**Buddhist Nationalism and Religious Violence in Burma**

By Nick Gier

The Venerable Ashin Wirathu, abbot of the 2,500-strong Ma Soeyein Monastery, calls himself the “Burmese bin Laden” and he has been preaching incendiary sermons against the nation’s Muslims, whose ancestors have been in the country for at least 1,100 years. Wirathu is calling for a boycott of Muslim businesses, a ban on interfaith marriages to preserve “racial purity,” and the prosecution of forced conversions to Islam.

Wirathu accuses Muslims of being “crude and savage” and having raped Buddhist women and girls. In a recent interview he declared: “Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly and they are very violent and they eat their own kind.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Incredibly enough, Wirathu has a strong following among students and professors at the nation’s Buddhist universities.

Wirathu’s sermons have inspired armed Buddhists to kill Muslims and burn their businesses and mosques. Pogroms against Muslims have been happening consistently since 2001, but earlier the army launched its own attack on Muslims in 1978, and, according to the *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, “scores of people were killed, raped, looted, and arrested.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The targets then and now are Muslims in Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state, adjacent to Muslim Bangladesh, where 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims live. The Burmese government has denied citizenship to those Muslims who are unable to offer the nearly impossible proof that their ancestors were in the country before 1823. The current round of sectarian violence has claimed the lives of at least 240 and left 140,000 Muslims homeless.

In the town of Meikhtila a Thai newspaper reports: “For three days, security forces let roaming gangs of armed Buddhists burn down nearly 1,000 buildings, including mosques, Muslim-owned businesses and houses.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Even though his government issued a report condemning “ethnic hatred” against Muslims, Burmese President President Thein Sein has defended Wirathu.

The response of Noble Prize Peace recipient Aung San Suu Kyi has been disappointing, but mostly to her international admirers. During her long period of house arrest after her party won the 1988 elections, Suu Kyi devoted herself to Buddhist studies and practice.

Suu Kyi writes that her political work was inspired by the example of the “hermit Sumedha, who sacrificed the possibility of early liberation for himself that he might save others from suffering.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The story of Sumedha, an accomplished *brahmin* who became a Buddha named Dīpamkara, or more accurately a *bodhisatta* in Pāli Buddhism of these writings, is found in the *Jātaka Tales*. With regard to this lofty status, Copley states that Suu Kyi “jokingly . . . recognizes she has not yet become a Bodhisattva.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

While her mother was a diplomat in New Delhi, Suu Kyi studied the writings of Gandhi, whom Ramjee Singh has called “the Bodhisattva of the 20th Century.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Copley describes Suu Kyi as a “pragmatic” but “strongly committed Gandhian.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Noting his significant exceptions to the principle of non-violence, I have maintained that Gandhi stands in constast to the Jain’s absolutist non-violence and the Hindu’s relative non-violence—for example, “relative” to the animal sacrifice, there is no violence. In chapter 4 of my book *The Virtue of Non-Violence: from Gautama to Gandhi*, I argue that the Buddha and Gandhi agree on a pragmatic application of the principle. In this book I also disagree with with Suu Kyi’s opinion that a theistic spiritual base for non-violence is stronger, because the Buddhist view of “no self” is difficult to apply to political action. I argue that the Buddhist self is only “empty of substance,” and there is no reason not to view it, the five *skandhas* working in unison as a *jīva*, as a robust moral agent in the world. Dave Hume, William James, and Whitehead self are Euro-American philosophical equivalents, as they all have “bundle” theories of selves that are non-substantial, constantly changing, yet still carrying the same personal identity.

With regard to the recent sectarian violence, Suu Kyi rejects the politics of ethnic identity—“we cannot have the attitude of ‘I’m Kachin,’ ‘I’m Burman,’ ‘I’m Shan’”[[8]](#endnote-8)—and the identity politics that sometimes accompanies such divisions. She has revealed an implicit nationalist bias when she admitted that she “can only talk about the ethnic Burmese majority. I’ve not studied the culture of the other ethnic peoples of Burma deeply enough to connect to them.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Adhering to the government policy regarding the Rohingya Muslims, she has doubts that they are Burmese citizens. Suu Kyi has laid blame on both Muslims and Buddhists, and has, incredibly enough, praised the good work of the security forces. International observers, such as Tomás Ojea Quintana, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, countered this by saying he had witnessed government authorities “standing by while atrocities have been committed before their very eyes, including by well-organized ultranationalist Buddhist mobs.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Maung Zarni, a Burma expert and visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, says that Suu Kyi “is no longer a political dissident trying to stick to her principles. She’s a politician and her eyes are fixed on the prize, which is the 2015 majority Buddhist vote.”[[11]](#endnote-11) To her credit she did object to the new government policy to limit Muslim parents, attacked world-wide by Islamophobs as “breeders,” to two children.

The parallels to Śri Lankā are instructive and worrisome. Just as in Śri Lankā, the Burmese monarchy traced its ancestry back to a legendary Hindu King Abhiraja, a prince of the future Buddha’s Sakya clan, who traveled from Northeast India and settled in the Irrawaddy River valley. In the 7th Century CE the Buddhism that came to Burma through India and Tibet was a tantric sect known as Ari Buddhism, which mixed animism, serpent (*naga*) worship, and Hinduism.

King Anawrahta Minsaw was an Ari Buddhist, but one of his generals was a Muslim named Byatta. Byatta’s two sons were elevated as *nats*, the spirits that Minsaw included in Buddhist worship even after he converted to the more “orthodox” Theravada school. As a gesture to his resident Hindus, King Minsaw also added the warrior god Indra to the Buddhist pantheon. In neighboring Thailand the Hindu creator God Brahmā sits at the top of every Buddhist house or business shrine.

During Minsaw’s reign (1044-1078) his armies conquered that area that is almost as large as Burma’s current boundaries. Burma flourished culturally, administratively, and agriculturally under Minsaw wise rule, but his Pagan Dynasty fell in 1287 to Mongol forces from China.

The purely Buddhist nationalist line, however, was interrupted, just as it was with the Tamil kings of Śri Lankā, by invading Turkish and Afghan forces from East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) in the 13th Century. In 1430 King Naramithla, exiled from the western coastal region of Arakan returned home to Burma, and, with the aid of primarily Afghan soldiers, established a hybrid Buddhist-Islamic dynasty at Mrauk-U. Mrauk-U grew to become a large cosmopolitan trading city of 160,000.

Thant Myunt-U lists Mrauk-U’s inhabitants as “mix of Arakanese, Bengalis, Afghans, Burmese, Dutch, Portuguese, Abyssinians, Persian, even Japanese Christians from Nagasaki.”[[12]](#endnote-12) These Arkanese kings grew even more powerful as the Bengali Sultanate’s rule waned, and they even able to resist the military juggernaut of King Bayinnaung, who, from 1551-1581, established the largest empire in Southeast Asian history. Crowned king in1554, Bayinnaung was known as a *chakravartin*, a Dharma-wheel-turning king, and the Thais, then decisively defeated by him, still refer to him as the “Conqueror of the Ten Directions.”

Until the arrival of the British in Burma, Muslims and Buddhists, the former having arrived as early as the 9th Century, lived in relative peace. In southern Burma Muslims at one time outnumbered Buddhists and there are records of an Indian Muslim kingdom there in the 13th Century. Over the centuries there were occasional acts of persecution and killing of Muslims.

The most celebrated incident was during the reign of the Arakan King Sandathudhama (1652-1674), who initially welcomed Mughal Prince Shah Shuja, who was seeking refuge from his brother Aurangzeb. When Emperor Shah Jahan died, Shah Shuja crowned himself emperor. As he moved his army and navy out of Bengal, where Shah Shuja had been governor, he was defeated by his younger brother Dara Shikoh near the present day Varanasi. Dara, however, was much less fortunate against Aurangzeb and was defeated twice in battle.

Shah Shuja marched all the way to Fatehpur near Agra where Aurangzeb defeated him decisively in January 1659. Shah Shuja fled east to Arakan by a road that still bears his name, but the gold, silver, and jewels carried on Shah Shuja’s camel train were too much of a temptation for the Arkanese. Shah Shuja’s daughter was raped by King Sanda Thudhamma and his three sons were beheaded, but their father was able to escape back to India. The details of this incident demonstrate that the principal motivation here was not religious differences but greed.

From 1853 to 1878, King Maung Lwin Mindon successfully modernized Burma, in spite of the fact that the British had taken over the lower half of his country and had backed a failed coup by his two youngest sons in 1866. He was a great supporter of Buddhism, and in 1871 he arranged the Fifth Great Buddhist Synod in Mandalay. Aung Zaw states that under Mindon “mosques were built and thousands of Muslims served in Burmese infantry and artillery divisions. Mindon even helped build a hostel in Mecca for Burmese Muslims making the pilgrimage, or hajj.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

During the 20th Century there have been nonsectarian and nonviolent protests, most of them led by students and/or monks, and, before the British left, inspired by the Indian National Congress and Gandhi. (In 1992 Thai students, with the support of their Buddhist king, brought down a military dictatorship.) At the beginning of the century it was the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, founded in 1916 and obviously modeled on the YMCA, that initiated the first political reforms in 1915. The YMBA’s goals were modest: they wanted Buddhist holidays to be recognized in the British calendars and they wanted more access to education. The latter goal was reached by a student strike in 1920, which led to the establishment of Buddhist schools and universities.

The YMBA led the way to the Genereal Conference of Burmese Association (GCBA), the original “B” standing for “Buddhist,” which, according to Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, was “changed to ‘Burmese’ in order to be more inclusive.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Under the leadership of U Ottama, who carried on a correspondence with Gandhi, the GCBA encouraged the Burmese to boycott British goods, and, inspired by Gandhi’s *khadi* campaign, to wear homespun clothing. U Ottama was imprisoned repeatedly by the British in the 1920s, and, in a show of support, Gandhi visited Burma three times during that decade.

During the 1930s fractures formed within the GCBA, and a one of its leaders U Saya San, described as a “disrobed monk and mystic pretending to be the heir to the Burmese monarchy,” formed an armed militia, and he led a “massive rural rebellion that still remains a major mark of nationalist pride. . . .” [[15]](#endnote-15) The *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* states: “The harsh repression devised by the British colonial authorities, but mostly handled by Indian, Karen, Chin, and Kachin police, left between 1,700 and 3,000 dead after 18 months of unrest.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Just as in India, the British established four different electorates (Burmese, Indians, Anglo-Indians, and Karens) in the late 19th Century. Time and time again, British colonial authorities all over the world used the principle of “divide and conquer” among ethnic and religious groups, and the long terms negative effects of that policy rebound to this day.

On May 8, 1930, 5,000 South Indian workers at the docks in Rangoon went on strike, and the British ship owners hired Burmese to replace them. As the Indians came back to work on May 26, fights broke out between them and the Burmese replacements. Over 200 Indians were killed that day in Rangoon, and violent Burmese reaction spread throughout the country.

In 1938 Burmese Buddhists were understandably upset about a book written by a Muslim, who wrote libelous statements about Buddhism and its founder. On July 26 thousands of Buddhists attended a meeting at the Shwedagon Pagoda, and they decided to vent their anger in the Sooratee Burmah Bazaar where there were many Muslim shops. A riot broke out and the military intervened. The official death toll was 204 and 1,000 injured.

A British judge banned the anti-Buddhist book, but he also proscribed any newspaper from reporting on the event. The stage was set for the development of an ever militant Buddhist nationalism. As Thant Myunt-U explains: “A powerful ethnic nationalism, based on the idea of a Buddhist and Burmese speaking people, one that saw little need to accommodate minority people, took root. At the centre of this nationalism would be a desire for a new martial spirit.”

It is sadly ironic that the Venerable Wirathu has chosen to associate himself with Osama bin Laden, because Muslims jihadis—Burmese, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, and Pakistans—have now arrived in Burma. The Long War Journal has released unconfirmed reports that in July of 2013, this “group claims it killed 17 Burmese soldiers in its first ambush of a military convoy, and “a few days ago they slaughtered three men including a Buddhist monk.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

This Burmese jihadist group is called Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Arakan, and it was founded by Maulana Abdul Quddus, a Burmese Muslim who has been associated with Al Qaeda since the early 1980s. Radical Muslims from around the world are rallying to the *jihad* in Burma and what they call the “genocide” of Muslims there. The future of religious harmony in Burma does not bode well.

**Endnotes**

1. Tin Aung Kyaw, “Buddhist Monk Wirathu Leads Violent National Campaign against Myanmar’s Muslims,” *Globalpost.com* (June 21, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Online Encycopedia of Mass Violence*, at [www.massviolence.org/Burma-Myanmar](http://www.massviolence.org/Burma-Myanmar), accessed on September 30, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Maung Zarni, “Myanmar’s Extremist Buddhists Get Free Rein,” *The Nation* (Thailand) (April 10, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in Peter Popham, *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2013), [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Antony Copley, “Burmese Days: Past and Present,” *Gandhi Marg* 34:4 (January-March, 2013): 465. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ramjee Singh, “Gandhi and the Bodhisattva Ideal” in *New Dimensions and Perspectives in Gandhism*, ed. V. T. Patil (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1988), vol. 4, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Copley, 467. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Quoted in ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Quoted in ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Aung Zaw, “Are Myanmar’s Hopes Fading?” *The New York Times* (April 24, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Julius Cavendish, “Burma’s Rohingya Muslims: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Blind Spot,” *The Independent* (August 20, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Thanbt Myunt-U, *The Rivers of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* (New York: Farar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Copley, 467. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, “Burma: Civil Resistance in the Anticolonial Struggle, 1900-1940,” *Gandhi Marg* 34:4 (January-March, 2013), 383. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Online Encycopedia of Mass Violence*, at [www.massviolence.org/Burma-Myanmar](http://www.massviolence.org/Burma-Myanmar), accessed on September 30, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Bill Roggio, “Jihadists Seek to Open New Front in Burma,” *Long War Journal* (July 15, 2013), at [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org), accessed September 23, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)