

The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar

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The Executive Summary is also available in Burmese.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the outbreak of deadly intercommunal clashes in Rakhine State in 2012, anti-Muslim violence has spread to other parts of Myanmar. The depth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, and the inadequate response of the security forces, mean that further clashes are likely. Unless there is an effective government response and change in societal attitudes, violence could spread, impacting on Myanmar's transition as well as its standing in the region and beyond.

The violence has occurred in the context of rising Burman-Buddhist nationalism, and the growing influence of the monk-led "969" movement that preaches intolerance and urges a boycott of Muslim businesses. This is a dangerous combination: considerable pent-up frustration and anger under years of authoritarianism are now being directed towards Muslims by a populist political force that cloaks itself in religious respectability and moral authority.

Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim violence is nothing new in Myanmar. It is rooted in the country's colonial history and demographics, and the rise of Burman nationalism in that context. Deadly violence has erupted regularly in different parts of the country in the decades since. But the lifting of authoritarian controls and the greater availability of modern communications mean that there is a much greater risk of the violence spreading.

Among the most discriminated against populations in Myanmar is the Muslim community in northern Rakhine State, the Rohingya. Most are denied citizenship, and face severe restrictions on freedom of movement as well as numerous abusive policies. In June and October 2012, clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State left almost 200 people dead and around 140,000 displaced, the great majority of them Muslims. Communities remain essentially segregated to this day, and the humanitarian situation is dire.

In early 2013, the violence spread to central Myanmar. The worst incident occurred in the town of Meiktila, where a dispute at a shop led to anti-Muslim violence. The brutal killing of a Buddhist monk sharply escalated the situation, with two days of riots by a 1,000-strong mob resulting in widespread destruction of Muslim neighbourhoods, and leaving at least 44 people dead, including twenty students and several teachers massacred at an Islamic school.

There has been strong domestic and international criticism of the police response. In Rakhine State, the police – who are overwhelmingly made up of Rakhine Buddhists – reportedly had little ability to stop the attacks, and there are allegations of some being complicit in the violence. The army, once it was deployed, performed better. In Meiktila, the police were apparently incapable of controlling the angry crowds that gathered outside the shop, and were hopelessly outnumbered and ineffective when the clashes rapidly escalated.

The violence has regional implications. There has been a sharp increase in the number of Muslims making the treacherous journey by boat from Rakhine State to other countries in the region, prompting public criticism from some of those countries. The intercommunal tensions have also spilled over Myanmar's borders, with the murders of Myanmar Buddhists in Malaysia, and related violence in other countries. There have also been threats of jihad against Myanmar, and plots and attacks against Myanmar or Buddhist targets in the region. As Myanmar prepares to take over the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014, this could become a serious political issue.

The Myanmar government understands what is at stake. President Thein Sein has spoken publicly on the dangers of the violence, and announced a "zero-tolerance" approach. The police response has been

improving somewhat, with faster and more effective interventions bringing incidents under control more quickly. And after some delay, perpetrators of these crimes are being prosecuted and imprisoned, although there are concerns that Buddhists sometimes appear to be treated more leniently.

But much more needs to be done. Beyond improved riot-control training and equipment for police, broader reform of the police service is necessary so that it can be more effective and trusted, particularly at the community level, including officers from ethnic and religious minorities. This is only just starting. The government and society at large must also do more to combat extremist rhetoric, in public, in the media and on-line. At a moment of historic reform and opening, Myanmar cannot afford to become hostage to intolerance and bigotry.

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