

## Examining Religious Extremism and Political Violence in Myanmar: An Experience from Rohingya Crisis

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to understand the relationship between religious extremism and political violence in the Rakhine state of Myanmar where Rohingya Muslims were discriminately executed by the majority Buddhist community with the support and direct participation of the Military. An alliance between Buddhist monks and the military is clearly behind the ethnic cleansing in 2017. However, Buddhist monks were not in favor of the Military rule and protested the military dictatorship. It is argued in this paper that the landslide victory of NLD (National League for Democracy) in 2012 election changed the scenario. To strengthen their side, the military donated millions of dollars to monks and temples as well as politically patronized them. As feedback, the monks formed a nefarious strategic alliance with the military, which is a mutual and win-win situation because of this alliance both sides paid off. As either a reward, monks built a hegemonic leadership like as Nazi party of Germany over the ordinary people, allowing the military to persecute the Rohingya people. Nevertheless, Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement played a role in the atrocities against Rohingya Muslims, this was done so that NLD could not take over power from the Military. The result of this Buddhist extremism was the uprooting of millions of Rohingya Muslims from their home in Rakhine, which forced the Rohingya Muslims to take shelter in Bangladesh.*

**Key Words:** Buddhists, Monks, Rohingya Muslims, Political Violence and Religious Extremism

### Introduction

In Myanmar, a mostly Buddhist country, the Rohingya<sup>1</sup> ethnic Muslim minority people have endured institutionalized discrimination for decades. Millions of Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh when Myanmar's army unleashed a deadly crackdown on them in August 2017. The exodus took place on August 25, 2017, after Rohingya ARSA insurgents massacred more than 30 police posts. Survivors risked everything to flee by water or on foot from a military onslaught later dubbed a "*textbook example of ethnic cleansing*" by the United Nations. The International court of justice of the UN ordered the Buddhist-majority country to take measures to protect its Rohingya people from genocide in January 2020. However, the Myanmar (previously Burma) army has stated that it is battling Rohingya insurgents and that civilians are not being targeted. Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's leader, and a former human rights champion has frequently dismissed charges of genocide. (BBC, 2020) Albeit the authority and supreme leaders denied ethnic cleansing, the reality was very different from what the authority said, and a number of

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scholars, media, and international organizations demonstrated that the problem had a lengthy history and also many explanations. Regardless, most of the influential monks in Myanmar are instigating dogmatism and fanaticism against Muslims, this contradicts the ethos of Buddhism which is acknowledged for pacifism and tolerance. Notwithstanding its periods of separation from the entire world, Monks seemed eager to capitalize on the tragedy by presenting it in a fresh light when dealing with its Muslim community. There has been a profusion of scholarly and policy publications, as well as press stories, connecting Islam, extremism, and securitization under this supposedly "*new world*" order (Ansar, 2020, p. 10). It has sparked a vicious dispute over who or what constitutes a Rohingya, as well as communal violence that has been described by human rights experts and activists as a crime against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (Cheesman, 2017, p. 1).

Nevertheless, the leaders of Ma Ba Tha, or the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, and the 969 movement have been working together. Besides, Ma Ba Tha's declaration of political independence and religious extremism stirred international concern regarding Myanmar. Thousands of monks revolted against Rohingya Muslims and promoted the Military's exclusion of Rohingya from the Rakhine state. Meanwhile, in 2013, most of the ex-969 movement's and Ma Ba Tha's key leaders, including Sitagu Sayadaw, U Wirathu, and Ashin Tiloka, demanded religious conversion, interfaith marriage, enforced monogamy, and population-control measures, which were enacted in 2015. Here, this paper will mainly examine why the Military supported, patronized and implemented the demands of monks and religious organizations since 2012. Buddhist religious militancy, against Islam based Rohingya minority is controlled through a combination of policies of state apparatus especially the Military that intensified the frequency of political violence. As a result, millions of Rohingya Muslims have been slain, but most have gone into Bangladesh crossed the border, which already mentioned.

Previously throughout the Military dictatorship, monks and *Sangha* were critical about the Military rule and they also took to the streets against the Military in 1988 revolution and *Saffron* Revolution in 2007. A crucial question is why the monks were being supported by the Military in the era of quasi civilian regime. While from the liberation period to *Saffron* revolution the monks and the military were in an antagonistic relationship, but now they have worked hand in hand specially in the issue of Rohingya crisis. This paper is a systematic attempt to find the answer to the specific question of reasons of alliance between monks and military, as well as to investigate the crisis' development through the lens of accelerating religious extremism.

### **Political Violence and Religious extremism**

The interrelation between political violence and religious extremism is undeniable, the inclination of religiously motivated extremist groups to involve politically violent activities into their communal interests has been observed from the ancient to contemporary civilized world. Religious extremists engage in violence for the sake of

religious objectives because they embrace sect ideologies that sanction violence in the service of God (Iannaccone, 1999, p. 2). Therefore, they anchor on violent extremism colored as political violence and vice versa. Political theorists debate about the nature and conception of political violence. In addition, a variety of the terminology is encountered while identifying political violence. Some scholars illustrated it as national liberation and domestic conflict, while others termed it as civil strife and political instability. However, in the neutral sense the internal meaning of all connotations is identical. Some theorists prefer to stress on only the overt types of activity such as “*riots and strike*,” (Mars, 1975, p. 221) while others tend to indicate moral convent or potentially violent attitudes like “*non-cooperation, passive resistance, the threat of force as necessarily involved in potentially violent behavior*”(Mars 1975, p. 223). Several number of theorists’ stress on more extreme forms of violence such as armed struggle which includes “*guerrilla war, rebellion, revolution and other such activities involving actual physical damage to property and injuries to person*” (Mars 1975, p. 224). Thus, political violence signifies activities, which require some resistance and force to bring changes inside the political realm, or to the political system. It might entail destruction and vandalization of property and distress of individuals. Furthermore, some extremist violent activities like armed struggle, riots, strikes, and some other less extreme behavior such as protest, demonstration, sabotage and alike, which are the results of religious extremism would be illustrated as political violence in this article.

Despite the fact that religious extremism is a fiercely contested issue, it is frequently reduced to a one-dimensional construct associated with religious violence (Wibisono, Louis and Jetten, 2019, p. 1). It involves a definite political goal or agenda, concerned about adversities such as prejudice, animosity and even armed conflict. In this regard, extremism is characterized as an idealistic position that it is essential to be using aggression to reinstate the political system to the form prescribed by religious norms(Arena and Arrigo, 2005, pp. 485–486). Extreme religious groups do not practice traditional religion; instead, they selectively alter ancient scriptures and customs to make them useful in the battle against modernity. To put it another way, the groups practice selectivity, selecting and choosing the components of the parent religion to include or exclude as needed. Throughout history, there has been much discussion and disagreement about how religion extremism and politics should interact. In this manner, extreme religious movements seek political power and the ability for using policies or coercion to encourage the implementation of their religious norms and thus religious extremism and political violence works hand in hand.

### **The Foreshadowing of Buddhist Religious Extremism in Myanmar**

Extremist religious sentiment has become a global phenomenon in recent times and is not only restricted to Myanmar. The stance against *Myanmafication* (Houtman, 2000) as a multi ethnic nation is evidently represented by the historical slogan occupying national banners, ‘*to be Burmese means to be Buddhist*’(Lehr, 2019, p. 157). This extremist expression in Myanmar has evolved with time and it is not sudden. Unlike Sri-Lanka and

Thiland, Burma has had its own history, which entails the country's early Buddhist chronology from the third century BCE to 1885 in the form of the *Sasanvamsa*, which would be the Region's Chronicle (Lehr, 2019, p. 160). Theravada Buddhism, successfully established its position as a prime religion in the Pagan dynasty (ruled 1044–1077), while *Mahāyāna* Buddhism dominated it during the early century of the running era. A predominant reason which can explain the inextricable link between Myanmar's culture and corporate identity with Buddhism can be attributed to the first emperor of Pagan dynasty, King Anawratha, who captured the kingdom of Burma, and relocated Mon monks but did not replace Buddhism with animism, Hinduism or even Brahmanism. Mon monks therefore have always been supported in that period. British conquest of Burma led to British administration's abolishment of Theravada Buddhism which was favored by the king. Also, British administration's adoption of secularist policy towards the existing religions came as a shock for the Burmese societies both politically and morally. The situation deteriorated further due to the British education policy which promoted western education and abolished monastery based cultural and religious education. Therefore, to rebel against British rule, the Buddhist monks and the traditional monarch collaborated. The *Saya San rebellion* and the riot of 1938 were iconic anti-Indian particularly anti-Muslim and anti-British expression. A book by a Muslim writer, Shwe Hpi, which was published in 1931, and reprinted in 1938, encompasses a number of anti-Buddhist comments (Smith, 1965, p. 109). In July 1935, a Muslim school teacher attempted to demonstrate Islam's superiority over Buddhism, in a lecture for villagers in the Tungoo district (Adas, 1974, p. 206). Scholars stated that these two incidents stimulated communal riot afterwards. The colonial policy, on the one hand, brought many Indian Muslims to Myanmar as low skilled labor and moneylender; which meant that Burmese people were replaced by these Muslims people in these low skilled occupations; these led to riots firstly in 1930 and again in 1938. But the primary reason was the disparaging references by the school teacher and Muslim writer. Parallely, a general meeting held on the platform of Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon on 26 July 1938 included 10,000 people, 1500 monks and numerous political leaders. A resolution was passed to throw verbal attacks against Buddhism and Gautam Buddha in "a pamphlet entitled *The Abode of the Nats*, written by a Burmese Muslim" (Adas, 1974, p. 206). The demonstrators and the monks also demanded punishment of the writer and they declared if the authorities fail to take actions, measures will be taken to treat Muslims as the top one adversary, accusing Muslims of insulting the Buddhist society and faith, and also to exterminate Muslims and its language and religion (Smith, 1965, p. 110). Thereafter, *The Sun*, a daily owned by a rightwing politician U Saw, published a controversial letter on behalf of a monk regarding the sufferings of women who married Muslim men. Several other rumors which spread that Sule and Shwe Dagon pagodas would be destroyed by the Muslims, sparked riot. All of a sudden 1500 of all Burma council of young monks, started burning and looting Muslim shops, killed 200 Muslims and wounded more than 878. 4000 Burmese Buddhists were arrested in that riot, which spread all over Burma and Muslims were portrayed as enemies. Everywhere monks instigated and motivated rioters, whereas monasteries armed them.

In the riot of 1942 between Buddhist and Rohingya Muslims, monks again instigated violence in the name of protection of Buddhism and monastery causing massacre. Meanwhile during World War II, a considerable number of Rohingya Muslims were recruited to fight alongside the British-led 'Fourteenth Army' against the Japanese forces, most of whom were ignorant indentured laborers in the rice plantations of present-day Rakhine. The Burmese National Army, led by Aung San (father of current Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi), fought side by side with the Japanese, who promised them freedom from British oppression (Sarkar, 2019). Many Burmese Buddhist people joined the Japanese side or, remained neutral. However, when Aung San understood that the Japanese would not win the war, he contacted the British authority. In January 1948, Burma got its independence from British rule but the regional unrest remained as it was. When Rohingya Muslims joined the British force, they were promised a separate state called Arakan state (currently Rakhine state), whereas Rakhine Buddhists joined the Japanese alliance. Armed groups of both the communities attacked each other causing 1942-1943 massacres. The Muslims fled to the northern part of Rakhine state where they were a majority and the Buddhists moved to the southern part (International Crisis Group, 2016), producing an ideological gap between them. Many scholars believe that the role of Rohingya people in the World War II also grew mistrust and division between them. Historically Buddhist monks were known for following Buddha's non-violent principles. During the Pagan dynasty, Theravada Buddhism became a quasi-state religion. Again, monks became a vital part of the kingdom of Burma and gradually adopted extremism inciting a couple of communal riots. Buddhism became the core spirit of Burmese nationalism. Finally, during the British Empire, Rohingya Muslims became the primary antagonist of the Buddhist people and 'to be Barman is to be Buddhist' became the spirit of Myanmar's nationalism, which is definitely the will of extremist monks.

### **Alliance between Monks and Military**

A significant number of monks have played a major role in Myanmar's culture, shaping communal perspectives and developing nationalism, and no Burmese government could function without monks or monasteries until recently. Most of the post-independence Burmese governments felt compelled to either co-opt or repress the monks in order to reduce their power over the people (Hlaing, 2007, p. 232). Because of the socio-political context, governments were compelled to form alliances with the monkhood, and relations between the two were either friendly or hostile. The allied government, on the other hand, would not tolerate any monks who supported the opposing parties. As the 1947 constitution declared, the misuse of faith for political reasons is prohibited, most governments distanced themselves from monkhood and the *Sangha* (Stokke, 2019, p. 159). The section 364 of the present constitution further added "*any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution.*" Section 407, contrastingly states that any party "*abusing religion for political purpose*" shall have "*no right of continued existence*" (Union of Myanmar, 2008, pp. 152, 163). Although these exist only in the paper, these rules did not hold in reality, as witnessed in the 1988 revolution as well as

2007's *Saffron Revolution* and the most recent Rohingya crisis. Monks propelled Buddhist principles to enact policies by the government, making the Buddhist community comparatively beneficial.

During the parliamentary period (1948-1958), U Nu's government which promoted the *Sangha* and Buddhism to satisfy the monks also joined leftist oppositions. The Military took over the power by advocating "*Burmese way to Socialism*," which is the blended one of both Buddhism and Marxism. The Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) dissociated from *Sangha*, because firstly it advocated Marxist ideology and secondly it didn't fear people's perception because political organization forbade political association of the Buddhist monks and restricted them to only religious associations (Hlaing, 2007, p. 233). Furthermore, Ne Win's formation policy, campaign of cleaning up the *Sangha*, widely known as '*Sangha Reform*'-failed miserably because many monasteries were seized, and many politically active monks were forcibly disrobed and put to prison, where some, like as Sayadaw U Nayaka, perished "after being tortured" (Lehr, 2019, p. 173). Indisputably the relationship between monks and the USPP government was worse than the previous government, by contrast, monks and the opposition grew closer. Hostility grew between monks and the Military but the situation reversed after 2012, they started working cooperatively specially in case of Rohingya crisis. Different international media specially *Al Jazeera* claimed that the Buddhist monks and Military re-emerged as an unholy alliance (Lianes, 2019) and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims was observed. However, I would go so far as to call the monk-military cooperation a nefarious strategic alliance in which both the military and the monks benefited, in other words, this alliance made a win-win situation where both parties profited by cooperation, compromise, or group participation. I'll clarify why I consider this is a nefarious strategic alliance and a win-win situation in the subsequent discussion. For instance, the NLD won convincingly in its first election in 2012, signifying noncooperation with the military and monks. Surprise and tension were expressed in the language of U Zaw Htay (Deputy director general of President Thein Sein's office), he said, "*all of our calculations were wrong*" (Bandow, 2015). To gain popularity they freed 300 of 651 political prisoners, stopped the Military operation against ethnic Kachin rebels, removed 2,082 names from the blacklist, who were regarded as threat to national security. Furthermore, the Military junta understood that 90 percent of the total population were devoted Buddhists. Majority of the masses were greatly influenced by the monks and their engagement and active participation in social and political life. NLD did not consider the role of monks as significant. The Military took this opportunity and made this alliance with the most nationalistic monks. Though the alliance was deemed nefarious because both sides had ill motives and high aspirations, it was beneficial for both. The Military enhanced their popularity and influence in the democratic era. They donated a fortune to the monastery and bribed the monks by giving them millions of dollars. According to U Gambira, famed for the *Saffron Revolution*, "*Military approached us with offers of financial assistance and presents, even offering to pay each monk \$3000 USD. This empowered the monks to come out in public in support of the military and to promote religious enmity.*" (Lianes, 2019). In addition, "*senior officials in the government have informally encouraged chief*

*ministers of regions and states to approach and support local Ma-Ba-Tha monks by building 'Sayar-Dagar-Setsanye' (a patron-client relationship) between Buddhist monasteries and regional administrative leaders"* (Zin, 2015, p. 383). Following the authority's decision, a military commander at a conference in Yangon personally donated about 20,000 us dollar in June 2019, where nearly thousands of monks were present. Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun, spokesperson of the military explained the reason for the military's donation to the Ma Ba Tha and other such groups, said, "The group is necessary and should be supported in the name of Buddhism," he further added to *The Irrawaddy*, "*we will make donations and support the organizations which we think we should*" (Zaw, 2019). Note worthily in the Military regime, monks had rejected even taking alms, but this time, as the documents suggested, they took donations pleasantly because of this coalition. Secondly, having evil intentions, a number of ultra-extremist monks including Ashin Wirathu along with Aung Sung Suu Kyi were given a presidential pardon a.k.a. Military granted amnesty. After the *Saffron* Revolution, thousands of monks took to the street in 2012 again and supported the Military objectives. *Al Jazeera* noted that "they were shouting their support for the Military and they were called to exclude the revenger" (Lianes, 2019). Most importantly, those who opposed and criticized senior monks for supporting the Military strategy of social control, were sentenced and ostracized for their views. U Gambira was one of them; furthermore, he also criticized the senior monks of the *Sangha Nayaka Committee* (SNC) for failing to release monks imprisoned in *Saffron* Revolution. Senior monks of SNC urged the government to arrest him for his political activism. Government took initiative within a while, only to release him a day after due to international criticism (Bottorff, 2012). In 2016 U Gambira finally took political asylum in Thailand. He openly opposed monk's attitudes towards Military and still believe "*democracy is the only way forward for Myanmar*" (Lianes, 2019). Besides, when the Time magazine published a cover story on Wirathu's extremist activism and hatred against Rohingya Muslims with the title "*Face of Buddhist Terror*," (Beech, 2013) the president reacted inclusively and controversially stated that the story of Time magazine, "*creates a misunderstanding of Buddhism*," confirming his support on the controversial monk. He also added, "the government is currently striving with religious leaders, political parties, media and the people to rid Myanmar [Burma] of unwanted conflicts." He further claimed Wirathu as a "*noble person*" and "*son of Buddha*" in his statement (Dehart, 2013). Though Wirathu was sentenced for 25 years in 2003 for inciting violence against Rohingya Muslims, he was freed by the amnesty of political prisoners. These types of stand by the president and the Military oriented political leaders affirms the Military's role behind the scene as well as the protector of monks.

Viewing the sinisterly alliance from another perspective, *Sangha*, as well as monks, play the role of civil society as there is no existence of civil society and through this alliance, ultra-extremists monks established its influence in the political arena, where they mobilized the general mass through their institutions and their own influence like the Nazi party in Germany. In 1920's and 1930's the Nazi party created a phenomenon against the Jews among the Germans, but when the Nazis came to power in 1933 Hitler

established a “Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda.” In this case, the Nazis spread propaganda through newspapers, printed cartoons, movies and even radio against Jews among the general mass, as there were distinct audiences for Nazi’s propaganda. German had been persuaded of both the war against foreign foes and the infiltration of Jews.(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2015). Furthermore, when government made rules against the Jews, the Nazis played a key role in mobilizing general people through propaganda against the Jews as well as in favor of the authority, these events occurred in 1935 and 1938 especially before the “Nuremberg Race Law” and “Barrage of Anti-Semitic Economic Legislation” respectively. The same things could be seen in the Myanmar, Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement also acted like the Nazi party, the ultra-extremist monks like Wirathu, Sitagu and even the chairman of Ma Ba Tha, Ashin Tiloka propagated relentlessly against Rohingya Muslims in the name of protecting “race and religion.” Ashin Tiloka gave a speech in a public meeting in Karen state, where he threw one question after another to the audience and finally audience answered with only, “yes.” His propaganda was as follows:

*“Outside people don’t want our family to be peaceful. They want our properties like our land that is why they provoke us. Look at the area where we living. It’s in the Indochina region. What area?” Indochina.<sup>2</sup> “What’s indo? Kalars[Muslim] from the west. What’s indo?” Kalars from the west. “So, our country could be disappeared?” Yes, it could. “So, do you want to be careful and not them separate us?” Yes, we have to! “These people who don’t like you, will try to separate you in different ways. To protect from the wild tiger we have to prepare our fences. Is it important to know why they want us to be divided?” Yes, it’s important! “It’s not only them. Are there some amongst us who are maggots and want to make things worse in our country?” Yes they are! “So, we also have to be careful with them?” Yes! (Lianes, 2019)*

Here it could be seen that the devoted followers of the Ma Ba Tha leader Tiloka, worshipped him and were convinced by his speech for the protection of Myanmar and ultimately Buddhism. He illustrated Rohingya Muslims as wild tigers. He claimed that he was an inspirational Buddhist monk and his mission was to “protect race and religion.” In an interview with *AlJazeera* he stated that “if one is not loyal to the nation, our country and race will disappear. This cannot be avoided if you live here. It’s like they say, ‘when in Rome, you must do as the Roman’s’ (Lianes, 2019). Thus, he and his organization Ma Ba Tha created propaganda among the general people of Myanmar in favour of the Military and against Rohingya, which is definitely hegemony.

Further pieces of evidence could be cited here, that in 2013 a number of monks demanded enactment of four communal laws after a conference of monks at Rangoon, these were religious conversion, interfaith marriage, enforced monogamy and population control measures. After a year, thousands of monks gathered in Mandalay for attending a conference and as per decision, they submitted signatures for supporting the ongoing proposed law of interfaith marriage, which restricted marriage between different religions, especially between Buddhists and Muslims. Moreover, Wirathu and his 969 movement also collected signatures to support interfaith marriage law, here it is



interesting to note, that after proposing the law by the monks, they hired lawyers for drafting the law properly. Another thing they did, which was most striking that they campaigned in favor of the legislation among the common mass in the name of protecting race and religion, which is also a common theme of Ma Ba Tha. Monks had a common stand in favour of the Military, in September 2012, Wirathu, after being freed from the jail by the Military approved amnesty, arranged a rally with his fellow monks in Mandalay for creating a social legacy of the then-president Thein Sein's policy against Rohingya Muslims, which was very controversial across the world and resulted in the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh. Besides, in the very first week of October, 2015, Wirathu posted a picture of President Thein Sein on his *Facebook* account by captioning that "I'll be with you Mr. President. You are ours"(Fisher, 2015). Besides, Sitagu, one of the leading monks who also supported the Military policy against Rohingya Muslims, although he portrayed himself as a peace builder and modest monk, at a military training academy in Karen State, he preached to members of the military. His comments had a terrible intent: to justify the mass murder of non-Buddhists on religious grounds(Walton, 2017). Subsequently, Ma Ba Tha and its prominent leaders took a stance very ambiguously in favor of USDP during the 2015 election, which was very ill-favored and controversial also. Ma Ba Tha chairman, Ashin Thiloka, openly adjured his lay people to vote for those who would be able to protect race and religion, further he argued that they must avoid those who would "destroy" race and religion, and this indicated rejection of NLD. Here, Wirathu's role and his voice was straight and unambiguous and he told his followers to be more specific in spreading the idea to the electorates that the Ma Ba Tha agenda was promoting largely following the formation of USDP; and it would proactively protect race and religion in comparison to the NLD (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 13). It is frequently observed that Wirathu was engaged in a bigger scale in the election of 2020, where he provided fund like the 2015 election. Thus the monks, the *Sangha* and their affiliated extremist organizations created a plot in favor of Military as well as USDP like the Nazi party in Germany, which is one kind of hegemony where the general mass psychologically accept the supremacy of the Military and their policy against Rohingya Muslims. Simply, Military and the monks entered into the alliance, where monks act as a vanguard of establishing the supremacy of the Military as they have social influence and the monks use it for mobilizing general mass in favor of the Military. As the British had gone and the Military dictatorship fell through the *Saffron* Revolution, the Military-based USDP was searching for a new enemy, through which they would be able to create the crisis and exist defending the NLD. Finally, USDP considered monks as friends and Rohingya Muslims as enemies.

### Political Violence: From Extremism to Militancy

Myanmar's sense of identity has historically been linked to its Buddhist religious practice. However, in the case of the Rohingya, religion has had a particularly strong impact. (Walton, 2017). Though Buddhism and its political patronization has a long history in Myanmar, its extremist character gradually became militancy and got international attention just in the very beginning of this running century, especially after 2012 when the democratic regime started with nearly fifty years' experience of Military dictatorship, where the Military and monks control the trigger of militancy. In this discussion, the primary focus will be on the political violence in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims, which is the result of militancy of Buddhist extremist monks and the state-sponsored armed forces. Now the question arises, what are the reasons behind political engagement of monks? According to Buddhist cosmological explanation, there are two distinct parts in the Buddhist world, which are *Lokiya* and *Lokuttara*; *Lokiya*- the mundane or materialistic world, which contains worldly things such as the temporary lives of human beings and factors entailed in it like happiness, sorrow, wealth as well as the impact of state apparatus, on the other hand, *Lokuttara*- the supermundane world or the spiritual world, which is greater than worldly things or materialistic things. Though these two are different both are dependent, they are complementary to each other. "The secular, materially oriented world needs merit and knowledge provided by the spiritual domain; and *lokuttara* needs material support from laypeople. If both decline then Buddhism is in danger" (Gravers, 2012, p. 8). Here in Myanmar, the monks argue that political leaders lost its 'moral power' to lead the state and welfare of its laypeople and monks have moral responsibilities to protect the laypeople from suffering. They also explain that there is no obligation to act in the mundane world, as the monks are not attached to the secular world. Even Aung San Suu Kyi considered Buddhism as a means of turning to real democracy and she argued that in order for Buddhism to become liberal, those who are treated as free subjects need to understand what truth is on their own free will and they must offer their help towards others (Ky, 1992, p. 174). Further, she criticized the Military and held them responsible for their despotic and immoral rule. According to her, "*failure to recover that which has been lost, omission to repair that which has been damaged, disregard for the need of a reasonable economy, and the elevation to leadership of men without morality or learning*" (Ky, 1992, p. 169). She also cited Universal declaration of human rights, 'if a man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, human rights should be protected by law' (Ky, 1992, p. 177), but her recent activities, unfortunately, does not portray it. Therefore, Buddhism is the reality of Myanmar and without it; no ruler could run the regime smoothly. On the one hand, monks primarily legitimize their political affiliation in the above mentioned cosmological explanation, but the recent trend of some Buddhists monks organization such as 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha are not confined in only non-violent protests like *Saffron Revolution*, they have taken on a very violent form. Primarily 969 movement and after it the Ma Ba Tha has been working hand in hand with the Military against Rohingya Muslims, now the extreme political role and militancy of extremist organizations and the Military in case of Rohingya crisis is illustrated below.

### **“969” movement and Wirathu**

Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk of Myanmar, who has been illustrated as “the face of Buddhist terror” (Beech, 2013) by *Time* magazine and who, himself also has taken the following entitlement “Burmese Bin Laden” (Hodal, 2013), 969 movement, on the one hand, led by him since it was established in 2001 and most importantly spread hatred against Muslims in the name of “promoting and protecting religion.” It is only three digits “969”, but these digits hold ideological meanings, among them 9 means the nine attributes of Buddha, 6 demonstrates special attributes of Buddha’s teachings and the last digit 9 represents the attribute of monastic community (Buddha’s *Sangha*), which symbolizes the ideology of revivalism and Buddhist nationalism. “969” was actually established as a rejoinder to the number ‘786’, a folk Islam symbol of the Bismillah that Islamists in Myanmar and elsewhere have long used to designate halal restaurants and Muslim-owned enterprises (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 10). The illustration of “the face of Buddhist terror” of Wirathu is linked with terrorism and *Time* magazine was the first to make this into an international concern. Protesters demanded “Take Action and Sue *Time* Magazine For Misrepresenting Buddhism,” and they also proclaimed that Wirathu is, “*Not The Terrorist, But The Protector of Race, Language and The Religion*” (Briggs, 2013). Nevertheless, this was not the case, in the previous discussion we dealt with an alliance between Military based quasi-civilian government and the monks, both party worked for each other, in addition, president’s press note against *Time*, as well as the monks and the followers of Wirathu also carried a banner in that protest against *Time* Magazine, which covered the president’s consent. Furthermore, Wirathu’s sermons and speech against Muslims were not peaceful and non-violent at all but there was a huge discrepancy as the president and the followers claimed, which could be seen in an interview with Van Patrick King; accordingly,

*“the role of the monks is inseparable from Myanmar’s politics. Monks will be working for the people in Myanmar’s politics without expecting any returns.” He went on to say something regarding monks’ response to the recent battles, “we practice non-violence and finding solution within the confines of the legal system. In order for no new problems to arise, we are assembling problem solving teams that include people of all faiths to cooperate with each other in towns and cities that are within our reach” (Van Patrick King, 2013).*

Here it is interesting to note that Wirathu unguardedly talked about the political engagement of monks and their participation in politics, where they targeted Rohingya Muslims as enemies like Military based quasi-civilian government. Primarily 969 movement’s motives were unclear but soon after the release of Wirathu in January 2012 and subsequent escalated activism, at first there was propaganda to boycott Rohingya owned businesses and this spread all over the nation, in addition to members of the parliament, who were mostly the supporters of the movement, there was also introduction and endorsement of laws that were the results of the movement (Thompson, 2020). Furthermore, Buddhist business owners began hanging the logos of 969 movement in the windows of their shops and Buddhist shop owners were playing the

speech of Wirathu, which was very controversial in a sense but they got positive feedback as well as profits. However, the monks and the followers of the 969 movement gradually became more violent, when Buddhist people who are liberal tried to help or even bought groceries from Rohingya shops, these Buddhists were either worn out or frightened or ostracized by their fellow extremist Buddhist disciples of 969 movement(Downs, 2013). It also observed that the monks motivated not only boycotting the shops of Rohingya Muslims but they demanded interfaith marriage law also and those parliamentarians who opposed the interfaith marriage law, were threatened by the monks of the 969 movement to electoral boycott(International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 17). In the second stage, of the 969 movement Wirathu tried to be very obvious about their objectives and started propaganda against Rohingya Muslims in a more dispersed manner. Fake news, rumors and most importantly his speeches were used to spread hatred against Rohingya Muslims. In an interview with Hannah Beech he stated, “[Muslims] are breeding so fast, and they are stealing our women, raping them,” he further stipulated, “they would like to occupy our country, but I won’t let them. We must keep Myanmar Buddhist” (Beech 2013). He further compared Rohingya Muslims with savage animals; “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog”(Fuller, 2013). In addition, he said to Kate Hodal, "In every town, there is a crude and savage Muslim majority"(Hodal 2013). As he believed Rohingya Muslims bred rapidly and they behave violently, they would be dangerous for Buddhism and Burmese people as well. This anxiety could be found in his language;

*“Muslims are like African Carps; they breed rapidly, have violent behavior and eat its own kind and other fishes. They also destroy the natural resources and beauty under water. Even though they are the minority, our entire race has been suffering a great deal under the burden of the minority. The majority Burmese have not intruded, corrupted or abused them, but we have been suffering under their burden. That is why if there are as many Muslims there are Buddhists Myanmar could never be at peace” (Van Patrick King 2013).*

Primarily these were Wirathu’s private sentiment but gradually it became the theme of 969 movement: “live in our land, drink our water, and are ungrateful to us”(Fuller 2013). Wirathu prescribed that illegal Rohingya Muslims were indicated. Furthermore, he also spread rumors and fake news that Buddhist women were forcefully converted to Islam and he warned Muslim men who “*target innocent young Burmese girls and rape them,*” and “*indulge in cronyism*” (Hodal 2013). He created fear among the Buddhists by saying Buddhism in Myanmar is endangered by the Muslims. He put forward instances were Indonesia used to be a Hindu and Buddhist majority country centuries ago. However, now it has “fallen” and become a predominantly Muslim majority country. Also Philippines is now fighting with “hordes” of Islamic militants. He warned that Myanmar is going to be the next (Economist, 2017). In the cases of preaching and instigating hatred, he previously used *DVD* but recently he spread his sermons as well as rumors via social media such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* and other social media platforms. Although *Facebook* removed his page for violating community standards as well as inciting hatred recently(Barron, 2018). Because of Military patronization he got more options to spread

his hatred much more violently which is definitely militancy. It was observed when he visited Taunggyi, “traffic policemen cleared intersections for his motorcade”(Fuller, 2013), further observations showed that during his visit at Maungdaw Township in Arakan State Border police provided security and most importantly he stayed there at Alodaw Pyei monastery in downtown Maungdaw, which was barricaded by police (Myint, 2017). Thus, patronization by the state authorities made him more violent against Rohingya Muslims, here, it could be cited that when the international criminal court was dealing with Rohingya issues, he showed his militant behavior in a public meeting at Yangon in 2018, he proclaimed that “the day the International Criminal Court and the R2P come to our country. That’ll be the day that U Wirathu will pick up a gun”(Lianes, 2019), which was an ultimate threat and the lay people were cheering up with showing their both hands in the air, which was also a sign of support of the lay people towards him. However, Wirathu and 969 movement misinformed the Buddhist of Myanmar, but he has mass popularity among the lay people not only in his own monastery but millions of Burmese Buddhist follow his instructions. Since 2001 he has been inciting hatred against Rohingya Muslims through his national campaign of boycotting Muslim shops, he was in jail for 25 years, but was freed in 2010 under the general amnesty, after that he has been instigating against Rohingya Muslims. Though in 2013 his organization was banned by *Sangha* Council for the unauthorized use of Buddhist symbolism, they not only rejected the legitimacy of the order, but they even questioned its formation because it was established in the Military regime and they also criticized it for its activities in favor of the government, not for the Buddhist faith. Finally, this ban order evolved into the 969 movement and they joined with Ma Ba Tha, which is a formal structure for Buddhist faith and Wirathu became vice president of the new structure. Though the last civilian government which was shared its power with the Military, recently again issued an arrest order for him, police said a couple of times that they would not find him, but he continues his sermon and hatred against Rohingya Muslims on social media. Here it is interesting to note that this arrest order issued by the government was not because of inciting hatred against Rohingya Muslims but for the sedimentation against Daw Aung San Suu Ky (Beech, 2019). Since the establishment of 969 movement he rejoined with the Ma Ba Tha and has been vigorously instigating hatred and many believe his hatred inspired crimes against Rohingya Muslims from 2012 till recent times, where Wirathu served the political interest of USDP through his hegemonic leadership.

### **Ma Ba Tha**

The acronym of Burmese Ma Ba Tha is Patriotic Association of Myanmar, which is said to have been established for the protection of race and religion. Ma Ba Tha received international attention from 2014, when prominent and founding members of Ma Ba Tha started supporting the ideology of the 969 movement and they also started relocating most controversial young monks including Wirathu in the vital position of the new form. Ma Ba Tha initiated several rallies and lobbied for the enactment of communal laws for the protection of race and religion, which the 969 movement could not achieve (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 11). Ma Ba Tha’s continuous lobbying,

urging, propaganda caused their draft law to be passed by the parliament in 2015, many claimed that the laws were enacted and formulated to “*stop Muslims having multiple wives, large families and marrying Buddhist women; to halt what a leading monk has called the Islamic ‘invasion’ of Myanmar.*” Ma Ba Tha celebrated the passing of laws by the parliament by inviting dancers from all ethnic and religious minority groups except Rohingya Muslims, Ma Ba Tha claimed that Rohingya Muslims are illegal immigrants. Ma Ba Tha wanted to show that it worked not only for the majority “Bamar,” but for every indigenous community of Myanmar. When the dances were over Ma Ba Tha chair Tiloka, addressed the crowd and stated: “*these laws are needed by our country and our people and to protect them. We want to urge people to protect them and stay away from those who want to destroy them*”(Fisher, 2015).

Ma Ba Tha leaders instilled fear among Buddhist people regarding the threat of Islamic “invasion,” propaganda by the monks put forward that Rohingya Muslims breed like cockroaches or insects; the monks also argued that if the birth rate of Muslims increased at a higher rate than that of Buddhist people, then the Buddhists would vanish from Rakhine state. U Yan Naing, a prominent leader, joined the United National Congress, which is a Muslim party but, he was rejected by the election commission for a couple of times as his father did not come to Myanmar in the colonial time. U Yan Naing informed BBC about the hatred of Ma Ba Tha monks, he stated “*they love everyone, even pigs and dogs, but they don't love Muslims. They hate Muslims.*” Ma Ba Tha leaders often included Military personnel in their propaganda. Monks like Sitagu Sayadaw, who had acceptance among the Military members created propaganda against Rohingya Muslims and the objective for this is very obvious, so that the Military could work against the Rohingya Muslims. Ashin Nyanissara widely known as Sitagu Sayadaw, who is 88 years old and has a revolutionary history as he participated in the revolution of 1988 against Military, is now a prominent figure and who aligned monks with the Military like other Ma Ba Tha monks. Besides, he is the most influential monk both home and abroad, since the 1988 revolution he had been exiled in the USA until the new democratic era, in the democratic era he returned home as an academic in monastic university but before entering into Myanmar he met with ex-president US Barack Obama and Pope Francis, which illustrates his influence outside Myanmar. Besides, he also sat in an interfaith meeting where he talked about the non-violence of Buddha(Beech, 2019); but after 2012 he changed his non-violence philosophy and took a hard-liner on the question of interfaith marriage law. He usually gives his sermons in English outside Myanmar, but his sermons in Burmese language tend to portray Islam as a religion of violence, he puts forward that Rohingya Muslims are foreigners and outsiders not the descendent of Myanmar(Walton, 2017). An example of Sitagu Sayadaw’s hypocrisy should be cited here, this would portray his hegemonic agenda among the Military. On the thirtieth of October in 2017 he preached a sermon in Karen state in front of a large number of Military members, where he justified the Rohingya crisis in the lens of protection of race and religion by exemplifying Dutthagamani’s role in establishing Buddhism in Sri-Lanka, when he defeated Tamil ruler in the first century BCE. He further added that the relationship between monks and Military, “*could not be separated.*” He told the commander of the

Military that “*there are over 400,000 monks in Myanmar, if you need them, I will inform them. He urged the Military to participate actively*” and he “*told the soldiers that no matter how much they have to fight, they should remember that those they kill are not fully human*” (Walton, 2017). Again, Sitagu is a prominent figure so the Military listened to him, on the one hand, his sermon spread hatred because he colorized it with religion by citing Dutthagamani’s example of devotion for protecting Buddhism from Tamil.

These types of instigation and hatred are common among the monks of Ma Ba Tha. Ashin Tiloka, Chairman of this extremist organization, reported to *Al Jazeera* that “the Myanmar culture is based on the teaching of Buddha,” he continued that “*they [Muslims] are like guests insulting the host.*” his assistant Vimala went far away than him in the same channel, he told much violently that, “*Rohingya is a fake news, it’s a fake name. We don’t like illegal migrants. They are lying to get our Rakhine state.*” He further added like Sitagu, “Everybody says human rights, where human duty is? Where is citizen duty?” he denied Rohingya Muslim’s human rights and urged that “*no, human rights is not first, we have to understand human duty and citizen duty, if you are a human being. We are not animal*”(Lianes, 2019). In July 2016 Sangal Council issued an order that Ma Ba Tha was not a “legal” organization and they prescribed a name instead of Ma Ba Tha, which was “*Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation,*” that was also supported by NLD but Ma Ba Tha rejected it and still instigated hatred against Rohingya Muslims by creating a plot in favor of Military.

### **Military Persecutions**

Rohingya Muslims themselves have been contending that the Military or Tatmadaw are responsible for the internal crisis between the Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists where monks and monkhood plays a vital role for infatuating laypeople and General Buddhists. It is also well known among the international community that the Military, as part of a larger operation, the militants were denied food, funds, information, and recruiting. Many observers believe, however, that the Tatmadaw's long-term intention is to expel all Rohingyas from Rakhine State.(Selth, 2018, p. 3). In 2012 when a new reformist era emerged after nearly half-century of Military dictatorship; a mass riot occurred in Rakhine state and afterwards it spread in the other parts where Muslims lived for centuries. Military, however, claimed that they have security concerns and Rohingya Muslims were portrayed as serious threats to Myanmar’s national security, stability and overall sovereignty, on the other hand, many believe that as the Military lost its throne they were involved in the conspiracy for inciting violence against different groups, as Rohingya Muslims are the most hated group among the Burmese Buddhists since the colonial period, so, they targeted Rohingya Muslims. There are several objectives behind the instability as well as the targeting of Rohingya Muslims in this new quasi-civilian era. First, though the Military lost its legacy during the *Saffron Revolution*, they aspired to remain in power. However, they had no popularity among the mass, which was revealed in the 2012 election where NLD won forty three out of forty five available seats and Aung Sun Suu Kyi became the successful candidate(Selth, 2018, p. 3). The Military tried

to grab power by stirring disturbance among different groups and they did it very perfectly where the Military appeared as civilians through USDP and delayed the reform process by showing following excuses, “The people can’t handle freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of organization. Therefore, we need to have a strong handle on the situation to make sure people stay in line and don’t kill each other”(Downs, 2013). The Military was doing this for delaying the reformation and staying in power. Secondly, as the NLD was the most popular party since the last decade of last century, the Military would like to tackle them through this instability, where they argued that in this vulnerable situation civilian government would not be able to ensure stable state security and sovereignty. Thirdly, the Military didn’t want to change anything because through this instability they wanted to defeat NLD in the 2020 election, they also tried to defeat NLD in the 2015 election although NLD achieved landslide victory in the 2015 election. Fourthly, the Military targeted Muslims because they are the most controversial to Buddhists in Myanmar and Rohingya Muslims are not legal citizens of Myanmar; if Rohingya Muslims are persecuted, no action would be taken inside Myanmar. Muslims are internationally regarded as a terrorist community, so it is easy to tag them as a terrorist group in Myanmar and they are a threat to the sovereignty of Myanmar, from these backgrounds, many believe that the Military community would like to continue this violence and instability as long as they want for achieving their political goals.

Military, on the other hand, entered into an alliance with monks of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha for persecuting and creating violence against Rohingya Muslims, which was illustrated in the previous section. Primarily extremist monks propagated against Muslims, which also permitted Military, secondly the Military persecuted Rohingya Muslims as the plot was already created by monks. Here another thing is noteworthy, along with monks Military also spread fake news and propagated against Rohingya Muslims. In 2018 the public relations and PSYOP war department of the Military of Myanmar published a book “Myanmar Politics and Tatmadaw: Part I,” which was the illustration of Military’s execution, the book spread fake and false news along with pictures, which was Photo shopped or otherwise ‘doctored’ from unrelated pictures of independent movement of Bangladesh, as claimed by Reuters(McPherson, 2018). Thus, primarily monks have been creating the plot of violence through fake news, propaganda and rumors as per the alliance since 2012 against Rohingya Muslims and finally the Military were executed and legalized.

A rumor was spread that a Rakhine Buddhist woman was raped and after that murdered by Muslim men on May 28, 2012, which sparked violence against Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine state. Within a second this riot spread all over the state and it was estimated that 98 people were killed and 123 injured; whereas 5,338 homes were destroyed and most importantly 75,000 people were displaced in that riot, they were mostly Rohingya Muslims persecuted by the Rakhine Buddhists. Again, after a month later in Toungup Township ten Muslim pilgrims were murdered, which sparked tension between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Though emergency was declared in June, further attacks appeared in October which were directed towards the Muslims not only against



the Rohingya Muslims but Kaman communities also (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 7). It observed in the riot that it was actually systematic persecution, which was pre-planned, many believe that it was systematic reaction to the June violence where might have political objectives as the army personnel Lieutenant General Hla Min claimed. In this second round of violence 92 people were killed, 142 were injured and 3,276 homes were burned down, Muslims were the most targeted. Comeback to the real story, several Rohingya Muslims<sup>3</sup> claimed that the rumor of the raped and murdered Buddhist woman was fake, it was actually a preplanned propaganda. Actually, a Rakhine girl in Kyauk Ni Maw fell in love with a Muslim boy from Kaman. Although they had been in love since high school, another Rakhine boy loved her. The couple broke up for one day. In the Rakhine state, girls were not permitted to have any romantic affair with Muslim boys. The act of love infuriated some people and they planned to kill the girl for not loving someone from the Rakhine race; they eventually brutally murdered her. Her mutilated body was then left somewhere near the Muslim village; as a result, the Muslim boy, who was her lover was accused of rape, murder, and was eventually incarcerated. Nevertheless, the autopsy report and investigation showed no evidence of rape. Two other Muslim boys were arrest along with him on the same accusations. Capitalizing on this, some Rakhine extremists circulated leaflets among Rakhine people to prompt rage and hatred against Muslims.

Meanwhile, other states as if in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and some other parts faced the same type of attacks and allegations by the state-owned forces. In Butthidaung police commissioner ordered to arrest educated people from every Muslim village and after torturing them, sent them to jail, besides, it was also claimed that several Muslim men died after being tortured in custody. Furthermore, police also claimed a huge amount of money for releasing them and if they were unable to pay this amount, they would have to be subject to torture. Again, from October to November 2012, monks held a meeting secretly for storing arms from Rakhines in Buthidaung, which created fear among the Muslim community.<sup>3</sup> The same occurrence also happened in Maungdaw, according to the source<sup>3</sup>, after starting the riot, NaSaKa<sup>4</sup> permitted and supported the killing of Muslims by Rakhine people, on the one hand, on Fridays when the Muslims came out from the Mosque after Jumma prayers at noon, NaSaKa and police fired on them and two Muslims died on spot. Again, within a second Rakhine Buddhists attacked several Mosques and burnt them along with Muslim houses. Results were obvious, because of Rakhine Buddhists and NaSaka's joint attack many of them died and sustained injuries and most importantly thousands of them escaped to Bangladesh, which the international community illustrated as mass exodus.

Many believe that miscreants were overwhelmingly motivated by monks of the 969 movement, such as Wirathu and Wimala, who were very vocal in inciting hatred against Muslims, as I previously illustrated. Many believe that miscreants were overwhelmingly motivated by them and attacked both the Rohingya and other Muslims, uch as Kaman, a government recognized ethnic group. Though Wirathu and his ultra-extremist 969 movement denied their involvement, *“he accepted that it may be causing Burmans to*

*have greater hatred of Muslims*”(International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 17). President, on the other hand, on 17 August in 2012 formed a commission which is widely known as “*investigation commission*,” which had the broad mandate and finally it submitted its report on April 2013 with some recommendations, but the majority of them were very controversial such as the report urged the government to adopt the term “Bengali” instead of “Rohingya” and another recommendation for family planning for Rohingya community urged only two children. Finally, this report would not work out and it was eye watching. However, it is claimed by some observers that the riot was preplanned and it had ill political objectives to destabilize the country through which the Military wanted to relocate their dictatorship, where the Military used the monks and their influence as a trump card for tricking the anti-force of the Military.

Religious extremism in Myanmar, on the other hand, also appeared from the side of Rohingyas which is known as Harakah al-Yaqin (Hay),<sup>5</sup> this resulted in an attack on Border Guard Police (BGP) very early in 9 October 2016, which sparked the conflict enormously, on the one hand, monks and armed forces got a valid reason to attack Rohingya people. In that insurgence, they launched three BGP posts all together in Maungdaw, Rathedaung townships and north-western border which is very close to Bangladesh, where 9 police were killed as well as 8 HaY members were killed and 2 of them were caught as the government reported. Their motive was to target the BGP headquarters very explosively and they did it multiple phases, where they had looted the majority of arms. However, from 10 to 12 October and 3 November they committed several attacks but according to the source it were very shallow, organized than the previous attacks by the locals(International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 6). These attacks were highlighted as a game-changing episode because Myanmar authorities labelled it a terrorist insurgency; on the other hand, the Rohingya community welcomed it for the sake of their rights, but it spread fear and insecurity between the two communities, particularly among Rakhine Buddhists living in northern Rakhine state villages. Further strikes by the ARSA a year later in August were more well-coordinated, with more explosives and a higher number of victims. It's worth noting that the ARSA assumed full responsibility for all of the devastating assaults because they wanted to demonstrate their authority. These insurgence and random attacks from 10 October 2016 to August 2017 by the ARSA had two types of impacts; firstly, Ma Ba Tha reacted very bigotedly and claimed that Rohingya Muslims have been fighting for overturning Islam in Myanmar and since then like as previous Ma Ba Tha has been inciting hatred by anti-Islamic sentiment for their ideological gain as well as gaining political ill motives of their aligned Military. Secondly, authority got legitimacy from the mass people to conduct area “clearance operation”<sup>6</sup> and they have been doing militancy since then through joint operation, which indicates the combination of Military, BGP and other armed forces. This is systematic violence, which could be illustrated as ethnic cleansing, where the security forces committed atrocities, which include “mass killings, sexual violence, and widespread arson, amount to crimes against humanity,” though the Myanmar authority denied all of the allegations. However, it is estimated that since August 2017, “more than 671,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled Burma’s Rakhine State to escape the Military’s

large-scale campaign of ethnic cleansing”(Human Rights Watch, 2020b). It is estimated that in this clearance operation more than 24,000 were killed by the Military and local Buddhists since August 2017, further it was claimed that more than 18,000 women and young girls were raped, on the one hand, 116,000 were beaten whereas 36,000 were burned by the persecutors. Recently, Human Rights Watch published a satellite report, where they showed that more than 200 homes and buildings were burned further(Human Rights Watch, 2020a). Besides, Reuters claimed that because of this ethnic cleansing nearly 690,000 Rohingya Muslims were displaced from their villages and they crossed the Border of Bangladesh since August for the sake of their life security (Wa Lone et al 2018). However, since the colonial period until the present Buddhism is the reality in Myanmar, but the recent trend of Buddhist organizations and monks (not all) engaging in politics deal with the cosmological explanation of Buddhism, but skips the main theme of non-violence of Buddha. Military, on the other hand, took it as an opportunity for gaining their political goals. In the period of Military dictatorship, they tried to stay aloof from the monks' influence mostly and monks criticized them and took part in the revolution against them because of their dictatorship in 1988 and most importantly in “Saffron Revolution” in 2007. Nevertheless, after 2012 the scenario changed dramatically when the monks and Military entered into an alliance that we discussed previously, this time the unity of “Saffron Revolution” shouted down and religious tension between Muslims and Buddhists started. Thousands of monks once again took to the street and they chanted, “Let’s protect our motherland, Myanmar,” there were shouting in favor of the Military and they also called for expelling the Rohingyas. Since then monks have been creating a plot for destabilizing the country, where they instigate hatred against Rohingya Muslims, which sparked after the HaY’s attacks on BGP. Some ultra-extremist monks like Wirathu, Wimala, Sitagu, Tiloka and several others as well as their ultra-extremist religious organization Ma Ba Tha has been using their influence for creating plot against Rohingya Muslims among the fellow laypeople so that the Military could persecute operation. Since October 2016 the Military have been persecuting Rohingya people and still there is no sign of stopping this militancy because they would like to continue it not for the sake of the people of Myanmar but for gaining political objectives for overthrowing NLD, where they use the support of Buddhist monks.

### **Concluding Remarks**

On the question of religious extremism and political violence against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, this paper propounds several arguments. Throughout the whirlwind tour, firstly, it posited a nefarious strategic alliance between monks and the Military, I termed it sinisterly because both the Military and monks had the same objectives, which are either evil or destructive for Rohingya Muslims and here; it argued that there are several reasons which led to this alliance from both sides. For the Military, firstly they ruled the country for a half-century and then lost popularity, which was observed in 2012 election, they have been reviving their popularity by using the influence of monks and their ultra-religious extremist organizations. For instance in the 2015 election Wirathu, Tiloka and other same-minded monks instructed laypeople for voting in favor of USDP. The

Military had been trying to destabilize the country to remain in power and has been opposing the NLD since the quasi-civilian regime started, when the Military used monks and took to the streets in 2012, 2016 and 2017. For monks, firstly, in the pre-colonial times, they were in touch with state authority but during colonial and military dictatorship they were back footed, through the alliance with the Military they regained their position. Secondly, the ultra-extremist monks acted as civil society, which helped them to establish hegemonic leadership over common people.

However, it also argued that in this mutual and win-win game both sides paid off. Military donated lots of money to the monks and monkhood, and patronized the extremist monks. On the other hand, monks and their ultra-religious organization Ma Ba Tha acted in favor of Military like the Nazi party in Germany. As they captured the position of civil society, monks propagated against Rohingya Muslims and spread anti- Islamic sentiments among the Buddhists as well as laypeople, to spread these sentiments they used the social media platforms like *YouTube and Facebook* as well as sermons in monasteries and also in public meetings, in these cases, they mostly instigated through fake news and rumors. Buddhist people consciously or unconsciously believed their propaganda of hatred against Rohingya Muslims. Thus, monks and their ultra-extremist organization Ma Ba Tha infatuated the Buddhist people, where they established the supremacy of the Military as well as USDP like the Nazi policy against Jews, which shows the hegemony of the Military and the general mass psychologically accepted the Military supremacy and their policy of persecuting Rohingya Muslims. Since the alliance between monks and the Military, monks have been playing the role of Nazi in the name of protection of Buddhist race and religion for establishing the hegemony of the Military; and the Military has been engaging in violence for their political objectives and this has led to mass killing, displacement and mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar.

## Notes

1. The epithet Rohingya is by far the most divisive in Myanmar because the term claims the indigenous status of the Rakhine state of the Muslim community that's why state authorities, monks, nationalist political leaders and mostly Military like to regard them as Bangladeshi immigrants and therefore they prefer to call as "Bengali" but many historians claimed them as Rohingya and they have been living in Rakhine state(Previous Arakan State) for centuries as Rohingya, again, in colonial period they also termed as Rohingya and most importantly they like to introduce themselves as Rohingya. So far, though there is a lot of controversy on the question of terming them, however, I am not going to solve this controversy but I would like to call them Rohingya as the international community and actors approved them as Rohingya.
2. Here the Italic words spelt by the audiences of the Ashin Tiloka, which infatuated answer of the audiences in the Karen state were meeting on the banner of Ma Ba Tha.
3. I interviewed several Rohingya people who fled to Bangladesh because of this violence, Ukhiya, Chittagong, Bangladesh, November 2019.

4. NaSaKa (Nay-Sat Kut-kwey ye) a special security force named containing Military, police, riot police, intelligence officers and customs officers worked in the Rakhine state up until 2013 and was directly controlled by the Ministry of Border Affairs.
5. Harakah al-Yaqin is an Arabic name and its English translation is “Faith Movement,” which the government portrayed as a “communities of fighters” in the name of Aqa Mul Mujahidin as well as they illustrated it as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, after 9 October attacked they rebranded as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), they claimed themselves not a terrorist and religious organization, but a secular organization, whose objectives would be “defensive attacks,” which only aimed at the “oppressive Burmese regime.” Furthermore, they would support and welcome the international organization for making the Rakhine state peaceful and redrawing harmony among different religion. But documents don’t support that because there are shreds of evidence of terrorist attacked against him, where they attacked not only the armed forces of Myanmar but Hindus and Muslims too. Many claimed that they are nothing but another extremist group like Ma Ba Tha and they have international connections where they funded by them.
6. Myanmar authority termed this operation as “clearance operation,” but the international media and actors called this action “ethnic cleansing”. I would like to use the term “ethnic cleansing” as it is widely admitted.

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