

Failed riots: Successful conflict prevention in four Myanmar cities

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Abstract

Collective violence between Buddhists and Muslims has taken place in nearly every state and region of Myanmar over the last five years. Yet, such violence has not occurred in the overwhelming majority of towns and villages across the country. Research on the production of collective violence suggests that there is much to be learned by examining times and places where the warning signs for riotous violence are present yet conflict does not escalate. This paper presents four such case studies, situations in which inter-religious riots were expected or feared but then did not occur. While we do not seek to conclusively demonstrate the counterfactual that actions by individuals in these cases prevented riots from breaking out, we believe that even partial descriptions of each case can help us to identify some shared characteristics and important insights for those working to prevent inter-religious violence and build peace in Myanmar. Based on an analysis of these cases, we offer conclusions related to: (1) the individuals and groups involved in the conflicts that made up each case; (2) the broader framing of the conflicts; (3) the kinds of competing arguments made by those attempting to prevent violence; and (4) concerns about forms of violence left unaddressed by these interventions.

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Introduction

Myanmar has been the site of serious Buddhist-Muslim violence over the last five years, generating expressions of concern from a variety of quarters, including international organizations dedicated to monitoring the potential for mass violence, even genocide. Much of this concern has been directed towards Rakhine State, where at least 145,000 persons displaced since 2012 remain in rudimentary camps.² More than 1,500 buildings have been destroyed within the last three months.³ Collective violence against Muslims has also taken place in nearly every other state and region of Myanmar. Yet, the overwhelming majority of towns and villages in Myanmar have *not* been the sites of such violence. That fact is the subject of this paper.

Paul Brass and Ashutosh Varshney both began ambitious studies of collective violence in India with a similar observation. Collective violence has been a frequent occurrence in India, they note, but only in a small number of locations relative to the rest of the country; most days in most places are peaceful. Brass and Varshney both asked, *why?* Brass focused his study on those cities where riots seemed to be a persistent feature of life. He concluded that this was best explained by the presence of “institutionalized riot systems.”⁴ He argued that, when riots occurred, it was because organized groups, often involving members of political parties and the state apparatus, chose particular moments to mobilize them. Varshney studied precisely the cities that Brass did not—those where riots were not common. Varshney concluded that the relative absence of collective violence in these cities was best explained by the presence of inter-communal connections, particularly associational forms such as civil society and business organizations that included members of different communal groups.⁵

In our research and work with local civil society networks, we have regularly heard of incidents that seem to parallel the findings of both Brass and Varshney. In locales where riots have occurred, residents have told us that these incidents were deliberately organized in ways strikingly similar to the dynamics described by Brass in north India. Elsewhere, we have argued that taking such explanations seriously is important both for peace-building and for holding individuals and authorities responsible for violence.⁶

We have also regularly heard anecdotes of incidents that seemed poised to escalate into larger-scale violence—but then did not.⁷ In these cases, there were clear contests: situations where individuals and

² UNOCHA, “Myanmar: Internal Displacement in Rakhine State (Jan 2015)” (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), January 2015), http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Affected_Map_IDP_Sites_Rakhine_OCHA_Jan2015_A4.pdf.

³ Human Rights Watch, “Burma: Military Burned Villages in Rakhine State,” December 13, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/13/burma-military-burned-villages-rakhine-state>.

⁴ Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (University of Washington Press, 2003), 32.

⁵ Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁶ Matthew J Walton, Matt Schissler, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Behind Myanmar’s Religious Tensions,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, August 10, 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Walton-Schissler-and-Phyu-Phyu-Thi-Behind-Myanmar-s-religious-tensions>; Matt Schissler, Matthew J Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making, and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Forthcoming.

⁷ Brass’s work might suggest that this is because those leading an institutionalized riot system ultimately chose not to force the matter. Varshney’s work might suggest that this is because intercommunal networks were able to prevent violence. For our purposes, we take both bodies of work as the launching point for a question rather than as sufficient for a confident answer, since aspects of both scholars’ theories seem to be present in our cases.

groups were competing over different ends and interests. Even when the details of these contests were not clearly apparent, the conflict was nonetheless visible. Sometimes, these contests resulted in awful violence. Sometimes, they did not. Where such violence did occur, in other words, it was an *achievement* in the non-evaluative sense used by Mike McGovern. Large-scale violence does not simply happen, McGovern has argued. It takes work, by individuals and groups, work that does not always live up to the actors' intentions. Understanding such failed attempts has as much to teach us as those which come to terrible realization.⁸ Or, as Varshney has argued: "Until we study ethnic peace, we will not be able to have a good theory of ethnic conflict."⁹ We agree.

This paper therefore examines four cases in which localized—sometimes even individual—conflicts seemed poised to escalate into larger conflagrations but then did not do so. Given that other situations in Myanmar of apparently similar character have resulted in significant instances of collective violence, we ask: why did these four cases fail to produce similar results? The first section of the paper briefly introduces the methodology and theoretical orientation of this research. The next section details the four case studies. In each case study, we summarize events as best we understand them and then present some of the analyses provided in interviews with individuals who were directly involved. In the final section of the paper, we offer four sets of conclusions that we hope will be useful for those interested in preventing collective violence in Myanmar.

Methodology

Along with McGovern and Varshney, there is a small but robust literature from those seeking to understand collective violence by focusing on failed attempts and "negative cases."¹⁰ A central insight from this literature is that it is not sufficient to explain—let alone predict—violence by attending only to the presence or absence of phenomena identified as warning signs, triggers, and root causes. These frameworks are helpful as tools for research and early warning as well as for engaging people in non-confrontational ways about the potential for violence in their communities. But the scholarly literature on negative cases also demonstrates that there will be many situations in which all the warning signs will be present and yet the most feared scenarios do not arise. As Scott Straus puts it, "One result is a frequency mismatch: most theory posits causal factors that are much more common than the outcome."¹¹

⁸ Mike McGovern, *Making War in Cote d'Ivoire* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 173.

⁹ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 6.

¹⁰ "Negative" in the sense that the expected results did not eventuate, where the preconditions for collective violence existed but where such violence did not occur (Straus 2012, 356).

¹¹ Scott Straus, "Retreating from the Brink: Theorizing Mass Violence and the Dynamics of Restraint," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (June 2012): 343, doi:10.1017/S1537592712000709. For other studies of negative cases and attempts to theorize why violence does not occur in situations where many theories would expect it, see Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Preventing Mass Atrocities: Ideological Strategies and Interventions," *Politics and Governance* 3, no. 3 (October 27, 2015): 67, doi:10.17645/pag.v3i3.320; Stephen McLoughlin, "Understanding Mass Atrocity Prevention during Periods of Democratic Transition," *Politics and Governance* 3, no. 3 (October 27, 2015): 27, doi:10.17645/pag.v3i3.318; Meghan Foster Lynch, "Civilian Agency in Times of Crisis: Lessons from Burundi," in *The Human Rights Paradox: Universality and Its Discontents*, ed. Steve J. Stern and Scott Straus (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 81–106; Stephen McLoughlin, "Reconceptualizing Mass Atrocity Prevention: Understanding Risk and Resilience in Zambia," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27, no. 4 (March 28, 2014): 427–41, doi:10.1007/s10767-014-9175-x; Stephen McLoughlin, "Rethinking the Structural Prevention of Mass Atrocities," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 6, no. 4 (November 27, 2014): 407–29, doi:10.1163/1875984X-00604004; Jeremy Allouche and Patrick Anderson Zadi Zadi, "The Dynamics of Restraint in Côte d'Ivoire," *IDS Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 72–86, doi:10.1111/1759-5436.12008; Bert Ingelaere et al., *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Springer, 2013); Straus, "Retreating from the Brink."

In Myanmar, all the warning signs of mass violence certainly appear to be present.¹² And there has indeed been awful violence, in the form of both riots and the slow burn of discrimination and systematic injustice. But the many instances in which the worst-case scenario does not transpire compel us to ask: what went right? This is the question we ask of four specific cases, which we believe highlight the interplay of competing—conflicting—interests in which collective violence was a potential outcome that did not eventuate. Examining as best we can how these cases unfolded—what went right—has much to teach us about how violence can happen in Myanmar, and how it can be prevented.

There is, of course, a legitimate question that always plagues examination of any counterfactual: perhaps violence in these cases was never going to occur, not for the reasons we discuss below but because there was never the potential to begin with. Perhaps we have simply incorrectly assessed the original level of risk or missed key intervening variables. One way of addressing this concern is to use the “possibility principle” proposed by Mahoney and Goertz for studying such cases.¹³ Certainly, in these four cases, the warning signs identified by available theories were all there. And the people we spoke with about these cases expressed their assessments in stronger terms: to them, larger scale violence seemed *probable*.

Most of the research into these case studies was conducted during September-December 2015. Research consisted of formal, audio-recorded interviews with a small number of individuals directly involved and informal inquiries with other residents of the local area. This research was difficult because it took place during the period immediately surrounding Myanmar’s national elections in November 2015, when issues of ethnicity and religion were particularly tense. It was also complicated by the fact that some of those we spoke with expressed concern that it would be unhelpful, even dangerous, to highlight their efforts. In some cases, the issues are not yet resolved. In others, those involved may hold different versions of events and presenting a singular narrative of the case risks generating new conflict. Time also presented an obstacle. Where incidents were recent, associated tensions were still fresh; where they were not recent inquiries risked raising new suspicions. For these reasons, we have withheld more detailed information about the cases, including their precise dates and locations, out of deference to the conflict context in Myanmar. In doing this we have sought to obscure the details of the cases so that readers could imagine them as having occurred in multiple different areas—that is, so it is not possible to definitively and exclusively link our description to events in a single location.

At the same time, we have tried to avoid presenting an overly confident assessment of each case. The studies are partial—there is much about the incidents that we do not know and never will. Brass has noted the multivalent nature of collective violence—one person’s personal dispute may be another’s communal affront may be another’s career opportunity.¹⁴ In another context, Michael Taussig has commented on the “epistemic murk” inherent to large scale violence, where fact and fiction can merge and mutually reinforce one another, creating real stakes for those experiencing violence and vexing scholars’ attempts

¹² For example, the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC listed Myanmar as among the highest risks for future mass atrocity, based on an early warning tool using such criteria. See: <http://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/how-to-prevent-genocide/early-warning-project>. The International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University of London, meanwhile, has used the criteria developed by Daniel Feierstein to evaluate the risk for genocide in Myanmar, concluding that it has reached the fourth stage of a six-stage process. See Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia de la Cour Venning, “Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar” (London: International State Crime Initiative, 2015), 22–23.

¹³ Mahoney and Goertz propose a “possibility principle,” by which counterfactual cases are valid for comparative study when assessment according to existing theory and specialists holds that the outcome under study was possible. See, James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, “The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research,” *American Political Science Review* null, no. 4 (November 2004): 653–669, doi:10.1017/S0003055404041401.

¹⁴ Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

to describe a given incident.¹⁵ We would add that these observations hold true in the case of failed riots, too. This is not a claim about the impossibility of truth, simply a caveat that the descriptions and understanding conveyed here are necessarily incomplete.

The studies also do not present a conclusive position on the causal relationship between different actions and the events we summarize; attempts to demonstrate causality through counterfactual analysis often use similar cases to identify specific configurations of causal conditions.¹⁶ Instead, we want to stress that we are not arguing conclusively that the actions described in each case study, and these actions alone, prevented riots from occurring. Such conclusive arguments would be interesting and valuable, but are not necessary for the kinds of conclusions with which we close the paper. In other words, we believe that even such partial case studies as these can generate useful insights into actions that can help to prevent riots, and thus we have limited our conclusions to those that we think the information we collected can bear.

Case studies

Case study 1

Background

This is a case in which leaders, including members of different religious communities, cooperated to systematically respond to a rumour that a well-known person in the area was amassing weapons in preparation for an attack on Muslims. The rumour prompted members of both Buddhist and Muslim communities to increase their vigilance and prepare to defend themselves, increasing tension such that local people thought escalation into a riot was imminent.

This case study was written based on interviews conducted at the end of 2015 with four individuals who are residents in the area and were connected in some way to the events related below: a female Muslim youth activist, a male Buddhist local CSO leader, a male Muslim local CSO leader and a male Buddhist local journalist. Copies of materials circulated to respond to the rumour are also on file with the authors.

The events

After the Thingyan water festival in April, the situation in the local area was tense. Interviewees remembered that this was particularly the case because people were watching and sharing videos of violence in other parts of Myanmar. Interviewees described many of the same arguments about Muslims as a “fearsome Other” that we have described elsewhere.¹⁷

Interviewees identified two Facebook groups created for sharing news and information about the local area. Posts to these Facebook groups were also being printed out and circulated by people that lived in the area, including trishaw drivers. Mobile phone, internet, and Facebook usage was less extensive then than it is now; at that time, people using Facebook mostly did so via internet shops and then shared the information offline through personal networks.

¹⁵ Michael Taussig, “Culture of Terror--Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (1984): 492, 494.

¹⁶ Charles C. Ragin, *Redesigning Social Inquiry: Fuzzy Sets and Beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Matt Schissler, Matthew J Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities,” M.MAS Working Paper 1:1 (St Antony’s College, Oxford University, July 2015).

Circulating online and through these other networks was a rumour that a construction company owned by a man who was reportedly a 969 supporter had ordered hundreds of long knives¹⁸ from a nearby area known for metal work. According to the rumour, these weapons were to be used for killing Muslims. According to one interviewee, followers of a 969-affiliated organisation were going to do the killing; according to another interviewee, Buddhist gangs would be involved.

According to the interviews, the rumours seemed plausible and people started to panic. The immediate effect was that Muslims and Buddhists ceased interacting, people stopped going out at night, and people from both religious groups began to close up their shops, anticipating violence. Muslims prepared themselves for the rumoured attack, including gathering tools that could be used as weapons and establishing watch patrols in their areas. However, the police soon asked that these patrols be disbanded and those organizing them complied.

One interviewee related having heard later that a group of Buddhists approached a leading monk at a monastery near one of the Muslim areas and asked him for help in preventing Muslims from killing Buddhists. The monk prohibited the Buddhists from attacking the Muslims in that ward, saying that Muslims and Buddhists had been living together in the area for a long time and had never had any problems.¹⁹

Eventually,²⁰ the owner of the construction company found out about the rumour and approached local CSO leaders to ask for their help in dispelling the rumour. He apparently wanted to dispel the rumour both because it was untrue and because he wanted to keep the situation in the city stable. At the same time, young people from various youth volunteer groups— both Buddhists and Muslims from the area where the knives were allegedly being produced and Muslims from the area where the rumour was circulating — fact-checked the rumour and found out that the weapons had not been ordered and were not being manufactured.

The CSO leaders, the construction company owner, youth groups, and religious leaders acted quickly to stop the rumour spreading. The young people communicated to religious leaders that the rumour was untrue. One evening²¹ around 6pm, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, CSOs, young people, trusted people of good public standing in their communities (*myo mi myo pa*), and people who work as freelance journalists for a number of news organisations came together to meet. The *myo mi myo pa* led the meeting because they had widely accepted positions of authority within the community. The construction company owner was present and informed the meeting's participants directly that the rumour was not true.

Within a few hours—by approximately 8pm—the participants had produced an announcement stating that the rumour was not true. This announcement was signed by three Muslim religious leaders, three Buddhist religious leaders, and two *myo mi myo pa*, all of whom provided their phone numbers next to their signatures. The announcement was scanned and circulated online, and photocopied and distributed throughout the area. Religious leaders and the *myo mi myo pa* also shared this information back to their communities, through other informal networks. Copies of the announcement are on file with the authors.

According to the interviewees, this coming together of communities and the announcement that the rumour was untrue seemed to calm the situation.

¹⁸ One interviewee said 100, one said 300.

¹⁹ Female, 25 years old, Muslim.

²⁰ We were not able to determine exactly how much time elapsed between the initial circulation of the rumour and the response described here.

²¹ Again, accounts differed as to how long after the rumour had begun circulating this meeting was convened.

Interviewees' analysis

Interviewees consistently stressed the fact that people wanted to avoid conflict. They recognised the negative impact it would have and that nobody would benefit: “The main reason [why people came to the meeting] was that they didn’t want the conflict to happen. If this conflict really occurred, it wouldn’t be good for anyone and nobody would be safe.”²² There was also a feeling that it was better to communicate through face-to-face dialogue than to let the situation escalate, a dynamic that was probably reinforced by the already-existing close relationships and regular interactions between people of different faiths in the area. One person explained, “whether or not this information [about the stockpiling of weapons] was true, it would be better to engage in dialogue face to face. So we negotiated with youths and we brought them [religious leaders] together.”²³

It is important to note that a desire to resolve the growing tensions around the rumour or the regular interactions that facilitated the dialogue did not necessarily mean that relationships between the communities were friendly. As one youth activist explained, “People would like to keep their relationship [with Muslims] but inside their heart, there is still hatred. They don’t want to have conflict because if there were a conflict, it wouldn’t be good for everyone. So instead they just stick together [with their own kind].”²⁴ These seemingly contradictory dynamics and their implications will be explored further in the conclusion.

Interviewees also noted the importance of civil society groups from all different types of backgrounds (not just explicitly interfaith groups) taking the lead in bringing people together. One interviewee thought that the role of youth had been particularly important, as it is easier for youth to come together and talk because of their relative lack of other responsibilities.²⁵ Everyone participated in solving the problem – a wide range of people were involved in the meeting and the subsequent announcement, including Christian leaders as well as Buddhists and Muslims. Including phone numbers of those who signed the announcement was thought to be particularly effective, as it added credibility to the statement. In addition to that, civil society leaders approached religious leaders who would be able to promote understanding, rather than foster divides. One Buddhist man noted, “For Muslim and Christian leaders, they are good at negotiations... they are very gentle when they talk.”²⁶

As noted above, people believed that an important contributing factor to the resolution of this issue was the existing strong relationships between religious communities in the area. People of different religions have been living together in the area for years and take pride in this aspect of their region. Interviewees drew upon this to explain why they were able to work together to combat the threat of violence. For example, businesses from different religious groups have been working together for years and many religious groups invite people of different faiths to their religious celebrations. One interviewee illustrated this by pointing to an area where the main water well is in a monastery compound. This means that Muslims and people of other religions interact closely and regularly with the Buddhist community, and people felt that they could easily contact each other to discuss how to address the situation. As one interviewee put it, “this area’s tradition [of inter-religious cooperation] is stronger than individuals’ religious beliefs. ‘We are the residents of this area’ is stronger than their religion.”²⁷

²² Male, 35 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

²³ Male, 30 years old, Muslim, local CSO leader.

²⁴ Male, 25 years old, Muslim, youth activist.

²⁵ Male, 30 years old, Buddhist.

²⁶ Male, 35 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

²⁷ Male, 35 years old, local CSO leader, Buddhist.

Considering the role played by various authority figures, interviewees believed that the *myo mi myo pa* (a kind of informal yet influential authority) were helpful and their role in the intervention was beneficial. The police were also seen by some to be helpful in asking the Muslim night watch guard to disband, which seemed to calm the situation by assuaging Buddhist fears of a counter-attack. However, the Special Branch (domestic intelligence agency) was apparently less helpful. When local residents shared their growing fears that there would be an attack by Buddhists on Muslims, they were told that such an attack was “impossible.” It was left to community members to resolve the issue themselves, which they did quickly and effectively.

Finally, although it may not have been a dynamic that was present during the time of the incident described here, people we spoke to noted a growing suspicion that religious conflict is being politically manipulated and that this has led people to be more sceptical about rumours. One interviewee explained that since 2013, particularly with the widespread student protests against the proposed national education law, it has become more apparent to people that conflicts have an element of political manipulation.²⁸ Another said something similar in relation to the violence that happened in the lead-up to the 2015 election, that some people who are instigating violence want to cause problems for the election, but local people want the election to go ahead, so they don’t want conflict to happen.²⁹ A Muslim youth activist explained, “If we compare the current situation and the situation from the past, [peoples’] views have been changing. [People] started to see that [the topic of] Islam had been used to create religious conflict. At the beginning, people didn’t believe that it was rumour, nobody believed, it was very difficult to talk [convince them].”³⁰ This shift of views is consistent with that described elsewhere and is considered in more detail in the Conclusions.

Case study 2

Background

This is a case in which a local woman intervened to prevent the family of a Buddhist man killed in a fight with a Muslim man outside a beer station from making a public call for revenge. A monk had come to ask the family if they wanted him to get revenge on the Muslim men and the woman persuaded the family to take up a police case instead, and not to consent to work with the monk, in an effort to avoid worsening inter-religious tensions in the area.

This case study was written primarily based on information gathered from an audio-recorded interview and a series of phone conversations with the woman who persuaded the bereaved family not to take up the case. The woman lives in a squatter community and does informal work, including as a motorcycle taxi driver for other local women. She is active in advocating for squatters’ rights, so she is referred to in what follows as a squatters’ advocate. An interview was also conducted with a local civil society leader from whom the squatters’ advocate had sought advice. Additional interviews were also conducted with local residents and civil society activists from the surrounding area; these individuals were not aware of the case, but they were nonetheless helpful in contextualizing feelings in the area at the time. The squatters’ advocate also advised us not to contact the family of the young man who had been killed, because the police case is still ongoing and she thought it might risk disrupting a tenuous calm.

The events

Two young Buddhist men were stabbed and killed in a fight with some Muslim men outside of a beer station. The men had apparently been involved in an argument inside the beer shop and were asked to

²⁸ Male, 35 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

²⁹ Female, 25 years old, Muslim.

³⁰ Male, 25 years old, Muslim, youth activist.

leave; the argument continued outside the shop and then escalated to physical violence. There was no indication, as far as we have been able to determine, that religious identities played any role in this initial incident, although this has still been a question, as the case is ongoing at present.

The mother of one of the young men that was killed was subsequently approached by a monk with connections to Ma Ba Tha.³¹ The squatters' advocate would not give the monk's name, but said that he had been active in campaigning for the Protection of Race and Religion Laws. This monk offered to take up the case and to help the families get revenge, in any way they wanted. Soon after their arrest, a group of people had also gathered outside the police station where the Muslim assailants were being held; this group of people also then went to the family to encourage them to kill the perpetrators. The monk and some of the men from this group also attended the young man's funeral.

According to the squatters' advocate, the feeling in the area was already tense because of violence elsewhere in Myanmar. She said that people had to watch what they say and also teach their children to be careful with their language, since teasing among children was common but ran a risk of being misunderstood:

“Children tease each other. They may say that today is Eid day, so, treat us to pork and sour bamboo shoot curry. It is just a joke, but as conflict can happen as the result of a single word, conflict between children can lead to conflict between adults, and then to ethnic and religious conflict.”³²

People were also discouraging their children from being friends with children from other religions. The unfortunate result, according to those we spoke to, was that, in order to avoid conflict, people were choosing to self-segregate and avoid those from other religious groups.

According to the squatters' advocate, she is friends with the bereaved mother who had been approached by the monk. Although the advocate had not been able to attend the funeral herself, she said that her mother went and heard the monk and others discuss the need for taking revenge against Muslims for the murder. The mother told her daughter, who decided to act to prevent further conflict. The squatters' advocate said she then discussed the case with her social networks and “people who are more educated,” who told her that they also didn't want conflict to happen and advised her on what to say to the family. She then went with one of the men whom she had consulted to see her grieving friend to discuss the monk's offer with her and her family and the possible consequences, were she to take him up on his offer.

The squatters' advocate said that the bereaved family wanted to see their son's attackers killed, but also worried that if they took up the case with the monk it would lead to a wider conflict that no one would be able to control. The squatters' advocate said she agreed and advised the family to tell anyone who asked that they wanted to follow due legal procedure. She also warned them that if they decided to go along with the monk and there were riots, people would blame the family and they would receive unwelcome attention. She also pointed out that riots and further violence would not bring back their son.

According to the squatters' advocate, during the following week, the bereaved mother was again pressured by monks and an uncle from the family of the other young man who had been killed to seek revenge. She was also interviewed by journalists and other individuals about the case. To all of the people who came to talk to her, the woman replied that she wanted to follow due legal process and that her family would agree with the decision of the courts. The squatters' advocate said that after the mother rebuffed outside interest in the case for about a week, interest appeared to wane and she felt that the risk of escalation had been averted. It was not clear whether the other bereaved family decided to take up the case with the monk.

³¹ Informants could not confirm whether this monk was acting on behalf of the organisation or on his own initiative.

³² All quotes in this section are from the female squatters' advocate.

Interviewees' analysis

For the squatters' advocate, the motivation to approach the family and discourage them from going along with the monk's suggestion came from a desire to prevent further conflict from occurring. From her own experience, she believed that it would particularly affect poor people, regardless of religion, saying that "Both Bamar and Kalar³³ will be affected." Other people that she discussed the case with also reinforced this feeling, saying that they did not want further conflict to happen.

The squatters' advocate was both personally influenced by and able to draw on the recent negative impacts felt by people in other areas affected by religious violence. "When there is a conflict, the ones who suffer most are the grassroots people. The consequences are that the price of rice rises, and they announce martial law, so we cannot work within our working hours. So, we have less income and that affects our livelihoods." She also drew on an experience she knew of, in which a friend in an area affected by a riot had loaned money to a Muslim woman who was then unable to repay her because she was afraid to travel. Religious conflict in that area had also affected small businesses that she knew of. In that area, normally Muslims would buy raw materials from Buddhists to make furniture, but the rise in tensions had limited interaction between the communities. Finally, the squatters' advocate said that an escalation of violence was particularly frightening for squatters, because if fires were set they could destroy both everything people owned and their basic ability to stay on the land they occupied.

Finally, those interviewed conveyed a strong sense that conflict was being orchestrated or encouraged by people who do not have the public interest at heart, and that these (unnamed) people's ulterior motives have to be questioned:

"The people who want to create conflict are drawing plans but we can say that people from [her area] are very smart as they do not follow the plan of the people who want to create conflict. Even if they didn't realise [that it was part of a plan] and were about to go along with it, other people can explain to them and stop them. For example, like my friend, when they are very upset, they would like to kill the person who killed their son. However, we explained to them the situation and they accepted it because they have their own brain to think. As we have the saying 'don't set the fire,' they didn't allow this situation to [get out of control] because of them."

This finding is consistent with many of the views expressed throughout our research and with interviews conducted by other scholars and journalists.

³³ Note that the word *kalar* is controversial—many feel that it is derogatory, but many do not; its use does not necessarily index communal animus on the part of the speaker. Most contemporary Burmese language dictionaries list the primary definition as "person from South Asia," but the term's etymology is contested. Etymological controversies aside, while many feel that the term is not intrinsically pejorative others feel that current usage is and strongly so. Maung Zarni, for example, uses the American English word "n--er" as a translation that emphasizes the negative rhetorical force of the word and while the appropriateness of such a choice might be debated it is consistent with other scholarship that has drawn comparisons between racial politics in the United States and dynamics between Burman and non-Burmans in Myanmar (See Walton 2013). One Muslim man that we interviewed in Mawlamyine during our Listening Project research, meanwhile, offered the following reflection on being referred to as "kalar": "Since I was studying... if you're small, they'd call you *kalar lay* ('small kalar'), if you're strong and big, you'd be called *kalar gyi* ('big kalar'). There weren't many Muslims at my school, only a couple Muslims in one class. We had some good [non-Muslim] friends but there were also naughty ones, however there was nothing like being badly discriminated or something. I still felt something when I was called 'kalar'. But I can understand them [non-Muslims] because it's a habit for them, calling us 'kalar.' However, they don't know how we feel" (Man, 34, Muslim, "Pathi," March 2015, Mawlamyine).

Case study 3

Background

The following two cases concern two separate but related events in the same region. Both cases are part of a growing controversy and antagonism over the right to slaughter cattle, an issue that has drawn particular attention in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.³⁴ Over the last few years, 969, Ma Ba Tha, and similar organisations have been purchasing the rights to slaughter cattle in the Delta, in order to prevent the animals being slaughtered. In the past these permits have tended to be awarded to Muslims, who slaughter the cattle as a business (to sell the meat), and also as part of religious custom on the occasion of religious festivals.

The case studies were written based upon interviews with two Buddhist activists and one Christian activist, all of whom are residents of the region, spend time in the affected areas and were involved in some way with the events described. These individuals cautioned against further inquiries into the cases for two reasons: cow slaughter is still a sensitive issue, and renewing inquiries after some time has passed since the events could prompt new suspicions. That illegal activity was involved, with possible knowledge of local government authorities, also made inquiries additionally delicate.

The events

These events took place after a 969-affiliated group had purchased the permit to control cattle slaughter in the local area. Although Muslims no longer had the permit for cattle slaughter, some Muslims reportedly continued to slaughter cattle illegally and paid money to the municipal authorities so that they would turn a blind eye. At some point after the 969-affiliated group took over the permit, two individuals connected to the group visited a Muslim-owned slaughterhouse to investigate whether cattle were being slaughtered without a permit. The men were beaten up when they tried to do so, and hospitalised. In addition, monks from the local 969 group attempted to arrest Muslims for illegal slaughter and confiscated beef from the slaughterhouse. The area is inhabited by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians.

After this incident, rumours spread across the wider area through social media and phones that Muslims had beaten up a monk, that the monk was in the hospital with head wounds, and that Muslims were going house-to-house killing people with knives. Leading 969 monks from elsewhere came to the village, and the situation became tense.

Interviewees also said that the authorities from the General Administrative Department office in a nearby town had come to the village when they first heard the news; however, they didn't feel they had authority to act. Soon after, the interviewees said that the army or police came and declared what the interviewees described as "martial law." This included measures such as preventing people within the village from going outside after dark. People in the area began to worry that they might face shortages of basic food supplies, as the village required difficult travel to other trading centres and the increased restrictions disrupted trade.

When the rumours started spreading, a civil society leader who had been working with farmers in the area was contacted by at least one local resident about the case. He went straight to the village to find out what was going on. The police were checking cars on the road and there were soldiers, firemen, and local *Pyithu Sit* militias standing guard, an obviously expanded security presence from the norm. The civil

³⁴ Swe Win, "Protecting Cows - a Buddhist Tradition Revived?," *Myanmar Now*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=95b1414d-bd48-4531-84e5-1f069be1075f>; Swe Win, "With Official Help, Myanmar's Radical Buddhists Target Muslim-Owned Businesses," *Myanmar Now*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=9ba61afc-285d-49bd-8f73-8b9efaf941c0>.

society leader alerted a friend in the media to the story but asked that nothing be published before he attempted to negotiate, and that the story should only be publicized if the negotiations broke down.

The following day, the civil society leader met with the hundred-household leader, the village tract leader, and laypeople and monks from 969. He met with them on the road and the villagers came and listened. When he spoke to the Township General Administrator, he was referred to the District General Administrator, saying that it was this man who had the authority to handle the situation. The civil society leader then went to the seat of the township and discussed the case with authorities from different departments.

When he went to talk to the police and the army, 14 or 15 people from the village went with him. He asked the person responsible from the army why they had declared martial law. They replied that it was because they have responsibility for security. The army then referred him to the same District General Administrator. Because this administrator knew the civil society leader, he trusted him to help with the problem. The civil society leader also met with police, other district GAD authorities, district-level 969 leaders, and Muslim and Hindu religious leaders from the area.

He argued to these leaders that the villagers did not want conflict, and so the case should be handled according to the law. He explained that the people who been hospitalised deserved medical compensation from those who had beaten them. In addition, Muslims had been in error because they were butchering cattle before Eid and had not informed the municipal authorities. He urged them to acknowledge and confess their mistake.

His argument was eventually accepted by the Muslim leader, who explained that the Muslims had made the mistake because they did not know the rules. In return, the 969 leader said that they would not be too strict about the rules. The leaders agreed that Muslims would only have to inform the 969-affiliated group, as the permit holders, when they were planning to slaughter cows and sell the meat.

According to the interviews, getting to this point of mutual agreement took about eight days. During this time, people who live in the area supported the civil society leader and encouraged him in the negotiations. Ultimately, the people who were hospitalised also received compensation. In addition, the civil society leader is still in contact with 969 and was invited to at least one meeting later convened by the group.

Interviewees' analysis

Again, one of the primary motivations, both for the civil society leader who facilitated the negotiations and for those he was trying to convince, was a desire to avoid the negative effects of a wider conflict. The civil society leader explained that he was particularly worried about the religious dimensions:

“There are not many Muslims in [another town in the area]. But there are many Muslims, Burmese, and Karen in [this area]. 969 has been around for only 1 or 2 months and already conflict is occurring between Muslims and monks. Conflict has occurred across Myanmar. So I was worried about it and helped to solve the problem.”³⁵

One person also contacted him to say that “I am afraid that our religion [Buddhism] will be affected,” presumably because people from outside of the area might blow the case out of proportion, not understanding the local dynamics.³⁶

The villagers were also concerned about the impact that conflict would have on them:

³⁵ Male, 38 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

³⁶ Male, 28 years old, Buddhist, local resident.

“Everyone from [the village] is making a living from farming. No one has a comfortable life. There are no rich people, no businesspeople. There are no businesspeople in the village or the surrounding area. If conflict were to occur, everybody’s livelihoods would be affected. Not only that village, but also the villages around it would be in trouble.”³⁷

The civil society leader believed that it was this desire to avoid a destructive conflict that motivated the villagers to support him in conducting the negotiations.

Interviewees also believed that government authorities were willing to negotiate because they were worried about the case getting out of hand: “The [local] authorities were worried that the case would become bigger. There has never been a case like this before [in the area]. The situation could really deteriorate as a result of this case.”³⁸

Case study 4

The events

This case also involves cattle slaughter in a village in an area where a group of Buddhists had recently purchased the permit for the activity. Among the group controlling cow slaughter were monks (some affiliated with Ma Ba Tha) and laypeople affiliated with Ma Ba Tha, some of whom also work with local CSOs. Before Eid, Muslims reported the number of cows they were planning to kill on Eid to the group. The group did not grant them permission to kill cows. According to the interviewees, the refusal to grant permission led to a very tense situation in the village. Muslims then went and guarded the mosque and people began to gather outside the mosque, so the police went to that area as well.

CSOs in the area found out about the rising tensions from their community-based networks, including those in the village, and got involved to negotiate with the monks and the Muslim religious leaders. These CSOs work on various issues including the environment, education, substitute fuels, and healthcare. They met in the administrative office of the village.

The CSOs told the authorities that the Muslims have always killed cows, and that it is a religious obligation for them. They also advised the authorities to give the Muslims permission to kill 100 cows, a compromise number which was less than they had originally requested. Then they spoke to the Muslims, who agreed to this number. The son of the Muslim religious leader, who does humanitarian work and with whom the CSOs have a relationship, represented the Muslim community in the negotiations. He agreed on their behalf to this reduced number, and promised that there would be no protests against the reduced number. The group controlling cattle slaughter also agreed to give permission.

Interviewees’ analysis

Interviewees identified two key factors in resolving the case. First was the perceived close relationships and networks among CSOs, which have become very strong and influential in the area. The CSOs that got involved in this case are working on different issues and they have a good relationship with the local religious leaders. One interviewee said that, “[The CSOs] are a big group and strong. They are united if something happens. They do not do bad things. Some of them understand the law and they are good.”³⁹ It seems clear that the high standing of the CSOs allowed them to play a crucial mediating role.

In addition, some of the CSO members are also part of the group that controls cow slaughter and of the area Ma Ba Tha network. While this may seem surprising, the networks of Ma Ba Tha and related groups

³⁷ Male, 28 years old, Buddhist, local resident.

³⁸ Male, 38 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

³⁹ Female, 31 years old, Christian, local activist.

are wide-ranging and people from CSOs hold a variety of different political views. Ma Ba Tha itself is not necessarily a unitary organization and many people join or support it because of its educational and religious activities, not simply its anti-Muslim activities. We were told that those individuals who were part of the group controlling cow slaughter and also active in CSOs were more open-minded (this was attributed to their civil society background) and so they could convince the other members of the group to give ground in the negotiations.⁴⁰

The second important factor was a perceived sense of shared community or mutual respect. Buddhists and Muslims in the area have lived together and shared each other's festivals. There seem to be good relations between the two groups and an acknowledgement of the importance of their respective religious practices. As one person explained,

“The reason they could control this case successfully was because [Muslims] have always celebrated this day [Eid], and it is part of their culture. The people from this side [Buddhists] also were aware that the Muslims have not just started celebrating this day. They have always done so... Muslims always celebrated this Eid Day every year with many people and the beef that they made was sent to all the Burmese' houses. The Burmese people go and eat in their celebration and also the meat is packaged and sent to their houses as well.”⁴¹

Interviewees also highlighted how this relationship of mutual respect came through in the negotiations, when the CSOs brought up an incident in the village that had occurred a few years earlier where Muslims had helped Buddhists. There had been a fire in the village and the monastery risked being burnt. A large number of Muslim youth, who were in the area for religious reasons, helped to put out the fire and saved the monks and items from the monastery. By bringing up this story, interviewees said that people from the CSOs were able to remind the people in the negotiations that there was a tradition of mutual assistance that crossed religious lines.

Interviewees also highlighted two aspects that they felt were conditions of possibility for inter-religious tolerance, which will be explored in more detail in the following section. First, there was a sense that tensions were less in the area because there was not a perception that Muslims were moving in from outside; Muslims in the area had lived there long enough to be accepted as part of the local population. As an interviewee said, “This is not a place where Bengalis are coming in. They [the Muslims] are people who have always lived here.”⁴²

There was also a perception that the “non-confrontational” behaviour of Muslims had contributed to a positive outcome. One interviewee gave the example of another moment in time when, after news of a riot in Rakhine State reached the area, Muslim residents informed the ward administrative officers that they would not riot and also closed their houses and shops as a precaution. This person concluded that “They just live peacefully by themselves and they controlled themselves. And, they do not live very proudly.”⁴³

⁴⁰ However, one interviewee also thought that Ma Ba Tha didn't really have much popular support in the area. She gave an example of a Ma Ba Tha protest that was organized in a nearby town that had very low levels of participation. Additionally, she said that a key person supporting the protest was the owner of a noodle shop, and the shop lost business after the protest.

⁴¹ Female, 31 years old, Christian, local activist.

⁴² Female, 31 years old, Christian, local activist.

⁴³ Female, 31 years old, Christian, local activist.

Finally, as with the other cases, interviewees mentioned a desire to avoid conflict. One person explained “If there is a conflict, there will be many consequences. People will kill each other and die. There will be no benefit. It is worse for people to die than for cows or animals to die.”⁴⁴

Conclusions

All of these cases represent situations in which there appeared to be a strong possibility that localized conflict between individuals or small groups could escalate into riotous violence between religious communities. Several of them occurred at times when conflicts in other parts of the country had produced heightened tensions—and fears that localized disputes could lead to wider repercussions. It is important to repeat that the factors we have identified in these cases as helping to reduce communal tension and stave off wider violence do not make up a universal “recipe” for responding to religious instigation and potential riots. Even this small number of cases reveal a number of situation-specific factors and those that can be generalized (such as the necessary role of trusted interlocutors) cannot necessarily be directly implemented.

We also cannot prove the counterfactual that the actions described in each case prevented violence that would have otherwise occurred. But in each case, those we interviewed believed strongly that such escalation was a serious risk. At a minimum, escalating violence was a distinct possibility in line with the methodological approach of Mahoney and Goertz, explained above.

Based on our research into these cases and the analysis offered by those we interviewed, we provide four sets of conclusions that we believe are instructive for anyone interested in promoting peace and preventing inter-religious violence in Myanmar. These conclusions relate to (1) the operational dynamics of each case (the individuals and groups involved and the contestations between them); (2) the broader framing of the conflicts; (3) the kinds of competing arguments made by those attempting to prevent violence; and (4) concerns about forms of violence left unaddressed by these interventions.

Contests and actors

Each of the four cases discussed in this paper could have escalated into wider violence, but did not. From our perspective, what is most important to highlight is that each of these cases entailed a contest, between and among both individuals and groups operating with their own ideas about what was good and right. Such an observation might border on the banal, but it underpins two corollary observations.

First, each case included activities by some organized groups seeking ends that risked escalating the situation into wider violence. Collective violence may not have been the outcome they sought; this paper does not attempt to prove the existence in Myanmar of the “institutionalized riot systems” Brass studied in north India. But, whatever the goals of the groups involved in these four cases, their efforts made such violence probable. In Case Study 1, interviewees indicated that, at least on social media, the rumours of weapons stockpiling and preparation to attack Muslims appeared to be shared and promoted in a systematic fashion. We know little about who might have been organising this information dissemination, though interviewees felt it was clearly more than one individual. In the other three cases, however, the level of organization appears to have been stronger and more transparently institutionalized. In the last two cases, for example, principle protagonists were involved or affiliated with groups such as 969 and Ma Ba Tha. To be clear, if riots had indeed transpired, this paper is not arguing that 969 and Ma Ba Tha members would have been the leaders or that their intentions were to instigate a riot. But, whatever their

⁴⁴ Female, 31 years old, Christian, local activist.

intentions, they played central roles in driving forward situations that made others in the affected areas feel seriously afraid of violent escalation.

Second, whatever ends were sought by those driving the situation in each case towards violence, their failure to achieve these ends was no accident. It took work, on the part of civil society and religious leaders, along with individual active citizens, who were important for efforts to de-escalate each of these situations. The cases considered here did not necessarily include previously-existing interfaith or peace-building groups, or at least not that self-identified as such. Instead, the common trait of the individuals involved is that they had built up trust and credibility in communities and with local authorities through previous activities that did not relate to promoting peace or inter-faith harmony. But this previous work enabled them to counsel against violence, mediate disputes, and act as trusted interlocutors in situations where communities either were not directly communicating with one another or when they would not have been inclined to believe statements from the other community. In Case Study 1, for example, the monk who offered support—in the form of revenge—may not have been relied upon because the nationalist monks did not necessarily have a good reputation in the neighbourhood; U Wirathu had apparently been unhelpful when the squatters had turned to him for aid during a previous struggle with police who were trying to push them off their land. The squatters' advocate pointed to this experience when she explained why she turned to other civil society leaders for advice rather than the monk. In Case Study 3, the civil society leader who navigated the bureaucratic and social channels necessary to facilitate negotiations was only able to do so because he had already built connections and established himself as working for the betterment of the area.

While these cases did not include explicitly interfaith groups, they did involve a diversity of actors from different religious communities working together. This dynamic should be distinguished from explicitly “interfaith” organizing, which, at least in Myanmar, has tended to focus on mutual understanding of each other's religious beliefs and practices. In these four cases, it was more often a different type of mutual interest that brought people together across religious lines to discuss a dispute. In Case Study 1, for example, it was sharing water from a communal well. In Case Study 3, it appears clear that the civil society leader who played a crucial role in negotiations was well connected because he had done other forms of social welfare and relief work in the area. Similarly, in Case Study 4, the young man who negotiated on behalf of the Muslim community had developed relationships with non-Muslim community members and civil society leaders via his social development and relief activities. It is also essential to recognize that, even in these situations of heightened tension and distrust, Buddhists and Muslims in diverse contexts were able to hold discussions and mediate potential conflicts. Highlighting this fact directly challenges common perceptions of intractable and long-standing antagonism between religious groups in Myanmar, although it does also highlight the further difficulties posed by extended geographic and social separation of religious communities, such as exists in parts of Rakhine State at the moment.

The CSOs and individuals that played key roles in calming, mediating, or bringing together opposed groups did not necessarily identify as “peace-builders,” but they did appear to play critical roles in de-escalating conflict and avoiding violence. In some cases, they had to do this when the state was not fulfilling its obligations, or when state officials or institutions were acting in ways that exacerbated the tensions. In Case Study 1, the police were seen to play a positive role in encouraging Muslims to disband night-time security patrols that might have escalated fears of a pre-emptive strike. However, interviewees said that the Special Branch was unresponsive to people's concerns about an imminent attack by Buddhists on Muslims. Similarly, in Case Study 3, the move by the military to declare martial law (or impose restrictions on movement) seemed to create additional worries for the local community regarding their ability to conduct business and get sufficient food. While much more research is needed into the role of state officials in cases of violence between religious groups, these examples make clear that both action and inaction by state authorities are crucial in either supporting or undermining the efforts of those who seek to make peace at a local level.

Religious framings, from conflict to violence

These four cases highlight the way in which framing conflicts in religious terms can serve to expand and escalate them. Effective collective action frames can accentuate and expand the resonance of particular grievances and mobilise a broader range of participants.⁴⁵ Whatever the cause of the fight between the young men in Case Study 1, for example, subsequent emphasis on the religious identities of the young men both drew in new actors and offered the potential for escalation beyond the initial dispute and its aftermath. The monk who came to visit the bereaved mother of one of the victims in this case, as well as those who subsequently pressured her to seek revenge, became involved because of identities understood in religious terms and directed antagonism towards a community larger than the young men involved or their families. Similarly, those concerned that the case might escalate recognized this potential for wider involvement and escalation. This underscores the fact that, in an environment with heightened attention to religious difference, the possibility always exists for quotidian incidents to be re-framed as religious or as having broader implications for religious communities. It also highlights the way that fears of “terrorism” in Rakhine State may become the basis for expanding violence towards Muslims elsewhere in Myanmar.

Re-framing a conflict as religious in nature both reinforces and is reinforced by already-existing stereotypes of religious others. M.MAS Working Paper 1:1 explored some of the narratives circulating about Muslims in non-Muslim communities, for example—that they are potential threats and that, as a group, they are intolerant, violent, and rapacious (or at least, potentially so).⁴⁶ With this image of Muslims in circulation, religious framing of conflicts between individual followers of Buddhism and Islam can also help to paint both the participants and their coreligionists as aggressors. The bare facts of the individual stories at hand—a fight between young men, unsanctioned slaughter of cows, or the (rumoured) stockpiling of weapons—may or may not be true, but these examples underscore that the salient point is their framing and the resonance of that framing with pre-existing stereotypes. Just as broad stereotypes are effectively applied to marginalized or excluded groups (with corresponding positive actions generally ineffective in shifting the narrative), individual acts of violence committed by Buddhists (as the dominant majority) do not affect the majority’s view of themselves as a whole. Indeed, throughout the violence in Myanmar, Buddhists have insisted—sometimes contrary to all evidence—that “Buddhists” are not violent.

Framing disputes and other conflicts in religious terms may be instrumental—by actors with political interests—or produced from existing narratives. In this sense, many disputes are not religious *per se* but are framed as such. It is also necessary, however, to recognize that some of these conflicts undeniably concern religious tenets or practices, not as a matter of framing but as a matter of content. Case studies 3 and 4 were not simply administrative concerns regarding Muslims slaughtering cattle without a license but appear to be conflicts generated by the clash of traditions that are held up as mutually exclusive. That is, to the degree that Muslims feel slaughter of cattle is a religious obligation (during Eid, for example) and to the degree that Buddhists feel slaughter of cattle is proscribed, followers of the two traditions can appear to be fundamentally at odds.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) especially Chapter 7.

⁴⁶ Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities,” 7–8.

⁴⁷ Cherry Thein, “Govt reaffirms rules on killing cows ahead of Muslim festival,” *Myanmar Times*, 22 September 2014; <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11712-govt-reaffirms-rules-on-killing-cows-ahead-of-muslim-festival.html>

Yet, such an analysis needs to take into consideration that categories such as “Buddhist” and “Muslim” are not stable concepts, and the practices and norms that they contain not only vary across space, but across time.⁴⁸ This is certainly the case with the tradition of cow protection. While it is true that avoiding the taking of life is a central Buddhist precept and some Buddhists in Myanmar avoid killing cows or eating beef due to the key role that cows play in agricultural life as work animals, there has never been a consistent or universal Buddhist tradition of protecting cows from slaughter. Prior to the current movement, which is difficult to date precisely but seems to have been revived recently, the most influential campaign to abstain from eating beef was led by the colonial-era monk Ledi Sayadaw, who argued that Buddhists should avoid eating beef also as a moral practice that would counter a presumed increase in beef consumption by the British.⁴⁹ Contemporary views on the subject in Myanmar diverge significantly,⁵⁰ acting as a reminder that what counts as quintessentially “Buddhist” (or “Muslim”) not only changes over time, but is contested in particular moments as well.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that some conflicts may be centred on perceptions of the irreconcilability of religious practices, because ignoring the religious nature of such disputes would be to ignore the broader implications of state-sanctioned religious intolerance and discrimination. There has been clear evidence of state officials acting in a biased manner in, for example, awarding cattle slaughter licenses. Case studies 3 and 4 illustrate the way this can connect to individual moments that risk escalating violence. Such practices also appear to violate Article 34 of Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution, which provides the right to freely profess and practice one’s religion. Acknowledging the religious aspect of these disagreements also highlights what could be a more fundamental disagreement about religious values and practices; while these may appear irreconcilable, engaging openly and fairly with religious difference is a necessary component of a plural democratic society.

Competing arguments

Studying these cases helped us to see the multiple contests involved in the kinds of situations that, particularly when framed in religious terms, could escalate and expand into collective violence. Each of these cases, however, also contained individuals and groups seeking to respond and prevent violence. These efforts employed various arguments and ways of framing or re-framing the situation that undermined or directly opposed both the individual contest that appeared primed to escalate and, in some cases, the larger negative narrative regarding Muslims that was the central focus of M.MAS Working Paper 1:1. In particular, we think four competing arguments are worth highlighting, because they appear to have enabled the situations to be de-escalated and because they may have wider application. These seem to have been critical in the cases described above in reminding people of shared experiences or solidarities, in forcing people to confront and reconcile contradictory views, and in offering plausible accounts of the causes of and motivations behind inter-religious violence.

First, consistent among all of the cases was the importance of highlighting the many devastating impacts of a riot. Those who attempted to defuse tensions emphasized that everyone would suffer if a dispute

⁴⁸ While many have made this point, one of the most cogent recent versions of this argument specifically related to Buddhism in Myanmar and the role of scholars in studying it comes from Alicia Turner, who considers the constructed and contested nature of seemingly stable Buddhist concepts during the colonial period and in the present. See, Alicia Turner, “Myanmar: Contesting Conceptual Landscapes in the Politics of Buddhism,” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 19 (March 2016), <http://kyotoreview.org/issue-19/myanmar-buddhism-conceptual-landscapes/>; Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2013), 35–38.

⁵⁰ Swe Win, “Protecting Cows - a Buddhist Tradition Revived?”

turned into wider violence, regardless of religious identity. In each case, they had compelling recent examples to draw on, of the other destructive instances of inter-religious conflict in Myanmar's recent history. Drawing attention to the potential effects of a riot was also a way of making people conscious of the power they held to escalate tensions further or not. In Case Study 2, for example, the squatters' advocate made a strong case that, if riots occurred as a result of the mother taking up the monk's offer to seek revenge, she and her family would likely be held responsible, if not legally, then at least within the community or the wider area. She also emphasized how poor squatters were particularly vulnerable, being affected by lack of trade and communication, but also living in conditions that would be especially susceptible to destruction by fires set during a riot. Or, in the words of one interviewee from Case Study 3: "No one has a comfortable life. There are no rich people, no businesspeople... If conflict were to occur, everybody's livelihoods would be affected."⁵¹

Second, interviewees emphasized alternative pathways for resolving the disputes at hand, particularly intervention via state authorities. In Case Study 2, for example, the core approach of the squatters' advocate was to pair her emphasis on the negative impacts of calling for revenge with using the law for punishing the man who killed the woman's son. At the same time, the delicacy of such an approach was emphasized to us when the squatters' advocate entreated us not to contact the mother lest we disrupt a precarious calm. The murder case was not resolved; a potential call for revenge could still be made.

Third, people drew on past experiences of solidarity, inter-dependence, or peaceful coexistence with neighbours of other religions. In Case Study 3, people were able to draw on the experience of collective suffering during a destructive weather event and the relief activities that followed as a way of reminding others of a point of commonality. Those who intervened were also able to invoke another important event in the past, of the time when a fire threatened the monasteries in the town. At the time, large numbers of Muslim youth had helped to put out a fire and saved materials from the monasteries and the monks themselves. Recalling this event in the midst of tense negotiations over cattle slaughtering was a way of reminding Buddhists that, despite different religious practices, Muslims considered themselves to be members of the community, contributing to the collective welfare. Interviewees in Case Study 1, meanwhile, repeatedly mentioned the power of their collective local civic identity, which they believed was an important factor in overcoming inter-religious tensions, not only in the context of the rumour described in the case, but throughout a time period when the area saw aggressive anti-Muslim organizing, especially among monks. Throughout, those who sought to intervene to calm tensions noted the interdependence of the religious communities in a number of different aspects, despite whatever conflicts might arise between them. Varshney would categorize these aspects of interdependence as "everyday", which he argued is less resilient during times of tension and conflict because it is less institutionalized.⁵² We do not dispute his claim about the importance of institutionalized webs of communal solidarity—but these cases illustrate ways in which "everyday" experiences of interdependence and solidarity can also be leveraged to promote peace even at difficult moments.⁵³

Finally, interviewees emphasized that the tense situation and apparent potential for conflict was the effect of political machinations. This argument viewed inter-religious tension as having been orchestrated by

⁵¹ Male, 38 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

⁵² Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 9.

⁵³ Connecting the first and third arguments in this section, although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be valuable to conduct further study of the effectiveness of this argument regarding mutual suffering, in relation to varying levels of socio-economic interdependence within different communities. Another important consideration is whether what Varshney's categories of "everyday" vs "institutionalised" do not effectively capture dynamics of exchange and relationality in Myanmar, where, in large part due to decades of state repression, informal structures and arrangements might be more meaningful and influential in people's lives. This is a question that warrants further examination.

people in power. Some versions of the narrative speculate (or claim) that religious identities, insecurities and fears are being used as a way of undermining the NLD. One interviewee in Case Study 1 explained that, since 2013, particularly with the student protests (that began in late 2014), it has become more apparent to people that conflicts have an element of political manipulation:

“When there was a political conflict...at first people only focused on the religious conflict. After the student protest, [these religious conflicts] appeared to be tricks of the military government. If we compare the current situation and the situation in the past, [people’s] views are changing.”⁵⁴

Another interviewee related similar sentiments regarding instigation in the lead-up to the 2015 election, arguing that those people were attempting to cause problems for the election, but since local people wanted the election to go ahead, they were willing to work together to avoid conflict:

“This problem happened before the election, so people have started to understand the situation. They [the local people] didn’t want the election to be postponed, so people used election-related language to prevent the conflict.”⁵⁵

Recognizing other types of violence

Each of the four cases discussed in this paper failed to escalate into wider violence and reflecting on how this came to pass has been instructive for us. Yet at the same time, some of the factors that interviewees believed had helped to avoid riotous violence have negative aspects that must also be considered. There is much positive to take away from the four “negative cases” studied here, but we feel compelled to close with three concerns that might dampen our optimism.

First, the unstated premise lurking under the analysis by some interviewees is that culpability for violence centres on the actions of the group that is a minority in terms of demography as well as political power. One woman in Case Study 4, for example, explained the value of what she saw as the non-confrontational behaviour of Muslims in her area: “They just live peacefully by themselves and they controlled themselves. And they do not live very proudly.”⁵⁶ A Buddhist man who described the meeting in Case Study 1 that seems to have dissipated religious tensions, spoke about the conduct of Muslim participants in the following way: “The Muslim group [at the meeting] was the minority and they apologized to other religious groups. Even if other factors stimulated the rumours, they also apologized for that. Whatever it was, they didn’t put themselves on the same level with the other groups, and they stepped down and apologized to others, to have a better relationship with other groups and show respect to all.”⁵⁷

This does not mean that our interviewees’ causal accounts were incorrect; it does seem clear that the incidents in these places did not escalate in part due to the deferential and submissive actions of Muslim leaders. It also appears to have been a wise strategy—and perhaps the only option—for non-Buddhists seeking to avoid worsening an already tense situation. But our concern is with the degree to which it implies that, if the incidents had escalated, the blame would have then rested with the Muslim minorities involved. While recognizing that Muslims can and have been antagonists, such an assessment is problematic because it suggests that the central precondition for peace is that Muslim populations in Myanmar keep quiet. This shifts focus away from any others who are involved in violence, including those who encourage and enact it. An interviewee in Case Study 4, for example, illustrates how this can play out even between friends: “Muslims [here] are very social. They do not live isolated [from others]. You can make jokes with them about eating pork.”⁵⁸ Willingness to allow joking about one’s religious

⁵⁴ Female, 25 years old, Muslim.

⁵⁵ Male, 25 years old, Buddhist.

⁵⁶ Female, 31 years old, Christian.

⁵⁷ Male, 35 years old, Buddhist, local CSO leader.

⁵⁸ Female, 31 years old, Christian.

practices or beliefs might be a hallmark of a tolerant and flexible religiously plural society, but this is not the case if the tolerance is not mutual; recent events suggest that similar flexibility is not displayed toward jokes or comments about Buddhism.⁵⁹

Second, local accounts of riotous violence that attribute instigation and participation to “outsiders” or political machinations can be challenging to interpret. On the one hand, such claims should not be casually dismissed as conspiracy theories. Cases like the July 2014 riots in Mandalay, which were later found to have been deliberately instigated, bear out much of these concerns, though the ultimate motivations of those involved remain opaque. It is also hard to look at Case Study 1, in which some individual or group appears to have systematically and deliberately attempted to foment tension and distrust, and not conclude that similar machinations were afoot. The other three cases, meanwhile, also involved individuals and groups who were working hard towards ends that risked escalating those particular conflicts into something larger. This is not to say that the outcome they desired was a riot—but it is understandable that those in the immediate area would look at such events and conclude that there are those who desire further violence. This dynamic is even more prevalent in other areas where we have done research, where individuals appeared to work in coordinated ways to plan and implement riots that did occur. Though we made no detailed study of such claims they sound strikingly similar to the “institutionalized riot systems” Brass described and, insofar as violence in Myanmar is potentially organized in a systematic fashion, anyone working towards peace must engage with this potential directly. But, perhaps just as important, these case studies show that the mere presence of this suspicion—whatever the empirical reality—can be an effective counter argument leveraged by those seeking to promote peace, since it can encourage people to be sceptical of claims made by those seeking to escalate conflict.

On the other hand, even if inter-religious violence is instigated deliberately, it is also the case that there are many others who join in, support, or at least tacitly condone it. The insistence that violence is primarily a function of conflicts in the larger political transition (or triggered and conducted by “outsiders”) can thus obscure deeper problems. In a general sense, this can inhibit efforts to honestly engage with discriminatory or exclusionary attitudes towards religious minorities—Muslims as well as other non-Buddhists. And in a more specific sense, claims by residents of locales in which riots occurred that it was not “their own” who committed acts of violence can be an obstacle to assigning culpability for particular actions.

Finally, preventing riotous violence is not the same thing as promoting peace. We can find useful guidance from Johan Galtung’s classic distinction between “negative” and “positive” peace: “negative peace which is the absence of violence, absence of war—and positive peace which is the integration of human society.”⁶⁰ The cases here entailed work to avoid some forms of violence, but this work is not necessarily mutually exclusive with violence in other forms. Those interviewed in every case, for

⁵⁹ One recent example is Ma Ba Tha’s vehement response to a portrayal of the Buddha wearing headphones by a bar owner with dual UK-New Zealand citizenship and two of his Burmese employees, mounting a public campaign for prosecution that resulted in sentences of two and a half years with hard labour. To be clear, the purpose of this comparison is not to suggest that Buddhists should not have been insulted by the image of the Buddha in headphones. It is merely to point out that (minority) Muslim populations in Myanmar might be forced into tolerating insults about their religion (that others might think are simply jokes) because they are not in a position to complain, knowing that their best chance of avoiding violence is to maintain a low profile. See Reuters, “Burma Jails New Zealand Bar Manager over ‘Insulting’ Buddha Images,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/17/burma-jails-new-zealand-bar-manager-over-insulting-buddha-images>.

⁶⁰ Johan Galtung, “An Editorial,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (1964): 1–4, doi:10.1177/002234336400100101; see also Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

example, discussed their reasons for intervening in terms of the potential damage to either their own community or to the prestige of their own religion. Indeed, this motivation was an important counter argument in their efforts to prevent violence; it helped convince people to assist in de-escalation or not engage in activities that could further inflame communal tensions.

However, the twin to this argument is that it ceases to function where the escalation of violence poses no threat to the protagonists' own community. In Case Study 2, for example, it may have been possible to dissuade a call for revenge on the basis of concern for subsequent repercussions. But concern for such repercussions can do little to militate against other forms of violence. The impact of systemic discrimination and disenfranchisement can be just as devastating as a riot, but it does not pose the same risk of fire that spreads beyond the homes of those initially targeted.

Similarly, insofar as religious framings that attribute negative characteristics to all followers of Islam remain in wide circulation, the risk of escalation will also persist. Recognition of this is particularly relevant in light of new violence in parts of Rakhine State since October 2016. Religious framings will be effective ways for instigators to brand Muslims in other parts of Myanmar as extremists by virtue of their religion and work to escalate violence as an extension of anti-terrorism operations in Rakhine State. The competing arguments discussed in this paper may not effectively counter such claims.

We do not raise these concerns as criticism of the ways in which escalating violence was countered and avoided in these four cases. Those involved seem to have made the best of difficult situations. Their actions were necessary—we just mean to say that they are not alone sufficient. They may prevent riots, but the apparent quiet that follows is not peace. To be sure, some of these cases illustrate dynamics that helped to prevent escalating violence but could also undergird work to promote peace. These include the arguments about shared local civic identity, for example, as seen in Case Study 1; shared forms of vulnerability born from poverty, as seen in case studies 2 and 3; or common experiences of hardship and cooperation to surmount difficulties or respond to local crises, as seen in Case Study 4. These arguments are born from lived experiences in Myanmar. They are in circulation and can help to promote peace, in the form of maintaining and encouraging forms of coexistence and solidarity that already exist. We should do our best to support them.

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