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Decolonizing Buddhist Authority: Religious Nationalism and State-Sanctioned Violence in Myanmar

***Muhammad Maulidan**
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

*Correspondence: muhammad.maulidan@uiii.ac.id

Abstract

This paper discusses the involvement of religious authorities in the reproduction of violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar. Using Johan Galtung's triangle of violence theory, this paper shows that violence does not only appear in physical forms, but is also institutionalized through state structures and normalized by religious narratives. This study traces how the 2017 military operations, the 1982 Citizenship Law, and the emergence of Buddhist nationalist movements such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement are part of a systematic process that legitimizes violence in the name of protecting religion and the nation. Rather than viewing Buddhism as a peaceful doctrine or its opposite, this paper highlights how religion is used as a tool of legitimation in postcolonial state-building projects. Religion serves to draw lines of identity between "us" and "them," thereby enabling the state to exclude groups deemed incompatible with an exclusive national identity. Within Galtung's framework, direct violence against the Rohingya cannot be separated from structural violence that institutionalizes exclusion, and cultural violence that makes it appear legitimate. These three forms of violence reinforce each other and demonstrate that violence is not merely an aberration, but rather part of a planned and sustained logic of power. This article contributes to studies on religious nationalism, state violence, and the role of sacred authority in exclusionary politics.

Keywords: Religious Authority, Buddhist Nationalism, Galtung Theory, Rohingya.

Introduction

Buddhism has long been regarded as a religion of peace, grounded in the core teachings of non-violence (*ahimsa*), compassion (*karuna*), and liberation from suffering (Clayton, 1996; Yeh, 2006). Given these values, it is unsurprising that the reality of conflict in Myanmar raises many questions. Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, has become one of the regions marked by protracted ethnic conflicts and violence that openly employs religious symbols. This reality presents a fundamental paradox and theoretical concern: how can a religion that preaches peace become part of structured, systemic, and even state-sponsored violence?

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After gaining independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar did not enter an era of peace but instead descended into waves of ethnic conflict and civil war that continue today. Previous studies have explored violence in Myanmar through the lenses of identity politics and religious nationalism, particularly in the context of the Rohingya crisis (Galache, 2020; Ibrahim, 2016; Wade, 2017). Building on these insights, this paper explores how Buddhist authority operates as an epistemic instrument in shaping power and legitimizing violence through religion.

Various ethnic minority groups took up arms, protesting the dominance of the Bamar ethnic majority and the Buddhist nationalist narrative (Smith, 1991). For decades, the authoritarian military regime used this situation to strengthen its control through structured violence, making conflict part of everyday life for Myanmar citizens. So how can this run parallel to the dominance of a religion that teaches peace? Does this mean we should blame religion? I do not think so. The problem does not lie in the teachings of Buddhism itself, but in how religious authority is interpreted and institutionalized within the state structure. When religion is used as a tool to mark 'the authentic' and 'the inauthentic', it becomes a machine of legitimization for violence—not because of its values, but because of how it is interpreted and used in power relations. This situation prompts us to question what is happening behind the conflict in Myanmar, what is driving it, and what makes it latent.

Previous studies have widely linked violence in Myanmar to the rise of religious nationalism, where Buddhism has been used as a means to legitimize political authority and construct an exclusive national identity. Research by (Walton, 2016) demonstrates that Buddhist teachings and symbols have been articulated within nationalist discourses to reinforce the political and moral authority of the state. In a different context, (Schober, 2011)argues that modernity in Myanmar cannot be separated from the role of Buddhist institutions, which function as intermediaries between religious authority and political power. Meanwhile, (Foxeus, 2019) highlights how ideas of Buddhist morality have been mobilized to justify violence and exclusion against minority groups, particularly Muslims. These perspectives provide a crucial foundation for understanding how religion operates as a political instrument, yet this paper moves beyond those readings by examining how violence is not only rooted in nationalist ideology but also institutionalized and normalized in everyday social life.

In this context, this paper employs Johan Galtung's theoretical framework of the triangle of violence to offer a more comprehensive reading of violence, not only as physical acts (direct violence) but also as violence embedded within social structures and systems of meaning (structural and cultural violence). Although previous studies have largely associated the Myanmar case with religious nationalism, where Buddhism is used as a tool to legitimize power, this paper instead focuses on how violence is institutionalized and normalized in daily life. Within this analytical frame, violence is not seen as an incidental symptom but as a systemic mechanism produced by the state and legitimized by religious authorities.

To understand why Buddhist authority can be politicized as a tool for legitimizing violence, Galtung's framework helps reveal the forms of violence that emerge from this relationship, namely physical, structural, and symbolic. Violence must be understood in these three dimensions: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence is the most visible, such as

murder or forced displacement. Structural violence occurs when social and political systems create inequality and oppression, while cultural violence manifests through ideological justifications that make violence seem acceptable. These dimensions reinforce one another, and when violence is not physically visible, it becomes more insidious because it is perceived as "normal" (Galtung, 1990).

This paper argues that the conflict in Myanmar stems from a form of institutionalized religious authority that has been translated into a nationalist political context. In Myanmar, Buddhism no longer functions solely as a spiritual path. It has instead become an instrument of the state to define who belongs and who is excluded within the framework of citizenship. In other words, the peaceful teachings of Buddhism remain, yet the way the religion is practiced, interpreted, and institutionalized has generated legitimacy for systemic violence. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer how Buddhist religious authority has been politicized by the state within the framework of religious nationalism and used to legitimize violence against minority groups in Myanmar.

Several previous studies have attempted to explain the involvement of Buddhist institutions in the landscape of violence in Myanmar, but their approaches and emphases tend to be fragmented. Research by Reny (2020), for example, traces how political forces in transition have exploited Buddhist nationalism as a tool to maintain power amid a crisis of legitimacy. She highlights how state elites facilitate spaces for the politicization of religion by providing a platform for religious actors to enter the formal and informal political arena. However, this study emphasizes the aspect of political contestation without theoretically analyzing how religious authority is transformed into a machine of power. On the other hand, Walton (2023) provides a strong ideological dimension in reading how Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar has become a pillar of exclusive nationalism. He shows that violence does not only occur in the physical realm, but also in the symbolic and ritual construction of religion that reinforces who is considered part of the "nation" and who is not. However, his approach remains textual and does not delve deeply into the state's power structures. Ren (2020) offers a different approach through remote sensing-based studies that visualize patterns of structural violence against the Rohingya. This study is methodologically helpful but does not offer an analysis of the ideological legitimacy underlying it. Meanwhile, research by Bilay shows how narratives constructed by monastic groups play a crucial role in constructing the image of a threat to Buddhist identity. However, their analysis stops at discourse without explicitly linking it to the state project. From this, it is clear that there are not many studies that integrate the ideological, structural, and legitimizing dimensions of power comprehensively.

This paper attempts to fill this gap. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative-descriptive approach using discourse analysis to investigate how Buddhist religious authorities in Myanmar serve as instruments of power legitimization through symbolic and narrative constructions. The analysis focuses on secondary discursive materials, including academic works, media reports, and organizational statements from Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement, as well as cited remarks attributed to prominent monks such as Ashin Wirathu. This approach was chosen because the conflict being studied is not only visible in the form

of physical violence but also operates through symbolic and structural mechanisms that require an analysis of language, discourse, and narratives of power.

To explore this issue, the paper draws upon Johan Galtung's theory of the triangle of violence (1990) to understand how violence is not only direct but also embedded within socio-political structures and legitimized through culture and religious language. This theoretical framework allows for a layered interpretation of violence, going beyond physical acts (direct violence) to include violence rooted in institutional and social arrangements (structural violence) and reproduced through cultural norms and religious discourse (cultural violence). Within this framework, the analysis focuses on how state power and religious authority operate simultaneously to sustain exclusionary practices against minority groups in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya Muslim community.

Therefore, this paper is conceptually grounded in the notion of coloniality of power introduced by Quijano (2000) to explain how the global system of domination established during early modern colonialism in the sixteenth century continues to shape social and political relations today. For Quijano, coloniality is not merely a legacy of colonialism but a structure of power and knowledge that organizes the world through racial classification and epistemic hierarchies. This argument on epistemic hierarchy aligns with the idea that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same historical process, beginning with Europe's conquest of Latin America and subsequently expanding the colonial matrix of power globally (Mignolo, 2005; Quijano, 2000). In this context, Europe and later the Americas became centers of knowledge production and global power, positioning Western epistemology as the universal standard of rationality (Mignolo, 2005). Within this colonial order, whiteness came to signify rationality, progress, and authority, while non-European groups were constructed as backward and uncivilized. As argued by Fanon, colonialism did not merely conquer territories but also implanted the ideology of white superiority into colonial consciousness, which continues to be reproduced after independence (Fanon, 2007). Accordingly, the concept of coloniality of power is employed here to trace how colonial patterns of domination persist and continue to shape ways of thinking and social practices in the postcolonial world.

Buddhism and Peace Paradox

When discussing the interplay between Buddhism and conflict, several conceptual clarifications need to be carefully addressed. Scholars such as Baroni and Morgan explain Buddhism as encompassing the concept of Ahimsa, which translates as "non-harming," and is a cardinal virtue in Buddhist thought. This concept guides us toward an understanding of Buddhism not merely as a belief system, but as a religious and philosophical tradition that has stood the test of time and remains relevant to the modern pursuit of world peace. Moreover, concepts such as Karuna or compassion further emphasize the moral imperative of caring for others who are suffering (Baroni, 2002).

There is a perception that Buddhism is often positioned as the most peaceful of the world's major religions. Unlike the narratives associated with the violent history of Islam, Christianity, or even Hinduism, Buddhism is often imagined as a neutral, non-aggressive spiritual tradition that is distant from power. This perception is reinforced by the image of

contemplative, meditative monks and teachings such as *ahimsa*, *metta*, and *karuna*, which emphasize compassion and non-violence. Even in academic circles and the international media, Buddhism is often seen as an alternative path to global peace. However, this perception is not only selective but also ahistorical. It suggests that violence committed by Buddhist actors is often excluded from public discourse, as if it were impossible because it does not correspond to the essence of the religion. In fact, in many cases—including in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—Buddhist religious authorities are directly involved in the production of violent discourse, whether through symbolic support, political backing, or mass mobilization (Jerryson, 2018). This means that the peace associated with Buddhism is not a universal reality, but rather a social construct that can be examined and questioned.

What this means is that the Buddha taught that if someone is having a difficult day, we should respond with compassion by being mindful of the suffering they are experiencing, as such awareness can help free them from that pain. Other than that is Metta, or loving-kindness, which teaches how we love others positively; we show our love to the individual. If someone is happy, we should also be happy; Ahimsa, Karuna, and Metta are interconnected.

Through principles such as *ahimsa, karuna, and metta,* it can be agreed that the Buddhist tradition normatively offers a path to peace, as reflected in its teachings. However, it is important to emphasize that the focus of this paper is not on Buddhism as a spiritual belief system but on how religious authority within Buddhism, which has been constructed as a bearer of peace, can play a role in the practice of violence. This raises a critical question: Does Buddhism, in its actual form, always carry a message of peace? The socio-political reality shows that the answer to this question is not always affirmative. The peaceful tradition of Buddhism in practice does not always guarantee the emergence of a society free from violence. This occurs because political elites often manipulate interpretations of Buddhist teachings to justify acts of power and domination (Frydenlund, 2018). In this context, religion is used as a source of legitimacy to rationalize violence in the name of protecting faith. Such a mechanism indicates that violence does not stem from the doctrinal essence of Buddhism itself but from the way religious narratives are produced, disseminated, and institutionalized within structures of power. Hence, a contradiction emerges between Buddhism as a spiritual tradition and Buddhism as a tool of political legitimization for violence.

The political context in Myanmar reveals a complex dynamic, where the state often operates in tension with influential Buddhist authorities whose political engagement has extended beyond the spiritual realm, particularly during the post-2010 democratic transition (Frydenlund, 2018; Walton, 2016). Through its state authorities, Myanmar actively adopts Buddhist nationalism as a tool to bolster political legitimacy, especially during a fragile democratic transition. A paradox emerges when the peaceful teachings of Buddhism are institutionalized into an exclusive identity system, where diversity is not accommodated but rather opposed. This contradiction is even more apparent when Buddhist symbols are used as tools for political mobilization, not only by state actors, but also by religious institutions such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement. In many cases, the state not only allows, but also gives space to these groups to produce hate speech against minorities, especially Rohingya

Muslims. Through laws such as the "Race and Religion Protection Laws," the state unites ethnic and religious identity projects in formal policy, so that religion is no longer a spiritual space but a legitimate tool of power to define who is entitled to be part of the nation. Thus, a peaceful interpretation of Buddhism does not automatically create a peaceful society. Such interpretations can be reconstructed, politicized, and institutionalized to support structures of exclusion and violence (Yutthaworakool, 2017). In the context of Myanmar, religion is not merely a system of values but also a state-sanctioned instrument of power to maintain the dominance of the majority over minorities. This is the central paradox that renders Buddhism not immune to political violence.

This can be seen through the lens of religious nationalism, where Buddhism, which is a minority in foreign countries and a majority in Myanmar, is used as a tool to control, manage, and command power. Religious nationalism is the biggest reason why Buddhist religious authorities tend to commit violence against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine.

The paradox between peaceful teachings and violent practices in Myanmar Buddhism does not exist in a vacuum. It operates within a state structure that defines who is entitled to be recognized as a citizen and who is excluded from the national imagination. In this context, religion becomes a highly effective political tool, not only because of its moral authority, but also because of its capacity to legitimize state actions through the language of "protection" of the majority identity.

One of the most obvious examples of this contradiction is the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State, where there has been ethnic violence against the Rohingya Muslim community. This is where religion and ethnicity are intertwined in a systematic exclusion project. What seemed like a community conflict or horizontal tension has deeper structural roots. Through religious interpretations and state policies, the Rohingya are not only defined as "the other," but also positioned as a threat to the Buddhist identity that is legitimized as the foundation of Myanmar's nationhood. To understand this dynamic more deeply, it is necessary to trace how Rakhine State has been turned into a space of political contestation involving religion, ethnicity, and nationalism simultaneously.

Rakhine as Political Competition

Scholars such as Leider explain that the ancestors of the Rohingya were Bengalis who migrated to Rakhine, a region that geographically borders Bengal (Leider, 2018). Due to this proximity and historical migration, many Rohingya initially identified themselves as "Bengali" before the term "Rohingya" became widely used. Over time, this community developed distinct linguistic and cultural characteristics that set them apart from other groups in Myanmar.

The narrative that portrays the Rohingya as foreigners is not merely a historical construction shaped by state authorities, but also a continuation of postcolonial narratives that reproduce colonial legacies. When Britain began its colonial rule in Arakan in 1824, it introduced social and administrative mechanisms such as ethnic classification, censuses, and territorial separation. However, these measures failed to fully capture the complex cultural and ethnic diversity of the region. The British, viewing Buddhism as the dominant religion in Rakhine, used it as a standard of indigeneity and consequently classified Muslims as foreign immigrants. This colonial process entrenched divisions among communities and laid the

foundation for protracted conflicts (Roy Chowdhury, 2020). The ethnic classifications implemented in Arakan also shaped the emergence of the Rohingya identity, grouping them as Bengalis because of their origins in Bengal. Through this colonial lens, the Rohingya were politically constructed as a distinct yet marginalized community within Myanmar.

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, Rakhine has repeatedly become a site of ethnic conflict. Between 1948 and 1962, the Rohingya were recognized as citizens and participated in elections, but tensions with the Rakhine majority intensified after the bloody riots of 1942. The military coup in 1962 marked a turning point when the Rohingya began to be systematically excluded from state institutions. In 1978, the "Nagamin" military operation triggered a mass exodus to Bangladesh, followed by similar waves of displacement in 1991–1992. Communal unrest in 2012 forced thousands more to flee, and the situation reached its peak in 2017 when a large-scale military operation displaced over 700,000 people. Throughout these decades, Rakhine has stood as a stark reflection of the state's persistent failure to manage ethnic diversity and identity-based tensions (Alam, 2019).

The Rohingya identity has been systematically removed from Myanmar's national narrative through historical, legal, and cultural denial. The state does not recognize them as part of the "*taingyintha*" or national race, even though historical records show the existence of Muslim communities in Arakan since the 8th century. The official narrative referring to the Rohingya as "Bengali" reinforces the claim that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, not an indigenous part of Myanmar. This denial is institutionalized through the 1982 Citizenship Law, which strips them of their citizenship rights and renders them stateless. Rohingya are excluded from the political system, restricted in their mobility, and denied access to education, healthcare, and land rights. Their language, culture, and identity are not only considered foreign but also serve as the basis for their exclusion. In this context, the Rohingya crisis is not merely a reflection of ethnic tensions but a form of profound structural marginalization carried out by the state against a group deemed incompatible with Myanmar's exclusive and ethnocentric national identity project (Mohajan, 2020).

The "illegal" status attached to the Rohingya did not arise from factual conditions, but was constructed by the state as an instrument of legitimizing exclusion. Since British colonialism opened the flow of migration from India to Arakan, this movement was viewed as internal mobility within a colony, not as immigration between countries. However, after independence, the Myanmar state blurred these historical boundaries and unilaterally redefined them as a narrative that the Rohingya are illegal immigrants. This narrative was then institutionalized in the 1982 Citizenship Law, which refers to the Rohingya as "resident foreigners" without full citizenship rights. In a position of legal limbo, the Rohingya were marginalized from education, public employment, and other basic rights. Even when some had previously obtained official documents, the state continued to reject their validity (Zhang, 2023). This "illegal" status opened the door for the state to carry out violence, expulsions, and human rights violations without accountability. By labeling this group as foreign, the state not only erases their presence from the national discourse but also reinforces an exclusive national imagination based on ethnicity and religion. In this context, the law is not a tool for justice but a mechanism of power that perpetuates the dominance of one identity over another.

The term or status created by the Myanmar authorities then makes us question again who is meant by taingyintha (literally "national races" or "sons of the soil") and why this term exists. Secondly, what are the main contents and requirements of the 1982 Law and why is this law considered ethnically exclusive?

Taingyintha, or the national race in Myanmar, can be traced as a concept that defines which ethnic groups are recognized as indigenous and have resided in Myanmar since before the colonial era began in 1823. Recognition as taingyintha is crucial for ethnic groups to obtain collective citizenship rights in Myanmar. The 1982 Citizenship Law grants full citizenship rights to members of ethnic groups believed to have resided within Myanmar's borders prior to 1823. Based on the concept of taingyintha, which is the national race recognized by the Myanmar authorities, the 1982 law grants rights to members of ethnic groups explicitly mentioned, with at least eight groups categorized as taingyintha: Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman (Bamar), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. However, this list is not exhaustive; the State Council of Myanmar has the authority to decide whether other ethnic groups qualify as national races. In 1990, the government published a list of 135 ethnic groups considered national races, ranging from large groups like the Bamar to smaller groups like the Moken (Lee, 2019).

This problem arises because there is one group that is not included as taingyintha, such as the Rohingya Muslims, who are excluded from collective citizenship rights. The government does not recognize the Rohingya as a national race despite historical evidence of their long existence in western Myanmar, resulting in their exclusion from citizenship under the law.

From this context, the Rohingya indeed occupied the region and lived alongside the Buddhist community, at least long before the establishment of Myanmar. When the country became independent, and the conflict escalation began to increase, at least in 1970, many Rohingya Muslim communities began to immigrate to several countries, and the number increased along with the ethnic violence that occurred. At least in 2014, the government stated that the Rohingya citizenship status is rejected or considered an illegal community that occupies the Rakhine region, so their citizenship status is not recognized (BBC, 2020). Based on this statement, the tension has escalated because it has created identity politics between Buddhist nationalists vis-a-vis the Muslim minority, creating years of systematic discrimination.

Thus, the conflict in Rakhine is not merely a communal issue between Buddhists and Muslims, but much more than that. The escalation of this conflict is the result of systematic exclusionary politics perpetuated by the state through legal legitimacy, official history, and identity labeling. This makes what is happening in Rakhine not merely a chronology of violence, but a political arena where the postcolonial state reproduces colonial logic through religious, legal, and historical memory instruments.

Resurgence of Buddhist Nationalism

To understand the political instrumentalization of Buddhism in contemporary Myanmar, the concept of religious nationalism provides a useful point of departure. Religious nationalism refers to a condition in which religion is no longer confined to the spiritual realm but

becomes a source of political legitimacy and a symbol of collective identity in building or maintaining a state. In this sense, religion functions as a boundary marker between "us" and "them" and serves as the moral foundation for an exclusive nationalist project. As Juergensmeyer explains, this form of nationalism can be both ethnic and ideological, often blurring the line between the sacred and the political. When religion becomes fully absorbed into the state project, the distinction between religious doctrine and political power gradually disappears. Thus, religious nationalism can be understood as a movement that arises among groups experiencing insecurity and marginalization amid geopolitical crises (Juergensmeyer, 1996). Thus, religious nationalism can be understood as a movement that arises among groups experiencing insecurity and marginalization amid geopolitical crises.

Historical conditions during British colonial rule show how Buddhism was institutionally marginalized and its societal role weakened. This process laid the groundwork for the rise of Buddhist nationalism, which later merged with the cultural and historical identity of Burma (Rabby, 2016). The emergence of Buddhist nationalism is also driven by fears of the perceived decline of Buddhism under the pressures of globalization, modernity, and demographic transformation. Faced with these anxieties, political actors have instrumentalized Buddhism as a nationalist tool to consolidate power, mobilize mass support, and legitimize the military's authority (*Tatmadaw*), positioning Myanmar as a state that sponsors Buddhism (Mohajan, 2020). Within this context, Buddhist nationalism seeks to sustain its dominance by producing exclusionary narratives such as Islamophobia and by persecuting Muslim communities in Myanmar. In this way, the evolution of Buddhist nationalism can be traced through several historical phases—from the colonial era to postcolonial nation-building, and finally, to the contemporary Myanmar state.

Several empirical manifestations of Buddhist nationalism can be observed, including organizations such as Ma Ba Tha (the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion), the 969 Movement, political parties like the Union Solidarity and Development Party, and charismatic monastic figures such as Ashin Wirathu. Ma Ba Tha, founded in 2014, represents an ultra-nationalist Buddhist movement that has become controversial for fueling anti-Muslim sentiment and inter-sectarian violence. The movement's central aim is to protect what it defines as the "Buddhist race and religion," a phrase that reflects the conflation of Bamar ethnic identity with Theravada Buddhism as the foundation of national belonging. In this discourse, "race" refers not to biological difference but to an ethno-religious identity that determines who is considered part of the nation's moral community (Foxeus, 2019).

This organization has carried out political activities and has had a significant influence on Myanmar's politics. They conduct anti-Muslim propaganda campaigns through various media, one of which is social media, political lobbying by encouraging the government to issue laws that are discriminatory against minority communities, especially Muslims, mass mobilization by holding protests and large demonstrations to protect Buddhism, and this organization often commits violence against Muslims, one of which is the burning of mosques and houses (Bilay, 2022). Just like Ma Ba Tha, the 969 movement is related to a Buddhist nationalist movement that is interested in protecting the so-called threat to Buddhism and the formation of Myanmar's national identity. Similar to other ultra-nationalist movements, the 969 puts forward a symbol that aims to ideologize Myanmar as an entirely

Buddhist state (Coclanis, 2013). The number 9 is referred to as the number of unique attributes of Buddha, and the number 6 is referred to as the Dharma or teaching of Buddha; the last number 9 is considered as the Buddhist Sangha (monastic community). Thus, the symbol 969 is connected to the Three Jewels of Buddha, which connects Buddha, Sangha, and Dhamma (Bookbinder, 2013). The third is the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), established in 2010 as the successor of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a mass organization established by the then-ruling military junta. Similar to 969 and Ma Ba Tha, the USDP as a political party has a far-right ideology with the goal of creating Myanmar as a Buddhist state. This political party was founded by Thein Sein, a retired military officer who ruled Myanmar in an authoritarian manner. The members of this political party are mainly retired military personnel who ruled Myanmar during the authoritarian regime and were in opposition when the National League for Democracy (NLD) political party was founded by Aung San Suu Kyi (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The last is Ashin Wiratu, a Buddhist who has played a significant role in the escalation of ethnic conflict in Myanmar. In 2013, Time magazine named Wirathu "The Face of Buddhist Terror," and the monk also titled himself "the Burmese bin Laden" in his sermons (Beech, 2013) . Wirathu became very important in the Buddhist nationalist movement as he initiated and became a leader of the 969 movement. Wirathu often delivers hateful rhetoric and anti-Muslim propaganda and has called for a boycott of Muslim products and businesses in Myanmar (Fuller, 2013).

Religious Power and the Triangle of Violence in Myanmar

To understand how religious authority contributes to violence against minority communities in Myanmar, this paper employs Johan Galtung's triangle of violence theory. This framework views violence not merely as a physical act but as a structural and discursive phenomenon legitimized by both the state and religious actors. Similar to many fundamentalist movements, there exists an impulse to commit violence as a means of restoring the "spirit" of religion, which is perceived to have been corrupted by modernity. This is evident in Myanmar, where groups such as Ma Ba Tha, the 969 Movement, and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) have functioned as major political instruments in reconstructing Myanmar's image as an entirely Buddhist nation. Within this context, these groups engage in various forms of mobilization, ranging from rhetorical campaigns and the dissemination of hate speech to direct support for violence against Muslim communities, particularly the Rohingya. These practices reveal how Buddhist teachings and symbols have been politicized as instruments of power, turning violence into a morally acceptable act framed as the defense of religious and national identity.

The above explanation shows that while Buddhism indeed teaches peace through its core principles, its implementation by religious authorities may differ in practice. For instance, the 969 Movement, allegedly led by Wirathu, carried out violent acts against Muslims and propagated racially charged sermons. Yet, the government claimed there was no indication of calls for violence, framing the movement merely as one promoting peace. This reflects how both the state and religious authorities normalized social hostility (A. R. C. Marshall, 2013). Why does this continue to occur? As in many cases of religious nationalism,

religion functions as a tool to legitimize state power in protecting and constructing collective identity. Consequently, destructive acts of violence are often perceived as morally justified. Although Buddhist teachings emphasize compassion (*karuna*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*), within Myanmar's political context these values are frequently manipulated to justify violence in the name of protecting the nation. In such circumstances, state violence gains legitimacy from religious leaders, creating a condition in which political power and religious authority reinforce one another under the pretext of maintaining social stability.

Galtung's research on the triangle of violence identifies three interconnected forms of violence: direct, cultural, and structural. Direct violence refers to tangible acts such as murder or torture. Cultural violence represents the subtler dimension, operating through the legitimization of new ideologies, norms, and values that justify harm. Structural violence, meanwhile, is embedded within social and political systems, producing systemic inequality, discrimination, and limited access to resources (Galtung, 1990).

Therefore, to analyze how Galtung's framework helps explain the nature of violence in Myanmar, this section is organized into three parts, each addressing one dimension of violence as reflected in the country's empirical realities. Given the extensive cases of violence against the Rohingya community, this paper focuses on three events that are conceptually and empirically most relevant to Galtung's theoretical framework.

One of the most brutal forms of direct violence in the context of the Rohingya conflict occurred in August 2017, when the Myanmar military launched a large-scale operation in Rakhine state. Investigative reports released by Reuters revealed that these attacks were not a spontaneous response to violence from Rohingya armed groups (ARSA), but rather part of a systematic plan that had been drawn up long before the operation began. Internal military documents show that armed forces had prepared detailed operational measures, including infiltrating spies, destroying mosques and homes, and creating conditions conducive to mass exodus. The violence was widespread—ranging from the killing of civilians, the rape of women, to the burning of villages, causing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh (McPherson & Lone, 2022). Within Galtung's framework of direct violence, these events represent the most visible manifestation of state-perpetrated violence against the bodies and lives of marginalized communities. This type of violence is physical, frontal, and intentional, where state actors use military force to injure, kill, and expel groups deemed "enemies" by the dominant ideological construct. The fact that these attacks were supported by religious narratives and symbols of protection for Buddhism shows that this direct violence does not stand alone but is closely linked to other forms of violence that are structural and cultural. However, in this context, the focus is on the involvement of the state as an active perpetrator and the use of military instruments as a means of executing violence specifically targeting the Rohingya community. One of the most hidden yet dangerous aspects of violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar is cultural violence legitimized through religious symbols and narratives.

According to a report by the Berkley Center (Georgetown University), Buddhist nationalist groups such as Ma Ba Tha play a central role in spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric through public lectures, the media, and support for discriminatory policies such as the Race and Religion Protection Laws. In their discourse, Muslims—including the Rohingya—are

not only considered a minority, but a threat to the purity of Myanmar's Buddhist identity. The narrative used is one of protecting religion and the nation, a form of symbolic mobilization cloaked in moral and religious obligations. When violence against the Rohingya occurs, this kind of narrative makes it appear to be a legitimate act of defense, rather than a violation of human rights (K. Marshall, 2023). Within Galtung's theoretical framework, cultural violence is a form of violence that operates through ideological and symbolic legitimization—making immoral actions appear normal, even right. This is what happened in Myanmar: when religious institutions and monastic groups engaged in the reproduction of discourse that positioned the Rohingya as "enemies within," the physical and structural violence perpetrated against them gained social justification. This is where cultural violence comes into play: it does not directly harm the body, but rather paralyzes empathy and spreads identity-based fear. Religious symbols, sacred rhetoric, and discriminatory laws are used as tools to create boundaries between "us" and "them," making the oppression of the Rohingya not only possible but also celebrated. Violence does not manifest in the form of weapons but in discourse that devalues the humanity of certain groups in the name of protecting faith and the nation.

A fundamental manifestation of structural violence in the Rohingya context is the systematic denial of citizenship institutionalized by the Myanmar state through the 1982 Citizenship Law. A Reuters report notes that the state officially recognizes only 135 ethnic groups as part of the "national race" (*taingyintha*), explicitly excluding the Rohingya. Consequently, the Rohingya are deprived not only of citizenship but also of basic rights that depend on legal recognition, including access to education, health care, employment, and freedom of movement. They have become a stateless population, marginalized from the political system and trapped in a condition of prolonged administrative uncertainty. Even when Rohingya fled to countries such as India, their legal status remained unresolved, as they were not recognized as citizens by Myanmar and lacked a valid legal basis for settlement in host countries (Bhalla, 2014)

This situation can be understood through Galtung's concept of cultural violence, which refers to forms of harm sustained through ideological and symbolic legitimization that render immoral actions acceptable or even virtuous. This is precisely what occurred in Myanmar. When religious institutions and monastic organizations participated in the reproduction of discourses portraying the Rohingya as "enemies within," physical and structural violence against them became socially justified. Cultural violence, in this sense, does not directly wound the body but erodes empathy and cultivates fear based on identity. Religious symbols, sacred rhetoric, and discriminatory laws serve as instruments to define boundaries between "us" and "them," turning the oppression of the Rohingya into something both permissible and celebrated. Violence is thus expressed not through weapons but through narratives that diminish the humanity of certain groups in the name of protecting faith and the nation.

When examined more deeply, this dynamic reveals why violence persists even though Buddhism is widely known as a religion that teaches peace. The state not only participates in direct violence but also perpetuates structural violence through discriminatory policies that construct a negative image of the Rohingya as illegal immigrants. State support for religious

authorities further legitimizes violence under the discourse of protecting Buddhism. Within this context, Ma Ba Tha, the 969 Movement, and the USDP operate in mutually reinforcing ways. Ma Ba Tha provides the religious and moral foundation for Buddhist nationalist narratives, the 969 Movement extends its influence through social and economic networks, and the USDP leverages both to consolidate political power and reinforce the idea of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation. This ideological relationship establishes a power structure that justifies violence against minorities as a form of defense for religion and the nation. Although Buddhist teachings emphasize compassion (*karuna*) and non-violence (ahimsa), their political reinterpretation by figures such as Wirathu, supported by the state, has transformed these values into instruments for legitimizing recurring violence.

Therefore, violence against the Rohingya community cannot be understood merely as a series of physical acts or discriminatory laws. It must be seen as the outcome of interlocking relationships between state institutions, religious symbolism, and cultural legitimacy. Through Galtung's framework, it becomes clear that violence in Myanmar represents a project of power that is institutionalized, reproduced, and celebrated in the name of identity, morality, and faith.

Conclusion

This study primarily employs Johan Galtung's triangle of violence as its main analytical lens, while the concept of religious nationalism serves as a contextual framework to understand how religion functions as an instrument of political power in postcolonial Myanmar. The research demonstrates that violence against the Rohingya community cannot be understood as an isolated incident or merely as an inter-religious conflict. By analytically separating religion and political identity, this study examines how Buddhist teachings, which are fundamentally teachings of peace, have paradoxically been used as tools of political legitimization. This suggests that religion has been stripped of its universal values of compassion and refilled with an exclusive nationalist agenda through the authoritative interpretation and representation of Buddhism by figures such as Ashin Wiratu.

Narrative accounts showing how Rakhine became a stage of political contestation, how Buddhist nationalism emerged through organizations such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement, and how monastic figures like Ashin Wiratu shaped public discourse reveal that colonialism left behind a legacy of structural problems that continue to define Myanmar's politics. Furthermore, by applying Galtung's triangle of violence, violence can be understood as a system operating across three dimensions: direct, structural, and cultural. Empirical cases such as the 2017 military operation, the exclusionary provisions of the 1982 Citizenship Law, and the dominance of religious narratives by groups like Ma Ba Tha demonstrate that violence is not only enacted by military forces but also institutionalized by the state and sanctified by religious authority.

From Galtung's perspective, it can be concluded that the violence experienced by the Rohingya community is not incidental but represents a layered and systematic form of political violence. It cannot be reduced to communal riots alone but must be understood as the product of state involvement encompassing all three forms of violence: military operations, the revocation of citizenship, and the deployment of religious narratives to justify oppression.

Through this analytical lens, this paper rejects the view that violence is merely a deviation from peaceful teachings. Rather, violence becomes possible through the reciprocal relationship between the state and religious institutions that actively construct and maintain the legitimacy of power. Buddhism is employed as a symbolic boundary separating "us" from "them," while the Rohingya are reduced to threats against the purity of national identity. Under these conditions, violence becomes normalized, even perceived as necessary, in the broader project of shaping Myanmar as an ethno-religious state. Consequently, this study contributes to a broader discussion on how political violence is generated not only through weapons or coercive policies but also through discourse, law, and religious interpretation. The case of Myanmar illustrates that in a postcolonial setting, religious authority extends beyond the spiritual domain and plays a decisive role in directing state power, making it a central actor in the perpetuation of institutionalized and invisible violence.

In this context, decolonization entails dismantling the ways postcolonial states reproduce colonial logic through law, religion, and identity. It is not merely an effort to erase the traces of colonization but an attempt to challenge the very foundations of inherited power. In light of this discussion, the use of Galtung's framework is not only valuable for revealing the layers of violence but also for reflecting on the colonial epistemology that continues to shape our understanding of religion and power. Decolonizing Buddhist authority, therefore, requires shifting attention from viewing Buddhism as a passive victim of politicization toward recognizing how colonial legacies of classification and hierarchy continue to structure religious authority in Myanmar.

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