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Islam in the China Sea: Muslims in Myanmar
Islam di Sekitar Laut China: Orang Islam di Myanmar

Maulana Akbar Shah*

Abstract

From an economic and strategic perspective, the Strait of Malacca is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. It has always been a strategic maritime route that benefitted kingdoms of Tiriwizara, Majapahit, Malakka, Pagan, Hantawaddy and Konbong Kingdoms of Myanmar. Thanks to the long borderland, China and Burma have always engaged in trade and diplomatic relation. Burma, presently called Myanmar, is an important country from the perspective of geo-politics in the region, but never has the situation of 8 million Muslims in this country been worse. Muslims have been living in Myanmar for a long time. The previous Buddhist rulers of the country and the British administration that followed provided rights of citizenship to them without discrimination. In the light of these welcoming circumstances, Muslims were happy to contribute to the nation by joining the army, the police force, government institutions in areas such as health care, education, trade, business, agriculture as well as in politics and as legislators in the parliament of Myanmar. Nevertheless, their unfortunate history began when the military came into power in 1962. All the rights and responsibilities they had enjoyed over the years became restricted. Discrimination policies were applied in every segment of national institutions, thereby threatening their citizenship rights. The discrimination continued to the extent that their racial status as one of the 145 ethnic groups of Myanmar was removed. Consequently, frequent riots, afflictions, and violence against Muslim minorities became the norm, rendering peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Buddhists difficult. The objective of this paper is to research the historical existence and identification of Muslims in Myanmar. Findings of this work will touch upon a theory of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar.

Keywords Islam, Muslim, identity, rights, discrimination, peace, coexistence.

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Abstrak

Dari perspektif ekonomi dan strategik, Selat Melaka adalah salah satu laluan perkapalan yang paling penting di dunia. Ia sentiasa menjadi laluan maritim strategik yang memberi manfaat kepada kerajaan-kerajaan kerajaan Tiriwizara, Majapahit, Malakka, Pagan, Hantawaddy dan Kerajaan Konbong Myanmar. Disebabkan sempadan yang panjang, China dan Burma sentiasa terlibat dalam perdagangan dan hubungan diplomatik. Burma, yang kini dipanggil Myanmar, adalah negara penting dari perspektif geo-politik di rantau ini, tetapi 8 juta umat Islam di negara ini tidak pernah mengalami keadaan yang buruk. Umat Islam telah tinggal di Myanmar sejak beberapa ribu tahun yang lalu. Para pemimpin Buddha terdahulu dan juga pentadbiran British memberi hak kewarganegaraan kepada umat Islam tanpa diskriminasi. Keadaan ini menyebabkan umat Islam dengan rela hati tampil memberi sokongan kepada negara dengan menyertai tentera, pasukan polis, terlibat dalam institusi kerajaan dalam bidang kesihatan, pendidikan, perdagangan, perniagaan, pertanian, politik dan penggubal undang-undang dalam parlimen Myanmar. Walau bagaimanapun, sejarah buruk bermula apabila golongan tentera berkuasa pada tahun 1962. Semua hak keistimewaan yang mereka nikmati selama bertahun-tahun menjadi terhad. Dasar diskriminasi telah digunakan pada setiap segmen institusi nasional dan telah mengancam hak kewarganegaraan mereka. Diskriminasi ini berterusan sehingga status mereka sebagai salah satu daripada 145 kaum Myanmar dihapuskan. Akibatnya, kerusuhan, kesengsaraan, dan kekerasan yang sering berlaku terhadap kaum minoriti Muslim menjadi norma dimana tidak mungkin akan wujud kesefahaman antara Islam dan Buddha. Objektif makalah ini adalah untuk menyelidik kewujudan sejarah dan identifikasi umat Islam di Myanmar. Hasil kajian akan menyentuh teori kedamaian antara umat Islam dan Buddha di Myanmar.

Kata Kunci: Islam, Muslim, identiti, Hak, diskriminasi, kemanan, coexisten

Introduction

The status of Muslims in Myanmar has become more difficult during the military rule in Myanmar. Although they have been living in Myanmar for hundreds of years, their citizenship rights were still doubtful, as they were not recognized as one of the 135 officially approved ethnic groups of Myanmar. According to the previous records, they were officially registered in the list of 145 ethnic groups of Myanmar during the first democratic rule (1948-1962). Muslims believe they are discriminated against as they are denied service in national institutions and their religious rights are ignored. They worry that they are targeted in different domains by the government and are utilized as political tools when the government regime encounters any kind of political crisis. This claim has been proved true by hundreds of religious-based confrontations between Buddhists and Muslims, particularly since the 1962 military coup.¹

¹ Moscotti, Albert D. *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Myanmar* (Hawaii: University Press, 1972), p. 39.

Generally, when a group of people lives for years without any criminal record, they are granted the right to be citizens of the country. The Muslims in Myanmar have a record of stay of hundreds of years. Moreover, they have significantly contributed to the country, but their rights are still denied. Scholars have likened the Muslims' difficulty to a sandwich that can be eaten by the regime at any time.² The status of Muslim is a tool malleable to exploitation by the regime. When this group was convinced that Muslims were a so-called threat, they became violent; they killed Muslims, looted their properties, and burned their religious buildings and schools. Since 2015, a new government, National League for Democracy, NLD, has been in power. But it seems that the NLD is incapable of fully controlling the country, such as the army, and certain areas in Myanmar are still in control of the old regime. The status of Muslims remains uncertain, law and order are deteriorating, and the economy of the country is still declining. The objective of this paper is to highlight the history and contribution of Muslims to Myanmar society. Furthermore, it attempts to find ways for their national identity, suggestions for their future success and for peaceful coexistence to occur between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar.³

Who are Myanmar Muslims?

Myanmar is a member of the Association of South East Asian Nation, ASEAN community. Geographically, the People's Republic of China is in the north, Thailand is in the east, Bangladesh and India border the west, while the Andaman Sea is in the southern part of Myanmar. The country has an area of 261,789 sq. miles (678,034 sq. kilometers)⁴ and its current population is about 55 million. Islam came into existence at the end of the 6th century in Arabia. It began to spread in the 7th century to different parts of the world, including Southeast Asia.⁵ The Arab Muslims mastered maritime trade and sailed through the Indian Ocean to various Asian countries such as China, India, Myanmar, Malacca, Indonesia, the Philippines, etc. The Arab Muslims disseminated Islam by manifesting generosity, friendship, technical proficiency in craftsman-

² Kaspar, Andrew D. "NLD Wins Supermajority, Will Form Next Government," *The Irrawaddy*, Nov 13, 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Atlas of the World, South East Asia, Myanmar: *National Geographic* (Ohio: NG Society, RRD. CT. 7th, Edition, 1999), pp. 34, 101.

⁵ N. A. Baloch, *Islam Reached Southeast Asia 7th Century: Advent of Islam in Indonesia* (Lahore: Mansoor Publishing, 1st Edition, 1980), pp.1-8.

ship, business and administration expertise through their businesses and maritime trade activities.⁶ Muslims arrived in Myanmar at 9th century as traders, settlers, military personnel, prisoners of war, refugees, and victims of slavery. As time passed, they became accustomed to the local culture and traditions such as food, dress code and living style. Muslims enjoyed living as differing class citizens and held positions at different levels within the country as soldiers, royal advisers, administrators, port authorities and mayors, etc.⁷

The Arrival of Muslims to Myanmar

There were four entry points used by the Muslims to enter Myanmar. The first group of Muslims to arrive in Myanmar through the Indian Ocean were the Arab traders, who set up their business centers and dockyards at the coastal cities of Arakan since around 700 CE.⁸ The second group of Muslims who had similar Arab and Persian origins settled their business centers at coastal cities such as Patheingyi, Yangon, Pegu, Muttama and Margui from around 1000 to 1500 CE.⁹ They were called Pati, because their capital was Patheingyi, the capital of the Irrawaddy Delta. In Patheingyi they set up business centers for trade, dockyards and enjoyed living and working there for three hundred years.¹⁰ The third group of Muslims, called Pantay, entered Myanmar through the northern border with China around 900 CE. Islam had already arrived in China by around 700 CE, when Wahab bin Abi Qabsha and Saad Larbish Habshi engaged in Islamic daw'ah at Quankyo, China 628 CE.¹¹ The fourth group to arrive in Myanmar were Muslims from India, who arrived during the British administration (1923-1948). They were the largest group among other Muslim groups and their population was estimated to be one million when the British left Myanmar in 1948.¹²

⁶ Pearn, B. R., *An Introduction to the History of Southeast Asia* (Hong Kong: Longman, Malaya, Ltd, Kl, 1963), p. 29.

⁷ Yegar, Moshe, *Muslim of Myanmar* (Wiesbaden: Germany, 1972), p. 20

⁸ Ezzati, Abul Fazl, *The Spread of Islam* (Tehran: Ahlul Bayt World Assembly Publication, 1994), pp.301, 333.

⁹ Gyi, Khin Maung, *Translation of "In the Hidden Myanmar" by Morris Collins*, (Yangon: Rangoon University press, 1977), p. 211

¹⁰ Pati, Ko lay, *Indigenous Muslims of Myanmar*, (Rangoon: Islam Council Press, 2009), p. 5

¹¹ Fatimi, S.Q. "The Role of China in the Spread of Islam in South East Asia", (Singapore: NUS Press, 1959), pp. 7-8.

¹² Cady, John F. *A History of Modern Burma*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1st Edition, 1958), p. 73.

According to early sources, the presence of Muslims in Myanmar has been traced back to the Pagan kingdom period (1100-1286). One of the two concrete proofs of contributions by Muslim soldiers in the Pagan army was the invasion of the Tathon Dynasty by King Anorratha. And the second was the digging of the Meikthila Lake, 11 centuries ago, where thousands of Muslim soldiers participated in both occasions. Without the presence of Byatta, a Muslim General, the conquest of Tathon would have been impossible. The role of Muslim generals, Byatwi, Byatta, ShwePhyin Gyi, Shwe Phyin Galay and Rahman Khan (Nyayamankan) also cannot be omitted. After around 200 years the Pagan kingdom finally came to an end when there was a Chinese invasion led by the Chinese Muslim commander, Nasiruddin Khan, with his army in 1286. Since then, the migration of Chinese Muslims increased in the region and their descendants are still seen today in different towns of northern Myanmar such as Mandalay, Sagang, Kyaukse, Meiktila, May Myo, Mogok, Taunggyi, Kalaw, Heho, Lashio, Tibaw, Kyakme, Myikyina, Mogaung, Bamo, Muse, Mingyan, Pakukku, Chauk, Shweb, etc. Symbols associated with Muslim such as mosques, madrasas and maktabas were also seen in every town. There is also the grand Chinese Mosque called Pantay Mosque, which was built by Chinese soldiers in the capital, Mandalay.¹³

Muslims in the Patheingyi city state

The presence of Muslims can be also traced to Patheingyi, the capital of the Irrawaddy division since 12 century. They were Persian sailors and Arab traders who helped locals with business and shared their knowledge. The Muslims also set up business centers for trade and dockyards at other southern coastal cities such as Yangon, Pegu, Muttama and Margui.¹⁴ In this period, the southern coastal city of Patheingyi was known as the Muslim Pathi kingdom, which ruled the coastal region for three centuries (1200-1500).¹⁵ The remnants of the Muslims ancient living quarters, trade centers, places of worship and graveyards are still available in many cities of Irrawaddy Delta, such as Hintada, Yeekyi, Atute and Dedaye.¹⁶ To date, a large number of Arab and Persian Muslim de-

¹³ Ba Shin, Colonel, (n.d.). *Tartanar Ayaung Tun Se Bo*. p. 6.

¹⁴ Gyi, Khin Maung, *Translation of "In the Hidden Myanmar" by Morris Collins* (Yangon: Rangoon University press, 1977), p. 211.

¹⁵ Pati, Ko lay, *Indigenous Muslims of Myanmar* (Rangoon: Islam Council Press, 2009), p.5.

¹⁶ Saya, Chai, *The true story of Burmese Muslims* (Yangon: MMANO Press, 2008), p.16.

scendants can still be seen in the cities of Baik (Margui), Bukpyin and Tavoy.¹⁷

Muslims in the Ava dynasty and Hantawadi dynasty

A Muslim presence was also identified in the Ava period. Muslim sailors and soldiers from India were conscripted by regional authorities such as the Myanmar kings as well as the colonial Portuguese around 16th century. In 1613, two thousand Muslim soldiers employed by Philip De Brito, the Portuguese administrator of Thanlyin, were captured by King Anauk Phet Lun. Later, they were allocated land at May Du and Shwe Bo. These Muslims were responsible to serve the king in the army during war but engaged in agriculture when peace availed. In those days many people did not want to participate in war, but the Muslims preferred to be warriors and they excelled at it. When Tabinshwethi attacked Pegu, the capital of Mon, once again, thousands of Muslim soldiers served the Mon king as artillery experts and on the ground. There were five hundred households that belonged to Muslim soldiers at the Ava capital when King Sanay was ruling the kingdom. Brintnaung (1698-1740), the founder of the second Myanmar kingdom, employed thousands of Muslim soldiers in his army. The Muslim soldiers were stationed at several towns in the middle of Myanmar such as Taungu, Yameithin, Nyaungyan, Yindaw, Meithilar, Pintalai, Tabatswe, Bawdi, Sitar, Sipautara, Nyethu and Dipeyin, etc.

Muslims in the Kone Baung dynasty

In the period of Kon Baung, there were already many Muslim civilians working in different sectors of administration and some of them worked in the army. The Muslim population increased when King Along Phaya took over Assam in western India, and the Rakhine kingdom and Sirlyan in southern Myanmar from the Portuguese. In Yangon, the Muslim presence was substantial, and they conducted business dealings in the area. Most of the Muslims recruited from Assam and Rakhine were placed by the royal authorities in the middle of Myanmar,¹⁸ in places such as Shwebo, Sakine, Maydu, Pinya, Khanlu, and others.

U Kyi, *Burmese History* (Yangon: Rangoon University Press, 1965), pp. 156-157.

¹⁷ Khin Maung Gyi, p. 212.

¹⁸ Chit, Khin Maung, *Mahar Yazawindawgyi* (Yangon: Rangoon University Press, 1989), p. 144.

King Botaw Min Tayagyi (1781-1891) moved his old capital Innwa to a new place named Amarapura, near Mandalay. The service of Muslim men and armed forces were also taken to the new capital. The Muslims could set up their religious buildings, centers, graveyards and schools, etc. Heavily Muslim populated areas in the new capital were BonOo, Sakyinwa, Kyimintine, Koyantaw and the Aa khyuktan township in Amarapura Township.¹⁹

In the 19th century, the second last king of Myanmar, King Mindong, came to power. He moved the capital Amarapura to Mandalay in 1844. Thousands of his Muslim subjects went along with him to Mandalay and continued to serve him until Myanmar lost their independence to the British in 1885. Muslims also contributed to the kingdom at different professional levels and their services ranged from ministers to soldiers. Mindon King, the second to last king of the Kong Bong Kingdom of Myanmar was benevolent towards his servicemen. Thousands of Muslims were authorized to live in the Mandalay palace and in the middle of town where hundreds of educational centers, mosques and teaching locations were constructed by the order of the king. There have been more than 70 official mosques in the capital, such as the mosques of Sakya New Sin, Ko Yandaw, Aa Chut Tan, Taung Palu, Gyun, Za Kine Dan, Kong Yo and Wali Khan and others.²⁰

Prominent personnel who served King Min Don were General U Chon and Captain Yacoob in the infantry unit, Major Khan Sahib and his son Wali Khan in the cavalry unit, Major Bokar in the artillery unit. The following Muslim officers: Mullah Ismail, trade Minister, U Don, Muslim Affair Minister, U Nu, Muslim scholar and diplomat, Shah Abbas Husaini called Kabuli Molvi, Imam of the Palace Mosque, U York, U Soe and U Bo Hla, information officers, and U Mau as appraiser served in their respective ministry at the Palace. Furthermore, there were many Muslims officers and merchants such as U Yit a great merchant, U Esar, U Yan Aung, U Sein, U San Pyaw, U Shew Ban, U Bo, U Bo Mya, U Abdullah, and U Chin O who were authorized to do business and trade in the kingdom.

In 1858, three Burmese Muslim gentlemen, Ahmed U Bo Mya, Abdul Karim U Shew Baw and Hanif were ordered by the king to build a two-story rest-house for Muslim pilgrims in Makkah, under the Ottoman

¹⁹ Oo, Ba, *Muslims of Myanmar, 100 years anniversary of Mandalay* (Mandalay: Kyipwayee Publishing, Mandalay, 1959), pp. 18-23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Caliphate then.²¹ It was registered both under the king of Myanmar and the government of Makkah.²² During the British invasion, the Burmese Kingdom could no longer stand as an independent state and ceased to exist in 1885.

Muslims in the British colonial period

British rule lasted for over a century (1823-1948). It developed a good administrative system in Myanmar and left in 1948 when Myanmar became independent.²³ The British rule was helpful to Myanmar and particularly the Muslim community. The Muslims benefited in many areas of their interest: business, trade, administration, industry, agriculture, mining, export, import, educational and social institutions, political and religious domains, etc. Since the British opened a new wave of business and agricultural sectors, the influx of Indians during the colonial rule was in much larger numbers. In just 20 years, the Muslim population increased to three times what it was in the kingdom period, from 100,000 to 400,000.²⁴ The period under British rule was a prosperous time for Muslims because they excelled in every sector of life. The situation of Muslims was as though Myanmar was part of Indian society. Muslims' presence and development of business, industries and commerce widely helped the colonial powers. Nevertheless, Muslims did not know that the growth of their population and power in business would become the very reason for their oppression in the future.²⁵

Muslims in the first democratic period, 1948-1962

Muslims expected that when Myanmar gained independence it would be free from foreign interference. However, their expectations were shattered when power was switched to Myanmar authorities. Myanmar authorities had no unity and were divided since the time of the struggle for independence in which many independent fighters surrendered their lives for the freedom of the nation. In this regard, there were three groups in parliament who had their own political objectives and contended with each other to attain power.

²¹ In the period Makkah was under the rule of Ottoman ruler.

²² Ibid., p. 145.

²³ Cady, John F, *A History of Modern Myanmar* (London: Cornell University Press, 1st Edition, 1958), pp. 73, 567

²⁴ When British occupied Myanmar in 1823, Muslim population was, 100,00 and 1923 their population reached to 400,00.

²⁵ Moscotti, Albert D. *British Policy*, p. 39.

The first group consisted of graduates from universities like U Aung San,²⁶ U Rashid, U Nu, U Kyaw Nyein, and U Ba Swe, etc. (In Burma, they were called the “U” group). They were lenient, rational in their thinking, and were friendly toward Muslims. The second group consisted of freedom fighters who were still belligerent despite the gain of independence. They were called “Takin,” for example Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Soe and Takhin Ba Thein Tin, etc. The attitudes of this group were tough and pessimistic. The third group consisted of ex-military personnel such as Bomu Aung, Bo Yan Nine and Bo Zay Ya, etc. They were called “Bo.” Apart from these three political groups, there were also representatives from ethnic minority groups who worked rigorously to have an autonomous rule in their respective regions. In addition to this, there were religion-based political groups in parliament, looking out for the interests of religious communities such as Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. Finally, there were other political parties such as socialists, leftists or communist groups, conservative parties and peasant representative groups, etc. It was unfortunate that the country did not get the opportunity to experience real democracy and development. Instead, the first period of democratic rule (1948-1962) was filled with political deadlock and racial indoctrination.²⁷

U Nu was the first Prime Minister Myanmar’s the democratic government. However, most of his time it was the objectives and struggles of the above-mentioned political factions that superseded most of the planned development programs. A few ethnic groups went to war with the central government in order to have a federal autonomous rule. Moreover, a Buddhist group forced the government to declare Buddhism as the state religion.²⁸

During this period, Muslims had a very tough time both within parliament and in business. Most of the industries were controlled by Muslims and thus were targeted.²⁹ No one responded to their requests

²⁶ 1) Maung Mya. “Assassination of General Aung San” Deedok journal Weekly, Vol.1, 20, July 1947. 2) Sein Win. “Assassination of National leaders” Hantaweddy, 20, July 1947, Vol. 1.

²⁷ 1) Maung Mya “Assassination of General Aung San” Deedok journal Weekly, Vol.1, 20, July 1947. 2) Sein Win “Assassination of National leaders” Hantaweddy, 20, July 1947, Vol. 1.

²⁸ Sein Aung Myint, *Pyin Manar, Zarti Tway Pwint Lan Yar Myay* (Working People Daily, 3, March 1991), p. 5.

²⁹ U Nu period, Muslims were owners of Bank, factories, mills, business and trade and they were not welcome by Buddhist nationalist and targeted all the times.

and demands when they really needed assistance, for example, when their religious buildings were demolished, and their citizenship rights were ignored. Most of the time the situation was confusing as the political parties and ethnic groups were busy struggling for the success of their own agendas in the parliament. The country was close to civil war. However, many Muslim officers and educated personnel continued to work in the army and the civil service. Two Muslim ministers, Abdur Rashid and Abdul Latif and five parliamentarians were motivational images and provided hope for Muslims.³⁰ They encouraged Muslim youth to focus their attention on education and technical expertise.

Muslims during the first military rule, 1962-1988

As it struggled for survival, the destabilized government sought assistance from the military to quell the flagging situation of the country. Since the military took power, they restricted the movement of political parties and stopped military advancements of ethnic groups. The military remained in power for two years (1958-1960) and studied every aspect of the government administration. A coup d'état by the military in 1962 took over the democratic government and seized all the political opponents including the Prime Minister and the President of the Union of the Republic of Myanmar.³¹

In 1964, all the lands, farms, factories, industries, transportation networks, water transport facilities, ships, markets, banks and housing complexes belonging to Muslims and foreigners were nationalized by the military.³² The sudden and quick declaration of nationalization had a tremendous impact on Muslim communities and left many mentally and physically disturbed. Muslims faced job losses, poverty, and instability.

After the nationalization, many Muslim servicemen, laborers and factory workers became jobless. This resulted in them and their family members becoming destitute. Consequently, increased crime, murder, fighting among different groups, communal conflict and violence fre-

³⁰ 1) The Islamic Center Magazine, *the origin of Muslims in Myanmar* (Rangoon: ICM Press at No. 91, 30th Street, 1983), p. 25. 2) Kyaw Win, Mya Han, Thein Hline, *Burma Politics, 1958-1962* (Rangoon: Universities Printing Press, 1962), p. 102.

³¹ Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (California: Asia Publishing House, University of California, 1969), pp. 248-251.

³² Gravers, Mikael, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Publishing, 1999), p. 62.

quently occurred. In 1977, a MOU³³ was signed between the Indian and Burmese governments whereby Indian nationals who wished to go back to India could go without any travel documents and fees. Under this repatriation program, 200,000 Indians returned home.³⁴

The military rule brought undesirable consequences not only to Muslims but to the rest of the people in the country, because the image of the country was totally collapsed. The administration of the country fell into the hands of soldiers, who only knew about battle and war. An economic breakdown was the root-cause of the total failure of the country. Indeed, Myanmar, the once famous and rich rice-pot of Asia was relegated to the status of the least developed country in the world.³⁵ Before World War II, Burma was a leading rice-exporter in Asia, but after that rice production reduced.

The fate of a state depends on its holder, who should be an expert at handling its politics. Politics means holding power and transferring it to the rest of the ministers in charge for implementation. If the heads of a country are wise, it will be successful and prosperous. Myanmar was led by leaders who proved incapable of running the country. This resulted in total failure and economic breakdown. Myanmar's people faced unprecedented sociopolitical challenges.

Nevertheless, the military has ruled for more than fifty years now. It did so by averting any threat brought by enemies of the regime, while ignoring strategically sensitive issues like racial, ethnic and religious tension. Therefore, prolonged civil war and religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar are common political trends as it is the regime that fosters them.

The Muslims in Myanmar were already demoralized by nationalization, consequently, the removal of Muslim professionals, officers and laborers from all institutions and industries of the country doubled their suffering. In 1980, the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) replaced the industrial based economic system with an agricultural one; many technicians were removed from their jobs. As a result, hundreds of technicians and family members were left uncertain about their future.

The grave trouble faced by Muslims under the military rule was the continued violence and affliction against Muslims. This assisted the

³³ MOU, *Between the governments of Burmese and India* (1967, July 20), Burma Alin, p. 2.

³⁴ Gravers, Mikael, *Nationalism*, p. 62.

³⁵ Before World War II, Burma was a leading rice-exporter in Asia, but after that rice production reduced.

interests of the Buddhist communities and helped the regime maintain their power indefinitely. Whenever political tension occurs, the regime blames Muslims.

Every year since 1962, a mosque or a madrasa, or several Muslim lives have been lost in the name of religious tension and violence. Sometimes the destruction, burning and killing became so appalling that entire Muslim villages and towns turned to ashes. The tension became known internationally and the world media and social organizations have come to assist to cease the violence. The worst violence created during the military rule were the 2012 riots in Rakhine, Meikthila and La Shore, where hundreds of Muslim lives, religious buildings and properties were respectively killed, destroyed and burnt.³⁶

Muslims during the Second Military Rule, 1989-2012³⁷

An immediate nullification of intermarriages between Muslims and Buddhist was initiated when the military came into power. This process prevented Buddhist women from converting to Islam.³⁸

At the same time, a Buddhist nationalist group attempted to issue an order from the Buddhist Monk authority urging Buddhist people not to visit Muslim business areas and not to buy items from Muslim shops in order to marginalize their businesses. People normally went to Muslim shops because their business strategies were to gain less profit with increasing sales. However, Buddhist shop owners did the opposite, thus they had fewer customers. The assumption behind this order was that visiting Buddhist shops would still benefit Buddhism, because the benefits of Buddhist businessmen would go to Buddhist charity work.³⁹

According to Islamic religious teachings, calling Muslims for prayers five times a day at a mosque was obligatory. The Muslims had been doing this act ever since they came to Myanmar. Nonetheless, this act came to a standstill as local authorities forced it to cease. Ironically, in contrast, Buddhist Monks were authorized to deliver sermons at com-

³⁶ Kyaw, Phone Kyaw, "Healing of Meikthila," *Frontier Myanmar Journal*, 21 April, 2016

³⁷ The first military rule was orchestrated by General Ne Win during 1962-1988, the second coup was led by General Saw Maun during 1989-2012.

³⁸ "Nullification of Intermarriage Law, between Muslim and the Buddhist", *Myaweddy Magazine*, Vol, 80, (11 November 1988), p. 88.

³⁹ U Aye: *Amyo Pyouk Mar Soe Kyouk Tai* (one is afraid of extinction of own race), (Yangon: July 1995), p. 5.

munal places with loud speakers, sometimes even at the heart of Muslim communities.

Since the beginning of the military rule, construction of new mosques, madrasas, maktabas and Islamic schools were no longer authorized. Even permission for renovations of religious buildings took a long time to attain. Eventually, many religious buildings were close to collapse. This situation highlighted the state's total neglect of the Muslim community. The Muslim population has increased 3 times in the past 50 years, thus, existing mosques could not fit them anymore. Since authorizations for the construction of mosques weren't granted, Muslims tried to settle their problems internally. They built maktabas and religious schools to teach religious studies for children and then used these buildings for prayer. This type of madrasa cum mosque was available in satellite towns such as Dagon, Shew Phy Tar, Lhine Tar Yar, Tarkayta, Than Layin and other rural areas. However, today, these maktabas are under threat as the Buddhist nationalist groups are pressuring the government to demolish them, because they are not a place of worship. Affliction by the nationalist group occurred just to destabilize the security situation of the country, as the NLD government faced a tough time before the international community. However, terrorizing Muslims this way disturbs their identity and stability.

A lack of Muslim educational buildings in rural areas makes a big difference for Muslims in a rural society compared to an urban one. This is because Muslim teachers are no longer available at rural areas when there are no schools and mosques. Urban Muslim religious buildings are still intact, but the lack of maintenance and renovation causes deterioration and there are fears that the buildings will collapse.

After the removal of most Muslim staff at government institutions, there were still some senior staff in the department of education, schools and universities. They are also concerned about forced participation in Buddhist religious activities such as the Tasaungtine festival and the Tathinkyut festival, etc. They are not happy, but they must follow the order of their superiors for fear they will be removed from their jobs.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Halima's case represents many other cases of other Muslim government staff experiencing the same conditions. They must follow the order of the Buddhist senior officers and have no choice to deny it. Halima is not her actual name and she has her Burmese name. The researcher discussed with Halima at her residence in Yangon in August 2009.

There are two Buddhist religious events called Tha Thing Kyut and Tha Saung Thing. Buddhists participate in these events and offer foods and clothing to the monks. Tha

The growth of the Muslim population has been always a threat to local Buddhists; some may put it as the constituent of Islamophobia.⁴¹ Therefore, one of the reasons for the oppression against Muslims in Myanmar was to create fear among the Muslims with the hope they would finally leave Myanmar sooner or later. According to official sources, the Muslim population in 2016 was 2.5 million, but local Muslims have reported that the figure was closer to a million.

The propagation of Islam, or Dawah Islamia, in Myanmar, also known as Tabligh activities, was initiated around 1965. It gained great momentum in later years resulting in its followers being available in every town and village in the country. During the last decade, followers from foreign countries started visiting Myanmar. However, restrictions on foreign Muslims by local authorities occurred with the instigation of Buddhist nationalists. According to Tabligh activists, the immediate problem was the National Identification Card (NIC). They said it was very difficult to attain, especially for Muslims. This resulted in it being very difficult to travel from one place to another for Muslims, as they didn't have the NIC. This was particularly so when the authorities knew that the objective of the travel of the Muslims was Islamic propagation work.

Demolition of mosques and schools⁴²

Since the beginning of the military rule, the life of Muslims in Myanmar has been in chaos. Indeed, they have been targeted by political outlets. When the state failed Muslims, the regime used them to divert the democracy campaign. Therefore, Muslims have faced constant trouble since the military continues to rule till the present day. The first encounter of the destruction of mosques was in North Ukkalapa in 1960, where three mosques were destroyed even though government protection was guaranteed.⁴³ The second one was destroyed by the U Nu government in 1962. It was an old mosque built by the Turks and the British Indian Muslim soldiers during the First World War at Saint June Road, near the Home Road Railway Station and the Rangoon Medical Insti-

Saung Dine is a Buddhist religious ceremony; the Buddhist common people offer food and utilities to the monasteries.

⁴¹ The Buddhist nationalist always mislead the local Buddhist that the growth of Muslim population is a big threat and they Muslim one day would take over Myanmar and the Buddhist would be driven out from Myanmar.

⁴² Nyo, Tun, Demolition of Medical Institute's Mosque. *Medical Student Annul Magazine*, 1958, Vol.1, No.1. pp. 69-74.

⁴³ "Destruction of North Ukkala mosques," *The Guardian*, (November 30, 1961), p. 1.

tute.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Buddhist extremists targeted mosques, shop-houses, and vehicles that were in the vicinity of mosques in Mandalay, on 16 March 1997. Looting, burning of religious books, acts of sacrilege, and vandalizing Muslim-owned establishments were also common. At least three people were killed. Attacks by Buddhist monks spread to the then capital of Myanmar, Rangoon, as well as to the central towns of Pegu, Prome, and Toungoo.

On May 15, 2001, anti-Muslim riots broke out in the Taungoo, Pegu division, resulting in the death of about 200 Muslims, the destruction of 11 mosques and the setting ablaze of over 400 houses. Around 20 Muslims praying in the Han Tha mosque were killed and some were beaten to death by pro-junta forces that day.⁴⁵ On March 6, 2003, a group of people set 15 Muslim houses ablaze including a mosque and a madrasa in the Kant Ba Lu township of the Sagaing division in upper Burma. The mosques in Taungoo remain closed since May 2002.⁴⁶

The process of applying for the NIC is a difficult task for Muslims. In 1982, immigration law hindered Muslims from being granted an NIC easily. The law allowed those who came to Myanmar before 1923 to obtain a NIC easily. Many Muslims encountered trouble in attaining a NIC, particularly the later generations who faced more problems. If the parents of a Muslim were not citizens, they would not be granted a citizenship certificate. Muslim students who were eligible to attend higher education and universities could not be granted admission as they lacked an NIC. In addition to this, the government wanted Muslims to accept the National Verification Certificate, (NVC), which was a preliminary certificate issued to those whose nationality was in doubt. The Muslims did not agree to accept it and the problem has continued to be a controversial issue.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Rashid, U, *Burmese Muslim Organization* (Rangoon: Merchant Road, Maha Waizza Press, 1961), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Ikeya, Chie, (2006) “*The traditional High Status of Women in Burma*,” *The Journal of Burma Studies*, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies”, pp. 51-70.

⁴⁶ Ba Saw U, *Life of Muslims in Myanmar* (Yangon: 1986), pp. 395-400.

⁴⁷ In 1989, the researcher visited the immigration office situated at merchant road, Rangoon and found the said motto stuck at the main gate of the office. Same motto was found in many branches of immigration offices as reported by many Muslims. WHAT MOTTO???

Retired Major Tun Nyo lives in Kuala Lumpur and the researcher interviewed him at his residence in March 2009. Tun Nyo’s views represent the Muslim personnel working in the armed forces as well as Muslim medical staff.

⁴⁷ Tun Nyo, pp. 69-74.

Dilemma for Buddhists

During the days under the rule of the Kingdom, native Myanmar people were self-sufficient, mild in nature, helped each other, and they also followed their traditional belief, Buddhism. They were peace lovers, humble, had good attitudes, assisted the poor, neighbors and even Muslims who came to Myanmar in later stages. Most of them engaged in farming and business transactions, brokering merchandise, while some permanently worked in the army. Buddhism was their revered religion and they followed it with full respect. Thus, their social lives were better-off and peaceful compared to period before military coup in 1962. There were hardly any records of Buddhists involved in violence or killings. Buddhism teaches its followers to engage in a good worldly life, not to be involved in crimes, alcoholism, adultery, theft, and the killing of any creature. These five precepts of Buddhism completely control the daily lives of its followers.

Buddhism teaches how to attain relief from circle of life or repeat of incarnation according to Buddhist doctrine. People come to life in this world, which is full of suffering (*Dukkah*). For example, they need to find food, and make effort for clothing and shelter. People must struggle day to day and face many troubles. These problems are caused by people's desires (*Tanar*), thus, to remove the problems of the world, people need to be free from desires and need to engage in a liberation process (*Niyawda*) through meditation, to attain a peaceful life forever (*Nirvana*). Buddhists believe that if a person reaches Nirvana, he/she will no longer be reincarnated, and is free from worldly *Dukkah* and the life cycle.

The process of attaining Nirvana requires eight methods called the Eight-Fold Path. Essentially, this process is like the process of Tazkiyatul Nafs in Islam. The methods are: (1) right understanding; (2) right thinking; (3) right actions; (4) right speech; (5) right livelihood; (6) right mindfulness; (7) right effort; and (8) right concentration. All these procedures and rules are intended to make its followers peaceful, intelli-

⁴⁷ Hajee Khin Myint was head of the trust of Jami Mosque situated in downtown Yangon. He lives near the mosque and is a close friend of the researcher. Both work together for Muslim community development work, and he explained many problems regarding the administration of the mosque which are unnecessarily complicated by the Buddhist authority. He was last interviewed in Yangon in 2009. His views are concerned with Muslim merchants and business environments as he himself is a successful businessman.

gent, wise, humble and self-satisfied. Many Buddhists who follow these principles are happy and they do not encounter difficulties in their lives.

Myanmar is a country full of natural resources, such as petrol and natural gas, mining products such as silver, bronze, gold, precious stones, and different types of woods such as teak. The abundance of resources means Myanmar has the potential to be one of the rich countries in Asia. However, the question is, why such a beautiful and prosperous country, where a widow was able to build a temple,⁴⁸ has become the least developed country, with a record of a 12-billion-dollar loan from international banks. This has shocked and confused many researchers.⁴⁹

It is shocking to discover that the beautiful teachings of Buddha have not reached most people in Myanmar such as rulers, officers, leaders and teachers. These people are responsible to bring Myanmar to the brink of success and prosperity, while making people happy and able to stand equally with other developed countries.

The reason for this is, the society does not understand and exercise the Eight-Fold Path of Buddhism. In fact, the process of eight-fold paths has been the standard procedure of success for every human being. Buddha himself struggled with these rules and received enlightenment. There are thousands of people in Buddhism who became successful, for they exercised the rules seriously and were committed.⁵⁰

It was sad for the people of Myanmar they have yet to find a good leader like Li Quan Yu of Singapore or Mahathir of Malaysia,⁵¹ who are committed in their work and have brought their countries to the periphery of success. Both attained enough knowledge and experience to establish their countries to a developed country.

The day Myanmar was freed from colonialism, different types of problems were experienced such as, confusion, disunity among ethnic groups, civil war, parliamentary disagreements, sectarian conflicts, religious discrimination, military coups, imprisonment of politicians, nation-

⁴⁸ During Pagan period, the state was so prosperous, there was temples built by poor and widow.

⁴⁹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-myanmar.html>

⁵⁰ Bodhipaksa is a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, and a published author. He founded Wildmind in 2001. Bodhipaksa has published many guided meditation CDs and guided meditation MP3s. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/10-people-who-came-out-of_n_4086176.html accessed on 30/4/2017

⁵¹ The world admired at them, they have proved themselves to be good leaders as they brought their country from the poorest to the developed status.

alization of public properties and business, deforestation, smuggling of natural resources, drug affiliated violence and crime, etc. Many still long for the colonial days where Myanmar was rich and an exemplary country in Southeast Asia.

The Process of Reform in Myanmar—A New Democratic Country and National League for Democracy

Daw Aung San Su Kyi's party, the NLD, is the favorite party of the people of Myanmar. The NLD won a landslide election in 2015 with more than 80 percent of the vote, which indicated how much people trusted her and expected change in the country. Muslims approached the election with high expectations that they would receive national recognition and that the longtime discrimination would end. Despite solicitation of a vote by Muslim candidates, most of the people voted for the NLD. Nonetheless, the NLD has already been in power for more than one year, but the reality of change is still far away.

Many have complained that the situation in the country has continued to decline. Some have also criticized that the state counselor, Aung San Su Kyi, favors the armed forces (Tatmadaw), which they see as the root cause of all her problems. The 2008 constitution gave the Tatmadaw a powerful role at the center of the government. Indeed, 25 percent of all seats in provincial and national assemblies have been reserved for military officers. Furthermore, the armed forces are directly controlled by three key ministries: Home Affairs (which includes the police force); Defense; and Border Affairs. In all security matters, the Tatmadaw have operated completely independently of the government.⁵²

The price for merchandise in Myanmar has increased. School fees and expenses for school children have also increased. The education system is still unimproved, despite promises made by the Minister for Education. The treatment of officials in the government offices continues with the same practices that used to be exercised by the previous government. Corruption and delay tactics continue because the new government keeps corrupt old officials using the excuse of reconciliation, but people are exhausted.⁵³

⁵² <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/the-cowardice-of-aung-san-su-kyi/>. Jeremy is a widely referenced political risk expert and weekly columnist for Global Risk Insights (GRI).

⁵³ <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2045262/one-year-myanmar-su-kyi-halo-slipping>. Ertel Lintner is the author of *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* and *Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Unfinished Renaissance*

NLD proclaims to change policies in ministries, regional government offices, business, commercial and trade segments, but they could not prove that changes have been made, particularly in mining, gas, forest, agriculture, health and education. The Ministry of Immigration is one of the worst ministries in the country. The immigration minister was called by parliament for questioning and was reminded of their correct functions and measures used to provide the national identification card. In addition to this, a few state governments, such as Mon, Tanintayi and Maguie, were criticized for corruption and the embezzlement of government funds. The Prime Minister of Mon, Min Oo, was forced to resign from his post as well as from his party. The GDP of FDI in Myanmar under the previous government increased from 5% to 7%, and it was expected to further grow up to 8%. Nonetheless, the expected GDP of 8% now seems impossible, as the NLD cannot keep its promise.⁵⁴

Aung San Su Kyi was heavily criticized by the international community for her failure to effectively deal with the violence against the Rohingyas⁵⁵ and her government's refusal to respond to what the UN has described as a genocide and crimes against humanity. In the north, ethnic groups and government troops continue fighting. So far, thousands of people have died and around 100,000 people have become refugees taking shelter in other countries. A national peace process, the reconciliation between ethnic minority groups, as well as cessation of civil war programs have attempted to progress to no avail, as there is a lack of good relationships between ethnic leaders and the NLD. Moreover, the government continues to battle in the border areas.⁵⁶

Suggested Strategies for a Brighter Future of Muslims of Myanmar

Muslims in Myanmar have developed considerable experience in how to continue their journey without further deterioration and destruction. The Muslims have faced enough suffering by sacrificing their lives, properties and religious buildings. The suffering that they have faced are not necessarily just caused by the oppression of the military rulers and the Buddhist extremists, it is also caused by failures in the Myanmar economy. Most Buddhist people have also experienced the agony of eco-

⁵⁴ <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/aung-san-su-kyi-honeymoon-over/>

⁵⁵ One of Muslim group living in Maung Daw and Buthitaung, Arakan Division of Myanmar. This region is bordered by Bangladesh.

⁵⁶ Selth, Andrew, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/suu-kyi-s-myanmar-one-year>, 27th April 2017.

conomic failure, as well as the lack of understanding of true Buddhist teaching which could have guided them how to attain peace and prosperity, while avoiding violence and suffering. Indeed, the ethical values of Buddhism teach the highest level of morality; its followers are recognized as the most modest group in the world.⁵⁷ In contrast, the image of some Buddhists in Myanmar has been severely affected to the extent that the world media has started describing them as “Buddhist terrorists.”⁵⁸

Myanmar Muslims have continuously struggled for their survival in their traditional ways and religious thought. A majority are still absorbed in their lives and have forgotten about change in political development. A newly crowned government, along with a strong opposition party filled with ex-military officers, is still not a promising situation for the Muslims. The Buddhist Nationalist group continues its threat of oppression of Muslims. Thus, they live under fear or possible violence which might be on the way.⁵⁹ Under these circumstances, peace is still far away, as the Muslims are living in distress and economic chaos. The most important question posed here is what strategies need to be adopted for the development of their future generations.

Firstly, a literacy campaign should be embarked on, so that everyone can read and write. This will increase the literacy rate and awareness for development of Muslims in the Muslim community. Every single child should be given the right of education, and the attainment of at least primary and secondary education should be arranged. Every Muslim youth should be assisted to continue their higher education according to their merits and interests. Scholarship programs should be arranged for those who have difficulties with furthering their continued education. At the same time, vocational programs should be encouraged to be set up in Muslim societies, thus, helping those who do not show an interest in higher education. An increased number of educated Muslim youth is the foundation of development for the future of a Muslim community. Paral-

⁵⁷ The Noble Eightfold Path is an early summary of the path of Buddhist practices leading to liberation from samsara, the painful cycle of rebirth. Anderson, Carol (2013). *Pain and Its Ending: The Four Noble Truths in the Theravada Buddhist Canon*. Routledge. 64-65.

⁵⁸ “The Face of Buddhist Terror | July 1, 2013,” how militant monk are fueling anti-Muslim violence in Asia by Hanan Beech.

⁵⁹ During 2012-17, this group caused several destructive conflicts including Meikthila, Lashore and Rakhine where hundreds of Muslims lives, properties and religious buildings were lost. A recent tactic of this group in 2017 is creation of violence in Muslim settlement areas.

lled to this, madrasah education systems should be aided with modern science and technological subjects in their curricula. The success of co-educational systems applied in other Muslim minority communities could be an example for the madrasah education system in Myanmar.

At the same time, the Muslim business community needs to stimulate their business centers and create progressive job opportunities, paving the way for the employment of Muslim graduates. An increase of social awareness programs in Muslim communities are needed where people of every level can engage in different social interactions. These programs can create awareness of corporation, a spirit of peaceful coexistence and brotherhood among Muslims and other non-Muslim communities. Muslim religious organizations could also contribute to the programs and educate Muslims with concepts of understanding Islam and a peaceful co-existence with other religious stakeholders.

A Muslim administrative council inclusive of scholars from all religious organizations and institutions should be set up for proper administration and leadership roles in the Muslim community. This council should communicate with the existing government in order to have its leadership role for the affairs of Muslim communities recognized. This body may issue religious rulings, a standard sermon at the Friday congregational prayers, propose appropriate legislation, set up sharia offices and appoint a chief mufti for the Muslim community. A Muslim marriage bureau should also be set up to administer all types of Muslim marriage matters. They could also supervise Muslim Waqf arrangements, the supervision of mosques and madrasahs, and the improvement of madrasah curricula.

All the suggestions made were based on a close look at the development of the Singaporean Muslim community. Here, the role of the Singaporean government was an important instrument for the development of the Muslim community. The logic behind the government support was that if any community is left behind in the process of building the country, they can be a source of danger for the security and progress of the country.

The Singaporean government has maintained a semi-official relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic religious council of Singapore, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), a statutory board in Singapore that administers all other religious organizations, religious institutions, madrasahs, maktab, cemeteries, waqf, religious activities, zakat collection, Waqf Management, Hajj travel, halal accreditation, the issuance of fatwas (religious decisions), construction and organiza-

tion of mosques and the interests of Singapore's Muslims. MUIS advises the government on matters relevant to the Muslim community, drafts approved weekly sermons, regulates some Muslim religious matters, and oversees a mosque building fund financed by voluntary donations.⁶⁰ MUIS council members are designated by the President of Singapore.

Today, Singapore Muslims are very happy with their multi-dimensional development in their society. A major portion of Muslim children attend government funded education schools where there are no religious teachings and education is secular. Muslim madrasahs are not forced to teach other subjects except Islamic subjects. The government introduced a primary education program in madrasahs with the support of materials and financial aid. Now madrasahs are producing qualified secondary students who have the choice to proceed with their higher education either in Islamic studies or in education such as medicine, engineering, etc. In addition to this, Muslim social institutions can operate independently in the country and can work to boost their members to engage in activities such as care for the elderly and orphanages, income generating programs for widows, rehabilitation centers for the disabled, and literacy campaigns, etc. In addition to this, the government appoints Muslim religious organizations independently irrespective of whatever sect they belong to. Therefore different sects of belief such as Sunni, Shiah and Qadiyani, etc. can operate their activities, if they do not contradict national security and the public order. Thus, it is very rare to see religious conflict among intrareligious or interreligious communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author believes that Singapore can be a good model for the development of minority communities. Singapore is a moderate and appropriate model for the Muslims of Myanmar, because Singaporean Muslims enjoy their share of developing their state. Singapore came out of a state of disarray and poverty with the help of state sponsorship and developed to a higher standard where Muslim community enjoys their right like other communities enjoy their privileges equally. Therefore, it is highly recommended that Singapore should be the model of development for any society and country looking to improve.

It is the tendency of the majority that people tend to seek assistance from others. It is suggested, as an individual, he/she can start

⁶⁰ In Singapore, Muslim individual voluntarily allows deduction of Zakat or Sadqah Money from their salary.

his/her own upbringing first by struggling at their own way and means. If they have the will, there will be a way for it. As a group or an organization, Muslims must start from a primary level. If every individual in society realizes this concept, it can lead to a collective development of society and the state. This way, Muslims of Myanmar can revitalize their lost morality and spirituality, and at the same time, they can revive their wonderful historical period of civilization. When intrareligious rights are fulfilled, this Muslim community can stand along with interreligious societies. At this stage, Muslims will be ready to participate in the usual process of political affairs.

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