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THESIS

**“INFIDELS AMONG US”: THE RISE OF BUDDHIST
NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA AND MYANMAR
THROUGH STATE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

by

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December 2023

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LANKA AND MYANMAR THROUGH STATE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Social movement theory typically helps us understand how and why civil and uncivil society groups strive to create social and political change, facing off against governments opposed to change. What if social movements also include ethno-religious groups that represent the more extreme aspects of ethno-nationalism when supported by their government's policies and powerful political parties? This thesis identifies this gap in the literature and argues that some social movements work with government officials when their interests match. It examines two specific Buddhist nationalist groups within Myanmar and Sri Lanka from 2009–2019 that have had a negative influence on democratic processes by targeting Muslim minorities with impunity, namely Ma Ba Tha (MBT) and Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), respectively. Both groups allow for political intrusion through comingling state and nonstate resources, shared narrative framing focused on Muslim minorities as existential threats, extensive use of social media platforms, and the circumvention of democratic and judicial processes which could have protected Muslims in both countries. Finally, the use social media and hate speech among these groups is a resource, framing mechanism, and political opportunity that both social movements and uncivil society use to further their anti-Muslim narrative.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

969	969 Movement
BBS	Bodu Bala Sena
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CDC	Civic Driven Change
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MBT	Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Preservation of Society and Religion)
MHN	Ma Ha Na (State Sangha Committee)
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSD	National Self Determination
NUG	National Unity Government
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SMT	Social Movement/Mobilization Theory
UN	United Nations
UNP	United National Party
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

“Yesterday’s victims become tomorrow’s oppressors,” observes Milton Esman in his book *Ethnic Politics*.¹ Sri Lanka and Myanmar, both with a history of British colonial rule and oppression of majority ethnic groups, are experiencing this phenomenon today. In the last decade, ethnoreligious majorities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have perpetuated ethnic and sectarian violence directed against their Muslim minorities. As Sivagruru and Ullah suggest, this manifested as communal violence between Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Hindus, and Arab and Tamil Muslims in Sri Lanka, and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims by Buddhist Burmese and Rakhine Buddhists in Myanmar.²

This thesis uses social movement theory (SMT) to compare the mobilization of two large Buddhist ethnonationalists groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar that colluded with government officials to realize their objectives. It explored the role of Buddhist ethnic nationalism in communal violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka and Myanmar between 2009–2019, how big a role the state played in this type of violence, and the role of civil society in this same communal violence. The primary findings are that both ethnonationalist groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar not only fed their respective social movements but were also co-opted by their governments to feed communal violence against Muslims. Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Ma Ba Tha (MBT) enabled government anti-Muslim narratives and, at times, participated in that same communal violence, to include riots, hate speech, the burning of Muslim homes and businesses, and in some cases, murder, and rape.

Such violence is not new in these states. Between 1983 and 2009, Sri Lanka’s Muslim communities avoided direct participation in the devastating civil war between the

¹ Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 5.

² Puthu Sivaguru, “Tamil Refugees: Protection For Whom, From Whom?,” *The Round Table* 348 (n.d.): October 1998; A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah, “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar: Seeking Justice for the ‘Stateless,’” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2016): 285–301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986216660811>.

Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), a United Nations (UN)-labeled terrorist group with separatist aims but legitimate grievances against the state.³ In Myanmar, the military has carried out pogroms against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state for decades by killing thousands of civilians, raping women and children, burning down villages, destroying mosques, and confiscating land and other capital.⁴ The political parties in both countries, which to some degree are organized along ethno-religious lines, contributed to this violence by advocating for policies that inherently disadvantage minority religious and ethnic groups.⁵ The governments and like-minded civil-society majority groups have advocated for Buddhist nationalism and exclusionary tactics against minorities in both countries.

During the 20th century and especially since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the world has seen an epidemic of ethnic and religious violence under the guise of nationalism to motivate and/or contain ethnic groups.⁶ While some states attempt to contain or crush social movements that challenge state sovereignty, other states foster or condone the proliferation of social movements in order to co-opt them by building constituent support along party lines. Modern governments—whether manifestations of totalitarian, authoritarian, or democratic regimes—appear particularly well poised to co-opt the messages and the momentum of social movements to advance nationalist narratives and, ultimately, to consolidate individual and political party power. In an attempt to test this

³ Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* (New York: iUniverse/Authors Choice Press, 2009).

⁴ Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*, 2nd ed. (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2018); John Clifford Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 1st ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 30–33.

⁵ Jonathan A. Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality," in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, ed. John Clifford Holt, 1 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 78–97; Kalinga Tudor Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena," in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John Clifford Holt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 256, 5. Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena By Kalinga Tudor Silva; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁶ Walker Connor, "A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group Is a . . .," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 1, no. 4 (October 1978): 377–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1978.9993240>; Jerry Z. Muller, "Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2008-03-02/us-and-them>.

proposition, this thesis uses social movement theory (SMT) to explain how and why, between 2009 and 2019, the governments of Sri Lanka and Myanmar co-opted and weaponized Buddhist ethno-nationalist social movements to help carry out their violent extremist campaigns against some of their Muslim minorities.

B. SIGNIFICANCE

SMT highlights the ways in which individuals form groups to enact social and political change, examining how grievances, resources, framing, and political opportunities contribute to social mobilization. SMT, at its very basic level, is about individuals organizing together, based on shared identities, norms, and goals, to change government policy.⁷ While SMT traditionally has been applied to civil and uncivil society organizations seeking social change through contentious, irregular means, its analytical framework can also be applied to state-based actors. This research applies SMT to better understand the behaviors of political parties, civil and uncivil society organizations, and governments that employ ethno-religious nationalist policies. It also analyzes how governments mobilized vast parts of the country against minorities through already existing social movements with moderate support.

From a policy perspective, highlighting the ways in which SMT is incorporated into government policies and propaganda tactics can be useful for academics and policy makers alike. Social movements are a powerful mechanism that groups can use to argue for or against policy changes. If the government or political party in power has a shared identity, values, and goals with a particular social movement, then the social movement's aims may be co-opted by government officials, giving both entities more power than they had operating alone. As social media and the ease of communication have evolved, both governments and social movements have more tools through which to influence individuals. They continue to use conventional news media to highlight alleged problems, using opinion articles to both praise and condemn ethnic groups. Government leaders reach their constituents not just through traditional means, such as television, radio, and press

⁷ David A. Snow and Doug. McAdam, *Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics and Outcomes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

releases, but also via Twitter (now X), Facebook, various social media platforms, and even government websites.

Within a decade after gaining independence from British colonial rule, the governments of Sri Lanka and Myanmar started embedding extremist Buddhist symbols, narratives, resources, and authority in state political and social life through their nationalist campaigns, security forces, and the sangha, the Buddhist community of monks that governs the religion. Buddhism and ethnicity are the defining narratives in both countries' political parties and ethnic-majority social groups. With large majorities of one specific ethno-religious group, the actors within the Buddhist nationalist groups have, at times, marginalized ethnic minorities within their countries. When these nationalist social groups partner with the government, they can contribute to state-sponsored violence, as happened during the period studied here.

Whereas social movements may be associated with positive connotations, such as pro-democracy movements, in the wrong hands, social movements may be co-opted to gain and maintain broad exclusionary power, and in extreme cases, to commit ethnic cleansing or genocide. While politicians and government officials ostensibly have a moral obligation to serving their constituencies, there can be a fine line between advocating or lobbying for ethnic majorities and marginalizing ethno-religious minorities for the purpose of getting re-elected or maintaining control within a government.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review comprises key definitions, an explanation of social movement theory and its relevant implications, civil and uncivil society, a brief history of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and finally Buddhist nationalism from the Sinhalese and Burmese viewpoints. Definitions are provided to ensure a shared understanding of key terminology, while the theories are further expanded in each section to provide a roadmap for understanding the cases of Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

1. Definitions

To understand the connection between ethnic nationalism and social movements in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, some definitions are necessary. First, **ethnic and ethno-religious nationalism** are the adherences to certain beliefs along ethnic, or ethnic and religious, lines.⁸ Milton Esman's definition of nationalism is used to describe an "ideology that proclaims the distinctiveness of a particular people and their right to self-rule in their homeland," whereas a nation is a community of people holding similar beliefs and ideas about the story of their origin, accomplishments, aspirations, or shared understanding of experiences (grievances, trauma, and the like).⁹ Second, SMT maintains that collective behavior has a political purpose and motivation, usually to change social, cultural, or political policy.¹⁰ Social movements are groups of people with a perceived collective problem or grievance that they aim to solve through political, social, nonviolent protest, and sometimes violent means.¹¹ They seize upon political opportunities, mobilizing structures, resources, and a framing process, or narrative, that resonates with and brings together individuals to advocate for resolving their shared collective grievances.¹² In this study's cases of ethno-religious conflict in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Muslim minorities are the targets of the groups' primary grievance and source of the majority's "siege mentality," or the belief that Buddhism is under siege by "outsiders" or "the other" within their own country.¹³

Hate speech is germane to this research, especially when combined with social mobilization and nationalism. There are many definitions of hate speech, some legal and

⁸ Esman, *Ethnic Politics*.

⁹ Esman, 28; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London: Verso, 2016).

¹⁰ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹¹ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald.

¹² McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald.

¹³ John Clifford Holt, ed., *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190624378.001.0001>.

others from specific social media sites. From a legal standpoint, in the United States, in a 2017 case between *Matal v. Tam*, the U.S. Supreme Court defined hate speech as “speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful; but the proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express ‘the thought that we hate.’”¹⁴ Hate speech can be used by individuals or groups, including politicians and governments. A debate about curtailing hate speech and allowing freedom of expression is still ongoing, although it is against U.S. law to act violently with the threat of violence using hateful speech.¹⁵

From a social media standpoint, in 2018, Facebook redefined its understanding of hate speech as “a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics—race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability.”¹⁶ It also argues that “we do not allow hate speech on Facebook because it creates an environment of intimidation and exclusion and in some cases may promote real-world violence.”¹⁷ This thesis focuses specifically on Facebook’s role in hate speech against Muslims and Myanmar and Sri Lanka, so I will use its definition to describe my research.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which tracks hate groups and hate crime across the United States, defines hate groups as those that have “beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics,” such as race, religion, sexual orientation, and the like.¹⁸ The groups are usually labeled as

¹⁴ American Library Association, “Hate Speech and Hate Crime,” Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, December 12, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/hate>.

¹⁵ Katharine Gelber, *Speaking Back: The Free Speech versus Hate Speech Debate* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central; American Library Association, “Hate Speech and Hate Crime.”

¹⁶ Radu Mihai Meza, Hanna-Orsolya Vincze, and Andreea Mogos, “Targets of Online Hate Speech in Context: A Comparative Digital Social Science Analysis of Comments on Public Facebook Pages from Romania and Hungary,” *Intersections* 4, no. 4 (December 2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v4i4.503>; “12. Hate Speech,” Facebook Community Standards, accessed September 23, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/hate_speech.

¹⁷ “12. Hate Speech.”

¹⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Frequently Asked Questions About Hate Groups,” Southern Poverty Law Center, March 18, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/20171004/frequently-asked-questions-about-hate-groups>.

organizations which adhere to beliefs against certain people.¹⁹ These definitions will continue to aid in the interpretation of hate speech usage and its effects on mobilizing groups against minorities in both countries.

New media refers to media in digital and all “new” forms, such as blogs, Twitter (X), and online outlets.²⁰ Some authors argue that the advent of digital news is unprecedented and has changed the face of news media.²¹ Social media is usually determined as a subset of new media: online forums for expression and information sharing.²² It is where people make “friends” and meet acquaintances online to share multimedia and other digital information. It also may be described as networked communication for collaboration in formal and informal networks and usually takes place on social networking sites, blogs, social news, and wikis.²³ It is important to understand this definition going forward because social media and new media will be discussed in all following chapters, particularly as resources for the Buddhist nationalist social movements and governments.

Fake news may be described as the attempt to deceive the media consumer through deliberate misinformation or disinformation.²⁴ Gelfert argues that “fake news” has become synonymous with “sources that spread falsehoods by manipulating their consumers’

¹⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center.

²⁰ Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2011), 200, 209.

²¹ Carruthers, *The Media at War*; Piers Robinson, “Media as a Driving Force in International Politics: The CNN Effect and Related Debates,” *E-International Relations* (blog), September 17, 2013, <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/17/media-as-a-driving-force-in-international-politics-the-cnn-effect-and-related-debates/>.

²² Lewis A. Friedland, “Social Media,” in *Sociology of Work: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Vicki Smith (Sage Publications, 2013), Credo Reference.

²³ Friedland; Lynete Lusike Mukhongo and Juliet Wambui Macharia, *Media, Democracy, and Political Change in Developing Countries* (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016), 6, <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/media-democracy-and-political-change-in-developing-countries/143935>.

²⁴ David Z. Hambrick and Madeline Marquardt, “Cognitive Ability and Vulnerability to Fake News,” *Scientific American*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/cognitive-ability-and-vulnerability-to-fake-news/>.

emotions and tapping into deeply held partisan beliefs.”²⁵ It is relatively inexpensive to disseminate through social media, while allowing the author to remain anonymous.

2. Social Movement Theory

Social movements are groups of people with a collective identity and perceived shared grievance that they aim to solve through irregular political, social, and sometimes violent means.²⁶ Grievances might include societal differences or even religious inclinations of a particular segment of society that are perceived to be causing or threatening harm or loss to the collectively identified group and its members.²⁷ SMT argues that grievances in and of themselves are not sufficient to mobilize people. Group members’ success in realizing enough influence to resolve their grievances depends upon their resources, framing narratives, and use of political opportunities. There is nothing in this definition that excludes government institutions or the state from hosting social movements by themselves or their proxies and partners. Indeed, government ethnonationalist campaigns, especially those that co-opt nonstate social movements, may be better understood by applying the SMT framework to their activities.

McAdam et al. argue that grievances transform themselves into a social movement when three features are present: the political opportunity and the environment to organize, mobilizing structures or resources, and effective framing of the narrative.²⁸ No movement survives, however, without diverse and deep resources. Mobilizing structures, such as resources, organization, and communication networks, are some of the assets available, as well as the organization, leadership, and membership of the group, which coalesce into

²⁵ Axel Gelfert, “Fake News: A Definition,” *Informal Logic* 38, no. 1 (2018): 84–117, <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v38i1.5068>.

²⁶ Doug McAdam et al., “Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes – toward a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements,” *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 2–3.

²⁷ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 2–6.

²⁸ Doug McAdam et al., pp. 2–6.

addressing specific grievances that could otherwise not be addressed by individuals acting alone.²⁹

Framing is how the group understands the world in which it lives and articulates the struggle and the solution in an effort to recruit adherents, supporters, and resources. The people feel motivated to action because of the framing and the narrative or creed that defines their ideals.³⁰ Political opportunities are events or junctures, such as elections, religious holidays, contentious court rulings, economic hardships, and political transitions, which people capitalize on to push for political or social change.³¹ McAdam et al. point out that “no matter how momentous a change appears in retrospect, it only becomes an ‘opportunity’ when defined as such by a group sufficiently well organized to act on a shared definition of the situation,” whatever that issue might be.³² In addition, if a group does not believe it has the opportunity to address its grievances within sanctioned political activities, then it is more likely to form a movement of change through irregular politics, such as nonviolent or violent protest.³³

Social movements sometimes involve religious elements, since organized religion can “mobilize, promote, and abet social movements—organized efforts of challenger groups to promote or resist social change through disruptive means.”³⁴ Smith argues that “social movements need symbols, rituals, narratives, icons, and songs. They use these to construct their collective identities, to nurture solidarity, to express their grievances, and to draw inspiration and strength in difficult times.”³⁵ Religion can provide cohesion, resources, narrative, and legitimacy to social movements; individuals can draw on their religious affiliations to promote and provide a resonating narrative.

²⁹ Doug McAdam et al., pp. 3–4.

³⁰ Doug McAdam et al., pp. 4–6.

³¹ Doug McAdam et al., pp. 2–3.

³² Doug McAdam et al., 8.

³³ This entire paragraph is taken from a final paper written for DA3720, Rise of Religious Violence, written by Christina Gatti.

³⁴ Christian Smith, ed., *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315022147>. 1

³⁵ Smith. 11

Social movements are traditionally viewed as grassroots movements that may change government policy or influence actors who have the capacity to enact social and political change. Authors such as McAdam, Tarrow, and Moghadam, have focused on how SMT, especially in a globalized world, changes politics.³⁶ For example, Moghadam notes that the rise of feminism and Islamism gave way to some positive social change in states throughout the world.³⁷ She argues that the need to articulate women's issues contributed "to the democratization process, the creation of a democratic civil society, and a civic culture"³⁸ while Islamism, and changes to how people perceive their religious faith, helped to spark the pro-democracy Arab Spring.³⁹ Tarrow argues that collective action is "triggered by ebb and flow of political structure," meaning that if an issue or political grievance arises, then social movements form to help redress that specific grievance, but recede when that grievance is corrected.⁴⁰ Constructivist theories on social change and transnational organizations also highlight the ability of social groups to change policy via social identity.⁴¹

Many authors have focused on how SMT affects collective action by nonstate actors involved in domestic and international policies. Fewer writers have discussed the role of governments in shaping, promoting, and maintaining social movements. Two such scholars, Imrat Verhoeven and Jan Willem Duyvendak, discuss governmental activism, or

³⁶ *Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics and Outcomes*; Sidney G. Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2012); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements : Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*, Globalization (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

³⁷ Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*.

³⁸ Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Women's Movement in the Middle East and North Africa: Responding to Restructuring and Fundamentalism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3/4 (Fall-Winter 1998): 57–67.

³⁹ Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*.

⁴⁰ Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16.

⁴¹ Martha Finnemore, "Norms, Culture, and World Politics: Insights from Sociology's Institutionalism," *International Organization* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 325–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300028587>; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 887–917, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>.

when government actors join with non-governmental actors “against policies they want to prevent or redress,” but do not discuss the promotion of social movements by government political organizations.⁴² Gary Marx argues that while the ways in which governments suppress social movements are more formal and codified, “it is hard to identify equivalent government agencies...concerned with facilitating domestic social movements.”⁴³ An exception is the literature on totalitarian regimes, where co-opting civil society and groups, such as collectives and professional societies in the USSR and Mao Tse Tung’s China, was necessary for the state to compel the vast revolutionary changes it required.⁴⁴ This thesis will explore this specific element by asking what happens when governments instrumentally co-opt existing social movements for their own benefit.

3. Civil and Uncivil Society: Contentious Politics

Civil and uncivil society are two types of citizen groups that operate in a nation-state for social or political purposes but are not formal parts of government. Civil society usually operates within the legal constraints of a state, while uncivil society operates on the fringe of acceptable behavior or via violent means.⁴⁵ An earlier understanding divided society into three sectors: “the state, the market and a social sector labeled as ‘civil society.’” They were ‘separated’ by their institutional logics: the first sector of government rests on regulation; the second sector’s rationale is the creation of economic wealth; and the third

⁴² Imrat Verhoeven and Jan Willem Duyvendak, “Understanding Governmental Activism,” *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017): 564–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1338942>.

⁴³ Gary T. Marx, “External Efforts to Damage or Facilitate Social Movements: Some Patterns, Explanations, Outcomes, and Complications,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movements*, ed. M. Zald and J. McCarthy (Nova Scotia, Canada: Winthrop Publishers, 1979), <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/movement.html>.

Mohamed Ismail Sabry, *The Development of Socialism, Social Democracy and Communism: Historical, Political and Socioeconomic Perspectives* (Bingley, UNITED KINGDOM: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4908214>; Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (Florence, UNITED STATES: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=3569165>; Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=4580513#>; Charles. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ Jack Lively and Andrew Reeve, “The Emergence of the Idea of Civil Society: The Artificial Political Order and Natural Social Orders,” *Democratization* 4, no. 1 (1997): 63–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510349708403502>.

sector is the home of social and political expression.”⁴⁶ However, the literature is now focused on civil society permeating all aspects of life within a state.⁴⁷ For instance, civil society includes social groups with no political aims, such as artists’ guilds, bowling clubs, and homeowners’ associations—all of which hold collective identify and objectives. More germane to this study, civil society may be defined as the nongovernmental people and actions intersecting with the political sphere to bring about political change.⁴⁸

Political change, Tarrow asserts, may also occur outside of the law and government institutions, where contentious actors operate both outside of and within the law to change politics and policies: “contentious politics emerges in response to changes in political opportunities and threats when participants perceive and respond to a variety of incentives” such as material, ideological, or partisan issues.⁴⁹ Contentious politics also falls in the realm of civic-driven change (CDC). CDC can involve the spectrum of authority challenge, such as street blockades, public disorder, and violence against authorities.⁵⁰ This area may be called uncivil society, where disruptive and unwelcome harmful actions arise between the individual(s) and the state.⁵¹ There is contention in the literature about whether defining civil and uncivil society is helpful. However, violence and violent action are usually a part of uncivil society, due to the fact that most citizens want to live in peace without fear for their lives.⁵² Finally, Kopecky and Mudde argue that uncivil society usually involves movements considered undemocratic and exclusionary, in this case extreme religious or nationalist groups whose primary goal is ostracism of other groups in civil society.⁵³ It is within this area that our cases of Buddhist nationalist groups operate.

⁴⁶ Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler, “A Civic Agency Perspective on Change,” *Development* 55, no. 2 (2012): 181–89, <https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2012.9>.

⁴⁷ Lively and Reeve, “The Emergence of the Idea of Civil Society.”

⁴⁸ Marlies Glasius, “Uncivil Society,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012).

⁴⁹ Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates*.

⁵⁰ Tarrow.

⁵¹ Glasius, “Uncivil Society,” 1584.

⁵² Glasius, “Uncivil Society”; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

⁵³ Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde, eds., *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003).

4. Histories of Sri Lanka and Myanmar

Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar currently share a rise in ethno-religious violence, but they also have a shared history of British colonial rule combined with a “divide and conquer” mentality, an entrenched Buddhist monastic order (sangha) which uses its historical status to influence political change today, and a majority ethnic group which uses that majority to try to force minority groups to assimilate to their view of a nationalist traditional order.⁵⁴ Although Sri Lanka was once ruled by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch, British colonial rule was the most recent and most volatile, occurring between 1796 to 1948, when Sri Lanka gained its independence.⁵⁵ Myanmar was administered under the British Indian Empire between 1824–1937 and gained its independence in 1948 as well.⁵⁶ During colonial times, communities within each country were conceptualized along ethnic and religious lines, because the British believed this made administrative rule and resource extraction more manageable. The majority ethnic groups, the Burmese in Myanmar and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, were removed from power and given little government influence within the colonial administration.⁵⁷ Minority groups were put in charge of others, helping persuade smaller groups to be beholden to the colonizers for giving them positions of power, while the majority had less power and therefore was less able to rise up against the colonizers.⁵⁸

Both states have long been multi-religious and multi-ethnic, each with a majority ethno-religious community. In modern times, Sri Lanka, with a population of 23 million, has had a majority population of people who identify as ethnically Sinhalese (75%). According to the 2012 Sri Lankan census, 70% of inhabitants practice Buddhism, while

⁵⁴ Rudy B. Andeweg, “Consociational Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 509–36, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.509>; Michael Edward Brown and Sumit Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “South Asia: Sri Lanka,” *The World Factbook*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html>.

⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma,” *World Factbook*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>.

⁵⁷ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁵⁸ Brown and Ganguly.

the other 30% is made up of Hindus (12.6%), Muslims (9.7%), Roman Catholics (6.1%), other Christians (1.3%), and other (0.05%).⁵⁹ In Myanmar, with a population of 57 million, the 2014 census data as shared in the *CIA World Factbook* reported that people who identify as Burman or Bamar predominate (68%), while the state recognizes 132 indigenous ethnic groups.⁶⁰ The same source reported Myanmar's population to include Buddhists 88%, Christians 6.2%, Muslims 4.3%, Animists 0.8%, Hindus 0.5%, other 0.2%, and none 0.1%.

The ethnic minorities were educated in English and in public policy; in the case of Sri Lanka, more Tamils from India were brought into the country to manage the country and the tea plantations in the north, a precursor to severe communal violence between Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups beginning in the 1980s.⁶¹ The Burmese in Myanmar were given little power over their own affairs and instead were ruled directly by British officials. Parts of the Arakanese area (what is now the Rakhine State) were separated from Burma itself and administered under the Indian empire in what is now Bangladesh, and where most of today's anti-Rohingya action has taken place at the instigation of the Burmese-Buddhist majority ruling from the center.⁶² It should be noted that for much of the 1960–1990s, the Arakan's Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims both fought the encroaching central Burmese-Buddhist state, often collaborating if not joining forces.⁶³

Prior to British colonialism, Burma was divided between the “valley” and “hill” peoples, whereby the minority groups, such as the Shan, Kachin, and Chin, were left to

⁵⁹ Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, “Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka,” accessed November 14, 2019, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/>; “South Asia :: Sri Lanka — The World Factbook – Central Intelligence Agency,” accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html>.

⁶⁰ “Burma; People and Society,” *CIA World Factbook*, Accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/#people-and-society>.

⁶¹ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Central Intelligence Agency, “South Asia: Sri Lanka.”

⁶² Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁶³ Andrew Selth, “Burma's Muslims and the War on Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 2 (2004): 107–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100490275094>; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”* (Zed Books Ltd, 2017).

govern their own affairs in peripheral areas.⁶⁴ Under the British, the Burmese, however, were divested of their power, pushed out of military and administrative affairs, and the sangha, which helped control much of the former Buddhist kingdoms, were pushed to the sidelines.⁶⁵ In Sri Lanka, where the former Kingdom of Kandy reigned with Buddhist monk and Muslim advisors, the sangha was pushed out of all administrative affairs, including schooling, where Protestant missionaries took over to teach Christianity and English for the British.⁶⁶

Today, the sangha in Myanmar and Sri Lanka represents both historical and current views about nationalism and Buddhist ties to the state. Monastic and lay persons are a part of the sangha within the Theravada Buddhist tradition and were a crucial part in the governing of the ancient Burmese kingdoms and the Sinhalese kingdom of Kandy.⁶⁷ Regarding Myanmar, Walton and Hayward observed that in “ancient Burmese kingdoms there was a relationship of patronage between the ruling monarchy and sangha (the monastic community). British colonial rulers, however, sought to separate the political and religious realms, refusing to appoint a head of the sangha, a duty that had typically been the responsibility of the king.”⁶⁸ In Sri Lanka, similar tactics of displacement of the sangha, with Protestant missionaries taking the place of teaching the population, led to the marginalization of monks’ roles in daily life.⁶⁹ Because of this, both the majority Burmese and Sinhalese felt their way of life and influence disintegrating under the British.

⁶⁴ Matthew J. Walton, “Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 889–910, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.6.889>; Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁶⁵ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, Policy Studies, No. 71 (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/35836>.

⁶⁶ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

⁶⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, “South Asia: Sri Lanka”; Jared Downing, “Myanmar 101: Ancient Kings and Lost Empires,” *Frontier Myanmar*, November 16, 2016, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-101-ancient-kings-and-lost-empires>.

⁶⁸ Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*, 10.

⁶⁹ Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, 2007), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/sinhalese-buddhist-nationalist-ideology-implications-politics-and-conflict-resolution-s>.

Moreover, even after independence, attempts at power sharing through nascent democratic institutions fostered divisive competition.⁷⁰

Influenced by colonial ostracism of both majority ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the Burmese and Sinhalese traditions are linked to nationalist ideology and what it means to be Sri Lankan or Burmese. At different times, some Burmese and Sinhalese Buddhists have argued that their way of life is threatened by what they conceptualize as outsiders or the other, and now, as privileged ethnic majorities within their countries, they assert a claim to set the tone of political discourse and policy in both countries.⁷¹ Sri Lankan Sinhalese Buddhists, primarily under the United National Party (UNP), dominated political discourse under the guise of a presidential democratic system.⁷²

The history of ethnic violence in both countries also paved the way for a weakened democratic system in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar and the ability to use hate speech and violence to assimilate minorities into the Buddhist ideology. Ethnic violence in Sri Lanka between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, characterized by a bloody civil war, killed tens of thousands of civilians and ended with the government crushing the LTTE and the way of life for many Tamils living on the island.⁷³ Once the LTTE lost the war, Tamil Hindus were no longer a threat to the Buddhist way of life; therefore Buddhist extremists needed to turn to another group in order to keep Buddhist nationalism and the marginalization grievance alive.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*.

⁷¹ Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476>; Matthew J. Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.730892>; Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁷² DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*.

⁷³ M. R. Narayan Swamy, *The Tiger Vanquished: LTTE's Story* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010); Central Intelligence Agency, "South Asia: Sri Lanka"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

⁷⁴ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

In Myanmar, 25 percent of the parliament was set aside for military seats due to the previous military junta in the country, which lasted from 1962 until 2010.⁷⁵ Since then, the National League for Democracy (NLD) dominated the political discourse under Aung San Suu Kyi until the 2021 military coup, the subsequent overthrow of the democratic government, and the degeneration of the Myanmar government back to martial rule.⁷⁶ Prior to this coup, much of the country was still divided with ethnically and/or religiously organized violence permeating the landscape.⁷⁷ This nationalistic fervor, combined with a belief in Buddhism's religious superiority, encouraged anti-Muslim rhetoric on social media platforms such as Facebook to garner widespread support from their respective populations, including anti-Muslim pogroms in Myanmar, and violence and criminal actions taken by Buddhist groups against Muslims with impunity.⁷⁸

5. Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism

There is significant research on the role of government policies, economic grievances, and colonialism as contributors to ethno-religious violence in Sri Lanka. Most of it has focused on the civil war (1983–2009) dividing the Tamil Hindus and the Sinhalese Buddhists; the latter now control almost all institutions of the state and society. However, what is more important is the nature of the state today and influences of the 26-year Sri Lankan civil war, which shaped the nature of today's violence against Muslims and perceptions of them within Sri Lankan society. The political backlash and violence against Sri Lanka's Muslims are relatively new, as Muslims remained on the sidelines throughout

⁷⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma."

⁷⁶ "Charred Bodies, Burned Homes: A 'Campaign of Terror' in Myanmar | Military News | Al Jazeera," accessed July 7, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/5/12/charred-bodies-burned-homes-a-campaign-of-terror-in-myanmar-2>.

⁷⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma"; "Myanmar (Burma)," Human Rights Watch, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/asia/myanmar-burma>.

⁷⁸ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 10.

the civil war, despite a substantial portion of them sharing Tamil ethnicity with the Tamil Hindus who fought the state.⁷⁹

The literature includes the effects of colonialism, which played a major role in creating nationalist and ethnic divisions between the Tamils and Sinhalese, as well as Muslims.⁸⁰ Grievances of the Sinhalese-Buddhist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), one of two social movement groups that this thesis researches, arise from previous colonial ties with the British and their use of “divide and conquer” techniques to separate the population.⁸¹ Bandarage emphasizes “by inherently uneven and unequal manner of integration into the polity, British colonial policies contributed to new forms of ethno-religious competition and stratification.”⁸² Shastri also indicates that elites from some minority ethnic groups, such as the Tamils and Arab Muslims, were given more and better jobs in the political and economic sectors while others were given land ownership, while at the same time disenfranchising the middle and lower classes regardless of ethno-religious affiliation.⁸³ This helped foster ethnocentric nationalism along religious and ethnic lines.⁸⁴ It also created an overlap of ethnic and class lines where the pre-colonial marginalized were thrust into the second-tier of power under British rule, while the majority Sinhalese, in power before British colonialism, were newly marginalized.⁸⁵

After independence from the British, Sri Lanka continued its emphasis on ethnicity and caste via the political party system. The centralization of the government in Colombo

⁷⁹ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*; Athambawa Sarjoon, Mohammad Agus Yusoff, and Nordin Hussin, “Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence: A Major Threat to Ethnic Reconciliation and Ethnic Harmony in Post-War Sri Lanka,” *Religions* 7, no. 10 (October 2016): 125, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7100125>.

⁸⁰ DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*; Michael Edward Brown, Sumit Ganguly, and Rabindranath Tagore Chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations and Professor of Political Science Sumit Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (MIT Press, 1997).

⁸¹ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁸² Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*. 29.

⁸³ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Shastri, “Chapter 3, Government Policy and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka,” 133–4.

⁸⁴ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly. Shastri, 134.

⁸⁵ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

ensured that minority groups would not have adequate power to moderate their own affairs: as a result, “they [the Tamils] began seeking greater autonomy for the regions in which they were the dominant group.”⁸⁶ Although minority rights were protected by the first constitution, they were undermined over time due to identity politics and the tenet that “the majority is always right,” which was the conventional Sinhalese view on democracy and the political system in Sri Lanka.⁸⁷ Seeing marginalization by the British in their rear-view mirror, Sinhalese-Buddhist elites mobilized “the Sinhalese middle and lower classes [who] eagerly provided political support to members of their elite in return for favorable policies and patronage.”⁸⁸ This rise in ethnoreligious nationalism spread to the political parties, which helped to label the nationalist identity with Buddhism and the Sinhalese community: even the flag had a lion symbol, representative of the Sinhalese ethnic group.⁸⁹

Other Sinhalese nationalist grievances include economic issues, also having roots in colonialism. According to this view, the rise of nationalism in Sri Lanka stems from the middle and lower classes, who felt disenfranchised during the colonial period and were not given as many economic opportunities under the British as the ruling elite.⁹⁰ As mentioned above, class and ethnic ties became blurred during the British colonial period and created further ethnically aligned problems within the political sphere under the later democratic government.⁹¹ Because of this, BBS claimed, Muslims were now “overstepping” their boundaries in Sri Lankan society by overtaking ethnic Buddhists in the economy; BBS’s

⁸⁶ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Shastri, 135–36.

⁸⁷ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, Shastri, 139.

⁸⁸ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, Shastri, 139.

⁸⁹ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 137–39.; Mark Juergensmeyer, Chapter 4: “Political Targets of Religion: South Asia,” *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 100–03.

⁹⁰ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* 5; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Shastri, 135.

⁹¹ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*.

“self-professed goal is to inhibit what it believes is a market manipulation being perpetrated by Muslim economic forces.”⁹²

Another issue is ethnic violence, which Neil DeVotta argues was spurred and further influenced by language policies that began in the 1950s shortly after independence against Tamils and other minority ethnic groups.⁹³ In Sri Lanka, ethnic violence was triggered when Sinhalese ethnic political parties sought to gain and maintain power.⁹⁴ Because the Tamils, who were a dominant minority during colonialism under the British, became subject to the Sinhalese majority after independence in 1948,⁹⁵ DeVotta and other writers argue that it was the marginalization of Tamils in both political party politics and institutional policies put into practice against minorities in the 1950s and ‘60s that led to the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and civil war.⁹⁶

After the end of the civil war in 2009, in the spirit of military triumphalism that grew during Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency, BBS arose to highlight Muslims as “a new threat to the economic, social, and cultural interests of the Sinhala Buddhist ethnic majority in the country.”⁹⁷ It is in this vacuum of government suppression that social movement groups like BBS arose—mirroring that of the already-established 969 and Ma Ba Tha groups in Myanmar, as well as the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India—which allowed for an “extreme

⁹² Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 14; “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena,” Bodu Bala Sena, accessed September 7, 2019, <http://www.bodubalasena.org/about/>.

⁹³ DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*.

⁹⁴ Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, 13; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 136–37.

⁹⁵ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Shastri.

⁹⁶ DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*; Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*; Md. Abul. Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Post War Review* (Verlag: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012).

⁹⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 119.

manifestation of ethnic and religious polarization in postwar Sri Lanka.”⁹⁸ (The RSS and BJP are both Hindutva, or Hindu supremacism, organizations that advocate for a Hindu nation-state in India.)⁹⁹ Between identity and ethnic politics stirred up during and after colonialism, economic grievances held by both Buddhists and Tamils prior to and during the civil war, and government policies enacted against Tamils after Sri Lankan independence, this convergence of factors made it easier for social movements such as BBS to form.

Sri Lanka’s continued resistance to accounting for the death of over 40,000 Tamil civilians due to indiscriminate bombing of LTTE-led areas in the final years of the war, as well as the lack of accountability for missing persons after the war, raises the question of whether their newest round of Buddhist extremism against Muslims will be acknowledged openly.¹⁰⁰ (In 2018, *The Diplomat* reported that “abductions and custody remain rampant and harassment and intimidation of Tamil activists has continued.”)¹⁰¹ The government also “failed to repeal and replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA),” which is still being used as the basis for detention and torture against any alleged opponents of the state.¹⁰² Because the anti-terrorism policy is still on the books, whereby it is legally permissible to detain anyone suspected of terrorist sentiment or activity, Muslims may now be targeted routinely, especially after the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Colombo and Batticaloa. In these terrorist acts, which killed approximately 290 people, Muslim militants

⁹⁸ Tim Hume, “‘Fascists’ in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists,” CNN, July 17, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/17/world/asia/sri-lanka-bodu-bala-sena-profile/index.html>; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena”; Thrishantha Nanayakkara, “Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS),” *Groundviews* (blog), June 21, 2014, <https://groundviews.org/2014/06/21/some-civil-society-questions-for-bodu-bala-sena-bbs/>; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 120.

⁹⁹ Samanth Subramanian, “How Hindu Supremacists Are Tearing India Apart,” *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>.

¹⁰⁰ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Ana Pararajasingham, “Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?,” *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/why-is-sri-lanka-defying-the-united-nations/>.

¹⁰¹ Mario Arulthas, “The Failed Promise of Reconciliation in Sri Lanka,” *The Diplomat*, October 11, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/the-failed-promise-of-reconciliation-in-sri-lanka/>.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch, “Sri Lanka: Events of 2018,” *World Report 2019*, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/sri-lanka>.

attacked specific Christian churches when many of the congregation were attending Easter services and three large, popular hotels.¹⁰³

As DeVotta states, “majoritarian democracies, which are fashioned to enable those in power to run unfettered until they are defeated at the next election, usually preclude opposing parties from influencing governmental policy...when one incorporates ethnic outbidding into this mix, it becomes clear that a polyethnic society with a majoritarian system may allow parties from particular ethnicity to dominate and thereby marginalize ethnic minorities.”¹⁰⁴ In Sri Lanka, not only is it ethnic politics, but also religious-centered narratives and political and economic policies, that allowed BBS and other like-minded social movements to form and continue their work toward excluding Muslims from civil society, political life, and the economy.

6. Myanmar’s Burmese Buddhist Nationalism

Like Sri Lanka, Myanmar has a similar history of exclusionary, colonial, and economic policies that has perpetuated ethnic violence against a minority, the Rohingya Muslims, since the 1960s. In 2023, Myanmar is again ruled by a military junta and faces a growing civil war between the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military; the National Unity Government (NUG), a proxy shadow government made up of formerly elected Parliament members, other elected government officials, and NUG’s a military arm, the People’s Defense Force (PDF); and over a dozen ethnically organized insurgent armies that, like the NUG, seek a return to democracy.¹⁰⁵

Since the 2021 military coup and the ousting of Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD government, virtually no one is safe from the military’s campaign of violence across the

¹⁰³ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Seevagan Poopalaratnam, “‘Attack against Humanity’: Church Bombing Shakes Batticaloa,” *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/humanity-church-bombing-shakes-batticaloa-190422134413551.html>; “Police Warned That Sri Lanka Churches Were Targets,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/world/asia/sri-lanka-explosion.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 192.

¹⁰⁵ “The Civil War in Myanmar: No End in Sight,” Brookings, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-civil-war-in-myanmar-no-end-in-sight/>.

country, not even the Burmese, who previously held higher standing among the military due to their Burmese Buddhist support against the Rohingya.¹⁰⁶ While some groups state it is “more of the same” ethnic violence and insurrection against the military, this is also akin to the time where disparate ethnic groups banded together against the Tatmadaw.¹⁰⁷ While this larger conflict is not the focus of our study, it is an important backdrop for the military government’s more recent attacks against Rohingya Muslims. A few further paragraphs will be devoted to the civil war in the Myanmar chapters as a follow up.

Prior to 2021, Myanmar had a high level of direct military involvement in its nascent illiberal democratic system (166 military appointees in both the House of Nationalities and House of Representatives out of 664 total representatives, or 25%), which helped to create exclusionary policies to hold onto their power.¹⁰⁸ Silverstein argues that while the first constitution of Myanmar was nominally committed to ethnic equality, “these commitments were gradually undercut: citizenship laws were tightened, political power was centralized, and Burman culture was promoted.”¹⁰⁹ Steinburg agrees but adds another element to the exclusionary policies which are present in Myanmar today: “no single other category seems a sufficient explanation for ethnic unrest except that of the Burman/non-Burman dichotomy.”¹¹⁰ A portion of the Burmese ethnic majority and most members of the Tatmadaw, which is also overwhelmingly Buddhist, continue to press for maintaining centrality of power, and also believe they are the “legitimate unifiers of Burma” and must

¹⁰⁶ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

¹⁰⁷ “The Civil War in Myanmar”; “Myanmar’s Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict | Council on Foreign Relations,” accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>.

¹⁰⁸ “East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma — The World Factbook – Central Intelligence Agency,” sec. Government, Legislative Branch, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 168.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* Silverstein, 168.

¹¹⁰ Lim Joo-Jock and Vani S, eds., *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, Issues in Southeast Asia Security 2 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), David I. Steinburg, chap. “Constitutional and political bases of minority insurrections in Burma,” 51.

continue to keep the disparate ethnic groups together.¹¹¹ Exclusionary tactics also include which specific ethnic groups are welcomed in the national narrative. Cheesman highlights the importance of taingyintha, or national races, which surpass even the most recent 2008 citizenship laws in Myanmar and are part of its historical context.¹¹²

While not responsible for it, Burma's colonial legacy has contributed to ongoing ethnic violence in Myanmar. As noted, the British created a system of dividing and conquering the region via the separation of regions and ethnicities: the annexation of the Rakhine province to British India, as well as the way in which they divided the plains (Burmese majority) and hill peoples (ethnic minorities and indigenous groups), which created new divisions between ethnic and social groups.¹¹³ Also, immigration from British India and what is now Muslim-majority Bangladesh created the seeds of ethnic divide and nationalism through economic marginalization: immigrant groups were given more specialized jobs during the colonial era, which disadvantaged Burmese and minority lower classes.¹¹⁴

The literature highlights exclusionary policies against the Rohingya Muslim minorities during the early decades of independence, which contribute to the ethnic violence that continues today. A 1982 citizenship law separated people into categories: full, associate, and naturalized citizens.¹¹⁵ Those persons who settled in the country after the Anglo-Burman war in 1823 were not considered full citizens, and, as Burmese nationalists consider the Rohingya either Bengalis who illegally immigrated for work, or as people who settled after the war, the Rohingya are portrayed as foreigners.¹¹⁶ This view runs counter to that of the Rohingya community; many date their ancestors' settlement in northwest

¹¹¹ Lim Joo-Jock and Shanmugaratnam, 54.

¹¹² Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya."

¹¹³ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 172.

¹¹⁴ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, 173.

¹¹⁵ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, 181.

¹¹⁶ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Lim Joo-Jock and S, *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*; Navine Murshid, "Bangladesh Copes with the Rohingya Crisis By Itself," n.d., 6.

Myanmar to hundreds of years ago.¹¹⁷ The identity of the Rohingya is still questioned by the state, and their case for citizenship is still not resolved.¹¹⁸

Violent attacks, disenfranchisement, and extreme discrimination against the Rohingya occurred prior to 2017, especially after 1962 when the Burmese military seized power from the nascent democratic government and subsequently changed citizenship laws to not include “Rohingyas—Indian Muslims living mainly in Arakan—as citizens of Burma.”¹¹⁹ Many Rohingyas refused to carry the foreign registration cards, and their children, over the age of 10, did not receive any form of identification.¹²⁰ Then, in 1974, the military required new registration certificates, but many Rohingya, when surrendering their old identification cards, did not receive new registration documents.¹²¹ In 1977, an identity check “triggered an exodus of more than 200,000 Rohingyas, who sought refuge in Bangladesh. The Burma government declared that those who left Burma had been illegal aliens because they did not have Burma identity papers.”¹²² In 1982, a new citizenship law was passed, categorizing the Rohingya as “non-nationals” or “foreign residents.”¹²³ Decades later, according to the CIA World Factbook, “under the Rakhine State Action Plan drafted in October 2014, the Rohingya must demonstrate their family has lived in Burma for at least 60 years to qualify for lesser naturalized citizenship and the classification of Bengali or be put in detention camps and face deportation.”¹²⁴ These tactics were continued by both the Myanmar military and democratic governments that came to power

¹¹⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 17–32.

¹¹⁸ N. Kipgen, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2014): 234.

¹¹⁹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Silverstein, 181.

¹²⁰ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly. Silverstein, 181.

¹²¹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly. Silverstein, 181.

¹²² Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly. Silverstein, 181.

¹²³ Central Intelligence Agency, “East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma.” “Refugees and internally displaced persons.”

¹²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. “Refugees and internally displaced persons.”

after the implementation of the Constitution in 1947.¹²⁵ In total, these laws, which caused continuous marginalization of the Rohingya, all but guarantee that little to no official documentation exists of their naturalized or birthright citizenship.

Exclusionary tactics are part of how uncivil social movement groups, such as the Buddhist-nationalist 969 movement or Ma Ba Tha, form to ostracize and alienate minorities within their own country.¹²⁶ The 969 movement takes its namesake from the “Triple Gems,” of Buddhist foundational teaching.¹²⁷ It is the antithesis to the Muslim number 786, which, in Myanmar, represented that halal food was served at a particular restaurant.¹²⁸ Ashin U Wirathu, the infamous monk in charge of the 969 movement and then Ma Ba Tha (MBT), has consistently fostered antagonism against Muslims in the country.¹²⁹

One issue worthy of mention in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar is the outright opposition to the UN and its policies toward accountability in ethnic conflict operations, including Myanmar’s direct opposition to a UN fact-finding mission in 2019, as well as the UN’s repeated call for Myanmar to prosecute its military personnel, who allegedly committed crimes against humanity and used genocidal tactics against the Rohingya since 2017.¹³⁰ Myanmar refuses to acknowledge its role in ethnic cleansing and the existence of almost one million Rohingya refugees currently residing in Bangladesh.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Silverstein, 177–8.

¹²⁶ Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” *Time* 182, no. 1 (2013): 1.

¹²⁷ Charles Keyes, “Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2016): 41–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1248497>.

¹²⁸ Keyes.

¹²⁹ Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

¹³⁰ “UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar Advances Accountability and Initiates New Investigations,” U.N. Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, March 14, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24334&LangID=E>.

¹³¹ Shibani Mahtani and Wai Mow, “A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar’s Generals Are Unapologetic,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-year-after-the-assault-on-the-rohingya-myanmars-generals-are-unapologetic/2018/08/20/24787ab6-a0a2-11e8-a3dd-2a1991f075d5_story.html.

D. HYPOTHESES

This thesis adopts the uncommon approach of examining government-led ethnonationalist campaigns as social movements that function within government organizations and alongside them with nonstate partners. Social movements are not only grassroots organizations that try to affect change, but also ones that can and are utilized by government policymakers and political parties with a need to grab, consolidate, and hold onto power. Social movements with controversial narratives may be ambiguously incorporated into formal state organizations, and thereby support violence against ethnic minorities, especially if sufficient resources and an extremist and exclusionary ethnoreligious narrative is used to gain relatively widespread support for their policies.

My hypothesis is that governments with exclusionary ethnonationalist platforms, such as those in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, co-opt like-minded ethnonationalist social movements because these nonstate actors hold similar grievances; partnering with nonstate actors increases their resources at a low cost while providing framing narratives, policies, and political opportunities with increased legitimacy.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis is a comparative analysis of social movements and government policies in Sri Lanka and Myanmar between 2009 and 2019 as they relate to ethnic and sectarian violence between the ethnoreligious majorities and Muslim minorities. It uses social movement theory (SMT) to explore the reasons why ethnoreligious violence occurred against Muslim minorities in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar and to better understand if government co-optation of social movements played a significant role in such violence.

This thesis focuses on 10 particularly hostile years between 2009–2019 to examine two specific issues: first, Sri Lanka’s nascent violent attacks against its Muslim minorities, and second, the pogroms against Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims. For Sri Lanka, 2009 was the end of the Sri Lankan civil war and marked a shift from government persecution of Tamils toward other ethno-religious groups. Myanmar is a different case because of its failed attempts at a fully-fledged democratic government, and its recent regression to military rule. The ten-year period brackets the issue of Muslim persecution by the Buddhist

nationalist groups 969 and Ma Ba Tha (MBT) in Myanmar and BBS in Sri Lanka and focuses the case studies on social media activities. While cases of persecution have existed before and after this timeframe, they were particularly persistent during this period.

This thesis uses a variety of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, first focusing on secondary sources to discuss the history of both countries. I used academic research for social movement theory. However, since there is less work available on governments using social movements for their own benefit, I also used uncivil society literature to discuss the development of these groups, and civil society usage of social movement groups to influence government outcomes in divisive ways (populist movements, among others). I used the literature of uncivil society in a globalized world to discuss how states and social movements operate both together and separate from one another. I resourced political parties and government websites for the assessment and analysis phase. My sources for understanding more recent events included journal articles, news reports, and documents from the UNHCR and other international organizations. Each party and government have its own narratives on the ethnic violence occurring in the respective country: I used these narratives to evaluate the messages and why these narratives are chosen to help foment violent threat and action against minorities. The source materials are government articles, political party information, journals, and news sources, as well as Facebook posts and personal websites from the specific social movements (969, MBT, and BBS), whether for the group as a whole or their leaders.

Through qualitative analysis, I collected, organized, and analyzed the data through the lens of SMT. I used Sri Lanka and Myanmar political parties and social organizations to analyze social movement grievances, resources, framing, and political opportunities that those governments employed to mobilize citizens into violent and political action against Muslim minorities. Government organizations injected their viewpoints (religious, cultural, economic, and colonial notions) into each aspect of SMT. I applied SMT to analyze the narratives and behavior of ethno-religious attacks within a timeframe—one month prior to an attack, during an attack, and one month after an attack—to develop a clearer understanding of how SMT and government organizations work together. I use qualitative process tracing to explore how, when, and where governments co-opted these

social movements and examine their narratives and protests directly to pull grievances, resources, framing narratives and symbols, and political opportunities of the social movements and government campaigns against Muslims in both countries.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

The second through fifth chapters present Sri Lanka and Myanmar case studies, respectively. Each case study has a chapter on background and history, followed by a chapter that examines grievances, resources, framing, and political opportunity. Throughout, I include recent policies that the government and nonstate social movements have implemented to ostracize Muslim minorities in the respective country. The sixth chapter compares the two case studies and discusses ideology, nationalism, and propaganda as a function of state campaigns and social movements at the nonstate level. It also assesses the utility of using the SMT to analyze the actions of state and nonstate actors that combine further shared objectives. Chapter IV also provides a conclusion, policy recommendations, and areas for further study.

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II. SINHALESE BUDDHIST NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

This chapter analyzes the underpinnings of ethnic nationalism and communal violence in Sri Lanka, beginning with the way colonial narratives and conditions made independent Sri Lanka susceptible to majoritarian social movements and civil strife. To understand Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and its rise to power within society and the government, it is important to explore the nature of the Buddhist narratives in Sri Lanka and how BBS and other social movements were able to flourish over time. British colonialism does not explain the violence which now occurs throughout the country, but it did manifest ethnoreligious tensions that were harnessed, not dissipated. More recent developments fostered ways in which BBS and other Buddhist nationalist groups used their large support base in the citizenry and political sectors to commit violent actions against Muslims, justifying these acts with their own specific brand of Buddhism and narrative.

The colonial elevation of the Tamil ethnic group at the expense of the majority Sinhalese, who previously belonged to the ruling class in Sri Lanka, created divide and discord during and after the colonial period. These hampered development of power-sharing and liberal democracy after independence and created openings for uncivil society and divisive social mobilization in the future.¹³² Because BBS is such a strong social movement in the country, the state has played a significant role in disregarding violent actions and allowing BBS and its leaders to operate freely, with support from the sangha.

To properly unpack Sri Lanka's BBS social movement, this chapter first discusses the recent violent actions committed against non-Buddhists between 2009 and 2019. It then offers some historical background on the British colonial legacy, the sangha, and ethnoreligious nationalism. I also briefly discuss the Sri Lankan civil war against the LTTE, and the role Muslims played in the conflict. Overall, the issue of BBS co-opting the Sri Lankan government started long before the anti-Muslim movement, beginning with the rise of post-colonial ethnic nationalism.

¹³² Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203407417>.

A. “COMMUNAL” VIOLENCE AGAINST SRI LANKA’S MUSLIMS 2009–2019

After analyzing source documentation, news articles, and BBS’s parent website and social media website, I found that since 2009, the BBS and its previous parent organization, Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), have orchestrated or supported over 200 events against Muslims, whether rallies, riots, or anti-Muslim campaigns.¹³³ Four key violent events—in 2012, 2013, 2018, and 2019—all orchestrated by BBS—further highlight their specific brand of communal violence and Buddhist nationalism.¹³⁴ As of 2023, although President Mahinda Rajapaksa had been ousted and a new president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, had taken over, Rajapaksa’s extreme right-wing cabinet and other government representatives reportedly still influence the government, working through state and social media to spread negative disinformation about non-Buddhists.¹³⁵

¹³³ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; “Discrimination and Harassment Haunt Sri Lanka’s Muslims,” *BBC News*, January 14, 2022, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59900733>; “Sri Lanka : President Stresses Need to Expose Everyone behind Easter Sunday Attacks,” *Colombo*, December 2, 2019, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19B/Dec02_1575307825CH.php; “Sri Lanka Bombings: Suspected Ringleader Arrested in Middle East,” *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, June 14, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3KTsD>; Amarnath Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka,” *Dbsjeyaraj.Com* (blog), May 31, 2019, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/64350>; A.R.M. Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, August 15, 2019, 0021909619868244, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909619868244>; Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* (New York: iUniverse/Authors Choice Press, 2009); Tim Hume, “‘Fascists’ in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists,” *CNN*, July 17, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/17/world/asia/sri-lanka-bodu-bala-sena-profile/index.html>; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena,” Bodu Bala Sena, accessed September 7, 2019, <http://www.bodubalasena.org/about/>; Thrishantha Nanayakkara, “Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS),” *Groundviews* (blog), June 21, 2014, <https://groundviews.org/2014/06/21/some-civil-society-questions-for-bodu-bala-sena-bbs/>; Lahiru Doloswala, “The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Bodu Bala Sena: How an Ethno-Nationalist Movement Is Fueling Religious Tensions and Targeting Minorities,” *Newscutter.Lk – Sri Lanka’s Leading News Site | Breaking News Updates | Latest News Headlines* (blog), March 31, 2022, <https://www.newscutter.lk/sri-lanka-news/protest-campaign-gnanasara-thero-31032022-29050/>; “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy,” *Colombo Gazette* (blog), June 3, 2022, <https://colombogazette.com/2022/06/03/us-says-bbs-used-social-media-to-promote-sinhalese-buddhist-supremacy/>.

¹³⁴ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims”; Sudha Ramachandran, “Sri Lanka’s Anti-Muslim Violence,” *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/sri-lankas-anti-muslim-violence/>; Spencer, *Sri Lanka*; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

¹³⁵ Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy.”

The main wave of Islamophobia started in 2009 and included rhetoric and violent acts carried out by “extreme Sinhala-Buddhist groups (led by Buddhist monks), with tacit support from politicians, attacking places of worship and Islamic practices such as halal food certification, cattle slaughter and dress code.”¹³⁶ Overall, since 2012, BBS has claimed and/or carried out hundreds of attacks against Muslims, including 20 mosque attacks in 2012 and at least 64 violent acts in 2013 alone.¹³⁷ The majority of the violence consisted of riots, unruly and threatening rallies, and attacks against mosques and specific Muslim-owned businesses, all led by the leaders of BBS, the co-founding monks Kirama Wimalajothi and Galagoda Gnanasara¹³⁸

It appears that the Sri Lankan government has repeatedly turned a blind eye toward these violent acts. In May of 2019, former Sri Lankan President Sirisena formally pardoned and released Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, head of BBS, just one week after Buddhist-nationalist mobs “attacked Muslim-owned homes, mosques and shops, killing over 250 people in apparent reprisal for the Easter bombings on April 21, 2019.”¹³⁹ The Easter Sunday attacks were attributed to ISIS affiliates in Sri Lanka. In the U.S. Department of State 2022 Report on Religious Freedom, “according to police, 2,299 individuals were arrested in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels, killing 268 persons, including 46 foreign citizens, and injuring more

¹³⁶ Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims.”

¹³⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 109–15; Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka,” TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, December 4, 2019, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/bodu-bala-sena>.

¹³⁸ BBS posts their rally and media conference videos on their website; of which five media conferences were posted in July of 2019 and four public rallies were posted in June of 2019, all viewable on YouTube with English subtitles. Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena”; Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka”; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

¹³⁹ “Sri Lanka’s Hardline Buddhist Monk Walks out of Jail after Pardon,” *Reuters*, May 23, 2019, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-monk-pardon-idUSKCN1ST296>; “Sri Lanka President Pardons Hardline Buddhist Monk,” *Al Jazeera*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/sri-lanka-president-pardons-hardline-buddhist-monk-190522192204588.html>; “Police Warned That Sri Lanka Churches Were Targets”; Amarnath Amarasingam and Lisa Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/17/sri-lanka-is-burning-again/>; Neil DeVotta, “Sri Lanka’s Christians and Muslims Weren’t Enemies,” *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/sri-lankas-christians-and-muslims-werent-enemies/>.

than 500.”¹⁴⁰ Sri Lanka indicted 25 suspects “involved in the Easter Sunday attack.”¹⁴¹ Some 70 additional suspects remain in custody as of October 2023, having been detained for over three years, with all trials ongoing.¹⁴²

The Washington Post asserts that the cluster of anti-Muslim attacks after the Easter Sunday bombings was different than in 2018 when 456 Muslim-owned properties were damaged within three days.¹⁴³ In contrast, on May 13, 2019, some 500 properties were destroyed in just a single day.¹⁴⁴ In addition, rioters in 2019 directly attacked Muslim civilians, in contrast to the 2018 attack, which primarily focused on businesses and properties.¹⁴⁵ In their opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, Amarnath Amarasingam, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and Lisa Fuller, a Sri Lanka-based journalist, argue that the government, and even the police who “participated” with the rioters, “both failed to stem the anti-Muslim violence and have made decisions that implicitly encourage hatred,” such as banning the niqab (Muslim woman’s face covering), arresting Muslim religious leaders, and allowing for rioters to continue unchecked.¹⁴⁶ There is also evidence that some of the rioting was politically coordinated. As BBS’s attacks and rallies continued, albeit less intensely than on May 13, the government-pardoned BBS leader Gnanasara was able to resume steering the movement against Muslims and spreading hatred throughout the island.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom,” U.S. Department of State, May 15, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>.

¹⁴¹ U.S. Department of State.

¹⁴² “Sri Lanka,” *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed September 17, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/>.

¹⁴³ DeVotta, “Sri Lanka’s Christians and Muslims Weren’t Enemies”; Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again.”

¹⁴⁴ Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again”; DeVotta, “Sri Lanka’s Christians and Muslims Weren’t Enemies.”

¹⁴⁵ Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again”; Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island.”

¹⁴⁶ Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again.”

¹⁴⁷ Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island”; Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims”; Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again.”

By highlighting recent violent events against Muslims on its social media sites, BBS tries to effect political change by encouraging the state to organize and enact policies prejudicial to minorities who do not fit the Sinhalese Buddhist model. Due to Sri Lanka's majoritarian democratic rule, one party, in this case the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has run the government since Maithripala Sirisena's tenure as president (2015–2019).¹⁴⁸ Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother, won the presidential elections on November 19, 2019.¹⁴⁹ His role as defense secretary during the end of the civil war caused international concern, in that it was his orders that reportedly led to the death of some 40,000 civilians at the war's end.¹⁵⁰ While he denies any wrongdoing, some experts worried that ethnic and communal violence would increase during his five-year presidential term and that his brother, Mahinda, would continue to exert control over the government through official and unofficial channels.¹⁵¹ In retrospect, the populist focus during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's tenure, his expansion of political presidential powers, and his isolationist policies framed around a threatening "other" have weakened democratic institutions and allowed for continual low-intensity political unrest and violence.¹⁵²

Although this thesis is focused on a ten-year period through 2019, it is important to mention that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was ousted in 2022. Ranil Wickremesinghe, a member of the United National Party (UNP), served under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as prime minister for the last two years before assuming presidential office in order to attempt to fix Sri Lanka's failing economy.¹⁵³ Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's changes to the government, in addition to allowing the further targeting of Tamil and

¹⁴⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "South Asia: Sri Lanka."

¹⁴⁹ "Sri Lanka Election Commission Censors State TV in Lead-up to Vote," Al Jazeera, November 3, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/sri-lanka-election-commission-censors-state-tv-lead-vote-191103074339338.html>; Upasana Bhat, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa: Sri Lanka's Powerful New President," BBC News, November 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50389014>.

¹⁵⁰ Bhat, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa."

¹⁵¹ Bhat.

¹⁵² Saif Khalid Kuruwita Rathindra, "New Sri Lanka Leader Wickremesinghe – an Opportunist or Saviour?," accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/21/profile-ranil-wickremesinghe-sri-lankas-new-president>.

¹⁵³ Kuruwita.

Muslim minorities, have damaged the country's political landscape.¹⁵⁴ The Sri Lankan Freedom Party's (SLFP) pro-Buddhist ticket allowed the majority Sinhalese population to lobby for political and social goals in partnership with social movement groups such as BBS and others who advocate against multiculturalism and liberal sentiments. As this thesis suggests, BBS and its followers fomented unrest by amplifying perceived political, social, and economic grievances to marginalize Muslims and other minorities.¹⁵⁵

B. THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY ON RECENT DYNAMICS

To better understand the current tensions between Muslims and Sinhalese Buddhists, we first explore the role that Muslims and other religious groups played in the formation of the island state, including colonial ties, the sangha's role in policy formation, and the rise of ethnoreligious nationalism after Sri Lankan independence from the British.

1. British Colonialism (1833–1948), Ethnic Identity, and Demographics

Colonialism in Sri Lanka changed the ways in which Sri Lankans viewed each other and their place in the world, fundamentally changing both their historical narrative and the political landscape.¹⁵⁶ Historically, according to McGilvray, there are “two main protagonists in Sri Lanka's ethnonationalist policies, the Sinhala (74.9%) and the Tamils (11.2%).”¹⁵⁷ According to a 2012 estimate, Muslims constitute 9.7% of the Sri Lankan population and are typically seen as relative newcomers to the island by Buddhist nationalists who argue that evidence of the Muslims' presence 1,000 years ago is insufficient.¹⁵⁸ Although discussion about the ethnic identity of the island started prior to

¹⁵⁴ Kuruwita.

¹⁵⁵ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 122–23.

¹⁵⁶ Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁵⁷ Both Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil reside in Sri Lanka. According to the 2012 Census, Tamils make up more than 15% of the country. Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 54; “South Asia :: Sri Lanka — The World Factbook – Central Intelligence Agency.”

¹⁵⁸ “Sri Lanka,” in *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, November 1, 2023), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/>; Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, “Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka”; Central Intelligence Agency, “South Asia: Sri Lanka.”

Western influence, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, all of whom enacted various forms of control over Sri Lanka between 1505–1948, began the process of ethnoreligious separation of Tamils, Sinhalese, and Arab Muslims, also known as Coast Moors. However, the British, who took control in 1796, created the largest divisions between Tamils and Sinhalese.

The more damaging effects of colonialism stemmed from British rule, which brought low-caste and indigent Tamils from India “between 1850 and 1930 to work on the tea plantations.”¹⁵⁹ The Sri Lankan Tamils, who had access to English secondary schools in the north, were assigned to positions of social and economic superiority over the Sinhalese: “next to the Burghers, the Ceylon [former name of Sri Lanka] Tamils were ‘over-represented’ in the administrative services relative to their proportions in the island’s population.”¹⁶⁰

The British had also displaced the sangha, the Buddhist monks who advised the Sri Lankan kings in premodern times, to allow missionaries to teach native Sri Lankans English and Christianity.¹⁶¹ The complete overhaul and ouster of the Kandyan administration and the way in which the British colonizers “advanced separate legal codes for ethnic groups,” also created further divisions between them.¹⁶² Finally, the distinct political advantage that the British gave to the Tamil minorities over the Sinhalese Buddhists created a backlash of ethnic and religious rivalry within the country; this created the foundation for ethnoreligious nationalism by utilizing religious and historical myths, as well as cultural symbols, to define Sri Lankan nationalism in a way that reshaped colonial divides into the current political spectrum, opening a door to communal violence as power and resource struggles played out.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Shastri, 131.

¹⁶⁰ Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* (New York: iUniverse/Authors Choice Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁶¹ DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 27–30.

¹⁶² Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*, 31.

¹⁶³ Bandarage, 32–33; Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood*.

According to Brown and Ganguly, , communal violence and competition between Buddhists and other ethno-religious minorities were nominal prior to British rule:¹⁶⁴ “The Sinhala-Muslim relationship was one of mutual trust and cooperation. The Muslims were also recruited to high civil posts and ‘structurally assimilated’ into society.”¹⁶⁵ However, when the British introduced communal representation in 1833 (divide and conquer policy), constructive Sinhala-Muslim relations waned.¹⁶⁶ The evidence suggests that much of the communal violence against Muslims began in earnest after the 1983–2009 civil war, but rare instances of major riots occurred earlier during the 20th century.¹⁶⁷ The first documented case of anti-Muslim riots occurred in 1915, caused by a “religious controversy between Coast Moors [also known as Arab Muslims] and Buddhists over an...annual religious practice of the Buddhists in Gampola, an ancient town in the Central Province, where the Sinhalese and the Muslims have coexisted for centuries.”¹⁶⁸

During the early 20th century, when economic rivalries were present between Sinhalese and Muslim groups, some Sinhalese exploited racial tensions and religious sentiments to agitate against well-established Muslim businesses, which had been thriving since the arrival of Muslim traders on the island.¹⁶⁹ Later, and lasting for more than two weeks, the riots in 1915 helped establish a collective memory of violence against Muslims to use in the future. The Sri Lankan government reported 25 deaths, 189 wounded, four rapes, 4,075 looted shops, 350 shops burnt to the ground, and 103 mosques either destroyed or damaged, although some of these numbers may be much higher.¹⁷⁰ In addition, because the government declared martial law and used harsh methods to suppress the riots at this

¹⁶⁴ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

¹⁶⁵ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 25.

¹⁶⁶ Holt, 25.

¹⁶⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

¹⁶⁸ Holt, 29.

¹⁶⁹ Holt, 26–29; A. R. M. Imtiyaz and Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, “Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Understanding Sinhala-Buddhist Mobilization Against Them,” *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 186–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1003691>; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; DeVotta, *Blowback*.

¹⁷⁰ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 30–31.

time, some Sinhalese elite groups further resented their Muslim neighbors. The ‘Black July’ riot in 1984 against Tamil Hindus stirred the pot even further by marking the government’s complicity in acts of violence (government officials provided names of Tamil households to the rioters prior to the event).¹⁷¹

Finally, another important legacy of British colonialism in Sri Lanka was majority marginalization. With the British long departed, resentment has fallen on the minority communities that were once elevated. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism replaced colonial narratives with a new narrative that promoted minority marginalization through post-independence policy, eventually sparking anti-Tamil-Hindu violence by the mid-1980s. Anti-Tamil policies included “lack of access to land, lack of political autonomy, and failure to implement existing legislation relating to the use of the Tamil language.”¹⁷²

2. Religion, Sangha, and State Interaction

Buddhism in Sri Lanka is characterized by the Theravada sect, where the sangha, which is comprised of monks, nuns, novices, and laity, were deeply interwoven with the political elite and former Buddhist kings who controlled much of what is now modern Sri Lanka.¹⁷³ Shastri states that “the time of arrival and the historical contributions of each group have been the subject of bitter controversies in the modern era.”¹⁷⁴ Regardless of who arrived first on the island, the current narrative Sri Lankan Buddhists use is structured to meet their need for belief in a powerful ancient Buddhist kingdom. Sinhalese “claim their descent from migrants who came to Sri Lanka from northern India around 500 B.C.”¹⁷⁵ For example, the former kingdom of Kandy, a Buddhist throne, helped to bring Buddhist nationalism to the forefront during independence and is revered in religious

¹⁷¹ DeVotta, *Blowback*.

¹⁷² *No War, No Peace: The Denial of Minority Rights and Justice in Sri Lanka*, Report / Minority Rights Group International (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2011).

¹⁷³ “The Sangha: The Buddhist Community,” Religious Literacy Project, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/religions/buddhism/sangha-buddhist-community>; Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

¹⁷⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 99–109.

¹⁷⁵ Juergensmeyer, 99–109.

myths today.¹⁷⁶ Such myths about ancient, glorious kingdoms are common among fundamentalist groups.

The sangha's role in political activity cannot be understated, especially the ways in which it responded to "virtuous governmentality," or the proper governance of a state for its people.¹⁷⁷ According to Schober, the state has a "responsibility to use violence in a legitimate manner," and links this to the way in which monks, active during both the Kandyan kingdom and today, participated and inserted themselves into political discourse and violence. Schober states that "contrary to popular perceptions in the West, the sangha is an institution structured by multiple principles of hierarchy."¹⁷⁸ As the only cultural institution that survived the collapse of the traditional kingdom, "Buddhism has been a rallying point for resistance against the colonial state and its successors."¹⁷⁹ In addition, "monks saw themselves as not merely advisors, but as moral guardians of the Sri Lankan nation and defenders of the Dharma, both threatened by ethnic and religious others. It was their responsibility to pave the way for politicians to safeguard a Sri Lanka where Buddhism would prosper."¹⁸⁰ Therefore, for Sri Lankan Buddhist monks, political action is also their primary religious obligation and one in which they continue to act upon in the political sphere today.¹⁸¹

Furthermore, the sangha has acted in recent years as the impetus for BBS and other uncivil-society groups that use fundamentalist narratives to assert their dominance over other religious traditions in Sri Lanka. By using primordial language—primordialism is the belief that groups have immutable characteristics or that something has 'always' existed, expressed in such sentiments as 'Buddhists have always been here'—members of the

¹⁷⁶Mark Juergensmeyer, "Political Targets of Religion: South Asia," *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 99–109.

¹⁷⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 79–80.

¹⁷⁸ Juliane Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka," in *Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia: Disputing Violence*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Sheldon W. Simon (London: Routledge, 2006), 54, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203967485-13>.

¹⁷⁹ Schober, 55, 61.

¹⁸⁰ Schober, 62.

¹⁸¹ Schober, 62.

sangha and the laity are able to use fundamentalism to further alienate non-Buddhists living throughout the island.¹⁸²

Juergensmeyer and Jayasekera assert that religious fundamentalism has four qualities: a reliance on faith as a source of identity, boundaries placed between the chosen and the rest of the followers, mythologized enemies, and eschatology, or stories that drive a specific political narrative, meant to be dramatic and emotional.¹⁸³ The sangha have used these fundamentalist qualities in their claimed role as a virtuous governor, by either attacking and supporting various government regimes from the Kandyan kingdom onward. For the sangha, the continued framing of virtuous governance and the political power it wields was the impetus for the BBS foundation.¹⁸⁴ This narrative is not new but a different configuration of the way in which the sangha asserts its dominance within the government.

3. Ethnoreligious Nationalism and Minority Rights

The usage of ethnoreligious narratives against Muslims by the state itself, through both tacit and some overt approval of actions committed by BBS and other hardline right-wing groups, has manifested in conservative political sentiment, especially after the end of the civil war and Rajapaksa's triumphalist narratives against the LTTE and ethnic Tamils.¹⁸⁵ In Sri Lanka, narratives of ethnonationalist views, especially those of the SLFP, include the primordial claim of "we have always been here," as well as that the culture of Buddhism is fixed and cannot be changed within the borders of the Sri Lankan (or Sinhalese) nation.¹⁸⁶ At times, their target has been Tamil Hindus, while more recently it has been Sri Lanka's Arab and Tamil Muslims.

¹⁸² Daniele Conversi, ed., *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203166246>.

¹⁸³ Rohan Jayasekera, "Narratives of Hate," *Index on Censorship* 42, no. 2 (2013): 110–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422013492260>; Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*

¹⁸⁴ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

¹⁸⁵ Holt; "Sri Lanka President Pardons Hardline Buddhist Monk"; Pararajasingham, "Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?"

¹⁸⁶ Conversi, *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*.

However, for many politicians and political activists, instrumentalist views of nationalism prevail in Sri Lanka. Instrumentalism is a theory in which nationalism can be summarized as a doctrine of ideas and defined by the utilitarian application for their beneficiaries, or by the citizens of a state.¹⁸⁷ Specifically, sociological instrumentalism is the view that “nationalism, like several other belief-systems, doctrines, and ideologies, is used and abused primarily by the ruling classes or power elites.”¹⁸⁸ This view is one variety specific to elite theorists, who claim “that elites use and abuse the identities and ideas of the masses on behalf of, and because of, the interests of elites, especially through the ‘invention of traditions.’”¹⁸⁹ This suggests that Sri Lankan ethnoreligious nationalism has served and continues to serve the narrow interests of the state elite, in this case those from majority Sinhalese Buddhist groups. Interestingly, ethnonationalist sentiment against Muslims was not a part of the mainstream political discourse until after the end of the civil war in 2009, when Tamils were no longer considered a threat by right-wing Buddhist groups.¹⁹⁰

Other policies which manifested Sri Lanka’s ethnoreligious nationalism include language policies and barriers to minority societal integration, security measures against terrorism, centralized control of power at the presidential level, and the winner-take-all majoritarian system, which led to polarization within Parliament and little coalition building on democratic policy issues.¹⁹¹ One example of language policy barriers was the Official Language Act of 1956, a law that declared Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka, creating serious ethnic resentment and division among the Tamils (both Muslim and Hindu) and Sinhalese.¹⁹² Prior to enactment, many Sri Lankans began to advocate for a return to swabasha, the campaign to use either Tamil or Sinhalese to replace English as

¹⁸⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Brendan O’Leary, “Instrumentalist Theories of Nationalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001).

¹⁸⁸ O’Leary, “Instrumentalist Theories of Nationalism,” 2.

¹⁸⁹ O’Leary, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

¹⁹¹ DeVotta, *Blowback*; Pararajasingham, “Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?”; Central Intelligence Agency, “South Asia: Sri Lanka.”

¹⁹² Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, Shastri, 143.

the official language in schools and all government operations.¹⁹³ Before the law took effect, the demands by pro-Sinhala majorities on the National Languages Commission created a serious bias against the Tamils, who felt this policy would “marginalize their community socioeconomically” because they would not be able to retain their language and identity if they had to assimilate with the Sinhalese majority.¹⁹⁴ In his book on ethnic conflict and institutional decay in Sri Lanka, DeVotta proposed that “when a majority community pursues linguistic nationalism to attain superordinate status, particularistic ethnic interactions will likely ensue. The more one ethnic group benefits, the more likely those marginalized will rebel.”¹⁹⁵ This statement highlights just one of the major rifts between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and minorities.

Yet another issue occurred in 1972 when the United Front (UF), a radical populist party, won the parliamentary elections and changed the constitution to enhance Buddhism to the “foremost place” in the religion hierarchy on the island.¹⁹⁶ Both the Official Language Act and the elevation of Buddhism as the premier religion on the island emboldened right-wing activist groups at a time when attentions were drawn toward the LTTE and ethnic Tamils instead of Muslims and other minority groups. These institutionalized political processes and right-leaning tendencies inherently marginalized targeted minority groups and later facilitated the rise of BBS and its campaign against Muslim minorities.

Finally, and more recently, the anti-terrorism laws enacted by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government right after the Sri Lankan civil war, as well as the consolidation of power by the Rajapaksa family in the late 2000s, also enabled Sinhalese Buddhist

¹⁹³ DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*, 42–47.

¹⁹⁴ DeVotta, 55–56.

¹⁹⁵ DeVotta, 93.

¹⁹⁶ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Shastri, 147.

ethnonationalism while marginalizing minorities.¹⁹⁷ Global anti-Muslim sentiment, reflected particularly on the BBS website and in the news media, shows just how much influence international news amplified anti-Muslim sentiment.¹⁹⁸ This created a political opportunity where BBS could foment unrest against Muslims with less resistance, even if the information posted on social media sites was untrue.¹⁹⁹

4. Arab And Tamil Muslims: The Nonviolent Nature of Sri Lankan Muslims

Although this research covers 2009 to 2019, a little background into the historical nature of Buddhist-Muslim relations, as well as Buddhist-Hindu relations and the LTTE conflict, is appropriate. This more recent anti-Muslim sentiment may not have emerged without the rise of Tamil and Hindu marginalization in the 1950s–2010s. The state practiced ethnic marginalization through formal policy and grassroots mobilization of Buddhists against Tamil-Hindus before they moved on to anti-Muslim campaigns. Because a precedence had already been set for systemic and cultural discrimination against minority groups in Sri Lanka, it facilitated the state taking advantage of Muslims throughout the country.²⁰⁰

Muslims played a key role in the transformation of Sri Lanka as a nation-state. McGilvray shares that Sri Lankan Muslim “origins are clearly connected to the maritime Indian Ocean trade between the Middle East and the South and Southeast Asia that brought both Arab and Persian sailors as regular visitors to the island in the medieval period.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Kat Lonsdorf, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections,” NPR, November 17, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/17/780241242/gotabaya-rajapaksa-wins-sri-lankan-presidential-elections>; Bhat, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa”; Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin, “Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence.”

¹⁹⁸ Nanayakkara, “Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)”;

Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

¹⁹⁹ Doloswala, “The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Bodu Bala Sena”;

Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy.”

²⁰⁰ Denis B. McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, ed. John Clifford Holt, 1 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54; Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*; Lydia Polgreen, “Tamils Now Languish in Sri Lanka Camps,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/13/world/asia/13lanka.html>.

²⁰¹ McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” 55.

Muslims were part of an integrated Sri Lanka society since the 8th century and McGilvray theorizes that there are four different ways in which Muslim identity was constructed. The four identity groups are as follows : a “caste-like system, Islamic Tamils, racial and ancestral Moors, which hail from Arab sea-traders in the 8th century onward, and Sri Lankan Muslims as simply ‘Muslims.’”²⁰² Therefore, Muslims became defined as “an umbrella designation based on religion that has now defined the Muslim community as a distinctive ethnic identity,” not just a religious one.²⁰³ More generally, two distinct Muslim communities are said to exist on the island, those that include Tamil Muslims and those who were Moors from Colombo and other locations; however, most Muslims now identify themselves as simply Sri Lankan Muslims, without distinction.

Holt and DeVotta discuss the nature of communal harmony prior to the British: “Until the arrival of the British, the Sinhala-Muslim relationship was one of mutual trust and cooperation.”²⁰⁴ This was due to the fact that the British recruited Muslims to high civil posts and “structurally assimilated” in society—as a result, as Holt points out, “the good relationship that had prevailed over a thousand years deteriorated into one of competition, suspicion, and ill will. This was the result of the policy of divide and rule and communal politics which the British initiated from 1796 onward.”²⁰⁵

Since at least the mid-20th century, a Muslim party worked with the main political parties to be protected from political marginalization, most often aligning themselves with the United Na Party, as was the case with the Tamil minorities before and during the civil war against the LTTE.²⁰⁶ For example, after independence from the British, Sri Lanka continued to emphasize ethnicity and caste via the political party system. The centralization

²⁰² Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 12–13.

²⁰³ Holt, 12–13.

²⁰⁴ M. A. Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence,” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, ed. John Clifford Holt, 1 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18–25.

²⁰⁵ Nuhman, 18–25; DeVotta, *Blowback*.

²⁰⁶ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence,” 18–54.

of the government in Colombo ensured that [some] minority groups would not have the power to govern their own affairs.²⁰⁷ Although minority rights were protected by the first republican constitution in 1972, they were undermined over time due to identity politics and the tenet that “the majority is always right.”²⁰⁸ Seeing marginalization by the British in the past, the elites mobilized “the Sinhalese middle and lower classes [who] eagerly provided political support to members of their elite in return for favorable policies and patronage.”²⁰⁹ However, through careful politics, Arab Muslims were still able to participate in political life, retain their economic niche, and enjoy some cultural autonomy. Arab Muslims also courted the vote of Tamil Muslims for their Sinhalese-led parties, which garnered protections for both Muslim communities.²¹⁰

It is important to discuss the end of the civil war in terms of violence against Muslims because President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had previously served in the military (1971–1991). The Sri Lankan government, under Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s command, launched a military offensive in 2006 to route out the LTTE for the last time.²¹¹ The Sri Lankan military took control of the eastern portion of the island in July 2007. There were many civilian casualties, including children, who the government labeled as child combatants; the LTTE claimed the military attacked an orphanage and training center.²¹² Throughout 2007 and 2008, despite major advances by the Sri Lankan government, including killing many of the LTTE’s top officials, human rights violations were alleged on both sides of the war.²¹³ The government allegedly committed many human rights

²⁰⁷ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Shastri, 135–36.

²⁰⁸ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, Shastri, 139.

²⁰⁹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, Shastri, 139.

²¹⁰ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*; McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka.”

²¹¹ Jayshree Bajoria, “The Sri Lankan Conflict,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 18, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/background/sri-lankan-conflict>.

²¹² Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Post War Review*, 47–51.

²¹³ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*.

atrocities against civilians caught in the crossfire, while the LTTE used its influence to kidnap, kill, and commit further terrorist acts in the northern part of the island.²¹⁴

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International catalogued extensive human rights violations and claimed that, in 2008, there were 250,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) without protection or aid from the government.²¹⁵ Many of these IDPs were Tamil Muslims. Toward the end of the war in 2009, the use of human shields by the LTTE became frequent, and “the LTTE accused the authorities [the Sri Lankan government] of being intent on genocide, while for their part the Tigers were accused of preventing civilians from leaving the conflict zone.”²¹⁶ The UN confirmed that cluster munitions were used by the military to attack the last hospital in an LTTE-controlled area, and UN satellite imagery “suggests that the government shelled a ‘no-fire zone’ where more than 50,000 people were trapped.”²¹⁷

President Rajapaksa officially declared the government victorious on May 19, 2009, making a statement that it was now time to win over the Tamil people.²¹⁸ Due to the allegations of human rights violations, which the Sri Lankan government repeatedly denied, the UN Secretary General commissioned a panel of experts to make a credibility determination regarding both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.²¹⁹ The government was found to have killed civilians through widespread shelling, “denial of humanitarian assistance,” and “human rights violations suffered by victims and survivors of the conflict,” among others.²²⁰ According to the UN, the LTTE used “civilians as human

²¹⁴ Bandarage, 209; Bajoria, “The Sri Lankan Conflict.”

²¹⁵ “The Sri Lankan Conflict”; “Sri Lanka: Political Crisis Threatens Justice Efforts | Human Rights Watch”; Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Post War Review*, 61.

²¹⁶ Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Post War Review*, 62.

²¹⁷ Bajoria, “The Sri Lankan Conflict”; Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 62–63; “Sri Lanka: Political Crisis Threatens Justice Efforts”; “UNHCR – Internally Displaced People,” accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html>; Pararajasingham, “Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?”

²¹⁸ Hasnat, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Post War Review*, 69–70.

²¹⁹ Steven R. Ratner, “Accountability and the Sri Lankan Civil War,” *American Journal of International Law* 106, no. 4 (2012): 796–800, <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.106.4.0795>.

²²⁰ Ratner, 800.

buffers,” forced labor and recruitment of child soldiers, suicide bombings, and “killing civilians attempting to flee LTTE control.”²²¹ After the findings were made public, the UN and international community allowed Sri Lanka to take control of its own affairs, with the expectation to begin the process of reconciliation (with Norway’s aid) and to hold accountable those within the government accused of crimes against humanity.²²²

Nonetheless, an era of triumphalism emerged soon after the war ended, and President Sirisena ushered in a new wave of nationalist fervor and sentiment, continuing the policy of arresting suspected terrorists without warrant and allowing for other militant Sinhala Buddhist organizations to continue acting out in this illiberal environment.²²³ After the defeat of the LTTE in the civil war and further displacement of Tamil Hindus, who were the primary targets of chauvinism before and during the civil war, Muslims became the new target. The narrative of victimization by the National Heritage Party (NHP) and the precedent set by Buddhist monks being involved in politics (and being elected to Parliament), allowed for other Buddhist nationalist groups and BBS to continue what Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the state began.²²⁴ While anti-Muslim chauvinism spiked after 2009, JHU, formed in 2004 before the LTTE war’s end, was made up entirely of monks, “to defend the rights of the Sinhalese Buddhist people because they alone are responsible for ‘the country, the civilization and the culture.’”²²⁵

It was in this political environment that the ultranationalist BBS was able to take hold. Bodu Bala Sena, which means “Buddhist Power Force” in Sinhalese, was founded in

²²¹ Ratner, 800.

²²² Ratner, 804–5.

²²³ Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*; Polgreen, “Tamils Now Languish in Sri Lanka Camps”; McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” 54.

²²⁴ Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena”; DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*; Emily Schmall, “Buddhist Nationalists Claim Victory in Sri Lankan Election,” *WRAL*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.wral.com/buddhist-nationalists-claim-victory-in-sri-lankan-election/18796873/>.

²²⁵ Benjamin Schonthal, “Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, by John Clifford Holt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 104.

2012, ironically from the Hindutva model of RSS/BJP in India.²²⁶ BBS developed out of a need to extricate itself from JHU, “claiming it [JHU] was not militant enough in protecting Buddhism.”²²⁷ BBS believed that to properly defend Buddhism, one must actually fight to both defend it and to eliminate any threat to that religion, including minority religious groups.

Although Tamil Muslims aligned with government policies prior to 2009, they are also considered a threat to Buddhist national values. One issue facing Tamil Muslims in the north was their expulsion from their homes by the LTTE and the government, which forced them to live in IDP camps, where some were still living in 2018.²²⁸ In 2019, the Sri Lankan government blamed rogue local Muslim terrorist for the Easter Sunday attacks.²²⁹ By June of 2019, the government arrested at least 2,000 people purportedly connected to the attacks, of whom 634 are still in jail.²³⁰ The Sri Lankan government can legally continue to hold these citizens without evidence due to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).²³¹ Because the government has used this law to detain Muslims as well as Tamils who were suspected of violence, Imtiyaz suggests that many of the Muslims arrested in coordination with this attack were innocent.²³²

To summarize, Muslims have resided in Sri Lanka since the Medieval Era and their more recent political affiliation has shifted between both apolitical and pro-government, eschewing specifically Muslim political parties in favor of issue-based parties during and

²²⁶ TRAC, “Groups,” TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/groups>; Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka.”

²²⁷ Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka.”

²²⁸ Mohamed Shareef Asees, “Plight of Northern Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka,” *Colombo Telegraph*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/plight-of-northern-muslim-idps-in-sri-lanka/>; McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” 56–57; Polgreen, “Tamils Now Languish in Sri Lanka Camps.”

²²⁹ Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island”; Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims”; “Police Warned That Sri Lanka Churches Were Targets.”

²³⁰ “Sri Lanka Bombings.”

²³¹ Human Rights Watch, “Sri Lanka: Events of 2018”; Human Rights Watch, “Sri Lanka: Events of 2022,” in *World Report 2023*, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/sri-lanka>.

²³² Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims.”

after the 1948 democratic transition.²³³ Today, Muslims are concerned over recent policies and laws designed to specifically target Muslims.²³⁴ However, Muslims were and continue to be targeted for their otherness, with some Buddhist groups arguing for a “pure” Sinhala society, even as Sinhalese politicians courted Muslims as political allies.²³⁵ Communal violence intensified in 2009, with subsequent attacks, riots, and anti-Muslim rallies occurring every year since then.²³⁶ It’s as if Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists needed a new “other” after defeating the LTTE.

²³³ McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” 55.

²³⁴ Ethirajan, “Discrimination and Harassment Haunt Sri Lanka’s Muslims.”

²³⁵ Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims”; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²³⁶ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island”; Imtiyaz, “The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka’s Muslims.”

III. BODU BALA SENA IN SRI LANKA

As discussed in the previous chapter, British colonialism influenced Sinhalese-Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism in Sri Lanka. It also played a role in shaping the narrative set forth by the sangha, who used the kingdom of Kandy as their historical example in writing history for the modern-day Sinhalese Buddhist in a way that enhanced their historical claims while marginalizing non-Buddhists within the country.²³⁷ This study's main focus is not just that of ethnoreligious nationalism, but also how interest groups, political parties, and social movements, whether political or social, use ethnoreligious nationalism to their own ends by framing their narrative to gain at others' expense. This chapter discusses Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), its organization, and its elements using social movement theory.

BBS is primarily a monk-led social movement designed to promote Sinhalese Buddhism.²³⁸ It was created in 2012 out of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a political party also created by monks to promote Buddhism and to spread the narrative that Sri Lanka was a Buddhist state and should remain so, which won nine parliamentary seats in 2004.²³⁹ Evidence of its continued support by the state, either via former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's attendance at their rallies, or security forces turning a blind eye to their violent protests, became problematic to both the Muslim population in Sri Lanka and the international community.²⁴⁰

Each element of a social movement—grievances, resources, framing, and political opportunity—works to move BBS toward its primary goals. On its website, BBS states its goals as follows:

1. To establish a Buddhist society

²³⁷ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

²³⁸ Hume, "'Fascists' in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists."

²³⁹ Hume; Nanayakkara, "Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS);" and Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality," 80.

²⁴⁰ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Hume, "'Fascists' in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists."

2. To develop a brave and independent generation of *bhikkhus* [ordained male in Buddhist monasticism]
3. To facilitate modernization and reorganization of the *bhikkhu* education
4. To improve Buddhist temples as centers of social development
5. To develop the *bhikkhuni* order
6. To develop and improve the Buddhists and Buddhist places of worship operating under hardships/vulnerable conditions.
7. To propagate *dhamma* [or *dharma*, which is the second law of Buddhism, and means either natural law or ethnical conduct and righteousness] and goodwill of Sri Lanka.
8. To set up organizations that support the development of Buddhists and network those organizations.
9. To set up funds for Buddhist development
10. To build and safeguard Buddhist entrepreneurs and enterprises.
11. To protect and safeguard Buddhist archaeological importance.
12. To take steps to face challenges of anti-Buddhist activities.²⁴¹

These goals help us understand the nature of the BBS organization and actions, but we can also glean more information and analyze the underlying grievances, resources, and framing behind these goals.²⁴² The following sections unpack these goals and reflected values of BBS, highlighting viewpoints and narratives which have led to communal violence in Sri Lanka.

²⁴¹ Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena”; Barbara O’Brien et al., “About Buddhist Monks: The Life and Role of the Bhikkhu,” Learn Religions, July 28, 2018, <https://www.learnreligions.com/about-buddhist-monks-449758>.

²⁴² Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

A. GRIEVANCES DURING 2009–2019: THE STATE AND BBS

Social movements often use grievances and complaints about injustices, which the state and the social movement and/or state face, as justification for a movement's existence. Usually, social movement grievances arise in response to an event or incidents that happened in the public sphere to the detriment or threat, perceived or real, of the movement's members.²⁴³ Specifically, grievances may derive from neglect over time by the state or may be deep-seated reactions to loss or fear of future loss that manifest themselves into political and social action.²⁴⁴

The following grievances that JHU, and subsequently BBS, developed over the years appear to be as follows: first, the fear of a loss of a physical and cultural way of life for Buddhists in Sri Lanka; second, historical and cultural significance, which seems to be lost due to the influx of other cultures in Sri Lanka; third, the upset of social order and Buddhist social values; and finally, economic grievances particularly relating to perceptions of Muslims taking job opportunities in both state and local sectors. These grievances have been gleaned from BBS's stated goals, the BBS website more generally, news and social media posts, and political messaging via government operations and agencies.²⁴⁵ Primarily, Buddhist nationalism through BBS highlights a fear of being replaced by other religious groups who may threaten their way of life. The collective goals (from numbers one through five above) indicate a *bhikkhu* society or order, as well as their education and social development. As noted previously, *bhikkhu* signifies a male Buddhist monk; however, it also indicates the role they play in society, what is studied as part of the

²⁴³ Karl-Dieter Opp, "Grievances and Participation in Social Movements," *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 6 (1988): 853–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095895>.

²⁴⁴ Sandra Ruth Leavitt, "Persuasion, Coercion, and Neglect: Understanding State Policy and the Mobilization of Muslim Minorities in Asia" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2007), ProQuest; Opp, "Grievances and Participation in Social Movements."

²⁴⁵ Bodu Bala Sena, "Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena"; Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena"; "Bodu Bala Sena's Gnanasara Thero to Contest from Kurunegala," *NewsWire* (blog), March 18, 2020, <http://www.newswire.lk/2020/03/18/bodu-bala-senas-gnanasara-thero-to-contest-from-kurunegala/>; Nanayakkara, "Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)"; Doloswala, "The Rise of Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena"; Colombo Gazette, "US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy."

education of a *bhikkhu*, and how monks should conduct themselves.²⁴⁶ These goals suggest that Buddhism, or the role of the *bhikkhus* and the *sangha*, needs to be revitalized or reestablished. Since its founding, BBS's actions suggest that the re-establishment of Buddhist values requires inhibiting or excluding other religious groups like Muslims.²⁴⁷ The state's acceptance of Buddhist monks in the political sphere, either as political party members, or as actual representatives in the state and local legislatures, highlights that although Sri Lanka was established as a multi-ethnic democracy, much of the constitution and formation of the government takes its influence from Buddhist social values as defined by Sri Lanka's politicized *sangha*.²⁴⁸

Goals six and seven, as well as other sources, also address the fear of a loss of a Buddhist way of life, and the fear of being vulnerable in the face of new threats, particularly Muslim groups. "Hardship and vulnerable conditions" indicate that BBS members feel they are marginalized in their own country and are being attacked. In Holt's edited volume, Silva asserts that BBS believes it is under a "cultural invasion" by Muslims on the Sri Lankan island and that it faces an extinction of their religious beliefs, indicated by a perception of more mosques than Buddhist temples.²⁴⁹ In addition, the propagation of "dhamma and goodwill" indicates the doctrine or dharma of the Buddha; part of that goal is to identify anything that is averse and take "necessary action" against the threat.²⁵⁰

The second type of grievances deals with historical narratives. Goals eight, eleven, and twelve all deal with Buddhist activity on the island. Buddhism is not only considered the "safeguard" of the state itself, but part of its historical importance, especially because historical narratives highlight the Buddha himself flying to Sri Lanka and giving them a

²⁴⁶ Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., eds., "Bhikṣu," in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), Credo Reference; O'Brien et al., "About Buddhist Monks: The Life and Role of the Bhikkhu."

²⁴⁷ Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena."

²⁴⁸ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; DeVotta, *Blowback*.

²⁴⁹ Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena," 131.

²⁵⁰ Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Dhamma," in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), Credo Reference; Bodu Bala Sena, "Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 137–38.

tooth, a bodhi tree, and establishing a temple.²⁵¹ The defense of both Buddhism and the cultural significance of the Sinhala is central to the identity of the state and BBS. When looking at English translations of comments on BBS’s press conferences and promotional video (promoted by the newspaper Colombo Today in some cases), many people argued that Buddhism should be fought for and that they should elect a nationalist president who will stand up and fight for Sinhalese-Buddhist rights.²⁵² For example, Wasantha Warakagoda, a public commentator in Sri Lanka, writes “2020 is our last chance...this is a national responsibility and unite all Sinhalese.”²⁵³ This is just one of many responses that mirror each other in their call for Buddhist values, which they consider intertwined with being ethnically Sinhalese.

The third type of grievances is linked in BBS’s vision for the future, as identified by the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC): “protecting and safeguarding Buddhist social values in the face of...change.”²⁵⁴ Part of that change involved the mix of races and cultures on Sri Lanka itself. In Holt’s compiled book on Buddhist extremism, Benjamin Schonthal transcribed the words of a monk: “For the non-Sinhalese even if they do not have Sri Lanka as their home, their races have other countries of their own...but the Sinhalese have one and only one country, and that is Sri Lanka.”²⁵⁵ The logic here is that because the Sinhalese could be pushed out of its righteous homeland by other groups, Sinhalese Buddhism must be safeguarded in whatever way it can.²⁵⁶ As

²⁵¹ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²⁵² *Bodu Bala Sena: දැයම එක රොදකට සිටි හෙලේ මහ සහ සමුළුව සජීවීව [Diyama One Group Live Conference with Siv Hele Maha Sangam]*, accessed December 7, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=TdZLSWt-jWI&feature=emb_logo; *ඥානසාර නිමිතෙන් විශේෂ ප්‍රකාශයක් 2018-03-07 [Special Statement from Gnanasara Thero]*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=tMZwDqvpiIE&feature=emb_logo; Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy”; Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁵³ *ඥානසාර නිමිතෙන් විශේෂ ප්‍රකාශයක් 2018-03-07 [Special Statement from Gnanasara Thero]*; *Bodu Bala Sena*.

²⁵⁴ Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka”; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁵⁵ Schonthal, “Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka,” 106.

²⁵⁶ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

Holt concludes, many Sri Lankans believe the motto or adage that “the country exists for the sake of religion” (i.e., Buddhism).²⁵⁷

The fourth type of grievances is economic in nature; however, the goals also suggest hatred for non-Buddhists and Muslim minorities.²⁵⁸ For example, while “to establish a Buddhist society” may not sound like anger or prejudice against Muslims or even non-Buddhists generally, the combination of this goal and others paint a different picture.²⁵⁹ Both JHU and BBS argue that Muslims and other non-Buddhists have taken their livelihood, using economic language to highlight the divide.²⁶⁰ Grievances for the Sinhalese majority include “economic practices that unfairly placed burdens on the Sinhala consumer and disadvantaged the competitiveness of Sinhala businessmen.”²⁶¹

In addition, BBS narratives typically include some form of outcry about the economic marginalization of the Sinhalese Buddhists, who are purportedly trying to fight for their continued presence in Sri Lanka.²⁶² Goals nine and ten above specifically highlight the need to safeguard those businesses and protect Buddhists in all economic enterprises.²⁶³ The perceived economic disadvantage which Sinhalese Buddhists face is used in narratives by both the BBS, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), and in daily political discourse. It is used repeatedly in the targeting of Muslim businesses, restaurants serving halal food, and in the recent riots in May 2019.²⁶⁴ According to its website, the BBS vision is to protect Buddhism for future generations, while its mission is the following:

²⁵⁷ Holt, 9.

²⁵⁸ Holt, 12–14.

²⁵⁹ “About Us | Bodu Bala Sena,” accessed September 7, 2019, <http://www.bodubalasena.org/about/>.

²⁶⁰ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁶¹ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 7.

²⁶² Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²⁶³ Holt; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁶⁴ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island”; Amarasingam and Fuller, “Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again”; Imtiyaz and Mohamed-Saleem, “Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka.”

The four Buddhist congregations, *Bhikkhus* [Buddhist monks], *Bhikkhunis* (Buddhist nuns), *Upasaka* (layman) and *Upasika* (laywoman) to lead the nation in protecting, safeguarding and sustaining Buddhist social values in the face of dynamic global trends of changes and to organize programmes and projects in this regard in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.²⁶⁵

Overall, the economic, social, cultural, and prejudicial grievances are not only propagated by BBS in their rallies but also used by politicians and former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who stated that the majority will is more important than minority rights.²⁶⁶ As Silva posits, “the widespread acceptance of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism as the official ideology of the state has enabled the BBS to plant its more biased statements in the imagination of certain cohorts of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists.”²⁶⁷ BBS’s views have permeated the Sri Lankan political and social landscape, making it almost impossible for an average citizen to miss their strong rhetoric and prejudicial messages.

B. RESOURCES 2009–2019: THE STATE AND BBS

In social movement theory (SMT), resources are the mobilizing structures which allow for collective action to take place.²⁶⁸ They consist of the formal and informal vehicles of mobilization and collective action.²⁶⁹ Both civil and uncivil society are part of the operations of BBS and their affiliates. BBS and its parent organization, JHU, which BBS leader Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara broke away from, were set up as social movement groups.²⁷⁰ Their resources included social and structural resources, such as social media, events and rallies; political parties and social/organizational groups, such as civil society and non-profit organizations who supported the government leadership; and Sri Lankan citizens who believe their cultural way of life is threatened and needs to be protected. These

²⁶⁵ Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁶⁶ “Sri Lanka : Sri Lanka President Ready to Abolish 19th Amendment If given Two-Third Majority in Parliament,” *Colombo*, December 2, 2019, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19B/Dec01_1575211860CH.php.

²⁶⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, 137.

²⁶⁸ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 3.

²⁶⁹ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 3.

²⁷⁰ Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena,” 125.

resources are gathered from regular citizens, government, political and public groups, both in civil and uncivil society. They are essential to BBS reaching a broader audience and gaining traction from both local and international groups.

BBS propaganda is spread through widely publicized and well-attended public rallies, its website, printed publications, and raids on so-called anti-Buddhist establishments, usually in front of television cameras.²⁷¹ Social media, including Facebook and Twitter (X), are mobilized by both sympathizers of BBS and BBS itself to disseminate selected hate messages that typically target Muslims and evangelical Christian groups.²⁷² One of the interesting ways in which BBS reaches a broader audience is via their website with the twelve goals displayed in English.²⁷³ In fact, much of the website is both in Sinhalese and English, making it possible to reach broader audiences outside of Sri Lanka.²⁷⁴

In recent years, in some countries, Facebook has shut down certain groups²⁷⁵ on the platform if they were using hate speech and slander towards other religious or ethnic groups.²⁷⁶ BBS uses not just Facebook but also the more private WhatsApp, which like Facebook is owned by Meta, to disseminate its message widely and to organize rallies, in addition to using local news outlets such as Colombo Today, in print, online, and on cable news networks. BBS also posts videos on YouTube, which is owned by Google, to spread its propaganda.²⁷⁷

²⁷¹ Silva, 125.

²⁷² Silva, 125.

²⁷³ Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁷⁴ “About Us: Bodu Bala Sena”; Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, “Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka.”

²⁷⁵ Groups include 969, MBT, and other government officials represented in Myanmar (Burma).

²⁷⁶ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook,” Facebook Newsroom, August 28, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/08/removing-myanmar-officials/>.

²⁷⁷ Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena”; *Bodu Bala Sena*; “Sri Lanka : President Stresses Need to Expose Everyone behind Easter Sunday Attacks”; “Sri Lanka : Sri Lanka President Ready to Abolish 19th Amendment If given Two-Third Majority in Parliament.”

Another major resource that both the BBS and the government use is their involvement and investment in political parties, the sangha's representation throughout the government, and the complicity of the police during rallies which often devolve into riots where mobs have killed Muslims and burned their homes and businesses.²⁷⁸ Gnanasara and BBS first refused to identify with political parties; however, their major campaign for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa tells a different story.²⁷⁹ Evidence points to both campaigning for the Rajapaksa brothers and against Muslim political parties, who were targeted in BBS's official propaganda.²⁸⁰

In addition, according to U.S. News reporter Emily Schmall, "Gnanasara described himself as an unofficial adviser to Rajapaksa and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, the war-time president whom Gotabaya Rajapaksa recently appointed as prime minister. Gotabaya Rajapaksa has praised and defended Gnanasara in the past, but his spokesman, Mohan Samaranayake, said the president had neither 'official nor unofficial advisers as yet.'"²⁸¹ The sangha's organization, combined with government backing and historical use of the sangha as political advisors, is also integrated daily into the governmental structure and given pride of place in the state due to the "majority rule" mentality.²⁸²

The violent aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019 also highlights the complicity of the police. According to Amarasingam, some police either stood by while homes and businesses were burned, while other police moved aside to enable mobs in finding and killing Muslims.²⁸³ Again, according to Amarasingam, although some police did try to

²⁷⁸ Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena."

²⁷⁹ Silva, 128; Schmall, "Buddhist Nationalists Claim Victory in Sri Lankan Election."

²⁸⁰ Schmall, "Buddhist Nationalists Claim Victory in Sri Lankan Election"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²⁸¹ Schmall, "Buddhist Nationalists Claim Victory in Sri Lankan Election."

²⁸² Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²⁸³ Amarasingam, "Terrorism on the Teardrop Island"; Amarasingam and Fuller, "Sri Lanka Is Burning — Again."

stop the mob, the majority of police were bystanders who did nothing to stop the mob in May 2019, and also during previous anti-Muslim rallies and riots.²⁸⁴

Finally, civil and uncivil societal resources include non-profits, the local Boy Scouts, monastical hierarchical orders, and traditional media to help push out propaganda and hate messages throughout the country.²⁸⁵ Some leading politicians (including the Rajapaksas) consulted Gnanasara, his monk advisors, and BBS itself to understand the “threat” posed by Muslims.²⁸⁶ Temples are used as social gathering places and organizational spaces. Gnanasara and his cohort even walk the streets praying for suffering people in their YouTube videos as a reminder to the Buddhist population that they are there for the people.²⁸⁷ Legacy media and social media advisors are utilized daily to further BBS’s views and influence government officials.²⁸⁸

With an ethnic and religious majority in the country, BBS can utilize fear, rumor, and propaganda to sustain the movement. Although a small percentage of the population protests daily against Muslim violence, the overall population, especially the majority who voted for President Rajapaksa and his party, are reportedly pro-majority and embrace the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist view.²⁸⁹

C. FRAMING 2009–2019: THE STATE AND BBS

BBS and the state frame the narratives they use to justify the persecution and marginalization of the Muslim population. BBS’s narrative is a moral, economic and cultural argument highlighting the dangerous nature of Muslims and the Sinhalese Buddhists’ pre-ordained right to rule.²⁹⁰ It includes the sangha’s previous political

²⁸⁴ Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island.”

²⁸⁵ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

²⁸⁶ Holt; Amarasingam, “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island”; Ameer Ali, “The Muslim Factor in Sri Lankan Ethnic Crisis,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 2 (1997): 253–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602009708716375>; DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*.

²⁸⁷ *Bodu Bala Sena*.

²⁸⁸ Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena.”

²⁸⁹ Lonsdorf, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections.”

²⁹⁰ Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena.”

approach within the ancient Kandyan kingdom, the sangha's influence after colonialism in promoting Buddhist culture and values within Sri Lanka, and the primordial view that Buddhists and Sinhalese are the primary owners of Sri Lanka: majority power is still the narrative today.

The framing process is shaped by strategic decisions made by both the BBS and the state.²⁹¹ Although McAdam argues that contesting narratives exist between the state and other contesting social movements, BBS is complicit with the government and the leading political party because both narratives and implementation techniques are similar: their overall goal is to spread their anti-Muslim message across all pro-Buddhist parties and internationally among Eastern and Western nations.²⁹²

First, the pre-colonial aspect of the BBS narrative, to include the “glory of the Kingdom of Kandy,” is one of the main frameworks that BBS uses to highlight Sri Lanka as a wholly Buddhist country with Buddhist values. Sinhalese Buddhists already consider themselves a “lion race” and use narratives that the land was “sanctified by the Buddha himself.”²⁹³ Mahanama, a Buddhist monk from the 6th century CE, links the concepts of homeland, or the Sinhadipa [Island of the Sinhalese] in his story with the Mahavamsa, which means the land of the lion race.²⁹⁴ Mahanama also links the previous terms Dhammadipa, which translates to the land chosen by Buddha to protect and propagate his dhamma.²⁹⁵ As Ramachandran says in *The Diplomat*, “although the Mahavamsa is more myth than fact, Sinhalese-Buddhists draw on it to justify their claim that the island belongs to them and that they are a people chosen to protect Buddha's teachings.”²⁹⁶

The second aspect of framing is the cultural fear of Buddhist marginalization in Sri Lanka and the world today. It includes BBS's perceived victimization by Muslims and

²⁹¹ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 16.

²⁹² McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 16.

²⁹³ Ramachandran, “Sri Lanka's Anti-Muslim Violence.”

²⁹⁴ Ramachandran.

²⁹⁵ Ramachandran.

²⁹⁶ Ramachandran.

those complicit with and sympathetic to the Muslim cause.²⁹⁷ Government narration stresses the repeated persecution of Sri Lanka in the press by Western governments and their institutions. The state, BBS, and other nationalist groups perceive that Sri Lanka is being treated unfairly by other nations and the international community. This view grew during the last few months of the civil war, when intergovernmental organizations and nongovernmental agencies repeatedly condemned the Sri Lankan government for killing up to 40,000 civilians in the name of national security.²⁹⁸ Since former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa served as defense minister to his brother during that time, the perception of being under attack by outside entities has not diminished since.²⁹⁹

The BBS mission and goals highlight the need to promote Buddhism in all forms and the supposed “necessary” steps it has taken to protect it, including defending archeological sites from non-believers and denying them access.³⁰⁰ Other major narratives include an economic campaign against halal food and Muslim-owned businesses; the BBS argues that Muslims have monopolized the “textile trade, financial markets, overseas employment and recruitment agencies, and the sale of electronic goods.”³⁰¹ Because this information had wide dissemination via private, government, and media channels, the likelihood of mainstream Sri Lankans believing the narrative is high.³⁰² In addition, the cutting of all digital network communications by the state in the aftermath of the Easter attacks in April 2019 allows for a specific narrative to be broadcast in keeping with the

²⁹⁷ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Alan Keenan, “Buddhist Militancy Rises Again in Sri Lanka,” Genocide Watch, March 7, 2018, <http://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/2018/03/07/Buddhist-Militancy-Rises-Again-in-Sri-Lanka>; DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*; Amresh Gunasingham, “Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An Examination,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 3 (March 2019): 1–6.

²⁹⁸ Charles Haviland, “S Lanka Publishes War Death Toll,” BBS News, February 24, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17156686>; Pararajasingham, “Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?”; Arulthas, “The Failed Promise of Reconciliation in Sri Lanka.”

²⁹⁹ Lonsdorf, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections.”

³⁰⁰ Beacham Publishing, “Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka”; Bodu Bala Sena, “Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena.”

³⁰¹ Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena,” 130.

³⁰² Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

political line and majority rule.³⁰³ Combined with the proper resources, the right narrative with the correct application of fear can be a political motivator at the polls, as indicated by former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's 10-point win in 2019.³⁰⁴

These narratives play into the way in which Sri Lankans view themselves in the aftermath of the civil war. Because the war lasted for over 30 years, it changed the way Sri Lankans viewed themselves, both in civil and social political groups. It appears that the Rajapaksa brothers were able to amass such a following in the aftermath of the civil war because they directly played key roles in ending the war and promoting Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism within their political parties.

D. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES 2009–2019: THE STATE AND BBS

A political opportunity is an event that gives space to form or move a social movement toward its goals, including the government's approval or disapproval of a group itself, and the collective action that results. BBS was not formed until 2012, in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war against LTTE; it was an era of triumphalism during Rajapaksa's regime.³⁰⁵ BBS followed the Hindutva model in India and the 969/Ma Ba Tha movement in Myanmar to break away from JHU and form its own social movement to take advantage of the influence of Sinhalese Buddhism on politics.³⁰⁶ The main political opportunities that led to the formation and rise of BBS were the defeat of ethnic Tamils as the primary threat against Sinhalese Buddhists, the internationalization of Muslim terrorist groups, and finally the rise of social media as the main platform by which to broadcast their goals, values, and narratives. These three opportunities allowed BBS to flourish, even with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa ousted in 2022.

As noted in the last chapter, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism existed prior to the Sri Lankan civil war; however, it was conceptually easier to focus on ethnic Tamils, both

³⁰³ Amarasingam, "Terrorism on the Teardrop Island"; Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims."

³⁰⁴ Lonsdorf, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections."

³⁰⁵ Beacham Publishing, "Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) -Sri Lanka."

³⁰⁶ Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

Hindu and Muslim, because they were seen as outsiders who emigrated during the British colonial period from Tamil Nadu in India and concentrated in the northern area of Sri Lanka.³⁰⁷ Once the war ended, and once the Rajapaksa brothers rose to political power as a result, Sinhalese nationalists turned against Muslims, who were also considered “other” and not part of the historical groups that resided on the island.³⁰⁸ Given that one of BBS’s grievances is that they are under attack by outsiders, an “other” is necessary.³⁰⁹ With the war at an end, the fear of marginalization still existed for many Buddhist nationalists, which is why BBS rose to power and began its campaign against another “other,” this time Sri Lankan Muslims.

Another political opportunity exploited by BBS was the international campaign against Islamist terrorism. BBS not only highlights it on its website; it has also raised the specter of Muslim terrorists on their social media platforms to foment unrest and anger at all Muslims in Sri Lanka.³¹⁰ This conflation of Sri Lankan Muslims with transnational Islamist terrorists is surprising, given that these groups were not able to take root in Sri Lanka on behalf of Tamil Muslims during the long civil war. After the war, though, the BBS emphasizes the threats of Salafism and Wahabism while continuously labeling Muslims as terrorists in Facebook posts, invoking the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks and calling for the maximum punishment for Muslims collectively in Sri Lanka.³¹¹ As noted

³⁰⁷ Ramachandran, “Sri Lanka’s Anti-Muslim Violence”; N. Shanmugaratnam, “Impact of Plantation Economy and Colonial Policy on Sri Lanka Peasantry,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 3 (1981): 69–80.

³⁰⁸ Ramachandran, “Sri Lanka’s Anti-Muslim Violence”; Deborah Johnson, “Taking Liberties and Making Liberty: Religious Bounding and Political Violence in Sri Lanka,” *Religion* 46, no. 3 (2016): 309–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1139012>.

³⁰⁹ Ramachandran, “Sri Lanka’s Anti-Muslim Violence.”

³¹⁰ “About Us | Bodu Bala Sena”; Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy.”

³¹¹ “About Us | Bodu Bala Sena.”

earlier, some Muslims have been detained for three years³¹² without proof of their involvement in the Easter Sunday attacks.³¹³

The third, and possibly most important, political opportunity is the advent of social media. While social media is used as a resource for pushing BBS's agenda, it also provides an opportunity to reach broader audiences with impunity. Using hate speech and other propaganda techniques on Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and WhatsApp allows an individual poster to remain anonymous, especially if internal security forces sympathize with the Sinhalese-Buddhist cause. Social media also lends BBS more credibility with a younger demographic, who may be mobilizing for change.³¹⁴ Spreading rumors online is easy. Accusations against Muslims include forcible conversions from Buddhism to Islam; viral examples includes charges of attempts at "reduc[ing] the Sinhalese population, such as a video of a Muslim cook in a restaurant confessing to adding 'sterility pills' to food served to Sinhalese going viral on social media."³¹⁵ Such rumors have spawned violent protests and attacks against Muslims across the country, with little to no intervention by state or local police.³¹⁶

In short, BBS quickly rose to power and influence, not just because the government was complicit in anti-Muslim sentiment, but also because social media enabled the easy and wide spread of rumors and hate speech against Muslims. The country had been through a gruesome civil war lasting over 30 years, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists turned from

³¹² If BBS wants to raise awareness on Muslim terrorism in Sri Lanka, then attacking Muslims in their homes, marginalizing them in the workplace, and making accusations on social media to foment violence is one way of encouraging Muslims to fight back for themselves.

³¹³ Bharatha Mallawrachchi, "Sri Lanka's President Will Appoint a Committee to Probe Allegations of Complicity in 2019 Bombings," 2016, sec. news, <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/sri-lankas-president-will-appoint-a-committee-to-probe-allegations-of-complicity-in-2019-bombings/ar-AA1gvbrk>.

³¹⁴ Fabienne Baider, "Double Speech Act: Negotiating Inter-Cultural Beliefs and Intra-Cultural Hate Speech," *Journal of Pragmatics* 151 (October 2019): 155–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.05.006>; American Library Association, "Hate Speech and Hate Crime"; Keegan Hanks, "SPLC: Facebook and Instagram Ban Far-Right and Extremist Figures, but Still Have More Work to Do Against Hateful Content," Southern Poverty Law Center, May 2, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2019/05/02/splc-facebook-and-instagram-ban-far-right-and-extremist-figures-still-have-more-work-do>.

³¹⁵ Ramachandran, "Sri Lanka's Anti-Muslim Violence."

³¹⁶ Ramachandran; Hume, "'Fascists' in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists."

Tamils to Muslims as the primary threat against the Sinhalese way of life. Sri Lankan governments have been complicit in BBS's acts and narratives against Muslim minorities. Ramifications are still being felt in 2023, as the previous Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidency used BBS as a platform to push its own political agenda.³¹⁷

³¹⁷ "Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Family Falls From Grace," accessed September 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/sri-lankas-rajapaksa-family-falls-from-grace/>.

IV. BURMESE BUDDHIST NATIONALISM IN MYANMAR (BURMA)

This chapter analyzes Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism in Myanmar from a historical perspective, explaining the reasons behind the communal violence which has occurred against non-Buddhists, particularly Rohingya Muslims, between 2009 and 2019. Like the previous chapters on Sri Lanka and Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Buddhist ethnic nationalism arose via British colonial legacies and Buddhist majoritarianism, in particular Burmese Buddhists groups centered around the state, the sangha, and “narratives of siege” against the Bamar Buddhists.³¹⁸ However, unlike Sri Lanka, there are currently 135 recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar, with various religious and identity views.³¹⁹ The history of military junta rule by the Tatmadaw has created major rifts in society, with a civil war ongoing since 2021 and multiple ethnic insurgencies active since the early 1960s when the military first seized power.³²⁰ The brief constitutional democracy, which grew out of 2011–2015 reforms and ended with a military coup in 2021, created a wave of anti-junta sentiment and the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in 2021 against the military, which is heavily dominated by a Bamar Buddhist majority.³²¹

Myanmar’s brand of ethnoreligious nationalism reveals many complications: a large ethnic majority that was marginalized by British colonizers, a history of ethnic conflict and civil war after independence—albeit not immediately—as well as a heavy

³¹⁸ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 14–16.

³¹⁹ Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”; “How Myanmar’s ‘National Races’ Trumped Citizenship,” *New Mandala* (blog), May 1, 2017, <https://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-national-races-trumped-citizenship/>.

³²⁰ “Civil War in Myanmar,” Global Conflict Tracker, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/rohingya-crisis-myanmar>; “The Deadly Battles That Tipped Myanmar into Civil War – BBC News,” accessed October 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60144957>.

³²¹ “The Civil War in Myanmar”; “The Deadly Battles That Tipped Myanmar into Civil War – BBC News”; “Myanmar’s Military Is Losing Ground against Coordinated Nationwide Attacks, Buoying Opposition Hopes,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/30/myanmar-offensive-brotherhood-alliance-militia/798d728a-8fe5-11ee-95e1-edd75d825df0_story.html.

influence of the sangha, all contributing to the ethnoreligious tensions we see today.³²² Sri Lanka's history as a British colony and previously as a religiously focused monarchy, also make Myanmar an easy choice when considering an alternative case study to discuss Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism because both Myanmar and Sri Lanka share these historical parallels.

While the role of Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar is distinct, such as the ethnic and national races and the genocide of the Rohingya, there are also similarities. One such example is the way Sri Lankan social movements organized and built themselves around the already established 969 movement.³²³ Unlike Sri Lanka, however, even after Myanmar's independence in 1948, democratic politics and organizations were not firmly established.³²⁴ The Tatmadaw's role "as the protectors and purifiers of the religion in the face of hostilities" is distinct from Sri Lanka's consolidated and state run military.³²⁵ Finally, there is the question of armed ethnic groups. As Holt, describing the work of Schober and others, points out in his book on Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim crisis: "in the past fifty years of post-independent Burma, military juntas have attempted to posture against an array of ethnic minority groups with aspirations for separate states or greater autonomy."³²⁶

This chapter specifically examines historical and current pogroms against the Rohingya and discusses the development of Buddhist nationalist groups, such as Ma Ba Tha (MBT) and 969, from a historical perspective. The 969 movement was founded by monks in 2001 to boycott "Muslim businesses and patronizing Buddhist establishments

³²² Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 58–68.

³²³ International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°290 (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, 2017); Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror."

³²⁴ "Burma," in *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, November 6, 2023), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/>.

³²⁵ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 24–25; DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology*.

³²⁶ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 24–25; Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqrx.f>.

only.”³²⁷ MBT, an offshoot of 969, was founded a Buddhist monastic militant group modeled after the ethnoreligious-nationalist model of RSS and Indian Prime Minister Modi’s Hindutva party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)³²⁸ It also touches on other non-Buddhists who have experienced violence by other Buddhist groups, albeit not as frequently, in the 10-year period between 2009–2019.

The next section focuses on historical background and on the effects of British colonial rule, primordial values and historical rhetoric by both Burmese Buddhists and Rakhine Buddhists who lived in the Rakhine state close to the Rohingya Muslims. The military’s belief that they are the protector of the nation is also discussed through the lens of both ethnoreligious nationalism as well as cultural and religious narratives. The role of the sangha in both fomenting violence against Muslims, as well as those who spoke out against it, is also highlighted. Finally, the history leading up to the current Rohingya crisis is reported, combined with international narratives regarding the Rohingya genocide, as it has been characterized by both the United States and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

A. “COMMUNAL” VIOLENCE AGAINST MYANMAR’S MUSLIMS 2009–2019

According to multiple sources, the Tatmadaw has committed most of the communal violence against Myanmar’s Muslims, including the historic and most recent acts of mass murder, burning villages, and raping women and girls; as a result of the attacks, more than

³²⁷ Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 9.

³²⁸ Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 376–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1290818>; Thomas Fuller, “Extremism Rises Among Myanmar Buddhists,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/asia/extremism-rises-among-myanmar-buddhists-wary-of-muslim-minority.html>; Shashank Bengali, “In Myanmar, Hatred for Rohingya Muslims Runs so Deep That a Diplomat Called Them ‘ugly as Ogres’ — and Got Promoted,” WWRN – World-wide Religious News, December 26, 2017, <https://wwrn.org/articles/47376/>; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Moe Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/ma-ba-tha-changes-name-still-officially-illegal.html>; Mratt Kyaw Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee,” *Frontier Myanmar*, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/ma-ba-tha-ordered-to-cease-all-activities-by-state-sangha-committee>.

800,000 Rohingya Muslims fled the country in the ten years between 2009–2019.³²⁹ However, the first large-scale, recent act of violence was perpetrated by Rakhine Buddhists against Muslims in the Sittwe riots in 2012 in the Rakhine state (Arakan) after tensions fomented by the state using its own divide-and-conquer strategy.³³⁰ Other smaller incidents, enabled by this event, occurred between 2013–2015 by both Buddhist nationalist mobs, as well as the Tatmadaw in 2015, who committed violence against Kaman Muslims, requiring them to also register as “Bengalis,” a citizenship problem stemming back to the 1982 citizenship law, as discussed in the introduction.³³¹ Policy issues, such as the “four race and religious laws,” were passed in 2015 by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to particularly target Muslims and marginalize them even further in society.³³² Violence targeting the Rohingya Muslims escalated between 2016 and 2017, also reportedly carried out by the Tatmadaw army. Some 700,000 Rohingya refugees now reside in Bangladesh’s refugee camps as of November 2023.³³³

In focusing on these specific instances of communal violence, the timeframe between 2009 and 2019 is significant, not only because the Tatmadaw’s grip on power loosened, but also because the wave of Burmese power and anti-Muslim sentiment rose

³²⁹ Mahtani and Mow, “A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar’s Generals Are Unapologetic”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

³³⁰ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 7–16; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 7.

³³¹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 12; Cho Khin Maung U., 1982 Kuhnit, *Myanma Naingngantha Ubade Hnin Letywezine Saungbanya [The 1982 Burma Citizenship Law and Selected Articles]*, ed. null, vol. null, Null, 2014; Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya.”

³³² Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 10.

³³³ “Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh Need Urgent Support as Crises Multiply: UNHCR | UN News,” August 22, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139977>; Ben Westcott, Rebecca Wright, and Kocha Olarn, “Deal Signed for Rohingya to Return to Myanmar, but Details Are Scarce,” CNN, November 23, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/23/asia/rohingya-myanmar-bangladesh/index.html>; “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya in Rakhine State, Myanmar (A/HRC/40/37) (Advance Edited Version) – Myanmar,” ReliefWeb, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-situation-human-rights-0>.

significantly throughout the country during this period. Although 29 May 2008 saw the approval of a new constitution in Myanmar, it was not until 2011 when more widespread changes, enacted by the Tatmadaw, began the transition toward a more democratically run government.³³⁴ However, despite the strengthening of a nascent democracy during this period, there was a prevailing view, held by both Burmese Buddhists and Rakhine Buddhists, that Muslims, and more specifically Rohingya Muslims, are not only a threat to the stability and unity of the Burmese state, but also that they are not even citizens in Myanmar, instead Bengali usurpers who do not belong to this modern nation.³³⁵ These prevailing views created an impetus for violent action against communities seen as a threat to majoritarian values of Myanmar Buddhist nationalists.³³⁶

During the period under review, the first major violent incident against Muslims occurred in Sittwe on June 12, 2012, in reaction to allegations of rape and murder of a Burmese Buddhist woman by a Muslim man.³³⁷ Claims were spread that the woman was attacked, gang-raped, and her throat slit on May 28, 2012, with police identifying three “Bengali Muslim” or “Islam followers” who were quickly arrested, tried, and found guilty in the following days.³³⁸ Only days later on June 3, “a bus carrying Muslims through the town of Taungup, west of Ramree Island, was set upon by some 300 Rakhine Buddhists, many wielding wooden poles. Ten passengers were dragged off the bus and beaten to death.”³³⁹ These people were not Rohingya Muslims but Muslim missionaries from other parts of the country.³⁴⁰ Five days later, further violence broke out, when Rakhine Buddhists were bussed in and proceeded to set fire to Sittwe’s Nasi quarter. This attack ended “the lives of about two hundred Muslims and [left] more than 120,000 people

³³⁴ “Burma,” November 6, 2023.

³³⁵ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 9–13.

³³⁶ Holt, xiv.

³³⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 13.

³³⁸ Francis Wade, 13.

³³⁹ Francis Wade, 13–14.

³⁴⁰ Francis Wade, 14.

homeless in Sittwe.”³⁴¹ As Ko Myat, who participated in the Sittwe riots against Muslims stated, “If I don’t protect my race then it will disappear.”³⁴²

The Sittwe violence became the impetus for other violent actions to spread throughout Myanmar.³⁴³ Holt confirms “violence then spread to other parts of the country over the course of the next year: forty-three Muslims were killed in March 2013 in the central Burmese town of Meiktila.”³⁴⁴ Lashio in Shan State and Mandalay also experienced violence against Muslims, specifically between May 28–30, 2013, and then in July of 2014, widely believed to be the work of MBT and the group’s de facto leader, Ashin U Wirathu.³⁴⁵ In Lashio, at least one Muslim man was killed and many Muslim properties ruined. Although soldiers and police enforced security afterward, “1,000 Muslims were taken to Mansu Monastery” to shelter while the fires consumed three religious buildings, including a mosque, 32 shops, and a movie theater.³⁴⁶ Much like the violence in Sittwe, “the violence was sparked by reports that a Muslim man had badly burnt a Buddhist woman. State-run MRTV television said Ne Win, 48, had poured petrol over Aye Aye Win, 24, who sold fuel by the side of the road, and set her on fire.”

Less than a year later, four days of riots rocked Mandalay, “triggered by an unverified online story about an alleged raping of a Buddhist employee by her Muslim employers in a tea shop.”³⁴⁷ Mong Palantino, a journalist at The Diplomat, argues that this

³⁴¹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 7; “Muslims Killed in Attack in Burma’s Rakhine Province,” *BBC News*, June 4, 2012, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18324614>.

³⁴² Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 12.

³⁴³ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 7.

³⁴⁴ Holt, 7.

³⁴⁵ Holt, 7; Jared Ferrie, “Troops Patrol Myanmar City after Violence, Muslims Hide,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2013, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSDEE94S0HG/>; Mong Palantino, “The Meaning of the Mandalay Riots in Myanmar,” accessed December 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/the-meaning-of-the-mandalay-riots-in-myanmar/>; Poppy McPherson, “‘We Must Protect Our Country’: Extremist Buddhists Target Mandalay’s Muslims,” *The Guardian*, May 8, 2017, sec. Cities, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/08/buddhist-extremists-anti-muslim-mandalay-ma-ba-tha>.

³⁴⁶ Ferrie, “Troops Patrol Myanmar City after Violence, Muslims Hide.”

³⁴⁷ Palantino, “The Meaning of the Mandalay Riots in Myanmar.”

story may have been deliberately planned by the Young Buddhists Association, a nationalist offshoot of a former organization from the 1920s, the Young Men's Buddhist Association.³⁴⁸ Regardless of the veracity of the story, anti-Muslim sentiment continued to increase after the Mandalay riots, widespread on social media and news networks.³⁴⁹ Poppy McPherson, a journalist at The Guardian, interviewed one monk with a different perspective: Kar Wi Ya insisted that "Ma Ba Tha members were among the rioters. 'When they saw me, they went back,' he says. 'Actually, this violence was created by Ma Ba Tha.'"³⁵⁰ McPherson also states that Kar Wi Ya echoed "the commonly held belief that Ma Ba Tha has close ties to the army and was created to foment trouble ahead of the pivotal 2015 election."³⁵¹

In 2015, Ashin U Wirathu's continuous campaigning for Buddhist nationalism led to the passing of "four legislative bills placing severe restrictions on Buddhist-Muslim marriages, making conversion from one religious to another extremely difficult, limiting the number of children who might be born to women under certain demographic circumstances, and formally banning polygamy."³⁵² The USDP, which passed these laws, were a military proxy political party that ran the government prior to the 2015 November general elections, when the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the majority votes.³⁵³ These laws, combined with the 1982 Citizenship Law, continued to marginalize Muslims, restrict their movements within the country, and allowed for further hate speech to spread easily by Ashin U Wirathu, MBT and its followers, and other Buddhist groups looking to advance their majority status within the fledgling democracy. These policies and violent riots paved the way for the Tatmadaw to strike against the Rohingya.

³⁴⁸ Palatino.

³⁴⁹ McPherson, "'We Must Protect Our Country.'"

³⁵⁰ McPherson.

³⁵¹ McPherson.

³⁵² Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 10.

³⁵³ Holt, 10; McPherson, "'We Must Protect Our Country.'"

The recent instances of violence against Rohingya are said to have been started in reaction to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). A wave of violence began in October of 2016, when “a ragtag group of militants, armed basically with little more than farm implements and a few stolen guns, attacked Myanmar border stations and killed nine Burmese security guards.”³⁵⁴ This event, labeled by the Myanmar government as a terrorist attack perpetrated by ARSA, launched a massive retaliation operation in February of 2017. The Myanmar military launched a widespread campaign of violence in Rakhine state: according to Amnesty International, the Tatmadaw was responsible for killing thousands of Rohingya men, women, and children, burning villages, and raping women and girls.³⁵⁵ *The Washington Post* reported that “the Myanmar military and Suu Kyi’s government were quick to deny allegations of ethnic cleansing...; she reported that ‘terrorist activities’ were the initial cause of the events that led to the crisis in Rakhine state and that the threat of terrorism remained.”³⁵⁶ ARSA, and anyone associated with them, were labeled as terrorists according to the Office for the President of the Republic of Myanmar.³⁵⁷

A second wave of violence occurred in August 2017, when another attack against border guards and an Army installation was orchestrated by small groups of fighters.³⁵⁸ ARSA denied responsibility for this attack; however, the damage was already done. As Holt states, “around 690,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in late 2017, in fear of what they call the Buddhist militias, meaning Rakhine Buddhists, and the ‘Buddhist army,’ or the

³⁵⁴ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 12.

³⁵⁵ “Why Rohingya Refugees Shouldn’t Be Sent Back to Myanmar,” Amnesty International, November 15, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/11/why-rohingya-refugees-shouldnt-be-sent-back-to-myanmar/>; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 12.

³⁵⁶ Mahtani and Mow, “A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar’s Generals Are Unapologetic.”

³⁵⁷ “Tatmadaw Supports Amnesty International’s Reveal of ARSA Terrorists’ Massacre | Myanmar President Office,” accessed March 22, 2019, <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-8801>.

³⁵⁸ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 12–13.

Tatmadaw. Hundreds of Rohingya villages, approximately 350 of them, were burned down, and untold numbers of men, women, and children were raped and murdered.”³⁵⁹

By 2018, Aung San Suu Kyi’s continued resistance to prosecute the military forces involved, as well as their public lack of remorse for the attacks, made reconciliation efforts highly unlikely.³⁶⁰ While Myanmar commissioned an inquiry into the events leading up and during the most recent attacks on Rohingya, the commission chair “found “no evidence” to support allegations of human rights abuses in the four months since it officially opened its investigations.”³⁶¹ More reliably, according to Human Rights Watch, the government also systematically bulldozed over 55 villages in Rakhine, where Rohingya Muslims had recently fled from violence and arson.³⁶² Satellite imagery highlights the complete demolition of buildings and vegetation in locations where the UN investigated crimes against humanity.³⁶³ The UN Independent Fact Finding Mission announced in 2019 that little progress had been made since its initial report: “human rights violations have not stopped, nor are victims seeing justice. There is an acute need to continue to thoroughly document the patterns of violations being committed, as we speak.”³⁶⁴

Efforts to begin repatriating Rohingya refugees occurred when Myanmar, China, and Bangladesh agreed to discuss the repatriation process to begin taking back certain

³⁵⁹ Holt, 12–13.

³⁶⁰ Mahtani and Mow, “A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar’s Generals Are Unapologetic”; Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “From Peace Icon to Pariah: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Fall from Grace,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/23/aung-san-suu-kyi-fall-from-grace-myanmar>.

³⁶¹ Human Rights Watch | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, and NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700, “Myanmar: Disband Panel on Crimes Against Rohingya,” Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/19/myanmar-disband-panel-crimes-against-rohingya>.

³⁶² “Burma: Scores of Rohingya Villages Bulldozed,” Human Rights Watch, February 23, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/23/burma-scores-rohingya-villages-bulldozed>.

³⁶³ “Burma.”

³⁶⁴ “UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar Advances Accountability and Initiates New Investigations.”

numbers of Rohingya to their original villages.³⁶⁵ Beginning in early 2018, Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed to start the repatriation process for the Rohingya: the Myanmar government created a transit camp to house 30,000 individuals before they would be “allowed to return to their place of origin or somewhere close to their place of origin.”³⁶⁶ Repatriation was to begin in January of 2018; however, Bangladesh postponed the date until further verification of those selected for repatriation were confirmed.³⁶⁷ Then, in November of 2018, the President of Myanmar’s website reported that the camps had been inspected and were ready for Rohingya processing and resettlement.³⁶⁸ Al Jazeera reported that many Rohingya refugees wanted to go back to their homes, “but only if Myanmar gives them legal recognition and their safety is guaranteed by an international body.”³⁶⁹

Although over 2,000 individuals were slated to return, all repatriation efforts were delayed due to international outrage at the prospect of unlawful repatriation.³⁷⁰ China, acting as a mediator, introduced a three-step plan to repatriate the Rohingya, which included a ceasefire, an agreement by Myanmar and Bangladesh “to find a mutually acceptable condition for the Rohingya refugees to return, and finally a long-term solution to deal with the poverty in the region.”³⁷¹

Although Kipgen argues that the first phase, a ceasefire and a more peaceful situation in the region, occurred throughout 2018, the United Nations report by the independent fact-finding mission painted a different picture: continued civilian violence and arson against Rohingya were still prevalent in the Rakhine state, and the Rohingya

³⁶⁵ Nasir Uddin, “Ongoing Rohingya Repatriation Efforts Are Doomed to Failure,” Al Jazeera, November 22, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ongoing-rohingya-repatriation-efforts-doomed-failure-181122124753014.html>; Nehginpao Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis: The Centrality of Identity and Citizenship,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2019): 61–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2019.1575019>.

³⁶⁶ Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis”; “Myanmar (Burma).”

³⁶⁷ Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis.”

³⁶⁸ “Union Ministers Inspect Repatriation Readiness at Reception Centre | Myanmar President Office,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-9129>.

³⁶⁹ Uddin, “Ongoing Rohingya Repatriation Efforts Are Doomed to Failure.”

³⁷⁰ “Myanmar (Burma).”

³⁷¹ Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis.”

continue to flee into Bangladesh, albeit in lower numbers.³⁷² While there have been some cases of resettlement in Canada and the United States, as well as some refugees in nearby countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand), most continue to live in and around Cox's Bazaar, the closest Bangladeshi province to Rakhine state.³⁷³ Bangladesh currently houses the majority of Rohingya from Myanmar with NGO and UNHCR support. As of 2023, almost 1 million Rohingya refugees live in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the largest refugee camp in the world.³⁷⁴

Overall, both the Tatmadaw and MBT supporters, including some Rakhine Buddhists, committed heinous violent acts against Muslims between 2009 and 2019. With each attack, mob, and massacre, tensions increased, hate speech circulated via social media, and MBT gained traction in the country and around the world. The 969 and MBT movements were outlawed in 2017, but they returned to their activities under another name: the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. They were again ordered by the NLD and MHN to cease all actions in 2019.³⁷⁵ Muslims interviewed in Mandalay by McPherson considered that “extremist Buddhist nationalism [is] a multi-headed hydra that, no matter how many heads you cut off, is liable to keep coming back.”³⁷⁶

³⁷² “UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar Advances Accountability and Initiates New Investigations”; “WFP Rohingya Refugee Response: Monthly Snapshot (February 2019),” 28 Feb 2019, ReliefWeb, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/wfp-rohingya-refugee-response-monthly-snapshot-february-2019>.

³⁷³ “Bangladesh: Cox's Bazar Refugee Response (4W) – as of 5 March 2019 – Bangladesh,” ReliefWeb, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/map/bangladesh/bangladesh-cox-s-bazar-refugee-response-4w-5-march-2019>.

³⁷⁴ “Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Crisis,” United Nations Population Fund, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/coxs-bazar-bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-crisis>.

³⁷⁵ Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee”; “Ultrnationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization,” Radio Free Asia, accessed December 7, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ultranationalist-myanmar-monk-group-07302019164233.html>.

³⁷⁶ McPherson, “We Must Protect Our Country.”

B. THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY ON RECENT DYNAMICS

The current tensions between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar have roots in the colonial period. This section also explores the sangha's role in policy formation and the rise of ethnoreligious nationalism after Burmese independence from the British.

1. British Colonialism (1824–1948), Ethnic Identity, and Demographics

British colonialism, combined with a monarchical sangha who were ousted by the British, enabled ethnic and religious upheaval in the years before and after Burmese independence in 1948.³⁷⁷ As a country with hundreds of languages, ethnic groups, and various religious practices, Myanmar, then Burma, was ruled by the British as an appendage to British India. Because of the ways in which the British took over the land piecemeal via three Anglo-Burman wars in the 19th century, the ousting of the sangha as part of the ruling class, as well as the disregard for existing ethnoreligious power dynamics in the country, enabled the rise of Buddhist nationalism and planted the seeds of communal tensions.

According to a 2014 census of Myanmar, Muslims make up 4.3% of the population, while Buddhists are the majority religion at 87.2%, followed by Christians (6.2%), Animists (0.8%), Hindu (0.5%), other (0.2%), and none (0.1%) in that order.³⁷⁸ As a note, the CIA World Factbook states that the Muslim population also accounts for “an estimate of the non-enumerated population for the Rakhine state,” however, “as of December 2019, Muslims probably make up less than 3% of Burma's total population due to the large outmigration of the Rohingya population since 2017.”³⁷⁹ According to Wade, some Muslims were present in what is now Myanmar for at least one thousand years; they first arrived “in boats, as traders from India and Persia who set up a string of small colonies along the western and southern coastlines.”³⁸⁰ Much later, during the colonial period, other

³⁷⁷ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

³⁷⁸ “Burma,” November 6, 2023.

³⁷⁹ “Burma.”

³⁸⁰ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim Other*, 17.

Muslims arrived as workers from other parts of British India. However, most Buddhists today in Myanmar believe that Muslims living in the country are Bengalis and should be ousted from the country.³⁸¹

The first kingdom that the British took over was Mrauk U: “the British occupied Arakan [province] in 1824 A.D., annexing it to former British India,” and began to use Burma to add wealth to an already massive empire.³⁸² Holt states that at the height of its power, Mrauk U “commanded what is now western and upper Burma and the eastern India states, as well as some of what is now Bangladesh” and ruled for approximately three hundred years.³⁸³ Mrauk U was also a center of trade as well as a cultural and religious center for Buddhist values, as religious history and oral tradition show that the Buddha himself visited the king and an image in his likeness was created.³⁸⁴ However, it was also a place where Muslims were a part of the religious fabric of the kingdom. During that time, “Muslims had been close to the centres of power, and the country had on the whole enjoyed a pluralistic society.”³⁸⁵ The Arakan province was ruled separately for 40 years until the rest of the country was taken over by the British in 1885, when the western border was erased to allow the flow of people and commerce from British India into its other colonies.³⁸⁶ The separate rule of the Arakan (later, Rakhine) state enabled the later view by Buddhist ethnonationalists that these people were ethnically and religiously different from Burmese.

³⁸¹ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other."*

³⁸² M.A. Tahir Tha, *A Short History of Rohingya and Kamans of Burma*, ed. Mohd. Ashraf Alam, trans. A.F.K. Jilani (Bangladesh: Institute of Arakan Studies, 1998), https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Ba_Tha-Kaladan-News&Network-Myanmar-2007-09-13-A_Short_History_of_Rohingya_and_Kamans_of_Burma-en.pdf. chapter 1.

³⁸³ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 15–16.

³⁸⁴ Holt, 15–17.

³⁸⁵ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 26.

³⁸⁶ Anthony Ware and Costas Laotides, *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 18–19.

The primarily Bamar kingdom, begun in the 11th century by King Anawaratha, played a role in the Buddhist nationalist values that arose during British rule.³⁸⁷ Anawaratha, and the monarchical line which ended in 1885, considered themselves bodhisattvas “on the path to Awakening, and sought to institutionalise Buddhism as the de facto state religion” of the empire.³⁸⁸ In this belief, the king became the ordained representative of the Buddha on earth and brought with him the sangha to ensure the monks gave legitimacy to the monarchy.³⁸⁹ The British, by ousting the king, effectively displaced the sangha as well, upending the belief system that the Burmese Buddhists had held onto for centuries.

Ethnic minorities were propped up as local and regional administrators during this time, exacerbating the ethno-religious and communal divisions within the population. Other ethnic policies were implemented for minorities and an economic depression furthered divisions between class, religious, and ethnic groups.³⁹⁰ The British placed themselves at the top of the pyramid of administrative, economic, and social order, using a “divide and conquer” technique to rule both the plains and hill peoples differently: the hill peoples (primarily ethnic minorities) were centralized and ruled administratively, while the plains people (majority Burmese ethnic group) were ruled through local laws and traditions.³⁹¹ The Burmese were not given proper authority to rule themselves and instead relegated to lower tasks within the central government.³⁹²

³⁸⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 21–23.

³⁸⁸ Francis Wade, 22.

³⁸⁹ Francis Wade, 23.

³⁹⁰ Michael Edward Brown, Sumit Ganguly, and Rabindranath Tagore Chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations and Professor of Political Science Sumit Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (MIT Press, 1997) Josef Silverstein, “Chapter 4, Fifty Years of Failure in Burma,” 171–3. ; “Myanmar – The Initial Impact of Colonialism,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar>.

³⁹¹ Brown, Ganguly, and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* Silverstein, 172.; “Physical Map of Burma,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.maphill.com/burma/maps/physical-map/>.

³⁹² Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

In the 1920s, nationalist groups arose to bring back Buddhism politically. The Young Men's Buddhist Association was one group "at the forefront of the first major wave of independence agitation" to not only gain independence from the British but to create a place for Buddhism to thrive again and regain its high status lost under the British.³⁹³ After the British ended their rule in January of 1948, Burmese leaders and ethnic communities worked together for over a decade to form an independent federalist state. By the late 1950s, ethnic conflict that was previously suppressed became more exclusionary in nature.³⁹⁴ Overall, in addition to overthrowing multiple kingdoms during the three Anglo-Burman wars within the current borders of Myanmar, British colonialism planted the seeds of communal violence by dividing ethnic groups and ousting the sangha from its former place of power.³⁹⁵ These issues became grievances and narratives of siege that the sangha and Buddhist nationalists later used to encourage violence against non-Buddhists.

2. Religion, Sangha, and State Interaction

The sangha itself is a product of Theravada Buddhism, and, just as in Sri Lanka, it was deeply entrenched in the political life of the kingdom prior to colonialism. It is the only institutional hierarchy to survive colonization after the final Anglo-Burmese war in 1885; it has both longevity and credibility as a primary authority on all religious and political matters.³⁹⁶ As previously noted, the sangha was summarily displaced from monarchical power when the British ruled, but regained momentum and support during the movement for independence from the British.³⁹⁷ In addition, much of the sangha did not support the socialist junta and its various regimes between the coup in 1962 and 2011, such

³⁹³ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 24.

³⁹⁴ Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific.*

³⁹⁵ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 19; Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict*, 14–34.

³⁹⁶ Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma," 55.

³⁹⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other."*

as the State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), even going so far as protesting against them.³⁹⁸

Nevertheless, all Burmese governments since independence in 1948 have catered to the sangha “for popular support, religious blessing, and political legitimation.”³⁹⁹ To further support the importance of the sangha to political life in Myanmar, these governments have also had to contend with the power of the sangha to mobilize people. Schober further explains how governments have used Buddhist ritual to legitimate political power in times of constitutional crisis or in the absence of a national constitution altogether. He describes how governments have used Buddhist authority or “Buddhification” to rally nationalist sentiments among the general population, to foster an ideological Buddhist nationalism, to integrate Christian, animist hill tribes and other ethnic minorities into the administration of the nation-state, and to put pressure on non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism. Most significantly, Buddhist nationalist sentiments have been invoked to deflect public attention away from other crises, including agricultural shortages, banking failures, and impending anti-government demonstrations.⁴⁰⁰

These issues grew during the economic and political 1988 uprising, when SLORC massacred thousands of protestors. The sangha was heavily involved in organizing the protests, allowing monasteries to become sanctuaries.⁴⁰¹ Because monks also led protests, organized riots and rallies, and relayed information to others, the Myanmar government held them accountable, imposing “rigid and comprehensive reforms on all religious organizations in Burma.”⁴⁰² Schober argues, “religious reforms since 1988 have brought the Buddhist sangha under the authority of the modern state,” making it easier since then to control and politically motivate the sangha towards the state’s own goals, military and otherwise.⁴⁰³ The monks who did not flee were more compliant to state demands.

³⁹⁸ Schober, “Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma,” 54–56.

³⁹⁹ Schober, 55.

⁴⁰⁰ Schober, 55.

⁴⁰¹ Schober, 56.

⁴⁰² Schober, 56.

⁴⁰³ Schober, 56–57.

Since 1988, other events led the sangha to become further entrenched under state control. In 1997, anti-Muslims riots, in which Buddhist monks targeted Burmese Muslims, was one such event.⁴⁰⁴ Rumors of food shortages and an alleged rape of a Burmese girl by a Muslim man was the impetus for attacks against Muslims, the burning of Muslims' homes and shops, and the destruction of mosques and other property by Buddhist monks.⁴⁰⁵ While some monks argued that violence was not the answer, others believed they were doing the right thing by protesting and enacting violence against Muslims.⁴⁰⁶ Some Rohingya Muslims began to flee to Bangladesh amidst the rampant violence.⁴⁰⁷ Schober describes how "facilitators of violence spread rumors and exploit complex cultural and religious sentiments to accomplish objectives that emerge from entirely different political configurations."⁴⁰⁸ According to Schober and other observers, the deep collusion between the state and the sangha represents the nature of religious identity and the use of Muslims as a scapegoat to avoid broader grievances dividing Myanmar's citizens and the state.⁴⁰⁹

Buddhist monks, including Ashin U Wirathu, founded the 969 movement in 2001 to boycott "Muslim businesses and patronizing Buddhist establishments only."⁴¹⁰ MBT, an offshoot of 969, was also founded by Buddhist monks as a Buddhist monastic militant group modeled after the RSS and Indian Prime Minister Modi's Hindutva party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); however, since the Myanmar government technically outlawed both 969 and MBT, they renamed themselves the Buddha Dhamma Charity

⁴⁰⁴ Schober, 58–60.

⁴⁰⁵ Schober, 58–60.

⁴⁰⁶ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁴⁰⁷ Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁴⁰⁸ Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma," 58–60.

⁴⁰⁹ Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁴¹⁰ Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 9.

Foundation (which has since also been “outlawed”).⁴¹¹ Although an arrest warrant was ordered for Ashin U Wirathu in Yangon in 2019 for his incendiary hate speech against Muslims, he has yet to be taken into custody, which suggests that he enjoys state protection.⁴¹² Unlike Sri Lanka, where Buddhist monks are allowed to run and hold parliamentary office, Myanmar does not allow monks to run for office, although they may campaign for and against political parties and even the military, who were reserved 25 percent of the seats in parliament.⁴¹³

3. Ethnoreligious Nationalism and Minority Rights

Ethnoreligious nationalism in Myanmar is similar to Sri Lanka, where one dominant ethnoreligious group controls much of the country’s politics, parties, and institutions. The Burmese ethnic group makes up 68 percent of the total population and Burmese has been the official language since 1989, although other minority ethnic groups use their own language within their own territorial regions.⁴¹⁴ In addition, the major religion is Buddhism, as almost 88 percent of the population practices it in some form, mostly within the Theravada tradition.⁴¹⁵ The Bamar (or Burmese) ethnic group asserts that they have always been in the region, worked to defend their way of life from British colonialism while other groups sided with the British and “sold out” their culture, and, after

⁴¹¹ Schissler, Walton, and Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions”; Fuller, “Extremism Rises Among Myanmar Buddhists,” June 20, 2013; Bengali, “In Myanmar, Hatred for Rohingya Muslims Runs so Deep That a Diplomat Called Them ‘ugly as Ogres’ — and Got Promoted”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal”; Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee.”

⁴¹² Joshua Carroll, “Myanmar: Arrest Warrant Issued for Anti-Muslim Monk Wirathu,” Al Jazeera, May 29, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/myanmar-arrest-warrant-issued-anti-muslim-monk-wirathu-190529051810338.html>.

⁴¹³ Htet Kaung Lin, “Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be ‘Worshipped,’” The Irrawaddy, May 6, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/firebrand-monk-calls-military-parliamentarians-worshipped.html>; Central Intelligence Agency, “East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma”; Hnin Yadana Zaw and Antoni Slodkowski, “Myanmar’s Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election,” Reuters, November 2, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-monks-insight-idUSKCN0SQ1AJ20151103>.

⁴¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma.”

⁴¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency.

welcoming the Japanese during WWII to help fight for independence, later protected and defended the country against Japanese occupation during WWII.⁴¹⁶

Besides primordialism, an instrumentalist narrative also lives within Burmese nationalism in the form of self-determination and entitlement.⁴¹⁷ Cheesman asserts that the term *taingyintha* not only describes the “national races” which comprise former Burma, but is also “an exemplary term of state: a contrivance for political inclusion and exclusion, for political eligibility and domination.”⁴¹⁸ This term exists in the political sector and in the Myanmar constitution, but it only applies to those who are recognized as citizens, and in the Burmese narrative, the Rohingya are not citizens.⁴¹⁹ Since Burmese Buddhist extremists believe they are under siege by outsiders seeking to destroy their homeland, allowing the Rohingya and other Muslims to live in Myanmar would, to them, be inconceivable.⁴²⁰

Another issue from 2009–2019 related to nationalism and state governance was the previous nearly five decades of military rule and the following weak democracy that began to emerge in 2011. In the decades prior to the 2011–2015 democratic transition, the military government suppressed any sentiment against the government and aggressively controlled the media, which limited independent thought and organization. The military recruited mainly from the Burmese ethnic group because many of the ethnic minority groups had

⁴¹⁶ Brooke A. Treadwell, “Downplaying Difference: Representations of Diversity in Contemporary Burmese Schools and Educational Equity,” in *Equity, Opportunity and Education in Postcolonial Southeast Asia*, ed. Cynthia Joseph and Julie Matthews (New York: Routledge, 2014), 32–57; Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁴¹⁷ O’Leary, “Instrumentalist Theories of Nationalism.”

⁴¹⁸ Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya.”

⁴¹⁹ Cheesman; “Myanmar_Constitution-2008-En.Pdf,” accessed December 29, 2019, https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf; “National Constitutions, Draft Constitutions, Amendments and Announcements (Texts),” Online Burma/Myanmar Library, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/category/national-constitutions-draft-constitutions-amendments-and-announcements-texts>.

⁴²⁰ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

their own militias fighting against the central government.⁴²¹ After the NLD became the dominant party through elections, its appeasement strategy was to let the military continue to govern in multiple forms, including the 25 percent appointed to parliament each election season.⁴²²

High levels of corruption, insecurity, and state-led violence against civilians existed throughout the country prior to the resumption of civil war in 2021, levying major grievances against the Tatmadaw and other security forces by multiple groups.⁴²³ Even in 2023, the central government is almost nonexistent in some areas, although themes of nationalism are alive and well throughout the provinces. To control the nationalist narrative, 969, MBT, and the central government flooded social media accounts, as well as prevented nonstate media from publishing anti-government sentiment or facts, including those involving the Rohingya crisis.

In 2019, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn Myanmar for its human rights abuses against the Rohingya, while the Myanmar UN ambassador declared this action a “double standard” which favored a “discriminatory application of human rights norms.”⁴²⁴ Myanmar’s ambassador stated that “the resolution will sow seeds of distrust and will create further polarization of different communities in the region.”⁴²⁵ Aung San Suu Kyi’s vehement refusal to prosecute military members or officials who served or are still serving in the Rakhine province exacerbated the conflict.⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Matthew J. Walton, “Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 889–910, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.6.889>; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁴²² Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 66–67.

⁴²³ Walton, “Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma.”

⁴²⁴ Edith M. Lederer, “UN Condemns Human Rights Abuses against Myanmar’s Rohingya,” Associated Press, December 10, 2019, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/un-condemns-human-rights-abuses-against-myanmars-rohingya/ar-BBYph3g?ocid=spartanntp>.

⁴²⁵ Lederer.

⁴²⁶ Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html>.

As populism and nationalist sentiment among Buddhist laity and bhikkhu rose throughout the country prior to the 2021 Tatmadaw coup, ethnonationalist groups also asserted their opposing narratives, furthering hatred and corruption at the lowest levels of government. These groups were fed anti-Muslim narratives on social media platforms by both the Tatmadaw and MBT.⁴²⁷ Much of the international conversation has shifted in recent years to whether the Tatmadaw can be replaced by a civilian government and the renewed civil war. The Rohingya crisis has taken a backseat to the violence between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic militias, as well as weakened Burmese-led efforts to restore democracy.⁴²⁸

4. History of Pogroms against the Rohingya in Myanmar

Since the overthrow of the nascent post-independence, democratic government by the Tatmadaw in 1962, Rohingya faced unfair citizenship laws driven by narratives spread by the central government. Holt argues that these citizenship laws and related persecution by the state created mass exoduses of Rohingya from Myanmar in the 1960s and also in 1982, when the military junta declared the 1982 Citizenship Law to require new documentation for the Rohingya, who were then excluded “from among 135 other ethnic groups deemed ‘indigenous’ and thereby eligible for full citizenship.”⁴²⁹ Valid reports of repeat, massive violent acts against them in the form of raping, pillaging, setting fire to homes, and bulldozing entire villages, among others, indicate that the central government of Myanmar, whether junta or weak democracy, has systematically terrorized the “Bengalis” for half a century and cannot be trusted.⁴³⁰

Sara Su, “Update on Myanmar,” Facebook, August 15, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/08/update-on-myanmar/>; “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook”; Maya Kosoff, “Facebook’s Hate-Speech Problem May Be Bigger Than It Realized,” *Vanity Fair*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/08/facebooks-hate-speech-problem-may-be-bigger-than-it-realized>; Hanks, “SPLC”; Htet Naing Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity: Military,” *The Irrawaddy*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-necessity-military.html>.

⁴²⁸ “The Deadly Battles That Tipped Myanmar into Civil War – BBC News”; “Civil War in Myanmar.”

⁴²⁹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 12.

⁴³⁰ Selth, “Burma’s Muslims and the War on Terror”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

Citizenship laws are part and parcel to how governments control populations because they legally define who is allowed to be a citizen of that state and, in many places, the rights granted. For example, part of Myanmar's law states that unless both parents are citizens of Myanmar, the child is not a citizen. Myanmar offers no path to citizenship through naturalization.⁴³¹ Despite this, the Rohingya were likely a part of the Arakan kingdom for centuries, "since Arab traders first settled on the Arakan coast plying their vocations more than a thousand years ago."⁴³² This understanding of how Muslims arrived and participated in Kandy and Arakan kingdoms for centuries is similar, as are later state-based narratives about economic grievances against Muslims. In the case of Myanmar, the state claims that Rohingya migration is much more recent, when Bengalis and other Muslims moved to Myanmar for agricultural and service work during British rule, thus justifying their exclusion from citizenship.⁴³³

Azeem Ibrahim argued in 2015 that "[the Rohingya] face a slow-motion genocide. And it is at this exact moment in time that this issue needs to be brought to the attention of the international community. This slow-motion genocide may tip over into a complete massacre at the slightest trigger."⁴³⁴ Unfortunately, the Rohingya have faced discrimination, rape, and death much earlier than 2015. Pogroms against Rohingya ensued starting in the 1960s. Early campaigns against the Rohingya were directly carried out by the Tatmadaw, who conducted "at least thirteen major armed operations...since 1948."⁴³⁵ Widespread violent operations took place in 1975, 1978, 1989, 1991–1992, and 2002.⁴³⁶ Southeast Asia expert Selth found that clearance operations were directed by the General Ne Win government:

⁴³¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "East Asia/Southeast Asia: Burma."

⁴³² Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 10.

⁴³³ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Brown and Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*.

⁴³⁴ Azeem Ibrahim, "The Rohingya: A Preview to the next Genocide of Our Time," WWRN – World-wide Religious News, May 11, 2016, <https://wwrn.org/articles/45764/>.

⁴³⁵ Selth, "Burma's Muslims and the War on Terror."

⁴³⁶ Selth, 111.

In 1975 about 15,000 Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh to escape persecution. In 1978 a massive military operation forced another 200,000 Rohingyas to follow them. This operation included the forced relocation of Muslim villagers and was accompanied by widespread looting, rape, arson, and the desecration of mosques. The regime later blamed these depredations on ‘rampaging Bengali mobs.’⁴³⁷

Although the Rohingya were eventually resettled in Arakan (Rakhine) State, “similar operations were staged in 1989, 1991–92, and again in 2002,” with major human rights violations occurring then as well.⁴³⁸ The 1987 operation, called Operation *Nagamin*, or Dragon King, and the 1991 operation, called *Pyi Thaya*, or Clean and Beautiful Nation, highlights just how much the Tatmadaw and junta officials considered the Rohingya a threat to their nation.⁴³⁹ Unlike other parts of Burma, the Rakhine Province has had a majority of Muslims residing there, while other provinces contain a much smaller contingent of Muslims and other religious groups.

Finally, because of the Rohingya’s fleeing to Bangladesh in 1982, and then subsequently returning to their villages as a result of repatriation, it exacerbated the state narrative of threat and terrorism from outsiders.⁴⁴⁰ Due to the government’s usage of hate-based narratives and labeling of the Rohingya—which means Arakanese in the eastern Bengali dialect—as Bengalis, “the understanding of the Rohingya Muslims as recent illegal border jumpers has now become somewhat standard in many current Burmese and Arakanese narratives.”⁴⁴¹ Repatriation efforts into the end of 2019 were bleak. Rohingya refugees have refused to repatriate at least three times since the initial request.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁷ Selth, 111–12.

⁴³⁸ Selth, 111–12.

⁴³⁹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Selth, “Burma’s Muslims and the War on Terror.”

⁴⁴⁰ Selth, “Burma’s Muslims and the War on Terror.”

⁴⁴¹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 10–13.

⁴⁴² Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”; Bengali, “In Myanmar, Hatred for Rohingya Muslims Runs so Deep That a Diplomat Called Them ‘ugly as Ogres’ — and Got Promoted.”

State grievances consist of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacking outposts and killing some military members or security guards, as well as being responsible for the death of “ninety-nine Hindus living in two rural villages of rural Maungdaw” in 2017 (also in Rakhine province). Yet, these alleged attacks were conducted *after* the Myanmar government contained Rohingya Muslims within their own villages in apartheid-like conditions in 2012.⁴⁴³ They were “restricted to no more than two children per family, left without medical or educational facilities, bereft of legal counsel, and denied freedom of movement,” all while many did not have legal citizenship or resident cards allowing for their free movement throughout the country.⁴⁴⁴ After using the military so forcefully, the new NLD government placed blame on a few “bad eggs,” as Suu Kyi did in 2018, while legitimizing the pogroms as responses to illegal aliens and terrorist attacks.⁴⁴⁵

In conclusion, communal violence between Rohingya Muslims and Burmese Buddhists arose in the years after Burmese independence and the 1962 military coup. Contributing factors were British divide-and-conquer tactics, the displacement of the sangha during colonial times, and subsequent reintegration of the sangha in the 40 years of military junta rule. Burmese Buddhist nationalism became the primary mobilizing tool of the leaders of Myanmar, although the nominal state policy under General Ne Win’s military dictatorship was the integration of 135 national races via the 1982 citizenship law.⁴⁴⁶ Once the Tatmadaw began to relinquish some powers to a democratically elected government starting in 2011, the only way to continue the narrative that Buddhism was under attack was to blame an aggressive, misplaced other: Muslims throughout Myanmar and specifically the Rohingya. Evidence suggests that Rohingya have been heavily targeted by the Tatmadaw for years since the 1962 coup. And, as the next chapter suggests, MBT arose out of the military’s pressure to gain support from Myanmar Burmese Buddhists and to exclude other ethnic groups.

⁴⁴³ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis*, 12–14.

⁴⁴⁴ Holt, 12.

⁴⁴⁵ Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations.”

⁴⁴⁶ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis*, 27.

V. MA BA THA IN MYANMAR

While the last chapter discussed the role of ethnoreligious Burmese Buddhist nationalism, this chapter discusses the social movement group Ma Ba Tha (MBT), its organization, and its elements by applying social movement theory. The influence of British colonialism, the sangha's high status in and among the state, a Burmese centered military, and its precise selection of ethnic races, or *taingyintha*, all enabled Burmese Buddhist nationalism's firm hold in the national discourse.⁴⁴⁷ Although the movements have changed names multiple times in the last 15 years, Buddhist nationalist social movements have not lost their fervor, regardless of the bans placed by the previously run National League for Democracy (NLD) government on the 969 movement and MBT to cease all operations.⁴⁴⁸

In the following sections, I expand on the history and foundation of MBT and its grievances, resources, framing, and political opportunity, aided and enabled by the state. Like Sri Lanka, government narratives helped shape 969 and MBT. However, Myanmar's particular history of military rule creates an interesting juxtaposition to Sri Lanka and its Buddhist nationalist movement, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).⁴⁴⁹ Unlike Sri Lanka, the Tatmadaw's history of five decades of military dictatorship influenced political discourse between 2011–2020. When the state was controlled by the Tatmadaw, MBT was welcomed and praised; however, when the NLD controlled the government, MBT and Ashin U Wirathu were banned from discourse.⁴⁵⁰ The military coup in 2021 again transformed the

⁴⁴⁷ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict*.

⁴⁴⁸ Moe, "Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal"; Thu, "Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee."

⁴⁴⁹ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 209–25.

⁴⁵⁰ Thu, "Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee."

way the state was involved in MBT's mobilization of grievances, resources, and framing.⁴⁵¹

The seeds of MBT date to the 1920s and 1930s, where “the rallying cry of ‘Amyo, Batha, Thathana!’ spoke to a need for the homogenisation of Myanmar society after decades of corrosive foreign rule.”⁴⁵² The term means “race, language/religion, and Sasana the teachings of the Buddha” and were “the three pivots which Myanmar society revolved, each one as inviolable as the other.”⁴⁵³ In *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, Francis Wade further explains that this cry was printed on pamphlets and spread throughout major cities in the 1930s, implying “that the independence movement would be a Bamar- [and Buddhist-] centric one.”⁴⁵⁴ After fledgling attempts to form an independent state that respected multiculturalism, the military took hold of the same Burmese Buddhist nationalism, making the ideology their political focus:

The notion of ethnic and religious superiority promoted by the Bamar Buddhist nationalists of the independence movement was seized upon by the military when it took power in 1962...All it took was a paranoid clique of generals to further manipulate lines of difference so that it could sell to the population the idea that Myanmar was still, long after the British left, infested with internal enemies. The quest for national unity became one of national uniformity, with the military seeking to assimilate vast swathes of the population into the Bamar Buddhist core – all the better to create a nation of one voice, one blood.⁴⁵⁵

MBT arose in 2013 during the 2011–2015 transition to democracy, with Ashin U Wirathu as the de facto leader. Its predecessor, the 969 movement, was formed in 2012 and called on all Buddhists in Myanmar to boycott Muslim-owned businesses.⁴⁵⁶ Members of

⁴⁵¹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity.”

⁴⁵² Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 30.

⁴⁵³ Francis Wade, 29.

⁴⁵⁴ Francis Wade, 29–30.

⁴⁵⁵ Francis Wade, 32.

⁴⁵⁶ Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal”; Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity.”

969 formed MBT one year later, rebranding it with the ethnonationalist name, the Association for Protection of Race and Religion, or Ma Ba Tha.⁴⁵⁷

MBT has held many names in the last fifteen years: 969, Ma Ba Tha, Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, and most recently, the Buddha Dhamma Prahita Foundation, or the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation.⁴⁵⁸ Regardless of the name, anti-Muslim ethnonationalism has been sustained, steeped in rhetoric, fear, and worry that the Bamar Buddhist race and culture will be eliminated if Muslims are allowed to continue in Myanmar.⁴⁵⁹ Although Ashin U Wirathu and MBT were successful in moving the state to approve its four race and religion laws, particularly targeting Muslims on “interfaith marriage, birth spacing, polygamy and conversion, the row between Ma Ba Tha and the National League for Democracy (NLD) government erupted when Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein described the group [MBT] as ‘unnecessary’ while addressing a gathering of Myanmar residents in Singapore in June 2016.”⁴⁶⁰

MBT and its rhetoric, particularly by founder, leader, and monk Ashin U Wirathu, have been banned on multiple occasions by the both the Ma Ha Na (State Sangha Committee) and the NLD-backed democratic state between 2016–2020, although at times half-heartedly by Aung San Suu Kyi and other officials.⁴⁶¹ Still, Wirathu spent seven years in prison for his incendiary rhetoric against Muslims in Myanmar. He has claimed that “‘taking care of our own religion and race is more important than democracy.’”⁴⁶² He also called “on Buddhists to fraternize only among themselves and shun people of other faiths” to protect Buddhism and the Myanmar way of life.⁴⁶³ Wirathu insists that “about 90% of

⁴⁵⁷ Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal.”

⁴⁵⁸ Moe.

⁴⁵⁹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim Other*, 1–6.

⁴⁶⁰ Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal.”

⁴⁶¹ Moe; Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity”; “Ultrnationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization”; Hannah Beech and Saw Nang, “He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/asia/myanmar-wirathu-monk-buddhism.html>.

⁴⁶² Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

⁴⁶³ Beech.

Muslims in Burma are ‘radical, bad people.’”⁴⁶⁴ Although MBT claims it is not a political entity, the incendiary language that Wirathu and his followers use to describe their grievances against Muslims is more hate speech than a list of grievances.⁴⁶⁵

Just as the weak NLD disapproved of MBT in the media and also officially outlawed 969, MBT, and all other iterations of the social movement, the consistently powerful Tatmadaw instead approved of MBT, supported it monetarily, and attended rallies held by Ashin U Wirathu and MBT supporters between 2016 and 2020.⁴⁶⁶ By Aung San Suu Kyi’s actions in refusing to prosecute the military’s pogroms against the Rohingya in 2017, as well as allowing them to control nearly all movement throughout the country (and keeping previous undemocratic laws on the books), she allowed the Tatmadaw to continue supporting MBT and other Burmese Buddhist nationalist groups.

In turn, this ensured that MBT and Ashin U Wirathu would continue their anti-Muslim rhetoric.⁴⁶⁷ They were still allowed to proselytize and use rhetoric to persuade the majority Buddhists to fight against the Rohingya and other minorities who would threaten Burmese Buddhist nationalism. As Holt states, “the phrase ‘narratives of siege’ indicates the importance of a national memory of loss and lack, or more specifically, how the exigencies of time are understood to bear witness to a people’s identity and contribute to the formation of a historical consciousness.”⁴⁶⁸ This narrative continues to be used by

⁴⁶⁴ Beech.

⁴⁶⁵ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”; Fatima Lianes, “An Unholy Alliance: Monks and the Military in Myanmar,” *Al Jazeera*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2019/03/unholy-alliance-monks-military-myanmar-190309083316608.html>.

⁴⁶⁶ Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”; Zaw and Slodkowski, “Myanmar’s Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election”; Beech and Nang, “He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw”; Nan Lwin, “State Counselor-Led Development Agency Denies Accusations of Land Seizures at ICJ,” *The Irrawaddy*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/state-counselor-led-development-agency-denies-accusations-land-seizures-icj.html>.

⁴⁶⁷ Mahtani and Mow, “A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar’s Generals Are Unapologetic”; Ellis-Petersen, “From Peace Icon to Pariah”; Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saleem Mazhar and Dr. Naheed S. Goraya, “The Rohingya Crisis and Silence of Aung San Suu Kyi,” *The Diplomatic Insight*, 2015.

⁴⁶⁸ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 24.

MBT's Buddhist clergy and the Tatmadaw in 2023, particularly in supporting the junta in the current war against the National Unity Government (NUG).⁴⁶⁹

Unlike BBS, I could not find MBT's website, and most of their Facebook pages were also taken down in 2018 due to incendiary speech and discrimination against Muslims.⁴⁷⁰ However, much has been said in the news media regarding MBT and their continued operations, especially regarding the Tatmadaw's financial support of MBT.⁴⁷¹ The *Irrawaddy*, an English-language expat media organization, wrote an article claiming that the Tatmadaw gave a cash donation to the renamed Buddha Dhamma Prahita Foundation in 2019.⁴⁷² Brigadier General Zaw Min is quoted in this article, purporting that "this foundation is a Sangha [Buddhist clergy] organization, and we made the donation for the Sangha. The Tatmadaw will make donations to organizations which it thinks are necessary for our religion... we will make donations and support the organizations which we think we should."⁴⁷³ Although the general's insistence that MBT's monetary donation was for the sangha, the money and resourcing, combined with the media coverage, indicates that the Tatmadaw shares the same grievances with MBT and wants to continue that support, despite the NLD naming the group illegal.⁴⁷⁴ Overall, MBT's grievances, resources, and framing closely adhere to the Tatmadaw's values and will be further discussed in the sections below.

⁴⁶⁹ Thu Thu Aung and Poppy Mcpherson, "Insight: Monk Militia: The Buddhist Clergy Backing Myanmar's Junta," *Reuters*, December 8, 2022, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/monk-militia-buddhist-clergy-backing-myanmars-junta-2022-12-08/>; "Two Years of Myanmar's Junta: Regional Instability, Surging Organized Crime," United States Institute of Peace, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/two-years-myanmars-junta-regional-instability-surging-organized-crime>.

⁴⁷⁰ "12. Hate Speech"; "Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook."

⁴⁷¹ Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 209–25; Mahtani and Mow, "A Year After the Assault on the Rohingya, Myanmar's Generals Are Unapologetic."

⁴⁷² Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity."

⁴⁷³ Zaw.

⁴⁷⁴ Zaw.

A. GRIEVANCES 2009–2019: THE STATE AND MBT

As discussed in the chapter on BBS, grievances are concerns focused on real or perceived social, political, economic, and security injustices; malign neglect over time; or threats to any of these realms, particularly threats involving loss.⁴⁷⁵ By fomenting and encouraging a sense of deep-seated grievances allegedly perpetuated by non-Buddhist “outsiders” against Buddhist, MBT and the Tatmadaw and other government officials, perpetuate the long-standing Buddhist-nationalist narrative of Muslims as threatening illegal immigrants.

In Holt’s interview with Ashin U Wirathu, who still maintains his role as MBT’s de facto leader, Wirathu describes four specific grievances against Muslims in Myanmar, injuries to the Burman-Buddhists that are aggressively discussed in media appearances.⁴⁷⁶ The first MBT grievance is that Muslims are a threat to Buddhist traditions, values, and the Myanmar social order.⁴⁷⁷ The second grievance is that Muslims are illegal aliens in the country and do not belong to the national races.⁴⁷⁸ Third is the vulnerability of Buddhist women and their rape by Muslim men, specifically noted multiple times as the reason for anti-Muslim communal violence between 2012 and 2019.⁴⁷⁹ Finally, the fourth grievance is that the NLD is not on the side of Buddhists in Myanmar but, instead, is providing economic support to Muslims, further continuing the narrative of siege against Burmese Buddhists and the sangha itself.⁴⁸⁰

The primary grievance is a perceived fear of loss of Buddhist values, tradition, and the social order that this subset of Burmese Buddhists believe is inherent in the political organization that allows Muslims to remain in country. Wirathu claims:

⁴⁷⁵ Leavitt, “Persuasion, Coercion, and Neglect”; Opp, “Grievances and Participation in Social Movements.”

⁴⁷⁶ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 209–25.

⁴⁷⁷ Holt, 213.

⁴⁷⁸ Holt, 215.

⁴⁷⁹ Holt, 212; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 13.

⁴⁸⁰ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 215–16.

This is not really a religious belief issue. The problem is one of religious colonization. If we do not defend, we will become like Malaysia. Islam is like a religious and political system that cannot be separated. Religion becomes the means through which politics are expressed. This is a subtle but scary tactic. People are entrapped by this [Islamic] formula.⁴⁸¹

His movement's fear is that Buddhism will be overrun and cease to exist if Muslims are allowed to continue growing as a community in the country. Wirathu also states that "like the Bodu Bala Sena [in Sri Lanka], he believes that the sangha is currently under great duress and needs to cooperate internationally in the future in order to survive."⁴⁸² In this worldview, the Burmese Buddhist way of life is threatened, and the enemy is anyone who does not agree or may try to change the way the sangha is connected to the state itself.

The movement's second grievance as expressed by Wirathu is that "there really are no Rohingya people – they are all just illegal immigrants."⁴⁸³ He is not alone in stating that the Rohingya, and all Muslims residing in Myanmar, are just Bangladeshis who should be deported. Wade explains that the Rohingya were "likely bracketed under different designators" under the British, but then were removed from the state's list of recognized 135 indigenous ethnic groups to call into question "the legal status of anyone who subscribed to the Rohingya identity."⁴⁸⁴ These actions, combined with the 1982 Citizenship Act, slowly eroded the value of the term Rohingya, an identity embraced by the Muslim community in Arakan (later Rakhine) State and recognized by the Rakhinese when they, too, fought the heavy-handed military junta for decades.⁴⁸⁵

Members of the Burmese Buddhist and Rakhine Buddhist communities now maintain that the Rohingya Muslims are a fabricated ethnic group "and pose a threat to

⁴⁸¹ Holt, 213.

⁴⁸² Holt, 211.

⁴⁸³ Holt, 212.

⁴⁸⁴ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 49–51.

⁴⁸⁵ Francis Wade, 49–51.

both Buddhism and national security.”⁴⁸⁶ Regardless of the Rohingya belief that Muslims arrived in four waves since 788 C.E., Buddhist nationalists and the state continue to deny that they are citizens.⁴⁸⁷ As Wade describes the Rakhine-Burman narrative: “Many, if not most, of the people claiming to be ‘Rohingya’ are Bengali migrants, many very recent and often illegal, and that they comprise such numbers (and have such a high birth rate) that they threaten to overwhelm the Rakhine people.”⁴⁸⁸

The third grievance, highly charged, involves the perceived vulnerability of Buddhist women, and allegations of rape by Muslim men against Buddhist women.⁴⁸⁹ Wirathu states, “Myanmar women are sort of naïve and so they are vulnerable to men from other religions and become converted. Some of them are abused by these husbands from other religions.”⁴⁹⁰ Holt explains that in his interview, Wirathu continued to bring up the vulnerability of women and that this grievance appears in his public proclamations, as well as his sermons on the four race and religion laws of 2015.⁴⁹¹ Wirathu laments in his sermons that Muslims reproduce at a faster rate than Buddhists and that Muslim men are taking away Buddhist women and converting them.⁴⁹² The alleged rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, allegedly by a Muslim man, triggered the communal violence of the 2012 Sittwe riots and the 2014 Mandalay riots.⁴⁹³ This particular grievance makes a continuous appearance throughout MBT’s articles and their social media posts.

⁴⁸⁶ Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar’s “Rohingya” Conflict*, 125.

⁴⁸⁷ Ware and Laotides, 78–90; “Myanmar Rohingya Violence Is Genocide, U.S. Says,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2022, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60820215>; Ahsan Ullah, “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar”; Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis.”

⁴⁸⁸ Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar’s “Rohingya” Conflict*, 125.

⁴⁸⁹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 212.

⁴⁹⁰ Holt, 212.

⁴⁹¹ Holt, 212–13.

⁴⁹² Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Matthew Schissler, Matthew J Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities,” *Myanmar Media and Society (MMAS)*, M.MAS Working Paper 1:1, July 2015; International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*.

⁴⁹³ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 13–14; Palatino, “The Meaning of the Mandalay Riots in Myanmar.”

Finally, the fourth grievance is that the NLD is against what MBT stands for by trying to provide economic opportunities to Muslims, and thus the NLD is against Burmese Buddhists.⁴⁹⁴ Wirathu claims:

The NLD victory is very dangerous for the religion [Buddhism] and country. So, this has been an advantage insofar as the Muslim aim has been to blow up the Ma Ba Tha. There has also been an advantage given to the Muslims in that the government has given them economic opportunities. The new government has never been on the Buddhist side.⁴⁹⁵

Wirathu continued to berate the NLD by stating that ““we can clearly see how this government [NLD] has tried to assist the illegals from Bangladesh. Aung San Suu Kyi has told the Ma Ha Na (MHN) organization [the country’s highest Buddhist authority] to destroy the Ma Ba Tha. Previously, the Ma Ha Na approved and supported the Ma Ba Tha. But the Ma Ha Na has been under pressure by this government.””⁴⁹⁶

Although his comments about the MHN withdrawing its support of MBT are accurate, the NLD’s declaration of MBT as illegal has not stopped Burmese Buddhist nationalists from speaking out against the NLD and for the Tatmadaw.⁴⁹⁷ The Tatmadaw’s defiance of the NLD in 2019, and its subsequent coup in 2021 after the NLD won the 2020 elections, highlights this specific grievance even further. MBT’s successors, such as Pyusawhti, as well as extremist Buddhist monks, have joined the side of the military junta since 2021 against the pro-democracy NUG and its militant groups.⁴⁹⁸

Overall, Wirathu’s portrayal of his grievances against Muslims are ones that have been perpetuated multiple times in his sermons and social media posts since 2003. These grievances also closely mirror the Tatmadaw’s original narrative under General Ne Win, as well as the more-recent Rakhine Buddhist narrative that they are under siege by Bengalis

⁴⁹⁴ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 215–16.

⁴⁹⁵ Holt, 215–16.

⁴⁹⁶ Holt, 216.

⁴⁹⁷ Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee.”

⁴⁹⁸ Aung and Mcpherson, “Insight”; Frontier, “‘A Threat to the Revolution’: Pyusawhti Returns to Post-Coup Myanmar,” *Frontier Myanmar* (blog), July 14, 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/a-threat-to-the-revolution-pyusawhti-returns-to-post-coup-myanmar/>.

in the Rakhine state, facing persecution by ARSA and the illegal immigrants residing there.⁴⁹⁹

B. RESOURCES 2009–2019: THE STATE AND MBT

Resources may be social, structural, or political in nature, and typically represent the structures necessary to mobilize a group into action.⁵⁰⁰ The resources used by both the Myanmar government, particularly the Tatmadaw, and MBT are similar. They play off citizen's emotions through social and structural resources, such as media propaganda (both old and new media) and monetary capital; and political parties and organizations, such as the military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Other resources include the sangha itself, a major organization with hierarchical structure and sponsorship from the government and military. Resources also include citizens outside of the sangha who fund the sangha and monk-led ultranationalist groups, foment insurrection, and support the Arakanese and Bamar Buddhists in their campaigns to oust and kill Rohingya Muslims.

Traditional media and some social media outlets are run by the government and have been controlled by the military for the last 40 years. Disinformation is rampant and myths are hard to dispel, even after 10 years of NLD's nascent democratic operations.⁵⁰¹ Although English news sources such as *Frontier* and *Irrawaddy* have made some headway in shedding light on these issues, little can be done if the government continues to jail journalists for speaking out against the government. Even though, or perhaps because, minority ethnic groups continue to have their own armies and militias, the *Tatmadaw* uses violence and other coercive means to suppress insurrection throughout the country, practices continued during the democratic transition phase.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict*, 107–36; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other,"* 47–54.

⁵⁰⁰ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 3.

⁵⁰¹ Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; "Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook."

⁵⁰² Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*.

Myanmar government officials push their own narratives through Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, and Buddhist and other networks.⁵⁰³ Wirathu is not alone in his usage of Facebook and other social media to push out anti-Muslim speech. His advisors and backers also use social media via Facebook and YouTube to capture his speeches and disseminate them worldwide.⁵⁰⁴

Other media propaganda focused on the changes wrought by the four “race and religion laws,” which were vetted in Parliament in 2014 and “aimed at [against] Muslims and advocated by Ashin U Wirathu and the Ma Ba Tha.”⁵⁰⁵ By using and abusing Buddhist narratives and playing on politician’s fears of minority nationalist groups rising to usurp the government, both MBT and 969 were able to influence and pass laws which are inherently discriminatory, especially toward Muslim minorities.⁵⁰⁶ With Bamar Buddhists holding most of the seats in parliament, regardless of the ruling political party, historical narratives tended to take precedent over good governance and liberal values.

Monetary resources given to the movement by government officials and the military, such as funds given to MBT by a military commander in 2019, communicate that the government approves anti-Muslim rhetoric, regardless of whether Buddhist monks receive much aid.⁵⁰⁷ While the military argues “it’s just a coincidence,” the public and other officials see this support from the country’s most powerful institution, thus encouraging the spread of further support from the police, other military and government leadership, other Buddhist sangha organizations, and Arakanese Buddhists who fomented communal violence themselves against the Rohingya.⁵⁰⁸ Other military commanders and

⁵⁰³ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook.”

⁵⁰⁴ Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”; Lin, “Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be ‘Worshipped’”; Zaw and Slodkowski, “Myanmar’s Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election.”

⁵⁰⁵ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 29.

⁵⁰⁶ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁰⁷ Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity”; Lianes, “An Unholy Alliance”; Lin, “Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be ‘Worshipped.’”

⁵⁰⁸ Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

groups have funded MBT publicly.⁵⁰⁹ Tatmadaw chief Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing donated to U Wirathu, among other monks, in 2016 at a donation ceremony in Mandalay.⁵¹⁰

In addition, in June of 2019, when the military Yangon Region Command funded MBT, “U Soe Tun Shein, the chairman of National Prosperity Co., a gold mining company, paid for lunch for the 1,000 assembled monks, according to an announcement made at the gathering.”⁵¹¹ Prior to 2021, the Tatmadaw, besides controlling 25% of parliamentary seats and one of two vice-presidential appointments, “owns and operates two business conglomerates that have over 100 subsidiaries,” which include insurance, tourism, jade and ruby mining, and military services, as well as “a film industry, publishing houses, and television stations”⁵¹² These extensive resources are only a small part of the public display of funding that the Tatmadaw has available and drawn upon to financially support MBT and members of the Buddhist nationalist sangha.

Other major resources for MBT include their affiliated local political and social organizations in and around Myanmar, including “Buddhist Sunday Schools, volunteer groups, legal clinics, relief campaigns, donation drives and other community-oriented activities.”⁵¹³ Their operation and continued support of these smaller organizations allows MBT to make sure that their anti-Muslim rhetoric gains traction. For example, MBT and other ultra-nationalist groups started developing doctrine for high school classrooms where they promoted their version of nationalism and patriotism, and even discussed “the horrors committed by Muslims elsewhere in the world.”⁵¹⁴ By starting at the local level, MBT has

⁵⁰⁹ Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity”; The Irrawaddy, “Yangon Military Chief Donates Nearly \$20,000 to Buddhist Nationalist Group,” *The Irrawaddy* (blog), June 17, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/yangon-military-chief-donates-nearly-20000-buddhist-nationalist-group.html>.

⁵¹⁰ Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity.”

⁵¹¹ Irrawaddy, “Yangon Military Chief Donates Nearly \$20,000 to Buddhist Nationalist Group.”

⁵¹² “Burma,” November 6, 2023.

⁵¹³ Matthew J. Walton, “Misunderstanding Myanmar’s Ma Ba Tha,” *Asia Times*, June 9, 2017, <http://asiatimes.com/2017/06/misunderstanding-myanmars-ma-ba-tha/>.

⁵¹⁴ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 188.

been able to control the narrative against Muslims, and at the same time, create continuous feedback loops of local resources back to MBT itself, such as Buddhist citizens, local press, and even the police organizations.⁵¹⁵ These resources, both at the state and local levels, allowed MBT to gain traction from 2011–2021 during Myanmar’s nascent democracy.

C. FRAMING 2009–2019: THE STATE AND MBT

Framing specifically refers to how stories and names are crafted to sell a movement’s narrative. In Myanmar’s case, both the Tatmadaw and MBT use “narratives of siege” to describe the threat posed by Muslims in the state⁵¹⁶ These draw on political, moral, and cultural elements about status and inalienable rights to superiority for the majority, such as Burmese Buddhist nationalists have the inherent right to rule and make decisions for the government because of their Burmese Buddhist heritage. They also draw on the fear of marginalization and extinction of the Buddhist race and culture.⁵¹⁷ These narratives include hate speech and discussions about national races, for which Muslims, particularly Rohingya, are not members.⁵¹⁸ They also include the fear of Buddhist decline and rekindling of history of British colonial domination, specifically for Rakhine Buddhists, who physically live much closer to the Rohingya than most Burmese Buddhists.⁵¹⁹ Finally, Wirathu’s grievances listed earlier, such as the vulnerability of Buddhist women, are heavily proselytized in his sermons, social media posts, and MBT’s videos.

The narratives of siege between Arakan Buddhists, Bamar Buddhists, and Rohingya Muslims are quite similar, with disinformation spread between all three groups, related social movements, and the government itself via Facebook, WhatsApp, and other

Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

⁵¹⁶ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵¹⁷ Holt; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”*; Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar’s “Rohingya” Conflict*.

⁵¹⁸ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 14–28.

⁵¹⁹ Holt, 14–15.

social media outlets.⁵²⁰ Unlike in Sri Lanka, most disparate minority ethnic groups do not agree with either the central government or the Bamar majority. However, MBT's continued operation at both the state and local level has allowed for a consistent narrative to spread and gain traction throughout Myanmar. Holt explains that "stereotypes often abounded because of how they are earlier proliferated in uncontested fashion, especially through the Myanmar Burmese conventional and social media."⁵²¹

Because MBT and the Tatmadaw share the same grievances against Muslims, they also share similar narratives, both for why Rohingya, in particular, are residing within Myanmar borders and also why they deserve to be ousted from Buddhist lands, inherent in the understanding of Burmese nationalism.⁵²² While MBT uses both economic and hate-based narratives to level their grievances against Muslims, the military has also used misinformation through social media and other media sites to describe the status of the Rohingya in Myanmar, severely downplaying or ignoring their condition.⁵²³

These grievances—fear of the loss of Buddhism, fear about state insecurity, sexualized fear on behalf of Buddhist women, and fear that the new NLD government wants to disband the sangha and the Burmese Buddhist way of life—are the most common narratives used to justify any and all actions taken by both the social movement and military government officials.⁵²⁴ For example, Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi discuss these narratives in *The Diplomat*, arguing that "this narrative of threat also helps to justify discriminatory laws, disregard for the suffering of a religious other, and even violence as forms of virtuous self-defense."⁵²⁵ They further explain that it is

⁵²⁰ Holt, 14–28.

⁵²¹ Holt, xii.

⁵²² Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵²³ Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵²⁴ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵²⁵ Phyu Phyu Thi, Matt Schissler, and Matthew J Walton, "Refugees in Crisis: The Roots of Religious Conflict in Myanmar," accessed November 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/the-roots-of-religious-conflict-in-myanmar/>.

relatively easy to understand the legitimization of violence against Muslims once one understands the context: “when the arrests made after a riot disproportionately target one religious community [e.g., Buddhists], this operates as a powerful statement about who has been victimized and who must be defended against.”⁵²⁶ If the government also condones, either implicitly or explicitly, the rhetoric of 969 and MBT, then it is understandable that narratives would turn to hate speech, and then violent action would follow.⁵²⁷

Overall, these narratives of the siege, particularly against Buddhist religion, values, and social order in Myanmar, are the primary way in which MBT and the Tatmadaw argue for the deportation of Muslims and justify the riots, violence, and hate speech against Myanmar’s Muslims. They also justify, in the minds of the military and Buddhist nationalists, the actions of the Tatmadaw and their complicit partners in committing mass murder, rape, and eviction of the Rohingya from the Rakhine state.

D. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES 2009–2019: THE STATE AND MBT

The political opportunity that Ma Ba Tha (MBT) used to foment most of its anti-Muslim rhetoric was the loosening of the Tatmadaw’s firm hold on the state via the democratization process that allowed other political entities to participate in Myanmar politics. As discussed in the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) chapter, a political opportunity may be an event that provides space for the social movement to pursue its goals further. In Myanmar, the Tatmadaw slowly ceded some powers to other political groups, such as the National League for Democracy (NLD), and allowed external media organizations to print alternative ideas, allowing Buddhist nationalist groups, among others, to take a larger step toward joining the political and social discourse.⁵²⁸ Although the military government was the one ceding certain powers, their thin veil of separation between military operations and state influence allowed MBT to fill the influence gap, which enabled further political

⁵²⁶ Thi, Schissler, and Walton.

⁵²⁷ Thi, Schissler, and Walton.

⁵²⁸ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

discourse and communal violence against Muslims. A nationwide unease in the few years before the transition began in earnest also contributed as people feared disorder.

The democratic transition, which began in 2011, allowed the media to print some alternative narratives, and, in this case, MBT chose this time, particularly in 2012 with the formation of 969, and then in 2013 with the development of MBT, to spread its narrative throughout Myanmar. Wade discusses how the transition allowed the media to be freer but not necessarily more civil, noting that before the transition, “any newspaper articles considered a threat to national security were often simply cut out of the publication, and whatever was left would be sent straight to the newsstand. Yet while many applauded the freeing up of the media, less visible was any strengthening, or indeed creation, of institutions that could monitor and act upon hateful content.”⁵²⁹ Democratic institutions, such as the media’s protection of ethnic groups against hate speech, did not develop in parallel.

Because of these changes, MBT could freely post content amounting to hate speech and conjecture with little to no correction by state authorities, as well as weak media institutions and few other civil society organizations after decades of repression. Ashin U Wirathu’s rhetoric and rallies were allowed to continue, although he had been jailed previously by the military government for his inflammatory speeches, because both the military and Wirathu shared similar Buddhist nationalist values. In particular, “either the previous USDP government was approving of his efforts to rally Buddhist nationalists, which seems a credible assumption given the Tatmadaw’s history of discrimination against Muslims and the USDP’s intrinsic links to the Tatmadaw, or it simply cast a benign eye in his direction.”⁵³⁰ Before NLD gained a share of power, the military-backed USDP allowed Wirathu and his followers to continue the anti-Muslim rhetoric because they shared the same narrative.

⁵²⁹ Francis Wade, 102.

⁵³⁰ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 216.

The Tatmadaw may have also seen this transition as another way to further their power through narrative control. Wade states that “in the decades after the coup of 1962 that brought Ne Win to power, a narrative developed which saw the military not so much as nation builders but nation restorers. They would return Myanmar to its supposed pre-colonial glory, when a Buddhist order thrived, uncontaminated by foreign influence, and all subjects of the king enjoyed an abiding sense of national unity.”⁵³¹ Once the NLD took power after the early 2016 elections, the military used MBT to further their political goals once they lost some influence.⁵³² These political changes also triggered more violent protests by Wirathu against the NLD, calling on Buddhists to boycott the elections, arguing that the USDP would protect their rights as Buddhists to pass the race and religion laws targeting Muslims.⁵³³

Ironically, the transition enabled MBT and their sangha-backed Buddhist nationalists to gain positions and authority in the newly elected NLD government between 2015 and 2019, regardless of the ban placed on them by both Ma Ha Na and the government.⁵³⁴ MBT continued to gain visibility, in part due to the international news media, regardless of their notoriety with the international press.⁵³⁵ They also grew more visible within Myanmar, in part due to their previous operations with local Buddhist nationalists throughout the country.⁵³⁶

⁵³¹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim Other*, 34.

⁵³² Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim Other*; Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity.”

⁵³³ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 209–25; “Myanmar: Aung San Suu Kyi's Party Wins Majority in Election,” November 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54899170>; Carroll, “Myanmar”; Zaw and Slodkowski, “Myanmar's Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election.”

⁵³⁴ Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal.”

⁵³⁵ Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”; Beech and Nang, “He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw”; Aung and Mcpherson, “Insight”; Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee”; Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*.

⁵³⁶ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim Other*, 156–59.

In 2015, the creation of another lay arm of MBT, called the Dhamma Wunthanu Rakita organization, which was formed to conduct tasks inappropriate for monks, and “the subsequent formation of the 135 United Patriots Party, demonstrated a further disaggregation and specialization on the part of a movement” to adapt “effectively to the changes in Myanmar’s political opportunity structures.”⁵³⁷ These quick adaptations to the new political opportunities allowed MBT to reinvent itself to make sure the Burmese Buddhist narrative and anti-Muslim rhetoric stayed fresh in Buddhists’ minds in the transition to democracy.⁵³⁸

In summary, MBT’s own transition to heady influence between 2009 and 2019 was due in part to the uncertainty of the transition period, more openness during this period, and its partner Tatmadaw stepping back but not out in 2011. MBT and the Tatmadaw are also inexplicably linked in their grievances, resources, and framing the “narratives of siege” against Muslims in Myanmar. The transition to democracy allowed 969 and MBT to seize political opportunity by disproportionately flooding the media, both traditional and social, with anti-Muslim rhetoric, building upon the already fiery Burmese-Buddhist nationalist rhetoric used by the Tatmadaw during its 50-year rule. As we will see in the closing chapter, both MBT and BBS have seen the years between 2009 and 2019 as a political opportunity for their brand of exclusionary politics.

⁵³⁷ Walton, “Misunderstanding Myanmar’s Ma Ba Tha.”

⁵³⁸ “Civil War in Myanmar”; “Myanmar.”

VI. COMPARISON, ANALYSIS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“We aren’t saying that violence is necessarily required. What we are saying is that we need to defend ourselves by building a fence with our bones, if it’s necessary to do so.”⁵³⁹ This quote, by a member of Ma Ba Tha (MBT), contains a belief that his way of life was being threatened by Muslims and other non-Buddhists.⁵⁴⁰ His view is not new, nor is it surprising or limited to Myanmar. To the east in Sri Lanka, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) followed a similar anti-Muslim path from 2009–2019 with support from some of their respective government institutions, officials, and politicians.

I have found that the states’ Sinhalese and Burmese Buddhist nationalism both enabled the creation of and fueled the continued work of their related social movements, specifically BBS and MBT. These groups were co-opted by both a Sri Lanka populist democracy and a military-backed Myanmar government for these governments’ political agendas. Both BBS and MBT used communal violence and anti-Muslim rhetoric to frame the threat of Muslim and anti-Buddhist influence in their respective countries, by either allowing the deaths of Muslim civilians during their watch, approving government-sponsored violence and genocide of Muslims (in the case of the Rohingya), or committing violent acts against non-Muslims, their property, and their livelihood.⁵⁴¹ Grievances, framing, resources, and political opportunities aligned to allow these ultranationalist groups, with state support, to further their exclusionary and violent objectives.

A. GRIEVANCES: AN IDEOLOGICAL BASIS

The grievances of MBT and BBS overlap significantly, due in part to the shared history of colonial rule and the presence of Theravada Buddhist monarchical sangha in Sri

⁵³⁹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”* (Zed Books Ltd, 2017), 1–3.

⁵⁴⁰ Francis Wade, 1–5.

⁵⁴¹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”*; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

Lanka and Myanmar.⁵⁴² Grievances, which grow out of perceived threats to a social group, are fundamental in a social movement's formation because they allow members to specify problems with either state injustices or a perceived threat by other social or political groups.⁵⁴³ In the cases of BBS and MBT, grievances can be bracketed into four types: religious and race-based nationalism, religious fundamentalism, economic, and social.⁵⁴⁴ In both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Holt's "narratives of siege" highlight the grievances shared by both groups, especially because they were created in similar timeframes and are referenced together in the international news media.⁵⁴⁵

BBS and MBT share race-based nationalist and Buddhist fundamentalist grievances through the use of Buddhist traditional imagery, historical examples of the sangha, and its role as political and spiritual advisors to the monarchy in the kingdom of Kandy in Sri Lanka and in the Bamar and Mrauk U kingdoms in Myanmar.⁵⁴⁶ British colonialism displaced these kingdoms and traditions, fostering a fear of replacement and the loss of Sinhala and Burman Buddhist influence.⁵⁴⁷ In the eyes of BBS and MBT, without these ethno-religious traditions, the respective countries would cease to exist.⁵⁴⁸ A difference between BBS and MBT grievances is the way Muslims are codified in Myanmar. Unlike Sri Lankan Muslims, who are considered citizens, the Rohingya and

⁵⁴² Keyes, "Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism"; Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*.

⁵⁴³ McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*; Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism*.

⁵⁴⁴ Bodu Bala Sena, "Goals and Objectives of Bodu Bala Sena"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror."

⁵⁴⁵ Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 14, 210.

⁵⁴⁶ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Nuhman, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*

⁵⁴⁷ Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; "The Sangha."

⁵⁴⁸ Doloswala, "The Rise of Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena"; Gunasingham, "Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An Examination"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

other Muslim groups are either treated as lesser citizens or labeled as ‘Bengalis’ and denied citizenship rights.⁵⁴⁹

Furthermore, the sangha who participate in BBS and MBT believe they have a fundamental calling to protect Buddhists from assimilation with other religious groups.⁵⁵⁰ While Sri Lanka has a history of the sangha participating in the democratic process, Myanmar’s sangha has only started their participation, mainly because the Tatmadaw controlled the narrative for so long that dissenters were promptly jailed or silenced.⁵⁵¹ Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar have Buddhist monks serving in the state and local governments, thereby enacting influence on the national government’s values, narratives, and laws.⁵⁵²

BBS and MBT share economic and social grievances, to include Muslim businesses spreading through Buddhist communities, Muslims gaining economic provisions not shared with the Buddhist majorities, and the physical reproduction of Muslim women in comparison to Buddhist women.⁵⁵³ In addition, MBT and BBS heavily discuss gender and sexual-based grievances, such as the vulnerability of Buddhist women and the conjecture which led to many riots in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: the rape and murder of Buddhist

⁵⁴⁹ Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”; Elizabeth J. Rushing, “How Many Internally Displaced Rohingya Are Trapped Inside Myanmar?,” Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, September 2017, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/expert-opinion/how-many-internally-displaced-rohingya-are-trapped-inside-myanmar>.

⁵⁵⁰ Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Hume, “‘Fascists’ in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists”; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 79–89.

⁵⁵¹ Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Hume, “‘Fascists’ in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists”; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 79–89.

⁵⁵² Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Schissler, Walton, and Thi, “Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities”; Thu, “Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee.”

⁵⁵³ Schonthal, “Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka”; Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Opp, “Grievances and Participation in Social Movements”; Spencer, *Sri Lanka*.

women by Muslim men.⁵⁵⁴ By sensationalizing this particular grievance on social media, BBS and MBT leaders allow rumors to spread, giving the semblance of threat to their women and children, and thereby appealing to strongly emotional biases.⁵⁵⁵

B. RESOURCES

Because national identity in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have been tied to Buddhist values, BBS and MBT's grievances are routinely co-opted by government officials, either implicitly or explicitly, in the form of political rallies and public statements.⁵⁵⁶ They are used extensively to deter citizens from supporting Muslims in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and Buddhist monks are seen supporting political party fundraisers, at rallies, and commenting on social media against Muslim "invaders," particularly by Ashin U Wirathu in Myanmar and Gnanasara Aththe Thero, the general secretary of BBS.⁵⁵⁷ As the Sri Lankan monk Venerable Ambalangoda Sumedhananda Thero argued: "The aim of Muslims is to take over all our land and everything we value.... Think of what used to be

⁵⁵⁴ Spencer, *Sri Lanka*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena."

⁵⁵⁵ Johan Farkas, Jannick Schou, and Christina Neumayer, "Cloaked Facebook Pages: Exploring Fake Islamist Propaganda in Social Media," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 5 (2018): 1850–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817707759>; Colombo Gazette, "US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy"; Silva, "Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena."

⁵⁵⁶ Bhat, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa"; Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity"; "Understanding Myanmar's Anti-Democratic Patron–Client Network," East Asia Forum, February 23, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/23/understanding-myanmars-anti-democratic-patron-client-network/>; Simons and Beech, "Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations"; Ellis-Petersen, "From Peace Icon to Pariah"; Schmall, "Buddhist Nationalists Claim Victory in Sri Lankan Election"; Pararajasingham, "Why Is Sri Lanka Defying the United Nations?"

⁵⁵⁷ "Bodu Bala Sena's Gnanasara Thero to Contest from Kurunegala"; "Bodu Bala Sena Secretary Galagoda-Aththe Gnasara Thero Asked to Appear before Police," iPlayerHD, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://iplayerhd.com/player/video/47b5f24c-b984-4063-9d93-b42d1e022197/share>; Doloswala, "The Rise of Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena"; "Fanatical Buddhist Monk Saydaw Wirathu Calling for Boycott of Myanmar Muslims," iPlayerHD, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://iplayerhd.com/player/video/514907c2-04ac-4503-bafa-9c17023cb4b8/share>; Lin, "Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be 'Worshipped'"; Beech and Nang, "He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw"; Zaw and Slodkowski, "Myanmar's Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election"; Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror."

Buddhist lands: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Indonesia. They have all been destroyed by Islam.”⁵⁵⁸

Grievances alone are not enough to spark a social movement or communal violence. In most democracies, citizens can criticize the state or even a specific ethno-social group. However, to correct perceived grievances, social movements must have access to available resources to spread their message, raise funding for the group, and be able to grow in terms of physical numbers, financially, or in the amount of influence a group has on their government. BBS and MBT were able to grow significantly in the years between 2009 and 2019 because each group’s grievances had sympathetic actors in the government.⁵⁵⁹ These actors therefore became part of the resources both social movements drew upon for monetary assets and political connections.

Both BBS and MBT used the following resources to further their Buddhist nationalist agenda: legitimacy within the sangha, sangha structure and numbers, money and profit, illiberal resources, and traditional press and social media platforms.⁵⁶⁰ These resources were also co-opted by the governments of Sri Lanka and Myanmar to gain recognition and credibility with Buddhists. The governments provided resources to BBS and MBT, and then members supported their respective governments by validating their legitimacy and donating money to the sangha.⁵⁶¹ In turn, the governments provided legal justification for communal violence, by using both traditional and non-traditional media to

⁵⁵⁸ Hannah Beech, “Buddhists Go to Battle: When Nationalism Overrides Pacifism,” July 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/world/asia/buddhism-militant-rise.html>.

⁵⁵⁹ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”*; Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Lonsdorf, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections”; Zaw, “Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity”; Nanayakkara, “Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).”

⁵⁶⁰ Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

⁵⁶¹ Young, “Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality”; Schissler, Walton, and Thi, “Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities”; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”*; “Understanding Myanmar’s Anti-Democratic Patron–Client Network.”

enable BBS and MBT's current members to continue spreading Buddhist nationalist narratives.⁵⁶²

First, sangha support provides legitimacy and protected status as a function of faith and religion in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar.⁵⁶³ The sangha also have extensive resources, such as centralized communication, an already built-in organization, and funding from both state and local organizations.⁵⁶⁴ They also retain political power and political integration in Sri Lanka and Myanmar through political seat appointment and the integration of religious groups by the state.⁵⁶⁵

The second type of key resource is funding, either from within or outside of the monastic tradition. It includes operations that support and enforce religious zeal within Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and outside of the countries toward the Buddhist diaspora and the feeding of fundamentalism by the international community.⁵⁶⁶ For example, funding within the monastic tradition may include Buddhist groups in and around Sri Lanka and Myanmar, who support each other via funding, as well as public support. States also support BBS and MBT via funding, by making donations to the sangha, when in reality it may fund BBS and MBT operations, instead of actual religious organizational support.

⁵⁶² Thi, Schissler, and Walton, "Refugees in Crisis: The Roots of Religious Conflict in Myanmar."

⁵⁶³ Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; "The Sangha"; "Sri Lanka President Pardons Hardline Buddhist Monk."

⁵⁶⁴ "The Sangha"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; Schonthal, "Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka."

⁵⁶⁵ Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Thu, "Ma Ba Tha Ordered to Cease All Activities by State Sangha Committee."

⁵⁶⁶ Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity"; Irrawaddy, "Yangon Military Chief Donates Nearly \$20,000 to Buddhist Nationalist Group"; Lin, "Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be 'Worshipped'"; "Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Family Falls From Grace"; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Lianes, "An Unholy Alliance"; Beech, "Buddhists Go to Battle: When Nationalism Overrides Pacifism."

The third type of shared resource are legal protections, or lack thereof, which privilege certain ethnic groups over others.⁵⁶⁷ By allowing legal precedence for Sinhalese and Burman Buddhist nationalists, while inherently disadvantaging non-Buddhists, the governments of Sri Lanka and Myanmar authorize the systematic marginalization of Muslims.⁵⁶⁸ Laws such as the 1956 Official Language Act in Sri Lanka, the 1982 Citizenship Law in Myanmar, and most recently, changes to the Sri Lankan constitution in 2020, fueled BBS and MBT anti-Muslim narratives.

The fourth set of resources that BBS and MBT use are traditional and social media platforms which both groups use to enable current group members to speak out against non-Buddhists freely. The use of anti-Muslim hate speech in traditional and social media influences both state and local Buddhist social groups, allows the government to directly influence constituents, and creates rapid change within the broader scale of both movements.⁵⁶⁹ For example, the Tatmadaw maintained Facebook and other social media accounts and directly influenced Burmese Buddhists by posting and publishing anti-Muslim sentiment and spreading rumors and conjecture about Muslims.⁵⁷⁰ This resource has a massive influence on the creation, sustainment, and propagation of grievances, by creating a platform for propaganda and narratives.⁵⁷¹ In these cases, social media also acts

⁵⁶⁷ Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”; DeVotta, *Blowback*; Moe Thuzar and Darren Cheong, “Ethnicity, Citizenship and Identity in Post-2016 Myanmar,” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, ed. Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2019), 243–58, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814843164-017>; Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

⁵⁶⁸ “Sri Lanka: Increased Marginalization, Discrimination and Targeting of Sri Lanka’s Muslim Community,” Amnesty International, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/3866/2021/en/>; Ahsan Ullah, “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar.”

⁵⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*; “Fanatical Buddhist Monk Saydaw Wirathu Calling for Boycott of Myanmar Muslims”; Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy.”

⁵⁷⁰ Lianes, “An Unholy Alliance”; “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook.”

⁵⁷¹ Lianes, “An Unholy Alliance”; Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy”; Silva, “Gossip, Rumor and Propaganda in Anti-Muslim Campaigns of the Bodu Bala Sena”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

as a feedback loop for government groups to continue to influence BBS and MBT, as well as to feed the communal violence narrative against Muslims.⁵⁷²

C. FRAMING: NATIONALISM AND PROPAGANDA

For BBS and MBT, the most frequent narrative use to justify communal violence is the “narratives of siege.”⁵⁷³ Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar Buddhist nationalists justify their actions because they claim that Muslims threaten their way of life.⁵⁷⁴ Violence is framed as a means to achieve their nationalist agenda and it is permissible in order to ensure Buddhism remains the national religion.⁵⁷⁵ For both BBS and MBT, “bias-motivated violence” is the way in which they frame the narrative for their own ends.⁵⁷⁶

Shared narratives among BBS and MBT are primarily about the vulnerability of Buddhism and typically followed by claims of Muslim illegitimacy in the country, which also creates the perception of a security issue for the Buddhist majority living in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.⁵⁷⁷ An old slogan from military rule by the Myanmar Ministry of Immigration stated, “the Earth will not swallow a race to extinction but another race will.’ It was abrupt and deliberately stark, and the message it contained was simple: save for strong borders and the vigilant offices of the state, outsiders would overrun the country. In time, the national race might cease to exist.”⁵⁷⁸ Buddhist nationalist propaganda in both

⁵⁷² “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook”; Colombo Gazette, “US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy.”

⁵⁷³ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 14.

⁵⁷⁴ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”*; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*.

⁵⁷⁵ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other.”*

⁵⁷⁶ “12. Hate Speech”; Carlson, Caitlin Ring, *Hate Speech*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021), 25.

⁵⁷⁷ Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar’s “Rohingya” Conflict*; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Kipgen, “The Rohingya Crisis.”

⁵⁷⁸ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other,”* 33.

countries does not fully accept Muslims as equal members of society, arguing that Muslims were outsiders to the historic Buddhist monarchies in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.⁵⁷⁹

In addition, other Buddhist nationalist narratives include concern for ethno-religious purity and continued numeric domination. For instance, Muslims are portrayed as having more children, taking Buddhist women as wives, and corrupting them. This propaganda plays out over and over again in various speeches by Ashin U Wirathu and Galagoda Gnanasara.⁵⁸⁰ There is also usually an economic narrative in these speeches, particularly due to the 969 movement's boycotting Muslim-owned business, as well as in Sri Lanka, where Muslims are said to take from Sinhalese society instead of adding value.⁵⁸¹

D. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

The political opportunities that allowed BBS and MBT to flourish are two-fold: first, major political events in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar created space for social movements to pursue their own anti-Muslim agenda, and second, political actors in the form of police, politicians, the sangha, and local Buddhists who believed the fear campaigns that spokespersons for the social movements utilized against Muslims.⁵⁸² Regardless of the government's direct support, complicity, or in some cases, direct denial

⁵⁷⁹ Ware and Laotides, *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict*.

⁵⁸⁰ Doloswala, "The Rise of Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena"; "Ven. Gnanasara Thera Pleads Guilty in Nippon Hotel Media Conference Case – Breaking News | Daily Mirror," accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Ven-Gnanasara-Thera-pleads-guilty-in-Nippon-Hotel-media-conference-case/108-267052>; Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror"; Carroll, "Myanmar"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁸¹ "Fanatical Buddhist Monk Saydaw Wirathu Calling for Boycott of Myanmar Muslims"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other."*

⁵⁸² Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Schonthal, "Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; DeVotta, *Blowback*.

of support for BBS and MBT, these political opportunities allowed for communal violent actions to take place over time by both state and social movement actors.⁵⁸³

Political events, political party changes and the beginning or ending of warfare are spaces where social movements can harness the news media to broadcast their narratives. BBS and MBT utilized the end of the LTTE civil war in Sri Lanka (2009), and the Tatmadaw's democratic power transition (2011) as opportunities to engage with Sinhalese and Burmese Buddhists nationalist constituents to air their grievances against Muslims, gain resources, and transmit "narratives of siege" on social media sites, government news media, and the international press.⁵⁸⁴

In Sri Lanka, by using the Rajapaksa family and their popularity in the years following the end of the civil war, BBS used the government to support their Buddhist nationalist agenda, increased sangha participation, and increased anti-Muslim rhetoric through the country.⁵⁸⁵ In Myanmar, Ashin U Wirathu and other hardline Buddhist nationalists published anti-Muslim hate speech on social media, increased political protests, and advocated for the four race and religion laws, which were specifically written and passed to disadvantage Muslims.⁵⁸⁶ By relinquishing a tight grip on the news media and allowing more freedom of speech, the Tatmadaw were able to further their own interest by allowing MBT to continue working for Burmese Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸³ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Beech and Nang, "He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw"; "Understanding Myanmar's Anti-Democratic Patron-Client Network"; "Bodu Bala Sena's Gnanasara Thero to Contest from Kurunegala"; "Ven. Gnanasara Thera Pleads Guilty in Nippon Hotel Media Conference Case – Breaking News | Daily Mirror."

⁵⁸⁴ DeVotta, *Blowback*; Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁸⁵ "Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Family Falls From Grace."

⁵⁸⁶ Zaw and Slodkowski, "Myanmar's Radical Monks Shaping Historic Election"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁸⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*; Lin, "Firebrand Monk Calls for Military Parliamentarians to Be 'Worshipped'"; Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity."

Key actors, whether political or social, also provided the political opportunity BBS and MBT needed to gain approval for anti-Muslim actions. In Myanmar, the police, also controlled by the Tatmadaw, tacitly supported violence when riots broke out in 2012, 2013, 2014, and beyond, and overt supporters of violence once they participated in the anti-Muslim communal violence.⁵⁸⁸

Leaders such as Aung San Su Kyi also tacitly approved of 969, MBT, and its other incarnations, even when MBT had been outlawed, by her own political party, the NLD.⁵⁸⁹ Other leaders of MHN also banned MBT but allowed Ashin U Wirathu to speak openly about the Muslim threat; neither Suu Kyi nor MHN dissuaded the Myanmar military from funding MBT.⁵⁹⁰ Finally, when government actors, such as the Tatmadaw, take part in anti-Muslim communal violence, it may reinforce those same narratives and grievances held by BBS and MBT.

E. BENEFITS AND COSTS TO THE STATE AND ITS NONSTATE PARTNERS

SMT elements of grievances, resources, propaganda narratives, and the political opportunities that allowed BBS and MBT to rise in influence and power between 2009 and 2019 emphasize the reasons why their respective governments would want to integrate with them. States gain more by explicitly and implicitly supporting Sinhalese and Burmese Buddhist nationalist groups, such as legitimacy and political influence, than it would cost to oppose them. Both groups gained so much power and influence in the last 15 years that

⁵⁸⁸ DeVotta, *Blowback*; Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka: One Hundred Years of Conflict and Coexistence”; Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁸⁹ Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”; Ellis-Petersen, “From Peace Icon to Pariah”; Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal.”

⁵⁹⁰ Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”; Ellis-Petersen, “From Peace Icon to Pariah”; Moe, “Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal.”

it would be irrational to ignore the influence that BBS and MBT had in the political process.⁵⁹¹

Both governments in Sri Lanka and Myanmar saw a major benefit in joining political forces with BBS and MBT to lend legitimacy to the political process. This shows how these governments will work with BBS and MBT to allow both de facto and de jure marginalization of Muslim minorities. The benefits of working with social movements are not only legitimacy, but also political support by BBS and MBT members. The sangha's support on both sides is also a benefit for the state because it provides further legitimacy and support for Buddhist nationalist grievances and propaganda.⁵⁹² In particular, although MBT was banned by the NLD, the military's authority in Myanmar, which dates back to General Ne Win's dictatorship, allowed MBT to continue its anti-Muslim rhetoric and open support for the military, even up to 2023, with members of the sangha supporting the military junta instead of the National Unit Government (NUG).⁵⁹³ Other benefits include the more widespread use of anti-Muslim hate speech on social media and the furthering of the Sri Lanka populist agenda by then President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his political party.⁵⁹⁴

The cost, however, of working with BBS and MBT is the loss of international political credibility, such as Suu Kyi's loss of democratic legitimacy in 2017–2019.⁵⁹⁵ By refusing to politically vilify the Tatmadaw for committing acts of genocide against the Rohingya, Aung San Suu Kyi lost the status she previously held with the international

⁵⁹¹ Hume, "'Fascists' in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists"; Nanayakkara, "Some Civil Society Questions for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)"; Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha Is a Necessity"; Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

⁵⁹² "The Sangha"; Young, "Refuge in the State: Buddhist Monks and Virtuous Governmentality"; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*; Hume, "'Fascists' in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists."

⁵⁹³ Frontier, "'A Threat to the Revolution'"; Lianes, "An Unholy Alliance"; "The Civil War in Myanmar."

⁵⁹⁴ Colombo Gazette, "US Says BBS Used Social Media to Promote Sinhalese Buddhist Supremacy"; "Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook"; Su, "Update on Myanmar."

⁵⁹⁵ Simons and Beech, "Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations"; Ellis-Petersen, "From Peace Icon to Pariah."

community.⁵⁹⁶ Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa also lost credibility internationally when he and his political party approved reforms to disadvantage Muslim citizens by taking away certain democratic rights under the guise of ‘security.’⁵⁹⁷ Another cost is the possible rise of Muslim fundamentalism, such as the attacks by ARSA on military outposts in Rakhine state in Myanmar and the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks by Islamists in Sri Lanka.⁵⁹⁸ Sitagu Sayadaw, another influential Buddhist monk in Myanmar, worried about Muslim influence in the country, saying “the Burmese are really afraid of terrorism. They don’t want the Muslim community to get bigger because they think that the factor of terrorism will grow...people see pictures in the newspapers of violence in southern Thailand where Muslim s have attacked monks.”⁵⁹⁹ This sentiment is also prevalent in Sri Lanka, with the history of the LTTE in the minds of voters, who saw the Rajapaksa regime move from military operations during the civil war to political programs and policies.⁶⁰⁰ These benefits and costs did not stop Sri Lanka or Myanmar from co-opting BBS and MBT to influence political discourse, where social media and hate speech played a particularly influential role in creating anti-Muslim narratives for both the state and social movement.

F. SOCIAL MEDIA AND HATE SPEECH: A RESOURCE, FRAMING MECHANISM, AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY OF THE STATE

The hate speech literature on the BBT and MBT is primarily based on Facebook’s attempts to ban speech deemed unsuitable.⁶⁰¹ Facebook’s misrepresentation policy

⁵⁹⁶ Simons and Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations”; “Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar Democracy Icon Who Fell from Grace,” *BBC News*, November 3, 2010, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977>.

⁵⁹⁷ “Sri Lanka.”

⁵⁹⁸ “Tatmadaw Supports Amnesty International’s Reveal of ARSA Terrorists’ Massacre | Myanmar President Office”; Tara Kartha, “Day after Easter Blasts, Challenge for Sri Lanka Is to Prevent Existing Fissures from Destabilising Country,” *Firstpost*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/day-after-easter-blasts-challenge-for-sri-lanka-is-to-prevent-existing-fissures-from-destabilising-country-6496331.html>; “Sri Lanka,” November 1, 2023.

⁵⁹⁹ Holt, *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*, 265.

⁶⁰⁰ Lonsdorf, “Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Sri Lankan Presidential Elections”; “Sri Lanka’s Rajapaksa Family Falls From Grace.”

⁶⁰¹ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook.”

ostensibly guards against networks of accounts that “mislead others about who they are, or what they are doing, and [in] Myanmar’s case, the government is using celebrity and entertainment accounts to push military propaganda.”⁶⁰²

Some recent trends which normalize hate speech in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, going so far as to allow for the mobilization of violence against Muslim minorities, are public services announcements and government narratives.

Public service announcements are usually sponsored by the government, such as persuading the public to recycle more or to not litter.⁶⁰³ Similar and constant messaging over time leads people to believe the truthfulness of the message, regardless of whether it is actually true.⁶⁰⁴ One of the reasons why BBS and MBT have been so successful in their messaging against Muslims is because the government have been complicit in providing the same tactical messaging throughout the country.⁶⁰⁵ Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movements were both given platforms to provide a narrative, such as Facebook posts allowing such hate speech by government officials.⁶⁰⁶

Inside Myanmar, The government and military officials, in partnering with celebrities, help to facilitate the constant messaging of hatred for Muslims and their blight on Myanmar society.⁶⁰⁷ In a similar vein, the Sri Lankan government’s allowance of BBS to continue its strategic messaging is partly the reason for continued violence against Muslims over the last five years.⁶⁰⁸ The website, Tracking Terrorism, labels BBS a

⁶⁰² “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook.”

⁶⁰³ Hambrick and Marquardt, “Cognitive Ability and Vulnerability to Fake News.”

⁶⁰⁴ Hambrick and Marquardt.

⁶⁰⁵ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook”; Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

⁶⁰⁶ Thomas Fuller, “Extremism Rises Among Myanmar Buddhists,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/asia/extremism-rises-among-myanmar-buddhists-wary-of-muslim-minority.html>; Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

⁶⁰⁷ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook”; Andrew Henry Jakubowicz, “Alt_Right White Lite: Trolling, Hate Speech and Cyber Racism on Social Media,” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 3 (2017): 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i3.5655>; Hambrick and Marquardt, “Cognitive Ability and Vulnerability to Fake News.”

⁶⁰⁸ Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; “Sri Lanka President Pardons Hardline Buddhist Monk.”

terrorist group and highlights its Facebook page called “My Conscience,” which has since been taken down.⁶⁰⁹ Other Sinhalese pages were also disbanded in conjunction with the removal of many pages in Myanmar using false narratives.⁶¹⁰ The website also stated that “Facebook and WhatsApp groups by Sinhala nationalists against the Muslim community in Sri Lanka are active in promoting anti-Muslim violence and business” while a Facebook posting read: “No Limit, which is a Muslim-owned clothing retailer has changed their name to ‘Y (why) pay more’. But ‘we’ (Sinhalese) won’t be fooled by masks.”⁶¹¹ The Sri Lankan President’s pardon of the head of BBS also highlights the way in which the government allows BBS to foster its boycotting of Muslim goods and services, allows hate speech to spread and violent actions to occur.⁶¹²

The internet and social media’s influence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka has exacerbated grievances against Muslims. In short, social media enables the distribution of so-called “ancient hatreds.”⁶¹³ Under social movement theory, social media (especially Facebook) is a resource with which to employ communication, strategic messaging, and the publication of a narrative.⁶¹⁴ Even though Facebook took down some specific pages in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, there are many others that still tout hatred for Muslims under a Sinhalese or Burmese Buddhist nationalist context.⁶¹⁵ Even if the governments are not specifically lauding BBS or MBT efforts against Muslims, the lack of policy against them means that the government is complicit in allowing these groups to flourish. Even some

⁶⁰⁹ “Combating Hate and Extremism,” Facebook Newsroom, September 17, 2019, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/09/combating-hate-and-extremism/>; Su, “Update on Myanmar”; Samidh Chakrabarti and Rosa Birch, “Understanding Social Media and Conflict,” Facebook Newsroom, June 20, 2019, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/06/social-media-and-conflict/>.

⁶¹⁰ “Combating Hate and Extremism”; Su, “Update on Myanmar”; Chakrabarti and Birch, “Understanding Social Media and Conflict.”

⁶¹¹ TRAC, “Groups.”

⁶¹² Hume, “‘Fascists’ in Saffron Robes? The Rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Ultra-Nationalists.”

⁶¹³ Jakubowicz, “Alt_Right White Lite”; Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 28–41; Chakrabarti and Birch, “Understanding Social Media and Conflict.”

⁶¹⁴ Dan Mercea, “Probing the Implications of Facebook Use for the Organizational Form of Social Movement Organizations,” *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 8 (2013): 1306–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.770050>.

⁶¹⁵ “Removing Myanmar Military Officials from Facebook.”

former LTTE members and some in the Tamil diaspora agree with the Buddhist nationalist narrative, especially after the Easter bombings in Colombo in 2019.⁶¹⁶

G. CONCLUSION

The primary conclusion of this work is that some social movements and governments, regardless of political type, use each other to further their own political agendas. BBS and MBT used their respective governments to amplify grievances against Muslims, leveraging specific political parties and figures as political opportunities.⁶¹⁷ Conversely, the governments of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, particularly members of the populist Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and the proxy military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), use BBS and MBT to garner support, increase Buddhist nationalist constituents, and ultimately, to place blame on Muslim minorities in order to support and sustain each other. The sangha's participation in the political process, especially in Sri Lanka, also allowed for the support and sustainment of these social movements by using government and institutional resources to spread disinformation throughout the country. Finally, BBS and MBT rose to power at the moment of transition for both Sri Lanka and Myanmar: BBS seized the opportunity to raise grievances after the end of the LTTE civil war, whereas MBT rose to power just as the Tatmadaw were taking steps to cede control of some government institutions for democratic transition. Although the Buddhist nationalist narrative existed well before both social movements, without these key political events, BBS and MBT's anti-Muslim narratives might not have had the same impact on each country's political process, nor the international media's focus.

This analysis suggests that more in-depth studies be conducted using social movement theory where governments collude with social movements in committing communal violence. Further study on information networks and AI generators would also be important, especially regarding social movements' use of AI to frame hate-based narratives. Finally, further study on the government use of AI in manipulating narratives

⁶¹⁶ Poopalaratnam, "'Attack against Humanity'"; "Police Warned That Sri Lanka Churches Were Targets."

⁶¹⁷ Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness'; Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*.

spread on social media platforms may also help to determine where hate speech and prejudice of ethno-religious groups begins. Instead of discussing the intractability of religious tension, we can further the discussion and help determine ways to change the narrative, so that we do not remain apathetic when communal violence occurs.

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