



# Buddhist Justifications of Violence during the 2017 Rohingya Refugee Crisis

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# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## BUDDHIST JUSTIFICATIONS OF VIOLENCE DURING THE 2017 ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

Iselin Frydenlund , October 2020

### INTRODUCTION

The case of mass violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar, leading to one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world today, begs the question of the role of religion in resisting or legitimizing the use of military force. While Buddhism is most often perceived as a religion promoting peace, it is also true that Buddhist traditions at times have been heavily involved in supporting state acts of violence, forcing academic communities and policy-makers alike to reconsider the role of Buddhism in violent conflict.

The military operations in Myanmar's Western state Rakhine during autumn 2017 led to approximately 750 000 Rohingyas fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh. According to UNHCR numbers, the Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh – housing some 600 000 Rohingya refugees – is the largest refugee settlement in the world today. The voluntary return of Rohingya refugees – whom the Myanmar state claims to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh – is unlikely given their lack of citizenship rights in Myanmar, in addition to the mass detention of 130 000 Rohingyas in camps in Central Rakhine. Member States and observer States of the UN Human Rights Council have expressed deep concern over the massive human rights violations against the Rohingya community during the military “clearance operations” in 2017, and numerous human rights organizations and Rohingya activist groups have claimed that the atrocities of 2017 qualify as genocide according to the UN Genocide Convention. Backed by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Gambia has accused Myanmar of genocide against the Rohingya at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The second legal case is at the International Criminal Court (ICC), where Bangladesh has brought charges against Myanmar for crimes against humanity.

The crisis in Rakhine is multi-faceted, involving several conflicting parties (the minority Muslim Rohingyas, the majority Rakhine Buddhist population (who fights against Bamar Buddhist dominance and military occupation), the Burmese military – the Tatmadaw – , and the government). While the multiple conflicts concern citizenship laws, political belonging and competing nationalisms, religion plays an important role in defining identities, providing semantic syntax, and as a mobilizing

force. Approximately 90 per cent of Myanmar's population adhere to Theravada Buddhism, the majority of whom would identify ethnically as Bamar, but also with important stronghold among ethnic minorities such as the Karen, Rakhine and Shan. Buddhism – in terms of its moral universe, its institutions and the Sangha's authority in the private as well as in public domains – permeates most aspects of Myanmar society (with the exception of the Christian dominated ethnic minority “parastates” such as the Chin and the Kachin states).

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Buddhism is often portrayed as pacifist (here defined as no-warism), and a point of reference would be the non-violent resistance to Burmese military rule by Burmese monks. However, the response to the 2017 violence in Rakhine from Buddhist leaders in Myanmar indicates little resistance to the atrocities against Rohingya civilians. In general, the Sangha remained silent, and even among religious minority leaders there were few signs of support to the Rohingyas. What stood out, however, was in fact the *support* to the military operations, most notably by Ven. Ashin Nyanissara, known as Sithagu Sayadaw, who is perhaps the most influential – and most beloved – monk in Myanmar.

On 17 October 2017 Sithagu Sayadaw gave a sermon to Burmese soldiers at a military camp in the Karen state. At the time, the military was fully engaged with their massive “clearance operations” in Rakhine, and the soldiers who participated in the Buddhist ritual at which Sithagu Sayadaw gave his sermon, were soon to be sent off to partake in the operations in Rakhine. In the sermon – which would be a functional equivalent to a military sermon in other armies across the world – the monk made extensive use of a Sri Lankan 5<sup>th</sup> century AD Buddhist chronicle called the *Mahavamsa*. This text, which contains passages where killing of non-Buddhists is glorified if committed to save Buddhism from perceived danger, has been used in Sri Lanka for centuries to legitimate Buddhist claims to the island and as well as a source for Buddhist political ideology. In Myanmar, the text is part of the monastic school curriculum, as an authentic source for early Buddhist history. In his sermon, however, Sithagu Sayadaw, brought the very controversial passages on the legitimate use of violence into the present, thus bestowing Buddhist moral authority over the military operations in Rakhine. In his speech, the monk claimed that “The battle was because of the effects of the power of the Dhamma (Buddhist teachings)...and as a result of the unity of the monks in fighting the battle together, the battle was over. That was how they had a landslide victory in beating the invaders”. Translocated into a new setting, the *Mahavamsa* now serves to legitimate violence in Rakhine, and to frame the Rohingyas as “invaders”.

What is often forgotten in discussions about Buddhism and violence is the fact that the Tatmadaw – like the conventional armies of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia – is comprised of Buddhists. In times of war, Buddhist monks serve as “military chaplains” consoling soldiers and boosting their morale. Also, while outright demands for military actions is not common – as this would go against provisions in the monastic code and be at odds with lay expectations of how Buddhist monks should behave – in times of perceived danger to Buddhism, monks make calls for protection of the *sasana* (i.e. Buddhism as a social entity in this world).

Myths of decline, but also the necessity to “protect the *sasana*” from internal and external threats are crucial to Buddhist historiography, which the *Mahavamsa* is perhaps the foremost example of. In recent years, Islam is regarded as a major threat to not only Buddhism in Myanmar, but in fact to Buddhism in Asia. Thus, anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim discourses are tied to larger concerns about the alleged “Islamization” of Buddhist societies and subsequent eradication of Buddhism. In such anti-Muslim discourses, old and new, local and global concerns and issues are interwoven into a coherent narrative of Islamic expansionism. Not unlike anti-Muslim ideologies elsewhere, Buddhist anti-Muslim theories evolve around Muslims as foreign to the “nation”, Islam as a security threat, as well as notions of demographic rise of the Muslim population and male Muslim sexual aggression against Buddhist women (so-called “Love jihad”).

Such narratives finally resulted in the 2015 so-called four “race and religion laws” that aimed at preventing the alleged “Islamization” of Myanmar. These laws seek to regulate marriages between

Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversions, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country. The laws were passed by the Parliament and signed by the President in 2015 and are current law in Myanmar, partly overriding previous Buddhist and Muslim family laws. The current Constitution (2008) contains severe restrictions to the right to religious freedom with reference to “public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution,” as well as excluding religion from the political sphere, including disenfranchisement of members of religious orders. These provisions are concerned with state security and state control over the religious sphere. However, with the 2015 “race and religious laws”, religious freedom issues came into central view, not with reference to security or public order, but with reference to religious freedom of (female) Buddhists, in the context of (perceived) increase in the Muslim population, “influx” of foreigners (the Rohingyas) and forced conversion of Buddhist women to Islam. In combination, the widespread circulation of anti-Muslim material, laws to protect Buddhism and prevent “Islamization”, and the general perception of the Rohingyas as illegal immigrants, together produced an environment conducive to compliance of the military operations in Rakhine.

In addition to the new rise of Buddhist protectionism in the early years of Myanmar’s political transition (2011 –) and a subsequent rapid politicization of religion, it is also important to understand other societal structures that helped shaping public opinion with regard to the “Rohingya crisis”. The 2017 violence – as well as the Gambia vs. the Union of Myanmar case – indicate radical difference in perception among the general Burmese public and international human rights organizations, governments and media institutions. The first difference relates to the nomenclature “Rohingya”. The state of Myanmar codifies ethnic and religious identities as basis of the political community, and “Rohingya” is not included in the list of 135 officially recognized “national races”. Thus, the state denotes them as “Bengali Muslims”, regarding them as illegal immigrants, excluding them from the political community. This position is widely accepted among the Burmese public, including many ethnic minority communities who are codified as belonging to one of the 135 “national races”. By contrast, international human rights bodies insist on a group’s right to self-identify as a basic human right. Second, while international organizations have collected strong evidence of massive violence against civilians, ethnic cleansing and scorched-earth operations, studies of Burmese media indicate that the “crisis in Rakhine” was mediatized as a legitimate clamp-down on Islamic terrorism. Third, while most international commentators noted the historic irony of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s defense of the Burmese military at the International Court of Justice in December 2019, she was received as a national hero by many Burmese back home, as a quasi-royal figure defending the nation from outside threat.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The need for policy-makers to engage with academic research on religion and violence that go beyond established taxonomies of perceived “good religion” and “bad religion”.
- The need for policy-makers to support academic research that provide deep understanding of cultural factors in violent conflict.
- The need for policy-makers to support academic research on Myanmar and to base their policies on informed knowledge.
- Support to academic research should aim at building up strong research communities inside of Myanmar itself. Thus, particular focus should be given to researchers in Myanmar – across religious and ethnic communities – in order to foster robust environments for academic as well as policy debates about the future of the country.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

**Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia** (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging ‘macro-micro’ dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

### 1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five ‘arenas of competition’ for the interplay of these forces, investigated in the project’s five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN’s regional model.

### 2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

### 3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)

**COORDINATOR** Andrew Hardy, EFEO, Paris, France, hardyv25@yahoo.com.

**CONSORTIUM**

- Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France
- University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany
- University of Naples l’Orientale – UNO – Naples, Italy
- Institute of Social and Political Sciences – ISCSP - Lisbon, Portugal
- University of Lodz - UL – Lodz, Poland
- University of Oslo – UiO – Oslo, Norway
- University of Cambridge – Cam – Cambridge, UK
- Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand
- The Centre for Strategic and International Studies - CSIS – Jakarta, Indonesia
- Ateneo de Manila University – ADMU – Quezon City, Philippines
- University of Malaya – UM – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam
- The University of Mandalay – MU – Mandalay, Myanmar

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<b>BUDGET</b>	EU contribution: €2,500,000.00
<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="http://www.crisea.eu">www.crisea.eu</a>
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<b>FURTHER READING</b>	<p>Frydenlund, Iselin (2019): “Buddhist Islamophobia: Actors, Tropes, Contexts”, in <i>The Brill Handbook on Religion and Conspiracies</i>, Dyrendal, Asbjørn; Asprem, Egil; Robertson, David G. Leiden: Brill, pp. 279-302.</p> <p>Frydenlund, Iselin (2017): “Buddhist Militarism Beyond Texts: The Importance of Ritual during the Sri Lankan Civil War.” <i>Journal of Religion and Violence</i>, Vol. 5 (1), pp. 27-48.</p> <p>Hayward, Susan &amp; Iselin Frydenlund (2019): “Religion, Secularism, and the Pursuit of Peace in Myanmar” in <i>Review of Faith and International Affairs</i>. 17:4, 1-11.</p> <p>Walton, Matthew J. 2017. <i>Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar</i>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.</p>