

Race to the bottom



The plight of the Rohingya highlights growing intolerance towards religious minorities throughout the region, Aye Thein writes.

When Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak [spoke up for human rights](#) of the “Rohingyas” in Myanmar, he won applause from his home crowd but drew opprobrium from the Myanmar government. Commentators wasted little time pointing out Najib’s action as a politically calculated move amid corruption scandals and eroding popularity.

While Najib’s talk of human rights reeks of hypocrisy (see Human Rights Watch’s [report](#) on Malaysia’s human rights records) and selectivity (Najib’s line that he attended the rally in [“the name of the Ummah”](#) suggests he was advocating for only the human rights of Muslims), it also raises the broader question of minority rights in ASEAN. With regard to respect and tolerance for minorities, Buddhist Myanmar has more than a few parallels with Islamic Malaysia and Indonesia. For instance, [Muslims have been called fast breeding animals](#) in Myanmar just as [the Chinese have been called pigs](#) in Malaysia. For all the excesses of Ma Ba Ta (the Association for Protection of Race and Religion) going after a few inappropriately dressed folks, Myanmar is yet to have

Buddhist police to rival Malaysia's "[religious officers](#)", who enforce Sharia law. The notion and practice of *bumiputera* – Malaysia's affirmative action favouring ethnic Malay Muslims – is not without its counterpart among Myanmar's Buddhist chauvinists insisting that Buddhists are rightful owners of the Burmese nation and non-Buddhists, Muslims in particular, are mere guests.

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority state, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) "194 violent attacks on religious minorities in the first 11 months of 2015" and maintains that "religious violence remains a serious problem." In the same report, it was noted that "national and local governments had passed 31 new discriminatory regulations in 2015, leaving Indonesia with 322 discriminatory local regulations targeting women."

Similarly, [Malaysian law](#) forbids the proselytising of Muslims by non-Muslims, and a non-Muslim must convert to Islam before marrying a Muslim in order for the marriage to be recognised. This should bring to mind Myanmar's so-called race and religion laws passed in 2015, which have been widely [criticised as violations of human rights](#) and discrimination against religious minorities and women. Again, it was Ma Ba Ta which extensively promoted those bills and egged on the previous Thein Sein government to write them into law.

I highlight these two examples of Malaysia and Indonesia for a reason; that is, the anti-Islamic elements among the Buddhists who condone or turn a blind eye to human rights abuses of Muslims in the country do so by referring to the plight of religious minorities in Muslim-majority states, not least Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Brunei Sultanate. The persecution of non-Muslims, or followers of non-official Islamic sects, in Muslim-majority countries is used as justification for attitudes which see Muslims as guests who can exist in Myanmar only at the generosity of the hosts -- Buddhists. Too many people equate the most intolerant policies and practices of not only their Muslim-majority neighbours but also of Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia as being representative of Islam.

In a sense, Buddhist fanatics in Myanmar seem to have taken a leaf out of their neighbours' book and gone a step further in their treatment of the Bengalis/Rohingyas in Rakhine State, with an increasing number of people now calling it a genocide.

None of the above is meant to justify the human rights abuses that religious minorities, particularly Muslims, in Myanmar have suffered both historically and in recent years. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Northern Rakhine needs to stop and those who are in desperate need of help must receive it. Rather, it highlights what seems to be a race to the bottom in minority rights, not only in some ASEAN countries but also around the world; there is a contagion of intolerance for religious difference.

These are terrible times to be religious minority anywhere in the world, and things look as if they will not improve any time soon.

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