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No. 169/2013 dated 18 September 2013

Myanmar's Wirathu: The Social Influencer in Sectarian Violence

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Synopsis

The influence of Wirathu, the Buddhist monk and leader of the nationalist 969 movement, in inciting the sectarian violence in Myanmar has been undisputed and unchecked. Is the unchallenged role of Wirathu as an effective social influencer due to the implicit support of those in power?

Commentary

THE SECTARIAN violence in Myanmar between Buddhists and Muslims that erupted last year is showing no signs of abating. Starting in western Rakhine State, it spread to central Meikhtila and north-eastern Lashio before erupting most recently in the northern region of Sagaing. UN estimates point to over 100,000 displaced people and 200 killed.

The official response by the government has been to arrest around 1,000 people involved in the rioting and the killing. Whilst the arrest of the perpetrators has generally been lauded as a step in the right direction, little if anything has been done to counter the preachings of Wirathu, the Buddhist monk who has been the chief inciter of the sectarian violence.

Wirathu, the social influencer

In the absence of official condemnation by the Buddhist and political leadership, Wirathu's virulent ideology has gained a strong following. There are at least two factors that have not only enabled Wirathu's teachings and calls for violence to gain traction, but also hindered effective counter strategies: the first is his role as an effective social influencer and the second the implicit support of those in power.

A social influencer refers to an individual who is able to mobilise popular support for his cause or ideology. In situations where social, political and economic grievances and injustice are present these individuals can inspire and incite violent radicalisation. Effective social influencers are able to achieve their goals if three factors are in place: first, he is perceived by his audience to have similar characteristics as themselves and represents a source of authority; second, he has a simple ideology or cause which resonates with his intended audience; third, he has a well-organised campaign platform.

Wirathu undoubtedly has the three characteristics of an effective social influencer. First, in a Buddhist-majority country, the religion deeply influences and underpins national identity and political practices. Monks serve as

the moral compass of the majority of the society and in the past led peaceful demonstrations against the military rulers. It is, therefore, no surprise that Wirathu has a following of over 2,500 monks.

Second, while his revered religious position has provided him with the necessary moral credibility for guidance, what additionally makes him very influential is his simple hate rhetoric, which has provided the complex societal discourse a very simple binary filter: Buddhists are the victims and Muslims the victimisers and you are either with us, the Buddhist, or them, the Muslims.

His simple ideology has enabled a clear monopolisation of the societal discourse, which hinders moderate interpretations or opinions from being expressed. This, in turn, may explain why other prominent leaders have remained silent in the face of increasing international pressure for a halt to the recurring sectarian violence.

Moreover, his well-organised hate campaign has facilitated an increase in the number of followers and bolstered his monopoly over the public discourse. Utilising the extensive networks of monasteries and supporters, Wirathu has gained what the New York Times referred to as “a rock-star following.” With an active and solid base of follower monks, Wirathu has managed to establish himself as the de facto voice of the aggrieved Buddhist community. He leads special schools where he propagates his beliefs and tours the country to deliver his hate-filled sermons, which are attended by thousands of followers. His sermons are also readily available on DVDs, CDs, brochures and online.

Support from those in power

More importantly, his public outreach extends well beyond the monastery walls. His strong presence on the social media platforms has allowed him to reach outside the audience in Rakhine State and to establish social networks of the Buddhist community in the rest of Myanmar. In stark contrast the rest of the Buddhist monks who may not share the same sentiments as him are largely muted.

A facilitating factor for Wirathu’s popularity in Myanmar is that despite the continued violence, he has been tolerated and implicitly supported by the government. After Wirathu appeared under the controversial heading ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’ on the front cover of Time magazine in June, the outrage of his followers was given further support by Myanmar’s president Thein Sein who defended him as ‘Son of Lord Buddha’. The magazine was promptly banned in the country.

Similarly, any external attempts to engage the government to deal with the prevalence of hate speech end up with confusing outcomes. For example, a workshop on hate speech organised by the US embassy centred on the Time magazine’s cover story, and Thein Sein’s call for responsible reporting from the media, rather than focus on the inter-communal tensions stirred by Wirathu’s teachings.

Moreover, the lack of action gives further support to the idea shared by certain monks that the continued ethnic and religious violence is used as a pretext by the military for maintaining full control over Burmese politics.

Need for a counter social influencer

This sectarian strife is taking place against a backdrop of accelerated political change and polarised public discourse where both political and religious leaders are not able to decisively deal with the problem. Accordingly the possibilities of further escalations and spread of sectarian violence are high.

Alternatively, measures to stem further escalation of violence could be taken if there is an equivalent counter social influencer who is able to match Wirathu in terms of popularity, ideology and organisation. At this point such a scenario does not seem likely. Therefore, Wirathu and the increase of his like-minded followers is likely to continue to gain importance and influence in a military-led Myanmar.

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