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## **Bombings in Burma: The long view**

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*There was no simple explanation for the rash of terrorist bombings that occurred in Myanmar in late 2013. By considering them in the light of the country's long history of such incidents, it was possible to view them in a broader context and appreciate the changing nature of the threat. However, that still did not explain who was responsible for the latest attacks, nor the motives that prompted them. They remained a mystery.*

The recent spate of terrorist bombings in Burma<sup>1</sup> has not injured many people or caused much property damage, but it is a reminder of the country's continuing, multifaceted internal security problems. No one seems sure who conducted the attacks, or why, but several explanations have been offered.<sup>2</sup> Some have been more convincing than others, but all need to be considered in the widest context.

Terrorist bombings in central Burma are not new. For decades, small devices have periodically exploded in public meeting places like markets, cinemas and railway stations. Larger bombs have been employed against

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1 "Cool Heads" Needed as Bombings Tear Through Burma', *Burma Partnership*, 21 October 2013, [www.burmapartnership.org/2013/10/cool-heads-needed-as-bombings-tear-through-burma/](http://www.burmapartnership.org/2013/10/cool-heads-needed-as-bombings-tear-through-burma/).

2 Saw Yan Naing, 'Who's Behind the Bombings in Burma?', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 October 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/news-analysis/whos-behind-bombings-burma.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/news-analysis/whos-behind-bombings-burma.html).

infrastructure targets such as bridges, communications facilities and power plants. Official buildings have also been attacked. The casualties were often light, but the bombings contributed to a persistent low-level threat.

Over the past 20 years, the nature of these attacks has broadened. In 1997, for example, a parcel bomb was sent to a senior military officer from Japan. In 2002, letter bombs were sent to Burma's embassies in Tokyo, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Manila. In 2005, two powerful bombs exploded in Rangoon, killing 25 people. At the time, Burma was averaging about one bombing a month, though attacks of this size and sophistication were unusual.<sup>3</sup>

It has never been clearly established who was behind all these incidents. The culprits have probably varied over time. Before 1988, they were most likely members of underground communist cells and armed ethnic groups. After the abortive prodemocracy uprising that year, the Thailand-based All Burma Students' Democratic Front planned a series of bombings inside Burma, and a few other activist groups may also have adopted terrorist tactics.<sup>4</sup>

The attacks against Burma's national infrastructure and official sites doubtless reflected the fact that, for many years, up to 25 armed groups were waging guerilla wars against the military government. The bombings in urban centres were harder to explain, as they achieved no appreciable results—apart from alienating the civilian population and prompting tougher countermeasures by the security forces.

Rarely did any group claim responsibility for terrorist bombings. Indeed, those groups accused by the government—most often ethnic insurgents—invariably denied any involvement. Supported by conspiracy theorists inside and outside the country, such groups claimed that Burma's Military Intelligence Service was staging such attacks to discredit opposition groups and justify the state's powerful coercive apparatus.

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3 'Bomb Blasts in Burma: A Chronology', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 May 2006, [www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=5762&page=3](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=5762&page=3).

4 Aung Naing Oo, 'Burma Bombings Raise Questions: Who and Why?', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 January 2007, [www2.irrawaddy.org/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=6619](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=6619).

From time to time, the authorities announced the arrest of an individual or group that they claimed was responsible for particular incidents. Some may have been guilty, but given the regime's paranoia, its constant search for scapegoats and its penchant for calling all its opponents terrorists, it was difficult to know when to take such claims seriously.<sup>5</sup>

The latest attacks are notable for three reasons.<sup>6</sup> First, they mark the first string of bombings since the inauguration of Thein Sein's reformist government in 2011. Second, they appear to have been part of a coordinated countrywide campaign. And third, a bomb left in a luxury hotel in Rangoon seems to have been specifically aimed at foreign visitors.<sup>7</sup>

If all nine reported incidents are connected—and that is not yet clear—their timing may be related to Burma's recent accession to the ASEAN chair. A nationwide ceasefire agreement with ethnic armed groups is close to being finalised<sup>8</sup> and Burma is due to host the Southeast Asian Games in December.<sup>9</sup> The bombing campaign raises the level of uncertainty about all these developments.

Burma's police have announced that the bombings were carried out by ethnic Karen businessmen to scare off foreign investors.<sup>10</sup> Others have pointed the finger at ethnic insurgents, hardliners in the armed forces, rogue intelligence agents, disgruntled democracy activists, Buddhist fanatics and Muslim extremists.<sup>11</sup> It is the last category that has attracted most attention from foreign observers.

5 'Burma: 14 Accused Over Bombing in Fabricated Case', Urgent Appeals Programme (Hong Kong: Asian Human Rights Commission, 19 August 2011), [www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-145-2011/](http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-145-2011/).

6 'Two More Bombings Kill 1, Wound 6 in Burma', *Voice of America*, 17 October 2013, [www.voanews.com/content/burma-bomb-blast-kills-1-in-shan-state/1771348.html](http://www.voanews.com/content/burma-bomb-blast-kills-1-in-shan-state/1771348.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.voanews.com/east-asia/two-more-bombings-kill-1-wound-6-burma](http://www.voanews.com/east-asia/two-more-bombings-kill-1-wound-6-burma)].

7 Andrew Buncombe, 'Myanmar Bombing: Three Held After Blast Hits Luxury Hotel in Burma', *The Independent*, [London], 15 October 2013, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/myanmar-bombing-three-held-after-blast-hits-luxury-hotel-in-burma-8880765.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/myanmar-bombing-three-held-after-blast-hits-luxury-hotel-in-burma-8880765.html).

8 Saw Yan Naing, 'All But One Ethnic Group Sign Agreement Supporting Nationwide Ceasefire', *The Irrawaddy*, 3 November 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/ethnic-reach-sign-agreement-sign.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/ethnic-reach-sign-agreement-sign.html).

9 'Concern for SEA Games Safety in Myanmar', *ABC News*, 19 October 2013, [www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-19/an-philis-myanmar-sea-games-safety/5033150](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-19/an-philis-myanmar-sea-games-safety/5033150).

10 Lawi Weng, 'Burma Police Say Karen Businessmen Plotted Bombings', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 October 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burma-police-say-karen-businessmen-plotted-bombings.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burma-police-say-karen-businessmen-plotted-bombings.html).

11 Jonah Blank, 'Who's Bombing Myanmar?', *CNN*, 30 October 2013, [globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/30/whos-bombing-myanmar/](http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/30/whos-bombing-myanmar/).

After the sectarian violence in Rakhine State in 2012, and similar outbreaks in central Burma this year, there were warnings that the persecution of Burma's Muslims could prompt action by foreign extremists, both inside Burma and further afield. It was also feared that it could radicalise local Muslims, leading to a campaign of terrorist violence in Burma and the recruitment of Burmese Muslims to conduct terrorist operations elsewhere.

These scenarios are worth briefly considering.

Foreign extremists have been calling for a jihad against Burma's government and 'infidel' population since the 1970s, but with little apparent result. After the 2012 violence, however, spokesmen for Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Jemaah Islamiyah all warned of retaliation for attacks against Muslim Rohingyas.<sup>12</sup> In May 2013, Indonesian authorities foiled an attempt to bomb the Burmese Embassy<sup>13</sup> and in August a Buddhist centre in Jakarta was attacked 'in response to the screams of the Rohingya'.<sup>14</sup>

Whether foreign extremists will increase their efforts to operate inside Burma is difficult to judge. Osama bin Laden stated in 2001 that there were already jihadist cells there—a claim repeated by a few journalists and academics. A small number of Rohingyas has been linked to Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Bangladesh,<sup>15</sup> but unconfirmed reports of militant groups in Burma with ties to organisations like Jemaah Islamiyah need to be treated carefully.<sup>16</sup>

12 *Friends Burma's Rohingya Could Do Without*, Burma Briefing No.20 (London: Burma Campaign UK, March 2013), [www.burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/Friends\\_Burmas\\_Rohingya\\_could\\_do\\_without.pdf](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/Friends_Burmas_Rohingya_could_do_without.pdf).

13 Ben Otto and I Made Sentana, 'Myanmar's Rifts Make Waves in Indonesia', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 May 2013, [online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324266904578459770982983566](http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324266904578459770982983566).

14 Yenni Kwok, 'Jakarta Bomb a Warning That Burma's Muslim-Buddhist Conflict May Spread', *TIME*, 7 August 2013, [world.time.com/2013/08/07/jakarta-bomb-a-warning-that-burmas-muslim-buddhist-conflict-may-spread/](http://world.time.com/2013/08/07/jakarta-bomb-a-warning-that-burmas-muslim-buddhist-conflict-may-spread/).

15 Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, April 2009), [www.state.gov/documents/organization/122599.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122599.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2008//index.htm].

16 Daniel Schearf, 'Indonesia Foils Terror Attack on Burmese Embassy', *Voice of America*, 3 May 2013, [newsle.com/article/0/75676637/](http://newsle.com/article/0/75676637/) [page discontinued] [now at [www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/indonesia-foils-terror-attack-burmese-embassy](http://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/indonesia-foils-terror-attack-burmese-embassy)].

In the vast literature on international terrorism that has appeared since 9/11, it is easy to find lists of factors that reputedly radicalise religious communities.<sup>17</sup> Considered against these criteria, it is easy to see why some counterterrorism experts fear the possibility of Burma's Muslims turning to terrorism. Experienced Burma-watchers, however, are much more cautious in speaking about homegrown or imported jihadism taking root there.

In the freer atmosphere now prevailing in Burma, a terrorist campaign might be easier to mount, from either inside or outside the country, but it would still be difficult to sustain. Burma possesses an extensive state security system<sup>18</sup> and an alert citizenry that would detect outsiders very quickly. More to the point, an organised campaign of violence would be strongly opposed by the overwhelming majority of Burmese Muslims.

Local Muslims want to be accepted as full citizens of Burma, not risk further marginalisation, or worse. They know that a terrorist campaign would be completely counterproductive. A bomb at a sacred site like the Shwedagon Pagoda, for example, could provoke a massive backlash. Also, such attacks would be exploited by Buddhist extremists ready to seize upon any 'evidence' of Muslim attempts to destroy the dominant culture.<sup>19</sup>

These are complex and sensitive issues, all demanding close attention. However, it is worth keeping in mind that, whoever is behind the latest bombings, they will fail to achieve their objectives, whatever these may be. The government will not fall, nor will major policies be amended, because of terrorism. Unless the scope and nature of the attacks dramatically change, tourists will still visit Burma in unprecedented numbers and foreign companies will continue to pursue opportunities in a country hungry for foreign capital and expertise.

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17 'What Causes Radicalisation?', *Radicalisation Research*, [www.radicalisationresearch.org/features/Francis-2012-causes/](http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/features/Francis-2012-causes/) [page discontinued].

18 Andrew Selth, *Burma's Security Forces: Performing, Reforming or Transforming?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.45 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2013), [www.griffith.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/559127/Regional-Outlook-Paper-45-Selth.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/559127/Regional-Outlook-Paper-45-Selth.pdf) [page discontinued].

19 Andrew Selth, 'Burma: Conspiracies and Other Theories', *The Interpreter*, 5 June 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/06/05/Burma-Conspiracies-and-other-theories.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/06/05/Burma-Conspiracies-and-other-theories.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-conspiracies-and-other-theories](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-conspiracies-and-other-theories)].

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