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Buddhist Nationalism and Islam in Modern Myanmar

Abstract

Perception of Burmese Buddhism by the Western world since 1988 has been largely associated with pacifism and democracy through the leader of the opposition and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. However, the current Rohingya refugee crisis is changing that positive perception. The aim of the following presentation is to analyze the contemporary conflict between Muslims and Buddhist nationalists in Burma. To get a deeper understanding of the problem, it is essential to connect it with Burma's pre-colonial and colonial past as well as the country's ethnic diversity. Radicalization of the attitudes of Theravada Buddhists and the rise of xenophobic sentiments in Burma are connected with Burmese national identity, which is largely based on ethnicity and tends to exclude the rest, including Muslims. However, due to historical, cultural and cosmological differences, Islam especially is a target. The aim of the paper is to explain why Myanmar's Islamophobia has its roots in Buddhist nationalism and why opposition to Islam is a part of it.

Keywords: Buddhism nationalism, Buddhism and violence, Islam in Myanmar, minorities in Myanmar, Political science of religion

Introduction

The international discovery of Buddhist monks' involvement in anti-Muslim riots in Rakhine State in Burma¹ came as a surprise. Buddhism in this country had until then been largely associated with the peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations of 2007 (the Saffron Revolution) and the famous dissident, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi².

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¹ I use alternately: Burma and Myanmar.

² Many of the journalists connected her Buddhism with advocating for democracy. Some compared her also with Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh; A. Clements, Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San Suu Kyi, Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008; Madeleine Bunting, *Aung San Suu Kyi's idea of freedom offers a radical message for the west*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/jun/26/aungsansuukyi-spiritual-struggle-lesson>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

However, critics and journalists generally described the problem of the violence in Buddhism as a new phenomenon. Although she was considered as a moral voice until recently, Aung San Suu Kyi's lack of unambiguous commitment was disappointing³. Despite the development of many peaceful teachings, Buddhism is more linked with politics than most Westerners would think⁴. One could not understand the problem without a short historical review of this relationship. In this paper I will briefly describe the relationship between Islam and Buddhism in the Burmese kingdom during the colonial time and also in current times. In the context of modernity, I will focus particularly on the anti-Islamic activities of the Buddhist nationalists and groups associated with them, such as the 969 movement and *MaBaTha* (Patriotic Association of Myanmar) - which has its roots in 969.

Kings and Buddhism

It was king Anawratha (1044-1099) who first officially adopted Theravada Buddhism in the 11th century as the state religion of the pagan kingdom and dismissed Ari Buddhism - a mixture of shamanism, alchemy, Hindu astrology and some Buddhist practices which one can categorise as tantric⁵. Anawrahta established a model of cosmology, which would have its consequences in the following centuries. Three important concepts were confirmed at the time: *bawashin*, *dhammaraja*, and *cakkavattin*.

Bawashin (the lord of life) meant that the king was morally superior to other people, he was the master of their lives. He held authority because of *kamma* (karma) he had accumulated in previous incarnations, which had enabled him to become king. His unlimited power was logical and was a consequence of *kamma*. If the king was inequitable, the Burmese had explained it as a punishment for their evil and the lack of morality in society⁶.

³ West misunderstanding of ASSK is a topic of many Michał Lubina articles e.g. M. Lubina, 'It's complicated : United States, Aung San Suu Kyi and U.S.-Burma relations', *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, No. 29, 2016, pp. 131–146.

⁴ The issue was broadly explored in M. Jerryson (ed), *Buddhist Warfare*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵ Maung Htin Aung, *Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/folk-elements-in-burmese-buddhism/306833/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶ M. Lubina, *Pani Birmy Aung San Suu Kyi. Biografia polityczna* [Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. A Political Biography], Warszawa: PWN, 2015, pp. 17-20.

*Dhammaraja*⁷ (king of law) meant the ruler would command the country in accordance with the principles of Buddhism. He was obligated to protect religion and maintain morality. The king had to ensure the development of Buddhism and protect the Buddhist clergy⁸. Most often he did this by building pagodas – which is the reason why Burma is called to this day “the land of a thousand pagodas”. That status also legitimised the ruler’s conquests - he made them in order to spread Buddha’s teachings.

As *dhammaraja*, he should also be a *cakkavattin* (the wheel-turner) - a universal king. This attitude equates the ruler to the Buddha himself, as one who turned the wheel of laws, *dhamma*. This similarity was also confirmed by ancient texts. In *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* there is information that Buddha in his past lives was *cakkavattin* seven times. The Pali tradition says that perfection achieved as a king allowed him rebirth as the Buddha⁹. The role of the ruler was totalistic in the social and cosmic dimension. As an earthly counterpart of the Buddha, he was a moral foundation for the population¹⁰. His power had a self-sustaining internal logic. If people did not understand the decisions made by rulers, they could explain to themselves that as *cakkavattin*, they, simply, could see more.

What is important is that the Burmese king and the monks had a symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, the monks were allowed to admonish the ruler if he moved away from the *dhamma*, and on the other hand there is no doubt that the king had full authority over the *sangha*. In the case of disobedience or violation of the rules of Theravada Buddhism, he could purify the Buddhist clergy¹¹. In fact, monks were a pillar of the Burmese monarchy.

⁷ *Dhammaraja* as well as *cakkavattin* were notions adopted from Hindu concepts of kingship.

⁸ M.J. Walton, *Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought*, Washington: University of Washington, 2012, pp. 117-118.

⁹ F.E. Reynolds, ‘The Two Wheels of the Dhamma’, in *The Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in India and Ceylon*, G. Obeyesekere, F. Reynolds, B.L. Smith (eds), Chambersburg: American Academy of Religious Studies 1972, pp. 13-15.

¹⁰ I. Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, New York: Routledge 2007, pp. 76-78.

¹¹ A. Naono, *The Buddhist Kings of Chingmai and Pegu, The Purification of The Sangha, and The Mahabodhi Replicas in The Late Fifteenth Century*, Michigan: University of Michigan 1996, pp. 5-8.

Theravada cosmology legitimised the absolute authority of the king. He was on the top of the hierarchy and was considered as more than an average human being¹². The king and the kingdom were a unity. Atsuko Naono writes: “One of the most important responsibilities was also for the *dhammaraja* to provide order, political and religious, out of chaos and to preserve that order once accomplished”¹³. The Buddhist clergy and society as a whole were strictly hierarchical. Ordinary Burmese people by and large accepted their class status and believed in a better rebirth in the next life. The ideal way of living was realised by monks, who theoretically should never reincarnate again. As W. J. Koenig emphasises: “The institution of the Kingdom has never been questioned in theory or practice but was simply accepted as a necessary part of life”¹⁴. Many scholars agree that Burmese Theravada cosmology was a rather static one¹⁵. Kings tried to maintain the status quo and protect the *dhamma* from its enemies.

Muslims in Burma

This part of the paper will discuss examples of the clashes between the Islamic and Burmese civilisations. Pre-Burmese states (Mon, Pyu) are not accounted in the work. Contact with Muslims in these states often looked different. What is important is that Islam was rather incompatible with many elements of Theravada's cosmology kingdom.

According to legend, Islam was brought to Arakan by the son of Imam Ali in the seventh century. Burmese Muslims believe that his tomb is near Maungdaw city¹⁶. Most likely, Arab and Persian merchants had visited the area before, but for the first time Muslims appear in the annals of Pegu in the eleventh century, during the reign of King

¹² Some kings went even further announcing that they are a realized bodhisattva or even reincarnation of Buddha Maitreya.

¹³ A. Naono, *The Buddhist Kings...*, p. 5.

¹⁴ W.J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: A Study of Kon Baung Politics, Administration, and Social Organization*, Ann Arbor: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1990, p. 5.

¹⁵ Par contra some scholars adjust that model, which can be considered as dynamic because some changes were easily assimilated by a society that was convinced of its dependent origination. However, the cosmological core remained the same, M.J. Walton, *Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought*, Washington: University of Washington, 2012, pp. 8-10.

¹⁶ Marlar Than, *The origin of Islamic Religion in Myanmar*, http://www.academia.edu/4657059/THE_ORIGIN_OF_ISLAMIC_RELIGION_IN_MYANMAR, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

Anawrahta. The ruler tried to maintain full control over religion in his country. By adopting Theravada, he persecuted other beliefs and Buddhist sects¹⁷. We find a story of two disobedient Muslims in the chronicles of Pegu in which two Arabs were sentenced to death after they refused to assist in the construction of a pagoda – a Buddhist sacred place¹⁸.

However, another mention in the annals of the kingdom of Pegu is milder. Muslims had the knowledge, equipment and technologies that impressed the rulers living in the areas along the Irrawaddy River. They also gladly accepted merchants from all over the world including Muslims. For this reasons, they were allowed to settle within the kingdoms and sometimes were even employed by the royal courts¹⁹. For example, King Sawlu (1077-1088) in his youth was educated by a Muslim Arab²⁰. For these reasons it can be concluded that the kings' approach of the first Burmese Empire to Muslims was a very pragmatic one. They did not hesitate to use the achievements of other civilisations, yet severely punished any act of disobedience to the prevailing rules in the kingdom.

The first king who openly discriminated against Muslims was Bayinnaung (1550-1581), founder of the Second Burmese Empire, a very talented leader, who, among other things, conquered Siam²¹. In 1559 the ruler saw the ritual slaughter of goats on the streets of Pegu, which greatly upset him. Buddhism recommends refraining from killing all creatures. In the circle of Theravada Buddhism, butchers had belonged to the excluded castes and usually lived on the outskirts of the cities. King Bayinnaung not only banned the practice of ritual slaughter, *halal*, but also forced the Muslim community to listen to lectures on Buddhist morality and compassion. Later rulers also maintained the ban of ritual slaughter²².

During the reign of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819), who conquered Arakan and was renowned for his cruelty, another incident happened.

¹⁷ M.J. Walton, *Politics in...*, p. 148.

¹⁸ M. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma. A Study of a Minority Group*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1972, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Marlar Than, *The origin of Islamic Religion in Myanmar*, http://www.academia.edu/4657059/THE_ORIGIN_OF_ISLAMIC_RELIGION_IN_MYANMAR, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

²⁰ M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, p. 2.

²¹ M. Lubina, *Birma [Burma]*, Warszawa: Trio, 2014, p. 25.

²² M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, p. 10.

The ruler heard that Muslims would sooner die than corrupt themselves by eating pork, so he decided to give Islam a test. He summoned the most important Muslim dignitaries from the capital (then it was Awa), and set before them a bowl of pork and ordered it consumed under threat of death. To the present time two accounts of the event survived. The first comes from a British man who spent two years in a Burmese prison and heard a discussion about the story. This version states that the Muslims quietly enjoyed the meal and thus avoided death²³. The second version, much less known, is promoted by Burmese Muslims. After disobeying the king, they were summoned and sentenced to death. Soon a terrible storm hit the city, after which the ruler regretted his decision. Burmese Muslims still cherish the story of the group of mujahedeen (martyrs) killed by the cruel king. Their alleged graves are located in Amarapura²⁴. Considering the nature of the king and the situation of the Muslim community, it is not hard to guess which version is more likely. Also Bodawphaya claimed that he had conquered the kingdom of Mrauk U in order to protect *sasana* (Buddhist religion). Mrauk U, geographically close to Bengal, adopted many elements of Islam and Bodawphaya justified his actions in order to purify the land²⁵.

In conclusion, it should be noted that in pre-colonial Burma, especially before the conquest of Arakan, there were few Muslims. They were valued for their skills. Kings used them as interpreters (mainly from Persia) and they often also served in the army and in the royal courts. King Mindon (1853-1878) even helped Muslims to build mosques, and also financed the construction of the marina for Burmese Muslims in Mecca. Generally, Burmese kings allowed foreigners to settle and practise their own religion, but they also intervened if they noted a violation of Buddhist law. For this reason, ritual slaughter was not acceptable and missionary activity was not possible in Burma²⁶. However, contemporary Burmese nationalists use particular examples

²³ H. Gounger, *A Personal Narrative of Two Years' Imprisonment in Burmah*, London: John Murray, 1860, pp. 96-98.

²⁴ M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, pp. 12-13.

²⁵ J.P. Leider. 'Forging Buddhist Credentials as a Toll of Legitimacy and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Arakan's Subjection in Nineteenth-Century Burma', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, No. 51, 2008, pp. 409-450.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11, 26-28.

from history to hold their anti-Islam position²⁷. Some historians argue that we can trace the beginning of Burmese national identity based on ethnicity and Buddhism to the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885)²⁸. The kingdom and the consequences of its absence are one of the main points of reference for the current Buddhist nationalist identity.

Colonial period

After winning three wars (1826, 1853, 1886), the British occupied all of Burma (and also designated its borders, which last to the present). By removing the king, the British destroyed the cosmological model of the country and overturned the social order. Still, many of them were surprised why local people did not treat them as liberators²⁹. The question of who could protect Buddhism without *Dhammaraja* was raised. Buddhist monks lost their authority: the growth of a European style state educational system took the Burmese masses away from their control and they also lost all support from the state. Paradoxically, their role started to grow back relatively quickly, but in a different context³⁰.

The first nationalist movement in Burma was led by monks. During speeches they called for a boycott and defence against British imperialism. Firier sermons circulated throughout all of Burma. “When Lord Buddha was alive, man had a predilection for Nirvana. There is nothing left now. The reason why it is so is because the government is English”³¹ said U Ottama (1879-1939) one of the most prominent figures of the first wave of Burmese nationalism. Another famous monk, U Wisara (1895-1929), died from a hunger strike in a British prison. Saya San (1876-1931) went even further by dropping monk robes and leading a rebellion against the British regime between 1930-31³². It

²⁷ M.J. Walton, S. Hayward, ‘Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar’, *Policy Studies*, No. 71, 2014, pp. 20-23.

²⁸ Thant Myint-U, *The making of modern Burma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 79-100.

²⁹ M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum kontra peryferie. Kwestia etniczna we współczesnej Birmie (1948-2013)* [Burma: Center versus Peripheries. The 'Ethnic Question' in Contemporary Burma 1948-2013], Kraków: KON-Tekst, 2014, pp. 59-70.

³⁰ W.M. Charney, *A History o Modern Burma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 5-10.

³¹ M.J. Walton, *Politics in...*, p. 121.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.

should be noted that the largest nationalist movements were also related to Buddhism. The most important were the tantric movements of *weiksa* (wizards), and the *vipassana* lay meditation movement. Both movements emphasised the end of the World Age - especially *weiksa*, which expected the imminent arrival of the future Buddha, *Maitreya*. In both there were voices for the restoration of the monarchy and the old moral cosmology. Even the *vipassana* as a lay movement was conducted by monks. Some of the Buddhist clergy were important also for the Thakins (the We Burmans Association), who later brought independence for Burma - although Marxist influences alongside secularist ideas were also visible³³.

During the colonial time, hatred against Islam grew rapidly. First of all, the British ruled Burma through Indians and other ethnic minorities. From the beginning of their presence, the colonists imported Indians en masse to work in the military and government. From the large number of incoming workers from India (mostly from Bengal), at least half were Muslims³⁴. The Burmese suddenly became the least privileged group in their own country – they were excluded economically and linguistically. Another dishonour for them was the fact that Burma had been connected under the administration to India as its province³⁵.

The causes of the conflict were not only economic. In 1930 and 1938 there were two bloody riots targeting immigrants. The second incident was directed not so much at the Indians, but specifically at Muslims. The pretext for initiating the riots was the publication of a pamphlet ridiculing Buddha by an Islamic publicist³⁶, although there were also other reasons for the growing hatred for Muslims.

The case of mixed marriages was very controversial. Muslims coming to Burma often took local women as wives. Most of them were not considered as full-fledged marriages until the woman converted to Islam. In the event of the death of her husband, a widow, if she was not a Muslim, faced problems in obtaining the inheritance, and if she was

³³ I. Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement. Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007, pp. 21-26, Club du Millénaire, *Bouddhisme et Politique en Birmanie, entre lutte et domination*, http://www.iris-france.org/docs/kfm_docs/docs/observatoire-religieux/iris-obs-rel---bouddhisme.pdf, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

³⁴ M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

³⁵ M. Smith., *The Muslim Rohingyas of Burma*, Amsterdam: Burma Centrum Nederland, 1995, p. 23, M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, pp. 60-68.

³⁶ W.M. Charney, *A History...*, p. 48.

his rightful wife (rarer cases) she still received much less than according to Buddhist tradition. Many Muslims after several years of working in Burma returned to India, leaving their partners, whom they did not treat as full-fledged wives because they practiced another religion. Both intermarriage and the inferior treatment of women by Muslims aroused widespread resentment among the Burmese³⁷. In 1935, one of the authors of the Burmese nationalist press wrote about Muslims: "[they] have taken possession of the wealth of the Burmese people and also their daughters and sisters"³⁸. Such views at that time were already common, and the perception of Muslims as a threat to the Buddhist population persists to this day.

During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Indians left the country for fear of repercussions and reprisals by the Burmese -- justifiably. The Japanese, who invaded Burma in 1941, used the Burmese nationalists to provoke ethnic cleansing, which turned into the war in Rakhine. Although nationalists had been trying to organise paramilitary organisations before, it was Japan who helped them create the Burmese Independence Army³⁹. The army was formed mostly by Burmese, often ideologically associated with the nationalist movement Dobama Asiayone (*We Burmans Association*), who received the promise of a "free country"⁴⁰. The British supported the Muslim-dominated North Rakhinse and the Japanese reinforced the Buddhist South. Even after the war, the Burmese State did not control the zone completely⁴¹. This war was yet another moment in history which contributed to the strengthening of the ethnic identity associated with Buddhism.

The hero of the struggle for independence, Aung San, was also accused of the cold-blooded murder of a Muslim village chief. Due to his popularity, the British decided not to take him in for trial. Today's Muslim community often recalls this incident as evidence that the violation of their rights was included from the beginning of independence. It should also be noted that many Muslims (though not

³⁷ M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, pp. 30-37.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

³⁹ M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ M.P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, New York: Cornell University Press 2005, pp. 48-50.

⁴¹ J. Leider, 'Rohingya: the name, the movement and the quest for identity'. in *Nation building in Myanmar*, Yangon 2013, pp. 239-241.

all) during the war remained faithful to the British, which was another reason for rising contempt. Burmese followers of the prophet Muhammad would be associated largely with the colonial invaders and as traitors from there on out⁴².

Independence period

General Aung San was murdered before the country achieved independence. After his death, the vision of the state as a federation in ethnic harmony began to fade. Soon the country plunged into civil war⁴³. In the first months of independence, a number of different Muslim organisations emerged. Some of them were associated with ethnic groups (like Mon Muslims) and often fought for their own national interests. For example, a part of the Arakan Muslims fought for their own independent state. However, some Muslims declared *jihad* (holy war), like those led by the popular musician Jafar Hussain (Jafar Qawwal). Their aim was to create an Islamic state in the west of Burma⁴⁴. Some of them wanted to join Pakistan⁴⁵. These operations assured many Buddhist nationalists in their convictions about Islam. Mujahedeen often called themselves “Rohingya” and this was actually the first time this name became widespread, with some Muslim politicians even using it in the fifties. Using this term they wanted to unify Muslims of Chittagonian origin in Northern Rakhine and find a connection to Burmese Islamic history⁴⁶. Protests by Buddhist nationalists, who see the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and a threat to *dhamma*, are why until today the Myanmar government does not recognise the Rohingya as an official ethnicity.

The chaotic rule of Prime Minister U Nu and his attempts to establish Buddhism as the state religion not only did not improve the situation, but strengthened the false division between Buddhist Burmese and non-Buddhist minorities. In the nation's capital, tensions between the two religions occurred constantly⁴⁷. Sometimes they were violent, as in 1961

⁴² M. Smith., *The Muslim...*, p. 5-6.

⁴³ W.M. Charney, *A History...*, p. 72-78.

⁴⁴ G. Defert, *Les Rohingyas de Birmanie. Arakanais, musulmans et apatrides*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2007, pp. 229-230, M. Smith., *The Muslim...*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Thant Myint-U, *Myanmar's resurgent nationalism shapes new political landscape*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Thant-Myint-U/Myanmar-s-resurgent-nationalism-shapes-new-political-landscape>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁴⁶ J. Leider, *Rohingya...*, pp. 240-41.

⁴⁷ M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, p. 104.

when armed monks took offence at the building of a new mosque on the outskirts of Rangoon. Police had to intervene and the protesters set fire to the mosque and surrounding Muslims shops, resulting in a number of deaths⁴⁸.

It was the army that first stabilised the situation. General Ne Win, who was inspired by Marxism⁴⁹, recalled Aung San's idea of a secular state and pursued a policy aimed against his predecessor - Prime Minister U Nu. The first years of his regime were welcomed positively by many Muslims. Ne Win revoked the banning of ritual slaughter and even established the Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha) as a national holiday. In addition, the Burmese government in 1961 signed a ceasefire with the Rohingya guerrilla military - today the pact is brought up by Muslim activists as proof of recognition of the existence of minorities⁵⁰. Ne Win's policy was not well received by most of the Buddhist clergy⁵¹. In response to criticism, the dictator ordered the Buddhist *sangha* to get rid of fake monks⁵². His general policy was well summed up by his own words that "for the Army, it is important to keep the 'bearded fellows' separate from the 'bald headed fellows'"⁵³. Lastly, his efforts to turn Burma into a socialist paradise failed - mainly for economic reasons.

The situation of Muslims drastically declined when the new junta of General Than Shwe took power after the 1988 mass protests. It had a strictly Buddhist nationalist approach. Being Burmese meant being Buddhist. Burmanisation in politics became a dominant trend according to this idea. Religious minorities were treated as lost sheep who had been led astray by foreign powers. The junta launched the operation "King of Dhamma", which meant large-scale buddhisisation. National radio and television urged people to convert to Buddhism⁵⁴. Many children from ethnic areas were sent by force to be novices in monasteries. In the Kachin State, crosses were removed and in their place pagodas were built. In Arakan the same thing happened to many

⁴⁸ M. Smith., *The Muslim...*, pp 100-104.

⁴⁹ Ne Win was strongly against communism although he considers Marxist methods as useful.

⁵⁰ G. Defert, *Les Rohingya de...*, p. 148-150, M. Smith., *The Muslim...*, p. 8.

⁵¹ J. Sisley, 'La robe et le fusil: le bouddhisme et la dictature militaire en Birmanie', *Politique et religion en Asie orientale*, Vol. 32, 2001, p. 175.

⁵² M. Yegar, *The Muslims...*, p. 93.

⁵³ R. Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015, p. 521.

⁵⁴ J. Sisley, *La robe et...*, pp. 184-190.

mosques⁵⁵. Muslims become the scapegoat of the Than Shwe's policy. The government's proselytism went even so far that in some places for converting to Buddhism peasants could get a river buffalo - an animal of high value in Burmese rural areas⁵⁶.

General Ne Win had tried to keep religion away from public affairs – during the reign of the new junta it was the opposite. More important abbots and monks received political voices, including monks with a radically anti-Islamic point of view. In this period, the 969 Movement was born.

The 969 Movement and MaBaTha

The movement was established in 1990 and was probably inspired by a book by U Kyaw Lwin, who used the number 969 as cosmologically stronger than 786 - the number of Southeast Asian Muslims which indicated their business properties. 786 represented the phrase: "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful", while 969 was connected to "three jewels of Buddhism": the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six attributes of *dhamma*, and the nine attributes of the *sangha*⁵⁷. As a movement 969 was decentralised. The followers, both lay people and monks, raised voices similar to those from the thirties - they accused Muslims of having economic privileges, abusing women, and fast, uncontrolled population growth⁵⁸.

On January 2014 U Wirathu, along with other prominent monks in Mandalay, launched the "Organisation for the Protection of Race, Religion, and Belief", abbreviated as *MaBaTha* (an acronym). According to one member, "Forming this association makes us stronger, as if we have built a fortress in Upper Myanmar which people from different religions won't be able to destroy,"⁵⁹. Many members of the 969 movement were absorbed by the *MaBaTha*. The organisation not only campaigned against Muslims, but also successfully lobbied in the

⁵⁵ B. Rogers, J. Woodrum, *Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books 2010, pp. 145-147.

⁵⁶ M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, p. 218.

⁵⁷ M. Jerryson, *The Rise of Militant Monks*, <http://www.lionsroar.com/the-rise-of-militant-monks/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁵⁸ T. Fuller, *Extremism builds among Myanmar's Buddhists*, <http://old.seattletimes.com/text/2021235489.html>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁵⁹ R. Vandenbrink, *Myanmar Buddhist Monks Launch Group for 'Defending Religion'*, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/buddhist-congress-01152014180734.html/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

government for a series of controversial laws to protect Buddhism. For example, one law required Buddhist women to register if they intended to marry non-Buddhists⁶⁰. Even though nationalist monks claimed that they did not support any single politician or political party, their agitation could be treated as the fifth column of the junta. Even after the 2015 election when the National League for Democracy (NLD) won significantly and obtained a majority of the total seats (235 in the House of Representatives and 135 in the House of Nationalities) the *MaBaTha* has remained a powerful and influential organization.

Above all, the movement see Muslims as a threat to the development of Buddhism in Burma. Their views are reflected in a song entitled: *We will fence our nation with our bones*, which was played during their rallies:

“Buddha’s Wisdom shines over our land

In the defence of the Bama race and the Buddhist faith we will stand at the front line.

These people [the infidels/Muslims] live on our [Buddhist] soil.

They drink our water.

They break our rules.

They suck our wealth.

And they insult us the host.

They destroy our youth.

Alas, they are just ungrateful, worthless creatures”⁶¹.

In the Buddhist nationalist’s worldview, religion is strictly connected with Burmese national identity. The ethnic identification is built on the opposition to Islam. Identity based on the opposition was characteristic for the *Dobama* movement during the pre-independence time. They focused primarily on the rejection of British and Indian patterns. Then, Buddhism did not play such a big role (still Marxist ideology was present), but minorities were excluded, for cultural betrayal and collaboration⁶². Similar to *Dobama*, 969 (and from 2014 the *MaBaTha*), is a broad-based social movement created as a response to the uncertainty of fast changes. For both *Dobama* and the *MaBaTha*,

⁶⁰ H. Wardle, *Burma passes controversial law on marriage of Buddhist women to non-Buddhists*, www.lionsroar.com/burma-passes-controversial-law-on-marriage-of-buddhist-women-to-non-buddhists/, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶¹ P. Fuller, *Preaching by the 969 and Ma Ba Tha movements*, <https://drpaulfuller.wordpress.com/category/969-movement/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶² M. P. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 30-35, M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, pp. 74-77.

the main enemy is from abroad and is trying to destroy the uniqueness of being Burmese. The nationalist monk U Wirathu, an example of a leading Islamophobic voice in Myanmar, accused Muslims for the sanctions the US imposed on Burma because he suspected the presence of Al-Qaeda in the country⁶³. When *Dobama* was calling for a rejection of British clothes and food⁶⁴, U Wirathu urged a boycott of Muslim products and stores and promoting a "Buy Buddhist" campaign⁶⁵. *Dobama* as a social movement received massive support from the Burmese and even the colonial government decided to tolerate its activism⁶⁶. Even after being imprisoned for several years for his hate-filled sermons,⁶⁷ U Wirathu did not lose his influence, and the incident rather increased his legend. After his release in 2012, he received support from government officials who were trying to use him for their political gains. In response to a "Times" article about violent Buddhism in Myanmar, even president Thein Sein replied that the 969 movement "is just a symbol of peace" and Wirathu is "a son of Lord Buddha"⁶⁸.

Many Buddhist nationalists, including U Wirathu, who was called the "Militant Monk" by his supporters and once called himself a Buddhist bin Laden⁶⁹, condemn violence. Although the 969 pamphlets reject violence⁷⁰, they seem to legitimise it at the same time. It seems that the defence of *dhamma* and *sasana* stands above all else. Monks connected to the *MaBaTha* use several arguments according to Buddhist tradition to support their view. In one story, Buddha in his past life killed

⁶³ H. Beech, *The Face of Buddhist Terror*. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-of-the-banned-time-story-the-face-of-buddhist-terror/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017)..

⁶⁴ M. P. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 36.

⁶⁵ H. Beech, *The Face of Buddhist Terror*. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-of-the-banned-time-story-the-face-of-buddhist-terror/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶⁶ M. P. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 39.

⁶⁷ H. Beech, *The Face of Buddhist Terror*. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-of-the-banned-time-story-the-face-of-buddhist-terror/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶⁸ H. Hindstrom, *Burma president backs anti-Muslim 'hate preacher' Wirathu*, <http://www.dvb.no/news/politics-news/burma-president-backs-anti-muslim-%E2%80%98hate-preacher%E2%80%99-wirathu/28955>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁶⁹ S. Bengali, *Monk dubbed 'Buddhist Bin Laden' targets Myanmar's persecuted Muslims*, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-ff-myanmar-monk-20150524-story.html>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁷⁰ M.J. Walton, S. Hayward, 'Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar', *Policy Studies*, No. 71, 2014, p. 24.

a man. He saw that the man would kill 500 people in the future, so killing him was an act of compassion and choice of a lesser evil. In the eyes of the nationalist monks, it looks like the perfect excuse. If they apply some kind of violence, it is only because it will prevent even more evil. In one of his speeches, U Wirathu quoted texts from the *Kālacakra Laghutantra*, which was rather strange, because it comes from a different tradition - Vajrayana Buddhism. The prophecy for the victory of Buddhism in a war with Islam which *Kālacakra* contained fitted well with U Wirathu's political view⁷¹. The common argument is that Buddhism disappears from the world because of Islam and countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia or Bangladesh were Buddhist in the past⁷².

Since the nineties, the conflict has turned violent many times. In 1997, due to rumours about a rape by a Muslim, the country was swept up by protests. In Mandalay, 18 mosques were torched and many houses that belonged to Muslims were destroyed. In the streets, violent mobs led by monks burned the Quran and preached anti-Islamic words⁷³. In 2001 there were more violent riots in Taungoo caused by the destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan by the Taliban. In response to this, a mob led by Buddhist monks destroyed a historic mosque in Taungoo. Protests covered the whole region; once again, there were suspicions that the riot might have been controlled by the junta as the monks had radios, normally available only for uniformed services⁷⁴. In 2012 several riots erupted in Rakhine after the rape and murder of an ethnic Rakhine woman. As a result, at least 166 Muslims and Rakhine were killed and tensions grow across the country. U Wirathu and other radical nationalists have been partly responsible for increasing tensions, while on the wave of the political thaw they saw an opportunity to speak more freely. In 2013 anti-Islamic incidents and violence occurred almost in every big city in Myanmar. Often riots were provoked by rumours e.g. in 1 July 2014 two people were killed in Mandalay after information about the raping of a Buddhist woman which appeared on U Wirathu'

⁷¹ C. Cameron, *Monk Wirathu's 969 quotes the Dalai Lama's Kalachakra*, <http://zenpundit.com/?p=29028>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁷² M. Walton, S. Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist...*, pp. 17-8.

⁷³ A. Asif, *Burma: Planned Religious And Racial Riots Against Muslims: A Historical Overview*, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/8539>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁷⁴ Sanooaung, *Masjids damaged by SPDC THUGS in Taungoo*, <https://sanooaung.wordpress.com/2010/03/07/masjids-damaged-by-spdc-thugs-in-taungoo-english/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

Facebook profile⁷⁵. As a result of prolonged conflict and persecution almost a half million Rohingya fled the country in September 2017. This is twice as many as in 1978⁷⁶ and it shows how bad the situation is currently.

Despite the commitment of some world figures of Buddhism to urge Burmese Buddhists to end Islamophobia, including both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, the attitude of the *MaBaTha* and Buddhist nationalists receive support from countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka. In the latter case, we notice the emergence of groups very similar to 969, such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist power group)⁷⁷. Also it must be noticed that the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are very pro-western Buddhist teachers. The Buddhist world is divided on the case of Myanmar. In the country, the methods of U Wirathu were condemned by some important abbots from the Burmese *sangha*, but it is also difficult to see unequivocal evidence. The conviction that there is a threat from Islam is widespread. One of the most well known Burmese monks, the Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw, condemned violent methods, but in the same speech he also stressed that, “we, the East Asian Buddhist countries are living in constant daily fear of falling under the sword of the Islamic extremists. As we are lacking power and influence, we cannot compete against with the rapid growth of the Islamic world.” He also referred to the Rohingya: “In 1948-49, by the name of Mujtahid, those illegal immigrants revolted against the Burmese army. Their intention was to establish a separate Muslim state. The Burmese army had to confront the Islamic Mujahedeen. Today, they neither call themselves Bengalis nor Mujahedeen. But, calling themselves Rohingyas, they are trying to demand a separate homeland. They also burned their houses by themselves as if it was done by Burmese Buddhists”⁷⁸. These words of one of the greatest moral authorities in the country show perfectly how Buddhist nationalism is strong in Myanmar today.

⁷⁵ M. Walton, S. Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist...*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum...*, p. 244.

⁷⁷ M. Walton, S. Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist...*, p. 55.

⁷⁸ P. Fuller, *The possible causes of Islamophobia in Burma*, <https://drpaulfuller.wordpress.com/2014/08/22/the-possible-causes-of-islamophobia-in-burma/>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

Conclusions and further prognosis

The removal of the King by the British led to the collapse of the Buddhist state and cosmology. This resulted in a trauma, the consequences of which are felt to this day. As indicated, Buddhism is intimately linked with politics and a secular vision of the country is by definition at odds with the one presented by religion. It should come as no surprise that monks pressure leading politicians to stand up in defence of Buddhism and *dhamma* - in other words - to take the attitude of *dhammaraja*.

Broad-based social movements like 969 and the *MaBaTha* are not centralised and are easy to characterise. Their activists can be classified as Buddhist nationalists, but also they differ from each other e.g. not all of them are supporters of U Wirathu, and many condemn any acts of violence. In a context of fast societal change, Buddhist nationalism is seeking to strengthen national identity and giving society a common enemy - due to historical circumstances and particularly Islam. It is an especially attractive scapegoat for those who have not managed to improve their status during the current economic changes and also for the government to divert attention from other problems. Similarly, like *Dobama* in the past, the *MaBaTha* gets widespread endorsement from most of the Burmese. This support is especially present online through social media like Facebook⁷⁹. Paradoxically, the popularity of the group could rise on the wave of reforms from 2010 giving greater freedom to the media, the press, and the associations.

Despite that in July 2016 when there were two mob attacks on Muslims communities and Aung San Suu Kyi's government threatened the *MaBaTha* using legal action against them for hate speech, the leader of the National League for Democracy remained silent and ambiguous. This attitude is responsible from a political perspective. If she denounces an army intervention on the Rohingya in Rakhine state, she could lose not only her social support, but also the generals could threaten her power⁸⁰. The current government in the same manner as the junta before it has refused to give the Rohingya right to be a legitimate minority and identified them as "immigrants from Bangladesh" despite

⁷⁹ Thant Myint-U, *Myanmar's resurgent nationalism shapes new political landscape*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Thant-Myint-U/Myanmar-s-resurgent-nationalism-shapes-new-political-landscape>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

⁸⁰ M. Lubina, *Pani Birmy Aung San Suu Kyi. Biografia polityczna* [Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. A Political Biography], Warszawa: PWN, 2015, p. 491-495.

that meaning they would have been illegal immigrants for at least a hundred years. The presence of armed groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in the region also works against the Rohingya case and the image of Muslims in Myanmar. It is also important to notice that some members of the National League for Democracy are supporters of the *MaBaTha* – in 2015 the party even refused to field any Muslim candidates⁸¹.

It is hard to predict U-Wirathu's future career, but it can be assumed that Buddhist nationalism's impact on politics and its fight with Islam will not decrease in the coming years. Social instability, the disappointment with the democratic system and economic changes, uncertainty about the future and the growing separation of conflicting groups will continue to serve radical voices and polarities. There is also the risk that, with the rise of religious and ethnic tensions the army will carry out another coup and recover full power.

Buddhist nationalism still will play an important role between the NLD and the generals' political game and it is important to not overlook the phenomenon of Buddhist nationalism.

⁸¹ H. Hindstrom, *NLD blocked Muslim candidates to appease MaBaTha: party member*, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/nld-blocked-muslim-candidates-to-appease-ma-ba-tha-party-member>, (accessed: 26.10.2017).

