

Communal tensions in Burma continue

John Roberts
18 July 2013

Anti-Muslim violence in Burma (Myanmar) that first erupted in June last year against ethnic Rohingyas in the western Rakhine state and spread to other areas has displaced tens of thousands of people and created a poisonous communal atmosphere throughout much of the country.

The major clashes in Rakhine in June and November last year left 168 people dead, mostly Rohingya, and drove another 120,000 from their homes. Attacks on the Muslim population of Meiktila in central Burma in March resulted in another 40 dead. In May in Lashio, capital of the eastern Shan state, mosques, schools and dozens of homes were torched by Burmese Buddhist thugs, including monks in saffron robes.

An *Asia Times Online* article on July 1 outlined the pattern: “A recurring theme from locals is that ‘outsiders’ are bussed in by trucks and nearly all of them are armed with sticks, swords and machetes. An incident soon happens between a Muslim and a Buddhist that provides the spark and then the gangs swing into action, agitating and enlisting locals to join the ensuing riot. Muslim homes and shops are demolished and along with them previous inter-communal and religious harmony.”

Many victims now live in camps or are imprisoned in ghettos such as suburban Aung Mingalar in the Rakhine capital of Sittwe. Associated Press reported on June 30 that officials in Rakhine stated that they did not know when, or if, the Rohingya in the Aung Mingalar ghetto would be permitted to leave.

Rangoon (Yangon), Burma’s largest city, has so far not had large-scale communal violence. It has long been home to a heterogeneous population of Burmese, ethnic Indians and a range of religions—Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Christians. Tensions are rising, however.

The *New York Times* on July 2 reported that Muslims in one of the city’s neighbourhoods have set up a self-

defence watch. A Muslim used-car salesman, U Aye, told the newspaper: “We are losing trust with each other. Any business transaction between a Buddhist and a Muslim can turn into an incident.”

Sections of the Buddhist clergy, colluding with layers of the military, are directly responsible for whipping up anti-Muslim communalism. The most prominent organisation is the chauvinist “969” movement, led by Mandalay monk U Wirathu who has called for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses and backed the violent pogrom in Meiktila. He lectures around the country denouncing Islam as a threat to Buddhism and Burma.

On June 27, a meeting of 1,500 Buddhist monks near Rangoon considered a draft law, authored by U Wirathu, restricting marriages between Muslims and Buddhists.

Neither the military-backed government of President Thein Sein nor the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, have challenged the 969 movement because they are mired in the same Buddhist chauvinism and sympathise with U Wirathu’s objectives.

Facing international criticism over the persecution of Muslims, Thein Sein and Suu Kyi have timidly criticised the Buddhist chauvinists’ proposed marriage laws and their calls to limit the number of children permitted to Rakhine Muslim families. Last week, the courts handed down sentences on more than 20 Buddhists involved in sectarian violence in March. Previous convictions have been mainly of Muslims, even though they have been overwhelmingly the victims of the violence.

However, when the July 1 issue of *Time* magazine featured a cover picture of U Wirathu under the caption “The Face of Buddhist Terror”, Thein Sein banned it in Burma and declared that Wirathu was “a son of Lord Buddha”. Suu Kyi has not criticised the government’s

handling of the anti-Muslim violence or the 969 movement and has refused to call for the granting of citizenship to the Rohingya, who are treated as illegal immigrants in Burma.

Anti-Muslim and anti-Indian chauvinism has its origins in the divide-and-rule policy of British colonialism in Burma. Britain administered Burma as part of India until 1937, bringing in police, soldiers and administrators from other areas of the subcontinent. Indian traders, shopkeepers, workers and professionals also came to Burma.

Burmese bourgeois nationalists promoted communal politics as a means of dividing the emerging working class and ensuring their dominance over the anti-colonial movement. There were anti-Muslim pogroms in 1930 and 1938, the latter under the banner of the Burma for Burmese Only Campaign.

Prior to the establishment of military rule in 1962, Prime Minister U Nu made Buddhism the state religion. After the military took power, the Rohingya population were singled out for discrimination as a means of trying to win support for the junta. In 1978, the army attempted to drive the Rohingya into Bangladesh.

Following the mass protests and strikes in 1988 that shook the regime to its core, the military, following its brutal crackdown on demonstrators, set up a Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana [Buddhist clergy]. Again in 1991, the army attempted to forcibly remove the Rohingya. There were anti-Muslim pogroms, led by monks, in Mandalay in 1997 and in Taungoo in 2001. The latter left 200 Muslims dead and 11 mosques destroyed.

The Burmese political establishment is once again stirring up Buddhist supremacism in order to divide working people and shore up bourgeois rule, amid deepening economic difficulties and a turn towards the US and its allies.

The junta's previous reliance on Chinese investment in resources extraction and infrastructure had created major imbalances in the economy, causing deep social unrest over questions of land use, jobs and living standards. The military carried out cosmetic "democratic" reforms in 2012, endorsed by Suu Kyi and the NLD, as a means of securing the lifting of Western economic sanctions and attracting foreign investment, especially in labour intensive industries.

Most Western investment plans, however, have been

oriented to resource projects, especially oil and natural gas. Government figures show that in the fiscal year to March, foreign direct investment was five times that of the previous year, but still amounted to just \$US1.4 billion. When combined with local investment of \$1.3 billion, the plans have the potential to support just over 82,000 jobs.

Social tensions are rising. Official unemployment is put at 5.4 percent of the 33.4 million workforce, but when underemployment and low productivity subsistence farming are taken into account, some analysts estimate the figure at more than 30 percent. Annual per capita income was just \$US1,300 in 2011, the lowest of any country in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).



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