

POLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY AND RELIGION IN MYANMAR

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Currently in Myanmar, ethnic issues and communal tension draw more attention of the international community than other issues. This focus has created many misperceptions and actions that are having a negative effect on the country.

After more than five decades of military dictatorship, Myanmar has started to embark on the way to democracy, beginning with the 2010 general election. Although institutional arrangements crafted by the highly-contested 2008 constitution have created some barriers, since late 2010 when the transition started, Myanmar has seen improvements in some areas. Civil society have more space to work, media have enjoyed more freedom, and people are able to assemble and express their opinions more freely than before. However, there remains many challenges facing Myanmar today which are arising out of existing social divisions and limited experience of democracy. Of those many challenges, politicization of religion and ethnicity is perceived to be one of the biggest.

Most people see conflicts in Myanmar are rooted in ethnicity and religion and numerous reports and documents have been written supporting that assumption. They portray the conflicts as between Burmese and other ethnic minority groups or between Buddhists and members of other minority religions. However, the problems are not as simple as it might seem. While there are pre-existing tensions between those different groups, they are not only rooted in ethnicity and religion. Rather, conflicts more often than not are the manifestations of a political game played out by political agents that take advantage of existing social cleavages.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a better understanding of the politicization of ethnicity and religion in Myanmar as an alternative approach to the simple interpretation of conflicts between majority and minority communities in Myanmar. I would like to argue that communal and ethnic violence in Myanmar is not the result of tension between the people on the grassroots level, but it is rather the result of the manipulation by elites.

2.0 BACKGROUND HISTORY OF MYANMAR

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, gained independence in 1948 with a newly established 1947 constitution after more than a century of British colonial rule. However, the civil wars and communist uprising that started before the independence left Myanmar with some issues to be carefully addressed as a colonial legacy.

The first elected civilian parliamentary government had to struggle to maintain the country despite the various rebellions and communist group who were fighting against the government. Then another two insurgencies appeared - that of Karen National Union based on Karen ethnic nationalism and Mujahedeen in Arakan based on demand of nationalities of Burma and national state. (State 19) Then the Kachin ethnic people formed an armed organization to rebel against the government in 1961 when the Prime Minister, U Nu, declared Buddhism as a state religion. (San Nyein) Throughout this time, communist groups

played a key role in challenging the Myanmar government alongside ethnic armed groups. (Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)*)

In 1962, General Ne Win seized the power, forming a Revolutionary Council, and putting an end to parliamentary rule in Myanmar. He later started his Burmese Way to Socialism with newly crafted 1974 constitution, nationalizing everything in his path. During his time, the Ne Win government tried to organize two rounds of peace negotiation in 1963 and 1975 mainly with communist-led groups but ended in failure (Smith). Ne Win's government controlled the country for more than 26 years and social and economic conditions of the country deteriorated during his time. Finally, the Ne Win government was confronted with a series of mass protests eventually leading to a nationwide uprising in 1988, in which the government was overthrown. However, the military seized political power again in a coup and in 1989 began signing bilateral ceasefires agreements with ethnic armed organizations, starting with groups that splintered from the Communist Party of Burma. (Smith 310-312)

The government organized a general election in 1990 in which National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory. However, its result was never implemented. The military government, first known as State Law and Order Restoration Council and later as State Peace and Development Council, have since been confronted with continuous challenges by political activists and armed groups (including ethnic armed groups). In 2003, they introduced a seven-step roadmap to political reform to ease international and local pressure after widespread oppression and arrests of political opposition groups including failed attempt to assassinate Aung San Suu Kyi in her tour across the country. They adopted the 2008 constitution, in which political power are secured for the military, after a widely criticized referendum.

Even though the fairness and integrity of the 2010 general election was hotly debated, Myanmar started its transition to democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from the house arrest seven days before the 2010 November election, though the NLD had already boycotted the election. After Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein negotiated a political reform process, the NLD decided to run in the by-election in 2012 in which NLD won 43 of 45 vacant seats and Aung San Suu Kyi became a member of lower house.

The quasi-civilian government started negotiating bilateral ceasefires in 2011 as a initial step to a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Eight ethnic armed organizations signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015. In 2015 also, the NLD won a landslide victory in the country's first free and fair elections in many years. The first Union Peace Conference was held in January in that year. After assuming power, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi constituted to organize series of peace meeting also known as 21st Century Panglong Conferences.

In a country where political transition is being tested, new challenges has emerged at the same time old or existing challenges still need to be carefully addressed. A series of armed conflicts broke out again in Kachin areas in 2011. Around the same time in 2010, a BBC report that carried a map depicting Arakan state as belonging to the Rohingya minority caused anger in Myanmar. (DVB) This report stirred anti-Rohingya sentiment for the first time anywhere in Myanmar outside of Rakhine state, and caused some protests in Yangon. Starting from 2012 when the spread of photos of a young Rakhine woman who was raped

and murdered by a group of Muslim men on social media led to communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state, communal tension has been growing between Buddhist Majority and Muslim minority communities, with some riots spreading to other cities in the country (I. Commission 8). Although there was some communal violence in history especially after Second World War, the incident was more widespread and could draw more attention of international community than before. Attacks on the police outposts in northern Rakhine launched by Islamic terrorists linked to foreign Jihadist group in 2016 and 2017 made the tension worse. (Group, Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State 18-19)

2.1 Political Identity, Religion and Ethnicity in Myanmar

According to Samuels, a political identity refers to: “the way individuals categorize themselves and others, and how they understand the relationships of domination and oppression that exist between groups.” (Samuels) Similarities and differences between identities groups have become the basic political platform as political actors compete for power. Above all the other aspects, religion and ethnicity play more significant role in shaping the identity of individuals as well as groups in Myanmar where religion has been crucial parts of daily life of people and ethnicity and religion is diverse and identity politics is active. (Aljunied 37)

3.0 THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION IN MYANMAR

In the case of Myanmar, 87.9 % of the population is Buddhists according to the 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar (Population 4), so Buddhism plays a very influential role in shaping the social and political life of Myanmar society. Successive rulers in Myanmar understood that context and tried to win majority support by patronizing Buddhism. (Aljunied 38)

3.1 Historical Examples of the Politicization of Religion in Myanmar

There are many historical examples of elites in Myanmar using religion to advance their political interest or reputation. Looking at the series of action by the government as well as political actors in history, they very often resort to religion to mobilize popular support and in this way, religion has become politicized through their mobilization.

The politicization of religion has been common among the rulers of Myanmar since ancient time and it was more evident during Konbaung era. The fact that Bawdawphaya, a king in the Konbaung dynasty, claimed himself to be a Bodhisattva (Aljunied 38) (a reincarnated enlightened being) and Mindonmin, his successor, organized the Fifth Sanga (the community of monks and nuns) Great Council in 1871 to purify the religion is key example of rulers trying to win the popular support by using the religion (Affairs 224). During the colonial era, anti-imperialist movements such as Young Man Buddhist Association (YMBA) mobilized popular support to resist the colonial rule by highlighting the British’s disrespect to Buddhism. (Stockwell)

In the post-independence era, religion became one of the hotly debated issues when the prime minister U Nu declared Buddhism as the state religion, to fulfil a promise he made during his electoral campaign in 1961. In the context of that time and situation, many see his declaration was not urgently needed, and he only did so to win the majority vote of the Buddhist who occupied more than 50% of the country's population. (San Nyein)

Successive rulers after 1962 military coup favoured Buddhism and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later renamed as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), formed a ministry of religious affairs which mainly focused on Buddhism and brought all Sanga order under the control of the Myanmar Sanga Nayaka Organization, the governing body for the Sangha. (Aljunied) The ministry of religious affairs mainly focused on and supported Buddhism over other religions to show that SLORC/SPDC as a protector of the religion.

Among Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, the politicization of religion is also used by elites to achieve their own goals. For example, the case of KNU's split up and power struggle between KNU (whose members are mostly Christian) and DKBA (whose members are mostly Buddhist) were mainly caused by the politicization of religions in their mobilization of followers' support. The Baptist church put a lot of pressure on the KNU (this is also true in the case of the Kachin Independence Organisation) and plays important roles in the KNU's non-military organisation. This made Buddhist members of the KNU to feel marginalized and then the DKBA was formed with the help of some elite manipulation from the Karen and Myanmar side to represent Buddhist Karen nationalists. The DKBA and KNU tried to show their support for religion by building pagodas (DKBA) and churches (KNU) (Horstmann 88-91)

3.2 Contemporary Examples of the Politicization of Religion in Myanmar

Politicization of religion has been more active since around 2012 when communal riots broke out in Rakhine state. The Buddhist nationalist movement led by an organization called Ma Ba Tha¹ emerged in late 2012 and grew into nationwide network of monks and laymen. This movement occasionally organized political rallies in support of the Tatmadaw and former military groups like Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) through the platform of Ma Ba Tha, aka the Patriotic Association of Myanmar led by extreme nationalist monks and laymen. (Lwin 1) These nationalist groups are trying to depict their opponent groups as defenders of Muslim and anti-Buddhist. Its activities are controversial and not widely accepted among some Buddhist communities. Ma Ba Tha were able to remain untouched during the time of President Thein Sein's USDP-led government which raised some suspicion about the relation between Ma Ba Tha and the USDP. (Lwin 52)

Ma Ba Tha has tried to instigate anti-Muslim sentiment and advocate for the promulgation of a set of Race and Religion Protection Laws which includes laws regulating birth control, conversion to other religions, monogamy and interfaith marriage. These laws were passed in 2015 largely as a result from pressure from Ma Ba Tha on the government. These laws are

¹ A Burmese abbreviation of *Amyotha Bartha Tharthana Saung Shaut Ye Aphwet*, which literally translates Organization for the protection of Race and Religion.

generally opposed by the NLD. Nationalist political actors use this to make the NLD look weak or pro-Muslim, which can have a destabilizing effect on political discussions. (Monitor)

In the current political context, many have noted that former military political actors are using religious conflict to undermine the NLD. (Project) Ma Ba Tha and U Wirathu, the prominent leader of the organization speaks against Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD in public in rally to denounce the terrorist attacks in Rakhine state, saying they support for the operation launched by military there while NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi is struggling under the serious pressures from international communities. He has often called on followers to support the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party and the Tatmadaw. (Myint) The rallies in support of Tatmadaw recently organized in major cities like Yangon and Mandalay are kind of events through which rivals of NLD tried to undermine government, paving the way for pressures from international communities.

The NLD and other democratic groups also mobilized popular support through religion. In previous times, democratic opposition groups occasionally approached Buddhist monks to ask them to get involved in the arena of political opposition. The 2007 saffron revolution is the result of that movement. More recently, the NLD has organized an interfaith prayer for peace campaign in cities across the country including Yangon and Mandalay to mobilize political support and to ease the international pressures. (Aung)

4.0 POLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY IN MYANMAR

In Ashley South's own words: the history of modern Burma has been fraught with violent conflict, much of which has been inspired by notions of ethnicity. He argued that the categories of identity had been constructed, and re-made, by the forces of history, as well as the manipulation of elites. (South 4)

However, ethnic conflicts are not the results of the tension between different ethnic communities on the grassroots level, but the result of the manipulation of the political actors to advance their political interest.

4.1 Historical Examples of the Politicization of Ethnicity in Myanmar

Ever since the British times, all institutions and political subunits have been based on ethnicity. This was not necessarily the case before. Before colonialization, ethnic politics was not active in Myanmar, and according to Mahalia Gaskin McDaniel, *politicization* of ethnicity is said to arise during colonialism, when policies were pursued upon ethnic lines in Myanmar. (McDaniel 11) The British administrative system divided the country into two: "Burma Proper" areas and Frontier areas. Burma Proper areas were mainly inhabited by Burmese people who were granted parliamentary home rule while frontier areas were mainly occupied by ethnic minorities who were ruled through traditional authorities. They had four different administrative laws to rule Burma: 1935 Burma Act for Burma areas, Kachin Hill Tribe Regulations (1893), Chin Hill Regulations (1896) and Federated Shan State Act (1922) for different frontier areas. "This strategy has been described as 'divide and rule" (N Ganesan 259)

British practice divides and rule system not only in the division of administrative areas, but also in their recruitment of bureaucracy. Karen, Kachin or Chin were mostly recruited into the British colonial bureaucracy including army by the British while Burmese people were left out. Majority of those ethnic populations then converted to Christianity. This situation helped create social cleavage between Burmese and those ethnic minority groups. (Group, Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics 2) Those non-Burmese recruited into the British administration were sometimes used in putting down Burman resistance movements. (Christina) During Second World War, those social divisions become wider when Burmese nationalist struggle for independence sided with Japanese while many hill peoples – notably the Karen and the Kachin – formed guerrilla units, which fought alongside the British and the Americans against the Japanese. (Lintner, Myanmar/Burma 181)

When independence for Burma was negotiated between British government and Burmese national leaders, the British tried to separate the Proper Burma from the frontier areas and demanded evidence that all the representatives from frontier areas wanted independence together with Burma proper. (Walton 895-903) As a result, the Panglong Agreement which was signed between representatives from proper Burma areas and frontier areas (ethnic minority areas) has become a sign of unity as well as a source of subsequent conflicts. Ne Win government drafted and passed the 1974 constitution which create seven regions and seven states and that structure were copied into the constitution when 2008 constitution were drafted. (Smith 304)

Today, the Union of Myanmar is made up of 14 subnational units: seven regions and seven states and, the later are named after seven major ethnic groups such as Shan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon and Rakhine in Myanmar. The majority of Burman or Burmese population are the majority population in the seven regions. There are also five self-administered zones and one self-administered division (Wa Self-Administered Division) exist for “national races with a suitable population” according to 2008 Myanmar Constitution.

The birth of widespread perception of Burmanization

Previous military governments took a lot of discriminatory measures against ethnic minorities such as a ban on printing in or promoting ethnic languages, making the Burmese language the official languages used in state schools, state control of the economy. (Smith 306) There are numerous reports of gross violations of human rights carried out by the Tatmadaw against ethnic minority communities. Those communities have been consistently denied any meaningful degree of self-government.

In addition, ethnic minorities are frequently discriminated against by public institutions. People from ethnic minority found it hard to serve in senior/high rank position in military or civil service especially during SLORC/SPDC periods although there is no policies or law about it publicly announced. Moreover, some civil servants who are corrupted, undisciplined, or deemed not to be qualified were sent to remote areas as a punishment, where unfortunately ethnic people predominantly reside. Power abuse of these corrupted officials intensified the pre-existing perception of Burmese dominance among the ethnic groups.

Consequently, many ethnic minority people have seen these corrupted officials and oppressive military dictatorship associated with the whole Burmese population although

millions of ordinary Burmese people have not benefited at all from those processes which some ethnic minority elites have labelled “Burmanization”. The majority of Burmese people equally suffered under half-a-century of military regimes which they kept challenging even during the country’s darkest moments. Long periods of military dictatorship and civil strife left people with poor education, low social trust and social prejudices which equip the authoritarian rules with unscrupulous playground for their political games.

Most ordinary Burmese people are not aware of the idea of “Burmanization” and those who are aware generally do not support it. Successive military leaders’ discriminatory policies and actions did not represent the whole Burmese populations’ wish. They tried to play Burmese against other ethnic groups by using the name of Burman in their every activity. This is especially true in the military, where leaders encourage soldiers to be more ethno-nationalist.

4.2 Contemporary Examples of the Politicization of Ethnicity in Myanmar

The large majority of Myanmar's political parties mobilize support only on ethnic identity and ethnic grievances. According to Union Election Commission's website, there are 53 ethnic based parties out of 95 parties currently registered. (U. E. Commission) Most of the ethnic parties were established in 2010, except the Arakan League for Democracy and the Mon Democracy Party. Ethnic parties are also independent and democratic so their decision-making processes are liberal and democratic but may be based on nationalism. (I.R 55). Because these political parties appear to base their rationale and existence wholly on ethnic nationalism, they limit themselves only to win the support from their own ethnic group, thereby excluding other ethnic groups.

Although there are too many ethnic-based parties which contested in two previous general elections, they were not able to win the popular support enough except Shan and Rakhine parties. There were some forms of campaigns in which ethno-nationalism is repeatedly echoed in their public speeches during their electoral campaign. (Myanmar) And also, some appointments of individuals from ethnic minority groups in high-level positions of legislature and cabinets by two successive ruling parties may be seen a form of politicizing ethnicity.

Furthermore, armed groups (both ethnic, and the Tatmadaw) use ethnicity and ethnic conflict as a way to recruit and indoctrinate people. Actors from different sides know their people and use the social divisions left by historical legacy for mobilizing political support by fueling the ethnic grievance. (Sakhong 4-5) Most ethnic armed group are trying to win the support of their own people by highlighting the differences in identities and cultures, and the threats of Burmese dominance.

Some ethnic armed group usually use “Burmese government or Burmese military” instead of military government or some other usage in their statement released which can make their ethnic people see military dictators associated with the whole Burmese populations, and encourage hatred toward them. In fact, there are Burmese pro-democracy activists participating in many protests demanding to end wars in Kachin and other ethnic areas. There were attempts to consolidate alliance between actors from pro-democracy Burmese majorities and different ethnic nationalities to overthrow military dictatorship, unfortunately those efforts were almost always seen with suspicions by ethno-nationalist elites. (Christina)

That was reflected by Aung San Suu Kyi in in one of her "Letters from Burma" printed in Japan's Mainichi newspaper (February 3, 1997): "Our ethnic nationalists still harbor a deep feeling of mistrust of the majority Burmese, a mistrust natural to those who have not been accorded justice and fair play. In trying to build up a strong union, our greatest challenge will be to win the confidence of those who have only known repression and discrimination."

5.0 CONCLUSION

Looking at the history of Myanmar, one can see religion and ethnicity became politicized and shaped most parts of the political conflicts as political actors have been trying to build their political power and legitimacy by using the religious or ethnic identity to mobilize people toward their goals. As mutual attacks intensify, the divide become wider and societal polarization occurs. Most ordinary people are getting lost in the crossfire between these rival narratives and rhetorical manipulations due to their limited critical thinking which resulted from having little knowledge of or experience with democracy.

Ethnic or religious tension is not a problems arising from communities, political actors just create those setting to play their political games. Ethnic and religious nationalism will not help solve the problems in Myanmar. At the same time, affirmative actions such as extremely favouring minority groups may make Burmese people feel humiliated and may create resentment among them in the long term.

Most Burmese people feel that they are being blamed for what they think they did not do and it is worrisome that the extreme Burmese nationalism will emerge among ordinary Burmese people in the future. This will lead the country to a worse situation because Burmese are the majority in the country, and peace will be unreachable if the majority becomes resentful of the minorities. A good analysis of the problem is important to finding a solution. Ethnic or religious identity is not the inherent source of conflict. Rather, it is the politicization of ethnicity or religion which can lead to conflict.

Against this backdrop, one-sided approach to Myanmar's problems that reinforce the cleavages between various groups only become deeper with heightened tensions. It is time that local and international actors got out of their comfort zone of "received wisdom" and found a balanced approach to tackle the challenge if they really want to see the reconciliation that will contribute to the conflict transformation and democratization in Myanmar.

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I wrote this essay as a partial fulfilment of requirements for University Admission as Master of Political Science candidate.

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