

WHEN BUDDHISTS GO BAD

Buddhism is famous for its pacifism and tolerance. But in several Asian nations, monks are inciting bigotry and violence—mostly against Muslims

BY HANNAH BEECH/MEIKHTILA, BURMA,
AND PATTANI, THAILAND

Dharma be damned
*Radical Buddhist monk
Wirathu with his entourage
in Mandalay, Burma*

Photographs by
Adam Dean for TIME

HIS FACE AS STILL AND SERENE as a statue's, the Buddhist monk who has taken the title "the Burmese bin Laden" begins his sermon. Hundreds of worshippers sit before him, palms pressed together, sweat trickling silently down their sticky backs. On cue, the crowd chants with the man in burgundy robes, the mantras drifting through the sultry air of a temple in Mandalay, Burma's second biggest city after Rangoon. It seems a peaceful scene, but Wirathu's message crackles with hate. "Now is not the time for calm," the 46-year-old monk intones, as he spends 90 minutes describing the many ways in which he detests the minority Muslims in this Buddhist-majority land. "Now is the time to rise up, to make your blood boil."

Buddhist blood is boiling in Burma, also known as Myanmar—and plenty of Muslim blood is being spilled. Over the past year, Buddhist mobs have targeted members of the minority faith. The authorities say scores of Muslims have been killed; international human-rights workers put the number in the hundreds. Much of the violence was directed against the Rohingya, a largely stateless Muslim group in Burma's far west that the U.N. calls one of the world's most persecuted people. The communal bloodshed then spread to central Burma, where Wirathu lives and preaches his virulent sermons. The radical monk sees Muslims, who make up at least 5% of Burma's estimated 60 million people, as a threat to the country and its culture. "[Muslims] are breeding so fast and they are stealing our women, raping them," he tells me. "They would like to occupy our country, but I won't let them. We must keep Myanmar Buddhist."



Aftermath *The Muslim quarter in Meiktila, Burma, where Buddhist mobs raged for days*

Such hate speech threatens the delicate political ecosystem in a country peopled by at least 135 ethnic groups that has only recently been unshackled from nearly half a century of military rule. Already some government officials are calling for implementation of a ban, rarely enforced during the military era, on Rohingya women's bearing more than two children. And many Christians in the country's north say recent fighting between the Burmese military and ethnic Kachin

insurgents, who are mostly Christian, was exacerbated by the religious divides.

Radical Buddhism is also thriving in other parts of Asia. This year in Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalist groups with links to high-ranking officialdom have gained prominence, and monks have helped orchestrate the destruction of Muslim and Christian property. And in Thailand's deep south, where a Muslim insurgency has claimed some 5,000 lives since 2004, the Thai army trains civilian militias

and often accompanies Buddhist monks when they leave their temples to collect alms, as their faith asks of them. The commingling of soldiers and monks—some of whom have armed themselves—only heightens the alienation felt by Thailand's minority Muslims.

Although each nation's history dictates the course radical Buddhism has taken within its borders, growing access to the Internet means that prejudice and rumors are instantly inflamed with

each Facebook post or tweet. Violence can easily spill across borders. In June in Malaysia, where hundreds of thousands of Burmese migrants work, several Buddhist Burmese were killed—likely in retribution, Malaysian authorities say, for the deaths of Muslims back in Burma.

In the reckoning of religious extremism—Hindu nationalists, Muslim militants, fundamentalist Christians, ultra-Orthodox Jews—Buddhism has largely escaped trial. To much of the world,

BUDDHISM: THE BASICS

THE EARTHLY DIMENSIONS OF THE WORLD'S FOURTH LARGEST FAITH

2,500 years old



Buddhists seek to reach a state of nirvana, following the path of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who attained enlightenment sometime around the 6th century B.C.

488 million

NUMBER OF BUDDHISTS WORLDWIDE

China	2.2 million
India	1.4 million
Thailand	1 million
Total	488 million

THREE MAIN TRADITIONS



WORLD BUDDHIST POPULATIONS



Source: Pew Research Center; International Religious Freedom Report; World Bank; World Factbook; World Religion Database

THESE PAGES: ADAM DEAN—PANOS FOR TIME; PREVIOUS PAGES: PANOS



Day watch In Pattani, a Thai soldier safeguards two monks



Grief Thai Muslim Sumoh Makeh mourns her insurgent son

it is synonymous with nonviolence and loving kindness, concepts propagated by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, 2,500 years ago. But like adherents of any religion, Buddhists and their holy men are not immune to politics and, on occasion, the lure of sectarian chauvinism.

When Asia rose up against empire and oppression, Buddhist monks, with their moral command and plentiful numbers, led anticolonial movements. Some starved themselves for their cause, their sunken flesh and protruding ribs underlining their sacrifice for the laity. Perhaps most iconic is the image of Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese monk sitting in the lotus position, wrapped in flames, as he burned to death in Saigon while protesting the repressive South Vietnamese regime 50 years ago. In 2007, Buddhist monks led a foiled democratic uprising in Burma: images of columns of clerics bearing upturned alms bowls, marching peacefully in protest against the junta, earned sympathy around the world, if not from the soldiers who slaughtered them.

But where does social activism end and political militancy begin? Every religion can be twisted into a destructive force poisoned by ideas that are antithetical to its foundations. Now it's Buddhism's turn.

Mantra of Hate

SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON A RAISED PLATFORM at the New Masoeyin monastery in Mandalay, next to a wall covered by life-size portraits of himself, Wirathu expounds on his worldview. U.S. President Barack Obama has “been tainted by black Muslim blood.” Arabs have hijacked the U.N., he believes, although he sees no irony in linking his name to that of an Arab terrorist. Around 90% of Muslims in Burma are “radical bad people,” says Wirathu, who was jailed for seven years for his role in inciting anti-Muslim pogroms in 2003. He now leads a movement called 969—the figure represents various attributes of the Buddha—which calls on Buddhists to fraternize only among themselves. “Taking care of our religion and race is more important than democracy,” says Wirathu.

It would be easy to dismiss Wirathu as an uneducated outlier with little doctrinal basis for his bigotry, one of eight children who ended up in a monastery because his parents wanted one less mouth to feed. But Wirathu is charismatic and powerful, and his message resonates. Among the country's majority Bamar—or Burman—ethnic group, as well as across Buddhist parts of Asia, there's a vague sense that their religion is under siege, that Islam has already conquered Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Afghanistan—all these formerly Buddhist lands—and that other dominoes could fall. Even without proof, Buddhist nationalists fear that local Muslim populations are increasing faster than their own, and they worry about Middle Eastern money pouring in to build new mosques.

Since Burma began its reforms in 2011, with the junta giving way to a quasi-civilian government, surprisingly few people have called for holding the army accountable for its repressive rule. This equanimity has been ascribed to

the Buddhist spirit of forgiveness. But Burma's democratization has also allowed extremist voices to proliferate and unleashed something akin to ethnic cleansing. The trouble began last year in the far west, where clashes between local Buddhists and Muslims claimed a disproportionate number of Muslim lives. Machete-wielding Buddhist hordes attacked Rohingya villages; 70 Muslims were slaughtered in a daylong massacre in one hamlet, according to Human Rights Watch. The communal violence, which the government has done little to check, has since migrated to other parts of the country. In March, dozens were killed and tens of thousands left homeless as homes and mosques were razed. Children were hacked apart and women torched. In several instances, monks were seen goading on frenzied Buddhists.

In late March, the transport hub of Meikhtila burned for days, with entire Muslim quarters razed by Buddhist mobs after a monk was killed by Muslims. (The official death toll: two Buddhists and at

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least 40 Muslims.) Thousands of Muslims are still crammed into refugee camps where journalists are forbidden to enter. I was able to meet the family of 15-year-old Abdul Razak Shahban, one of at least 20 students at a local madrasah who were killed. Razak's own life ended when a nail-studded plank was slammed against his skull. “My son was killed because he was Muslim, nothing else,” Razak's mother Rahamabi told me, in the shadow of a burned-out mosque.

Temple and State

DREAMS OF REPELLING ISLAM AND ENSURING the dominance of Buddhism animate the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sri Lanka's most powerful Buddhist organization whose name means Buddhist Strength Army. At the group's annual convention in February in a suburb of Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, more than 100 monks led the proceedings, as followers clutched Buddhist flags, clasped their right hand to their chest and pledged to defend their religion. Founded just a year ago, the BBS

insists that Sri Lanka, the world's oldest continually Buddhist nation, needs to robustly reclaim its spiritual roots. It wants monks to teach history in government schools and has called for religious headscarves to be banned, even though 9% of the population is Muslim. Said BBS general secretary and monk Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara Thero at the group's annual meeting: "This is a Buddhist government. This is a Buddhist country."

Hard-line monks, like those in the BBS, have turned on minority Muslims and Christians, especially since the 26-year war against the largely Hindu Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam insurgency ended four years ago. After President Mahinda Rajapaksa, a conservative, was elected in 2005, Buddhist supremacist groups became more powerful. In recent months, their campaign of intimidation has included attacks on a Muslim-owned clothing store, a Christian pastor's house and a Muslim-linked slaughterhouse. Despite monks' being captured on video leading some of the marauding, none have been charged. Indeed, temple and state are growing ever closer in Sri Lanka, with a monk-dominated party serving as a coalition member of the government. In March, the guest of honor at the opening ceremony for the BBS-founded Buddhist Leadership Academy was Sri Lanka's Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the President's brother, who said, "It is the monks who protect our country, religion and race."

Alms in Arms

IN THAILAND'S DEEP SOUTH, IT'S THE monks who need help—and in their desperation some have resorted to methods contrary to Buddhism's pacifist dogma. The southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat used to be

part of a Malay sultanate before staunchly Buddhist Thailand annexed the region early last century. Muslims make up at least 80% of the area's population. Since a separatist insurgency intensified in 2004, many Buddhists have been targeted because their positions—such as teachers, soldiers or government workers—are linked to the Thai state. Dozens of monks have been attacked too. Now the Thai military and other security forces have moved into the wat, as Thai Buddhist temples are known, and soldiers go out each morning with monks as they collect alms. "There's no other choice," says Lieutenant Sawai Kongsit. "We cannot separate Buddhism from guns anymore."

Wat Lak Muang, in the town of Pattani, is home to 10 Buddhist monks and around 100 soldiers. The sprawling compound's main stupa has been taken over as an operational command center for the Thai army's 23rd battalion, with camouflage netting wrapped around the central base of the holy structure. Each year, thousands of Buddhist volunteers receive training at this wat to join armed civilian militias charged with guarding their villages. Prapaladsuthipong Purassaro, who was a monk for 16 years and now tends the temple, admits that when he wore monastic robes, he owned three pistols. "Maybe I felt a little bit guilty as a Buddhist," he says. "But we have to protect ourselves."

If Buddhists feel more protected by the presence of soldiers in their temples, it sends quite another signal to the Muslim population. "By inviting soldiers into the wat, the state is wedding religion to the military," says Michael Jerryson, an assistant professor of religious studies at Youngstown State University in Ohio and author of a book about Buddhism's role



The faithful In a Burmese village, Wirathu's followers wait for him to give a sermon

in the southern Thailand conflict. "Buddhists will never think we're Thai people," says Sumoh Makeh, the mother of a suspected insurgent who, with 15 others, was killed by Thai marines in February after they tried to raid a naval base. "This is our land but we are the outsiders." After all, Muslims too are running scared in the deep south. More of them have perished in the violence than Buddhists, felled by indiscriminate bombings or whispers that they were somehow

connected to the state. (By proportion of population, however, more Buddhists have died.) Yet monk after monk tells me that Muslims are using mosques to store weapons, or that every imam carries a gun. "Islam is a religion of violence," says Phratong Jiratamo, a marine turned monk. "Everyone knows this."

It's a sentiment the Burmese bin Laden would endorse. I wonder how Wirathu reconciles the peaceful sutras of his faith with the anti-Muslim violence

spreading across his Bamar-majority homeland. "In Buddhism, we are not allowed to go on the offensive," he tells me. "But we have every right to defend our community." Later, as he preaches to an evening crowd, I listen to him compel smiling housewives, students, teachers, grandmothers and others to repeat after him: "I will sacrifice myself for the Bamar race."

The Buddhist spirit of forgiveness, though, still exists in the unlikelyst of

places. In 2011, Watcharapong Suttha, a monk at Wat Lak Muang, was doing his morning alms, guarded by soldiers, when a bomb detonated. The lower half of his body is covered in shrapnel scars. Now 29 and disabled, Watcharapong is still traumatized, his eyes darting, his body beset by twitches. But he does not blame an entire faith for his attack. "Islam is a peaceful religion, like Buddhism, like all religions," he says. "If we blame Muslims, they will blame us. Then this violence will never end." ■