



The Myanmar Crisis: An Interview with Matthew Walton

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Specialist on religion and politics in Southeast Asia, Matthew Walton, examines the complex drivers behind and dynamics to Myanmar's refugee crisis.

Q. Myanmar has recently seen what has been described by the UN as “the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis”. Reports suggest around 680,000 Rohingya refugees have now been registered. Who are the Rohingya and why are they fleeing Myanmar?

Rohingya identity is partially what this conflict is all about. Let’s start with the second part of the question. They are fleeing because of the massive, organised campaign of violence against them, led by the military and other security forces, but also including local non-Rohingya communities. We can acknowledge that attacks by the insurgent group ARSA (more about them below) precipitated the current campaign, while strongly asserting that it has been overwhelmingly disproportionate, especially in the violence visited upon civilians.

Furthermore, reports from refugees and visual evidence of areas in Rakhine State that Rohingya have fled are consistent with the violent methods that the Burmese military has regularly visited upon other ethnic groups in the country over the past six decades. Available evidence suggests that Rohingya were not necessarily supporting ARSA in large numbers at the time, but the Burmese military and the government have effectively tarred the entire population with the “terrorist” label, without justification. Similarly, “pull” arguments from Burmese officials that say that most Rohingya fled because of incentives across the border have little connection to reality. Reports from refugees now in Bangladesh present a consistent picture of fear and certainly no desire to

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become stuck in what now looks to be a protracted yet dangerously precarious refugee situation.

Entire books have been written about who the Rohingya are. The shortest explanation I can give (that will likely still invite controversy) is that Muslim communities have been present in Rakhine State for centuries, with a multitude of identities. Some of these identities were captured in partial and inconsistent ways in official colonial records, making it difficult to provide conclusive evidence that the community that currently identifies itself as Rohingya lived in Rakhine State for generations *identifying as Rohingya*. There is plenty of evidence that people who currently identify as Rohingya had ancestors living there using a variety of other identity markers, such as Arakan Muslims. There is also evidence that the name “Rohingya” did not become a more widely used and commonly accepted label until the middle of the twentieth century, which is what leads many in Myanmar to erroneously reject their identity as “invented.” Of course, at a moment when the Rohingya face not only disenfranchisement and exclusion from the Myanmar polity but also mass violence, any attempt to clarify details such as these is understandably seen as undermining their claims, not just to indigeneity but to existence itself. Their indigeneity was not necessarily questioned after independence, but they were gradually excluded from the citizenship regime that emerged under military rule, first with the 1982 citizenship law, and later with the artificial codification of 135 officially recognised ethnic groups. The irony, as [Nick Cheesman](#) has eloquently pointed out, is that this citizenship regime requires the Rohingya to argue for their indigeneity and identity in ways that make their claims to belonging appear so threatening to other groups in Myanmar.

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Q. Arguably, the international media began to take a greater, though perhaps still not significant enough, interest in this issue around 2012 after violence occurred in Rakhine State. But do the roots of this crisis lie deeper in Myanmar's history?

For the Rohingya, this is certainly true, although more generally we should be careful about simply equating violence against Muslims in 1930s Burma, for example, with today's violence. This is the third mass expulsion of Rohingya due to violent, concerted military operations; the previous two took place in 1978 and 1992. The roots also go back to the 1940s, where Muslim and Buddhist communities that found themselves on different sides of the conflict in World War II organised pogroms against one another in the northern and southern parts of Rakhine State. The result was that what had been more integrated communities became significantly more segregated, with Buddhists fleeing northern areas to be more concentrated in the south and Muslims fleeing the south to northern districts. Going back even further, scholars such as [Michael Charney](#) have argued that two significant events, the Burmese conquest of the Kingdom of Arakan in 1784, followed by the beginnings of British colonial rule in Arakan in 1824 gradually "Buddhicized" the history of the region, sanitising it of what had been a significant Muslim presence and cultural influence. Even today, in many of the interviews my colleagues and I conduct in different parts of Myanmar, people outside of Rakhine State are more likely to see the current conflict as having started in 2012; by contrast, Rakhine accounts tend to date it back to World War II or even earlier.

Q. The crisis has often been presented as a consequence of clashes between Muslims and Buddhists. The term "Buddhist extremists" has been used recurrently in NGO reports and by media outlets. Often two names are

raised: the 969 Movement and, to a lesser extent, Ma Ba Tha. Who are these groups and what do they believe?

969 was a loosely organised, decentralised movement that came onto the scene relatively rapidly in 2012 and 2013, largely through advocating a “Buy Buddhist” campaign and distributing stickers to identify Buddhist-owned establishments. The result was a visible set of material markers connected with a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses that, for a time were ubiquitous in big cities across the country. But more senior monks quickly became concerned that outspoken monks like Wirathu were bringing Buddhism into disrepute (although they didn’t necessarily disagree with his concerns about the need to protect Buddhism). That concern, in part, led to the founding of Ma Ba Tha in 2013, although the group didn’t rise to prominence until 2014 when it took up the campaign in support of four controversial laws for the protection of “race and religion.”

Ma Ba Tha is often portrayed as an anti-Muslim group, and that’s certainly a part of the group’s ideology, at least as expressed by some of its most prominent members. But focusing on that aspect misses the context in which many Burmese encounter the group, which is its charitable, educational and community development activities. Ma Ba Tha (and monks strongly affiliated with Ma Ba Tha) sponsor Buddhist “Sunday Schools,” donation ceremonies for monks, fundraising drives for relief activities, and even micro-finance schemes. Part of the group’s persistent appeal is that it is helping to carry out many of these activities that Buddhists would see as essential to the development of their religion. Even more importantly, the group is seen by many as a strong advocacy voice for Buddhists and Buddhism, in a time of transition and uncertainty when people are concerned about the future of their religion. None

of what I've just said is intended to defend or glorify Ma Ba Tha, but rather, to help produce a more nuanced understanding of it, as one of our [current research projects](#) is designed to do. Recognising these dynamics leads us to suggest that a more productive way of responding to a group like Ma Ba Tha and its problematic anti-Muslim orientation is to foster alternative discourses on how Buddhist practice and Buddhist communities might be strengthened in ways that do not demonise or discriminate against non-Buddhists.

Q. You recently conducted a research project, involving interviews with 78 residents of six cities in Myanmar, to better understand the production of the violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities. What role has religion played in the violence?

The [Myanmar Media and Society \(M.MAS\) project](#) has had two phases. In the first one we sought to better understand the narratives in Myanmar that justify a feeling of Buddhism under threat and, by extension, are used to legitimise discrimination and violence against Muslims. But we've also pushed back hard against characterising this conflict as "religious." Instead, we think it's essential to dig deeper and uncover the ways in which particular actors (including representatives of the Myanmar government) have *actively framed* this conflict as being between Buddhists and Muslims. Since 2012, there have been people who have sought to cast any given dispute between a Buddhist and a Muslim in broader religious terms; there have also been people who have resisted and actively contested these broader conflict framings.

The second phase of the project has sought to collect and share people's memories of peaceful inter-religious coexistence, and we'll soon be releasing a book in Burmese that includes some of these oral history narratives, along with commentary and reflections from prominent Burmese writers and activists. For

a number of people that we've interviewed, these have been a strong component of what they consider to be their identity as "Myanmar" and of how they see their local communities. We've also seen situations where these collective memories of helping across religious lines seem to have defused potentially violent situations. But increased suspicion and segregation is also limiting the circumstances under which people will be able to have these experiences and generate these memories, with negative effects on how they see people from other religions. Without those memories, it is much easier to paint an entire group with broad brush strokes, and to attribute actions not to individuals but to entire identity groups, further reinforcing these negative stereotypes.

Q. A large amount of media coverage has framed this issue as a "communal conflict" and "tribal violence", driven by "ethnic hatreds" which implies a more regional, rather than national consistency. Yet there have been arguments made that this is part of a long-standing state sponsored campaign against the Rohingya. What role has the Myanmar government played in this crisis?

We have to remember that there have been rapid shifts in government in recent years, although many bureaucratic structures have remained consistent. Prior to 2011, the government was entirely military-controlled, and there were a range of discriminatory policies towards the Rohingya, although the severity of these varied over time. The semi-civilian government led by President Thein Sein created an enabling environment for anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence more generally and was very slow to respond to the initial violence in 2012, which fuelled riots in places outside of Rakhine State. The NLD government contested the election campaign of 2015 in a heightened context of nationalist

and anti-Muslim sentiment and, whether for strategic reasons or because of anti-Muslim feelings within party leadership, purged its candidate list of all Muslims.

While the NLD has no control over the military, or the three crucial ministries that the military controls (Defence, Border Affairs and Home Affairs), no one from the party leadership (including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) has spoken out in ways that adequately acknowledge and firmly denounce (without equivocation) the massive violence visited upon the Rohingya in the last 18 months. Instead, faced with accusations of being complicit in the violence, they have responded defensively, with [government spokespeople denying](#) the scope of the military's campaign, [impeding](#) attempts to report on the situation, [undermining survivor's accounts](#) and [doubling down](#) on the argument that this is simply a case of Myanmar reasonably defending itself against a [terrorist threat](#).

Q. The Myanmar government has justified many of its security forces' activities in Rakhine State as push backs to the aforementioned Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Allegations have been made by the Myanmar government that the Salvation Army is a jihadist group with foreign ties. What do we know about ARSA activities and is there any substance to the allegations made by the government?

Unsurprisingly, it's difficult to get a good picture of what ARSA is and what networks it taps into. Ironically, both ARSA and the Myanmar authorities have an interest in playing up the ties to global jihadist networks, although reporting in late 2016 and early 2017 painted a picture of a small, poorly-equipped insurgency that had been rebuffed by some of the major jihadist players. That dynamic has likely changed in the last year, as the scope of military violence expanded drastically after the 2017 attacks. We shouldn't discount the

normative power of this “terrorism” framing, either domestically or in gaining some level of international sympathy. There is a parallel to the argument that political scientist [Mary Callahan](#) has made regarding the process through which the Burmese military, when faced with multiple insurgencies in the 1950s, gradually came to see its own citizens as potential enemies. In this case, messaging from the media and from the Myanmar government overwhelmingly connects Muslims (and more recently, the Rohingya specifically) with terrorism, making it that much more difficult to imagine a situation in which they can be accepted back into Myanmar communities. It is absolutely an unjustified mass characterisation, but gains strength and legitimacy through influential global discourses that inaccurately stereotype Muslims in this way.

Q. What role should the international community be playing in this crisis and what could it do to resolve the situation?

It is imperative that we continue to try to stake out ground that is unequivocal in denouncing the violence against Rohingya and demanding the recognition and protection of their basic rights. We should, however, be able to do this without unfairly and unhelpfully painting all Buddhists in Myanmar as “fascists,” or other incendiary labels. While the Burmese government, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in particular, deserve criticism for certain actions (and inactions) in relation to this crisis, it is also reasonable to acknowledge widespread Burmese frustrations that the flood of international condemnation was disproportionately focused directly on her, rather than the direct perpetrators in the military. If we want to get past the current impasse, where Burmese public opinion as well as the official government stance seem to have hardened into an outright rejection of very credible concerns and outside assessments of the conflict, we need to consider that, in addition to admittedly

strong feelings against the Rohingya, the current defensive posture of the Burmese is also motivated by what they feel is an unfair attack that undermines the possibilities for success of the democratic transition that many have struggled for decades. By pointing this out, I don't mean to endorse this view (after all, a "democratic" transition that was consolidated on the back of mass violence and the exclusion of almost 1 million people wouldn't be worth the name), but to suggest a different angle of engagement. After all, if there is ever to be a chance that the Rohingya can return with security and dignity to the areas they consider to be their homeland, where many of them have lived for generations, there will have to be a long process of engagement with Myanmar communities (especially Rakhine) in order to rebuild trust and provide mutual protection. If that sounds implausible, it's difficult to imagine an alternative beyond semi-permanent lives in terrible and precarious situations on the Bangladesh border. And certainly, as bad as those conditions are, the current rush to implement a repatriation process is dangerously reckless; no one should be compelled to return under the current conditions, which means that at the least, the focus ought to be on supporting refugees where they are, while pressuring the Myanmar government not to act in ways that would make a future return impossible.

How might one go about this advocacy work? While the Rohingya seem to have found very little support domestically, a few brave groups (mostly ethnic women's organisations) have [expressed concern and solidarity](#), largely along the lines I mentioned above. So much of Myanmar's population has experienced violent repression at the hands of the military over many decades, there should be space to frame what the Rohingya are experiencing in similar ways. Similarly, just as the Rohingya have collectively been defined in terms of the actions of ARSA and painted as terrorists, people living in other conflict

areas in Myanmar have been unjustly targeted due to military assumptions that saw all ethnic people as somehow associated with armed resistance groups. Recognising this other shared injustice provides a way of pushing back against this dangerous characterisation and generating a much-needed foundation for solidarity and hope.

Interviewee biography

***Matthew J Walton** is the Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. His research focuses on religion and politics in Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on Buddhism in Myanmar. Matt's first book, *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought in Myanmar*, was published in 2016 by Cambridge University Press. Matt is P-I for an ESRC-funded 2-year research project entitled "Understanding 'Buddhist nationalism' in Myanmar." He is a co-founder of the Myanmar Media and Society project and of the Oxford-based Burma/Myanmar blog *Tea Circle*.*

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