Local initiatives to counter extremist Buddhist nationalism in Burma

Summary

The rise of extremist Buddhist nationalism in Burma since the political transition in 2011 has received increased attention in recent years. What has received less attention is what local actors are doing to counter the influence of such organisations. This report is the result of a project that set out to document ways in which local civil society organisations, religious and community groups, networks, and individuals counter Buddhist nationalist influence. Seventy individuals, from 20 organisations, were interviewed in nine cities, towns, and villages across the country. The study found a broad range of actors and strategies and some reported having achieved significant and positive results in their local communities. The study also found that many of these groups relied heavily on one or a few key individuals, as did their funding, suggesting challenges for their long-term sustainability.

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Introduction

The rise of Buddhist nationalism[1] in Burma[2] has sparked domestic and international concern. Influential radical Buddhist groups emerged as the country began its transition from autocracy and military rule to a more democratic system in 2011. The rise of these groups coincided with several violent and deadly clashes between Muslim and Buddhist communities across the country. Although this violence is often referred to as intercommunal, it was overwhelmingly anti-Muslim.[3] Since then, the prevalence of hate speech and other expressions of anti-Muslim sentiments in Burma have continued to increase and polarisation between religious groups has arguably intensified in recent years.

The topic has gained increased attention from academics, policy institutes and the media in recent years.[4] Something that has attracted less attention is what is being done to counter the influence of these nationalist movements.[5] For this reason, the Swedish Burma Committee, together with a local Burmese organisation, set out to explore and document how local groups across Burma respond to the activities of extremist Buddhist nationalists. This report is a result of that project and aims to shed more light on what is being done at the local level to prevent violence, promote trust, and to challenge nationalist narratives. Another aim was to identify successful methods and strategies in order to improve understanding of how such initiatives could be strengthened. The Swedish Burma Committee supports a number of civil society groups operating in this field and wanted to increase its understanding of this understudied theme.

The report is based on field research conducted by a group of activists who were themselves working to counter extremist Buddhist nationalism. They interviewed representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs), religious and community groups, and individuals who were all working in one way or another to counter the influence of religious extremists in their communities. As insiders themselves, the researchers drew on their own activist networks when identifying relevant groups and initiatives to study. The research process itself intended to contribute to expanding

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1 This report uses the term "Buddhist nationalism" or "extremist Buddhist nationalism" to refer to the organised movements in Burma that seek to promote a nationalistic and exclusionary form of Buddhism and that display a hostile attitude towards, in particular, Islam and Muslims. This report is particularly concerned with the more extreme sides of this nationalism, which are sometimes violent.
2 Also known as Myanmar.
3 Kyaw, Nyi Nyi (2015), "Alienation, Discrimination, and Securitization: Legal Personhood and Cultural Personhood of Muslims in Myanmar", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Routledge
4 See e.g. International Crisis Group (2017), "Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar," *Asia Report*, N⁰. 290; Walton, Mathew J. & Hayward, Susan (2014), *Contesting Buddhist narratives: Democratization, nationalism, and communal violence in Myanmar*, Policy Studies, No. 71, East-West Center.
5 See e.g. Orjuela, Camilla (2019), "Countering Buddhist radicalisation: emerging peace movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka", Third World Quarterly, Routledge; Walton, Mathew J, Schissler, Matt & Thi, Phyu Phyu (2017), "Failed riots: Successful conflict prevention in four Myanmar cities", M.MAS Working Paper 1:2

networks among like-minded groups, share experiences, and build trust.

As mentioned, some research into this movement has been undertaken but a lot is still unknown. While there is anecdotal information about what is being done around the country and some groups are aware of each other and cooperate, there are few that have a systematic understanding of the multitude of activities out there. Initiatives are often highly localised and sometimes operate with a low profile to avoid reprisals from extremists. Therefore, compiling and sharing information with different groups and initiatives within this movement, as well as providing examples of successful methods and strategies, is an important ambition of this project. This limited project does not claim to provide a comprehensive account of this movement. Rather, the intention is to make a contribution to the small but slowly growing pool of research on the topic so that practitioners, donors and other interested parties can make more well-informed decisions.

The study found a broad range of activities and methods used. These included religious leaders using their authority to diffuse violent conflict, the systematic countering of anti-Muslim rumours and fake news,[6] long-term interfaith work to build trust and understanding between communities, education and exposure to other communities, and more. Any judgement of success is primarily based on what actors involved in the respective initiatives reported to the researchers. Some initiatives were well-organised and operated regionally and nationally, through networks that span towns and cities. Others were highly localised, spearheaded by one or more community or religious leaders, and some involved working in partnership with state authorities while others involved confrontation.

Due to the limited scope of this study, there were many initiatives that were identified but could not be included. This should be seen as a positive sign reflecting that in fact there are plenty of ongoing initiatives that challenge the extremist nationalist narratives.

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6 In this study, fake news is defined as "the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design." See Gelfert, Axel (2018), "Fake news: A definition," *Informal Logic* 38, No. 1, p. 108. A rumour is defined as an unverified claim that can spread on social media or by word of mouth. See Bondielli, Alessandro, and Marcelloni, Francesco (2019), "A survey on fake news and rumour detection techniques." *Information Sciences* 497, p. 39.

Background

Religious intolerance is arguably one of the major challenges facing Burma today. Muslims have been the main targets of hate propaganda and violence in the Buddhist-majority country. The Rohingya[7] are particularly targeted. They, and Muslims more generally, are portrayed as a threat to Buddhism and national sovereignty. Extremist Buddhist nationalists have played a key role in anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya violence and in supporting further discrimination. In its 2018 report, the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Burma (FFM) concluded that a "carefully crafted hate campaign has developed a negative perception of Muslims among the broad population."[8] This has created a conducive environment for anti-Muslim violence in Rakhine State and elsewhere, enabling the state-led brutal attacks against the Rohingya in 2017, which forced over 700 000 people to flee to Bangladesh. According to UN investigators, there is evidence to suggest that the campaign against the Rohingya likely constitutes war crimes, crimes against humanity and even genocide.[9]

Historical roots

Although the current situation is unprecedented in scale, Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiments are not new to Burma. They featured in anti-colonial nationalism during British rule, in which monks played an important role and activists developed sometimes violent and exclusionary discourse around the majority ethnic Bamar (or Burman) identity. The British conquest of Burma brought significant political, cultural, and economic changes. Among them, the overthrow of the monarchy with its links to Buddhism, the ending of state support for monasteries, and the separation of state administration from religion – perceived by many Burmese Buddhists as a decline of Buddhist authority.[10] As Burma became more interconnected with the British Raj,[11] considerable numbers of Indians were brought in to staff the colonial apparatus. This caused resentment among parts of the majority Buddhist population as they were seen as getting a disproportionate role in positions of government, commerce and finance. Xenophobia and anti-Indian attitudes grew

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7 The Rohingya people are a, primarily Muslim, ethnic group concentrated to northern Rakhine State in western Burma. The term "Rohingya" is highly contested in Burma where the government and many people instead use the derogatory term "Bengali," suggesting that they are illegal immigrants who do not belong in Burma. See e.g. Kyaw, Nyi Nyi (2015), op. cit.

8 United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (2018), *Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/CRP.2, p. 164, para. 696, 17 September 2018

9 UNHRC (2019), *Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/42/CRP.5, 16 September 2019

10 International Crisis Group (2017), op. cit.

11 The British Raj, or British Crown rule in India. The British took control over Burma successively through the the so-called Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-26, 1852, and 1885). After the Third Anglo-Burmese War, in which the British annexed Upper Burma, the country was incorporated as a province of India. It remained a province of India until 1937, when it was separated and granted its own constitution. Burma gained independence from the British in 1948. See e.g. *Encyclopaedia Britinnica*, entry on "Myanmar," available at https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar (accessed 4 January 2020)

stronger and were manifested in several anti-Indian riots during the first half of the 20th century, and post-independence in openly anti-Indian policies.[12]

The anti-colonial Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association) organised under the principle "Burma for the Burmans," effectively excluding Muslims and residents of Indian descent.[13] Another common slogan of the time was "to be Burman is to be Buddhist."[14] The colonial period also saw the rise of new forms of Buddhist organising, with some Buddhist organisations seeking more direct political confrontation. Divisions within the prominent anti-colonial organisation the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) led to its more nationalist faction reorganising as the General Council of Burmese Associations. The shift from "Buddhist" to "Burmese" was significant and demonstrated a new focus on ethnicity and the nation.[15] During the colonial period, religion came to be an "important and operative aspect of Burmese identity."[16]

Post-independence period

After Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, several governments continued to politicise religion, recognising that supporting Buddhism was a way of increasing their legitimacy. Prime Minister U Nu launched a campaign to support Buddhism and even make Buddhism the state religion, and in 1961 a constitutional amendment was passed to that effect, alienating religious minorities.[17] However, after General Ne Win took power in a military coup in 1962, U Nu's efforts to promote Buddhism were overturned, including its position as state religion. Burma became a one-party state under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which adopted an officially secular stance, similar to the colonial period.[18] Another coup in 1988 brought a new military government to power, this time under the name the State Law and Order Restauration Council (SLORC), later rebranded the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). This government abandoned socialist and secular ideologies and sought closer ties to the monastic community, including increasing support to monasteries. This has been interpreted as an effort to heal relations to the Buddhist community after the socialist years and the brutal crackdown of the

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12 Egreteau, Renaud (2011), "Burmese Indians in contemporary Burma: heritage, influence, and perceptions since 1988", *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol 12, p. 33-54
13 Yi, Khin (1988) cited in International Crisis Group (2013), *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*
14 Klinken, Gerry van & Aung, Su Mon Thazin (2017), "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 353-375, Routledge
15 Turner, Alicia (2017), "Conclusion", in Chandler, David P. & Kipp, Rita Smith (Eds.), *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma,* University of Hawaii Press
16 Arnold, Dan & Turner, Alicia (2019), "Why Are We Surprised When Buddhists Are Violent?", *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, Vol. 3 Issue 1, p. 163, University of Chicago Press
17 Kyaw, Nyi Nyi (2018), *Freedom of Religion, the Role of the State, and Interreligious Relations in Myanmar*, International Centre for Ethnic Studies and Equitas – International Centre for Human Rights Education
18 Ibid.

uprising of 1988, but also as a way of increasing political legitimacy.[19] The military government also rekindled anti-Muslim discourse, illustrated by the motto of the Ministry of Immigration and Population, which was established in 1995: "A landslide does not submerge a race, but another race does!", implying Muslims.[20] Following independence, successive governments adopted legal and administrative measures that eroded the civil and political rights of the Rohingya in particular, but also Muslims in general.[21] There were significant instances of anti-Muslim violence during the years of military rule, most notably the anti-Rohingya operations *Naga Min* in 1978 and *Phi Thaya* in 1991-1992, which forced hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh. Narratives of Rohingya as illegal immigrants that do not belong in Burma can be traced back to this period.[22]

The re-emergence of Buddhist nationalism

Since the start of the political transition in 2011, there has been an upsurge of extremist forms of Buddhist nationalism. The largest and most well-known of these nationalist groups is the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion, more commonly known by its Burmese acronym MaBaTha.[23] MaBaTha evolved from the 969 Movement[24] which traces its roots to Mon and Kayin states in the early 2000s. The 969 Movement organised more formally after the murder and alleged rape of a woman in Rakhine State in May 2012.[25] The crime was widely publicised along with information about the suspected attackers being "Bengali,"[26] leading to a surge in hate speech against Muslims and large-scale communal violence, which were

19 Klinken & Aung (2017), op. cit.; see also Foxeus, Niklas (2016), "Mimicking the State in Burma/Myanmar: Royal, Nationalist, and Militant Ideology in a New Buddhist Movement," *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land En Volkenkunde*, Vol. 172, No. 2/3, pp. 197-224, Brill Academic Publishers

20 Kyaw, Nyi Nyi (2018), op. cit.

21 Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (August 2017), *Towards a peaceful, fair and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine*, Final Report

22 Lindblom, Alina et al. (2015), *Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: Is Genocide Occurring in Myanmar's Rakhine State? A Legal Analysis*, Fortify Rights

23 MaBaTha is also known in English as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar. A ruling in May 2017 by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (MaHaNa), the state body that oversees the *sangha*, i.e. the monastic community, banned the use of the name MaBaTha. The organisation then rebranded itself as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, but many, both followers and opponents, continue to use the name MaBaTha. Two chapters, in Mandalay and Kayin State, defy the ban and continue to use MaBaTha signboards. See e.g. Walton, Mathew J. & Kyi, Khin Mar Mar, "Is this the end of MaBaTha?," *Tea Circle*, 2 December 2019, available at https://teacircleoxford.com/2019/12/02/is-this-the-end-of-ma-ba-tha/ (accessed 4 January 2020). This report uses MaBaTha as it is still widely used when referring to the organisation.

24 The numbers 969 refer to the three "gems", or "jewels", of Buddhism and represent the nine qualities of the Buddha, six qualities of the Dhamma, and nine qualities of the Sanga. Followers of the movement claimed it was a reaction to 786, numbers that had long been used by Muslims in Burma to mark shops or restaurants that offered halal food. 969 stickers soon started appearing on Buddhist-owned shops and restaurants and the movement urged followers to "buy Buddhist". See e.g. Kinetz, Erika, "New Numerology of Hate Grows in Burma", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 April 2013, available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/new-numerology-of-hate-grows-in-burma.html

25 Benjamin Ismail, "Crisis in Arakan State and New Threats to Freedom of News and Information", *Reporters Without Borders*, 20 January 2016, available at https://rsf.org/en/reports/crisis-arakan-state-and-new-threats-freedom-news-and-information

26 "Bengali" is widely used as a derogatory term for Rohingya, implying that they are foreigners and do not belong in Burma.

capitalised on by extremist Buddhist nationalists. Monks played a leading role in this movement. The leading public figure of the 969 Movement was firebrand monk U Wirathu who became notorious for preaching messages of hate against Muslims and inciting violence. He garnered an international profile after being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine as "the Face of Buddhist Terror."[27] The 969 Movement was effectively banned in late 2013 and MaBaTha became its more formally structured successor.[28] U Wirathu continued to be one of the leading figures and became a member of the MaBaTha Central Executive Committee.

MaBaTha

MaBaTha has close ties to the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military. Soon after it formed, MaBaTha successfully lobbied the then USDP-led government to enact a series of discriminatory laws to "protect" race and religion: the Population Control Law (2015), the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law (2015), the Religious Conversion Law (2015) and the Monogamy Law (2015), demonstrating their influence.[29] Senior figures of the *Tatmadaw* and USDP have also been seen making significant donations to MaBaTha monks.[30]

Much of the attention, in particular from international observers, has been directed toward loud and controversial monks like U Wirathu, hate speech and agitation against Muslims (in particular the Rohingya), and open support for the military. But there is a lot more to the organisation. Many of its followers have a very different perception of the organisation, shaped in large part by their interactions with the organisation at the local level, through Buddhist Sunday schools, community-based initiatives, donations, relief work etc.[31]

MaBaTha is active in all states and regions of the country. It works through both a centralised organisation and a loose network of religious and lay associations, civil society groups, charities, businesses, media, and ethnic armed organisations. It has an extensive network of alliance groups that extends beyond Burma's borders. The network structure is crucial to build and reproduce the movement, to raise funds, to

27 Beech, Hannah, "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *Time*, 1 July 2013, available at http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html (accessed 24 November 2019)

28 International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar* (Brussels: International Crisis Group), available at https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/290-buddhism-and-state-power-in-myanmar.pdf.

29 For a summary of the laws, see International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar* (Brussels: International Crisis Group), https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/290-buddhism-and-state-power-in-myanmar.pdf.

30 Wa Lone, "USDP candidate donates big to Ma Ba Tha," *Myanmar Times*, 3 September 2015, available at https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16287-usdp-candidate-donates-big-to-ma-ba-tha.html; Sithu Aung Myint, "Is the Tatmadaw supporting an anti-government organisation?" *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 July 2019, available at https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/is-the-tatmadaw-supporting-an-anti-government-organisation (accessed 24 November 2019)

31 See e.g. Walton, Mathew J., "Misunderstanding Myanmar's Ma Ba Tha", *Asia Times*, 9 June 2017, available at https://www.asiatimes.com/2017/06/article/misunderstanding-myanmars-ma-ba-tha/ (accessed 14 December 2019)

increase its influence and to avoid state control and prosecution. Through its charity organisations, MaBaTha activists can organise and influence recipients, and recruit new members into the movement. Examples of such sub-organisations include Shwe Thanlwin, a popular organisation that assists disadvantaged families with free funerals, and Parami Pyoe Khin and Myanmar Thwe, which organise blood donation campaigns for Burmese hospitals.

These patronage networks extend to some of the most remote villages in the country, creating a strong sense of obligation to MaBaTha from programme recipients. Other groups in the network use the politics of identity and empowerment to further MaBaTha's objectives. The Patriotic Youth Organisation supports and organises young Buddhists, providing capacity-building, guidance and a sense of community. Chin Buddhist Youth does similar work within an ethno-nationalist frame, promoting a patriotic, Buddhist form of Chin identity. Witha Kha is a women's organisation, named after a famous woman in Buddhist history. Based in Shwebo, they collect donations, both for MaBaTha the organisation, and for associated monks. Four Women's Voice is a group of four well-known supporters of MaBaTha that have been influential in spreading anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya messages to women.

Previous research

While there is an increasing body of literature on MaBaTha and Buddhist nationalism in Burma, limited research has been done on civil society strategies to fight back against extremist Buddhist nationalism, although there are a few notable exceptions.

In 2015, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) published *This is Not Who We Are: Listening to Communities Affected by Communal Violence in Myanmar.*[32] Focussing on six towns and cities affected by inter-religious violence, the report highlights some of the grassroots strategies used for conflict response and prevention. Researchers found that in some cases, Buddhist members of the community helped Muslims flee and hide when conflict broke out, e.g. some Buddhist monks helped Muslims take refuge in monasteries. In line with the present study, CPCS also found instances of Buddhist and Muslim leaders cooperating to intervene to reduce tension and prevent conflict. According to their report, many participants described how Buddhist and Muslims used to live together without problems, but were concerned about social harmony in the aftermath of violence. CPCS found that "participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to live in peace again."[33]

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32 Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *This is Not Who We Are: Listening to Communities Affected by Communal Violence in Myanmar,* Siem Reap, Cambodia: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
33 Ibid, p. 52.

In 2016-17, prominent Burmese writers came together to collect stories of interfaith coexistence, publishing *Of Peaceful Days*.[34] The aim was to challenge the perception that there is a historical basis for Buddhist-Muslim conflict. By collecting stories from the past of how diverse religious communities have lived together, the book serves as a model for future relationships. It challenges readers to question what changes have led to violence and to consider ways in which community relations can be transformed for peace.

Search for a Common Ground ("Search"), an international non-profit organisation working to end violent conflict, has conducted some research highlighting the work of civil society to respond to extremist Buddhist nationalism. In 2016, Search conducted a rapid conflict assessment of North Okkalapa Township of Yangon and Lashio, the main town of northern Shan State. The findings were published in the report, *Let's think, let's change: Promoting diversity through popular culture*, part of a wider Search project to counter rumours that can lead to intercommunal violence.[35] The research identified forces for and against peace. One of the forces for peace was "people's ability to form friendships and relationships with people from different socio-cultural or religious communities […which are] mutually beneficial."[36] The creation of platforms to bring people together and build friendships as a strategy was also a finding in the present study, and some community activists described friendship as targeted and strategic action to mitigate conflict.

In 2017, Search conducted research for the report, *Stakeholder mapping of countering hate speech in Myanmar*.[37] The research aimed to identify community organisations and outline strategies they used to counter hate speech and dangerous speech, to document how they identified results and to record tools used so as to assess gaps and needs. Strategies found included monitoring and mitigating rumours, the use of social media campaigns, legal initiatives, promoting digital and media literacy, civic and peace education, critical investigative journalism, and interfaith activities. The report provides a good overview of community action to counter hate speech and includes recommendations for greater collaboration, capacity-building, and increased diversity within the movement to counter hate speech. Since publication, there has been greater coordination and collaboration through the establishment of an anti-hate speech network.[38]

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34 *Of Peaceful Days* was published in Yangon by Myanmar ICT for Development (MIDO). No date of publication is provided.
35 Search for a Common Ground, *Let's Think, Let's Change: Promoting Diversity Through Popular Culture*,
 https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/MYA_RCA-Lets-think-Lets-change_dr2.pdf.
36 Ibid, p 6.
37 O'Connor, Taylor (2017), *Key Findings and Recommendations: Stakeholder mapping of countering hate speech in Myanmar – External Report*,
 https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SFCG-Stakeholder-Mapping-Report-external-20Nov2017-FINAL-for-printing.pdf
38 The extent this can be attributed to the Search report, if any, is not known.

There are also a few academic studies of efforts to counter religious extremism in Burma. For example, Camilla Orjuela has looked at how peace movements opposing nationalism mobilise in Burma and Sri Lanka.[39] In 2016-2017 she conducted 21 interviews with religious leaders, peace activists and NGO representatives in four cities and towns. She finds that, although small relative to the nationalist groups they are up against, these countermovements are important in terms of providing alternative narratives. She also finds that religious leaders play important roles in this countermovement.

In 2014, Walton and Hayward published *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratisation, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, which examines popular support for Buddhist nationalist movements.[40] They also looked at counterarguments that were being put forward, especially from within the Buddhist community. Although few and far between, they found that Buddhist monks were involved in local initiatives aimed at building trust and fostering peaceful coexistence between religious groups. These included courses, often aimed at monks sympathetic to nationalist movements, where Buddhist arguments in support of peace were presented. They also found examples of Muslim leaders who were able to call upon Buddhist monks in times of looming violence who would come to protect Muslim buildings from angry mobs. This is in line with findings in the present study, which suggest that good relations between Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders can be crucial for diffusing violence in times of heightened tension.

In 2017, Walton, Schissler and Thi published *Failed riots: Successful conflict prevention in four Myanmar cities*, looking at four cases where strong warning signs for riotous violence involving Buddhist and Muslims were present but failed to materialise.[41] They studied groups that did not identify as peace or interfaith groups, but were still found to have played important roles in mediating peaceful settlements at times of threatening violence. They conclude that the key individuals involved had built trust and credibility with local communities and authorities through previous work that was not aimed at peacebuilding or promoting harmony between religious groups. This previous work enabled them to act as trusted mediators at times of heightened tensions.

39 Orjuela, Camilla (2019), "Countering Buddhist radicalisation: emerging peace movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka", *Third World Quarterly*
40 Walton, Mathew J. and Hayward, Susan (2014), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Vilence in Myanmar*, East-West Center
41 Walton, Mathew J, Schissler, Matt & Thi, Phyu Phyu (2017), "Failed riots: Sucessful conflict prevention in four Myanmar cities", M.MAS Working Paper 1:2

Methodology

The research for this report involved qualitative social research, conducted by a group of 31 researchers, split into small teams of three to five persons each. The researchers involved were themselves activists from a Burmese civil society organisation working to counter extremist nationalism. Many of the groups participating in the study were therefore peers of the researchers, connected through civil society networks. Desk research was conducted on a selection of culture and media initiatives, of which four were contacted but were not available for interviews. Myanmar Now was the only media organisation interviewed for the study.

Burma, like many other post-colonial states, has a problematic history of research as an instrument of repression, implicated in colonisation and state repression.[42] Researchers tried to mitigate against negative impacts of their research by following ethical principles, including respect and beneficence. All dialogues began with a discussion of consent, where researchers informed participants of the study, how it would be used and how they would be informed of the results. Participants were then asked to give verbal consent, including whether or not the discussion could be audio recorded. In all but one instance, participants consented to being audio recorded.

Discussions were conducted informally, with small groups or individuals, depending on context. A semi-structured discussion guide was used and researchers were encouraged to lead the discussion in a way that was responsive to the context and interests of participants.[43] Interviews were approached as a dialogue in which experiences of work to promote tolerance and counter extremist Buddhist nationalism were shared, although this was not always possible, especially when participants had high status in the community. Showing respect involved giving space to let participants speak, even if, in some cases, it did not directly address the concerns of this study. When detail was limited, researchers did not insist that respondents go on, resulting in an imbalance in the information available between different actors.

Participants

Participants for the study were identified through the purposeful method of snowball sampling. It involved contacting organisers that already had a relationship with the researchers' organisation and seeking assistance from partners to contact other organisations within their networks. Activists within the researchers' existing network were largely grassroots community-based organisations and more informal initiatives. It was also at this level that the researchers could identify the widest range of initiatives and recruited the majority of participants. Purposeful sampling fit with the research plan, where relevant organisations were selected in discussions with the research organisation's staff and partners. In some instances, new organisations

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42 King, Charles (2019), *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the 20th Century*, Doubleday
43 The interview guide is attached as an appendix to this report.

and community activists were also visited during data collection, with assistance from participants in the field. Snowball sampling was greatly beneficial in expanding circles of trust. Given the high sensitivity of some of the community initiatives and the risks involved, trust was crucial for research relationships to be positive, based on consent and result in accurate data. In the relatively short timeframe of the field study, it was highly challenging to establish new relationships of trust, so it was important that relationships snowballed from already existing partners, through trusted contacts of the researchers' partners. Due to the sensitivity of the work, the identity of participants, group names, and locations have been anonymised, with the exception of actors that have a public profile.[44]

In total, 70 individuals from 20 organisations participated in discussions in nine cities, towns and villages around Burma. They described 32 initiatives that were examined for this report. Participants came from a diverse range of community organisations, networks, initiatives, schools and religious organisations working to counter extremist Buddhist nationalism and included Buddhists and Muslims. In a number of sites, key contacts were from the Muslim community. This created some difficulties recruiting Buddhist participants, which reflects a weakness in snowball sampling. To minimise security risks, it was also important for researchers to limit participation to individuals who were either known to the researchers or were trusted by peer organisations of the researchers.

Challenges to female participation

Less than one third of participants were female, so there is gender imbalance in the findings. In five field sites, there were no female participants. In one site, a female research participant shared her views and experiences until her husband came home. Her husband told her to stop and said that he would continue in her place. In another site, a female research participant kept deferring to a male participant and was reluctant to share her own views. There was also a weakness in the sampling method used, which lacked a strategy to increase female participation, and will be improved upon in potential follow-up studies or other future social research. In contrast, there was gender balance in the research teams, with 16 male researchers and 15 female researchers. Female participation in every research group was also ensured.

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44 The sensitivity of the topic of Buddhist nationalism in Burma should not be underestimated. For example, there are several cases where people who have spoken out publicly against the activities of, or leading figures, in MaBaTha have been targeted by violent extremists.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the field study. All of the nine sights visited during the field research reported having a presence of nationalist groups and many had witnessed communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the past. Some more recently but most during 2013-2015, when communal violence flared up across the country. Respondents described how their communities had responded in different ways, in order to stop or prevent violence. By engaging religious leaders, setting up peace networks, creating new platforms for interaction across religious and cultural lines, actively trying to counter dangerous rumours as they spread, and more, the groups interviewed considered that their efforts had played a role in preventing violent clashes form reoccurring.

Researchers found a diverse range of activities and methods used to counter extremist nationalist influence and build trust in communities, but there were also many common themes. For the sake of presentation and argument, these have been divided into five categories that are distinct from one another, yet with many overlapping features: (1) religious leaders, (2) platforms for interaction, (3) countering dangerous rumours, (4) culture and media initiatives, and (5) vigilante initiatives.

Religious leaders

This category looks at strategies to counter extremism that involve religious leaders as a key part of community initiatives, and where initiatives take place within a religious framework. MaBaTha's leadership is dominated by monks and as such, the *sangha*, the monastic community, is a highly contested arena, with some monks organising to expand extremist influence, and others advocating for peace and tolerance. Monks are by tradition highly influential in Burma and have the ability to command a level of respect among Buddhist laypeople that other figures, including police and politicians, cannot.

A Burmese cultural concept, *awza*, helps explain the power of monks to incite hatred and foster peace. *Awza* can translate as "influence" or "moral authority," and it involves rule through consent, as opposed to *ana*, a Burmese concept that applies to forms of power that involve the use of force. *Ana* and *awza* are not binary oppositions but rather "blend into one another."[45] As the cases presented here indicate, to counter extremism, the use of *awza* appears to have been a successful strategy, with senior monks using *awza* to influence their juniors and monks using *awza* to disarm mobs and bring communities together. *Awza* has also been a factor in how Muslim religious leaders have responded to conflict, in some cases exerting influence over members of their community to prevent escalation.

45 Houtman, Gustaaf (1999), *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National league for Democracy*, Vol. 33, p. 169, ILCAA

Thus, one key factor for the perceived success in the examples in this category was the fact that they were able to make use of the influence and authority of religious leaders in both responding to violence and building trust in communities. An important and significant finding is that in many of the sights visited, there was active cooperation between Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders.

Example 1: Imam in Mandalay

One imam in Mandalay described how he worked to build trust and solidarity across religious divides. He personally met with monks regularly to cultivate relationships and he supported Buddhist charities, sometimes giving his time to serve meals. When travelling, he would stay at Buddhist monasteries, as a sign of friendship and with the intention of showing that Muslims and Buddhists form part of the same community.

He had been successful at building trust and his interfaith work had taken him to different cities where he had been involved in responding to conflict. He described how he had learnt to recognise tactics used by extremists to instigate violence and how he was able to use this for early response. This had enabled him to play an important role in preventing conflict in Mandalay one time when tensions were particularly high. He explained that his strategy to create strong interfaith networks involved building solidarity so that community members would have greater levels of trust and could work together if conflict broke out. His work shows how individual religious leaders can have considerable impact on improving relations across religious divides and how this can help prevent conflict.

Example 2: Monk in Rakhine State

In one region of Rakhine State, a monk played a key role in maintaining peace and protecting neighbouring Muslim villagers. The Muslim village head described the monk as instrumental in maintaining good relations with the neighbouring Buddhist village. At one point, tensions between the two villages increased as a Buddhist mob went to the Muslim village and there was a perceived risk of violence. Due to the existing relationship between the Muslim village head and the monk, the monk was fetched and asked to intervene to prevent violence from escalating. He came and negotiated with the mob and eventually the crowd stood down and left the scene.

A Buddhist village head in the same area told researchers that they had developed a sort of "peace agreement" with their neighbouring Muslim villages not to attack each other, which the monk had strongly advocated for. At the time, there had been widespread intercommunal violence in western Burma and a general breakdown of community relations, despite decades of relative social harmony and coexistence. One of the arguments that resonated well with Buddhist leaders was that peaceful coexistence would enable them to continue to hire Muslim labourers. It was explained that Muslims were known to work hard and there was a worry that the supply of labour might be disturbed. Important elements that reportedly contributed to this successful example included the involvement of the respected monk, high-level contact between communities, and a desire on both sides to prevent conflict. And

although the argument in this particular case may have been inspired by realpolitik rather than grander ideals of peaceful coexistence, it shows how the authority of a religious leader can exert influence over followers and contribute to preventing violence.

Example 3: Monks and imams cooperating in Mandalay Region

In May 2013, violence broke-out in Lashio in Shan State after news spread that a Muslim man had set a Buddhist woman on fire. Buddhist mobs attacked Muslims and set fire to their property. Thousands fled and went into hiding.[46] This incident inspired the formation of a new peace team in Mandalay Region that included Buddhist monks, Muslim leaders and youth. The team had notable success in July 2014. A false rumour circulated about a rape case, which was used to spur vigilante action targeting a café in Mandalay and conflict broke out. Crowds gathered to attack a mosque and Muslim-owned shops and some were shouting "kill all *kalar.*"[47] The local imam reached out to a senior allied monk and they mobilised together. The monk reasoned with the mob that if the alleged rape had taken place, the perpetrator would be prosecuted in accordance with the law. Peace team leaders handed out drinks to people as a sign of goodwill, peace and solidarity. Public offerings of food and beverages are a common Buddhist act in Myanmar and are associated with *metta*, a Buddhist concept of love. This example shows the advantages of good relations between individual leaders of different religions.

Reflections

These examples show the potential for great impact of individual religious leaders working to promote peace and tolerance. It was striking and somewhat unexpected that there was so much interaction between Buddhist and Muslim leaders at the local level. This provides nuance to some popular perceptions of protracted conflict and deep divisions between Buddhist and Muslim groups across Burma. While the limited scope of this field study cannot claim to give a representative view of the situation across the country, these examples do provide some hope for a more tolerant future relationship between Muslim and Buddhist communities in Burma. Arguably, engaging religious leaders to counter exclusionary narratives is a strategy that has proven useful in many cases and that deserves further examination and support.

Some religious leaders also stressed the importance of acting as role models to show that people from different communities can coexist peacefully. Even small symbolic actions can have positive impacts. One well-known monk talked about the importance of being a role model, showing how, as a Buddhist monk, he could work together and nurture friendships with people from other religions. One gesture he highlighted was when people from other religions ride in his car that displays a Buddhist flag. It is a public display of coexistence to challenge the views of those who are intolerant of difference.

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46 BBC, "Burma Muslim-Buddhist clashes continue in Shan state", 29 May 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22697104 (accessed 14 December 2019)
47 *Kalar* is a derogatory term for 'Muslim' or persons of South Asian descent.

But there were also initiatives involving religious leaders which were more problematic. For example, one prominent monk in southern Mandalay Region was able to prevent a dramatic situation in 2017 from turning violent. Rumours of a new mosque being constructed led to angry crowds mobilising to destroy the building. The situation was in danger of escalating and lead to the destruction of other Muslim property and potentially physical injury to people. Local authorities requested assistance from the monk. He described the scene:

> "There were tens of thousands[48] of people surrounding the house. The roads were blocked by people. The police couldn't do anything. Some people tried to instigate violence, shouting to demolish the building. I told them to prove that it was a mosque and they backed down. When the situation calmed down, I patrolled the city with local authorities. We used a loudspeaker to announce that it was fake news aimed at destabilising the city."

While the monk was successful in defusing conflict, his strategy was to argue that the crowd lacked evidence to support that the building was going to be a mosque. This can be seen as implying that anti-Muslim mobilisation could be justified with sufficient evidence. The resolution of the conflict resulted in the "voluntary" destruction of the building by the owner, with the support of local authorities. While the danger of mob violence was overcome, the settlement seemed to favour extremist Buddhist nationalists. The monk explained his motivation for action as a commitment to non-violence. He said: "my main purpose is peace. It is a religious leader's duty to reduce anger and bring people onto the path of peace."

Platforms for interaction

This second category of activities identified involved efforts to bring communities together in order to bridge differences and build trust. They were often grassroots initiatives aimed at bringing communities together across religious and cultural divisions to offer platforms for people to meet and allow friendships to develop. In many places visited, it was not common for people to socialise across religious and cultural divisions. A number of initiatives involved bringing members of different ethnic and religious communities together in workshops, that were specifically focussed on cultivating inter-cultural understanding and participatory learning to challenge racism and Islamophobia. These could be transformative for the people involved. Some programmes were youth-oriented and included workshops in which Muslim and Buddhist youth were, for the first time, put in a position where they had to work together and cooperate.

Examples in this category often involved elements of education, e.g. through workshops, trainings, and exposure trips. This awareness-raising did not necessarily involve physical meetings between members of different religious communities, but often did. Increased understanding and tolerance for other religions can be achieved

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48 Independent estimates of the crowd size are unavailable.

either through education or through increased interaction, or a combination of the two. In contrast to the previous category, these examples did not necessarily involve or depend on religious leaders. They were initiated by non-religious civil society groups.

Example 1: Awareness-raising in Mandalay

Researchers spoke to the founding monk of a national non-profit network working to bridge difference and respond to conflict. He was based in northern Mandalay Region. Formerly a religious nationalist leader, he reflected on how he had been personally "liberated" after participating in a training with participants from different religions:

> "We used to see other religions as inferior and didn't want to give them space. I didn't want to consider others as part of the human race. We urged our people to only marry Buddhists, to only buy at Buddhist shops and we distributed letters calling for a boycott of Muslim horse carts and buses… A close friend of the Secretary of our foundation was organising a training and invited two of us to attend. We didn't even really know what social science meant at that time. I was concerned because I couldn't accept diversity and the training was in the compound of a Catholic church. I was really confused.

> I didn't trust the programme but I went to see what really happens there. I didn't want to see Christian fathers and it was even worse than I thought because there were also Muslim leaders with long beards. I had always hated their appearance. The training started but I couldn't concentrate. It was hard to accept sitting beside other religious leaders in the same row. I didn't like it and didn't want to clap during the opening ceremony. I decided to watch and observe as they started playing games.

> I had to join in when I lost my chair [during the activity]. A Muslim youth told me what I missed and I started actively participating. Their welcoming attitude was important for me…. I did some self-reflection at that time and I realised how little I knew, despite being the leader of a foundation. The only thing I had done before is yell against those I thought were against me. I changed a lot after that training.

> Many Buddhists only know the god we worship. I didn't have a chance to attend a training like that until I was 45. We hate not because we have problems with people from other religions but because older generations passed this hatred down to us. Even a religious leader like me believed that it doesn't matter what happens to people from other religious groups, even if they are killed...

> We've been fooled by false information being passed down across generations. A key point is that we are uneducated so hatred grows every day until it is unmovable. I was lucky to join this training and I have been free since then."

This study cannot assess how common such radical change through platforms of interaction is. Researchers asked the leader why other monks had not changed like him, despite participating in similar workshops. He replied that some monks lack self-reflection and the basic knowledge to benefit from the course.

Example 2: Peace network in Magway Region

Another example comes from a town in Magway Region, where community and religious leaders formed a peace network after communal violence that involved the destruction of mosques and Muslim property. The police and military did little to prevent violence and protect the Muslim community so grassroots interventions were seen as essential to prevent future violence. One of the key strategies the network used was education and cultural exchanges. They held regular talks to present and share cultural and religious practices from different communities, to raise awareness and appreciation of diversity. They also organised workshops to increase inter-cultural interaction and cooperation and conducted periodic cultural exchange fieldtrips. Fieldtrips were organised approximately every three months and included Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, usually scheduled to coincide with workshops and other activities. One of the network leaders explained:

> "We go on cultural exchange trips… to build empathy. The trips are so beneficial. We cannot go to places of other religions by ourselves without help from each other. [On the trips,] we share how we do religious rituals. For example, we explain to non-Buddhists why we ring bells in pagodas and everyone is really happy. It would have been impossible for [Muslims] to go there without Buddhist friends… because they are afraid."

Example 3: Community school in Rakhine State

In Rakhine State, a community project set up schools and used education to bring communities together. Their curriculum included content on peace, diversity and conflict studies, aimed at changing participants' perspectives. They aimed to improve relationships between communities and had had success facilitating more diverse voices in local decision-making. For instance, some alumni were serving in local government in a township in northern Rakhine State, which had seen particularly serious conflict. It is not possible to assess their impact in local politics but it is a positive step if they are able to integrate what they learnt in the community school to their work life. Most alumni work with NGOs and community-based organisations. According to the leader, their schools are one of the only places where Rakhine and Muslim youth can meet to build relationships. In addition to education, they had organised a football competition to bring male and female youth together from both communities.

Example 4: White Rose campaign in Yangon

One recent initiative that has received a lot of attention is the White Rose campaign. It is a public campaign that was set up in 2019 after extremist Buddhist nationalists forced the closure of three places of worship in Yangon that had been set up for Ramadan. Violence broke out in South Dagon Township with a mob attacking the local government administration office demanding permanent closure of a neighbourhood mosque.[49] The mob captured a journalist from Myanmar Muslim Media, a local news outlet, and destroyed some Muslim property. At the time, progressive activists were present and, in response, held a meeting to mobilise and counter the extremist Buddhist nationalists. A prominent monk handed out white roses to Muslims that night and other activists decided to join and build a movement around the symbolic act of solidarity, following the use of white roses as a symbol for peace and coexistence in France and England after acts of violence.[50] There have since been more than ten White Rose campaign events in Myanmar.

The movement is important in communicating the idea of solidarity. It enables members of the public to demonstrate to Muslims that MaBaTha does not represent them. White Rose has received substantial media attention which amplifies their message of solidarity, but the reach and scope of the media coverage was not examined in this study. In a recent event at a mosque in Mingalar Taung Nyunt, an inner-city township of Yangon with a high Muslim population, White Rose activists gave out more than 2 000 roses. The Yangon White Rose leader described local reactions: "The Muslim community accepted our apology and really appreciated it […] They prayed for us and guided us to every street in the ward. The response gave us a lot of energy."

Reflections

Many of the groups in this category were actively working to bring people from different religious communities together. There are indications that these groups seem to play important roles in building long-term trust between communities and that this trust is crucial in times of heightened tension. A key impediment to success in some of these initiatives were continuing restrictions on civil society. For instance, one challenge to public mobilisation is the 2012 Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law,[51] which allows for limited public gathering but subjects them to a high degree of state regulation. The White Rose campaign is supposed to obtain

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49 M-Media, "In Yangon, Myanmar – Mob appears in streets again to show their denial of religious freedom," *M-Media*, 16 May 2019, http://www.m-mediagroup.com/en/archives/9043 (15 December 2019)

50 For instance, after a terrorist attack in 2017, members of the London Muslim community organised 1 000 Roses London, handing out roses "as a symbolic gesture of love, solidarity and community."
See e.g. Sarah Ann Harris, "Muslims Hand Out Roses On London Bridge To Show Solidarity Following Attack," *Huffington Post, 12* June 2016**,** https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/muslims-hand-out-roses-on-london-bridge-to-show-solidarity-following-atack_uk_593e4c49e4b0b13f2c6be738?guccounter=1 (accessed 16 December 2019)

51 See e.g. Free Expression Myanmar, *Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law*, available at http://freeexpressionmyanmar.org/peaceful-assembly-and-peaceful-procession-law/ (accessed 20 November 2019)

permission from authorities for public events, which is sometimes hard to obtain. The response of the state can be unpredictable, depending on the whims of local authorities with little recourse to question decisions. Supposed violations of the law can lead to criminal prosecution, one of the tools being used to restrict civil society in Myanmar. A recent White Rose campaign planned for Sule Pagoda in central Yangon was cancelled because local authorities refused permission.

In Rakhine State, there are particularly significant restrictions on civil society, that create major difficulties for community initiatives that promote peace and coexistence. In one project visited, researchers were told that police regularly visit and had warned that bringing people from the two communities together can lead to problems. "Their opinion is that there will be more problems if the two communities are closer together," one project leader explained. After one event that civil society actors organised, images were circulated online with personal attacks for bringing Buddhist Rakhine girls into contact with Muslim boys. "We were very worried at that time" the project leader said. In Rakhine State, civil society is also subject to other restrictions, which put their operations at risk, especially when activities involve access to Rohingya camps, and depend on temporary permits for travel and access.

Some groups self-labelled as "interfaith" while others did not. Nevertheless, most groups interviewed were working actively to bring people from different religious backgrounds together. Researchers also encountered a few problematic community groups calling themselves interfaith groups. For example, one group in eastern Burma, although identifying as "interfaith," required the local Muslim community to ask for permission before carrying out religious activities. Researchers were also told that this group cooperated with the government, acting as a kind of go-to group for organising religious events, and it also dealt with religious disputes. Over the past years, the NLD-led government has actively supported interfaith initiatives, as part of its efforts to promote peace. Several international actors are also active in Burma with support to interfaith initiatives.[52]

Countering dangerous rumours

This category looks at examples of initiatives to counter dangerous rumours online and offline. One interesting finding from the study is that in all places they went, researchers were told that bouts of violence or escalation of conflict had been preceded by online or offline hate speech – information respondents considered to be false rumours or fake news. There was an assumption that such information probably had been spread in order to create conflict or instigate violence between communities. This was also noted by the UN Fact-Finding Mission, which received similar information during its investigations, suggesting a linkage between hate speech and acts of discrimination or violence that is "more than circumstantial."[53] This requires further examination.

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52 Kyaw, Nyi Nyi (2019), "Interreligious Conflict and the Politics of Interfaith Dialogue in Myanmar", *Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 10, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute
53 UNHRC (2018), op cit. p. 326, para. 1327

There were quite a few examples of activists and civil society organisations working to counter false rumours and hate speech online, with several popular Facebook pages that fact-checked news and rumours. When news spread that could be dangerous, they verified the information and published debunking posts on their pages. Most of these groups were Yangon-based.

Example 1: Cooperating to monitor hate-speech

Researchers encountered an interesting example of civil society organisations working together to monitor hate speech in a structured way to distribute to other civil society groups on a monthly basis. Their reports were based on the daily monitoring of 33 mainstream media sources, 109 Facebook accounts, 58 Facebook pages, 71 Facebook groups, and 375 VK accounts.[54] Instances of hate speech were recorded and divided into categories, including those that involve personal attacks on democratic actors, journalists and civil society activists, and posts that actively instigate violence. These monthly reports aimed to show patterns of hate speech, and by monitoring a wide number of sources analyse trends over time, including new targets and new forms of dangerous language.

Example 2: Fact-checking national charity

One national charity set up a system to check and counter rumours, as a strategy to intervene and prevent conflict from flaring up. The leader explained, "there are a lot of rumours. Rumours like a schoolgirl being raped by Muslims, fake news that creates mobs of angry people." Using phones, they call around to check the veracity of rumours. If rumours are false, they inform community leaders within their network, including those supporting mob action. They had trained members around the country to check and counter rumours as a means of active conflict prevention. The group claimed to have been able to prevent riots three times using this approach, although it was not possible to verify their claims, Because of his work, the leader himself had become a target of MaBaTha, which had tried to spread rumours that he was converting monks to Islam.

Example 3: Countering hate speech in Magway

It is common for towns around Burma to have local Facebook groups. These can be influential in the community and a forum through which rumours can spread and fuel violence. Researchers noted with interest the work of a group in Magway to develop relationships with the administrators of their local Facebook town-group with a plan to work with them to stop the spread of rumours at the source. Through informal

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54 VK, short for its previous name VKontakte, is a Russian social media site that grew in popularity among extremist Buddhist nationalists and members of the Tatmadaw after Facebook began banning users, pages and groups involved in spreading hate, including the page of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in 2018. See e.g. Beech, Hannah and Nang, Saw, "In Myanmar, a Facebook Blackout Brings More Anger Than a Genocide Charge," *New York Times*, 31 August 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/asia/myanmar-genocide-facebook-military.html. VK also banned Min Aung Hlaing's page. See Steger, Isabella, "After getting kicked off Facebook, Myanmar's top general is banned from Russia's biggest social network," *QZ*, 17 September 2018, https://qz.com/1392003/after-facebook-myanmar-military-chief-min-aung-hlaing-booted-by-russias-vkontakte-vk/.

meetings, the Magway activists successfully influenced the administrators to take a stronger stand on misinformation and religious hatred. This example shows the importance of local knowledge and is a good example of how community members can counter misinformation before it spreads. It is a potentially high-impact approach that could be replicated in other towns across Burma.

Example 4: Fact-checking Facebook groups
There are popular Facebook pages that fact-check news and rumours, including *Think Before You Trust*[55] and *Real or Not*[56]. These are led by teams of activists that regularly monitor popular Facebook pages and groups, including those with known links to MaBaTha. Some also focus on mainstream media. When news spreads that could potentially be dangerous, they verify the information and publish debunking posts on their pages. If the news is fake, they explain how it was constructed, thereby improving the digital literacy skills of readers. At a micro-level, these sites have played a role educating Facebook users and in diffusing fake news narratives.

Reflections
Geographically based Facebook groups appear to be highly influential in the local communities and act as fora through which rumours can spread quickly and fuel violence. That means they can also be used for other ends, e.g. to disseminate alternative messages, fact-check statements and debunk rumours. It is also interesting to note that local knowledge and contacts matter, as shown in the Magwe case where activists successfully contacted and influenced the administrators of a local Facebook group. The Magwe groups was a positive discovery as strategies to monitor and counter fake news and hate speech are rarer outside of Yangon and in ethnic minority languages. While it is early to say whether they have been successful, it is potentially a high-impact approach that could be replicated in other towns around Myanmar. Online initiatives also have a potential of increasing the digital literacy of internet users.

Culture and media initiatives

This category involves varied methods to counter nationalist groups' efforts at media and cultural influence. It involves the use of print and online media to uncover the workings of nationalist groups such as MaBaTha and the use of popular culture and other cultural expressions to critique extremist Buddhist nationalism and disseminate counter messages. The culture and media sphere is a key, contested field. MaBaTha are heavily involved in cultural production, including literature, music and film. Print and online media in Burma is an important outlet for the spread of racist and Islamophobic tropes and more overt forms of hate speech. Therefore, media that present alternative narratives can play an important role. *Khit Thit Media* for example,

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55 "Think Before You Trust," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/ThinkBeforeYouTrust/ (accessed 1 November 2019)
56 "Real or Not?," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/realornot.mm/?__tn__=%2C-d%2CP-R&eid=ARB4J_ETkJjvBL25ZcDXajZpX7WAeHYkQmKQ_6230cdyKueu3DotA1Yk-HOV4KX0cUtLynXBR1-VLY6me (accessed 1 November 2019)

an online outlet, has become somewhat of a source for stories countering extremist Buddhist nationalism as part of their approach to socially engaged journalism. They regularly report on peace initiatives and run features to showcase Buddhist monks who are opposed to MaBaTha, presenting an alternative narrative.

There is also a limited number of singers who use their platforms to actively counter extremist narratives, including famous pop singers producing songs against hate. The few mainstream artists with large fanbases that were found tended to be less overt in their opposition to nationalist narratives, focusing on conveying messages of love and understanding. Less mainstream or underground artist tended to be more openly confrontational with explicitly critical messages of nationalist groups. Some of these groups defined themselves as "anti-racist." An example of an openly critical group is a Yangon-based initiative that launched a "smash blind nationalism movement." They use graffiti and social media to spread anti-racist messages. Due to threats and high risk of reprisal, they are required to operate anonymously. One popular cartoonist is known for his open criticism of MaBaTha and has portrayed the organisation as a threat to Buddhist practice and to democracy.

Example 1: Investigative journalism into MaBaTha

A prominent and rare example of a news outlet publishing investigations into MaBaTha's operations is Myanmar Now. For example, in 2019 this news outlet investigated rallies in support of MaBaTha and uncovered evidence of financial links to the military-backed USDP party.[57] This story gained a lot of attention. After covering the Wirathu support rallies, the journalists involved reported increased concerns for their personal security. They avoided attending further MaBaTha events in Yangon for fear of retaliation, reflecting the precarious environment that independent journalists operate in. The work of Myanmar Now is potentially influential since it reaches a broad audience and reveals information about nationalist groups that is seen as problematic in the eyes of many members of the public. It could thus help decrease the popularity of such groups.

Example 2: Muslim community media

Media outlets such as *M-Media* and *Choun,* which are run by Muslim community members and mainly target the Muslim community, have played an important role informing readers about conflict and highlighting the impact on communities of extremist Buddhist nationalism. These platforms can in part be seen as an alternative to the extensive range of Buddhist-affiliated media, including publications, TV and radio, published by groups like MaBaTha. Muslim community media plays a key role in giving a voice to members of the Muslim community, reporting on events and highlighting content that is of particular concern to Muslim communities. Given the often-problematic portrayal of Muslims in much of Burmese media, they also play a

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57 See e.g. "Paid to Pray? USDP Officials Arrange 'Rent-A-Crowds' For Pro-Wirathu Protests", *Myanmar Now*, 26 June 2019, available at
 https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/paid-to-pray-usdp-officials-arrange-rent-a-crowds-for-pro-wirathu-protests (accessed 12 December 2019)

role in increasing representation of Muslim communities in media.

Reflections

One advantage of these initiatives is the potential of reaching wide audiences and thus achieving greater impact. However, there are several challenges for initiatives within this category. Media and cultural initiatives are at a systemic disadvantage because of a lack of capital and distribution networks. With the exception of some celebrity cases, many of the media and cultural initiatives are restricted by limited resources. MaBaTha, on the other hand, has wide donor networks, including major benefactors, that allow them to produce media and cultural products without profit. They also have wide networks around the country that they use for distribution. In contrast, many media and cultural initiatives are largely operating with little or no funding, limiting the amount of content and the audience. Greater funding is needed to support journalistic and creative initiatives to increase production quality and reach.

Other important limitations are threats and the use of a number of repressive laws to limit freedom of expression.[58] Several journalists who have written critically of Buddhist nationalist groups have also been threatened or attacked.

Vigilante initiatives

This category includes local strategies to organise in defence activities that can be categorised as forms of vigilante methods. Various community security initiatives are common, especially during heightened inter-religious tension. In Muslim communities, there can be distrust of police or a lack of police presence, given the problematic track record of security forces' complicity or inaction during times of violence. Community patrols can fill gaps by providing security through trusted members of the same community. But these activities can also be highly problematic and even lead to increased tension and insecurity.

Example 1: Civilian defence initiatives in western Bago Region

In western Bago, a group of peace activists successfully prevented outbreaks of violence by, among other things, forming a close partnership with the police. When there was an increased threat of extremist violence, the activists used their local networks to find out who the instigators were and referred them to the police. The activists also set up civilian checkpoints on the outskirts of town to stop MaBaTha supporters that were being bussed in to participate in the violence. Another strategy involved actively spreading false information to stop violence. These included false messages saying that the police were planning to shoot rioters if they did not dissolve. Although these methods can be seen as controversial, they seem to have been effective in terms of reducing the immediate risk conflict.

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58 Human Rights Watch (2019), *Dashed Hopes: The criminalisation of peaceful expression in Myanmar*

Example 2: Community security in eastern Bago

At a time of serious tension in a mixed community in eastern Bago, members of the Muslim community organised a security group and collected rods and swords. The leader explained that their intention had primarily been to protect children and the elderly, but a rumour had spread that they were gathering weapons to attack Buddhists, leading to greater security risks. Similarly, a Mandalay Muslim leader described efforts by a local imam to prepare to defend his mosque from attack. This led to a police operation, in which they confiscated steel pipes, wooden sticks, and a slingshot.

Reflections

Some of the initiatives in this category were highly problematic, such as self-defence groups sometimes using violent methods. Due to the absence of state protection from extremist violence, whether real or perceived, one can see how for example community patrols can play a role to increase security within a group. However, such initiatives also risk backfiring, especially when they involve weapons, leading to rumours, prosecution or even increased violence. There were some cases where respondents explained how Muslims had paid aggressors money in order to protect their property from being destroyed. And while this was seen by some as a kind of success in terms of saving property and stopping further violence from breaking out, it can also be seen as rewarding the extremists and is therefore highly questionable. It can hardly be interpreted as a sustainable or long-term solution. Indeed, this kind of protection money could even risk further escalation if some actors were to see it as a money-making scheme.

Conclusions and learning outcomes

This study set out to document examples of civil society initiatives countering the influence of Buddhist nationalists and identify successful methods and strategies in order better understand how such initiatives could be strengthened. The study found a large number of initiatives deploying a range of strategies to counter the influence of Buddhist nationalism and prevent violence. Some were highly organised and operated across states and regions. Others were informal local responses that were initiated to bridge divisions and save lives and property. The 32 initiatives included in the study range from networks with hundreds of members to the work of individual community and religious leaders. The vast majority belonged to the latter category.

This study also seems to confirm that there are significant tensions between religious communities in many places across Burma and that extremist Buddhist nationalists have played a role in stoking fears and fuelling conflict. Many of the places visited had experienced communal violence and were still very much affected by those conflicts. Although, importantly, it also shows that despite these tensions, communities were in many cases able to come together and resolve disputes peacefully. Many respondents described how their groups had been successful in disrupting Buddhist nationalist initiatives, including preventing ongoing or looming violence. That said, this study was not an evaluation of groups' performances and any judgement of success is based on what the respondents chose to convey and highlight during the interviews. Nevertheless, the fact that many of the cases displayed similar characteristics allow for some conclusions to be drawn, without claiming to have proven any causal relationships.

The research suggests that involving religious leaders is an important strategy as they have the authority to negotiate with communities and in several cases even the ability to put an end to violence. This supports findings of previous studies in Burma.[59] Significantly, successful cases often involved both Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders working together. Involving individuals with *awsa* in community-based interventions was highlighted as a factor enabling more impact and higher chance of success.

Creating platforms for interaction to bring members from different religious communities together showed some potential for improving trust between communities. Trust can be seen as a crucial theme present in all of the five categories (religious leaders, platforms for interaction, countering dangerous rumours, culture and media initiatives, and vigilante initiatives). Trust between religious and community leaders made it possible for them to call upon each other for help in times of heightened tension and looming violence. The study also identified a number of more problematic initiatives, including community security initiatives involving weapons and "interfaith" groups that appeared to favour the Buddhist community

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59 See chapter 3, *Previous research*.

over Muslims, thus maintaining or reinforcing discriminatory practices.

A weakness of this study is that it failed to grasp gender dynamics in a systematic way. The religious leaders heading some of the initiatives were all men. However, it is not clear what roles women may have played within these and other initiatives. Respondents were not systematically asked to describe the different roles men and women might have played. Observations by some researchers suggest that women had active roles in some of the groups in this study. This should be further explored in future research, especially given the relatively prominent role of women in nationalist organisations.[60]

There are several potential learning outcomes from this study that should be taken into account for future work within this field in Burma. Many of the actors that participated in this research are engaged in grassroots work, in community-based organisations or informal initiatives. Many of these are based on a small number of individuals, often people with influence in their local communities. They can have noticeable roles in their communities to counter nationalist influence, either by directly challenging extremist legitimacy, or by building trust across religious communities. However, the long-term sustainability of grassroots actions that centre on individuals are fragile, and a number of the initiatives depended on the support of a wealthy benefactor or on community donations. This also poses difficulties for donors, as many groups are informal, unregistered and lack formal structures.

It would be beneficial for groups and initiatives across the country to interact more and build networks that can engage a wider range of people. Some networks are developing around particular strategies, such as countering hate speech. However, greater effort and resources are needed to bring activists together and increase cooperation across these diverse strategies. This would facilitate the sharing of experiences of what methods and initiatives have proven to be successful or unsuccessful and allow for some efforts to be scaled up. The sensitive nature of this topic may however pose a challenge to network-building. Many of these groups operate under the radar or with limited public visibility due to fear of reprisal.

From a donor perspective, it is important to note that groups operating in this field can face additional risks if they are seen as funded by outside, foreign actors. This could be used by nationalist groups to undermine their credibility. It is also clear from this study that not all groups operating in this field are forces for positive change. Donors should be aware of these risks. In-depth knowledge of the local dynamics is highly important for any donor considering supporting groups within this field. Initiatives may end up having negative impact if they are not carefully assessed and designed.

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60 See e.g. McKay, Melyn & Win, Khin Chit (2018), "Myanmar's gender paradox", *Anthropology today*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 1-3; and International Crisis Group (2017), op. cit.