

Everyday ethnic tensions in Myanmar

MATT SCHISSLER, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR - 27 MAR, 2013



Anyone who is paying attention to Myanmar right now should be deeply saddened by the recent violence in Meiktilla.^[1] And, understandably, many are expressing mounting concern over the rise of virulently anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalism across the country, characterized in violent Facebook comments or incendiary speeches like those of U Wirathu.^[2]

We risk missing just how concerning the recent violence in Meikitalla is, however, if we focus only on the most extreme speech. There is extremely hateful speech, to be sure, just as there have been recent attempts to counteract it and call for peace.^[3] It is also likely, as prominent 88 Generation leader Min Ko Naing recently pointed out, that there are those systematically seeking to encourage and profit from such violence and religious tension.^[4]

But it also needs to be noted that these virulent sentiments connect to a less violent, but nonetheless concerning – and, I believe, widespread – lack of understanding and trust between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Burma; the tensions are religious, not limited to questions of citizenship and ethnicity. This has to be recognized, because it helps explain how the more venomous statements find purchase; only recognizing this helps explain things like the rapid spread of the ‘969’ movement^[5] or seeming national indifference to the violence in Rakhine State and central Burma. This in turn highlights why there is strong potential for

more violence, countrywide. And it helps highlight the need for interfaith cooperation and reconciliation that a) moves quickly to counter-act rumours and misinformation campaigns, b) addresses specific sources of mistrust and conflict and c) finds other lines of connection and solidarity through which Buddhist and Muslim communities can strengthen ties.

To this end, below are summaries of conversations from March 25, which took place in my neighbourhood in Yangon after violence spread from Meiktila to Yamethin.[6]

The rumours are flying fast and thick. Yesterday morning, a friend called to warn me. "The Muslims are going to be really angry now," he said. "I just want to let you know to please be careful." Then he sent me a Facebook link to a video of men with face scarves and guns, speaking Burmese and threatening revenge for Meiktila.[7] Facebook is abuzz with posts like this. But the video quality is so poor, the men masked and lips obscured, and the dialogue so obviously smacking of dubbing that it can hardly be taken seriously.

Except it is. Why?

When I came home yesterday evening, another friend, who sells betel nut from a stand in front of my apartment building, immediately grabbed me. Almost before I'd even stepped off my bicycle. "Did you check on the internet?" he asked me. He was agitated. "Check about what?" I responded. "I heard they are fighting in Mingalataungnyunt. Is it true?" I had heard the same thing, but I'd also just read media articles saying that it was an unfounded rumour heard all across the city.[8] "It isn't true," interjected one of my adoptive aunts in the neighbourhood. "I called my friend who works in the market there. She closed her shop but she said there is no fighting."

Her first-hand information settled the matter. We talked for twenty minutes or so more. My friend with the betel nut stand is often energetic and bouncy – but one would never call him agitated. This evening as we talked I would have thought he was high had I not known better; his eyes were wider than I had ever seen them. When we parted we both agreed to listen and watch and warn each other if we heard anything. Me, monitoring the news and calls from friends. He, interacting with patrons and listening to the foot traffic on our busy street.

My adoptive auntie followed me upstairs. “Today they were stealing things from houses on the other side of our township,” she said. “They caught twenty people taking things. Half of them were Muslim. The other half were Buddhist.” Really? I asked her. “Actually I don’t know. But there are ones who want to take things. They are causing all this.”

I spent the rest of the evening sitting on the corner at the top of my block. I try to spend a few evenings a week there, talking with my neighbours, drinking rough tea or beer. Usually we talk about girls, or sports, or work or lack of work. Often we talk about politics and history, too. They are all electricians, carpenters, trishaw or van-for-hire drivers (not owners), wage labourers, seamen on container ships. One of my closest friends in the group, Htoo Lay^[9], doesn’t work but gambles, mostly on himself as he plays caneball in the evenings against challengers from other neighbourhoods. A few years ago he toured competitions in Thailand. But now he’s a little older and less quick, though he still wins enough to win enough. How else he makes his income I’m not sure.^[10]

Last night we sat around our low plastic table and talked about the violence in Meiktila. Mostly, we debated about relations between Buddhists and Muslims. Htoo Lay and I have had this debate a lot, and tonight he served as my surrogate; the conversation was quick and I could barely keep up. He alternated between commanding the group to slow down so I could follow. Or interrupting me and finishing my sentences so the group didn’t leave me behind. We disagree on many things, but by now he and I at least know what we each mean to say. The others I’d never heard talk about the issue in as much detail, though I’d heard them talk about it enough not to be surprised by what they said.

Right away, we all agreed that the violence in Meiktila has been horrible. But we didn’t spend very much time discussing how or why it happened. Htoo Lay and I had learned from discussing violence in Rakhine State last year that the who-did-what-to-whom conversation wouldn’t lead us anywhere worthwhile. Because, really, none of us were there. And, really, none of us 100% trust the media, our own sources, or the information others have heard and are sharing. Without a trump-card phone call to an eyewitness, no one was going to agree on anything.

But regardless of how we thought the violence started, no one was celebrating the bloodshed. This is important to note; I had other conversations yesterday in which I *did* hear the bloodshed celebrated. The point is not to highlight those kinds of conversations, but to highlight instead the views of ‘moderates’ – and how they are *also* concerning – but in some cases have roots in everyday conflicts.

These views need to be understood, because they are views I believe commonly held by many Burmese Buddhists who constitute the ‘moderate’ mainstream and who, though not necessarily ready to condone violence, are nonetheless deeply disconnected from Muslim communities. Where that leads I do not know.

"All Muslims are not good or bad, just as all Buddhists are not good or bad," Htoo Lay began. "There are always good people and bad people." Here he was repeating for the group a point he and I had previously agreed upon. Everyone at the table concurred, and then earnestly set out to explain to me why it is impossible for Buddhists and Muslims to coexist peacefully in Myanmar. These are the arguments they set forth, retroactively grouped into five sets by me:

- **Interfaith tensions:** Muslims are disrespectful of Buddhist traditions. For example, they butcher animals during festival times when they should not do so. They get angry when people eat pork; Buddhists who are vegetarian are not rude to others who eat meat. ("On my ship, the Muslim seaman rudely threw away my pork curry before I had finished it.")
- **Economic grievances:** Muslims only hire Muslims and only shop at Muslim shops. Buddhists don't do the same. Muslims receive outside funding from other countries that gives them an unfair advantage against Buddhist shops. They pool taxes to their Mosques to bribe government officials and politicians to take (undefined) actions that give them a collective market advantage. ("For this reason, it is okay to put a 969 sticker on your shop if you are Buddhist.")
- **Fear of a 'Muslim takeover'/loss of Buddhism:** Muslim men marry Buddhist women and then force them to convert; Buddhist men who marry other religions do not force them to convert. ("My father is Buddhist but my mother is Christian. If my father was Muslim, this could not be.") Muslims have many children deliberately so that they will outnumber Buddhists. Muslims in Burma would like to break away and form their own Muslim country.
- **Islam is inherently violent:** Islam is a religion that teaches one to follow without thinking. Islam promotes violence so that Muslim men can go to heaven where they will meet young women. For proof, one should look to other Muslim countries and see that there is much violence and war. You are an American, and so you should know this because of 9/11.
- **International media, foreign countries and western NGOs are untrustworthy and biased:** Media only reports on violence against Muslims, not violence committed by Muslims (here the criticism was specifically levelled at Al Jazeera coverage of violence Rakhine State; notable because no one who was at the table speaks English). Western NGOs provide most of their aid to Muslims. In order to seek out this aid, Muslims deliberately destroy their own homes in order to receive free food and money.

Three hours later, we had not come to any agreement. But Htoo Lay interrupted another friend at the table and ended the conversation abruptly – our friend Tin Win was approaching with his wife and son. Tin Win is Muslim, his wife is Buddhist; the table looked at me with eyes full of pointed significance. And then the conversation shifted to an infected injury on Tin Win's hand. Would he be able to swing a hammer tomorrow? He was supposed to work on a job with Htoo Lay's brother.

As I walked home a little later, I wondered whether it would have helped to point out that Tin Win had not forced his wife to convert.

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[1] "After 3 Days of Violence, City in Myanmar Counts the Dead," *New York Times*, March 24th 2013

[2] Francis Wade, "Opinion: This is militant Islamophobia in Burma, rooted in history," *Asian Correspondent*, March 25th 2013; Maung Zarni, "Buddhist Nationalism in Burma," March 23rd 2013.

[3] "Religious leaders call for peace, UN convoy visits Arakan," *DVB*, June 13th 2012; "Religious leaders unite to dismiss rumour of impending riot in Mon State," *Eleven Media*, March 25th 2013; "The 88 Generation Students Group calls for ending Meikhtila rioting," *Eleven Media*, March 23rd 2013.

[4] "Min Ko Naing on Meiktila," *Mizzima News*, March 24th 2013. Making this point more directly, see also RFA footage of Min Ko Naing <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2pQL4GNF8c> Accessed 3/25/13

[5] '969' has come to recent prominence following the violence in Rakhine State, and '969' stickers and signs can be seen for sale in markets or affixed to shops in Yangon, and especially Moulmein and Pa'an. In Moulmein and Pa'an in particular there has been, since September 2012, a concerted effort to encourage support for Buddhist shops and to discourage Buddhists from patronizing establishments with Muslim ownership and refuse sale to Muslims. This coincides with declarations distributed by monasteries in at least two cities in Karen State, Pa'an and Papun, ordering Buddhists to obey 'Four Disciplines,' including not to marry Muslims, buy or sell them land or other property, or buy or sell property on their behalf. Copy of '969' stickers and 'Four Disciplines' declaration on file. See also, "Incident Report: Religious discrimination and restrictions in Papun District, September 2012," *Karen Human Rights Group*, March 8th 2013; "Papun Situation Update: Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, September to December 2012," *Karen Human Rights Group*, March

8th 2013. In some explanations, '969' efforts are designed to counteract '786' symbols that can be seen in many Muslim-owned shops in Myanmar. In others, including those of my neighbors, it is a tactic to drive out Muslim shops and, eventually, all Muslims. "If no one buys from Muslim shops, then they will all leave," a neighbor told me yesterday. "And then there will be peace." Note that this is not without precedent; after the 1938 Indo-Burman riots, Buddhist Burmese shops increased as Buddhists would no longer shop at Muslim stores. See, Thein Pe Myint, *Ashe-ga-ne-wun-twet-thi-bama* ("Like The Sun Rising in The East"), serialised is a magazine over 4 years in the 1950s and recently republished (For information on the re-release, see http://blog.irrawaddy.org/2013/01/blog-post_3059.html Accessed 3/26/13)

[6] "Myanmar: Anti-Muslim violence spreads beyond Meikhtila," Global Post, March 25th 2013.

[7] <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=440368762708866&set=vb.100002072377074&type=2&theater> Accessed 3/25/13

[8] "Shops shut in Yangon following rumours of mosque attacks," *Eleven Media*, March 25th 2013 5:27pm.

[9] Name changed.

[10] The point is: none of those in the group have more than a basic level of education. They are ardent followers of the news, by TV, radio and print journal; but they can only afford to buy print journals occasionally. Some of them use Facebook; all of them watch videos on the Internet, using the internet-enabled phones owned by the van-drivers. Almost all of them have travelled abroad, mostly to Thailand and Malaysia – some, the seaman, further afield.
