THE LADY LOSES HER LUSTRE

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A REVIEW SPECIAL

And the Buddha weeps...

ANARCHY, VIOLENCE AND MURDER... THE RISE OF BUDDHIST MILITANCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

TEARING
the social fabric

Buddhist nationalism threatens Myanmar's fragile balance

By ALEX BOOKBINDER / Yangon

A vocal minority of Buddhist ultra-nationalists are threatening Myanmar's fragile ethnic balance, and tensions across the country are running high. While Yangon has remained relatively free from widespread violence so far, the city's Muslims are living in an environment of pervasive fear.

Recent events in the wake of serious anti-Muslim attacks in central Myanmar have done nothing to allay this. A suspicious fire at an Islamic religious school in Yangon on April 2 killed 13 students. While authorities explained it away as an electrical fire, Yangon's Muslims remain unconvinced. Muslim-majority township councils in a number of Yangon townships have organised private volunteer security forces to patrol the streets, because locals feel they cannot trust the police to protect them in the event they come under attack.

The transport hub of Meiktila in central Myanmar was rocked by serious anti-Muslim violence starting on March 19. Allegedly triggered by an argument over the value of a gold hairpin at a local jewellery store, 42 people were killed over three days of clashes, according to state media.

Entire city blocks were reduced to ash and rubble, with charred bodies lining the streets. Smoke rising from burning homes and mosques clouded the sky. Things calmed down after the government declared a state of emergency on March 22, but the damage will be difficult to undo: an estimated 8,000 Muslims were displaced by the attacks, many of whom have taken up emergency residence in Meiktila's football stadium.

On March 25, Muslim areas in two towns some 200 kilometres north of Yangon were attacked by Buddhist mobs while police looked on, and sporadic attacks around central Myanmar continued throughout the week.

The events in Meiktila mark the single worst instance of sectarian violence

A sticker of the 969 movement seen at a shop in Minhla. Since 42 people were killed in violence that erupted in Meikhtila town on March 20, unrest led by hardline Buddhists has spread to at least 10 other towns and villages in central Myanmar, with the latest incidents only a two-hour drive from Yangon. – Reuters

in Myanmar since riots in Arakan State last year, in which hundreds of people were killed and more than 120,000 displaced. Both incidents shed light on the growing spectre of Buddhist ultra-nationalism in Myanmar, which – although far from new– has manifested itself in increasingly malign ways in recent years. The scale of the events in Meiktila indicates a high level of coordination and planning, suggesting that these clashes were more than just spontaneous cases of "communal violence."

Numerous small-scale attacks against Muslim targets have occurred on-and-off across the country with increased frequency over the last year. While there have only been isolated incidents in Yangon thus far, there is a palpable fear that a full-on pogrom – as occurred in Meiktila – could take place here, too.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar is nothing new, but the recent emergence of a popular mass movement called "969" is especially worrying. Stickers bearing its insignia have become omnipresent in Yangon since they first started to appear in January, seemingly out of nowhere. Ironically, of all the world's hate groups, 969 probably has the prettiest logo – the vivid colours of the Buddhist rainbow flag superimposed upon by a chakra wheel and the four lions of Ashoka.

But despite their aesthetic sensibilities, 969 represents all that is wrong with Buddhism in Myanmar today – hate-mongers promoting a narrow, divisive vision of a Buddhist-supremacist state, a vision that has the potential to undo the reforms of the past two years and leave many people dead in the process.

The 969 has its origins in a book written in the late 1990s by Kyaw Lwin, a former official in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Late last year, a monastic order from Mon State – the Gana Wasaka Sangha – began to employ the 969 insignia as part of local anti-Muslim campaigns.

The movement's popularity spread from Moulmein to Karen State and further afield, eventually gaining widespread support in Yangon early this year. The 969 styles itself as a non-violent movement dedicated to the promotion of Buddhism and the Burman race, but there are distinct echoes of Nazi Germany and Serbian nationalism in its rhetoric.

A snapshot of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia

ACROSS Southeast Asia, home to four of the world's only five Theravada Buddhist countries, saffron-robed monks conjure up images of piety and peace at dawn.

They are often seen walking through paddy fields near villages or near markets in cities to deliver prayers of merit in exchange for food offered by local communities.

In places like Luang Prabang, in Laos, scenes of monks proceeding quietly in single file bathed by the early morning light have a picture-postcard quality.

Yet, for the nearly 150 million adherents of this region's Theravada followers – out of 376 million Buddhists globally – politics has threatened, and at times shattered, an enduring symbol of non-violence.

And all four countries – Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos – have been affected in varying measures, bringing to relief the non-religious role of the monks from the oldest school of Buddhist thought.

The long tradition of political Buddhism in Myanmar places its monks in a league that has no parallel with the rest. The recent outburst of hatred in a monk-led campaign to target the country's Muslim minority hardly resonates beyond the country's borders.

A Sri Lankan police officer escorts a Buddhist monk to a magistrate's court in Colombo on April 2 in connection with a mob attack on a Muslim-owned clothing store near the capital on March 28. – AFP

Cambodia, for instance, has its own Buddhist issues to deal with – steadily rebuilding the clergy after it was virtually decimated by the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s, with only 3,000 coming out alive out of the 60,000 monks who had filled the temples before Pol Pot's army grabbed power.

The clergy in Laos is under the thumb of the ruling communist party. And in Thailand, the world's largest Theravada Buddhist country (population wise), political Buddhism burns on the fringes.

The political roles the monks are playing in Myanmar is hardly surprising given the close ties its clergy has had with monks in Sri Lanka, the only Theravada Buddhist country in South Asia, and from where this particular school of thought was introduced to Southeast Asia.

Sri Lankan monks have been in the vanguard of Buddhist nationalism in the island nation – the same way Buddhist monks from Myanmar's majority Burman community have blazed a path. **– MARWAN MACAN-MARKAR**

Its adherents believe that Myanmar's Muslims plan to take over the country in the 21st century, and that they communicate this with each other through the use of the number 786 (a traditional South Asian numerical representation of the phrase *bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-rahim*, or "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful."). Superstition and a belief in numerology inform this; the fact that 7 plus 8 plus 6 equals 21 is seen as conclusive proof of a Muslim plot to destroy Buddhism and Burman civilisation in this century.

The number 969 is intended to act as a numerological foil to 786, and ostensibly represents the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six attributes of his teachings and the nine attributes of the sangha, or monastic order.

While it is officially leaderless, the most prominent figure affiliated with 969 is a Mandalay-based monk named U Wirathu, the self-styled Buddhist "Burmese Bin Laden," who was jailed in 2003 for disseminating anti-

A mosque burns during a riot in Meikhtila in central Myanmar on March 21 after clashes killed 10 people, including a Buddhist monk, and injured at least 20. The violence was triggered by an argument between a Buddhist couple and the Muslim owners of a jewellery shop. – Reuters

Muslim literature and organising attacks against Muslim targets.

Much like the claims that Nazis made about German Jews, Wirathu argues that Myanmar's Muslims dominate the economy. Muslims in Myanmar have become successful in a number of specific industries – including construction and the gem trade – but most Myanmar Muslims are no better off than their immediate Buddhist neighbours.

The fact that none of the so-called "cronies" that truly dominate Myanmar's economy is Muslim exposes the blatant racism of Wirathu's philosophy. Wirathu operates a full-scale DVD-production factory at his monastery to distribute his sermons, and despite his previous conviction, he continues to distribute hate literature at religious events around the country.

In a move reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's first action against German Jews in 1933, Wirathu has called for Buddhists to patronise only Buddhist businesses, identifiable by their display of the 969 insignia.

"If you buy goods from a Muslim shop, your money just doesn't stop there," he said in a widely distributed sermon on Feb 23. "That money will eventually be used against you to destroy your race and religion. That money will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam," he claimed.

While only a miniscule proportion of Myanmar's population has access to the Internet, social media seem to be playing a role in provoking violence and hatred. Pro-969 Facebook groups disseminate anti-Muslim literature, going so far as to post photos of "Muslim-looking" men with traitorous "Burmese-looking" girlfriends.

Wirathu has attempted to distance himself and 969 from anti-Muslim fanatics looking for blood, but his claims are shaky at best.

Repeating what has become a common theme in Myanmar since the events in Arakan state last year, he asserted that Buddhist mobs are systematically provoked by Muslim agitation.

In a recent interview with *The Irrawaddy*, he claimed that "people living in the *kalar* (derogatory term for Muslim) quarter of Meiktila were systematically attacking Buddhists," and that "(Muslims) threw bags containing acid at the crowd" that gathered outside the gold shop – a claim that appears to be completely fabricated.

Wirathu's reading of events contradicts the widely accepted timeline of the Meiktila clashes, and sounds suspiciously like justification for the events that occurred there.

While 969's reactionary rhetoric is obviously worrying, it would be unfair to suggest that most Myanmar Buddhists agree with their ideology or tactics. Many of the principal organisers behind the 2007 uprising against

A body lies on a street in Meikhtila following the clashes that killed 10 people. – Reuters

military rule have publicly distanced themselves from 969, and in Meiktila, Buddhists reportedly protected their Muslim neighbours from 969 mobs by ushering them to the relative safety of the football stadium.

On March 24, a group of young activists in Yangon launched a campaign called "We the citizens of Myanmar don't discriminate" to counter 969's propaganda onslaught, which has garnered nearly 1,900 followers on Facebook.

While Aung San Suu Kyi has stayed silent on the issue – to the dismay of many of her followers – other prominent political figures, such as Min Ko Naing, leader of the "88 Generation Students," have been forceful in their denunciation of racism and violence.

The fire at the religious school seems to have been a tipping point for Yangon's Muslims. Four assailants reportedly attempted to throw a petrol bomb at a mosque in Mingalar Taung Nyunt township on the evening of April 2, but were stopped by a local watch force before they were able to do so. One person was arrested and the others escaped; local Muslims claimed that at least one of the escapees had taken refuge in a nearby Buddhist monastery.

In the immediate aftermath of the attempted attack, there was a large police contingent on the streets, but this dwindled within an hour to a few concentrated on the fringes of the Muslim neighbourhood, despite pleas by locals for them to patrol the streets.

An elderly Muslim shop-owner I spoke with in Yangon's Pabedan township the week before the fire lamented attempts by the radicals to divide neighbours and communities.

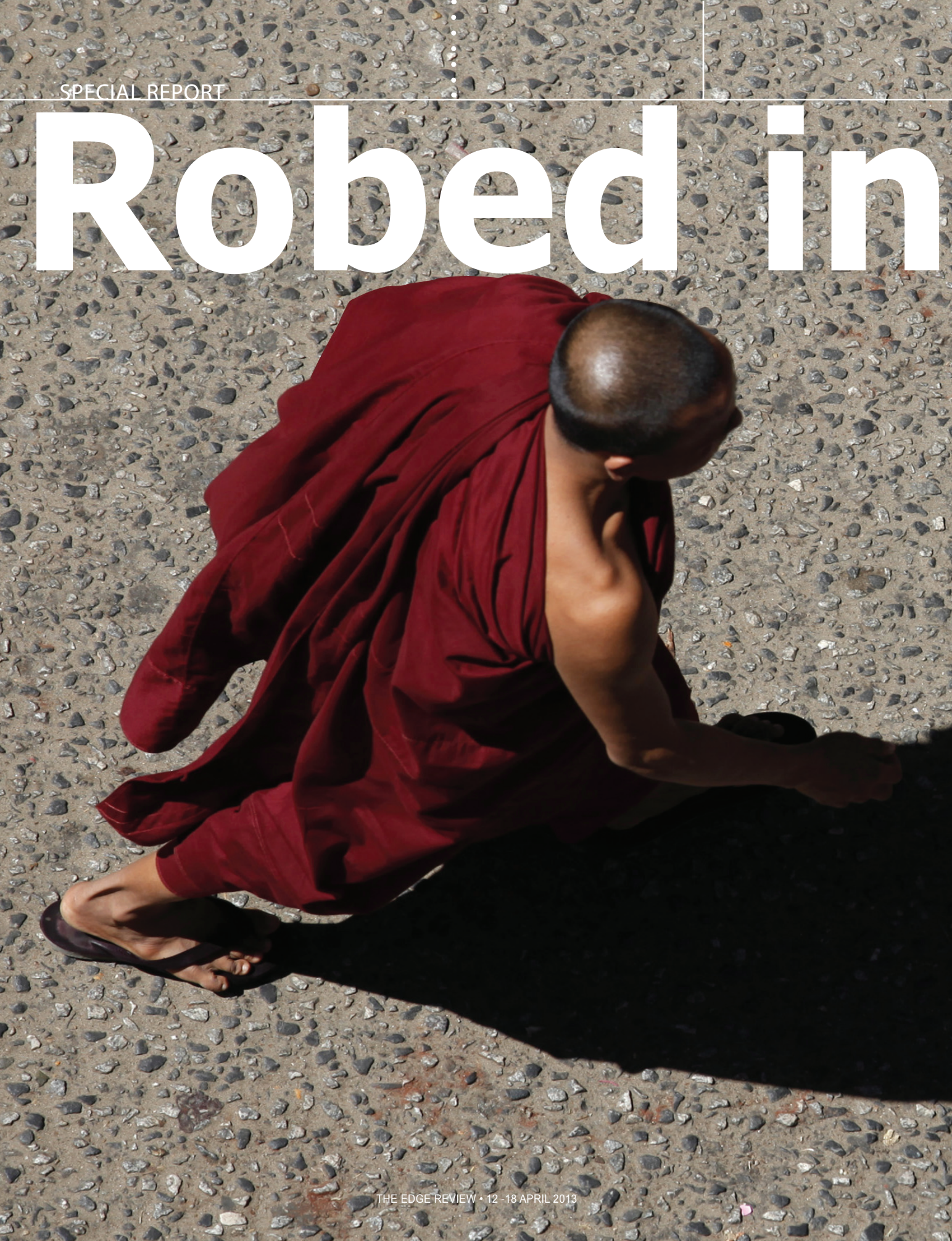
"In this neighbourhood, we have never had problems between us," he told me, while the Buddhist friend he was drinking tea with nodded in agreement. "It's the people on top who try to divide us."

The more conspiratorially minded in Myanmar see the hand of the government in 969's rapid ascent, and there have been whispers that disgraced spy chief Khin Nyunt is playing a role in promoting its activities.

While these assertions stretch the limits of credibility, the fact remains that there is a vocal and violent minority trying to tear apart Myanmar's delicate social fabric, and that the government has not gone far enough to challenge its moral authority. At the very least, the fact that police seem generally unwilling to step in and keep the peace is obviously worrying. While the prospect of genocide in Myanmar is thankfully no sure thing, the country's Muslims are currently living in precarious times.

• *Alex Bookbinder is a Yangon-based journalist.*

Robed in



politics

Myanmar's long history of political Buddhism

))) By **BERTIL LINTNER**

Buddhists are supposed to be peace-loving people who chant *suttas* and preach non-violence. It is therefore not surprising that many pro-democracy activists and others, especially those who remember 2007 when tens of thousands of Buddhists monks marched peacefully against Myanmar's military regime, are shocked at the sight of knife-wielding mobs of Buddhists attacking and killing Muslims – and hearing outright racist speeches by monks, showing nothing of the tolerance for which their religion is known. The last few weeks have seen scores of Muslims being hacked to death in the central Myanmar town of Meiktila, and Muslims homes and shops being burnt down there and in some other places in the central plains.

Buddhists monks, it was assumed, were above politics.

But Myanmar actually has a long tradition of political Buddhism that, at times, has been militant. This was evident even during the peaceful 2007 movement by monks, when support and inspiration came from the *sangha* in Sri Lanka, where many monks are hardly known for their religious tolerance.

Myanmar monks stayed at monasteries in Sri Lanka at the time, and travelled back and forth between Colombo and Yangon. It is also believed that some monks from Sri Lanka visited Myanmar before and during the events of 2007. Baddegama Samitha Thero, one of Sri Lanka's best-known Buddhist clerics and the first monk to be elected to his country's parliament, led demonstrations outside the Myanmar embassy in Colombo.

More radical influences are believed to have come from Makutarama, a monastery in Colombo that became a centre for the monks' resistance in exile. Already on Sept 6, 2007, as the demonstrations were gaining momentum in Yangon, Myanmar monks in Sri Lanka set up the Myanmar Students' Monks Association, the first organisation of Myanmar monks outside the country.

Buddhism and Myanmar nationalism can be traced back to 1906, when a group of Myanmar laymen organised the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), which was modelled after the YMBA in Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon. The Myanmar YMBA strove to preserve the country's Buddhist heritage under British colonialism.

For years, it was the only nationalist movement in the country. Out of the YMBA grew the even more political General Council of Buddhist Associations, which later became the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA). The GCBA cooperated closely with the General Council of Sangha Sammeggi, which brought together radical monks, subsequently known as "political pongyis" (pongyi being Myanmar for monk).

Since then, Buddhism and Myanmar nationalism have been intertwined and often represent two sides of the same coin. Not surprisingly, Myanmar's first real independence fighter was a monk from the Rakhine region, U Ottama.

A fiery speaker and agitator – but a supporter of non-violence – he attracted huge crowds and was eventually arrested by the colonial authorities. He was released, re-

Buddhist monks walk barefoot on a street in Yangon during a protest last year. – Reuters

arrested and died in prison in 1939. In the 1920s, another monk, U Wisara, continued the agitation against British colonialism – and was also arrested. He died in jail in 1929 after a 163-day hunger strike.

After Myanmar's independence in 1948, Buddhism and nationalism were in the minds of many inseparable from Marxist-inspired socialist ideas. U Ba Swe, the leader of the Burma Socialist Party in the 1950s, wrote in a pamphlet, The Burmese Revolution, "Marxist theory is not antagonistic to Buddhist philosophy. The two are, frankly speaking, not merely similar. In fact, they are the same in concept."

In another pamphlet, U Ba Yin, an education minister in independent Myanmar, took this theme a step further: "Marx must directly or indirectly have been inspired by the Buddha."

Nonetheless, some of the young nationalists did not hesitate to criticise the *sangha*. In 1935, a satirical novel entitled, *Tet Pongyi* (The Modern Monk), by Thein Pe Myint, a leftist intellectual, criticised the traditional monastic hierarchy in Myanmar and even highlighted acts of immorality among the Buddhist clergy, including sexual misconduct. The book shocked many devout Buddhists, and Thein Pe Myint received several death threats.

But there was also a rightist movement among the monks. In the late 1950s, they centred around the

Yahanpyu Aphwe ("Young Monks' Association"). It drew its strongest support from monasteries in Mandalay and was staunchly anti-communist.

The Yahanpyu was also allegedly supported by the US-government backed Asia Foundation. One of its most outspoken leaders, U Kethaya, was even nicknamed the "American pongyi."

Virtually every government in independent Myanmar has tried to control the *sangha*, fully aware of its political potential. But an attempt to make Buddhism the state religion in 1960 backfired badly.

It led to an insurrection among the predominantly Christian Kachin in the north, who in 1961 formed the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), still one of Myanmar's strongest ethnic resistance forces.

In more modern times, Buddhist monks played an important role in the 1988 uprising against the dictatorial rule of General Ne Win and his Burma Socialist Programme Party. The revolt, which swept across the entire country, did not dislodge the military from power – which it has held since a coup d'etat in 1962 – but it did lead to the abandonment of one-party rule and socialism, thus paving the way for changes we are now seeing in Myanmar.

But even during that uprising, which was drenched in blood when the military moved in and gunned down thousands of demonstrators in Yangon and elsewhere, monks showed their militancy. Pictures of monks armed with crossbows were shown in books and booklets published by the government. Even though these photos were used for propaganda purposes, they were genuine.

It would be grossly unfair to compare the present anti-Muslim movement with the anti-colonial struggle once led by U Ottama and U Wisara, as well as the activities of the YMBA and the GCBA. But political Buddhism is not an alien concept in Myanmar and it has, at times, been militant and even violent.

Moreover, in the minds of many, it is inseparable from Myanmar nationalism. Whenever "the Myanmar Buddhist nation" rightly or, more often, wrongly, feels that it is being threatened, there is no more convenient scapegoat than the country's Muslim minority. Ethnically, many of them are from the Indian subcontinent, or, in the case of

A Buddhist monk from Myanmar shouts during a protest against the military dictatorship outside the Myanmar embassy in Colombo October 3, 2007. REUTERS/Buddhika Weerasinghe (SRI LANKA) - RTR1UJAT

the so-called Panthay, from Yunnan in China. Many of them are also shopkeepers and merchants, and therefore easy targets for people who believe they are being exploited.

It is still an open question to what extent the recent attacks on Muslims in Meiktila were condoned by the authorities. Muslim sources point out that the local police stood by when the mobs went on a rampage, burning, killing and looting. But, as a Western diplomat argues, that could be because the police are subordinate to the military, and therefore did not dare to take action unless ordered to do so.

The argument has also been made that although the attacks may not have been orchestrated by any of the security forces, the military may have taken advantage of the situation to show that they are the only force capable of restoring and maintaining "law and order" – something which they succeeded in doing after days of carnage in Meiktila and elsewhere.

Yet another interpretation is that what Myanmar is experiencing right now is similar to what happened after the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: once the lid of repression is lifted, as is the case in Myanmar today, all kinds of extremist ideas may surface, sometimes with undesirable consequences. In Russia, it was skinheads and neo-Nazism, religious cults, gangsterism and pornography; in Myanmar, it is religious fanaticism and anger directed against innocent people who happen to be of another faith.

But, whatever the reasons for the bloody events in Meiktila, it is evident that what might have been a spontaneous movement soon found its leaders.

A group calling itself the "969" – a numerical reference to the attributes of the sangha, the Buddha and the dhamma (teaching) — and an outspoken monk called Wirathu are receiving powerful backing from affluent elements in the country.

Stickers, posters and other paraphernalia bearing the name "969" have been distributed widely, and must have been financed by somebody. The 969 also has its own Facebook page. It is clear that this is not the last we have seen of political Buddhism in Myanmar, or even its more extreme variants.

Still on the fringe

Political Buddhism in Thailand

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

A rallying cry last November by a retired four-star general to trigger Thailand's 19th military coup brought out the usual suspects. Among those who heeded Gen. Boonlert Kaewprasit's call were members of the Dhamma Army, an ultra-conservative religious movement in the world's largest Theravada Buddhist country.

While the retired soldier's political adventure ended in a farce – military commanders in Bangkok refused to take Boonlert's telephone calls to send in the cavalry to oust the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra – the presence of the Dhamma Army's uniformed brigades at a political rally in the capital was anything but funny. It affirmed that politics is still in the crosshairs of a group that is part of the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect.

After all, Chamlong Srimuang, a retired general and former politician, is a prominent leader of Santi Asoke. He led his ascetic troops to join the tens of thousands of angry Thais who called for the ouster of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in early 2006 – paving the way for the kingdom's 18th military putsch, which removed Yingluck's elder brother that September.

Chamlong and his army of ultra-conservatives next threw their weight behind a subsequent protest campaign that succeeded in hounding out of power a Thaksin-allied political party that had been elected in December 2007.

Yet the continuing political muscle flexing by Santi Asoke stands in contrast to the recent campaigns of hatred and violence spearheaded by saffron-robed monks in two other Theravada Buddhist countries, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In the latter, the monks involved in the virulent anti-Muslim rage come from the mainstream Buddhist orders.

In contrast, Santi Asoke – despite its overt Buddhist overtones and its nod towards an austere life – is deemed a heretical organisation by the mainstream *sangha*, the monastic order that traditionally holds sway over Thailand's 63 million Buddhists, nearly 95 per cent of the population, the largest number of Theravada Buddhists in any country.

But monks from the mainstream Buddhist orders have not been beyond the tug of political violence. In those rare cases where violence has occurred in Thailand, they have often been in response to national security threats faced by the state.

Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand, a recent book by American academic Michael

This combination picture shows the site of the bomb blasts on March 31, 2012 (top) and Buddhist monks leading a prayer ceremony for the victims at the site in Thailand's southern province of Yala on April 7, 2012. Eight people died and at least 70 were injured in a series of explosions in predominantly Muslim Yala, the latest in a wave of violence blamed on separatists in a region bordering Malaysia. – Reuters

Jerryson, chronicles the "open secret" about Buddhist monks lending a hand to the Thai military battling insurgents from the Malay-Muslim minority in three provinces close to the Malaysian border, where over 5,000 people have been killed.

When not chanting or delivering guidance to the laity to gain merit, some monks passionately advocate Buddhist nationalism, and move around in military uniforms and even bear arms.

Older examples also abound, shattering the myth often propagated by Western converts to Buddhism about its adherents being non-violent, eschewing hatred and helping to build a pacifist society. The most renowned among them was the Thai monk Phra Kittivuddho, who famously declared in 1976 that it was not a sin to kill a communist.

This monk's right-wing rants and links to a paramilitary group made him a favourite among the ultra-conservatives. Thailand, at the time, was a frontline country during that Cold War and its troops were battling its own communist cadres in remote northeastern provinces.

And even when it comes to the death penalty, which is enforced here, the Buddhist strictures against killing or taking a life are sidestepped by monks through a deft turn of argument, as a local human rights organisation learned.

During a series of seminars across the country, its researchers were repeatedly told by monks invited to attend that they were against killing "even a mosquito," living up to the ideals of Buddhism. But when asked specifically about the death penalty, they gave a nod of approval, making the argument: "It is state policy, it is politics, and we, as monks, cannot be drawn into politics."

Thwarting militant Islam

Cambodia's Chams at peace in a world of Buddhists

By LUKE HUNT

Almost four decades ago, Cambodia's Muslim Chams faced a stark choice: abandon their religion and fall into line with the Khmer Rouge or be executed. Perhaps 200,000 of them died as a result.

Their plight wasn't helped by the bitter conflicts that continued to engulf the country after Pol Pot and his ultra Maoists were ousted in 1979, enduring until the final round was fired in 1998.

Since then, however, much has changed.

This is evident on the lawns outside the Extraordinary Chambers for the Courts in Cambodia, where Chams and Buddhists mix freely and easily, united by a common cause – the pursuit of some kind of justice for Pol Pot's victims at the United Nations-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal.

That cause has driven the Chams and Cambodia's overwhelmingly Buddhist population into a peaceful co-existence. But even this conviviality was once almost derailed.

As peace finally took hold in Cambodia, hard-line Muslims from abroad began appearing in the Cambodian countryside, offering money and scholarships for students to study abroad in return for conversions from a traditionally moderate and matriarchal brand of Islam to

Muslim Cham children eating mangoes.

A Cambodian mosque built in a remote jungle with donations from the Middle East.

Reading the Koran in the Nur ul-Ihsan Mosque in Phnom Penh where Hambali once prayed.

the more militant strands of the Wahabi and the Dawah Tabligh movements.

At first, the authorities were slow to grasp what this meant. Then came the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC in 2001, followed by the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings carried out by Jemaah Islamiyah, an al-Qaeda-linked Southeast Asian terrorist outfit.

Riduan Isamuddin, commonly known as Hambali, was soon identified as the mastermind of the twin attacks on the Indonesian island and his movements were tracked through Thailand to a small guest house at the back of the Nur ul-Ihsan Mosque in Phnom Penh.

The future of Cambodia's Cham population was again on the line. Taking money from Middle Eastern Islamic militants and harboring terrorists was a recipe for extraordinary renditions and unconditional detention, as Hambali was to discover.

Despite the heavy-handiness and paranoia that characterised this period, common sense prevailed through a concerted effort by the United States and the Cambodian government.

Cham communities were engaged across the country, and funding was provided for schools and community development, with stringent criteria for curriculums and offshore study programs aimed at limiting the encroachment of militancy.

Central to this was Haji Yusof bin Idris. As the imam of the dilapidated Alazhar Mosque – which until recently stood on the peninsula dividing the Mekong River from the Tonle Sap – he was responsible for about 2,600 Muslims who benefitted from this projection of US soft power.

In the immediate years after peace returned to the country, Cham communities built separate mosques and

A picture of Hambali outside Room No. 10 at a guesthouse behind the Nur ul-Ihsan Mosque in Phnom Penh.

Muslim Chams at the Khmer Rouge tribunal watch testimony being delivered by Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who ran the S21 torture and extermination centre.

fought among themselves. They feared outsiders and some Cham mothers accused Saudi missionaries of stealing fatherless children to be reared in the madrasas of the Middle East.

The US embassy took the lead in steering the Chams away from militancy with a pro-active campaign that supported Cham traditions and helped build a bulwark against unwanted outside militants, at a time when most Chams had no idea what was happening in the Islamic world outside of Cambodia.

Funding was contingent upon Cham communities patching up their differences. English lessons were introduced and direct funding for the poor and disabled was made available.

Assistance from outside countries was vetted, while the Ministry of Cults and Religions held regular meetings with Cham community leaders. As a result, violence is largely spurned and terrorist acts here are seen as the work of misguided individuals and not of Islam.

Yusof once told me the relationship between Americans and Cambodians had, as a result, become much deeper, noting that many Cham teenagers wore denim jeans and ate at KFC. He said he had often dined with the US ambassador and thanked the Americans for their help.

These days, Cham problems are more mundane. The old mosque was recently torn down to make way for a road and the community is dispersing and re-establishing itself as Cambodia enjoys an unparalleled period of economic growth and reconstruction.

Cambodian Chams, and their cousins who escaped to Laos after the Khmer Rouge came to power, fully comprehend the oppression being felt by Muslims in Burma. Equally, they are more likely to see the oppressors as godless individuals, rather than Buddhists, with whom they have lived peacefully amid decades of war and the past 15 years of peace.

In the name of God

Religious intolerance on the rise in Indonesia

By KEITH LOVEARD

Myanmar's recent ethnic and religious strife sent shock waves as far as Indonesia, where eight Buddhists were beaten to death April 5 at a detention centre in the North Sumatra port city of Belawan. Rohingya asylum seekers, enraged after seeing photographs of Buddhist attacks on Muslim communities in Central Myanmar, took vengeance in the middle of the night on the Buddhists, who were being held for illegal fishing.

Indonesia's tiny Buddhist minority has largely escaped religious discrimination in the country. The only other recent case in which followers of the religion were targeted came last September, when a bomb exploded prematurely at a house in a slum area of Jakarta.

Counter-terrorism police followed that trail to a group plotting attacks on Indonesian authorities and a Buddhist centre. Discrimination against the Rohingya in Myanmar was behind the centre's selection as a target.

If Buddhists have largely been spared in Indonesia, other minority sects have not been so fortunate. Christian, Ahmadiyah and most recently Shia Muslim groups have come under attack. In February 2011, three members of the Ahmadi sect were beaten to death by a mob in Cikeusik in Banten province on western Java Island.

In August last year, a group of Shia adherents on the East Java island of Madura who were taking their children to school was attacked by a mob, which killed one man and severely injured another.

Some 500 Shiites were expelled from their homes and are still living in a sports centre, struggling to survive on meagre rations from the state. Another group of Ahmadis, whose religion holds that Muhammad was not the final prophet of Islam, has been cooped up on the island of Lombok for even longer after being expelled from their homes.

Dozens of Christians were injured in a suicide bombing at a church in the terrorist hotbed of Solo in Central Java in September 2011. Authorities in a number of areas of the country have refused to allow Christian groups to construct houses of worship, claiming they do not meet administrative requirements that demand local communities support the construction plan.

In Bogor, West Java, just south of the capital Jakarta, the local administration has ignored an order from the Supreme Court stating that a Christian group has the right to build its church. No action has been taken to impose the court ruling.

Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali, a member of the Islam-based United Development Party, has been unsympathetic. He recently dismissed allegations of discrimination by Christian groups, saying they were themselves to blame for the refusal to grant building permits for churches by not following correct administrative procedures.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has called on a number of occasions for an end to discrimination, but no one appears to be paying attention, including the police.

The Setara Institute, which defends religious freedoms, says the number of cases of discrimination is rising dramatically, with over 300 in the first half of last year alone. It alleges that journalists are also part of the problem, with 45 per cent of respondents to a survey saying that they believed Indonesia should be ruled by shariah law,

Another survey found that teachers at schools were forcing anti-Christian propaganda onto their students. One senior high school student recounted that a teacher had told her class that the London Olympics had been scheduled to clash directly with the fasting month of Ramadhan, even though it is the fasting month that moves with the lunar calendar, not the Olympics.

Indonesia's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but with growing pressure on minority communities and hard-liners increasingly dominating the stage, no one in authority appears ready to stand up and protect that right.