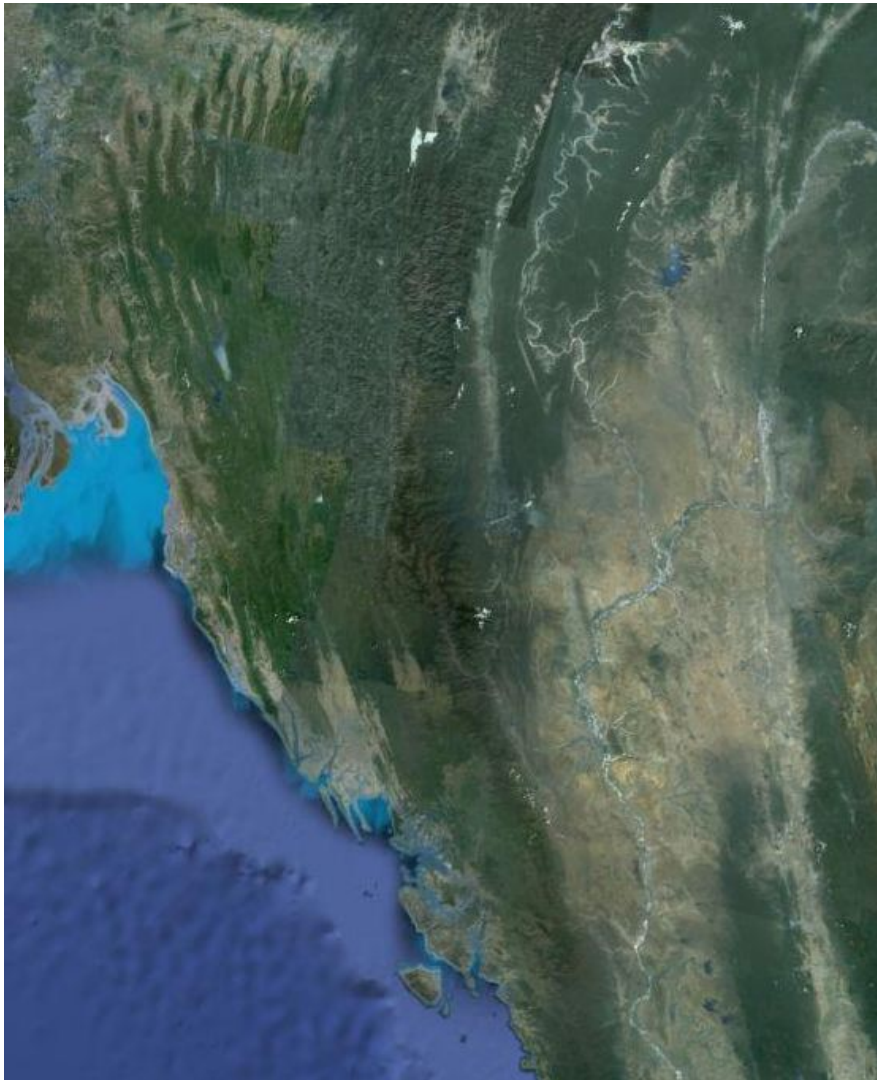


Intolerance, Islam and the Internet in Burma

SAI LATT, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR - 10 JUN, 2012



Last week Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr told [Radio Australia](#) that his government would monitor democracy and human rights in Burma. Of course, this is welcome news, but the Australian government needs to be mindful of a new dynamic of human rights violations in Burma. The current peace building initiatives between the government and ethnic armed groups in Burma are not enough anymore; ethno-religious and inter-

communal relations must be taken seriously in order not to derail the current political reform. For human rights abuses and violence are committed not only by the state but also by different ethno-religious groups against each other. Racism and racial profiling in the media deserve careful attention, and the transnational nature of fostering ethno-religious intolerance as part of the new dynamic of human rights need to be addressed.

As I was writing this piece, communal riots just broke out in Maungdaw district in Arakan State. Breaking news came quickly, indicating that 'Bengali' [the term the media and the public *now* use for Rohingya minority group] have burned ethnic Rakhine houses in various villages, and have killed at least 6 people. The President's Office also released information on the event, while a senior official from the President's Office has been updating his Facebook status. My reading of his status messages is that the country's national security is in great danger, and that the state is on alert for effective actions.

The mainstream media has been reporting that a mob of many hundred 'Bengalis' started the incident, storming houses, burning down villages, and killing people.

Only very rare alternative information have made its way to the public, saying that the Muslims returning from Friday prayer were mistaken by the police to be rioting and therefore were shot. The initial tension was between the Rohingya and the police, and the riot spread from this. Some other alternatives indicate that the state security forces have been the perpetrators against Rohingya. Both sides are giving consistent information of their own, but independent confirmation is unavailable so far. In this contribution to New Mandala, I will illustrate the recent history of the riots.

I have already noted on *New Mandala* about some Arakan's [Rakhine's] racist campaign against Rohingya on social media websites, mostly Facebook. I also noted that it is open and public and that it has a genocidal tendency.

On 3 June 2012, this campaign turned really ugly. A mob of 300 Rakhines, Buddhists from Tounggout Township in Arakan State, stopped a bus and beat to death 11 persons traveling to Yangon. Ten were Muslim travelers, one of whom was a woman who was sexually assaulted before being killed. One other Buddhist was killed as he was mistaken for a Muslim. None of the victims were Rohingyas whom Arakan called 'illegal' immigrants from Bangladesh. This incident frustrated the country's Muslim population that felt even more insulted when the state media referred to the victims as Muslim '*Kalar*'. This is a derogatory term used for Muslims, those of South Asian descent, or "black-skinned, undesirable aliens", as Dr Maung Zarni has noted.

This massacre was said to be a response to the rape-murder of a 26-year-old Arakan woman on 28 May 2012, allegedly by three Muslim men. But the story is much more complicated.

The ongoing campaign and the media

As I noted in my earlier *New Mandala* post, the anti-Rohingya campaign began with intensity in November 2011. As the campaign continued, the unclear, confusing and even non-sense ethno-religious categories such as Rohingyas, Burmese Muslims, '*Kalar*', 'Muslim race,' and 'Islamic race' became even more blurred. With such confusion, the common target became anything '*Kalar*': Muslims, Rohingyas, South Asians, Islam.

The campaign also started representing Burmese Muslims [i.e. Muslims in Burma, or Burmese citizens of Islamic faith] as foreigners who came to Burma during colonial times only to take advantage of the country. The spreading discourses of racism increasingly deny and undermine the long political history of Burmese Muslims.

Then came two incidents within two weeks of the byelection in April 2012. A mob led by Buddhist monks and members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy demolished a mosque in Hpakant, Kachin state. At the same time, another mosque in Magwe Region, central Burma, was demolished by a mob that also destroyed the homes of local Muslims and looted their properties. Initially, this was part of business competition

between Win Naing, a Member of the Parliament from the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, and Muslim business families (particularly one extended family). The MP, losing previously monopolised ferry business contracts, instigated a religious riot so that he and his colleagues could take back business licenses from the Muslim family (ferry business, taxation and so on). Law enforcement officers were simply watching as the riots took place.

The country's Muslim population was frustrated since the mainstream media was completely silent on these attacks. Myanmar News Now (MNN), a single person-run website, but a very popular one, published a news report indicating it as a daylight "robbery" by a mob. Unclear reports confused people who thought that about 300 Muslims violently looted and destroyed the properties of local people. Anti-Muslim messages sprung up on Facebook accusing Muslims such as the quote below.

"How come the so-called democratic government is not doing anything when these *Kalar* came to our country and insulted us like that?"

Myanmar Muslim Students and Youth (MMSY) sent a complaint letter to the media both in Burma and in exile, and the Burmese media started reporting on the incident. Though, it is unclear whether the action of the media has anything to do with the letter. Nonetheless, usage of '*Kalar*' by the media (particularly by one media organisation) upset the Muslims.

Being misinformed, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi commented on Radio Free Asia's Burmese Service telling the people not to fight with each other. This added to Burmese Muslims' humiliation as they did not fight, but are being attacked and insulted because they are left unprotected. No other pro-democracy activists, human rights advocates, and politicians condemned the attacks.

Transnational campaign: Who is involved?

Hostilities against ethnic Rohingyas and Burmese Muslims are not new. They were rooted in dictator Ne Win's time since the 1970s. But the

current racist campaign is distinct from the past. It is not simply a state-sponsored project anymore. As Chris Lewa from Arakan Project noted on Radio Australia, it is difficult to say that the government is behind the current campaign.

The campaign now is a public and transnational movement orchestrated openly on social media websites. Thousands of people from the Burmese diaspora in Australia, US, Canada, UK and other European countries have joined this campaign. These participants include some pro-democracy and human rights activists who migrated to these countries as refugees and asylum seekers. Many are now citizens of these countries.

Some comments and self-published articles speak of such murderous language as killing all '*Kalar*'. Some blame dictator Than Shwe for not eradicating all Rohingyas and Muslim populations from the country. Insulting messages using bad languages and sexually sensitive words are quite common. The followings are two examples that are less inappropriate to illustrate the point here.

"Penis Kalar, F!@# Kalar, Dog Kalar, Pig Kalar"

"You Kalar even F!@# your mother and your babies"

The campaign is so severe that such comments and postings have been littered on thousands of Facebook walls and pages. Thousands of Burmese-speaking Facebook users are exposed to them every single day. Many Facebook groups such as "Kalar Beheading Gang" appeared one after another. While it is possible to report abuse to Facebook, there were few Burmese Muslim Facebook users who would report to Facebook. Even when they did successfully, new groups keep appearing frequently. The campaign looks very cheap, but it goes on.

Surprisingly, some of Burma's famous film directors and celebrities are also involved. Director Cho Tu Zal who is seeking asylum (?) in the US is at the

forefront of the campaign. He has 5,000 friends and more than 2,000 subscribers on his Facebook account; many hundreds support and re-distribute his anti-Rohingya and nationalist postings.

Similarly, a top film star named Min Maw Kun referred to Rohingyas, in a recent traditional staged sitcom, as black-skinned, big-belly, and hairy “Kalar” who marry many Burmese women. Maung Myo Min, one of the most popular film directors in Burma, directed the sitcom, which is available on Youtube and shared on Facebook. The star’s portrayal of Rohingyas resembled a comment by Burmese Consul-General to Hong Kong, Ye Myint Aung, who said in 2009 that Rohingyas were “ugly as ogres”.

While Buddhism is known to be a peaceful religion, some relatively junior monks are at the forefront of the campaign. One monk in particular is Ashin Wirathu, who was responsible for 2003 religious riots in Kyautse, central Burma. He is known for preaching extremism in the name of protecting ‘race and religion’, including his call for mandatory Buddhist education in all educational institutions. Without any statistical data, he accused Muslims for committing more rapes than members of other faiths. His extremism led the critics to call him the “Taliban Monk”.

Other junior monks studying Buddhism in Sri Lanka and elsewhere are also spreading made-up stories such as the one in which Muslim men forcefully marry Buddhist men’s wives. Respected and senior monks in the country have been trying to stop the campaign, but it continues. To my knowledge, similar stories [and short Facebook comments] are being written and distributed by so-called right activists based in the US, UK and Canada. These accounts are stirring people’s anger and reinforcing the idea that *Kalar* are trying to take over the Buddhist nation.

Although there is no single organisation or individual formally leading the campaign, the campaign’s patrons are Arakan nationalists such as Dr. Aye Chan from Kanda University of International Studies in Japan, the late Dr. Aye Kyaw from the United States and historian Khin Maung Saw based in Germany. Dr. Aye Chan’s infamous book about the ethnic Rohingya was titled *Influx Viruses: The Illegal Muslims in Arakan*.

Muslim responses

Campaigns against Rohingya and Muslims on social media have existed since the Internet became available in Burma in 1999. But these intensified in November 2011 when Cho Tu Zal (allegedly the first person to do so) highlighted [BBC's 2010 article on Rohingya](#).

While Rohingya activists have been consistently lobbying western governments for support, Burmese Muslims, with few exceptions, have been silent on the racist campaign. Although frustrated and humiliated, they hoped that it would fade away sooner or later as democratic reform proceeds and that the reform would allow them to address the issue through the parliamentary process. The lack of action is partly because the Muslims are politically too weak and immobilized during the past decades.

While Islamophobia is growing in the country partly as a result of state-sponsored campaign against Muslims in the past three or four decades, the Muslim communities have failed to reach out to the Buddhist majority and foster better relations or address the majorities' concerns. Moreover, the Muslims have not been able to address the issue of confusing South Asian cultural traditions with Islamic religion, which helps sustain the majority's view of Muslims as aliens. While politico-religious extremism is not an issue, the communities have not been able to address the Muslims' hypersensitivity to issues such as handling pork or address everyday community relations, in which Muslims appear ill behaved. Emerging youth groups have been trying, but their actions have been ineffective due to the lack of financial and human resources.

Most importantly, perhaps, although Burmese Muslims do not seem to be enthusiastic about supporting Rohingyas' status as an ethnic group of Burma, they are not able to make visible the distant between themselves and the Rohingya, as they doubt that anti-Rohingya campaign is also an anti-Muslim one. In other words, the idea of Muslim brotherhood is not relevant to the relationship between Rohingyas and Burmese Muslims; they are not completely antagonistic to each other either. Likewise, although religiously motivated terrorism is not a significant issue in Burma, the Muslim communities have been unable to act on some Rohingya

groups that have been accused of having connections with Al-Qaida. The Muslims communities are politically too immobilized to do the tasks anyway. This has an important implication on the relationship between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority.

On the part of Rohingya activists, their insistence on the group being an official ethnic group of the country only sustains backlash from Rakhines and majority Burmese. They have not taken on the so-called 'illegal' immigration, making the majority Burmese to insist on immigrants and Burma-born Rohingya being the same. In short, the meddling of ethnicity, religion, 'illegal' immigration and citizenship has been left unaddressed.

There are politicians, activists, and journalists from Muslim communities who are working within the mainstream. When the mainstream completely ignores them in times of need, the Muslims find themselves too paralyzed: they have no representatives to act on their behalf nor do they have their own leaders, organizations/parties, or media. Realizing that the mainstream political movement is only inattentive to their needs, Burmese Muslims started responding to the racist campaign after the April incidents. Some predicted that sectarian violence would break out soon if the media and mainstream political organizations did not control the racist campaign. Their cry for help, however, only falls on deaf ears: the media and human right activists assumed that the campaign on Facebook was not worth addressing.

Yet, the campaign has already redefining political spaces, citizenship and inter-communal relations manifested in the 3 June 2012 massacre, which was a strong reaction to a rape-murder case of a 26-year-old woman in Rambre Township.

Triggering public anger

What actually triggered public anger? It may have been racial profiling by the ethnic Arakan news agency, *Narinjara*, established in 2005. When the rape incident took place, the agency published news identifying the accused with their Islamic faith. In its Burmese language news, the incident was presented as if Muslims [read aliens] were threatening local people,

and now they have raped and brutally killed a woman. The words — Muslims, *Kalar*, Islam — were repeatedly used in its news reports. The news spread and people started talking about it in terms of *Kalar* and “Lu Myo Char [i.e. different race/people or alien] insulting our woman”.

Interestingly, *Naranjara* and Facebook users started talking about the accused rapists as Kalars even when the backgrounds of the accused were still unclear. Information from alternative sources shows that the main accused’s father was born into a Buddhist Rakhin family, but a Muslim couple adopted him after his parents abandoned him at birth. However, his father and the couple died. He became a spoiled kid with a criminal record showing multiple violations. Whether he practiced Islam or not, and his ‘Rakhin-ness’ [if so] were not considered. Instead, news reports portrayed the case as an insult by Kalar. I have not noticed The Narinjara or other agencies specifically blaming Rohingya for the crime. (Note: I do not seek any identification of ethnicity with criminal activities. My intention here is only to point out racial profiling).

As the news spread, genocidal comments also appeared one after another such as the one below.

“Bad Kalar. We already allowed them to live in our country. Now they have raped and killed our woman.... If we just watch, we will end soon. Unless we take initiative and plan to end Kalar men and women, Rakhine people will end” [his word choice “Myo Ton Aung” literally means the end of race/ethnic kind].

Ignoring the complaints from Muslim groups and individuals, the agency continued publishing news in similar fashions until 2 June 2012 (a total of five news reports). Initial erratic reporting of the victim’s age as 16-years-old (instead of 26-years-old) contributed to stirring people’s anger dramatically.

On 3 June 2012, the angry mob at Taunggot stopped a bus and killed 11 people [There are reports saying that the culprits were not local residents. Some were holding communication devices that are normally used by security officers]. Surprisingly, although this massacre humiliated many Burmese (Muslims and non-Muslims alike), there are still many who openly justify the violence. Some Facebook users even offer money to those whoever would rape and kill Muslims in Arakan State. It should be noted, though, that it is still unclear to what extent the Facebook campaigns and comments actually fed into the communal riots.

A new issue emerges

As the country tries to address the issue, another problem has been introduced: citizenship. Burmese Muslims are being treated as second-class citizens and the discourses of racism are increasingly portraying them as *Lu Myo Char* [different race/people]. When the massacre took place on 3 June 2012, the state run media referred to the victims as “Muslim Kalar”. When Muslims in Yangon protested against it, the Information Department corrected its usage to “Members of the Islamic faith who are living in the country”. This raises a question of whether the state recognizes Muslims as citizens. An open letter, submitted to President Thein Sein by Burmese Muslim Associations, raised the concern that the state media’s new usage downplays their citizenship status and that “living in the country” only signifies their “guest” status. [The complicated identity crisis of Burmese Muslims, now Myanmar Muslims, has a long history in Burma. I hope to contribute this topic to NM in the future.]

As these issues pre-occupied the Burmese home and abroad, the government has established an investigation committee for the 3 June 2012 massacre. Five major Islamic organizations in Burma have issued a joint statement, urging Muslims to calm down and not to protest. The Muslims in the country seem calm.

On 8 June 2012, however, riots broke out in Maungdaw district, which is a Rohingya majority area. Previously idle media organisations started distributing breaking news. *Weekly Eleven*, a Yangon based-agency, for

example, that completely silent on anti-Muslim riots in April and the 3 June 2012 massacre has been posting breaking news every minute.

Campaigners started distributing information associating Rohingya with terrorists, and speculating that foreign interventions (including from Bangladesh) are behind the scene. In the evening, leaders of influential 88 Generation Students declared that Rohingya is not an ethnic group of Burma. The government has issued Curfews in Maungdaw and Buthitaung (another Rohingya area) in Arakan State. Some fear that the military government is returning to power in the name of 'keeping the country together'.

To summarise, the above chronology of the 3 June 2012 massacre illustrates that violence cannot be limited to state abuses. Instead, any attention to human rights issues in Burma needs to be serious about racism, inter-ethnic and religious relations, the role of the media and its code of conduct, transnational racist campaign on social media websites, and finally citizenship issues. The Rohingya problem has already troubled both Burma and its neighbors near and afar.

If the Australian government engages with Burma on human rights issues, the very first step, requiring minimal effort, will be to get Burmese-Australian citizens off the racist campaign who are one way or another fostering racial and religious intolerance in Burma. The next step is to support peace education programs through Australian educational institutions in order to foster critical understanding of issues involving ethnicity/identities, migration, conflict, nation-building, and citizenship. This educational support must be available to the general public, but not be limited to scholarships designed for few of the country's brightest and most privileged. Finally, the government should initiate and support offices that can effectively monitor human right cases and ensure the prosecution of perpetrators.

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