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The axis of Buddhist extremism

By Tom Farrell

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The images posted to YouTube and elsewhere on the Internet could hardly be more discordant. Sitting or reclining, stone or bronze, the serene features on images of the Buddha are strikingly at odds with the taut, anger-charged faces of the shaven-headed men who have recently emerged from various monasteries and shrines to do battle in his name.

Their message is straightforward. Nearly a millennium ago, gigantic representations of the Enlightened One smiled down on peoples from Afghanistan to the Pacific. Begotten on the Himalayan foothills during the sixth century BC, two main schools of the faith, Mahayana and Theravada, branched out and were embraced by a multitude of races across a wide Asian geography.

In northeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism (Greater Vehicle) was eventually diluted by local customs and philosophies. Centuries later, as Islam spread east and Hinduism revived on the Indian subcontinent, Theravada (Lesser Vehicle) worship shrunk back to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, with its legacy in much of the rest of Asia reduced to a few abandoned stupas and statues.

Jump forward to the 21st century and certain monks are calling for a fight against what is possibly the terminal phase of this long-term decline. In Sri Lanka, the most visible of these "religio-nationalist" Buddhist groups is known as the *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Strike Force),

which was officially inaugurated in July 2012. In Myanmar, there is the comparably extremist 969 Movement, so called because it claims to represent the numbers of attributes associated with the Buddha, his teachings and the clergy.

The triggers for both groups' sometimes violent attacks are usually rumors of a Buddhist being raped or murdered by Muslims. Or sometimes a new mosque or church is under construction in a Buddhist majority area with a growing minority presence. From there, fighting often escalates into hours of vandalism and intimidation; in worst cases, the initial spark results in days of arson and mass killing.

Separated by race, language and the vastness of the Bay of Bengal, there is a striking convergence in the rhetoric of Myanmar's and Sri Lanka's Buddhist fundamentalist groups. Both fizz with triumphalism, belligerence and a fierce persecution complex. The BBS and 969 Movement have similarly cast Muslims as their main villains, although their hostility towards Christians and Hindus is also palpable in certain areas.

Sri Lanka is emerging from decades of ruinous civil war; Myanmar from decades of sclerotic military rule. Already resented by the majority Buddhist population during each country's colonial period, Muslims in both nations bore the brunt of government or insurgent-led excesses after independence.

In Myanmar, alone out of the nation's 135 officially recognized ethnicities, the Rohingya Muslim minority were stripped of their citizenship by General Ne Win's ruling junta. Military operations in 1978 and 1991 sent hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing into neighboring Bangladesh.

In Sri Lanka, Tamil insurgents expelled 60,000 Muslims from the rebel mini-state they established in the country's north after 1990. Ironically, Islamism has made far fewer inroads into the Muslim communities of either nation in comparison to their neighboring countries.

Yet BBS general secretary Golagoda Gnanasara Thera and 969 spiritual leader Ashin Wirathu both consistently harp on about high Muslim birth rates, regardless of how the children may grow up to behave in their respective communities, leading to what both radical leaders have claimed is causing the slow eradication of Buddhist culture.

The Rohingyas, in particular, are officially denigrated as *kalar*, a racist epithet, and dismissed as "Bengali" migrants who should "return" west to Bangladesh. Wirathu's speeches, easily accessed online or on DVDs available in most Myanmar markets, call for boycotts on all Muslim-run stores and businesses.

"If you buy from Muslim shops, your money doesn't just stop there," said Wirathu in a speech last year. "It will eventually go towards destroying your religion and race."

Encroachment by the Crescent and Star has long been a preoccupation of Sri Lankan nationalists. Until the elimination of the Tamil Tiger rebel group in May 2009, that fear was largely displaced by the more immediate bogey of Tamil separatism.

A mostly Hindu minority in the island's north with historic links to Sri Lanka's vast Indian neighbor, they replaced the perceived menace of the western Christian missionary. But in Sri Lanka's East Province, where Tamil militants carried out a string of particularly brutal mosque massacres in the early 1990s, the Muslim proportion of the population nudged slightly ahead between the 1981 and 2012 censuses.

On August 10 last year, a mob led by *bikkhus* (monks) from the Sinhala Ravaya (Roar of the Lion) converged on the Molawatte Mosque in the Grandpass area of the capital Colombo. Three hours of vandalism and intimidation ensued, leaving five Muslims injured amid an insipid police response. When the original mosque's wooden structure that was scheduled for expansion was built in 1966, it ministered to about 20 Muslim families; now there are 430 families there.

Other incidents have mobilized around similar calls to Buddhist supremacism. During a meeting that presaged an attack on a Muslim-owned store-cum-warehouse in Colombo called Fashion Bug some months earlier, the crowds were exhorted by Buddhist fundamentalists towards the *santana* (struggle) to *rata jathiya agama bera ganna* (save country, race and religion).

Colonial context

Anti-Muslim violence is nothing new to Myanmar or Sri Lanka. The economic strains imposed by the Great War and the Great Depression catalyzed into violence that permanently stunted Buddhist-Muslim relations, just as the colonial order was fissuring in both countries. The April-May 1915 riots in the central highlands of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) left dozens of Muslims dead at the hands of Sinhalese Buddhist extremists.

Many Sinhalese nationalists gained considerable local kudos and legitimacy after being jailed in the subsequent clampdown by the colonial British. During the 1930s, anti-British sentiment in Myanmar, then known as Burma, was frequently intertwined with resentment towards Muslims and on several occasions erupted into riots.

National identity awoke in many Asian nations in the aftermath of the reform-minded modernist or "Protestant" Buddhism of the 19th century. Like its Christian namesake, this represented an assertion of individualism, and in then Ceylon and Burma the movement came to be associated with Western notions of race and nationhood.

It is grimly ironic that the part of Asia today most readily associated with "militant" or "violent" Buddhism is Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) State. In the capital of Sittwe, empty, vegetation-choked mosques have been guarded by the police since the Buddhist-on-Muslim violence that erupted there in mid-2012. Now ghettoized Rohingyas are regularly denied assistance of international aid agencies.

Yet Sittwe district was the birthplace of Sayadaw U Ottama (1879-1939), an anti-colonial monk but also a pacifist and admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. He founded the She Zedi Kyaung monastery in 1903, which is considered the birthplace of "politicized" Buddhism in Myanmar.

Of course "Protestantism" in Christianity or Buddhism has manifested divergent interpretations of the original doctrine. To some extent, groups like BBS and the 969 Movement also represent a reassertion of the importance of the monks' role within the *sangha* (monastic order).

Sri Lanka and Myanmar differ from Thailand and Cambodia (or Laos pre-1975) in that for centuries the *sangha* has not deferred to a *devarajah* (divine king), or even a constitutional monarch. This might explain why Thai Buddhism has not spawned an equivalent movement - at least not yet.

That said, the escalation of the Malay-Muslim insurgency in the south of Thailand, the ongoing struggle for national power in Bangkok and the recent military coup may yet have a radicalizing effect. Already, a non-violent organization called the "Knowing Buddha Foundation" is calling for a "blasphemy" law and the extension of Buddhist concepts of morality into Thai society.

Monasticism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar has been broken into several orders for centuries. In common with fundamentalists in other faiths, a preoccupation of the new religio-nationalists is "purification", that is, vigilance against rival interpretations of the faith.

In April this year, the BBS raided a media conference in Colombo called by a moderate organization called the Jathika Bala Sena. Incensed that they had invited Muslims to participate, BBS general secretary Gnanasara shouted that the organizer, Watareta Vijitha Thera, should be killed. In a subsequent interview, he called Vijitha "a Muslim by nature".

In early January, dozens of Sinhala Ravaya monks and laity converged on the Colombo residence of the prime minister, demanding and eventually receiving a written apology over derogatory remarks he allegedly made about the clergy.

With both nations in a state of flux, the inevitable question arises of links between religio-nationalist radicals and political elites. Politicized Buddhism goes back a long way in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

It is perhaps ironic that Sayadaw U Ottama's Ceylonese contemporary Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) espoused a far less pacific and more ethnocentric form of Buddhism. Dharmapala drew on specifically Sinhalese legends, particularly the 6th century *Mahavamsa* .

This text evinces a territorialism little seen in other Buddhist countries: Ceylon is the *dharmadipa* (island of teaching) given to the Sinhala race and consecrated by the dying Buddha. *Mahavamsa* also breaks with the Buddhist interdiction against killing: compelled to kill the king of an invading Hindu army, the Sinhalese king Duttugemunu is absolved by the *bikkhus* of guilt for his action.

Less than two decades after independence, when Myanmar was under strict military rule, Buddhism was co-opted into General Ne Win's "Burmese Road to Socialism" and decades of isolationism commenced. Sri Lanka remained a parliamentary democracy, but by 1956 the populist Sinhalese prime minister Solomon Bandaranaike won an overwhelming election victory,

riding a wave of Buddhist populism. His subsequent policies, aimed at reviving the primacy of Sinhalese culture, did much to push the Tamil minority towards separatism and militancy over the following three decades.

To win the election, Bandaranaike had relied on the support of the United Bikkhu Front, a shadowy cabal of monks.

The speed of the BBS's emergence in post-civil war Sri Lanka lends credence to the notion that it functions as a kind of "vigilante" group on behalf of the ruling regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa. The president's brother, Gotabhaya, was an honored guest last March at the opening of Meth Sevana, a Buddhist academy run by the BBS. More recently, he has distanced himself from the BBS, but the ascent of Muslims in the business sector is a rising cause of resentment for the regime's Sinhalese cronies.

That was witnessed in the Buddhist monk-led mob that attacked the Muslim-owned Fashion Bug store in the Colombo suburb of Dehiwala on March 28 last year. Fashion Bug has 18 stores around Sri Lanka and most of their employees are Sinhalese Buddhists. A meeting had taken place at a nearby *vihara*, or area in a monastery, where it was claimed (erroneously) that a 15-year-old Sinhalese girl had been raped by a Muslim employee. Locals were drawn to the monastery after the temple bell was rung repeatedly and in the subsequent violence one manager at the store was hospitalized with head injuries.

The initial response of the police was much criticized: the Inspector General of police was notified only after being telephoned by Muslim politicians. When police arrived, according to reports, they targeted the spectators rather than the attackers. Order was only restored after nearly three hours when the army and police Special Task Force was deployed.

On January 12 this year, about 30 Sri Lankan monks plus 200 laymen attacked two churches in the nearby resort of Hikkaduwa. The specter of "unethical" conversions by Christian evangelists has been a sore point with Buddhist nationalists since the days of British colonial rule. The mob brandished Buddhist flags and anti-Christian banners, with protestors led by a tuk-tuk (motorized trishaw) with an affixed loudspeaker.

Local police knew the protest was imminent and had warned the staff at the Calvary Free and Assembly of God churches. Even so, they deployed only a few men on the day. Despite the subsequent (filmed) vandalism and roughing up of Christians - an Assembly of God priest was threatened with death - that caused 2 million rupees (US\$15,400) worth of damage, none of the 24 suspects involved in the attack were arrested, according to reports.

The anti-Muslim attacks in Sri Lanka have been overshadowed by the scale of the Buddhist on Muslim violence in Myanmar beginning in March 2012. Subsequent bursts of violence have spread beyond the original epicenter of violence against the Rohingyas in Rakhine state and have even targeted non-Rohingya Muslims.

According to Kyaw Min, a Rohingya politician and former prisoner of the junta, the reason security forces have failed to quell the violence could be "to make people believe that the

military are a lot better than civilians at ruling the country". This has been a consistent charge leveled against the reformist post-military government now in power.

The International Crisis Group published a report citing eyewitness accounts of ethnic Rakhine Buddhist extremists traveling in trucks with police and Rohingya protestors being fired on by the military during these outbreaks.

Radical links

Radicalized monks in both nations probably have covert links to politicians and security forces. But it would be misleading to think of the 969 Movement, BBS, Sinhala Ravaya and others as lacking a life force of their own.

Even Vijitha Thera, whose life has been threatened by Buddhist radicals, admits: "BBS started in 2012, and at that time there was huge support from the Buddhist community because at that moment there was no good leadership."

Amid reports of 969 spiritual leader Wirathu planning to visit Sri Lanka this year, it is tempting to think of the island as the "Afghanistan" of religio-nationalist Buddhism, an incubator nurturing foreign extremists. Some Myanmar monks may have been radicalized there in the 1990s upon being forced to flee the country after the 1988 democracy movement was crushed.

For all their racism, these groups are not parochial. On October 4, 2012, the BBS held a protest outside the Bangladesh High Commission in Colombo after Buddhist villages near the Myanmar border were torched in what were believed to be planned and coordinated attacks by Islamists.

When Time magazine put Wirathu on its cover last July, dubbing the monk "The Face of Buddhist Terror", some 4,000 copies never made it beyond Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike International Airport. According to a customs spokesperson, the Wirathu-hostile article "could hurt the religious sentiments of the people".

When the UK Times interviewed Wirathu last year, the 969 Movement ideologue sent fraternal messages of goodwill to his fellow Islamophobes in the English Defense League, one head-shaven crew lauded by another as "not carrying out violence but protecting the public".

Their "secular" patrons might ponder all this. In Sri Lanka, Solomon Bandaranaike reaped a huge electoral victory in 1956 by wrapping his manifesto in saffron. Three years later, however, his ashes were interred in that metaphorical cemetery whose fellow occupants over the years have included Mahatma Gandhi, Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin: political leaders assassinated by religious fanatics from within their own constituency. His patronage of Buddhist hardliners ultimately brought him into conflict with a notoriously avaricious and corrupt monk named Buddharakhita.

The so-called "Buddy Racketeer" kept a mistress and ran numerous business interests. When Bandaranaike seemed set to curb one of them, a monk turned up at his official residence on September 25, 1959. As the prime minister bowed to pay his ritual respects, the monk dispatched

by Buddhakhita pulled a pistol from his robe and shot him repeatedly. General Ne Win may have decreed that his junta was a defender of the faith, but it was ultimately monks who similarly formed the backbone of the first major uprising against his rule.

Religious fundamentalist groups the world over have long had a monster quality, turning on those who imagine they can control them. Today's re-emerging Buddhist variety is likely no different.