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Non-Violent Extremism: The Case of Wirathu in Myanmar

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The controversial Buddhist monk Wirathu, putative leader of the Buddhist fundamentalist 969 movement in Myanmar, has fuelled Buddhist-Muslim violence in the past year. Liberal responses to let the marketplace of ideas drown his extremist rhetoric are unlikely to suffice.

Commentary

THE CONTROVERSIAL monk Ashin Wirathu, putative leader of the Buddhist fundamentalist 969 movement in Myanmar, has drawn world attention in recent weeks with his extremist rhetoric. Wirathu has graced the cover of *Time* magazine and even been called the Burmese bin Laden because his sermons have been blamed for fuelling the anti-Muslim violence that has rocked Myanmar the past year.

Between June and October last year, 200 people, mainly Muslims, were killed in Buddhist-Muslim riots in the western Rakhine region of Myanmar, and 110,000 villagers, mostly Muslim Rohingya, displaced. Periodic episodes of Buddhist-Muslim violence have continued in 2013 and communal relations remain tense.

The non-violent extremist: A vexing problem

Wirathu's role in fomenting Buddhist-Muslim tensions should not be overplayed. However he seems to have skillfully tapped into widespread Buddhist anxieties about Muslims, who form only about four percent of the total population. Myanmar's Muslims - save for the disenfranchised Rohingya in Rakhine - are economically well off in general. Ordinary Buddhists, influenced by the incendiary sermons of Wirathu and his ilk, fear that one day Islam and not Buddhism, will dominate the country.

The case of Wirathu highlights the vexing nexus between non-violent extremist rhetoric and real-world violence. Whether the subject is Wirathu, or Anjem Choudary - the non-violent extremist leader of the Islam4UK movement fingered for indirectly inspiring the murder of an off-duty British soldier in London in May this year - or Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the jailed virulently extremist Indonesian Islamist leader, the same pressing question remains: should such individuals who spout non-violent but clearly extremist rhetoric be ignored, because ultimately they are not the ones actually carrying out violent acts? Ba'asyir once told a journalist: "I am only a craftsman selling knives. I am not responsible for how those knives are used."

How should societies respond to such assertions? In conventional liberal legal discourse, two positions have

been staked out. First it is held that inciting hatred against members of another religious or ethnic group should not be considered a crime, unless it can be demonstrated clearly that such speech led directly to a violent, criminal act. The second position is that in any case, rather than throwing the book at extremist individuals it is better to allow the marketplace of ideas to drown out and demolish extremist ideas.

Is non-violent extremist speech harmless?

Examining the effects of non-violent but extremist speech requires closer scrutiny of religious fundamentalism in general, and as an illustration, Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar in particular.

Religious fundamentalism refers essentially to the form religion takes *when it is threatened and on the defensive*. Fundamentalists are not necessarily violent, but the record shows that there are latent violent potentials in fundamentalist religion. There are three reasons for this embryonic potential for out-group violence.

First, fundamentalists are very sensitive about at minimum, the relative standing of, and at maximum, the very survival of their religious in-group. Fundamentalists are particularly paranoid about ensuring that their religious in-group dominates out-groups for fear of being dominated by them. The self-identity of fundamentalists is profoundly intertwined with the pecking order status of their religious in-group, and as such, any perceived slight to the latter can provoke violent reactions.

Wirathu clearly evinces this paranoid concern for the status of Buddhism and for that matter the very survival of the faith in Myanmar. He has warned publicly that Muslims have long been “despicable and dangerous destroyers of our Buddhism and Buddhist symbols,” and have a “100-year plan” to take over Myanmar’s “sovereignty through inter-faith marriages of Buddhists.” Such rhetoric can incite violence, not directly but indirectly, by playing on Buddhist fundamentalist fears of religious extinction.

Second, words are not neutral. Social psychologists have long warned that linguistic dehumanisation of religious or ethnic out-groups can ultimately pave the way for acts of violence against them, by rendering them as sub-human and beastly. In Rwanda, for instance, Hutu death squads were driven to mass killing of Tutsis by among other things incessant radio propaganda comparing the latter to *inyenzi* or insects that needed to be squashed.

It is thus significant that Wirathu and his followers engage in linguistic dehumanisation of Myanmar and Rohingya Muslims, calling them “leeches”, “bloodsuckers” - and even “African carp,” an “invasive species” that “breed quickly,” are “very violent” and “eat each other and destroy nature.”

Third, non-violent but viscerally extremist rhetoric can indirectly incite out-group violence in another way: by amplifying the profound fundamentalist obsession with religious purity and by implication, fear of contamination. In many fundamentalist religious traditions believers are expressly warned never to intermarry with people who worship a different deity because they are considered unclean. Moreover, genocide scholars warn that when extremist fundamentalist sages decry out-group members as “pigs, rats, maggots, cockroaches, and other vermin,” a relation between “disgust and genocide” is established.

Wirathu is clearly headed down this path of marrying disgust with genocide. He calls for official bans on marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim “mad dogs” and “cannibals.” He has even urged Buddhist mobs to “cut off the d*cks” of Muslim men “to make an example of Muslim men who marry our women.”

When the marketplace fails

As noted, liberals would hold that the best way to deal with the vitriol of the likes of fundamentalist extremists such as Wirathu is to allow the free marketplace of ideas to take its course. This way moderate Buddhist voices may emerge that would eventually censure and drown him out. The problem arises when the marketplace is skewed. This seems to be the case in Myanmar.

Burgeoning democratic freedoms have produced a jingoistic media landscape that is anti-Muslim. Observers have commented that since the outbreak of the anti-Rohingya Muslim violence in June last year, the media has framed the conflict as an attack on the nation by “Bengali” foreigners, fostering the stark, radicalised us-and-them mindset that Wirathu and his 969 movement have promoted.

In sum, stock liberal responses to non-violent extremism have their limits. The Myanmar authorities must recognise that to regard Wirathu merely as a craftsman selling knives would be a mistake. His non-violent but stridently extremist version of Buddhist fundamentalism represents a clear and present danger. Unless suitable corrective action is taken, the prospect of a major Buddhist-Muslim conflagration in Myanmar - with its ensuing regional spillover effects - will remain all too real.

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