

Gendered rumours and Muslim scapegoats in Myanmar



In Myanmar, rumours abound about the assault and coercion of Buddhist women. What makes this trope of everyday storytelling—often factually inaccurate—so resistant to “debunking”?

Based on more than four years of in-depth qualitative research, we argue that rumours are durable because they resonate with, and allocate blame for, the suffering and stagnation of the 1990s and 2000s.

We see these dynamics at play in support for the four “Protection of Race and Religion” laws. Drafted with assistance of Buddhist organisation Ma Ba Tha, they were passed in the final months of the U Thein Sein government and remain a thorn in the side of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy government.

During the 2012 to 2016 period when we were conducting fieldwork in Yangon and in central Myanmar, discussions about these laws with interlocutors often centred on detailed rumours propagated on Facebook and by trusted contacts.

Muslim men, we were often told, were attempting to sexually assault or force the conversion of Buddhist women to Islam through “terrorism”, financial incentives or complex legal contracts. The allegedly high birth rate within the Muslim community was cited as “proof” of a systematic “strategy” to propagate Islam and thereby weaken Buddhism in Myanmar.

Assumptions that Muslims are wealthy, sexually deviant and capable of coercing outcomes reflect

findings of the [Myanmar Media and Society project from University of Oxford](#). Based on interviews around the country, that research showed how people in Myanmar are reframing memories of the past as they try to make sense of recent communal conflict as well as global narratives of Islamic extremism.

We argue that rumours about Myanmar's Muslims are seen to contain an element of "truth" because they project blame for decades of suffering under military rule.

Consider the following scene, which unfolded in a betel nut shop in central Myanmar in mid-2015. A young Burmese man showed a Facebook clip on his smartphone, titled "Something everyone should watch", to the other attendees lazing on plastic chairs in a dusty market. The young man had found the video on Facebook, where it had been shared more than 3,000 times.

The seven-minute clip showed a quarrel in a busy market between a bearded man in his late 30s—presumed to be Muslim by those watching—and a young woman in her early 20s, who was presumed to be Buddhist.

In the clip, apparently filmed on a bystander's smartphone, the agitated young woman repeatedly lambasts the bearded man as a "liar", while slapping him and saying he "promised to marry her".

After watching the video, discussion at the table framed the story of the young woman as a cautionary tale about inter-religious relationships but also of the economic advantage of Muslims. One man said, "He has a lot of money, so she is interested in him. But you really cannot trust them [Muslims]."

The video sparked discussion of the alleged economic dominance of Muslims, the potential for sexual exploitation of "naïve" Buddhist women as well as petty corruption in the bureaucracy that "gives Muslims more chances and opportunities".

Attendees agreed that it was best to be "careful" with Muslims, mentioning stories of lived suffering during Myanmar's military period and the way Muslims allegedly experienced this period differently due to their "wealth" and ability to bribe government officials.

This was neither a unique or unusual discussion, and nor was it factually correct. Muslims control a tiny proportion of Myanmar's economy compared to military-linked businesspeople, for example.

However, similar cautionary tales recur at betel shops and other meeting places, real and virtual, around the country. Behind these discussions are narratives of suffering interlinked with concern about the moral and spiritual decline of a Buddhist-imbued notion of "nation".

Ko Kyaw Win (a pseudonym), a petty trader in his 20s from a poor urban family in a Buddhist majority town in central Myanmar, sheds lights on those narratives. Kyaw Win began volunteering

for the “969” movement after listening at a local monastery to a sermon by U Wirathu about the 2012 Rakhine violence.

Deeply disturbed by the detailed accounts of rape described in the sermon, he contributed two weeks of his meagre salary—a donation of the equivalent of around US\$100—to have 500 DVDs made of U Wirathu’s sermons. Over the space of a few weeks in 2013, Kyaw Win disseminated these DVDs throughout rural and urban areas as part of his trading routes. Later, he helped distribute petitions for Ma Ba Tha’s nationwide signature campaign in support of the four “Laws for Protection of Race and Religion”.

Throughout 2015 and 2016, one of the authors regularly met with Kyaw Win. During these interactions he often recounted stories of how he and his family had suffered through the 1990s and 2000s.

They had struggled because of Myanmar’s economic isolation, high unemployment and, as he put it, “shit-bag health and education systems”. For Kyaw Win, the “economic” and “moral” states of Myanmar were closely intertwined. He said that “most people are morally destroyed...they have no time to meditate or do social work”.

He blamed successive military regimes for “disconnecting Myanmar from the rest of the world”. He even refused to vote in the November 2015 elections, saying he was unable to choose between the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which he said was “corrupt”, or the National League for Democracy, which had “quarreled with monks”.

In explaining the need for the race and religion laws, however, Kyaw Win blended specific rumours about the desecration of Buddha images and the physical violation and exploitation of Buddhist women at the hands of “Islamic terrorism” with a sincerely held concern about the future of Buddhism.

Kyaw Win said that Ma Ba Tha believed that “there should be no terrorism in religion” and that they had drafted the package of four laws for “protecting race/nation”.

“Many Buddhist women are marrying people of other religions. The Ma Ba Tha laws allow Buddhist women to marry people of other religions, but they make sure that monks check if there is any terrorism,” he argued.

“If a Buddhist woman tells the monks that she is converting to Islam, the monks must check if it is her real attitude and will or if there is any terrorism like a debt that she owes him.”

The clarity of Kyaw Win and other Ma Ba Tha activists’ narratives of suffering and frustration during the 1990s contrasts sharply with the figure of the wealthy, sexually deviant Muslim man that is seen to justify discriminatory legislation and requires monks to “protect Buddhist women”.

The associations and attribution of grievances embedded in these rumours and explanations are neither natural nor automatic. Here is the power of gendered rumours: they link real and experienced suffering and grievances with the embodied vulnerability of women and, by extension, the social reproduction of Buddhism. Whether they are true or false, the power of these stories lies in the allocation of blame to a non-military scapegoat for the suffering of authoritarian rule.

The loaded nature of everyday rumours means that anti-Muslim prejudice cannot be addressed simply through “public education” or “debunking” campaigns that do not acknowledge experiences of suffering and grievance.

If the NLD wants to address Myanmar’s widespread Islamophobia and build an inclusive democracy, it must start by apportioning blame to the real culprits for the suffering of the 1990s and 2000s and begin to bring social and economic improvements to the lives of ordinary people.

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