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# Contesting Buddhist Narratives

Democratization, Nationalism,  
and Communal Violence in Myanmar

*Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward*



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**Contesting Buddhist Narratives**  
Democratization, Nationalism, and  
Communal Violence in Myanmar

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# Executive Summary

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For the past few years, Myanmar's political transition has been hampered by violence between Buddhists and Muslims. A nation with an ethnically Burman and religiously Buddhist majority, the population also comprises a large minority of Muslims and members of other religions, and includes many different ethnic groups. As such, Myanmar society is complex and innately plural.

While the country has struggled with a range of political and socio-economic challenges related to the transition, the violence between religious groups has taken center stage since 2012, particularly with the rise of the 969 movement and MaBaTha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). These Buddhist nationalist groups, led by Buddhist monks, claim that their purpose is to protect and promote Buddhist values and traditions in the midst of the country's transformation and as it opens up to the modern world.

Leaders associated with both groups articulate a Buddhist national discourse that describes its culture, values, practices, identity, and even its very existence as threatened by foreign elements within and outside the country. They have accused Muslims—particularly those from the Rohingya ethnic community—as seeking to displace Buddhism, and they have articulated through sermons and publications anti-Muslim sentiments that are often based on rumor or mischaracterizations of

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*As Myanmar wrestles with political transition, violence between religious groups has taken center stage*

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Islamic teachings and objectives. These groups have also begun to advocate aggressively for a series of laws that would restrict religious freedom, and they have developed religious education curricula for “Buddhist Sunday Schools” and leveraged media—particularly social media—to advance their cause. The shift from 969’s initial knee-jerk “Buy Buddhist” campaign to targeted political and legal advocacy efforts through MaBaTha reflects both the ability of those promoting Buddhist nationalism to alter their strategies in response to changing political conditions and opportunities and the emergence of new actors in the political landscape.

By providing political, social, religious, and historical context to Myanmar’s current situation, this paper challenges the claim that the recent violence between Buddhists and Muslims is inevitably rooted in communalism. Although nationalist movements such as 969 and MaBaTha express themselves in religious terms, they are not seeking to defend a doctrinal stance as such. Instead, they refer more to notions of Burmese Buddhist national identity and traditional ideas about the fragility of Buddhism and its teachings that have circulated within Theravada Buddhist societies for centuries.

The paper examines the dimensions of Buddhist national identity in Myanmar expressed through these movements, considering their dominant narratives that justify fear and hatred, their resonance among the public, and their leaders’ denial of responsibility for violence fueled by these narratives. In doing so, it acknowledges a reflexive defense against what is perceived by some to be the threat of a globally spreading Islam, as well as the motivation to preserve and promote Buddhist practice and behavior in Myanmar during a time of significant change. These overarching concerns regarding the fragility and perpetuation of Buddhism help to explain the widespread popularity of the movements, but also complicate characterizations of them as exclusively “anti-Muslim.” The analysis in this paper reveals more complex motivations for the popular support of 969 or MaBaTha.

The authors situate arguments for Buddhist nationalism and the rise of these movements within the history of monastic mobilization and religious/ethnic conflict in Myanmar, highlighting the ways in which current monastic political mobilization can be seen as an extension of past anti-colonial movements and rooted in traditional roles of the monastic community to defend the religion, respond to community needs,

and guide political decision-makers. Monastic political participation—while always a controversial and disputed topic in Myanmar—remains multifaceted and is oriented toward purposes that can unite estranged communities in the country, as well as further entrench long-standing divides.

Within the vast Theravada Buddhist corpus and Myanmar Buddhists' particular understandings of these teachings, there are numerous values and historical examples that can promote religious pluralism, discourage hate speech, and encourage a more critical approach to rumors and misinformation. Indeed, some of these Buddhist counterarguments to nationalist discourse are already being advanced on the ground in Myanmar. By framing them in culturally and contextually relevant ways, these Buddhist counterarguments might best serve to challenge current Buddhist nationalist rhetoric, and to promote attitudes and practices that can prevent further communal violence and develop social norms and attitudes that foster coexistence and understanding between groups.

However, the construction of a Buddhist counterargument that appeals to Buddhist ethics is unlikely to bring an end to communal violence by itself. In order to advance sustainable peace and coexistence in the country, these Myanmar Buddhist arguments for religious pluralism must be complemented by a series of political, economic, and legal reforms to address underlying insecurities and long-standing inequalities between communities. These structural and governance issues are some of the primary root drivers of conflicts, which are currently manifesting as communal violence.

Among the most pressing needs are strategic reform and strengthening of the rule of law, including greater support for the police in their efforts to prevent and manage conflict through democratic means and in partnership with local communities, and the institutional capacity to investigate and hold accountable those involved in violent conflict. Consideration must also be given to processes increasing access to information, transparency in religious education, political decentralization, and oversight to ensure that new foreign investment and development projects bring equitable benefit to Myanmar's communities.

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***Appropriate Buddhist  
counterarguments  
could challenge current  
nationalist rhetoric***

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Clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar have highlighted the challenges that latent intercommunal tensions pose to the government, as the reform process reveals old grievances that can be easily manipulated by those seeking to obstruct reform. Amplifying and supporting the actors who are able to criticize anti-Muslim arguments and rhetoric on Buddhist grounds is crucial. In order to be effective, these responses need to directly acknowledge and incorporate the complex dynamics described in this paper. Without acknowledging the entire range of contributing factors and encouraging cooperation among actors inside and outside of the country, interreligious conflict could be the downfall of Myanmar's once-promising transition to democracy.

# Contesting Buddhist Narratives

## Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar

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### Introduction

The political transition in Buddhist-majority Myanmar (also known as Burma)<sup>1</sup> that began in 2011 has been marred by regular outbreaks of violence between religious communities. Although the fighting first started in the west of the country between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, more conflicts soon appeared in other parts of the country between Buddhists and Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. Many see a connection between these violent episodes and the rise of several Buddhist nationalist groups, first the 969 movement that emerged since 2012, and more recently the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) that was formed in early 2014. The most prominent of the nationalist monks has been U Wirathu, who was featured on the cover of a July 2013 issue of *Time Magazine* above the words “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”<sup>2</sup> Literature produced by those connected to 969 and MaBaTha states that the objective of these movements is to protect and promote Buddhism and the Myanmar nation as a whole against perceived threats within and outside the country. Islam has faced the brunt of criticism from Buddhist nationalist groups. Their leaders depict Islam as culturally

inimical to Burmese values (focusing particularly on the treatment of women), inherently violent, and driven by an agenda to take over the country, region, and globe. Many people within and outside the Buddhist community are puzzled by these arguments supporting anti-Muslim violence, as on the surface they seem antithetical to Buddhist teachings and ethics.

This paper starts with a brief sociohistorical account of the current interreligious tensions in Myanmar, putting them in the context of the rapid political, economic, and social changes the country has undergone since 2011, when President Thein Sein launched a dramatic democratic reform process. It then analyzes the narratives of the 969 movement and MaBaTha that emerge from sermons, statements, and publications. It considers how their arguments are connected to particular ideas that circulate within Myanmar's Theravada Buddhist tradition and posit what lies "behind" the narratives: the concerns, fears, interests, or needs.

Next, the paper offers elements of a constructive counterargument within a Theravada Buddhist framework that might be employed to challenge the rhetoric of the 969 movement and MaBaTha. The proposed counterargument draws from Buddhist teaching and texts, as well as other notions common in Burmese Buddhist culture. The hope is that some of these might be persuasive to Buddhists in Myanmar and useful for those seeking to develop or amplify more tolerant Buddhist attitudes and behaviors toward other groups in the current insecure and rapidly changing environment. The paper also presents several complementary policy prescriptions designed to respond to the underlying socioeconomic insecurities and political impediments, which are seen as root causes of the present conflict.

## **The Current Context**

After almost five decades of international isolation and repressive rule by a succession of military governments, Myanmar began a gradual transition to democracy with the handover of power to a quasi-civilian government in March 2011. Defying admittedly muted expectations, President Thein Sein, a former military general elected by the military-dominated parliament in early January 2011, initiated a series of reforms that have opened up space for political participation and

economic development. The government has released hundreds of political prisoners, relaxed restrictions on the press, and passed laws allowing for peaceful demonstrations and the formation of unions. In addition, the new government has secured cease-fires with over a dozen nonstate, ethnic-minority armed groups in the country, and has voiced its commitment to seeking a nationwide cease-fire accord that would launch a national political dialogue process seeking a full political settlement. Finally, restrictions were lifted on opposition parties, resulting in sweeping gains for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in parliamentary by-elections in April 2012.

However, each of these encouraging changes carries with it a sobering counterpart. The promising rhetoric of the new government has not necessarily been matched by a capacity (or willingness) to carry out many necessary reforms or address institutional barriers to meaningful change.

For example, some political prisoners still remain behind bars, and their numbers have been swollen by newly arrested activists. In addition, while the government peace team has negotiated cease-fires with most ethnic armed groups, violent conflict with the Kachin Independence Army and several other ethnic armed groups threatens peace talks. Furthermore, the hoped-for benefits of foreign investments have not only failed to appear, but the investments seem focused on a model of growth that has led to dispossession of land and indebtedness for much of the country's rural population. Foreign investments are perceived to be controlled by so-called "cronies," Myanmar's wealthy elites who often have strong ties to the military. Despite the dramatic and genuine changes that have brought obvious new freedoms in urban areas, the reforms have yet to significantly improve the lives of the country's vast rural population, who often exist in a world far removed from the center, both geographically and psychologically. These challenges translate into ongoing feelings of anxiety, cynicism, and uncertainty for many living in rural areas.

Meanwhile, as is common in countries undergoing rapid political transition, new domestic conflicts are emerging (International Crisis Group 2013, Transnational Institute 2013). There are a number of actors who, for various reasons, are resisting the reform efforts. Multiple

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*Each encouraging political change carries with it a sobering counterpart*

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forms of interethnic and interreligious bias have expressed themselves as groups debate the nature of the democratic reform, questions of inclusion in the national community, and the country's overall direction. Decades of authoritarianism and violent conflict have left entrenched wariness, if not outright fear and hostility, between different groups,

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*Who will profit and who will be left behind in the midst of vast changes?*

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which has created major barriers to collaborative efforts to promote peace and reform and fueled communal tensions and violence. At the root are concerns about who will profit and who will be left behind in the midst of these vast changes. These emerging anxieties and conflicts make visible the

political, social, and psychological challenges to the creation of religious pluralism in the current Myanmar context, as well as the urgent need for efforts to promote and protect peaceful religious and ethnic coexistence. The country's ability to move forward successfully in its democratic reform depends on it.

### **Demographics and Interethnic/Religious Relations**

A fundamental dynamic of the current context is the country's long and complex history of ethnic-based conflict. The 2014 census has indicated that Myanmar's overall population is 51.4 million (BBC 2014), and the country is home to 135 officially designated ethnic communities, although that number is disputed and likely misrepresents the complex ethnic diversity in the country. The majority ethnic group is the Burmans, with approximately 68 percent of the population. Other major ethnic groups include the Shan (9 percent), Karen (7 percent), Rakhine (4 percent), Mon (2 percent), and Kachin (1.5 percent). Many of these non-Burman groups live in outlying states that border neighbors Bangladesh, India, China, and Thailand; speak their own languages; and have cultural practices distinct from the Burmans. Theravada Buddhism is the religion of the Burman ethnic majority and of many non-Burmans, and is practiced by about 89 percent of the overall population. Some ethnic minority groups, including the Karen, Kachin, and Chin, have sizeable or even majority Christian populations; the overall percentage of Christians in the population is 4 percent (mostly Baptist). Muslims comprise 4 percent of the population, and the remaining 3 percent are practitioners of

indigenous Nat worship (Animist) or other religions (including Hinduism and Bahai).<sup>3</sup>

However, it is important to note that demographic figures in Myanmar are little more than conjecture and are widely disputed. The last official census took place in 1983, and figures of non-Burman and non-Buddhist populations were likely underreported (International Crisis Group 2014b). Additionally, the 1983 census did not include the populations in areas with active conflicts. With support from international donors and technical expertise from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Myanmar began the process of collecting new census data in March 2014 and released the first overall population figures on August 31, 2014. The new figures have been contentious because they do not include the entire Rohingya population or some communities in territories controlled by ethnic armed groups; the new estimate also falls well below the 57 million that the Myanmar government estimated in 2008 (Sanay Lin 2014).

While many observers expected data collection to inflame religious tensions, the census was carried out with no violent incidents.<sup>4</sup> However, in response to protests from Rakhine Buddhists, the Myanmar government decided at the last minute not to allow “Rohingya” as a write-in identity category, reversing its prior commitment to allow self-reporting and delaying data collection in parts of Rakhine state (*The Guardian* 2014). Additionally, while data collection did not spark violence, some analysts have predicted that the announcements of results (planned in several stages throughout 2014 and 2015) could exacerbate tensions, especially if the results show a significantly larger Muslim population than previously reported (International Crisis Group 2014a).

Interethnic conflict has marked Myanmar’s modern history. For decades, many ethnic groups in Myanmar have been fighting for various degrees of autonomy from a central government that is seen to represent the ethnic Burman group. These ethnic armed movements seek to sustain their own languages and cultures and to retain control over political and economic life in their regions, including the wealth derived from rich mineral depositories and other natural resources.

Under the military regimes that ruled Myanmar from 1962 until the recent reforms began, religious freedom for non-Buddhists was severely limited. Christians, Muslims, and others faced restrictions on

their movement, their ability to construct buildings, and on public worship.<sup>5</sup> For the ruling military-led governments, religious difference, like ethnic difference, marked individuals and groups as outside the

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***Under military regimes,  
religious freedom for  
Christians, Muslims,  
and other non-Buddhists  
was severely limited***

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national community and as potential threats to the integrity of the country. Partly as a result of this, Burmese nationalism became increasingly conflated with Buddhist religious identity, conveying a sense that to be authentically a citizen of Myanmar was to be Buddhist (and ethnically Burman) (Walton 2013c). This exacerbated the dynamic of non-Burman, non-Buddhist “others” being considered a threat to the state, and tools of

regional or global power interests. Outside support from Western or other foreign elements to insurgency efforts and anti-junta democratic movements fed this perception.<sup>6</sup>

Since the colonial period, Muslim populations have occasionally faced targeted repression (Christians have also been targeted). Riots in 1930 were directed at immigrant Indians (as a stand-in for the colonial power), but riots in 1938 targeted Muslims more explicitly. After the establishment of military rule in 1962, Muslims were explicitly excluded from the Burmese military. Anti-Muslim riots occurred again in Mandalay in 1997 and Taungoo in 2001.

It can be difficult to separate violence and oppression visited on minority communities from more general political and military actions, simply because most of the non-Burman areas have been active conflict zones for the past 50 years. That is, the military carries out violence that appears to target non-Buddhist populations, but justifies these actions as a necessary response to ethnic insurgencies rather than religious discrimination or an attempt to assert Buddhist and/or Burman hegemony (Walton 2013a). However, whatever the stated purpose, these actions do reinforce the general tenor of Burmese national identity as “Buddhist” and the idea that non-Buddhists are foreign elements.

Decades of interethnic and interreligious fighting in an authoritarian state in which many ethnic and religious groups lived removed from one another, separated by violent conflict or government restrictions on movement, have taken a toll. Religious bias and misunderstand-

ing are common, especially in communities that have lacked access to information. As a result, while there is a great deal of religious diversity in Myanmar, one would rightly hesitate before describing it as a context of religious pluralism. Robert Wuthnow makes the distinction: “diversity and pluralism are not the same. We can be diverse without being truly pluralistic. Pluralism is our response to diversity—how we think about it, how we respond to it in our attitudes and lifestyles, and whether we choose to embrace it, ignore it, or merely cope with it” (2005, 286).

Particularly pernicious is antagonism toward the religion of Islam and toward Myanmar’s Muslim community. In a country that for a long time restricted access to information, word of mouth became the primary vehicle for relaying information. As communities often lived at a remove from one another, negative rumors about Islam spread quickly and became entrenched as “truth.” These aspects of the current conflict will be explored in more detail below.

### **“Religious” Conflict in the Current Political Transition**

In June 2012, a little over a year after the new quasi-civilian government came to power, riots erupted in western Rakhine state after the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl by three Muslim men. Rakhine Buddhists retaliated by killing ten Muslims in an attack on a bus, and the fighting quickly spread between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, with Rohingya Muslims suffering a disproportionately greater loss of life and property.<sup>7</sup> In October 2012, violence again broke out across Rakhine state, bringing the death toll to at least 200, and with more than 100 thousand displaced (Roos 2013).

Although the conflict in Rakhine state initially appeared to be an isolated incident fueled by specific regional tensions, violence directed at Muslims soon appeared in other parts of the country. In the central Myanmar town of Meikhtila (in ethnic Burman territory), riots in March 2013 resulted in dozens of deaths as Buddhists burned Muslim homes, mosques, and schools in response to a jewelry store dispute and the murder of a Buddhist monk by a group of Muslims (Davis, Atkinson, and Sollom 2013). Anti-Muslim violence also occurred in May 2013 in the town of Lashio, located in Shan state (an area with active armed, ethnic-opposition groups that occasionally clash with the Burmese military). Another flare-up of riots occurred in and

around Thandwe, a town in Rakhine state, in early October 2013. President Thein Sein was already en route to the region when the violence erupted, and he visited affected areas and met with local officials (Robinson 2013).

An independent commission established by President Thein Sein following the initial outbreak of sectarian violence in Rakhine state in 2012 carried out field interviews and issued its analysis and recommendations to the president in July 2013 (Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2013). The commission identified several causes as leading to the outbreak of violence, which included rising extremism on both sides of the conflict divide, political polarization, lack of economic opportunity and development, and corruption. Its report highlighted the breakdown in communication between the two sides and called for measures to promote reconciliation and coexistence, including inter-faith dialogue, civic education, implementation of the rule of law, and economic development.

In January 2014, a violent episode took place in Du Chee Yar Tan, a village in Rakhine state, that underscores the complex politics surrounding incidents of religious violence. The United Nations made immediate public statements urging the government to investigate reports that scores of Rohingya were killed (OHCHR 2014). An independent commission established by the government investigated these allegations and determined there was no evidence for these claims, and allegations of mass murders in Du Chee Yar Tan remain unproven (Radio Free Asia 2014a).

On July 1, 2014, riots flared for several days in Mandalay, the country's second-largest city. Two people were killed (one Buddhist and one Muslim), scores injured, and many Muslim houses and businesses burned in unrest that was provoked by rumors of a Buddhist woman raped by a Muslim man, which later turned out to be untrue (Shwe Aung 2014). This time, authorities acted more quickly to investigate and make arrests, although residents still expressed frustration that they did little to intervene during the actual violence (Bookbinder 2014). Although the riots were thought to be driven, in part, by the rumor being shared on U Wirathu's Facebook page (Campbell 2014), monks also played prominent roles in trying to calm crowds and prevent violence in the midst of the rioting (Bookbinder 2014). Many analysts saw a political motivation behind these riots, as Aung San Suu

Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was scheduled to soon arrive in the city as part of its campaign for constitutional change (Mathieson 2014). In addition to these major instances of unrest, there have been numerous smaller episodes across the country, including in the former capital of Yangon (Lawi Weng 2014).

In many cases of communal violence over the past couple of years, local security forces, particularly the police, have appeared unable or unwilling to intervene to stop violence and rioting. In some cases, they have been accused of participating in the violence (International Crisis Group 2013). Moreover, various reports have indicated evidence of a degree of organization among rioters that implies pre-planning, and government, religious, and civil society actors make frequent references to undefined "dark forces" responsible for driving this violence. Local residents often claim that the riots were led by people from outside, and that prior to the events there were no significant religious tensions between neighboring Buddhist and Muslim communities (Wade 2013).<sup>8</sup> Though some have accused elements of the military or economic elite of orchestrating these events in order to turn back the reform movement, there is no direct evidence tying the events to either current or former members of the military or government.<sup>9</sup> However, the continued instability is a threat to the current democratic reform process because it could be a pretext for martial law and the resumption of direct military rule (Stoakes 2013). It is notable, and hopeful, that in Mandalay and elsewhere stories did emerge of effective community policing, Buddhists sheltering Muslim neighbors from attacks, and religious and community leaders coming together to refute rumors and restrain militant elements of their own communities. These positive illustrations of indigenous community resilience against communal violence will be discussed later in this paper.

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*The Mandalay riots were thought to have been spurred by rumors posted on U Wirathu's Facebook page*

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## Monastic Mobilization in Myanmar

Since 2011, Myanmar's monks and nuns have responded to the political transition in ways that have fostered and supported the reform and peace efforts, as well as driven conflict and bolstered exclusionary attitudes that feed violence. Their mobilization in response to political, social, and economic dynamics in the country has a great deal of historical precedent. As in other Asian Buddhist contexts, in ancient Burmese kingdoms there was a relationship of patronage between the ruling monarchy and *sangha* (the monastic community). British colonial rulers, however, sought to separate the political and religious realms, refusing to appoint a head of the *sangha*, a duty that had typically been the responsibility of the king. Due to this absence of central authority, many Buddhists claimed to see a moral decline in the monastic community. This perceived weakening of Buddhism, in concert with Christian missionizing, fueled a Burmese nationalist and Buddhist revival movement in the early twentieth century, spearheaded by several prominent Buddhist monks.<sup>10</sup>

During the brief parliamentary period following independence in 1948, Buddhist ideas were more prominent in the political realm, especially in the speeches and policy prescriptions of U Nu, the country's first prime minister. The military regime, which took power in 1962 to stabilize the country in the face of violent rebellion by ethnic minority groups, sought to implement socialist rule loosely grounded in Buddhist moral teachings (Walton 2012). While Buddhism receded from the public sphere for the first few decades of military rule, successive military governments also relied on the legitimating potential of Buddhist acts, such as building religious structures and visibly patronizing monks.<sup>11</sup> Despite severely repressive policies in other areas, the military governments, nonetheless, acted as proper Buddhist rulers should by creating opportunities for Buddhism to thrive. This gave them some degree of legitimacy in the face of general popular discontent (Jordt 2007).

Current monastic political mobilization can be seen, in some ways, as an extension of monastic efforts to be responsive to community needs during the era of military rule. While some monks served on the government-appointed Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, established in 1980 to consolidate state control over the diffuse monastic orders,

the vast majority sought to maintain distance from the ruling military regime. In the absence of adequate government programs for education, public health, or disaster relief, monasteries increasingly stepped in to fill this void. Some 15 hundred monastic-run schools provide free secular and religious education to village children who cannot afford to attend government schools, and community health clinics operate out of some monasteries. In 2008, when Cyclone Nargis hit the coast of Myanmar, causing large-scale destruction—including the deaths of well over 100 thousand people—relief efforts were largely organized and funded through monasteries (sometimes in partnership with national and international Christian organizations) (Jaquet and Walton 2013).

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***Current monastic political mobilization can be seen as an extension of its wide-ranging community efforts***

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While many monks participated in the anti-government protests of 1988, the 2007 so-called Saffron Revolution is perhaps the most well-known contemporary mobilization of Myanmar's monks and nuns (although the recent nationalist movements threaten to eclipse it in fame). In September 2007, in response to the regime's decision to remove fuel subsidies, which in turn led to further economic hardship for Myanmar's already struggling population, activists took to the streets in protest throughout the country. When many of those activists were arrested, some monks began to protest. The monastic response expanded rapidly when a few protesting monks in the town of Pakokku were beaten by security forces. The ensuing marches lasted for days, swelling in numbers until eventually tens of thousands of monks and nuns were engaged, particularly in Yangon and Mandalay. The protesting monastics marched to and prayed at Aung San Suu Kyi's home—where she remained under house arrest—and refused to take alms from members of the military, thus demonstrating their opposition to it.<sup>12</sup> Eventually the security forces began to brutally crack down on the protesting monks, raided monasteries, and jailed, injured, or killed many.<sup>13</sup>

The former regime was able to put down the Saffron Revolution and retain its hold on power. It is difficult to know the degree to which that event influenced the speed or nature of the subsequent political transition, if at all. Certainly the reforms were driven by myriad reasons,



including economic and geopolitical reasons.<sup>14</sup> But there is also a widely held perception (even if no direct evidence exists to prove it) that the mass monastic mobilization against the regime, and the outrage caused by the military's brutal attack on monks and nuns, contributed to the speed with which the regime pushed through its constitution in 2008 and followed with multiparty elections in 2010.

Since 2011, Buddhist monks and nuns have continued to voice public positions and mobilize communities. Some monks have organized peace marches and reached out to support religious and political leaders in war-affected states. In Kachin state in August 2012, the president of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) noted that a group of "Saffron Revolution monks" had recently visited to offer relief to victims of the conflict and to learn more about the situation of the Kachin people.<sup>15</sup> In early 2014, a monk walked on a six-day journey in Rakhine state, from Sittwe to Mrauk U, in support of national peace and reconciliation (*Democratic Voice of Burma* 2014).

Monks have also been quite active in advocacy and mobilization to support environmental protection efforts and protest development infrastructure projects. The largest and most well-known example was against the expansion of a China-backed copper mine in Letpadaung, in the northwest of the country. The monks and farmers who encamped in the area for months sought to draw attention to illegal land seizures and social, environmental, and health consequences of the mine. The heavy-handed and clumsy response by riot police in November 2012, which resulted in serious injury to Buddhist monks, attracted domestic and international condemnation (Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2013a). The events also drew more attention to the negative consequences of foreign-backed investment projects and the need for greater legal oversight of these projects. Finally, as will be discussed in more depth below, some monks have been responding to recent incidents of violence against Muslim communities by providing humanitarian relief and by challenging Buddhist arguments justifying bias toward other religious groups.

### **The Rise of the 969 Movement**

Since 2012, monks have played a visibly negative role, on the whole, in supporting and organizing anti-Muslim campaigns. The face of the Buddhist monastic mobilization against the Muslim community has

been U Wirathu, a monk based in Mandalay and a complex figure whose career mirrors that of Burmese nationalist monks from the early twentieth century. He spent nine years in jail, having been arrested in 2003 for inciting anti-Muslim riots in Mandalay. He was released in a mass amnesty in early 2012 and promptly returned both to his monastic duties and to political organizing, which included sending monks from his prestigious Ma Soe Yein monastery in Mandalay to support the protests at the Letpadaung copper mine (Marshall 2012).

After fighting worsened in Rakhine state near the end of 2012, it was reported that President Thein Sein suggested to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees that the best solution would be to remove the estimated 800 thousand Rohingya to another country (*Democratic Voice of Burma* 2012). On September 2, 2012, U Wirathu led a march of thousands of monks in Mandalay, calling for citizens to support the president's proposal and casting the Rohingya as a threat to the Burmese "motherland." As one of the authors has written elsewhere: "U Wirathu epitomizes the all too common model of a nationalist leader who fights for expanded political freedoms for some citizens, but also uses religious reasoning to justify the exclusion of groups considered to be outside the national community" (Walton 2013c).

The 969 movement is a decentralized, loose grouping of monks and laypeople. While many commentators have portrayed U Wirathu as the "leader" of the movement, this is an incorrect characterization, as even the monks who have claimed credit for the contemporary revival of the 969 symbol have emphasized its leaderless nature. The movement has complex, culturally embedded elements and has evoked seemingly contradictory interpretations and impulses. Its name is a contemporary repurposing of Buddhist numerological symbolism related to the Buddha, the *dhamma* (his teachings), and the *sangha*, known collectively as the "Triple Gems." Lists of attributes are commonly found in Theravada Buddhist teachings, most likely originating as a memorization device when the religion was transmitted orally. In this case, there are nine distinctive noble qualities of the Buddha, six of the *dhamma*, and

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***The 969 movement is a decentralized grouping of monks and laypeople, with seemingly contradictory interpretations and impulses***

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nine of the *sangha*. Thus, Burmese Buddhists occasionally use “969” as shorthand to refer to the Triple Gems. The logo of the 969 movement includes a stone pillar flanked by three lions, meant to represent the ancient pillar of Emperor Ashoka, a third-century BCE ruler of the territory now known as India who is commonly associated with Buddhism (Arai 2013).

The movement imagines “969” as a symbolic counter to the number 786, a numerological representation of “Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim” (“in the name of Allah”) and a shorthand for Islam used among some Muslims in Asian countries. The number 786 has a practical

purpose, as Muslim restaurants display a 786 sticker to indicate to customers that they serve halal food, although it also functions as a more general notification that the business is Muslim-owned. In response to this, the 969 move-

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***969 is a symbolic counter to 786, shorthand for Islam among some Muslims in Asian countries***

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ment distributed stickers for their followers to designate businesses as Buddhist-owned, and encouraged followers to “Buy Buddhist.” Behind this campaign may lie resentments about the economic success of some members of the Myanmar Muslim community, who historically comprised the mercantile class and so enjoyed financial success.

### **The Emergence of MaBaTha**

Despite the tendency for analysts to overstate both its coherence and its unity, 969 was always a decentralized movement held together by a common symbol and some roughly defined tenets. Since the beginning of 2014, other groups have formed that are pursuing complementary goals, but with more targeted political strategies and more centralized organization.

The most prominent is the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, founded at a large conference of monks convened in Mandalay in January 2014 (Radio Free Asia 2014c). The Burmese name for this group is *A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shauq Ye a-Pwe*, or MaBaTha for short. The very name of MaBaTha indicates the way in which its originators see Burmese ethnic, racial, and national identity as bound up in Buddhism: *a-myo* is a variant on *lu-myo*, which is alternately understood as “ethnicity” or “race”; *batha*, in this case, refers to

religion; and *thathana* is the Burmese rendering of *sasana*, the Pali word for the Buddhist tradition as a whole (explained in more detail below).

The formation of these new groups could be a response to a ban on the political use of the 969 symbol in September 2013 by the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (Ferrie and Min Zayar Oo 2013). However, they also represent a tactical shift, as the groups are working more closely with political parties and other actors inside the system. Although 969-allied monks such as U Wirathu still maintain prominent and visible positions, the shift in tactics indicates that Buddhist nationalism in contemporary Myanmar is responsive to changing political opportunities.

It is difficult to characterize adequately the complexity of MaBaTha. Probably the most common perception of the organization among foreign observers (also held by some in Myanmar) is of a discriminatory group that spreads a virulently anti-Muslim message and reinforces notions of an exclusively Buddhist nation. While this is certainly true of some of the most outspoken and prominent MaBaTha monks, other monks convey more mixed messages. One MaBaTha monk, Galon-ni Sayadaw, became well known in the days after the June riots in Mandalay, when a video spread of him telling rioters to disperse, that violence and hatred were not appropriate responses to their concerns, and that monks would resolve the situation.<sup>16</sup>

Another example is the seeming ambivalence of the influential monk Sitagu Sayadaw, who is associated with MaBaTha and also regularly participates in interreligious dialogues and preaches for peace and tolerance. In explaining the association, one monk close to him said that he was seeking to channel the MaBaTha monks' motivation to protect Buddhism into reconciling rather than divisive ways.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, multiple people (sympathetic to the organization, it must be noted) explain the genesis of MaBaTha as an initiative on the part of some senior Burmese monks who felt that the 969 movement was in danger of creating a negative perception of Burmese Buddhism and wanted to bring it under more control.<sup>18</sup> While this may have been the intention of some of the monks who launched the organization, its creation has certainly not resulted in the disappearance of anti-Muslim preaching or violence directed against Muslims.

In the past year, some of the most controversial monastic mobilization has focused on passage of a law that would restrict interfaith

marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men. A draft of the law circulated in July 2013 mandated that Buddhist women seek official permission from local authorities before marrying a man of another faith. It also included a clause that the man must convert to Buddhism

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***Some of the most controversial monastic mobilization has centered on restricting Buddhist-Muslim interfaith marriages***

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if he wished to marry a Buddhist woman. The law, which has been supported and lobbied for by many monastics, is presented as a response to the rumor that Muslim men marry Buddhist women to convert them and so spread Islam, discussed further below. Over the summer of

2013, monks carried out demonstrations to show support for the bill and allegedly collected some 2.5 million signatures in support of it (Mahtani 2013).

Legislative action related to religious identity has expanded since the middle of 2013. Buddhist nationalist groups worked with sympathetic political parties to introduce four bills in parliament in July 2013; these bills were related to interreligious marriage, religious conversion, monogamy, and population control (Eleven News 2014).<sup>19</sup> Following a monks' conference in Mandalay in January 2014, renewed public pressure from monks and laypeople brought the issue back into the spotlight (Zarni Mann 2014). Cautious in the run-up to the 2015 national elections, Myanmar's political leaders have been careful to neither publicly support nor oppose the pieces of proposed legislation, although the legislation appears to have sufficient support within the parliament and a vocal constituency of monks and lay supporters (Radio Free Asia 2014b).

However, in May 2014, an alliance of civil society organizations issued a statement strongly opposing the proposed laws, claiming that they violated the rights of women and minorities (Shwe Aung and Solomon 2014). MaBaTha responded quickly with a statement calling the civil society groups "traitors on national affairs" and disputing their claims to represent Burmese communities because they were "backed by foreign groups" (Nyein Nyein 2014). In the following weeks, some of the most prominent members of the civil society groups that signed the statement received death threats, yet they have continued their public opposition (Yen Snaing 2014).

## Buddhist Narratives of Insecurity and Conflict

The next section analyzes different themes that emerge in contemporary Buddhist discourse on conflict, violence, and insecurity in Myanmar, and is separated into five subsections: rumors and fears about Islam and Muslims, the defense of the *sasana* (Buddhist religion), the use of “non-Buddhist” methods, the claim that nationalist groups merely promote Buddhism, and the denial of responsibility for violence associated with the movement.

### Rumors and Fears about Islam and Muslims

As noted, one of the most prominent aspects of the current violence has been the spread of rumors that demonize Muslim populations in Myanmar and elsewhere. Some of these rumors tap into claims about Muslims in Myanmar that have existed for generations, while others have developed a modern and global twist as they are connected to broader discourses about Islam.

A common claim made by Buddhists in Myanmar is that the country is being taken over by Muslims. U Wirathu has described this scenario in a number of different sermons and interviews. He says that there is a “Muslim conspiracy’ to conquer Burma through economic exploitation and interfaith marriage” (Galache 2013), and that “Muslims deliberately razed their own houses to win a place at refugee camps run by aid agencies” (Marshall 2012). He also gives the example of the strong Muslim presence in the construction sector in Yangon as evidence that Muslims are attempting a gradual takeover of Burmese society and the economy, with the end goal of “destroy[ing the Buddhist] race and religion” (U Wirathu 2013).

Many Burmese Buddhists point to regional examples of how Islam has displaced Buddhism in the past. Ashin Sada Ma, a prominent 969 monk who claims to have designed the movement’s logo, has stated, “Only small parts of Asia are Buddhist now; in the past, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and many other places, including Turkey and Iraq, were Buddhist countries, but now they are lost” (Galache 2013). Speaking specifically about Myanmar, U Wirathu has said, “If Buddhists don’t do anything to stop it, the whole country will be like the Mayu region in Arakan state by 2100,” referring to an area of the state that is populated primarily by Rohingya Muslims (Galache 2013).

Quasi-historical claims such as this are commonly shared on social media sites. Their questionable historical veracity is beside the point because the monks who make these claims enjoy a respected social status among Burmese Buddhists, and it is assumed that they have correct information about the history of Buddhism.

Some of the fears related to Muslims in Myanmar explicitly tap into the broader narrative of the global war on terror and claims about Islamic society more generally. Ashin Sada Ma makes this anxiety clear when he directly states, “I fear that some Bengali Muslims are terrorists and have a mission to Islamize our country” (Galache 2013). U Wirathu has preached that “whatever [Muslims] do, they do it from their Islamic point of view.” Further, he says: “Everywhere in the world, the Muslims themselves are the violators of basic human rights...they have brutally violated freedom of religion in every society they control” (U Wirathu 2013). The late journalist and National League for Democracy (NLD) member U Win Tin suggested that “no one can deny that Muslims are usually extremists” (Eleven News 2013). Even Aung San Suu Kyi reinforced this view in a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) interview in 2013 when, in response to questioning about the validity of Buddhist fears of Islam, she cited a “perception that...global Muslim power is very great” (Aung San Suu Kyi 2013).

One of the methods through which 969 and MaBaTha claim that Muslims will accomplish this dominance is by marrying and forcibly converting Buddhist women. An excerpt from one of U Wirathu’s sermons is worth quoting at length: “[Muslims] have a lot of money and no one knows where that money mountain is. They use that money to get our young Buddhist women. They show that money to attract our young women...That money will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman, and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam...And the children born of her will become Bengali Muslims and the ultimate danger to our Buddhist nation, as they will eventually destroy our race and our religion. Once they become overly populous, they will overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation” (U Wirathu 2013). U Wirathu has also updated this claim for the twenty-first century with the additional assertion that the funds used to forcibly convert Buddhist women come from Saudi oil money.

Tun Kyaw Nyein and Suzanne Prager Nyein have explored the historical justification for these fears, as well as the legal protections

created in response to them that have been in place for decades (Nyein and Nyein 2013). In late-1930s British colonial Burma, Buddhist-Muslim riots broke out, in part, due to Buddhist concerns that women who married Muslim men were forced to give up their spousal rights. However, several laws were enacted to explicitly protect the rights of Buddhist women, and those who claim that this is a serious problem facing Buddhist women do not provide any evidence beyond nonspecific anecdotes.

Many Buddhists not only believe that Buddhism in Myanmar is under threat from Islam, but they are also frustrated by Western dismissals of this threat and by the perception that the global community is demonizing Buddhism and is only acknowledging Muslim grievances. They point to media coverage from the Islamic world and the West critical of “Buddhist terrorism” in Myanmar and describing Muslims as innocent victims of violence (Dolan and Gray 2014). While the plight of the Rohingya has received the

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***While international media publicized the plight of Rohingya Muslims, Rakhine Buddhists feel their own impoverished conditions are ignored***

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bulk of international media coverage, Rakhine Buddhists have felt that their own conditions of poverty and denial of rights have been ignored. Additionally, Buddhist fears in Rakhine state and elsewhere are not simply fueled by fears of Muslims, but also by experiences of repression and suffering under former military regimes. In an interview with one of the authors, U Wirathu mentioned the fact that one reason why people are afraid is that “the police do not make them feel secure.”<sup>20</sup>

Although to outside observers, fear that Muslims could come to dominate in Myanmar may seem preposterous, it is important to note the ways in which demographic and geographical differences can make this fear more visceral and understandable in Rakhine state. While Rakhine Buddhists in the state are a majority, estimates of the total Muslim population (including Rohingyas and Kamans) run as high as 1 million people (out of an estimated 3.1 million), and a sizeable population of Burman Buddhists adds to the demographic insecurity (*The Economist* 2012). According to the Rakhine State Commission report, two townships that border Bangladesh, Maungdaw and



Buthidaung, are over 90 percent Rohingya (although the report uses the term “Bengali”) (Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2013). These demographics have increased the sense among Rakhines that they are alone in “guarding Myanmar’s western door,” as the chair of the Rakhine Women’s Network described it (Belford 2014). Even Speaker of Parliament Thura Shwe Mann felt obliged to acknowledge and praise these sentiments in 2013, saying, “I appreciate the attempts of the Rakhine people to protect Myanmar” (Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2013b).

Moreover, many even within the Myanmar Muslim community note that there has been an increasing presence of more conservative forms of Islam throughout the country, spread by missionaries who travel from village to village, often recruiting young men. This form of Islam derives from the Deobandi school, preaches a message that is perceived to be less tolerant of other religions and cultures, and assumes practices (such as the donning of conservative dress) that set it apart culturally. Some leaders within the Muslim community express concern about the spread of this conservative form of Islam and worry that the Buddhist community sees these adherents, which drives their fears of being overcome by a form of Islam that is inimical to their values.<sup>21</sup> One must be quick to note, however, that adherents of this form of Islam remain small in number.

### **Defense of the *Sasana***

While the current Buddhist-Muslim conflict embodies a broader threat to democratic consolidation in Myanmar, it reflects a common theme

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*969 and MaBaTha use  
‘defense of the sasana’  
to justify discrimination  
(and sometimes violence)*

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in Theravada Buddhist history. Buddhist groups such as 969 and MaBaTha justify discrimination (and sometimes even violence) against Muslims as a necessary response to the imminent threat of Islam’s expansion in Asia, and its encroachment upon the Buddhist community. In a situation like this, some Buddhists in Myanmar and elsewhere in Asia (like Sri

Lanka and Thailand) argue that actions taken against non-Buddhist communities, which seem counter to Buddhist values of compassion and equanimity, are justified if undertaken in defense of the *sasana* (Bartholomeusz 2002).

The Pali word *sasana* refers broadly to the Buddhist religion, but it should also be understood as including the entire Buddhist community (of monks, nuns, and laypeople) and the Buddha's teachings themselves. For Theravada Buddhists, this includes the texts of the Pali canon, as well as the vast commentarial literature and the lived knowledge of those teachings among Buddhists. The *sasana* is critically important; without it, enlightenment would be impossible. Over the centuries in Theravada Buddhist-influenced kingdoms, political and religious elites cultivated a worldview in which the health of the religion and the strength of the polity were seen as interdependent. Defending Buddhism, therefore, requires not only protecting the integrity of the state, but also ensuring that the state and its leaders create an environment conducive to the well-being of the religion. Similarly, in this frame, protecting the Burmese nation requires solidifying Buddhism as its primary moral touchstone and, to a certain degree, as the ideological infrastructure for the state.

One of the earliest accounts of violence in defense of the *sasana* is of the Sinhalese king, Dutthagamani, who defeated a Tamil king in approximately the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, declaring that his purpose was not to win territory but to protect the *sasana*.<sup>22</sup> According to the sixth-century Sinhalese Buddhist text the *Mahavamsa*, monks allegedly disrobed in order to join his army and fight for the Buddhist cause. When Dutthagamani experienced remorse at the bloodshed he had caused, he was visited by eight *arahants* (fully enlightened beings) who assured him that there was no need to worry. Only one and a half "people" had died at the hands of his army: one who had taken the Five Precepts (and who could be considered Buddhist) and one who had taken a lesser vow. The rest, according to the exceptionally authoritative voices of these *arahants*, were all non-Buddhists, less than human and not even deserving of consideration, let alone pity.

The Burmese Buddhist King Bodawphaya argued that his intention in conquering the Arakanese kingdom of Mrauk U in 1785 was for the purpose of "purifying" the *sasana* (Leider 2008). While the Arakanese were also Buddhist, their kingdom maintained close ties with Islamic sultanates to the west and adopted some cultural and political traditions from them. For Bodawphaya, the "defense of the *sasana*" was carried out through a violent, expansionist policy, in this case conducted against co-religionists.

Religious and political leaders have also employed “defense of the *sasana*” arguments in contemporary democratic contexts in order to justify bloody, anti-democratic policies, particularly violence against non-Buddhist religious groups perceived as a threat to Buddhism. In contemporary Sri Lanka, some nationalist monks exhorted the Sinhala Buddhist-led government to press the prosecution of the war against the Hindu and Christian Tamil insurgency group the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), using imagery that invoked the legacy of Dutthagamani (the war was brutally won by the government in 2009). They were following in the footsteps of the controversial Sinhalese monk Walpola Rahula, who, in legitimizing monastic participation in politics in the 1970s, also commented approvingly on the belief of Dutthagamani’s *arahant* advisors that “the destruction of human beings [for the purpose of protecting the religion] was not a very grave crime” (Rahula 1974).

The “protection of the *sasana*” argument does not need to be explicit in cases like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, where the identity of the Buddhist majority effectively overlaps with the national identity. Calls to “defend the motherland” in these countries might appear to be simply nationalistic, yet the long-standing connection in Buddhist political thought between the integrity and strength of the state and the health of the religion suggests that many people view these conflicts through a religious lens.

Recent incidents of thousands of Buddhist monks marching in anti-Muslim protests across Myanmar reinforce the idea that the purification of the state and the protection of the *sasana* are coterminous processes. The 969 movement’s “Buy Buddhist” campaign urges Myanmar’s Buddhists to strengthen the *sasana* against expansionist Islam by patronizing only Buddhist-owned and -operated businesses; its logic suggests that one must protect Buddhism by economically punishing local Muslim populations and driving Islam completely out of the country. According to U Wirathu, the movement “is about protecting the religion, but also protecting the nation, the race, the country. It’s not just about protecting the *sasana*, but protecting the country.” This rhetoric reinforces the notion that the well-being of the religious and political communities are inextricably intertwined.<sup>23</sup> The argument for the defense of the *sasana* is compelling and difficult to refute since no Buddhist can afford to be accused of failing to defend the religion. The recent conflicts in Myan-

mar likely have more localized and personalized causes, as people struggle to maintain stability in a transitional context of economic, political, and social uncertainty. However, the broader religious context allows Buddhists to portray Islam and the Muslim community as a threat to the *sasana*, despite the absence of evidence to support this claim. It is critical for scholars and policymakers analyzing recent events to recognize the persuasive force of religious reasons given in defense of discriminatory or exclusionary policies (Kyaw San Wai 2014). This is a particular threat to continued reform in countries where democratic practices and values have not yet been consolidated, as is currently the case in Myanmar. At the moment in which the Buddhist *sasana* is perceived as being threatened, democracy reverts to theocracy.

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*The call to protect Buddhism  
is inextricably intertwined  
with protecting the country*

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### **“Non-Buddhist” Methods**

One of the most confounding aspects of the current wave of anti-Muslim violence is the notion that Buddhists in Myanmar are seeking to defend their religion by seemingly violating core Buddhist values and by using what many observers have referred to as “non-Buddhist” methods. In fact, some of the rhetoric of 969 supporters has acknowledged that very claim.

For example, U Wirathu admits that “tactics” such as buying only from those who share your religious beliefs are not properly “Buddhist.” In one interview, he explained: “It is not the Burmese way, but a Muslim way, and they practice this [marking their shops with 786]. So go around the town and see how many Muslims are visiting Burmese shops. If they support their own shops, why won’t we Buddhist [Burmese] do the same?” He continued on, in response to the interviewer’s query as to whether these actions constituted discrimination: “This kind of buying behavior doesn’t mean it’s discrimination. It can protect our people’s interests” (*Irrawaddy* 2013b). U Wimala, another 969 monk, also supported the actions of some monks in Karen state who have fined Buddhists who were caught buying from Muslim shopkeepers (Marshall 2013a).

Similarly, in explaining and defending the proposed interreligious marriage restrictions, the 969 monk Ashin Sada Ma acknowledged that

“forbidding interfaith marriages” was not the “traditional Buddhist way,” but also insisted that methods such as this are “acceptable if they help Buddhism” (Galache 2013). Another of the law’s defenders, the chairperson of a Buddhist religious network, argued that restrictions on intermarriage were necessary because “our Buddhist women are not intelligent enough to protect themselves” (*Democratic Voice of Burma* 2013). Additionally, as a result of the blurred line between 969 political rallies and political sermons, these events increasingly include elements that seem at odds with their religious content. One song is entitled “Song to Whip Up Religious Blood” and contains the lyrics “Buddhists should not stay calm any more.” A slogan found on the pamphlets of a Mon 969 network declared: “If necessary we will build a fence with our bones” (Marshall 2013a).

When pushed by one of the authors in an interview about how he defends his rhetoric within Buddhist teachings, U Wirathu responded that “all of my sermons are consistent with the *pitaka* (teachings of the Buddha). I hold tight to the *pitaka*. The *dhamma* is very wide, but I hold tight to the *pitaka*. And I follow the path of the *hpaya-laung* (Maitreya, the future Buddha). The path for national harmony is the path of the *hpaya-laung*.”<sup>24</sup> He went on to give an example of a Buddhist teaching that speaks of how a tree standing alone is vulnerable when the storm comes. “But when trees, even small young ones, stand together, they will not fall when the storm comes. We must stand together,” he explained. In this same interview, he also made clear: “But we do not advocate violence. In fact, we are clear in condemning violence against other groups. We have a policy that makes clear we are against violence.” Indeed, 969 pamphlets have listed codes of conduct that condemn the use of violence, while at the same time they defend the urgent need to protect the *sasana* and promote the “race and the country.”<sup>25</sup>

There is historical precedence for violating both the letter and the spirit of specific Buddhist ethical codes privileging nonviolence, when the violations are in defence of Buddhism. As noted above, Sri Lanka is another Theravadin-majority Buddhist country whose *sangha* has close relationships to Myanmar’s own—religiously, culturally, and psychologically. In Sri Lanka, monastics have in recent decades used a Buddhist “just war” rhetoric to defend the use of violence to protect the Buddhist community against non-Buddhist insurgency groups and

foreign elements, and to protect the integrity of the island nation as a Buddhist homeland.<sup>26</sup> This form of “just war” theory draws from certain Buddhist literature that renders ambivalent Buddhist ethical positions on violence (Bartholomeusz 2002). Taking the vast Theravadin corpus as a whole, these Buddhists argue that there is no single ethical principle (such as pacificism). Instead, the various stories considered sacred depict a more complicated picture, defending violence as sometimes, if regrettably, necessary for the sake of Buddhist self-defense. In other words, the short-term violation of Buddhist principles and ethics is sometimes justified for the sake of what is considered a righteous goal.

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***Theravadin sacred stories depict violence as sometimes necessary***

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### **Promotion of Buddhism**

One of the most challenging aspects of these nationalist movements for outside observers to grasp is the fact that in certain ways they represent a widely accepted implementation of Buddhist values. As explained above, like all conditioned things, even the Buddha’s *sasana* is impermanent and will eventually disappear. This is a fundamental element of Buddhism and a perpetual source of both anxiety and motivation for Buddhist practice. While this anxiety is often directed toward (and against) external actors portrayed as a threat to Buddhism, a consistent (and arguably more positive) manifestation is the desire to prolong the existence of the *sasana* through the propagation of Buddhist teachings and through encouraging a deeper engagement with the religion among those already in the community.

This sentiment is often expressed by supporters of 969 and Ma-BaTha as they defend their organizations against claims of extremism. A Burmese Buddhist nun from Mandalay explained why she had joined a push to rebrand the movement in the face of a ban on 969 organizations by the state Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee: “I quite support this organization...I believe it can spread religious and cultural knowledge widely to children who live in rural areas. Many live far from the Buddha’s teachings” (Si Thu Lwin 2013b). The monk Ashin Sada Ma has said that the purpose of the movement is to educate young Buddhists about their religion. “In the modern age, the young people don’t

know the jewels of Buddhism; this logo is designed to remind them” (Galache 2013). Some of the literature put out by 969 even includes instructions for praying and recitation (Galache 2013).

Buddhists in Myanmar keenly feel the pressure to compete with other modern distractions in ensuring that younger generations learn the basics of the religion and see the value in donations to monasteries, material support of monastics, and even advanced scriptural study. “We need to emphasize Buddhist ethics...At this point we are weak in teaching Buddhist tradition and culture, so our antibody is weak. If you do not understand your Buddhist tradition, an attack can come. I can see a lot of weaknesses in us, and it makes me sad. We need to develop a curriculum and teach kids,” noted a monk based outside Mandalay.<sup>27</sup> This has been, of course, a common concern in modernizing societies, but is particularly felt in contemporary Myanmar as the country rapidly opens up after decades of relative isolation. Buddhist Sunday schools created by MaBaTha, as well as related religious education programs for public schools developed by associated monks and other groups, have gained widespread popularity in the past two years (Marshall 2013a).

Even when presenting the purpose of 969 as the development and propagation of Buddhism, its supporters have used language that reflects their understanding of the ways in which the religious and political communities are necessarily interconnected. A businesswoman who donates to U Wimala, one of the more vocal and active 969 monks, stated, “I want children to learn the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings), improve their manners, and protect the nation and religion” (Marshall 2013a). In her formulation, to be an effective defender of Buddhism and the Burmese nation, a child must first have a strong grounding in Buddhist teachings.

Because supporters insist that the primary objective of the movement is to defend Buddhism, it also creates a space for monastic political action, something usually frowned upon in the Burmese tradition. One of the ways in which monks have historically justified political engagement has been to frame it as part of their necessary monastic duties of protecting and spreading the religion. In the Theravada tradition, education has traditionally been the province of monastics. Although their control of this field has waned since the colonial period, it is still universally accepted that monks ought to be teachers of the

*dhamma*. This gray area of “traditional monastic duties” also allows for a wide range of interpretation of appropriate actions. In response to the ban on 969 organizations, one monk replied: “We don’t take part in political affairs, steal others’ possessions, attack or lie to others. So you cannot say we violate the ethics of a Buddhist monk. We just make our special efforts in order to preserve our race and religion” (May Sitt Paing 2013). Monks have used this interpretive space throughout Buddhist history to justify various methods of political engagement, and it will remain an important aspect of religious life in Myanmar, especially if space continues to open up for political organizing more generally.

There are ways, then, in which these movements can be seen as an expression of the impulse to strengthen and sustain Buddhist practice in Myanmar. This does not excuse the violence that has been carried out either in the name of protecting Buddhism or indirectly as a result of 969 or MaBaTha sermons and literature, but it does help to explain why the groups appear to have such widespread support among Burmese Buddhists. It also suggests (although significantly more research would be required to demonstrate this) that a good deal of the monetary support for 969 and MaBaTha activities might come from committed Buddhists whose interests lie in the propagation of the religion, rather than the vilification of Muslims. One element is not easily separated from the other, either conceptually or, in the case of exceedingly opaque religious organizations, fiscally. The following section explores further the rhetoric and framing that allow Buddhists who support the movement to distance themselves from responsibility for the destructive acts associated with it.

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*Support for 969 and MaBaTha might be driven by a desire to propagate Buddhism, rather than vilify Muslims*

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### **Denying Responsibility for Violence**

As discussed above, the monks and laypeople involved with the 969 movement consistently deny any responsibility for the violence that has been carried out in its name or in connection with its anti-Muslim propaganda. They insist that the movement’s purpose is merely to defend Buddhism, and attribute any related evidence (such as the fact that “969” was found spray-painted on the walls of destroyed buildings in



the town of Meikhtila) to the fact that “others” outside of their control are defaming an otherwise holy symbol.

U Wirathu has vehemently denied any responsibility for the riots in Meikhtila, Lashio, or other cities in Myanmar. “I don’t have any contacts in [the areas where violence occurred],” he stated in one interview. “We’ve just become scapegoats because no culprits were found after the Meikhtila riots...In our community, the real 969 [campaigners] do not use violence” (Kyaw Zwa Moe 2013). Similarly, Ashin Sada Ma, one of the monks who takes credit for creating the movement in its current form, has pointed to the fact that there has been no violence in Mawlamyine, the city where 969 had its genesis, as evidence that the movement bears no responsibility for anti-Muslim violence elsewhere (Galache 2013).

In fact, both monks have placed the blame squarely on Muslims, alleging that they were the instigators of the worst incidents. After rushing to Meikhtila in March 2013 in the wake of rioting, U Wirathu—who claimed to have come to the affected area to promote interreligious peace—brazenly heaped blame on local Muslim residents for the riots, despite ample evidence to the contrary (*Irrawaddy* 2013b). He claimed that Muslims had thrown bags of acid on peaceful Buddhists crowds, which agitated them and caused the ensuing violence. He also stated, in response to a question about the “planned” nature of the attacks carried out by Buddhists, that the only systematic attacks came from Muslims who provoked the Buddhists.

One 969 monk, U Wimala, admitted that the movement might have “inspired followers to commit anti-Muslim violence.” However, he immediately deflected the blame by claiming that those who had committed violence were “an ill-educated minority,” and that the scope of the attacks had been “exaggerated by Muslim-owned media” (Marshall 2013b). Ashin Sada Ma shifted responsibility to outside groups, which took advantage of the decentralized nature of 969: “In other places, they will spread the symbol on their own. Other townships use the logo for their own purposes” (Galache 2013). In fact, this monk even distanced his own 969 efforts from those of U Wirathu, claiming that the movement’s most well-known face acted “independently” of the original organization (Galache 2013).

This dynamic of denying responsibility for violence connected to one’s actions is not uncommon in situations where the hate speech of

influential public figures is presumed to contribute to intercommunal violence. However, a possible complicating factor in the Burmese case is the particular way in which many Theravada Buddhists understand action, intention, and karmic effects. One doctrinal innovation commonly attributed to the Buddha was to fundamentally alter the then prevailing notion of *karma* in Indian religious thought. While the word *karma* simply means “action,” the Buddha virtually redefined the term from ritual action to volitional action. The effect was to ethicize the concept, making intention central to the karmic results of any deed. In some instances, intention itself is sufficient to bear some degree of karmic consequence. So, simply thinking unwholesome thoughts will have negative karmic effects, but these effects become magnified by actually committing the deed. The important alteration in Buddhist theory is the distinction between action in general and intentional action (the latter of which bears karmic consequences).

Among Myanmar’s Buddhists, it is a relatively common belief that if an action or its result is not intentional, there is no moral or karmic culpability (Walton 2013d). For example, in a *Jataka* tale (one of the hundreds of stories of the Buddha’s past lives), a king and his advisors discuss the king’s deeds and the merit or demerit that follows from them. As part of his royal duties, the king has shot four ceremonial arrows into the air. He loses track of one of

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***U Wirathu’s denial of responsibility for rioting is legitimized by the Buddhist idea that lack of intention removes culpability***

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them and is concerned that it could have errantly struck and killed some living being. However, his advisors reassure him that since he had no intention to take life, even if his arrow had killed someone or something, he would not have technically taken a life. The implication of this interpretation is clear: without intention there are no karmic consequences.

We argue, however, that this reasoning is incomplete, at least as it applies to monks in Myanmar who continue to use derogatory language and dehumanizing metaphors when preaching about Muslims. Myanmar’s monks are almost always treated with respect, if not worshipful deference. Their sermons are understood as blueprints for proper moral

conduct, and when these sermons are peppered with sensationalized rumors of Muslim violence or sinister plots to destroy Buddhism in Myanmar, their listeners take their words as reflections of the Buddha's teachings.

Additionally, in a world where a monk's sermon to 50 people can be recorded and quickly distributed to tens of thousands via DVD, and instantly disseminated to hundreds of thousands more online, a monk like U Wirathu can no longer disassociate himself from the violence committed in the name of the nationalist ideals that he preaches. His awareness of the potential consequences of his words and actions is enough to make him culpable in spreading violence, despite his protestations as to his actual intentions.

The rhetoric from those who spearhead the organizations effectively employs a perspective that separates intention and results through will-

ful ignorance and denial. Through this logic, U Wirathu can effectively deny culpability simply by stating that he does not directly advocate or commit violence against Muslims. Additionally, he claims that he is consistently misquoted by Western journalists, despite ample video evidence of his anti-Muslim preaching. Again, this explanation should not

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*With social media's far reach, anti-Muslim rhetoric cannot be disassociated from violent acts against Muslims*

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be taken as cultural or religious justification for the actions of 969 or MaBaTha monks and supporters, but to help shed light on the ways in which their denials of responsibility acquire some grounding when understood in the context of Buddhist doctrine.

## **Constructing a Counternarrative**

Many in the West have questioned the lack of Buddhist voices challenging or critiquing the anti-Muslim narratives of Buddhist nationalist organizations in Myanmar. That accusation is not entirely fair. In fact, a number of monks have publicly criticized the 969 movement and critiqued the anti-Muslim message it advances, and some critiques of MaBaTha are beginning to emerge. These Buddhist voices demonstrate that the lay and monastic Burmese Buddhist communities are not monolithic, and they are currently struggling to determine the

“proper” Buddhist response in a situation of contestation, violence, and vast change. For example, several public sermons by Buddhist monks calling for coexistence and decrying violence between ethnic and religious groups have circulated on social media.<sup>28</sup> Women’s organizations have been among the most vocal critics of proposed laws restricting interreligious marriage, arguing that not only are the laws discriminatory, but they also demean women rather than protect them, as supporters claim (Zarni Mann and Michaels 2013). They have been joined in their opposition by some monks and by a range of other civil society organizations.

Buddhist monks have been involved in various local initiatives, some public and some under the radar, working with other religions and within the monastic community to challenge these narratives and to advance peace. For example, a prominent monk member of the Mandalay Inter-faith Mercy Group helped launch a multiethnic and multireligious committee in Mandalay to respond to misinformation and rising tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities and to prevent violent episodes. He has also led a series of 10-day courses at his monastery for dozens of monks sympathetic to the 969 movement to analyze the situation in the country and to present Buddhist arguments in support of peace and coexistence. According to him and his colleagues, his efforts have succeeded in fostering peaceful religious coexistence in the area and in directly preventing violence from breaking out.<sup>29</sup> On July 4, 2014, as a response to riots and in an effort to build on earlier endeavors, a new peacekeeping committee was formed in Mandalay among religious leaders of different faiths, which announced that it was prepared to pursue legal action against those spreading rumors or fomenting further unrest (Aung Ko Oo and Myo Thant 2014, Si Thu Lwin 2013a).

According to several activists, a statement made by monks in Yangon in 2012, which was made to de-escalate tensions after incidents had occurred elsewhere, may also have prevented the destruction of a city mosque that rumors indicated would be destroyed.<sup>30</sup> Some Buddhist monks have helped organize humanitarian relief to Muslim victims of recent violence (Fawthrop 2013). In Yangon, a Muslim leader reported that he was able to call on groups of Buddhist monks who would immediately come to protect mosques or religious schools that were being threatened by angry mobs.<sup>31</sup>

There are also stories of monks opening their monasteries to protect Muslims, including in Meikhtila, where the monk U Withuta provided safe sanctuary to hundreds of Muslims. When rioting crowds came to his monastery demanding to be let in, he stood outside the gate and told them that they would have to kill him to get to the Muslims inside. The crowd moved on. When asked later why he took them in, he responded: “I was only doing it in accordance with Buddha’s teachings. You must help all beings who are in need, who are in trouble.” He went further to say: “If we can live harmoniously without religious or racial discrimination, there will be peace not only for Myanmar but for the whole world...If we’re living free of conflict, with each person truly practicing his or her religion, then we’re helping bring peace. It would be best if we could steer clear of all the violence instigated by people abusing religion for nefarious means.”<sup>32</sup>

As one monk said in a meeting with a number of other monks sympathetic to the 969 movement, and who had been accusing Muslims of stoking violence: “We need trust. The main thing is trust. We need to remove our suspicions on both sides. In order to have trust, we need love and compassion...we need to teach people not to hate each other.”<sup>33</sup> At the same meeting, another monk spoke up to say: “We all must have right understanding in order to resolve the conflict. Right understanding of Buddhism...people are teaching things that promote violence. We cannot condemn each other; we must change ourselves. If we blame others, the problem always becomes bigger.” These comments, raised in response to negative statements made by other monks—for example, referring to Muslims as “crows...who try to steal the eggs of others”—demonstrate both the myriad positions held by the monks, and the subtlety with which it is necessary to raise objections. In these statements, we can see monks criticizing, even if gently, their fellow monks by referencing particular points resonant within Buddhist ethics.

The well-known monk Sitagu Sayadaw, who runs several school systems and hospitals throughout the country, has made a series of statements calling for interreligious peace. He has participated in interreligious peace events across the country, and has traveled with other religious leaders—including Muslims—to visit communities affected by Buddhist/Muslim violence. In a speech given in Yangon on March 30, 2013, he said:

I deeply denounce religious, racial, and commercial conflicts in varying degree with no exception. Lord Buddha's teaching is 'non-violence'... There are almost 500 thousand monks, numbers nearly matched by Myanmar Army personnel. Like soldiers defending the motherland's peace and stability, a colossus of *sanghas* is strongly asked to deploy the weapon of loving kindness in dismantling ugly social unrest, and at the same time to help establish peace, stability, and unity by working to their utmost abilities hand and hand with any religious leader having similar goals.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the existence of some of these voices of opposition, there is still some truth to the accusation that Buddhists have not responded forcefully or quickly enough to stem the tide of interreligious hostility that seems to have contributed to the violence. A complicating factor is the general unease monks feel about criticizing fellow monastics in public. According to a monk activist interviewed in July 2013: "There are divides within the monks—Saffron Revolution monks and 88 Generation monks do not agree with these 969

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***While examples abound of monks protecting Muslims, most are hesitant to criticize fellow monastics in public***

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monks. The 88 and Saffron monks have intentions to live peacefully. But they are less powerful than the 969 monks. They lost many from their ranks due to arrest or exile."<sup>35, 36</sup> Thus, while support for the 969 movement can appear broad, there could be more opposition to it within the *sangha* than meets the eye.

The same is likely true of MaBaTha, which, as explained above, has several prominent monks associated with it who have supported interfaith activities. This adds to the confusion regarding the group's purpose. One monk stated in a private interview that "the Buddha's perspective and the MaBaTha perspective are directly opposed to one another." He shared this idea with his lay supporters, but not necessarily through more public channels.<sup>37</sup> The unwillingness to criticize fellow monks is rooted in monastic rules and values,<sup>38</sup> as well as social and political pressure. "We dare not criticize the extremist monks because they are very strong. So if we make a move, a criticism, we are attacked

from every side,” noted a monk involved in interfaith peacebuilding work.<sup>39</sup> He offered examples of monks who criticized the 969 movement and were subsequently accused of not being “true Buddhists.” If a counternarrative is to be raised that will refute the 969 movement and promote religious pluralism and tolerance, a crucial element will be sensitivity to these concerns and a grounding in Buddhist frames.

### **A Theravada Buddhist Argument for Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Myanmar**

Myanmar is at a crucial moment in its history, but entrenching a sustainable and just peace will require that the country strengthen religious pluralism, develop a national identity that is inclusive, and advance social and legal norms discouraging hate speech. This will require efforts from multiple sectors, including media, policymakers, and legal activists. But the religious sector will be crucial to developing social norms that support religious pluralism, and key to this will be the Buddhist monastic community, arguably the most influential social sector in Myanmar. How might one advance support for religious pluralism within a Theravada Buddhist frame that will not only resonate with Myanmar’s Buddhist community, but also acknowledge the complex challenges delineated above? This section will suggest elements of such an argument, building on some of the arguments already being advanced by Buddhist monastics working for interfaith coexistence.

In Myanmar, the teachings of high-ranking monks, both living and dead, to whom one is affiliated as a student can be authoritative, in addition to the Pali canon (teachings of the Buddha as transmitted by his disciples in early Buddhist history and recorded in *suttas*<sup>40</sup>) and certain commentaries on the Pali canon (for example, those by the fifth-century scholar Buddhaghosa). Examples from Buddhist history, such as the famous Emperor Ashoka, are also influential. Finally, *Jataka* tales are popular and can be a source of moral authority. Each of these sources is drawn from in the following construction.

**Right Speech.** In his teachings, the Buddha described an eightfold path of practices that leads one toward liberation, the ultimate goal of Buddhism. These are a series of attitudes and behaviors that are wholesome in nature and so, according to the law of *karma*, bring positive

effects to oneself, developing insight into the true nature of phenomena (or reality) and eradicating the drivers of suffering:

And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times? Just this noble eightfold path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration...I followed that path. Following it, I came to direct knowledge of aging & death, direct knowledge of the origination of aging & death, direct knowledge of the cessation of aging & death, direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of aging & death. —*Nagara Sutta*

Several aspects of the eightfold path bear relevance in constructing an ethic for treating the “other,” which is central to religious pluralism. In particular, given the dynamics in contemporary Myanmar, it is useful to focus on right speech. Right speech, as described by the Buddha, entails abstaining from malicious or harsh speech, from idle chatter, and from lies (*Samyutta Sutta*). Elaborating, the Buddha describes malicious speech as that which causes divisions between people, whereas one rightly following the eightfold path speaks in a way that promotes concord and friendships, (re)uniting people:

He does not repeat elsewhere what he has heard here in order to divide [those people] from these, nor does he repeat to these people what he has heard elsewhere in order to divide [these people] from those; thus he is one who reunites those who are divided, a promoter of friendships...a speaker of words that promote concord. —*Culahalthipadopanna Sutta*

Moreover, right speech is said to reduce fear among others: “By abstaining from false speech, the noble disciple gives to immeasurable beings freedom from fear” (*Anguttara Nikaya*).

These Buddhist calls for a form of speech that promotes concord and does not sow division or fear appear powerfully relevant and resonant for the current situation in Myanmar. Recently, some civil society organizations and actors, as well as political actors, have criticized the use of “dangerous speech,” and several new campaigns actively promote



speech that can protect and fuel peaceful coexistence. As an example, in April 2014, the Burmese activist Nay Phone Latt led a group of civil society organizations that launched the Pan Zagar (flower speech) campaign. This campaign promotes speech that supports coexistence between those of different races, religions, genders, and sexual orientations. It has distributed pamphlets and stickers, launched a Facebook account, and produced and disseminated a song during the annual Thingyan festival in April 2014.

In describing the purpose of the campaign, Nay Phone Latt connects hate speech and violent conflict in the country: “Those groups that seem to be spreading [hate speech] intentionally greatly affect violence and conflicts happening in our country....If people hate each other, a place will not be safe to live. I worry about that most for our society. In some places, although they are not fighting, hate exists within their heart because they have poured poison into their heart for a long time [through hate speech]. It can explode at any time” (*Irrawaddy* 2014). The Pan Zagar campaign could be particularly effective because of the way it is rooted in a Burmese idiom, and because it does not necessarily seek to censor “hate speech” (a project that many in the country might be skeptical of, given a history of censorship), but instead to promote the alternative of productive speech that leads to harmony.

***Byama-so taya (Brahmaviharas)***. The keys to embodying the wholesome actions and attitudes in the eightfold path are the four principal virtues called in Burmese the *byama-so taya* (Pali *brahmaviharas*). These virtues include (1) **myitta (Pali metta)**: loving kindness—the desire to offer happiness to others; (2) **karuna**: compassion—the desire to remove suffering from the other person; (3) **mudita**: sympathetic joy—deriving joy from the success and happiness of others; and (4) **upekkha**: equanimity—acceptance of things as they are and restraint from discrimination (Dharmasiri 1989, 42). These virtues both compel one along the eightfold path and are cultivated through its practice.

The primary drivers of suffering, often described as the source of conflict, are the three poisons (*kiletha*, Pali *kilesa*): greed, hate, and ignorance. Actions considered ethically “good” are those that are not motivated by greed, hate, or ignorance. By cultivating the *byama-so taya*, one reduces the degree to which one is motivated by these three poisons. For example, as Buddhaghosa wrote, cultivating *myitta* helps

one “seclude the mind from hate” (Dharmasiri 1989, 44). But this loving kindness cannot be limited to one’s own community or those who are “likeable.” The Buddha insists that one must extend loving kindness to all possible types of sentient beings (*Karamiya Metta Sutta*), and this practice of loving kindness is said to be the most powerful means to make merit (*Itivuttaka*).

Equanimity, meanwhile, helps ensure that one is not acting impulsively, out of anger, greed, or ignorance, but is able to judge a situation as objectively as possible in order to correctly assess what kind of response will reduce suffering. Moreover, equanimity helps to ensure that one acts without discrimination or bias toward a group based on unwholesome attitudes or attachments (Dharmasiri 1989, 49). Compassion is a virtue that compels action—the desire to reduce the suffering of others motivates one to go out and help others. Meanwhile, sympathetic joy helps to stem resentments as one cultivates an attitude of appreciation for others’ achievements and successes, rather than begrudging them.

From the perspective of the Buddha’s calculations, each of these virtues can help one respond to the current environment in Myanmar in a way that will reduce communal tensions and help drive religious pluralism. Loving kindness and compassion will reduce actions and attitudes driven by hate (which in turn drives “hate speech”) and encourage action that reduces the suffering of victims of the current violence—overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, Muslims. Equanimity will help to ensure that one seeks not to respond out of fear or anger, as much as those might be natural emotional reactions to a situation of insecurity, but with a sense of fairness and care. Sympathetic joy might help to reduce anger or hatred derived from feelings of resentment about the economic successes of others, or the resentment of perceived inequities in, for example, the distribution of aid to communities affected by violence.

Long-standing resentments among Buddhists concerning the development and education provided to Christian groups by missionaries, as well as the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity, and/or resentments

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***Cultivating the four principal virtues  
could reduce communal tensions and  
drive religious pluralism***

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toward Muslim businessmen who profited in the modern era have driven some of the interreligious tensions. Similarly, Rakhine Buddhists have expressed their frustration that, after years of neglect from both the Myanmar government and the international community, much of the aid that first flowed into Rakhine state went disproportionately to the Rohingya (MacLean 2013). While the Rohingya have certainly experienced greater suffering, these Rakhine concerns have not been sufficiently recognized by donors or critics of anti-Muslim activities.

It is important to note that cultivation of these virtues does not in itself mean that a conflict has been resolved. There may indeed remain particular issues—social, economic, and political—that underlie the conflict. However, these virtues may help compel Buddhists, and all people, to manage conflict more effectively and in collaboration with others. Certainly these virtues are commonly celebrated in Burmese Buddhist rhetoric, although, as with many religious values, adherence can often be superficial. But by appealing to these virtues and connecting their practice explicitly to tangible circumstances of conflict or misunderstanding, one will have a powerful tool to advocate for a more constructive and peaceful means of addressing communal relations.

**Testing Claims.** Much of what has shaped popular attitudes toward Islam and the Muslim community in modern Myanmar has been obtained through hearsay. Monks and nuns, as well as lay Buddhists, will often make generalized statements about what Islam teaches, or relate conspiracies about global Muslim agendas that they have received from others in their community or from online media sources. As noted above, the legacy of authoritarianism, the repression of interreligious engagement, and the isolation of Myanmar’s Muslim community have afforded few opportunities for authoritative Muslim voices to refute these common misperceptions.

In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha instructs his disciples to test the veracity of truth claims, and the speakers and teachers who utter these claims, to ensure that they are derived from wholesome values and not motivated by hatred, ignorance, or greed. Sitagu Sayadaw alluded to this teaching in his March 2013 speech in Yangon, saying: “Lord Buddha in his sermon in Pali ‘*Ma Anussavena Gabhittha*’ [said] ‘with [your] own eyes only is seeing believing, and not to take rumors and hearsay

on face value.’ I furthermore ask fellow brothers and sisters not to be in a state of tizzy at every manufactured rumor, but to analyze them painstakingly and act upon them accordingly on their merit.”<sup>41</sup>

This admonition from the Buddha not to accept any claims on face value, but to investigate their sources, might indeed compel all citizens in Myanmar to critique rumors or generalizations made about others. Nothing should be accepted readily as “truth” about reality until it has been thoroughly examined from a trustworthy source. However, the further challenge is that much of what comes through rumors and hearsay can, at some point along the chain, be attributed to a “trustworthy” source, whether an elder, a neighbor, or a religious authority. There has been limited research on modes and networks of communication in contemporary Myanmar, but anecdotal accounts suggest that it could be challenging to develop a counternarrative that undermines the authoritative voice either of monastics or of the “community” writ large (Schissler 2014).

It is also worth noting that, while some people interpret this *sutta* as a call to challenge tradition, one young man from a suburb of Yangon, who is active in his local Buddhist youth organization, explained to one of the authors that it needs to be understood in the proper context.<sup>42</sup> That is, the Buddha gave this advice to people who were confronted with many different doctrines and needed a method to avoid confusion. Since Burmese Buddhists already had the teachings of the Buddha to follow, they should turn instead to the *Mingala Sutta*, which advises obedience to parents and elders. Differences of interpretation about the implications of the *Kalama Sutta* could limit its utility as a general scriptural justification for questioning the veracity of rumors, especially when the source of those rumors is a presumably authoritative monk.

**How to Defend the *Sasana*.** The argument for protection of the *sasana* has always relied on an “end justifies the means” logic, in which the preservation of the Buddhist community as a whole allows Buddhists to act in ways that contravene the basic moral teachings of the religion. A different response, however, would be to argue that a commitment to democratic principles and religious pluralism need not be in opposition to defense of the *sasana*, but is, in fact, a more effective mode of defense. This type of argument is just beginning to be developed by

Buddhists in Myanmar, and an increasing number have asserted that the violent and exclusionary actions allegedly in defense of the *sasana* are antithetical to core Buddhist values. As an example, a Buddhist monk involved in interfaith peacebuilding work in Mandalay, when asked about the defense of the *sasana*, responded: “In my opinion, you don’t have to protect the religion. It will protect itself. It’s been strong enough to survive for nearly three thousand years. Defense of the *sasana* means you follow the practice and you give right direction to the people. That’s all it means. Acting like [969 monks do] does not protect our religion, it only invites enemies.”<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, the efforts of the 969 movement and MaBaTha have actually created a threat against Buddhism in Myanmar that did not previously exist. US State Department officials recently confirmed in an

interview with one of the authors that Al Qaeda and other violent Islamist groups have used recent attacks against Myanmar’s Muslims to recruit Muslims to their cause.<sup>44</sup> A number of militant Islamist groups in the region have issued statements warning of attacks on their home govern-

ments and the Myanmar government in defense of the Rohingya and Muslims generally (Agence France Presse 2012). Likely to that end, in February 2014, two men on a motorcycle shot at Rakhine politicians visiting Malaysia (Mahtani and Fernandez 2014).

In the *Cakavatti Sutta*, the Buddha himself predicted that the *sasana* would disappear five thousand years after his death (making the current moment the halfway point), preceded by a period of moral degeneration and societal collapse, and leading to the arrival of the next Buddha (named Maitreya) who will revitalize the teachings. Reminders of this prediction can put into perspective any anxiety about Buddhism’s supposed imminent extinction; one might find solace in reminders that the Buddha himself predicted this as part of the nature of impermanence. To try to struggle against the inevitable extinction of things that are inherently impermanent will only increase suffering and anxiety. Indeed, the increased threat of violence against the Buddhist community from outside Muslim groups, the increase in suffering among both Muslims

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and Buddhists in Myanmar, and the condemnation of Buddhism by the international media can be seen as increases in suffering caused by precisely this attempt to violently or repressively defend and cling to something that is, by nature, impermanent and empty.

While this discourse of alternate understandings of protecting the *sasana* is only just emerging publicly among Burmese monks, in interviews, some have presented ideas that differ markedly from the MaBaTha fear-based model. One Mandalay monk insisted that one could only protect oneself (and by extension, the *sasana*) by protecting others. Without creating an environment where others are safe, one's own community will never be safe.<sup>45</sup> Several others connected the defense or propagation of the *sasana* with an explicit motivation of spreading peace. If certain actions do not spread peace, they cannot be considered to help Buddhism.<sup>46</sup> Of course, given the refusals described above, to acknowledge responsibility for the connections between anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence, many MaBaTha monks would say that they *are* conducting their work with the intention to create a peaceful society. This is why a deeper structural awareness that recognizes the unintended effects of actions is also critical to developing a response.

**Understanding the Effects of One's Actions.** In Theravada Buddhism generally, but in Myanmar in particular, the analysis of karmic effects is often limited to consideration of the intention driving one's action; thus, if an action or its result is not intentional, there is no moral or karmic culpability. Indeed, when one of the authors pressed U Wirathu and others to consider the linkages between certain speech (what in the West we might call "hate speech") and violence, and the karmic consequences on the speaker for violence that is motivated by this speech, there was rarely recognition of a karmic connection. One scholar, who identified this as a lack of "structural awareness," has been working with Burmese monks to develop a greater understanding of how to situate this notion within Burmese Buddhist discourse (Arai 2013).

There is certainly precedent in Pali scriptures that complicates this denial of responsibility based solely based on intention. Even though the Buddha emphasized intention in determining karmic consequences, he also said that one must critically examine the end results to see if there are bad side effects of one's behavior. The example that the Buddha offers is charitable giving, where one must always critically

examine the end action to see if there are any negative side effects (Dharmasiri 1989, 36). One Burmese monk also explained that if one carries out an action without the intention to cause suffering, but suffering does occur as a result, there can be no (karmic) blame. Yet, once someone realizes the potential connection, doing the same action again, even without an intention to harm, would absolutely be a blameworthy act.<sup>47</sup> Appeals to this teaching of the Buddha might compel closer investigation of not only the intention with which one speaks, but also of the chain of cause and effect between speech and violence.

**Nonattachment.** The virtue of equanimity, one of the *byama-so taya*, cultivates an attitude of “nonattachment.” According to Buddhist teaching, as noted above, attempting to cling to what is impermanent drives one’s suffering. When asked by one of his disciples why conflict happens between religious practitioners, the Buddha responded: “Ascetics fight with each other because of attachment to views” (*Anguttara Nikaya*).

The encouragement to practice nonattachment can apply to material things. This is one of the reasons monastics own very few things and must depend on the generosity of laypeople each day for their meals. Consequently, giving is encouraged by the Buddha, who said to his followers: “If people knew as I know the results of sharing, they would offer up everything they had” (*Itivuttaka*). But this attitude is also meant to extend toward immaterial things. Reality, as taught by the Buddha, is fundamentally empty and impermanent. Things are constantly in flux, and our lack of control over our reality is the source of much of our anxiety and suffering.

As noted at the outset, the situation in Myanmar right now is one of overwhelming social, political, and economic change. The changes are clearly driving excitement, as well as anxiety and fear. Some of the manifestations are constructive, as people seek to entrench democracy and exercise new freedoms, but others are harmful, as conflict and contestation break out concerning who will benefit from the changes and who will be left behind. This is a moment that requires investment in the creation of a better future for Myanmar. However, attempts to cling to or own aspects of the reality in Myanmar, including national identity, are driving some of the current intergroup conflict. By drawing attention to the ways in which dramatic change heightens

anxiety, competition, and clinging—and thus suffering—competing groups in Myanmar might be able to move forward constructively and collaboratively.

**Attitudes Toward Other Religions and the Example of Ashoka.** It is important to make the point that soteriological concerns—the question of whether Islam is a “legitimate” religion that can lead one toward salvation—are not central to the accusations being waged against it by 969 and MaBaTha. There is, however, an element of Buddhist superiority that is feeding the movement, or at the very least is implied by it. This begs the questions: Does this conform with traditional or historical Buddhist attitudes toward other religions? Does Buddhism recognize other religions as paths toward “Ultimate Truth”? There is obviously no singular answers to these questions, but a consideration of several examples could be instructive in the Myanmar context.

The logo of the 969 movement, as noted above, includes an image of an ancient pillar associated with Emperor Ashoka, a much-celebrated ruler from the third century BCE who is often held up as an exemplar of Buddhist kingship. Toward the beginning of his reign, he waged a war of conquest, but was subsequently overcome by remorse for the destruction and death inflicted by this war. As one of his self-testaments stated: “He has felt profound sorrow and regret because the conquest of a people previously unconquered involves slaughter, death, and deportation” (Nikam and McKeon, 1978, 27). According to the Buddhist chronicles, the rest of his reign was marked by religious tolerance and peace. He commissioned a number of stone pillars, on which were inscribed various ethical teachings, and erected them throughout his kingdom.

A number of his stone pillars declared his support for tolerance for those of all faiths. One of his “rock edicts” is worth quoting in full:

One should not honor only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others’ religions too. So doing, one helps one’s own religion to grow and render service

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*A perception of Buddhist superiority is feeding MaBaTha and the 969 movement*

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to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise, one depraves one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honors his own religion and condemns other religions does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking, 'I will glorify my own religion.' But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely. So concord is good. Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others.  
—Rock Edict XII (Rahula 1974, 4–5)

Given this admonition of Ashoka, there is some irony in the 969 movement's use of a pillar representing Ashoka in its own logo, as the emperor himself urged respect for other religions and restraint from condemning others as not only a moral good in itself, but also because the effect of criticizing others is often to "deprave" one's own religion. As noted above, this has been a concern raised by those critical of the 969 movement.

The question of the Buddha's own attitudes toward other religions has been richly debated by practitioners and scholars of Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> In one assessment, scholar Kristin Kiblinger argues that Buddhist texts contain the message that the Buddha's teachings may offer the most direct or useful path to liberation, but other

teachings can also offer insight and spiritual growth toward liberation (Kiblinger 2005). Others have pointed out instances of negative portrayals of practitioners of other Indian faiths, who are painted as naïve in the Buddhist scriptures (Jayatilleke

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***The Buddha's own attitude  
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2013). J. Abraham Velez de Cea, focusing exclusively on the Pali texts, argues that Buddhism cultivates openness to insights from other traditions, but judges them on moral criteria—the degree to which they abide by the eightfold path (Velez de Cea 2013). Indeed, as stated in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha said on his deathbed that the only criterion for assessing others is the presence of the eightfold path. Kulatissa Jayatilleke describes the Buddhist attitude toward other religions as one of "critical tolerance," reflecting openness to others' insights, accompanied with a willingness to critique the beliefs or practices of others, so long as the critique is free of "rancor or hatred in our hearts" (Jayatilleke 2013, 107).

Certainly many Buddhist teachings discourage a rigid dogmatism in favor of openness and curious, well-intentioned investigation. The Buddha's encouragement to assess other truth claims carefully and fairly, reinforced by the Ashoka example that 969 adherents themselves have celebrated, might compel Myanmar Buddhists to seek to better understand Islam on its own terms, from Muslim scholars, with openness to the insights it might offer.

## **Building Peace and Strengthening Reform— Considerations and Recommendations**

Myanmar is at the beginning of a process of profound social, political, and economic change, which is uncovering and exacerbating underlying grievances and structural inequalities that are driving violence in the country and threatening its future. Increased political and economic openness also creates opportunities for people and groups to impede reforms. Creating sustainable peace will require more than simple refutation of the Buddhist narratives that are driving bias and violence, but must also address underlying economic and political issues. In this final section, considerations and recommendations are offered to advance pluralism, human rights, equality, and democratic governance to complement the efforts of religious and other actors in their promotion of peaceful Buddhist narratives.

### **Economic and Development Concerns**

Development projects hold the possibility of significantly increasing standards of living and creating employment and educational opportunities that were previously unimaginable for a population living under decades of military repression. Yet it is by no means certain that economic development will progress in an equitable or inclusive manner; in fact, the available evidence suggests that this is not currently the case.

During the last decade of military rule, as the government gradually began to implement a free market system, so-called “cronies” (those businesspeople who had close ties to the military or who were former military members themselves) were well-positioned to create monopolies, amass large landholdings, and use other advantages to become a new oligarchy in Myanmar. Not only this, but the military remains in control of large sections of the country's economy through its two

major holding companies. The persistence of these advantages through the period of democratic transition has made much of the population question whether the promised benefits of development projects will actually enrich local communities, or whether wealth will remain concentrated in a few hands. Land grabs that have displaced local populations, particularly farmers, have fueled public cynicism about who will benefit from current and future development.

Uncertainty regarding the shared benefits of economic development is certainly fueling conflict between religious groups. Clearly delineated and enforced mechanisms for community input into development projects, revenue sharing between state and central governments, and legal protections for workers and small landholders will be necessary to alleviate some of this anxiety. A recent Arakan National Conference, held from April 27–May 1, 2014, called for Rakhine state to retain 50 percent of the revenues from oil and gas projects within its borders (Maung Tintone and Kay Zue 2014). Rakhine state is currently the second-poorest state in the country, so these economic insecurities are acutely felt there and channeled by many against the Rohingya community.

### **From Isolation to Engagement**

Fear regarding the loss of Buddhism not only manifests as fear toward Muslims, although that is probably the most public expression at the present time. A persistent discourse in Myanmar since the colonial era has been anxiety regarding the incursion of “modern” or “Western” values. The early twentieth-century nationalist movement was initially motivated, in part, by concerns that the British were not sufficiently supporting the country’s religious infrastructure, and that Buddhist moral practice was degraded as a result (Braun 2013 and Turner 2009). Recently, Buddhist nationalist actors, particularly monks, have begun to criticize international NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) operating in the country, particularly those addressing human rights and interfaith dialogue. These Buddhist critics argue that the organizations are seeking to defame and degrade Buddhism (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2013), or at least are showing preference for non-Buddhist groups. They also play into concerns that outside influences are seeking to advance foreign agendas through non-Buddhist, or non-Burmese, communities and organizations.

These concerns have historic roots in Myanmar and must be navigated with sensitivity by good-willed foreign actors and organizations seeking to promote peace and coexistence. Without this sensitivity, outside actors risk unintentionally inflaming exclusionary Buddhist nationalism. As such, they must focus on ensuring that local actors and organizations take the lead, while supporting these efforts from behind, streamlining efforts to prevent duplication, and encouraging collaboration between initiatives in different parts of the country. The

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*Without sensitivity, outside actors risk unintentionally inflaming exclusionary Buddhist nationalism*

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international community must also ensure that while it consistently criticizes hate speech and violence on all sides, it refrains from language that generalizes or vilifies entire groups, or that seems to privilege one group over another.

Today, people in Myanmar also worry about what they see as the preservation of Buddhist moral values and of other traditional practices in the face of rapid modernization, technological advancement, and increased openness to the outside world. They also express fears common to religious groups as they encounter modernity—that Buddhism might lose its position within society or might be debased in a secular, multireligious context.<sup>49</sup> While the government might want to consider policies designed to ease these fears and recognize and protect religious and cultural traditions, the targeted discrimination contained in the legislation discussed above demonstrates that enacting policies for the protection of particular religions always risks institutionalizing practices of discrimination. As such, the proposed laws on interreligious marriage, conversion, monogamy, and population control must be rejected as violating the basic rights of those living in Myanmar, and as counter to the democratic vision the country seeks to embrace.

### **Religious Transparency and Informed Citizens**

One factor that continues to fuel conflict is ignorance of other religions, particularly ignorance of Islam. While it is understandable—given repressive state tactics—that Muslim communities in Myanmar have been relatively insular with regard to religious practice, some Muslim leaders have decided that increased transparency will foster mutual

understanding and grant them more control over narratives regarding Islamic practice. The intention here is not to blame the victims, but to recognize that increased understanding of what other religious traditions practice or believe will be an important part of contesting rumor, challenging prejudice, and eventually building trust between communities.

Both increased transparency in teaching and preaching and curriculum reform will be important for all religions in Myanmar, both

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*National curriculum for Buddhist  
monastic schools could offer  
messages of tolerance and peace*

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to foster mutual understanding and respect and to avoid targeting only Islam as the source of current conflicts. A standardized national curriculum for Buddhist monastic schools, for example, could include accurate information on

other religions in Myanmar and their history in the country, and could offer messages of tolerance and peace rooted in Buddhist teachings.

An important element of this curriculum could be the cultivation of a deeper awareness of the structural links between language that demeans other groups of people and language that incites violence against them.

### **Rule of Law**

Rule of law has been a mantra repeated by political figures inside Myanmar and by much of the international community, but it is in danger of becoming an empty signifier, if not already so. Implementing an impartial legal system with publicly known and understood processes and clear channels for appeal is undoubtedly a critically important step in Myanmar's political development. But it is also important to recognize that Myanmar is currently in the earliest stages of transitioning from an arbitrary legal system in which informal mechanisms outside the justice system have become the norm, to a more formalized system where citizens would be expected to respect the law and work within its confines, and could also expect fair treatment from legal institutions. A slavish insistence on instituting rule of law without attention to this context risks marshaling the power of the state against already marginalized and repressed communities, which have merely adapted to the arbitrary nature of the previous system and are not as well-positioned as

some elites to take advantage of the new legal norms (Prasse-Freeman forthcoming).

As the police, historically underfunded and disempowered, increasingly assert their independence from the military and take on new responsibilities to prevent and manage violence, protect vulnerable communities, build relations with the public, and investigate and arrest perpetrators of violence, they need assistance from national and international actors. Some of this assistance is already being offered through programs by the European Union (EU) and the United States Institute of Peace. Many within the country have recognized the important opportunity that exists for police and religious actors, in particular, to work together to prevent and manage conflict, especially by monitoring for and refuting misinformation and by managing crowds. This could be leveraged and supported through the creation of hybrid police/community conflict prevention committees in local jurisdictions.

Just as important as the efforts to prevent and manage conflict before and during moments of crises—efforts that can be strengthened through support of the new EU-funded, cross-ministerial Myanmar National Crisis Management Center in Naypyitaw—are the initiatives taken in the aftermath of crises to ensure accountability for criminal behavior. Authorities must ensure swift but thorough and fair investigations into those who directly participate in riots, as well as (in cases with sufficient evidence) those who indirectly plan and support them, give voice to hate speech inciting violence, and threaten those opposing violence and hatred.

Legal reforms will also need to recognize other social, political, and economic factors that continue to inhibit the equitable administration of justice. This may well mean instituting legal protections for certain minority populations. There would certainly be resistance to those types of policies, but Myanmar may be an example of a transitional state in which social change must be preceded and compelled by legal frameworks. Key to this will be the process by which rule of law reforms are made, as much as the end state. The process pursued by the government must involve public participation, transparency, and a fostering of intergroup and civic-government collaboration, thereby building trust between groups and trust in governance.

### **Political Decentralization and Constitutional Reform**

Finally, conflict between religious groups needs to be analyzed within the overall political context in Myanmar and the pressing concerns of constitutional reform and decentralization. Part of what motivates the socioeconomic concerns explained above is the unitary nature of both the constitution and the national state, which effectively limits the autonomy and agency of both state governments and local communities. Devolution of power will be important in alleviating these anxieties, but could also create new ones or new opportunities for discrimination, especially in Rakhine state. If Rohingya remain excluded from the national community, the Rakhine state government will be dominated by Buddhist Rakhines, who will have a freer hand to implement repressive policies targeting the Rohingya. On the other hand, if the state recognizes the citizenship claims of more Rohingya (at least one is in parliament, but even that status is contested by anti-Rohingya groups) or implements some sort of path toward citizenship (something that the government's Rakhine State Commission already recommended), the presence of more Rohingya representatives in state and national government could serve to reinforce Rakhine fears. Constitutional reform of some type in Myanmar appears to be inevitable, but its effects on conflict between religious groups are unclear.

### **Conclusion**

Clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar have highlighted the challenges that latent intercommunal tensions pose to the government, as the reform process reveals old grievances that may be exploited by those seeking to obstruct change. Fortunately, there are monastic and lay voices in Myanmar advancing arguments that speak to the anxiety of the current moment in a way that supports religious coexistence. These voices can help entrench religious pluralism and stymie those seeking to spoil the reform process. However, they remain few and far between, seemingly drowned out by the voices of those affiliated with the 969 movement and MaBaTha, whose messages are fueling inter-religious conflict and conveying Buddhist superiority. Amplifying and supporting the monastic voices that are able to criticize anti-Muslim arguments and rhetoric on Buddhist grounds is crucial. Equally important is offering support in ways that are sensitive to the risks those

actors run and their need to challenge exclusionary narratives in sometimes indirect ways, or through internal monastic dialogue. In addition to supporting monks and other religious and lay leaders in speaking out against divisive speech that incites hatred and violence, it is vital to help them do so in such

a way that directly incorporates and acknowledges the complex dynamics described in this paper. Vague pronouncements in favor of “peace” will be insufficient

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*Vague pronouncements in favor of  
‘peace’ will be insufficient to address  
the rhetoric of nationalist movements*

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to address the ways in which the rhetoric of U Wirathu and others taps into deeply held anxieties about the fate of Buddhism, anxieties that are pronounced in this period of political transition.

As illustrated above, there are rich resources within the Theravada Buddhist tradition that can be drawn upon to inculcate attitudes and policies supporting religious pluralism. Buddhists in Myanmar can engender a rich and potentially transformative conversation by appealing to notions of right speech, to the virtues of loving kindness and compassion, to the need to test claims about reality and be open to others, and to understand the ways in which change and impermanence drives anxiety and suffering. While it will be important to construct and support alternative Buddhist narratives regarding conflict, other religions, and the protection of Buddhism, it will be equally necessary for continued political, legal, and economic reforms to address the underlying socioeconomic insecurities that motivate the current conflicts and that will continue to inhibit national reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in Myanmar. Without attention to this entire range of contributing conditions, interreligious conflict could be the downfall of Myanmar’s once-promising transition to democracy.





# Endnotes

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1. The former military government changed the country's name to "Myanmar" in 1989. The official government policy of both the United States and United Kingdom is to refer to the country as "Burma."
2. This cover appeared in the Europe, Middle East, Africa, South Pacific, and Asia editions of the July 1, 2013, issue of *Time Magazine*. It was not used for the cover of the Mainland US edition.
3. Demographic data pulled from the US Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*.
4. In addition to International Crisis Group 2014b, see Winn 2014 for an example.
5. For further details on curtailment of religious freedom for minorities, consult the US State Department's yearly International Religious Freedom report, which can be accessed online here: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/>.
6. For example, Christian ethnic minority groups received support from Western Christian organizations, including training for the insurgency groups operating in refugee camps across the Thai border, which served to fuel the military's accusation that Christians in Myanmar were conduits for foreign influence seeking regime change.
7. The Rohingya community is not a formally recognized ethnic group in the country. They are of Bengali descent, some having migrated to Myanmar multiple generations ago, and some having migrated illegally more recently. As a nonrecognized ethnic group, they have few political and legal rights in the country. They are often poor and—although data is limited, making confirmation difficult—anecdotal evidence suggests that they tend to practice a more socially conservative form of Islam (Deobandi).

8. Some note that the outsiders who come in and lead the violent attacks are reminiscent of “Swan Arshin,” a paramilitary-like group of thugs (usually young men) who were used in the past by the ruling regime to intimidate the population and to break up protests.
9. See, for example, *The Economist* 2013. For a more nuanced example that does not provide evidence of present government or military involvement, but does effectively place the current violence in historical context, see Kyaw Win 2014.
10. See Turner (2009), Schober (2011), and Walton (2012, 15).
11. See Schober (1997) and Houtman (1999).
12. Donating alms to monks is one basic way for Buddhists to make merit: that is, to perform actions that will ideally bring good results in the future, either in this life or in future rebirths. The practice of “turning over the alms bowl” functions as a religious or spiritual boycott among Buddhist monastics.
13. The UN estimated that 30–40 monks and 50–70 civilians were killed, although some reports have suggested significantly higher totals (UN News Centre 2007).
14. In addition to the economic stagnation in the country resulting, in part, from Western sanctions (coupled with the former regime’s terrible economic policies), some have argued that the Arab Spring revolutions, echoing as they did the Saffron Revolution, in fact drove the regime’s rulers to decide that it was in their interest to advance a transition on “their own terms.” Others have pointed out that the regime has hewed relatively faithfully to its own “Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy,” which was initiated in 2003 by General Khin Nyunt and contained all the elements of the current transition, including a constitutional referendum and elections for national and state/regional parliaments.
15. Interviews in Kachin state, August 2012.
16. See, for example, the video of the Galon-ni Sayadaw, a prominent Mandalay monk, telling rioters to disperse (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A92tS9xw0j4>). It is worth noting that Galon-ni Sayadaw himself is a member of MaBaTha.
17. Interview in Yangon, July 2014.
18. Interviews in Yangon and Mandalay, July 2014.
19. As an indication of how complex and seemingly contradictory Burmese political platforms can be, one of the main parties supporting the legislation has been the National Democratic Force (NDF), initially a breakaway party from the opposition National League for Democracy (*Irrawaddy* 2013a).
20. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.
21. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.

22. The *sangha* in Sri Lanka and Myanmar share a common heritage and at times a close relationship. Nonetheless, in citing examples of similar dynamics in the Sri Lankan context we do not intend to conflate the two scenarios, but rather to show precedent in the Theravada world.
23. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.
24. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.
25. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.
26. Perhaps more ominously, there has arisen in Sri Lanka over the past two years a movement with striking similarity to the 969 movement in rhetoric and tactics, which calls itself the Bodu Bala Sena, translated as “Buddhist power group” (Silva 2013).
27. Interview in Sagaing, July 2013.
28. See, for example, this sermon for coexistence preached by Ashin Issariya, who has been a particularly vocal critic of 969: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=vQdNDS5b600#!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vQdNDS5b600#!); accessed December 14, 2013.
29. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013. See also Si Thu Lwin (2013a).
30. Interviews in Yangon, August 2012.
31. Interviews in Yangon, July 2013.
32. Nyein Chan (2013).
33. Interview in Sagaing, July 2013.
34. See Sitagu Sayadaw (2013).
35. The term “88 Generation” refers to the activists who led the anti-government protests in August 1988, many of whom were students or young monks at the time.
36. Interview in Mandalay with members of the Mandalay Inter-faith Mercy Group, July 2013.
37. Interview in Mandalay, July 2014.
38. According to *vinaya* rules, the *sangha* is to constantly seek and present to the world unanimity and concord, and to deal with internal disputes quietly and quickly.
39. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.

40. Unless otherwise noted, all passages from *suttas* are taken from the translations of Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi in his collection *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005).
41. See Sitagu Sayadaw (2013).
42. Interview in Yangon, June 2011.
43. Interview in Mandalay, July 2013.
44. Interview with officials from the US Department of State, December 2013. See also Ghosh 2014.
45. Interview in Mandalay, July 2014.
46. Interviews in Yangon and Mandalay, July 2014.
47. Interview in Mandalay, July 2014.
48. See the four-volume set *Buddhism and Religious Diversity*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
49. See, for example, a recent discussion on Democratic Voice of Burma's "DVB Debate" show, entitled "Does Cultural Exchange Mean Changing Culture?" [<http://www.dvb.no/dvb-video/dvb-debate-controlling-cultural-changes-burma-myanmar/39938>; Accessed May 17, 2014].

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## About this issue

Myanmar's transition to democracy has been marred by violence between Buddhists and Muslims. While the violence originally broke out between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, it subsequently emerged throughout the country, impacting Buddhists and Muslims of many ethnic backgrounds. This article offers background on these so-called "communal conflicts" and the rise and evolution of Buddhist nationalist groups led by monks that have spearheaded anti-Muslim campaigns. The authors describe how current monastic political mobilization can be understood as an extension of past monastic activism, and is rooted in traditional understandings of the monastic community's responsibility to defend the religion, respond to community needs, and guide political decision-makers. The authors propose a counter-argument rooted in Theravada Buddhism to address the underlying anxieties motivating Buddhist nationalists while directing them toward peaceful actions promoting coexistence. Additionally, given that these conflicts derive from wider political, economic, and social dilemmas, the authors offer a prescription of complementary policy initiatives.

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