

Buddhism in Myanmar: Extremism and Crimes Against Humanity

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Myanmar is undergoing a state of upheaval and transformation. As of now, the country is experiencing changes on the political, economic and social frontiers.

Amidst such transitions, Myanmar is also witnessing increased cases of religious intolerance. In spite of its rich cultural heritage and legacy of socio-religious harmony, present-day Myanmar is surely not the best place for its religious minorities.

Recently, the government of Myanmar proposed a law that seeks to impose a virtual ban on religious conversions (any case of religious conversion will need prior approval of the state). This proposed law is just one of the many recent ones that are being put into effect to target the country's religious minorities: there are plans to outlaw interfaith marriages, and also to limit the birth-rate among non-Buddhist families residing in Myanmar.

But that's not all. The worst part is the fact that these discriminatory laws are being backed by radical Buddhist monks (collectively known as the Mabatha), and there have been petitions signed by as many as 1.3 million people calling for elimination of Muslims from the country.

A Historical Perspective

Just like any other religion, Buddhism too has seen its principles being put at stake by its own clerics and clergymen. For centuries, Buddhist sects and monasteries have failed to arrive at a common consensus on various issues, both big and small.

Should a monk's robe cover both shoulders or just one? Answer awaited.

Also, in spite of Buddha's non-violent teachings and principles, Buddhist monks are no strangers when it comes to violence and conflict. During the colonial era, several Buddhist monastic orders made it mandatory for their members to engage in armed violence against the Europeans.

As such, politics is not unknown territory for Buddhist monks who claim to have denounced the world. In the period ranging from 1980s to 2000s, many Burmese monks participated in the pro-democracy struggles.

However, after the political transition of 2011, two extremist Buddhist outfits — the Mabatha and the 969 Movement — have dominated Burmese political thought and ideology. Firebrand radical Ashin Wirathu has emerged as the de facto proponent of communal discord. Both the 969 Movement and the Mabatha seem to have one common goal: creation of an exclusively Buddhist state in Myanmar.

Crimes Against Humanity

Back in mid-2012, communal violence took a turn for the worse, when riots broke out in the western state of Rakhine, killing hundreds and displacing over 140,000 Rohingya Muslims. The government simply refused to step in, and even when it did, the authorities blatantly sided with the extremists and essentially rendered the Rohingya people helpless. This showed that anti-Rohingya activities in Myanmar were (and still are) nothing more than planned religious pogrom being conducted by the Buddhist terror outfits in assonance with the government of Myanmar. More details about the ill-effects of the riots [can be found here](#).

Apart from planned genocide, Buddhist extremist groups also indulge in anti-minority propaganda in the form of economic boycotts against Muslim businesses and false criticism of religions they do not like (which include, apart from other faiths, forms of Buddhism that do not agree with their extremist actions). Of course, Islam is the centre of their hatred: when delegates of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation visited Myanmar in 2013, banners reading “Islam is a faith of animals with uncontrollable birth-rates” were flashed.

Fundamentalism Among Myanmar’s Monks — Exploring The Causes

The question is, if certain sects of Buddhism are engaging in violence, why are they getting away with it? Fundamentalism can be found in any religion: Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam... you name it! But in every religion, the majority of the followers are always against fundamentalism.

But in case of Buddhism, the anti-extremist or moderate voices are too feeble.

The problem is that the average Buddhist is taught, time and again, to think of monks as ascetics who have renounced worldly comforts and are thus immune to human flaws. Even if a monk errs, he is not called ‘corrupt’, but is instead termed as ‘deviant’. The robe of the present-day monk is still equated with the Wisdom of Buddha, even if the said monk is miles apart from the teachings of the Enlightened One. As a result, each Buddhist monk considers himself to be a Pope in his own right — incorruptible.

More importantly, on the practical front, the radical monks serve as handy allies for the pseudo-civilian government of Myanmar. Therefore, even Aung San Suu Kyi, so well known for her pro-liberty credentials, has chosen to be a [mute spectator](#) while innocent Rohingya children are being massacred.

A Ray of Hope?

Yet, all hope is not lost. In Myanmar, even though the extremists seem to have the upper edge, there are voices who are trying to protect the country’s secular fabric. Led by monks such as Metta Shin U Zawana, some intellectuals and students are coming forward to question the policies and propaganda of the radical outfits. Bloggers such as Nay Phone Latt have written extensively on this subject.

However, the Mabatha and the 969 Movement are quick to discard the peaceful voices as “echoes of treachery”. When the government’s discriminatory policies against the Rohingya were criticized by women activists, the Mabatha terrorists termed the activists as “traitors”.

Conclusion

Buddha preached that salvation could be attained only if one were to free himself or herself from worldly desires. Universal brotherhood of humankind was the underlying principle of Buddhism in its pristine form.

Unfortunately, modern-day extremist monks of Myanmar are more concerned with ethnic cleansing. Their critics are summarily silenced by the government of Myanmar, and this has left the Rohingya people at the mercy of the terrorist-members of the Mabatha and the 969 Movement.

This is where the international community needs to step in. The Dalai Lama, for instance, should be requested to help spread the true message of Buddhism among the Burmese masses and specifically criticize the extremists for defaming Buddhism.

The actions of the fundamentalists is causing great tension and turmoil in Myanmar (not to mention the fact that it is putting the lives and property of the Rohingya people at stake). If Myanmar actually intends to progress towards true democracy and prosperity, it will have to eliminate the terror groups like the Mabatha and the 969 Movement, and attempt to safeguard the interests of its religious minorities. True development seems impossible as long as terrorists are dominating the Burmese politics and society.

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