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RADICAL BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN MYANMAR: ROOTS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

Abstract

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian country with exceptional ethnic diversity, is a classic example and strong footprint of Buddhist radical movements. Over time, the doctrine of “us versus them” has dominated the politics of Myanmar, where the Bamar nationalism aims to “protect and promote” the Buddhist land from “foreign” incursions. Radical nationalist monks spurred aggression and violent acts toward people of different religions. Against this backdrop, the present study is an endeavour to understand the roots, transformations and political impacts of Buddhist radicalism in Myanmar. The study finds that after the British occupation of Myanmar, the Buddhist monks found their race and religion under threat and the first anti-British movements started by them. They were also against Indian immigrants in Myanmar. However, after the country’s independence in 1948, there was a strong influence of Buddhist monks to ensure supremacy in the constitution of Myanmar and they were very vocal about expelling foreign immigrants from the country. In the recent years, the newly emerged Buddhist movements, i. e., Ma Ba Tha and the Movement 969, have developed new narratives identifying the Muslims as a threat to the security of their state and religion. While tolerance is one of the core values of the Buddhist religion, the radical groups developed a narrative that has affected Myanmar’s socio-political sphere and has led the country towards violence and conflict. They have made substantial impacts in the political sphere of the country and influenced the government to develop anti-minority laws.

Keywords: Radical Buddhism, Myanmar, Ma Ba Tha, Movement 969, Political Impact

1. Introduction

Myanmar is a nation with unique ethnic diversity. The majority of the population is Burmese, accounting for over half of the people. According to a 2014 Census, Myanmar is home to 9 per cent Shan, 4 per cent Rakhine, 7 per cent Karen, 2 per cent Indian, 3 per cent Chinese, 2 per cent Mon, and 5 per cent other ethnic groups.¹ This diverse ethnicity in Myanmar is, however, inextricably linked to ethnic conflicts. Throughout the early post-independence period, battles between the state and non-state armed actors were primarily motivated by ethnic tensions, minority concerns and ideological disagreement dominated by majoritarian Burmese-Buddhist nationalism. Over time, the doctrine of “us versus

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¹ “Census Atlas Myanmar,” 2014, accessed February 13, 2022, https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MyanmarCensusAtlas_lowres.pdf.

them” has dominated the politics of Myanmar, where the Bamar nationalism aims to “protect and promote” the Buddhist land from “foreign” incursions.²

The state and non-state armed groups have used Buddhism throughout the history of Myanmar to foster national identity. The monastic community of Buddhism, or *Sangha*, has a symbiotic relationship with the state. This does not mean, however, that they are or will be considered allies.³ If the power is secular, it is conceivable that the *Sangha* will face trouble. Likewise, if the government is seen to be corrupt and incapable of meeting public demands, the *Sangha* intervenes. This constant state of careful negotiation is deeply embedded in the political history of the country. In Myanmar, monks have always been politically involved.⁴ The British administration, *Sangha* believed, was the “End of Days.” Zibani Sayadaw wrote a poem —“No more the Royal Umbrella. No more the Royal Palace. And the Royal City, no more. This is indeed an Age of Nothingness. It would be better if we were dead.”⁵ Throughout its history, the symbiotic nexus between the monks and rulers in the political system of Myanmar continued to prevail and shaped the political contours in Myanmar.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates both the elements that lead to radicalisation and the dynamics of radicalisation in Myanmar. Additionally, this paper discusses the role and political impacts of the most significant radical Buddhist movements, namely Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movements. In this backdrop, the paper is divided into five sections, including the introduction and conclusion. The second section is dedicated to examining the colonial roots of the radical Buddhist thoughts in Myanmar. Third section deals with the drivers and motivations behind violent activities of Buddhist radical thoughts in the country. The fourth section elaborates on the political demands of radical Buddhist organisations and the last section intends to examine the political repercussions of these demands on Myanmar’s political landscape.

2. Colonial Legacy and the Radical Buddhist Movements in Myanmar

The British took complete control of Burma in 1885 following the third Anglo-Burmese war. They then deposed the throne and annexed Burma to the British Indian colony.⁶ In Mandalay, the monarchy collapsed, thereby putting an end to a thousand-year-old dynasty of royal Buddhist patronage.⁷ Traditionally, the monarch was the primary sponsor of monasteries and the Buddha’s teachings. The latter was jeopardised as a result of this invasion. During the British colonial rule, Burmese society, especially the Buddhists, faced tremendous moral and culture shock. The colonial regime took control of the economy and withdrew state support from monasteries. This came as a surprise since monasteries

² Fred Von Der Mehden, “Buddhism and Politics in Burma,” *The Antioch Review* 21, no. 2 (1961): 166, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4610325>.

³ Michael Jerryson, “Buddhists and Violence: Historical Continuity/Academic Incongruities,” *Religion Compass* 9, no. 5 (May 2015): 141-50.

⁴ Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (May 2017): 376-95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1290818>.

⁵ Mehden, “Buddhism and Politics in Burma.”

⁶ Charles Keyes, “Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 4 (October, 2016): 41-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1248497>.

⁷ Jerryson, “Buddhists and Violence: Historical Continuity/Academic Incongruities.”

depended on these governmental subsidies and local contributions to continue.⁸ Consequently, the monks struggled to fund their daily operations. The communities suffered a great deal as a result of the tumultuous times and uncertainty. Additionally, the British maintained a separation between religion and government. Burmese monks saw this as a direct challenge to Buddha's teachings. They became adamant about reinforcing common cultural and religious perspectives on correct behaviour and good manners. Between 1890 and 1920, a plethora of Buddhist organisations were founded. This was done to safeguard Buddha's teachings by halting the purported degeneration of Burma's language and culture and conserving Burma's language and culture. Among them, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), founded in 1906, was by far the most influential.

The British were well aware of the importance of monks in Burmese politics. As a consequence, they started to seize them and their authority over the rest of the populace. This was done to westernise Burma's educational system and to distort the country's religious practices. The colonial administration, thus, encouraged young monks to embrace reforms in politics and communal life. Additionally, the colonial masters prohibited the same monks from engaging in nationalist activities in order to prevent them from developing into an independent political force capable of challenging the British rule. Henceforth, a significant number of young men abandoned monasteries as European culture expanded and enrolled in government schools since office employment provided a more lucrative career opportunity. The colonial administration also brought a schism between the *Sangha*, economy, and the state. When the British came to Burma, they were hesitant to follow the monarchy's lead in promoting Burma's royal, cultural, religious, and political traditions, emphasising the need for redistribution to establish its economy. Supply and demand were frequently ignored due to government's price control in the simplest of situations. However, following the advent of the British Raj, Burma's economy became more entwined with Western colonial companies over time, wreaking havoc on the nation. A century-old economic framework that benefitted the Burmese people was dismantled under British colonial rule in Burma.⁹

In the meantime, however, many Indians started to migrate to Burma in order to settle in the region, which fuelled local hostility between the sons of the soils and British-sponsored migrants. Anti-Indian riots broke out in 1930 due to a labour dispute at Yangon port. Following a walkout by Indian port workers, the British Firm, Stevedores sought to break the strike by employing migrants. When the Indian employees learned they would be laid off, they returned to work, and the Stevedores laid off the freshly hired Burmese staff. As Burmese employees accused Indian workers of being guilty of their job losses, a scuffle occurred. Authorities utilised section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code to open fire on armed protestors who refused to lay down their weapons. The riots spread rapidly throughout Burma, primarily targeting Indians and Muslims. Anti-Muslim riots erupted in Burma once again in 1938. Moshe Yegar believes that the riots were framed as anti-Muslim in order to avoid a harsh reaction from the British. Despite this, the British government took action in response to the 'rebellions.' Thus,

⁸ Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁹ "Myanmar-The Initial Impact of Colonialism," Britannica, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar/The-initial-impact-of-colonialism>.

Buddhist-Burmese nationalism was ignited by stoking anti-Muslim and anti-British sentiments.¹⁰

Following a marketplace dispute between Indians and Burmese, another brawl erupted. During the “Burma for Burmese” campaign, a violent gathering occurred in Surti Bazaar, a Muslim neighbourhood. Three monks were injured when police officers of Indian ethnicity attempted to disperse the protest. Photographs of monks being attacked by police officers of Indian heritage were published in Burmese media, causing outrage. Muslim-owned property, such as companies and residences, were taken. According to official figures, 204 Muslims were killed, another 1,000 were wounded, and 113 mosques were damaged. The British Governor established a Inquiry Committee to investigate the events of 22 September 1938.¹¹ It was established that the degradation of Burmese socio-political and economic situations was the basis of dissatisfaction. The Burmese media used this information to incite sectarianism. To add fuel to the already burning unrest, a Buddhist monk published a fierce letter in the Sun newspaper, stating Buddhist women were marrying Muslims. Under the customary laws, the mixed religion children were losing their religion as well as their ethnic identity.

Buddhists and Muslims both struggled with their religious identities throughout the colonial times. The Arakanese Muslims opted to support the British side in the Second World War for materialising their demand, whilst the Barmars supported Imperial Japan and viewed this posture of the Rohingya Muslims as one of the biggest threats to the unity of Myanmar. Growing hostility towards the Muslims, therefore, prevailed throughout the post-independence period. The Buddhist rage rose exponentially when General Ne Win took over the country following the 1962 coup.¹² Yet, the military instantly ran into problems with market control and economic function due to its socialist ideology. To push a discriminatory development agenda, the Junta administration divided the country into seven ethnic groups. As a result, the state became a home only for the majority-Buddhist populace. Then, following the fallouts of Ne Win’s government, countrywide protests broke out and the military established the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). However, when the SPDC came to power, it did the same thing by dividing the country and stirring up resentment towards the country’s ethnic minority by cashing on the Bamar-Buddhist nationalism.¹³

Although the decades of military rule came to an end in 2011, the legacy of radical Buddhism continues to haunt the political, social, and economic life of Myanmar. Faced with an “Islamic menace”, the current Myanmar government’s readiness to institutionalise Buddhism’s “protection”, as well as its seeming aggression in combating the “Muslim” threat in Rakhine, is a point of contention.

¹⁰ Egreteau Renaud, “Burma (Myanmar) 1930-2007,” *SciencesPo*, October 19, 2009, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/burma-myanmar-1930-2007.html>.

¹¹ C D Cowan, “Moshe Yegar: The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group (Schriftenreihe Des Südasiens-Instituts Der Universität Heidelberg),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38, no. 2 (June, 1975): 486-87.

¹² S M Anisuz Zaman, “The Rise of Mono-Ethnic Religious Nationalism in Myanmar and Its Impacts on the Security Situation of the South Asian Region,” MS Thesis, Portland State University Conflict Resolution Program, 2020, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7309>.

¹³ A R M Intiyaz, “Buddhism and Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka Politicization, Tensions and de-Politicization of Buddhism,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 3 (May 2013): 315-31.

Rakhine has historically functioned as an interface for Buddhists and Muslims alike, a practice that continues today. As a result of colonial-era South Asian migration, an economic connection formed, and it still exists today, represented by a commercial class of dealers with extensive cross-border connections. In Myanmar, the 969-boycott movement is based on the belief that Muslim-owned businesses conduct business exclusively with other Muslim-owned businesses, sharing market access and finance primarily within their religious groups. According to the majority of religious nationalists, human rights activities promote Islam by encouraging religious tolerance. This highlights the diametrical opposition between global and local attitudes of Muslims, particularly the Rohingya. When it comes to democratic pluralism, many Burman Buddhists fear that official policy announcements cede cultural and political influence to a militant religious minority that would adopt legislation enshrining its religious convictions if given the opportunity.¹⁴

This is because globalisation hastened the development of nationalist narratives, rumours (of Muslim sexual assault on Buddhist women), and hate speech.¹⁵ A few drivers such as economic and cultural anxieties, demographic fears, and regional dynamics impact these pervasive senses. For instance, following the introduction of a hybrid regime in Myanmar, Buddhist-Muslim riots began in 2012 in Rakhine State and extended to other parts of the country the following year, causing the United Nations (UN) to denounce the violence. Numerous Buddhist nationalist and anti-Muslim monastic organisations were founded to protect their region from an “ever-growing” Muslim population (4.3 per cent).¹⁶ When monks were accused of providing anti-Muslim teachings, they maintained that they had committed no such acts. These events must be seen in the context of Burma’s openness, embrace of liberal capitalism, modernisation, democratic ideals, expansion of globalisation, and the country’s fear of radical Islam, to mention a few reasons.

3. The Ideological Roots of Radical Buddhist Movements in Myanmar

Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar is centred on the promotion of Buddhism and the preservation of Myanmar’s Buddhist-Burmese culture. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between political and non-political nationalist conduct in this context.¹⁷ Buddhist scholars try to present themselves as devoid of religious orthodoxy. Western writers try to mirror these sentiments, such as dogmatism, violence, and fundamentalism. Buddhism is the way to go when it simmers down to modernism and compassion. Religious leaders claim it to be a religion that has the cleanest slate otherwise. This knowledge explains why the recent issues in Myanmar provoke such widespread outrage and dismay.

Regardless of what scriptures or parts of scriptures are being used to support the violent activities in Myanmar, it is necessary to look for the origins which have divided the core textual traditions. Buddhist monks in Myanmar struggle with a

¹⁴ Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*.

¹⁵ Keyes, “Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism.”

¹⁶ Schissler, Walton and Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions.”

¹⁷ Adam Simpson and Nicholas Farrelly, *Myanmar: Politics, Economy and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

broad sense of religious superiority.¹⁸ This notion is based upon an alleged scientific resemblance that religion is rational, compassionate, beneficial to mankind, and better. Since it is perceived to be a better religion, it has become an essential part of Myanmar's national identity. The monks go to war, discriminate others, and commit atrocities contrary to what Buddha taught.¹⁹ Dhamma has fundamental goodness, from which the monks take high pride. It must be noted that Buddhist canons have enough credos that forewarn us about such attitudes. However, history shows that there is support whenever individuals take a strong sense of pride in their tradition. When a culture prioritises compassion, Buddhism, and tradition over other values, intolerance in Buddhism emerges.²⁰

Following the translation of the Buddhist Chronicles, particularly the *Mahavamsa* became a critical source for the twentieth-century integration of Buddhist cosmological imagination and new nationalism. Following a protracted battle with the evil (Tamil) King Ela ra, a Buddhist King named Duhagmin expelled the Tamils from his kingdom in the second century BC. Numerous sources assert that Duhagmin's story is true. This is how Dhammarajas, or righteous kings, are depicted in Buddhist mythology throughout the ages, fighting demons and defending Buddhism. According to some, Ma Ra's attack on Buddha before his enlightenment is a metaphor for what happened to him previously. It occurred after the Earth Goddess wrung her wet hair and the ensuing flood destroyed Ma Ra's evil army. Ma ra and his army were annihilated (teachings of the Buddha and the teachings of the Buddha). Ela ra was given to Duhagmin after he killed his adversary, according to Deegalle²¹, a Sinhala monk. Deegalle expressed Duhagmin's regret and returned Ela ra to him. Duhagmin was consoled by the monks, who explained that killing an "evil unbeliever" in the final rites was no worse than killing a "good unbeliever", because both were evil. The *Mahavamsa* does not adhere to the principle of nonviolence, which states that murdering any sentient being is wrong and incompatible with metta (literally, "loving-kindness"). It is preferable to kill animals than to harm them.²²

During colonial rule, Buddhism became the central tenet of ethnic Burman nationalism, playing a role in identity politics. Monks believed the colonial order was morally wrong and thus believed it was appropriate for them to engage in political activities to prevent the external invasion of religious and secular values. Soon after the independence of Myanmar in 1948, the first Prime Minister of independent Burma U Nu made Buddhism the official state religion in an attempt to atone for the country's treatment by the colonial order.²³ However, U Nu infuriated the young monks by granting religious minorities the same rights as citizens. On 02 October 1961, the Union Parliament enacted, and President Mahn Win Maung signed the State Religion Promotion Act, establishing Buddhism as

¹⁸ Keyes, "Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism."

¹⁹ Christopher James Downs, "The Deconstruction and Rise of Radical Buddhism," *Perspectives of Innovations: Economics and Business* 17, no. 1 (2017), accessed March 26, 2022, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA571516092&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=18040519&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon-89eb20f8>.

²⁰ Susan Hayward, "The Double-Edged Sword of 'Buddhist Democracy' in Myanmar," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 25-35.

²¹ Jerryson, "Buddhists and Violence: Historical Continuity/Academic Incongruities."

²² Mikael Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities," *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1 (January, 2015): 1-27.

²³ Marie Eve Reny, "Myanmar's Transition and the Resurgence of Buddhist Nationalism: How Incumbents Seek to Hold on to Power," *Asian Survey* 60, no. 6 (2020): 1072-89.

the state religion. There was a moratorium on livestock slaughter, the introduction of *Uposatha* days as public holidays, and the commuting of certain death sentences, among new measures. Many Buddhist monks disapproved of Buddhist women marrying Muslims or in mixed marriages. Simultaneously, the military initiated an operation against the communists by depicting the communists as the “non-believers” in God. Even after Ne Win deposed U Nu as Prime Minister in 1962, he continued to prevail with Buddhism as the cornerstone of his nationhood. According to state-run media, military leaders were photographed visiting monasteries and making donations to the monks. Through *Dhammantarayā* (“Buddhism in Danger”) and public forums, the military promoted Buddhism in danger throughout its ruling years.

Interestingly, Myanmar’s population has developed a heightened awareness of regional and global trends. Religious ties to Sri Lanka and concerns about a global “Islamist terrorist” threat and acceptance of the concept of defensive violence have bolstered nationalist narratives. Myanmar nationalists think that due to the essence of Islam and its worldwide spread, the Muslim minority is the ultimate invader. Similar anti-Muslim efforts may be seen in Sri Lanka, another *Theravāda* nation. In the early twentieth century, Sinhala-Buddhist groups such as the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) and Sinhala nationalist politicians fought to elevate Buddhism to official religious status. It is worth noting that neither the Ceylon National Congress, which was founded in 1919 to press colonial rulers for “long-delayed constitutional reforms”, nor Ceylon’s political elites have expressed an interest in associating the island with the concept of a Sinhala Buddhist state at this time.

Following independence, Sinhala nationalism, based on Buddhism, influenced Sri Lankan politics. For decades, Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka have pleaded with the government to protect Buddhism. Bandaranayake joined these organisations in the mid-1950s for political purposes and was elected President of Sri Lanka in 1956. The Bodu Bala Sena’s focus has switched from the Tamil danger and toward global Islam, where it has formed uncomfortable anti-Muslim alliances with regional nationalist organisations.²⁴ Following the Sri Lankan narrative, Islamic extremism is commonly presented as a danger to Buddhism in Myanmar’s religious-nationalist literature. The Taliban’s 2001 destruction of Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Buddhas is frequently cited as an example of Muslim brutality, violence, and intolerance. This negative perception of Islam encourages current Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and the belief that Islam is intrinsically violent. According to the *Kayah Times*, young people in Loikaw, the state capital of Kayah, held up cell phone photographs of Islamic State beheadings to express their fury at the National League for Democracy (NLD) government’s hesitation to face a perceived Muslim threat.²⁵

Buddhist groups in Myanmar have reacted violently to Buddhist identity issues, resulting in the emergence of a new religious narrative. As a result, the most visible counter-movement emerged: the “Organisation to Protect Race (*amyo*) and Religion (*amyo barthar thathanar*),” commonly abbreviated as Ma Ba

²⁴ Reny, “Myanmar’s Transition and the Resurgence of Buddhist Nationalism.”

²⁵ Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Tha in Burmese.²⁶ This group is headed by Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, who is most known for his association with the nationalist and radical 969 movements. Ashin Wirathu's Buddhist narratives, along with those of the 969 movements and the Ma Ba Tha group, demonstrate a new kind of Buddhist storytelling that is gaining hold in Burmese Buddhism. All of these connected movements have a philosophy founded on intolerance and prejudice, as well as an outward manifestation of Islamophobia.²⁷ This would be startling to many individuals, which is understandable. Throughout history, Buddhism has frequently been associated with kings, monarchs, and emperors, albeit not always. Except for a tiny but significant number of individuals, there is scant historical evidence that the globe rejected austere culture.

Buddhism renounces violence. The religion itself promotes "*Ahimsa*" meaning not to injure or harm anyone. This is one of the primary virtues of Buddhism. But, in Myanmar, hardcore nationalist monks spurred aggression and other violent acts toward people of different religions. Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is the oldest militant organisation active in Myanmar. However, the recent two radical groups are the 969 movements and the ascent of Ma Ba Tha as discussed earlier. Ma Ba Tha entered politics in June 2013 to stop the 'Islamisation of Myanmar' and influenced the government for incorporating four anti-Muslim laws in August 2015. They boosted President U Thein Sein's reputation as a defender of race and religion or Buddhism. Ma Ba Tha's religious exploitation failed as the NLD swept to power. First-month attempts to engage Ma Ba Tha and defuse anti-Muslim language and actions failed. As a monastic order, they were outlawed by the NLD in May 2017 after alerting Ma Ba Tha due to its alleged role in fuelling violence and radical extremism.

4. Political Demands of the Radical Buddhists Groups

In pre-colonial Myanmar, political organisations and groupings of political parties lacked well-defined boundaries. Before the colonial era, the aristocrats, monarchs, and their closest advisers dominated politics. The majority of people were kept out of politics, and there was never a notion that anyone besides a few individuals could aid govern the state. Beginning in the late 1800s, political players in Burma strove to extend this field of political activity. Since 1948, parliamentary, socialist, and dictatorial experiments have taken place, culminating in what Turnell refers to as a "fifty-year authoritarian trap."²⁸ Each political system, in its way, fell short of adequately addressing the variations between migrant people and locals, as well as the need to make concessions to the necessities of a functioning central government apparatus. Since Ne Win's 1962 coup, the military grew to prominence as the country's major political, logistical, administrative, and executive institution. Its refusal to share power with ethnic minorities or democratic adversaries was based on the belief that only severe management could avert the union's fragmentation and eventual disintegration. This unity unites the seven Bamar majority districts and seven ethnic majority republics, all of which are entwined in the concept of "union spirit." In this

²⁶ Gerry van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 353-375.

²⁷ Kyaw Zwa Moe, "Myanmar's Time Bomb," *The Irrawaddy*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/burmas-time-bomb.html>.

²⁸ Sean Turnell, "Myanmar's Fifty-year Authoritarian Trap," *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 1 (2011): 79-92.

context, the demands of the radical groups need to be comprehended in the following sections.

Burmese Buddhists have promoted a varied range of “political” notions. “State problems”, which translates as “state issues”, is the most regularly used word in Burmese politics. Ethnic minorities continue to oppose the concept of a unitary Burma controlled by the Bamar majority, seeking independence or total autonomy in their affairs. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), created in 1994 by monk U Thuzana, was employed to defeat Karen State’s Christian-dominated Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and establish a Buddhist “holy land”, or *Buddhadesa*. Furthermore, the Arakan Liberation Party assaulted Muslims (Arakanese Rohingyas) to force them out of their “holy” Buddhist territory. It is evident, once again, that the extremist or violent monks surrounding Ashin Wirathu are not isolated incident that does not fit with what Westerners consider “true” Buddhism.²⁹

The monkhood, also known as the *Sangha*, has consistently said that it would defend the religion following the *Vinaya*,³⁰ the monks’ rule of discipline, in its function as a moral guardian for Buddhist believers. This is a principle that the *Sangha* has always upheld. They claim that they are inspired to act in this manner due to the recent dissemination of a large amount of violent and obscene content.³¹ Another reason for this intolerance is a wish to retain Myanmar’s Buddhist traditions while excluding Islam, as was formerly the case.³² Many people in Burma are anxious that the country’s unique Buddhist culture would be lost as the Muslim population continues to grow. Rakhine State officials said that the Rohingya were aiming to “Islamise Buddhists” via their vast population. According to them, the Rohingya birth rate is ten times that of Buddhists in the area where they dwell.³³ They think that this puts the Bamar people’s long-standing Buddhist traditions in jeopardy. Numerous Buddhists, both monks, and lay people are worried about the extinction of the Buddhist tradition. Examples of this issue may be seen in nations such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan, which historically had a sizable Buddhist population but now have a sizable Muslim population. Similar arguments have been offered in other parts of the world before, and this one is no exception.³⁴

People in Burma at the time seemed to be following the Buddha’s warning that violence breeds violence, which seems to be correct. Many Burmese monks and the general public believe that employing violence to defend oneself, if not counter, is unavoidable. Ashin Wirathu stressed, “Muslims, are more inclined to

²⁹ Van Tran, “To Understand Post-Coup Myanmar, Look to Its History of Popular Resistance — Not Sanctions,” February 9, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/09/to-understand-post-coup-myanmar-look-to-its-history-of-popular-resistance-not-sanctions/>.

³⁰ Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka.”

³¹ Tran, “To Understand Post-Coup Myanmar.”

³² Nyi Nyi Kaw, “The Return of Ma Ba Tha to the Political Scene,” Yusof Ishak Institution, 2019, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/the-return-of-ma-ba-tha-to-the-political-scene-in-myanmar-by-nyi-nyi-kyaw/>.

³³ Mehden, “Buddhism and Politics in Burma.”

³⁴ Tobias Angenent, “A Comparison of Contemporary Politically Radical Movements in Myanmar (Ma Ba Tha) and Germany (AfD),” Bachelor Thesis, Department of Southeast Asia Studies, University of Passau, 2017, accessed March 26, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327987557_A_comparison_of_contemporary_politically_radical_movements_in_Myanmar_Ma_Ba_Tha_and_Germany_AfD.

engage in physical combat. As a result, we must watch out for our own country's best interests."³⁵ In the past, allegations of Muslim males assaulting Buddhist women were used to set fires throughout the nation. These contradicting tales are not only believed by those close to Ashin Wirathu. Many other monks and citizens in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State, where the Rohingya account for 42.7 per cent of the population, believe them. Rumours and claims of horrible acts of violence against monks and Buddhist lay followers are now more potent than they were in 1938 in inciting animosity. In Burma, the widespread use of social media aids the spread of these tales, which often include photographs.

Despite the ongoing process of nation-building or Myanmarification in this multi-ethnic state, this slogan of the Burmese independence struggle remains widely popular, demonstrating the critical role Buddhism plays for the Burmese majority. "Buddhism was unquestionably the most potent integrative force in Burmese society and culture, and the unifying element that bound this civilisation together, providing a worldview, cosmology, and even a sense of identity as a people and a country."³⁶ It is not uncommon to find militant monks who are staunch supporters of regressive, xenophobic ultra-nationalism, much like the "preachers of hatred" documented in other faiths.

"You may be kind and loving, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog." Ashin Wirathu observed, emphasising that this is not the time for peaceful meditation but rather for vigorous action against what he perceives as Muslim intruders. He further asserted, "If we remain weak, our nation will convert to Islam."³⁷ Ashin Wirathu takes joy in spewing hate rhetoric on Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority. With a rapid socio-economic and socio-political change in Burma and the assassination of a monk in Meiktila by Muslims in early 2013, it is unsurprising that his message resonates with the Buddhist mainstream, and thus, providing a straightforward explanation for these unwelcome changes, as well as a convenient scapegoat.³⁸ In 2013, *Time* magazine dubbed him "The Face of Buddhist Terror" for his anti-Muslim beliefs.³⁹ The fundamentalist monk was enraged by this. He claimed that the foreign news organisation had violated his "human rights." Additionally, he said that *Time* magazine was financed by "Arab money." which he claimed controlled "the world's media."⁴⁰

The widely popular conception among Western elites and others regarding Buddhism, is that it promotes nonviolence, tranquillity, and spiritual calm, while radical monks like Wirathu takes a more combative stance.⁴¹ Those militant groups aspire to convert Myanmar to become a pure Buddhist land. Many people were incensed by Wirathu's anti-Semitic tirade. Yanghee Lee, a developmental psychologist in South Korea who has been outspoken in her opposition to anti-Muslim legislation, has been an outspoken opponent. He addressed her in public

³⁵ Hannah Beech, "The Buddhist Monks Advocating Intolerance in Asia," *Time*, 2013, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130621021018/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html>.

³⁶ Susan Hayward, "The Double-Edged Sword of 'Buddhist Democracy' in Myanmar," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 25–35.

³⁷ Keyes, "Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism."

³⁸ Schissler, Walton and Thi, "Reconciling Contradictions."

³⁹ Lehr, *Militant Buddhism*.

⁴⁰ Hayward, "The Double-Edged Sword."

⁴¹ Robertson, "Buddhist Extremism."

using some choice words and also used “*Kalar*,” a highly racist term for Muslims used by Myanmar’s radical Buddhist actors.⁴²

5. The Impacts on the Political Sphere of Myanmar

During the military dictatorship, state-sponsored anti-Muslim animosity simmered for 50 years. It has increased since March 2011, when the quasi-civilian government took over⁴³ and it continues to be the case up until now. The nexus between the radical monks and the military is well evident in the political landscape of Myanmar. Thus, President Thein Sein’s administration once touted 969 as “simply a symbol of peace” and Wirathu as “the son of Lord Buddha.” He sought to secure military backing, as he has done in the past, by inciting anti-Muslim prejudice via religious rhetoric. When he proclaimed, “the people should embrace Tatmadaw Members of Parliament as if they were Buddha,” he unmistakably appealed to religious sensibilities.⁴⁴ Buddhist leaders have lauded authoritarian regimes and advocated for violence against anyone who disagrees with them. Such organisations seek to exploit the anxieties of a group undergoing significant change by emphasising the consequences of that transition. This exploitation is shown in extremist Buddhist ideologies that advocate violence against adherents of other faiths and cultures. It occurred in October 2017 when Sitagu Sayadaw referred to the Rohingya as “non-human” as a result of their Muslim faith.⁴⁵ He justified violence against them by claiming that they were not fully human as Muslims. The military and Buddhist nationalists operate together as a consequence of this cooperation. While the military defends Buddhism against the threat posed by Muslims, nationalists use religion and culture to justify the military’s atrocities.

Since the country’s democratic transition started in 2011, extreme Buddhist nationalism, anti-Muslim intolerance, and deadly inter-communal violence have grown. Ma Ba Tha is the most important nationalist organisation in the country. This is Myanmar’s most powerful nationalist movement. Although there has been a minimal success in diminishing the attraction of nationalist narratives and organisations, these narratives and organisations have been boosted in certain contexts.⁴⁶ There are various misunderstandings surrounding Ma Ba Tha’s nature and the degree to which it is endorsed by government officials. It is not only a political or anti-Muslim organisation,⁴⁷ as many of its members think, but also a wide social and religious organisation committed to the preservation and promotion of Buddhism in a nation and culture where Buddhism and the state have long been closely interwoven. Ma Ba Tha leaders purposefully avoided exposing their political opinions in the run-up to the 2015 and 2021 elections. In the 2015 election, Ashin Thiloka, chairman of Ma Ba Tha, urged people not to vote for the NLD, emphasising the need of “keeping” race and religion laws and against those who want to “destroy” them. Ashin Wirathu was one among those prepared to be

⁴² Klinken and Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar.”

⁴³ Marshall Andrew R C, “Special Report: Myanmar Gives Official Blessing to Anti-Muslim Monks,” *Reuters*, June 27, 2013, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-969-specialreport-idUSBRE95Q04720130627>.

⁴⁴ Hayward, “The Double-Edged Sword.”

⁴⁵ Imtiyaz, “Buddhism and Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka.”

⁴⁶ Beech, “The Buddhist Monks Advocating Intolerance in Asia.”

⁴⁷ Camilla Orjuela, “Countering Buddhist Radicalisation: Emerging Peace Movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka,” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (January 2019): 133-50.

more candid in reminding people that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) supported Ma Ba Tha and protected race and religion. However, Ma Ba Tha's implicit support for the NLD has grown considerably prior to the 2021 elections. Many projected that if the NLD were to win, it would adopt a more nationalist stance, while others worried that its focus on human rights and tolerance would emulate Western pluralism, which many Myanmar Buddhists despise. Any attempt to amend the racial and religious limitations would face severe resistance from Ma Ba Tha, who has issued a harsh warning. Confronted with serious doubts about its nationalist credentials and accusations of being "pro-Muslim", the NLD chose to follow the lead of the other major parties and not run any Muslim candidates in the elections. Both Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are to blame for Myanmar's emergence of a specific kind of Buddhist nationalism. Prior to the 2015 election, neither the government nor the opposition parties had nominated a Muslim candidate. The NLD did not nominate any Muslim for election. In 2017, the NLD launched a deliberate attempt to debunk stories of Rohingya massacres. Suu Kyi and the NLD, yet, are seen as "weak" Buddhist sympathisers by many Myanmar nationalists. Thus, radical Buddhist nationalism became a major force in the political sphere of Myanmar.

Many Myanmar Buddhists consider that Ma Ba Tha's charismatic and well-respected monks have far more credibility than the government or other religious groups when it comes to religious problems. A diverse group of people, including those opposed to the organisation's involvement in party politics or hate speech, are drawn to the organisation's involvement in a variety of community "good causes,"⁴⁸ including Buddhist Sunday schools, social service, secular education, legal aid, and disaster relief.⁴⁹ Nuns and other laywomen's organisations have embraced Ma Ba Tha because it protects what many regards as patriarchal attitudes, such as laws preventing women from marrying anybody they please. In an era of fast-forwarding social change and limited job and other opportunities, the Ma Ba Tha organisation provides a strong, well-funded outlet for a significant number of young people to participate in community-supporting activities.⁵⁰

The Buddha's teachings have spread across Myanmar, with laypeople primarily supporting monastics via alms and monastics promoting them. Along with religious instruction, these monastic teachings have a tremendous influence on the communities in which they are practised. In 2015, nationalist monks posed the question, "Can you vote for a party that promotes Islam?" in an effort to sway public opinion against the election of the NLD. In 2013, the 969 Group advocated for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses after the monk leader Ashin Wirathu's characterisation of mosques as "enemy strongholds." Racism and anti-Muslim views are common among Ma Ba Tha's leading monks and laypeople, who promote or condone violence in the name of defending race and religion. These initiatives are likely to provoke widespread community violence in a climate of strained inter-communal relations, with possibly fatal outcomes. Following the February 2021 coup, a renewed debate over the political leadership's responsibility in protecting Buddhism and its societal acceptability is rising. The fact that this situation is unlikely to be resolved very soon cannot be seen just through the lens of politics and nationalism, disregarding moral and spiritual

⁴⁸ Schissler, Walton and Thi, "Reconciling Contradictions."

⁴⁹ Robertson, "Buddhist Extremism."

⁵⁰ William J Long, "Buddha on Politics, Economics, and Statecraft," in *A Buddhist Approach to International Relations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 35-50.

considerations and problems arising from the state's long-standing ethnic and religious tensions.

6. Conclusion

The radical Buddhist movements are rooted within the colonial history of Myanmar. While in the pre-colonial era, Buddhism always played a significant role in the political sphere of the country, but after the British occupation, colonial rulers suppressed Buddhism and denied the respectable position of Buddhist monks in society. Therefore, the monks were the first group who organised movements against the British rule. Moreover, when British rulers allowed foreign immigrants into the country, the people of Myanmar felt insecure about their jobs and livelihood. Society itself became antagonistic towards immigrants and became afraid of securing their religion and culture. During the long anti-colonial movement, Buddhist values influenced and organised people to obtain their independence and sovereignty. Though General Aung San, the father of the nation of the country, intended to develop a secular constitution, but after his assassination, the first constitution of Myanmar accepted Buddhism as the state religion. Nevertheless, the constitution also recognised the rights of other religions also. In 1962, while General Ne Win adopted the military rule in Myanmar, the monks first thought that it will be a resurrection of Buddhist supremacy in the country. But his socialist policies tried to maintain distance from the Buddhist monks and promoted linguistic nationalism in Myanmar. However, in the long history of Myanmar's military rule, there was always a contentious relationship between the government and the monks of the country, because most of the monks were against the suppression of the military and supported democratic movements. But, in the question of government's suppressive policies to the immigrants, the monks were supportive of the regime.

After the fall of General Ne Win government, the monks received better patronisation from the military rulers, because the military was trying to develop a relationship with the monks. But, the monks remained mostly aligned with the democratic movements of the country and considered it as their moral responsibility. However, after the 9/11 attack of Al-Qaeda in the World Trade Centre, a global narrative was propagated that Muslims were emerging as a threat to the world. This narrative influenced a number of Buddhist monks of Myanmar and they have promulgated a row that the Muslim population are rising in Myanmar and it will be a threat for the culture and religion of the country. The military government were mostly silent about such hate narratives. The Saffron Revolution of 2007 of the monks in favour of democracy induced a direct confrontation between the military and the monks. The military suppressed pro-democratic monks. The military developed a nexus with the radical monks and tried to achieve legitimacy from the monks. The movement 969 and Ma Ba Tha received support from the state and reinforced propagating against minorities. Such narratives converged the interests of both the military and the radical monks, and subsequently, a number of violence spread against the minorities in Myanmar. While Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2015, the NLD did not take any position against or favouring radical groups. The consequences of this scenario lead to a terrible military operation against the Rohingya community in the Rakhine state of Myanmar in 2017.

The radical Buddhist groups have made a mentionable influence in the political sphere of Myanmar. They have offered a kind of legitimacy for the military and helped the military to take steps against democratic forces and minority groups. Due to the political rhetoric of the radical forces, the democratic parties almost remain silent on the issues of hate speech and suppression of minorities, fearing that it will affect their popularity. However, it is also claimed that there is a stronghold of radical forces in the mainstream democratic forces of the country. The radical forces influenced the government for introducing laws against minorities and the military found a kind of support to suppress many active forces of the country. During the 2021 military coup, the radical groups clearly declared their support for the military and started to extend their influence in the country's political affairs. Therefore, it can be argued that radical monks will remain an influential factor in the political space of Myanmar in the coming days.