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Understanding Myanmar's Buddhist Extremists: Some Preliminary Musings

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Abstract

This article examines Buddhist extremism in Myanmar. It argues that Buddhist extremism—like other types of religious extremism—is an acute form of fundamentalism. The article begins with a survey of how extremism is usually understood in the theoretical literature, showing that its religious variant is best conceived of as an acute form of fundamentalism. It then fine tunes this understanding, arguing that religious extremism is a fundamentalist belief system that justifies structural violence against relevant out-groups. The article outlines seven core characteristics of the religious extremist culled from the various theoretical approaches to extremism. It employs these seven characteristics to examine Buddhist extremism in Myanmar, particularly in the way it has fueled violence against the ethnic minority Rohingya Muslim community in that country, giving rise to a humanitarian crisis with potential wider regional repercussions. The article reiterates that to cope with the ongoing Rohingya crisis, policy makers within and outside Myanmar must acquire a much deeper understanding of Buddhist extremism.

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Most observers studying violent extremism in Southeast Asia focus on Islamist expressions of the phenomenon, with good reason. The region has long been home to numerous militant groups animated by various violent forms of the political ideology of Islamism. These violent Islamist militant and insurgent networks have spanned the spectrum from transnational networks—such as the Indonesian-epicentered, Al Qaeda–linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and its various splinters that date from the first decade of the twenty-first century, the JI-affiliated Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, and the Al Qaeda–linked and more recent Islamic State–linked Abu Sayyaf Group and other factions in the southern Philippines—to more nationally focused Islamist groups—such as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate and similar groups in the long-running insurgency in southern Thailand.¹ It is important to recognize, however, that extremism can infect all faiths not just in this region but elsewhere. In this respect, the controversial monk Ashin Wirathu, a nationally known leader of the Buddhist fundamentalist 969 and its successor, the Ma Ba Tha movement in Myanmar, and his fellow monks associated with this movement provide a useful reminder of how religious extremism beyond the Islamist variety exists in Southeast Asia. Wirathu and his associates have long been associated with sectarian violence against the Muslim Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in the country.²

The 969 movement arose in the southern city of Mawlamyine in 2011. According to the International Crisis Group, “969 is numerological shorthand for the special attributes of Buddha and his teachings and a riposte to the number ‘786,’” which is a “folk Islam representation of the *Basmala* long used by Muslims in Myanmar and elsewhere to identify halal restaurants and Muslim-owned shops.”³ When 969 ran afoul of the authorities after it was accused of fueling Buddhist-Muslim violence and faded from the scene, Ma Ba Tha—the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion—emerged in earnest by early 2014 to take its place.⁴ Wirathu, in his role as a central figure in 969 and Ma Ba Tha, has graced the cover of *Time* magazine and has even been called the “Burmese bin Laden” because his sermons have been blamed for fueling the anti-Muslim violence that has rocked Myanmar in recent years.⁵ Wirathu, who began preaching in 2001 against the threat of Islam, was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to twenty-five years in jail for dangerous speech in the form of inflammatory anti-Muslim pamphlets. These materials had apparently incited deadly violence in Kyaukse, his hometown. He was freed in 2011 as part of a government amnesty.⁶ Between June and October 2012, 200 people, mainly Muslims, were killed in Buddhist-Muslim riots in the western Arakan region of Myanmar, and 110,000 villagers, mostly Muslim Rohingya, were displaced. While Wirathu’s role in fomenting Buddhist-Muslim tensions should not be overplayed—as mentioned and as we shall see, there have been other extremists as well—he seems to have skillfully tapped into widespread Buddhist anxieties about Muslims, who form only about 4 percent of the total population, which is dominated by the Buddhists (88 percent). In general, Myanmar’s Muslims—except for the disenfranchised Rohingya in Arakan—are economically well off. Ordinary Buddhists, influenced by the incendiary sermons of Wirathu and his like, fear that Islam—not Buddhism—will eventually dominate the country.⁷

Before we examine how Wirathu and his colleagues evinced extremist tendencies, we shall survey how extremism is usually understood in the theoretical literature, showing that its religious variant is best conceived of as an acute form of fundamentalism. In the process, we shall define religious extremism as a fundamentalist belief system that justifies structural violence against relevant out-groups. Next, we shall outline seven core characteristics of the religious extremist, culled from a close reading of the various theoretical approaches to the

subject. Finally, we shall apply these seven characteristics to better grasp how Buddhist extremism in Myanmar presents itself.

What Is Extremism?

Some scholars posit that being extremist in one's views does not necessarily mean being violent and that "extreme movements are good, even great . . . when people shift from indifference to intense concern with local problems, such as poverty and crime."⁸ Other analysts opine that "extremism is not necessarily bad or good" and can be "employed in the service of goals that may be valued either positively or negatively by a given individual or group."⁹ Alex Schmid has argued, however, that governments should counter extremism in all its ideological forms and should do so whether it is violent or not. According to the literature, there are still other ways of thinking about extremism. It has been suggested, for example, that the extremist "state of mind tolerates no diversity" and internalizes an "ideology" delineating "a simplified monocausal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them."¹⁰ Also, extremism is said to refer to an intense emotional attachment to that particular worldview. Kristen Klein and Arie Kruglanski argue that it means "zeal or profound conviction" for "a particular position or attitude on a given issue."¹¹ This notion of zeal or profound conviction for a particular worldview corresponds neatly with what Max Taylor has called "fanaticism" or "excessive enthusiasm" for the worldview in question, arising from a single-minded focus on ideological convictions—one that is resistant to "other social, political or personal forces that might be expected to control and influence behaviour."¹² Further, extremism can imply that the zealous adherents to the narrow worldview consider it to be dominant over other contending interpretations. Hence, extremism "takes its own wider group identity—be it religion or tradition—to an extreme; not by a move away from the centre, but rather by intensifying its self-understanding and self-proclamation as representing, or being, the centre."¹³

Another interpretation of extremism is its implicit embrace of violence as a possible tactic to actualize its preferred worldview. Schmid avers that extremists are "positively in favor of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power," despite being "vague and ambiguous in their public pronouncements," particularly "when they are in a position of weakness."¹⁴ In the same vein, J. M. Berger posits that extremism "refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group," including "violence, and even genocide."¹⁵ Other scholars suggest that extremism also connotes that the narrow worldview in question resides at the margins and boundaries of the societal mainstream and tends to be only tenuously linked to the normative core or center.¹⁶ In this sense, extremism represents a stark deviation from the societal norm or the majority worldview.¹⁷ In other words, extremism refers to "actions and value systems"—or worldviews—"that lie beyond the moral and political centre of society."¹⁸ To reiterate the point, worldviews are extremist if they are far removed from the societal norm. It is worth noting here that because there are different societies in the world, there could be differing societal norms. Hence, as Jane Kinninmont notes, the term *extremism* can be interpreted differently in different national contexts. While the United Kingdom and the Gulf countries, for example, differ on whether promoting atheist beliefs and LGBT and abortion rights should be considered "extremist," the United Arab Emirates and Qatar—both Gulf countries—disagree about whether the Muslim Brotherhood should be seen as an extremist entity.¹⁹ Thus, extremism may be context specific. What is considered extremist in a secular, multicultural country with a unique political and historical trajectory may not be seen as

such in a country with a more religiously legitimized and racially homogeneous country with an entirely different political and historical heritage.²⁰

In keeping with the foregoing analysis, *religious extremism* is defined in this study as a fundamentalist belief system that legitimizes the structural violence of an in-group against relevant out-groups. Two points are worth making here by way of elaboration. First, religious extremism is an acute form of fundamentalism—religion on the defensive. Fundamentalism, in other words, is “a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.”²¹ Broadly agreeing, Malise Ruthven describes fundamentalism as a “religious way of being that manifests itself in a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identities as individuals or groups in the face of modernity and secularization.”²² The fundamentalist response is generated in the face of not just the “general processes” of secularization and modernization and a “secular state” aiming to “secularize and delimit the domain of the sacred” but also—and importantly for our purposes—“other religions and/or ethnic groups.”²³ In sum, the “defense of religion is the sine qua non of fundamentalism; without it, a movement may not properly be labelled fundamentalist.”²⁴

Second, extremism could be seen as a belief system that legitimizes structural violence against relevant out-groups. Berger, in his interpretation of extremism as “hostile action” against out-groups, argues that while physical “violence” is part of the hostile action he mentions, it is not the only form. He adds that such hostile action includes “verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior.”²⁵ We can go further to more systematically situate his musings about not-violent yet hostile out-group actions as forms of structural violence. Structural violence has long been understood to encompass more than mere physical violence. In 1969, Johan Galtung, the doyen of peace and conflict studies, interpreted violence broadly. In a famous and wide-ranging essay, he argues that, in essence, “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”²⁶ Applying Galtung’s analysis of violence here, it could be said that out-group members experience violence not just when they are subjected to direct physical attacks—“personal violence”—but also when they are subjected to the indirect, sustained psychological threat of such attacks—“psychological violence.”²⁷ Moreover, apart from “violence that works on the body,” there is also “violence that works on the soul; where the latter would include lies, brainwashing, indoctrination of various kinds, threats, etc. that serve to decrease mental potentialities.”²⁸ In addition, there need not be any observable “subject” or perpetrator administering violence on the “objects” or out-group members. The political system itself that is dominated by powerful in-groups could ensure that “violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.” In other words, when resources are “unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on”; when “all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed”; and when “the persons low on income are also low in education, low on health, and low on power—as is frequently the case because these rank dimensions tend to be heavily correlated due to the way they are tied together in the social structure”—we are talking about broader, more insidious structural violence.²⁹

Two final elements of Galtung’s perceptive analysis are relevant here. First, personal, out-group physical violence is often subtle and “latent.” That is, “latent violence is something which

is not there, yet might easily come about”; it refers to “a situation where a little challenge would trigger considerable killing and atrocity” and exists “the day, hour, minute, second before the first bomb, shot, fist-fight, cry.”³⁰ Second, policy makers, rather than expending energy in determining guilt by focusing on whether out-group violence by certain perpetrators was intended or unintended, should analyze what the potential consequences of their actions would have been. As Galtung says, “ethical systems directed against intended violence will easily fail to capture structural violence in their nets—and may hence be catching the small fry and letting the big fish loose.”³¹ Galtung’s insights on latency and consequence are important. They offer us the opportunity to shift from an excessive downstream, analytical focus on only the violent manifestations of religious extremism to a much-needed, more upstream excavation of the subtle dangers of the supposedly “nonviolent” expressions of extremism itself. Specifically, Galtung’s musings on latency and consequence enable us to move away from the “small fry”—the actual violent perpetrators themselves, be they rioters, lone actors, or networked terrorists—to grasp the structural impact of the ostensibly “nonviolent” ideological extremist entrepreneurs in the background—“the big fish” whose hateful, carefully calibrated rhetorical remonstrations online or in the real world have been a source of continuing controversy. We shall now address this issue as part of a discussion of seven core characteristics of the religious extremist.

Core Characteristics of the Religious Extremist

As discussed, religious extremism is best seen as an acute form of fundamentalism. Put another way, extremism is a gestalt—or what David M. Terman defines as a “perceptual, affective-cognitive” structure.³² I contend that within the wider context of a religious in-group perceiving itself to be facing varying degrees and combinations of political, social, or economic pressures within a multicultural polity, the religious extremist—in contrast to mainstream believers within in-group ranks—evinces seven core characteristics.

The first, and foremost, core characteristic of the religious extremist is the intense emotional, fanatical attachment he displays toward his sectarian religious belief system, in the process relegating universally recognized international customs, as well as mainstream national constitutional, ideological, or mainline theological currents, to a secondary status. In other words, while the “actions and value systems” of the religious extremist “lie beyond the moral and political centre of society,”³³ he takes his “own wider group identity” to “an extreme” by “intensifying its self-understanding and self-proclamation as representing, or being, the centre.”³⁴ The religious extremist is thus an identity supremacist, particularly strongly driven by the “pecking order impulse” for in-group “pride, dignity and dominance.”³⁵ The uncompromising zeal of the religious extremist to promote and preserve the pecking-order primacy of his religious belief system and way of life with respect to universal international customs, mainstream national ideological, or theological worldviews illustrates an “obsessive-compulsive flavor” grounded in a “rigid structuralist approach.”³⁶ Thus, the extremist comes across as closed-minded, rigidly certain in his convictions and resistant to countervailing facts, and uninterested in relation to debate and compromise.³⁷ The extremist’s drive for pecking-order primacy for his religious way of life is further fueled by a perceived sense of victimization by dominant out-groups. The British Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary, for example, has charged that mainstream society disadvantages and discriminates against Muslims.³⁸

Another good example of the identity supremacism described here is that evinced by Jewish extremist right-wing settlers in Israel’s West Bank. The “most hard-core settlers,” Jeffrey Goldberg writes, “profess indifference, even scorn, for the state”; they are “free of doubt” and

see “themselves taking orders from God,” not the state.³⁹ As Neil Kressel notes, while mainstream Israelis wish to be governed under secular, humanitarian, and liberal principles, seeing themselves “as more Israelis than Jews,” the so-called retros—the settlers—regard “Israel as inherently different from other nations and separate; they see themselves more as Jews than as Israelis.”⁴⁰ In short, the religious extremist’s acute fundamentalist fixation with championing in-group identity and prestige compels him to deprioritize potentially competing identities—whether these are mainstream religious currents or national constitutional, ideological identities. This supremacist attitudinal orientation becomes problematic in secular multicultural contexts. Francis Fukuyama has argued that stable modern multicultural democracies cannot be based on any single “race, ethnicity, and religion” but must instead be based on shared creedal understandings, such as constitutionalism, democratic accountability, the rule of law, and political equality.⁴¹ In a similar vein, Amy Chua argues that an overarching US national identity cannot be based on sectarian understandings such as “‘whiteness,’ ‘Anglo-Protestant culture,’ ‘European Christianity,’ or any other terms not inclusive of all religions and ethnicities.”⁴² Hence, championing a sectarian religious belief system and way of life at the expense of mainstream theological or national constitutional ideals within a secular democratic multicultural context would be an extremist act.

A second core characteristic of the religious extremist flows from this intrinsic identity supremacism: he is dogmatically committed to the notion that his religious in-group is inherently morally superior to relevant out-groups. Generally, cognitive neuroscientists tell us that “it is easier for the brain to first quantify objects into pairs, and then to differentiate them into opposing groups,” such as “Republican or Democrat”; furthermore, these “dyads” represent a “unified concept” because “each term is defined according to its relationship to the other.” Thus, once an “oppositional dyad” is generated, the brain will automatically impose an “emotional bias on each part of the dyad,” leading us, after we “divide objects, people, and ideals into groups,” to “express a preference for one and a dislike for the other.”⁴³ E. O. Wilson concurs, noting that the root of this in-group bias is the basic human yearning to belong to “any collectivity that can be compared favorably with other, competing groups of the same category,” such as a “religious sect.”⁴⁴ Hence, going from “categorization to stereotyping and favoritism for one’s own group,” Neil Kressel asserts, “is not that difficult.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, religious in-group members generally believe that co-religionists are “more similar” to themselves than to “out-group members” across a “wide range of thoughts, feelings and behaviors,”⁴⁶ and the in-group as a whole basically possesses a good, morally pure “essence”—“the unseen spirit or nature that is endangered by contact or infection.”⁴⁷ The point is, such a generalized cognitive-affective tendency toward in-group bias, while present among mainstream believers, is far more acutely pronounced in the case of the religious extremist. Clark McCauley and Daniel Chirot observe in this respect that the acute, zealous in-group “love” of the religious extremist predisposes him to go through extraordinary lengths to protect the “in-group’s essence” against contamination by ostensibly impure out-group essences.⁴⁸

This brings us to the third, related core characteristic of the religious extremist: he is equally dogmatically committed to the notion that the out-group as a whole is evil and poses an urgent, existential threat to the in-group. For mainstream in-group members, the “out-group homogeneity effect” predisposes them to assume that all out-group members are basically alike and “if we know something about one out-group member” we “feel that we know something about all of them.”⁴⁹ Because of the “accentuation effect,” mainstream in-group members to varying degrees tend to be biased toward information that amplifies the differences with out-

group members. Intergroup similarities tend to be downplayed or ignored.⁵⁰ Within a wider religious in-group facing serious stresses within a multicultural polity, mainstream believers may well be experiencing various degrees of mass radicalization: the cognitive processes of in-group depluralization, in which all other competing in-group identities are stripped away; self-deindividuation, in which in-group members' personal identities are eliminated; and other-deindividuation, in which the personal identities of out-group members are stripped away. These processes, however, would be far more acute among in-group religious extremists.⁵¹

The deep-rooted fundamentalist impulse animating the religious extremist would compel him to hold that nothing less than a battle of “good and evil” is involved, in which “two incompatible essences” are engaged in cosmic conflict, and where “love of the good means necessarily hate for the threatening out-group.” In short, the “out-group’s essence must be kept from contaminating the in-group’s essence.”⁵² Moreover, the religious extremist would believe that urgent action is needed to defend the in-group against the existential “crisis” perpetrated by the out-group against the embattled in-group.⁵³ Following Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, therefore, while gradually radicalizing mainstream religious in-group members may “assign preferences and dislikes to people from different cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds” and seek to “develop scenarios—pass laws, distribute benefits, etc.—that are less than favorable for the out-group,”⁵⁴ in-group extremists would be willing to go much further to engage in distinctly stronger forms of such structural violence. Berger identifies a spectrum of stronger structurally violent extremist responses, ranging from direct harassment, discrimination, and enforced physical segregation to outright physical violence, such as hate crimes or “nonsystematic violence against out-group members,” to “terrorism,” “genocide,” and “war.”⁵⁵

A fourth core characteristic of the religious extremist is an obsession with purity and fear of contamination of the good essence of the in-group through commingling with the out-group. To better understand this characteristic, we can turn to the so-called four Bs of community life that members of a religious in-group are expected to commit to: beliefs, behavior (or rituals), badges (clothing or other markings), and bans (taboos and proscribed activity). Adhering to certain beliefs and behavioral rituals, badges, and bans often require costly, sacrificial responses from religious in-group members.⁵⁶ In the context of the current discussion, it could be said that while mainstream believers would likely evince nominal adherence to the four Bs, in-group extremists would hold to these four Bs with much greater degrees of fealty and zeal, and, as acute fundamentalists at the core, would seek to impose such commitment on the wider community of less extreme co-religionists. An example of an extremist interpretation of the four Bs comes from the United States: some violent Christian anti-abortion extremists influenced by Reconstruction theology hold the belief that the country should become a “Christian theocratic state.” Reconstructionists and other extremists, hewing to the related tenets of Dominion theology, argue that the United States should function as a “Christian nation” rather than a “secular society,” and in this respect, “abortion on demand, fornication, homosexuality,” and “sexual entertainment” are regarded as bans.⁵⁷ In the realm of behavior, another strain of Christian extremism calls for social segregation from and religiously sanctioned violence against out-groups. Hence, adherents of Christian Identity seek to merge religion and the state in “a new society governed by religious law,” compelling identity groups such as Elohim City, the Aryan Nations Compound, and the Freeman Compound to “live together in theocratic societies” away from the societal mainstream. Furthermore, driven by an “apocalyptic view of history,” they are geared toward “valiant, militant efforts” to threaten the “evil system” of governance that is said to be manipulated behind the scenes by a global “Jewish-Freemason conspiracy to control the

world and deprive individuals of their freedom.” Identity extremists also carry firearms as a badge of their religious commitment to defend their way of life against the trepidations of the “Jewish-UN-liberal conspirators.”⁵⁸ In sum, a fourth core characteristic of the religious extremist can be said—through the instrumentality of the four Bs—to “enforce rigid boundaries between” his ostensibly beleaguered in-group and hostile and threatening out-groups.⁵⁹

A fifth core characteristic of the religious extremist is a pronounced categorical or dualistic thinking. The cognitive exercise of simplifying and organizing the social environment into binary oppositions is rooted in human nature and encompasses multiple domains, such as age, culture, religion, ethnicity, language, social class, and sexual orientation.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the fundamentalist mindset animating religious extremists evinces this cognitive tendency more strongly. The rigid, dualistic cognitive orientation of the religious extremist arises out of the “psychological anxiety” caused by “perceived threat or uncertainty” to “simplify” and to “eliminate the middle ground, to split, dividing the world into safe and threat, good and evil, life and death.”⁶¹ Schmid thus considers religious extremists to be “single-minded black-or-white thinkers.”⁶² A related factor intensifying the dualistic thinking of the religious extremist is what has been called *low integrative complexity* as evinced in the fanatic’s “simplified view of the world.”⁶³ While “integratively complex thinking recognizes the legitimacy of different evaluative viewpoints and is capable of higher order synthesis of these viewpoints,” lower integrative complexity “thinks in terms of, for example, binary, black-and white contrasts with little or no integration of the perspectives.”⁶⁴ While stronger integrative complexity is able to “achieve higher levels of integration between non-compatible perspectives” through, for example, “dialectical reasoning (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) and analogical reasoning (x is like y , as in the metaphor ‘man is a wolf’),” the lower integrative complexity of the religious extremist tends to result in information *processing* derived from “classical binary logical/mathematical thinking.”⁶⁵ In this respect, it is interesting that Khaled Abou El Fadl, writing about the Islamic fundamentalist-extremist variant known as Wahhabism, observes that “the majority” of the Wahhabi “puritan leadership” comprised people who “studied the physical sciences, such as medicine, engineering, and computer science” and hence “anchor themselves in the objectivity and certitude that comes from empiricism.”⁶⁶ Perhaps the binary logical/mathematical thinking associated with some of the harder technical sciences fosters a lower integrative complexity, rendering religious extremists from such educational backgrounds prone to “monodimensional or literalist readings of scripture,” in contrast with their “counterparts in the arts and humanities whose training”—and consequently stronger forms of integrative complexity—“requires them to approach texts multidimensionally, exploring contradictions and ambiguities.”⁶⁷ Very few “poets and cosmologists,” Martin Marty and Scott Appleby wryly observe, “find their way into fundamentalist cadres.”⁶⁸

While a supposed link between an education in the physical/technical sciences and fundamentalism/extremism has attracted scholarly attention, it should not be overdone.⁶⁹ More generally, the rigid, dualistic thinking and lower integrative complexity of the religious extremist can also be incubated through sustained socialization within religious enclaves insulated from the multicultural, societal mainstream, or what Cass Sunstein would describe as insulated social spaces or enclaves.⁷⁰ Hence, while the Christian Identity groups described earlier live together in theocratic societies away from the societal mainstream, the Indonesian Islamist extremist and long-time spiritual leader of the JI terrorist network, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, described as “a very simple man” possessing a “horizon” that is “very primordial” and “very much ignorant in other matters” beyond Islam, evolved his low integrative complexity through sustained immersion in

almost exclusively Islamist, in particular, Darul Islam, circles.⁷¹ Ba'asyir's low integrative complexity has predisposed him to see the world in rigid, dualistic, Manichean terms for sure. His "maximalist" interpretation of Islam "is couched in terms of an oppositional dialectic that juxtaposes Islam against everything else that is deemed un-Islamic or anti-Islamic [such as] secularism, Western culture and values, democracy, worldly politics," as well as other religions and "all man-made secular ideologies."⁷²

The sixth core characteristic of the religious extremist is a tendency to engage in dangerous speech toward out-group members. Dangerous speech, according to Susan Benesch, is "an act of speech [that] has a reasonable chance of catalyzing or amplifying violence by one group against another, given the circumstances in which it was made or disseminated."⁷³ Dangerous speech occurs when several key elements are present: a charismatic extremist ideologue who possesses significant influence over a particular audience, widespread grievances and anxieties that can be exploited by that ideologue, a sociohistorical context of past intergroup conflict and weak rule of law, lack of access to countervailing sources of information, and speech content that dehumanizes the out-group "as vermin, pests, insects or animals" and actively justifies violence against its members as legitimate self-defence.⁷⁴ Benesch's insights on dangerous, linguistically dehumanizing speech are further strengthened by Paul Rozin's work on the psychology of disgust. Rozin argues that such a psychology is an evolved instinct in human beings. This instinct emerged in ancestral environments in which early human bands not only had to guard against predators and other warring tribes but also had to worry about the unseen bacteria and germs infesting plant life and the bodies of dead animals. Gradually, a powerful, instinctive psychological revulsion toward rotting food and corpses and dirt and excrement evolved as an important evolutionary adaptation. Rozin argues that the human contagion-avoidance instinct has so evolved that we automatically assume that "limited contact, however brief," with a source of dangerous contamination "transmits the whole of the risk."⁷⁵ The point is this: The unconscious, evolved human contagion-avoidance instinct can also be activated when contamination-averse religious extremists encounter out-group members stereotyped as unclean. This is not an outlandish idea. John Teehan reminds us that in the Old Testament, for example, the Israelites were commanded to destroy entire "sinful" cities and towns because they are "polluted and so everything in [them] must go."⁷⁶

In other words, because linguistically dehumanizing speech against out-group members activates the contagion-avoidance instinct that is pronounced among religious extremists, even supposedly "nonviolent" rhetoric that while not directly inciting out-group violence nevertheless compares religious out-group members to "pigs, rats, maggots, cockroaches, and other vermin" becomes potentially dangerous. As argued, dehumanizing rhetoric establishes an unconscious link between "disgust and genocide" among religious extremists, encouraging them to believe that these "disgusting characteristics" of the out-group "threaten to pollute the environment and must be eliminated."⁷⁷ In this respect, it could be said that when the Indonesian JI terrorist Mukhlas—implicated in the October 2002 Bali nightclub bombings—referred to all Westerners as "dirty animals and insects,"⁷⁸ such speech was dangerous because it was what the former radical Ed Husain calls "mood music." Though mood music may not necessarily always incite out-group violence directly and explicitly, by activating the contagion-avoidance instinct of in-group extremists, it paves the way psychologically for such violence eventually to be perpetrated.⁷⁹ Anthony Stahelski concurs that "dehumanization," in which out-group members begin to be regarded as "subhuman" or "inhuman," and finally "demonization," in which they are reframed as "evil," are cause for concern.⁸⁰ Similarly, James W. Jones holds that when

religious extremists subject out-group members to what he calls “satanization,” the latter would be seen as subhumans “who embody pure evil,” who “cannot be argued with or compromised with” and “can only be destroyed” as a “moral duty.”⁸¹ No one who lets religious extremists preach “antidemocratic, antihuman sermons of hate in public,” Hamed Abdul-Samad warns, “has the right to be surprised when, sooner or later, their messages lead to violence.”⁸²

The dangerous speech of religious extremists thus can be of two types: “hard” or “soft.” In the hard mode, the extremist makes little effort to temper his incitement to out-group violence. But extremists may also operate in a more subtle, more difficult to detect soft mode, not explicitly inciting violence, for fear of falling afoul of national laws against hate speech. In the United Kingdom, for example, for years the Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary managed to evade arrest by being “careful to avoid being linked to anything actually illegal,” expressing public sympathy, defending and justifying the actions of terrorist plotters—but adding for good measure that he was not directly involved with their plans.⁸³ Ba’asyir in Indonesia provides an example of operating in both modes. In October 2007, addressing a crowd of young people in East Java, he incited them to “just beat up” foreigners who dared to venture into East Java and “not tolerate them.”⁸⁴ Though much of the time Ba’asyir avoided explicitly calling for out-group violence, even his speech in the soft mode provided the sort of mood music that fosters a combustible climate of out-group intolerance that could spark into violence should the right circumstances coalesce. Hence, when he extolled Muslims in Indonesia to “reject the laws of the nation’s parliament” because “following state laws” that contradicted “Islamic Shariah law” was an “act of blasphemy” and when he dehumanized non-Muslim tourists in Bali by calling them “worms, snakes, maggots,” that is, “animals that crawl,”⁸⁵ and advised his followers not to “seek to mingle” with such outsiders, his speech was problematic.⁸⁶

Even in the absence of direct incitement to act violently, soft hate rhetoric such as that Ba’asyir used can, with repetition, be as dangerous as hard hate rhetoric. By subtly normalizing and mainstreaming “discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes towards” out-groups with a view “to injure, dehumanise, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimize” them, soft hate rhetoric eventually foment “insensitivity and brutality against them.”⁸⁷ Thus, Schmid has argued, the whole notion of “non-violent extremism” is utterly “misleading.” While “Gandhian non-violence is radical” it is not “extreme, he writes, it is an example of a “principled political philosophy that seeks to hold the moral high ground in the face of a violent opponent.” By contrast, extremism is in essence “not-violent” or “not-now violent” in the sense that “the non-use of violence is based merely on pragmatic, tactical and/or temporal considerations.”⁸⁸ Astrid Botticher agrees, arguing that “holding extremist views without the political will to translate thoughts into action might be more a question of circumstances and opportunities than principles.”⁸⁹ In short, the religious extremist can shift between soft and hard modes of dangerous speech depending on his tactical appreciation of the situation.

A seventh core characteristic of the religious extremist is his drive to seek the political clout and influence to restructure the wider polity and society to reflect his preferred vision of a religiously legitimated sociopolitical order, in which divinely sanctioned structural violence is inflicted on enemy out-groups. Animated by an acute fundamentalist drive to defend their religious in-group from an ostensibly threatening sociopolitical environment of competing out-groups, extremists “would like everyone to be like them, preferably under theocratic rule.”⁹⁰ Stuart Sim points out, for example, that the acutely fundamentalist extremist, as seen evincing low integrative complexity and consequently driven by the “desire for certainty,” seeks also “the

power to enforce that certainty on others.”⁹¹ Thus, Sim adds, “power is a political rather than a spiritual issue,” and what sets the extremist apart from politically active co-believers is a far more pronounced quest for “control, control, control.”⁹² This fixation with seeking power and control explains why the religious extremist, as Schmid notes, is “anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian,” “fanatical, intolerant,” “rejecting the rule of law while adhering to an ends-justify-means philosophy,” and, of no small consequence, aiming to realize his “goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents.”⁹³ The extremist drive for power and control is evinced by the Christian extremist network Army of God, for example, which considers US society to be in a state of moral and spiritual decay and has sought power to construct “a new moral order” based on “Biblical” and not “secular principles.” Moreover, evincing the always-present potential for out-group physical violence as Schmid indicates, Army of God followers admitted that because “America was on the edge of an abyss,” it was apparent that “civil war was inevitable.”⁹⁴

The Framework Applied: Core Characteristics of Buddhist Extremism in Myanmar

Returning to the case of Buddhist extremism in Myanmar, what can we surmise? Above all, Wirathu himself is unequivocally an identity supremacist, though to be fair, this orientation could be said to be partly a product of the wider historical evolution of Buddhist-majority but multicultural Myanmar itself. Until the reign of King Anawratha in the eleventh century CE, the country hosted several religions, including Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, and animism. Anawratha, however, began institutionalizing Buddhism as the de facto state religion of his empire, establishing a special, mutually symbiotic politico-religious relationship with the Sangha monastic order. Nevertheless, Anawratha’s successors did not engage in systematic structural depredations against other faiths—such as Islam—that had emerged in the country by the ninth century, having been introduced by seafaring traders from India and Persia. Instead, as Francis Wade points out, they cultivated “a degree of communal harmony that would be unfamiliar to those watching the country today.” In fact, he adds, the “country had on the whole enjoyed a pluralistic society.”⁹⁵ But in the wake of political missteps by the British, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Muslims and other minorities were increasingly viewed as colonial stooges out to undermine the political dominance of the Buddhist Bamar (Burman) majority. A nationalist anticolonial movement gathered steam by the 1930s, fired by “an ethnic and religious chauvinism” toward “non-Bamar and non-Buddhist” minorities that “would carry well into the post-independence era, splitting the country along multiple lines and paving the way for decades of conflict.”⁹⁶ After independence, moreover, attempts by the postcolonial military regime to designate Buddhism as the state religion were rebuffed by minority groups.

By 2008, the national constitution, while recognizing the “special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens (section 361),” also took care to stipulate under section 362 that “Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism” have followers in the country as well.⁹⁷ By October 2017, the newly elected National League for Democracy civilian government had ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which includes a provision that states are obliged to “guarantee economic and social rights without distinction as to race, religion, or national or social origin.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, a widespread notion long before had taken root in military-institutional circles that while building a strong Myanmar based on the “purity and homogeneity” of the Buddhist-Bamar majority community was utterly imperative,⁹⁹ the country was being “lost” to Muslims” who identify as ethnic

“Rohingya.” They are descendants of early Muslim settlers who came from Bengal between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, from the laborers brought in by the British during the colonial era of the twentieth century, and later from the “Bengalis” who crossed over into the eastern Rakhine state from Bangladesh.¹⁰⁰ Against this backdrop of national existential uncertainty, Wirathu’s extremism expressed through identity supremacism comes out clearly. The Buddhist fundamentalist Ma Ba Tha movement of which Wirathu is a part champions the preservation of Buddhist-Bamar political supremacy—and has significant grassroots support among Myanmar Buddhists who buy into its narrative that “inherently peaceful and non-proselytising” Buddhism in the country is “susceptible to oppression by more aggressive faiths” like Islam.¹⁰¹ Wirathu goes further. He has warned publicly that Muslims have long been “despicable and dangerous destroyers of our Buddhism and Buddhist symbols” and have a “100-year plan” to take over Myanmar’s “sovereignty through inter-faith marriages with Buddhists.”¹⁰² Deifying Ma Ba Tha as Buddhism’s divinely sanctioned vanguard in Myanmar, Wirathu has quipped, “We came down from the sky, not like a normal person,” and “we are brilliant people.”¹⁰³

The identity supremacism of Wirathu and other similar Buddhist extremists reflects the second and third core extremist characteristics described earlier: acute in-group bias and out-group prejudice. Wirathu’s fellow Ma Ba Tha monk U Parmoukkha hinted at what he considers the innate “good essence” of the Buddhist in-group in Myanmar when he declared that “in Buddhist teaching it is taught that you cannot harm other people”; hence, “the person who harms is not someone who follows Buddhist teaching.” And though he claimed that he did not know “whether the people who say they are Buddhist and then attack only temporarily follow Buddhism or whether they follow it at all,” he confidently asserted that if “there is no Buddhism, there will be more violence, and the situation will be even worse.” Parmoukkha added that “all the robbery, all the killings are seen as bad deeds.” Thus, without the Buddhist in-group, “ideas might come about that these acts are not sinful,” because “there would be no one to teach that they are bad.”¹⁰⁴ In contrast, Parmoukkha’s anti-Muslim prejudice and assumption that Muslims possess a “bad essence” was revealed in his assertion that “Muslims have been trained since they are young in the mosque” about “extreme ideas,” such as a call “to dominate the whole world. “Most of the Muslims,” he asserts, “are touched in this way.”¹⁰⁵ Evidence for the worrying mainstreaming of the extremist notions put forth by Wirathu, Parmoukkha, and their ilk that Muslims in Myanmar—including Muslims of shared Bamar ethnicity even—are basically homogeneously evil is revealed by a young Buddhist who informed the journalist Francis Wade that though he once had a Rohingya friend, he “no longer interacted with Muslims” because “they are very stupid” and their “religion is bad,” and though he did not think his former Rohingya friend was necessarily a “bad person,” “his ethnicity is bad,” and the “group is bad.”¹⁰⁶

Buddhist extremism in Myanmar also reflects the fourth core characteristic of the extremist in its obsession with purity and fear of contamination through intimate contact with the Muslim out-group. The belief in the importance of maintaining Buddhist-Bamar in-group purity against supposed Muslim bad essence is buttressed by behaviors and bans targeting Muslims.¹⁰⁷ Wirathu, for example, in a December 2012 sermon in Meikhtila, several months before violence broke out there, “called on Buddhists to disassociate themselves entirely from Muslims,” in the process “solidifying the religious divide and making it clear that they were two very different groups of people, one to be trusted, the other not.”¹⁰⁸ Putting such bans into operation included, in Wirathu’s view, buying only from Buddhist-owned businesses, because patronizing Muslims stores would strengthen their economic and political capacity to “destroy the whole nation and religion,” and they “will take over the whole country.” At the same time, Wirathu advised

Buddhists to identify Buddhist stores by a familiar badge, the “969” sticker associated with the Buddhist fundamentalist movement of which he was a part. Several months, later, during the Meikhtila violence, Buddhist mobs scrawled another badge—the “786” associated with Islam—on Muslim houses marked out for attack.¹⁰⁹ While reciprocal radicalization of Buddhist-Muslim dyads in the country leading up to and in the wake of communal violence meant that often religiously mixed communities suddenly became polarized and physically segregated, there were some villages—such as the one in central Myanmar Parmoukkha hailed from—“where only Buddhists live and where we didn’t know much about other religions.” Parmoukkha’s growing up in such an insulated enclave would have helped incubate his insular, fundamentalist-extremist fixation with preserving in-group purity against the existential Muslim threat.¹¹⁰

Wirathu and his fellow Ma Ba Tha extremists seem to possess pronounced dualistic thinking twinned with low integrative complexity, a reflection of the fifth characteristic of the extremist. Wirathu seeks to “eliminate the middle ground, to split, dividing the world into safe and threat, good and evil, life and death.”¹¹¹ As he puts it, 90 percent of Muslims in the country are “radical, bad people” who are “stealing our women [and], raping them” and who seek to “occupy our country,” extinguishing Buddhism in the process.¹¹² Wirathu’s narrative—disseminated widely through CDs and DVDs—was, mildly put, simplistic. As Wade observes, Wirathu’s storyline of the existential Muslim threat “linked together in a simple chain of causation the fate of Buddhism to the fate of the nation, and thus the fate of the individual,” and if not checked, “events happening elsewhere in the country would soon come to bear on the security of people hundreds of miles away.”¹¹³ Wirathu taught that “in Buddhism, we are not allowed to go on the offensive”; but “we have every right to protect and defend our community” if attacked.¹¹⁴ While the narrative was straightforward and unsophisticated, it was potent, capable of spreading visceral fear of and hate toward Muslims from “Rakhine State to towns in the country’s centre,” radicalizing communities and “transforming neighbours into enemies.”¹¹⁵

The sixth core characteristic of the religious extremist—dangerous speech capable of catalyzing out-group violence—is also readily evinced among Myanmar’s Buddhist extremists. Wirathu and other influential extremists adroitly exploit long-standing anti-Muslim prejudices, and state authorities seem unable and unwilling to decisively curb their efforts to dominate the information space with their simple but virulent narrative.¹¹⁶ Wirathu in particular employs a key element of dangerous speech—linguistic dehumanization. Perhaps the mildest term he has used to dehumanize Muslims is *kalar*, a derogatory word similar to the “N-word” in a US context.¹¹⁷ He has been more extreme, declaring, for example, “Muslims are only well behaved when they are weak” and adding that when “they are strong they are like a wolf or a jackal, in large packs they hunt down other animals.”¹¹⁸ Like the Nazis in World War II who reframed the Jews as “leeches” and “bloodsuckers,” Wirathu describes Muslims, including even those of the same Bamar ethnicity, in similar terms.¹¹⁹ Wirathu has also described Muslims as “mad dogs,”¹²⁰ “cannibals,” and even “African carp”—a “very violent,” “invasive species” that “breed quickly” and that “eat each other and destroy nature.”¹²¹

All the preceding examples are indicative of Wirathu’s use of dangerous speech in the soft mode, in which no explicit call to violent action against Muslims is made. Wirathu often emphasizes that “he never encouraged attacks, and nowhere in his sermons does he implore followers to take up the sword”—but as Wade points out, he certainly “did lay down tinder that could easily catch flame.”¹²² Moreover, according to the US-based human rights group Justice Trust, “outbreaks of violence often coincide with Wirathu’s speeches or posts on the 969 Facebook page.”¹²³ Wirathu, however, has not been averse to switching to the hard mode on

occasion, actively inciting out-group violence, such as when he urged Buddhist mobs to “cut off the d*cks” of Muslim men “to make an example of Muslim men who marry our women.”¹²⁴ Wirathu, therefore, seems to exemplify what Schmid, as noted, calls a “not-violent” extremist—or, simply, an extremist—whose position on nonviolent action is based on tactical considerations rather than pious principle.¹²⁵ Thus, when Wirathu assures journalists that he is “going to give lessons to educate the whole people to stop the violence”¹²⁶ and implores them, “Look at my face, I don’t have any hatred at all,”¹²⁷ it behooves one not to be too readily taken in.

The seventh core characteristic of the religious extremist—his drive to seek political power to restructure the wider polity in line with his vision of a religiously legitimated sociopolitical order—is evidenced in Wirathu’s and Ma Ba Tha’s vocal support for four laws enacted by the government in May and August 2015 that, taken together, appear to represent institutionalized discrimination against Muslims.¹²⁸ The Population Control Law appears to give the government the necessary powers to implement noncoercive population control measures in areas identified as having high population density and growth and high maternal and child mortality exacerbated by poverty and food scarcity. Observers have pointed out that this law appears to “apply particularly to Muslim-majority northern Rakhine state where coercive local orders that limited Muslim couples to two children have been in place in the past.” The Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law puts several administrative strictures in place to regulate “any marriage of a Buddhist woman to a non-Buddhist man.” It requires that a “non-Buddhist man must allow the wife to freely follow her Buddhist faith, not attempt to convert her and allow any children to freely follow the religion of their choice”—and most pointedly, the law requires that he “must not insult Buddhism in any way,” or else he is liable “to three years imprisonment or a fine.” The Religious Conversion Law imposes regulations on Buddhists seeking to convert to other religions; a township Religious Conversion Scrutinising and Registration Board must examine each case and approve such decisions. Finally, the Monogamy Law makes it a criminal offense, among other things, “to have more than one spouse”; offenders are liable to “up to seven years imprisonment.”¹²⁹ Such laws are extremist in the sense that they diverge from “Myanmar’s constitutional provisions on religious freedom and non-discrimination” and “its treaty obligations under various international human rights conventions.” Because these laws appear to “have discriminatory intent and to be targeted at Muslims,”¹³⁰ they represent a form of Galtungian structural violence directed at Muslims, preventing them from actualizing their religious and lifestyle preferences and potentials.

Conclusion

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), on January 23, 2020, delivered a preliminary ruling on a widely reported case brought by Gambia against Myanmar for its alleged “genocide” against the Rohingya Muslims—a case that has generated global attention. The ICJ “recognized the extreme vulnerability of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the irreparable harm they have suffered” and called on Myanmar to take steps to curtail its structural violence against the embattled minority group. In particular, Myanmar is required “to take all measures within its power” to “prevent killing members of the group” and to avoid “causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group,” “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part,” or “imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.”¹³¹ Legal experts believe that it is going to be very difficult for the ICJ to bring a genocide verdict against Myanmar, prompting some to argue that Gambia should have pursued the lesser and supposedly more winnable charges of “war crimes” or “ethnic cleansing.”

While there are still several months of deliberations and assessment of further evidence to come, some observers note that within Myanmar itself, by “taking on the allegations of the ICJ case in a most direct and defiant manner,” the Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi has effectively “reemerged as the protector of the Burmese people, the nation and indeed the Myanmar military.” Her actions have won her domestic political capital that can strengthen her hand in her ongoing political tussle with the military over “democratic reform, constitutional revision and the fight to bring the military back under civilian control,” and most analysts assess that her NLD party can win the coming national elections slated for later in 2020, albeit with a “smaller margin.”¹³² It is hoped that Suu Kyi will, in the process of consolidating her power further, re-examine ways to curb Buddhist extremism against her Rohingya and the wider Muslim minority. Apart from the obvious and very pressing humanitarian rationale, such an exercise would have implications for regional security as well. Counterterrorism officials in Malaysia and Indonesia have long worried that the plight of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar may serve as a lightning rod, prompting the likes of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda to stoke an even bigger regional conflagration. Such fears were realized in August 2017. Following attacks by radicalized Rohingya militants of the shadowy Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army on security forces that month, the Myanmar state reacted with a massive crackdown in the western Arakan region, killing 400 Rohingya and causing 370,000 others to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. The following month, Al Qaeda called on “mujahid brothers in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the Philippines to set out for Burma (Myanmar) to help their Muslim brothers” with a view to resisting Myanmar state “oppression against their Muslim brothers and to secure their rights, which will only be returned to them by use of force.”¹³³

As a first step to forestall such a troubling scenario, policy makers within and outside Myanmar must acquire a much deeper understanding of Buddhist extremism, recognizing that, like all religious extremisms, Buddhist extremism is an acute fundamentalist belief system justifying structural violence against out-groups. Only then will a more holistic attempt at ameliorating the serious humanitarian and wider, looming geopolitical aspects of the ongoing Rohingya crisis be possible.

Notes

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