

Ultra-nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha - We must protect our country': extremist Buddhists target Mandalay's Muslims

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Ultra-nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha has been spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric across Myanmar for years. Cosmopolitan Mandalay is at the heart of this hostility - which many fear is here to stay.

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In a cluttered room in a monastery in Mandalay, Myanmar's second city, a group of crimson-robed monks and their followers feverishly smoke and talk. One monk wearing black, thick-rimmed glasses feeds paper into a photocopier. Another lies on the floor, stapling pages of propaganda together. Hangers-on laugh loudly and flick cigarette butts into an ashtray.

They're forming petitions, explains a monk with oversized sunglasses perched on his forehead. A local journalist recently criticised the group's front man, the vitriolic monk Ashin Wirathu, known for his violently anti-Muslim rhetoric. They now want the reporter arrested.

"Jihadi Muslims want to overwhelm the country, so we have to protect it," says Eindaw Bar Tha, the monk lying on the floor.

This is the headquarters of the Committee to Protect Race and Religion, or Ma Ba Tha. It is an ultra-nationalist Buddhist organisation, and for years it has been spreading anti-Muslim sentiment across the country from this unassuming base. Self-anointed protectors of Myanmar's dominant Buddhist religion, Ma Ba Tha members have sown insidious new tensions in Mandalay, a diverse city home to sizeable Muslim, Christian and Hindu populations.

In 2014, the hostility culminated in anti-Muslim riots widely linked to Ma Ba Tha - a tension that's still present throughout Mandalay. On the street, a Muslim man passing a monk freezes up for fear of saying a wrong word. A Buddhist taxi driver, driving away from an Islamic neighbourhood, mutters: "So many Muslims."

Smar Nyi Nyi, a softly spoken Muslim businessman, puts it like this: "When we are speaking with the Buddhists we have to be careful. We don't want our words to harm them. Also, we are thin-skinned about their words."

The people in his neighbourhood have responded by putting up huge grey gates, which are shut each night at 10pm. "We are preventing trouble," he says. "Some of the young kids, when they are

insulted they will speak back, they will act back.”

Two eras: before and after 2014

The country’s ancient royal capital situated in the dry and dusty northern lowlands, has long been viewed by western travellers through a romantic lens. Britain ruled Myanmar from here, and colonial-era writer Somerset Maugham called the reconstructed palace and surrounding moat “one of the minor beauties of the world”.

Today, Mandalay is a rapidly modernising trading town, strongly influenced by its proximity to China - the motorbike-choked streets are packed with Chinese hotels, clothes stalls and cosmetics shops.

It’s also the country’s Buddhist heartland, home to hundreds of golden pagodas and monasteries. When King Mindon founded the city in the 19th century, he was fulfilling an old Buddhist prophecy that the location would be a centre for the revival and study of the religion.

Nevertheless, the city has become a melting pot of cultures and religions. Mosques, churches and sculpture-encrusted Hindu temples stand interspersed with the glittering spires of pagodas. Burmese kings had Muslim advisers. One of them, U Bein, lent his name to a spectacular teak bridge - now a popular tourist site.

During British rule, the city drew Armenian businessmen, Iraqi Jews and many south Asians. It wasn’t continuous harmony - anti-Muslim riots in 1938 claimed hundreds of lives - but relations have mostly been peaceful.

However, the city’s status as a centre of Buddhism gives Mandalay a special place in the national psyche . In the 1960s, the Ministry of Information referred to the city as “the indestructible heart of Burma” - and Ma Ba Tha has its roots in this nationalistic attitude.

“According to the constitution, most of the civilians’ religion is Buddhism,” says Eindaw Bar Tha. “The government has the responsibility to respect the rights of Buddhist citizens, too. But they’re not doing this. That’s why we have the full responsibility to protect our religion.”

The biggest threat, in their eyes, comes from their Muslim neighbours, who they view with atavistic suspicion: they say Muslims steal Buddhist women, outbreed the Buddhist majority and plot terror attacks.

While many people in cosmopolitan Mandalay eschew Ma Ba Tha’s fanaticism, the city’s Muslim residents date the escalating hostility to the emergence of the group (and its precursor, the 969 movement) in 2013.

When the movement’s logo began to appear on car decals and in shops, and they started handing out pamphlets listing Muslim businesses to avoid, people such as Zin War Law, a Muslim office worker in her mid-30s, thought it was a joke. “It is very childish, their activity, and their manners are childish,” she says. Later, she heard Buddhist friends parrot their views.

Interfaith activists in Mandalay operate amid a climate of severe hostility and fear
Shaivalini Parma

“I feel disgusted,” says her friend Yin Yin Mya, a spritely 61-year-old Muslim woman. Her great-grandfather, who was also Muslim, served in the royal palace. “I hate them because actually the communities got along since a long time ago, but because of them they started to split.”

For many Mandalay residents, recent history falls into two eras: before and after 2014.

After a local Muslim was accused of raping a Buddhist girl, several nights in July brought the worst intercommunal riots in years [1]. A mob on motorbikes, armed with machetes, rampaged around targeting Islamic homes and businesses. Two men died.

“After 2014 we lost the peacefulness,” says Yin Yin Mya.

She lives around the corner from the Muslim-owned chapati shop where the violence first broke out. Her own daughter, Pwint Phyu Latt, helped broker peace, but was later arrested – after a campaign by Ma Ba Tha – and remains in prison.

Yin Yin Mya says she saw rioters drive motorbikes down the road that leads from Wirathu’s monastery. “At the time the groups of people – they were drunk – were sent by Wirathu,” she says.

Ma Ba Tha denies any involvement in the riots. At the suggestion that they paid rioters, Eindaw Bar Tha snorts with laughter. “We have no money to buy a tea,” he says.

The ‘water’ to Wirathu’s ‘fire’

Most people don’t dispute the role the nationalists played in the riots. At another monastery a short drive away lives an eccentric, round-faced monk who calls himself the “water” to Wirathu’s “fire”. Kar Wi Ya, 60, lives with a collection of cats and kittens named after Myanmar film stars. He was one of the people responsible for calming the violence in 2014, and Muslim groups consider him a friend and sometime protector.

“After I was called by the Islamic leader, I came there with about 200 people,” he recalls. “When I arrived, there were two groups fighting. I went into the middle and stopped them ... I led both groups to their respective homes.”

He insists Ma Ba Tha members were among the rioters. “When they saw me, they went back,” he says. “Actually, this violence was created by Ma Ba Tha.”

But because he has relationships with both the Muslim community and Ma Ba Tha, some view him with suspicion. In 2013, he led protests against a visit to Myanmar by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. “He’s like a gecko, easy to change colour,” says Yin Yin Mya.

Nevertheless, the monk, who spent more than a decade in prison for opposing the former military junta, says he has no love for Wirathu. He echoes the commonly held belief that Ma Ba Tha has close ties to the army and was created to foment trouble ahead of the pivotal 2015 election [2].

Last year, after half a century of military rule, the generals handed power to a civilian government led by longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. They retain control over key institutions, including the security forces.

The fact that large-scale violence has not broken out in Mandalay since 2014 is partly thanks to the grassroots work of sympathetic monks like Kar Wi Ya, and activists who have calmed the skirmishes that are publicised and manipulated by nationalist groups on social media.

“These small things happen occasionally,” says Harry Myo Lin, who runs an advocacy group called the Seagull. “It’s solved underground.”

He gives the recent example of a Buddhist man and Muslim woman who eloped together. Ma Ba Tha supports a ban on interfaith marriages, and local monks used this case to rile up anti-Muslim sentiment.

On another occasion, two groups of young people fought in the city and a Buddhist boy was killed. Although both groups contained Muslims and Buddhists, the incident was framed as a religiously motivated killing.

If you remove Ma Ba Tha, another group will come. We have to remove the powerful guys behind Smar Nyi Nyi

Such situations have been resolved quietly through interventions, Harry Myo Lin says. Sometimes, money changes hands.

“There are countering forces which make peace,” he says. “Maybe it’s not continuous peace messaging, but at least they are easily coming together to stop any possible violence.”

But activists like him face continuous interference from nationalist groups. In addition to Ma Ba Tha, there are numerous youth organisations that follow their example.

“Interfaith activists in Mandalay operate amid a climate of severe hostility and fear, facing parallel forms of harassment and discrimination from both state and non-state actors,” says Shaivalini Parmar, Myanmar programme officer for Civil Rights Defenders.

‘We don’t need Ma Ba Tha’

While it has done nothing to help persecuted interfaith activists, the NLD government led by Aung San Suu Kyi has shown some limited willingness to act against Ma Ba Tha. Shortly after taking power, Yangon chief minister Phyo Min Thein breezily told crowds on a trip to Singapore: “We don’t need Ma Ba Tha.”

Meanwhile the group has demonstrated callousness that may have dented its popularity. After the popular Muslim NLD legal adviser Ko Ni was assassinated in February, Wirathu publicly thanked the killer, prompting widespread ire.

Last month, Ma Ha Na, the state Buddhist organisation, sought to clamp down on Wirathu’s hateful preaching - but he has continued to travel the country, broadcasting pre-recorded sermons with duct tape plastered across his mouth.

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While the case against the journalist accused of defaming Wirathu was thrown out on a technicality this month, the incident demonstrates the group’s continuing political sway.

Kar Wi Ya is skeptical about the government’s ability to rein in Ma Ba Tha. He predicts further clashes between Buddhists and Muslims. “No hope,” he says, when asked about relations between the communities.

Muslims and activists in Mandalay tend to view extremist Buddhist nationalism as a multi-headed hydra that, no matter how many heads you cut off, is liable to keep coming back.

“If you remove Ma Ba Tha, another group will come,” says Smar Nyi Nyi. “We have to remove the

power[ful] guys stringing behind.”

In the meantime, the climate of mutual distrust they have helped foster in Mandalay will be hard to shift.

Zin War Law, for her part, regrets the loss of her Buddhist friends. “They changed,” she says. “Whenever they see Muslim people they feel afraid.”

Poppy McPherson in Mandalay

P.S.

* The Guardian. Monday 8 May 2017 07.30 BST Last modified on Tuesday 9 May 2017 10.36 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/08/buddhist-extremists-anti-muslim-mandalay-ma-ba-t-ha>

Footnotes

[1] <http://time.com/2956180/burma-mandalay-race-riots-sectarian-violence-buddhist-muslim/>

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33547036>