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Title	Inter-religious violence in Myanmar : a security threat to Southeast Asia
Author(s)	Eliane Coates
Citation	Eliane Coates. (2013). Inter-religious violence in Myanmar : a security threat to Southeast Asia. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 117). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2013
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/20070
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No. 117/2013 dated 26 June 2013

Inter-Religious Violence in Myanmar: A Security Threat to Southeast Asia

By Eliane Coates

Synopsis

Continuing inter-religious violence in Myanmar is spilling over into neighbouring countries as seen in recent attacks between groups within the Myanmar migrant community in Kuala Lumpur. If left unchecked, such spillovers will pose a threat to Southeast Asian security and stability.

Commentary

RENEWED VIOLENCE between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar appears to be spreading regionally. Since May 2013, at least eight people have died in a series of retaliatory attacks by Muslims from Myanmar against Myanmar Buddhists in Kuala Lumpur which has a community of Myanmar refugees and illegal workers.

Concerns abound that the violence among Myanmar nationals in Malaysia may radicalise non-Myanmar Muslims that could lead to a vicious cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals. The spate of anti-Muslim attacks in Myanmar by Buddhists in recent months has agitated Muslims in neighbouring Southeast Asia especially where there are Myanmar nationals fleeing persecution in that country. As noted by ASEAN's former Secretary-General, Surin Pitsuwan, such radicalisation "would have wider strategic and security implications for the region".

Origins of the violence

Since June 2012, approximately 200 people, mostly Muslims, have died in the expanding sectarian fighting between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar. While the violence was still centered in Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) in 2012, it has spread throughout the country in 2013. In March for example, at least 43 people died and another 10,000 were displaced during riots in Meikhtila in Mandalay. This resulted in a total of ten townships in central Myanmar being placed under a state of emergency.

In May, the violence flared again in northeast Myanmar after a riot between Muslims and Buddhists in the township of Lashio in Shan State, where 'Buddhist mobs' set fire to Muslim homes and engaged in indiscriminate killings. Seen as a sign of increasing ultra-nationalist Buddhist violence, these attacks have been associated with the '969 campaign' which promotes the boycott of Muslim businesses and the segregation of Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar.

Regional spillover

Renewed violence in Myanmar has provoked Buddhist-Muslim tensions in both Malaysia and Indonesia. The recent retaliatory attacks by Myanmar Muslims against Myanmar Buddhists in Kuala Lumpur put at risk inter-religious relations across the region. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 83,000 refugees in Malaysia from Myanmar, 28,000 of whom are registered as Rohingya - a Muslim ethnic group from Rakhine State in south-west Myanmar. This figure adds to the existing 257,000 Myanmar nationals in Muslim majority Malaysia who are mostly illegal workers.

In response, Myanmar officials have asked the Malaysian government to do its utmost to protect Myanmar citizens and take action against those responsible for the attacks. Naypyidaw has also sent a delegation of senior ministers to Kuala Lumpur to observe the situation and lodge protests should their citizens not be adequately protected. In the meantime however, the trend of Myanmar Muslims seeking vengeance for the persecution of their brethren in Myanmar shows no signs of abating.

While Myanmar's religious tensions have gradually spilled over into Malaysia, the rallying cry has been most vocal in the world's largest Muslim nation Indonesia. Jakarta has demonstrated continuous support for Muslim minorities in Myanmar. For example, in January 2013, the Indonesian government pledged US\$1 million to aid the Muslims in Myanmar. However, some of the sympathy and assistance has also come from Muslim hardliners in Indonesia. In July 2012, imprisoned radical cleric Abu Bakar Ba'ashir wrote a letter to President Thein Sein threatening violent *jihad*, or holy war, against Myanmar over the persecution of the Rohingya. In April 2013, Ba'ashir reinforced his statement by calling forth *mujahideen* for the *jihad* on Myanmar's Buddhist population.

However, threats of violence from Indonesia only form part of the bigger picture. In April, eight people were killed after Muslim and Buddhist refugees from Myanmar fought at a detention camp in Medan, Sumatra. Several foiled attempts at violence against Buddhists have also occurred in Indonesia. In September 2012, an Indonesian Muslim man turned himself in to the police and admitted to having planned a suicide bomb attack against local Buddhists in Jakarta.

In May 2013, police foiled an attempt by Indonesian Muslim militants to bomb the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta. On the following day protests were held outside the same embassy with approximately 1,000 Indonesian Muslims denouncing the persecution of Muslims in Myanmar and supporting Ba'ashir's call for *jihad*. Similar protests were also held in Medan as well as in Solo, Central Java.

While some support for the Muslims of Myanmar is genuine, there are concerns that radical Muslims outside Myanmar could exploit the situation to support their narratives of Muslims being persecuted to recruit followers. In turn, this could feed into the narratives of Myanmar's violent Buddhists, who believe that certain Muslim ethnic groups, including the Rohingya, are supported by foreign radicals. Unless this situation is firmly addressed by regional governments, Southeast Asia could be at grave risk of more Muslims becoming radicalised for the 'Myanmar cause'.

Way forward

Despite Myanmar's ongoing efforts towards democratisation since 2011, recent violence only reaffirms there is still a long way to go. Undoubtedly, Myanmar's inter-religious skirmishes are generating a spillover effect, involving both Myanmar nationals abroad as well as foreign citizens, which threatens to undermine regional security and stability. Certain measures, therefore, must be taken to bring about durable solutions to the crisis.

Firstly, Naypyidaw must make concerted efforts to arrest and prosecute those accountable for the ongoing violence inside Myanmar, including and especially the complicit local authorities, such as those evident during the outbreaks of violence in Lashio and Meikhtila. Secondly, ASEAN should put more pressure on Naypyidaw by stressing the risk of a regional spillover from its internal problem of sectarian violence. While intervention by ASEAN member states in Myanmar's domestic affairs is unlikely, ASEAN could play a constructive role by facilitating dialogues, such as those seen in Mindanao and Aceh.

Such pressures upon Myanmar to end the violence could be collectively initiated by ASEAN's Muslim nations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Indonesia, in particular, could lead by example as Jakarta has successfully defused its own inter-religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Ambon and Poso a decade ago.

ASEAN should refrain from taking short-term solutions. Rather, it should develop coherent plans that would yield long-lasting peace in Myanmar. While such measures do not guarantee success, they may well encourage Myanmar to do more to address its home-grown violence which is threatening regional security.

Eliane Coates is a Research Analyst at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.