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Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar

Asia Report N°290 | 5 September 2017

Headquarters
International Crisis Group
Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Executive Summary

The August 2017 attacks by al-Yaqin or Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which the Myanmar government has designated a terrorist organisation, have pushed Rakhine state into renewed crisis. They also are being used by radical Buddhist nationalists in the rest of the country to promote their agenda. While dynamics at play in Rakhine are mostly driven by local fears and grievances, the current crisis has led to a broader spike in anti-Muslim sentiment, raising anew the spectre of communal violence across the country that could imperil the country's transition.

Since the start of the political liberalisation in 2011, Myanmar has been troubled by an upsurge in extreme Buddhist nationalism, anti-Muslim hate speech and deadly communal violence, not only in Rakhine state but across the country. The most prominent nationalist organisation is the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly referred to by its Burmese-language acronym, MaBaTha), made up of monks, nuns and laypeople. The government has focused considerable effort on curtailing this group and pushing the top Buddhist authority in Myanmar to ban it. Yet these efforts have been largely ineffective at weakening the appeal of nationalist narratives and organisations, and have probably even enhanced them. However uncomfortable it may be, a more nuanced understanding of the sources of social support for MaBaTha, as opposed to simplistic one-dimensional portrayals, is vital if the government and Myanmar's international partners are to find effective ways to address the challenges posed by radical nationalism and reduce risks of violence.

The nature of MaBaTha and the extent of its popularity are widely misunderstood, including by the government. Far from being an organisation narrowly focused on political or anti-Muslim goals, it sees itself – and is viewed by many of its supporters – as a broad-based social and religious movement dedicated above all else to the protection and promotion of Buddhism at a time of unparalleled change and uncertainty in a country and society where historically Buddhism and the state have been inseparable.

While State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party command enormous respect and support in the political realm, there is a widespread nationalist perception that they have a generally Western liberal outlook that privileges minority rights and diversity (including religious diversity) over protection of the Buddhist faith – notwithstanding the fact that many minorities feel that the government is not taking account of their concerns. Efforts by the government to crack down on MaBaTha have only amplified the perception that they are weak protectors of the faith. If the government makes good on its threat to declare MaBaTha an unlawful association, there will be severe, likely violent, reverberations across the country.

MaBaTha is led by widely-revered and charismatic monks who have far greater legitimacy on religious issues in the eyes of many Myanmar Buddhists than the government or state religious authorities. MaBaTha also appeals to a broad range of people, including those who oppose its forays into party politics or hate speech, through its engagement in a wide range of "good causes" at the community level – from Buddhist Sunday schools, social service and secular education provision to legal aid and disaster relief. Nowhere is this clearer than in the strong support for MaBaTha

among nuns and numerous laywomen's organisations – despite MaBaTha's support for what many see as misogynistic objectives such as laws that restrict women's right to marry whom they choose. For many – male and female – MaBaTha provides not only a powerful, well-funded channel for participation in community-support activities, but also a sense of belonging and direction in a context of rapid societal change and few jobs or other opportunities for youth.

In light of the realities of simmering intercommunal tensions and outbreaks of violence linked to hate speech and nationalist provocations, the stakes for the country are extremely high. Some prominent monks and laypeople within MaBaTha espouse extreme bigoted and anti-Muslim views, and incite or condone violence in the name of protecting race and religion. In a context of tense intercommunal relations, there is a real risk that these actions could contribute to major communal violence. The biggest threat may not be MaBaTha itself, but the dynamics it has created and individuals it has empowered that may be beyond its control.

While the government must continue to take robust action against hate speech, incitement and violence, it is unlikely that confrontation and legal action will be effective in dealing with the broader phenomenon of Buddhist nationalism and groups such as MaBaTha. Indeed, these arguably may play to their advantage, given the wide resonance of MaBaTha narratives combined with the popularity of the community services provided under its banner.

In Myanmar's new, more democratic era, the debate over the proper place of Buddhism, and the role of political leadership in protecting it, is being recast. Given the deep, mutually legitimising historical relationship between the state and the clergy, this debate, which is unlikely to end soon, cannot be seen only in terms of politics and nationalism, divorced from moral and spiritual issues. The government should take control of the narrative by reframing, on its terms, the place of Buddhism in a more democratic context and setting out its own positive vision.

In parallel, it should address the underlying grievances that lead people to support exclusionary nationalist narratives, which are partly economic. A much more visible focus on the economy would give people confidence that the government is prioritising better opportunities and jobs and a more prosperous future for ordinary people. The more that people can feel they have a role to play in this, and the more channels they have to do so outside nationalist networks, the greater their sense of control over their destiny. International development actors must also recognise the diverse social role of monasteries and nunneries, including those aligned with or sympathetic to MaBaTha, and find ways to positively influence their activities and promote credible alternative channels to problematic nationalist networks.

Yangon/Brussels, 5 September 2017

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Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar

I. Introduction

Rising Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar since the start of the political transition in 2011 has prompted domestic and international concern.[1] The largest Buddhist nationalist organisation, the Association for Protection of Race and Religion (known by its Burmese-language acronym, MaBaTha) enjoys widespread grassroots support despite government-led attempts to undermine its religious authority. Forays into party politics are controversial – even within MaBaTha – but its view that Buddhism is under threat is widely shared among Myanmar Buddhists. Many members and supporters also see the organisation as primarily focused on protection and promotion of Buddhism and provision of social services, complicating government efforts to ban or weaken MaBaTha.

This report provides a detailed and nuanced understanding of the activities of MaBaTha and other nationalist groups as well as of the motivations and views of its members and supporters. Such understanding is indispensable in formulating effective policy responses.

The report is based on six months of detailed research and interviews in 2017, including: interviews with high ranking members of MaBaTha and other nationalist groups; Buddhist monks and nuns who support MaBaTha; women's groups that support MaBaTha; high ranking members of the National League for Democracy party; and civil society and human rights activists. The research also draws on Crisis Group observations of MaBaTha events and outreach activities, including rallies, dispute resolution activities, civic education, and gathering of signatures for petitions. Relevant academic and policy research has been reviewed, particularly where it draws on in-country interviews. Most of the primary interviews were conducted in the Burmese language; many of these were of female religious nationalists interviewed by female researchers. Interviews were carried out in both upper and lower parts of central Myanmar, as well as in Kayin state.

The focus on female religious nationalists was deliberate, intended to shed light on an aspect of nationalism in Myanmar that is rarely studied or discussed, and because understanding the motivations and views of female nationalists challenges as-

[1] See Crisis Group Asia Report N°251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013. For other recent Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar, see Asia Briefings N°s 149, *Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, 19 October 2016; 147, *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, 9 December 2015; 146, *Myanmar's Peace Process: A Nationwide Ceasefire Remains Elusive*, 16 September 2015; 144, *Counting the Costs: Myanmar's Problematic Census*, 15 May 2014; 143, *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?*, 22 April 2014; also Asia Reports N°s 287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017; 283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016; 282, *Myanmar's New Government: Finding Its Feet?*, 29 July 2016; 266, *Myanmar's Electoral Landscape*, 28 April 2015; and 261, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014.

sumptions commonly-held domestically and internationally about Buddhist nationalism in the country.

The report describes the rationales members have for their participation in MaBaTha and its activities. Whether or not these are cogent or fact-based, they are genuinely felt and therefore important to understand to design effective policy responses. The report does not provide a definitive account of MaBaTha membership, structure or activities, given the fluid nature of the organisation and ongoing changes in response to recent government and religious pressure. It also does not analyse the August 2017 attacks in Rakhine state by the militant group known as al-Yaqin or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the military's response, which continued at the time of publication. This serious episode and its implications will be explored in a report to be published in the fall of 2017.

II. Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar and the Region

A. *Historical Roots in Myanmar*

1. Kingdom and monarchy

Rising religious nationalism is a global phenomenon, not unique to Myanmar.[2] Although it often surprises and disheartens educated elites and local political activists, it can be seen in many democratic and democratising countries, including Myanmar's neighbouring Buddhist countries. For instance, Thailand's military junta has positioned itself as the defender of the faith to enhance its authority, and some of Sri Lanka's major parties have co-opted religious nationalism to bolster their perceived legitimacy among the Sinhalese majority.[3]

The expression of religious nationalist views in Myanmar today is informed by the country's historical legacy, particularly colonisation, regional demographic shifts and contemporary global politics. To many of the Burmese Buddhist majority, these factors suggest that the country's religious and cultural well-being is at risk and that the current government is either unable or unwilling to address the sources of threat.[4] There is also a strong millenarian current in Theravada Buddhism that the religion will inevitably decline and disappear, combined with a traditional worldview that sees the health of the religion and the strength of the polity as interdependent.[5] This creates an imperative for members of the monastic community to lead pious and patriotic laymen and women in a campaign of "virtuous defence".[6]

The relationship between the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks) and state is one that many in Myanmar believe should be symbiotic. This does not mean that the state and the Sangha are expected to be allied. Rather, the secular authority may move to purge the Sangha if they become corrupted in some way, and the Sangha might similarly intervene in secular affairs if the government becomes ineffective, weak or abusive. This constant, delicate negotiation, and the deeply-rooted historical role of Buddhism in legitimising rulers and as a key pillar of the Myanmar state significantly complicate any attempts by the current government to challenge Buddhist nationalist organisations widely seen as protecting and promoting the faith. Attempts to undermine groups like MaBaTha on the basis that monks should not act politically largely miss the point. Most Myanmar Buddhists would prefer that monks not engage in secular, political affairs, but many see their doing so as a reflection of the government's failings – not necessarily the Sangha's.

[2] "Religious nationalism" is used in this report to refer to movements that combine religious and nationalist political objectives. "Buddhist nationalism" in this report refers to Buddhist-led movements of this kind in parts of the Theravada Buddhist world, particularly Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand – which are sometimes violent and often explicitly anti-Muslim.

[3] See "Repression is feeding the Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand", *The Economist*, 10 August 2017; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°141, *Sri Lanka: Sinhala Nationalism and the Elusive Southern Consensus*, 7 November 2007.

[4] Matthew Walton, Melyn McKay and Khin Mar Mar Kyi, "Women and Myanmar's 'Religious Protection Laws'", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2015), pp. 36-49.

[5] Matthew Walton and Susan Hayward, "Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar", *Policy Studies*, 71 (Honolulu, 2014).

[6] Mikael Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka", *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-27.

2. British colonial period and independence

The British conquest was a political and moral shock to Burmese society. The colonial state withdrew traditional state support for monasteries and disrupted village economies, another source of regular, sizeable donations, compounding the monasteries' unprecedented struggles to finance their daily activities. Monastic communities were acutely affected by the period of instability and uncertainty between the British capture of lower Burma in 1852 and upper Burma in 1885, with the subsequent fall of the monarchy in Mandalay, ending a lineage of royal Buddhist patronage dating back more than a thousand years.[7]

The British move to divorce state administration from religion was seen by many Burmese Buddhists as a further sign that the teachings of the Buddha were in decline. This spurred laymen and women into action, with particular efforts to reinforce shared religious and cultural values of good manners and proper conduct. While there was some focus on the ways in which European customs actively insulted Buddhism (wearing shoes at pagodas quickly became a sensitive issue), far greater anxiety was expressed over the loss of religious and cultural education and discipline in Burmese Buddhist society: "[Boys] abandoned studying in the monasteries to attend government schools in hopes of a lucrative career as a clerk. The monks no longer held the same respect".[8]

Most colonial government positions were filled by imported Indian bureaucrats – Hindus and Muslims – rather than local elites. Indian businessmen also came to dominate some sectors of the economy, and the Chettiar moneylenders (who were Hindu) were particularly despised for taking over vast tracts of land – including some 25 per cent of agricultural land in lower Burma – when farmers were unable to service their debts during the Great Depression.[9] The resulting economic and power disparities and demographic shifts created enormous tensions between Burmese and Indians that came to a head in 1930 and again in 1938.

The 1938 violence had a particular religious dimension. One of the triggers was a book published by an Indian Muslim author, reprinted with an attachment containing "highly disparaging references to Buddhism". It is unclear whether religious or political provocateurs added this attachment, but it further inflamed communal and religious tensions. Demonstrators including monks demanded that the author be punished; if not, they threatened to treat Muslims as "enemy number one" and take action to "bring about the extermination of Muslims and the extinction of their religion and language".[10]

Shortly after, *The Sun* newspaper published an inflammatory letter by a Buddhist monk recounting the sufferings of Burmese women married to Muslims, and noting that under customary law their children lost not only their religion but also their ethnic identity.[11] Rumours spread that Muslims were preparing to destroy the revered Sule and Shwedagon pagodas, prompting 1,500 monks from the All Burma Council of Young Monks to attack Muslims and loot and burn their shops in the

[7] Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu, 2014).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Donald Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, 1965).
[10] Ibid.
[11] Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma, 1930-38* (Ithaca, 1988).

markets. Some monasteries became armed sanctuaries and storage space for loot, contrary to monastic rules. More than 4,000 people were arrested, including monks accused of violence, arson and murder.[12]

Anti-colonial movements often focused on religious and civic education rather than outright political mobilisation. The emergence of "Dhamma Schools" (Buddhist Sunday schools), currently a major focus of MaBaTha, can be traced to this period as part of an effort to stem both the loss of Buddhist culture and growing religious antipathy among youth.[13] The Buddhist Young Men's Association became a focus for efforts to preserve Buddhist Burmese culture under British rule and eventually factionalised over a disagreement about whether or not to participate in politics more explicitly.[14] Even today, secular schools teach "civic education" based heavily on Buddhist precepts and values, rather than governance and rule of law.[15] When a local NGO recently published a series of civic education textbooks that promoted religious literacy and included information on the basic tenets of four major faiths (including Buddhism), it prompted a nationalist outcry with claims it was an attempt at "Islamisation" and "religious colonialism in the name of education" followed by demands that children should be taught only about Buddhism.[16]

3. Patriotism and religion

At the end of the First World War, anti-colonial leaders established *Wunthanu* (patriotic) organisations throughout the country to mobilise the largely uneducated rural population in support of the nationalist movement. The emphasis on restoring traditional Buddhist values struck a chord with many village women who had lost their occupations and legal rights under colonial rule.[17]

In November 1919, an elite women's patriotic organisation, *Wunthanu Konmari*, was established with around 300 members, led by the wives and female relatives of prominent male nationalists as well as women entrepreneurs. Colonial authorities were concerned about women's involvement in the *Wunthanu* movement, fearing that it would further boost nationalist sentiment. In 1923, the governor of Burma reportedly stated that "the influence of women on politics in many countries has made for nationalism, and so far as I can gather it is making for it in Burma".[18] Since edu-

[12] Mikael Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka", *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-27.
[13] Matthew Walton, "What are Myanmar's Buddhist Sunday schools teaching?", *East Asia Forum*, 16 December 2014; and Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago, 2013).
[14] David I. Steinberg, "A Void in Myanmar: Civil Society in Burma", paper presented at "Strengthening Civil Society in Burma" conference (Transnational Institute and Burma Centrum Nederland, Amsterdam, 4-5 December 1997).
[15] Crisis Group interview, Phaung Daw Oo, monastic school senior staff, Mandalay, June 2017.
[16] "Nationalists oppose NGO's curriculum for including religious education", *The Irrawaddy*, 7 March 2017.
[17] This was due to the disruption of village economies as well as legal changes – for example, they lost the right to hold public office and some inheritance rights. Mya Sein, "Towards Independence in Burma: The Role of Women", *Asian Affairs* vol. 3, no.3 (1972), p. 294.
[18] Ibid, p. 295.

cation was a prerequisite for women's enfranchisement, nationalist leaders became some of the strongest advocates for female education.[19]

The way that colonial Burma was governed further solidified the role of Buddhism in the national identity. In particular, the British decision to implement indirect rule in ethnic minority border areas – leaving them under their own local chieftains – meant that minority communities were administratively separated from the central Burman state.[20] The Burmese saw this as a way both to undermine the central state and promote the formation of separate ethnic identities, including non-Buddhist ones. The independence movement thus worked to unite the country under a shared (and Burmanised) culture that was heavily influenced by Buddhist values, though it favoured more revolutionary language.[21]

Resistance to the imposition of a Burman-Buddhist identity on a diverse country has been one of the drivers of the seven-decade civil war. Prime Minister Nu's abortive attempts in the early 1960s to designate Buddhism as the state religion were divisive, and a factor behind the Kachin rebellion. They also drew criticism from Muslim and Christian religious leaders.[22] The 2008 constitution treads a careful line, recognising the "special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens" (section 361) while also acknowledging that "Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism" have adherents in the country (section 362). There is a Ministry of Religious Affairs, established in 1948, which mainly deals with Buddhist affairs.

B. *Contemporary Drivers*

1. Emergence of nationalism and violence

Since the start of the political transition in 2011, Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar has become significantly more visible. As authoritarian controls were lifted after years of repression, deep-seated grievances emerged into the open, and new freedoms of expression allowed individuals and the media to give voice to these grievances in ways that were not possible before. Newly available telecommunications combined with access to social media accelerated the spread of nationalist narratives, rumours (often of sexual violence perpetrated by Muslims against Buddhist women) and hate speech. A wave of anti-Muslim violence swept across the country starting in June 2012.[23]

The question of what sustains these dynamics, and the particular focus on Islam, is more complex. Several factors contribute to a pervasive sense of existential angst shared by Myanmar's Buddhist majority, including demographic fears, economic and cultural anxieties, and current regional dynamics.

[19] Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History* (Copenhagen, 2012).
[20] J. S. Furnivall, *Governance in Modern Burma* (New York, 1958).
[21] Matthew Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar", *Journal of Contemporary Myanmar*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1-27.
[22] The State Religion Promotion Act of August 1961, personally championed by Nu, never came into force and was repealed by General Ne Win following his 1962 coup d'état.
[23] See Crisis Group Report, *The Dark Side of Transition*, op. cit.

2. Perceived demographic and religious threats

Rakhine has long been the interface between Buddhist and Muslim Asia. There is a strong belief in Rakhine state and across Myanmar that if Buddhists in Rakhine had not protected the "Western Gate" of the country and held fast against demographic pressure from Muslim Bengal, then Myanmar and the rest of Buddhist South East Asia would have become Muslim long ago. Whether or not this claim is plausible, it is taken as true by many in Myanmar, driving fears of illegal immigration and demands that the Muslim Rohingya[24] minority in Rakhine continue to be denied recognition and rights. This has been extended more broadly to include all Muslims in Myanmar, who are increasingly seen as interlopers – even those from recognised ethnic groups such as the Kaman.[25] Thus, for example, none of the major parties fielded a single Muslim candidate in the 2015 elections, and most Muslim voters were disenfranchised.[26]

But nationalist narratives are not focused only on Rakhine. Many religious nationalists cite a mix of hyper-local incidents, such as conflicts over land, animal slaughter, or domestic abuse in addition to incidents such as the brutal rape and murder of a Muslim woman by Muslim men in Rakhine state in 2012, to justify their positions.[27] Beyond demographic fears over the "Western Gate", other oft-repeated narratives claim that Muslims across Myanmar are hoarding capital, buying up real-estate in town centres, using their wealth to woo and marry Buddhist women, then forcing their wives and children to convert to Islam through physical or economic pressure. Muslims often are described as a "cancer within", and many Burman Buddhists with religious nationalist leanings agree that "a race does not face extinction by being swallowed into the earth, but from being swallowed up by another race", an old Myanmar saying which is also the motto of the immigration ministry.[28] Other nationalists feel that unlike other faiths, Muslims are unwilling to reciprocate the religious freedoms they demand, and therefore are a threat to Buddhism.[29] These fears are strongly felt, notwithstanding that Muslims are in a small minority in Myanmar

[24] The term "Rohingya" is highly contested within Myanmar, because it is perceived as a claim of indigenous ethnic status by a community that most Rakhine Buddhists, indeed most people in Myanmar, regard as more recent interlopers. It is used in this report not to imply endorsement of any particular historical narrative or political claim but because it is the term that community overwhelmingly refers to itself by, and because other terms such as "Muslims from Rakhine state" are less precise (several Muslim communities in the state do not identify as "Rohingya").

[25] Myanmar law recognises 135 indigenous ethnic groups, a flawed and controversial list drawn up in the 1980s under military rule, and seen as divisive by many ethnic people. See Crisis Group Report, *Counting the Costs: Myanmar's Problematic Census*, op. cit.

[26] See Crisis Group Report, *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, op. cit., p. 2.

[27] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017; and Crisis Group interviews, council member of women's MaBaTha (Upper Division), February-June 2017. See also Matt Schissler, Matthew Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi, "Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making, and Memory in Myanmar", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2017), pp. 376-395. The murder of the woman (Thida Htwe) sparked the violence in Rakhine state in 2012 and has become a nationalist cause célèbre (see Crisis Group, "Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing communal bloodshed and building better relations", 12 June 2012).

[28] See, for example, the dated immigration ministry website at http://bit.ly/259WAfy.

[29] Crisis Group interviews, vice principal of a nunnery, Sagaing Region, February-June 2017.

as a whole, comprising perhaps 4 per cent of the population, while Buddhists are 88 per cent and Christians 6 per cent.[30]

The debate over whether the current Myanmar government is able to provide for the spiritual needs of the Buddhist polity primarily hinges on whether the government is seen as willing to institutionalise the "protection" of Buddhism and on its perceived weakness (or even complicity) in the face of an "Islamic threat".[31] Moves to address human rights issues are seen by many religious nationalists as tantamount to enabling Islamic encroachment.[32] This means that international and domestic views around the status and treatment of Muslims (and the Rohingya in particular) are in many ways irreconcilable. Government policy statements that attempt to calm nationalist agitation by emphasising the importance of democratic pluralism are read by many Burman Buddhists as ceding cultural and political power to a belligerent religious minority that would not hesitate to enshrine its own religious views into law if given the opportunity.

3. Economic and cultural anxieties

The economic networks that developed as a result of colonial-era immigration from South Asia have persisted in the form of a business class of traders with strong cross-border ties. There is a common perception that these communities only do business with each other, sharing access to markets and capital only within their own faith communities; the 969 boycott movement against Muslim businesses (see section III.A) was a direct response to this. Buddhist nationalists express similar concerns regarding the Chinese business community, particularly in Mandalay and Taunggyi.[33]

The combination of nationalist concerns over Buddhist religious and cultural education, economic protectionism and inter-religious marriage means that groups like MaBaTha focus not only on perceived slights to their religion and religious community, but also on behaviours Buddhists see as incompatible with a safe, peaceful society. This helps explain their widespread support for the package of "protection of race and religion laws" adopted in 2015 (see section III.B below). Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar is not just about promoting the faith, but also protecting the culture. This makes it impossible to draw a clear distinction between political and non-political nationalist activism.

4. Regional dynamics

In part, nationalist views reflect a growing awareness in Myanmar of regional and global dynamics.[34] For example, the notion that some Buddhist monks in southern Thailand must engage in armed struggle against Muslim militants is highly resonant, and something that people living in Myanmar's south-eastern borderlands in particu-

[30] The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, Union Report: Religion, Census Report Volume 2-C, Department of Population, July 2016, section 5. The reliability of the Muslim figures has been questioned by some analysts and Muslim leaders.
[31] Gravers, op. cit.
[32] See Walton and Hayward, op. cit.
[33] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[34] Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Oxford, 2002).

lar are aware of through trade and migration.[35] Female religious nationalists in Kayin state were resolute in their belief that it was the lay community's role to ensure that monks were protected from ever having to take on such a role – and that use of force was undesirable, but not inherently problematic to the faith, in cases of self-defence.[36]

Religious exchanges with Sri Lanka – and with the Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena in particular – also have reinforced nationalist narratives and fears of a global Islamist terrorist threat, as well as acceptance of the concept of defensive violence. There are echoes of Sinhalese characterisations of the "Tamil threat" in Myanmar nationalist beliefs that the Muslim minority is the real aggressor given the nature and growth of global Islam. In Sri Lanka today, Bodu Bala Sena has shifted focus from the Tamil threat to that of global Islam, with worrying attempts to build anti-Muslim alliances with nationalist groups in the region. Buddhist women, particularly nuns, who travel to Sri Lanka for religious education appear more likely to accept or encourage the direct participation of Buddhist monks in politics, and cite Sri Lankan history as doctrinal justification for the use of defensive violence.[37]

The notion that Islam threatens Buddhism around the region appears frequently in religious nationalist materials in Myanmar. The Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001 is often cited as an example of Muslim cruelty, violence and intolerance; the Taliban's 2007 attacks on Buddhist relics and ancient university grounds in Pakistan are also sometimes referenced.[38]

The idea that Buddhism is an inherently peaceful and non-proselytising religion, and therefore susceptible to oppression by more aggressive faiths, is a recurrent theme across Myanmar. The feeling that Islam is especially pernicious, given the purported tendency to enact Islamic law once a majority is achieved, frustrates Buddhists who believe that their faith has suffered for its tolerance of other religions. This, together with the perception that Islam is inherently violent, is a potent driver of contemporary Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. As far afield as Loikaw, the capital of remote Kayah state, young people showed images of Islamic State beheadings on their mobile phones to explain their fears, specifically in relation to National League for Democracy (NLD) government leadership and its failure to tackle a perceived Muslim threat.[39]

[35] Michael Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford, 2011).
[36] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017.
[37] Crisis Group interviews, principal, vice principal and teaching nun at a nunnery, Sagaing region, February-June 2017.
[38] Crisis Group review of MaBaTha Facebook posts, 2015-2017; and interview with high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), August 2017.
[39] Crisis Group discussion with young women, Loikaw, 2015.

III. The Rise of MaBaTha

A. *Origins of the Organisation*

The recent resurgence of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar was spearheaded in part by the "969" movement, which first became prominent in the southern city of Mawlamyine in 2011. 969 is numerological shorthand for the special attributes of Buddha and his teachings and a riposte to the number "786", a folk Islam representation of the Basmala long used by Muslims in Myanmar and elsewhere to identify halal restaurants and Muslim-owned shops.[40] The 969 movement was led by prominent monks including Ashin Wirathu and Ashin Wimala and was particularly vocal in its extremist rhetoric, making claims of a Muslim plot to take over the country and of schemes to pay Muslims for marrying and converting Buddhist women.[41] These dire warnings combined with a simple message to the faithful to "buy Buddhist" resonated strongly and were spread widely in the country through DVDs and 969 stickers. Yet the movement remained decentralised, with no infrastructure beyond the monastic economies of individual member monks.

Wirathu had begun preaching in 2001 about the rising threat presented by Islam and was arrested two years later and sentenced to 25 years in jail for inciting deadly violence in his home town of Kyaukse by distributing inflammatory anti-Muslim pamphlets; he was freed in 2011 as part of a broad amnesty by then-President Thein Sein.[42] He and the 969 movement revived old prejudices: a British colonial inquiry into the 1938 riots noted that "one of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of Burmese was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular".[43]

In late-2013, the 969 movement was effectively banned by the Sangha Council, the government-appointed body of monks that oversees and regulates the Buddhist clergy.[44] In the announcement, the Sangha Council said nothing about links between the 969 movement's inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and subsequent outbreaks of deadly violence, but focused on the movement's unauthorised use of Buddhist symbolism. This was not an outright dismissal of the group's ideology, but rather reflected the Sangha Council's frustration with the 969 movement's lobbying for the enactment of the protection of race and religion laws (see below) – not because the council considered the laws unnecessary or inappropriate, but rather because the protection and promotion of religion comes under the remit of the Sangha Council and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Members of the 969 movement rejected not only the legitimacy of the ban, but of the Sangha Council in general, which they stat-

[40] The Basmala is the name of the Islamic phrase "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful".

[41] Crisis Group interview, Ashin Wirathu, Mandalay, August 2013. "Ultranationalist monk says NLD govt 'better step down'", *The Irrawaddy*, 17 July 2017. The subtitled video of a sermon by Wirathu has been deleted from YouTube. See also Crisis Group Report, *The Dark Side of Transition*, op. cit., section IV.

[42] Andrew R. C. Marshall, "Myanmar gives official blessing to anti-Muslim monks", Reuters Special Report, 27 June 2013.

[43] Burma Riot Inquiry Committee, *Interim Report* (Rangoon, 1939).

[44] More formally, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee.

ed was formed by the previous military regime to control the monkhood, and which they saw as serving the interests of the government not the faith.[45] Such views are widely held in Myanmar, though MaBaTha's highest-ranking monks tell members that disparaging the Sangha Council is bad *karma*.[46]

These actions against the 969 movement prompted it to evolve into the somewhat more formal structure of MaBaTha. Though founded a few months earlier in June 2013, MaBaTha was not particularly prominent until January 2014, when its upper Myanmar branch was established in Mandalay. Its founding monks then stated publicly that the organisation was intended not only to support the 969 movement's ideology, but also to rein in outspoken "younger monks" (including Wirathu) who were prompting domestic and international criticism. In addition, MaBaTha's structure was specifically designed to give official roles to laymen and women, which in turn created ambiguity about the Sangha Council's jurisdiction over the group.[47] MaBaTha immediately picked up where the 969 movement had left off, rallying for the adoption of the race and religion laws and extending awareness of nationalist ideology – and the MaBaTha brand – far into rural and remote parts of the country, and making it by far the most prominent and nationally-known Buddhist nationalist group.[48]

B. *Protection of Race and Religion Laws*

After a huge lobbying effort made them a significant electoral issue, the four laws were enacted in May and August 2015, in the lead-up to the November 2015 elections. The laws are as follows:

- The Population Control Law (May 2015) gives the government the power to implement (non-coercive) population control measures in areas designated by the president with high population density, growth, maternal and child mortality, poverty or food insecurity. No such areas have been designated, but the provisions would appear to apply particularly to Muslim-majority northern Rakhine state where coercive local orders that limited Muslim couples to two children have been in place in the past.[49]
- The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law (August 2015) provides that any marriage of a Buddhist woman to a non-Buddhist man requires an application to be submitted to the township registrar, who will display it publicly for fourteen

[45] "Burma Buddhist Committee Bans Anti-Muslim Organizations", Reuters, 11 September 2013.
[46] Crisis Group interview, high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), June 2017. Here, *karma* is used not in its colloquial English sense of "fate" or "destiny", but rather the Buddhist doctrinal concept that the sum of a person's intentional actions determines their future states of existence.
[47] Matthew Walton and Aung Tun, "What the State Sangha Committee actually said about MaBaTha", Tea Circle blog (teacircleoxford.com), 29 July 2016.
[48] See Walton, McKay and Khin Mar Mar Kyi, op. cit.; and Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017. Other Buddhist nationalist groups, some more extreme than MaBaTha, include the Patriotic Monks Union and Myo-chit Thamegga.
[49] For example, Regional Order 1/2005 in parts of Rakhine state, which has not been enforced for several years, but in the past made marriage permission for Muslims (which also was required) contingent on a signed undertaking to "limit the number of children" (usually to two).

days. After that time, the marriage can be approved, provided no objection has been lodged on the basis that the parties are not of age or sound mind or that there has been coercion. An official publicly-accessible registry of such marriages is to be kept. The non-Buddhist man must allow the wife to freely follow her Buddhist faith, not attempt to convert her and allow any children to freely follow the religion of their choice. He must not insult Buddhism in any way. If the non-Buddhist man violates any provision, he is liable to three years imprisonment or a fine and forfeiture of joint property and custody of children. The law supersedes the 1954 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act, from which it differs in only a few provisions, but which had fallen into disuse.[50]

- The Religious Conversion Law (August 2015) provides that a person wanting to convert to another religion must be eighteen years old, convert voluntarily and apply to a township Religious Conversion Scrutinising and Registration Board for permission. The person shall be interviewed by the board to ascertain whether he or she has a genuine belief in the religion as well as knowledge of its marriage, divorce, division of property and inheritance practices.
- The Monogamy Law (August 2015) makes it a criminal offense to have more than one spouse or to live with an unmarried partner who is not a spouse or to engage in marital infidelity. There is no provision for bail and the penalty is up to seven years imprisonment. While the law was championed by nationalists citing polygamous practices in Muslim communities, most cases under the law have been brought by Buddhist women against unfaithful husbands.[51]

The laws drew considerable international attention, as they appeared to have discriminatory intent and to be targeted at Muslims, potentially violating not only Myanmar's constitutional provisions on religious freedom and non-discrimination, but also its treaty obligations under various international human rights conventions.

MaBaTha supporters argue that the four laws were a formalisation of existing customary law. The strong perception among many Myanmar Buddhists is that Buddhist women in inter-religious marriages – particularly those married to Muslim men – lose many of their rights since matrimonial disputes are adjudicated on the basis of customary law relating to the husband's religion. This longstanding concern was the impetus behind the 1939 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act, replaced by a 1954 act of the same name. Nationalists saw these laws as being weak in their lack of application and their content, particularly regarding prohibitions on polygamy and forced conversion. Although the new law MaBaTha supporters are pushing is very similar, it reaffirms the relevance of these concerns.[52]

Domestic and international opposition to the four laws tends to emphasise the restrictions they place on women's rights and freedoms. Yet some women are strong

[50] Melissa Crouch, "Constructing Religion by Law in Myanmar", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2015), pp. 1-11.
[51] Thin Lei Win, "Law aimed at Muslims in Myanmar strikes Buddhist targets", Myanmar Now, 16 December 2015.
[52] Crisis Group interview, prominent human rights activist, Mandalay, May 2017, high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), June 2017. See also, Melyn McKay, "Rights law the wrong move?", NewMandala.org, 17 March 2017; and Crouch, op. cit.

proponents of the laws and nuns and laywomen led marches and signature-gathering campaigns in support of the legislation, raising popular awareness of and support for the draft laws. The support of female nationalists stems primarily from a commitment to outlawing polygamy and strongly-felt concerns over forced conversion, which they see as the likely (if not inevitable) by-product of Muslim-Buddhist marriages.[53]

These concerns over polygamy and forced conversion are also driving opposition to an upcoming bill to protect women from violence. The Violence Against Women and Girls Bill was drafted in consultation with Myanmar gender experts and activists and international advisers, with the intention of protecting women from all forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, marital rape, sexual violence, harassment by stalking, harassment in the work place and public places and violent traditional and customary practices.[54] The bill has not yet been publicly released or scheduled for legislative debate,[55] but MaBaTha supporters are deeply concerned that it could weaken the polygamy ban and religious conversion law. They have undertaken to protest the bill if it overrides or alters the four laws.[56] Even if it does not repeal or amend those laws, any failure to explicitly prohibit polygamy and forced conversion will be interpreted by Buddhist nationalists – and nationalist women in particular – as de facto weakening the race and religion laws. Nationalists will take this as a signal that the NLD is willing to sacrifice moral and religious imperatives in order to appear tolerant and appease Muslims at the expense of the majority – and Buddhist women, in particular.

C. *A Foray into Party Politics*

In the lead up to the 2015 elections, MaBaTha leaders were intentionally ambiguous in their party-political stance. The MaBaTha Chairman, Ashin Thiloka, advised followers to vote for candidates who would "protect" the race and religion laws and to avoid those who would "destroy" them – implying that they should not vote NLD. Others, notably Ashin Wirathu, were willing to be more direct in telling voters that the establishment Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was more supportive of the MaBaTha agenda and stronger in its protection of race and religion than the NLD.[57]

Although MaBaTha appeared to have a clear preference for the USDP and expressed great scepticism about the NLD's nationalist credentials, this was not organisational doctrine. MaBaTha should be seen as a fairly loose coalition of subnational chapters, monasteries and members or supporters whose views are generally aligned, but without any orthodoxy or top-down decisions being imposed. Member monks had close personal relations with numerous political parties, including the NLD; and both USDP and NLD politicians made donations to MaBaTha-affiliated

[53] Crisis Group interviews, several female MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017. See also McKay, op. cit.

[54] These experts and activists now express concern about the bill's current form, which reportedly shies away from tackling harmful legal provisions and cultural practices – for example, failing to ease the current ban on abortion in the case of pregnancies after rape.

[55] Crisis Group interview, senior NLD representative, Naypyitaw, July 2017.

[56] "Tensions ahead over changes to 'race and religion' laws", *Frontier Myanmar*, 20 February 2017.

[57] "MaBaTha, USDP: election bedfellows?", *Myanmar Times*, 30 September 2015.

monasteries.[58] While this could be construed as an attempt to buy MaBaTha support, it can also be seen as a reaffirmation of the historical political and financial connections between the state and Buddhist clergy.

A number of lay MaBaTha members were NLD supporters. Many hoped that the organisation could press the NLD to take a stronger nationalist stance once in office,[59] even as others feared that its language on human rights and tolerance reflected Western pluralist views rejected by many Myanmar Buddhists.[60] MaBaTha issued strong warnings that attempts to roll back the race and religion laws would be met with staunch opposition. Faced with widespread doubts about its nationalist credentials and claims that it was "pro-Muslim", the NLD decided to follow the other major parties in not fielding any Muslim candidate in the election.[61]

The election results came as shock to many nationalists. Not only did the NLD win by a landslide, routing the incumbent USDP, but other nationalist parties and independent candidates failed to win any seats, and only received a tiny number of votes.[62] It was clear that while MaBaTha had a great deal of popular support and its leading monks commanded considerable respect, its foray into electoral politics had failed. At the ballot box, widespread adoration for Aung San Suu Kyi and hatred of the former military regime, with which the USDP was closely associated, trumped nationalist concerns.

This did not necessarily imply a major loss of support for MaBaTha and its nationalist ideologies, merely a rejection of its party-political intervention. However, once the extent of the NLD landslide became clear, MaBaTha was put on the back foot, adopting a wait-and-see approach.[63] This lack of visible MaBaTha activity led many national and international observers to conclude that MaBaTha had been neutralised by the election outcome.[64] Yet, while certainly chastened, the continuing broad popular support for Buddhist nationalist narratives suggests that the NLD landslide was not a rejection of MaBaTha's ideology. The organisation's silence probably was due to its assessment of the new political landscape and because the new government did not immediately move to confront nationalist ideology – for example, by seeking to repeal the race and religion laws. Indeed, MaBaTha's pre-election statement that their objective was to protect the laws rather than support a

[58] Crisis Group interview, high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), June 2017.
[59] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017.
[60] Crisis Group interview, male members of Myo-chit Thamegga, Yangon, May 2017.
[61] "NLD blocked Muslim candidates to appease MaBaTha: party member", *The Irrawaddy*, 31 August 2015.
[62] The NLD won some 57 per cent of the popular vote and 79 per cent of elected seats. The USDP won only 9 per cent of elected seats, and parties running on an ultra-Buddhist-nationalist platform (such as the National Development Party) fared far worse: none won a seat, and none of their candidates reached the 12.5 per cent thresholds required for return of their deposit (most gained between zero and 5 per cent). Even more striking are the results for three members of the MaBaTha-linked Myanmar Nationalist Network, who contested seats as independent candidates and received vanishingly little support – between 0.3 and 1.3 per cent of the votes in their respective constituencies. (Crisis Group analysis of 2015 election results.)
[63] Crisis Group interviews, pro-MaBaTha monk, Sagaing Region, February-May 2017.
[64] See, for example, Andray Abrahamian, "Myanmar's MaBaTha fades with barely a whimper", *Lowy Interpreter*, 2 August 2016; and Thulasi Wigneswaran, "Managing a declining threat", New-Mandala.org, 6 December 2016.

particular party was likely an accurate representation of the views of at least some of its leaders.[65]

D. *New Action by the Sangha Council*

In July 2016, the Sangha Council issued a statement that MaBaTha was not a "legal" Buddhist organisation.[66] Commentators and the media almost universally construed this as a ban on the group's activities or at the very least a repudiation of MaBaTha by the state's high Buddhist authority.[67] However, a careful examination of the statement shows that it only indicated that MaBaTha had not formally registered itself as a Sangha organisation. This can be interpreted in several ways: as a response to NLD calls to dissolve "unnecessary and redundant" Sangha organisations;[68] a move to delegitimise MaBaTha's outspoken monks; a warning that the organisation was in a precarious position; or even a desire to place MaBaTha and its activities under civil rather than religious jurisdiction to facilitate legal action.[69] MaBaTha responded by noting that it was formed with the support of individual Sangha Council members and did not need to register formally as it was not a purely monastic organisation.[70]

The deadly October 2016 attacks on Border Guard Police bases in northern Rakhine state by a new Rohingya militant group gave new oxygen to nationalist groups.[71] This brought the perceived threat of violent Islam to the forefront of national consciousness and anti-Muslim sentiment spiked. The military response to the attacks was heavy-handed, with allegations of extrajudicial killings, rape and violence that the UN characterised as "the very likely commission of crimes against humanity". Some 75,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh.[72] Separately, on 29 January 2017, a prominent Muslim advisor to the NLD, Ko Ni, was assassinated outside Yangon International Airport.[73]

[65] "MaBaTha monks declare political independence", *Myanmar Times*, 27 June 2014; and "MaBaTha justifies religion in politics", *Myanmar Times*, 5 October 2015. One of its most senior members, Ashin Parmaukkha, resigned following the election, stating: "I decided to quit MaBaTha because I didn't like it when MaBaTha was making speeches ... to vote for a certain party during the election campaign period .... I want MaBaTha to stand free from party politics". "Myanmar Buddhist monk may have plans to build monastery near Anglican Church", *Radio Free Asia*, 7 June 2016.
[66] "State-backed monks' council decries MaBaTha as 'unlawful'", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 July 2016.
[67] For example, "State Sangha disowns Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion", *Myanmar Times*, 13 July 2016.
[68] The NLD chief minister for Yangon in July 2016 referred to MaBaTha as "unnecessary and redundant", and received the full backing of his party amid nationalist demands for his ouster. See Matthew Walton and Aung Tun, op. cit.
[69] Ibid.
[70] "MaBaTha suffers another blow as defamation suit filed against U Wirathu", *Myanmar Times*, 14 July 2016. The response echoed language used in the wake of the ban on the 969 movement.
[71] Crisis Group Asia Report N°283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016.
[72] Ibid.; "Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016", Flash Report, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 3 February 2017.
[73] "Myanmar Assassination Shows Urgent Need for Unity Against Hate Crimes", Crisis Group statement, 29 January 2017.

MaBaTha and other nationalist groups returned to the spotlight. An aid shipment for Rakhine state sent by the Malaysian government was protested vigorously by members of various Buddhist nationalist groups, notably the fiery young Myo-chit Thamegga, a group whose membership overlaps with MaBaTha, though it is reportedly beyond their direct control.[74] The investigation into Ko Ni's assassination considered, but ultimately ruled out, MaBaTha involvement.[75] Communal tensions rose in neighbourhoods of Yangon with large Muslim populations. Violent nationalist protests demanded local authorities shut down two Muslim schools that doubled as prayer centres. Nationalists also insisted that police raid an apartment they alleged to be a safe house for illegal Muslim migrants (implied to be Rohingya from Rakhine state); the mob turned violent when the raid uncovered no evidence.[76]

In addition to government legal action against some of the agitators and protestors, the spectre of renewed communal violence spurred the Sangha Council (likely under government direction) to issue a new statement, this time indicating more clearly that MaBaTha was in violation of the Sangha Law.[77] The decision – issued on 23 May, just days before the group's planned four-year anniversary conference – banned use of the MaBaTha name and logo and required that all MaBaTha signs and placards be removed by 15 July. It used language that hinted at similarities between MaBaTha and other illegal Buddhist factions whose proponents have been prosecuted and imprisoned.[78] The decision was conveyed at a meeting with MaBaTha central committee leaders, who signed their acceptance.[79] Despite initial reports that MaBaTha's 27-28 May conference would be cancelled, it instead became an opportunity to discuss responses to the decision and possible legal implications for disobeying it.[80]

During the conference, legal experts presented arguments on why the Sangha Law did not apply to MaBaTha, including because it was an organisation with both monks and lay members.[81] MaBaTha leaders concurred, but indicated that they would follow the Sangha Council's decision so as to avoid "weakening the religion at a time of considerable threats to its well-being".[82] While the idea of Buddhism being under threat in Myanmar may seem incomprehensible to most observers, it reflects a strong mille-

[74] Crisis Group interview, Myo-chit Thamegga member and "No Rohingya" protest leader, Yangon, May 2017. See also "Aid ship to help Rohingyas arrives in Myanmar, greeted by protest", Reuters, 9 February 2017.
[75] "'Patriotism' behind U Ko Ni assassination, says minister", *Frontier Myanmar*, 25 February 2017.
[76] "After court date, extremist nationalists strike again in Yangon", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 May 2017.
[77] Document circulated at MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017, referring to the Law Relating to the Sangha Organisation, 1990 (State Law and Order Restoration Council Law No. 20/90), specifically sections 8 (prohibiting the formation of new Buddhist sects), 9 (prohibiting the formation of unauthorised Sangha organisations) and 10 (prohibiting agitation, speeches or writings denigrating Sangha organisations).
[78] "The monk in blue robes", *Frontier Myanmar*, 25 April 2016.
[79] Statement by Ashin Thiloka, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.
[80] Document circulated at MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.
[81] Legal presentations, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.
[82] Statement by Ashin Thiloka, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.

narian current in Theravada Buddhism that the current Buddha era could end in "a single day" if neglected by those in power.[83] The conference took three key steps:

- It was announced that MaBaTha would respond to the Sangha Council ban by changing its name to the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. MaBaTha leadership explained that the Sangha Council had only rejected use of the name "MaBaTha" and had not abolished the organisation.[84]
- Maung Thway Chun, editor of MaBaTha's journal and then-chairman of another Buddhist nationalist group, Dhamma Wunthanu Rakhita, indicated that this group would take on a more prominent leadership role and debated whether they would encourage more militant activities. In the end, the conference stated that while they would not explicitly promote violence, neither would they "allow the race and religion to suffer".[85]
- On the final day of the conference, Maung Thway Chun announced that he was withdrawing from Dhamma Wunthanu Rakhita, MaBaTha and the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation in order to start a nationalist political party named "135 Nationalities United", a decision he presented as part of a long-term strategy rather than as a direct response to the Sangha Council statement. At the time of his announcement all monks and nuns had been removed from the event hall, an acknowledgement of the legal prohibition on involvement of religious associations in party politics.[86]

Following the conference, MaBaTha's regional leaders organised follow-on meetings in their respective areas to share updates on the Yangon discussions, drawing large numbers of monks – 700 in the case of the Kayin state meeting.[87] Many of these meetings ended with announcements that the branches would not accept the Sangha Council decision, regardless of the views of MaBaTha headquarters. Currently, only three of eight main branches reportedly have accepted the decision – Yangon, Bago and Yamethin – and will adopt the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation rebranding; the rest will continue to use the MaBaTha name and logo.

Given that the rebranding would have had limited impact on the organisation's structure or activities, refusing to drop the MaBaTha name is a clear signal of defiance against the Sangha Council and the government. The refusal seemingly has broad understanding or support across the organisation, including in those branches

[83] Ashin Thiloka, as quoted in Crisis Group interview with high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), Yangon, June 2017.
[84] Statement by Ashin Thiloka, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017. An entire afternoon was dedicated to a question and answer session concerned with the likely legal ramifications (and possible legal defence) of continuing to use the MaBaTha name despite the council's decision. Legal presentations, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.
[85] Maung Thway Chun statement, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017. In the lead-up to the conference, Dhamma Wunthanu Rakhita had reportedly received a substantial donation from a prominent MaBaTha supporter. Crisis Group interviews with MaBaTha women's council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[86] Ibid. The prohibition on involvement in party politics was included in all Myanmar's post-independence constitutions and is provided in its current election laws.
[87] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017.

that acquiesced in the name change.[88] On 16 July, nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu released a video on Facebook calling on the government to step down and "hand over the power to those who can well handle the country".[89]

As the 15 July deadline passed, the government warned through state media that MaBaTha members who failed to follow the Sangha Council's decision would be prosecuted under civil law.[90] A senior NLD representative clarified that action would be taken in two stages. First, monks would be disciplined through their local monastic authority, and if that failed to secure compliance, MaBaTha could be declared unlawful under the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act.[91] This designation would allow for criminal charges to be brought against both leadership and members, as well as potentially against any other person who has contact with them.

Although the NLD representative suggested MaBaTha was "on the brink" of such a designation, it would be an extraordinarily inflammatory move to put a Buddhist organisation with considerable public support and led by revered monks in the same category as belligerent armed groups and terrorist organisations. It also would be ineffective in quashing MaBaTha activities, given the ease with which the organisation could circumvent the designation by rebranding. At the time of this report, MaBaTha and its supporters appear to have temporarily halted most activities as they seek to better understand their legal position and the government's resolve, but this should be interpreted more as a regrouping than a defeat.

E. *MaBaTha's Organisational Structure*

Although more institutionalised than the 969 movement, MaBaTha has a highly decentralised structure based around a group of monasteries, monks and laypersons who share a commitment to the protection and promotion of Buddhism. This amorphous structure makes it difficult to enforce any ban. The central committee, situated within Yangon's Insein Ywama Monastery, has only limited authority over regional branches and personalities. Some of the most visible and well-loved MaBaTha monks, such as Ashin Wirathu, have deceptively low-ranking titles such as manager.[92] Eight MaBaTha chapters are currently the most active.[93] Each has a prominent monastery, usually several revered monks, and often an affiliated women's organisation comprised of nuns and/or laywomen. They have fluid relationships with other nationalist groups.

Though MaBaTha has numerous chapters and smaller local offices, it has no shared accounting system, with funds being handled by individual monasteries and

[88] Crisis Group interviews, several MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.
[89] Video available at http://bit.ly/2w29SPr. See also "Ultranationalist monk says NLD govt 'better step down'", *The Irrawaddy*, 17 July 2017.
[90] "Action to be taken inevitably against those who don't comply with Sangha Committee's decisions", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 15 July 2017, p. 2.
[91] Crisis Group interview, senior NLD representative, Naypyitaw, July 2017.
[92] "Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar", C4ADS, 2016.
[93] These are, in descending order of prominence: Yangon, Mandalay/Sagaing, Mottama/Mawlamyine, Yamethin, Meiktila, Hpa-an, Taunggyi and Bago. Crisis Group interviews, MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.

members.[94] The organisation denies that it is well-funded.[95] MaBaTha used to have a formal membership sign-up process, but this has not been maintained in many areas and the group tends to work through phone-tree networks rather than any central mobilisation system.[96]

MaBaTha often has helped coordinate other religious nationalist movements. In the wake of the Sangha Council ban, MaBaTha (and its Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation rebrand) has positioned itself as an umbrella organisation for nationalist groups, including remnants of the 969 movement, Dhamma Wunthanu Rakhita, and various *myo-chit* ("nationalist", or literally "love for one's own race") youth groups.[97] Yet while MaBaTha is influential, its control over these other groups is limited and largely dependent on personal relationships. This will be particularly true of the emergent "135 Nationalities United" political party, which is controversial among MaBaTha members concerned about blurring the lines between social and religious work on the one hand and party-political activities on the other.[98] As in 2015, MaBaTha monks probably will support whichever political party appears most likely to support the nationalist cause in future elections. Support for 135 Nationalities United is not a foregone conclusion, but any perceived NLD attempt to pressure or unfairly treat that party could be leveraged by MaBaTha into a powerful political narrative.

[94] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[95] Wirathu statement, MaBaTha conference, Yangon, May 2017.
[96] Crisis Group interviews, numerous MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.
[97] Presentation by MaBaTha women's council member to Sagaing nuns, June 2017.
[98] Crisis Group interview, high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), June 2017.

IV. Explaining MaBaTha's Popularity

A. *Social and Cultural Activities*

Though international media have tended to portray MaBaTha as a political entity, members and many supporters see it as having a much broader role; this is particularly true among women, who often are raised to avoid politics.[99] Today, when asked about MaBaTha work, members typically highlight a range of activities for the "promotion and protection of Buddhism", which further enhance grassroots support for the organisation:[100]

- *Promoting shared Buddhist cultural values*. These are understood as originating from Buddhist moral precepts. Maintaining them is seen as critical for the social and spiritual health of the community. Educating members of society on these shared values is viewed as ensuring peaceful coexistence between people with different ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. Where the secular state fails to provide this "civic education", the monastic order may intervene. This explains why, while MaBaTha is widely seen by non-supporters as spreading hate speech, intolerance and conflict, the vast majority of its supporters believe the organisation's very existence promotes peace in plural communities.[101]
- *Providing a social safety net*. Historically, monasteries have played this role, taking in the poor, sick and elderly, providing food and health care. Most monasteries have never been solely concerned with theological activities. Those that are often suffer from chronic lack of funding.[102] As MaBaTha rose to prominence, member monks increasingly conducted their usual monastic social works under the MaBaTha banner.[103]
- *Disaster relief*. This is a core focus of MaBaTha's work in Myanmar and is also used as a means of building its international Buddhist connections.[104] MaBaTha members commonly mention the way that Christian organisations mobilised to provide aid to communities following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which they see as a means of proselytisation. Some say that impact was enhanced by the fact that Christian assistance is provided for longer-term recovery rather than just emergency needs, something MaBaTha aims to emulate.[105] MaBaTha provided significant support to communities affected by the devastating 2015 floods in upper Myanmar, leveraging its broad membership base to quickly identify communities in need and raise funds; visits by high profile monks to deliver aid in affected areas gave MaBaTha considerable visibility.[106] MaBaTha monks have also taken a

[99] Crisis Group interview, Phaung Daw Oo monastic school senior staff, Mandalay, June 2017.
[100] Crisis Group interview, women's MaBaTha council member, Yangon, May 2017.
[101] Crisis Group interviews, numerous MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.
[102] Turner, op. cit.
[103] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017.
[104] MaBaTha sent aid to Nepal after the devastating 2015 earthquake, and more recently to Sri Lankan nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena to support victims of the May 2017 flooding. Crisis Group interviews, nun teacher, Sagaing Region, May-June 2017.
[105] Crisis Group discussion, vice principal of a nunnery and her family, Sagaing region, June 2017.
[106] "Sitagu Sayadaw, MaBaTha raise millions", *Myanmar Times*, 6 August 2015.

prominent role in fundraising for the restoration of hundreds of ancient pagodas in Bagan that were damaged in the 2016 earthquake.[107]

- *Education*. Monks and nuns in Myanmar have a long tradition of providing education for underprivileged and rural youth. Monastic education was the norm in the pre-colonial period, and many Myanmar Buddhists bemoan the fact that the expansion of government-run secular schools means that understanding of Pali (the language of the Buddhist canon) is markedly lower in younger generations.[108] Education is one of MaBaTha's most prominent activities, in particular through its Dhamma School Foundation, launched in 2012, which operates a large network of Buddhist Sunday schools (Dhamma schools) across the country. Many Dhamma School teachers are also members of MaBaTha, particularly MaBaTha women.[109] MaBaTha also sponsors a high school in Hlegu township (Yangon region), built in mid-2016 and serving some 200 students. It teaches the standard high school curriculum, but also includes Buddhist cultural and civic education programs taught by monks. A second such school is reportedly in the making near Mandalay.[110]
- *Dispute resolution and "women's rights"*. Monastic communities often use their moral authority to resolve disputes and promote harmony in their communities. MaBaTha regards outreach trips around the country to "protect women" as a proactive part of such community work.[111] Across upper Myanmar in particular, women are actively engaged in community-level efforts to inform rural Buddhist women about their marriage rights and the right to practice their Buddhist faith.[112] While this could be seen as spreading anti-Muslim sentiment, nuns and laywomen conducting this outreach say it is designed to protect women's freedom of choice – specifically regarding whom they marry and how they practice their religion. This could morph into anti-Muslim narratives, however, given the widely-held belief – particularly in nationalist circles – that Muslim men use polygamy to force their Buddhist wives to convert, with the threat that otherwise they will take a Muslim second wife who under Muslim customary law would receive any inheritance.[113] However, MaBaTha women also reference the precolonial prevalence of Buddhist polygamy as evidence that the laws also are designed to protect women's progress and equality within Buddhist society. Many women members specifically cite feminism as a reason for joining MaBaTha, including nuns, who see women's protection as part of their religious duty.[114]

[107] Crisis Group interviews, nun teacher, Sagaing Region, May-June 2017. Indeed, many MaBaTha supporters claim the NLD opposes the group because it is so much more effective in disaster relief.
[108] G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824-1942* (London, 1946); and Turner, op. cit.
[109] Crisis Group focus group discussion, women's MaBaTha members (Upper Division), January 2017.
[110] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017; and "New MaBaTha school teaches children to 'protect race and religion'", *Mizzima News*, 4 June 2016.
[111] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[112] Crisis Group interviews, vice principal of a nunnery, Sagaing region, February-June 2017.
[113] Crisis Group focus group discussion, women's MaBaTha members (Upper Division), January 2017.
[114] Crisis Group interviews, high-ranking women's MaBaTha member (Lower Division), June 2017; and vice principal of a nunnery, Sagaing region, February-June 2017.

- *Legal aid*. The legal advisory group affiliated with MaBaTha, which analysed the Sangha Council decision and provided input to the race and religion laws, also engages in pro bono legal work under MaBaTha's umbrella. Female members provide pastoral support and legal aid to women in abusive family or work situations who do not have the means to go through the courts. These cases often are brought to MaBaTha monks by communities; specific women are then tasked by the monks depending on their availability and the nature of the case. In the case of a young Buddhist girl abused by a Chinese businessman, which gained nationwide attention, female MaBaTha members housed the girl and her family for several months. Members do not usually receive financial compensation for this work, which they regard as a form of support for MaBaTha.[115]

All these activities either resonate with societal views about good Buddhist practice or provide tangible and much-needed community services and support. Both roles enhance positive perceptions of, and support for, MaBaTha and its agenda.

B. *Positive and Negative Grassroots Perceptions*

International and some domestic analysis portrays MaBaTha as a fundamentally political entity pursuing a radically nationalist, bigoted and misogynistic agenda. The group's claims to be a "missionary organisation" focused on social work and propagating Buddhism are dismissed as an attempt to protect its members from criticism, and its social and cultural activities are seen as a cynical vehicle for propagating its ultranationalist views.

While this is true for some of the organisation's leaders and some of its interventions, it does not explain the group's considerable grassroots support. These assessments often overlook the accomplishments of MaBaTha supporters, particularly women, who prioritise contributing to the group's social work. Understanding how MaBaTha acts as a vehicle for furthering individual projects – religious, social, or in some cases political – requires understanding why such women feel better able to contribute to their communities through MaBaTha than through local civil society or non-governmental organisations. This in turn would enable a more effective policy approach to addressing MaBaTha's more extreme and negative activities and impacts.

Nuns and laywomen involved with MaBaTha see their work as improving the situation of women around the country.[116] These supporters are not limited to poorly-educated, rural women, but include members of the country's most prestigious nunneries, respected female religious scholars and lay lawyers, educators and medical professionals. Though many are in their fifties, there is also a very active cadre of tertiary-educated, feminist-identifying laywomen and nuns in their late twenties and early thirties.[117]

[115] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[116] This, despite the myth propagated by MaBaTha monks and much of society and government that women enjoy religious and social equality in Myanmar. See Chie Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration", *The Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 10 (2005), pp. 51-83.
[117] Crisis Group interviews, senior female MaBaTha members and prominent supporters across Myanmar, February-June 2017.

At least part of the reason they pursue their objectives through MaBaTha is that it provides an extraordinarily powerful platform, with its religious legitimacy, popular support and extensive networks across the country. Thus, for example, a female MaBaTha council member indicated that she joined MaBaTha because she wanted to raise money for schools in Rakhine state, and the group was happy to give her a platform for a series of religious talks through which she raised several hundred dollars in three days. This led her to deepen her engagement with MaBaTha, having concluded it provided a better opportunity for supporting her community than the NLD, of which she was an early member and strong supporter.[118]

Crisis Group discussions with numerous members and lay supporters of MaBaTha suggest several reasons for the strong support that the group attracts:

- There is a perception that MaBaTha has been highly effective in supporting the needs of communities, particularly as regards rule of law. Communities across the country continue to lack effective access to formal systems of justice and feel that in this respect they have a powerful ally in MaBaTha.[119]
- Many women say the group addresses problems traditionally unacknowledged given the persistent myth of women's high status and equality. For example, abuse against women is widespread. Women supporters also feel that they are bound by domestic expectations that limit the time available for Buddhist study and merit-making activities, hindering their intellectual and spiritual development. Engaging in MaBaTha activities is not only meritorious, but MaBaTha's stature and the roles it gives women allows them to negotiate participation with their husbands more easily. Thus, even if religious groups such as MaBaTha could be seen as perpetuating conservative mores around the roles of women, they also provide an outlet for women to contribute to important social issues. Moreover, many women are hugely supportive of the polygamy ban and the religious conversion law, which they see as protecting them against threats to their economic rights and religious freedoms (see section III.B above). Various women's groups across Myanmar that were already in existence at the time of MaBaTha's founding approached the group to offer support. They were not co-opted by powerful or influential monks; rather, they supported the group's message and objectives or felt that working with MaBaTha would help them achieve their own objectives. They say they propose activities to MaBaTha as well as respond to requests from the group. Laywomen and nuns express appreciation for being treated equally to men by the organisation.[120]
- Members and supporters believe MaBaTha takes their fears seriously, notably about Muslims. Indeed, there is a strong perception among many in Myanmar that Islam is inherently violent and a discomfort with what they see as violent aspects of Abrahamic religions in general. Other features associated with Islam – the slaughter of cows on specific holidays,[121] and Quranic passages on Islam's view

[118] Crisis Group interviews, women's MaBaTha council member (Upper Division), February-June 2017.
[119] Crisis Group interview, prominent human rights activist, Mandalay, May 2017.
[120] Crisis Group interviews, numerous MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.
[121] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017. See also Matthew Schissler, Matthew Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi, "Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listen-

of other religions and on proselytising and conversion – likewise are regularly cited by people to explain their support for MaBaTha. Many MaBaTha women, including nuns, say they have read the Quran and find its material distressing.[122] Men of South Asian extraction (*kala*), especially Muslims, are the subject of particular cultural prejudices in Myanmar, being portrayed as sexually rapacious and greedy; parents have long invoked them as bogeymen to scare children.[123]

Of course, while there is strong support in Buddhist communities for MaBaTha and its nationalist narratives, this is by no means unconditional. Those who support MaBaTha do not necessarily endorse all of its narratives or activities, and may be uncomfortable with the involvement of monks in some MaBaTha activities, even if they support the activities themselves.[124] That said, research or journalism that claims to have found widespread or growing disapproval of MaBaTha should be interpreted carefully – government, religious bodies and the media tend to conflate criticism of certain MaBaTha activities with criticism of its underlying mission. There is a longstanding debate in Myanmar on the involvement of monks in secular, political affairs; there is far less questioning of their nationalist ideology.

ing to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities", Myanmar Media and Society project, 22 July 2015.

[122] Crisis Group interviews, numerous MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.

[123] Crisis Group interview, Myanmar historian, Yangon, May 2017.

[124] This same view is echoed by nationalist Buddhists in Sri Lanka in respect of Bodu Bala Sena. Crisis Group focus group discussion, Buddhist devotees in Kataragama, Sri Lanka, July 2017.

V. Assessing the Risk of Violence and Government's Policy Response

A. *What Next for Buddhist Nationalism?*

The new Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation has already been adopted in place of MaBaTha in some parts of the country even if, as noted, several regional branches are determined to continue using the MaBaTha name and logo. Those that have accepted the Sangha Council's decision have pushed to position Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation as an umbrella organisation for all nationalist groups (although the 135 Nationalities United party will remain separate). MaBaTha and its successor groups are likely to continue to enjoy considerable public support.

The Sangha Council decision is far from a mortal blow to Buddhist nationalism. The Sangha Council's authority is contested, and its views and decisions are unlikely to determine the future of MaBaTha or its renamed avatar. MaBaTha supporters, and Myanmar Buddhists in general, see the council as having an important role in disseminating Buddhist literature, but as far removed from the practical and spiritual needs of the average Buddhist.[125] In Buddhist doctrine, religious authority stems from both mastery of Buddhist teachings and addressing the total well-being – spiritual, social and economic – of the community. Unlike the authority assigned to the Sangha Council by law, religious authority must be earned and continuously reaffirmed through activities that strengthen the religion and its adherents. In this respect, many see MaBaTha and its leading monks as having far greater legitimacy than the Sangha Council.

MaBaTha has already demonstrated it can circumvent restrictions with the shift to the new Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation branding. The Sangha Council's move may push coordination among nationalist monks, nuns and lay supporters into the shadows, but their efforts are unlikely to stop. Rather, the informal networks that sustain MaBaTha will become slightly harder to trace and understand.

Indeed, the Sangha Council actions may have amplified a looming confrontation between nationalists and the authorities on several other fronts. These include the prosecutions of nationalist demonstrators and violent agitation around the court hearings (see section III.D above); nationalist anti-government protests in Naypyitaw targeting the Minister for Religious Affairs in particular;[126] a recent alms strike by nationalist monks and the forcible closure of demonstration camps set up at prominent pagodas;[127] and the defiance by leading MaBaTha monk Ashin Wirathu of a Sangha Council preaching ban.[128]

If the government makes good on its threat to declare MaBaTha an "unlawful association" there will be severe, likely violent, reverberations across the country. It also could lead to renewed clashes with the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army armed group, which has informally aligned with MaBaTha in Kayin state and whose leaders

[125] Crisis Group interviews, numerous MaBaTha leaders and members, February-June 2017.
[126] "Religion minister rejects nationalists' criticism, intends to 'purify' Buddhism in Myanmar", *The Irrawaddy*, 28 June 2017.
[127] "Myanmar steps up efforts against nationalist monks", *Voice of America*, 8 August 2017.
[128] "Bhamo Sayadaw: U Wirathu could be imprisoned", *The Irrawaddy*, 28 March 2017.

have promised to defend Buddhism with force of arms wherever that may be required.[129] This has created a volatile environment with the potential for serious violence.

The biggest threat may not be MaBaTha itself, but nationalist dynamics that may now be beyond its control. The perception that MaBaTha activities have been constrained by the Sangha Council has spurred hardliners to action. This could play out in ways that may be more extreme or violent than MaBaTha itself would have sanctioned, and which the organisation may not be able to rein in.[130]

B. *Policy Implications*

Grassroots support for MaBaTha is flourishing in areas where the government is perceived to be weak, in particular basic service provision around education, access to justice and disaster relief. Many of these weaknesses are the longstanding legacy of failures by previous regimes. Nevertheless, a perception that the current government has not communicated a clear strategy for addressing them has allowed MaBaTha to create a narrative that it is reluctantly stepping in to fill gaps left by an ineffective government.

In this context, pressure on MaBaTha by the Sangha Council and Ministry of Religious Affairs may diminish their own reputations. The Sangha Council's legitimacy is limited; its increasingly strident decisions against MaBaTha are seen as coming at the behest of the ministry, which itself is part of a government perceived to have a Western liberal orientation, which does not prioritise the protection and promotion of Buddhism. The legislative flashpoint of the Violence Against Women and Girls Bill also will feed this narrative.

While it must remain determined to prosecute anti-Muslim hate speech, illegal actions and violence, the government is unlikely to successfully tackle extreme Buddhist nationalist ideology and widespread Islamophobia through confrontation and legal measures against MaBaTha. These will play into the narrative of Buddhism under threat, and ultimately empower the organisation and other, more extreme nationalist groups. Rather than constantly responding to provocations and appearing on the defensive, the government should aim to take greater control of the narrative by reframing, on its terms, the place of Buddhism in a more democratic context and articulating a positive vision of the future – one that emphasises the strength of Buddhism rather than perceived weaknesses or threats. This can engender greater confidence in Buddhist communities that the government has made addressing their concerns about the future a priority.

Much of the angst in monastic communities and Buddhist society at large stems from the rapid changes the country is going through. These changes have led to worries that secularism and modernity threaten the traditional role of Buddhism, defining success in material terms rather than religious achievements. In this new era for Myanmar, many youths are searching for a cause, a sense of belonging and of direction.

[129] Crisis Group focus group discussion, female MaBaTha supporters, Kayin state, June 2017. See also Justine Chambers, "Buddhist extremism, despite a clampdown, spreads in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 13 August 2017.

[130] For example, Myo Chit Thamegga stated in a recent meeting that although they would not take arms themselves to defend the religion, they would not condemn those that did. Crisis Group interview, MaBaTha leader, Yangon, August 2017.

The government, NLD and society as a whole need to find ways to channel this enormous energy in a positive direction. MaBaTha's popularity stems not only from its ideology and activities, but also from the sense of prestige, belonging and direction it gives to members and supporters. It provides a channel for women to participate meaningfully in social life and to create opportunities for spiritual growth that are accepted by their families. For many youth, especially young men, participation may provide an anchor for those who feel rudderless as a result of high unemployment, lack of opportunity and uncertainty or unease due to the rapid changes in the country.

The NLD has a new, unique handicap with which it has not yet fully grappled. Until it came into government, the party embodied Myanmar's biggest cause – the struggle against authoritarianism and repression. But once in government, it has not been able to harness the energy of those at the grassroots and the youth who supported that cause. Nationalist organisations are partly filling this space. Better opportunities for people to participate in community development, social welfare, education and environmental conservation would all resonate strongly and give people a greater sense of control of their destiny.

Also underlying the popularity of nationalist narratives is a sense of economic anxiety and a feeling that ordinary people are not seeing tangible benefits from the reforms.[131] This increases their sense of concern about the future and the resilience of their communities. A much more visible focus on the economy by the government would boost public confidence that its priority is providing ordinary people with better jobs and opportunities for a more prosperous future.

International intervention on the issue of Buddhist nationalism – such as the range of current donor-supported projects to combat hate speech or promote interreligious harmony and pluralism – risks being ineffective or worse, counterproductive if they fail to account for the complex motivations that drive support for nationalism. Organisations working on access to justice, dispute resolution, civic education and related areas should take into account the role of monasteries, including those aligned with or sympathetic to MaBaTha. For example, female lawyers play a particularly important role in identifying abuse cases and providing pro bono pastoral and legal aid to the most vulnerable women and children, and many choose to do so under the banner of MaBaTha.

It is important to provide alternative structures through which these monasteries can work, but with an understanding that Western liberal framing of human rights and women's rights issues – which many local women's rights policy organisations also use – does not translate unproblematically into a traditional Buddhist moral worldview. This is not to question the universality of these rights or to suggest any relativism in their application; it is rather a question of drawing on those with the relevant expertise in order to find the most effective ways to communicate these rights and develop activities to promote them.

Monks and nuns, including those aligned with MaBaTha, are very active in raising awareness in communities of legal rights and in individual dispute resolution activities. However, there is little systematic legal training for members of monastic

[131] For example, a recent poll by the International Republican Institute indicated that people's biggest concerns for the future were economic. "Survey of Burma/Myanmar Public Opinion, March 9 – April 1, 2017", Center for Insights in Survey Research, 22 August 2017.

orders, so such activities are often done on the basis of incomplete or distorted legal knowledge. For example, marital dispute resolution decisions may be made on the basis of an out-dated conception of Buddhist customary law with no understanding of developments in statute law or the arbitrary application of laws. Nuns who teach communities about women's rights may only be aware of the race and religion laws, not other statutes. The government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Sangha Council, could develop a policy on legal education for monastic orders, to provide more systematic and balanced legal presentations and training at major teaching monasteries and nunneries, possibly with the support of Myanmar universities and legal scholars.

Women's rights NGOs and women members of MaBaTha working on rights issues may in some ways have highly divergent perspectives, but their ultimate objectives overlap to a considerable degree. It would be valuable to bring these groups together to discuss and share their experiences of promoting women's rights.

VI. Conclusion

Virulent Buddhist nationalism has emerged as a considerable societal issue in Myanmar and a threat to peaceful coexistence in this multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. The attacks in northern Rakhine state by al-Yaqin or ARSA in August 2017, while mostly driven by local grievances, will inevitably become part of the Buddhist nationalist narrative, further complicating the social and political dynamics of religion and ethnicity. Understanding and addressing how these dynamics fuel fear, nationalist rhetoric and militant behaviour within Myanmar's different communities has taken on even greater urgency.

The NLD's landslide election victory in 2015 put MaBaTha on the back foot. But it also led to premature claims that it was a spent force, with some interpreting a recent decision by the Sangha Council banning use of its name and signboards as a death knell. Yet a refusal by many MaBaTha chapters to adhere to the ban, and an upswing in political agitation and violent provocation, have demonstrated the resilience and continued popularity of this organisation and its beliefs. Its religious authority in many quarters is greater than that of the Sangha Council and the government, and it has proven adept at turning restrictions imposed by them to its advantage.

Efforts to tackle MaBaTha and its divisive narratives must start from recognition of its sources of support. It is engaged in far more than political nationalism, having a prominent role in religious and civic education, service delivery and dispute resolution. Its members are not primarily interested in accruing political power, but rather view political influence as necessary to the promotion of their moral agenda. Countering its influence requires providing other avenues for communities and youth to participate in these areas with a sense of purpose and belonging. Failure to understand the extent of the services it provides and the support it can muster will lead to ineffective and ultimately counterproductive policy responses.

Yangon/Brussels, 5 September 2017

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar

International Crisis Group/KO/Dec 2015. Based on UN map no. 4168 Rev. 3 (June 2012).

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Defence, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Henry Luce Foundation, Humanity United, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

September 2017

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2014

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

North East Asia

Old Scores and New Grudges: Evolving Sino-Japanese Tensions, Asia Report N°258, 24 July 2014 (also available in Chinese).

Risks of Intelligence Pathologies in South Korea, Asia Report N°259, 5 August 2014.

Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm, Asia Report N°267, 7 May 2015 (also available in Chinese).

North Korea: Beyond the Six-Party Talks, Asia Report N°269, 16 June 2015.

Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters, Asia Report N°275, 26 January 2016 (also available in Chinese).

East China Sea: Preventing Clashes from Becoming Crises, Asia Report N°280, 30 June 2016.

China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017.

South Asia

Policing Urban Violence in Pakistan, Asia Report N°255, 23 January 2014.

Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition, Asia Report N°256, 12 May 2014.

Education Reform in Pakistan, Asia Report N°257, 23 June 2014.

Afghanistan's Political Transition, Asia Report N°260, 16 October 2014.

Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan, Asia Report N°262, 28 October 2014.

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election: Risks and Opportunities, Asia Briefing N°145, 9 December 2014.

Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis, Asia Report N°264, 9 February 2015.

Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan, Asia Report, N°265, 8 April 2015.

The Future of the Afghan Local Police, Asia Report N°268, 4 June 2015.

Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls, Asia Report N°271, 22 July 2015.

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Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab, Asia Report N°279, 30 May 2016.

Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi, Asia Report N°284, 15 February 2017.

Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government, Asia Report N°285, 10 April 2017.

Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere, Asia Report N°286, 16 May 2017.

Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War, Asia Report N°289, 28 July 2017.

South East Asia

Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?, Asia Briefing N°143, 22 April 2014 (also available in Burmese).

Counting the Costs: Myanmar's Problematic Census, Asia Briefing N°144, 15 May 2014 (also available in Burmese).

Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State, Asia Report N°261, 22 October 2014 (also available in Burmese).

A Coup Ordained? Thailand's Prospects for Stability, Asia Report N°263, 3 December 2014.

Myanmar's Electoral Landscape, Asia Report N°266, 28 April 2015 (also available in Burmese).

Southern Thailand: Dialogue in Doubt, Asia Report N°270, 8 July 2015.

Myanmar's Peace Process: A Nationwide Ceasefire Remains Elusive, Asia Briefing N°146, 16 September 2015 (also available in Burmese).

The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications, Asia Briefing N°147, 9 December 2015 (also available in Burmese).

Thailand's Lengthening Roadmap to Elections, Asia Report N°274, 10 December 2015.

The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao, Asia Report N°281, 6 July 2016.

Myanmar's New Government: Finding Its Feet?, Asia Report N°282, 29 July 2016 (also available in Burmese).

Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: No Traction, Asia Briefing N°148, 21 September 2016.

Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue, Asia Briefing N°149, 19 October 2016 (also available in Burmese).

Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State, Asia Report N°283, 15 December 2016 (also available in Burmese).

Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar, Asia Report N°287, 29 June 2017 (also available in Burmese).

Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees