

# DEMOCRATIC CHANGES AND THE ROHINGYA IN MYANMAR

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## **Abstract**

Despite the domestic and international reforms to democracy in Myanmar over the past few years, the situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine has been deteriorating without any signs of improvement. To understand this situation, first of all, this paper examines the nature of Buddhist nationalism and then explores the relations among the central government, Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations such as Ma Ba Tha and Sangha according to political and social changes in transition toward democracy. These analyses help to identify the backgrounds of coexistence of the oppression of the Rohingya and democratisation in Myanmar, and further how and why the persecution of the Rohingya has continued in democratic transition. This paper concludes that political and social changes facilitated the building of the viable structures for the persecution of Rohingya Muslims based on Buddhist nationalism in transition toward democracy.

*Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya, Democratic Transition, Buddhist Nationalism, Persecution, Tatmadaw, Sangha, Ma Ba Tha*

## **Introduction**

Myanmar has changed remarkably with reformation, shifting from a military rule to a civilian government since 2011. The Western world has noted Myanmar's democratic reforms over the past few years. With the expectation of positive changes towards democracy, they have been concerned about the fact that the violation of human rights of the Rohingya Muslims has been growing disastrous.

The recent transition to democracy in Myanmar is characterised by unprecedented changes related to increased openness including internal changes such as the release of political offenders, multi-party general elections and international activities such as efforts for foreign investment and international trade (Ijtemaye, 2014). However, contrary to such positive changes, the Rohingya have been suffering not only from exclusion by the 1982 Citizenship Law but also from social deprivation such as violating their fundamental human rights. The Rohingya have been forced to languish in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps since the intense violence between Buddhist and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine in June and November 2012. For these reasons, they have attempted a perilous exodus to neighbouring nations such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia to seek jobs or to save their lives. More than 100,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled by boat from Myanmar since 2012 (Holmes, 2015). However, their desperate escape for survival to another country was by no means a guarantee for a better life. In May 2015, 139 graves suspected to be Rohingya from Myanmar were discovered on the Thai-Malaysian border. It is said that the place where mass graves were found is well-known to traffickers smuggling migrants and refugees (Pitman & Gecker, 2015).

This paper suggests that the hostility toward the Rohingya originated from deeply rooted Buddhist nationalism and accumulated sentiments such as disbelief, hatred, and imagined the fear of the Rohingya in a Buddhist society. Political and social changes have affected the formation of practical and systematic structures to persecute the Rohingya in the transition to democracy.

## **Rationale**

Many studies are focusing on the Rohingya issues after the time when the central government started to reform in the realms of politics and economics. The recent investigations have considered the problem around the Rohingya as not a single religious conflict between Buddhists and Muslims but as the persecution of the Rohingya committed by the state and local communities since the violent riots in 2012. These alternative interpretations help to elucidate ongoing Rohingya problems despite the democratic changes in Myanmar.

Zarni and Cowley (2014) claimed that the Rohingya have been subject to genocide executed by the civilian-military rule. Their research also shows that the reality of the Rohingya results from the pre-existing military, and power structures, as well as policies implemented with the aim of expelling

and destroying the Rohingya. Their report verifies that the state and local authorities in Myanmar have perpetrated four acts among five acts that determine the genocide compared with the Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide (1948). Moreover, the study explains more clearly the persecution of the Rohingya continuing in a transition toward democracy as compared with the studies that claim that the Rohingya problem is a result of British colonial policy, divide and rule or the conflict between two religions in the Rakhine state. However, it remains questionable to explain why Thein Sein's government and Buddhists have tried to destroy the Rohingya Muslims. "Addressing the Rohingya Problems", written by Kipgen (2013), deals with the facts, as well as international and domestic responses to violent riots in June and October 2012. His research claims that building a 'Consociational democracy' led by elites after the openness of Myanmar would be a solution to the Rohingya problems. "Citizenship Challenges in Myanmar's Democratic Transition: Case Study of the Rohingya-Muslim" (2015), written by Ahmad Suaedy and Muhammad Hafiz, explains that the discrimination toward the Rohingya became more systematic due to the dominant role of the military after five years of Myanmar's reformation. Moreover, the paper presents a somewhat positive perspective that the future of the Rohingya would be contingent on Aung San Suu Kyi's stance and power in the upcoming election.

Although a new government was inaugurated in 2011, Myanmar's political system remained under the military power and allowed the Tatmadaw<sup>1</sup> (the Myanmar armed forces) to be involved in politics (International Crisis Group, 2014). In Myanmar's social structures, the number of Burmese Buddhists is overwhelming compared with the number of any minority group<sup>2</sup>. In light of these characteristics and Buddhist nationalism, this paper covers political and social changes related with the Rohingya to figure out political and social structure to perpetuate the persecution of the Rohingya in the democratic transition.

The objective of this paper is to explore the backgrounds where the oppression of the Rohingya has coexisted with democratisation in Myanmar and how and why the persecution of the Rohingya has continued in the transition toward democracy.

The basic framework is to examine political and social changes related to the Rohingya for understanding what influences democratic changes have exerted on the Rohingya by drawing assumptions from several discourses on Buddhist nationalism, ethnic cleansing and democratic changes. Nationalism, as defined by Benedict Anderson, refers to the idea that citizens of a single

country imaginarily recognised one another as members of a community based on kinship and religion although members of the nation will be unfamiliar with each other. The nation of his work is explained in that it is a limited, sovereign and unified community. Regardless of the fact that the boundary of a nation looks blurred and endless, its limitation exists. Moreover, the nation is imagined as homogeneous communion without a mutual difference (Anderson, 1991). Furthermore, religious nationalism such as Buddhist nationalism would be possible to practice, when a common religion prevails for the public (Friedland, 2001). In terms of the relation of nationalism to democratic changes, O'Donnell and Schmitter noted "if guarantees for individuals and some rights of contestation have begun to be extended in the transition from authoritarian rule, a generalized mobilization will occur", in other words, they described this phenomenon as the "resurrection of civil society" (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, pp.48-49). Jack Snyder warned that "the transition to democratic politics is meanwhile creating fertile conditions for nationalism and ethnic conflict" (Snyder, 2000). Ultimately, democratic changes of political and social sectors could lead to a series of process for the actualization of Buddhist nationalism. These perspectives on Buddhist nationalism and democratic changes suggest a possibility of the coexistence of the consistent attempts to exterminate the Rohingya with the movement of democratic reforms. This paper firstly reviews the history of the Rohingya briefly and then elucidates the nature of Buddhist nationalism. This context will help to explore exclusionary attributes for the Rohingya based on Buddhist nationalism. Thirdly, it covers recent events related to the Rohingya as well as the political and social changes to figure out how the interrelation of Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations such as Ma Ba Tha<sup>3</sup> and Sangha<sup>4</sup> has formed and conditioned in the early stages of the democratic transition in Myanmar.

### **The History of the Rohingya**

There are approximately between one and 1.5 million people living with their citizenship denied by the Myanmar government in Northern Rakhine State separated from Burma proper. More than 87,000 Rohingya Muslims have escaped from grave human rights violations since deadly riots in 2012 and 53,000 people undertook a dangerous journey by sea to the Bay of Bengal in 2014 (Pellet, 2015; UNHCR, 2014; Equal Rights Trust, 2014). Rohingya Muslims did not originate from just one single racial stock, but constitute an ethnic

group that was developed and mixed from diverse ethnic groups including Arabs, Moghuls, and Bengalis (Bahar, 1981; Alam, 2013).

The history of the polarisation and conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims dates back to the *Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885)*. Muslim persecution of the Burmese originated during the reign of King Bodawpayar (1782-1819)<sup>5</sup>. The invasion of the Burmese king led to atrocities that broke the spirit of the people in Arakan<sup>6</sup> (Bahar, 2010; Yunus, 1994). Moreover, during the time between the British evacuation and the Japanese invasion, the Buddhists attacked Muslim villages in Arakan because of pent-up discontent, accumulated by unequal treatment resulting from the divide and rule strategy, at this time, Britain's colonial policy, reached its climax<sup>7</sup> (Yunus, 1994; Yegar, 1972).

After independence, a military junta began to repress the Rohingya in a systematic way. At the beginning of February 1978, in Arakan, an atrocious operation, Nagamin (King Dragon operation), targeted the Rohingya Muslim population that was not provided with identity cards to exterminate them. Both armed officials of immigration and Burmese forces blocked and besieged them. They attacked, arrested, and even persecuted the Rohingya, accusing them of being illegal inhabitants who had migrated from Bangladesh. Ultimately, they forced the Rohingya to be taken away to concentration camps where the Rohingya were not allowed to move to another place and were not supplied food or necessities for life. At the end of February 1978, some Rohingya died of rape, starvation, and torture in the concentration camps. As a result of the Nagamin operation, more than 50 Rohingya died, approximately 200,000 were rendered homeless, and these Rohingya refugees had no choice but to flee to neighbouring nations such as Bangladesh. Finally, the number of the Rohingya depopulated rapidly in Rakhine as it was their purpose to eradicate the Rohingya ethnic group itself (Rohingya Patriotic Front, 1978).

Moreover, in 1982, the Citizenship Law is sufficient to underpin discrimination against Rohingya Muslims. The government enacted the 1982 Citizenship Law that classified all people into three categories (citizens, associate citizens, and naturalised citizens), ruling out the Rohingya who did not have any evidence to verify their lineage. The next year, the Burmese government took a nationwide census with the number of Rohingya completely excluded (Mathieson, 2009). Further, Thein Sein's government has supported this law and has not made any attempt to change it. Brutal violence sparked by the death of a Buddhist woman by Muslims resulted in the killing of around 90 people and leaving roughly 120,000 displaced in Rakhine in 2012; nearly all were Muslims (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2012).

Furthermore, to control the number of Rohingya Muslims, there have been inhumane laws about marriage permission and restrictions on the number of children permitted. For example, a Rohingya couple is subject to requesting permission for their marriage plan and is restricted in the number of children they are permitted to have according to the marriage licenses by the NaSaKa<sup>8</sup> since 2005 (Lewa, 2008).

In fact, the causes of conflicts between Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims are too complicated to explain as a single incident or one reason. There are several assumable reasons based on these historical events and changes of a political system. And it should be considered that the causes of the conflicts changed after independence from Britain. At first, religious and ethnic conflicts were caused by disbelief and hatred between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state. But, after the colonial period, Buddhists began to perceive Muslims as a serious threat that would challenge Buddhists community on Buddhist nationalism, which was influenced by the colonial strategy and Japanese fascism.

The first reason stems from the 'disbelief' between two different religions at the early stage of the settlement during the dynasty era, which can be seen to function as a root of later conflicts. According to Moshe Yegar, there were a few attempts<sup>9</sup> for the Kings to examine the religious truth of Islam of a large number of Muslim groups during the reign of Bodawpayar and Bagyidaw (1819-1837), a successor of Bodawpayar, but it was said that the results were unsatisfying to dispel his doubts (Yegar, 1972).

The second reason is 'hatred emotion' toward Rohingya Muslims aroused by the divide and rule strategy during the British colonial period, which is also deeply related to the fact that Tatmadaw has been persecuting the Rohingya Muslims (International Crisis Group, 2014). During the British rule, there were several events that made Buddhists feel hatred towards Rohingya Muslims. One of them is that a massive number of people from India and Chittagong immigrated into Myanmar as labourers, merchants or administrators to help the rich landowners, particularly during harvest season. Moreover, there were money-lenders apart from labourers among a great number of immigrants from India, which made rural farmers impoverished and gave rise to resentment towards them. This strongly stimulated Buddhist nationalism, and the activated nationalist movements resulted in a few communal riots against India in the 1930s. These movements of Burmese nationalists were inflicted on Muslims in a chaotic way due to the difficulty of the distinction between Indians and Muslims (Smith, 1995). Such hatred is

distinguished from the first reason, disbelief, regarding dissatisfaction accumulated due to Britain's differential treatment during the colonial period.

The third reason is 'fear' that is derived from two ideas: one is that a few Rohingya organisations such as the ARNO (Arakan Rohingya National Organization) and the RSO (Rohingya Solidarity Organization) had a close connection with leaders or members of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The other is that Buddhists believe that the number of Muslims has increased rapidly as a demographical factor. These factors made the monks feel anxious because they thought that Muslim would overcome their Buddhist society.

The fourth reason is the antagonism that the military junta manipulated as a political instrument to retain their regime by diverting the public attention from discontent with autocratic policies to the Rohingya issue, particularly during the military regime. For example, the SLORC deliberately issued propaganda against the Rohingya, not accepting the results of the 1990 general election (Yunus, 1994).

It is essential to consider the accumulated sentiments between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims to explore the changes in Myanmar's political and social structures where the persecution of the Rohingya has been acceptable in democratic transition.

### **Buddhist Nationalism**

It is necessary to explore the traits of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar to understand the links between Buddhist nationalism and the Rohingya problem. Buddhist nationalism began to emerge against British colonial rule and involved Buddhists as identifying with Burmese culture and history. Also, Buddhists consider their voice as being genuine enough to represent the voice of the nation (Breuilly, 1993). Thus, Buddhist nationalists assert that their ideology is equal to the ideas of the entire nation.

In particular, during the colonial period, Tatmadaw and the founders of several armies including Aung San were trained by fascist Japan's military to defeat Allied forces and British and were patronised by Japan's military (Zarni, 2013). In this process, Myanmar's Buddhist nationalism was influenced by Japanese fascism. The practical aspect of fascism seems appropriate to explain the persecution of the Rohingya. Moreover, it is a close relation that may be imagined as a coherent community. The imagined coherent community tends to attempt to exterminate or counter any extrinsic influences that may disrupt the coherency of the proper community. This fascism replicates and develops beyond states' control in a populist form (Deleuze &

Guattari, 2009; Esposito & Hanafi, 2013; Frewer, 2015). However, fascism could not exert a force by itself in a country (Payne, 1995), and it could be actualized according to a particular flow of nationalism, racism and state interest. Thus, the community that was imagined by traditional Buddhists has attempted to propel the law and restriction to ensure a population of proper Buddhists and to limit and suppress Muslim influences, which are regarded as outside influences (Frewer, 2015). It is because that after independence from Britain, the Buddhist nationalists regarded the Rohingya as illegal immigrants and a threat to the Buddhist community. It is also important to consider the fact that Thein Sein's government under the control of Tatmadaw influenced by Japanese fascism has retained Buddhist nationalist stance (Philip, 2014).

### **Political Changes**

This paper covers the relations between Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations such as Ma Ba Tha and Sangha in the transition towards democracy to examine how the central government and Buddhist organisations have affected the Rohingya, considering the central government to be under military power.

The new government led by President Thein Sein, a former general, was inaugurated in March 2011 when Myanmar's junta transferred power into a quasi-civilian parliament, terminating military regimes of the period from 1962 to 2011. The civilian government altered the political landscape from a military regime into a presidential republic with the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament). Moreover, Tatmadaw, which took over the state from a military coup in 1988, handed over formal authority to a civilian government. However, despite such a notable change, the Thein Sein government has still maintained a special position of Tatmadaw to avoid hampering their progress and interests (MacDonald, 2015).

During a military regime, a civil society<sup>10</sup> could not operate its function actively, and was often limited to a narrow sphere of activities, or was circumscribed under authoritarian rule, because it would be impossible to sustain the regime without prohibiting civil society from protesting against the incumbent regime. Changing to a democratic system, civil society began to function as an intermediate realm, representing public interests to the state, or monitoring the power of the nation through voluntary and private form of associations (Bunbongkarn, 2004; Skaar, 1994). Also, it started to serve as a significant source for securing the legitimacy of state power (Skaar, 1994).

The rapid regime change and the restoration of parliament needed to secure popular support for social movements to provide its legitimacy. As a new government tends to gain popular support by exploiting existing public sentiments instead of bringing about a new change in attitudes (Breuilly, 1993), the Thein Sein government began to support Sangha, which was a community that had a strong driving force in politics and society of Myanmar, in order to maintain his regime. It is because not only did tens of thousands of monks protested against the government on the street in defiance of the junta in 2007 but also because it is considered that monks are valuable and beneficial to the public as the effect of the Saffron Revolution (Phone, 2014). Moreover, Sangha can exercise its influence on monks as a leader that has a key role in the Buddhist community. Because the interplay between the central government and monks is beneficial not only for Sangha but also for the central government and what remains as close connections can prohibit opposition against them from rising by the support of the public, the government provided considerable contribution to Sangha and held several ceremonies and events for the Buddhists for the purpose of fostering a better image for the public after the crackdown (Gil, 2008).

However, such relations caused Sangha members, who believe that they have responsibility for preserving Buddhist identity in Myanmar, to engage in politics. Such an overwhelming influence of Sangha in the Burmese political and social dimension was enough to revitalise religion abroad as well as in the country (Phone, 2014). Also, Buddhist nationalists have attempted to enact legislation related to different religious conversion. For example, 'the Race and Religion Protection laws' proposed by Ma Ba Tha are remarkable regarding the effects of Burmese nationalism on politics and changing anti-Muslim movements into institutionalisation.

Recently, Myanmar's Parliament is considering four aspects of proposed legislation related to the perspective of Buddhists nationalism. These laws' purpose is seeming to protect race and religion, but they seem to be retrograde on religious freedom and women's rights. Looking at the legislation more closely, it is intended for Buddhist nationalist protection against the fear of Islam. These laws consist of four bills: a special marriage bill for Buddhist women, a religion conversion bill, a monogamy bill, and a population control bill (Horsey, 2015). At first, the Buddhist women's marriage bill is a bill opposing interfaith marriage, which states that if a Buddhist woman desires interfaith marriage, she must be permitted by her parents and the township authorities. And then, the religion conversion bill prohibits younger than the age of 18 from converting to another religion, and an adult must ask the

authorities to convert. Next, the monogamy bill opposes polygamy, which means that a person lives with more partners than one spouse. Finally, the population control bill passed by Parliament will be implemented on a group showing a higher population increase than other groups to control population. Although some of the Buddhist communities have expressed opposition to these laws, in particular, the marriage bill, Buddhist nationalists have pushed the Parliament to pass the laws (Nilsen, 2015). However, in democratic transition, what is most concerning is that these laws would cause a division of Myanmar's society and drive the Rohingya issue into being much worse. In particular, the monogamy law seems intended to impose a legal restriction on polygamy, which is legal in Muslim society.

Another factor to notice is that the fact that Tatmadaw has still retained a powerful role in Myanmar's politics. It is closely connected with the question of why persecution of the Rohingya has continued in the state that is evolving toward democracy. Tatmadaw has preserved their four fundamental interests regardless of political changes in recent years. Those are independent, complete institutional autonomy, veto power on changes to the Constitution, exclusive power on the security portfolio, and immunity from action taken during the military junta (MacDonald, 2015). Despite the change of a civilian government, Tatmadaw, based on Buddhist nationalism with such an absolute power, has consistently attempted to exile the Rohingya from Myanmar. That is because the Tatmadaw assumes the nature of fascism and thinks that the Rohingya, regarded as a contaminant, would destroy the homogeneous Buddhist community.

Since Ma Ba Tha takes the same stance against the Rohingya that Tatmadaw does, both of them maintain a close relation to each other's interests. In particular, Buddhist groups such as Ma Ba Tha and Sangha deliberately tend to fuel Buddhist nationalist agitations against Rohingya nationwide during the election year, which is intended to shift the focus away from the lack of legitimacy of Myanmar's government, the democratic deficits of the Constitution, and for pursuing the interests of undemocratic forces like the armed forces for the public (Nilsen, 2015). Besides, Thein Sein's government has guaranteed the Buddhist community more influential positions because the government believes in making them support the recent party rather than the opposite parties in return (Ahmad & Muhammad, 2015). As a result, the interactions and the close relations between the central government and Buddhist organisations can be said to have exploited anti-Muslim sentiments for their interests as political instruments.

In general, democratic reforms in politics can be considered as a mechanism to enhance cooperation of inter-ethnic, religious groups and further help ethnic conflicts to resolve. However, in the case of Myanmar, political changes under the influence of the Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations which pursue Buddhist nationalism not only have been more jeopardised rather than mitigated the brutal situations of the Rohingya but have also led to the formation of political and institutional structures that could implement persecution of the Rohingya.

## **Social Changes**

In democratic transition, as the control from the authoritarian regime reduced, a variety of groups and individuals are likely to expose their sentiments and needs (Grugel, 2002). In particular, freedom of expression is a core, fundamental factor in a democratic society, and it is essential for the formation of public opinion. Thus, the freedom enables political parties and cultural societies to be formed and developed (Human Rights Library, 1985). However, in Myanmar, the same principle that grants the right to express individual opinions had an effect on the other side of the same coin on the Rohingya problem.

The democratic process has made the social atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment, particularly against Rohingya Muslims, more pervasive throughout the state. The spread of the anti-Muslim movements led by the monks accelerated nationwide, which was considered to be implications of two impetuses in relation to the social change to democracy as follows: one is social circumstance where freedom of expression in some degree is allowed compared with military regime, and the other is resurgence of extremist Buddhists by an amnesty for political prisoners.

The transition toward democratisation makes the activities of civil society more alive than previous political circumstances (Elin, 1994). In Myanmar, Buddhists perceive Islam as a threat and believe that they lie in a privileged position within the state (MacDonald, 2015), anti-Muslim movements of extremist Buddhists began to grow rapidly.

Since the new Burmese government initiated a series of political reforms, the problem related to the release of its political prisoners has been one of the most significant issues. That is because it has been related to US economic sanctions that have affected Myanmar's political and economic development, and the release of political prisoners is considered to play a vital role in political reform regarding participating in politics and implementing

fair election of several opposition parties. In fact, there has been a difference in definition for political prisoners between a general definition—a person who is detained by authorities for a person's political opinions—and the definition in Myanmar. Mentioning that the political prisoners include prisoners of conscience solely, the central government consistently had put this action off. However, over recent years the Myanmar's government began to release individuals based on humanitarianism and possibly to affect the national interests (Martin, 2013). In 2014, there was a presidential amnesty that allowed approximately 3,000 political prisoners and ethnic Rohingya prisoners to be released (Human Rights Watch, 2015), which influenced the activities of extremist Buddhists.

Ethnic and religious tensions that had been suppressed under military rule for almost 50 years started to reappear and became even worse through anti-Muslim movements including Islamophobia and reprisal because of the activities of Buddhist civil groups and extreme Buddhist nationalists. In particular, the 969 Movement<sup>11</sup> was caused by Burmese monk Ashin Wirathu, who has played the most incendiary role to provoke anti-Muslim sentiments. He was arrested as he had instigated a riot that resulted in the deaths of ten Muslims in 2003. However, he was pardoned and released in 2011 (Routray, 2014).

Looking closely at the 969 Movement, it has flourished on a form of nationwide symbolism. The 969 logo, in opposition to 786, has four Asiatic lions in the middle of a wheel that represent the Buddhist emperor Asoka. Stickers printed with the 969 logos were distributed for free to be attached at various spots such as shops and homes (Routray, 2014). By using it, Buddhists could distinguish between people who supported or opposed Islam's expansion in a dominant Buddhist society. As the 969 Movements diffused rapidly in the Buddhist communities, it caused the public to have anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar. Moreover, it also significantly affected Muslims' economic clout. Because Buddhists have believed that Muslims are dominant in Myanmar's economy, accordingly they have continued a call for a boycott of Muslim-owned business since 2014 (Alex, 2013). This is considered as fear of Islam, and it seems to reflect Buddhists' imaginary idea that the wealthy of the Muslim economy would lead more people to convert to Islam, and further Muslim society to conquer Buddhist community. In reference to this movement, the remarkable thing is the fact that the Myanmar's military, Tatmadaw, is the real power of the 969 Movement, and that it intended to divert the public attention from Tatmadaw to an emotional aggression towards Muslim. Moreover, the Myanmar government is not the exception in

these movements. In other words, Thein Sein's office has painted the 969 logos as an indication of the peace symbol, and even the Minister of Religious Affairs has made a vow for 969's propagation (Routray, 2014). In addition, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD (National League for Democracy) has remained silent about the problem related to the Rohingya as they recognise public opinion and public power derived from the monks. As the threat towards Islam increased, hardline monks started to participate in hate speech against Rohingya Muslims, which has affected the civil society (Raymond, 2015). Furthermore, it is clear that anti-Muslim sentiment has been prevalent among the Burmese. However, it is essential to explore the reasons why particularly the Rohingya among Muslims were targeted by the Buddhist extremists, placing heavy emphasis on current events. There are several reasons to induce antagonism of the Rohingya, although anti-Muslim sentiment was influenced by Buddhist nationalism.

One of the significant elements to evoke a hostile emotion from the Buddhists is the idea that the Rohingya maintained a relationship with terrorist organisations. During the military regime, the BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party) under General Ne Win's command implemented Operation Nagamin, which at first was conducted to distinguish foreign migrants before a nationwide census. However, the Rohingya were targeted in operation in Rakhine state. The Rohingya had to escape from Rakhine and a brutal persecution conducted by the BSPP for the annihilation of the surviving Muslim population in 1978 (Human Rights Watch, 2000). However, at that time, Afghan instructors were found at the RSO camp at the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar where the RSO formed at the beginning of the 1980s. Moreover, Salem Ulah, who was in charge of the military arm of ARNO, had a strong relation with Al-Qaeda and wanted its members to join the Taliban in Afghanistan. In May 2000, five members of ARNO had a meeting of high-ranking officers with Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the Taliban, to discuss political, military, and financial affairs, and further arms and ammunition. A year later, 90 selected members of ARNO took part in guerrilla warfare with various explosives and heavy weapons drills in Afghanistan and Libya (Internal Security document, 2002). The RSO, which Zafar Alam headed, had a close connection with the JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), a terrorist group in Bangladesh. In 2002, a few members of the RSO were trained about how to devise and set bombs off by JMB explosives experts at a camp on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. In return, arms experts of RSO trained several operatives of JMB and further also taught the Huji (Harkat-ul-Johad-al-Islam), an illegal Islamist group, in a forest near Chittagong (Manik, 2009).

Because of the relation between the Rohingya communities and terror groups, some from among over 200,000 Rohingya were repatriated, and others became to organise militant groups in Bangladesh (Lintner, 2002).

Another reason is related to a demographical factor. Although this reason might sound somewhat questionable, some Buddhist extremists such as Wirathu claim that as Muslims are terribly populous, they would take over the country. As mentioned above, the religious conversion bill and the monogamy bill proposed by Ma Ba Tha seem to reflect the fear of the growing number of Muslim because these bills would prevent women and children from marrying Muslim and being encouraged to convert to Islam. For example, a census that had been taken of Burma in 1931 showed that the greatest Muslim population was Indian Muslim. However, because there was an obvious distinction between Indians and Muslims, the figure could not be accurate about the Muslim population in Myanmar at that time. Nevertheless, the most important thing was that 41% of Muslims, the highest subset of the overall Muslim population, lived intensively in Rakhine (Grundy & Wong, 1997), which caused monks to focus on the Rohingya in Rakhine.

For these reasons, both Buddhist communities and extremist Buddhists began to perceive the Rohingya as a threat in Myanmar. Thus, over recent years, social changes in democratic transition enabled movements of the extremist Buddhists to be activated. Furthermore, they have played a key role in the formation of the current social circumstances where the antagonism toward the Rohingya gets more pervasive.

## **Conclusion**

Myanmar has changed with reformation from military rule to a civilian government since 2011. In contrast, the Rohingya Muslims have still suffered from ruthless oppression by the military-controlled government and Buddhist organisations.

Buddhist nationalism influenced by Japanese fascism considers Buddhists themselves as a coherent community and the Rohingya as an outside influence that may conquer their imagined community. Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations on Buddhist nationalism have attempted to exterminate the Rohingya to prevent the outside influence from disrupting their coherent community.

Over recent years, in democratic transition, the central government which needed democratic legitimacy under Tatmadaw began to support the Buddhist organisations to gain public support because the number of the

Burmese who believe in Buddhism is much greater than any other group and the beliefs of the monks have been affirmed through the Saffron Revolution. Consequently, political changes in democratic reforms made the relation between Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations stronger and closer, which facilitated the formation of political and institutional structures against Rohingya Muslims on Buddhist nationalism. Furthermore, the influence of Tatmadaw and Buddhist organisations in politics and legislation has caused politics and policy based on Buddhist nationalism by protecting their race and religion and restricting the rights of ethnic Rohingya Muslims.

On social changes, social circumstances where the freedom of expression allowed to a certain degree and revitalised activities of extremist Buddhists by the release of political prisoners caused the spread of anti-Muslim movements in Myanmar. As a typical example, the 969 Movements led by extremist Buddhists and supported by the central government spread anti-Muslim sentiment, particularly regarding the Rohingya, nationwide and widened the rift between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims.

Democracy is viable when the activists of civil society that represent various ethnic opinions are allowed to express their voices. However, the current situation in Myanmar has led to building a nation not for multi-ethnic tolerance but only for the Burmese, driving Rohingya Muslims into ethnic cleansing. Moreover, political and social changes in the democratic process contributed to building the possible structures and circumstances for the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

The future of the Rohingya would not be different from now, as long as Tatmadaw's prerogative, the political involvement of monks and political supporters for the activities of the extremist Buddhists remain unchanged.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tatmadaw emerged from the British rule to struggle against British Colonialism, which consisted of young nationalists and was led by Aung San claiming the independence from British administration (International Crisis Group, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The figure of Buddhists occupying 80.1% showed an enormous gap with 7.8% Christians and the rate of folk religions at 5.8% ([http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/Burma Myanmar/religiousdemography#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/Burma%20Myanmar/religiousdemography#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010)).

<sup>3</sup> Ma Ba Tha is the Burmese acronym of the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion.

<sup>4</sup> Sangha is a community of monks.

<sup>5</sup>The Burmese king who had been in rivals with the Mons in the 18th century conquered the Arakan in 1784. The Arakanese suffered from forced labour and were made slaves in constructing a pagoda. They were also subject to heavy taxes beyond their ability, which caused the Arakanese to flee across the Thai-Myanmar border. Hundreds of people were burnt out in bamboo forests regardless of ages and gender, and most people had to flee from terrible atrocities committed by the Burmese.

<sup>6</sup>Arakan is the former name of Rakhine.

<sup>7</sup>In response to the Buddhists' attack, Jafar Kawal, a leader of the Mujahid movement in Arakan, started to recruit and train, inspiring the Muslim masses with a conscience. The Mujahids' rebellion did not meet with success fluctuating between dissolutions and reunifications as several large-scale campaigns such as 'Operation Monsoon' were launched to suppress Mujahids by the central government forces over the period from 1941 to 1954.

<sup>8</sup>The NaSaKa is the border administration force of Tatmadaw.

<sup>9</sup>One of the attempts is that the book written by an Englishman, imprisoned in Myanmar, Henry Gouger read "Bagyidaw invited the dignitaries of the Muslim community in Ava and the flesh of the hatred animal was placed ready-cooked before them. He commanded them to eat the pork. They thought of the executioner's sword outside and ate the pork".

<sup>10</sup>When it comes to a term of civil society, although there are several definitions mentioned in many kinds of literature sources, this paper makes use of the concept of "an intermediary between the private sector and the state".

<sup>11</sup>The number of 969 indicates the nine divine attributes of the Buddha, his six teachings, and the nine attributes of monks or the Sangha, first written by U Kyaw Lwin, a public officer of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the 1990s. The number 969 has the meaning opposed to 786, referring to a phrase in the Quran "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful." Buddhists who emphasise numerological importance interpreted that the number 786 indicated that Muslims would conquer Myanmar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (7 plus eight plus 6 is 21).

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