

# The rise of Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Asia and possibilities for transformation

By Iselin Frydenlund

## ■ Executive summary

Violence against Muslim minorities in Buddhist societies has increased in recent years. The Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar are disenfranchised, and many of their candidates were rejected by the official Union Election Commission prior to the 2015 elections. Furthermore laws about religious conversion, missionary activities, and interfaith marriage are being promoted to control relations between religions and prevent conflict. The danger, however, is that increased control will lead to more, not fewer, conflicts. Discrimination against religious minorities may lead to radicalisation. In addition minority-majority relations in a single state may have regional consequences because a minority in one state can be the majority in another, and there is an increasing trend for co-religionists in different countries to support each other. Thus protection of religious minorities is not only a question of freedom of religion and basic human rights; it also affects security and peacebuilding in the whole region. Anti-Muslim violence and political exclusion of Muslim minorities take place in the wake of increased Buddhist nationalism. This policy brief identifies local as well as global drivers for Buddhist-Muslim conflict and the rise of Buddhist nationalism. It then shows how Buddhist-Muslim conflict can be addressed, most importantly through the engagement of local religious leaders.

## Introduction

Attacks on Muslim minorities in Buddhist countries have escalated in recent years (OHCHR, 2014). Following repeated waves of violence in 2012, 140,000 Muslim Rohingyas are still living in desperate conditions in camps in Rakhine State in Myanmar (International Crisis Group, 2013). The violence in Rakhine has spread to other parts of Myanmar, including Meikthila, which faced severe Buddhist-Muslim violence in 2013. The same period also witnessed several serious attacks on Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka. The region's most deadly conflict at the moment is in Southern Thailand, also characterised by divisions between Muslims and Buddhists. While the conflict drivers are different in Southern Thailand, the conflict seems to assume a stronger religious identification than before, feeding radical Buddhist nationalism in the region.

Contrary to what is often presented in international news, anti-Muslim attacks do not mean that Muslims living in

Buddhist countries are generally at risk of persecution. But weak state protection of Muslim communities leaves these communities at risk of violence and intimidation when other groups in society see benefits from starting a conflict. While identifying the perpetrators has been difficult, two things remain clear: the attacks take place in an atmosphere of strong anti-Muslim rhetoric from certain Buddhist monk-led nationalist groups, and orchestrators and perpetrators of violent attacks operate with impunity.

This report analyses local and regional drivers of Buddhist-Muslim conflict, with a special emphasis on Buddhist nationalism. The report is based on direct experiences in religious peace activities in the region during 2014-2015, and on three public seminars on various aspects of Buddhism and conflict in south and south-east Asia.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See PRIO's website for more information: <https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1129>.

## Buddhism, state, and conflict in south and south-east Asia

Buddhism's close relations with the state have made Buddhism an ally with modern ethno-nationalism. Buddhism is identified with the majority ethnic group to the extent that religious minority identities are often represented as non-national. Thus the dark side of Buddhist political paradigms is the potential exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities, and hence the possibility of increased insecurity. The escalating religious intolerance constitutes a serious threat to local communities, which in turn may represent a threat to the states themselves. Radical Buddhist groups today present a narrative of an inherent Buddhist-Muslim conflict, which excludes narratives of co-existence, tolerance, and inclusion. The strong evidence of peaceful coexistence between various religious communities throughout Asia suggests that religious difference *per se* does not lead to conflict. Thus under what circumstances is religious difference made socially and politically relevant? Or put differently, why do radical Buddhist groups *just now* perceive Islam as a great threat to Buddhism?

### New forms of Buddhist nationalism

Anti-Muslim violence has taken place in the wake of the formation of two particularly vociferous groups in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the 969 (together with MaBaTha)<sup>2</sup> and the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), respectively. Both groups were formed in 2012 and have since then made global headlines for their militant anti-Muslim rhetoric. While BBS and 969 are far from identical and formed in different political contexts, these new – and radical – political Buddhist associations share similar traits, namely fear of the extinction of their races and religion, the perception of Islam, especially Salafism and Muslim violent extremism, as an imminent threat, and new legal regulations to prevent “Islamisation”. Moreover these groups represent a novelty in that they transcend the nation-state's boundaries. The early stages of this process are tied to a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by BBS and 969 in Colombo in 2014. The future strength of these collaborative efforts is still unclear, but the MoU's signing indicates a stronger recognition of shared Buddhist political interests across the region.

As long as the state is considered legitimate and thus a tool for “Buddhicising” society, Buddhist pressure groups will work to reform the state rather than violently oppose it. Thus there are few examples of Buddhist “fundamentalist” violence against the state or threats to public security. However, radical Buddhist political groups may present a threat to social stability because they fuel and sharpen religious divisions.

Central to Buddhist radicalism is the idea that Buddhists are “hosts” while Muslims are “guests” accredited with

limited minority rights in a Buddhist majoritarian political model. While this vision of citizenship limits the scope for real democratic change, such notions also neglect the fact that Muslims have for centuries been living within Buddhist polities. The Rakhine State in Myanmar, which borders the populous Muslim state of Bangladesh, is glossed as a “frontier state” between Buddhist and Muslim worlds, ignoring local co-existence in pre-British times. Moreover the 969/MaBaTha concern for Rakhine conflates Arakanese and Burmese Buddhist nationalisms, ignoring centuries-old Arakanese Buddhist resistance to Burmese Buddhist rule. In this respect ethnic difference among Buddhists in Myanmar is downplayed while boundaries based on religious difference are intensified.

### Buddhist nationalism in local politics

Anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence serves national-level political interests. The “evil state” is commonly seen as the source of anti-Muslim attacks, implying politically orchestrated violence between different religious communities. This violence benefits authoritarian regimes by giving them an excuse for curfews or even military intervention. Furthermore political parties deliberately use Buddhist concerns and hate speech against religious minorities to gain votes among religious majorities. Such processes were discernible in Myanmar prior to the 2015 elections. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) formed various alliances with monks and strongly backed the laws “to protect race and religion”. USDP politicians likewise donated large sums to high-ranking 969/MaBaTha monks during the election campaign, while MaBaTha circulated flyers encouraging voters to vote for parties (most importantly the USDP) that supported the laws “to protect race and religion”.<sup>3</sup>

In fact there are strong connections between authoritarian regimes and radical Buddhist groups. In Myanmar, the emergence of radical Buddhist groups can be linked to the military's strategic moves after the 1988 crackdown. To build up its “Buddhist capital” and legitimacy, the regime increasingly sponsored the Buddhist cause by co-opting key Buddhist monks. The authoritarian Rajapaksa regime (2005-2015) in Sri Lanka built its legitimacy around victory in the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) under the banner of Buddhist nationalism. Buttressed by the regime's protective wings, various Buddhist nationalist groups came into being – and thrived. BBS in particular is far more militant in its anti-Muslim rhetoric than previous manifestations of Buddhist nationalism and has been accused of playing a role in instigating anti-Muslim violence in 2014. In June 2015 BBS decided to form its own political party and run for elections in August 2015, which could be read as a move to support ex-president Rajapaksa's (failed) return to national politics.

2 Referred to by its Burmese acronym “MaBaTha”, the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion has since 2014 more or less eclipsed 969 and included the 969 monks within its fold.

3 For more details on the role of Buddhist monks in the Myanmar elections, see Iselin Frydenlund, “Are Myanmar's monks hindering democratisation?”, *East Asia Forum*: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/11/04/are-myanmar-monks-hindering-democratisation>.

## The Buddhist fear of Islam: regional and global drivers

While the local political context is of paramount importance for understanding the new forms of political Buddhism, so too are the global processes that inform the discursive strategies and practices of these movements. Two global discourses stand out as especially important: securitisation of Islam and the expected global rise in the Muslim population.

Fuelled by new forms of communication, worldwide concerns over the rise of global jihadism, and the subsequent securitisation of Islam, local Muslims in Buddhist societies are increasingly portrayed as a threat to national security. Muslim associations are seen as representatives of international terrorist networks and local agents of Islamic global imperialism. Leading monks have called mosques “enemy bases”, and they have identified the niqab as a direct threat to the state and its territory.

Radical political Buddhism has garnered unexpected support by successfully interweaving local concerns with international alarmism. Such global concerns are reproduced to fit local-level social and political contexts. In post-war Sri Lanka, Islam fills an ideological vacuum in Sinhala nationalism after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. From this perspective Islam has replaced LTTE as the significant “Other” in Sinhala nationalist ideology. Moreover global discourses on terror seem to be a convenient myth in local competition for power and resources. For example Rohingya militant groups in Rakhine are accused of international jihadist connections, even though Rohingya militancy rather must be understood in the local context of ethnic minority resistance to internal Burmese colonialism and state repression.

Changing global demographics and the expected worldwide increase in the Muslim population is perceived as an existential threat to Buddhism. To prevent “Buddhists from becoming a minority in their own country”, radical Buddhists call for family planning policies, including legal regulation of women’s reproductive health. BBS leaders have demanded a government shutdown of all family planning units so that Sinhala women could produce more babies. Radical Buddhist groups are particularly concerned with sexuality and reproduction, and following familiar Islamophobic tropes in Europe and India, Muslim male sexuality is portrayed as aggressive and uncontrollable; Muslim men are accused of raping Burmese Buddhist women. In Sri Lanka, spurious allegations have surfaced accusing Muslim shopkeepers of distributing sweets containing sterilising medicaments to Sinhala Buddhist women. This has spurred nationalist calls for “protecting local Buddhist woman” against “the male Muslim intruder”. In Myanmar, the four laws “to protect race and religion” aim to prevent “Islamisation” by regulating conversion, interreligious marriages, and family planning, and by banning polygamy and extra-marital affairs. The laws are designed to counter Muslim practices that (allegedly) increase the size of the Muslim population.

## Possibilities for transformation

What we see are both stronger attachments to Buddhist identity vis-à-vis other religions, as well as a new regional concern about religious minorities and majorities in Asia. Leading Buddhist monks focus on the situation for minority Buddhists in Muslim majority societies like Bangladesh, Southern Thailand, and Malaysia.

But this same sense of broader connectivity also fuels religious peace initiatives across the region. The rising levels of hate speech by religious leaders, new forms of religious intolerance, and growing instances of Buddhist-Muslim violence are met with great concern, not only by international actors but more importantly by local civil society organisations and religious leaders themselves. While not denying the importance of international engagement, discussions on issues like inter-communal violence, the place of religion in the public sphere, or legitimate or illegitimate restrictions on freedom of religion or belief must be addressed *within* the religious communities themselves. Statements crafted by local religious leaders and endorsed by several authoritative Buddhist and Muslim organisations carry much more weight than any human rights group’s condemnation of the role of religious leaders in creating intolerance and mistrust.

Engaging religious leaders is paramount in these deeply religious societies because they can challenge exclusivist discourses by pointing at diverse interpretations of how one is to protect Buddhism in a way that does not foster communal conflict. This requires an intra-Buddhist debate on Buddhist principles, religious pluralism, and human rights. Moreover religious peace initiatives might offer alternative spaces for cooperation between religious communities, for example through a shared interest for the common good.

“Religious peacebuilding” is vague and often romanticised. There are many pitfalls to be recognised: the religious leaders’ limited impact on their communities, their lack of independence from the state, and the danger of top-level talk with little impact on local realities. However, the rising levels of religious tension require the engagement of religious actors, unless exclusivist ideologies, intolerance, and violence are to win.

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