

# IIAS Report

## Religious violence in South(East) Asia: domestic and transnational drivers of intolerance against Muslim minorities

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BUDDHIST AND HINDU MAJORITY SOCIETIES of South(East) Asia are not traditionally associated with conflict and intolerance. Yet recent years have seen a surge in international reports of religious tensions and violence perpetrated by Buddhist and Hindu majorities against Muslim minorities in the region. A seminar on this topic was organised by VU University's Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the International Institute for Asian Studies on Monday 15 June 2015. The seminar was opened by Ton Salman and Maaïke Matelski from VU University, who explained the department's interest in the apparent rise in intolerance towards Muslim minorities in the region. Recent news reports of Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing Myanmar by boat are a reminder that this has now become a matter of regional or even global concern.

Jonathan Spencer (University of Edinburgh) explained the precarious position of the Muslim minority population in Sri Lanka caught between aggressive Buddhist nationalism and aggressive Tamil separatism during the decades-long conflict between the government and the LTTE. Significantly, open anti-Muslim sentiments actually increased after the conflict ended, particularly as the Bodu Bala Sena ('Buddhist Power Force') gained societal influence in 2013 when it started a public campaign against the labelling of Halal-food in supermarkets. Spencer's presentation ended on a somewhat optimistic note, as he identified a decrease in hostility towards Muslims under new President Maithripala Sirisena, who came to power in January 2015 with significant Muslim and Tamil support. However, he argued anti-Muslim sentiments are unlikely to have disappeared completely.

Iselin Frydenlund (PRIO/University of Oslo) then drew a comparison between the anti-Muslim rhetoric that has been emerging in Sri Lanka and Myanmar in recent years. The campaigns that are marked by symbolism, hate speech, and instances of violence have been largely met with impunity by the respective authorities. Societal changes such as a shifting religious demography and public displays of religion have politicised the Buddhist leadership, which actually invokes

discourse on 'religious freedom' to protect the Buddhist identity from other religious influences. Frydenlund also pointed to a new sense of threat and insecurity as a result of political changes in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar. She further highlighted that important inter-religious peace initiatives have also acquired a transnational character.

Next, Ward Berenschot (KITLV Leiden) focused more specifically on the topic of 'religious violence', comparing cases in Gujarat (India), where Hindus killed about 2000 Muslims in 2002, and North Maluku (Indonesia), where violence between various Muslim groups broke out in 1999 after the Christian population had initially been targeted. In these cases, as well as in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the police has been inactive or arguably complicit in the violence. With reference to the presumed inter-ethnic and inter-religious component of these instances of violence, Berenschot asked when and how political elites manage to make religious differences salient, and in what cases they are able to incite populations into violence. The answer he argues can be found in the workings of patronage networks, whereby political support is generated through the provision of access to resources by certain middlemen, who act as brokers between politicians and needy communities.

In her role as discussant, Nira Wickramasinghe (Leiden University) questioned whether the term 'religious violence' adequately sums up what is happening in Sri Lanka, as various forms of communal violence have been taking place in the country for decades. Based on her experiences at the University of Colombo, she signalled a growing disconnect between Buddhist monks and Sri Lanka's liberalising society since the 1980s, while the monks are still considered an authoritative voice in society. She also highlighted the connection between the growing anti-Muslim rhetoric in the region and the global discourse on the 'war on terror'.

The afternoon session focused on Myanmar and Thailand. First, Khin Mar Mar Kyi (University of Oxford) described the impact of the increasing intolerance towards Muslims on the

position of women in Myanmar. She referred specifically to four draft laws on the protection of race and religion, some of which have already been approved by Parliament. These laws are seen as directly targeting women from the (officially unrecognized) Rohingya minority group, and also infringe on women's right to interfaith marriage. Khin Mar Mar Kyi further described the heightened sense of fear and insecurity as the country opens up to the outside world, which has highlighted intergroup differences and sparked a fear of Muslims as a threat to national (Buddhist) identity. Increased internet access in parts of the country has led to the emergence of Facebook as a new discussion forum, but also a potential site of misinformation, which can give rise to further rumours.

Next, Matthew Walton (University of Oxford) presented recent findings from a project on the prominent narrative of Islam as a threat in contemporary Myanmar. The project team identified a consistent set of justifications which present Islam as a threat to society, and Buddhists as acting out of virtuous self-defence. These narratives have emerged since the eruption of communal violence in 2012 and have since remained uncontested by the state. Walton questioned the widespread understanding of communal violence as resulting from hate speech, arguing that the narrative of Muslims as a threat is so dominant that it does not even need to be publicly articulated in order to have a societal impact. He concluded that it is important to recognize the limitations of human rights language, as many Buddhists in Myanmar do not consider human rights standards irreconcilable with the narrative of Muslims as a threat to society.

The last presentation by Alexander Horstmann (University of Copenhagen) focused on local experiences in Southern Thailand, where Buddhist and Muslim populations had long managed to co-exist despite a history of religious tensions. This changed in 2004 when the conflict in Southern Thailand escalated and violence occurred on both sides. In seeking to increase its presence in the region, the state created Buddhist settlements and imposed its linguistic and religious dominance on the local population. The increase in violence in the region has resulted in an atmosphere of insecurity and mistrust in which the space for mutual exchange is reduced. Horstmann concluded that cultural or religious differences in themselves are insufficient explanations for the emergence of conflict, and emphasized the importance of examining intra-communal processes, as well as the role of external influences.

Gerry van Klinken (KITLV Leiden/University of Amsterdam) then commented that although mass violence seems to require some form of organisation, the organisers behind the violence cannot always be clearly identified. He referred to political transitions as forming a 'political opportunity' for certain actors to bring forward new, potentially intolerant discourses, or 'frames'. In Myanmar, for example, the previous narrative of military dictatorship as a threat seems to have been replaced by the framing of Muslims as a threat. Such processes do not occur naturally, van Klinken argued, but require an exploration into the actors behind these changing frames.

In the panel discussion that followed, the speakers tried to identify commonalities and differences among the cases, and discussed the transnational dimension of this rising intolerance in the region. The interrelatedness of developments in various countries was confirmed by the fact that various speakers had expanded their research focus to multiple countries, e.g., by comparing the situation in Thailand or Sri Lanka to recent developments in Myanmar. Linkages between Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have already been noted in the media, for example in a 2013 issue of Time Magazine, titled 'The Face of Buddhist terror', which was banned both in Myanmar and in Sri Lanka. Dutch journalists have also pointed out that the anti-Muslim discourse of politician Geert Wilders is being used by Buddhist monks in Myanmar as an example of the global threat of Islam. Other transnational trends that were identified included the global discourse on the 'war on terror' and European campaigns such as the burqa ban that are influencing anti-Muslim sentiments in the region. Conversely, the halal boycott campaign initiated in Sri Lanka has since spread to countries such as Australia and the UK.

It was concluded that the recent increase in intolerance towards Muslim minorities in the region can be attributed to a combination of local developments, including significant political transitions in various countries, and transnational factors that may reinforce local perceptions of Muslims as a threat to society. An adequate response would therefore take into account local specifics, but also strengthen transnational inter-religious dialogues as a means to counter rumours and the sense of threat that gives rise to feelings of insecurity, which in turn have the potential to be mobilised into hate speech and/or violence.

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