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Events of 2015

The year 2015 marked a milestone for Burma as it held its first openly contested general election since the end of 50 years of military dictatorship. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, achieved a landslide victory, securing 77 per cent of seats in parliament and ousting the military-backed ruling party. But this historic moment was overshadowed by religious and ethnic frictions, fuelled by a Buddhist nationalist movement that is playing an increasingly destructive role in the country's politics.

Millions of ethnic and religious minorities were prevented from voting in the November poll, either as a result of conflict or discriminatory electoral rules. Notably, hundreds of thousands of temporary identity card holders – mostly Rohingya Muslims in western Burma, but also ethnic Indian and Chinese residents – were stripped of their voting rights due to concerns about their citizenship. This represented a complete change of policy from all previous elections, including the 1990 election won by the NLD but later annulled by the junta. The decision was broadly viewed as an effort to placate escalating hostility towards the Rohingya, who are treated as interlopers from Bangladesh and heavily persecuted. By June, some 100,000 were estimated to have fled the country by boat since the outbreak of communal violence in 2012, culminating in Southeast Asia's worst refugee crisis in decades.

Anti-Muslim sentiments have continued to thrive as a monk-led nationalist organization, known under its Burmese acronym Ma Ba Tha, has gained prominence. The group launched an aggressive campaign to slander the opposition party ahead of Burma's election, fuelling suspicion that Ma Ba Tha enjoys political backing from the army-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). In August, President Thein Sein signed into law the last of four controversial 'race protection laws' proposed by Ma Ba Tha to curtail the rights of religious minorities and women. Speaking at rallies during the election campaign, prominent nationalist monks likened the NLD to a 'Muslim party' and urged voters to back the USDP. The opposition party subsequently scrubbed all Muslim candidates from its candidacy list, while the election commission blocked almost all independent Rohingya politicians from participating. Burma's parliament will now include no Muslims for the first time since independence.

Ma Ba Tha's crusade has further restricted the space for Muslims to practise their faith and culture in a country dominated by Buddhist religious rites. This year, the group began a campaign to ban Muslims from slaughtering cows (considered sacred among many Buddhists in Burma) during the annual Eid al-Adha festival.

As a result, Muslims were forced to keep their festivities low-key out of fear of violent reprisals. In the Irrawaddy delta, radical monks worked with the local authorities to shut down Muslim-owned cattle slaughter houses and beef processing facilities, claiming to 'protect' the Buddhist philosophy. Ma Ba Tha is also now pushing for a ban on Muslim headwear in schools. Similar problems have been reported in Yangon, where Buddhist hard-liners have lobbied to stop Muslims from using a local madrasa to pray.

In Rakhine state, Rohingya Muslims live in isolated ghettos and unsanitary displacement camps which they can only leave if they have an official permit. The community does not have access to higher education, health care and employment opportunities, let alone the right to practise their culture freely. The Burmese government, which describes the minority as 'Bengalis', has led a systematic campaign to erase the Rohingya name and ethnic identity from the country's history. Rohingyas are prevented from marrying, bearing children or accessing medical care without official permission, and security forces have been implicated in mass violence against them. A report by the advocacy group Fortify Rights concluded that there was 'strong evidence' that genocide was taking place, calling on the UN to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate abuses.

The Burmese government has a long history of promoting Buddhism as the *de facto* state religion and other faiths are prohibited from constructing new houses of worship. This ban has been acutely felt by ethnic minority and indigenous communities that predominantly practise Christianity, such as the Chin, Kachin and Karen. For example, in the impoverished Chin state, in January a community elder was taken to court for erecting a 54-foot-high cross the previous year without permission from the authorities. A 2012 report by the Chin Human Rights Organization had also exposed the systematic practice of forced conversions at government-sponsored border areas' development schools. Many of these policies are rooted in the junta's long-running strategy of 'Myanmaification' (or Burmanization) of ethnic minority areas, where separatist insurgencies have festered for many decades. Until 2014, minority and indigenous communities were forbidden from learning their own languages at school, and even now children are only able to take extracurricular classes in their mother tongues.

One key legacy of this process is the Burmanization of ethnic minority names and cities, which were abruptly changed by the junta in 1989. The government presented the decision to change the country's official name from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' the same year as an effort to dismantle the last vestiges of colonialism – since the former was used by the British. However, it also led to the deliberate erasure of ethnic minority heritage and languages as many names were 'Burmanized' and subsequently lost their original meaning. This policy of sidelining minority cultural expressions persists to this day, as reflected in February 2016 when authorities refused to allow Karen and Chin cultural groups to celebrate their national days in Yangon. And on the rare occasions the government has sought to showcase its diversity, its representation is carefully choreographed: for example, at the 2014 ASEAN Summit in Naypyidaw, when ethnic Burmans donned indigenous outfits to welcome delegates at the start of the event.

The imposition of Burman culture, language and religion was seen by the military as a tool to unite the country without having to address underlying concerns about human rights and self-determination. Shortly after General Ne Win first seized power in 1962, he banned minority media from publishing in their local languages. All publications had to first be translated into Burmese before passing through the censorship board, creating significant obstacles to free speech and

cultural expression. Despite the recent relaxation of censorship, the oppression of minority media continues to be felt today, with smaller press groups struggling to compete with larger, better funded, Burman-dominated institutions.

In February, fresh conflict broke out along Burma's north-eastern frontier when ethnic Kokang rebels re-emerged from China to retake land snatched by the army in 2009. The Burmese army continues to launch attacks on ethnic Kachin, Shan and Ta'ang rebels who have declined to participate in the current ceasefire process, and reports of attacks and sexual violence against minority communities are common. In October, only eight armed groups signed a national ceasefire agreement in Naypyidaw. The process has been criticized for its lack of inclusion and failure to address urgent political issues, such as the structure of federalism, natural resource revenue sharing and military impunity. Minority women say they have been systematically excluded from the peace process, allotted only 3 out of 96 spots on three ceasefire implementation committees.

Suu Kyi has pledged to prioritize minority rights and the peace process in her new government, but many difficult questions remain. For example, the NLD has signalled that it will appoint the chief ministers of ethnic minority states, despite widespread calls for them to be democratically elected by the local populations. In many areas the NLD's electoral success came at the expense of smaller ethnically-based parties, which now risk being sidelined in Burma's democratization process. The NLD has also said that it will not be pushing for retribution against the former military junta, instead focusing on 'national reconciliation'. Instead Suu Kyi has insisted her party will respect the political role of the military, which retains a quarter of parliamentary seats under Burma's 2008 Constitution and handpicks the heads of key government ministries, including that of border affairs.

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