

Opinion

Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Asia rears its ugly head

First published in the Bangkok Post on 17 July 2013

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/360199/buddhist-muslim-conflict-in-asia-rears-its-ugly-head>

When Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011, there was hope of an end to the pernicious religious conflicts afflicting the world. After a decade of war between the largely Christian West and Islamic extremists, levels of suspicion and intolerance between these two great religions of the book had returned to medieval levels. By injecting faith into geo-political contest, the modern world was turning back the civilisational clock.

However, no sooner was al-Qaeda neutralised as the spearhead of Islamic-inspired violence against non-Muslims, other than innocent Muslims became victims themselves of religiously inspired violence _ from Buddhists.

The ground zero of this new conflict is Myanmar's northwestern Rakhine State, home to around 1 million Muslims who call themselves Rohingya.

Tensions erupted last year when the majority Buddhist Rakhine community turned on their Rohingya neighbours, indiscriminately killing them and forcing more than 120,000 into makeshift camps. A year later, Muslim-Buddhist tensions have flared in other parts of Myanmar, most recently in Shan State.

This flare-up is echoed in nearby Sri Lanka, where the island's sizeable Muslim minority, comprising around 9% of the population, has become the target of a militant Buddhist nationalist group that emerged after the government's defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009.

Recently, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk burned himself to death in protest against the Muslims' halal practice of slaughtering animals.

This month, in what would seem to be a provocative counter attack, a series of bombs was detonated in the Bodh Gaya temple, one of Buddhism's holiest sites. The site, in India's Eastern Bihar state, contains the Bodhi Tree, under which Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment in 531BC. There is strong speculation that Muslim militants planted the bombs.

Much like Islam and Christianity, which share common origins in ancient Judaic religion, there is no real basis for such discord between Islam and Buddhism on grounds of dogma. Both draw the source of their faith from the enlightenment of charismatic preachers _ the Buddha taught in northeastern India around 1,000 years before Mohammed preached on the Arabian peninsula.

Similar to the clash between Islam and the Judeo-Christian world, the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims is over land and nationalism. The Rohingya are stateless, even though they claim to have been settled in the area for hundreds of years. Tensions erupted into violence after the Buddhist Rakhine people suspected the central government might grant citizenship to the Rohingya. The common refrain is that if allowed to settle permanently, the Muslim population would increase more rapidly, and use their business acumen to completely marginalise the people of Rakhine. The same arguments are heard in Sri Lanka _ that if allowed to do so, Muslims would overtake the majority Sinhalese in business and commerce.

Flare-ups of violence in central Myanmar and Shan State were nominally the result of petty arguments in shops and market places. Nothing at all to do with faith, but a lot to do with the wider stresses and strains of a country lifting the heel of repression and allowing social forces to express themselves more freely. As was the case in Indonesia in the 1990s, religious conflict often becomes the easiest way for competing political interests to exploit these tensions and provoke violence.

But in today's online world, localised conflict is easily transformed into a global issue. The ultra-nationalist 969 movement allegedly behind much of the Buddhist animosity towards Muslims in Myanmar now has a US-based website defending its aims. A Time magazine cover featuring U Wirathu, the Myanmar monk supposedly behind the movement, was banned in not just in Myanmar but also in Sri Lanka.

Buddhists are clinging to notions of non-violence and peace _ the core of the way of life preached by Buddha. Even so, there is no escaping the way some countries have harnessed Buddhism to nationalism, a dangerous, potent source of conflict when tied to any religion. One of the first victims is the easy-going pluralism that has characterised the region's multi-ethnic and religious societies. What is to be done?

Dialogue is usually the first tool deployed in situations of incipient conflict. But inter-faith dialogues tend to be meetings among like-minded moderates whose voices are mute in the face of politically backed ultra-nationalist extremists. Besides, Buddhists, when probed on the recent clashes with Muslims, are inclined to agree that for too long they have been passive in the face of aggressive Islamic proselytising, especially throughout the past few decades; therefore, a dialogue among Buddhists themselves is necessary: how to prevent the mobilisation of faith for political motives.

There is a risk that if beleaguered Muslims start to deploy violent and militant counter-measures, it would be hard to stem the tide of popular Buddhist prejudice against them. There are already disturbing reports that Rohingya activists have been seeking training and support from Muslim radicals in Indonesia.

It would help immensely if the force of law could be applied without prejudice. In this respect, it is encouraging that courts in Myanmar have handed jail sentences to almost two dozen Buddhists charged with violent and fatal strikes against Muslims earlier this year.

Above all, governments need to consider the social implications of a widening rift between Buddhism and Islam, and ensure a prudent separation between church and state.

This won't be easy. It bucks the trend in this region towards religiosity over secularism, politicians opting for purity of faith as an easier platform to sell and deliver on than programmes requiring commitment to change _ an unfortunate consequence of democratic reform.

Michael Vatikiotis is Asia regional director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. His latest novel, The Painter of Lost Souls, reflects on the impact of religiosity in Indonesian society.