

# Everyday Justice for Muslims in Mawlamyine: Subjugation and Skilful Navigation

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## Abstract

This article, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar 2015–2017, explores the everyday interactions between Muslim and Buddhist residents in an urban ward in Mawlamyine, the capital city of Mon State. The focus is on tensions and injustices, analyzed through the prism of everyday dispute resolution and survival strategies. I discuss occurring forms of injustice that are not only re-enforced by anti-Muslim nationalist discourses and global trends (including the role of social media), but also mediated by local and personal agendas, and efforts to mitigate open violence. Competition for power and insecurities in the current transition play into these dynamics. In analyzing the tactics used to navigate the socio-political environment that interlocutors face in their everyday, I contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities of local politics and Muslim-Buddhist relations in Myanmar and how this affects (in)access to justice.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

အစ္စလာမ် ဘာသာဝင် မွတ်စလင်များအတွက် နေ့စဉ်မျှတမှု  
ဖော်ဆောင်မှု (သို့) လက်အောက်ခံ အဖြစ် ဖိနှိပ်ခြင်းနှင့်  
ရည်ရွယ်ချက်ရှိရှိ ဖော်ဆောင်မှု စာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ  
မွန်ပြည်နယ်၏ မြို့တော် မော်လမြိုင်မြို့တွင် ၂၀၁၅ခုနှစ်မှ ၂၀၁၇ခုနှစ်  
အတွင်း ကွင်းဆင်း လေ့လာ သုတေသနပြု တွေ့ရှိချက်များကို  
တင်ပြထားခြင်း ဖြစ်ပြီး မော်လမြိုင်တွင် နေထိုင်လျက်ရှိသည့်

သမိုင်းနောက်ခံနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှု ဓလေ့ထုံးတမ်း မတူညီသည့် အစွဲလမ်းဘာသာဝင် မွတ်စလင်များနှင့် ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင် ဌာနေ ပြည်သူများကြား နေ့စဉ်လူမှု ဘဝများ၏ တရားမျှတမှု ဖော်ဆောင်ပုံကို ချဉ်းကပ်တင်ပြထားခြင်း ဖြစ်ပါသည်။

စာတမ်းပြုစုသူ အနေဖြင့် အဆိုပါ လူမှုဝန်းကျင် နှစ်ရပ်ကြား ဆက်ဆံရေး တင်းမာနေသည့် အခြေအနေများနှင့် တရားမျှတမှု ဖော်ဆောင်ရာတွင် အားနည်းချက် များကို အလေးထားတင်ပြထားပြီး၊ နေ့စဉ်လူမှုဘဝ တရားမျှတမှု ဖော်ဆောင်ပုံနှင့် ၎င်းတို့၏ အနာဂတ် ရှင်သန် နေထိုင်နိုင်ရေး ကြိုးပမ်းနေရသည့် အကျပ်အတည်း အနေအထားကို ချဉ်းကပ် တင်ပြထားပါသည်။ ထို့အပြင် တရားမျှတမှု ဖော်ဆောင်ရာ၌ တွေ့ကြုံ နေရသည့် မမျှမတဖြစ်စဉ်များ၊ ယင်းဖြစ်စဉ်များက ထပ်ဆင့်လာသည့် မွတ်စလင် ဆန့်ကျင်ရေးကို အားပေးသည့် အမျိုးသားရေး ဟောညွှန်ချက်များနှင့် လူမှုကွန်ရက် မီဒီယာများတွင် ဖော်ပြချက်များ အပါအဝင် ကမ္ဘာတစ်ဝှမ်း အစွဲလမ်းဆန့်ကျင်ရေး ဆိုင်ရာ အထိ လေ့လာတင်ပြထားသည့် အပြင် လူမှု အသိုက်အဝန်း နှစ်ခုကြား ဒေသတွင်း အမုန်းတရားကြောင့် ပြဿနာများ လျော့ပါးစေရေး၊ အချင်းချင်းကြား ပြေလည်စေရေး လူ အများစုနှင့် ပုဂ္ဂလတစ်ဦးချင်းစီပါ ကြိုးပမ်းနေရသည့် အကြောင်း ခြင်းရာများကိုပါ လေ့လာတင်ပြထားပါသည်။ ထို့ထက်ပို၍ တင်ပြရ ပါမူ ဒေသတွင်း ပြည်သူများ ဖြစ်သည့် အစွဲလမ်းဘာသာဝင် မွတ်စလင်များနှင့်ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်များကြား နေ့စဉ်တရားမျှတမှု

ဖော်ဆောင်ပေးမှုမှ စတင်ကာ လူမှုရေးအခြေပြု၍ နိုင်ငံရေး အထိပါ ဆက်စပ်ပါဝင်သင့်သည့် အကြောင်းအရာများကို ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာ တင်ပြထားသည့် အပြင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ ဒီမိုကရေစီရေး ဖော်ဆောင်မှုနှင့် တစ်နိုင်ငံလုံး တရားဥပဒေ စိုးမိုးရေး ဖော်ဆောင်မှုကိုပါ တစ်စုံတစ်ရာ အားပေးထောက်ပံ့ ပြုစေလိုသည့် ပိုမိုကျယ်ပြန့်သည့် ရည်ရွယ်ရင်း ဖြစ်ပါသည်။

## Introduction

In much of the recent literature and media coverage on Muslim-Buddhist relations in Myanmar, the focus has been on open conflict and violence, especially in Rakhine State. In addition, the Ma Ba Tha, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, has made headlines with their stated intention to protect Buddhism, race and nation. Ma Ba Tha monks use their authority to communicate nationalist ideology with the explicit claim to provide security, protection and justice for Myanmar Buddhists. In this process, religion and ethnicity merge and boundaries have been demarcated, excluding other denominations as alien. The significance of Buddhists monks, the growing focus on religious identity and its effects on injustices and the provision of justice is discussed further by Gravers (this issue). Several anti-Muslim campaigns instigated by Ma Ba Tha or its predecessor 969 Movement,<sup>1</sup> have since 2012 resulted in incidents of communal strife and violence in Myanmar, and have drawn considerable scholarly and media attention to the religious unrest

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<sup>1</sup> The 969 Movement was headed by Buddhist nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu and opposed the perceived spread of Islam in Myanmar. For a detailed account of the 969 movement see Kyaw (2016).

in the country.<sup>2</sup> While recognizing the importance of discussing the violent conflicts, their origins and repercussions, this article analyses how relations play out in places where conflicts have not erupted. I identify injustices against Muslims and how they are entangled with nationalist, anti-Muslim discourses, and the rapid spread and accessibility of social media. Rather than leading to open conflict, these injustices are mediated by both local and personal agendas and efforts to mitigate open violence.

More specifically the article explores the complex relationships between Muslim and Buddhist residents of a poorer ward on the outskirts of Mawlamyine, the capital city of Mon State. I show how boundaries and forms of subjugation between the 2 groups are produced through everyday interactions, especially dispute resolution, in oftentimes subtle and unnoticed ways. On the surface, coexistence in the Mawlamyine ward looks unproblematic and harmonious. I argue that the reason for this peacefulness is that many Muslims have taken on a strategy of *local subjugation* that prevents conflicts from erupting. Local subjugation implies that the majority of the Muslims avoid confrontation. They compromise, take the blame, and keep their heads down, for instance if there is a local dispute or they have been victims of a crime. The wider repercussions of local subjugation are that it distorts Muslim residents' position in local and informally negotiated justice as well as their access to human security. However, the examples from Mawlamyine also show how some Muslim residents apply strategies to navigate their disadvantaged power position, displaying skilled agency in directing their lives.

The concept of social navigation is useful in terms of understanding 'local subjugation' not only as passive suppression or exclusion but also as an active strategy and imbued with agency (Vigh 2009). Even if social navigation reproduces the Muslim residents' own subjugation, along with reducing open conflict,

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<sup>2</sup> See Cheesman (2017) for a chronology of the violence.

it also shows that the Muslims are actively engaged in dealing with subjugation for survival and improvement of their situation.

A focus on everyday interactions contributes to filling the gap in contemporary scholarship on the relationship between Muslim and Buddhist communities and the influence of government policies.<sup>3</sup> Walton, Schissler and Thi (2017) examine four cases in which inter-religious riots were expected or feared but then did not occur. Among their conclusions is the cautious proposition that the absence of collective violence can be explained by the presence of inter-communal connections, 'a contest, between and among both individuals and groups operating with their own ideas about what was good and right' (Ibid, 15). In line with this literature, I argue that it is necessary to understand local dynamics in their own right and concurrently link them to national-level conflicts and global discourses channeled through social media and news stories. The Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State, anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila, global discourses of the Islamic State, and segregating hate speeches by nationalist monks influence and manifest themselves in the everyday lives of citizens in areas remote from the places where open violence broke out. Locally, this leads to an increasing awareness of otherness and dissimilarities between neighbors with different religious denominations. It introduces and articulates notions of belonging and rights among groups and thus demarcates who is entitled to make claims and who is not. Consequently, this skews access to justice.

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<sup>3</sup>See also Cheesman (2017), Crouch (2016), Walton (2017) and Schissler, Walton, and Thi (2017)

The article's findings are based on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar between 2015 and 2017.<sup>4</sup> The article begins with an overview of the immigration to and presence of Muslims in Mawlamyine, an important insight as it shows a historical practice of coexistence. Next, there will be an introduction to the ward and an example of a dispute in order to outline the local conflict dynamics and illustrate the notion of local subjugation. Nationalist discourses and social media will be problematized in identifying a local narrative of a Muslim threat that influences life in the ward. The article further discusses local political agendas and social navigation, in the aim of going beyond a victim–perpetrator dichotomy as local dynamics prove to be complex. I show how Muslims are progressive in improving their own situation but simultaneously reproduce their own marginalization in aligning with people who are part of that process. In the conclusion, I discuss how a general unease with the new political transformation influences Muslim-Buddhist relations in the ward.

### **Muslims in Mawlamyine**

British colonial rule (1824–1948) saw a great movement of people all over the empire, a process that has had significant influence on the ethnic composition in many parts of Myanmar. The Lower Delta for example, experienced large-scale immigration of ethnic Barmars, who came to outnumber the indigenous Karens and Mons in many areas (Smith 1993, 43). Colonial rule also brought with it an increase in the Muslim population. In 1900, the number of Indians who had migrated to Burma had risen to

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<sup>4</sup> This particular field site I chose for pragmatic reasons, due to a contact who facilitated access. Fieldwork consisted of both participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. I had 11 main informants, and interviewed approximately an additional 120 persons. Included in those are 18 people who are involved with local administration (former and current ward administrators, 10–Household-leaders, security group leader, clerk), 3 Buddhist monks, 3 Muslim religious leaders, 1 Women's Group Leader, 2 Political party representatives and 3 government employed nurses.

250,000 and by 1927 this increased to 428,000. In the 1940s the population numbered approximately 6 million Barmans and 1 million Indians, one-third of whom were Muslims (Berlie 2008, 6). However, following strong anti-British sentiments and anti-Indian riots during the 1930s many Indians were killed and others fled the country. During the Second World War as many as 500,000 Indians were chased out by the Nationalists of the Burma Independence Army (Smith 1993, 44).

Although not as numerous as in the past, today the largest groups of Muslims are still those of 'Indian' origin and they constitute a diverse group. According to the 1931 census the main languages and regions of these migrants were Bengalis, Chittagonians, Oriya (from Orissa), Tamil (from the Madras area) and Telugo (from Andhra Pradesh) (Berlie 2008, 7-8). In Mawlamyine, Muslims have also been part of the community for centuries and historically they were not considered illegal by successive governments. Mawlamyine, as a port city which functioned as the capital for 26 years during British colonial rule, attracted many Indian Muslims and educated religious leaders. Three blue mosques were built at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, testimony to the historical presence of the Muslims in this area (Berlie 2008, 67). According to R. R. Langham-Carter, a British-India civil servant from the time, there was not really an indigenous population to speak of in Mawlamyine prior to 1880:

The tale of Moulmein till about 1880 is largely one of its foreigners. Mons and Burmans had not yet begun to play a large part in the city's story. As late as 1872 they formed only half the population, which was then: Europeans 652; Americans 14; Eurasians 1534; Armenians 9; Chinese 1484; Natives of India 18,635;

Burmese 11,115; Talaiings<sup>5</sup> 12,162; Karens 180; Shans 633; Taungthus<sup>6</sup> 54. Total 46,472 (Langham-Carter 1947, 19).

According to the 2014 census, the entire Mon State has a population of a total of 2,054,393 persons. Of those 5.8 percent are Muslims. Therefore, Muslims are a minority but still a significant part of the urban population in particular.<sup>7</sup>

The arguments in this article build on ethnographic fieldwork among Muslim and Buddhist neighbors, conducted in a mixed urban ward in Mawlamyine, home to about 500 Buddhist and 600 Muslim households.<sup>8</sup> People were relocated to this area about 15 years earlier from 2 other more centrally located wards, due to a construction project running through their former area. The ward was on the outskirts of Mawlamyine, and divided in a lower and an upper part. The upper part had larger plots of land and better houses than the lower part, and was mainly inhabited by Buddhists, who were slightly wealthier. Most of the Muslims lived in the lower part, and it was especially the wealthier Buddhists in the upper part who were most explicitly hostile toward the Muslims. My general impression was that there were (better) relations between equally poor Muslims and Buddhists, as they were facing the same hardships and to some extent similar forms of discrimination. The lower part of the Mawlamyine ward had smaller plots of lands and experienced flooding every year during the rainy season, and consequently many of the wooden houses were constructed on poles. Most of the city's day

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<sup>5</sup>An alternative name for the Mon, used by the British and Burmese. Not common anymore.

<sup>6</sup>A Karen tribe.

<sup>7</sup><http://themimu.info/census-data>

<sup>8</sup>Towns and cities in Myanmar are administratively divided into a number of wards.



laborers lived there, incomes were unstable and many families ate only 1 meal a day. The majority of the residents were Muslim, some were Hindu, although poor Buddhists also stayed in the lower part of the ward.

When referring to the Muslim inhabitants, I am aware that I am grouping an ethnically diverse assemblage of people into a single category. All my interlocutors were Sunni Muslims. Most were of an unspecified ‘South Asian’ descent. Some were of Malay ancestry from the southernmost part of Myanmar around Kawthaung (referring to themselves as Pashu) and some were of mixed lineage, mostly with 1 Buddhist or Hindu parent and 1 Indian Muslim. My crude categorization of Muslims mirrors that of the Buddhist inhabitants of the ward, who even go one step further and call all dark-skinned people *kalar*, which is a general description for Hindus and Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, many of the Muslims that I talked with did not know their own lineage and origin. There are many different sub-groups of Muslims in Myanmar but the ancient distinctions among Indian Muslims are disappearing. According to Berlie (2008), this is partly a result of a longstanding and intense process of ‘Burmanisation’ by the military dictatorship, a strategy in the pursuit of national unity that has pushed for assimilation of all ethnic races into a Burman identity. This has led to most of the country’s Muslims (except for the isolated Arakan Muslims or Rohingyas) to consider their faith more important than their ethnic origin. Over the years, Muslims have taken Burmese names that they use in public while their Arabic names are used privately within the family or the Muslim community (Berlie 2008, 13-16).

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<sup>9</sup>The term *kalar* in the Burmese language originally was used in pre-colonial times to refer to foreigners coming from the West. With British colonialisation the term was used specifically to refer to Indians or South Asians regardless of their religion. The origin of the term is unclear but in Hindi *kala* means black. Today it is a derogatory but common term for Muslims and people of South Asian descent (Seekins 2017, 288).

### **Subjugation as a Strategy of Conflict Prevention**

One of the inhabitants in the ward in Mawlamyine is Ebrahim, a 46-year-old Muslim man.<sup>10</sup> Ebrahim is better off than many of his neighbors. He owns a small mobile accessories shop. In November 2015, Ebrahim's 15-year-old son and his friend were involved in a serious traffic accident. They crashed head on with another motorbike. The other driver was a 33-year-old man. Ebrahim's son was hurt, but not critically. However, his friend remained in a serious condition for some time. The same was true for the driver of the other motorbike. The hospital doctor said that the 33-year-old man had been drinking alcohol, and once Ebrahim's son regained consciousness, he confirmed to the police that the other motorbike driver was to blame for the accident, as he had driven straight into them. The police officers asked Ebrahim if he wanted to file a case against the man. As Ebrahim considered this, he noticed that two monks had come to visit the 33-year-old. He found out that 1 of the monks was the *sayadaw* (senior monk) from the Nyein Chan monastery of his ward. He also learned that the injured man is a member of an armed group that shelters in the Nyein Chan monastery. This made Ebrahim decide that it would be better to negotiate with the other party than to file a case with the police. The next day they had a negotiation meeting at the Nyein Chan monastery, and the *sayadaw* led the conversation. He explained that the 33-year-old man was poor and that he felt responsible for his well-being while he was a guest at the monastery. The *sayadaw* requested that Ebrahim pay the entire hospital costs for all 3 men, and the costs for retrieving the motorbikes from the police. The costs amounted to US\$1,800. Ebrahim agreed to the terms and signed the contract. I initially assumed that the presence of the armed actor influenced the situation, but Ebrahim explained his actions differently:

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<sup>10</sup>All names have been anonymised.

What can I say [...]? I don't think about whether this was fair or not. But I worry in my heart if there is going to be a conflict between Buddhists and Muslims and that we might end in a situation like in Rakhine State. I feel like a fool. I spent a lot of money for negotiation. I am very afraid that this would otherwise cause conflict between the monks and Muslims. Also I was afraid the monks would destroy my shop. The Nyein Chan zedi follows the Ma Ba Tha way, you know?<sup>11</sup>

There had been no major violent incidents between Muslims and Buddhist in this part of the country. Still Ebrahim made his decision to take the blame and the damages, based on anxiety for retaliation and fear of open conflict and violence. He had heard and read about the Ma Ba Tha and the conflicts in other parts of the country. The monk was aware of this fear, and in a later conversation, the Nyein Chan *sayadaw* frankly told me that yes, he believed that Ebrahim agreed to pay because he was afraid that there otherwise would be a conflict with the monks as he is a Muslim. The *sayadaw* considers his involvement in the negotiation as rightful. He explained to me: 'This was an accident, nobody did it on purpose and what happened was unintentional, so it should be easily solved. The Muslim should pay because the boy [the 33-year-old Buddhist armed group member] is poor.'<sup>12</sup>

The argument was thus not simply that Ebrahim needed to take responsibility and pay for all costs because he was a Muslim, but because he had more resources. It is not uncommon in dispute negotiations that the more affluent party agrees to take it upon him- or herself to cover a larger share than the other (poorer)

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<sup>11</sup>Interview 16.02.2016

<sup>12</sup> Interview 03 March 2016

party, where there is a consensus about shared responsibility. However, Ebrahim did not agree that his son was guilty. But the fact that he was a Muslim negotiating with a Ma Ba Tha-associated monk left him no space to contest this decision, and both parties were aware of that. Ebrahim consciously made the decision to subjugate himself and his claims to the adversary.

The Nyein Chan *sayadaw* was active and respected in the area, and as a Buddhist monk, an important spiritual adviser, mediator and justice provider who often compensated for a corrupt legal system. Followers came for help with problems spanning from domestic quarrels, fights with neighbors, problems with government officials, land issues and debt. He prided himself in being an activist, knowledgeable of the rule of law, he told me, presenting a number of copied pamphlets with various excerpts of law texts.

Around his monastery, the *sayadaw* had assembled a large youth group, which worked as a task force of volunteers who helped him in carrying out construction, relief projects, and religious festivals. Most recently during the prolonged dry season, they gathered to collect donations for drinking water and then formed a caravan of trucks to carry the large tanks and thousands of bottles to villagers in areas affected by the drought. On the drive to the villages via bumpy, dusty roads, he pointed out a number of Muslim men that also joined the endeavor. He said to me, ‘You see, I am also friendly with the *kalar*.’<sup>13</sup>

The monk and his monastery thus provided numerous social services and community-building activities, and it would not be right to describe the nationalistic monk as a perpetrator and his monastery as a place that channels hateful nationalism and segregation since the monastery’s role in the ward was far more complex and multi-sided. Simultaneously, the topic of Islam in Myanmar was important to the *sayadaw*, and he expounded on how appropriate it was for Ma Ba Tha to engage in

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<sup>13</sup>. Informal conversation 30 April 2016

public debate. The *sayadaw* explained to me that it was his duty and that of Ma Ba Tha to protect the Myanmar people and culture. In his view, there are two kinds of politics, party politics (*Party Naing Ngan Yay*) and public politics (*Pyi Thu Naing Ngan Yay*). According to the *sayadaw*, Ma Ba Tha served the country through public politics by trying to safeguard and improve the society. Party politics were outside of the sphere of what a monk should engage with, whereas public politics was in the domain of the monks, who ‘securitize’ Myanmar people and culture. As their survival was threatened, extra-ordinary political measures were legitimized.

As discussed in further detail by Gravers (2015) and most recently by Schissler, Walton & Thi (2017), Islam is viewed as predatory and a ‘persistent narrative in Myanmar that constructs Muslims as a fearsome Other’ can be identified (Ibid, 378). The Nyein Chan *sayadaw* equally told me that Buddhism was under threat from global forces and Islam, and he considered it his obligation to practice an ‘engaged’ Buddhism, actively countering the menace. Teaching of the *dhamma* (Buddha’s teachings or doctrine) in what he considered a contested space was the reason the *sayadaw* had set up his monastery in that particular ward 3 years earlier. There were already 5 other monasteries in the area, all collecting donations in the relatively poor area. However, the *sayadaw* explained that he wanted to improve the neighborhood, as education was poor and there were many Muslims. He considered it particularly important to teach the *dhamma* and claim Buddhist territory in a ward like that one, so as not to let the Muslim religious institutions dominate.

Walton, Schissler and Thi (2017) engage in the question of why Buddhist–Muslim violence has erupted in only a few particular sites and not in the majority of towns and villages. Through investigating 4 particular conflict situations between Muslim and Buddhists, they arrive at a number of preliminary conclusions, one being the concerns about other forms of [structural]

violence left unaddressed by the interventions (ibid, 15). This speaks to the relations between Muslims and Buddhists that I have observed, namely the non-confrontational and submissive behavior of Muslims. Walton, Schissler and Thi (2017) quote a woman who expressed how she thought Muslims in her neighborhood were easy-going. She could even joke about eating pork. The authors raised the concern that, unless tolerance goes both ways, this was not a tolerant and flexible religiously plural society (ibid, 24). This example resonates with the case above of how Muslims help monks and partake in festivals or donation activities, while the reverse case would be unheard of. It is a uni-directional relation.

On the surface, coexistence in the Mawlamyine ward looked unproblematic and harmonious, but I argue that the reason for this peacefulness is that many Muslims have taken on a strategy of *local subjugation* that prevents conflicts from escalating. People have knowledge about national discourses and politics, as well as the conflicts in other parts of the country. This awareness, I argue, pressured Muslims to give money or simply avoid any form of confrontation. Consequently, in social disputes and crimes, when one party is Muslim and the other is Buddhist, the Muslim party compromised, taking the blame and keeping his or her head down. Ebrahim's story is an example of this dynamic. The next section will elaborate further on the role of nationalist discourses.

### **Fears of Muslim Domination and the Practice of Making Oneself Small**

The Ma Ba Tha and other critics of Islam were visible and present as both the local monks and laypeople were informed through Facebook updates and sharing of propaganda and rumors about Muslims. Muslims were portrayed as the culturally different other and Islam was depicted as predatory. Buddhist interlocutors would warn me not to eat in a Muslim shop 'be-

cause they spit in the food if it's for someone not Muslim' or because they allegedly cooked food (for non-Muslims) in their women's discarded bathing water. I was told that this is a strategy of Muslims to increase their power over other people. Eating food that has been cooked in bathing water would cause bad luck and make the person eating it inferior to the cook. To spit in someone's food gives one's words power over the recipient. According to a local nurse, all Muslims were told to do this by their religious leaders, because this was a way of spreading their word, in the process of converting the country and the entire world to Islam.<sup>14</sup> This perception of a global threat by Islam was echoed by a large part of the Buddhist residents of the ward.<sup>15</sup> There was a distrust toward the religious teachings in the mosques, which was believed to be directly anti-Buddhist. Another woman explained the threat:

Even here in this ward the *kalar* are like that. They have been told since their childhood that it is a good thing to kill people from other religions. They have gone to the mosque since they were small children. They want to do Jihad war. Before, Pakistan and Indonesia were Buddhist countries; now they have made them Muslim.<sup>16</sup>

Matt Schissler (2016) recounted similar discourses about a looming Muslim invasion and (fake) videos circulating on Facebook showing Muslim men behaving barbarically. He pointed to the connections between the new technological developments

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<sup>14</sup> Interview 24 April 2016

<sup>15</sup> See also McCarthy and Menager (2017) for a more detailed account of narratives about the Muslim threat and how Muslim men are being framed as scapegoats.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 24 April 2016

and access to social media platforms in Myanmar and the dissemination narratives of a Muslim threat.<sup>17</sup> Schissler did not argue that the new media forms caused the Buddhist-Muslim antagonism, but that we should consider how political contests and conflicts unfold in the arena of these new technologies.

[...] new technologies likely to reshape the everyday production of narratives are arriving at precisely a moment when narratives about the country, its past, and its future are being wrenched open and contested with new force and possibility (Schissler 2016, 223).

McCarthy and Menager (2017) also took up the role of the increasing accessibility and affordability of web-enabled smartphones in their analysis of the Muslim man as scapegoat for the lamentations held by the Buddhist majority, and the significance of rumors in this process. This new development involving social media is important to bear in mind. Social media have the capacity to quickly disperse narratives and rumors to an audience not necessarily critically assessing these messages, but also the mere fact that a certain information or videos did in fact figure on a digital platform has been used as an argument for its authenticity. The discriminatory and oftentimes incorrect information welling up on social media was also visible and accessible for non-Buddhists. Muslims in the neighborhood were highly aware of the messages and videos circulating, and had knowledge about the conflicts which erupted and developed in other places in the country. Muslim 10-household-leader Nang Htaw Oo explained that he was aware of the influence of the videos, and that despite the peaceful relations in the ward, he was afraid of provoking. He always told people coming for his advice to be cautious and apologetic. He told me:

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<sup>17</sup> Schissler (2016) refers to Facebook and Viber in particular.



We have to apologize, because otherwise it may turn out to become a bigger problem and a conflict between the two religions. Even when we are right, we apologize because we do not want to create a conflict. We would lose it anyway. We need to make ourselves small.<sup>18</sup>

The ward administrator, who in cases of local disputes advised Muslims not to go up against more powerful or well-off Buddhist residents, supported this strategy of conflict avoidance in order to sustain harmony in the ward.<sup>19</sup>

The use of social media was not limited to laypeople. Monks and nuns likewise logged on to social media platforms and the Nyein Chan *sayadaw* was particularly active in dispensing information about anti-Muslim campaigns. Other local monastic communities may have experienced influence and pressure to behave intolerantly toward other religions from both ordinary members of their congregation, main donors, as well as powerful Ma Ba Tha monks. Another *sayadaw*, from the Ou Ru Sati Monastery in the same ward, was asked to take action by a group of his followers because a Muslim family was about to buy land bordering the monastery. The group of Buddhist followers did not want the Muslims to move into their area and suggested that the monastery should buy the land instead. The *sayadaw* declined, to the disappointment of the complainant. Thus, it is important to remember that the relation between monk and layperson is not unidirectional. Buddhist residents of the ward did

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 14 May 2016

<sup>19</sup> The ward administrator is not considered government staff, but still he is regarded at the lowest level of Myanmar's bureaucracy, falling under the Ministry of Home Affairs. He is paid a small stipend to cover office expenses. The Ward administrator has diverse functions: he writes recommendation letters (needed to apply for a household certificates, driver's license, jobs, etc.) and contracts for sale of property. He also mediates local disputes and assures law and order in his area.

have expectations toward the monks and how they should act to protect Buddhism and their followers from the perceived Muslim threat. Ostensibly, the negative categorization and boundary-marking has been sharpened under influence from the wider national situation.

The Ou Ru Sati *sayadaw*, while also following the Ma Ba Tha was generally more moderate in his statements. As a dedicated follower of Aung San Suu Kyi, he tried to balance these two somewhat opposing forces. He declined the request by a prominent Ma Ba Tha monk to hold a *dhamma* talk from his monastery shortly prior to the National Elections in November 2015 as he knew they would be anti-NLD (National League for Democracy) since the event was funded by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which had been in power from 2011–2015.<sup>20</sup> During the period leading up to the elections Ma Ba Tha monks' involvement in the USDP political campaign increased visibly. They toured several states and divisions advocating for Thein Sein and his USDP being at the forefront of Ma Ba Tha's agenda of protection of race and religion (van Klinken and Aung 2017).

However, the Ou Ru Sati *sayadaw* excused himself, saying that he would be too busy to host the Ma Ba Tha talk from his monastery, so instead the meeting was held at the local ward administrator's office. The ward administrator was also a member of the USDP. The *dhamma* talk was explicitly hostile against Islam and Muslims in Myanmar and therefore could be seen as a provocative gesture, which was held right inside a ward where the majority of residents are Muslims. Thus, I was puzzled to learn that the USDP had many followers among the Muslims in the lower part of the ward. The next sections explores this puzzle.

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<sup>20</sup>NLD is the political party spearheaded by Aung San Suu Kyi.

### Navigating Everyday Injustices

One of the Muslim members of the USDP is the local *pali ogataw*, the secretary of the Islamic community, an entrepreneurial and intelligent man in his mid-40s. I call him Kyaw Win. He runs the local pharmacy, which is in the front of what probably is the best stocked shop in the area. I remember my first visit well. As I entered through a small door from the street, a rather big, almost warehouse-like room opened up in front of me filled with everything: diapers and plastic tubs, buckets and shovels, stacks of onions, potatoes, and garlic, pens and papers, energy drinks, candies and snacks, umbrellas, longyis and flip-flops, electric kettles and fans. I was slightly taken aback by the well-stocked interior in this badly lit, poor looking wooden house. Kyaw Win explained that it is fully intentional that he only has a small door and no windows in the building:

Citizenship and religion are mixed together in this country even though they are separate things. People call you a *kalar* and say that you are not a Myanmar citizen. I think that is mainly because they are uneducated. But I am a little scared here, the 969 movement has changed a lot, people are much more unfriendly now. Many houses have the 969 sticker<sup>21</sup> over the door and the monasteries follow the Ma Ba Tha. Even though we have a big shop with many things, we only have a small entrance with one door open. Because people are jealous toward Muslims, so when I keep it this way it looks like I only have a small shop.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The 969 Movement encouraged Buddhists to put a sticker with the numbers 969 at the front of their houses and shops which would easily identify them as Buddhists. Reversely, Muslim owned shops were subject to boycott. For a detailed account of the 969 movement see Kyaw (2016)

<sup>22</sup> Interview 15.03.16

Kyaw Win tries to hide his wealth and keeps a low profile, thus also subjugating himself to the suppressive sentiment in the neighborhood.

The question remains, why become a USDP member? The subject of USDP membership is sensitive and some reasons for this became clear to me only gradually. Some Muslims have felt pressured by friends and colleagues, while others have had the incentive that food was served or gifts handed out at USDP voter meetings. But the majority chose to join the USDP for strategic reasons. Most importantly, the holder of a USDP membership card suddenly finds himself endowed with a range of freedoms and possibilities that are normally not within reach of those not holding a national ID card. Many Myanmar Muslims have difficulties in obtaining a government ID card that confirms Myanmar citizenship. According to a local NLD representative, approximately 900 adults in the ward do not have ID cards. He explained to me that the first obstacle in obtaining an ID is that people need a letter of recommendation from the ward administrator confirming their rightful residency. The ward administrator will ask a fee for that favor, which will be higher for Muslims. Even with the letter in hand, the officer at the *LaWaKa*, the immigration office, may still deny the request, either through referring to a lack of documentation for the ancestry in the country or by requesting an unaffordable amount of money.<sup>23</sup> This makes it extremely difficult in particular for poor Muslims to get a proper ID card. Without an ID card, it is difficult to travel freely around the country, as you need to show identification when buying a bus or train ticket. This is also the case when spending the night at a hotel or even at a friend's house. In terms of occupation and education, it is also important be able to prove your rightful belonging and citizenship: Many workplaces request their employees to hold ID cards and students are required to hold an ID card in order to graduate from the university and

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with NLD member 04 May 2016

receive a certificate. The same goes for getting a driver's license and the right to vote. This is where the USDP membership card can function as a substitute, that enables, for example, freedom of travel and business transactions. For this reason, a USDP membership card is sometimes referred to as 'gold card'. Even now, after the NLD has gained power, the system of obtaining USDP membership is still in place, several interlocutors assured me.

The membership of the USDP does however not entail loyalty toward the party. As Kyaw Win remarks, 'Nobody respects the USDP, because the USDP is like a mother who gives a snack to the child, but does not recognize the child as hers.'<sup>24</sup>

Kyaw Win further reaffirms that he loves the NLD, not the USDP. However, he uses the USDP card to 'get better chances'. The concept of social navigation as theorized by Henrik Vigh (2009) is useful in understanding Kyaw Win's tactical agency. Social navigation designates motion within motion and actions in a transforming environment. This view embraces the relationship between agency and social forces as it takes the fluid, unstable and unpredictable social environment into account when analyzing people's actions. Vigh (2009, 433) reminds us that when invoking the concept of navigation, we also 'acknowledge that the agent is positioned within a force field which moves him and influences his possibilities of movement and positions'. Social navigation is what people do to survive in uncertain circumstances, and through an example from Bissau he shows how people continually assess their socio-political environment as they constantly seek to make the best in emergent social possibilities in order to direct their lives into an advantageous position (Ibid, 442). Kyaw Win displays the same flexibility in navigating toward sustaining his livelihood. By concealing his shop, he may have to take some losses to his income but he avoids feeding into

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<sup>24</sup> Interview 12 June 2016

the bigoted narrative of the trade-dominating wealthy Muslim. A USDP membership card likewise is a strategy to direct one's life into a more advantageous position, and both Kyaw Win and Naing Htaw Oo estimate that 30–40 percent of the Muslims in the ward have a USDP card.

In the ward the ties of the Islamic community secretary with the USDP, which also includes the ward administrator, have even made other transactions possible. There is no official permission to have an Islamic mosque in the ward. However, mutual agreements and liberal payments to the ward administrator and other local authorities have made it possible for the Islamic community to construct what are officially termed 'Muslim Schools' in the ward. Calls for prayer can be heard throughout the ward on Fridays and leaves no doubt that there are places of worship. The exchange of money knits closely together the relation between the Muslim groups, the ward administrator and USDP. Practices of bribery and corruption is another form of social navigation, and a way to uphold and communally practice religious identity. This exchange is another way of navigating the system, and thus not surprisingly at the recent local ward administrator elections, the Muslim residents chose *not* to put their votes behind the local NLD representative, but backed the USDP candidate, who won the majority.<sup>25</sup>

Kyaw Win confided in me that he played a great part behind the scenes. Since he as a Muslim could never become a ward administrator, at least he could back a candidate that he and other Muslims could influence (and pay), despite the political convictions being suppressive toward religious minorities. Supporting the local NLD representative, a woman, in the ward leader election was not a wise choice because she had declared that she was

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<sup>25</sup>It is important to make a distinction between local and national politics, as even the registered USDP members voted for the NLD and ASSK in the November 2015 elections.

against corruption. If she would not accept money for favors such as allowing the Muslim school and mosque to operate, the Muslim residents might lose their religious institutions in the ward. To side with the USDP in the local election, although this reinforced the existing suppressive structures, was the best strategy for otherwise marginalized Muslims deprived of the opportunity to hold a political position. The Nyein Chan *sayadaw* told the following to some of his followers who asked his advice in the local-leader elections:

You can vote for anybody, it depends on your own decision. My only advice is that you should vote for a Buddhist candidate. Because the majority of people living here are Muslims, so it would be bad for the area if there were to be a Muslim leader. In a conflict, he might side unfairly with the Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

This speaks into Nicholas Farrelly's (2016) analysis of Muslim political activity in transitional Myanmar, which he finds to be greatly restrained and even worsened as a result of the recent anti-Muslim campaigns. How boundaries between Muslims and Buddhists have deepened could also be seen in the inclusion and exclusion from social activities. This particular neighborhood in Mawlamyine has been mixed from the outset as people have been relocated here from different parts of the town due to infrastructure construction. As mentioned above, coexistence is void of open conflict but it has become increasingly articulated and noted who is Buddhist and who is Muslim. A Myanmar New Year ceremony honoring the elderly in the ward and giving them blankets and snacks, was split in 2016, as it no longer included the Muslim seniors. The Muslims still received presents but were not taken into the school for the honoring and ceremonial procedure. The argument for excluding them was that

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<sup>26</sup>Interview 26.02.16

the celebration is a 'Buddhist cultural tradition' and thus it is unfitting for Muslims to partake. Interestingly, the ceremony had in previous years included all old people in the ward, regardless of religion, and it was often recollected to me as an example of how there was a good relationship between the two religious communities. The 10-household-leader Naing Htaw Oo attributes this change to the nationwide anti-Islamic discourse:

There used to be a good relationship, but now the monks teach about the Muslims and speak bad words, so most of the Buddhists now hate them. People's opinion have changed. Some Muslims are afraid of Buddhists and Buddhists do not trust Muslims. It is especially bad among the more wealthy people from the upper part of the ward.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, the negative relationship and unequal justice situation has its repercussions in terms of how the monks and Buddhism are perceived by some of those involved in the negotiations. Quoting the *pali ogataw* Kyaw Win:

Before, I thought that Buddhism is a very kind religion, but after my own experiences with the monks, I do not feel that way anymore. Now it feels like Buddhism is a bad religion, and the monastery is an evil place.<sup>28</sup>

Kyaw Win feels dissociated from the wider community in the ward and strongly identifies with his religion. Conversations with him reveal how he sympathizes with violent Islamic groups, and he shared with me his aspiration to send his only

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<sup>27</sup>Interview 14 May 2016

<sup>28</sup>Interview 27 March 2016



son to join Al-Qaeda once he is old enough. One might postulate that through the process of alienation, Kyaw Win has been molded into 'the fearsome other'. Simultaneously, taking refuge in a religious identity and distancing oneself from the wider community and country emphasize differences and reinforce prejudices.

### **Conclusion**

The Myanmar transition since 2010 has, at least as far as this ward in Mawlamyine goes, led to the hardening of boundaries between Muslims and Buddhists. While the past saw a 'silent barter' between Muslims and Buddhists in the ward, they now form increasingly segregated groups of people. Muslims stick together, keep a low profile and surrender to outside claims, thereby confirming the picture of closed and gated communities that are not integrated with the wider society. At the same time, they navigate strategically in their everyday social lives to survive and position themselves. For many Muslims it has been a strategy of social navigation to locally support the former ruling party in order to obtain practical advantages and bypass an oppressive system that denies them basic rights due to their religion. Not only do they struggle to attain ID cards, they also face *de facto* decreased access to justice in the local arena. Simultaneously, their strategies of social navigation, i.e., joining an oppositional political party, also breed distrust toward Muslims among the Buddhist ward residents, the majority of whom publicly pledge alliance to the ruling party, NLD. These are complex relationships that makes it difficult to draw clear dichotomies and causal relations between religious affiliation, political stance and public discourse. Local political agendas, actions and emotions need to be included if we want to understand the whole picture.

In reference to Johan Galtung's conceptions of positive and negative peace, Walton, Schissler and Thi (2017) bring up the

important point that the absence of conflict does not equal peace. Absence of (visible) violence does not mean that there is no structural violence. My own analysis of dispute resolution supports this perspective. In the vast majority of cases where the adversaries are Buddhists, Muslims will subjugate themselves to the claims of the opposing party. The local subjugation has deeper repercussions for Muslim residents' access to justice in both local informal negotiations and in the formal justice system. A recent report on local justice in Myanmar, states how in general '[...] injustices are not reported, are downplayed or are resolved at the lowest level possible, often at the expense of wider substantive justice'. (Denney 2016, 8) Low reporting of disputes and crimes is more prevalent among discriminated groups such as religious minorities who experience very limited options for dispute resolution and a starkly reduced chance of a fair outcome should they access them. This structural repression in access to justice is deeply problematic.

In a novel piece on agency during the Ebola outbreak, Theresa Ammann emphasizes how insecurity and security are in a continuous and relational process (Ammann 2018, forthcoming). She argues that "victim- and perpetratorhood are not exclusive states of existence but emerging processes of becoming that emerge through one another and are both secure and insecure at once" (Ibid, 2). In Mawlamyine, this is what happens when some Muslims choose to become members of an organization that in the wider political arena is against Muslims. It demonstrates an active move toward security while also creating insecurity for themselves. In addition, poor Buddhists also experience insecurity and injustice, and some also take part in reducing conflict, like the ward administrator and his network who facilitate informal agreements allowing religious practices and buildings, accommodating interests of the Muslim leaders. Similarly, the Ou Ru Sati *sayadaw* declined to buy the land that some Muslims wanted to buy. Thus amidst the repression and

structural violence there are several conflict prevention practices. Local agendas and relationships are very complex and cannot be boiled down to a question of essential hatred between the two groups. Thus, I have sought to engage in an exploration of social navigation that moves beyond a victim–perpetrator dichotomy, in order to understand how everyday justice and local politics are negotiated in the relationship between the Muslim and Buddhist residents of the ward. National political orchestrations and global trends have local repercussions, which fuel insecurity and the sentiment that Buddhism is under threat at a time when the everyday lives of people are undergoing rapid and unforeseeable transformations. This helps to encourage the segregation and distancing between the two religious groups, conveniently framing the Muslims as manageable enemies. The Muslim leaders contribute to the reproduction of their own marginalization in that they locally sustain the USDP, the same force that supports the rising Buddhist nationalist movements. However supporting the local NLD representative in the ward leader election albeit promising some change is partly rejected because this candidate took an anti-corruption stance. An alliance that does not rely on bribes is uncharted territory for the Muslim local leaders in the ward.

This same concern with the burgeoning more-transparent system at the national level, replacing systems of ‘mutual understanding’, was echoed by several interlocutors in early 2017. This was about a year after Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD took office. While Aung San Suu Kyi wants to have a strict rule-of-law approach, the system of ‘mutual understanding’ would mean that negotiation, bending the law, paying some ‘tea money’ could make things happen. A man working as a bus driver explained:

I want to get back to a system that works by understanding. In the new system... for example, before,

you could bring more than the allowed goods across a checkpoint, you just had to pay the officers. But now you just can't! The only way is to open a case or something. I am not comfortable with that system.<sup>29</sup>

Another similar complaint was that the NLD had strengthened the law on child labor, meaning that children were not legally allowed to work. To many poor residents, this makes it difficult for the family to survive. In general, there was not a sense of open protest against policy changes, but an overall sense that the changes were happening too rapidly and not in accordance with local needs and ways of operating. These sentiments resonate with what can also be read into the Muslim-Buddhist conflict dynamics, namely as influenced by fears that the transformation will be uncontrollable and cause existing structures to fall apart and cultural values to erode.

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