

Nationalism, Ethnonationalism, and the Making of Modern Myanmar (Burma): A Case for Constructed Primordialism

Anna Tan

Abstract

This article looks at the evolution of forms of nationalism through Burma (Myanmar)'s pre-colonial to post-colonial political history via the contesting lens of two theories: constructivism and primordialism. I argue that the nationalism that predominates in Burma has been primarily Burman-centric, *i.e.* Burman-ethnonationalism dominating over that of various other ethnic groups. Throughout Burma's colonial and post-colonial history, this Burman-ethnonationalism morphed into different forms for the sake of fighting against a common enemy, playing a significant role in Burma's gaining of independence from the British and formation as a state-nation. During the decades of military dictatorship, popular opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi provided a mirage of national social cohesion that instilled a form of anti-military 'Burmese nationalism'. In the present-day era, I focus on the role of Burman ethno-nationalism in the legitimacy battle between the old and new elites in Burma's democratic struggles, and consequently how it led to the 2016 mass violations against the Rohingya.

Keywords: Burma, Myanmar, Rohingya, war crimes, crimes against humanity, nationalism, ethnonationalism, ethnic conflict, colonialism.

Introduction

While nationalism has always been a motivating factor in war and state creation and maintenance, the nationalism we are familiar with today was first popularized during the French Revolution. The Jacobin violence and in the making of the modern French Republic, as well as in Italian and German Revolutions, all led to mass atrocities of those who did not fit within this newly imposed identity. Anthony Marx defines nationalism as an identity or an emotion that is collectively felt by a group of individuals bound together by a 'sense of large scale-political solidarity' with an objective that 'challenges, creates or legitimises states'¹. Nationalism's purpose as a powerful political ideology is to make the population cohesive

¹ Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Chapters 1–3.

as a nation. And with a powerful nation comes a powerful state. After all, as Charles Tilly argues: 'war makes state and state makes war'².

However, there is an important dichotomy that exists in the role of nationalism in the formation of nation-states of the West in developed countries after the Second World War, as opposed to the state-nations of underdeveloped countries across Asia and Africa, notwithstanding exceptions. As Mostafa Rejai and Cynthia Enloe argue, this is because the former countries had the 'sense of national identity evolved prior to the crystallisation of the structures of political authority', while for the latter countries, this sequence is in a reversed format³. For Burma's case, authority and sovereignty had existed in the form of the Burmese monarchy. The self-consciousness of Burma's ethnic groups that later emerged as ethnonationalism were not aroused until the disturbance of the existing social cohesion by British colonial rule. To this extent, Burma's 1947 independence had created a state-nation, whereby Burman ethnonationalism played a central role in its early state formation. In the contemporary era, however, Burma is contested in the Weberian definition of a nation-state, as opposed to the historical influence of nationalism in the formation of Westphalian nation-states in European revolutions. Given this context, using Burma⁴ as a case study, I argue that the theoretical perspective of nationalism is conditional; that the applicability of primordialism or constructivism depends on the circumstances and the motives that lie underneath its usage. And that it is this conditionality that, in contemporary Burma, resulted in the mass war crimes against the Rohingya.

This article is composed of four sections. First, I analyse primordial theories against those from the constructivist paradigm. The former argues for a fixed notion of nationalism, while the latter, for a socio-ideological construct. I then introduce how nationalism manifested in Burma prior to the colonial era. Its metamorphosis throughout the colonial era is featured in the second part. Third, I describe how nationalism became a unifying factor once again during Burma's struggle against the military regime, under the popularity of the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Finally, a particular focus is placed on the role of Burman ethnonationalism in the legitimacy battle between the old elites, defined as the military state actors, and the new elites, mainly defined as the civilian state actors. The brunt of this legitimacy battle was received by the Rohingyas in the form of mass atrocities and gross human rights violations in the 2016 Rohingya Crisis.

² Charles Tilly, *War Making and State Making as an organised Crime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), x.

³ Mostafa Rejai and Cynthia Enloe, "Nation-States and State-Nations*," *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (June 1969), 140-158.

⁴ Burma was changed to Myanmar in 1989 by the Tatmadaw without a national consensus, in an attempt to distance from its colonial past. In this article, I use the name Burma for the sake of consistency and to minimise confusion, but not to make a political statement.

Theories of Nationalism

Edward Shils, from the primordialist school on nationalism, regarded nationalism as a natural as well as biological attribute that is inevitable, held together by a common bloodline⁵. Constructivists on the other hand disagree, arguing that nationalism is a constructed ideology and therefore artificial. According to the latter, the biological 'ties' put forward by the primordialists are instead a socially defined concept of kinship⁶. Benedict Anderson defined nationalism as an 'imagined political community' that is 'limited' and 'sovereign'. He argues that nationalism is imagined in a way that compatriots who are not mutually knowledgeable about one another are nevertheless connected by the idea of their unity. It is limited since it is exclusive to the people of a particular nation⁷.

Nationalism also creates a community that, despite existing socioeconomic disparities, entrenches a camaraderie that is supposedly horizontal⁸. In how nationalism has played a role in the French Revolution, the Jacobin phase must be put under scrutiny. In the abolishing of the Hobbesian *divine right to rule* that saw the end of the French monarchy, the collective revolt of the Third Estate triggered a national consciousness. As George Mosse describes, 'the unity of the people was cemented by common citizenship', hence the creation of the phrase 'civic religion' to describe the new consciousness⁹.

Pre-colonial Burma

In the late 1800s, a radical British statesman named Lord Randolph Churchill implemented an excessively brutal solution to the 'Burma problem'. Lord Churchill created an 'expeditionary force' made up of the British Indian army, whose goal was to abolish the Burmese monarchy and aristocracy and disrupt the existing social cohesion of the Burmese. This expedition created British Burma under British India. The British also led a pacification campaign to clamp down on resisting guerrilla forces within Burma that erupted after the fall of Mandalay, the seat of the Burmese monarchy. This had the effect of disturbing the social fabric of the Burmese

⁵ Edward Shils, "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory," *British Journal of Sociology* 8, no. 2 (1957): 130–145.

⁶ Jack David Eller and Reed M. Coughlan, "The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no. 2 (1993): 183–202.

⁷ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions/NLB, Schocken Books, New York, 1983), Chapters 1–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ George Mosse, "Fascism and the French Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (1989): 6.

people associated with traditions based on Buddhist teachings¹⁰. The expeditionary army contained both British and Indian belligerents, which the Burmese collectively perceived as one and the same as part of the invading British Empire. An issue released by the *Hluttaw*, a local newspaper, translated as “the King’s Court”, was noted to have referred the British as ‘heretics’ and ‘*kala* barbarians’¹¹ that destroyed the religion of the Burmese and degraded the Burmese race¹². The term *kala* was used to refer to both Westerners and Indians during the colonial era. However, in the post-colonial era, it became exclusively restricted to South Asian or Indians and also Muslims. As Mikael Gravers argues, ethnic consciousness arose here in the pre-colonial times through these circumstances that fostered deep-rooted resentment amongst the Burmese against ethnic groups in the country of Indian heritage or origin¹³.

As nationalism did not manifest in the locals until foreign powers threatened their existing social fabric and communal existence, neither just the primordialist nor the constructivist theories individually could satisfy the complexity of Burmese nationalism in this context. Instead, it emerged as a politico-socio construct that would not have been aroused if it were not for use of violence by foreign oppressors. Instead, as contemporary theorists argue¹⁴, I contend that the Burmese nationalism and ethnic struggle triggered by British colonialism is one of a neo-primordialist hybrid with constructionism. This concoction of two theories for nationalism views ethnic consciousness as not necessarily a “thing” in itself per se, but as manifested into an active political identity as a response by a population, through kinship, that realises that its very existence, interests, and dignity are at stake due to external forces. In this case, it is the British-Indian belligerents.

Colonial Burma

Burma’s colonial era under British rule between the 1890s to the early 1920s saw a relative modernisation, but it was far from egalitarian. The social hierarchy consisted of the British at the apex, followed by Anglo-Burmese, and then the Burmese themselves. Ethnic minorities in certain areas that converted to Christianity brought by the British, enjoyed socio-economic

¹⁰ Michael Aung Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and transformations*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2013), 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Pum Za Mang, “Religion, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Burma,” *Journal of Church and State* 59, no. 4 (2013): 626–648.

¹³ Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as a Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, NIAS Report Series 11 (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993), 1–3.

¹⁴ John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern, “New Perspectives on Nationalism and War,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1 (1994): 5–45.

privileges greater than other ethnic groups as they were more anglicised than the Burmans¹⁵.

During this time, there was no border separating Burma and India, despite both being in different sovereignties before the colonial era. Without any border under the British India empire, the Burmese were not considered as ethnically distinctive from the Indians. Between 1920–30, immigration from India to Burma spiked. The sudden mass influx of mostly skilled migrants into the country triggered a new wave defensive Burmese nationalism to emerge. The British colonial rulers then quelled the rebels by recruiting other ethnic groups into the British-Indian army and appointed them as army officers and military police. Simultaneously, the British also labelled the Burmans as a ‘non-martial race’, which led to a conscription law that ostracised the Burmans from serving in the British-Indian army purely based on their ethnicity¹⁶.

Nationalist narratives during the colonial era now turned into something different. The external threat, which used to be the British-Indian army now became internal, introducing a new cause for social and political division that did not previously exist. The minorities within Burma adhered to different faiths, including Christianity and Islam. This had the effect of transforming Burmese nationalism into a form of Burman-ethnic consciousness mixed with Buddhism. In short, during the pre-colonial era, Burmese nationalism emerged as a form of a collective resistance against foreign armies, particularly the British-Indian Army. By the 1930s, nationalism in Burma transformed into a Bamar-centric ethnic consciousness rather than a Burmese national one.

Nationalism in Contemporary Burma

Aung San, a social democrat and a charismatic nationalist, formed the Burmese Military in 1946 and was responsible for leading negotiations with the British to give Burma full independence. Aung San’s Burma was founded under the 1947 constitution, a secular constitution that separated church and state as well as gave the assurance of civil rights and liberties for the major ethnic minorities. A drastic turn of circumstances took place with Aung San’s 1947 assassination and the succession of U Nu as Burma’s first Prime Minister. Souring civil-military relations along with a post-colonial legacy of a weak state apparatus led to U Nu’s passing of an unconstitutional bill that declared Buddhism as the state religion. It was the final straw in bogging Burma down in ethnic strife across the peripherals with non-

¹⁵ Emilie Biver, *Religious Nationalism: Myanmar and the Role of Buddhism in Anti-Muslim Narratives: An Analysis of Myanmar’s Ethnic Conflicts through the Lens of Buddhist Nationalism*, Thesis, Department of Political Science, Lund University, 2014, 15.

¹⁶ Thant Myint-U, “What to do about Burma,” *London Review of Books* 29, no. 3 (8 February 2007).

Buddhist minority groups demanding for autonomy and federalism. Burma has since been in a state of constant civil war¹⁷.

'There is an enduring myth', says Thant Myint-U, 'that in 1948, when it achieved independence from Britain, Burma was a rich country with every reason to expect a bright future...'¹⁸. In short, Burma's independence was essentially brought about by a Burman-centric, anti-colonialist nationalism whilst the rest of the country's peripheries suffered from insufficient state governance, a legacy left by the Raj. This implies the formation of Burma's early nation building as a state-nation centred around Burman-centric ethnonationalism.¹⁹ U Nu's bill declaring Buddhism as a civic religion seem to have compounded on this ethnonationalist early state formation. The dichotomy, however, sits between the Burman-Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism versus the ethnic consciousness of the minorities in fear of civic marginalisation²⁰. The repercussions of ethnic strife caused by U Nu's political subjection of Buddhism over the population nation-wide, are seldom discussed in the contemporary political discourse, but should be perceived as foundation as much as the Burman chauvinist underpinnings are in the founding of the modern-day Burmese military and the Burmese republic. The primordialist view of Burmese nationalism that says Burma as a land resided by a heterogenous population, becomes conflated with Buddhist nationalism, a constructivist perspective of nationalism that says Burma is a Buddhist state-nation.

F.K.L. Chit Hlaing articulates this reality very well, when he argued, 'not all Burmans are Buddhists and yet all recognise and acknowledge the centrality of Theravada Buddhism for their Burman identity – which is what is really meant by the common view that "to be Burman is to be Buddhist"²¹. Burmese identity and Buddhism have been inseparable since the times of the monarchy, only until the colonial era laws divorced the other ethnic groups from this identity and aroused ethnoreligious heterogeneity. The *sangha*, the Buddhist clergy, and the state's relationship mostly exists as a reciprocal one where the former feels responsible to ensure that the government is ruling the nation according to the moral principles of Buddhism, and the state ultimately stands as the guarantor of the sangha's sanctity. In other words, the state is the defender of the faith and the faith provides the state with legitimacy. Because of the linkages between the state and faith, throughout Burmese history, monarchs have waged wars in the name of Buddhism in

¹⁷ Mang, "Religion, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Burma," 626–648.

¹⁸ Myint-U, "What to do about Burma."

¹⁹ Thant Myint-U, "Not a Single Year's Peace," *London Review of Books* 41, no. 22 (21 November 2019).

²⁰ Biver, *Religious Nationalism*, 15.

²¹ F.K.L. Chit Hlaing, "Some Remarks upon Ethnicity Theory and South East Asia, with Special Reference to the Kayah and Kachin," in *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, ed., Mikael Gravers (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007), 108. Emphasis added.

the past. Against the enduring myth of Buddhist non-violence, violence in the name of Buddhism in Burma is, in fact, not a new concept²².

The importance of secularism, however, in politics only entered when Aung San emerged towards the dawn of the Second World War. The sangha-to-state relationship²³ existed for the most of history in precolonial Burma. It was then disrupted temporarily during the British rule from 1886 to 1947. The state-sangha relationship saw an attempted resumption under U Nu's time as Prime Minister from Independence in 1947 until the 1962 coup d'état by General Ne Win. It was then disrupted once more by the military during its fifty years of dictatorship until 2011. Notably, 1982 saw the enactment of the infamous Citizenship Law, which effectively institutionalised constructivist-primordialist perception of nationality and entrenched the concept of nativism. The law classified Burma's population into eight major ethnic groups, which was divided into a further 135 that were recognised by the state.

These years of direct military rule between 1962 and 2011 were also a capsule of time where Burma was under global ostracism. 1988 saw popular uprisings that entailed heavy bloodshed of students that led the mass civil resistance, while the 1990s saw the rising influence of the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San. The opposition was made up of democrats who later formed the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the former's leadership. 2007 saw the collaboration of democrats and the state clergy as a collective mass civil resistance, yet again, later dubbed as the Saffron Revolution, named after the colour of the robes of monks that filled the urban streets of Burma. Bloodshed ensued furthermore, monks were tortured, disrobed, and jailed. Some were killed and others given life sentences with hard labour. The monks also criticised the military for attempting to legitimise their authority by building Buddhist pagodas and donations²⁴. In short, the role of Buddhism never left the scene of mass civic movement, and with Aung San Suu Kyi at the apex, almost giving an illusion of being a cohesive glue for the population's their struggle against the military, and for the military, as a weapon against civic marginalisation of the ethnic minorities²⁵. This alliance led to the 2008

²² Gravers, *Nationalism as a Political Paranoia in Burma*, 1–3.

²³ Tharaphi Than, "Nationalism, Religion, and Violence: Old and New Wunthanu Movements in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 22–24.

²⁴ Mikael Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities," *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1 (2015): 1–27.

²⁵ Benedict Rogers, "The Saffron Revolution: The Role of Religion in Burma's Movement for Peace and Democracy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9, no. 11, (2008): 115–118.

Constitution recognising Buddhism as a civic religion²⁶. Simply, in Burma, constructed primordialism is institutionalised and legally protected.

After years of global ostracism, Burma finally underwent democratic reforms in 2011, and in 2015 it saw its first free and fair election that formed the incumbent NLD government under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi.²⁷ For the West, Suu Kyi's image was that of a Western liberal democratic ideal and a human rights icon. For the Burmese, she was a nationalist, anti-military symbol²⁸. The dichotomy of the role of Buddhist nationalism in anti-military civic resistance and that of its role in Burma's standing as a state-nation became more conspicuous as democratisation materialised post-2011. This manifested as a legitimacy battle between the old elites of the military and its ex-general polity and the new elites of the democrats in support of Aung San Suu Kyi. The commonality shared by the two is Burman ethnonationalism. In this battle there is no room for the ethnic rights of Burma's highly heterogeneous population, and ultimately given a highly neoconservative nature of Buddhist orthodoxy and its deep-rooted Islamophobia, a group of Muslim minorities in Rakhine called the Rohingyas took the brunt of this legitimacy battle. I substantiate this argument by placing an emphasis on the Rohingya Crisis of 2016, and dissect on the primordialist and constructivist perspectives of Burman ethnonationalism in the next section.

The 2016 Rohingya Crisis: A Background

From 2012 to 2015 Burma saw an increase in sectarian conflicts in the region of Rakhine, where most of the country's impoverished population reside in. The northern part of the region is resided mainly by a Muslim minority group called the Rohingyas, who are believed to be descended from the influx of Indian immigrants from Chittagong in the former British India (later East Pakistan and then Bangladesh) before a demarcation existed. The Citizenship Law instated in 1982 that divides Burma's population into 135 recognised²⁹ ethnic groups exclude the Rohingyas, despite their recognition during Burma's brief democratic governance in the 1950s. The sectarian conflicts spurred between the Rohingya Muslims of Northern Rakhine and of the majority Rakhinese Buddhists in the south. Albeit both populations commonly faced mass human rights violations from the Burmese armed forces, the Rohingyas were subject to disproportionately higher violations

²⁶ *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/64 (New York: United Nations Human Rights Council, 12 September 2018), 5.

²⁷ Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism and The Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020), 133–219.

²⁸ Richard Horsey, "Myanmar at the International Court of Justice", *International Crisis Group*, 10 December 2019, www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-international-court-justice.

²⁹ What it means to be 'recognised' by the state generally refers to nativism in Burma's identity-based ethnic politics.

and mass atrocities. At the core of the violence against the Rohingyas were a collective of Buddhist chauvinist organisations comprising of monks, nuns, and civilians that mobilised through Islamophobic demagoguery. Their message touts that all Muslims are a threat to Burma's national security and promotes the military's role in protecting Buddhism as a 'state religion'. Their patrons are the armed forces and its ex-generals-turned-politicians. The Rohingyas, on the other hand, claim that they have been indigenous people in the area since the times of the monarchy and therefore deserve the right to citizenship³⁰.

The conflicts escalated to a new level in 2016, just shortly after the newly elected NLD government assumed office, where an insurgent group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that claims to represent the Rohingyas attacked government security posts in Northern Rakhine. An disproportional, pre-meditated retaliation by the armed forces and its civilian supporters followed, in the form setting fire to hundreds of Rohingya villages, mass and systemic sexual violence against Rohingya women, and the death of thousands of civilians. An exodus of the remaining hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas ensued, crossing the border to Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar. The number of Rohingya refugees in the camps swelled to an approximate one million³¹. The events have been documented by various international human rights organisations, including the United Nations as 'textbook ethnic cleansing'³² and 'genocide'³³.

The Rohingya Crisis and Theoretical Perspectives of Nationalism

Nationalism, as Comaroff described³⁴, became both a primordial and social construct, exploitable by the military junta and its supporters to legitimise their need to use power and violence for the sake of "defending Buddhism" as the state's religion. The inextricability between Burman religion and state religion is therefore reinforced again. There is no room for pluralism recognised neither by the civilian or the military actors despite the fact that Burma is populated by a highly heterogenous population of a multitude of faiths. As such, the rights, as well as the religious and ethnic identities, of others were excluded from this narrative of the Burmese

³⁰ Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461-483.

³¹ Gert Rosenthal, *A Brief and Independent Inquiry into the Involvement of United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018* (New York: United Nations, 29 May 2019), 9.

³² UN News, "UN Human Rights Chief Points to 'Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing' in Myanmar," *UN News*, 11 September 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>.

³³ *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, 16.

³⁴ John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern, "New Perspectives on Nationalism and War," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1 (1994): 5-45.

nationalists in their desire of building a nation after the dictatorship³⁵. At the centre of this legitimacy battle between the old elites versus the new elites is the shared Buddhist chauvinism as a primordialist construct compounded on Burma's statehood as a state-nation, given the point of this violence itself is to ostensibly be able to restore Burma into its imagined state as a Buddhist nation³⁶. The identities and the rights of the remaining ethnics are purely forgotten, and in the context of the crisis, the brunt of this legitimacy battle was taken by the Rohingyas.

Dissecting the liturgy of these movements can further support my argument on why they are explained by this hybrid theory and how far reaching they can be to grip masses of men and women to commit heinous atrocities. In the chauvinism that fuels violence against the Rohingyas, the external threat, as mentioned in Comaroff's theory of nationalism³⁷, is now considered being a mix of Muslim, which is foreign to the Burman Buddhist identity, and as Rohingyas that speak the Bengali tongue, a language foreign to the Burmans. Both characteristics pose an imagined threat to the Burmese-Buddhist national identity. Wirathu, an ex-convict and a Buddhist monk at the forefront of these movements, had his reputation spread internationally as the mouthpiece of the 969 Movement from 2012 onwards.³⁸ Contrary to popular perception, however, the 969 is a decentralised movement, with its followers held together by a unified mission to prevent Buddhism from being eradicated by Islam and Burma being turned into a Muslim country³⁹. The numbers, 969, represent Buddhist signs, practices, and virtues within a 'community' as a countermovement to the long-held idea across South Asia that Muslims intend to 'conquer Burma in the 21st Century'⁴⁰. While this movement is utilising a political liturgy that has gripped laypeople, and mobilised them by demagogues like Wirathu, it should more accurately be viewed as a legitimacy battle between the old elites formed around the military and the new elites, formed around the NLD, given that the 969 movement's patrons are unquestionably the military senior leaders. The nature of the violence conducted by 969 differs from those described in Brian Victoria's *Zen at War*⁴¹, however. Victoria draws intimate correlations

³⁵ Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka," 20-27.

³⁶ Penny Green, Thomas MacManus, and Alicia de la Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar* (London: International State Crime Initiative, 2015), 27-31.

³⁷ Comaroff and Stern, *New Perspectives on Nationalism and War*, 6.

³⁸ *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Report No. 290 (Brussels, International Crisis Group, 5 September 2017), 10.

³⁹ Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, Policy Studies 71 (Washington, DC: East West Center, 2014).

⁴⁰ Alex Bookbinder, "969: The Strange Numerological Basis for Burma's Religious Violence," *The Atlantic*, 9 April 2013.

⁴¹ Brian D. Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2nd ed., (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

between Japanese militarism and Zen Buddhism in the Second World War that led to the fanatical and suicidal spirit displayed by soldiers. Instead, 969's violence is more akin to the pogroms of the twentieth century. Though they may share comparable traits of breaking the myth of Buddhist non-violence, Burma's state clergy denounces such movements. However, they were not equipped to be as involved in mainstream domestic politics due to fear of retaliation from state actors as they have been in the past. This was seen in 2016 when the Sangha Council (*i.e.*, the state clergy) made a public announcement citing that MaBaTha (the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, the parent organisation of the 969 Movement) lacks legal credentials. The domestic analysis of this announcement acted as a disavowal of the organisation by the highest religious authorities in the country⁴².

Unfortunately, this was as far as the renunciation went, because most of the state clergy that make up the actual composition of the state clergy have remained to engage in more peripheral roles within the Burmese society, such as daily religious activities and humanitarian work⁴³. Throughout all of this, the NLD is focused on winning this legitimacy battle rather than implementing radical reforms to achieve a better peace by accommodating inclusivity through democratic governance. No radical peace campaigns or mass interfaith peacebuilding efforts were implemented. Thus instead, violence continues.

Most importantly, this Buddhist nationalist narrative created by the MaBaTha and the 969 Movement self-introduced a new kind of threat to the state. This narrative has allowed the leaders of the 969 and MaBaTha to lobby against the Government to enact laws that would prevent Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men. In this instance, being Rohingya and being a Muslim (the former being an ethnic identity and the latter being a religious one) was also being conflated⁴⁴. Within the discourse of anti-Muslim sentiments that got inflamed since 2012 onwards, many who were well-integrated Muslims in urban areas and do not necessarily belong to the Rohingya ethnic population, were also subjected to Buddhist extremist violence. Followers of MaBaTha campaigned for people to boycott Muslim-run businesses, causing them to be shut down⁴⁵. Ultimately it was not just the Rohingya ethnicity itself was regarded as foreign and a threat, but the entire Muslim community was perceived as an existential threat to the state.

Conclusion

⁴² *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, 15.

⁴³ Morten Pedersen, "Democracy and Human Rights," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (Routledge, Milton Park, 2017): 371-390.

⁴⁴ Tharaphi Than, "Nationalism, Religion, and Violence: Old and New Wunthanu Movements in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 22-24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The idea of a Burmese identity is almost mythical in Burma. Instead, it is largely Burman ethnonationalism and an amalgamation of the country's many ethnic groups. This is because there is no unifying Burma/Myanmar identity in the first place. Since independence, Burma lacks the social cohesion to make the highly heterogeneous population into one. To reiterate Thant Myint-U, 'there is an enduring myth that in 1948, when it achieved independence from Britain, Burma was a rich country with every reason to expect a bright future...'⁴⁶. Burma, from colonial rule up until the present day, has never been whole. What dominates in Burma is actually the superiority of Burman ethnonationalism, which is intertwined with Buddhism, eclipsing that of all the other remaining ethnic groups, religious groups, and their rights. The majoritarian nature of its domestic politics therefore has never really dissipated despite the change in regime from a direct military rule to the current quasi-civilian hybrid regime⁴⁷. With these iterations in governance styles, so has the constructed notion that Buddhism is a civic religion and the religion of the state-nation. This definition adamantly negates plurality.

Ethnonationalism is therefore considered sacrosanct and it overwhelms Burma's politics. This is lucid in the way Burma's peace processes has led towards building an ethno-federal state, despite decades of inter-marriage between ethnicities and uneven internal migration⁴⁸. The Burmese seem unable to become cognizant of the idea that ethnicity can be fluid. Whichever route Burma ends up heading towards, whether remaining a majoritarian ethnostate or an ethno-federal state, it seems likely that the Rohingyas will remain excluded from this process. If any inkling of peace were to take shape in Burma, it will have to be a process that gives more *neutralité* to the majoritarian composition of its armed forces and civilian state institutions generating ample room for plurality, heterogeneity, and fundamental rights, and a future that moves away from this constructed primordialist grip of ethnonationalism amongst the Burmese.

⁴⁶ Myint-U, "What to do about Burma."

⁴⁷ Pedersen, "Democracy and Human Rights."

⁴⁸ Myint-U, "The Hidden History of Burma."