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Growing Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar and Indonesia:
R2P and Promotion of Communal Dialogue

Ethnic tensions in Myanmar and Indonesia have been growing within the last year. The outbreak of communal violence in Meiktila in central Myanmar last month indicates that animosity between Muslim and Buddhist communities is spreading and intensifying since mid-2012. In Indonesia, violence against minority groups by militant Islamists is exacerbated by the lack of resolve on the part of the national government to enforce the rule of law in general and ensuring the protection of rights and freedoms of minorities in particular.

This policy brief examines recent developments in Myanmar and Indonesia in the context of ethnic tensions and how their respective governments have responded so far in averting further communal violence. It argues that growing ethnic tensions in these two countries should serve as a wake-up call for governments in Southeast Asia to take more seriously their primary responsibility in preventing the escalation of communal conflicts that could lead to mass atrocity crimes. Specifically, it underscores the need for adopting an atrocity prevention lens in dealing with ethnic conflicts, which is key towards implementing R2P and in protecting minority groups. It recommends, among other things, the importance of promoting inter-faith dialogue and community-based peacemaking in order to prevent the escalation of further communal violence. A regional response, through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is also necessary, particularly in the case of addressing the Rohingya issue, as it has become a transnational security concern in this part of the world.

What follows is a brief overview of recent ethnic violence in Myanmar and Indonesia.

Communal Violence in Myanmar and Indonesia: Overview

Myanmar

Ethnic violence erupted once again in Myanmar on 20 March between Buddhist and Muslim communities—this time in the central township of Meiktila in Mandalay—which forced the government to declare a state of emergency. The three-day rioting resulted in 42 people dead and some 86 persons injured[1] from the burning of houses and buildings, apart from looting. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on the extent of damage in Meiktila and neighboring towns with satellite images, while the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimates more than 12,000 internally displaced persons after the communal riots (see table below), with some 2,245 houses destroyed.[2] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that signs of ethnic tension were on the rise in other parts of Myanmar, with several isolated acts of arson and arson attempts reported in Yamethin, Okpho, and Gyobingauk. Local media also reported on destruction of religious buildings and houses in Zee Gone township and Minhla even as the government imposed a curfew in six townships of Bago region.[3]

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Meikhtila – according to the Inter Agency Assessment	
Assessment locations	**Displaced Population**
Schools (3)	6,138
Educational college (1)	1,085
Stadium (1)	2,340
Monasteries (17)	3,283
Total	**12,846**

Source: "Myanmar: Inter-communal conflict," Information Bulletin no. 1, 29 March 2013, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

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A number of Buddhist homes were also reportedly set on fire during the ethnic riots, with some Buddhists taking shelter in shrines.[4] At least five mosques were burned in the three-day violence, and most homes and shops owned by Muslims were set ablaze.[5] Muslims, who make up 30 percent of Meiktila's population of 100,000, appeared to have suffered the brunt of the violence.[6] This latest communal violence even stoked residents in Yangon as false rumors circulated about an outbreak of violence in parts of the former capital, forcing shopkeepers in a major market area to close their stores.[7]

Figure 1: Satellite Image dated 13 December 2012 before violence on 26 March 2013.

Figure 2: Satellite Image after violence on 26 March 2013

Source: Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Satellite Images Detail Destruction in Meiktila," 1 April 2013, from http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/01/burma-satellite-images-detail-destruction-meiktila.

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In response to the situation, President Thein Sein warned that his government will not hesitate to use force against "political opportunists and religious extremists" to contain the spread of religious hatred and in order "to protect the lives and safeguard the property of the general public."[8] The warning was apparently aimed at Buddhist extremists, like the Movement 969 group (see box) led by monk Wirathu.[9] So far, some 68 people have been arrested following the violence in Meiktila even as the government promised that perpetrators would face the full extent of the law. A 10-member committee was created by the government and was tasked to ensure effective coordination between security forces and regional governments in responding swiftly to riots, preventing sectarian and religious violence, and exposing main instigators.[10] In the meantime, the government denied allegations that some state agents were involved in the ethnic unrest even as the UN human rights envoy to the country cited the reluctance of security and law enforcers to crackdown on rioters.[11] As this developed, the government continued to face international pressure on the latest ethnic violence. Specifically, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) announced that its members would convene on 14 April to discuss violence against Muslims in Myanmar.[12]   The United States also expressed concern over the latest ethnic violence and announced that it was providing US$100,000 to help the victims of communal riots in central Myanmar.[13] For its part, the Australian government on19 April announced that it will donate US$2.5 million humanitarian assistance to Myanmar aimed at providing emergency relief to displaced peoples in Rakhine and Kachin states.[14]   Thus far, ASEAN has not issued any formal statement on the outbreak of communal riots in Meiktila. On 12 April, the township court of Meiktila sentenced three defendants to a 14-year prison term for sparking the communal riots. They were Muslim gold shop owners who were accused of beating a Buddhist customer in argument.[15]

For her part, Aung Saan Suu Kyi remained careful in her statements on the latest outbreak of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, saying only that it demonstrated "the need to strengthen the rule of law and improve local policing."[16] Civil society groups and human rights advocates within and outside Myanmar have criticized Suu Kyi for not coming out strongly against attacks by Buddhist extremists, especially following violence against Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine state, which erupted in June and October 2012. She argued that she did not want to take sides in the communal conflict and acknowledged that both sides were displeased with her stance.[17] In any case, Suu Kyi recently met with representatives of leading Islamic groups in Myanmar and discussed the ethnic tensions last month.[18] While visiting Tokyo, she also called for a review of Myanmar's controversial 1982 citizenship law, which renders the Muslim Rohingya stateless.[19]

Meanwhile, the plight of Rohingyas from Myanmar remains a major humanitarian problem in Southeast Asia.   Since the beginning of the year, Rohingya refugees have sailed dangerously on boats to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.   Singapore refused entry to these refugees in its shores, while Thailand basically considered them as illegal migrants.   More than 800 Rohingya refugees who arrived mainly through Thailand's southern province of Khuraburi have been detained, some of whom were rescued from human traffickers. Other suspected Rohingya refugees were also detained in Malaysia.[20]   Thus far, the Thai government has allowed humanitarian access to the Rohingyas following negotiations with the UNHCR office in Bangkok.[21] It also called on the Myanmar government and the UN to address the Rohingya refugee crisis and explore ways for their repatriation or resettlement.[22] Even so, there were some allegations made against the Thai military's inhumane treatment of Rohingya refugees, which included the army's participation in human trafficking[23] and the navy's killing of some refugees to prevent them from coming into Thai shores.[24] However, the Thai navy denied such allegation and the army is reportedly conducting an investigation into human trafficking involvement of some border troops.

In January, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa visited Rakhine state to see firsthand the situation in the area following an invitation from the Myanmar government.   He pointed out that there is still a strong sense of distrust between the Muslim Rohingyas and Buddhist Rakhines and that both communities should exert more efforts at reconciliation by rebuilding trust and confidence.[25] Natalegawa also underscored the importance of looking beyond emergency humanitarian response to the situation in Rakhine and the need for creating economic opportunities for both communities in the long run.[26] Apparently, the Myanmar government is receptive to Indonesia's attempts at helping the country in finding a long-term solution to the ethnic conflict in Rakhine, which is

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part of Jakarta's low-key efforts in encouraging democratization in the country.[27] Since the outbreak of violence in Rakhine state in mid-2012, Rohingya refugees have been arriving in Indonesia, which now number at about 600. Some of these refugees were reportedly involved in beating to death eight Buddhist fishermen from Myanmar inside a detention center in Medan in early April.[28] Currently, the government in Jakarta is seeking the help of some Middle Eastern countries to take in Rohingyas seeking asylum given that Indonesia is under no legal obligation to do so as it is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention.[29]

Anti-Muslim Movement 969 in Myanmar

Movement 969 is an anti-Islamic mass-based campaign led by a monk named Wirathu, which was created early this year. The number stands for the Buddhist tradition of Three Jewels or Tiratana, composed of 24 attributes (9 Buddha, 6 Dhamma, 9 Sangha). It is reported that the Movement's number is an attempt to counter the Muslim "786" used in South Asian Muslim tradition, which represents the phrase in Quran, "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful." [51] In a country where numerology holds power, Buddhist extremists interpreted "786" as a Muslim conspiracy to take over the world in the 21st century (the three numbers add up to 21).

Although the movement claims that it aims to "protect race and religion" by "peaceful means," in practice, its supporters organize meetings and religious sermons to build and spread (through CDs, books and leaflets) anti-Muslim sentiments in Myanmar. It also targets Muslim traders by asking Burmese and other ethnic groups in the country not to buy from stores owned by Muslims. Specifically, the group recommends Buddhists buy and sell only in stores with 969 signs or stickers, with some unconfirmed reports that some of its supporters and monks even beating up civilians who continue to patronize Muslim stores, teashops, restaurants, food stalls, and street vendors.[52] Anti-Muslim paraphernalia like stickers, audio and video CDs, and booklets are widely and openly sold in urban centres, including in Yangon (the former capital) where CDs are played in the streets and grocery stores. It is likely that anti-Muslim sentiments will grow further as the movement's supporters and monks travel across the country. The use of social media, such as Facebook, has also contributed to the spread of prejudice against Muslim communities in Myanmar.[53]

Indonesia

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on increasing intolerance among religious groups in Indonesia when it released its annual report early this year. Specifically, HRW noted that violence and discrimination against religious minorities such as the Ahmadiyah, Ba'hai, Christians, and Shia deepened in the country. Citing Indonesia's Setara Institute, the report said that attacks against religious minorities increased from 216 in 2010 to 244 in 2011,[30] and 264 in the 2012.[31] In the first six weeks of 2013 alone, Kontras, a human rights organization in Indonesia, documented a total of 18 incidents of religious-motivated intimidation, discrimination, and violence, such as the arson attack on a church in Makassar.[32] Attacks by Sunni militants against a Shia minority village in Madura island in late 2011 resulted in burning of houses and a religious school (madrasa), and another attack in August 2012 in the same village razed 50 houses, with one person killed and another one injured.[33] In Aceh, some villagers attacked and killed a Muslim teacher and his students accused by mainstream Muslim sect of spreading heretical teachings.[34]

In late March, HRW called on President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to stop local governments from demolishing houses of worship and to "revoke discriminatory regulations on religious structures."[35] This came in the aftermath of local authorities in Bekasi district (east of Jakarta) ordering on 21 March the demolition of a house of worship of the Batak Protestant Christian Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP) Taman Sari as it did not have a building permit. The request for demolition of the structure came from the Islamic People's Forum in Taman Sari (Forum Umat Islam Taman Sari), a militant Islamist organization.[36] There are fears that further demolition of other HKBP churches in Bekasi will be undertaken given the continuing protests from militant Islamist groups and the refusal of the local government to issue construction permits. In fact, the Bekasi district government has also refused to issue a permit to HKBP Filadelfia despite the ruling of the Indonesian Supreme Court that it had met all

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legal requirements for constructing a church.[37] On 1 April, a group of 30 pastors representing beleaguered Christian churches in Bekasi held a meeting with the district head to protest the closure of churches. However, the meeting failed to resolve the issue as the district head insisted that local people in Bekasi rejected the construction of these churches, including the HKBP Filadelfia.[38] Another church in Bogor (GKI Yasmin) has been locked out since 2008 by the municipal government in defiance of two Supreme Court rulings and an order by the Indonesian Ombudsman to allow its congregation back in.[39]

Christian communities Indonesia face extreme difficulties in securing church construction permits, which could take between 10 and 20 years. Some 30 churches in Java and Sumatra, and a mosque in Kupang, were shut down between 2010 and 2012, with some Muslim militants invoking a 2006 decree to justify vandalizing or burning these churches that they considered "illegal." Since 2004, over 430 churches have been attacked, burned, or shut down in the country.[40] Although President Yudhoyono has called for tolerance and respect for minority beliefs and cultures in Indonesia, he has been criticized by HRW for lack of leadership in confronting the issue and for not taking decisive action against acts of violence towards religious minorities by militant groups.[41] Partly this may be due to his efforts in courting support from conservative Islamist elements in order to to maintain his party's majority in parliament. This has to some extent emboldened Islamist extremists in the country to use violence against minorities.[42] Decentralization in the country has also served as the main barrier to the protection of minority rights and freedom, as more power shifted in favor of local administrators since the downfall of Suharto. In its report in 2012, the International Crisis Group found that "local institutions are allowing conflicts to simmer after being empowered by decentralization" even as local officials have ignored with impunity Indonesia's highest court, particularly on the issue of protecting basic rights and freedom of minority groups.[43]

On 9 April, a rally was held in central Jakarta composed of 300 protesters from Christian, Ahmadiyah, and Shia Muslim minority groups that sought government action against religious-motivated violence and discrimination.[44] The *Jakarta Globe*, an English daily, ran an editorial about the rally, pointing out that the country's elected officials "cannot turn a blind eye to these protestors" even as the Indonesia's reputation as a democracy "depend[s] on how the government and the state treat and protect minorities" and their right to "practice their religion unmolested by radical groups."[45]

R2P and Promoting Communal Dialogue

Preventing ethnic tensions from escalating further into widespread communal violence is the primary responsibility of states. So far, the Myanmar government responded decisively in halting the three-day riot in Meiktila and other townships in central Mandalay by declaring a state of emergency and setting up a mechanism for managing potential violence that could ensue later on. However, these are short-term preventive measures that do not address the fundamental issues of ethnic violence in the country, in particular that between Buddhist and Muslim communities. The latest outbreak in Meiktila indicates that, in the aftermath of the violence against the Rohingyas in Rakhine last year, prejudice against Muslims is apparently spreading and could be growing more intensely. Anti-Muslim rhetoric, periodic violence, and organized actions by groups such as the 969 Movement led by Buddhist monks are reportedly on the rise.[46] Ironically, the newfound freedom of expression and greater access to social media has contributed to the spread of inflammatory speech and misinformation by Buddhist extremists against the Muslims.[47]

In Indonesia, local authorities in Muslim-majority districts have trampled upon the rule of law especially where it concerns the protection of basic rights and freedoms of minority groups. The central government appears unwilling to enforce the rule of law as it fears losing the support of conservative Muslim groups. This only contributes to growing resentment of minority communities in the country and may escalate further ethnic tensions in the medium-term. While Indonesia prides itself of being a model of democracy and tolerance for ethnic diversity in Southeast Asia, growing religious tensions in the country over the last five years clearly indicates a serious gap between official pronouncements and practice. While Jakarta is a strong advocate of human rights protection within ASEAN, initiated the creation of an ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR), and has been vocal in calling

on the government of Myanmar to do more in protecting the Rohingyas, it has to start improving its credibility and integrity at home in dealing with its own ethnic conflicts.

Indeed, Indonesia and Myanmar are likely to experience heightened ethnic tensions ahead in the run up to general elections in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Specifically, government agencies and civil society groups in Indonesia have expressed concerns about increased horizontal conflict ahead of legislative and presidential elections next year. No less than the head of the country's national intelligence agency warned that violence will escalate and clashes will get worse, citing in particular the growing social distrust due to social injustices and poor law enforcement.[48] The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta reported last year that the government's slow response to conflicts had undermined state authority, which contributed to people resorting to violence to achieve their ends.[49] As well, the head of the parliamentary commission on foreign affairs, defense, and security acknowledged that the escalation of violence in the country resulted from poor law enforcement, which has forced people to resort acts of violence because the government is perceived to have failed in accommodating their needs.[50]

In Myanmar, heightened ethnic tensions are also likely to ensue unless the government and competing political parties could work towards countering anti-Muslim activities of Buddhist extremists, which may be expected to increase towards the elections in 2015. For good reason, the ruling party and opposition groups would certainly avoid alienating themselves from the support of the Buddhist majority. However, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi is particularly going to be in the spotlight and may face increasing pressures both at home and abroad to come out more strongly against the use of violence on both sides. As Jim Della-Giacoma of the International Crisis Group has put it, it is now "time for political leaders to rise to the challenge of shaping public opinion rather than just following it" and in particular for Ms. Suu Kyi to be "prepared to go further than she has been willing to up till now," which is "to vocally and unambiguously take the side of peace and tolerance."[51]

Clearly, promoting communal or inter-faith dialogue in Indonesia and Myanmar should be a priority in the short- and medium-term. In particular, their respective governments should consider creating mechanisms both at the national and community levels that would focus on building trust and confidence among various ethnic and religious groups. Well-respected religious leaders and peace advocates from faith-based communities should be tapped, together with other civil society groups already engaged in peace-building activities on the ground.

In Myanmar, for example, a number of influential religious leaders from throughout the country met for five days prior to the outbreak of violence in Meiktila. The meeting was organized by the US Institute for Peace and its local partners. They discussed various strategies in inter-faith peacebuilding by studying examples of peace programs led by religious leaders in the Philippines and Sri Lanka. These programs sought to advance inter-communal reconciliation and cooperation, as well as promote peace processes, rule of law, justice and security.[52] These same religious leaders responded directly to the outbreak of violence in Meiktila by engaging with extremists who preached prejudice and violence against Muslim groups, raising money, and donating humanitarian relief supplies to the victims. Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders in Mon State also met and organized themselves to dispel misinformation and rumors that could have sparked tensions between their communities, which might have led to escalation of violence. A monk in Meiktila was even reported to have provided shelter to some Muslims fleeing unrest in his monastery.[53]

Indeed, Indonesia could learn from Myanmar's community-based experience in promoting inter-faith dialogue and active peacemaking at the grassroots level. This could well complement national-level efforts in promoting the rule of law, justice, and protection of rights and freedoms of minority groups. Thus, the promotion of communal dialogue should be an important element in building the capacity of states to prevent ethnic conflicts from escalating into mass atrocity crimes.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Growing ethnic tensions in Myanmar and Indonesia should serve as a wake-up call for governments in Southeast Asia to take more seriously their primary responsibility for preventing the escalation of communal conflicts that could lead to mass atrocity crimes.   Adopting an atrocity prevention lens in dealing with ethnic conflicts in the region is key towards implementing R2P, specifically in protecting minority groups and averting communal violence. A few important steps may be pursued in this regard, to wit:

- States should encourage and support the promotion of inter-faith dialogue and community-based peace building efforts.
- Governments should work in partnership with civil society groups and leaders of religious communities in developing action plans in preventing, and responding to, communal violence.
- National governments should ensure that the rule of law is observed and enforced, especially in protecting the rights and freedom of minority groups.
- States should show resolve in dealing with militant or extremist groups that espouse intolerance, promote prejudice, and use hate speech against other ethnic groups. While freedom of speech is an important pillar in building democratic societies, it should not be abused and misused to promote violence against any ethnic or communal group.
- International assistance is an important pillar of R2P and serious efforts should be undertaken to extend help for capacity building of states to manage ethnic relations, including the promotion of inter-faith or communal dialogue. The recently launched ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) should give priority to undertaking research and training to member states, with participation from civil society groups and donor countries, in peace building and confidence building to promote communal or inter-faith dialogue.
- Australia, Japan, and the United States are important dialogue partners of ASEAN and could provide significant assistance in promoting community-based peacemaking among various ethnic communities. Inter-faith dialogue is a particular area that needs urgent support especially in Indonesia and Myanmar.

Suggested Readings:

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