



# Sticks and Stones

Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was researched and authored by C4ADS analysts.

We would also like to thank our interns Ji Hae Kim and Lindsay Cejka for their invaluable research support throughout this project.

We would also like to thank our translators, without whom this project would not have been possible, as well as the many individuals who generously contributed their time inside and outside Myanmar, but who cannot be named publicly. We would also like to thank our peer reviewers, Emanuel Stoakes and Francis Wade, for providing input and reviews.

## LEGAL DISCLAIMER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conditions for Muslims have steadily declined in Myanmar, with the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State facing the gravest threat. In 2012, the country was rocked by the worst sectarian violence in over 50 years, resulting in over 200 killed and 140,000 displaced, most of them being the Rohingya. A 2015 study by the United States Holocaust Museum counted 19 early warning signs of genocide in Myanmar since the start of sectarian violence.<sup>1</sup> Another study by the International State Crime Initiative concluded that the Rohingyas had already passed the first four stages of genocide, including dehumanization and segregation and are now on the verge of mass annihilation.<sup>2</sup> Anti-Muslim sentiment has grown so widespread that even Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party declined to field a single Muslim among their 1,100 candidates for the November 2015 elections.

A campaign of hate speech that actively dehumanizes Muslims plays a key role in sustaining violence across Myanmar. This is not limited to the Rohingya, and in fact, anti-Muslim sentiment has evolved to the point that a range of anti-Muslim prejudices have now normalized in mainstream Burmese discourse. A tense inter-faith atmosphere has resulted in Muslim grievances finding an unreceptive ear even among many liberal and pro-democracy activists, and small triggers rapidly escalating into mob violence. The most recent such eruption was in Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city, in July 2014, where a mob destroyed several Muslim businesses, and resulted in the deaths of two people.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, a network of ultra-nationalist monks organized as the "Ma Ba Tha" (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) has grown rapidly. The Ma Ba Tha has been formally active since only 2014 when it was established, but it has already grown into one of Myanmar's most powerful socio-political forces. In 2015, it achieved huge success. Most notable was the passage of all four 'Protection of Race and Religion Laws' that the Ma Ba Tha had drafted and lobbied for. Collectively, the laws actively target and discriminate against key tenets of Burmese Muslim society, and significantly infringe on their religious and social freedoms. These legislative actions are backed by a sophisticated mass messaging campaign that co-opts the various anti-Muslim prejudices latent across society, and packages them into a coherent narrative that has mass appeal.

In **Part One** of our paper, we profile the landscape of anti-Muslim hate speech in Myanmar. In doing so, we describe the information communication landscape, examining the types of hate speech content and identifying different forms of online and offline incitement that appear to have triggered violence in the recent past.

In **Part Two**, we analyze a dataset of 100 social media accounts belonging to Ma Ba Tha monks, hate speech propagators, and key disseminators of the content. Over a three-month period, we examined the public content on these pages, in many cases running back a year, to identify the various themes and narratives that they disseminate. We found a close tie between online hate speech and offline Ma Ba Tha activities, where messaging is often a precursor to action and is an integrated component of the Ma Ba Tha's broader lobbying strategy.

In **Part Three**, we examine the Ma Ba Tha's organizational profile, including its leadership, funding, and the major channels along which it disseminates its messaging. We find a decentralized, but still highly organized, group that operates with unrivaled freedom for a non-governmental organization and conducts a wide range of activities, such as pressuring judicial and police cases, activist rallies, legislative campaigns, and controlling a powerful media network.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Information Communications Landscape</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Hate speech Content</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>From Hate Speech Violence</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Online Incitement.....	11
Offline Incitement.....	12
<b>DISCOURSE ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Theme 1: An Existential Physical Threat</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Illegal Immigration .....	16
Terrorist Threat .....	18
<b>Theme 2: Threats to Burmese Purity</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Inter-Marriage.....	20
<b>Theme 3: Threats to Religious Sanctity</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Cow Slaughter .....	21
Other Social Markers.....	22
<b>FACILITATORS</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Organization</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Activities</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Channels</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Newspapers and Magazines.....	29
TV and Radio.....	30
Social Media .....	30
<b>Funding</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Enablers</b> .....	<b>34</b>
The USDP-led Government.....	35
The Opposition NLD .....	36
Small and Independent Politicians.....	38
Youth Activist Groups .....	39
Hate Speech Propagandists .....	41
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>43</b>

## METHODOLOGY

This report uses Burmese and English language material, including Ma Ba Tha statements, publications, videos of sermons, local and international news reporting, as well as an analysis of content and imagery disseminated on social media. We have supplemented this desk research with a field visit to Thailand and Myanmar in 2015, and have conducted over 100 remote and on-the-ground extended interviews with editors and senior journalists of several leading Myanmar-based media organizations, anti-hate speech and human rights activists, and financial and real estate professionals.

This report is primarily focused on examining online hate speech in Myanmar; as such, we have made significant use of social media to collect primary source material. Social media is extremely important in Myanmar's media and communications landscape, where it is often one of the primary outlets for news and information and a key origin point for a significant amount of unique content that can later become the basis for news. Social media is particularly relevant to our research as a key disseminating channel for hate speech and hate speech related content, including material that can trigger large-scale mob violence.

We began our analysis by constructing a dataset of 100 Facebook accounts. These included as many monks on the Ma Ba Tha Central Committee or in leading chapters as we could identify. From these, we expanded to other accounts, including those of monks, politicians, activists, government officials, and laypeople who serve as key disseminators or consumers and followers of the Ma Ba Tha monks' content. Over a period of three months, we actively examined the public content on these accounts, as well as their affiliated websites and blogs. We paid particular attention to posts that contained hate speech and any available data on Ma Ba Tha and 969 activities. Of particular interest were images of activities such as conferences, rallies, and meetings and primary source documents, such as uploaded copies of Ma Ba Tha statements, sermons, donation receipts, and publications.

We acknowledge some limitations in this course of research. Myanmar constitutes an inherently difficult data environment. The country ranks 144 out of 180 countries on the 2015 Press Freedoms Index and has only recently lifted draconian limitations on freedom of expression. Independent media is still in a nascent phase and the online space is rife with rumors and misinformation. This is particularly true on social media where data is additionally raw and un-vetted.

To mitigate this, we have attempted several controls. First, we have only selected accounts that at a high degree of probability represent personal or official accounts of known personalities, or are highly relevant to our study as significant disseminators of hate speech. Second, we have sought to use a variety of sources of data to corroborate key facts. For example, imagery from Ma Ba Tha events found on accounts within our sample can provide examples of banners, signs, faces, and other identifying characteristics that can clarify the nature of the event, its location, attendees, and any other relevant information, and can be found or recreated in other forms of reporting. Finally, we acknowledge the difficulties in generalizing "narratives" and have tried as much as possible to avoid "cherry picking" information and to primarily use content that is representative of themes and references we have repeatedly observed, or that have been shared very widely.

All of our social media data analysis has been manually hand-coded without the use of any automated data collection or "scraping" technology.

## INTRODUCTION

The persecution and marginalization of Myanmar's Muslim population have sharply increased in recent years. Buddhist chauvinism towards minority religious communities has ebbed and flowed for decades in Myanmar, but violence in the past few years against these groups has been among the worst in over 50 years. Since June 2012, mob violence primarily targeting Muslim communities has resulted in approximately 135,000 displaced people, 8,500 destroyed homes, and scores of ruined mosques and monasteries.<sup>4</sup> Initially, the violence was primarily targeted against the Rohingya Muslims, a minority population in Rakhine State whose origin and citizenship are bitterly denied by Buddhist hardliners. More recently, attacks have expanded to targeting other Muslim populations, including against the Kaman,<sup>5</sup> who are one of the officially recognized ethnic groups of Myanmar,<sup>6</sup> as well as Muslim communities that have coexisted with Buddhists for decades, such as those in Meiktila and Mandalay. These prejudices are not limited to the extreme right. Many politicians and ordinary citizens have expressed prejudices against the Muslims, especially towards the Rohingya.

Alongside the violence, there has been a growing ultra-nationalist campaign by elements within the Burmese monkhood to protect Myanmar and Buddhism against an apparently existential Muslim threat. The most visible manifestation of this campaign came in the form of the "969," a grassroots movement started in Mon State in 2012 by a group of five junior-level monks seeking 'to protect race and religion in Myanmar.'<sup>7</sup> The 969 message, which overtly targeted Muslims, spread rapidly across Myanmar, with stickers and flags bearing the group's logo appearing on taxis, businesses, and homes.



**Image 1:** Monks working with laypeople to hand out 969 stickers

The 969 showed significant marketing savvy. Its monks displayed an innate ability to package commonly held grievances and prejudices against Muslims that have existed for centuries into easily digestible content relevant to a modern mass audience. They then distributed these through a variety of new media channels, including social media. The 969 is widely alleged to have helped fuel the violence. A report by the NGO Justice Trust that examined the 'hidden hands' behind the June 2012 Rakhine violence found a "recurrent pattern," with 969 sermons preceding anti-Muslim riots.<sup>8</sup> However, while the 969's message found widespread resonance, the 969 organization itself remained a decentralized grassroots movement without the infrastructure necessary to catalyze any meaningful socio-political change on a national scale. In late 2013, the 969 was banned by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka (Ma Ha Na), the government-appointed body that oversees and regulates the Sangha, the Buddhist clergy.<sup>9</sup>

The Ma Ba Tha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion or, as it often translates itself, the Patriotic Monks Association of Myanmar) has risen as the 969 has waned. A much more coherent organization than the 969, the Ma Ba Tha has become the steward of the populist anti-Muslim narrative launched by the 969, and in large part as a result, has grown into one of the country's most powerful socio-political forces. In this process, the Ma Ba Tha has come dangerously close to violating the laws of both the Burmese constitution and of the monkhood. Monks are governed by the rules of the Buddhist Sangha that discourage involvement in politics,<sup>10 11</sup> and are prohibited from abusing "religion for political purposes" under Section 365<sup>12</sup> and from voting under Section 392<sup>13</sup> of the 2008 constitution. Nonetheless, monks have been involved in Burmese politics, such as during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, in which monks participated in anti-government protests.

The Ma Ba Tha has thus far directed most of its energy towards social and religious issues, particularly those relating to Islam's role in Myanmar. The Ma Ba Tha has benefited from the foundation built by the 969, but formally it has been just two years since the Ma Ba Tha's official founding date. Within those two short years, it has already had significant impact. It has forced religious and social issues to the forefront of the 2015 political agenda, mobilized support behind the government's bid to delegitimize the Rohingya, and helped pass a series of sweeping laws that are widely seen as targeting the Muslims.

It is important to note that what the Ma Ba Tha propagates is often not explicitly 'hate speech.' However, as detailed in a study by Oxford University and MIDO, "Hate speech is [no longer] necessary in order to construct a narrative of Muslim threat."<sup>14</sup> Instead, a range of anti-Muslim fears and prejudices are so ingrained in Burmese Buddhist society today that many see a credible existential threat from a population that by most current estimates is unlikely to exceed 5 to 10 percent.<sup>15 16 17 18</sup> This fear has significantly lowered the barrier for potential mass violence against Muslims by rationalizing a need to 'protect the Burmese race and religion' from imminent threat and mobilizing support behind a series of restrictive and discriminatory policy measures. The proliferation of anti-Muslim stereotypes and narratives has propelled sectarian tension where small triggers in the form of rumors and false information can quickly become 'viral' and incite mob violence. For example, the Meiktila riot of March 2013, which was one of the country's worst incidences of sectarian violence, began with a petty brawl at a gold shop and resulted in at least 45<sup>19</sup> and up to 100 deaths<sup>20</sup>, and 1,500 destroyed homes.<sup>21</sup>

The Ma Ba Tha is by no means the only propagator of anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar, but it is likely the most effective one. Its media apparatus is one of the most powerful and organized in the country, and has demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilize an advocacy arm to support the transformation of its message into tangible policy and legislative action. The most notable success has been the ratification of the four 'Protection of Race and Religion Laws' in 2015, which the Ma Ba Tha helped draft, and then aggressively lobbied for. The four laws are widely seen by activists as targeting key tenets of Burmese Muslim society. They include:

1. The Population Control Healthcare Bill: Approved on May 19, 2015,<sup>22</sup> the bill mandates that women in certain regions wait 36 months before having another child.<sup>23</sup> Local authorities are given the power "to request a presidential order limiting reproductive rates if it is determined that population growth, accelerating birth rates, or rising infant or maternal mortality rates are negatively impacting regional development."<sup>24</sup> Human rights activists have expressed concerns that the population law is primarily designed with the Rohingya in Rakhine State in mind,<sup>25</sup> where it is widely believed that the high Muslim birth rates pose an imminent threat in making the Buddhist Rakhine a minority in their own state.<sup>26</sup>
2. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill: Approved on August 26, the bill regulates the marriages of Buddhist women to non-Buddhist men, including requiring parental consent for those under 20.<sup>27</sup> It also allows local registrars to publicly post marriage applications and solicit objections.<sup>28</sup> Human rights activists claim the bill is a "blatant attempt to curb interfaith marriages" and is a "potential trigger" for more anti-Muslims violence.<sup>29</sup> The law also restricts Muslim husbands married to Buddhist wives from "committing deliberate and malicious acts...with intent to outrage feelings of Buddhists;" violations could end in divorce, with the husband losing "his share of jointly owned property, owe his wife compensation, and be denied custody of the children."<sup>30</sup>
3. The Religious Conversion Bill: Approved on August 26, 2015,<sup>31</sup> the bill states that those wanting to convert to a different religion would have to apply to a local "Registration Board" that is regulated by the government.<sup>32</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, "Allowing local officials to regulate private faith so closely is a pathway to repression of religious freedom...In

their zeal to protect Buddhism, the authors of these laws are imperiling other religious minorities, including... [the] Muslim minority.”<sup>33</sup>

4. The Monogamy Bill: Approved on August 31, 2015,<sup>34</sup> the bill prohibits married people from having an extramarital affair,<sup>35</sup> and outlaws having more than one spouse or living with “an unmarried partner who is not a spouse.”<sup>36</sup> Human rights activists claim that this bill, by criminalizing consensual sex, violates the “right to privacy” that is a part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>37</sup>

## Information Communications Landscape

The darkening sectarian environment in Myanmar has coincided with a rapidly changing information communication landscape. In 2013, Myanmar was the last “unphoned” country in the world; however, the country has jumped into the mobile Internet age since market reforms and the invitation of private bids in January 2013.<sup>38</sup> By 2015, SIM card prices had dropped from US\$1,500 to under \$1.50,<sup>39</sup> and internet penetration increased from less than one percent in 2012<sup>40</sup> to as much as 40 percent as of April 2015,<sup>41</sup> according to Radio Free Asia and MIDO, respectively. By March 2016, it is expected that as many as 35 million new mobile phone users will enter the market, driving penetration to as much as 80 percent.<sup>42</sup> In response, providers such as Ooredoo have sought to launch 3-G “smart-phone” only networks, skipping 2-G networks altogether.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, mobile phones, rather than personal computers, are Myanmar’s primary interface to the Internet. Today, social media plays a central role as a platform for news, popular media, and other forms of mass information. “Apps,” such as Facebook and Viber, have become popular and often come pre-loaded onto phones at mobile phone shops or stalls. Viber has seen very high adoption rates, with the number of users in Myanmar more than doubling in six months in 2014 - from 1,989,508 users in February to 5 million by July 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>44</sup> The app has several advantages unique to Myanmar, such as its superior performance in low-bandwidth environments and its need for only a phone number at the time of registration.<sup>45</sup> Both Facebook and Viber have become popular platforms for hate speech. The government has recognized Facebook-driven hate speech as an issue, and has claimed it will seek to better monitor occurrences of hate speech before the 2015 elections.<sup>46</sup>

Social media is used to attack and intimidate activists, with an increasing level of sophistication. Private attacks to pressure and intimidate activists are often threatening messages through Viber, generally from unrecognized numbers and anonymous callers. Image 2 on the next page on the left was obtained by Justice Trust, which documented several messages directed against activists campaigning against the Race and Religion Laws. <sup>47</sup> The text states, “The kalars are bad but what is worse is race traitor whores like you. Mark our words, we will kill those who work to destroy the race.”<sup>48</sup>

Many hate speech disseminators, including prominent monks and politicians, maintain Facebook accounts that cater to a large audience and publish original content on a regular basis. Today, most are careful to avoid crossing the line into outright hate speech or any incitement to violence. However, many still regularly toe the line. One representative example below concerns prominent Ma Ba Tha monk and 969 co-founder Ashin Wimala Bivuntha. In August 2015, an account apparently controlled by him commented on a prominent case of jailed inter-faith Muslim activist Zaw Zaw Latt. The account itself only shared a post and posted one sentence on the share, warning his audience “to beware of such cunning people.”<sup>49</sup> However, the original post warns against inter-faith activities, mocks monks supporting these activities as “stupid, fake monk,” and condemns the Buddhist girls pictured with Latt as “ignorant bitches who are following the money.”<sup>50</sup>





**Image 2:** A hate speech threat received by an activist documented by Justice Trust; the texts include statements such as, “The kalars are bad but what is worse is race traitor whores like you. Mark our words, we will kill those who work to destroy the race.”



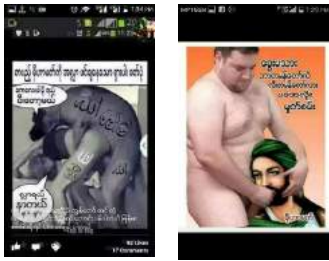
**Image 3:** Post by an account seemingly controlled by Ashin Wimala Bivuntha shared on August 9, 2015 warning readers of “cunning” Zaw Zaw Latt and the “stupid, fake, monk” and “ignorant bitches” supporting him

## Hate speech Content

There is no universal definition of hate speech. The American Bar Association defines it as, “Speech that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits.”<sup>51</sup> Narrower definitions associate hate speech specifically with the incitement of violence.<sup>52</sup> Harvard University’s Susan Benesch, who is one of the leading scholars on hate speech, coined the phrase “dangerous speech,” as examined in the context of mass violence, and identified it as, “Speech that has the potential to catalyze collective violence.”<sup>53</sup> Her examination created a fairly simple framework to identify such speech and noted three framework components: “targeting a group of people, containing a call for action, and utilizing a dangerous speech hallmark.”<sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> Hallmarks of dangerous speech include comparing the targeted group to non-humans, as well as suggesting that they constitute a serious threat or that they are defiling a group’s integrity.<sup>56</sup>

In Myanmar, there is no shortage of outright hate speech directed against the Rohingya and other Muslim groups. This is especially true in unfiltered online discourse, where incitements to violence and deeply offensive and derogatory terms are common. However, even offline, various derogatory terms targeting Muslims are common in everyday speech, most notably kalar (a particularly derogatory term for Muslims), mus (a less derogatory term), and Bengali (a widely used term that is not strictly derogatory, but implies a lack of belonging in Myanmar). Many of these terms are regularly employed during violence. For example, a report by Physicians for Human Rights on the Meiktila riots in March 2013 included survivor testimonies recounting the mobs’ chanting of racially charged terms, containing phrases such as “kill the kalars” and “tanari!” (a derogatory phrase meaning “keep out” and used when referring to dogs).<sup>57</sup> Similar language is common online. In one representative social media post alleging that local Buddhist Rakhine villagers were threatened by Muslims in Mrauk-u Township, commenters replied with hate speech including, “It’s time to kill all kalars,” “If they chop one Rakhine head, we will behead ten thousand kalars’ heads,” and “For the next generation, burn all Muslim villages nearby.”<sup>58</sup>

Crude and dehumanizing anti-Muslim imagery and language is regularly woven into “memes” that “go viral” through social media and text messaging apps. Two examples that were particularly popular in our observations are included below; one involves an image of bestiality with Arabic script all over and another shows a supposed image of the Prophet Muhammed being orally penetrated.<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that both examples are screenshots of images taken from Android smartphones and re-posted on Facebook. These examples of crude bigotry can often support much bigger official campaigns, such as the 969’s attempt in 2013 to disrupt the business of Ooredoo, a rapidly expanding telecommunications provider from based in Qatar, a Muslim-majority country.<sup>60</sup> The image below on the right shows a “meme” that was associated with the campaign and “went viral.” It includes a digitally altered version of the Ooredoo ad with the original text, “Something exciting is happening in Myanmar.” The anti-Ooredoo ad replaces the original image with another that depicts Muslims as violent.<sup>61 62</sup>



**Image 4:** Popular crude and dehumanizing anti-Muslim memes repeatedly observed by analysts during course of study



**Image 5:** An altered advertisement of the Ooredoo advertisement; “Something exciting is happening in Myanmar”

Anti-Muslim narratives are often framed in terms of a Muslim threat. This fear appears vastly disproportionate to the reality, but is at least partially driven by a large volume of circulated information that appears to reinforce and validate these pre-existing stereotypes. Much of this information is false or taken out of context, but is still regarded as true among many in Myanmar’s still relatively unsophisticated media audience, who, after decades of media isolation, often lack an understanding of basic media biases and photo manipulation techniques.<sup>63</sup>

One example on the right addresses the pervasive perception that Rohingyas are not citizens of Myanmar, but rather, are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who bring crime and danger to Myanmar. The social media post from October 2012 purports to show an arms seizure from Bangladesh into Myanmar. However, a reverse image search shows that the picture was of a seizure by Egyptian security forces in Cairo in 2012.<sup>64</sup> Regardless, the post was “liked” 8,400 times and shared over 42,700 times, as of October 2015. Other pieces of misinformation can border on absurdity. One post depicts “Bengalis as cannibals,”<sup>65</sup> using fairly obvious fake pictures of ‘human butcher shops’ that were originally from a video game marketing stunt in London.<sup>66</sup> This post was “liked” over 9,100 times and shared almost 40,000 times, as of October 2015.<sup>67</sup>



**Image 6:** Social media post regarding the ‘arms seizure’ from Bangladesh to Myanmar

## From Hate Speech Violence

While it is very difficult to prove a direct causal link between hate speech and physical violence, it is clear that an ongoing and intensifying campaign of dehumanization has placed many Muslim populations around Myanmar, especially the Rohingya, at heightened risk of persecution and violence.

### Online Incitement

There are several instances where online hate speech is alleged to have triggered the onset of violence. One prominent example is the Mandalay riot of July 2014, which was allegedly triggered by a story posted online by “Thit Htoo Lwin,” an Australia-based news aggregator, as reported by independent media sources and academics.<sup>68</sup> In its post from June 30, 2014, the site claimed that two Muslim teashop owners had raped a Buddhist woman. The post identified the teashop by name, its precise location, and the full names of the alleged perpetrators and victim.<sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> Despite the unconfirmed details and lack of sourcing, the story quickly spread. One of the early disseminators was Ashin Wiseitta Bhivamsa, better known as Wirathu, the most prominent 969 leader and a current member of the Ma Ba Tha Central Committee, who was the subject of a Time Magazine cover story as the “Burmese Bin Laden.”<sup>71</sup> Wirathu, who is now a household name in Myanmar, later admitted that he had originally found the news on the Thit Htoo Lwin post.<sup>72</sup> At the time, Wirathu re-posted the article on his own social media channels with a blurb stating that Muslims “are recruiting and preparing for Jihad against [Myanmar]” and that “all Burmans [sic] must be ready.” The full post is seen below:

The incident sparked riots in which approximately 20 people were injured, 2 people were killed, and over 10 cars were destroyed<sup>73</sup> by a mob that was over 450 people strong at times, according to local media.<sup>74</sup> The story turned out to be false, and Thit Htoo Win later apologized and removed the story from its website, saying that “[they] did not intend to cause [the riots].”<sup>75</sup> At the time of the incident, Thit Htoo Lwin had only 5,500 followers.<sup>76</sup>

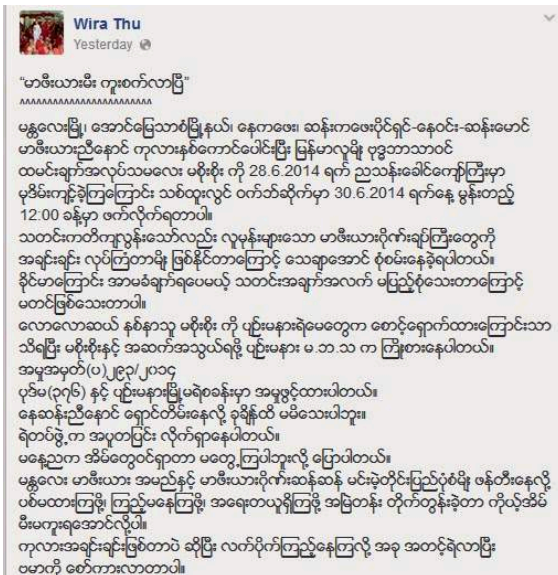


Image 7: Wirathu Repost of Rape Allegations

### Translation

“The rape of Ma Soe Soe on June 28, 2014 at the hands of Sun Cafe owners Nay Win and San Maung is not just a criminal offense but an offense aimed at instigating violence in our country. The July 1 and 2 incidents in Mandalay are not a clash of religions or races but a Jihad. They are gathering in mosques in Mandalay under the guise of Ramadan but in reality they are recruiting and preparing for Jihad against us. The government of Myanmar must deal with these Islamic extremists and raid all suspicious mosques and homes. All Burmans [sic] must be ready and not fall into these Muslims’ traps.”

Offline Incitement

Hate speech in Myanmar is still often spread by physical means, such as through leaflets, sermons, and rallies. Many of the cities that experienced riots have reported anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya leaflets being handed out and monks preaching anti-Muslim rhetoric prior to the outbreak of mob violence. One example is a Reuters investigation into the 2013 riots around the town of Minhla near Yangon that destroyed three mosques and 17 Muslim-owned homes; witnesses stated that anti-Muslim sentiment in the area had significantly increased after 969 sermons a month before the incident.<sup>77</sup> Another prominent alleged example is the 2013 Meiktila incident, where a detailed report by Physician’s for Human Rights placed the death toll at 100,<sup>78</sup> and where witnesses stated that the police stood by and watched as Muslims were killed.<sup>79</sup> According to the International Crisis Group, weeks of anti-Muslim sermons by 969 monks, including by Wirathu, preceded the Meiktila incident.<sup>80</sup> Another incident in January 2014 in Rakhine State, which resulted in upwards of 60 deaths, was allegedly preceded by 969 anti-Muslim sermons through loudspeakers in December.<sup>81</sup>

Witnesses also stated that members of the 969 had spread anti-Muslim messages during the same time period.<sup>82</sup> One leaflet from Meiktila, seen below, included the following:<sup>83</sup>

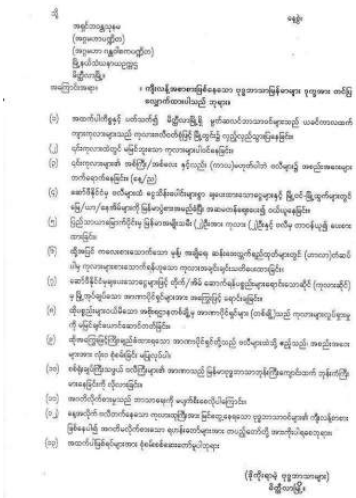


Image 8: Anti-Muslim Leaflet from Meiktila

Translation

- We are very terrified whenever we see a big group of Kalar who go to mosque everyday. Therefore we would like to ask support from monks who wouldn't take bribery.”
- “According to the above situation, Muslims in Marhtila, those tiger kalar are wearing their kalar mosque clothes and going around in the town more than before.”
- “Using money Saudi allocated to mosques, they have been buying land, farm and houses both in and out of the town with incredible amount of money under the Burmese names.”

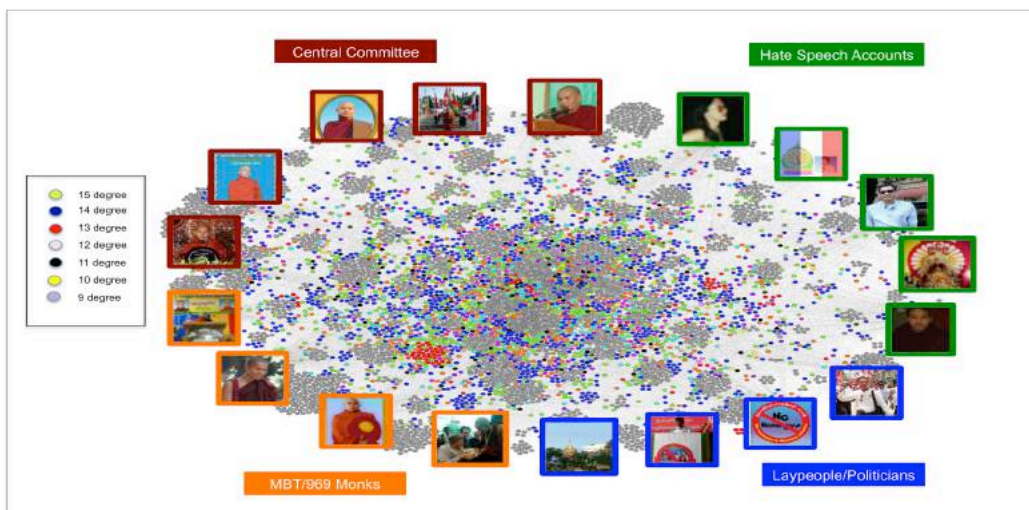
## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims have existed since the days of British colonial rule, and the mass migration of Muslims from present-day India and Bangladesh into Myanmar. In more modern history, the emergence and rapid proliferation of the 969 reiterated how pervasive this anti-Muslim sentiment still is. The Ma Ba Tha's powerful and organized communications apparatus has recognized the populist appeal of these anti-Muslim narratives. It has latched onto many pre-existing Buddhist grievances against Muslims, and transformed them into a coherent message that is relevant to a modern audience and is coordinated with an on the ground activist and lobbying strategy. This message has very close similarities with broader patterns of hate and dangerous speech in Myanmar. In fact, a "Listening Project" conducted by Oxford University and MIDO in Myanmar in 2015 interviewed 78 local residents across six cities and found that "narrators described Muslims as violent, untrustworthy, and devout."<sup>84</sup> Many of the themes they identified are identical to those we will outline below.

For our analysis, we identified and then monitored the public content of 100 Facebook accounts. This sample primarily consisted of monks, including all those on the Central Committee whose accounts we could identify, and then built out to the originators, disseminators, and consumers of their content. Wherever relevant and applicable, we also included government officials and politicians, in addition to several hate speech accounts that closely mirror with the messaging of Central Committee monks. We primarily relied on manual observation of these accounts, but we also sought to conduct some limited quantitative social network analysis. In particular, we attempted to map follower convergence to obtain a sense of the relative inter-connectedness of the followers of accounts in our sample.

The visualization below maps 18 accounts within the sample, including monks, politicians, and lay people. Each account's publicly available friends list was manually hand-coded without the use of any automated program and then imported into Gephi, a network visualization tool. Gephi identified repeated names between each public friends list, and produced the visualizations below. The graph visualizes a total of 32,614 Facebook accounts and 47,205 connections between the accounts with an inter-connected score of 2 or more (i.e. an account that is following at least 2 of the 18 accounts in the sample).

Image 9: Data Visualization of Extract of Core Sample



In addition to the targeted content analysis of the 100 accounts within our sample, we also conducted a scan of accounts that were connected to a significant proportion of the 18 accounts within our sample (in this case to ten or more accounts). We manually inspected the publicly available content on these accounts and evaluated the prevalence of material aligned with Ma Ba Tha narratives. We found that many were active disseminators of Ma Ba Tha messaging, and engaged consumers of anti-Muslim and “Muslim threat” narratives. Many also crossed into outright hate speech. This set of accounts was “lower tier” in terms of their reach and relative importance, but such methodologies can be applied to help improve the efficiency of online hate speech disseminators being identified, reported, and where necessary, removed. For our purpose of examining discourse trends, however, we relied on more established and influential accounts such as those within our core sample.

Image 10: Accounts Following At Least 10 of the 18 Key Accounts



Across all of our various forms of content analysis, we identified a consistent narrative of ‘Muslim threat’ that is presented as a danger to the ‘race and religion.’ This threat perception can be bracketed into three fairly distinct themes. These themes closely correspond to key Ma Ba Tha organizational priorities; in fact, it is striking to see just how many of these themes have been transformed by the Ma Ba Tha into legislation or government policy. The three themes include:

- **Muslims as Threats to Myanmar’s Sovereignty** through illegal immigration, terrorism, and insecurity. These themes have been the basis of various national security laws against Rohingyas, including the denial of voting rights in 2015.
- **Muslims as Threats to Burmese Racial Purity** through their population growth rates that are upsetting the demographic balance. These themes are couched in various social and religious prejudices, including around inter-marriage, fertility, and polygamy. These prejudices that have become the basis for the Race and Religion Laws passed in 2015.

- **Muslims as Threats to Buddhist Religious Sanctity** through their religious values, such as sacrificial animal slaughter and veiling that are inimical to Buddhists’ sensibilities. These themes are regularly expressed in terms of the ‘offence’ they cause and the danger they could pose to inter-faith harmony.

**Theme 1: An Existential Physical Threat**

Myanmar’s population is 90 percent Buddhist, with a Muslim minority of 4 percent, as reported by the last census in 1981.<sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> Today, most credible estimates place the Muslim population at between 5-10 percent.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, the idea that the majority Buddhist population faces a significant, let alone existential, Muslim threat appears implausible. However, this is a central and reappearing theme in the Ma Ba Tha message, tying various other narratives together.

This threat is regularly couched in terms of both national and physical security, as well as civilizational and spiritual security. Ma Ba Tha monks point to the decline of Buddhism between the twelfth and fifteenth century in the face of Islam in countries such as Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to reinforce the idea of a ‘race and religion’ under threat. These historical trends are reinforced by a steady flow of international news relating to atrocities and violence from around the world that is often placed out of context to link violence and illegal immigration in Rakhine state to broader trends in global Islamist terrorism. This “illegal immigration” concern was evident in the white card incident from February 2015, when President Thein Sein announced the expiration of white cards (temporary identification cards) for the Rohingyas, without which they would become illegal immigrants.<sup>88</sup> The government provided the Rohingya with the option to apply for citizenship using green cards; however, as “Rohingya” is not a nationally recognized race in Myanmar,<sup>89</sup> they would have to use a different term to define themselves, stripping them of their ethnicity.

The Ma Ba Tha’s messaging often centers around two distinct issues: the threat of illegal immigration via the “boat people” and the threat of terrorism via “jihadists.” As exemplified in the June 2015 copy of the Ma Ba Tha magazine Aung Zeyathu, which was posted online on social media, five out of the six articles mentioned on the lead page involved Muslims as ‘boat people’ and ‘jihadists.’<sup>90</sup>



**Image 11:** Copy of June 2015 Ma Ba Tha Magazine

Publisher: Aung Zeyathu

Date: July 24, 2015

Articles

1. The 2015 Election and the Danger of Jihadist Incursion
2. How to Respond to the Boat People
3. Op: Ed: I am Worried About the Boat People
4. Op: Ed: Like the Byat Brothers who Arrived by Raft
5. The Jihadist Threat of the Homebound Journey
6. The Hope of Expectant Moms

A key component of the threat narrative is the notion that Buddhists, in their values and traditions, are too pacifist to sufficiently defend against the apparent Muslim threat. For example, one Ma Ba Tha Central Committee statement from June 2015 found on Facebook and purportedly signed by Chairman

Ashin Tiloka instructs readers that, “There are precedents where helping those who aren’t worthy for compassion have led to the demise of race and religion such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines and Rakhine State.”<sup>91</sup> This sentiment is quite strongly reciprocated by supporters. As voiced by a major Thai donor to the Ma Ba Tha, “We need to have monks like Wirathu. About 80 percent of monks only act according to tradition; sometimes we need fighter monks.”<sup>92</sup> This viewpoint is also prominently reflected in online discourse. One of the most common “memes” seen in the comments of nationalist posts is an image that shows a man armed with a club (likely taken from the Grand Theft Auto video game series), as seen in the image on the right in the previous page. The overlaid text states, “For I am a Burmese Buddhist, I’ll be rude and rough were my race and religion threatened.”



**Image 12:** Popular meme with the caption “For I am a Burmese Buddhist, I’ll be rude and rough were my race and religion threatened.”

Illegal Immigration

Many Burmese present the Rohingya issue as primarily one of illegal immigration. This belief is not unique to the Ma Ba Tha, or even the nationalist-right. The status of Rohingya Muslims as citizens of Myanmar, or as one of the recognized ethnic groups, is bitterly contested. Ye Htut, the government spokesman and current Information Minister, summarized the prevailing line in 2013, “We have said this many times, that Myanmar has never had a Rohingya ethnicity ... there are no documents about them in history or in any census taken since the British era.”<sup>93</sup> However, the Ma Ba Tha and ultra-nationalists go one step further in presenting the illegal immigration issue as an existential demographic threat that will erode the Buddhist majority in the country. Ma Ba Tha monks regularly refer to Maungdaw, a township near the border with Bangladesh in Rakhine State and one of the few Muslim-majority areas in Myanmar, as an example of Buddhists becoming minorities in their own homeland. This notion of a Muslim invasion is far from new and has long been a theme in the Burmese political thought; in fact, Arakan State is referred to as the “Western Gate,” or the frontline, between Buddhist Myanmar and Muslim Bangladesh. This reference is regularly used by Rakhine politicians, including in 2013, when they called for the implementation of Rakhine militia patrol units near the border against the ‘illegal Bengalis.’<sup>94</sup>

The Ma Ba Tha does not accept the word “Rohingya” in Burmese, generally substituting it with “Bengali.” However, the Central Committee goes beyond mere denial by attempting to provide legal, historical, and religious background for its position. The Central Committee has issued several statements to explain and clarify their position on the issue. One statement in January 2015 was released on Facebook in English to address an international audience. It stated that, “there were no nomenclature of the Rohingya in the Myanmar ethnic groups throughout the successive ages of history at all. There also had one firm opinion remark as they were Bengali trespassers which was proclaimed by the embassy of the England... in December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1975.”<sup>95</sup> Beyond statements, the Ma Ba Tha has organized and supported rallies against the “boat people.” For example, a Yangon rally in May 2015<sup>96</sup> was organized by the Ha Pyar Za (Golden Pagoda) organization,<sup>97</sup> which has a large number of affiliated groups, including the Myanmar National Network and Rakhine youth groups. Images of the event posted on MNN social media show the attendance of senior Ma Ba Tha monks, including Ashin Parmoukha.<sup>98</sup>



This theme of illegal immigration as an existential demographic threat to Myanmar is not unique to the Ma Ba Tha, and is regularly highlighted even in elite academic discourse. Dr. Aye Chan, a prominent Rakhine historian and professor is a representative example. He describes the “illegal Muslims in Arakan” as “influx viruses” in his writings, and in his historical examination of Myanmar back to 788 AD, finds no evidence for a “Rohingya” ethnic group.<sup>99</sup> On his personal Facebook page, he recently penned an open letter to Malala Yousafzai, who brought up the Rohingya plight. Chan notes in his post that he has “sympathy for the Muslims in refugee camps,” but firmly states that there is “no discrimination” against the “so-called Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State.”<sup>100</sup> In other posts, he displays less patience, decrying the “thick-headed human rights defenders” who cannot recognize the illegal immigrant issue.<sup>101</sup> Of course, online discourse is far less nuanced. One graphic that appears quite popular is the image displayed in the following page that shows how Muslim attitudes change as their numbers grow. The post, which was shared on a high volume pro-Ma Ba Tha community page is captioned, “the slyness of Muslims.” It further notes the need to “think like a kalar and act like a kalar.”<sup>102</sup>



**Image 13:** Popular Anti-Muslim Facebook Meme

Image:

1. *When Muslims are a minority? Islam is a peace loving religion*
2. *When Muslims become powerful? “Give Muslims an equal right”*
3. *When Muslims become the most powerful? “Islam or the sword! Choose one!”*

*O Myanmar people, arise!*

Ma Ba Tha monks and disseminators echo the sentiments displayed in the meme. In one Facebook post from June 2015, a Ma Ba Tha monk re-posts a news report on a Muslim man being arrested on drug charges and found possessing numerous machetes and axes. The monk captions the post by noting that Buddhists should be careful if their neighborhood has any Muslims. He proceeds to note that, “When Muslims are small in numbers, they will strategically pretend to be nice and kind. Better be cautious if Muslims are large in numbers.”<sup>103</sup>

Terrorist Threat

Tied to the narrative of illegal immigration is one of Myanmar facing a jihadist threat. Despite the conspicuous absence of any organized Islamist terrorist history in the country, Ma Ba Tha monks are avid consumers of news and graphic imagery from the Middle East, particularly those pertaining to ISIS atrocities. These are regularly used to warn their readers of the threat that jihadists pose and are inter-mixed with regular reminders of pro-Rohingya statements made by foreign terrorist organizations including al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, whose leader Abu Bakar Bashir is reported to have issued a call for jihad against Myanmar in April 2013.<sup>104</sup> In addition, various Pakistani militant groups, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba<sup>105</sup> <sup>106</sup> and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, have addressed the Rohingya issue<sup>107</sup> allowing Ma Ba Tha narratives to equate the Burmese Buddhist plight to extremist terrorist threats experienced by other countries around the world. On January 26, 2015, a copy of a Ma Ba Tha Central Committee statement signed by Chairman Ashin Tiloka released on Facebook in English stated that powerful Western countries are “anxious and defending their national securities in their own way due to dangers of extremist terrorism.”<sup>108</sup> It then stated that Myanmar cannot accept the Rohingya in their country and that “[they] encourage that powerful and developed countries to understand and sympathize the difficult Myanmar for those situation.”<sup>109</sup>

The fear of terrorism in Myanmar is a convenient myth to justify the Muslim threat narrative, but it appears highly disproportionate to the actual threat at best. One of the most pervasive assumptions is that there are significant armed Muslim movements in Myanmar. There is little evidence to support this claim, but the belief is widely propagated and several references to Muslim movements are often used. These include the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, a militant group that is widely regarded to now be defunct, but is still presented as a significant threat.<sup>110</sup> In more recent months, there has been significant online buzz around a group that allegedly calls itself the “Myanmar Muslim Army,” or MMA. As seen on the right, one typical Facebook post by a major identified hate speech account claims that the group was established in 2014 with the intention to wage jihad in Myanmar.<sup>111</sup> The post additionally states that terrorists from Muslim countries are slowly infiltrating the country, and that no one knows how many groups are in Myanmar or how many training sessions have occurred inside mosques. Finally, it warns that, “Myanmar will soon be seized by ‘Muslim Dogs.’”<sup>112</sup> The images with the post include the organization’s supposed logo, pictures of an alleged training camp in the jungle, and a significant amount of weaponry. At least one picture is time-stamped from October 2014.<sup>113</sup> Many of the images appear to be from other incidents in Kachin and outside of Myanmar. Nonetheless, the post was shared and liked almost 3,000 times.<sup>114</sup> The government has seized on the myth to make arrests of supposed terrorists linked to the MMA, but international terrorism experts have voiced strong skepticism that the group even exists.<sup>115</sup>



**Image 14:** Ma Ba Tha’s statement equating the world’s fight against terror to Myanmar’s Rohingya



**Image 15:** Hate speech account warning readers of the dangers of the “Myanmar Muslims Army”

## Theme 2: Threats to Burmese Purity

In addition to a physical threat, Muslims in Myanmar are seen as a threat to the ‘racial purity’ of the Burmese people. Such latent xenophobia has existed in Burmese society for a long time, especially as British colonialism introduced the mass migration of Indian and Bengali workers. For example, a Burmese newspaper article from 1938 warns of Muslims defiling the Buddhist race, and states, “You Burmese women who fail to safeguard your own race ... are responsible for the ruination of the race.”<sup>116</sup> More recently, the government has helped stoke many of the same narratives. A book named “If You Marry a Man of Another Evil Race and Religion,” published by a monk in 2010 with the permission of the government, included a section with stories of Buddhist women who were “sexually abused, raped or forced to marry members of another ‘evil’ religion.”<sup>117</sup> Today, the Ma Ba Tha has seized upon these themes and expresses them in two major ways: in warning of the dangers of inter-marriage to Muslim men and in propagating a cultural prejudice that suggests that Muslims are ‘outbreeding’ Buddhists.

### Polygamy and Birth Rates

Complementing the idea of an illegal immigrant Muslim horde crossing the border, many nationalist Burmese propagate a popular social prejudice that Muslim women are more fertile, have more children, and thus, ‘outbreed’ Buddhists. This belief was found in a Harvard study to be “unfounded in both data and logic,”<sup>118</sup> but it is still widely believed and is the basis of the Ma Ba Tha sponsored Population Control Law. Wirathu has stated that, “Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly and they are very violent and they eat their own kind. Even though they are minorities here, we are suffering under the burden they bring us.”<sup>119</sup> Under the new law, women in designated “special regions” are required to space apart the birth of their children by at least 36 months if the government determines an “imbalance between population and resources.”<sup>120</sup>



**Image 16:** Monks at a hold a banner reading, “Oppose Islam, the Faith of Animals. Muslims Procreate Like Rabbits”

This law is particularly concerning to an already vulnerable Rohingya population in Rakhine state. In June 2013, the Immigration Minister Khin Yi articulated the view that, “Bengali women living in the Arakan State have a lot of children. In some areas, one family has 10 or 12 children, it’s not good for child nutrition. It’s not very easy for schooling. It is not very easy to take care of the children.”<sup>121</sup> Ma Ba Tha monks have stated the same view. Even Sitagu Sayadaw, a relatively moderate Ma Ba Tha monk, has used the “demographic issue” as a basis to deny the violence against Muslims in Myanmar. He stated in early 2014 that, “Actually in total only two hundred people were killed in Rakhine... (with a slight laugh) these people cannot be eliminated so easily having an unbelievable birth rate... I told them we could not kill you all, because in Burma you have a very high birth rate.”<sup>122</sup>

## Inter-Marriage

The issue of inter-faith marriage in Myanmar is primarily a social and religious one. Various hardliners, including Ma Ba Tha monks, regularly express fears that Buddhist women who marry Muslim men will find themselves in a vulnerable position, where they can be forcibly converted to Islam or physically abused. However, there also have been attempts to tie these social worries into national security fears. Some have posited that Muslim men may attempt to use marriage as a tool of conversion and a means to acquire power, particularly through marriages to daughters of prominent military officers.<sup>123</sup> The prevailing sentiment is best articulated by Maung Tha La, a former diplomat, who claims that Muslim men “emigrate into the Union of Burma, the land of abundant food and pretty damsels, to marry the native maidens ... to spread Islam ... and ultimately overthrow the government.”<sup>124</sup>

The peril of marriage to Muslims, particularly Muslim men, is a theme that is widely disseminated on social media. One fairly typical example is included on the right, and is a variant of a common theme that juxtaposes ‘before’ pictures of seemingly happy interfaith couples with ‘after’ pictures of the same women as victims of domestic violence. This Facebook image is particularly explicit; the yellow text states, “If you marry a Muslim man, this is what happens to you.”<sup>125</sup> However, many of the images appear to be fake or framed without proper context; in this case, the beheaded woman appears to be of a different ethnicity from the woman on the right, and a victim of Mexico’s cartel violence. The comments section displays some of this willful ignorance. Despite some comments pointing out the inaccuracy, several others approve of the post, stating, “Great post! Beware my sisters!” and “O Burmese women, maintain the integrity of your race!”<sup>126</sup>



**Image 17:** A social media post warning Buddhist women of interfaith marriage and ‘violent’ Muslim men who kill their wives

The Ma Ba Tha has successfully used the inter-marriage issue to enact legislation that human and women’s rights activists claim infringe on minority rights. A website likely linked to the Ma Ba Tha released a statement in 2014 explaining why the organization deemed the issue important, alluding to legal loopholes that in their eyes leave Buddhist women vulnerable. The statement explains that non-Buddhists have their own customary law, while the Burmese are only subject to Burmese customary law. Consequently, when a Buddhist woman marries a non-Buddhist man, she is subject to his religious laws, rather than the Burmese customary law, thereby endangering the Buddhist woman’s rights.<sup>127</sup> Messaging on that same blog in later months expanded on these explanations, as seen on a post from January 20, 2015, entitled “Respecting and Upholding Equality.”<sup>128</sup> It defended the development of the Race and Religion Laws, especially the Special Marriage Law, arguing that current legislation was not enough to protect Buddhist women. It further asserts that the proposed bill would be promoting women’s rights, rather than limiting them.<sup>129</sup>

### **Theme 3: Threats to Religious Sanctity**

The third key narrative is the idea that Muslim values are inherently incompatible with Buddhism. This narrative is expressed in a wide variety of perceived Muslim characteristics of which Ma Ba Tha monks disapprove, including the Muslim practice of slaughtering cows at Eid, women’ veiling practices, and various forms of criminality that are attributed to Burmese Muslims. Many of these practices are often described as ‘offending’ the sensibilities of Buddhists, and consequently create flashpoints for inter-faith tension. One senior Ma Ba Tha monk, Ashin Parmoukkha, alluded as much when he noted

that, “They [the Muslims] should avoid actions such as these [referencing cow slaughter] if they want to live in peace and harmony.”<sup>130</sup> Online, many commentators take such sentiments much further. One popular Facebook post from late September 2015 gleefully referenced the stampede in Mecca that killed over 1,000 pilgrims, and stated that it was likely karma for Muslims’ slaughter of cows.<sup>131</sup>

### Cow Slaughter

In the wake of the ratification of the Race and Religion Laws, the issue of cow slaughter has become one of the most prominent strands of the Ma Ba Tha’s messaging. The issue refers specifically to the Muslim practice of sacrificing livestock during religious events, such as Eid al-Adha. The issue has become a key means for the Ma Ba Tha to easily juxtapose an apparently innate Muslim tendency towards ‘violence’ against Buddhist values of pacifism and non-violence, where cows are revered and the sanctity of animal life respected. Central Committee member Kyaw Sein Win, a layman ‘spokesman’ for the Ma Ba Tha, directly alludes to this when he noted that, “saving lives was central to Buddhist philosophy” in contrast to Muslims who “would kill animals as they believe this is how they gain merit.”<sup>132</sup> Online, with graphic imagery of dead animals, this issue is well suited to crudely tarnish Muslims and is easily juxtaposed as seen in the two examples below. The Facebook post on the left was shared by a self-professed 969 disseminator and contains a popular photo of a cow bowing to a monk out of reverence. On the other hand, the Facebook post on the right was shared by a possible hate speech account and shows graphic images of cows being slaughtered by Muslims, along with a Ma Ba Tha statement from September 2015 urging an end to the practice.<sup>133</sup> The latter post had over 10,000 likes and shares by mid-October 2015, and was re-posted by several organizations, including the Arakan Youth Organization, a Rakhine ultra-nationalist political party.<sup>134</sup>



**Image 18:** Social media account for the “969 Myanmar Defense League” shows cows bowing to a monk out of reverence



**Image 19:** Social media post showing cows being slaughtered by Muslims alongside a Ma Ba Tha petition against cow slaughter

Beyond simply highlighting clashing values, the Ma Ba Tha’s choice to target the issue of cow slaughter touches at much deeper socio-economic structures in Myanmar. Burmese Muslims, especially those in the delta region of Myanmar, are heavily represented in the slaughterhouse and meat trades<sup>137</sup>, and the Ma Ba Tha’s bid to disenfranchise a seeming ‘religious freedom’ actually has major impacts on a key ‘Muslim sector’ of the economy.

Since after the June 2015 annual convention, the Ma Ba Tha Central Committee has aggressively targeted the issue and released a statement on Facebook calling on the government to ban Muslims from slaughtering animals at religious events.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, according to an exposé by investigative journalists with Myanmar Now, local Ma Ba Tha chapters have been actively waging a successful campaign to pressure the closure of Muslim businesses, most prominently meat factories and slaughterhouses.<sup>139</sup> In particular, Ma Ba Tha monks have reportedly been buying up slaughterhouse licenses assisted by a sympathetic local government that offered them a 50 percent discount.<sup>140</sup> Ma Ba Tha monks have also begun ‘investigating’ Muslim businesses to uncover violations that could lead to their closing.<sup>141</sup> Even Central Committee monks have joined in; for instance, on September 24, 2015 Wirathu on his purported personal Facebook account accused Muslims of “breaking laws” by slaughtering cows for Eid at “unauthorized places”, such as inside mosques.<sup>142</sup> The Ma Ba Tha campaign has allegedly led to the confiscation of thousands of Muslim-owned cows, causing significant financial strain for many Muslim businesses.<sup>143</sup> Several local authorities have begun to cave to Ma Ba Tha demands; the Mandalay government, for example, recently ordered the use of goats instead of cows this Eid.<sup>144</sup>

### Other Social Markers

The Ma Ba Tha monks highlight other social markers in their messaging. Some are borderline ludicrous. One senior Ma Ba Tha monk from the Bahan chapter township, for example, was profiled in Tharki-thwe in October 2015 and spoke about nine ways to “protect” Buddhism. One of his suggestions on his purported personal Facebook account included boycotting biryani, a popular dish across the country, due to its ostensibly ‘Muslim’ origin.<sup>145</sup> Others are more serious and touch at key facets of Muslim society. In particular, the issue of the veil as a security concern has grown increasingly prominent in late 2015. In justifying this threat, Wirathu stated, “[Muslims] use the robes in suicide bombings, helping men to pretend they are women... It is a security concern and a threat to the sovereignty of the country. We will make that tradition stop.”<sup>146</sup>

Lay followers of these monks have taken these messages much further. One key theme is a targeted attack on mosques as the ‘headquarters’ for the Muslim threat. This theme can cross into direct hate and dangerous speech, including incitements and gloating over violence. One such example is the Facebook post by “Zaw Win,” an activist who has spoken at Ma Ba Tha events and was one of the supporters recognized for his contributions with an honorary plaque.<sup>147</sup> On November 25, 2015, he posted a Facebook photo of the burning ruins of Meiktila, captioned, “We didn’t just burn U Ko Ni’s heart. We, in fact, cremated his heart.”<sup>148</sup> U Ko Ni is a NLD lawyer who had once stated in an interview that “Burning a mosque is like burning a Muslim’s heart.”



**Image 20:** Zaw Win’s Facebook post with Meiktila’s mosques burning; “We didn’t just burn U Ko Ni’s heart. We, cremated his heart.”

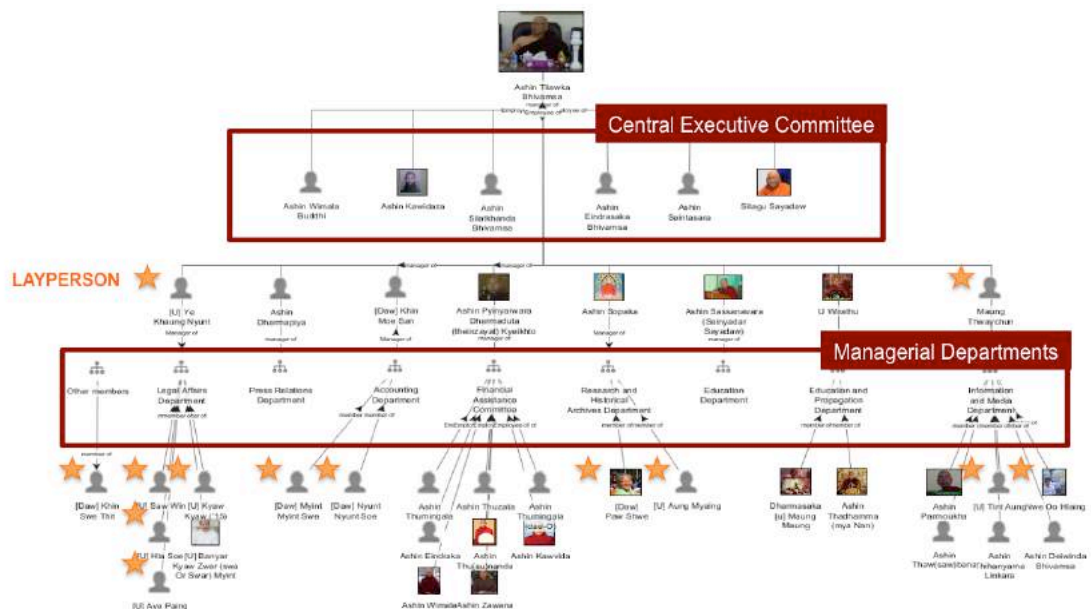
## FACILITATORS

Myanmar is one of the world’s most deeply religious societies.<sup>149</sup> Approximately 90 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist,<sup>150</sup> and monks exert a deep spiritual and moral influence over Burmese society. However, unlike monks in other Buddhist nations, such as in Sri Lanka, Burmese monks are banned from “secular affairs.” They are prohibited from voting in parliamentary elections and cannot participate in politics.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, monks have been at the forefront of many of Myanmar’s pivotal historical turning points, including during the struggle for independence against British colonialists and during the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” against the military junta.<sup>152</sup> However, the role of religion in Burmese politics extends beyond just specific events. A monastery is at the center of cultural and social life, especially in rural areas. As Matthew Walton, one of the foremost scholars on religion and politics in Myanmar, has stated, Buddhism provides a “repertoire of ‘raw materials’ that people have used to make sense of their political environment.” As a result, “Burmese political thinkers have constructed Buddhist arguments to both [legitimize] and criticize various forms of political authority and political ideologies.”<sup>153</sup>

As one of the country’s largest religious organizations, the Ma Ba Tha lends significant legitimacy to the anti-Muslim narratives that are poisoning Myanmar’s socio-political discourse. The Ma Ba Tha claims to have over 250 offices and 10 million followers across the nation,<sup>154</sup> and while this figure is uncorroborated, the size of its recent rallies do indicate very significant support from within both the monkhood and the laypeople.<sup>155</sup> However, these tens of thousands of affiliated Ma Ba Tha monks are spread out in local chapters across the country; as a result, they have significant autonomy in their local operations. Thus, rather than a hierarchical organization, the Ma Ba Tha is perhaps better understood as a network of similarly inclined individuals, each with their own respective patronage systems and activities. This network has a central organizational core that provides an ideological direction for chapters, but is unlikely to exert much direct operational control over all chapter activities.

## Organization

Image 21: Ma Ba Tha Central Committee Hierarchy Chart



The Ma Ba Tha is officially led by a 52-member Central Committee that is sub-divided into the Central Executive Committee, and then further divided into eight Managerial Departments. Researchers were able to identify 42 out of these 52 individuals with a high probability, including by cross-referencing lists and news compiled by local journalists.<sup>156</sup> The identified Central Committee members include several of the founding 969 monks, in addition to some of Myanmar's most influential and respected mainstream Buddhist monks, who add significant legitimacy to the organization from the perspective of laypeople. These monks represent a diverse range of opinions on the "Muslim issue" and some would even be considered moderate relative to their colleagues; however, most, if not all, agree that 'race and religion' are under threat, and primarily by the Muslim minority.

The Ma Ba Tha Central Committee, particularly through its official 'head office' at Ashin Tiloka Bhivunsa's Insein monastery, oversees a powerful communications apparatus that includes newspapers, magazines, journals, cable broadcast deals, and conferences. Access to this media apparatus provides individual monks significant national public profile, and by extension, significant donor funding as well. Through this apparatus, the Central Committee is able to widely disseminate and, to some level, control the core Ma Ba Tha message.

The Chairman of the Central Committee is Ashin Tiloka Bhivunsa, who leads the eight-member Central Executive Committee. Also known as Insein Ywama Sayadaw, Ashin Tiloka Bhivunsa is the 76-year old<sup>157</sup> Abbot of Insein Ywama Monastery.<sup>158</sup> He holds the title Agga Maha Pandita,<sup>159</sup> one of the highest honorifics in Theravada Buddhism and oversees a monastery school in Yangon with 1,000 students.<sup>160</sup> The Vice Chairman Sitagu Sayadaw (also known as Ashin Nyanissara) is also an Agga Maha Pandita, and is one of Myanmar's most popular and influential monks.<sup>161</sup> Sitagu Sayadaw is the most prominent moderate associated with the Ma Ba Tha. He has publicly spoken out against the violence in 2012<sup>162</sup> and traveled to Tehran in December 2015 as part of an inter-faith dialogue,<sup>163</sup><sup>164</sup> but has also publicly voiced several popular prejudices associated with Burmese Muslims.<sup>165</sup> <sup>166</sup> <sup>167</sup> Other monks on the Central Executive Committee are prominent hardliners, such as Deputy Chair Ashin Kawi Daza, the Abbot of Mae-Baung monastery in Karen state. Kawi Daza was one of the most senior monks associated with the 969, and is among the most aggressive anti-Muslim propagandists in the country. In September 2012, a Buddhist nationalist group based at his monastery issued one of the first anti-Muslim boycott orders, circulating leaflets in the Hpa-an township instructing Buddhists under threat of "serious effective penalty" to immediately cease selling or renting property to and buying goods from Muslims.<sup>168</sup> The leaflet also forbids Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.<sup>169</sup>

Under the Central Executive Committee, there are eight "departments" that are led by "managers" and staffed by a total of 23 identified "members." Several of the managers and members are prominent "younger" monks, many of whom were formerly associated with the 969 movement.<sup>170</sup> Wirathu, who now manages the 'Education and Propagation Department,' is the most prominent. Also among the members is Ashin Wimala Biwuntha from Mawlamyine in Mon State, who is considered one of the leaders of the 969,<sup>171</sup> and Ashin Thaddhamma, who is said to have designed the 969 logo.<sup>172</sup> Several of these monks continue to associate themselves with the 969 logo, despite its ban by the Ma Ha Na. For example, Ashin Wimala is seen in 2015 at a public rally with printed banners that display both the Ma Ba Tha and 969 logos.<sup>173</sup> However, the Ma Ba Tha is more than just a rebranded 969, and has monks who were not formerly associated with 969. For example, Ashin Sopaka, who oversees the 'Research and Historical Archives' Department, is seen in imagery as closely associated with the aforementioned monks, but has no history with the 969. Instead, he is a former student of Ashin Tiloka, who started his own monastery in 2005 that became quickly popular.<sup>174</sup>

Several of these aforementioned monks, as well as other Central Committee monks, continue to voice anti-Muslim sentiments that come dangerously close to hate speech, while several are engaged in



activities that could be viewed as blurring the lines between religion and politics. Most famously, Wirathu served several years in jail for inciting anti-Muslim riots that led to the death of several Muslim civilians in his home village of Kyaukse in 2003. Regardless, he routinely paints Muslims in a negative light in the media.<sup>175 176 177</sup> Meanwhile, Ashin Wimala is known for his fiery and extremely intense speeches, which a local newspaper –The Irrawaddy- reported attendees describing him as “like Hitler.”<sup>178</sup> Others, such as North Dagon-native Ashin Parmoukka, a member in the Information and Media Department and oft-described “spokesman” for the Central Committee,<sup>179</sup> has been reported on social media to be in close coordination with several fringe activist groups who are openly engaging in outright hate speech.<sup>180</sup>

It is not certain that the official hierarchy described above fully describes the real distribution of power within the Central Committee. Most Central Committee edicts and statements are signed in the name of Chairman Ashin Tiloka, who speaks at major events, but he is now in his late seventies and reportedly in poor health. Meanwhile, Vice Chairman Sitagu Sayadaw plays a backseat, but seemingly opportunistic role. Between late 2014 and mid-2015, he appeared to be distancing himself from the organization as its international reputation slid. In early 2015, Sitagu Sayadaw released a statement denying that he held a leadership position in any organization other than his Sitagu Buddhist Missionary organization,<sup>181</sup> and he conspicuously failed to attend the annual conference in June 2015, despite other Central Committee monks expecting his arrival even at the last minute.<sup>182</sup> However, after the ratification of the Race and Religion bills in late October, Sitagu Sayadaw returned to deliver the keynote speech at the triumphant celebration rally in Yangon.<sup>183 184</sup>

A significant amount of operational influence over the Ma Ba Tha’s strategy and its communications apparatus is believed to reside with the younger, more outspoken members. For example, Wirathu, as mentioned, is officially only a ‘manager’ in the formal hierarchy, but he has officiated some very significant events that suggest an influence greater than his formal title’s presumed influence. For instance, he received the NLD’s Chairman Emeritus, U Tin Oo, as part of a highly public NLD outreach to the Ma Ba Tha on September 30, 2015.<sup>185 186</sup> Other than Sitagu Saydaw,<sup>187</sup> Oo appears to have visited only Wirathu, with a leaked video showing Wirathu condescendingly lecturing the much older Oo.<sup>188</sup> Additionally, at most public Ma Ba Tha events, it is a small circle of Central Committee monks, including several of those mentioned earlier, who appear to be the most highly engaged.<sup>189 190 191</sup> This smaller circle is known to travel across the country in support of each others’ initiatives. For example, at a September 30 rally to celebrate the Race and Religion Laws in Mawlamyine, at least five Central Committee monks were seen in attendance on social media, including Ashin Sopaka, Ashin Wimala Buddhi, Ashin Wimala Bhivunsa, Ashin Thadamma, and Ashin Parmoukka.<sup>192</sup> These same monks are entrusted with core functions, as per Central Committee directives seen on social media; one from July 6, 2015 ordered Wirathu and Ashin Parmoukka to handle “the legal team” that handled the drafting and lobbying for the Race and Religion Laws.<sup>193</sup>

Additionally, the power of the laypeople, or non-clergy, experts cannot be underestimated. Laypeople comprise about half of the 23 identified “members” on the Central Committee and offer technical expertise that monks do not have. Laypeople are concentrated in the Legal Affairs, Accounting, and Information and Media departments, according to the list of 52 individuals identified by researchers. Key individuals among them include Maung Thway Chun, editor of the Ma Ba Tha’s popular Aung Zeyathu journal,<sup>194 195</sup> and U Ye Khaung Nyunt, a respected 80-year old lawyer coaxed out of retirement to help oversee the legal department.<sup>196 197</sup> These technical departments have been central to the Ma Ba Tha’s success, and are important examples of the growing efficiency and professionalism of the group. They have been crucial in helping the Ma Ba Tha expand its media outreach, navigate the legal environment with ever-increasing efficiency, and have served as training centers for the broader

network of Ma Ba Tha supporters and volunteers.<sup>198 199</sup> For example, the Ma Ba Tha held a journalism workshop in Mandalay in late September 2015, as reported on social media.<sup>200</sup>

## Activities

The most visible symbol of Ma Ba Tha power has been its massive public conferences. The latest mass event was the Ma Ba Tha-sponsored nation-wide celebration of the Race and Religion Bills in late September and early October 2015, which were so large that gatherings had to be housed in sports stadiums. In fact, the main event on October 2, 2015 had over 30,000 attendees<sup>201</sup> and had to receive special dispensation to use Rangoon's Thuwanna stadium from the President himself, who usually does not allow its use for non-sporting events.<sup>202</sup> Prior to that celebration, the Ma Ba Tha had also held at least two large conferences, in January 2014<sup>203</sup> and in June 2015<sup>204</sup>. Social media posts of these events indicate that these events are invariably well organized to rival most professional and mainstream conferences. Events feature sign-in sheets, lanyards, and name badges for all attendees; table cards and television screens for speakers; and a large amount of Ma Ba Tha paraphernalia for attendees, including t-shirts emblazoned with the Ma Ba Tha logo, as seen on social media;<sup>205 206207</sup> In late 2015, even food aid supplied by the Ma Ba Tha was distributed in sacks stamped with their logo, according to imagery on Facebook.<sup>208</sup>

### Ma Ba Tha Celebration of Passing of Race & Religion Laws (October 2015) <sup>209</sup>



**Image 22:** Panoramic view of attendance at Ma Ba Tha October Conference at Thuwanna Stadium in Yangon, as seen on a social media post



**Image 23:** Daw Paw Shwe, Ma Ba Tha Central Committee member seen with aid stamped with Ma Ba Tha logo from an August 2015 post on social media

Monks under the Ma Ba Tha umbrella appear to operate with a significant degree of autonomy. Monks often conduct initiatives on their own prerogative, but with the implicit support of the Ma Ba Tha, which gives them significant power in their dealings. For example, the Ma Ba Tha's protest movement pressured the government to cancel a very high-profile multi-million dollar real-estate project on military-owned land due to its proximity to the Shwedagon Pagoda.<sup>210</sup> The Architectural Association of Myanmar and the Yangon Heritage Trust had already been waging a campaign to halt the project, but the government's decision to cancel only came after the Ma Ba Tha's involvement. The protest was initially spearheaded by Ashin Parmoukka,<sup>211</sup> but quickly became a major agenda among the broader the Ma Ba Tha community. With such significant mobilizing power that can pressure even Myanmar's most powerful actors, it is worrying when leading Ma Ba Tha monks choose to focus on already vulnerable communities.

In this context, one of the more worrying recent trends has been the interference of Ma Ba Tha monks in local police and judicial cases. Ashin Parmoukkha appears the most egregious, as seen in various pieces of imagery from 2015. For example, in a report by the Burmese Muslim Association, he is seen allegedly reviewing the police case file on a Muslim man accused of stabbing his Buddhist friend.<sup>212</sup> In another, in Sanchaung Township, he is seen on social media allegedly pressuring firmer sentencing against a reportedly mentally ill Muslim imam,<sup>213</sup> while in North Okkalapa Township, he is seen Facebook lobbying for charges against 200 Muslims who had ‘illegally gathered’ alongside members from a virulently anti-Muslim youth activist group.<sup>214</sup> More recently in October 2015, he can be seen seen on social media visiting a local crime scene even before the body had been cleared.<sup>215</sup>

**Ashin Parmoukkha Involved in Local Cases (Images 9<sup>216</sup>, 10<sup>217</sup>, 11<sup>218</sup>, 12<sup>219</sup>)**



**Image 24:** Ashin Parmoukkha visiting police station to review a murder case in Mingalar Taung Nyut Township, Yangon, involving Muslim suspect in March 2015



**Image 25:** Ashin Parmoukkha seen on Facebook visiting police station in Sanchaung Township with activists from Myanmar National Network



**Image 26:** Ashin Parmoukkha seen on Facebook meeting police in Insein Village for an apartment dispute between a Buddhist and Muslim. The post claims the Buddhist was wrongly arrested



**Image 27:** Ashin Parmoukkha seen on Facebook visiting crime scene in South Dagon where trishaw driver was allegedly murdered by a Muslim. Post states time of incident as Oct 24, 2015

The pressure monks such as Parmoukkha can bring is considerable. In November 2015, five men associated with a publishing house that released a calendar claiming Rohingya to be an ethnic group of Myanmar were arrested, charged, and fined \$800 for publishing material that threatened law and order.<sup>220</sup> However, after the intervention of Ashin Parmoukkha and other Ma Ba Tha monks who argued that the fine was inadequate and that the issue was spreading through social media channels, the police re-arrested and incarcerated the men.<sup>221</sup> The local police chief admitted to local media that he had “received an order from my superiors to arrest these men under a different charge” and added that, “this is a case related to protecting the race and religion.”<sup>222</sup> The Ma Ba Tha has also used this

power to influence judicial cases at a higher level, including attacking interfaith activists. For example, Zaw Zaw Latt, an inter faith activist, was arrested in 2015 for a photograph of himself with a firearm in Kachin, two years prior to the arrest.<sup>223</sup> He was charged for being in association with 'unlawful groups;' Latt's family claims that Ma Ba Tha members showed up at his court hearings.<sup>224</sup> In addition, he was targeted by at least one Ma Ba Tha magazine.<sup>225</sup>

Many prominent monks with large follower bases regularly travel across the country to attend sermons, rallies, and events. For example, Wirathu appears to maintain a grueling travel schedule. According to the data collected by the Burmese Muslim Association, he made a total of 24 public appearances across the country in just one month in March 2015, including in Mandalay, Yangon, Kachin, Mon, Karen, and Rakhine states.<sup>226</sup> During these visits, he is alleged to have cultivated relationships with various hardline political parties and armed groups around the country. According to available imagery from Rakhine State, Wirathu met with Aye Maung, the leader of a major Rakhine nationalist party, and Maung Maung Ohn, the then-Chief Minister.<sup>227</sup> In Karen State, he met with leaders from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, an anti-Muslim breakaway group from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), as seen in the left-hand image below.<sup>228</sup>

Members of the Ma Ba Tha also appear to maintain friendly relations with the Tatamadaw, or the Burmese Armed Forces. This was particularly evident during the flood relief efforts in August 2015, when Ma Ba Tha monks and soldiers were seen coordinating and distributing aid together. On the right-hand image below, Ashin Thaddhamma is pictured on a social media post meeting with soldiers from the garrison in Mawchi in Shan state in September 2015 as part of flood relief efforts. The post accompanying the imagery stated that, "The military and monks are always the first to help whenever the people face problems."<sup>229</sup>



**Image 28:** Wirathu seen visiting leaders of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. Image timestamp says March 6, 2015



**Image 29:** Ashin Thaddhamma seen visiting soldiers in Mawchi Township in Shan State in 2015 as part of flood relief efforts, as seen on social media posts

## Channels

At the heart of the Ma Ba Tha's power is its highly effective communications apparatus, which is one of the most powerful mobilizing forces in the country today. In 2014, the first petition by the Ma Ba Tha in support of the Race and Religion bills, which was sent to President Thein Sein, was reported to have 1.3 million signatures.<sup>230</sup> By February 2014, the Ma Ba Tha claimed an additional 3 million signatures in support of the laws,<sup>231</sup> or nearly 8 percent of the country's population. To engage and maintain this large base of support, the Ma Ba Tha uses a variety of dissemination channels, both online and offline. Among these are a range of publications, including a magazine that is likely to have one of the largest circulations of any such publication in the country; a cable TV deal to broadcast sermons throughout

the country on Myanmar's largest television provider, SkyNet;<sup>232</sup> and a vast array of social media accounts, both directly and indirectly connected to the organization and to individual monks on the Central Committee.

A major reason for the Ma Ba Tha's success has been its willingness to shape its outreach to best engage the masses. For example, Chairman Ashin Tiloka is well known for his teaching style that simplifies traditional Buddhist teaching methods; he distils complex philosophies into easy to understand lessons, and uses tables, charts, and common language instead of complicated scripture.<sup>233</sup> He is also known for his humility and willingness to communicate with junior monks and laypeople on equal terms.<sup>234</sup> This is often in stark contrast to the reputation of senior monks on the State Sangha, who are seen as having been corrupted by the trappings of wealth and privilege.<sup>235</sup> Today, many Ma Ba Tha monks engage followers with the same pragmatism, employing a range of innovative sermonizing tactics. For example, one video shows a 969 monk standing on a table in front of a crowd, singing and clapping with the audience to a catchy song in a manner more reminiscent of a concert than a sermon. The song, which was the 969's unofficial anthem and often accompanies Ma Ba Tha videos, is titled, 'We will Fence the Country with Our Bone.' One verse mentions "infidels" (i.e. Muslims) who, "drink our water... break our rules... suck our wealth... insult us the host... destroy our youth...Alas, they are one ungrateful creature."<sup>236</sup>

### Newspapers and Magazines

The Ma Ba Tha publishes a wide range of literature that is both low cost and widely circulated. These include Aung Zeyathu, a weekly newspaper that is available at most tea shops for 1,000 kyat (US\$ 0.78);<sup>237</sup> Atumashi,<sup>238</sup> a magazine for Upper Burma<sup>239</sup>; and a bi-monthly magazine, Tharki-thwe or "Royal Blood," that is reported to have a circulation of around 50,000<sup>240</sup>. This number may appear low compared to international standards, but is much higher than the circulation of even The Irawaddy, the highly respected and largest Burmese independent media organization, at 30,000 readers.<sup>241</sup> In addition, the Ma Ba Tha publishes a periodical journal called Myittatagun, which sells for 500 kyat (US\$0.39). Given the print quality, all of these publications are remarkably inexpensive, even by local standards. The hardcopy Myittatagun is a glossy print and bounded publication, and self-reports on the inside cover to have an extensive production staff, including consultants, legal advisors, graphics designers, editors, and a newsroom with reporters in at least three states.<sup>242</sup> Many of these magazines appear to have come a long way in professionalism; for example, the first copy of Tharki-thwe from July 2013 is an amateurish black and white production, but the 2015 publication is a professionally designed color edition, as seen in authors' copies. Finally, Ma Ba Tha monks also publish a wide range of books and other literature, many of which are available in major bookstores throughout Myanmar, as seen by authors' field visit in September 2015.



**Image 30:** Author Copies of Ma Ba Tha magazines (from left to right), Tharki-thwe, Myittatagun, and Aung Zeyathu

The Central Committee appears to run a significant, but frugal, operation to maintain these publications. Reuters imagery from September 2015 shows bulk copies of magazines, including Aung Zeyathu and Tharki-thwe, being packed for distribution at the Ma Ba Tha head office in Chairman Ashin Tiloka's Insein monastery.<sup>243</sup> What is described in captions as a "warehouse" appears to be little more than a

room located within their headquarters. The publications are believed to be shipped to local chapters who distribute them through their own networks, but the magazines themselves are printed in Yangon; Myittatagun is published at Myin Chan Press in Kyauktada Township.<sup>244</sup> It is likely that the revenue from sales helps offset the costs of publication, but it is believed that donors may defray at least some of the cost. For example, one post from July 5, 2015 on a pro-Ma Ba Tha Facebook page, noted that Tharki-thwe publications had been donated by an affiliated monk-teacher community association, and were available at no cost in all Mawlamyine monasteries.<sup>245</sup>

### TV and Radio

In addition to its publications, the Ma Ba Tha has aggressively pushed to expand into radio and TV to broaden its reach. During its June 2015 conference, a Thai delegation pledged funding and the donation of equipment worth at least \$35,800<sup>246 247</sup> to fund the construction of two radio stations. Pornchai Pinyapong, the owner of a Thai private hospital<sup>248</sup> and president of the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth, was reported to have brokered the deal.<sup>249</sup> The deal was blocked by the government, which cited a current law that requires a partnership with the state-linked TV broadcaster.<sup>250</sup> The ruling has stalled the project, but the Ma Ba Tha has vowed to mobilize support behind the upcoming Broadcast Bill to reform the law. Meanwhile, Pinyapong has also continued his patronage in Myanmar,<sup>251</sup> despite some condemnation in Thailand, including a strong Bangkok Post editorial criticizing his activities.<sup>252</sup>

Despite setbacks on its radio stations, the Ma Ba Tha has experienced significant success on the TV front. In September 2015, it signed a licensing deal with Skynet, the country's largest cable news provider to broadcast its sermons.<sup>253</sup> Skynet is owned by U Kyaw Win, the owner of Shwe Than Lwin, an entity that was formerly sanctioned by the European Union.<sup>254</sup> According to imagery from 2015, SkyNet camera crews have been widely seen at Ma Ba Tha events and Ma Ba Tha monks appear to have received significant airtime.<sup>255 256 257 258</sup> In the few months since the formal deal, social media posts show that even smaller Ma Ba Tha aligned fringe activist groups appear to be gaining national airtime.<sup>259</sup>

### Social Media

Many Ma Ba Tha monks are tech-savvy. Many junior monks maintain large and active online presences, including social media accounts, blogs, and other websites. Even 77-year old Ashin Tiloka is known to text, and is seen clutching his smartphone in at least one image on a social media post.<sup>260</sup> The most popular is Wirathu, with a primary Facebook account that boasts 117,000 followers as of November 2015, but another representative example is Ashin Sopaka, who operates at least four Facebook accounts, as seen below. Many of these accounts release nearly identical content, and are high-volume feeds that post a large amount of information and imagery multiple times a day.

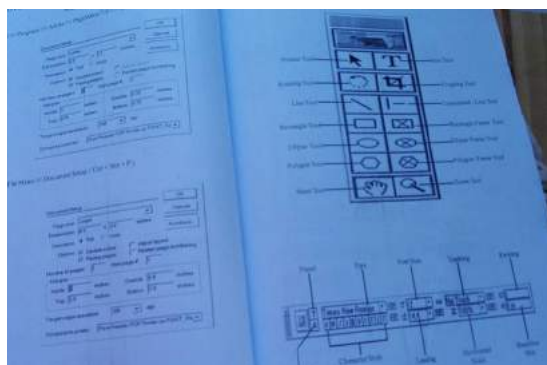
### Ashin Sopaka Social Media Accounts (November 2015)



The content on these accounts is typical of the younger generation of networked monks, who post a high volume of content with detailed coverage of their sermons, events, travels, and personal thoughts on major news items. While Wirathu and Ashin Sopaka are both believed to personally manage and post on their accounts, they are also assisted by ‘media teams,’ often comprised of laypeople and junior monks armed with smartphones, cameras, and computers, as seen on various social media posts.<sup>261 262 263</sup> In fact, computer literacy and training has become an important priority for many monks. Ashin Sopaka recently held a free two-month computer literacy training event for laypeople at his monastery. Available imagery from a social media account apparently controlled by Ashin Sopaka, shows a well-organized operation with textbooks produced by the monastery and instructors in well-stocked classrooms.<sup>264</sup>



**Image 31:** Photo from free two-month free I.T. training course offered for laypeople at Ashin Sopaka’s monastery. The social media post was from November 14, 2015



**Image 32:** Page from computer literacy curriculum at Sopaka’s monastery detailing use of Microsoft Word as seen on a Facebook account apparently controlled by Ashin Sopaka

### Funding

Myanmar is a deeply religious society, and all segments of society liberally donate to monks and monasteries. In 2014, Myanmar ranked first in the “Global Giving Index,” a ranking of charitable behavior among countries around the world,<sup>265</sup> despite being one of the poorest and least developed countries in Asia.<sup>266</sup> Much of this charitable giving is directed towards the monkhood in the forms of cash, gifts deemed useful to monks or their monasteries, and even labor through donated volunteer time. An analysis of available Ma Ba Tha donation receipts shows donations ranging from small

individual contributions of a few hundred kyats to upwards of US\$10,000 (12.7 million kyat). Donations are unregulated and subject to virtually no accountability.

The Ma Ba Tha appears to have low operating costs. Many significant expenditures are donated, such as much of the technical expertise that has allowed the Ma Ba Tha to reach its current level of efficiency. Nearly all of the Ma Ba Tha's team of lawyers, accountants, and media experts are reported to provide their services for free. An illustrative case is the lead lawyer U Ye Khaung Nyunt and his daughter who claim they came out of retirement at the urging of senior Ma Ba Tha monks.<sup>267</sup> In an interview, Nyunt claims to be helping purely for "the merit" (i.e. the concept of good deeds that accumulate into the next life in the path towards spiritual enlightenment).<sup>268</sup> Interviews with local journalists suggested the same regarding other Ma Ba Tha advisors who worked full-time jobs and assisted the Ma Ba Tha afterhours.<sup>269</sup> Other significant donations are similarly intangible. For example, the Ma Ba Tha's grand October 2015 celebration rally at Thuwanna Stadium was a venue secured by a special Presidential exemption.<sup>270</sup> <sup>271</sup> For other major events, such as the Race and Religion Law celebration in Patheingyi, even the 20,000 required chairs were donated, in that case by the Irrawaddy General Administration Department.<sup>272</sup>

According to author observations, donations appear to be primarily made in the form of cash, for which some monasteries issue receipts. <sup>273</sup> <sup>274</sup> <sup>275</sup> <sup>276</sup> <sup>277</sup> However, an increasing share of donations also appear to route through the formal banking system, with some monks even posting their bank account details online to facilitate donations.<sup>278</sup> The majority of available donations to the Ma Ba Tha, though, appear to be relatively small and from laypeople of various socio-economic statuses, as seen on donation receipts and bank transfer slips. Some typical examples include:



Reported Donation Amount: 120,000 kyat (US\$93)<sup>279</sup>  
Donor: Family Business in Theingyi Market (largest in Yangon)  
Reason: In Support of Flood Relief

Reported Donation Amount: 1,500,000 kyat (US\$1,163)<sup>280</sup>  
Donor: Yee Mon Pickled Tea Family  
Reason: General Support

The Ma Ba Tha does not advertise its big-money donors, and some no doubt prefer anonymity. However, in some cases, donors have chosen to publicize their contributions. One such donation that received significant press was alleged to have consisted of 700 million kyat, or US\$ 550,000, donated to the Ma Ba Tha by a Buddhist group backed by a gold mining firm, Myanmar National Prosperity Public Company (MNPPC).<sup>281</sup> However, according to contacts who reached out to Ma Ba Tha after the news release, the Ma Ba Tha claimed that the figure had been misreported and was closer to US\$ 55,000.<sup>282</sup> The latter figure appears more realistic. In an interview with BBC Burmese around the time of the donation, MNPPC Chairman Soe Tun Shein stated that he had donated 1 viss (about 3.6 pounds) of gold.<sup>283</sup> At market rates, it would be worth approximately US\$60,000 (76 million kyat).<sup>284</sup> <sup>285</sup> This may not be Shein's only donation; Wirathu claimed in September 2015 that he had previously made another donation of "1 billion kyat" (US\$770,000) to flood relief efforts, although there is no corroborating evidence.<sup>286</sup> It is worth noting that the MNPPC is reportedly currently in dispute with the government concerning its gold concessions, resulting from the company owing money to the Ministry of Mines<sup>287</sup> and having incurred local opposition to their operations.<sup>288</sup>



Accurate details on the Ma Ba Tha’s fundraising efforts are difficult to determine. For example, one image from August 2015 circulated on pro-Ma Ba Tha social media accounts shows Central Committee members Ashin Thadhamma and Ashin Wimala Buddhi sitting alongside a significant amount of cash as seen in the image on the right.<sup>289</sup> No other details on time, location, or donor are available, but the amount appears to be between US\$5,000-10,000. Additionally, it is widely believed that some monks can raise very significant sums through their own channels. For example, a flood relief committee created by Sitagu Sayadaw raised 325 million kyats (\$252,000) in just four days, according to local media.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, funding can come from a wide range of sources. One instance involves the flood relief coordination committee managed by Ashin Sopaka on behalf of the Central Committee.<sup>291</sup> According to what appears to be a page from the committee’s accounting book posted on a social media account, donations came from Ma Ba Tha Central, various local chapters, Mon State USDP party, and local companies, including a bookstore and two bus companies.<sup>292</sup>



**Image 33:** Ashin Wimala Buddhi and Ashin Thadhamma seen with donation raised by the Ma Ba Tha Mon State chapter, as seen on social media

While the allegation is that the Ma Ba Tha receives significant funding from the military, political, and business elites of Myanmar, there is very little information available in the open-source to validate this claim. However, available imagery indicates that several local political elites were courting the Ma Ba Tha’s support in the run-up to the elections. A notable donor was USDP-candidate Lin Zaw Tun, pictured below, who donated \$31,000 to the Ma Ba Tha in August 2015.<sup>293</sup>

Some political and military donations that can be verified with imagery are included below:



**Image 34**  
 Reported Donation Amount: 10,000,000 kyat (US\$7,800)<sup>294</sup>  
 Date: July 11, 2015  
 Donor: Colonel (Tatamadaw)  
 Recipient: Sayadaw Tiloka Bhivunsa



**Image 35**  
 Reported Donation Amount: 50,000,000 kyat (US\$ 38,900)<sup>295</sup>  
 Date: Unknown  
 Donor: “Yaung Ni Oo” aka Maung Maung Aung (former military officer and active Facebook user; currently running military veterans charity)



**Image 36**  
 Reported Donation Amount: 40,000,000 kyat (US\$ 31,100)<sup>296 297</sup>  
 Date: August 30, 2015 (image metadata)  
 Donor: Lin Zaw Tun (former Colonel, and close to Presidential Office; reportedly running in election as USDP candidate)  
 Recipient: Ashin Wirathu

## Enablers

The Ma Ba Tha's astronomic rise has not occurred on its own; a series of political and civil society groups have enabled its growth. In particular, the freedom with which the Ma Ba Tha's Central Committee and regional chapters have been allowed to operate in comparison to other non-governmental groups has suggested at least some level of collusion with the USDP-led government.<sup>298</sup> Meanwhile, the Ma Ba Tha's apparent might has cowed opposition and pro-human rights political groups and activists, including for a while, seemingly even the NLD, as will be discussed. The Ma Ba Tha's political involvement appears to have grown through 2015, especially after the June 2015 Second Annual Convention, when the Central Committee issued a directive that urged its chapters to 'guide the people in electing a "reliable MP" for the Ma Ba Tha's cause,' as one of its four key points, according to a copy of the directive posted on social media.<sup>299</sup> Since then, as discussed below, the Ma Ba Tha has fairly overtly allied and associated itself with a series of small, ultra-nationalist political parties and activist groups, going as far as co-hosting events and actively disseminating these groups' content on Ma Ba Tha channels, and vice versa.<sup>300 301 302 303</sup>

The November 2015 landslide NLD electoral victory with 77 percent<sup>304</sup> of the votes was a crushing defeat for the Ma Ba Tha allied candidates, nearly all of whom lost. These results have clearly come as a surprise to the Ma Ba Tha, which appeared to have been expecting much stronger results by the political parties it had implicitly endorsed.<sup>305 306</sup> The extent of this defeat has raised questions on the true depth of Ma Ba Tha support; additionally, as Walton states, the Ma Ba Tha has been clearly chastened after the elections, but it remains to be seen if it will suffer any consequential effects.<sup>307</sup> A large degree of the Ma Ba Tha's appeal derives from the simple fact that its core narratives on 'race and religion' resonate broadly across mainstream society, even among NLD supporters.<sup>308</sup> Prominent individuals across politics, the government, civil society, and even pro-democracy civil rights leader have agreed with and repeated various anti-Muslim narratives, particularly those involving the denial of basic rights for the Rohingya, as seen below. The following are some examples:

- USDP Religious Affairs Minister Sann Sint (2013): "Wirathu's sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions. It is impossible he is inciting religious violence."<sup>309</sup>
- USDP Information Minister Ye Htut (2015): "We will not register it, if a household wants to identify themselves as Rohingya."<sup>310</sup>
- Rakhine State Government Spokesman Win Myaing (2013): "How can it be ethnic cleansing? They are not an ethnic group."<sup>311</sup>
- Rakhine Politician & Chairman of Arakan National Party Aye Maung (2013): "We don't have Rohingya's in our country. We can only say that they are Bangladeshi or foreign Bengalis."<sup>312</sup>
- 88 Generation Peace and Open Society Group Leader and prominent pro-democracy activist Ko Ko Gyi: "I will resign from this commission if it uses the word 'human rights' in association with these Bengali."<sup>313</sup>
- Member of Presidential Inquiry Commission on the Rakhine Sectarian Violence Commission, Dr. Yin Yin New: "These un-educated Bengali women procreate like mad [...] Because of this population explosion, now 90-plus percent of Buthidaung and Maungdaw is made up of Bengali and only about 5-6 percent are Rakhine. So think for yourself who is a majority here and who is a minority. That is why, we proposed population control – albeit on a voluntary basis"<sup>314</sup>

Such support makes it difficult for activists to actively confront the Ma Ba Tha or the Race and Religion Laws. As such, even though the NLD currently appears to have a significant mandate, recent history suggests that it is unlikely that they will spend this political capital on confronting the Ma Ba Tha. On the contrary, in recent months, the NLD has willingly conceded to the Ma Ba Tha on various occasions, most famously in failing to field a single Muslim among the 1,151 candidates it fielded for office, with the NLD officials admitting that it was to avoid the ire of the Ma Ba Tha.<sup>315</sup>

### The USDP-led Government

As will be discussed below, judging from Ma Ba Tha-related media in the final run-up to the election, it appeared that the USDP was cruising towards a strong showing, buoyed by its role in supporting the Ma Ba Tha's 'race and religion' initiatives. Through 2015, the USDP and Ma Ba Tha appeared to have closely aligned interests, with the Ma Ba Tha pushing forward its ideological agenda and the USDP garnering political support from the powerful monkhood. As such, ratification of the Race and Religion Laws earned President Thein Shein and the USDP significant support from prominent Ma Ba Tha monks. Many of these monks were vocal in 2015 in their preference for the USDP as stewards of 'race and religion' in Myanmar, especially as compared to the NLD. Prominent Ma Ba Tha monks were clearly taken by surprise by the extent of the USDP's defeat.<sup>316</sup> Some have sought to rationalize it in various ways, alluding to the idea that the election was a referendum on the USDP's past failings, and not on race and religion issues.<sup>317</sup> <sup>318</sup>As one Ma Ba Tha official recently put it, "It is difficult to save someone who is on the verge of death," alluding to the USDP.<sup>319</sup>

The level of USDP support for the Ma Ba Tha has been a matter of significant debate inside Myanmar. Laws delineating religion and politics are severe. Article 12 (A4) of the Political Parties Registration Law, for example, is quite specific in mandating that any political party using religion for political means shall not have the right to exist.<sup>320</sup> As such, any overt high level USDP and military support has been muted; nonetheless, there is a body of evidence that shows several rank and file USDP politicians and leaders making donations and articulating public support for the Ma Ba Tha.<sup>321</sup> It is difficult to determine whether this rises to the level of institutional support, but it is more certain that government officials at the highest levels have favored policies that are in line with Ma Ba Tha narratives and disadvantage the rights of Muslims and other minorities. The government has allowed Ma Ba Tha mass rallies and activities to occur without any interference, in stark contrast to the lack of freedom afforded to other pro-democracy and human rights activists.<sup>322</sup> Additionally, several significant USDP politicians are online consumers and disseminators of Ma Ba Tha content. Win Wunna, a Deputy Director with the Ministry of Immigration, often re-posts Ma Ba Tha statements and content on what appears to be his personal Facebook page,<sup>323</sup> including the Ma Ba Tha's criticism of the draft National Education Bill that claims, "Legal loopholes that could allow Islamic schools."<sup>324</sup>

The Ma Ba Tha has publicly stated that it sees the USDP's non-interference as a sign of tacit support. As early as 2013, Ashin Wimala addressed the issue by telling a journalist that, "By letting us give speeches to protect our religion and race, I assume they [the government] are supporting us."<sup>325</sup> A year later, at a ceremony to launch the Mandalay chapter of the Ma Ba Tha in January 2014, Chairman Ashin Tiloka voiced precisely the same sentiment. A social media post quotes Ashin Tiloka saying, "Fellow monks, don't fear of what you are doing. The government hasn't objected to what we have been doing, and the leaders have allowed us as to do what we are doing. Keep striving for the Ma-Ba-Tha cause."<sup>326</sup> However, as the Ma Ba Tha has grown more powerful, monks have grown more aggressive. Ashin Wimala politically threatened politicians who were thinking of voting against the Race and Religion Bills at the June 2015 Ma Ba Tha convention, stating, "I want to know which representative turn down the law... I will make it so that they get no votes in 2015."<sup>327</sup> This was echoed by Ashin Wimala, a Central

Committee leader who said, “We need to note their names, those who did not support our proposal. I told our followers not to give votes to those lawmakers in the upcoming election.”<sup>328</sup>

The ratification of the Race and Religion Bills between May and August 2015 significantly improved the relationship between the USDP and the Ma Ba Tha. During the keynote speech at the grand celebration rally in Yangon in October 2015, Chairman Ashin Tiloka publicly voiced gratitude for the personal efforts of President Thein Shein,<sup>329</sup> while others had stated their gratitude several months earlier. In June 2015, after the ratification of one of the four bills, Ashin Vimala addressed a public event of over 1,000 monks saying, “We all should forget the bad that [the USDP] have done in the past. They are doing good things for us now. We should support them now.”<sup>330</sup> This surge in support behind the USDP and Thein Shein was particularly evident online. After Thein Shein was summoned by the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York in October 2015 “to respond to allegations of human rights violations committed against the stateless Rohingya Muslim minority,”<sup>331</sup> there was an outpour of support on social media. A significant proportion of monitored and observed profiles, including those of Ma Ba Tha monks, changed their profiles to sport a photograph of President Thein Sein on a black backdrop with the slogan “I’ll be with you Mr. President.”<sup>332 333 334</sup>

While USDP-Ma Ba Tha relations have evolved over the past year, there have been persistent allegations that the nexus is far deeper.<sup>335 336</sup> Some imply that the government is responsible for having created and nurtured the Ma Ba Tha.<sup>337</sup> Many of these allegations center on the now deceased former key regime crony and Minister of Industry, Aung Thaung<sup>338 339</sup> who is alleged to have closely supported the 969 and Ma Ba Tha.<sup>340 341</sup> There is little available evidence for these specific allegations. However, in one video posted on YouTube, Wirathu is seen meeting with Aung Thaung. In the video, Wirathu appears deferential to Aung Thaung and appears to be lobbying for the release of his comrades still imprisoned by the regime.<sup>342</sup> An investigative documentary aired by Al Jazeera dived further into such allegations,<sup>343</sup> quoting several interviewees who claimed first-hand knowledge of Wirathu’s close relationships with the security services. It included at least two sources claiming that during the 2012 visit, Aung Thaung also met with Wirathu privately, after which his attitudes towards Muslims drastically changed.<sup>344</sup> Wirathu denied having a close relationship with Aung Thaung or his followers.<sup>345 346</sup> That being said, the Aung Zeyathu issue released after Aung Thaung’s death on July 23, 2015 featured the banner headline “We are All Aung Thaung.”<sup>347</sup>



Image 37: Aung Zeyathu with the “We Are All Aung Thaung” caption

### The Opposition NLD

As the Ma Ba Tha grew increasingly positive towards the USDP through 2015, its messaging toward the NLD grew increasingly hostile. Various Ma Ba Tha monks and supporters sought to portray the NLD as unsympathetic to issues of ‘race and religion’ and “pro-Muslim,” with NLD members finding themselves directly and indirectly targeted in Ma Ba Tha affiliated campaigns.<sup>348 349 350</sup> The Ma Ba Tha allegedly constituted a significant worry to NLD strategic and electoral planners in the run-up to the elections.<sup>351</sup> A senior member of the NLD admitted in an Irrawaddy article from August 2015 that the party decision not to field a single Muslim candidate in the elections was a result of fear that the Ma Ba Tha would use it to label them a ‘Muslim party.’<sup>352</sup> In hindsight, it appears to the researchers that the Ma Ba Tha significantly overreached in its deliberate provocations of the NLD, which is now likely to lead the

country. However, the NLD's cautious attitude towards the Ma Ba Tha appears to indicate its understanding of the resonance of the Ma Ba Tha's populist anti-Muslim message, and its recognition of the Ma Ba Tha as a significant political player.

The Ma Ba Tha has been relatively careful to not directly target the NLD, although it has regularly strayed very close to the line. Many of the Ma Ba Tha's attacks have sought to paint the NLD as pro-Muslim, and have also targeted Aung San Suu Kyi herself. For example, a statement by the Central Committee under Ashin Tilo's name in September 2015 urged people "not to vote dollar-paid politicians and those people who have been given several awards and titles by non-Buddhist foreign countries to destroy our country and religion" in a fairly obvious reference to Aung San Suu Kyi, as seen on a social media post.<sup>353</sup> Similarly, Wirathu explained in a local interview why he was calling the NLD's mascot of *Khuddaung* ["Fighting Peacock"] a *Muddaung* ["Muslim Peacock"], claiming that, "When the Rakhine incident broke out, (I found that) Daw Aung Saun Suu Kyi was not reliable [...] And also in many towns, the persons in charge in NLD offices are Muslims."<sup>354</sup>

Online, where there is a stronger degree of plausible deniability, Ma Ba Tha's supporters were much more outright in their hostility towards the NLD. One of the most common 'viral' images that regularly circulates in pro-Ma Ba Tha forums is an edited picture of Aung San Suu Kyi in a hijab that even Aung San Suu Kyi acknowledged as a political liability.<sup>355</sup> She complained that, "They took a photograph, cut out the monks and put the photograph on the Internet and said I was paying obeisance to the Muslims. And what was worse was, when I went to the Mon state recently, they distributed this photograph to make the Monks think that I was pro-Muslim or anti-Buddhist."<sup>356</sup> Additionally, various social media posters are often openly derogatory of Aung San Suu Kyi, labeling her a foreigner and Muslim sympathizer,<sup>357</sup> while others disseminate pieces of misinformation that misrepresent or discredit her positions and leadership. A prominent example came in September 2015, when an email allegedly written by Aung San Suu Kyi was "leaked" and circulated on the Internet. The email, which was addressed to a Rohingya rights activist in the U.K., claimed that the NLD would support and focus on the equality and rights of Rohingyas if they won the November elections.<sup>358</sup> The email was widely disseminated through pro-Ma Ba Tha social media channels, even though Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD quickly moved to deny its authenticity.<sup>359</sup>



**Image 38:** An anti-Aung San Suu Kyi graphic with the text, "Hajji Daw Su and her hardcore followers" circulating the Internet

Nonetheless, the NLD showed itself through much of 2015 to be wary and even outright nervous of the Ma Ba Tha's power. In addition to selecting not a single Muslim<sup>360</sup> among the 1,151 candidates<sup>361</sup> it fielded for elections, the NLD has, on various occasions, chosen to pander to, rather than confront, the Ma Ba Tha. One of the most prominent examples came in September 2015 after the Ma Ba Tha released a statement condemning U Tin Oo, the NLD patriarch, who had accused the Ma Ba Tha of obstructing the NLD's election campaigns.<sup>362</sup> The aftermath was instructive. Instead of pushing back, Oo, an 88-year old well-respected former political prisoner, visited Sitagu Sayadaw and Wirathu to smooth over the rift.<sup>363</sup> Available footage on Youtube of the visit to Wirathu's monastery at Masoyein in early October shows an awkward encounter with Oo being condescendingly lectured by Wirathu without speaking back.<sup>364</sup>

The NLD's landslide victory has meant a catastrophic defeat for Ma Ba Tha Central Committee preferred candidates across the political spectrum. However, it remains to be seen if the election will result in any material change in the government's policy towards the Ma Ba Tha, and towards 'race and

religion' issues. A Central Committee statement posted on social media on November 4<sup>th</sup> stated that the Ma Ba Tha maintained its impartiality, but welcomed "the transition to a democratic country with nationalist characteristics." It further warned that, "Any individual or organization who is disrupting the passage of the Myoe-Saute laws and Ma Ba Tha works is in fact disrupting the race and religion of our motherland Myanmar."<sup>365</sup> After electoral results were released, the Ma Ba Tha congratulated the NLD, but urged them to "march forward in the path to democracy by respecting the existing law,"<sup>366</sup> as seen on a copy of the statement posted on social media.

Similarly, individual monks have also taken a cautious but pragmatic outlook. Wirathu in October had noted that, "If the NLD forms the government and if they try to amend the [race and religion] laws, they will have to deal with Ma Ba Tha."<sup>367</sup> After results were released, Wirathu acknowledged the "surprising" NLD victory and his concerns that the NLD's platform on "human rights" and "minorities" would be to the detriment of the 'race and religion.'<sup>368</sup> However, he also suggested that there would be no confrontation as long as the NLD did not act in a way countering Ma Ba Tha's philosophy, such as rescinding the Race and Religion Laws or opposing 'nationalist issues.'<sup>369 370 371</sup> Other monks such as Ashin Sopaka have taken much the same line, noting that, "We will welcome and support any party that takes office. But we will be watching what the next government does for race and religion [...] And we will not accept any insults to race and religion. That is our policy."<sup>372</sup> Furthermore, in the November 24 edition of Tharki-thwe that was posted on social media, Ashin Sopaka points out that the Ma Ba Tha has never sided with any political parties or politicians, and will continue to strive for a nationalist cause.<sup>373</sup> He warns that "any official who tries to obstruct Ma Ba Tha cause will need to change their behavior...[he'd] like to urge new MPs to be loyal to the nation, race, and religion" and that "those who come into power try to offend our race and religion and 'race and religion protection laws,' that individual won't last long," according to information posted on his Facebook.<sup>374</sup>

### Small and Independent Politicians

During the run-up to the election, a wide range of smaller political parties and politicians gravitated toward the Ma Ba Tha. Many strongly backed the Race and Religion Laws, including the National Development Party (NDP), run by former Presidential political advisor Nay Zin Latt,<sup>375 376</sup> who campaigned on 'race and religion issues,' and the National Democratic Force (NDF), a splinter NLD faction, which helped the Ma Ba Tha draft the Race and Religion Laws.<sup>377</sup> All of these parties suffered crushing defeats with the NLD's electoral sweep. The NDP fielded 354 candidate admissions, making it the fourth largest party in the country,<sup>378</sup> but failed to win a single seat.<sup>379 380</sup> The rest fared little better; the only party that did remotely well was the Arakan National Party, which fielded 78 candidates and won 45 seats.<sup>381 382</sup> The Arakan National Party, formed in 2013 after a merger between Arakan League for Democracy and Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, is comprised of Rakhine Buddhists and is known for its hardline position on various Muslim related issues.<sup>383 384</sup>

Many of these parties supported the Ma Ba Tha to different degrees. Some, such as the National Democratic Force that held eight seats across both houses of parliament and lost them all, were fairly overt in their support. Despite NDF Chairman Khin Maung Shwe's statement in September 2015 that it is important for "political parties not to include religious issues in their campaign,"<sup>385</sup> the party helped introduce the draft interfaith marriage bills into parliament.<sup>386 387</sup> Wirathu spoke at the party's annual conference on May 16, 2015,<sup>388</sup> and in a September interview further stated that, "[the Ma Ba Tha] are close with small political parties such as the National Democratic Force... We see that these parties revere and respect protecting our nationality and religion."<sup>389</sup> This relationship has existed for some

time. In available time-stamped images, senior NDF leaders were pictured at Wirathu's monastery at Masoeyein as far back as January 10, 2014.<sup>390</sup>

Other politicians have been seen at Ma Ba Tha events; at times, these attendances have been unpublicized. In one Facebook image from October 2015,<sup>391</sup> Central Committee members, including individuals who appeared to be the Chief Editor of Tharki-thwe and a Ma Ba Tha lawyer, were seen seated with a woman who appeared to be Daw Khin Wine Kyi, a senior politician with the NDF,<sup>392</sup> who, according to social media, had received one of the Ma Ba Tha's ceremonial badges at the celebration rallies.<sup>393</sup> In other reporting from October, Wirathu and Ashin Parmoukkha are known to have attended the opening ceremony of a new nationalist party, the National Prosperity Party, which contested three seats and promised to "strictly protect the race and religion protection laws."<sup>394</sup> In addition to these two examples, it is likely that many others courted the Ma Ba Tha's support, but in a more covert manner. In one such example, a series of images were posted online of a Ma Ba Tha event from July 2015. Pictured among the attendees<sup>395</sup> appears to be Daw Nyo Nyo Thin, a prominent independent politician and member of the Yangon Regional Parliament, although there is no other open source reporting on her attendance. Alongside her in the photograph are Ashin Parmoukkha and at least one member of the Myanmar National Network, a fringe youth activist allied with the Ma Ba Tha.<sup>396</sup>



**Image 39:** A social media image of a woman appearing to be NDF politician Khin Yi Wine seen with Ma Ba Tha editor and lawyer at the gold pin award ceremony in North Okkalapa Township in October 2015



**Image 40:** A social media image of a woman appearing to be Daw Nyo Nyo Thin (bottom, second from left) seen with Ashin Parmoukkha, members of the MNN and a Ma Ba Tha lawyer at the Sixth Conference on People With Grievances Due to [Corrupted] Government Offices, at Parmoukkha's Magway Priyatti Monastery in July 2015

### Youth Activist Groups

A variety of youth activist groups actively support the Ma Ba Tha, but perhaps the most prominent among them is the Myanmar National Network (MNN). A small fringe group that sought to contest a seat for the first time in the 2015 elections, the MNN is a highly visible component of the Ma Ba Tha's propaganda apparatus, as will be discussed below. Their activists appear closely involved with the Ma Ba Tha's ground activities and they appear to be very active on social media as major disseminators of Ma Ba Tha content, as well as outright hate speech. For example, they accompany Ma Ba Tha monks pressuring police and judicial cases involving Muslims and tailor their anti-Muslim lectures in rural villages to young children, as discussed later. Recently, association with the Ma Ba Tha has begun to give the MNN a significantly elevated public profile, including interviews on SkyNet, the country's largest cable TV provider.<sup>397</sup>

The MNN General Secretary is Naung Taw Lay, a 30-year old former land and youth rights activist<sup>398</sup> who ran as an independent candidate from North Okkalapa Township for the Lower House,<sup>399</sup> but lost in the November election.<sup>400</sup> Lay's candidacy received significant coverage on the Ma Ba Tha channels. He was profiled and interviewed in the Ma Ba Tha's Myittatagun magazine in August 2015,<sup>401</sup> and updates on the MNN's electoral activities were regularly posted on several Ma Ba Tha monks' Facebook pages.<sup>402 403 404 405</sup> Other senior MNN members include 33-year old Chairman and co-founder, Win Ko Ko Latt,<sup>406 407</sup> He is a prolific social media user and is highly active at Ma Ba Tha events, including rallies. He is regularly pictured alongside senior Central Committee monks, including Wirathu,<sup>408</sup> Ashin Wimala, and Ashin Parmoukkha.<sup>409</sup>

The MNN's anti-Muslim messaging is often more direct than the Ma Ba Tha's official narrative. In Naung Taw Lay's interview with Myittatagun, he described an aggressive legislative agenda focused on "national security" that would eliminate "terrorist training camps" and tighten Myanmar's already draconian citizenship laws, including restricting MP candidacies to only those belonging to "national races."<sup>410</sup> In addition, MNN members regularly attended the Race and Religion advocacy rallies; in one instance from 2015, Latt was seen leading part of a protest against Rohingya 'boat people.'<sup>411 412</sup> Among the images posted on Facebook were ones with signs that had crude and overt anti-Rohingya messages such as, "Go away, disgusted and wicked Bangali from our Myanmar Sea."<sup>413</sup> More recently, several activists were seen on social media maintaining what appeared to be a booth at the Ma Ba Tha's grand celebration rally in Yangon in October; they were also pictured at the event with prominent monks, including Ashin Parmoukkha and Ashin Sopaka.<sup>414</sup>

The MNN regularly hosts anti-Muslim events that target young children. In these MNN-sponsored 'classes,' children are shown evidence of Muslim crimes (often with graphic imagery), and subsequently quizzed on their knowledge.<sup>415 416</sup> In a recent Facebook video of such activities, MNN members are seen teaching a 'Buddhist training course' to young children and having them recite atrocities committed by ISIS in Syria. At one point, a teacher asked, "Who is committing these violent murders?" and the children responded, "Islam!"<sup>417</sup> The photos below, seen on Facebook,<sup>418 419</sup> display what appears to be a fairly typical event. MNN propaganda on printed sheets was laid out on the ground for the entire village to pass by and view. This was accompanied by a speech; in this case, delivered by a monk named Ashin Nayaka who spoke in front of what appears to be a group of 5-10 year olds.<sup>420</sup>



**Image 41:** MNN event at Tat Khone Township with sheets of "informational material" on Muslims laid out for the whole village to view from September 2015, as seen on social media



**Image 42:** Children looking at posters in Tat Khone Township in September 2015, as seen on social media



MNN members work in coordination with senior Ma Ba Tha monks, and have co-hosted events, as discussed below. In one example from September 2015, Ashin Parmoukkha was seen on a social media post speaking at a large MNN-organized gathering under a MNN banner donning 969 logos.<sup>421</sup> In addition, Latt and Myint are frequently seen with Ashin Parmoukkha, including on a visit to a local police station with the latter to pressure the sentencing of an allegedly mentally ill Muslim man, as seen on Facebook.<sup>422</sup> In June 2015, MNN leaders were also seen on Facebook with other senior Ma Ba Tha officials and monks as part of the Save Shwedagon rally,<sup>423</sup> and also appear to have played a role in helping coordinate the Ma Ba Tha's flood relief drive in August. A large amount of imagery, much of it disseminated by the MNN itself on social media, showed its leaders working alongside the Ma Ba Tha Central Committee figures and the military. In one series of images found on Facebook, Latt and other MNN members are shown collecting donations on behalf of the Ma Ba Tha;<sup>424</sup> in another set of Facebook photos, they were shown discussing relief efforts with deputy commander of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Light Infantry Division Colonel Kyaw Kyaw Htun and Daw Paw Shwe of the Ma Ba Tha Central Committee.<sup>425</sup>



426

**Image 43:** Facebook image of MNN members with Daw Paw Shwe of the Central Committee and a Tatamadaw officer to coordinate flood relief, likely in Sagaing Region, in July 2015



427

**Image 44:** Facebook image of Ashin Parmoukka and other Ma Ba Tha monks at MNN event, "Nationalist Talk," at Kyaikdayyone Pagoda in Thanlyin, in October 2015,

### Hate Speech Propagandists

There are several outright anti-Muslim hate speech propagandists in close proximity to the Ma Ba Tha. The best known is a fringe politician, Nay Myo Wai, the Chairman of the Peace and Diversity Party (PDP). The PDP is a small political party that participated in the 2010 elections and fielded 14 candidates in 2015, all of whom lost.<sup>428</sup> Wai was previously a labor rights activist, most famous for leading anti-land grab protests against Khin Shwe's Zaykabar Company<sup>429</sup>. Since then, he has gravitated towards a hardline anti-Muslim message, and on numerous occasions, has threatened and slandered Muslims on his active and popular online channels<sup>430</sup> that have repeatedly been taken down by Facebook. Wai has become a significant amplifier and disseminator of Ma Ba Tha related content online through a Facebook account that appears to be controlled by him. Offline, he has participated and spoken at Ma Ba Tha rallies.<sup>431</sup> Wai is a strong supporter of the 'race and religion' narrative and his supposed account posts pictures of himself with Ma Ba Tha paraphernalia.<sup>432</sup>

On various occasions in the past, Nay Myo Wai has disseminated hate speech and rumors. In December 2014, amidst claims that Bengali Muslims had raped and killed a Buddhist girl, he was among those

who shared rumors and allegations without any attempt to corroborate the material. The graphic photos, which were widely circulated as evidence of the rape, later turned out to have been pictures from Brazil.<sup>433</sup> During a May 2015 speech, Wai was also documented addressing a crowd of about 50 people, including monks. He explicitly called for violence in his crude speech, going as far as to say, “I won’t say much, I will keep this short and direct. Number One. Shoot and kill [the Rohingyas]. Number two. Shoot and kill them. Number three. Shoot and bury them.”<sup>434</sup> The crowd responded with cheers of support.<sup>435</sup> Wai’s proselytizing extends beyond mere words. In May 2015, ahead of the Ma Ba Tha-opposed Union Muslims Nation-Wide Conference, Wai posted comments online threatening to attack the event with his followers. Among other insults, he posted pictures of stacks of bamboo sticks he claimed to have bought for the expressed purpose of equipping his followers to beat the “kalar” attendees and announced that they will “face [the Muslims] directly. [Protesters] will give speech in front of Muslim conference and will feed pork curry.”<sup>436</sup>

In recent months, despite his dubious reputation and well documented hate speech, Nay Myo Wai has been a speaker at Ma Ba Tha organized rallies. However, he did attend an engagement on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, a few days before the election, according to available images and video posted online.<sup>437</sup> <sup>438</sup> In the video, Wai is seen speaking under a Ma Ba Tha banner alongside prominent “nationalist monks,” including Ashin Kissanaw Bartha, an active 969 preacher.<sup>439</sup>



**Image 45:** A Facebook account that appears to be controlled by Nay Myo Wai shared a post about a Buddhist girl allegedly being raped and killed



**Image 46:** Nay Myo Wai attending an event hosted by the Ingapu chapter of the Ma Ba Tha in October 2015, as seen on social media

## CONCLUSION

After a year of dizzying gains, the Ma Ba Tha is entering a far more uncertain 2016. The November electoral outcome has come as a shock. The NLD landslide decimated the USDP, which had strongly allied itself with the Ma Ba Tha, and left no space for third-party candidates that had used religious nationalism as a central plank. The defeat is embarrassing to an organization whose key leaders had openly advocated against the NLD, but it may prove to have little material impact over the long run.

To date, the Ma Ba Tha has proven itself to be an adaptive organization. It learned from the mistakes of the 969 and is continually evolving and professionalizing its messaging, activities, and narrative dissemination. Today, the Ma Ba Tha has built a strong foundation of highly active and motivated monks who oversee a vast network of ground activities and partnerships, as well as a powerful communications and lobbying apparatus, all with proven results. The Ma Ba Tha is likely to continue to retain a significant base of support because its messaging endorses a range of anti-Muslim prejudices that resonate in the broader Burmese society. Much of what is considered 'ultra-nationalist' in the international media is closer to 'center-right' in Myanmar, and core Ma Ba Tha issues such as the denial of rights for the Rohingya, enjoy popular mainstream support. No electoral outcome or new government can easily change these deep-rooted prejudices, but it is possible to better understand their core themes and develop better counter-messaging and early warning strategies.

The Ma Ba Tha has articulated some clear 'red lines' for the incoming NLD government that could lead to confrontation. Chief among them is political opposition to 'race and religion' issues, particularly with any move to rescind or weaken the newly passed Race and Religion Laws. Meanwhile, the NLD is unlikely to forget the often-crude manner in which Ma Ba Tha followers slandered and defamed the party and its leadership in the run-up to elections, but the party has also shown an acute understanding of the Ma Ba Tha's mobilizing power. Judging from recent history, despite its unambiguous political mandate, it is not clear if the NLD is willing to expend the political capital that will be required to confront the Ma Ba Tha and curb its anti-Muslim messaging and activities.

On net assessment, the Ma Ba Tha is likely to remain a powerful force in Myanmar's politics for some time to come. Furthermore, the organization is likely to remain centered around the guiding principles of its key personalities, which currently consist of anti-Muslim monks, such as Ashin Wirathu, Ashin Wimala, Ashin Parmoukkha, and other charismatic junior monks who are currently driving the message and overseeing Central Committee activities.. Several years of tolerance for their activities has made them powerful actors in their own right, but a concerted push by Myanmar's government and senior and more measured members of the Sangha could begin to curb their excesses.

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