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Overcoming fear of the 'other'

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MYANMAR SEEKS TO TURN TIDE ON ETHNIC CONFLICT

Overcoming fear of the 'other'

EUGENE K B TAN



The political and economic changes in Myanmar have been breathtaking, and it would seem there is no turning back now. Certainly for the political elites, the changes are very much about enlightened self-preservation. But deep-seated sectarian conflict could prove to be the Achilles heel of Myanmar's reforms.

Two weeks ago, I participated in a dialogue with the controversial monk Wirathu at the Ma Soe Yein Monastery in Mandalay. A senior monk, Wirathu shot to global attention when he was featured on the July 1 cover of Time magazine, with the provocative headline: "The face of Buddhist terror".

Wirathu exuded a charismatic presence and quiet confidence even as he fielded questions on the surge of communal violence — particularly between Buddhists and Muslims — plaguing Myanmar since 2011. He spoke in a measured, almost dispassionate tone, but there was no mistaking his steely conviction.

Whatever grievances the ethnic minorities had, Wirathu noted, they should resolve it with the government and not direct them against the ma-

majority Burmans. He spoke of the imperative for the minorities to respect the national symbols and Buddhism in his country.

More significantly, he was adamant that Buddhists must respond strongly, resorting to violence if necessary, in defence of their faith and country when attacked by non-Buddhists, especially the Rohingya Muslims.

He acknowledged that he supported the "969" ultra-nationalist movement which is vehemently anti-Muslim — but was coy as to whether he led it. (969 stand for the nine qualities of Lord Buddha, six qualities of his teachings and the nine qualities of monks.)

AN INTER-FAITH FIRST

With Myanmar having 135 recognised racial categories and a history of violent ethnic conflict, the military junta justified its tight grip on society between 1962 and 2011 as necessary to maintaining stability.

Today, however, the powerful message of fear by those like Wirathu must contend with the countervailing philosophy of peace and dignity being advocated by other religious leaders, including leading Buddhist monks.

On Oct 1, Yangon hosted what was probably Myanmar's first inter-faith academic conference on Security,



Controversial monk Wirathu shot to global attention when he was featured on the cover of Time magazine, with the provocative headline: "The face of Buddhist terror". PHOTO: REUTERS

Peace and Co-existence. Organised by Myanmar's Sitagu International Buddhist Academy and the Institute for Global Engagement, the event drew more than 400 local participants and observers, including political ministers and leaders from a variety of major faiths. I was invited to speak on Singapore's experience in managing ethnic relations.

In an expression of bipartisan support, President Thein Sein and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi sent messages read out at the conference. The relative openness in discussing such matters publicly was as refreshing as it was bold. Even the dialogue with Wirathu was reported in the English-language Myanmar Freedom Daily newspaper.

WHEN DEMOCRACY BREEDS FEAR AND ENVY

By now, it is clear that the mere introduction of democracy anywhere will not miraculously transform voters into fair-minded citizens. Democracy requires institutions such as rule of law, a minimal level of education and political maturity, or else it degenerates into the tyranny of majority rule where might is right. Myanmar must guard against this tendency.

History has shown that when non-democratic societies switch to free-market democracy, certain ethnic groups — often the majority or a smaller entrepreneurial group — may benefit more than others.

Opening up the market can enrich already-dominant groups, even as democracy empowers the majority group. It is in this confluence of economic liberalisation and democracy — especially when both are rapidly introduced — that the two groups can collide, leading to communal tension and violence.

The competition for votes (and power) can encourage political entrepreneurs to make scapegoats of a resented or marginalised minority. It can foment ethno-nationalist movements which demand that the

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country's wealth and identity be reclaimed by the "indigenous" people.

For Myanmar, the challenge of regulating ethnic conflict is a huge one. It needs to balance deep-seated fears on the one hand, with the rapacious tendencies on the other hand aroused by the opening up of resource-rich frontiers — much of it in the lands of the minorities — to the global economy.

And in such a divided society, politicians can find it tempting to appeal to primordial populism: Blood ties reinforced by religious loyalties and common insecurities are powerful levers.

CHANGING THE GAME

Myanmar's political and religious elites are acutely aware that ethno-religious conflict will derail the state-and nation-building process. There is growing realisation that national security and the security of the various ethnic groups are not separate — they are inherently indivisible.

Collectively, Myanmar must embrace the rich diversity in its ethnic make-up. There must be political will to implement laws and policies that are fair and equal, notwithstanding the ethnic Burman majority and the special position of Buddhism in Myanmar.

Efforts are being made to develop meaningful platforms for the various

groups to hold dialogues and engage each other. To effectively counter the pervasive fear of the "other", such endeavours need to build trust both vertically (between the state and ethnic groups) and horizontally (between ethnic groups).

The President's visits earlier this month to the conflict-ridden Rakhine state is significant. Religious leaders from different faiths also have begun to visit conflict-prone areas together, to soothe tensions and dispel misunderstandings of minority faiths. These are potentially game-changing actions.

Myanmar needs to urgently develop incentives so that leaders and ordinary citizens alike will find that moderation in ethnic relations is the only way forward, to achieve security and religious freedom for all. There are signs this mindset is gaining traction. In July, several prominent religious leaders, such as the Buddhist Venerable Sitagu and Catholic Archbishop Charles Bo, issued an appeal for "religious harmony, greater attention to peace and human development". That was an important signal, even if little noticed.

Myanmar sits on the cusp of history. As a born-again society, its founding vision is extremely important, and how it positions its majority and its minorities now will profoundly impact its future. The political will to deal resolutely with conflict by affirming peace and dignity will be crucial.

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