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Buddhist Monks in Myanmar: Driving Religious Intolerance and Hindering Reform

By Eliane Coates

Synopsis

Two hundred Buddhist monks took to the streets of Yangon on 12 November to protest the visit of a delegation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Many Buddhist monks are re-igniting anti-Muslim animosity and Burman Buddhist nationalism. Can Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship and structural reforms give an opportunity for the country to heal old wounds?

Commentary

TWO HUNDRED Buddhist monks took to the streets of Yangon on 12 November 2013 to protest the visit of a high-level delegation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The delegation, comprising the OIC Secretary-General and senior ministers of seven member states – Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Djibouti and Egypt – were met by demonstrations against the world's largest Islamic bloc. Echoing those of 2012, the demonstrations were led by Buddhist monks demanding that the OIC not get involved in Myanmar's internal affairs.

The delegation, which was to review the situation of Muslims in Myanmar, came almost 18 months after violence broke out in the western Rakhine state between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhists in June 2012, which developed into widespread clashes all over Myanmar, resulting in the death of 240 persons and the displacement of 240,000 people – the majority being Rohingya Muslims.

History of Burman-Buddhist nationalism

The anti-Muslim animosity among Burman Buddhists has its roots in the lingering resentment of colonial history 80 years ago. British colonisation of the Indian sub-continent and Myanmar and the erasing of historical boundaries in the 19th century led to an open immigration policy which enabled an influx of Bengali Muslim labourers into Myanmar.

Buddhist monks claim that the Rohingya are the descendants of the Bengali migrant population, citing the 1982 Burman Citizenship Law which refused to recognise the Rohingya as an ethnic group of Myanmar, and thus essentially legitimised discrimination against Rohingya.

Indeed Buddhist monks led the riots in the 1930s during the Great Depression which resulted in the emergence of the Doh Bama (We Burma) movement. This subsequently saw the rise of Burman-Buddhist nationalism and

the beginning of nation-wide anti-Indian sentiment, which later evolved into anti-Muslim attitudes.

Today a section of Burman Buddhist monks led by Ashin Wirathu is re-igniting that sentiment by preaching hatred and sowing fear which drives religious divisions in society. A senior abbot in the Mandalay Buddhist monastery, Wirathu is the founder of the '969' economic-nationalist campaign which encourages Buddhists to shop only at Buddhist stores.

Two narratives

Two narratives are salient underlying the anti-Rohingya drive.

The first is the 'Islamic encroachment' idea that runs deep in Burman Buddhist society. There is fear of a demographic explosion of Muslims that would disrupt Myanmar's Buddhist identity. These concerns stem from the fact many Rohingya fail to assimilate Burmese local customs and way of life. Despite criticism from Aung San Suu Kyi – the opposition leader and spokesperson for human rights - as well as the international community, several cities began in May this year to impose a discriminatory two-child policy on Rohingya families to slow their population growth.

According to the Rakhine State government spokesperson the Rohingya "are trying to Islamise [Buddhists] through their terrible birth rate," citing that the Rohingya population growth is ten times that of native Buddhists. However economists at Harvard's Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation argue that there is no evidence of an increasing Rohingya birth rate. Instead, they find there has been a net outflow of the Rohingya, mostly to Bangladesh, since 1950.

The second narrative being disseminated is that 'the Rohingya started it', that this minority Muslim group has been taking over the Buddhist lands of Myanmar. After Myanmar's Independence in 1948, the Rohingya formed a guerilla-fighting Mujahideen which launched a 13-year rebellion for a separate Islamic State or to join the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

While this movement was defeated, lingering resentment remains amongst Buddhists as the rebellion was seen as a great betrayal and threat to Myanmar's new found sovereignty. The Rohingya too were blamed for igniting the recent ethnic clashes after the alleged rape of a Buddhist woman in May 2012 which soon led to retaliatory attacks by local Buddhists.

Ironically, however, efforts by Buddhist monks to propagate these narratives have been facilitated by Myanmar's reforms. Whereas during the period of the military junta ethnic tensions and separatism were held at bay by (and justified) strict military rule, new found freedom of speech permits Buddhist monks, such as Wirathu, to spread ideas of religious intolerance and fan the flames of Islamophobia.

Embracing diversity and ASEAN Chairmanship

While in the past Burmese nationhood has been fundamentally linked to Buddhism, now is time for a more concerted effort by Myanmar, and in particular its senior Buddhist monks, to embrace multiculturalism, condemn hate speech, and find strength in ethnic diversity. No doubt Myanmar has undergone rapid economic and political transitions since 2011 – it has held elections, lifted censorship laws, and freed hundreds of political prisoners.

Yet reform should not only touch on the hardware of development, but also the software, including both national identity and character building. After decades of civil war between ethnic nationalities and lingering anti-Muslim prejudice, it is clear that denying the ethnic diversity of Myanmar has only caused harm to the country and its people. As United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in July this year: "There is a dangerous polarisation taking place within Myanmar" and "if it is not addressed urgently and firmly, underlying tensions could provoke more upheaval, undermining the reform process and triggering negative regional repercussions". Change could begin with constitutional reform to repeal the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law.

This choice is important now more than ever as Myanmar has recently become the chairman of ASEAN for 2014. It has to demonstrate that this is not a premature move given the growing climate of insecurity for minorities within its borders. There is a lot at stake for both ASEAN and Myanmar. Both parties want Myanmar to normalise its international standing and increase the much-needed political legitimacy for the regime in Naypyidaw.

More so, Myanmar wants to show off its reforms, and in doing so, portray a positive image of itself internationally. Yet, this image is reliant on public confidence as to how Myanmar treats its own society, including its minority population.

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