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Burma: Conspiracies and other theories

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Myanmar has always attracted its fair share of conspiracy theories, but after the anti-Muslim violence in 2012, they seemed to increase in number and intensity. Some were more credible than others.

There is something about Burma that seems to encourage conspiracy theories. Not only does it create them in abundance, but they tend to be picked up by the international news media and given wide circulation. This in turn gives them a prominence that most do not deserve—at least, not without appropriate caveats and qualifications. To give a few recent examples:

1. When a misguided American tourist invaded Aung San Suu Kyi's home in 2009, there were suggestions he had been put up to it by Burma's Military Intelligence Service to help publicly justify an extension of her house arrest.¹
2. When President Thein Sein acknowledged Burma's myriad problems and announced an unprecedented reform program in 2011, activists claimed it was merely a ploy to neutralise Aung San Suu Kyi and seduce foreign governments.²

1 Andrew Selth, 'Conspiracies and Cock-Ups in Burma', *The Interpreter*, 26 May 2009, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/05/26/Conspiracies.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/conspiracies-and-cock-ups-burma].

2 Bertil Lintner, 'The Limits of Reform in Myanmar', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 18 January 2012, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NA18Ae03.html [page discontinued].

3. The widespread sectarian violence in Rakhine State in 2012 was described by some commentators as a clever plot by the Thein Sein Government to embarrass Aung San Suu Kyi, who at the time was receiving a rapturous welcome in Europe.³

All these theories have been dismissed by serious Burma-watchers.

The latest stories in this vein focus on accusations that the anti-Muslim violence seen in several parts of Burma over the past year constitutes a coordinated campaign by conservative forces either to reassert their national role and stymie Thein Sein's reform program or to achieve some other grand design, such as the expulsion of all non-Buddhists.

There are a number of possible reasons conspiracy theories find such fertile soil in Burma.

First, there is a long tradition of storytelling, social gossip and rumour-mongering. This may have its roots in the country's deeply entrenched 'tea culture',⁴ but others point to the restrictions on free speech imposed by successive military governments after 1962, which made the open discussion of many issues dangerous.

Second, news about developments in Burma is now more freely available than it has been for the past 50 years, but there is still a lack of hard, verifiable information about contemporary events. And, as tantalising as some rumours may be, resident diplomats, analysts and journalists cannot investigate every rumour they hear in Rangoon's hothouse environment.⁵

Third, given the volatility of Burma's political scene, the divisions within most major institutions, the fractiousness of the main parties and the emotive nature of international Burma studies, it is little wonder that sensational stories arise and find their way into the public arena. The sources and motives behind these tales are rarely easy to determine.

3 Edward Loxton, 'Is Burma Regime Inciting Rakhine Conflict to Discredit Aung San Suu Kyi?', *The Week*, [London], 12 June 2012, www.theweek.co.uk/asia-pacific/burma/47364/burma-regime-inciting-rakhine-conflict-discredit-aung-san-suu-kyi.

4 Bamarlay, 'Teashops in Myanmar', *Today in Myanmar*, 14 December 2008, www.myanmar2day.com/myanmar-life/2008/12/teashops-in-myanmar/.

5 'US Embassy Cables: North Korea Alleged to be Building Secret Underground Missile Site in Burma', *The Guardian*, [London], 10 December 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/20129.

Fourth, the news media is now better informed about Burma than in the past, when some myths and misconceptions were the basis of serious reports;⁶ a few unlikely claims became the received wisdom.⁷ Even so, in today's highly competitive news environment, some outlets and websites still publish stories that warrant more careful handling.

As regards the violence seen since mid 2012, it is evident that there are religious zealots, including some Buddhist monks, who are stirring up trouble and leading attacks against minority communities. There is also a strong racist element directed at those perceived to be foreigners. Rohingyas and other Muslims have been the latest targets, but in the past local Christians and Chinese have been victims.⁸

According to unconfirmed news reports, at least two groups are behind the latest anti-Muslim unrest.⁹ One is the 'Swan Arshin', a loose collection of thugs used by the former military regime to attack Aung San Suu Kyi in 2003 and prodemocracy demonstrators in 2007. The other is reportedly a 'Buddhist militia' called the Taung Tha Army, linked to a former general turned politician.

Little is known about either group, but both appear to share the views of the extremist 969 Buddhist Movement headed by radical monk U Wirathu, whose anti-Muslim diatribes have been circulated widely.¹⁰

Part of the conspiracy narrative are claims that the outbreaks of violence in central and northern Burma this year were well planned and executed, with armed men being brought in from elsewhere to support attacks by locals on Muslim communities. Each outbreak seems to have been sparked by a specific incident, but there have also been suggestions that these were staged with a view to inciting wider violence.

6 Derek Tonkin, 'Political Myths', *Network Myanmar*, www.networkmyanmar.org/index.php/political-myths [page discontinued].

7 Andrew Selth, *Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.10 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2007), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18225/regional-outlook-andrew-selth.pdf [page discontinued].

8 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Burma', in *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2012), www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/#wrapper [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper].

9 Maung Zarni, 'Myanmar: Old Military Monsters Stirring Up Trouble', *Dr Ko Ko Gyi's Blog*, 2 June 2013, at drkokogyi.wordpress.com/2013/06/02/myanmar-old-military-monsters-stirring-up-trouble/.

10 Matthew J. Walton, 'Myanmar Needs A New Nationalism', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 20 May 2013, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-02-200513.html [page discontinued].

The apparent reluctance of the army and police to intervene in anti-Muslim riots has been cited as evidence that the security forces, and possibly even the government itself, are complicit in the violence.¹¹ Little allowance is made for the enormous practical difficulties of responding to such attacks or for Naypyidaw's obvious reluctance to endorse tough measures that might prompt further international censure.

Some reports claim that hardliners in the security forces and USDP are encouraging anti-Muslim unrest to put pressure on Thein Sein.¹² If so, their motives are unclear, but a common explanation is that they want to reassert their dominance in Burma and remind everyone that strong security forces—and strong measures—are necessary to preserve internal stability and national unity.¹³

A few sources have also suggested that powerful vested interests in Burma—notably, corrupt former generals and wealthy businessmen—wish to establish an extraparliamentary power base that can be used to weaken any reforms that threaten their position. Others have claimed that such groups plan to use private militias to eliminate rivals and to protect themselves should Burma's 'disciplined democracy' become less disciplined.

It is difficult to confirm or deny such stories. There is insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusions. Parts of some reports appear accurate, or draw on known precedents, which give them a degree of plausibility. There is also a troubling pattern to some anti-Muslim riots, which, as Thein Sein has acknowledged, have involved extremists and reactionaries.¹⁴ Other reports, however, simply do not ring true.

11 'Burma: Government Forces Targeting Rohingya Muslims', *News* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 31 July 2012), www.hrw.org/fr/node/109214.

12 'Deep-Seated Prejudice, Radical Buddhist Monks Fuel Violence Against Myanmar's Muslims', *The Washington Post*, 1 June 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/deep-seated-prejudice-radical-buddhist-monks-fuel-violence-against-myanmars-muslims/2013/05/31/ab1149e4-ca61-11e2-9cd9-3b9a22a4000a_story_1.html [page discontinued].

13 'Buddhist Top Brass Conspiracy of Muslims Massacre in Myanmar', *Jafria News*, 16 April 2013, jafrianews.com/2013/04/16/buddhist-top-brass-conspiracy-of-muslims-massacre-in-myanmar/.

14 President's Office, 'President U Thein Sein Delivered a Remark on the Report of the Rakhine Investigation Commission', The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Naypyitaw, 6 May 2013, www.president-office.gov.mm/en/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks/2013/05/07/id-1989 [page discontinued].

It is undeniable that there are dark undercurrents in Burmese politics. There are elements within the country that hold strong beliefs and seem prepared to go to considerable lengths to pursue them. Not everyone welcomed the creation of a hybrid civilian–military parliament in 2011, Thein Sein’s rapprochement with Aung San Suu Kyi and the relaxation of the former regime’s control measures. Also, notwithstanding the popular view of Burma as a tolerant Buddhist country, sectarian strife has never been far from the surface. Over the years, social tensions have been exacerbated by a complex mix of political, economic, legal and cultural issues.

The question that now arises, however, is whether these feelings are being exploited by particular individuals and groups for political or economic gain.

The civil unrest of the past year has exposed deep fissures in Burmese society and serious weaknesses in the government. Both have had international consequences. Even if there are no cabals, conspiracies or coverups, as often claimed, these problems can only work to the benefit of those opposed to a more progressive approach to public policy in Burma.

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