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During 2013, Burma continued with its democratic reform programme, which has seen the country emerge from half a century of military rule. President Thein Sein pledged to free all remaining political prisoners by the end of the year, culminating in a mass amnesty on 31 December. Media restrictions were further peeled away, with the country's first-ever private dailies hitting the shelves in April, while negotiations with Burma's myriad ethnic minority militias finally appeared to gain traction.

The international community has responded positively to the changes taking place in Burma, despite persistent reports of human rights violations against minorities. The EU moved to scrap all remaining economic and diplomatic sanctions in April, subsequently welcoming the country into its preferential trade scheme and pledging €30 million to support the ethnic peace process. But campaigners slammed the move as premature, highlighting Burma's failure to meet the bloc's own benchmarks for progress, including ending violence and discrimination against ethnic Kachins and the stateless Rohingya minority.

The US has also sought to boost ties by gradually easing travel restrictions for individuals linked to the former junta, but agreed to extend targeted sanctions for another year and maintain a ban on the import of jade and rubies. This comes amid growing concerns over corruption and mismanagement of the country's natural resources, which are predominantly found in its conflict-torn ethnic minority regions. Thirty lucrative offshore oil and gas blocks were opened for bidding, prompting interest from Western companies for the first time in nearly two decades. The controversial Shwe Gas Project, a China-backed venture that connects the Bay of Bengal with western Yunnan province, began pumping gas in July in the face of protests from Arakanese and Shan communities, whose lands have been scarred and polluted by the pipeline.

Armed ethnic groups continued to clash with government forces throughout the year, despite making some progress on ceasefire negotiations. Fighting in Burma's northern Kachin state reached its peak in January 2013, when the military launched a full-scale land and aerial assault on the ethnic rebel stronghold in Laiza, killing civilians and forcing thousands from their homes. The violence drew widespread condemnation from the international community, with accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity levelled at the armed forces. The two sides were finally brought to the negotiating table in February, following an intervention from neighbouring China – which has vast economic interests in Kachin state – and reached a preliminary agreement to end

fighting. Although two additional peace deals were brokered in 2013, they failed to produce a comprehensive ceasefire and locals report ongoing attacks on civilians.

In October, the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand accused the army of raping, torturing and killing villagers as part of an offensive designed to seize control of the northern state's timber and mineral resources. A subsequent report by the Women's League of Burma concluded that the military still uses rape as a weapon of war against ethnic minority women, documenting over 100 cases across the country since 2010. However, women have been largely excluded from the ceasefire negotiations and none of the preliminary agreements include any reference to gender issues. According to the Swedish Burma Committee, the country lacks the political will to raise women's voices in the peace process – reflecting patriarchal power structures within both government and ethnic minority institutions.

Across the country, ethnic minority activists have been arrested and jailed for organizing peaceful protests against land grabs and large-scale development projects. In September, 10 Arakanese men opposing the Shwe Gas Project were sentenced to three months in prison under the controversial Peaceful Assembly Law – a reform-era decree that issues criminal penalties to anyone who stages a demonstration without official permission. Between May and October 63 people were prosecuted or jailed under various authoritarian laws, according to the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (Altsean), nullifying the progress made in a string of high-profile presidential pardons. Amid growing pressure, the President's office scrambled to put together a last-ditch end-of-year amnesty, which freed several ethnic activists. However, a significant number of political prisoners remained in detention, including displaced ethnic Kachins, Rohingya activists and NGO workers.

Security forces also target certain minority groups, particularly Muslims. Hundreds of Rohingya Muslims, who are viewed as undocumented Bengali immigrants and denied citizenship in Burma, were also arbitrarily jailed in 2012 after a wave of clashes with Buddhist Arakanese. In Rakhine, around three-quarters of those killed in intercommunal violence since late 2012 were Muslim, yet four-fifths of those arrested are Rohingya. The UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Burma, Tomas Quintana, who toured the country in October, cited evidence of 'systematic torture' against Rohingya inmates. Other reports indicated that many Rohingya prisoners had died in detention.

The year was also clouded by several fresh bouts of ethno-religious clashes between Buddhists and the country's Muslim minority, fuelled by a vocal and growing extremist movement, known as '969'. Spearheaded by an extremist monk, Ashin Wirathu, the movement calls on Buddhists to boycott Muslim-run shops and advocates for restrictions on inter-faith marriages. The monk has been accused of spreading hate speech and fomenting violence through his vitriolic sermons, which often allege that Muslims are attempting to take over the country by marrying Buddhist women. The movement disseminates propaganda through stickers, DVDs, leaflets, social media and has been linked to several bouts of violence.

The surge in hate speech is partly a by-product of Burma's democratic transition and its move towards greater freedom of speech after many years of repression. But it also reflects deep-rooted historical grievances and decades of military propaganda about minority populations. Rohingya Muslims are described as 'Bengalis' by most Burmese media and popularly vilified as expansionist aggressors. Similarly, the head of Burma's armed forces has persistently blamed minorities for the country's civil conflicts.

Two months after Wirathu preached in Meiktila, a central town near Mandalay, a minor dispute between a Muslim shopkeeper and a Buddhist customer boiled over into a three-day riot. The violence claimed at least 40 lives, including those of 20 Muslim schoolchildren. A report by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) later detailed disturbing first-hand accounts of the atrocities, noting that police 'stood by and watched' as hundreds of villagers – goaded by Buddhist monks – rampaged through the neighbourhood, wielding sticks and iron pipes, while torching houses.

A subsequent investigation by PHR found that Wirathu and his supporters had delivered anti-Muslim speeches in several locations shortly before they were ravaged by violence in March and April. An eyewitness from Meiktila recalled seeing groups of people a week before the violence going door-to-door and 'giving Buddhists stickers to mark their homes so that they would not be targeted for burning'. Thein Sein later blamed 'religious extremists and political opportunists' for the violence, but his government has come under fire for failing to hold agitators to account.

The eruption of anti-Muslim violence corresponded with the launch of a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report in April, which accused the state of colluding in a campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' against Rohingya Muslims. A state-backed investigation published around the same time blamed the violence on 'contentious border issues with Bangladesh' and fears that Bengalis, referring to Rohingyas, were planning to take over the state through overpopulation. Shortly afterwards, the government reaffirmed its 'two-child policy' for the Rohingya, further promoting a xenophobic narrative of Muslims in the country.

There are no hate speech laws in Burma, but it is not uncommon for individuals to be targeted for criminal defamation or inciting unrest. In April, a Muslim man was sentenced to two years in jail for 'insulting religion' after scraping a 969 sticker off a betel-nut shop in central Burma. However, the government has made little effort to curb the proliferation of anti-Muslim propaganda. By contrast, when the June edition of *TIME* magazine branded Wirathu as 'the face of Buddhist terror', the President defended Wirathu as a 'son of Buddha' and the government swiftly banned the publication 'in order to prevent the recurrence of racial and religious riots'.

It was only after mounting pressure that the state-backed monastic body, Sangha Maha Nayaka, banned 969 sermons in September. But Wirathu has been allowed to continue preaching under the guise of a new pseudo-civilian body, the Organization to Protect Race and Religion. In October, two of its members were arrested in Arakan state, along with other local nationalists, for their alleged role in stirring fresh religious riots in Sandoway. After hundreds of monks marched through Rangoon in November, brandishing Buddhist Sasana flags and chanting anti-Muslim slogans, an investigation was also announced by authorities – albeit on the grounds of insulting religion rather than inciting hatred. Nevertheless, Wirathu's activities in Burma remain largely unhindered, raising concerns about the government's commitment to promoting an open and rights-based democracy in the country.

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