



Aela Callan interviews a moderate monk, Sein Nita, abbot of Asia Light monastery situated on the Shan Plateau [Pailin Wedel]

TOO EXPOSED TO HEAL

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The dead were not given the dignity of a burial. Broken and yellowing pieces of skull, hips and spines were scattered and sinking into the muddy ground.

More than four months after violent pogroms rocked the Meikhtila, an army town in central Myanmar, the remains of students and teachers were still openly decaying. Shoots of grass sprouted up and pigs picked across broken, flower-patterned porcelain and rubble. It was as if the earth sought to cover the naked horror of the bones.

SLIDER WILL BE ADDED HERE

Across this country and the world, many are asking why such cruel violence exploded in Myanmar at a time when the country is being liberated from the shackles of military rule. At a moment when people are finally enjoying freedoms they have coveted for six decades.

Sadly, the forces driving this violence are much bigger than one town in Myanmar's central plains. Religious conflict in Myanmar poses the greatest threat to the country's fragile reform process and attitudes that inspired the violence are deeply ingrained in the national psyche.

While walking on blocks of broken cement and burned shreds of clothing in Meikhtila, a man watched us from his motorcycle. I recognised him immediately as one of the country's notorious 'special branch' officers, rarely seen in Myanmar these days. Two years ago, I would have put my head down and fled, but today I walked up to him and struck up a conversation. I asked if he thinks people will be able to return to their homes one day. "Only if they behave," he replied, repeating an often heard, but incomprehensible story about how the arson sprees were carried out by Muslims burning down their own homes.

Over four years covering Myanmar, I have struggled to make sense of a complex web of ethnic, religious and racial identities. Language and customs can be completely different from one part of the country to the next. Even within ethnic groups there exist hundreds of sub-groups that would never have grouped together to make the country known as Myanmar today, were it not for the drawing of a border during British rule.



Myanmar has little else to unify it in terms of national identity. History has been erased or re-written by military dictators. Apart from the Tatmadaw (military) museum in the capital, Naypitaw, the rest of the country's historical artifacts are kept in shameful conditions that offer little to be proud of. The glass palace in Mandalay, home of the former kings was reconstructed by the former dictatorship after being destroyed by British bombs in World War II. It is a damp, empty, pigeon swept place that barely offers visitors any insight into its rich cultural history. The compound surrounding it is still used as military barracks, banners hoisted high on the palace walls that celebrate the Tatmadaw's power and might.

Having travelled to all but one of Myanmar's diverse ethnic states, I have struggled to find any sense of national pride in historical or tourist attractions that are not based around Buddhism. The first thing people in small towns show a visitor is the monastery, or a pagoda.

Nationalism seems to be based around a common notion that the 'other' is Muslim, even if Muslim groups have existed in Myanmar for centuries. It is enshrined in citizenship. Muslims are routinely listed as Bengali, Pakistani or Indian on national identity cards, under the heading 'race/religion'. In other words, you cannot be both Bamar and Muslim in the eyes of the state. This edict has brought on nonsensical categorisations in which brothers and sisters belonging to different faiths are classified as belonging to separate races. The fact that 'race/religion' is a single category in the first place is the outcome of an unyielding ideology that attaches religion to race and considers the two to be the same.



Unclear demographics are another factor. It is widely assumed that Buddhism is the majority religion, but no one knows for sure if Buddhists make up 70 or 90 percent of the country. A census planned for next year threatens to unleash fresh threats of violence if Myanmar turns out to be made up of more Muslims than anyone thought.

These factors are exploited by a group of monks known as 969. Set up to counter the marker 786, which is used to identify halal food and Islamic businesses, they are driven by the notion that Muslims are plotting to take over the country and implement sharia. Seven plus eight plus six equals 21, and the theory states that 786 is a call for Islam to rise up in the 21st century.

On the other hand, 969 represents aspects of the Buddha. I watched the electric effect that a sermon by its controversial and outspoken leader, Wirathu, had on a group of poorly educated and impoverished Mandalay residents. Since *Time magazine* put him on the cover as “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” journalists have been the subject of suspicion and even contempt. So it was not safe for a Western film crew to remain among the crowd that smelt of whiskey and were gunning for a fight.

Wirathu was as sceptical of me as I was of him. His monks constantly videotaped me over the three days we visited his monastery in case I should write something he does not agree with. But we got along, despite ourselves. He was affable and accommodating. He smiled often, admitting that yes, he compared Muslims to African carp that devour their own. He was trying to educate people, he explained.





 MORE INFO

“Wirathu is a nationalist,” he told me. “Obama won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, but at the same time attacked Afghanistan with drones. I’m not as bad as that.”

It is easy to cast heroes and villains in Myanmar. Sizzling headlines are spun from news of religious rioting and monks uttering hateful rhetoric. But most reports barely scratch at the deeper roots of Myanmar’s racial hatred. These misplaced feelings of rage are fed by social and institutional factors. Education levels average grade five, monks go unquestioned as a moral authority and decades of misinformation feed a culture that thrives on conspiracy theories like no other.



The first waves of anti-Muslim violence since the country's opening were directed against the Rohingya, a stateless group in Myanmar's Rakhine State often described as one of the world's most persecuted people. Communal clashes in 2012 left more than 200 dead, according to the government, and left 140,000 people languishing in squalid camps.

Fuelled by atrocities committed against Buddhists in coastal Rakhine State, violence erupted in far-flung locales: Meikhtila, a town near Yangon called Bago, and in Lashio, a city in hilly Shan State.

People offer countless theories about what is behind it all. The most common allegations point towards former military hardliners who have lost power in favour of reformists running the government. These men, so the theory goes, are backing the 969 group and sparking off anti-Muslim violence to stir discord and return to power as national saviors.

Every single person I spoke to during the filming of *Freedom from Hate*, whether Buddhist or Muslim, believed outsiders were involved. I could not find a shred of evidence to support that belief, even after sifting through widely available amateur video footage and photos.

The more frightening possibility is that there is no conspiracy at all; that Myanmar is willing to tear itself apart as a nation due to



old fears and insecurities; that silencing a few monks and calming down hysterical Muslim leaders will do nothing.

Moderate voices in Myanmar are hard to find. Several academics and religious leaders would not appear on camera because they had already received death threats for speaking out on the issue. Sein Nita, the abbot of a monastery on the foothills of the Shan plateau explained when I prodded him to criticise 969: “Much more learned and influential monks than I, have been silent on this issue. The government and authorities have been silent about it. Aung San Suu Kyi also is in a situation where she has to be silent about it. I also have to be silent about this.”

If Myanmar cannot rely on its religious leaders, its politicians or even its most famous Nobel Prize winner, one has to imagine that attitudes in the country will not be tempered any time soon. But one of the more intriguing and balanced figures we encountered did agree to show his face to our cameras. He is a Muslim leader from Mandalay named Maung Maung who considers Wirathu his friend.

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Interfaith dialogue appears to be a fresh concept in Myanmar. Even translating terms such as ‘political correctness’ or ‘racism’ is difficult, as the words do not exist. Strangely, acts as benign as promoting tolerance can prove dangerous. Most community-based organisations in Rakhine State would not talk about efforts that are underway to bring leaders from the two faiths together. They operate in fear of a backlash from both communities’ wild-eyed extremists. In Meikhtila, interfaith events are often conducted in secret.

I came to Meikhtila not only to understand the reasons behind the brutality but also to figure out if the town was healing and if any hope can exist here. But as I scaled the hill where Muslim students were hacked to death in the mud, I saw that this community’s wounds are still too fresh. The bones are still exposed.

Freedom from Hate can be seen on Al Jazeera’s [101 East](#) from September 05