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
Hate speech threatens the delicate political ecosystem in a country populated 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,
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 cross-legged on a raised platform at the New Masoeyein monastery in Mandalay, next to a wall covered by life-size portraits of himself. Wirathu expresses his views on 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.

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 Burmese—also 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 dominos 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, surprising few people have called for holding the official death toll: two Buddhists and at 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.

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**Temple and State**

**Dreams of Repelling Islam and Enshrining 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, clapped 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 continuously 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 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, the President’s Academy was Sri Lanka’s Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the President’s brother, who said, “It is the monks who trained 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 our land but we are the outsiders.” Af- ter all, Muslims too are running scared in the deep south. More of them have perished in the violence than Buddhists, perishèd in the violence than Buddhists, in the southern Thailand conflict. “Bud- dhists will never think we’re Thai peo- ple,” says Sumoh Makeh, the mother of a suspected insurgent who, with 15 others, was killed by Thai marines in February. “Islam is a peaceful religion, like Buddhism, like all religions,” he says. “If we blame Muslims, they will blame us. Then blame Muslims, they will blame us. Then 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, grandparents and others to repeat af- ter him: “I will sacrifice myself for the Bamar race.”

The Buddhist spirit of forgiveness, spreading across his Bamar majority homeland. “In Buddhism, we are not al- lowed to go on the offensive,” he tells me. “But the lower half of his body is covered in shrapnel scars. Now 29 and dis- robed. 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. “I urge all Muslims, we will blame us. Then this violence will never end.”