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The Religious Landscape in Myanmar's Rakhine State

By Melyn McKay



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the ways in which religious actors, networks, and organizations in Myanmar's Rakhine State navigate and influence local conflict and peace dynamics.

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Cover photo: Two boys walking in Rakhine State near Sittwe. (Photo by Suphapong Eiamvorasombat/Shutterstock)

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Summary



Conflict dynamics in Myanmar’s Rakhine State are deeply rooted in a complex and traumatic history of violent confrontation with expansionist powers, making international and union-level engagement on peace and conflict issues particularly sensitive. Rakhine’s recent conflicts and humanitarian crises can be understood as an intersection of numerous grievances—many of which are not explicitly religious. Interethnic tensions, economic inequalities, and political drivers all contribute to violent conflict.

To date, few influential religious leaders and religious social service networks have been engaged by aid, policymaking, and peacebuilding actors—whether national or international. This lack of engagement has sustained pervasive mistrust of the international community at all levels of Rakhine society. Key opportunities to build trust with the religious sector include engaging religious actors in consultations, needs assessments, and aid distributions and providing dispute resolution training to religious leaders across all communities.

International nongovernmental organizations need to be sensitive to the concerns that religious actors and networks have about engaging with them on social issues. When engaging with religious actors in programming, it is essential to bear in mind that though religious figures and networks may be able to influence community perspectives and attitudes, they rarely have the power to enforce broad behavior change. Furthermore, ordination is not essential to religious influence in Rakhine (and in Myanmar more broadly). The elderly and members of local religious committees and networks, including women’s and youth groups, are regularly cited as sources of religious influence despite their being lay persons.



Buddhist nuns pray during the June 2019 annual meeting of the nationalist group Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, previously known as Ma Ba Tha, in Yangon. (Photo by Ann Wang/Reuters)

Introduction and Methodology

Recent events in Rakhine State have drawn attention to Myanmar in ways that the country's many other conflicts have not.

In October 2017, thousands of displaced people, primarily Muslim, flooded across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in response to renewed conflict in northern Rakhine State. Simultaneously, a monk widely revered across Myanmar, Ashin Nyanissara, better known as Sitagu Sayadaw, stood before a military crowd and quoted from the *Mahavamsa*, an epic poem about the ancient history of Sri Lanka, seemingly to offer religious endorsement of a military campaign targeting some of Myanmar's Muslim inhabitants.¹ Sitagu Sayadaw represents the complex and in many ways ambivalent space that religion and religious actors occupy in Myanmar. He is an expert in Buddhist literature and famous within Myanmar for establishing Buddhist universities and for his extensive charity work, particularly in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the country in 2008. He is also well known within the international community for his participation in numerous interfaith activities, seemingly despite his ties to the Committee for the Protection of Race and Religion. Primarily known by its Burmese acronym, Ma Ba Tha, this committee is a blended monastic-lay organization accused by many international and domestic actors of propagating hate speech and incitement against many of Myanmar's most marginalized communities.

Alongside political, economic, and other social drivers, religious dimensions are clearly affecting the intensity and trajectory of conflicts in Rakhine. However, these factors remain little understood and overly simplified, especially by international observers and actors.

Recent events in Rakhine State have drawn attention to Myanmar in ways that the country's many other conflicts have not; for instance, international coverage of recent offensives in northern Shan and Kachin States has been sparse. This is due largely to the scale of violence in Rakhine—but also, at least in part, to the perceived religious dimensions of the conflict. For many, and perhaps Western audiences in particular, the seemingly discordant image of Buddhist monks appearing to justify extraordinary violence against a long-oppressed minority was disorienting. Alongside political, economic, and other social drivers, religious dimensions are clearly affecting the intensity and trajectory of conflicts in Rakhine. However, these factors remain little understood and overly simplified, especially by international observers and actors. As a result, internationally backed conflict transformation interventions in Rakhine State struggle to effectively acknowledge or draw on key religious actors who can be partners for peacebuilding. The consequence is that these interventions run the risk of unintentionally exacerbating religious tensions and suspicion about outside actors' hidden agendas and undermining locally led efforts. At the same time, overemphasizing the religious dimensions of the conflict, and the actual scope of influence exerted by religious leaders, can heighten religious sensitivities and polarization.

It is more important than ever to invest in understanding the impact of religious actors, institutions, and ideas on violence, peacebuilding, and reconciliation efforts in Rakhine. Efforts to engage the religious sector should be pursued with full recognition of the range of factors and issues driving the conflict. This report aims to support policymakers and relevant peacebuilding organizations in understanding both the current and potential influence of the religious landscape on peace and the democratic transition in Rakhine State,

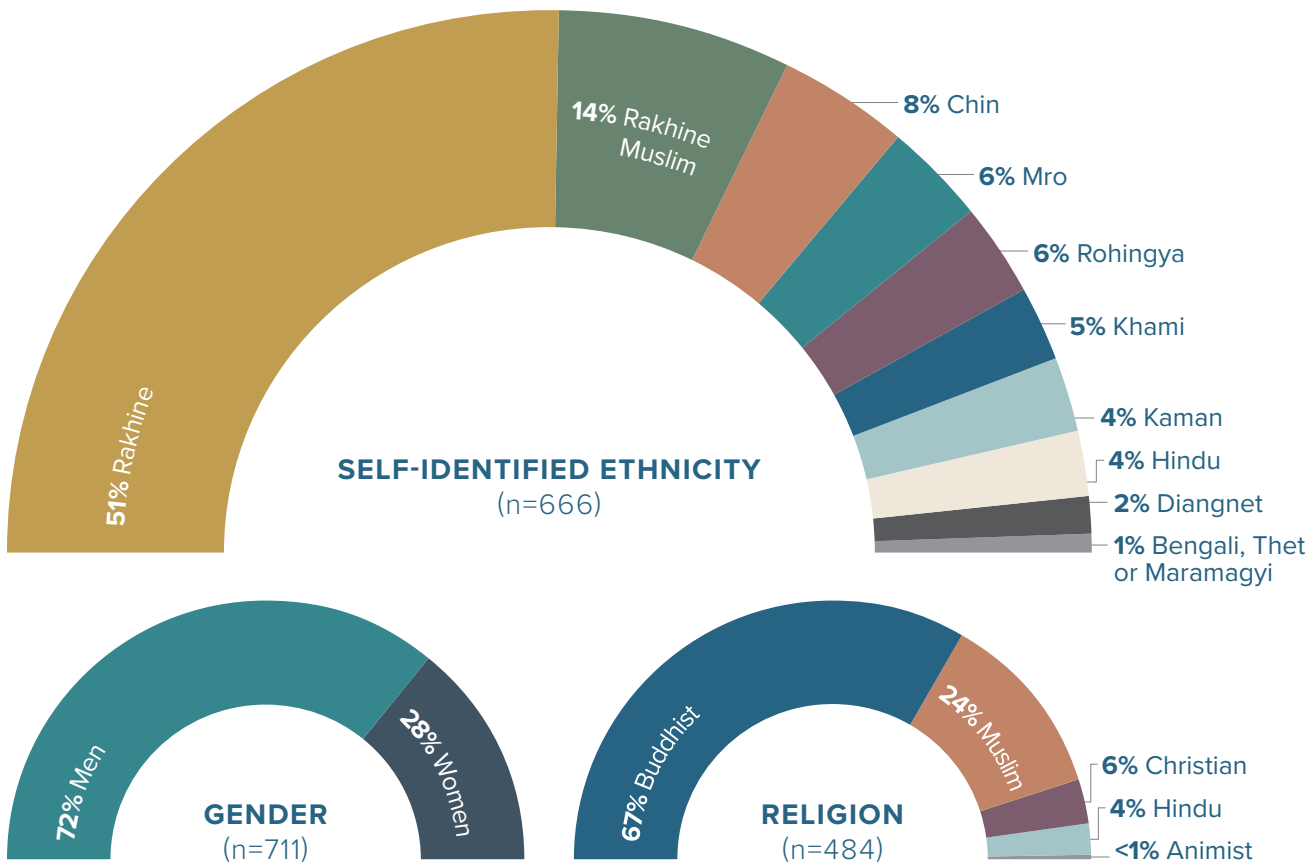
identifying avenues for engaging the religious sector in current and future peace and justice programming, and ascertaining opportunities for strengthening the peacebuilding capacity of religious actors.²

Research for this project was undertaken between March and August 2018. Over these six months, a gender-balanced team of religiously and ethnically diverse Rakhine-based researchers collected data in nine townships.³ In total, the team conducted 530 qualitative interviews with more than seven hundred participants, including representatives of Rakhine's many ethnic and religious minority communities. (See figure 1 for demographic statistics of the survey respondents.) A local Myanmar organization specializing in digital media was also engaged to produce a mapping of the online influencers most involved in shaping discourse in and on Rakhine in an effort to see where and how religious actors and ideas made their way into online spaces.

The research used purposive sampling to ensure that minority ethnic and religious community perspectives could be accounted for: 67 percent of the sample identified as Buddhist, 24 percent Muslim, and just under 6 percent and 4 percent as Christian and Hindu, respectively. A single inquiry was conducted with members of the animist community. Respondents were allowed to self-identify without prompting, and no limitations were placed on their answers. The Rakhine identifying as Buddhists represented slightly more than 50 percent of the sample. Taken together, participants who identified as Rohingya and Rakhine Muslim accounted for 20 percent.⁴ Numerous ethnic minority participants, including Khami, Diangnet, Thet, Maramagyi, and some Mro, also made up the Buddhist category. Christians in the sample predominantly identified as Chin or Mro, whereas those in the

Figure 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 711 individual respondents, representing a variety of religious faiths, in nine townships in Rakhine State.



Note: Discrepancies in total figures reflect nonresponses.

sample who considered themselves to be practicing Hindus also identified as ethnically Hindu (rather than as Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, Rohingya, and so on).

The gender breakdown heavily favored male respondents, a bias that was particularly pronounced among non-Buddhists. In part, this was a function of the research methodology, which employed in-depth interviews with high-level religious and community leaders (who tended to be men) to supplement focus group-based community consultations. In addition to broader community perspectives, this report includes the views of members of the Buddhist *sangha* (monks), Buddhist nuns (*thilashin*), Buddhist laymen and women

(both elders and youth leaders); Islamic clerics (imams, *moulvis*), scholars (*hafiz*), *hajjis* (religious pilgrims to Mecca), and other community leaders (lay, both male and female, though predominantly male); Hindu Brahmans, ascetics (*thamadis*), ceremonial attendants (*pujatis*), and community leaders (lay, both male and female); Christian priests and pastors; as well as animist spirit (*nat*) shrine attendants.⁵

CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Given the ongoing nature of the conflict in Rakhine State, the research encountered several challenges. First, the arduous research approvals process meant considerable delays. As a result, significant time passed between

interviews, which in some instances materially affected the context. Second, it was not always easy to get people to agree to cooperate with researchers. On occasion, religious leaders refused to participate because they did not want to interact with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—a hesitance that extended not just to national and international NGOs (INGOs) but also to local NGOs based in Rakhine State. Furthermore, influential individuals were often difficult to access because they were busy.

Third, in northern townships, it was difficult to adhere strictly to the questions in the research guide because communities are traumatized. Unsurprisingly, they were primarily concerned with discussing their grievances, and the research team believed it would be unethical to prevent communities from expressing themselves in this way. Fourth, in some instances, community members refused to participate because INGOs, in their words, “never come back.” That is, they feel that INGO actors extract information from them but rarely return with programs or support. Fifth, Muslim enumerators found it difficult to navigate the different social groups within their communities. Moreover, even when speaking with enumerators they knew and trusted, communities felt it necessary to protect certain information because of security concerns, in particular, the precise role of religious leaders and their contact with other Muslim communities. Some communities in central Rakhine would participate on the basis of consensus only. In such cases, the answers to research questions were nearly identical or, in the case of one village in central Rakhine, approved by village leaders in advance.

Last, social desirability bias is a factor in all research. It has almost certainly affected the quality of information in every community consulted for this mapping.

NOMENCLATURE

The research team used certain terms and made several language choices in conducting the research. Religiously inspired and organized social welfare activities are referred to locally by the Pali term, *parahita*, which often functions as a shorthand for any volunteer

or community-based work meant to improve the conditions of the community. It can include anything from free education and health care to road works and other infrastructure development. It can be used in reference to certain advocacy efforts, particularly those concerned with the development or security needs of the community, as long as this type of work is not undertaken as part of paid employment. It is particularly concerned with the well-being of others but also incorporates personal development or moral self-improvement. It is not unlike Christian or Islamic concepts and practices of charity, mission or service, or hospitality, wherein personal attachments to wealth may be sublimated to the needs of others or compelled by the divine command to care for others, or both. Although the term *parahita* derives from Pali, the classical and authoritative language of Theravada Buddhism, it is commonly used by Christians, Hindus, and Muslims in Rakhine (and throughout Myanmar) to refer to their own religiously inspired social welfare work.

The decision to include *parahita* actors and networks in this research originates from the knowledge that religious influence is multifactorial. Influence can be derived from high levels of religious education and piety, but also from visible community advocacy. Indeed, many of the stakeholders—civil society and community-based organizations (CSO/CBOs), political party representatives, community leaders, and the like—consulted for this study felt strongly that religious influence, in relation to ability to affect community attitudes and behaviors, derives primarily from the “ability to do for the community.” By including *parahita* actors and networks, the research team was able to uncover critical intersections of religion and social organization—particularly, the ways in which communities are defined by their participation in religious practice and how faith-based social work can function as a way of developing and exerting religious influence. It has the added benefit of providing additional insights that may be valuable to repairing relationships between religious actors and the international community.

This report reproduces terminology as it was used by research participants or adopts “non-Kaman Muslims” when speaking more broadly about those participants from communities generally considered by local or international actors to be Rohingya. Many of the Muslim participants in northern and central Rakhine State referred to themselves as “Rakhine Muslim,” even when other members of the same community identified as “Rohingya.” Individuals and communities should—unequivocally—have the right to identify themselves in whatever way they choose. However, intracommunal discourses on the use of Rohingya exist within the Muslim community, and it is not the place of any international actor to presume a person’s ethnic identity on the basis of their religion. Relatedly, the term Rohingya is vocally rejected by much of Myanmar society. Thus the quotations included in this report may also use the term “Bengali Muslim,” which reflects the belief within Myanmar that non-Kaman Muslims in Rakhine State, however they identify, are recent immigrants from Bangladesh.

The Buddhist organization formerly known as Ma Ba Tha—shorthand for the organization’s longer name in Burmese, *a-Myo Batha Thathana saun shauk ye a-hpwe*, which is often translated as the Committee for the Protection of Race and Religion—emerged in 2013 in Yangon. Founded by Buddhist monastics and lay persons, its mission involved advocating for Buddhist interests and coordinating activities to revitalize Buddhist education and welfare. The group has been accused of propagating discriminatory, particularly anti-Muslim, sentiment and behavior. In 2016, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Council (Ma Ha Na), the governing body of monastics appointed by the Myanmar state to oversee and regulate affairs within the Buddhist monastic community ruled that Ma Ba Tha had been operating unlawfully under that name.⁶ Although the group officially changed its name to the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation in 2018, this name, too, as recently as July 2018, has been banned by the Ma Ha Na.⁷ In the majority of Myanmar, the organization

is, to a great extent, still referred to as Ma Ba Tha by both its followers and detractors. Ma Ba Tha will likely continue to be the most efficacious shorthand for the movement on the whole and is used throughout this report. In some instances, research participants have used the name Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, particularly members and monastic leaders of the group in southern Rakhine; these references appear as Ma Ba Tha, too, given that the usage does not reflect a significant difference in understanding of the group’s mission, activities, or membership.

Sii Htein is a network of predominantly Rakhine monks engaged in promoting ethnic issues and certain aspects of an independence or autonomy agenda. The group has been involved in everything from aid blockades that prevent humanitarian actors from reaching Muslim communities to political lobbying. The network is most robust and visible in central and northern Rakhine. Like Ma Ba Tha, Sii Htein has over the years gone by several names, including the Organization for Discipline and Control. The mission and membership remain the same, however, so this report uses Sii Htein exclusively.

Muslim communities in Rakhine use both moulvis and mullah to refer to Islamic religious leaders. However, because mullah often has a negative association for the Kaman, this report uses only moulvis.

This report uses the Burmese pronunciation and spelling “Rakhine” to differentiate the historical kingdom and polity from contemporary identities. This does not indicate a particular political position on the validity of Rakhine autonomy efforts. Many participants used the terms “Arakan State” and “Arakanese.” Standard Burmese place names and spellings are used to differentiate historical references (such as Rangoon) from contemporary ones (such as Yangon). In some places, these may differ from the common Rakhine pronunciation.

Background



Rakhine State is bordered to the west by the Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh and to the north by India. To the east, the imposing Yoma Mountains partially divide Myanmar's most western state from the central lowlands. Situated between various expansionist empires, Rakhine has for centuries experienced frequent occupations, transformations of power and population, and near continuous threats to its sovereignty. This complex history echoes in the collective consciousness and shapes contemporary conflicts of identity, autonomy, and resources.

No historical account is without omission and few if any are truly objective. With this in mind, this account should be read not as an exhaustible history of conflict in Rakhine State but, rather, as an admittedly and inevitably elliptical background designed only to help frame the report's findings. Nor does this report provide a full conflict analysis; instead, it examines the religious dimensions of life in Rakhine, insofar as they shape the experience and trajectories of conflict. For a deeper and more thorough analysis of the conflict events, particularly the role of the Myanmar government, its policies, and the violent actions of its security apparatus, consult additional sources.⁸

The first unified Arakan Kingdom was established in the first half of the fifteenth century as a protectorate of the Bengal sultanate.⁹ The kingdom, whose capital was in Mrauk-U, gained independence in 1531 and defended itself against Burmese and Portuguese invasions after leading a successful campaign against southeastern Bengal that culminated in Arakan's conquering Chittagong.¹⁰ Under the leadership of King Man Paw, a figure known to many as the father of modern Arakan, the kingdom grew into a considerable regional power; its influence extended from the Ganges to the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River.¹¹ In 1638, a palace coup destabilized

the kingdom and set the stage for the 1784 invasion of Arakan by the Burmese King Bodawphaya.¹² The inhabitants of Rakhine were effectively drawn under the authority of the Konbaung dynasty but never fully integrated.¹³

Following the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, the British Empire annexed Arakan together with Tenasserim to form what would become the Lower Burma Province of British India.¹⁴ Across British Burma, divide-and-rule reinforced colonial power at the center. The British use of ethnic and religious minorities to suppress the Bamar majority's political aspirations deepened what were in some cases existing grievances.¹⁵ Further, the British use of rigid ethnic classifications as the basis for legal political rights ossified what were before fairly fluid ethnic boundaries.

By the early 1900s, the British practice of importing foreign labor alongside rising Bamar nationalism and militancy led to an escalation of tensions. In May 1930, several anti-Indian riots exploded in Yangon (then Rangoon) following a massive coolie strike.¹⁶ The violence left at least 120 people of Indian origin dead and more than nine hundred others injured.¹⁷ In the summer of 1938, new waves of anti-Indian violence with a distinctive anti-Muslim underpinning ripped through the country's major cities, and general strikes paralyzed the economy. Although much of the violence was directly motivated by economic pressure and expressed in relation to immigrant and host identities, religious differences between the two communities exacerbated the conflict by linking it to broader demographic changes across Southeast Asia.¹⁸

When Myanmar became a front in World War II, Rakhine Buddhist leaders, like their Burmese



Rakhine State Research Locations

Artwork by Lucidity Information Design, LLC

coreligionists, tended to favor the Japanese, believing that they were more likely than the British to grant Rakhine independence. A number of Muslim leaders living in northern Rakhine supported the British for similar reasons, scholar Anthony Ware notes, arguing that “such a confluence of nationalist Rakhine mobilization on the one side of the war and a Muslim mobilization on the other rapidly escalated tensions.” The Japanese eventually took the northern capital, Sittwe (then Akyab), but held their position for nearly six months without advancing toward the Bangladesh border. The resulting uncertainty in the north let loose a “terrifying wave of intercommunal violence” as the war and its weapons breathed new life into old land conflicts.¹⁹ Exact figures are hotly contested, with both communities claiming to have suffered considerable losses.²⁰

INDEPENDENCE

After Burma’s independence from Britain in 1947, a multifront Rakhine nationalist rebellion broke out.²¹ A large insurgency led by the Buddhist monk U Seinda, well-known for his leadership in Rakhine during World War II, demanded the establishment of a separate state for Rakhine Buddhists.²² Almost simultaneously, a Muslim group calling itself the Mujahid (plural mujahideen, meaning ones involved in holy war) launched its own rebellion in the hope of joining East Pakistan.²³ When Pakistan rejected the proposal, the mujahideen turned their attention to advocating for an autonomous Muslim area in the north of the state, resettlement of displaced villagers, amnesty for the Mujahid party, recognition of the Muslims in Rakhine as a *taingthar* (indigenous and distinct ethnic group) and official acknowledgement of the Urdu language as the national language of northern Rakhine.²⁴ In 1961, a cease-fire more or less brought an end to the insurgency. However, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), “Partly in response

to Mujahid demands, partly for electoral reasons, in 1961 the government established a Mayu Frontier Administration in northern Rakhine, administered by army officers rather than Rakhine officials.”²⁵ The Mayu Frontier Administration included Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and part of Rathedaung townships.

After Myanmar’s 1962 military coup, the Mayu Frontier Administration was dissolved and a more hostile stance was taken toward minorities. The ICG suggests that although this move “prompted attempts to re-form the Mujahideen movement,” local support for another Muslim insurgency was not significant.²⁶ Meanwhile, relations between the military and the Rakhine community were openly hostile and, in 1967, mass demonstrations held in Sittwe were met with harsh rebuke.

Over the following decade, Muslim scholars and politicians in Rakhine and elsewhere increasingly attached political significance to the ethnonym Rohingya.²⁷ In response to General Ne Win’s 1974 constitution, the Rohingya Patriotic Front, established in 1963 under the name Rohingya Independence Force, launched new offensives.²⁸ In retaliation, the military used the 1978 census to launch a massive military operation, Naga Min, targeting so-called illegal migrants in Rakhine.²⁹ Non-Kaman Muslims, whom many within Myanmar believe to be recent (and, importantly, illegal) arrivals from Bangladesh, were targeted by security forces for violent removal. As a result, more than two hundred thousand people, primarily Muslim, fled into Bangladesh.³⁰ Just as the refugees began to return to Rakhine, a new law in 1982 made it almost impossible for many—but especially Muslims living in or returning to Rakhine—to claim citizenship.³¹

The 1988, pro-democracy protests around the country, including those held in Sittwe, were met with extreme police violence, which included civilian shootings.³² The melee destabilized the government, and a resultant coup led to the establishment of

the State Law and Order Restoration Council, under which conditions in Rakhine deteriorated rapidly.³³ When the results of the promised elections in 1990 were annulled, the military launched a massive police operation targeting Muslim communities (especially non-Kaman Muslims) in Rakhine State—some believe, as a way of distracting a discontented, predominantly Buddhist populous.

Throughout the 1990s, frustrations with the state of governance grew until in 2001 riots broke out in Sittwe following an argument between a group of young monks and a Muslim shop owner. The violence spread to Maungdaw, where several mosques and madrassas were destroyed, and later to Taungoo, where mobs set fire to several Muslim shops, restaurants, and mosques.³⁴

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

By 2007, monks in Sittwe were some of the first to begin a nationwide popular protest movement against the military-led government.³⁵ The following year, in May 2008, a national referendum on a new constitution was held.³⁶ The new constitution made Rakhine State a constituent unit of the new Union of the Republic of Myanmar, equal in status to the other states and regions. The 2010 multiparty elections, meant to establish local institutions and structures, again led to rising political tensions in Rakhine State. The pledge of the newly emerged Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to extend citizenship to Muslims in Rakhine, regardless of taingthar claims to citizenship, angered many Rakhine Buddhists. As the United Nations Development Programme has observed,

Rakhine nationalist parties saw [the extension of citizenship] as part of an effort to secure the Muslim vote and thereby limit the electoral success of the Rakhine party. Notably, in the 2010 election holders of “white cards”, i.e. temporary registration documents that according to the 1982 Citizenship Law did not convey or document citizenship, but nevertheless a legal residence status, were admitted casting their votes.³⁷

In the 2010 elections, the also newly formed Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNNDP) was the only regional party to win the most elected seats in its parliament. In the April 2012 by-elections, the USDP suffered yet another defeat. Just two months later, the first wave of communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in northern Rakhine ignited in four townships. The conflict began in June following the rape and murder of a Buddhist Rakhine woman in Rambre Township.³⁸ The same month in Toungup, Muslim missionaries from central Myanmar were murdered by a mob after fliers were distributed criticizing Islam.³⁹ The closeness of the events led many to speculate that the military, USDP, or some other powerful political force opposed to an Aung San Suu Kyi–led government or continued Thein Sein reforms, was behind both incidents, using intercommunal tension to allay fears over losing even more legislative power in the 2015 elections. After police forces fired into a crowd of Muslim protesters, killing several, a state of emergency was declared.⁴⁰

In Rakhine, religious nationalism had thus become a defining factor of local politics. In September 2012, some two thousand participants from all seventeen townships, including local politicians from the RNNDP and representatives from social organizations, met at a public meeting in Rathedaung. The meeting, as Human Rights Watch noted, was said to be “the largest public meeting in modern Arakan history.”⁴¹ According to researcher Adam Burke,

The meeting passed a series of resolutions calling for, among other measures, special birth control laws for “Muslim Bengalis,” the formation of armed militia in border villages and other steps to stop perceived migration from Bangladesh, further monitoring of Muslim schools, resettlement of Muslim Bengalis to a third country, and the return of all land allegedly taken during communal rioting in 1942.⁴²

By October, the violence had spread to the central Rakhine township of Thandwe, threatening the Kaman population—Muslim members of the 135 recognized “national ethnic races.” As humanitarian needs mounted, monks, women’s groups, and youth organizations held demonstrations in Sittwe against a proposed Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) mission, which they believed would target aid to displaced Muslim communities. Shortly after, the Myanmar government canceled the OIC aid agreement altogether and an All-Arakanese Monks’ Solidarity Conference labeled the Rohingya-identifying Muslims “national traitors,” urging townships to band together to “help solve the problem.”⁴³ The violence claimed tens of lives and displaced upward of a hundred thousand people; given the nature of the 2012 conflict, exact figures may be disputed. The Myanmar government increasingly limited non-Kaman Muslims in their movements, and many of those who fled their homes and villages for the safety of camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) were forced to remain against their will even after the situation stabilized—ostensibly, according to military and government figures, for their own protection. Although the military’s actions brought the conflict to a halt, it did so in part by targeting and imprisoning Muslims across the state.⁴⁴

Since 2012, community relations in Rakhine have been increasingly fraught. The Muslim population in the north of the country lives in what many have termed open-air prisons, with limited to no access to education or health services.⁴⁵

Recent Conflict in Rakhine



The conflict situation in Rakhine is multivalent and characterized by a “web of grievances” that intersect in meaningful ways.⁴⁶ The current crisis can be understood as arising from tensions over allegations of ethnic cleansing, citizenship and voting rights, the peace process, economic and environmental concerns, the involvement of international actors, and access to humanitarian aid. While not all of these tensions explicitly involve religion, the frequency with which conflict crosses religious lines contributes to the perception that the situation in Rakhine is essentially about religion. Often, however, this is an oversimplification. For instance, proposed or even rumored changes in the citizenship status of non-Kaman Muslims is one of the most frequent conflict triggers. The Kaman Muslim community in Rakhine, on the other hand, is accepted (if precariously) as a member of the 135 nationalities with the right to vote.⁴⁷ Moreover, divisions exist not just between religious communities but also within them; for instance, Kaman community leaders expressed tepid support for the military’s actions in northern Rakhine, citing disapproval of illegal “Bengali” immigration.

It would also be an oversimplification to focus only on the conflict dynamics between Muslims (Rakhine, Rohingya, Kaman, or otherwise ethnically identifying) and Buddhists. The Hindu community in Rakhine claim to have suffered attacks from Rohingya armed groups in northern Rakhine yet simultaneously report biases in citizenship processes managed primarily by Rakhine and Bamar Buddhists.⁴⁸ The Christian community has seen its religious freedoms constrained by various hard-line Buddhist movements, especially because its members conduct missionary work within ethnic minority communities, which many Buddhists believe coerces vulnerable

populations to convert for access to food and other aid. Many Rakhine Buddhists hold strongly unfavorable views of the Bamar ruling class, which dominates the union-level government (most members of which are their coreligionists); this sentiment is often reciprocated, to the political and economic disadvantage of all Rakhine populations, including the Buddhist majority.

Differences in religious practice have in recent years become more sensitive. Buddhist groups with anti-Islamic leanings emphasize certain Muslim practices, such as animal sacrifice, as a way of illustrating perceived cultural incompatibility and an innate appetite for violence. Conversely, the Hindu community’s participation in Buddhist religious festivals is used to illustrate its willingness to acculturate. Simultaneously, the animistic practices that once featured prominently and, in most ways, unproblematically in both Muslim and Buddhist cosmologies in Rakhine are dismissed as degenerate by conservative elements of both religious communities.

Thus, religious beliefs sometimes define the boundaries of conflict in Rakhine—but not always. Religious identities are a factor in decisions to extend or refuse access to citizenship—but not uniformly. Syncretic religious practices are at times cited as a marker of compatibility between communities—other times, they are vigorously policed from within. Each of these dynamics intersects with an even more complex ecosystem of discourses within Myanmar and, more broadly, Theravada Buddhism. For instance, Buddhists across the region stress the anticipated loss of the Gautama or Sakyamuni Buddha’s teachings and threats posed to Buddhist people and culture by larger demographic trends in neighboring Muslim-majority states.

Timeline of Conflict in Rakhine State Since 2009

A lack of clear, triangulated data is a key characteristic of the most recent conflicts in Rakhine. The dates and details of events may therefore be contested.

2009

The Arakan Army (AA), a Rakhine nationalist armed group, forms in Kachin State.

2015

NOVEMBER The national legislature passes four “race and religion laws” that restrict plural marriage, interfaith marriage, conversion, and birth rates among certain impoverished (often ethnic and religious minority) populations.

DECEMBER The AA begins harassing Tatmadaw security bases in Chin State and northern Rakhine State.

2014

FEBRUARY Attacks in Maungdaw on Border Guard Police (BGP) patrols leave four officers dead. An officer on duty claims the attackers were members of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO).

JULY Humanitarian access is restricted in northern Rakhine State on basis of so-called terrorist activity.

2017

AUGUST A new Rohingya militant group calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacks thirty BGP posts and an army base, killing twelve.

The Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) responds with extreme and indiscriminate force. Rohingya civilians are attacked by both regular and irregular armed forces, villages are razed, and human rights abuses are documented by local and international rights groups.

A mass exodus begins with more than 730,000 Muslims, along with a number of Hindu and ethnic minority Buddhist families, seeking sanctuary in Bangladesh.

Reported massacre by ARSA of dozens of Hindu men and women in Kha Maung Seik/Fakira Bazar (Maungdaw).

Reported massacre by Tatmadaw of Rohingya villagers in Gu Dar Pyin (Buthidaung) and Maung Nu (Buthidaung). Video evidence emerges later (February 2018) of government forces clearing the areas with bulldozers.

SEPTEMBER Tatmadaw forces massacre ten unarmed Rohingya men in Inn Din (Maungdaw).

OCTOBER ARSA announces an end of its unilateral cease-fire.

NOVEMBER In Naypyidaw, Myanmar and Bangladesh sign a repatriation agreement for Rohingya refugees.

DECEMBER Myanmar denies access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, and suspends cooperation with her team.

Clashes between the Tatmadaw and the AA increase in Chin State.

2016

OCTOBER Militants attack BGP headquarters and two bases, killing nine officers. Myanmar government officials suggest the attackers are “Bengali Muslim” and have links to the RSO.

2018

JANUARY A private non-governmental group offers resettlement of ethnic Rakhine into a “Muslim free zone.”

The remainder of 2018 was characterized by political stalemate on the issue of repatriation. Although exact figures are difficult to substantiate, the United Nations estimates that nearly a million non-Kaman Muslims languish in what it characterizes as cramped, squalid, and insecure camps in Bangladesh. An estimated three-quarters of a million remain in Myanmar, many in similarly restrictive and insecure conditions. Drawing on satellite imagery, Human Rights Watch accuses the Myanmar government of engaging in a concerted effort to erase evidence of Muslim habitation from northern Rakhine. The unprecedented levels of state-sponsored violence to which the Muslim population in Rakhine has been subject leads many rights organizations, foreign embassies, and UN agencies, to press for war crimes tribunals and an official genocide designation. The additional insecurity created by an escalation of fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw in northern and central Rakhine throughout 2018 and into 2019 further reduces the likelihood of internally displaced persons and refugees in Bangladesh being able to return home.

Regardless, the tendency for tensions to be most explosive along religious divides materially affects the conflict experience at every level and in every sector. For instance, political actors often conceive of their constituencies in terms of religious identities. Community leaders are almost always elected or selected on the basis of a religious identity shared with the majority of community members; religious education or perceived righteousness regularly plays into their selection or election. Even business leaders, many of whom move between religious communities, are susceptible to changes in the interfaith conflict context; boycotts and “Buy Buddhist” campaigns have for some time been a hallmark of interfaith tensions in Rakhine.

Critically, religious difference is not the singular driving force behind recent or even historical tensions in Rakhine. Instead, in many instances, religious identities have become essentialized as communities contract around ethnic, political, economic, or environmental pressures. For instance, many Rakhine Buddhists believe that humanitarian responses to the Cyclone Giri disaster in 2010 favored Muslim communities. The perceived inequality of the response damaged relationships between all actors and further entrenched an us-versus-them mentality, which exploded into open conflict just a few years later, in 2012.⁴⁹

HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

The most recent period of open conflict, which began in October 2016, is marked by credible accusations of illegal summary execution, rape as a weapon of war, mass displacement, and the indiscriminate destruction of property. These claims are made all the more credible given similar patterns of abuse documented in the military’s treatment of pro-democracy activists (many of whom are both Bamar and Buddhist) and other ethnic minority federalist movements (Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Wa, Mon, and so on). Many in the international and human rights communities, including a UN Security Council fact-finding mission, believe that the military is guilty not

only of war crimes but also of genocide.⁵⁰ According to research participants, for example, the number of Muslim villages in northern Rakhine has decreased significantly since 2016: no more than three Muslim villages remain in Buthidaung. Entire Hindu villages have also been displaced; an estimated twenty-one families continue to take refuge in a temple in Sittwe.

Although the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments have signed an agreement to repatriate refugees, the process has been slow. The Myanmar government does not seem to intend to repatriate the majority of those who have fled; indeed, the returnee camps that have been built in northern Rakhine are inadequate facilities, in which inhabitants’ civic freedoms are harshly restricted, rather than genuine settlements. Further, this research found that Rakhine nationalist groups, with the support of local CSO/CBOs, are actively working to repopulate the northern part of the state with Rakhine Buddhists in an attempt to make the prospect of voluntary return even more unlikely.

Those refugees who have begun to trickle back across the border into the stretch of land termed *no build* have been intimidated by the Myanmar security forces, their temporary shelters destroyed. Meanwhile, the estimated one million plus refugees in Bangladesh are particularly vulnerable to monsoon flooding as well as labor exploitation. Reports of sex trafficking and abuse are rampant, often implicating camp leaders. Reports are mounting in frequency that refugees willing to accept the Myanmar government’s offer of return (on the basis of accepting temporary identity cards) have faced violent, even deadly coercion.

Numerous humanitarian and news agencies have attempted to map the exact events and actors in the conflict occurring between October 2016 and the present. The Myanmar government’s obdurate refusal to allow journalists, researchers, and rights agencies unfettered access to the most conflict-affected areas has forced these entities to rely on proxy, piecemeal, or anecdotal

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data. Still, these reports credibly document the systematic abuses that the Myanmar security forces have perpetrated. However, the sheer number of these reports, many of which are written in English, coupled with often conflicting accounts provided by Myanmar media and compounded by a few notable incidents of inaccurate reporting, have made it more difficult than ever for communities within Myanmar to discern fact from fiction and news from propaganda. The resulting war of discourse has eroded trust between key stakeholders.

CITIZENSHIP AND VOTING

The question of non-Kaman Muslim citizenship and voting rights is one of the most significant drivers of conflict in Rakhine. As the Southeast Asia expert Adam Burke writes,

Until recently, the Rohingya had been able to register as temporary residents with identification cards known as white cards. . . . The cards, while keeping holders' freedom of movement restricted and barring them from certain jobs and university programs, gave them the right to vote in the 2010 general elections as well as access to health and education services.⁵¹

In 2014, according to the Yangon-based Center for Diversity and National Harmony,

the Government of Myanmar embarked on a pilot citizenship verification exercise . . . whereby non-Kaman white-card holders in Myebon Township could apply for citizenship provided that they agreed to be identified as "Bengali," instead of "Rohingya." . . . Interest in the process has remained low, with only small numbers of non-Kaman Muslims willing to self-identify as "Bengali."⁵²

Analyst Richard Horsey notes that

Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a repatriation agreement on 23 November 2017 in Naypyidaw. . . . The agreement

also provides for the issuance of National Verification Cards at the point of return—a document most Rohingya reject out of fear that it will codify second-class citizenship status. The government and security forces have expressed concern about the presence of "terrorists" . . . or their supporters among the refugees, warning they would arrest such individuals upon return, which suggests returnees will be subject to extreme scrutiny or vetting. Another major obstacle is that Rakhine Buddhist leaders and communities are strongly opposed to the return of any Rohingya refugees.⁵³

CEASE-FIRE AND PEACE PROCESS

Between 2011 and 2013, the government of President Thein Sein had considerable success negotiating bilateral cease-fire agreements with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that had fought against the central government and military since independence, and in 2015 the government and several of these groups signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Critically, the government did not allow the three groups without bilateral cease-fires agreements, including the Rakhine-based Arakan Army, to sign the NCA. Two years into the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government's administration, only two new parties have signed on to the NCA, and only one of the two primary Rakhine-based EAOs, the Arakan Liberation Army, has engaged in the process.

Despite the best efforts of Rakhine negotiators, the peace process in Myanmar has failed to include the vast majority of Rakhine Buddhist voices, to say nothing of the utter lack of representation of its religious and ethnic minority communities.⁵⁴ The Arakan Army's participation continues to be blocked by the Myanmar military. According to interviews with Arakan National Party (ANP) leaders in Sittwe, the NLD-controlled Rakhine State government has refused to issue ethnic parties with the necessary permissions to host community consultations as required by the NCA. Although the Arakan

Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which the government in Naypyidaw has alleged is affiliated with international Islamic terrorist groups, has proposed a cease-fire and hinted that it wants to be engaged in the NCA process, most analysts agree that this is unlikely.⁵⁵ Instead, ARSA has been designated a terrorist organization.⁵⁶

ECONOMICS AND ENVIRONMENT

Although Rakhine State is rich in natural resources, in 2016 it became the poorest state in Myanmar—falling behind Chin State, which held that ignominious title for many years. The recent exploitation of offshore natural gas near the Rakhine coastline has generated a major revenue stream for the national and (potentially) for the local government—along with significant political strife: “The gas is piped directly to China under a long-term concession, and local politicians want Rakhine State to see a share of the profits. However, the national government did not concede to their demands and retained all of the proceeds.”⁵⁷ Some analysts go so far as to suggest economic drivers, such as land grabs and the intended special economic zone in Maungdaw, are behind the refugee crisis and the recent escalation in armed conflict.⁵⁸

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

International relations in Myanmar today are most succinctly described as dominated by a “turn East.” Relations between Myanmar and the West have soured as Aung San Suu Kyi’s once fervid supporters pressed with increasing vigor for the Nobel Peace Prize winner to more strongly condemn the military’s actions in Rakhine. China and other East Asian countries have tended to favor a more neutral view of the Myanmar government’s many conflicts and rights abuses, which had almost certainly influenced opinions within the government, both civilian and military, about where the country’s economic and diplomatic future lies. As a result, threats of economic sanctions (targeted or otherwise) have not been as strong an incentive for the government to take responsibility for its actions in Rakhine as they may once have been.

Ambassadors from European, Anglophone, and Muslim-majority states have tended to be highly critical of the government’s behavior in Rakhine, often failing to differentiate criticisms of the civilian government and military apparatus. The NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi had committed to following the recommendations of a UN-backed report on Rakhine authored by Kofi Annan. The day the report was published, however, attacks carried out by ARSA on Myanmar border posts shifted the landscape, and the report was tabled despite ongoing efforts to publicize its findings. Now, Myanmar’s relationship with the United Nations is arguably the most fraught in a decade, at least since the previous military government denied UN humanitarian access to populations badly affected by the Cyclone Nargis disaster in 2008.⁵⁹ Avenues for productive dialogue between international actors and the Myanmar government have, some argue, shrunk considerably.

AID ACCESS

To date in Rakhine, international assistance has been offered primarily on the basis of humanitarian need. As Burke writes of past interventions, “the vast majority of recipients are Muslim, many of them restricted to isolated displacement camps. Little attention was given to ethnic Rakhines who may not have qualified for emergency assistance yet still struggle with the daily grind of entrenched poverty.”⁶⁰

International actors, however, have expressed frustration with this perception:

International agency efforts to support conflict-affected ethnic Rakhine communities have gone unrecognized or have been actively blocked. . . . In one case cited by an international interviewee, a group of ethnic Rakhine IDPs from Maungdaw received material support from an international humanitarian agency in Sittwe on the day of their arrival. When the international agency staff arrived to provide additional support the following day, they were confronted by ethnic Rakhine activists who refused to allow the agency access to the IDPs. The incident was later portrayed as a refusal by international agencies to provide aid to ethnic Rakhine IDPs on social media, exacerbating anti-international sentiment.⁶¹



A Rohingya Muslim woman stands in a temporary camp in November 2017 outside Maungdaw, Rakhine State, as she waits to cross the border to go to Bangladesh. (Photo by Wa Lone/Reuters)

Rakhine Religious Influence Mapping

It is not possible to definitively distinguish religious from secular space—the exact meaning of secularism is constantly evolving and hotly contested. Whereas some advocate for a strict separation of religious and state, others believe that religious institutions have an important role to play in guiding the state apparatus toward enacting legislation and policy that ensures moral decency and cultural cohesion. The overlap between culture, religion, and politics is as contentious in Myanmar as it is elsewhere in the world, but in Rakhine State, as well as in the country more broadly, the difficulty of imposing rigid spheres of authority is especially clear. Accordingly, this report takes a broad view of religion, asserting that religious identity and intention

need to be taken seriously, even when it contradicts mainstream and textual interpretations.

RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

In Myanmar, secularism is sometimes understood as an absence of ethics and at other times as enabling coexistence of multiple religious perspectives in government.⁶² The debate over the role religious and secular institutions should or should not play in public life has a long and complicated history linked to the historical ties between Buddhist kings and the monastic community (sangha), the intentional decoupling of those ties by the colonial authority and post-independence socialist regime, and later appropriation by the military junta. Indeed, the relationship

Given decades of oppressive military rule, it is no surprise that monasteries, churches, temples, and mosques often operated as centers of social gravity within the community.

between the sangha and the state in Myanmar has always been complex, contested, and changing. For instance, the oft-cited restriction on participation of sangha members in politics is recent, dating back to a Ma Ha Na (high Buddhist council) decision in 2007; the decision itself was aimed at quelling the 2007 so-called Saffron Revolution and was more than likely made by religious figures under enormous pressure from the military government.⁶³

Differences in the affective and effective quality of secular and religious authority can be best understood in relation to power and influence. More specifically, in his 1999 examination of Burmese political thought, anthropologist Gustaaf Houtman posited that whereas *ana* is defined by command or hierarchical authority, *awza* is linked to moral and charismatic influence.⁶⁴ This research finds that although numerous religious figures and organizations are thought to have *awza*, few are vested with *ana*. It is therefore critical to examine both the boundaries and the directionality of influence as it is applied within the religious sector in Rakhine State.

For instance, respondents regularly cited religious figures and networks as having *awza*, but primarily assigned *ana* to the General Administration Department (GAD), police, and other military-controlled entities. The only religious actor or institution considered by participants, including religious leaders, as having *ana*, is the Ma Ha Na. It is here, however, that specificity is key—the Ma Ha Na and its members have the power to command other members of the *sangha* to adhere to their interpretation of the *vinaya* (monastic code) and the authority to dispense punishments to members of the *sangha* as they see fit. However, the Ma Ha Na does not and cannot command the state legislature, state ministries, or extended military apparatus (including the GAD, Border Security Guard, and so on) to act in any particular way. Instead, all political parties and levels of government must consider the

awza of the Ma Ha Na's senior monks and other large, blended, lay sangha groups (such as Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein) in their political calculations because they can exert influence at the local and grassroots levels to shift the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers.

Co-opting or at the very least placating religious actors is therefore a key feature of Myanmar and indeed Rakhine politics. Today, links between the Rakhine sangha and the Arakan National Party are clear, and rumors circulate that the ANP consults an "advisory board" of monks before making political decisions. The ANP, for instance, holds many of its events at Ma Ha Na monasteries, thereby leveraging the Ma Ha Na to validate its activities in the political sphere. Simultaneously, the ANP courts groups like Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein to bolster its grassroots appeal. Similarly, the relationship between senior monks and the military has a mutually reinforcing effect, whereby donations made to the leaders of sangha groups such as Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein contribute to their stature and influence among communities just as the presence of these same monks at military events or briefings bestows on them an air of moral approbation.

Given the precariousness of Muslim communities in Rakhine, it is unsurprising that no Islamic religious leaders, networks, or institutions within Rakhine or Myanmar more broadly were understood by the Muslim communities in this study as having *ana*. Further, Muslim participants in this research were more likely to give examples of businessmen and elderly lay people, when asked to identify their community members with *awza*, than to note particular or even classes of traditional religious leaders (such as moulvis and imams).

During decades of oppressive military rule, monasteries, churches, temples, and mosques often came to operate as centers of social gravity within the community. Far from being singularly concerned with the soteriological, places

of worship or spiritual education also function as coordination hubs for numerous activities including secular education, food and nonfood aid distribution, dispute resolution, and commensality (food-sharing festivals and coming-of-age ceremonies). Conversely, places of worship very often double as orphanages and schools. In periods of acute crisis, they regularly transform into safe houses and aid distribution centers. Given restrictions placed on the building and maintenance of mosques, madrassas generally offer many of the same social supports and may operate as places of prayer.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

Attempts to define almost any aspect of faith and religion are likely to encounter internal and highly sensitive disagreements among followers and practitioners. This is precisely the case when determining who counts as an authoritative or authentic religious actor and what their influence is.

According to Insein Sayadaw, a well-respected Buddhist scholar in Myanmar and chairman of Ma Ba Tha, the Buddha refused to enter nirvana until he was assured that his teachings (*dhamma*) would be propagated. Monks, nuns, and laypeople act like the legs of a stool—each need to carry equal weight in propagating the Buddha’s teachings if the *sasana* (the totality of Buddhist religion) is to survive.⁶⁵ Ordination is not required to participate in *sasana* promotion, much in the same way Christian missionary work does not require those who undertake it to join the clergy. Indeed, because the *sangha* rules prohibit ordained monks and *thilashin* (Buddhist nuns) from certain activities and tasks, the role of laypeople is critical to the flourishing of the faith.⁶⁶ It is not uncommon for monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen to have long-standing relationships of mutual benefit in which tasks are shared in accordance with *vinaya* (regulatory framework for the *sangha*) rules.

According to interviews with Muslim community leaders in Yangon and Sittwe, religious actors trained as congregational leaders (generally imams) in the Muslim community

have been targeted for violence, political oppression, and arbitrary detention since 2012, and many have emigrated out of Myanmar as a result. Spiritual education and leadership has thereby often fallen on religious teachers and scholars (*moulvis*, in Myanmar, who are examined members of the *ulema* overseen by a central body in Yangon) and any community member who is especially or even marginally more educated in the Quran and hadith, like the *hafiz*, who have memorized the Quran, and *hajjis*, who have undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁶⁷

Christian denominations in Myanmar tend to reflect the hierarchical religious leadership common to the faith elsewhere; however, ethnic communities have added an additional network through which leadership can be expressed (such as the Karen Baptist Convention).

Hindu leadership is also multivalent, with *Brahman*, *pujatis*, *thamadis*, and community leaders all taking on various tasks aimed at promoting the religion and culture of Hinduism. Community leaders in particular were noted by Hindu community leaders within Rakhine for taking an active role in the management of Myanmar-wide networks designed to propagate teachings and provide for community assistance and development.

The research team found that *nat* (spirit) worship in Rakhine is commonly practiced by both Buddhists and some Muslims. *Nat* shrines are ubiquitous, though some carry greater or broader (geographically) significance. Shrine attendants manage donations and access to the shrine while also ensuring that *nat* stories continue to be told.

When asked, key informants across Rakhine, including religious leaders, politicians, GAD figures, and CSO/CBO workers, tended to see a religious leader’s advocacy efforts on their behalf as a more important determinant of their influence, broadly speaking, than moral authority (good behavior) or formal religious education. This suggests that religious influence is developed and asserted along a spectrum. Religious leaders (and their

communities) see themselves as playing an essential role in relaying information, assessing community needs, and responding to them in ways critical to building peace. However, the leaders consulted for this study felt that the international community, and to a lesser extent many national actors engaged in aid work and peacebuilding, had thus far failed to adequately consult with them. This has exacerbated a suspicion of the international and peacebuilding communities that pervades the Rakhine sangha and extends to many Buddhist lay leaders.

Ordination is incredibly common; the majority of Buddhist participants in this research (more than 60 percent) indicated that they or a family member have at some point in their lives been ordained. Both Buddhist and Muslim communities in this study believed that religious leadership is auspicious, and thus many families encourage at least one (generally male) member to deepen their religious commitment through further study or renunciation. However, ordination is not essential to religious influence. The elderly and members of local *gawbaga* (religious affairs) committees were sometimes cited by Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu participants in this research as sources of religious advice, despite their being lay persons. Community leaders in the Muslim villages in northern and central Rakhine (typically village administrators, but also one hundred heads of household, and local leaders elected or selected to oversee a block of families), were expected to be actively and outwardly religious by those who elect them. Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu communities across the state expect their leaders to be moral persons, and though they do not express this explicitly as a function of religiosity, adherence to the social mores derived from their respective religions is likely implied.

One way of more deeply exploring the influence of religious and lay leaders is the degree to which their communities view them as a source of “high quality” and “trustworthy” information and advice, and how likely they are to turn to them in a time of crisis. To better understand information- and advice-seeking behaviors in Rakhine, along with crisis behaviors, research teams

asked communities across the country to provide a ranked list of actors to whom they turn. These answers were then combined to form a composite “influence score,” expressed as an average of the frequency with which they were mentioned. These scores, along with data gathered through key informant interviews, were then used to identify notable trends.

As shown in figure 2, the General Administration Department is the most influential entity for the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian communities in Rakhine State. Significant portions of each community cite the GAD as a source of trustworthy information, a source of advice, or somewhere to turn in times of conflict. Friends and family are more influential among the Buddhist and Hindu communities than the others. Religious leaders have greater influence in Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities than in Buddhist communities. Community leaders hold more sway in Hindu and Buddhist communities than in the other religious communities consulted for the research.

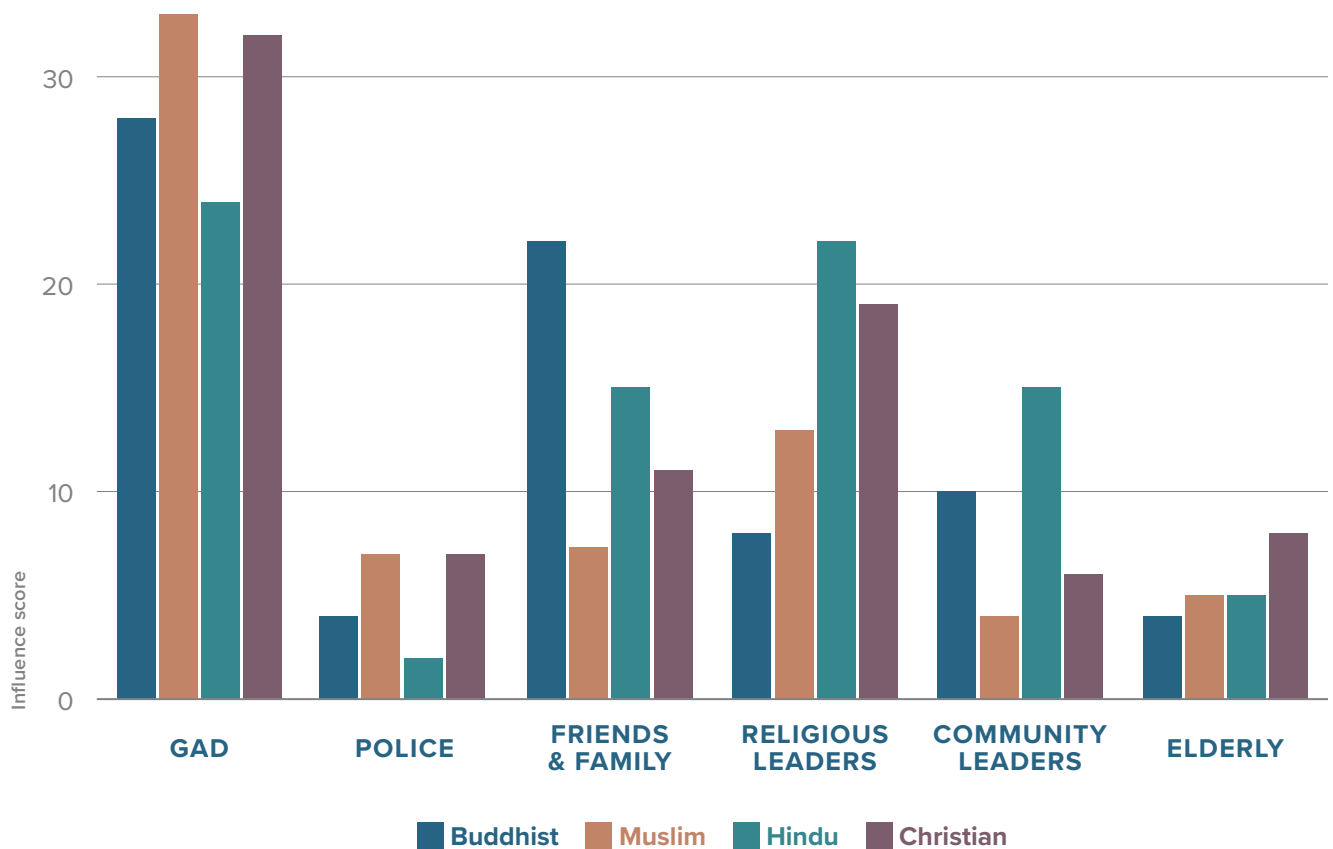
It is worth noting that the data show important variations from region to region and township to township. According to key informant interviews, communities who have been cut off from the GAD—for instance, in areas controlled by the Arakan Army or in Muslim villages where recent violence has severed reliable or trusted networks—are more likely to rely on religious leaders to stay up to date.

In northern Rakhine, Buddhist communities in government-controlled areas depend primarily on village authorities and their personal networks for information—less than 2 percent of respondents mentioned religious leaders. For Muslim communities in the north, which are often particularly isolated, the GAD (28 percent), friends and family (18 percent), religious leaders (12 percent), and the elderly (10 percent) are key sources of information.

In central Rakhine, Buddhist communities in Kyauktaw reported that they depend for the most part on the GAD

Figure 2. Most Frequently Cited Sources of Influence

The General Administrative Department (GAD)—which functions as a primary link between the national government and districts and townships—was mentioned frequently by all Rakhine ethnic groups as an important source of influence in their community.



Note: Influence score is the average frequency with which a given response was mentioned by interviewees. For example, 32 percent of Buddhists surveyed in Rakhine listed the General Administrative Department as a source of trustworthy information, 16 percent as a source of advice, and 37 percent as somewhere to turn in times of conflict. Averaging these figures yields an influence score of 28.

for high-quality information; religious leaders still featured in their self-reported information-seeking behaviors, but to a lesser extent. Buddhists in Mrauk-U and Sittwe, were much less likely to turn to the GAD, pointing instead to family and friends in Mrauk-U and to the media in Sittwe. In Sittwe and Ponnagyun, 14 percent and 11 percent of participants, respectively, mentioned Facebook as a source of information (more than in any other township)—comparatively, only 5 percent of participants in Sittwe and 2 percent of participants in Ponnagyun mentioned religious leaders as key sources. The Muslim community in Sittwe reported that its members relied on Camp Management Committee members, personal networks,

heads of households, and the educated. In Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, and Kyauktaw, Muslim communities cited GAD administrators at the village and village tract level.

In southern Rakhine, Buddhist communities in Thandwe and Rambre reported that they turned to village authorities, the GAD, and monks for advice and information in equal measure. In Thandwe and Rambre, both the GAD authorities and religious leaders were seen as sources of high-quality information. In a crisis, Muslims across the state were most likely to seek out the GAD (50 percent) or the police (12 percent); by comparison, only 5 percent of participants claimed to turn to religious leaders in a crisis.

Within Muslim communities, religious leaders and the elderly are especially influential because severe restrictions on movement and gathering limit their ability to devolve authority into community committees.

The pressures placed on the Muslim community over the course of several years means that religious leaders are less able to act as community spokespeople than they might otherwise. The research suggests, however, that moulvis are involved in numerous community structures and are expected to be involved in a variety of social works—just as Buddhist monks are. Indeed, where the data are sound, it appears that it is even more common for Muslim communities to seek out moulvis for trustworthy information and advice, particularly in a crisis, than for Buddhist communities to seek out their religious leaders in the same townships. For instance, where 15 percent of Muslim participants in Rakhine said they turned to religious leaders, only 4 percent of Buddhists claimed the same.

This influence can be exerted in both positive and negative ways. According to one women's organization, for example, the moulvis most often interfere with their aid and education activities targeting women in the IDP camps. Regardless, it is likely telling that the Muslim communities in central Rakhine least affected by direct violence have more active and visible moulvis who participate in community committees and who travel locally, nationally, and even internationally, whereas the most conflict-affected areas guard the remaining religious leaders closely. Indeed, in central Rakhine, Muslim religious leaders have been more clearly implicated in peace and conflict issues than their counterparts across the country.

In northern Rakhine, moulvis are incredibly important sources of information and leadership in the communities but rarely the primary interface between Muslim communities and the government apparatus, or even INGOs. Within communities, however, religious leaders and the elderly are especially influential because severe restrictions on movement and gathering limit their ability to devolve authority into community committees.

Christian and Hindu participants in this research rarely cited religious leaders as sources of trustworthy or reliable information. Only 8 percent of all Christians said they looked to religious leaders for information; 17 percent of Hindus said the same. However, when examined in view of total influence, Hindus in Rakhine appear to regard their religious leaders as being very influential (influence score of 22), as do Christians (19). The difference between these two scores may indicate that Hindu and Christian religious leaders feel cut off—or are in fact cut off—from the sources of information that would make them a stronger resource for their communities.

Hindus in central and northern Rakhine most commonly cite Buddhist monks when asked to identify figures with *awza*. Hindus have sheltered in Buddhist monasteries in times of conflict and many report that Buddhist monks are still providing them with direct funding to alleviate the poverty they suffer because of their displacement. Many Hindus have also fled to Bangladesh to escape violence and persecution.

Buddhist monks are also influential within ethnic minority Christian communities, particularly the Chin and Mro. Specifically, the practice of sending so-called missionary monks from Yangon to serve in remote ethnic villages ensures that the monks that find themselves in these roles are almost always better networked to sources of power in the central and state governments than local religious figures and community leaders. Missionary monks often collaborate with Christian religious leaders on issues related to education, particularly boarding schools for poor or orphaned children.

Currently, engaging the religious sector in peace and justice programming is exceedingly difficult if the objective of the programming is the eventual integration of Buddhist and Muslim communities. Buddhist leaders, regardless of their personal views, are tightly policed

by strong sangha and lay-sangha organizations so as to prevent them from working across faith lines. Muslim and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Christian and Hindu religious leaders, working on the ground in the local communities, could be risking their lives in doing so.

Religious leader participation in donor-funded aid and peacebuilding programs has been to date largely limited to a small pool of Buddhist religious leaders who are either intentionally maintaining an ambivalent position between seemingly opposing forces (nationalist and peacebuilding) or who are so engaged in international missionary work their frequent absences prevent them from suffering the effects of any retaliation too acutely. Religious leaders from the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities are most often drawn from the central state, and thus have limited influence on the ground in Rakhine.

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Throughout Myanmar are nine Buddhist sects, only five of which are said to exist in Rakhine: Shwe Gin, Thudhamma, Mula Dwara, Maha Dwara, and Stubuminka. Representatives from each elect a steering committee to enable coordination between them. Buddhists in Rakhine are in some ways siloed by ethnic identities. Many communities are de facto segregated—Rakhine, Diangnet, Khami, Maramagyi, Thet, and Mro often living in ethnically homogeneous villages. That is not to suggest a total lack of engagement between communities. Urban populations tend to be more diverse, and popular Buddhist sites and monasteries draw multiethnic crowds. Still, non-Rakhine Buddhists are in many ways marginalized, particularly in politics.

Information flows between the Rakhine and Bamar sangha influence ideas about the place of Buddhism in modern Myanmar, as do transnational linkages. Rakhine monks regularly travel to neighboring countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, where anti-Muslim sentiment is growing vis-à-vis the threat it is believed to pose to Buddhism. Monastic and lay pilgrimage trips to India also appear to be one route through which elements of

Hindutva rhetoric are encountered and then adapted to service a pan-Theravada identity project.

The Muslim community in Rakhine features several ethnic identities: Rakhine Muslim, Rohingya, Bengali, Kaman, and Indian. Although some Bamar communities in Rakhine practice Islam, none participated in this study. Regardless of ethnic and interpretational differences between coreligionists, all Muslim communities in Rakhine are affected by widespread anti-Muslim sentiment and constrained by the various branches of government in Rakhine, including the Arakan National Party, as well as by other Rakhine nationalist and religio-nationalist groups. Since 2012, however, Muslim community leaders in Yangon (Rohingya leaders) and Thandwe (Kaman leaders) claim that Muslim communities in Rakhine have increasingly focused on providing aid for themselves: Kaman for Kaman, Rohingya for Rohingya, and so forth. Community information management also tends to be organized around ethnic identities, many operating WhatsApp, Facebook, and Viber groups inclusive of ethnic peers only.

Complex out-migration patterns, such as to Malaysia, influence the ways in which Muslim communities in Rakhine interpret their religion and its teachings. Whereas the Kaman community often engages with Egyptian scholars from Al-Azhar University in Cairo and other scholars outside the country, non-Kaman Muslims rely increasingly on traveling missionaries and education funding from countries with more austere cultural practices.

The Hindu community is marginalized—a position Hindus attribute to the bias they face from both Buddhists and Muslims. They are often discriminated against on account of their physical appearance despite very often worshipping alongside Buddhists. Some reports indicate that Hindu communities in northern Rakhine suffered considerable harm at the hands of ARSA and that in addition to those who fled voluntarily, a few Hindu women have been smuggled to the camps in Bangladesh and forced to convert.⁶⁸ This information is likely unverifiable, but nonetheless it shapes Hindu

community perceptions of their position within Rakhine. Despite hailing from diverse backgrounds, the vast majority of Hindu communities in Rakhine identify predominantly as Hindu. Language-based community networks do emerge and are nurtured by community leaders inside and outside Rakhine, including those that extend beyond standard Sanskrit and Hindi.

Three primary denominations of Christianity are followed in Rakhine: Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist. Although most Christians are clustered around township capitals, some ethnic Chin and Mro Christians live in more far-flung parts of the state, including in the north. Remote Christian communities are often caught between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army forces. Their vulnerability stems at least in part from their lack of access to the informal communications channels that often serve as early warning systems for ethnic Rakhine.

Indigenous animist (nat) worship and astronomy are important cultural traditions across Rakhine. Despite syncretic traditions in both Buddhist and Muslim communities, purely animist villages face extraordinary pressure when more conservative figures take the place of more tolerant religious leaders at local monasteries and mosques.

According to community and key informant interviews with Muslim religious leaders, the Rohingya-Rakhine Muslim population used to practice a Sufi-influenced form of Sunni Islam. However, pressure from more conservative strands of Islam has resulted in a rejection of more mystical beliefs. For instance, a popular pilgrimage for all Muslims in central Rakhine was disparaged by conservative religious leaders—those influenced by Wahhabist teachings—who declared the practice *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law). Some Muslim community members rejected the imposition of more conservative beliefs, and small-scale skirmishes broke out among youth. Similar events have transpired in southern Rakhine, where some Sufi mystics from the Kaman community have been forced underground by threats of violence from conservative religious leaders.

RELIGIOUS SECTOR AND CONFLICT

Currently, religious actors in Rakhine are contributing to a deepening of interfaith conflict in two primary ways. Powerful Buddhist sangha and lay-sangha organizations use local influence to advocate for non-engagement with (and in some cases, removal of) Muslim communities; and these efforts discourage both state and nonstate actors from working to build bridges between Buddhist and Muslim communities. This position derives in large part from anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment, but it is also driven by belief in the idea that segregation will reduce violent conflict. However, this policing instinctively (if not purposefully) takes an enormous toll on already marginalized Muslim communities.

Some Muslim religious leaders appear to be embracing increasingly conservative expressions of Islam, such as those that emphasize separation from non-Muslims and avoidance of non-Muslim cultural practices. This should be understood in relation to the sequestration of Muslim communities—lack of access to religious education, theological discourse, and literature limits opportunities for exploring faith through scriptural study. Instead, performative displays of religiosity offer a commonly understood register through which the devout can communicate their piety.⁶⁹

SANGHA

The Rakhine sangha has a long tradition of political engagement. For instance, U Ottama, a Rakhine monk, was one of the first to protest against colonial British rule in Burma in the 1830s.⁷⁰ Nearly a century later, U Seinda led a large communist insurgent group against both British and Burmese forces.⁷¹ At the time of the Arakan Liberation Army's formation in 1967, almost all its leaders were former monks.⁷² In 2007, monks in Sittwe were early to join the protest movement against the military-led government.⁷³ Across Myanmar, but particularly in Rakhine State, the line between state and sangha has long been softer than many actors would like to believe. Indeed, in Rakhine, the sangha has

Even the progressive monasteries and individuals most supportive of religious minority rights and peace are largely unwilling to stand publicly for the Muslim community; those that do face threats of violence.

repeatedly positioned itself as a revolutionary counter-balance to an oppressive state apparatus undermining the well-being of Rakhine Buddhists.

Thus, Rakhine Buddhist nationalism has long been a feature of the conflict in Rakhine State. It is not, as some would argue, merely the production of USDP politicking or a power vacuum created by the process of liberalization. Instead, Buddhist identity has been part of the Rakhine independence struggle for decades, and the tendency to see non-Kaman Muslims in the north as agents working against that struggle dates back at least to the British occupation. The extension of anti-Muslim sentiment to the Kaman population is likely a more recent phenomenon that can be linked to changes in the political environment since 2008. However, as Burke writes, “rigid ethnic classifications that are enshrined in Myanmar’s laws and political system have encouraged territorial attitudes and furthered discrimination against Muslims and others perceived as migrants. This environment generates incentives for local politicians to strengthen group identity and present themselves as the guardians of their electorate.”⁷⁴ Even the resentment toward indigenous Muslim populations such as the Kaman thus draws on deeper historical roots, ones that predate the state’s current liberalization process.

Associations of progressively open-minded monks and monastic networks do exist; for instance, Bodhi Alin, a monk-led education outfit that teaches computer literacy and English, now has a presence in numerous monasteries around central and northern Rakhine. However, even the progressive monasteries and individuals most supportive of religious minority rights and peace are largely unwilling to stand publicly for the Muslim community; those that do face threats of violence from other members of the sangha. Moreover, according to interviewees, they tend to maintain ties to the ANP and thus play a

careful game navigating between the international community and national interests as voiced by the Rakhine Buddhist nationalist majority. Monks and monasteries known within the international community for their participation in aid and peacebuilding events maintain ties to groups such as Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein. Many monasteries display posters rejecting interfaith activities.

LAY-SANGHA ORGANIZATIONS

In Rakhine, the lay-sangha organization Ma Ba Tha primarily serves to coordinate between local CSO/CBO networks and donors, most of whom are drawn in through regional Ma Ba Tha headquarters (particularly Mandalay and Yangon). Like their counterparts across Myanmar, Ma Ba Tha in Rakhine engage in grassroots parahita work in accordance with the organization’s main pillars: free education, religious education (that is, dhamma schools), health care (generally but not limited to support for the poor in hospitals and clinics), and disaster relief.

In some ways, Ma Ba Tha is better understood as a revivalist movement, rather than as a conservative or fundamentalist organization. Indeed, it focuses less on promoting purity, in terms of Buddhist belief and practice, or in enforcement of things such as monastic rules and traditional gender norms, and considerably more on ensuring the protected place of Buddhism in everyday public life and building a pan-Theravanda, pan-Buddhist identity across Myanmar and the region. To that end, variance is considerable in the attitudes of members: some are open to collaborating on interfaith and intercommunal activities, but others propagate extremely dangerous anti-Muslim rhetoric. Monks in central Rakhine who are known to intercommunal harmony and peacebuilding organizations for their moderate or even progressive stance toward interfaith work may have monasteries in their northern networks in which abbots are members of Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein. Ma Ba Tha monks in southern

Rakhine have expressed greater willingness to engage in parahita work across religious lines. This demonstrates not only that Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein membership does not preclude monks from having more open and tolerant views toward Muslims, but also that many monasteries that appear committed to interfaith work may be merely satisfied with coexistence and not necessarily interested in proactively developing intercommunity relationships or countering state-sponsored and structural violence.

Although it is easy to assume that these organizations are monolithic, in reality the difference between what a monk says as an expression of his own opinion and what he may say when speaking on behalf of his organization is significant. Any briefings or discussions must be conducted with the entire executive committee of a lay-sangha organization, or at least with a designated spokesperson, to be deemed reflective of that organization's official position. Furthermore, the positions of groups such as Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein, and the views of their members, are fluid. Rumors that Ma Ba Tha in Yangon are engaged in the development of a coordination compact with Muslim community leaders are as likely to influence the Rakhine branch's position on various issues as are conflicts within the group—for instance, communications from Wirathu in Mandalay regarding support for the Arakan Army.⁷⁵

As is the case across Myanmar, Ma Ba Tha's many layers of authority can be confusing to observers. Ma Ba Tha Rakhine has a five-person, state-level executive committee that currently features monks from Sittwe, Ponnagyun, Thandwe, Kyaukphyu and Minbya. In addition, however, are township-level executive committees, generally featuring a chairman, a vice secretary (in some cases, multiple), and an official spokesperson. As in other regions, Ma Ba Tha in Rakhine has close ties to lay parahita groups such as Wunthanu Rakhitta in southern Rakhine, and Kula Rakhitta in central Rakhine. They are similarly well networked within the CSO/CBO community and keep particularly close ties to the Committee for Rakhine Resettlement, which is leading the resettlement of Buddhist families in northern Rakhine with the support

of the ANP, GAD, and the broader military apparatus. Outside Rakhine, Ma Ba Tha's network of online influencers has been hugely successful at harnessing the most recent conflict, in July 2016, by producing and promoting dangerous speech on Facebook, YouTube, and an assortment of personal websites. Despite recent attempts by Facebook to remove the offending accounts, the full impact of Ma Ba Tha's social media strategy is as of yet unclear, but likely significant.

In Thandwe, where Ma Ba Tha is most publicly active, community expectations of monks' participation in civic life is very broad and includes an emphasis on activities included in Ma Ba Tha's core pillars. This may suggest that there is ample space in Rakhine for lay-sangha organizations that are heavily involved in meeting community development needs. Moreover, it demonstrates that expectations of monks' engagement in cultural or even development initiatives are flexible and, at least in part, responsive to changes in monks' behavior. That is, where the behavior benefits the community, it quickly becomes normative.

Ma Ba Tha reports having a positive relationship with other lay-sangha groups, including Sii Htein. However, members of Sii Htein paint a slightly less rosy picture, citing differences in the overall nationalist objectives of the groups.⁷⁶ One Ma Ba Tha leader pointed out that the groups have become more distinguishable over time, with Ma Ba Tha playing a coordinating role with parahita and CSO/CBO networks (unlike Sii Htein's more bombastic and politically engaged activities). Regardless, Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein membership is in some instances overlapping and the groups appear to collaborate as needed, particularly where facilitated by the ANP. In general, however, Ma Ba Tha conduct the majority of their activities through the GAD (not unusually, with Tatmadaw security detail), where Sii Htein are to some extent disadvantaged in this regard due to their often-assumed association with the Arakan Army. As one research participant commented, "Ma Ba Tha have goals and interventions based on



Hindu refugees pray at a temple in a temporary shelter in Sittwe, Rakhine State, where they fled after attacks on the villages of Kha Maung Seik and Ye Bauk Kyartheir, near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. (Photo by Nyunt Win/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

religion. Rakhine nationalists are about independence. Sometimes they work together, but the nature of sentiments is different.”

Another critical difference between the two groups is the role of women. Although Sii Htein has numerous female supporters (one women’s group, Ahlon Dega, was often cited by research participants), it rejects female members as a rule. In contrast, women’s Ma Ba Tha participation has surged in recent years (especially in Thandwe), despite there being few formal women’s Ma Ba Tha groups.⁷⁷ This may be due to the participation of key female influencers. Unlike in other parts of the country, such as Sagaing and Yangon, thilashin do not appear to be particularly active in Rakhine’s Ma Ba Tha.

Sii Htein is a more effective spoiler than leader. Although it stands accused of everything from blocking

aid to engaging in direct violence, Sii Htein is described by members of the Rakhine community as an advocacy group, with members looking out for the best interests of Buddhist communities and empowered to speak on their behalf. Sii Htein monks who participated in this study emphasized that they only began blocking the activities of INGOs when community perceptions of aid bias became a threat to peace and stability. Rakhine Buddhist community members noted that Sii Htein has also helped INGOs ensure smoother implementation. For instance, in Ponnagyun Township, an INGO planning to distribute hygiene kits failed to properly inform the community of its activities. The village responded by refusing the distribution. When a local member of Sii Htein heard the news, he worked with other local Buddhist leaders and the village administrator to coordinate with the INGO so that the distribution could go ahead as planned.

The group is primarily concerned with maintaining social order—Sii Htein monks have on several occasions been involved in conflict management and mitigation activities. Though its members do engage in occasional *parahita* activities, they do so primarily as part of their own monastic social works or alongside senior Ma Ba Tha monks. Its members regularly cite concerns about conflict sensitivity and emphasize their role in dispute resolution or negotiation. By this, it would appear, that they mean ensuring the actions of the government and INGOs do not create opportunities for conflict between groups. Generally, this is done by enforcing strict separation. Sii Htein is very active in policing other members of the sangha and preventing those with more open-minded and tolerant views from participating in activities designed to aid the Muslim community or build interfaith resiliencies. As a result, they have considerable scope to act as spoilers and enough influence to shape the attitudes and actions of the sangha, Rakhine politicians, and communities.

A generous interpretation of the group's underlining motives would note that Sii Htein's strict segregation policy reflects a keen awareness of common conflict trajectories in Rakhine. Specifically, the ways in which hyperlocal, interpersonal conflicts can swiftly consume much larger swaths of the population. Sii Htein's attempts at draconian enforcement of this *de facto* apartheid likely represent a genuine desire to prevent further outbreaks of violence. However, a richer analysis also shows that Sii Htein is institutionally anti-Rohingya and Rakhine Muslim and deeply biased against Muslim communities on the whole.

Sii Htein has close links to the ANP and some of its members are reportedly consulted in advance of key party activities. However, any such consultations are likely to be a function of personal relationships rather than institutional processes. Sii Htein's influence is strongest in central Rakhine, especially Sittwe, and wanes in the southern townships where Ma Ba Tha's prominence is more apparent. Sii Htein's leadership is

as complex as Ma Ba Tha's, its executive committee in Sittwe is divided into four quarters, representing the cardinal points of the city (north, south, east, and west), each with rotating chairs. The group has two designated spokespersons and additional representation in each township.⁷⁸ The group benefits from the widespread assumption that "most monks in Rakhine are under Sii Htein organization." However, it was unusual for participants in the research to identify specific members of Sii Htein as being especially influential, instead tending to reference the group as a whole. This suggests that it is the size and presumed universality of membership that affords, at least in part, Sii Htein with the influence it enjoys.

Generally, approaching any sangha or lay-sangha group will validate their influence in the community, so this should be done carefully and with full awareness of potential risks, particularly given the presumed prevalence of Sii Htein membership in Rakhine. Even if a monk has more progressive views, if he is a member of Sii Htein (even as a nonmember) he will be subject to intense and possibly threatening peer pressure. One monk in central Rakhine recalled that he had been intimidated by other sangha members for expressing his willingness to conduct education outreach in a local Muslim village. The threats of violence prevented him from doing the programming he felt was needed.

Sangha and lay-sangha groups should be approached on the basis of *actual* leadership; not all members can speak on behalf of the group, no matter their seniority. This is true for Sii Htein, Ma Ba Tha, and the Ma Ha Na. However, if attempting to work at the community level, organizations can consult local monks from these networks to gather information on community needs and general dispositions to certain types of interventions, and to get information out into the beneficiary community.

ISLAMIC IDENTITIES AND INTERPRETATIONS

According to the analysis of the Muslim researchers (both Kaman and Rohingya-identifying) who conducted interviews for this research, diversity of thought within Rakhine Muslim communities can be assessed along two primary axes: those who embrace the ethnonym Rohingya (and the political implications of it) versus those who prefer Rakhine Muslim, and less conservative versus more conservative Sunnis.⁷⁹

Within the research population, the majority of non-Kaman Muslims preferred to identify as Rakhine Muslim (70 percent) rather than as Rohingya (30 percent). This finding can be interpreted several ways, principally, that Rohingya carries within it a political statement that at present evokes a highly negative and indeed dangerous response from many within the broader Myanmar community. It is not unreasonable to assume that many of the research participants who claimed to prefer Rakhine Muslim would present their ethnic identity differently outside the parameters of a research interview. Still, participants made particular note of their preference to be called Rakhine Muslim, including to researchers who themselves identify as Rohingya. This does not suggest that differences between these two groups are not genuine (such as linguistic or demographic), but instead that the findings do not clarify this issue further. The only notable factor was geographic distribution: more than half (54 percent) of all Rohingya-identifying participants were living in IDP camps in Sittwe; those who did not lived in Rathedaung (38 percent) or Maungdaw (5 percent).⁸⁰ It may be that the experience of acute conflict causes communities to cohere around the Rohingya ethnonym, whereas communities still in villages that abut Buddhist communities have a greater incentive to assert a shared ethnic identity (that is, Rakhine) in an attempt to mitigate risk. This interpretation, however, is purely speculative.

The question of religious conservatism is also the source of some concern and even conflict for Muslim communities in every region. In Thandwe, these differences appear to fall along ethnic lines: the Kaman community and religious leaders report that Kaman prefer Hanafi jurisprudence; non-Kamans tend to lean toward Deobandist interpretations of Islam brought to the township by Tabligh Jamaat missionaries from Yangon.⁸¹ Generally, Muslim communities in Rakhine appear to follow more austere interpretations and engage in more conservative practices in the north and central parts of the state. In the south, Muslim communities generally report to follow syncretic cultural traditions that improve their integration with neighboring Buddhist communities. Marriage practices further evidence this trend: a majority of Muslims in southern Rakhine noted mixed Rakhine-Kaman heritage; marriage customs among Muslim communities in the north and central part of the state appear to be predominantly endogamous.

CHRISTIAN AND HINDU NETWORKS

The largest Hindu religious organizations have struggled to organize in Rakhine State given the hypersensitive context. Nevertheless, Hindu community committees have been established across central and northern Rakhine to enable more efficient aid delivery to at-risk or conflict-affected Hindu villages. Indeed, Hindu religious and parahita networks in Yangon are critical to the dwindling community's physical and economic well-being.

For Christians in Sittwe, the Myanmar Council of Churches is an important source of information, advice, and support. Similarly, Baptist churches across Rakhine are tightly networked to other conventions; for instance, the Mro Baptist Convention is part of the Karen Baptist Convention, and other Baptist churches across the country fall under the network of a larger, Rakhine convention.

MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

Although mysticism is commonly downplayed initially by both Buddhist and Muslim communities (particularly the latter), over time it became clear that supernatural powers can bestow those that claim to have them with incredible influence—even across faith lines.

Nat worship among Rakhine Buddhists is as prevalent as it is elsewhere in Myanmar, and is largely a cultural phenomenon inasmuch as it is explicitly religious. Notably, no Rakhine nats are featured in the Cult of the 37 Lords (a formalized pantheon of nat spirits), which is likely a reflection of the sour relations between Arakan and King Anawrahta, who formalized the list of nats to be domesticated under the Bamar kingdom.⁸²

Mystical Islamic traditions used to be common in Rakhine, but they have been increasingly disavowed by conservative religious leaders. However, small pockets of Sufi mystics remain in Thandwe, including one or two said to have significant influence. In Sittwe, Kaman communities pay homage to local nats, but spirit worship is reportedly less common among other Muslim communities in central Rakhine.

Nat worshippers in Rakhine today face many challenges if relations with Buddhist neighbors sour. For instance, in Mrauk-U those who pay homage to the nat Mra Thwan Devi have fallen out of favor with the abbot of the Buddhist monastery nearby. Though community members once worshipped alongside one another, at both the nat shrine and the Buddhist temple, now the nat community is actively excluded by the local Buddhist abbot and village administrator from needs assessments and even aid distribution. As a result, they have become closer to a neighboring Muslim village, where they take part in social activities and trade.

PARAHITA ORGANIZATIONS

Parahita groups are, on the whole, loosely cohesive and have a fluid membership. Some are more institutionally organized around clear objectives with set staff roles (if

volunteer), whereas others are to some extent mostly ad hoc, designed to be responsive to situations as they emerge. As a result, the personal beliefs and priorities of designated group leaders have undue influence.

Many Buddhist parahita groups and networks have an executive steering committee of community and religious leaders. This has two primary implications for policy and programming. First, the existence of sangha members can make it difficult to involve these groups in peacebuilding activities, particularly if their ordained patrons face pressures within the sangha community that prevent them from working on interfaith issues. Second, most of these groups consider themselves motivated or influenced by their faith, but their mission, vision, and values—to the extent to which they are formally or informally articulated—are rarely concerned with soteriological, eschatological, or even missionary objectives.

Even if not formally included in an organization, it is common practice for CSO/CBOs, parahita groups, and community committees to consult with monks before beginning their activities; it is also considered good practice to inform the monk of activities, regardless of his personal interests in parahita. Indeed, the Buddhist community has a broad view of the ways religious leaders should participate in parahita work. In interviews with members of Rakhine's Buddhist community, activities most frequently mentioned in response to the question "What work is most appropriate for religious leaders" suggested that the provision of education—both secular and religious—is central to the role people want them to play in the community.

In regard to Buddhist women's associations, the findings suggest that the women's groups conduct activities in the IDP camps and collaborate with groups like Ma Ba Tha and Sii Htein. Thus, when it comes to women's organizations in Rakhine, the actions of one figure cannot be seen as representative of other members' overall attitudes toward peace and conflict. In every township, however, when women's associations were seen to be

influential, so were dhamma schools. This speaks to the ways in which Buddhist parahita work can create opportunities for women to expand their influence within a given community. This is particularly important given the ways in which women of all faiths are more susceptible to religious coercion because they often lack the social capital required to deny (male) religious leaders' demands and proscriptions. (One area where women of all faiths appear to have more leadership opportunities, however, is health care. In particular, midwives are very often seen as sources of trustworthy information.)

Muslim, Christian, and Hindu communities have fewer robust parahita networks but numerous ties to larger, national-level organizations such as the Islamic Religious Affairs Council (Muslim), the Karen Baptist Convention (Christian), Myanmar Council of Churches (Christian), and Sanatan Dharma Swayam Sevak Sangha (Hindu). For the most part, these organizations may be consulted in Yangon on issues related to interfaith conflicts, but rarely are their in-state counterparts engaged on a more substantive basis. Indeed, none of the INGOs consulted in Rakhine as part of the stakeholder mapping of this project were aware of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council, nor did they know that the council has a dedicated Rakhine expert, or that the Central Committee for Muslim Affairs in Rakhine includes representatives from each township.

Muslim parahita actors had a strategy of giving aid to both Muslim and Buddhist communities as a way to ease tensions before 2012. However, since 2012, those activities are no longer possible in most areas. Muslim leaders now claim that they currently cannot find any monks or Buddhist leaders willing to work with them to improve community relations or deliver aid. Still, when asked about appropriate work for religious leaders, the Muslim community in Rakhine as a whole expects their religious leaders to engage primarily in religious affairs and teaching, though parahita activities are also featured.

The vast majority of respondents (including religious leaders) felt that parahita work should extend to peace

and security issues. This suggests opportunities to engage with parahita groups and their ordained patrons to find ways of shifting attitudes on key peace and interfaith issues if sensitivities can be creatively managed. However, even groups considered more progressive have relationships with organizations that members of the INGO and donor communities might find troubling on the surface. This is, in many instances, merely a way of navigating a complex field of actors, but at other times is a genuine problem for programming and partnerships. In general, activities linked to education, livelihoods training, and health care are the most likely to be seen by Buddhist parahita organizations as politically neutral and are thus most likely to receive a positive response to requests for participation. Groups prefer to participate within their own communities (that is, no mixed-faith groups) but many note that over time, and with sensitization, opportunities to work toward integration goals would arise.

The Christian parahita groups are more willing to cross faith lines—Buddhist or Muslim. They are also vulnerable to intimidation and retaliation, however, which INGOs and donors should bear in mind when engaging them. Nonetheless, Christian parahita groups are keen to be consulted and to participate in activities that do not create undue risk of reprisal. The Hindu parahita community in Rakhine, though limited in size, is keen to be consulted and to participate in activities. However, most communities in central and northern Rakhine are highly traumatized and have aligned closely with the Buddhist majority for protection. They are, as such, on the whole very risk averse—and understandably so. The Muslim parahita community has been dramatically impacted by the military government's continued insistence on limiting their movement and the size of their meetings. Most of what could be considered parahita work is done by community elders, who have funds and ties to the government that allow them to navigate the movement restrictions more easily. The elders would, on the whole, very much like to be consulted and engaged in programming.

COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

Committees are essential to community organization. Most communities have some assortment of leadership, disaster, education, water, gawbaga (religious), health, women and children, youth, and elder committees. These are replicated at the village, village tract, and township levels. In some instances, the communities create a supra-committee, including representatives from each of the other committees, as well as a religious and community leader, as a means of streamlining community decision making and coordination.

Gawbaga committees are incredibly important interfaces between communities and religious leaders in both Buddhist and Muslim villages. Whereas they and temple committees are sometimes separated in Buddhist communities, in Muslim communities they are often combined to form a single mosque committee with an extended purview. Members of the gawbaga committee (laypeople) are often in positions where they may influence needs assessments, distributions, and collaboration with other communities in addition to religious activities. They are also often seen as someone to go to for religious advice or guidance and may act as the public face of a local monk or monastery, including handling of donations via the monastery, accounting, and distribution activities.

Given movement restrictions, Muslim communities often organize through education committees, which operate within every camp and village. Through these committees, communities that are unserved or underserved by government or INGO aid can connect with larger Muslim organizations, for example the Islamic Religious Affairs Council. Because of these restrictions, teachers, moneylenders, and lawyers play an outsized role in providing information and advice to their communities. These actors may not be explicitly understood as religious, but their centrality to religious communities makes their appearance notable.

MINORITY ETHNIC NETWORKS

Both the Mro Cultural Organization and Chin Literature and Culture Society were regularly referenced by Mro and Chin participants as being influential parahita actors. However, these same ethnic networks can at times function as interfaith spaces for Christians and Buddhists. Groups such as the Chin Literature and Culture Society, Mro Cultural Organization, Diangnet Association, Maramagyi Committee, Thet Committee, and Khami Committee are therefore important mechanisms for creating intercommunal resiliency across religious lines.

Conclusions and Recommendations



To date, outside actors, especially from the international community, have not adequately understood, navigated, and engaged with religious actors and organizations in Rakhine State. This has driven suspicion of international activities and hidden from view potentially powerful sources of collaboration and barriers that should be addressed. At the same time, overemphasizing the religious dimensions of the conflict and the actual scope of influence exerted by religious leaders can heighten religious sensitivities and polarization. Efforts to engage within the religious landscape to advance peace should always be pursued with full recognition of the range of factors and issues driving the conflict in Rakhine.

ENGAGING RELIGIOUS INFLUENCERS

If they hope to be more effective, policymakers, donors, and INGOs need to find ways to engage at the local level. This likely means moving from risk mitigation to risk acceptance models of programming, whereby it is acknowledged that certain types of programming need to encounter and address resistance if they are to have an impact. The most promising avenues for engaging the religious sector require patience and time. Specifically, working with religious leaders—both ordained and lay—to first build trust by enabling them to work more effectively on behalf of their communities. While providing tangible goods and services (such as trainings on interest-based negotiation or rapid needs assessment methodologies), soft-focus peacebuilding programming may over time create opportunities for more explicit engagement. Research indicates a strong need for outside actors operating in Rakhine for both short-term humanitarian work and long-term peacebuilding work to

build better lines of communication with local religious leadership. This relationship building should proceed in ways that take certain issues into account.

Because approaching any sangha or lay-sangha group will generally validate their influence in the community, this should be done carefully and with full awareness of the risks. Further, even if a monk has more progressive views, he will be subject to intense and possibly threatening peer pressure. Relatedly, caution suggests avoiding simple labels of progressive, conservative, or hard-line for individual religious actors or religious organizations. Relationships, aims, and influences are often ambivalent. Actors should be prepared to encounter and navigate this complexity. Peacebuilding actors should not assume that one leader or representative of an organization, group, or movement is representative of the whole or of the organization's mission and mandate. Rather, it is prudent to be aware that people's views and positions evolve over time, particularly as the circumstances around them change. Individual actors may have views that diverge from those of their organizations, yet deep bonds and a sense of obligation may make them reluctant to break away. It is important to bear in mind that many actors believe they can most effectively advocate for change from within.

Consultation for programming should be meaningful, ongoing, and begun early. Nonengagement contributes to negative working relationships. At the same time, local religious leaders are wary of being instrumentalized by outside actors. Relationships of trust need to be built over time. As much as possible,

In reaching out to religious leaders who are identified as supporting interfaith and peace-related activities, outside actors should be extremely sensitive to the fine line they are walking to maintain credibility and authority.

engagement with religious leaders should be across the spectrum of traditions—Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu—so as not to be perceived as preferential treatment for any group. In practice, however, it may be necessary to begin programming by engaging first with Buddhist religious leaders to avoid the risk of program proposals being blocked by government or religious actors, even both. Engaging only the usual suspects—the primary and visible religious actors already identified and engaged by the international community—significantly diminishes the efficacy of programming. This may mean, understandably, advocating for longer project timelines, to allow adequate time for outreach and relationship building. Working through religious leaders to provide programming helps ensure that it is in line with community expectations. Areas of collaboration might include those seen by communities as being most appropriate for religious leaders, such as education, health care, disaster response, CSO/CBO coordination, and so on. Organizations can begin this process by meeting with local religious leaders and asking them about the work they are already engaged in on behalf of their communities.

Providing dispute resolution training for religious leaders across all communities (separately) is essential as well as preparation for eventually supporting the creation of informal negotiation committees between communities—bearing in mind that the best religious influencer may in fact be a layperson. Exploring more deeply the attitudes of formally affiliated and senior monks may provide insight into opportunities for sidestepping spoilers (such as other monks): if permission or support for activities is given by a high-ranking monk, they may have the necessary authority to overpower dissent within their respective sangha groups and networks. This strategy, however, should be undertaken carefully and with awareness of levels of authority (village, township,

state). Not all monks are willing to engage in political issues, but many feel that they have a duty to protect culture and the health of the sasana—which includes the Buddhist community. This angle is the most likely to be successful in engaging these figures, particularly in attempting to get support for programming.

Sangha and lay-sangha groups should be approached on the basis of actual leadership—that is, the formal structure defined by the organization. Not all members can speak on behalf of the group, no matter their seniority; this is true for Sii Htein, Ma Ba Tha, and Ma Ha Na. Buddhist monks at the township level are well represented in local leadership. At the district and state levels, monks are somewhat less likely to engage as individuals, hence the need to engage with sangha groups such as Ma Ba Tha, Sii Htein, and the Ma Ha Na. It is not always necessary to explicitly ask advice or permission from religious leaders before doing work in a community, but taking the time to inform them will generally be appreciated and often helps maintain a smooth working relationship. Religious leaders may not offer to directly mobilize communities (in some instances, they may), but they will be able to identify community members best suited to the sector of programming. In especially sensitive locations, engaging gawbaga or education committees in consultations may enable indirect communication with key religious leaders.

In reaching out to religious leaders who are identified as supporting interfaith and peace-related activities, outside actors should be extremely sensitive to the fine line they are walking to maintain credibility and authority as they engage in activities that might warrant criticism from other more conservative members of their community, and that potentially put them at risk of physical violence. Deference should be paid to their wishes in regard to how visible their engagement with outside actors will be.

Groups such as Ma Ba Tha, in many areas, are keen to have their nonpolitical activities—which is the vast majority of their work at the community level—taken seriously. Similarly, Sii Htein sees itself as primarily concerned with conflict sensitivity and mitigation, and are, in this capacity, open and interested in being consulted on the design and delivery of programming.

Muslim leaders (moulvis, imams) are often protected by their local community members for their physical safety. Peacebuilding actors should recognize their need for maintaining a low profile for the sake of their security and effectiveness. Younger moulvis tend to be more interested in engaging in parahita activity for their communities, and, in the camps, imams have been successfully involved in preaching public health messaging during Friday meetings, which suggests that engagement is possible under the right circumstances. Education is an obvious space for collaboration. Christian leaders should be recognized for their bridging role between communities, but without pushing them too hard to adopt visible positions or to take advantage of ambiguity in government policies in regard to necessary permissions and processes.

ENGAGING PARAHITA NETWORKS

Local communities throughout Rakhine encounter grassroots parahita actors and networks that provide for community welfare. The vast majority of those interviewed believe that parahita does or should extend to peace and security. Some parahita actors and networks already operate regularly in ways that cut across identity difference, providing services to communities other than their own. That they do demonstrates the potential for partnership on concrete activities and, potentially, on influencing general attitudes and behaviors related to peace. Some of these actors and networks have complicated ties to conflict or political actors (or both) that need to be navigated carefully.

At the very least, outside actors seeking to assess and respond to community needs throughout Rakhine

should consult local parahita actors and networks. They should also engage local parahita groups and networks in needs assessments and aid distributions because this will improve access and build trust with influential lay members and their patrons. Efforts should build on the successful parahita work already being done, not seek to supplant or displace it by creating competing local-level peace or social engagement committees or projects that are less likely to be sustainable. This will, however, require that outside actors be patient with their sometimes fluid structure and informal operating methods. They should not be expected to operate like traditional, formal NGOs.

A good deal of work to address issues related to peace and security can be done on an intragroup basis. That said, intercommunal efforts can be nurtured via parahita if done carefully. Some foundational work within religious communities to establish greater support for cross-communal work may be necessary before engaging in more robust intercommunal work (using pragmatic versus moral argumentation, as noted). These efforts will likely be more successful if their express aim is not described in peacebuilding or human rights language, but instead emphasizes specific and immediate community needs.

Muslim, Hindu, and Christian parahita actors and networks may be weaker than their Buddhist peers. Humanitarian and peace groups should be careful not to unintentionally reinforce Buddhist dominance. It is also essential to recognize and build on women's networks across religious difference and to take advantage of women's ability and eagerness to engage in parahita work as a way to participate in religious activities from which they might otherwise be sidelined.

Not all organizations are well suited to work with parahita groups. Organizations with longer funding cycles will be better able to develop the kinds of working relationships necessary to fully engage. This likely means that organizations working on issues such

as health, education, and rural development will be better placed than those working explicitly on peacebuilding. However, as noted elsewhere, once trust has been established, more opportunities to engage parahita groups in more sensitive work may be available. Partnership models—in which larger INGOs with dedicated offices in Rakhine collaborate with smaller specialist organizations to deliver skills trainings with peacebuilding, interest-based negotiation, or diversity components—may also be feasible.

LAY PROGRAMMING

Multiple opportunities to strengthen trust with the religious sector through engaging key lay actors are available. Elders are hugely influential in both Buddhist and Muslim communities. They are also most likely to remember a time when communities lived together and have retained some ways of connecting with old friends and colleagues from other faith communities. They thus offer an opportunity for building intercommunity relations—particularly negotiation committees, a concept very much supported by both communities, including more conservative groups in each of the townships where the research was conducted.

Midwives in both the Rakhine and Buddhist communities are empowered and able to act as community leaders, which suggests possible opportunities to train midwives in other areas as a way of improving women's health outcomes, participation in community decision making, and ultimately creating an opportunity for interfaith professional networks to develop. Such networks need not be explicitly political. Currently, all health programming in Rakhine is managed by the national Ministry of Health in Naypyidaw, which

means that approvals may be slow to materialize but local hesitation may be somewhat easier to navigate. Understandably, all programs in Rakhine should include strong buy-in from communities, particularly secular and religious leaders.

Teachers in numerous communities are seen as primary sources of information and advice. Thus, given the role they play in shaping civic and social values in children, engaging them more directly in intercommunal harmony and peacebuilding programming is possible. It is important to bear in mind, however, that education programming in Rakhine is overseen directly by the national Ministry of Education.

Moneylenders play an important role in responding to crises, particularly for marginalized communities. There may be opportunities to engage them directly in intercommunal harmony and peacebuilding programming, potentially through municipal governments, which generally oversee public places of business, such as markets, and are invested in returning communities to “normal” as quickly as possible. Working to transform moneylending into micro-savings and loan programming may help Muslim and some marginalized Hindu communities to alleviate the financial burden of accessing health care and other basic services.

Finally, lawyers are often key sources of information and advice for Muslim communities, both Kaman and non-Kaman. They may be meaningfully engaged in intercommunal harmony and peacebuilding programming by providing legal aid as well as direct training on the current citizenship law and avenues for alleviating uncertainty and insecurity around citizenship status.

Notes

Local researchers from across Rakhine carried out a majority of the data collection and analysis that informs this report; unfortunately, naming them would put their physical safety and future access at risk. The author extends a sincere thanks to those researchers who not only worked tirelessly to bring this project to fruition, but also generously gave their time and committed their energy to building local research capacity in Rakhine. Special thanks to the communities in Rakhine who agreed to participate in this research. Thanks also to the many government, CSO, CBO, INGO, and academic figures who helped clarify the Rakhine context, made personal introductions, and went above and beyond to facilitate this project. Finally, thanks to the government of Rakhine and the Emergency Coordination Committee—without their guidance, approval, and support, this research could never have been completed.

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3. Rakhine and Rohingya Muslim—identifying enumerators conducted research within their own communities.
4. Many Muslims once living in northern Rakhine are now in Bangladesh; these figures can only be taken to represent the population that remains.
5. Muslim communities in Rakhine use both moulvis and mullah to refer to Islamic religious leaders. However, because mullah often has a negative association for the Kaman, this report uses only moulvis.
6. The Ma Ha Na’s authority is derived from its official status, which is granted by the Myanmar union-level government. It is overseen by the Ministry of Religion, which is controlled by the civilian government. For more on the rise of Ma Ba Tha, see International Crisis Group (ICG), “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar,” ICG Report no. 290, September 5, 2017, www.crisis-group.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar; and Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar,” Policy Studies no. 71, East-West Center, 2014, www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/ps071.pdf.
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9. This report uses the Burmese pronunciation and spelling Rakhine to differentiate the historical kingdom and polity from contemporary identities. This does not indicate a particular political position on the validity of Rakhine autonomy efforts. Many participants used the terms Arakan State and Arakanese. Standard Burmese place names and spellings are used to differentiate historical references (such as Rangoon) from contemporary ones (such as Yangon). In some places, these may differ from the common Rakhine pronunciation.
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66. There is no full ordination for women in Myanmar. *Thilashin* take additional precepts and wear robes but they are not *bikkhuni* (the female equivalent to an ordained Buddhist monk).
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79. Some, of course, exist beyond these dichotomies, in particular, the Kaman Muslims and a small (and shrinking) community of Sufi(esque) mystics.
80. Other Rohingya-identified participants were from Rakhine but living in Yangon.
81. The Kaman in this research referred to the more conservative communities as being "culturally Bengali," despite participants from these communities identifying as Rakhine Muslim. The Pew Research Center defines Tablighi Jamaat (Society for Spreading Faith) as "a global educational and missionary movement whose primary purpose is to encourage Muslims everywhere to be more religiously observant." For more information on the history of Tablighi Jamaat in Myanmar, see Mratt Kyaw Thu, "The rise of the Tablighi Jamaat movement," *Frontier*, May 24, 2018, www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-rise-of-the-tablighi-jamaat-movement.
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Behind the conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State is a complex and traumatic history of violent confrontation with expansionist powers, making international and union-level engagement particularly sensitive. Interethnic tensions, economic inequalities, and politics all contribute to the crisis, as does religion—whether Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Muslim. Understanding the impact of religious actors, institutions, and ideas on the violence, peacebuilding, and reconciliation efforts is essential. In mapping the religious landscape in Rakhine, this report identifies avenues for engaging the religious sector in peace and justice programming and for ascertaining opportunities to strengthen its peacebuilding capacity.

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