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## Burma's Muslims: A primer

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*Another round of anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar prompted a survey of the different Muslim communities in the country, their relations with the central government, popular attitudes towards local Muslims and the likelihood of further outbreaks of civil unrest.*

Given the spate of articles in the news media that connect the anti-Muslim riots in Burma last week<sup>1</sup> with the sectarian violence in Rakhine (Arakan) State last year,<sup>2</sup> it may be helpful to sketch out the multifaceted nature of Burma's Muslim communities and some of the underlying issues.

Burma is often left off lists of Southeast Asian countries with sizeable Muslim populations. Yet, at least 4 per cent of Burmese are Muslims or, by most counts, well over 2 million people. A large number of Muslims in Burma are not recognised as citizens, however, and thus do not figure in the official statistics. Some unlikely claims range as high as 20 per cent, or more than 11 million people. A few websites include up to 1.5 million Muslims currently living overseas.

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1 Thomas Fuller and Wai Moe, 'Sectarian Clashes Are Reported in Central Myanmar', *The New York Times*, 21 March 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/world/asia/sectarian-clashes-are-reported-in-central-myanmar.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/world/asia/sectarian-clashes-are-reported-in-central-myanmar.html?_r=0).

2 *'The Government Could Have Stopped This': Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 2012), [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0812webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0812webwcover_0.pdf).

Most of Burma's Muslims are Sunnis. They are widely dispersed and notable for the diversity of their ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status and degrees of social and political integration into mainstream society. There is some correlation between ethnicity and religion, and not all Muslims are from Burma's 135 recognised 'national races', but the picture is not a simple one.<sup>3</sup>

The oldest Muslim group in Burma can trace its origins back to the eighth century, but most look to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when their ancestors arrived in Burma as traders, court servants and mercenaries. Some achieved high office. They were known as Pathi or Zerbadee—a term that usually denoted someone with a Burmese mother and Muslim father. Now known as 'Burmese Muslims', they are linguistically and culturally integrated into Burmese society.

There is a small Chinese Muslim community—found mainly in the northeast—known as the Panthay. Their origins go back to ethnic Chinese who settled in Burma during the thirteenth century, but most are descendants of Chinese Muslims who fled to Burma after the collapse of a sultanate in Yunnan in the nineteenth century. Another group, the Kamans, live in Rakhine State and there are some Malay Muslims, or Pashu, in southern Burma.

Following the British conquests of Burma in 1826, 1852 and 1885, there were major inflows of Muslims from the Subcontinent. They entered as immigrants, businessmen, officials and labourers. Before World War II, more than one-third of all Burmese Muslims were Indian. There were then over one million Indians in Burma, out of a total population of 16 million. Many left during the Japanese invasion in 1942 or after Ne Win's military coup in 1962.

The largest Muslim community in Burma—estimated to be about 800,000 strong—calls itself 'Rohingyas'. Most live in Rakhine State, but there is also a sizeable number in Rangoon. Broadly speaking, they are ethnically South Asian and speak a characteristic Bengali dialect.

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3 Khin Maung Yin, 'Salience of Ethnicity among Burman Muslims: A Study in Identity Formation', *Intellectual Discourse*, Vol.13, No.2, 2005, pp.161–179, [iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam/article/viewFile/108/110](http://iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam/article/viewFile/108/110) [page discontinued] [now at [journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam/article/view/108](http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam/article/view/108)].

Controversy surrounds almost everything to do with this group—even its name<sup>4</sup>—and the picture has been further clouded by inaccurate and biased commentaries in print and on the internet.

Some Rohingyas trace their ancestry back to Muslim kingdoms in the Arakan area during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but most seem related to Indians who arrived during the British colonial period. There was another influx after 1945, and further inflows followed natural disasters in East Pakistan and Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence. In 1974, the Bangladeshi Ambassador in Rangoon stated that there were about half a million illegal Bengali immigrants in Burma.<sup>5</sup>

Full rights for Muslims were enshrined in the 1947 constitution, but in 1960 Buddhism was made Burma's state religion and, after the 1962 coup, the military regime tended to equate Muslims with colonial rule and the exploitation of Burma by foreigners. Muslims were not permitted to run for public office, join the security forces or work as civil servants. The number of mosques was restricted, some Muslim cemeteries were destroyed and a number of madrassas were closed.

'Burmese Muslims' and 'Chinese Muslims' are now largely assimilated into Burmese society, but some other communities are not. In 1982, the government decreed that all citizens must be able to trace their line to forebears who lived in Burma before 1823—that is, before the first Anglo-Burmese War.<sup>6</sup> As was doubtless intended, the impact of this policy was mainly felt by the Rohingyas.<sup>7</sup>

Religious tensions have never been far from the surface. Since the twelfth century, Burma has been predominantly Buddhist—a philosophy that has become deeply woven into the fabric of the local culture. Islam, however,

4 'The Rohingya Question', *Network Myanmar*, [www.networkmyanmar.org/component/content/article/106/The-Rohingya-Question](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/component/content/article/106/The-Rohingya-Question) [page discontinued].

5 'A Bangladesh View from December 1975: FCO Archives Transcript', *Network Myanmar*, [www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/kaiser-obrien.pdf](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/kaiser-obrien.pdf) [page discontinued].

6 Tin Maung Maung Than and Moe Thuzar, 'Myanmar's Rohingya Dilemma', *ISEAS Perspective*, 9 July 2012, [www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/iseas-rohingya.pdf](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/iseas-rohingya.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [www.researchgate.net/publication/259625408\\_Myanmar's\\_Rohingya\\_Dilemma](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/259625408_Myanmar's_Rohingya_Dilemma)].

7 *Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon*, Asia Report No.238 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 12 November 2012), [www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/238-myanmar-storm-clouds-on-the-horizon.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/238-myanmar-storm-clouds-on-the-horizon.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-storm-clouds-horizon](http://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-storm-clouds-horizon)].

grew incrementally through historical accident and natural development. As a result, Muslims became socially and politically marginalised, particularly after Burma regained its independence in 1948.

For example, anti-Indian riots in Rangoon during the 1930s were sparked by economic issues, but they soon became racial and religious in character. More recent unrest has centred on popular fears of economic domination by Muslims and competition for land. There have been disputes over property and marriage laws. Racist literature and smear campaigns have also alleged Muslim insults to Buddhism, Burmese women and the 'Burmese race'.

Few parts of Burma have been unaffected. For example, anti-Muslim riots occurred in Mandalay in 1997, in Toungoo and Sittwe in 2001 and in Meiktila and Yamethin last week. The Rohingyas in Rakhine State, however, have been the most severely treated. In 1978, 200,000 fled to Bangladesh to escape persecution. After another pogrom in 1992, 300,000 followed. Last year, an estimated 52,000 Rohingyas were displaced in the sectarian violence. Many have been killed.

Burma's Muslims have found it difficult to fight back. They are divided among themselves and there has been no single organisation able to represent all their interests. Watched equally closely by the authorities and the local citizenry, most Muslims have been essentially nonpolitical and tried to keep a low profile. There has been little religious proselytising, although some community leaders have referred to the plight of Muslims in Burma and elsewhere.

Before 2011, Burma's Muslims had little outside contact. Trips to Mecca were limited by the regime. There were occasional appeals for foreign help but, some UN aid to refugee camps aside, they produced few practical results. That situation is now changing, as the freedoms enjoyed under President Thein Sein are encouraging Burma's Muslims to speak out more strongly. The Rohingyas, for example, are now more adept at using the internet to present their case.<sup>8</sup>

There have been a few Muslim insurgent groups, but with one exception they have been small and ineffective. Some attempts have been made to link the Rohingyas to international terrorist organisations, citing the

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8 Sarah Logan, 'The Rohingya and the Viral Ummah', *Circuit: International Relations and Information Technology*, 14 March 2013, [ircircuit.com/?p=265](http://ircircuit.com/?p=265) [page discontinued].

obvious triggers for their radicalisation. To date, any such ties appear to have been slight, but such fears have probably been encouraged since the 2012 unrest by expressions of support from prominent Islamic extremists.<sup>9</sup>

It has been suggested by some commentators that the latest outbreaks of anti-Muslim unrest have occurred because, under Thein Sein's reformist government, the Burmese people are now free to vent their deepest feelings.<sup>10</sup> This may have been a contributing factor but, as noted above, religious intolerance is not new to Burma. Indeed, before 2011, the regime reportedly encouraged some anti-Muslim riots to divert attention from its own failings.

The key issue now is not what has happened in the past, but how Naypyidaw will respond to sectarian violence in the future. Even if the government is determined to tackle social tensions in a more sensitive manner—and last year's abuses in Rakhine State showed how difficult that can be—it will still face enormous challenges. For the problem is not just the tactics of the security forces, but also the discriminatory policies and community attitudes in Burma that make anti-Muslim unrest likely to recur. These are issues that few Burmese politicians seem willing to seriously address.

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9 'Abu Bakar Bashir Threatens War if Burma Harms Muslim Rohingyas', *Herald Sun*, [Melbourne], 3 August 2012, [www.heraldsun.com.au/news/world/abu-bakar-bashir-threatens-war-if-myanmar-harms-muslim-rohingyas/story-fnd134gw-1226442628062](http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/world/abu-bakar-bashir-threatens-war-if-myanmar-harms-muslim-rohingyas/story-fnd134gw-1226442628062).

10 'Ashes and Fear in Myanmar Town', *The Australian*, 23 March 2013, [www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/ashes-and-fear-in-myanmar-town/story-e6frg6so-1226603788468](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/ashes-and-fear-in-myanmar-town/story-e6frg6so-1226603788468) [page discontinued] [now at [www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/ashes-and-fear-in-myanmar-town/news-story/b806cb0a6c0b8fa1c9857df7dc5effc6](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/ashes-and-fear-in-myanmar-town/news-story/b806cb0a6c0b8fa1c9857df7dc5effc6)].

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