

Melissa Crouch (ed.)

Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016. xix + 345 pp. ISBN 9780199461202, price GBP 31.99 (hardback).

Francis Wade

Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'. London: Zed Books, 2017, xv + 280 pp. ISBN 9781783605279, GBP 14.99 (softcover).

The plight of Myanmar's Rohingya is by now well-known to the general public, thanks in large part to investigative reporting by Al-Jazeera, the International Crisis Group, and the online magazine *The Irrawaddy*, published by Burmese exiles in Thailand. Their reports are essential reading for whoever wishes to follow the transformation of the conflict from hate speech to ethnic cleansing and, arguably, genocide. (Recently, however, *The Irrawaddy* has adopted a more cautious line and refrained from criticizing the government's position on the Rohingya.) Readers interested in the broader context of the events will find much of value in the two excellent books under review, both of which make significant new contributions to our knowledge of Myanmar's relations with its Muslim population, which constitutes at least four per cent of the total and possibly twice as much.

Until recently, there was only one serious book-length study of the subject, Moshe Yegar's *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (1972). Melissa Crouch's edited volume, which covers many different aspects of the Muslim presence in Burma/Myanmar, is a fine update and complement to this standard work. The quality of the individual contributions is uneven, but each offers valuable new insights and will stand as a useful addition to the academic literature. Francis Wade's more journalistic book not only gives a lucid and balanced account of recent events on the ground, based on his visits to the affected places and interviews with participants and a wide range of other personalities, but also provides a well-researched historical background to the current conflicts.

Both books show Myanmar to have a very diverse and widely dispersed Muslim population, of which the Rohingya are only one, although admittedly the largest and most compact community. The colonial past—Burma was militarily invaded by the British in the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826, annexed to British India in 1886, made into a separate colony in 1937, and gained independence in 1948—looms large over Buddhist-Muslim debates and mutual perceptions in Myanmar, and the dominant discourse holds that all Muslims were brought over from British India in order to assist in Burma's

colonial exploitation (with the exception of the Rohingya, who are, in spite of abundant evidence to the contrary, said by Myanmar's officialdom to be recent immigrants from Bangladesh). Many Muslims of Indian origin were in fact forced to leave the country in the wake of anti-Indian riots in the 1930s and systematic anti-Indian purges in the 1960s, but various Indian Muslim communities have remained behind and were until recently well-integrated in the economic, cultural and political life of Myanmar society, as is illustrated by several chapters in Crouch's volume.

In the first two chapters of the book, Melissa Crouch and Stephen Keck, while acknowledging the large influx of Muslims from various parts of the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period, show the well-documented presence of Muslims in pre-colonial Myanmar and highlight the complexity of the Muslim mosaic, which also includes *Kaman* (descendants of Indian archers in the service of the Buddhist kingdom of Mrauk-U, now assimilated to Rakhine culture), smaller numbers of *Panthay* (Chinese Muslims) and *Pashu* (Malay Muslims), and more numerous communities of Burmese or part-Burmese ancestry. The last-named, called *Zerbadee* in the older literature and nowadays *Pathi*, consider themselves as ethnically Burmese (or Shan, Karen, etc.) but are increasingly seen as aliens by Burmese Buddhists. Keck concentrates on the colonial period and the encounter of the various Muslim communities with the British and ends his chapter with vignettes of now forgotten but once prominent Indian Muslims who played a role in the making of modern Myanmar. Crouch provides a useful overview of the relevant literature published since Yegar's study. Having briefly surveyed the ethnic variety, she suggests that a more useful classification than that by ethnicity is one by distance to the state. She discusses cases of Muslims participating in the Burmese independence movement and in post-independence government, Muslims playing a part in the opposition to military rule alongside non-Muslims, and Muslims 'beyond the state', i.e. in parts of the country not controlled by the central government or abroad—with a brief discussion of the Burmese Muslims in Melbourne and hinting at the significant role of displaced Rohingya in Pakistan (and, one might add, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia).

Crouch is a legal scholar by training, and her second chapter in the book presents significant new research on the practice of Islamic law in Myanmar, yielding major corrections to the established wisdom of the standard reference, M.B. Hooker's *Islamic Law in Southeast Asia* (1984). She succeeds in shedding light on practices that had thus far been invisible. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar does not have Islamic courts, but matters of Muslim personal law (marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody) can be, and continue to be, adjudicated in general courts, which refer to the colonial codification of

Anglo-Muhammadan Law and compilations of case law, both borrowed from India. Muslim communities may also have recourse to informal forms of arbitration based on Islamic law. Referring to Supreme Court decisions (no longer reported in English but only in Burmese and therefore long invisible to outsiders) as well as *fatwa* of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council of Myanmar, Crouch shows that the practice of Islamic law in Myanmar has continued well after independence and even under military rule.

Phyu Phyu Oo, writing from within the Indian Muslim community, contributes a chapter on Muslim women's education. She notes the existence of Urdu-language *madrasa* throughout the country and comments on the growing influence of the revitalization movement Tablighi Jamaat, which has strengthened conservative attitudes in the community and discouraged the attendance of state schools by Muslim boys and especially girls. This is only one of the numerous obstacles to Muslim women's higher education and employment, some internal to the community and others due to discrimination by the state.

Zooming in on a small sub-community of Indian Muslims in Yangon, the Kalai Memon, the anthropologist Judith Beyer looks at the fate of Muslim families through the prism of changing property rights. She traces the travails of one Memon family through more than a century of Myanmar's history, from ancestors settling in northern Burma as well-to-do and enterprising merchants, through a gradual decline and loss of property in successive waves of expropriation and Burmanization.

Muslim political activity, especially in electoral politics since the transition from military rule, is studied by Nicholas Farrelly. I was surprised to read that in Rakhine State, all parties contesting the 2010 elections fielded Muslim candidates and that one of those parties by its name claimed to represent the Kaman (who are the only Muslim community to be officially recognized as one of the country's indigenous ethnic groups). Several Muslims were elected to the State assembly but gave up attending its sessions after the 2012 pogroms. Unsurprisingly, by the time of the 2015 elections, the political space available for Muslims had significantly decreased.

The final section of the volume concerns more specifically the rising Islamophobia and the context of the communal violence of the past years. Nyi Nyi Kyaw discusses the discursive violence of the monks leading the Buddhist supremacist 969 and *Ma-Ba-Tha* (Protection of Race and Religion) movements, which revived the older siege mentality and perception of Buddhism as threatened with extinction by Muslim expansion. In a comparison of Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Benjamin Schonthal identifies similar, and connected, forms of activism by Buddhist monks. Following the defeat of the secular Tamil Tigers,

Buddhist activist monks in Sri Lanka have turned against Muslims as the main Other and chief enemy, emulating the modes of action of their Myanmar peers. Riots in Sri Lanka in 2014 followed a similar pattern to those in Myanmar in 2012 and 2013. Matt Schissler, who spent years hanging out with young people in Yangon, discusses the role of social media (especially Facebook) in the mobilization of anti-Muslim sentiment.

The Rohingya issue is discussed most directly by Alistair D.B. Cook, in a well-informed account of humanitarian aid in Rakhine State after the 2012 pogroms and the sensibilities aid workers have had to navigate in order to bring food and medical aid to the displaced. The Buddhist Rakhine, who constitute the majority in this westernmost state, are themselves one of the poorest and most oppressed ethnic groups of Myanmar and they resent foreign concern with the Rohingya. Cook notes that the tensions between the two communities go back at least to the Second World War, when the Rakhine considered the Japanese as liberators and the Rohingya fought on the side of the British.

In the second book under review here, Francis Wade provides a more extensive treatment of the historical background to conditions in Rakhine State and, more generally, the transformation of Myanmar's Muslim policies since independence. He mentions the Muslim-Buddhist polarization of the Japanese occupation, the short-lived and unsuccessful Mujahid movement in northern Rakhine State that sought to secede from Burma and join East Pakistan at the time of independence, and the Burmese military's first reprisals, burning mosques and villages, which caused tens of thousands Rohingya to flee into East Pakistan in 1948. He describes some of the methods employed by the military regime to police the region, such as releasing Buddhist prisoners from jail and settling them in so-called Na Ta La 'model villages' in northern Rakhine State to dilute the Rohingya population (and similarly among the Christians of Chin State further north), and the network of loyal monks that was built up as agents of the regime.

Two chapters deal with the actual pogroms in Rakhine State of 2012 and the following year in Meikhtila in central Myanmar, where both Buddhists and Muslims are ethnic Burmese (*Bamar*). Wade gives a vivid and detailed account of how the events developed, narrating them in the words of actual witnesses, victims, other local people, and various authorities. Although anti-Muslim sentiment had been brewing for some time at both places, the most aggressive perpetrators of violence appeared to be groups of men brought in from elsewhere. Police stood by without intervening as Muslims were slaughtered—Wade suggests that the police were overpowered and actually afraid of the mobs. Monks were not much in evidence as actual participants in the pogroms but as Wade notes, the militant anti-Muslim discourse of activist monks such

as U Wirathu had prepared Buddhist communities for accepting violence as a necessary means of purging society from a dangerous internal threat.

Like most foreign observers, Wade notes with obvious disappointment the failure of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) to condemn the violence against Muslims and to make any effort to protect them, but he tries to make this attitude intelligible. He hints at forces behind the scene, i.e. the military, which have stimulated the monks' activist Buddhist nationalism and may have orchestrated at least some of the pogroms. The Islamophobic message has been extremely effective: almost all Myanmar Buddhists believe that there is a single, worldwide, monolithic and politically and economically powerful Islamic movement, which is aiming to undermine Buddhism and convert Myanmar by force. NLD leaders appear convinced that they will lose their popular support if they show any sympathy with the plight of Muslims. The monk-led Ma-Ba-Tha movement has shown, Wade notes, 'an alarming ability to intimidate the political leadership in Myanmar' (p. 166). Hatred of Muslims has increased year by year since 2012, and the once detested army appears to be gaining goodwill as the protector of Buddhism. An attack by a group of Rohingya on a police post in October 2016, followed by a call to *jihad*, could only confirm the perception that Islam is the aggressor and legitimate the army's excessive reprisals.

However, Wade ends the book on a hopeful note, describing his encounters with interfaith activists who continue to row against the stream and make efforts to restore trust between the different faith communities. In Meikhtila he visits a monastery whose abbot had in 2013 welcomed Muslims as well as Buddhists fleeing from the violence and had offered them the protection the police could not give. Visiting northern Rakhine State, several years after the 2012 pogroms, he finds that the relations between the communities are not entirely severed and that there are still spaces, however precarious, where their lives intersect.

Crouch and Wade's books avoid taking sides and present richly documented, complex analyses of what is happening in Myanmar. In spite of the horrible conditions afflicting the country's Muslims and the seemingly inexorable trend towards more violence, they also show resilience and survival and the possibility, however unlikely today, of reconciliation.

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