

Religion, Secularism, and the Pursuit of Peace in Myanmar

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The dramatic military-led reform of the Myanmar state that began in approximately 2011, constituted by partial democratic reform, economic liberalization, and a newly invigorated peace process with more than 20 armed groups, has been hampered by myriad ongoing conflicts and the military's continued hold on key pillars of power. While hope surged in the early days following a series of significant shifts in policy by the Thein Sein-led administration, including the release of many political prisoners, increased freedoms of press and assembly, the legalization of the National League of Democracy (NLD), and the pursuit of bilateral ceasefire agreements with several ethnic armed groups, optimism began to sour quickly as episodes of communal violence spread across the country, often targeting Muslim communities and seemingly spurred on by anti-Muslim rhetoric espoused by some military and religious figures. With the sweeping electoral victory of the NLD in 2015, many assumed democratic reforms and peace would continue apace. In reality, recent years have borne witness to the limited scope of the reform in the face of massive challenges. Most dramatic has been the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State, where, following attacks on Border Guard Police in 2016 and 2017 by the newly formed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) launched a horrific military campaign, supported by many citizens, that led over 700,000 ethnic Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh. In the face of international outcry, the NLD-led government appeared both unable and unwilling to halt or condemn the military campaign. More recently in Rakhine State, fighting between the Arakan Army (which claims to represent the Rakhine Buddhist community) and Tatmadaw has escalated, as has violent conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States. The peace process, meanwhile, has made little progress under the NLD-led government, exacerbating a perception among non-Bamar ethnic groups that the NLD and its figurehead, Aung San Suu Kyi, do not take seriously their concerns. High profile attacks on journalists, including the arrest of two Reuters journalists who had reported on atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw in Rakhine (the two were finally freed in May 2019 after over 500 days in prison), ongoing restrictions on religious freedom, and arrests of peaceful protestors

throughout 2018 and 2019 raise concerns about a retraction of Myanmar's new democratic space.

A notable element of this environment is Buddhist nationalist rhetoric and activism that has flourished since the political reforms were introduced in 2011, finding new forms of expression and civic mobilization in the space of democratic openings and often driving exclusionary attitudes, particularly against Myanmar's Muslim population. First emerging in a "Buy Buddhist" campaign as the 969 Movement, leading Buddhist monks subsequently formed the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, generally known by the abbreviation 'MaBaTha,' which has the aim of promoting Buddhist interests. MaBaTha monks, nuns, and lay members have been the driving force behind, among other things, legislative activism to help draft and pass four controversial laws designed to 'protect race and religion' that were passed by the Thein Sein government in the run up to the 2015 election. Some saw this as an instrumentalist effort to curry favor with Buddhist communities but it likely also reflected the sincere interests of Thein Sein himself and some politicians from his party, the USDP. The stated aim of these laws is to protect Buddhist interests (particularly Buddhist women), but they are seen by several women's rights groups and religious minorities as discriminatory in their restriction of interfaith marriage, conversion, and reproductive rights. Some members of MaBaTha have close relations with the armed forces, the Tatmadaw, and helped campaign for the military party (USDP) in the lead up to 2015, accusing the NLD of being pro-Muslim and declaring the USDP better willing and able to protect Buddhist interests. Through legislative activism, community mobilization, petition drives, and the use of social media, MaBaTha has demonstrated a deft use of new tools available in Myanmar's quasi-democratic space to advance their interests. This past dynamic begs the question: how might Buddhist nationalist activism impact the peace talks and the 2020 election in the coming years?

Understanding Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar

The main concern of MaBaTha (and of the now seemingly defunct 969 Movement) is protection of *a-myo* (race/ethnicity/nation), *batha* (in this case, used to refer to religion generally) and *thathana*

(Pali: *sasana*, a term that refers to Buddhism as a social, cultural and institutional practice in this world). According to minutes from the MaBaTha inaugural meeting in 2013, its mission is threefold: (a) to raise public awareness about the need for racial protection and the dangers of religious conflicts, (b) to establish peaceful co-existence among different religions in Myanmar through ‘unity and maintenance of discipline,’ and (c) to safeguard ‘race and religion within a legal framework.’ To achieve these goals, MaBaTha envisions engagement first in the public propagation of the *dhamma* (the Teachings of the Buddha) and education (particularly through so-called *dhamma* schools for children), and second, through promulgation of the ‘race and religion’ laws. In many regards, MaBaTha (as well as numerous other Buddhist activist groups) fit the classic pattern of neo-traditionalism, here defined as the wish to work against institutional differentiation brought about by colonial rule, modernity, and secularization. MaBaTha is, first and foremost, an expression of the popular desire to ensure that a particular understanding of “traditional values and practices” is not undermined by the overwhelming forces of capitalism and globalization. Its primary focus, religious education, and its widespread support among the population can be attributed to this shared desire among Myanmar’s Buddhist population, though many may not appreciate, or find salient, MaBaTha’s anti-Muslim expressions nor its association with the Tatmadaw.

Activism by Buddhist monks and nuns is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, and in fact one can understand MaBaTha as a contemporary expression of a historical phenomenon. As will be discussed further below, the colonial period transformed the traditional mutually-beneficial and dependent Buddhist relationship between the ‘state’ (under the king) and the sangha (monastic community), leading to a perceived weakening of the latter. This led to movements by both lay and monastic to revitalize Buddhist practice; colonial independence movements for many, especially monk activists, were understood as part of an effort to restore the health and centrality of Buddhism against “anti-Buddhist” foreign powers. From independence onward, Buddhist monastics and lay people have continued to mobilize for political causes, including most dramatically in the 2007 so-called Saffron Revolution, in which monks and nuns throughout the country rose up in opposition to the military’s economic policies and conferred their blessing on Aung San Suu Kyi outside the gates of her home, where she lived under house arrest.

It came as a surprise to many that Buddhist groups such as MaBaTha have close ties with the military. After all, the military regime (1962-1988,

1988-2011), operating under a socialist ideological frame, crushed all opposition, and, at least initially, did little to support the sangha. However, the military began a re-orientation toward the sangha in the post-1988 era as the generals began to take on more visible and traditional roles of patronage of Buddhist leaders and monasteries while cultivating a more explicitly Buddhist nationalist ideology to legitimate their rule. Some also believe that following the 2007 monastic uprising, the military pursued a strategy to forge alliances within the sangha to ensure a network of support and tamp down future opposition from the monks.

Buddhist nationalist activism – past and present – is seen by many in and outside the country as a threat to coexistence and peace. Myanmar is extraordinarily diverse, with 135 state-recognized ethnic groups, five constitutionally recognized religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism) and other small communities of faith including Bahai and Sikh. Ethnic and religious diversity and their intersections are complex. While the vast majority of non-Bamar are Buddhist (and MaBaTha negotiates internal tensions related to inter-ethnic competition among its members), nearly all those who practice a tradition other than Buddhism are ethnic minorities. Among the Chin, Karen, and Kachin ethnic groups, where Christianity is practiced in significant numbers, Christian identity has been forged in a context of resistance to an authoritarian state and Buddhist majoritarianism, sometimes with support from foreign groups. Muslims are often associated with Indian migration supported by British colonists. As such, religious minority identity has sometimes been seen and treated by the state as a threat to its security and/or sovereignty. The state’s heavy involvement in Buddhist patronage, its discriminatory application of laws such as the Offense of Religion (in recent years applied to those accused of defaming Buddhism, but rarely other traditions), and restrictions on religious freedom defended as necessary for national security, are all seen as reflective of state preference for Buddhism and a broader cultural Buddhist hegemony that shapes Myanmar’s political culture.

The Ambivalence of Law: between Buddhist Constitutionalism and Secularism

In contemporary, quasi-democratic Myanmar, religious freedom is constitutionally protected at the same time that the state offers explicit support to Buddhist institutions, restricts the political rights of clergy, and sometimes discriminates against communities on the basis of religious identity. The complex and ambivalent relationship between religion and the state is rooted partly in colonial

practices. Thus, understanding the role of religion in electoral politics or the peace process requires taking into account British colonial legacies of differentiation between 'religion' and the 'secular' and post-colonial re-configurations of the relationship between the two.

In today's Myanmar, 'religion' (*batha*), the 'secular' (*lokiayay*), and 'Buddhism' (*thathana*) are regulated in a number of laws/legal spheres, including the constitution, election laws, the penal code, the Buddhist monastic court system (the *vinichayya*), and in the 2015 'race and religion laws.' The 2008 Constitution's article 361 grants Buddhism a special position as the majority religion, thus attempting to strike a balance between a 'Buddhist constitutionalism' and recognition of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism. While it should be noted that it does not grant Buddhism the status of state religion, article 361 as well as post 1988 re-orientations towards Buddhist symbols and institutions indicate that the state sometimes acts like a *de facto* Buddhist state. The Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, under the Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs, for example, is responsible for implementing a specific policy of Buddhist missionary activities in areas dominated by non-Buddhist religions. Furthermore, the state supports a Buddhist court system (the *vinacchaya*), where Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxis are defined. The court, which is unique to Myanmar, has absolute authority in doctrinal matters and shapes and formats Buddhist thought and practice in decisive ways. In these courts, Buddhists (mostly monks) are charged with heresy (*adhamma*) and malpractice (*avinaya*) under the jurisdiction of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee (often referred to as 'MaHaNa', a government-appointed body of monks established by General Ne Win in 1980 that oversees and regulates the sangha). This is a significant feature of both the maintenance of the *sasana* by the sangha and the control of the sangha by successive governments.

Parallel to Buddhist constitutionalism, the 2008 Constitution expresses a specific secularist orientation by referring to a remarkably strong separation between 'religion' and 'politics'. It bans the abuse of 'religion' (however defined) for political purposes generally (Art. 364), with additional and specific restriction on political parties' abuse of 'religion' (Art. 407) and parliamentarians use of religion for electoral purposes (Art 121). Any action that sows enmity between religions and races is considered unlawful (Art. 364). Moreover, members of 'religious orders' (defined primarily as Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as Christian clergy and some Muslim leaders) are not entitled to vote or to form political parties (Art. 392a). The Political Parties Registration Law No. 2/2012, 6(d) prohibits political parties from

writing, speaking, and campaigning in a manner that will instigate conflict or violence among religious and ethnic groups or individuals.

This particular conceptual division between the 'religious' and the 'secular' can be traced back to British colonial policies of religion. However, this 'path dependency' of differentiation goes further back in time: a key point in Theravada Buddhist political ideology is a formal divide between the state and sangha. With the introduction of modern political systems, this has been interpreted in different ways across Theravada Buddhist countries. Translated to the modern democratic political order in Myanmar, it is understood as a state obligation to protect the sangha from politics, going back to 1946 when monks were formally disenfranchised. Myanmar's half million monks and nuns comprise a significant base of voters, and it is easy to assume this rule was introduced either by the British or by the later military regime in order to restrict monastic political activities. However, this law was in fact passed after strong *monastic* pressure. Understanding the Burmese Buddhist point of view here is fundamental as it shapes the form of monastic political/non-political engagement, and furthermore, the particularly strong secularist provisions of the constitution and election laws. It also points to the deep ambivalence the Buddhist public express about monastic mobilization around political issues. It is these cultural and religious assumptions that are often drawn on by public figures as the basis for their criticism of both 'extremist' and 'progressive' monks who are perceived as *too* political in their rhetoric or activities. What constitutes "political activities" and the lines of appropriateness for monastic activism are, of course, constantly contested.

Upcoming 2020 elections

In 2014, a package of four laws referred to as the 'race and religion laws,' which seek to regulate marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversion, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country, were submitted to Parliament. These laws had been drafted initially by lawyers affiliated with MaBaTha. The 'race and religion' laws came to play an important role in the 2015 elections, as the USDP presented itself as the protector of the laws in contrast to the NLD which voted against their passage in Parliament. Moreover, the elections influenced the timing of the legal process as MaBaTha pushed for the laws to be signed by the President before the election, fearing the laws would not be passed if the NLD won. The 'race and religion' laws influenced the ways in which religious interests informed the electoral campaign. Back in 2014 MaBaTha had declared its

neutrality vis-à-vis party politics, but in 2015 some prominent members urged people not to vote NLD because they considered it too 'Muslim-friendly,' demonstrated by NLD parliamentarians' votes against the laws. USDP campaign posters explicitly mentioned the laws, while MaBaTha issued flyers urging the people to vote for parties that supported the laws and reinforced this message in a series of massive 'victory campaigns' around-the-country to celebrate the laws' passage in the weeks leading up to the election. On the ground, MaBaTha monks sometimes directly supported the USDP. For example, two MaBaTha monks were observed accompanying a USDP candidate campaigning among his Rakhine State constituency. After the NLD victory, Ashin Wirathu promised to bring the NLD down if they dared remove the laws.

The 2015 election campaign showed that Buddhist nationalist actors may back authoritarian regimes if they are seen to be promoting Buddhist interests. The prevailing historical concept is that of an ideal Buddhist king, who is expected to safeguard the monastic order and help prevent its moral decay, as well as the *sasana* more broadly. The sangha, in turn, is expected to offer ideological legitimacy to the state while ensuring it rules in accordance to Buddhist teachings. Many of the claims made by the MaBaTha in the 2015 election campaign fit into this traditional frame of reference.

The dominant assumption among the majority population of the state's role in protecting and propagating Buddhism ensures that political power is bound up in religious affiliation, with Buddhism used to legitimize and shape ruling political power. The challenge is the place of religious minorities in states with a Buddhist identity such as this. In several countries in the region, a pattern has developed wherein Buddhism is used to curry support for the ruling political power, while ethnic and religious minorities undergo systematic exclusion. This political culture was evident during the 2015 election campaign in Myanmar, in which 88 candidates—many of whom were Muslims—were declared ineligible to stand for election. Thus, a crucial issue in the lead-up to the 2020 elections is how religious identity plays out in the nomination processes of political parties. Will the Union Election Commission (UEC) bar Muslim votes or candidates in any way? Will the NLD or the USDP file Muslim candidates, or will they fear Buddhist nationalist smear campaigns for being too 'Muslim-friendly'?

Given the specific legally defined distinction between 'religion' and 'politics,' MaBaTha (as well as other religious groups operating in the public sphere) needs to avoid possible allegations of 'doing politics.' Already in 2013, MaHaNa had issued an order banning the *political* use of the 969 symbol, as well as the creation of formal organizations associated with the symbol. Since the

entry of the NLD into office in February 2016, the ties between the government and MaBaTha have loosened. MaHaNa, likely responding to the preferences of the newly elected political leaders, reduced its tacit previous support to MaBaTha by denying them formal recognition as a lawful monastic organization. In 2017, after allegations of anti-Muslim hate speech, MaHaNa banned Ashin Wirathu from public speaking and preaching for one year. The decision was made a few days after Ashin Wirathu had publicly expressed support for the assassination of Myanmar's leading constitutional lawyer U Ko Ni, a Muslim. A few months later, MaHaNa ruled that the 'MaBaTha' name was not in compliance with the 1990 Law Relating to the Sangha Organization and ordered all MaBaTha signs and symbols be removed by 15 July 2017 (while stopping short of condemning the organization or its activities). While most MaBaTha groups accepted the enforced re-brand and simply continued their activities, the Mandalay (Upper Myanmar) chapter and the Karen State chapter refused, arguing that MaBaTha was not an official sangha organization, thus not breaching the Law Relating to the Sangha Organization. In popular practice, it is usually still referred to as MaBaTha.

As evidenced by these moves, with the 2016 NLD government and Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, MaBaTha's position is more vulnerable. In the past year, MaBaTha has been notably less visible. However, Buddhist protectionist groups form an integral part of social and political life in Myanmar and many feel that MaBaTha is not deflated or defunct, but is prepared to 'rise up' again as needed. As political and economic liberalization transforms Burmese society in radical ways, calls for cultural and religious protectionism can be expected to increase. Finally, calls to 'protect Buddhism' are easily drawn upon in electoral politics, and it is an open question how the USDP, the NLD and other political parties will draw on this rhetoric in the 2020 elections.

Relatedly, as in many divided societies with diverse populations, electoral campaigning will likely accentuate and potentially exacerbate ethnic and religious grievances as politicians mobilize their communities. This may be even more the case this year, given many ethnic groups' disenchantment with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, who they believe have not prioritized ethnic grievances and the peace process. The fate of the some 700,000 Rohingya living in refugee camps in Bangladesh and their possible repatriation could be an issue around which some of the anti-Rohingya leaders in MaBaTha mobilize, along with the monastic nationalist group Sii Htein in Rakhine (more on it below). These elements may rally around the candidates they believe will resist pressures from the international community to repatriate or give full citizenship and legal

recognition to the Rohingya, marshalling social media and intimidation tactics for their cause.

Hate speech on social media will likely continue to contribute to tensions and potential violence in the run-up to the election. While the Myanmar public has shown more critical engagement with online information in recent years, especially following the global criticism of Facebook as a platform for hate speech in Myanmar, this critical engagement is far from saturated among the population. In the 2015 election, the government's Union Election Commission showed little willingness nor ability to confront and denounce hate speech (which often manifests in the form of anti-Muslim and anti-women rhetoric). Such efforts would be welcome in the form of a mechanism within the UEC in the run up to the 2020 election, as recommended in a recent report published by the U.S. Institute of Peace.

The Struggling Peace Process

Historically, several of Burma's insurgencies are related to the question of Buddhist constitutionalism. Both the formation of the Kachin Independence Army and the Chin rebellion can be seen as direct responses to the 1961 amendment to make Buddhism the state religion (a move that was overturned by the military following its 1962 coup). Even among Buddhist non-Bamar ethnic groups such as the Shan, the 1961 efforts were opposed as they were seen as counter to the Panglong Agreement. Therefore, peace negotiations and secular/religious constitutionalism are two closely related questions, at least as seen from Ethnic Armed Organizations' and ethnic and/or religious minority perspectives.

Myanmar's peace process is a complex structure composed of the so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)—which is far from nation-wide—in addition to the Northern Alliance, which comprises four non-ceasefire groups. Religious actors, particularly Christian leaders, have played important roles in support of ceasefires and the peace process, both historically and with respect to current efforts. In Kachin State, Baptist leader Rev. Lahtaw Saboi Jun, who died in 2017, mediated a ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Burmese military in 1994. His daughter, Ja Nan Lahtaw, has served as a key facilitator of the political dialogue process. She also leads the organization her father founded, Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, which supports peacebuilding efforts throughout the country, often working with faith actors and in support of interfaith relationship-building. Today, the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) is sometimes accused of undermining peace efforts by cajoling the KIA's campaigns against ongoing Burmese military interventions as a 'just war' (some believe

that the KBC's more skeptical attitude toward the current political dialogue process stems in part from cynicism and resentment about the negotiated agreement their own Rev. Saboi Jun helped mediate, which was not honored by the Tatmadaw). The Catholic Church in Kachin, by contrast, calls on all sides to remain committed to the peace process. Its more conciliatory stance has been embraced by the Tatmadaw, sometimes exacerbating intra-Christian tensions in Kachin.

Meanwhile, the Chin Peace and Tranquillity Committee (CPTC), which was established in 1996 by church leaders, has since 2011 exerted advocacy campaigns and helped to facilitate talks between the Tatmadaw and the Chin National Front. CPTC personnel have also served as monitors of the ceasefire, reporting violations by both sides. In Karen State, several Buddhist and Christian leaders have led efforts to advocate for intra-Karen reconciliation and relationship building (tensions among the Buddhist and Christian Karen led to a split within the pan-Karen resistance movement in the mid-90s), arguing for its necessity as a bulwark against 'divide-and-rule' efforts by the Tatmadaw. Religious leaders—both male and female—have also served as observers to the peace process at the state and union levels.

Overall, however, it is less common to observe community mobilization by Buddhist monastics in support of the peace process, much less as direct mediators, shuttle diplomats, or monitors of the ceasefire agreements, even as they have provided humanitarian aid to support those displaced by fighting, set up orphanages, or provided other kinds of services to ease the suffering of those living in the midst of violence. There are notable individual exceptions. Some Buddhist monks have led peace marches across the country and advocated within their communities for support for the peace process as a Buddhist virtue. Several have attended the Union Peace Conference (also known as the 21st Century Panglong Conference). More often their participation is at the state level, especially in so far as they participate in the community-level dialogues that feed input to the negotiators involved in the peace talks.

Contrary to expectations, a civilian government did not translate into a strengthened peace process. Rather, the process has become paralyzed by the state's two-headed structure, with a civilian and a military leader in a non-cooperative relationship. At present, there is a clear impasse; trust in the process, and between all the parties, has eroded. A new charge is needed in order to break through the impasse, and religious leaders, with their critical social role in Myanmar, have the potential to help augur this. However, the peace process is unlikely to make much progress between now and the 2020 election, despite the ways in which such progress would help the NLD regain

some confidence in ethnic areas. Political will and capacity appear lacking.

The Contested Nature of the State

The need for de-centralization and a federal structure is often claimed by democracy activists, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and international actors as the way to peace and democracy. However, to many, 'federalism' remains a vague category. Furthermore, from EAOs' perspectives, this new federal state is to be secular, thereby respecting the principles of the 1947 Panglong Agreement. By contrast, the Buddhist majority view is based in a Theravada Buddhist political theology in which the state is regarded as the protector of Buddhism. Therefore, although many people regard the 2008 Constitution as deeply problematic, the Buddhist protection clause (article 361) is rarely debated in Buddhist Myanmar, either in the peace process or in ongoing discussions about constitutional reform.

This stands in sharp contrast to Christian (political) theologies in Myanmar, which hold a secular state as a prerequisite and a sine qua non in a future federal and democratic state. Rooted in Baptist theological separation between religious and political powers, calls for a Buddhist state are often dismissed as extreme, but with limited understanding of the historical background and colonial grievances of Buddhists who make such calls. Public debates about the nature of the state focus on federalism and regional autonomy, but so far, very few have questioned the 2008 constitutional preference for Buddhism nor the patronage of Buddhism conducted by the Ministry of Religion. If peace talks progress to substantial political negotiations, and/or as constitutional reform efforts move forward, the question of the state's cultural identity inevitably needs to be addressed. As previously mentioned, MaBaTha—especially its more extreme leaders—have not paid much attention to the peace process. If/when more substantive discussion about what a secular state means in practice proceeds, might they become opposed to it? An incident among the Pa'O may prove prescient, in which political groups reported to the press that they were advocating for a secular state, after which monks protested.

Encouraging those monks and nuns who have shown support for the peace process will be critical preparation to ensure there are voices to challenge any spoiler effect by Buddhist nationalist activists who might feel threatened by its 'secularist agenda.' In order to play this role, these monastics will need to have a solid understanding of how the negotiations are potentially reconfiguring the state's responsibility over religious matters, if at all. They may also serve as advisors to those

supporting the peace process on how best to engage monastics skeptical of the peace process to better understand their interests so as to ensure they do not become spoilers. These efforts will need to be very carefully designed and conducted; they will likely need to operate under-the-radar.

Informal Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

Even as the peace process remains stalled, peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts have progressed across Myanmar thanks to a vibrant civil society accustomed to operating in difficult political environments. Lawyers, youth, women, and former political prisoners, and religious actors of all faiths have all played critical roles to address the underlying drivers of violence, advocate for state policies that foster inclusion and human rights, and to prevent violence in their communities. These efforts have helped to curb Buddhist nationalist activism's negative impact on inclusive governance and sustainable peace.

The opening of civic space in 2011 led to a flourishing of interfaith activities, some of which built on the important and pragmatic interfaith efforts to bring humanitarian aid to the Delta region following the destruction of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Particularly flowering out of Mandalay and Yangon, these efforts focused on building understanding across faith communities through dialogue and low-risk shared activities. As a spate of inter-communal violence broke out across the country beginning in 2012, targeting Muslim communities in particular, and seemingly encouraged by the rhetoric of some Buddhist leaders associated with 969 and MaBaTha, interfaith activities blossomed even further. New organizations arose to support interfaith peacebuilding with support from the international community, such as Religions for Peace Myanmar, a branch of the global Religions for Peace, while national organizations that had long operated on issues related to peace and human rights integrated interfaith efforts into their ongoing programming. A meta-evaluation of interfaith peacebuilding work in Myanmar from 2012-2018 conducted by the US Institute of Peace found that much of this interfaith work has created positive change at the individual level, but has had less impact on state practices that undermine social cohesion. Among the recommendations offered to national and international stakeholders interested in supporting interfaith peacebuilding work in Myanmar were the need to ensure greater inclusion of women, training or networking for interfaith groups to use social media more effectively to promote intercommunal respect, strategic efforts to translate horizontal-axis change in social attitudes into vertical-axis change in discriminatory state

practices, more engagement with hardline actors in each tradition, and assistance in reducing competition between interfaith efforts and facilitating collective learning and evaluation. Research findings also conveyed a strong sense from Myanmar interfaith activists that international donors' lack of understanding of the local context, unrealistic timelines, and lack of conflict sensitivity creates frustrations and security concerns for local actors, while funding mechanisms foster competition between groups. International actors seeking to support local interfaith work must do a better job being led by local actors, designing their programs in partnership with them.

Notably, the government has conducted its own interfaith work in partnership with religious actors and institutions. Former President Thein Sein supported the Interfaith Dialogue Group, founded in 2008, in its meetings throughout the country. After the NLD's 2015 win, the new government supported a series of large interfaith rallies around the country, led in large part by Catholic Cardinal Charles Bo (his involvement in a manner that seemed partisan—in defense of Aung San Suu Kyi—has invited criticism). Both initiatives have tended to focus on events meant to convey messages about religious harmony as a political aim and social good. The NLD's rallies were seen by many to be part of a series of efforts following the election to challenge Buddhist nationalist activism and constrain MaBaTha's political and social influence.

Several interfaith efforts have also sought to reduce violence through providing early warning and response to intercommunal tensions, conflict mitigation if it has broken out, propagation of 'flower speech' as a counter to hate speech, and address of local development needs through joint projects. As noted, the 2020 election campaigns are likely to strain inter-communal relations as politicians mobilize communities around identity-based interests. Interfaith networks could play an important role in helping to mitigate these tensions, prevent or challenge hate speech, and prevent election-related violence.

While interfaith work has generally been able to operate with minimal backlash in much of the country, efforts to deepen and broaden interfaith cooperation in Rakhine State has proven the most challenging. There, as in all states, Buddhist nationalist activism manifests in response to local contextual (and specifically ethnic-based) needs and dynamics. Sii Htein, an organization comprising exclusively Rakhine monks, sometimes in partnership with MaBaTha's local representatives, expresses suspicion about interfaith activities orchestrated by internationally-funded NGOs, seeing them as cover for 'pro-Muslim' agendas or for efforts that will lead to citizenship and mass settlement of Rohingya. At the

same time, long-standing community-oriented social service networks that operate out of religious places of worship across Rakhine (often referred to as 'parahita' groups, a Buddhist term that is nonetheless used by all religious groups to refer to similar work) sometimes work across faith communities to conduct their efforts aimed at serving the needs of local communities, illustrating the complexity of religious actor involvement efforts one might call interfaith peacebuilding. While many feel these informal parahita networks could become involved in more organized peacebuilding efforts, these efforts would need to proceed with care to ensure they are walking the right line to engage and push Buddhist hardliners while not capitulating to their opposition to NGO-orchestrated interfaith work. Patience is needed, but ultimately work with local faith actors and networks, many of whom say the international community has rarely engaged them, could pay critical dividends to enabling an environment permitting the return of those driven away.

Conclusion: Threading the Needle

As is clear in even this brief overview of religious dynamics in Myanmar, the relationship between religion and the state and their intersection with conflict and peace is extraordinarily complex. To date, outside actors seeking to navigate the religious landscape in efforts to advance the democratic reform and peace have not always demonstrated sensitivity to these dynamics—including the contested boundaries of appropriate political engagement by religious actors, the complex inter-religious and inter-ethnic intersections that manifest in unique ways in different geographic regions and political conflicts, nor the primary interest of groups like MaBaTha within a traditional Buddhist political-moral frame and historical experience that elicits public support. To be fair, navigating them, much less seeking to engage them directly, is a fraught exercise filled with pitfalls. However, one thing is clear: Myanmar's progress toward peace will not materialize without taking into account these dynamics.

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