Report: Several Anti-Muslim Incidents Signal Worrying Trend in Yangon

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Executive Summary:

- On 21 April a group of Buddhist ultra-nationalists disrupted a mass prayer by Muslims at an Islamic school in Tharkayta Township
- On 28 April, the same groups protested the same Islamic school, as well as another nearby Islamic school, and ultimately pressured police to allow them to seal the schools shut
- Those involved in the protests came from both the Yangon area and cities significantly far away
- On May 9th a mob of ultra-nationalists involved themselves in a search for Muslims living illegally in Yangon, which turned violent when no illegal residents were found
- Two men were said to have been attacked when the mob became upset. One Muslim man had to go to the hospital after he was attacked
- The ultra-nationalist groups have previously protested Islamic schools in Tharkayta being used to host prayers

- Ultra-nationalists have previously prevented the celebration of the Birthday of the Prophet of Islam by local Muslims

- Police issued arrest warrants for 7 nationalists involved in the 9 May incident. Two of them are said to be monks. Two have been arrested

Introduction:

The Burma Human Rights Network is very alarmed by three particular incidents, which have occurred over the course of three weeks, each involving ultra-nationalists groups protesting or harassing local Muslims. The increase of anti-Muslim rhetoric in Burma has been a steady trend for many years, but these latest incidents in the country's largest city are especially worrying as tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities there have been relatively calm compared to more troubled regions where anti-Muslim riots have taken place. While the ultra-nationalists represent a vast minority of the population, these latest incidents unquestionably demonstrate that they feel more emboldened, even to the point of violence. Moreover, these occurrences are not isolated to the past month, but are part of a series of similar events by the same organizations while operating in Rangoon.

On 21 April a group of Buddhist ultra-nationalists disrupted a mass prayer by Muslims at an Islamic school in Tharkayta Township at around 1 pm. The group complained that the schools were holding prayers in defiance from orders by the township not to do so. The following week, on 28 April, the same groups protested the same Islamic school, as well as another nearby Islamic school, and ultimately pressured police to allow them to seal the schools shut. Most recently, on 9 May, a mob in Mingla Taungnyunt took part in a supposed search for Rohingya Muslims who they said were living illegally in the township. When the search found no one living illegally in the area the nationalists reportedly became aggressive towards the Muslim residents there. One Muslim man had to be hospitalized after the altercation. As tensions rose, police fired warning shots into the air, a rare occurrence, to disperse the crowd. Following the incident police issued warrants for the arrests of several ultra-nationalists. On the 12th a couple (husband and wife) were said to have been arrested for charges related to the incident.

Tharkayta Township

Recent Events:

Two Islamic schools, also called Madrassas, near downtown Rangoon (Yangon) were sealed off by a mob of Buddhist ultra-nationalists, which was led by monks. The move followed accusations that the Islamic schools were operating as mosques without official permission. The schools, which are located on Anawmar 11 and 12 streets in Thakayta Township were chained and sealed by protesters on 28 April without any official decree from the township. During the protests, an estimated 150 nationalists

staged a rally in front of the township's administration office at around 3:30 PM, where they sought to pressure authorities to seal off the two schools.

During the week prior to the protests nationalists had already called for the closure of the schools. Buddhist ultra-nationalists disrupted a mass prayer by Muslims at an Islamic school in Tharkayta Township at around 1 pm on the 21st of April 2017. The Muslims praying were gathered in a prayer room on Anawmar 12 Road for Friday prayer (Jummah). The nationalists also visited the local administration office to ask the authorities to take action against the trustees of the Islamic school. After this incident, the Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network asked the authorities to close the Islamic school for breach of an undertaking prohibiting them from hosting prayers. Subsequently, the trustees of the school were summoned by the Tharkayta Township General Administration Department at 3 p.m. on 21 April and told not to organise mass prayers in future, according to a trustee who attended the meeting. Men were seen photographing Muslims coming out of the Islamic school on the same day. Afterwards, nationalists were observed posting messages on social media to intimidate Muslims. Following these incidents representatives from the nationalists groups approached authorities requesting that they prohibit prayers in the schools.

Prior to this, authorities prohibited the Islamic schools in the township from holding mass prayers in October of 2015. At that time the trustees of the Islamic schools had signed an undertaking at the Township Administration office agreeing that they would not organize mass prayers in their schools, following complaints from nationalist groups.

In the latest incident, the two Islamic schools were closed by the Township Administration, Township Monks Supervisory Committee, District Religious Affairs Department and the nationalist monks. The schools were closed after discussions with the trustees were unable to reach an agreement. Negotiations were held between the head of Yangon Region Police, named Colonel Myo Swe, an MP from Thakayta named Dr Wai Phyo Aung and five members of the nationalist groups. After the negotiation failed, police accompanied Dr Wai Phyo Aung as he sealed the two schools on Anawmar 11 and 12 streets.

The chair of the school on 11 Anawar Street, Haji U Tin Shwe said, "The authorities asked us to demolish the pond which is used for cleaning and also an area where sermons are delivered. The pond is used for cleaning of the hands and feet of our students." In Islam, believers make sure they are clean before they pray and washing areas are typically outside of areas used for prayer.

The chair of the school in Anawmar 12 Street said,

> **"Why were the schools sealed off even though we have official papers? We asked the head of the Township Religious Department if we made any mistake. He said we did not but the schools were sealed off to prevent conflict. They do not have any official order to close down the schools they just did it with a verbal order."**

Among the nationalists gathered to put pressure to close the schools were U Thusita and a lay monk named Taungthar, who are members of the Patriotic Monk Union, as well as members from the Patriotic Dharma Network and members of other nationalist organizations from the Yangon Region, Mandalay, Meiktila, Ma U Bin and Pathein.

Around 100 people, including police, attempted to control the situation, but they were unable to effectively restore order. A reporter from the *Associated Press* was assaulted and panic was widespread among the Muslims living in the township.

Even though about 20 police were deployed near the schools, a group of nationalists came to Anawmar 11 and complained about the water pond and the stand used to deliver sermons. Finally the nationalists were allowed to enter the school with the head of the township administration, the head of the police and members of the ward administration. Once, inside the group took photographs.

A resident of Anawmar 6 Street named U Khin Maung said,

> **"Who were the police deployed to protect, us or those who want to destroy our religious properties? It is questionable,"**

U Maung Kyaw, A trustee of an Islamic school in Anawmar Ward, which is still operating, said his school would be closed as a precaution after the two schools in the same ward were sealed off. "All the Islamic schools in Tharkayta will be closed, but we will try to get permission for their reopening after Ramadan. We will not conduct prayers anymore," U Maung Kyaw said.

The head of the school administration for Anawmar 12 Street, U Tin Shwe, said the closure of the schools would affect the studies of nearly 400 students.

> **"This decision to close the school was taken in bias against us – no religious equality. In my school, there are 370 students. Their studies will be affected. I see this is an abuse against our religion."**

The move to ban prayers in the school was against the country's constitution. A religious teacher named Jamal, who is a resident of Anawmar 10 Street, said;

> **"This is in clear breach of a constitutional provision which guarantees freedom of religion in the country"**

There are 500 students studying in the two schools that were sealed off on 28 April. There are about 50,000 Muslims living in Tharkayta Township, if a ban on prayers is imposed on all schools they will have to go to New Aye mosque in Dawbone, which is about 1.4 kilometers from the town. However, due to growing population in Daw Bon a mosque there could not accommodate all of them. In that

case, they will have to travel further for prayers. The next nearest place is *Salamat* Mosque, which is near Pazundaung Post office, about 4.5 kilometer from Tharkayta.

Background:

Thakayta Township was established in 1958 by the Government of President U Ne Win. At the time the township was established, nine schools were built. At that time, Muslims gathered for prayers at the schools, as there was no mosque in the township. In 1959 when the people from lower Pazundaung Township were moved to Thakayta, one Islamic school was built in Anawmar 11. This is the same school which was closed on 28 April 2017 following ultra-nationalist protests. The local Muslims asked for permission to build a mosque in 1990 but their request was denied. Instead, the authorities issued a letter on 29 August 1990 saying that they could use the school for prayers. Since that time the schools have been used to teach religious studies and to host those who wish to pray.

Among the 9 Islamic schools in Tharkayta one in Man Pyay Ward was sealed off on 17 February 2013 at the pressure of national groups. The closure came after the nationalist groups accused the trustees of the no 3 school of doing refurbishments without permission.

The remaining 8 schools continued to be used for teaching of Islamic studies as well as for prayers. However, on 20 October 2015, under pressure from the Patriotic Dharma Network, the authorities asked the trustees of the 8 schools to sign an undertaking prohibiting mass prayers.

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in July of last year the authorities had granted temporary permission to conduct mass prayers.

Background on ultra-nationalists monks and their affiliated groups



Figure 1: Taungthar Lay Sayadaw

Taungthar Lay Sayadaw, a Monk whose name is Ashin Agga Dazahar is a member of the Meiktila chapter of Ma Ba Tha. He took a leading role in putting pressure to close the Islamic schools in Tharkayta. On 23 April, he was involved in preventing prayers at an extension building of the mosque in Yinmar Bin village in Tharzi Township. On 21 March, he prevented older people from praying at the residence of U Johnny in Pyithar Yar North ward (D). He gathered along with 40 other people at the ward administration to put pressure on the authorities to stop prayers at U Johnny's place.

The monk, together with his followers, used their presence to put pressure on the authorities to seal off the Madrasas in Tharkayta.

After a ban on sermons was imposed on a senior Ma Ba Tha leader U Wirathu, Taungthar Lay took a more prominent role among the Buddhist nationalist movement.

Taungthar Lay Sayadaw also took an active role in an event held in Mandalay related to a petition calling for arrest of Ko Swe Win, the Editor-in-Chief of Myanmar Now news agency. He has been observed also increasing activities in opposition to Muslims in Burma.

U Thusita



Figure 2: Sayadaw U Thusita

U Thusita is a close ally of U Wirathu. He is the leader among the nationalists who gathered in Tharkayta to put pressure on the authorities. He is the secretary of the Patriotic Myanmar Monk Union. He has been involved in disruption of religious ceremonies held by the minority religions and also in the disruption of prayers in mosques and raids on shops owned by Muslims. He took the lead in the disruption of an event on the birthday of the Prophet of Islam, which was due to be held at New Light hall in Anawmar ward in Tharkayta. The hosts of the event were forced to cancel due to the pressure of nationalist groups.

U Thusita is facing libel charges (under the section 505 (b) of the criminal procedure code) and charges under section 19 of Peaceful Assembly Law, for his role in organizing a demonstration in front of the US embassy in Yangon a year ago.

The Patriotic Dhamma Network

The Tharkayta branch of the network was established early last year. The head office of the network is in the congregation hall of the 969 movement on Shwe Oakgu 4th street. The network has organized trainings that are supposed to involve Buddhist culture for youths, but are used instead to spread hatred against Muslims. The network was also involved in raids on religious schools and mosques. They took the leading role in disrupting ceremonies to mark the birth of the Prophet of Islam earlier this year. They frequently use activities like this to create religious tension between Buddhists and the members of minority faiths. In 2016, the group entered into a Muslim orphanage in no 10 Ward of Tharkayta, confiscated photo records, and told the orphanage administration not to allow prayers inside the building.



Figure 3: Patriotic Blood Dhamma Network

Mingla Taungnyunt Township

Recent Events:

On 9 May a group of ultra-nationalists attempted to stir up religious violence in Mingla Taungnyunt Township in Yangon. The nationalists were involved in a search of an apartment where a Muslim family lived, under the pretext that they were looking for "illegal Bengali immigrants". The Term Bengali is a term used to describe the stateless Muslim Rohingya population who live in Rakhine State, which borders Bangladesh. The mob was composed of about 30 people and was led by a prominent extremist monk named U Thursta and his followers. Police and Immigration officials, along with nationalists and monks, searched an apartment at the corner of Mya Yar Gone and 123 Street. They arrived at the 8th floor apartment at no 105 /107 at 10 p.m.

"About 5 monks first came to the street to search for illegal Bengali immigrants. They did not accept the explanation by the police and Immigration. When they did not find any illegal immigrants, but they found a sword, which is kept to use for slaughter of cattle on Muslim's Eid-ul-Adha festival, they accused the apartment owner of keeping a lethal weapon," a local resident who is a member of the NLD told the *Friday Times* Journal.

The apartment owner, Daw Win, and her family were asked to produce their citizenship and household registration cards. The extremists asked the Police to arrest them, but the Police refused and said they would be called only if needed, but there was no evidence that this family violate any rules of law. After this the Nationalists were frustrated and assaulted two Muslim bystanders, in a possible display of displeasure with the police decision.

"They were very much upset with the Police for not arresting the family. Women among the extremist group cursed at the Police. The situation became so tense and then they attacked Ko Zar Ni Aung," said U Soe Myint, the head of 100 households on 123 Street (local administrative authority). "He was sent to the hospital for emergency treatment."

Incitement through 'fake news'

BHRN obtained a video clip of an interview with U Thusita where he said; "The Police have failed to take action against the illegal immigrants and those holding weapons despite people making a report to them." A video file of the interview was posted on the Facebook page of Moe Zaw, but deleted one hour after it was posted.

After tension from the situation increased, U Thusita and his followers took refuge inside the Police station. While they were there their supporters posted on social media that they were in police protection after being attacked by Muslims. They wrote Muslims have started *Jihad* against them. Supporters wrote that a red alert has been declared for Mingla Taungnyunt and urged the nationalists to

attack Muslims there by using any weapons they could find and asked the military to assist them in their fight. Beyond this, they spread fake news, saying they were under attack and a policeman had been stabbed. After these posts about 100 nationalists gathered in front of the Police station.

The local Muslim residents then came out to the street to defend their ward and homes. They gathered in wards along Mya Yar Gone Road. According to an eyewitness, Police asked the nationalists to leave the Police station and to avoid conflict with Muslims standing outside. To disperse the crowd they fired two live rounds from their guns into the air. The situation became calm at around 2 a.m. on 10 May after the local MP and security forces intervened.

Financial problem with the house owner

Daw Win, the owner of the house, which was searched, said in a media interview that she had a financial dispute with a Buddhist woman named April Htun, who colluded with Ma Ba Tha and other nationalists forces to provided false information to the police with the intention to stir up religious violence.

Evidence the incident was planned:



Figure 4: Htin Linn Hteik Facebook post

Facebook posts by ultra-nationalist give some indication that the incident may have been planned in advance to inflame tensions. A nationalist named Ko Latt wrote in a post on Facebook on 8 May stating, "We are going to play a drama tomorrow would like to be provided with security as usual."

Also, two hours ahead of the incident, Htin Linn Hteik (Figure 4), who is a member of the Patriotic *Dhama* Network from Tharkayta Township in Yangon wrote, "We are collecting people to go to arrest *kulars* (a derogatory word used in Myanmar to describe Muslims and the people of South Asian origin)." The post was with a photo of 4 people having a meal at a beer station.

Rule of law:

U Mya Aye of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society and a resident of Mingla Taungnyunt Township said in an interview with *BBC* –

> **"I find that the authorities didn't take any action. I would say there is absolutely no rule of law in the country. If there are actually illegal immigrants, arrest them according to the law. In this**

incident, people who are not from the enforcement agencies are searching public houses and beating up people. That has become like a regular occurrence in Myanmar,"

Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, an MP from Mingla Taungnyunt Township, in her interview with *BBC* said;

"Ordinary people have no rights to be involve in search of private residences even the Police need search warrant, they cannot go in to private homes at their own will. I find this incident as absolute lawlessness,"

"Last week a similar incident took place in Tharkayta. This week in Mingla Taungnyunt Township. Mingla Taungnyunt has been relatively peaceful. I think this incident was not naturally taking place, it could be instigated " Daw Phyu Phyu Thin said.

On 11 May police issued warrants for the arrest of seven of the Nationalists involved in the incident. Two of warrants are said to be for monks. On 12 May a man and woman (a couple) were arrested. As of May 14th the following warrants were issued and arrests were made: 1.Tin Zaw Htut (or) Ko Latt (arrested) 2.Ma Aung Aung Myint (or) Ma Aung (ko latt's wife) (arrested) 3.Tin Lin Htike (or) Linn Linn 4.Tin Htay Aung (or) Akyi Kaung 5.Myat Bone Mo 6. Ashin Thusita 7.Ashin Pyinnyar Wintha

BHRN is alarmed that these searches were conducted without a warrant, and seemingly at the behest of the ultra-nationalists.

Further, it is entirely inappropriate that authorities allowed civilians from a mob to join them on these searches and investigations of private residences, even if their intent in doing so was to defuse tension. Authorities are setting very dangerous precedents by responding to the demands of overtly bigoted mobs, and endangering both minority communities and the broader community's peace and coexistence, by doing so. While the call to arrest those involved in the more egregious aspects of this incident are entirely welcome, BHRN calls on the authorities and Government to take steps to ensure police and local authorities do not allow themselves to act on behalf of extremists who amass themselves into intimidating crowds.

Conclusion:

The increasing trend of anti-Muslim sentiment, which has been escalating for years, coupled with the pubic perception of the conflict in Rakhine State are an incredibly worrying combination for the welfare of Muslim residents throughout the country. While some organic elements of these problems can be alleviated, what is most alarming is the organisation and coordination with which much of the tension is being created. While a communal dispute can often be resolved through mediation and intervention, it is far more difficult when the escalation is the desired outcome by those creating the

dispute, as seems to be the case in these recent events. We are very pleased to see the police and Government have taken action against the nationalists involved on the May 9 incident and consider it a welcome step in the right direction towards restoring calm and creating a more tolerant society. We do, however, stress that steps need to be taken before these kinds of escalations can occur. The closing of the Islamic schools on April 28th at the behest of a nationalist mob is in direct conflict with the aspirations of a tolerant society, and allowed the police to be used as tools of those attempting to take the law into their own hands, rather than to protect the vulnerable. We urge the Government of Myanmar to increase vigilance of these organizations now and take further steps to ensure any parties intending to create violence or disruption are properly addressed. Further, members of the ruling NLD party should take this opportunity to try to seek calm through example, in particular addressing the Islamophobia and unbridled nationalism in the country as an obstacle to both peace and democracy. There is no political party or body with the same degree of influence over citizens as the NLD, and in their popularity and endearment to their people is a responsibility to lead on this matter as well.

Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

Media Enquiries

Members of The Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) are available for comment and interview.

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