

Wirathu: Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma

Thursday 9 November 2017, by [HODAL Kate](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2013).

Thousands watch YouTube videos of 45-year-old 'Burmese Bin Laden' who preaches against country's Muslim minority.

His name is Wirathu, he calls himself the "Burmese Bin Laden" and he is a Buddhist monk who is stoking religious hatred across Burma.

The saffron-robed 45-year-old regularly shares his hate-filled rants through DVD and social media, in which he warns against Muslims who "target innocent young Burmese girls and rape them", and "indulge in cronyism".

To ears untrained in the Burmese language, his sermons seem steady and calm - almost trance-like - with Wirathu rocking back and forth, eyes downcast. Translate his softly spoken words, however, and it becomes clear how his paranoia and fear, muddled with racist stereotypes and unfounded rumours, have helped to incite violence and spread misinformation in a nation still stumbling towards democracy.

"We are being raped in every town, being sexually harassed in every town, being ganged up on and bullied in every town," Wirathu recently told the *Guardian*, speaking from the Masoeyein monastery in Mandalay where he is based.

"In every town, there is a crude and savage Muslim majority."

It would be easy to disregard Wirathu as a misinformed monk with militant views, were it not for his popularity. Presiding over some 2,500 monks at this respected monastery, Wirathu has thousands of followers on Facebook and his YouTube videos have been watched tens of thousands of times.

The increasing openness of Burma, which was once tightly controlled under a military junta, has seen a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment spread across the 60 million-strong Buddhist majority - and Wirathu is behind much of it.

Rising to prominence in 2001, when he created a nationalist campaign to boycott Muslim businesses, Wirathu was jailed for 25 years in 2003 for inciting anti-Muslim hatred but freed in 2010 under a general amnesty.

Since his release, Wirathu has gone back to preaching hate. Many believe his words inspired the fighting last June between Buddhists and ethnic Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state, where 200 people were killed and more than 100,000 displaced.

It was Wirathu who led a rally of monks in Mandalay in September to defend President Thein Sein's controversial plan to send the Rohingya to a third country. One month later, more violence broke out in Rakhine state.

Wirathu says the violence in Rakhine was the spark for the most recent fighting in Burma's central city of Meiktila, where a dispute in a gold shop quickly spiralled into a looting-and-arson spree. More than 40 people were killed and 13,000 forced to flee, most of them Muslims, after mosques, shops and houses were burned down across the city [1].

Wirathu says part of his concern with Islam is that Buddhist women have been converted by force and then killed for failing to follow Islamic rules. He also believes the halal way of killing cattle "allows familiarity with blood and could escalate to the level where it threatens world peace".

So he is back to leading a nationalist "969" campaign, encouraging Buddhists to "buy Buddhist and shop Buddhist" and demarcate their homes and businesses using numbers related to the Buddha (the number refers to his nine attributes, the six attributes of his teaching and the nine attributes of the Buddhist order), seemingly with the intention of creating an apartheid state.

Wirathu openly blames Muslims for instigating the recent violence. A minority population that makes up just 5% of the nation's total, Wirathu says Burma's Muslims are being financed by Middle Eastern forces: "The local Muslims are crude and savage because the extremists are pulling the strings, providing them with financial, military and technical power," he said.

Not everyone agrees with Wirathu's teachings, including those of his own faith. "He sides a little towards hate," said Abbot Arriya Wuttha Bewuntha of Mandalay's Myawaddy Sayadaw monastery. "This is not the way Buddha taught. What the Buddha taught is that hatred is not good, because Buddha sees everyone as an equal being. The Buddha doesn't see people through religion."

Critics point to Wirathu's lack of education to explain his extremism as little more than ignorance, but his views do have clout in a nation where many businesses are run successfully by Muslims.

The second son of eight children, Wirathu was born in 1968 in a town near Mandalay and only attended school until 14, after which he became a monk. Eager to leave "civilian life rife with its greed and spite", he said he had no intention of marrying: "I didn't want to be with a woman."

Wirathu claims he has read the Qur'an and counts Muslims among his friends, but said: "We're not so close because my Muslim friends don't know how to talk to Buddhist monks ... I can accept [being friends] if they consider me an important and respected religious figure."

Despite spending seven years in prison for stoking religious violence, Wirathu won a "freedom of religion" award in February from the UK's foremost Burmese monastery, Sasana Ramsi in London [2], in the same week that he spread rumours that a Rangoon school would be developed into a mosque.

Analysts warn that Wirathu's seeming freedom to preach as he pleases - in addition to his influence over other monks, who have also started preaching against Islam - should be taken as a wake-up call to the rest of the world. "If a similar hate movement like Burma's '969' movement - which spreads hate speech and hate symbols - [existed] specifically against, say, the Jews in Europe, no European government would tolerate it," Burmese activist and London School of Economics visiting fellow Maung Zarni said.

"Why should the EU not take it seriously, in a major EU-aid recipient country?"

Both Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi have been criticised for not taking a greater stand against the violence that has racked Burma in recent months. Some have pointed to the seemingly planned nature of many of the attacks; UN special envoy Vijay Nambiar said the violence had a "brutal efficiency" and cited "incendiary propaganda" as stirring up trouble [3].

Multifaith activists in Burma recently took to the streets to counter the violence, distributing T-shirts and stickers with the message: “There shall be no racial or religious conflicts because of me.” But the Buddhist-Muslim tension has already spread far and wide.

In Rangoon, a recent mosque fire that killed 13 children was widely believed to be a case of arson. And in Indonesia, eight Buddhists were beaten to death by Rohingya Muslims at a detention centre, in apparent retribution for incidents of sexual assault by Buddhist inmates against Rohingya women [4].

Rumours abound that those inciting the fighting, like Wirathu, are pawns for being used by Burma’s military generals to stir up trouble in the nascent democracy. But Wirathu insists he is working alone: “These are my own beliefs,” he said. “I want the world to know this.”

In a chilling sermon last month [5], Wirathu warned that the “population explosion” of Burma’s Muslims could mean only one thing: “They will capture our country in the end.”

And just like his namesake, this “Burmese Bin Laden” made a brazen call to arms: “Once we [have] won this battle, we will move on to other Muslim targets.”

Kate Hodal in Bangkok
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Preacher of hate

1968 Wirathu is born in Kyaukse, near Mandalay

1984 Joins the monkhood

2001 Starts promoting his nationalist “969” campaign, which includes boycotting Muslim businesses

2003 Jailed for 25 years for inciting religious hatred after distributing anti-Muslim leaflets, leading to 10 Muslims being killed in Kyaukse

2010 Freed under a general amnesty

June 2012 Violence breaks out between ethnic Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in Rakhine state

September 2012 Wirathu leads a rally of monks in support of President Thein Sein’s proposal to send the Rohingya to a third country

October 2012 More violence breaks out in Rakhine state

March 2013 Inter-religious fighting in Meiktila sees 40 killed and nearly 13,000 displaced; “969” stickers and plaques distributed throughout Burma

P.S.

* The Guardian. Thursday 18 April 2013 12.08 BST First published on Thursday 18 April 2013 12.08 BST:

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/22/burma-ethnic-violence-dead-meikhtila>
- [2] <http://www.dvb.no/news/controversial-monk-handed-'freedom-of-religion'-award/26601>
- [3] <http://www.dvb.no/news/mob-attacks-staged-with-'brutal-efficiency'-u-n-envoy/27221>
- [4] <http://www.dvb.no/news/indonesian-prison-riot-sparked-by-rape-of-rohingya-inmates/27532>
- [5] <http://www.m-mediagroup.com/en/archives/7625>