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Trends in  
Southeast Asia

INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND THE  
POLITICS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE  
IN MYANMAR

NYI NYI KYAW

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

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## FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **Interreligious Conflict and the Politics of Interfaith Dialogue in Myanmar**

By Nyi Nyi Kyaw

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Amidst successive episodes of interreligious violence in Myanmar between 2012 and 2014, interfaith dialogue emerged as a crucial conflict resolution and prevention mechanism.
- The 2011–16 Union Solidarity and Development Party administration often indirectly promoted the use of interfaith dialogue to defuse interreligious tensions and conflicts, though its political will was questionable. Various governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental actors have engaged in interfaith dialogue, peace, and harmony initiatives in the past seven years.
- The present National League for Democracy administration has more actively sought to engage in intrafaith promotion of Buddhism and in interfaith peace and harmony initiatives. Intergovernmental, international and local interfaith actors also work in the interfaith dialogue field, but their impact is relatively weak because the government remains the most important actor in Myanmar in transition.
- Although the National League for Democracy has largely eliminated Buddhist nationalist groups such as Ma Ba Tha, Buddhist identity politics remains influential after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's attacks in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 and the consequent refugee crisis.
- Although extreme anti-Muslim Buddhist identity politics may not see a resurgence in the approach to the 2020 general elections, it may come back in more nuanced forms. Interfaith dialogue and other training and activities for interreligious peace and harmony will thus remain relevant to the political scene.





# Interreligious Conflict and the Politics of Interfaith Dialogue in Myanmar

By Nyi Nyi Kyaw<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented series of episodes of violent intercommunal, interreligious or religiously motivated conflict between Buddhist majorities and Muslim minorities in several places in Myanmar from 2012 until 2014 were the bitter fruit of the country's political transition. In the past seven years, "Rohingya"<sup>2</sup> Muslims concentrated in northern Rakhine State in the west of Myanmar faced a citizenship and identity crisis (2012–), a campaign for their wholesale disenfranchisement (2015), and attacks culminating in a refugee exodus (2017–present). Their plight

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<sup>1</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw is a Visiting Fellow in the Myanmar Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> The legitimacy and legality of the ethnonym "Rohingya" are among the most heated issues that surround the extremely controversial situation in Rakhine state. There are at least three perspectives on it. The international community holds that the Rohingya have a fundamental human right to self-identify and insists that they be called as such. Most, if not all, of the Rohingya claim that they were once—rightly—recognized as "Rohingya" and should be allowed to continue to use the ethnonym. The Myanmar government, military, and perhaps a majority of the country's people assert that there has been no such ethnonym in the history of Myanmar, and that the Rohingya are racially and culturally Bengalis and must thus be called "Bengali". I use "Rohingya" for at least three reasons: in respect of the right of the Rohingya to use an ethnonym of their choice; in appreciation of some, if not most, of the historical and contemporary basis of the politics of ethnic names and identity; and in preference to the use of what is simply a better-known term.

resulted in a Rohingya “insurgency” on the part of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which the National League for Democracy (NLD) government designated as a terrorist organization in August 2017. It was ARSA’s attacks on Myanmar security forces in northern Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 that led to reprisal attacks and the exodus of some 750,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh. They remain stranded there, their return to Myanmar impossible or extremely difficult.

From 2012 until 2015, the non-Rohingya Muslims who constitute half of the total Myanmar Muslim population also found themselves the focal point for anti-Rohingya Buddhist nationalism and public questioning on Muslim citizens’ loyalty to the state and nation of Myanmar. Although people in Myanmar do not generally problematize non-Rohingya Muslims’ legal citizenship, they view many of them as pro-Islam, pro-Rohingya, or pro-Muslim. The anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim campaign of the monk-led Buddhist nationalist Ma Ba Tha (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) even forced both the then-ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the then-opposition NLD to decide not to field a single Muslim, let alone Rohingya, candidate in the 2015 general elections.<sup>3</sup>

Although Myanmar often witnessed violent or non-violent interreligious tensions and conflicts in the colonial period and the decades following independence, the country has never before seen such a charged atmosphere of interreligious tensions, misunderstandings, and conflicts over a successive period of several years as in the years since 2012. The problem remains one of the most serious political and social issues that Myanmar faces. The country had a politically closed or repressed society under military rule throughout the 1990s and 2000s. It is natural, albeit not entirely excusable, that existing intercommunal tensions and misunderstandings often lead to conflicts especially when

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<sup>3</sup> Hanna Hindstrom, “NLD Blocked Muslim Candidates to Appease Ma Ba Tha: Party Member”, *Irrawaddy*, 31 August 2015, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/nld-blocked-muslim-candidates-to-appease-ma-ba-tha-party-member> (accessed 7 June 2019).

a closed society undergoes political and social change. Large-scale contagious conflicts have not occurred since July 2014, but small-scale, stand-alone ones occasionally flare up or remain highly likely.

These factors have led the two administrations of Myanmar in transition—the USDP-led (2011–16) and the NLD-led (2016–present) governments—have employed or promoted the use of interfaith dialogue for conflict resolution or prevention. Several local civil society organizations, usually with but sometimes without the assistance of the international community, have also joined in the effort to defuse tensions and promote interfaith peace and harmony.

In general, the USDP government did not directly and publicly engage in the field of the interfaith dialogue, but it did encourage several initiatives. At times, however, President U Thein Sein’s USDP administration seemed only to pay lip service to interreligious peace and harmony, and proved too slow in countering the rise of Buddhist nationalism and interreligious tensions. In contrast, the NLD government held so-called interfaith prayer services in several cities and towns in October 2017. It has also rendered Ma Ba Tha, and its anti-Muslim campaign by extension, almost entirely defunct. Its work in these areas has coincided with the time in which international criticism of the government for its conduct in relation to the Rohingya refugee crisis was mounting.

This present study relies on desk research and in-depth interviews, using both reputational and snowball or referral samplings in the selection of interviewees. Reputational sampling is helpful for selecting the most prominent and active interviewees, while snowball sampling is useful in identifying potential interviewees through referral from other interviewees. It appears that the track record of governmental and non-governmental efforts for interfaith peace and harmony in Myanmar in the past seven years is mixed. In general, success or impact seems to hinge upon the political will of the government in power. Many efforts have proven simply ineffective, especially when the government has not been willing to solve a conflict as quickly as possible.

Indeed, the seemingly interreligious conflicts that Myanmar has faced in recent years have deep political roots and ramifications. The non-Rohingya Muslim question has largely abated from public debates

since the NLD government quelled Ma Ba Tha. However, the protracted Rohingya citizenship and identity crisis undeniably has a religious dimension, despite the adamant claims by Myanmar that it is an issue solely of the (illegal) migration, the (undecided) citizenship status, and the (alleged) terrorist extremism of the Rohingya. Taking everything into consideration, religion, religious identity politics, and religious conflict will continue to be important in Myanmar. Therefore, as a crucial conflict resolution or prevention mechanism, interfaith dialogue will remain a feature of the political scene.

## DIVERSITY IN MYANMAR

Myanmar is a communally diverse country, and ethnicity and religion are the country's two most politically potent identity markers. Ethnically, Myanmar has a Bamar majority (69 per cent) and numerous minorities: Kachin (1.4 per cent), Kayah (0.4 per cent), Kayin (6.2 per cent), Chin (2.2 per cent), Mon (2.4 per cent), Rakhine (4.5 per cent), and Shan (8.5 per cent).<sup>4</sup> One hundred and thirty-five groups, including those eight, and 127 sub-groups are recognized as native or indigenous—known as *taingyintha* (indigenous or native) or “native races”<sup>5</sup> in Myanmar. This diversity makes ethnic outbidding—the use of ethnicity by political actors and groups in trying to outbid or outperform rivals—difficult, unlike in Sri Lanka where there are only two major ethnic groups (Sinhalese (75 per cent) and Tamils (11 per cent)).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These ethnic census data are from the 1983 census, the second most recent census conducted in Myanmar. Because of perceived sensitivity, the USDP and NLD governments have not released ethnic-demography data from the 2014 census.

<sup>5</sup> The Myanmar word *taingyintha* is translated as “national races” in the unofficial English translation of the present Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

<sup>6</sup> Neil DeVotta, “From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka’s Separatist War”, *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2005): 141–59.

Religiously, Buddhists (87.9 per cent), Christians (6.2 per cent), Muslims (4.3 per cent), Hindus (0.5 per cent), and Animists (0.8 per cent) comprise Myanmar's population.<sup>7</sup> The relatively small size of Myanmar's Muslim population only came to light in July 2016, two years after the census. It provided a strong rebuttal to the exaggerated claims by Ma Ba Tha during 2013–15 that the number of Muslims in the country was swelling. In other words, the pre-census and post-census politics of religious demography became largely meaningless after July 2016.

The Myanmar Citizenship Law of 1982 designates most Myanmar Muslims as “lesser” citizens of mixed-race or alien ancestry, legally called *eh-naingngantha* (literally, “guest citizens” but officially “associate citizens”) or *naingngantha-pyukwinyathu* (literally, “one who may become a naturalized citizen” but officially “naturalized citizen”). Although the later generations of those *eh-naingngantha* and *naingngantha-pyukwinyathu* should have become *naingngantha* (citizens) by now, as nearly four decades have passed since 1982, many Muslims, Hindus, and Chinese still find it difficult to be recognized as such because of cumbersome and discriminatory documentation policies and practices.<sup>8</sup> The only exception among the diverse Muslim groups in Myanmar is the 50,000-strong ethnic Kaman, who are accepted as one of 135 *taingyintha* ethnic groups and therefore entitled to the citizenship at birth which is only available to descendants of one or more members of the *taingyintha* club.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *The Union Report: Religion: Census Report Volume 2-C* (Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2016), p. 5. Although the USDP government conducted the census in March and April 2014, it did not announce the data on religion. The NLD government announced them in July 2016, three months after it came to power.

<sup>8</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Adulteration of the Pure Native Race by Aliens? *Kapya* and their Socio-Legal Identity in Colonial Burma and Present-Day Myanmar”, *Social Identities* 25, no. 3 (2019): 345–59.

<sup>9</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Myanmar's Other Muslims: The Case of the Kaman”, in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being In and From Burma*, edited by Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

In comparison, although the data on the ethnic break-up of Myanmar Christians are not known, it is commonly understood and accepted that most Myanmar Christians belong to the Kachin, Kayah, Kayin and Chin *taingyintha*. Therefore, even though they are religious minorities, their ethnic *taingyintha* status often acts as a protective identity cover that encloses their Christian identity. That is why a Myanmar Christian and senior interfaith dialogue leader succinctly remarks, “We are between first-class-citizen Buddhists above and second-class-citizen Muslims below.”<sup>10</sup>

As stated above, in spite of the less than 5 per cent population of Muslims, it took two years for the Myanmar government to announce demographic statistics relating to religion in the 2014 census, because of perceived sensitivity over their allegedly large proportion of the populations.<sup>11</sup> The exaggeration and securitization of Muslim demography—discussed in detail below—becomes more apparent when we consider the important fact that the total Muslim population only constitutes 2.3 per cent when we exclude 1,090,000 unenumerated people in Rakhine state.<sup>12</sup> However, the Muslim population is extremely noticeable in that state, where Rohingya are a big minority (34.2 per cent). Buddhists constitute only 63.3 per cent of the population of Rakhine state

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, Yangon, 6 February 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Ye Mon and Pyae Thet Phyo, “After Long Delay, Religious Census Data Proves Less ‘Sensitive’ than Anticipated”, *Myanmar Times*, 22 July 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/21542-after-long-delay-religious-census-data-proves-less-sensitive-than-anticipated.html> (accessed 28 June 2019).

<sup>12</sup> A heated argument within Myanmar before the census in March and April 2014, over whether to allow the Rohingya to self-identity as such, eventually led to the non-counting of the Rohingya in the 2014 census. See Philip Heijmans, “Myanmar’s Controversial Census”, *Diplomat*, 2 September 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/myanmars-controversial-census> (accessed 1 April 2019). The 2014 census estimated their number in Rakhine state to be 1,090,000. Since almost all of the Rohingya are Muslims, I calculated their percentages based on the total Myanmar population of 51.4 million, on the total Myanmar Muslim population, and on the total population of Rakhine state.

when we include Rohingya but 96.2 per cent when we exclude Rohingya. These religious demographic data show the importance of the inclusion or exclusion of Rohingya at the Rakhine state and national levels. Therefore, Muslim demography, especially that in Rakhine state, became an unclear but extremely sensitive issue in the years after intercommunal violence first broke out in Rakhine state in 2012 and spread to other parts of Myanmar.

## **POST-2012 RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE AMIDST POLITICAL CHANGE**

Interreligious, intercommunal, or religiously motivated or framed conflicts are not new to Myanmar. In both colonial Burma and independent Burma/Myanmar, several episodes of violent and non-violent conflict pitted Buddhists against Muslims, or vice versa. In more recent history, there were a few flare-ups of violence of a religious nature or appearance in the 1990s and 2000s in several places across Myanmar<sup>13</sup> under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC).<sup>14</sup> However, it is not wrong to state that the chain of violence witnessed in 2012–14 was unprecedented. Although large-scale, riotous, and contagious religious violence has not occurred since July 2014, small-scale, one-off episodes of conflict have often broken out. Table 1 below lists most violent and non-violent conflicts and attempts to provoke rioting or violence in Myanmar from 2012 through 2017.

There are four noteworthy facts about the political timing of an episode of violent conflict or an attempt to trigger such violence. First, the wildfire-like spread of violence from June 2012 through September

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<sup>13</sup> Images Asia, *Report on the Situation for Muslims in Burma* (Bangkok: Images Asia, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Military rule in Myanmar lasted from 1988 until 2011. The military junta by the name of the SLORC ruled by decree until 1997 when it changed its name to the SPDC.



**Table 1: List of Interreligious Incidents across Myanmar (2012–17)**

No.	Date	Place	Immediate Causes	Effect
1	Jun and Oct '12	Several places in Rakhine State	Rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Muslims; Vigilante killing of ten Muslims by Rakhines	Unprecedented communal violence; 200 fatalities; displacement of 140,000 people; thousands of houses burned and destroyed
2	Feb '13	Tharkayta, Yangon Region	Alleged construction of a mosque during maintenance work on an existing madrasa	Madrasa and ongoing construction work locked
3	Mar '13	Meiktila, Mandalay Region	Brawl between Muslim shop owner and Buddhist customers; revenge killing of a Buddhist monk by Muslims	43 fatalities; displacement; houses, shops, and buildings destroyed
4	May '13	Okkan, Bago Region	Female Muslim bicyclist bumping into a Buddhist novice	1 fatality; houses burned; displacement
5	May '13	Lashio, Shan State	Muslim man pouring petrol on a female Buddhist petrol-seller and burning her	1 fatality; houses and mosque burned; displacement
6	Jul '13	Thandwe, Rakhine State	Rumour of rape of a Buddhist woman by two Muslim men	Burning of two houses
7	Jul '13	Mandalay, Mandalay Region	Explosion of a small bomb near where U Wirathu was delivering a sermon*	Minor injuries to four men and one novice; small damage to a car nearby
8	Aug '13	Pantanaw, Ayeyarwady Region	Quarrel over a Muslim's playing of a music album loudly while his Buddhist neighbour plays a 969 sermon	Self-destruction of a Muslim-owned house

9	Aug '13	Htangono, Sagaing Region	Alleged attempt to rape a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man	Houses and shops burned
10	Sept '13	Thandwe, Rakhine State	Quarrel over a Buddhist-owned trishaw with a Buddhist flag parked in front of a Muslim shop	7 fatalities; houses and shops burned
11	Sept '13	Thingangyun, Yangon Region	Attempt to burn down a madrasa with kerosene	No damage
12	Sept '13	Myinkin Village, Magway Region	Attempt to riot amidst rumour of rape of a 6-year-old girl by a Muslim man	No riot
13	Jul '14	Mandalay, Mandalay Region	Rumour of rape of a Buddhist employee by two Muslim tea shop owner brothers	2 fatalities; a Muslim cemetery attacked
14	Jun '16	Thayethamain Village, Bago Region	Quarrel between a Muslim man and a female Buddhist neighbour over alleged construction of a mosque	Muslim man's house, an existing mosque and construction work destroyed
15	Jul '16	Hpakant, Kachin State	Alleged illegality of a Muslim prayer hall	Prayer hall burned down by Buddhist mob
16	Apr '17	Tharkayta, Yangon Region	Alleged illegality of two madrasas as prayer halls	Madrasas locked
17	Sept '17	Taungdwingyi, Magway Region	Probable response to the Rohingya attack in August 2017	Mosques, Muslim-owned homes and shops stoned and attacked

*Note:* The compilation in this list is based on local and international media reports during the five-year period.

\* U Wirathu (b. 1968) is arguably the most controversial and provocative anti-Muslim monk in Myanmar. He is based at Masoeycin teaching monastery in Mandalay, which hosts 3,000 student monks and is the largest monastery of its kind in Myanmar.

2013 coincided with the rapid transformation of Myanmar politics after the SPDC transferred power to the USDP government in March 2011.<sup>15</sup> Second, there was no violence from September 2013 through July 2014, or from July 2014 until June 2016. The outbreak of rioting in Mandalay in July 2014 after a nine-month hiatus was remarkable because it coincided with the climax of the popular constitutional reform movement launched by the NLD and 88 Generation (Peace & Open Society).<sup>16</sup> Third, the conflicts stopped for more than a year, until the NLD won in a landslide in the November 2015 general elections, and only resumed after the NLD came to power in March 2016. Finally, the conflict resumed in September 2017, most probably as a response to the insurgent or “terrorist” attacks by the *Harakah al-Yaqin@ARSA*<sup>17</sup> on 25 August 2017. The NLD government branded ARSA a terrorist organization on the same day.<sup>18</sup>

As we can see in Table 1, because of the violence in Rakhine state and elsewhere, at least 250 people—mostly Muslims—were killed or died; thousands of homes, shops and other properties—mostly Muslim-owned—were burned and/or destroyed; and 140,000 people—almost all Muslims—were displaced. Of course, there were some important exceptions to this general pattern, such as the violence in Maungdaw on 8 June 2012, when the Rohingya who are the numerical majority in the city attacked and set fire to Rakhine-owned homes. Likewise, 58 Rakhine Buddhists and 134 Rohingya or non-Rohingya Muslims died in the two rounds of violence in Rakhine state in June and October 2012.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar* (Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Justice Trust, *Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar: Case Study of the Mandalay Riots* (New York: Justice Trust, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> “The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Anti-Terrorism Central Committee Order 1/2017 (25 August 2017), “Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) Declared as Terrorist Group”, *New Light of Myanmar*, 28 August 2017, pp. 1, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, *Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State* (Nay Pyi Taw: Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, 2013), p. 20.

Therefore, the violence in Rakhine state often seemed intercommunal, although this reading remains open to question.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, one Muslim and one Buddhist man died in the violence in Mandalay in July 2014, again creating a perception that violence was interreligious.

Due to the numerical minority status, political powerlessness, and religious minority status of Myanmar Muslims in general, the international community viewed most of the violence described here as anti-Muslim. In contrast, Buddhist rioters and bystanders framed it as the justified, spontaneous, or unfortunate consequences of Muslims' own actions. The grand narrative within Myanmar simply and strongly stated that Muslims were aggressors and Buddhists victims.<sup>21</sup> Some reasonable critics pointed to these being the impact of the political transition, the possible involvement of the authorities, the rampancy of hate speech, and the blatant sluggishness of the security forces.<sup>22</sup> But those reasonable

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<sup>20</sup> A detailed analysis of all violent episodes and their causes lies beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>21</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar: The 969 Movement and Anti-Muslim Violence", In *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, edited by Melissa Crouch (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 183–210; Gerry van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 353–75; Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menager, "Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat in Myanmar's Transition", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 396–412; Matthew J. Walton, Melyn McKay and Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi, "Women and Myanmar's 'Religious Protection Laws'", *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 36–49.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Dark Side of Transition*; Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2014); Min Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now?", *Social Research* 82, no. 2 (2015): 375–97; Susan Hayward, "The Double-Edged Sword of "Buddhist Democracy" in Myanmar", *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 25–35.

perspectives were overwhelmed by louder self-defensive Buddhist narratives that blamed Islam and Muslims alone.<sup>23</sup>

Internationally, the somewhat Orientalist view held in the West about Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha as, respectively, a peaceful religion and a serene clergy gave way to a sweeping generalization of the Buddhist Sangha of Myanmar as extremist and Islamophobic. This international (media) narrative failed to produce a more nuanced picture of a Myanmar Sangha whose many members were either silent or, in some cases, protective of local Muslims during riots in places such as Meiktila<sup>24</sup> and Lashio.<sup>25</sup> Instead, “parachute” journalists who flocked to Myanmar in transition seized on sensationalist narratives of maroon-robed hate-mongers, such as U Wirathu, who were extremely media-friendly and instantly became poster monks for extremist Buddhist nationalism. The latter Mandalay monk eventually landed on the cover of the 1 July 2013 issue of *Time* magazine, along with the caption “Buddhist Terror”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 376–95; Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; Iselin Frydenlund, “The Birth of Buddhist Politics of Religious Freedom in Myanmar”, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, no. 1 (2018): 107–21.

<sup>24</sup> Nobel Zaw, “Burmese Monks Recognized for Interfaith Peace Efforts”, *Irrawaddy*, 3 June 2015, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmese-monks-recognized-for-interfaith-peace-efforts.html> (accessed 23 February 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Htun Khaing, “The True Face of Buddhism”, *Frontier*, 12 May 2017, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-true-face-of-buddhism> (accessed 24 February 2019); Naw Betty Han, “Mansu Monastery Sayadaw Sets Tone for Racial, Religious Tolerance”, *Myanmar Times*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/mansu-monastery-sayadaw-sets-tone-racial-religious-tolerance.html> (accessed 20 March 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”, *Time*, 1 July 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,2146000,00.html> (accessed 24 February 2019).

In this context, the monk-led Ma Ba Tha emerged in June 2013 clamouring to defend Buddhism and Buddhists from Islamization and international criticism while Myanmar was unsuccessfully dealing with seemingly unstoppable conflicts. Ma Ba Tha and its predecessor 969 movement, which emerged in October 2012 and later joined hands with Ma Ba Tha, contended that Muslim shoppers intentionally bought only from Muslim-owned shops and enriched themselves so that rich, polygamous Muslim men could seduce poor Buddhist women, convert them to Islam by means of interreligious marriage and eventually outbreed Buddhists. These groups urged Buddhists to boycott Muslim-owned shops, to buy from Buddhist-owned shops alone, and to use the 969 emblem at their shops to develop symbolic Buddhist solidarity. Reminiscent of buy-domestic campaigns in colonial India and Burma, the 969 campaign was extremely successful and the emblem became ubiquitous at shops, offices, and homes throughout 2012 and 2013.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, to wage “lawfare” against Islamization, Ma Ba Tha demanded four special acts to ban or restrict polygamy, interfaith marriage, religious conversion, and hyperbreeding. It campaigned on offline and online platforms via a signature campaign, weekly and biweekly journals, pamphlets, statements, books, street protests, monks’ sermons, laypeople’s talks, conferences, public consultative workshops, press conferences, pictures, songs, life-story telling sessions, movies, and social media.

Perhaps even more importantly or persuasively than the anti-Islam or anti-Muslim content, Ma Ba Tha’s narrative was also framed in a pro-Buddhist language. Recycling rhetoric used during the colonial era, it claimed that the Myanmar Buddhist woman has been the prey of the Muslim man. She must be protected by law, for the Muslim man’s allegedly forced conversion of his Buddhist wife to Islam was tantamount to violation of Buddhists’ religious freedom. That freedom must also be

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<sup>27</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar”.

protected by law.<sup>28</sup> This language seemed to be successful in attracting Buddhists, including women,<sup>29</sup> to the movement.

Ma Ba Tha was admittedly a loose, complex movement that included both monastic and lay members across Myanmar. Although not all of the monks in its senior leadership and others in its hierarchy used inflammatory language in speech and writing, provocative monks such as U Wirathu and some grassroots lay activists profusely used Islamophobia as a key element in their rhetoric. Hate speech, offline and online, thus became rampant—especially on Facebook, which had become the most popular Internet platform in Myanmar after the liberalization of the telecommunications sector from 2012 onwards. Hate speech seemed uncontrollable or unbridled. And it was at this point that interfaith dialogue emerged as an alternative mechanism for conflict resolution or prevention.

## **EMERGENCE OF THE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AS A MECHANISM OR A FIELD**

Interfaith dialogue of a theological type is not new to Myanmar. It has existed at least since the 2000s, when the Judson Research Center at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon, established in 2003, started holding interfaith dialogues.<sup>30</sup> But the dialogues conducted at that time were theological. A small number of religious leaders or representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism got together and talked about their respective religious teachings. These talks occurred in an authoritarian context, when Myanmar was still under the military rule,

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<sup>28</sup> Walton, McKay and Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi, “Women and Myanmar’s ‘Religious Protection Laws’”; McCarthy and Menager, “Gendered Rumours”; Frydenlund, “The Birth of Buddhist Politics”.

<sup>29</sup> Walton, McKay and Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi, “Women and Myanmar’s ‘Religious Protection Laws’”.

<sup>30</sup> Judson Research Center, “About Us”, <http://judsonresearch.center/about-us/> (accessed 4 April 2019).

and their purpose was not to serve as a conflict resolution or prevention mechanism. The field of interfaith dialogue significantly changed when different actors and groups started using it for conflict resolution, political legitimacy, and peacebuilding. At least three main actors now had roles on that field: the government in power, intergovernmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations, and local civil society organizations.

### *The Government in Power*

Although the USDP government encouraged the use of interfaith dialogue whenever there was interreligious violence and tension, it is the NLD government that has directly and extensively used the interfaith field. The NLD witnessed Ma Ba Tha's strong accusations that it was explicitly pro-Islam/Muslim and implicitly anti-Buddhist. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's comments telling Buddhists to restrain themselves in June 2012,<sup>31</sup> hinting at a possible review of the 1982 citizenship law in line with international standards in April 2013,<sup>32</sup> and criticizing the two-child limit imposed on the Rohingya in Rakhine state in May 2013<sup>33</sup> and Ma Ba Tha-proposed restrictions on Buddhist women's marriage to non-Buddhist men in June 2013<sup>34</sup> instantly went viral on social media. Ma Ba Tha and its supporters, sincerely or not, took everything that Daw Aung

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<sup>31</sup> Hanna Hindstrom, "State Media Issues Correction after Publishing Racial Slur", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 6 June 2012, <http://www.dvb.no/news/state-media-issues-correction-after-publishing-racial-slur/22328> (accessed 23 February 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Aye Nai, "Suu Kyi Calls on Citizenship Law to be Amended", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 17 April 2013, <http://www.dvb.no/news/suu-kyi-calls-on-citizenship-law-to-be-revised/27605> (accessed 23 February 2019).

<sup>33</sup> AFP, "Aung San Suu Kyi Condemns Two-Child Policy", *Myanmar Times*, 27 May 2013, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/6915-aung-san-suu-kyi-condemns-two-child-policy.html> (accessed 23 February 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Khin Maung Soe, "Suu Kyi Blasts Proposed Law on Marriage Restrictions", *Radio Free Asia*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/marriage-06202013231513.html> (accessed 23 February 2019).



San Suu Kyi said to heart and started pitting themselves against her and her party. Their anti-Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and anti-NLD discourse and campaign reached a climax in the months prior to the general elections of November 2015. Ma Ba Tha's Islamophobia apparently led the NLD not to choose a single Muslim candidate to run in those elections.

But the NLD came to power prepared, and it sought to control Ma Ba Tha and to deal with the religion question. It has focused on both intrafaith and interfaith issues. Intra-Buddhist affairs under the NLD are important not only in their own right but also in relation to other minority religions such as Islam and Christianity. The NLD must make sure that Buddhists, especially the morally influential Buddhist Sangha, feel prioritized while Muslims, Christians, Hindus and others do not suffer marginalization or persecution. Below, I outline what the NLD has been doing since 2016 to promote Buddhism before I move to its interfaith activities.

### *The NLD Government's Intrafaith Promotion of Buddhism*

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, appointed State Counsellor on 6 April 2016 and consequently the de facto leader of the NLD government, visited the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, or Ma Ha Na,<sup>35</sup> the following 14 May. She told the senior monks that the NLD government would apply a policy of no discrimination on the basis of religion and that this policy would promote the image of Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> This highly symbolic meeting apparently led to a tacit rapprochement between the NLD and Ma Ha Na. The latter warned in July 2016 that Ma Ba Tha was illegal,<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ma Ha Na is the supreme Sangha administrative committee. It is in charge of monastic matters, although the government alone reserves punitive powers in cases of monks' disobedience of Ma Ha Na and violations of Sangha rules and regulations.

<sup>36</sup> Myanmar News Agency, "Daw Suu Kyi Speaks on Unity: Virtuous Leaders Serve Public Interests with Genuine Affection: Chairman Bhamo Sayadaw", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 25 May 2016, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Kyaw Phyo Than and San Yamin Aung, "State-Backed Monks' Council Decries Ma Ba Tha as 'Unlawful'", *Irrawaddy*, 13 July 2016, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/state-backed-monks-council-decries-ma-ba-tha-as-unlawful.html> (accessed 3 March 2019).

and eventually banned it in May 2017.<sup>38</sup> In March 2017, the NLD also had U Wirathu’s preaching banned for one year through Ma Ha Na.<sup>39</sup>

While cracking down on Ma Ba Tha and U Wirathu, the NLD organized three huge annual New Year’s Buddhist sermons in the People’s Square at the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, attended by hundreds of thousands of devotees including government officials.<sup>40</sup> The Shwedagon Pagoda received a grand, lavish consecration by the NLD government on 1 January 2018.<sup>41</sup> In a move directly framed in terms of peace, the NLD began building a 54-foot-tall Eternal Peace Pagoda on 1.3 acres of land in Nay Pyi Taw in May 2018.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the NLD has also planned “Eternal Peace” Buddhist sermons in twenty-one cities—including Yangon, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw—starting with the first round of sermons in the People’s Square in Yangon in April 2019.<sup>43</sup> The preachers in all those New Year and Eternal Peace Buddhist sermons are highly regarded scholarly monks and famous orators such as Sitagu Sayadaw, Oxford Sayadaw, and Ashin Sandadika. This intrafaith

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<sup>38</sup> *Irrawaddy*, “State Buddhist Authority Bans Nationalist Organization’s Name, Signboards”, 23 May 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/state-buddhist-authority-bans-nationalist-organizations-name-signboards.html> (accessed 3 March 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Htun Htun, “Govt Bans U Wirathu from Preaching Sermons”, *Irrawaddy*, 11 March 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/govt-bans-u-wirathu-preaching-sermons.html> (accessed 3 March 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Ye Khaung and Zaw Gyi, “2nd day of New Year Congregation in Yangon attracts about 200,000 people”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 3 January 2019, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Aung Kyaw Min, “Shwedagon New Year’s Event Draws 18,000 Monks”, *Myanmar Times*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/shwedagon-new-years-event-draws-18000-monks.html> (accessed 3 March 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Myanmar News Agency, “Ground consecration ceremony held for building Eternal Peace Pagoda”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 11 May 2018, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Han Lin Naing, “တာဝရငြိမ်းချမ်းရေးဓမ္မသဘင် ပဉ္စမနေ့ ပြည်သူ့ရင်ပြင်၌ ဆက်လက်ကျင်းပ” [Fifth Day of Eternal Peace Dhamma Sermon Continues], *Myanma Alinn*, 6 April 2019, p. 11.

promotion work is expected to continue throughout 2019 and even grow more prominent in 2020, when general elections will be held.

### *The Interfaith Policies and Activities of the NLD Government*

#### Interfaith Prayers in October 2017

Despite its express commitment to interfaith peace and harmony, the NLD started out late in adopting substantial policies and undertaking concrete activities in this area. The government initially seemed concerned about a potential backlash from Ma Ba Tha and like-minded groups, at least before it banned the movement.

Comments made on the NLD government's first day of his office, 1 April 2016, by minister for religious affairs and culture U Aung Ko, to the effect that Muslims in Myanmar were associate citizens, became controversial.<sup>44</sup> But the NLD government remained silent, out of concern about a Buddhist backlash.<sup>45</sup> The NLD government would also remain aloof from the Muslim question in general during the next two years. However, after the ARSA attacks of August 2017 massacred up to ninety-nine Hindu women, men and children and terrorized an unknown but smaller number of Rakhine Buddhists, according to an Amnesty International investigation,<sup>46</sup> the NLD government could not stay silent. It began to actively participate in the interfaith field.

While the notion of "Rohingya terrorists" was widespread in the governmental and media reports on the attacks and their aftermath, the United Nations and international media coverage spotlighted the refugee

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<sup>44</sup> Phyoo Thiha Cho, "Myanmar Religion Minister Angers Muslims with Comments", *Myanmar Now*, 6 April 2016, <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=e711ade0-75c6-4366-997b-cba8de7835cf> (accessed 4 April 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Aung Kyaw Min, "NLD Treads Carefully over Remarks on Citizenship", *Myanmar Times*, 7 April 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/19862-nld-treads-carefully-over-remarks-on-citizenship.html> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Amnesty International, "Myanmar: New evidence reveals Rohingya armed group massacred scores in Rakhine State", 22 May 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/myanmar-new-evidence-reveals-rohingya-armed-group-massacred-scores-in-rakhine-state/> (accessed 5 April 2019).

crisis or exodus of approximately 745,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State to Bangladesh from August 2017 onwards. This exodus was largely due to a clearance operation undertaken by the Myanmar military.<sup>47</sup> An anti-Muslim attack occurred in Taungdwingyi, Magway Region on 10 September, most probably as a response to the Rakhine crisis.<sup>48</sup> The international media repeatedly criticized State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's silence.<sup>49</sup> She eventually responded with a long speech on 19 September.<sup>50</sup>

In this increasingly contentious and fragile context, both locally and internationally, the NLD government held several high-profile interfaith prayer sessions in cities across Myanmar, including Yangon and Mandalay, in October 2017. Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu religious leaders and NLD government officials celebrated and praised interreligious harmony and peace, and made a vow to follow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>51</sup> Despite the high profile of these sessions, they abruptly ended because of a controversy over seating arrangements in Sintgaing, Mandalay region on 24 October, where Christian and Muslim

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<sup>47</sup> For example, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis", <https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Nay Aung, "Police Detains Five in Taungdwingyi Riot", *Myanmar Times*, 13 September 2017, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/police-detains-five-taungdwingyi-riot.html> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>49</sup> For example, Ishaan Tharoor, "The Shameful Silence of Aung San Suu Kyi", *Washington Post*, 6 September 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/06/the-shameful-silence-of-aung-san-suu-kyi> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>50</sup> "State Counsellor's Speech on Government's Efforts with Regard to National Reconciliation and Peace", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 20 September 2017, pp. 6, 7, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Zarni Mann, "Thousands Gather for Interfaith Rallies", *Irrawaddy*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/thousands-gather-interfaith-rallies.html> (accessed 5 April 2019); Naw Betty Han, "Interfaith Celebrations Aim to Unite Myanmar, NLD Says", *Myanmar Times*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/interfaith-celebrations-aim-unite-myanmar-nld-says.html> (accessed 5 April 2019).

representatives were seated on the stage together with Buddhist monks<sup>52</sup> while Buddhist novices were in the audience.<sup>53</sup>

### The NLD Government's Continued Sponsorship of Interfaith Dialogue Group (Myanmar)<sup>54</sup>

The Interfaith Dialogue Group (Myanmar) (IDG) has existed in various forms since 31 January 2008, when Myanmar was still under military rule. The IDG acts like a non-governmental organization but is in essence a government-organized non-governmental organization. Although not very active under military rule, it experienced reinvigoration during the interreligious violence under USDP rule. President Thein Sein expressed a commitment to interfaith peace and harmony on several occasions<sup>55</sup> and gave a President's Excellence Award to the IDG on 30 April 2013.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The controversial picture showing Muslim and Christian religious leaders on the stage with Buddhist novices in the audience that went viral online was apparently taken before Buddhist monks arrived. Another picture taken at the same event and used in a Radio Free Asia (Burmese Service) news story showed Buddhist monks together with those Muslim and Christians leaders on the stage. See “စဉ့်ကိုင် လွှတ်တော်ကိုယ်စားလှယ်က တောင်းပန်” [Sintgaing Member of Parliament Apologizes], *Radio Free Asia*, 27 October 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/sintkaing-muti-religious-10272017081427.html> (accessed 10 May 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Ye Mon, “NLD Probing Controversy over Mandalay Interfaith Event's Seating”, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 30 October 2017, <http://www.dvb.no/news/nld-probing-controversy-mandalay-interfaith-events-seating-arrangements/78120> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>54</sup> The Interfaith Dialogue Group (Myanmar) is alternatively called the Interfaith Friendship Group, Interfaith Friendship and Unity Group, or Interfaith Friendship Organization.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Mark Inkey, “Thein Sein Talks at Chatham House”, *New Mandala*, 17 July 2013, <https://www.newmandala.org/thein-sein-talks-at-chatham-house/> (accessed 1 January 2019).

<sup>56</sup> Myanmar News Agency, “President's Excellence Award Presentation Ceremony Held: Formulating People-Centered Policy Calls for Mass Participation”, *New Light of Myanmar*, 1 May 2013, pp. 16, 10.

The group formed several subnational chapters across Myanmar,<sup>57</sup> issued statements calling for interfaith peace and non-violence,<sup>58</sup> attended interfaith workshops and meetings under government auspices,<sup>59</sup> celebrated religious festivals attended by people of different faiths,<sup>60</sup> and engaged in humanitarian assistance.<sup>61</sup>

Despite its self-professed status as a non-governmental organization, the IDG was elitist and top-down during the period of USDP administration. Its activities and messages of peace and harmony failed to reach the grassroots at a time when Ma Ba Tha's narratives and campaigns were widespread across Myanmar.<sup>62</sup> When the NLD came to power, it inherited the IDG and further developed it. The NLD government has reformed the IDG twice: first on 5 August 2018 and most recently on 22 March 2019. The IDG as reformed in 2018 had eighty-one participants—including eighteen Buddhists, fourteen Christians, seventeen Muslims, and fifteen Hindus as executive members. It now brings together ninety-eight persons, including the same numbers of executive members from the four faiths. According to U Aung Ko, although the IDG is a non-governmental organization, his ministry now assists it in developing the capacity to stand on its own in the near

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<sup>57</sup> For example, "Interfaith dialogue organized in Patheingyi", *New Light of Myanmar*, 24 September 2013, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> For example, "Interfaith Friendship Organization Issues Statement on Restoring of Peace and Stability", *New Light of Myanmar*, 24 March 2013, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Myanmar News Agency, "Interfaith Meeting Held to Discuss Peace and Harmony of All Communities", *New Light of Myanmar*, 31 March 2013, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Kyemon-Aung Win (Pyapone), "Interfaith Friendship Group Marks Eid Day Get-together", *New Light of Myanmar*, 29 October 2013, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> For example, Myanmar News Agency, "Myanmar Interfaith Friendship Group Provides Humanitarian Aid to Flood Victims", *New Light of Myanmar*, 13 August 2014, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with three civil society actors and two religious leaders, Yangon and Mandalay, 6 and 10 February 2019.

future.<sup>63</sup> The work of the IDG is founded on two key assumptions. First, there will be no development in Myanmar without peace and harmony. Second, Myanmar requires a good international image as a country where there is no religious discrimination.<sup>64</sup>

The main difference between the IDG during the USDP rule and the organization under NLD rule is that the IDG is now committed to cooperating with the international community because of concerns for the image of Myanmar on the international stage. On 2 April 2019, the IDG signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate with Religions for Peace – Myanmar (RfP-M),<sup>65</sup> an international non-governmental organization.<sup>66</sup> This move reflected the institutional development of the IDG from a largely government-backed and locally elitist body to a more non-governmental organization willing to engage in international cooperation. Despite its more open nature, it is still too early to say what exactly the IDG will do between now and the general elections in 2020, although it is likely to become more involved in the interfaith field—especially if there is a resurgence of interreligious tension or violence.

### *Non-Governmental Interfaith Actors*

Besides the government, two other types of actors, both non-governmental, play roles in the interfaith field in Myanmar. The first type includes international or intergovernmental interfaith actors and their local chapters, which I call *specialist interfaith actors*, while the second group includes local civil society organizations that I call *generalist*

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<sup>63</sup> “ဘာသာပေါင်းစုံချစ်ကြည်ညီညွတ်ရေးအဖွဲ့ (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ) (ဗဟို)နှင့် ငြိမ်းချမ်းမေတ္တာအဖွဲ့တို့ ပူးပေါင်းဆောင်ရွက်ရေး နားလည်မှုစာချွန်လွှာလက်မှတ်ရေးထိုး” [Interfaith Dialogue Group (Myanmar) and Religions for Peace Ink Memorandum of Understanding], *Myanma Alinn*, 3 April 2019, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Interviews with three key senior leaders of the IDG, Yangon, 7 February 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Religions for Peace, “About”, <https://rfp.org/about/> (accessed 4 April 2019).

*interfaith actors*. This section does not offer a comprehensive description and analysis of the whole non-governmental interfaith field in Myanmar. Instead, it discusses some significant representative organizations and activities.

### *International Specialist Interfaith Actors*

#### An International Non-Governmental Specialist Interfaith Actor

The most high-profile and visible international specialist interfaith actor in Myanmar is the RfP–M known in Myanmar as Nyein Chan Metta. It is a multi-religion coalition that seeks to promote interreligious peace and harmony across the world.<sup>67</sup> It entered Myanmar in June 2012 after the religious violence first struck Rakhine State. Its arm in Myanmar is one of its ninety national affiliates. The composite organizations in the country are the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy and the Ratana Metta Organization (Buddhist), the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) and the Catholic Church (Christian), the Sanatan Hindu Organization in Myanmar (Hindu), and the Islamic Centre of Myanmar (Muslim).<sup>68</sup>

RfP–M’s patron is His Eminence Cardinal Charles Bo of the Catholic Church of Myanmar, who has close relations with State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Cardinal Bo successfully brokered the historic visit of Pope Francis to Myanmar in November 2017.<sup>69</sup> The papal visit was helpful in obtaining a green light for increasing the visibility and activities of RfP–M.<sup>70</sup> An RfP–M delegation had an audience with State Counsellor

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Religions for Peace–Myanmar, “Profile”, <https://www.rfpmm.org/profile/> (accessed 4 April 2019).

<sup>69</sup> Vatican News, “Memory of Pope Francis’ Visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh”, 26 November 2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-11/pope-francis-visit-myanmar-bangladesh.html> (accessed 4 April 2019).

<sup>70</sup> Interview with a senior leader of RfP–M, Yangon, 8 February 2019.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on 25 May 2018.<sup>71</sup> Its members visited Sittwe and Maungdaw, in Rakhine State, from 26 through 28 May.<sup>72</sup> They held their inaugural Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and Peace in Myanmar in Nay Pyi Taw in November; Daw Aung San Suu Kyi delivered a speech.<sup>73</sup> RfP-M has planned three more advisory fora for May and October 2019 and March 2020, and it expects to hold additional fora until 2021.<sup>74</sup>

Besides its own interfaith dialogue and other development activities across Myanmar in 2017 and 2018,<sup>75</sup> RfP-M entered into an agreement for cooperation with the NLD-sponsored IDG in April 2019, as stated above. The arrangement seems mutually beneficial because RfP-M needs the approval of the NLD government, while the government requires the well-established international exposure and network of RfP-M. It also seems that the two organizations will increase their interfaith activities in

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<sup>71</sup> Religions for Peace, “Press Release: Religions for Peace Multi-religious Delegation meets with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Deliver the Letter to the Peoples of Myanmar”, 25 May 2018, <https://rfp.org/religions-for-peace-multi-religious-delegation-meets-with-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-to-deliver-the-letter-to-the-peoples-of-myanmar/> (accessed 20 April 2019).

<sup>72</sup> Aung Kyaw Min, “International Religious Leaders Visit Rakhine Refugee Centres”, *Myanmar Times*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/international-religious-leaders-visit-rakhine-refugee-centres.html> (accessed 18 April 2019).

<sup>73</sup> Myanmar News Agency, “State Counsellor Delivers Speech at Religions for Peace Advisory Forum”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 22 November 2018, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with a core member of RfP-M, Yangon, 6 February 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Religions for Peace–Myanmar, “2017 National Chapter Report: 1 January to 31 December 2017”, <http://rfpasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/RfP-M-National-Chapter-Report-2017.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2019); Religions for Peace–Myanmar, “Religions for Peace – Myanmar Chapter presents to the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) Executive Committee It is Myanmar National Chapter Report between January 2018 and December 2018”, 28 March 2019, <https://www.rfpmm.org/pdf/RfPMyanmar%20Chapter%20Annual%20Report%202018.pdf> (accessed 11 April 2019).

the rest of 2019 and in 2020. One possible area of cooperation is RFP-M's planned national reconciliation and peace.

### An Intergovernmental Specialist Interfaith Actor

The most important intergovernmental specialist interfaith actor in Myanmar is the Vienna-based International Dialogue Centre (IDC) of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), whose members are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kingdom of Spain, the Republic of Austria, and the Holy See.<sup>76</sup> KAICIID runs an international fellowship programme that has so far recruited sixteen fellows from Myanmar, including five Buddhist monks.<sup>77</sup> Partly because of sensitivity around interfaith issues<sup>78</sup> and partly because of the usual pattern in Myanmar of cooperation between intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations and local civil society organizations, the IDC has chosen to work in partnership with Peaceful Myanmar Initiatives (PMI).<sup>79</sup>

PMI is a network of prominent Myanmar religious leaders such as Myawaddy Mingyi Sayadaw Ashin Aria Bhivamsa and Asia Light Sayadaw Ashin Seindida, and of local civil society organizations such as the Metta Campaign, Asia Light Sayadaw Ashin Seindida's Asia Light Foundation, and the Law Ka Tha Ra network. With the support of the IDC, PMI has been in operation since December 2016—notably, the same year in which the NLD came to power. With its close cooperation with the IDC, PMI may be called a local specialist interfaith actor. Before conducting targeted or private interfaith training sessions, PMI held a

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<sup>76</sup> KAICIID, "Governance", <https://www.kaiciid.org/governance> (accessed 11 April 2019).

<sup>77</sup> KAICIID, "KAICIID International Fellows Programme", <https://www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/kaiciid-international-fellows-programme> (accessed 11 April 2019).

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a key official with the IDC in Myanmar, Singapore, 14 March 2019.

<sup>79</sup> PMI is also spelled out as Peaceful Myanmar Initiative.

public forum called the “*Mandalay Regional Forum on Interreligious Coexistence and Inclusive Development*” in Mandalay in May 2017 reportedly. It was attended by 200 people of various faiths and by government officials.<sup>80</sup>

Besides interfaith dialogue initiatives in twelve out of fourteen regions and states across Myanmar, PMI has run an Interfaith Dialogue Training Center since May 2018 at the Asia Light Monastery in Pyin Oo Lwin, Mandalay Region—the first of its kind in Myanmar.<sup>81</sup> As of December 2018, the centre had hosted six interfaith peace, harmony, and dialogue trainings for more than 100 religious and community activists and leaders.<sup>82</sup> Some training sessions are only meant for monk attendees. They allow monks to engage in discussions about interfaith issues through peer learning from a monk trainer and foreign Buddhist scholars. Most other sessions aim at lay participants.<sup>83</sup>

### *Local Generalist Interfaith Actors*

Besides abovementioned intergovernmental and international specialist interfaith organizations and their local chapters in Myanmar, Myanmar civil society organizations also act as important members of the interfaith dialogue field in the country. I call them *generalist interfaith actors* because they often promote interreligious peace and harmony without

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<sup>80</sup> KAICIID, “Peaceful Myanmar Initiative Launches Major Interreligious Event in Mandalay Region”, 3 May 2017, <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/peaceful-myanmar-initiative-launches-major-interreligious-event-mandalay-region> (accessed 1 May 2019).

<sup>81</sup> KAICIID, “Myanmar’s First Interreligious Dialogue Training Centre Launched by Peaceful Myanmar Initiative and International Dialogue Centre”, 25 May 2018, <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/myanmar’s-first-interreligious-dialogue-training-centre-launched-peaceful-myanmar> (accessed 12 April 2019).

<sup>82</sup> Peaceful Myanmar Initiatives, *PMI Annual Report: Period Covered: 1st January 2018 to 31st December 2018* (unpublished report), n.d.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with a key official with the IDC in Myanmar, Singapore, 14 March 2019.

specializing in it. They pursue it not continually but on an ad hoc basis, usually during and after violent conflicts. And persons or organizations in this diverse group often work individually or through networks.

Individual generalist actors usually include, but are not limited to, religious leaders, literary figures, politicians, and activists. Organizationally, generalist actors comprise civil society organizations that often engage in interfaith trainings, fora, and other related activities in addition to their usual activities, which are usually framed in the language of peace, development, federalism, diversity, citizenship, and so forth. Typically depending on the needs and wants of their international funding sources—the European Union, the Paung Sie Facility, the Forum of Federations, Norwegian People’s Aid, and others—these civil society projects seem to be attempts to respond to religious tensions and conflicts when they occur. Hence, they often lack consistency and persistence.

Mosaic Myanmar, for example, arranges so-called diversity tours to multi-religious sites such as mosques and temples to supplement trainings and workshops framed in terms of diversity and inclusion.<sup>84</sup> Another Myanmar civil society organization, Synergy, conducts conflict prevention workshops across Myanmar which target potential religiously motivated or framed violence.<sup>85</sup> The Metta Campaign organizes literary talks, documentaries, debates, and prayers that highlight inclusion, diversity, and peaceful coexistence.<sup>86</sup> Although these organizations focus above all on their own diverse activities, they often form networks and work together when necessary and relevant. Depending on their

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with a key official with Mosaic Myanmar, Yangon, 5 February 2019; Mosaic Myanmar, “Our Projects”, <http://www.mosaicmm.org/index.php/about>; Mosaic Myanmar, *Community-Based Federalism Workshop Series: 06 February – 24 April 2017* (unpublished report), n.d.; Mosaic Myanmar, *Community-Based Federalism Workshop: September 2017 – April 2018* (unpublished report), n.d.; Mosaic Myanmar, *Federalism and Diversity Management Training Series: 01 July 2018–02 December 2018* (unpublished report), n.d.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with a key official with Synergy, Yangon, 9 February 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with two leaders of Metta Campaign, Mandalay, 13 February 2019.

respective influence and proximity to local government officials, some civil society organizations and their members join government-organized prayer services or peace events.<sup>87</sup>

Interviews with a selection of intergovernmental, international, governmental, and non-governmental interfaith dialogue actors in Yangon, Mandalay, and Pyin Oo Lwin during February 2019 indicate that the success of the various interfaith trainings, fora, and activities greatly depends on the posture and support of the government. Most actors and groups accept that the potential achievements of their efforts for interfaith peace and harmony are limited if the government, especially local security or police officials, do not swiftly respond to tensions and conflicts. In particular, some civil society activists and religious leaders question the actual level of political will behind the USDP government's use of the IDG and point to its failure to respond swiftly to, let alone to prevent or resolve, conflicts.

While civil society organizations criticize governmental efforts in the interfaith field as superficial, cosmetic, or politically oriented, they also fail to see themselves as “political” actors. Apart from public promotion of Buddhism and its own interfaith activities and events, the NLD government has generally stayed aloof from non-governmental activities in the field of interfaith peace and harmony. Many activists resent the fact that government officials fail to attend their events. However, they are generally appreciative of the fact that the NLD government generally neither blocks nor publicly attacks civil society initiatives.

According to some activists, the message of interfaith peace and harmony from the government may amount to weak or superficial “ripples” now, but it may all the same create “waves” in the longer term if the government proves consistent and persistent. Many civil society organization initiatives pay attention to the promotion of “effective” conflict transformation and resolution with grassroots law enforcement

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<sup>87</sup> For example, Khin Hnin Wai, “ဘာသာပေါင်းစုံဆုတောင်းပွဲ မန္တလေးတွင် ပြုလုပ်” [Interfaith Prayers Held in Mandalay], *Myanmar Now*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/mm/news/1903> (accessed 22 March 2019).

agencies equal to that paid to interfaith dialogue, but some face official and local disapproval in that former work.

## CONCLUSION

It seems that the Rohingya problem, which remains framed in Myanmar as one of (illegal) migration, undecided citizenship, and terrorism, is not going to go away soon. Interreligious tensions may thus long be present. However, the way the NLD dealt with Ma Ba Tha deserves some credit, even if the brand of Buddhist nationalism that Ma Ba Tha militantly promoted from 2012 until 2015 has not completely vanished. As the 2020 general elections approach, Buddhist identity politics are likely to prove resurgent, if in different forms and narratives. A Ma Ba Tha-style blanket anti-Muslim narrative that targetted *all* Rohingya and non-Rohingya Muslims without distinguishing between them will not work this time. Buddhist identity politics may perhaps be fixated on the repatriation of Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh, but it may also focus on narrower religious questions such as what the NLD will do to promote and “protect” Buddhism further.

The NLD also seems acutely aware of the need to avoid a resurgence of conflicts like those of 2012–14, during the run-up to the 2020 elections. We may therefore expect to see more intrafaith and interfaith initiatives and activities on the part of the government during the rest of 2019 and into 2020. A similar increase in non-governmental work in this field is—depending on the need and context as perceived by international funders and local organizers and the funding made available—also likely.

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