BBS events including the opening of a BBS-formed Buddhist academy.(42)

During the violent episodes in 2014, no action against the BBS leadership was taken, thereby fuelling speculations of a possible collusion between the state and BBS. Some assert that the former government had remained cautious of outright condemnation of the BBS in order to not lose favour amongst the Buddhist majority of the country. This

interest-based politics and capitulation will only strengthen organizations like the BBS and its support base.

International Response

There has been little concern in the west regarding the increasing hostilities against Muslims in Sri Lanka. Unlike Burma, large-scale displacement of Muslims has not occurred. Furthermore, while Muslims have faced discrimination at the state level, Sri Lanka has largely remained for most of its history a pluralistic society. It has not seen the type of contentious and divisive legislation of the kind proposed in Burma, where the treatment of the country's Muslims in society and at the government level has been far more troublesome. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka's brutal 26-year civil war should be a reminder of the consequences of chauvinistic Buddhist nationalism, which resulted in thousands of deaths.

From Burma to Sri Lanka: does a link exist?

Differing local context in the birth of political movements (in this case fundamentalist Buddhist movements) is likely to result in notable differences in the activities of groups such as the Burmese 969 and the Sri Lankan BBS. However, when considering their almost simultaneous rise on the international stage, there are stark similarities in their political ideologies and strategies.⁽⁴³⁾ Both groups have consistently conflated their nation states with the Buddhist religion (the majority faith in the two countries) and both groups perpetuate the notion of a religious nationalist identity that they claim is under threat uniquely from Muslims.

Hence it is no surprise that the leaders of the two groups have reached out to one another. In September 2014, Wirathu attended a BBS conference in Colombo where he and Gnanasara signed an agreement (ironically) to protect the region from terrorism.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In 2015 the BBS leadership reiterated their desire to create an 'Asian alliance' to maintain peace in the region and to protect Buddhism, presumably from Muslims.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Conclusion

Religion has always been a cloak used throughout history to justify unspeakable crimes, whether it be in the name of Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. The incitement and violence against Muslims in Buddhist-majority countries like Burma and Sri Lanka is a stark reminder of what xenophobic provocation can lead to; the pogroms of Pol Pot and the Nazi Holocaust are two recent examples. Considering the strength of groups like the 969 and the BBS, and the seemingly helpless and often sympathetic nature of the state, future violence is likely to endure.

The international community must therefore be blunter in its criticism of the countries in question, especially of Burma, which is facing a devastating situation where thousands are fleeing across dangerous waters in search of refuge, away from a place they have called home for centuries. The Burmese and Sri Lankan governments have recently emerged from a long and tumultuous period in their history. A breakdown in relations with their most vulnerable minorities will serve neither country well in their stated quest to be a more democratic and peaceful society.

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