
Myanmar's Alarming Civil Unrest

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Anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar, which last year had seemed confined to the western state of Rakhine, has exploded across the country. Mobs of Buddhists, some with ties to the militant 969 Movement, have attacked Muslims in the towns of Meiktila, Naypyidaw, Bago, and most recently, in Yangon, the largest city. Many Muslims in Yangon, Bago, and other large towns are afraid to go to the mosque, enter shops catering to Muslims, or show displays of their faith outside their homes or stores. At least 100,000 Muslims have been made homeless in the past two years, and hundreds have been killed.

Many Muslim leaders had been warning of such attacks for months. Although the government had tried to tell donors, investors, journalists, and foreign diplomats that the violence in Rakhine state in 2012 was an issue localized to that area, in reality even last year there had begun to be attacks on mosques and some Muslim shops in other parts of the country. A number of donors and investors believed this reassurance because of the enormous opportunities in Myanmar, one of the last giant emerging markets to open up.

Yet anti-Muslim sentiment (and, at times, anti-Chinese, anti-Indian, and anti-anyone who is not ethnic Burman) has clearly been intensifying in Myanmar, one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries in Asia over the past two years. (Still, Buddhists comprise by far the majority of religious groups.) The 969 Movement has been giving anti-Muslim speeches, holding anti-Muslim rallies, and distributing DVDs full of vitriol for at least a year. Meanwhile, the Myanmar Internet, though only accessed by less than 5 percent of the population, already is overwhelmed by hateful screeds against Muslims, Indians, Chinese, and other ethnic minorities, among others. Even in Suu Kyi's pro-democracy National League for Democracy, there are worrying levels of prejudice against Muslims-- comprising about 5 percent of the population--and those not from the Burman ethnic majority group.

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With Myanmar attempting to make the transition to democracy from one of the most repressive

regimes on earth, this rising ethnic hatred and attacks could turn the country into a twenty-first century version of post-Cold War Yugoslavia. While Myanmar has made great strides in the past three years of reforms, without more proactive measures to halt ethnic and religious violence, the country could descend into chaos.

Meiktila (Main Damage Area 1)

Move the slider to compare images from before and after the violence.



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Unleashing Old Ghosts

Myanmar has had a long history of xenophobia and inter-ethnic tensions, exacerbated by the British colonists' use of divide-and-rule tactics and then by the army's oppressive five-decade rule over the country. In 1962, the government forcibly expelled many Indians from the country, and since gaining independence in 1948, the military, dominated by Burmans, has fought more than fifteen ethnic minority insurgencies.

In 2010, the army began a transition to civilian government, holding elections that ultimately helped create a civilian parliament and formally renouncing their control of the presidency. Still, the military remains the most powerful actor in the country, and the civilian president, Thein Sein, who clearly has reformist instincts, was himself a senior general before assuming the presidency.

Myanmar's opening has allowed for both opposition parties and the media to exercise their rights. Where once the Myanmar media diet consisted of a bland state-dominated newspaper, a few websites, and state TV, in the past two years hundreds if not thousands of Myanmar sites have opened up as the government has lifted controls. Meanwhile, with a loosening of media laws, four new Burmese-language print dailies launched earlier this month. The National League for Democracy swept last year's by-elections, recently held its first national meeting in years, and is expected to dominate the planned 2015 national elections, putting it in position to run the government.

But the rapid opening also has unleashed dangerous forces. The military is not entirely under civilian control, and some Muslim leaders accuse members of the security forces of stoking the violence. Thein Sein cannot trust his regional commanders to follow his orders, and must worry that if he gives the armed forces power to control unrest, they will use brutal measures and make the situation worse. The police have little resources or training in nonviolent methods of crowd control.

Meanwhile, though the political climate has opened up, neither the government nor Suu Kyi has offered a viable plan for how to create a more federal state, which will be essential in a country with so many ethnic minority groups and so little trust of the central government. Within the top ranks of the National League for Democracy, Suu Kyi's party, nearly all senior leaders are against significant federalism, despite ethnic minorities' deep distrust of the national government.

Neglecting Minorities

Suu Kyi has publicly advocated for a new federal model, and has paid homage to her father's vision, which was enunciated at the Panglong Conference and Agreement in 1947, and she is probably the only Burman trusted enough by ethnic minority leaders to preside over a new federalism. Yet she has not made it the centerpiece of her politics since joining parliament last year.

In addition, while ethnic and religious minority areas are the most in need of aid and investment in physical infrastructure, officials in the capital Naypyidaw already are competing to channel new foreign aid and investment to Burman majority regions which are not as needy of roads, electricity, and other necessities. Meanwhile, donors have been scrambling to enter Myanmar since most democracies lifted sanctions over the past two years; little of the new assistance has focused on ethnic tensions, and much of it has been given **[without coordination with other donors](#)**.

With leaders avoiding the issue of federalism, and some even stigmatizing non-Burmans, the most extreme voices have gained currency. The new print dailies and the Internet in Myanmar have little modern regulation, and violent, hateful speech has proliferated. Buddhist and Burman nationalists like the leaders of the 969 movement have gained national platforms in the media.

Nationalists appear to be well organized, since the recent anti-Muslim violence has spread rapidly and in an apparently coordinated way, according to reports by *The Irrawaddy* and other prominent Myanmar publications. In many towns, *The Irrawaddy* reported, local Muslims and ethnic minorities have complained that the police and army have done nothing to protect them from attackers.

Stopping a Disaster

The government, Suu Kyi, and foreign donors that have poured into Myanmar in the past two years must act rapidly to stop this looming disaster. For one, the government, the opposition, and prominent ethnic and religious leaders need to quickly develop a plan for devolution and federal government. This should be accompanied by Thein Sein purging senior military leaders shown to be disobeying his commands. In Indonesia, the devolution of economic and political power to regions and sub-regional levels has been highly successful, reducing ethnic tensions in another diverse country and getting far more people involved in politics. Suu Kyi needs to be less reticent in speaking out on the rights of all people in Myanmar, and on the need to halt ethnic and religious attacks.

In addition, the Myanmar government, with the help of donors, needs to focus incoming aid money on areas crucial to restoring peace. These include: creating a civilian-controlled police force, which can protect law and order and reduce the need for army intervention in conflict areas; training young journalists to understand the need for sourcing stories; and launching mediation efforts to increase people-to-people dialogue among ethnic groups and religions. While some Myanmar officials believe that the inflammatory reporting should lead to the restoration of laws curbing the press, training print and online journalists will have a similar effect without curbing newfound freedoms.

At the same time, regional governments and Western donors could more effectively plan for outflows of refugees from Myanmar's conflicts over the past two years. Many Muslims from Rakhine state already have tried to flee, setting out in rickety boats or trying to cross into Bangladesh, but the region has no coordinated policy, and groups of these Muslims have been allegedly attacked by the Thai military, detained, or forced back into Myanmar. Instead, UNHCR and wealthier Muslim nations like the UAE or Saudi Arabia (or Japan, the EU, and the United States) could provide the bulk of the funds for temporary camps for these refugees in Thailand, as well as for helping some resettle in third countries like Malaysia.

Meanwhile, ASEAN together could agree on one approach to intercepting their boats. Nations like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore also could agree to accept people fleeing Myanmar, assured that the economic burden would not fall on them alone.