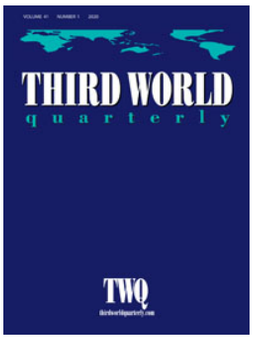

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Countering Buddhist radicalisation: emerging peace movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT
Violence and hate speech endorsed by Buddhist monks against Muslim minorities in South and Southeast Asia have attracted global attention in recent years, and been the focus for a growing academic scholarship. This article turns the attention to peace activists, religious – including Buddhist – leaders and other civil society actors seeking to counter anti-Muslim agitation in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Drawing on theories about social movements and countermovements, it analyses the diverse counter-forces, their activities and the obstacles they face. Doing so, the article contributes to an understanding of peacebuilding in religiously framed conflicts, and of the conditions for peace movements in an age of radicalisation and online activism. Based on interviews with civil society representatives and religious leaders, complemented with secondary sources, the study finds that although the peace movements are weaker and largely reactive to and restrained by the radical Buddhist nationalist movements, they constitute important counter-voices. The article also argues that the struggle between hate speech and counter speech in social media constitutes an important part of the movement–countermovement dynamics. Finally, the article suggests that theories on opposing movements can usefully be developed to enhance our understanding of mobilisation in different arenas in conflict-affected societies.

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Introduction

The crowd of local villagers and activists from around the country who had gathered to hear a panel discussion about religious coexistence fell silent as the monk began to speak. It was the second day of a peace festival in Pyin Oo Lwin in central Myanmar, and the Buddhist priest spoke about the meaning of tolerance, linking it to patience and acceptance. His talk was followed by that of a Muslim preacher, who related Prophet Mohammed and the Koran's teachings about peaceful coexistence. The ensuing vivid discussion, which also involved Christian and Hindu representatives, and the peace messages that the festival participants later wrote on a large board, demonstrated a commitment to inter-religious understanding. Two and a half thousand kilometres away, in a hotel conference room in Galle, southern Sri Lanka, participants in another peace event were deeply engaged in conversations about

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religious radicalisation, local misunderstandings and strategies to fight prejudices. A Colombo-based organisation had brought together local civil society representatives of diverse religious backgrounds. The assembly of saffron-clad monks, bearded or veiled Muslim delegates, young activists and experienced leaders provided another illustration of efforts to work for peace.[1]

These events – and many similar ones – took place amidst an upsurge of hate speech and inter-religious violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Organisations led by Buddhist monks who framed Islam as a key threat against Buddhism had gained influence from 2012, and mosques, Muslim-owned property and individuals had been attacked on numerous occasions. The two countries are ethnically and religiously diverse Buddhist-majority states, where Muslim minorities make up 4–10% of the population. In Myanmar, the targeting of Muslims came in the wake of a shift from military rule to partial democracy, while in Sri Lanka Muslims emerged as a target for Buddhist nationalists after the defeat of a Tamil separatist insurgency.

Scholars have recently put much effort into understanding this upsurge of radical Buddhist nationalism (see Holt 2016; Walton and Hayward 2014; Crouch 2016; Gravers 2015; Schonthal and Walton 2016; Haniffa 2016a; van Klinken and Thazin Aung 2017; Frydenlund 2018). This article turns the focus to the civil society mobilisation that has emerged to counter the messages of hate, protect minority rights and prevent violence.[2] The article draws on social movement theory as it enquires into this countermovement's composition, activities and challenges. By analysing movement–countermovement dynamics, the article contributes to a deepened understanding of peacebuilding in religiously framed conflicts, and of the conditions for peace movements in an age of religious radicalisation and online activism.

Based on interviews with civil society representatives and religious leaders in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, complemented with secondary sources, the study finds that although the peace movements are considerably weaker and largely reactive to and restrained by the radical Buddhist movements, they constitute important counter-voices. The article shows that the opposing movements interact and shape each other in several arenas, of which social media is a particularly important one.

The next section introduces the idea of social movements and countermovements, and relates this to the literature on religious conflict and peacebuilding. Thereafter follows a note on methods and data. The main part of the article analyses the mobilisation of social movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, starting with a description of the radical Buddhist groups. Civil society attempts to counter them are then analysed, drawing attention to the diversity of actors and activities. Thereafter, dynamics between the two movements are discussed, before the paper sheds light on the online encounters between the movements. A concluding section discusses how movement–countermovement dynamics can enhance our understanding of religiously framed conflicts and peacebuilding.

Movements and countermovements in religiously framed conflicts

Over the last few decades, religion has come to play an increasingly central role in conflicts and political violence (Toft et al. 2011; Svensson 2012; Juergensmeyer 2017). The number of armed conflicts over religious issues has increased substantially since the 1970s, and Islamist conflicts make up a large share of religious-issue conflicts (Svensson and Nilsson 2017, 11–12). Islamist actors have since the attacks on the US in 2001 come to be framed as

a major global threat. The process of religious radicalisation, whereby individuals adopt attitudes and behaviours favouring the use of violence to achieve religious objectives, has come into focus within an expanding policy and academic discourse on how to counter violent extremism. The radical Buddhist nationalism which has (re)emerged in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, is an important reminder that any religion – including Buddhism known for its principles of non-violence – can be instrumentalised to justify violence. Conflicts in these two countries have been framed as 'religious' when radical Buddhist groups mobilise around the sense that Buddhism is under threat and in need of protection. Religion is also closely tied to national identity, and the boundary-maintenance between those who belong to the nation – and thereby to the country – and those who do not.

The global upsurge of religious conflicts has triggered a growth in the study and practice of religious peacebuilding. '[T]he use of a religious rationale to justify a conflict creates opportunities for spiritually motivated peacemakers', Johnston and Sampson (1994, 332) note. Much of the religious peacebuilding literature points to this ambivalent role of religion:

> religion is a source not only of intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of nonviolent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies. (Appleby 2001, 821)

A growing number of religious actors have been involved in peacebuilding efforts over the past few decades (Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, 276–77; Omer 2012, 2) and interfaith initiatives have mushroomed. Peacebuilding can draw on religious resources. For instance, it can make use of the authority of religious leaders, the mobilising and legitimising power of holy texts, myths and religious discourse, and the networks and economic assets of religious institutions (see Harpviken and Roislien 2008; Appleby 2008).

In addition to the insights from the literature on religion, conflict and peace, this article uses analytical tools from social movement theory. Social movements are usually understood as sustained collective action carried out with the objective of instigating or resisting social change. A movement can consist of numerous, sometimes uncoordinated, organisations and initiatives mobilising towards the same aim (see Snow et al. 2004). The emergence, strategies and outcomes of social movements have traditionally been analysed primarily in relation to the state towards which they make claims and which restricts or provides opportunities for their mobilisation. Some social movements, however, are greatly influenced by competing movements. A movement may emerge in response to another social movement, and focus not primarily on claims-making towards the state, but on inhibiting the mobilisation of the contesting movement (Dillard 2013, 781).

The rise of a countermovement is often triggered by the success of another movement, real or perceived threats to the interests of a group, and opportunities provided by political allies (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1635). Some social movement researchers have conceived of countermovements as a conservative response to an original, progressive social movement that challenges the status quo. In practice, however, it may be difficult to distinguish between initiating and responding movements and to draw clear lines between progressive and reactionary mobilisation. Instead, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996, 1632) suggest that we talk about 'opposing movements' engaged in what Zald and Useem (1987, 247) has called a 'loosely coupled tango of mobilization and demobilization'. Paying attention to the interaction between opposing movements enables important insights that are not available if we study a single movement. For instance, it reveals how the timing, venues

and tactics of mobilisation and political activism of one movement can be greatly influenced by the strategies, victories and mobilisation of an opposing movement. Analysing local peace endeavours in Myanmar and Sri Lanka as social movements that oppose radical Buddhist nationalist movements – rather than as activities carried out by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society – thus enables us to see inter-movement dynamics, and place the peace activities in a context of broader societal change.

The central role of religion in contemporary societies implies that the competition between social movements often concerns how religion should be interpreted and practiced. Religious peacebuilding has to a large extent focused on interfaith dialogue and cooperation. However, intra-religious struggles are often equally – or even more – significant. Religions are fragmented and internally differentiated; they are polycentric and full of internal struggles over power and interpretation. This means that '[o]ften the first task of religious peacemakers is to challenge or otherwise neutralize their belligerent coreligionists' (Appelby 2008, 126). Frequently, religious peacebuilding presumes 'that violent motifs constitute inauthentic or perverted interpretations of religion. In other words, the task of religious peacebuilding amounts to a recovery of good religion' (Omer 2012, 7). In response to movements which frame religion as threatened and in need of protection, even with violence, opposing movements may hence also use religious frames and resources.

The peace and interfaith movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka need to be understood in relation to the Buddhist nationalist movements they strive to counter, as well as in relation to the state (cf. Zald and Useem 1987). There is also a global context which is important for their formation and functioning. An increased interest among Western powers, particularly the United States, to support interfaith peacebuilding (see Hayward 2012) has made economic and human resources available and encouraged mobilisation. However, the influx of donor funding has also been criticised for contributing to the creation of 'artificial' civil societies and a 'peacebuilding industry' focused more on its own perpetuation than on peace, and being accountable to outsiders rather than to local populations (see Orjuela 2008; Matelski 2016; Bächtold 2015).

Methods and data

While the literature on the recent upsurge of Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka has grown, little is written about civil society actors countering them. I have hence used secondary sources mainly when discussing the Buddhist nationalist groups. For the peace movements, I make use of media reports, but mainly rely on interviews with religious leaders, peace activists and NGO representatives. Interviews were conducted in Sri Lanka in January 2016 and in Myanmar in December 2016 and January 2017. In both cases, field work was carried out shortly after decisive elections had brought to power leaders less inclined towards Buddhist majoritarianism and anti-Muslim propaganda, but when Buddhist nationalist organisations were still active and hate speech flourished. Interviewees – in total 41 – were selected among individuals and organisations that were as central as possible in the interfaith and peace community. They included religious figures as well as peace NGOs, Muslim rights groups and activists working with social media. In Myanmar, interviews were carried out in and around Mandalay, Meiktila, Pyin Oo Lwin and Yangon (interviews 21–41), while in Sri Lanka they were conducted in and around Colombo, Galle and Kandy (interviews 1–20).[3] Although interviews were not carried out in some of the most violence-affected areas

such as Rakhine State in Myanmar and Aluthgama in Sri Lanka, several interviewees were engaged in or knowledgeable of peace work also in these areas. The interviews were held in English when possible and in local languages with the use of an interpreter when necessary (10 interviews). Some observations of peace activities were also carried out. Although the limitations in time and space do not allow for an all-embracing picture of the researched movements, the study points to some broad trends that subsequent research can further enquire into.

Buddhist nationalism in contemporary Myanmar and Sri Lanka

In Myanmar, the charismatic Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu has become a forthright front figure of the new Buddhist nationalist movement. The movement, which also includes numerous other respected monks, rallies around the need to protect Buddhism from the threat posed by Islam in general and Muslim minority groups in Myanmar in particular. Ma Ba Tha emerged as the main Buddhist nationalist organisation in the country in 2014, promoting laws for the protection of race and religion. The rise of radical Buddhist organisations – most prominently 969 and Ma Ba Tha – coincided with a series of violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012–2014, which killed hundreds and left thousands homeless in Rakhine state and other parts of the country (ICG 2013). Simultaneously in Sri Lanka, an upsurge of Buddhist nationalism was also spearheaded by radical Buddhist monks. Several new organisations – most importantly Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) – appeared in 2012–2014, a few years after the end of a 26-year-long civil war. These groups policed against defamatory use of Buddhist texts and images, levelled accusations against and attacked Muslim businesses, fought against halal certification and agitated for the preservation of sites of Buddhist archeological value (Silva 2016; Haniffa 2016a).

Several parallels could be seen between the two countries. Not only did the Buddhist nationalist movements develop during the same period and share an anti-Muslim rhetoric, they also stressed the importance of strengthening Buddhists economically in the face of Muslim business competition and pushed for legal changes to protect Buddhists against minority religions. In 2014, Wirathu visited Sri Lanka on the invitation of BBS (see Schontal and Walton 2016; Gravers 2015; Holt 2016).

Both movements worry that the Buddhist population is disadvantaged in relation to Muslims, who presumably reproduce at a higher rate, convert Buddhist women through mixed marriages, and dominate economically. Their anti-Muslim sentiments also draw strength from the global discourse of fear of militant Islamist groups such as Islamic State (IS).

Their anti-Muslim stance resonates with the views of large parts of the Buddhist populations in the two countries, as well as among Buddhist clergy (Schissler, Walton, and Thi 2017; Herath 2019). In Myanmar, 'the Muslim issue' has colonial origins, as (mainly Muslim) migrants who moved there from India during British rule were framed as an Indian 'other' (Crouch 2016). In Sri Lanka, the 1915 riots against Muslims, triggered by a conflict about a religious procession, make up a first historical example of the framing of and attacks on Muslims as a threatening 'other' (Holt 2016).

In both countries, Buddhism has been closely connected to state power. Buddhist nationalism has sometimes been propagated by the rulers and other times by the opposition and civil society. The Buddhist nationalist movements are hence not new social movements; the links between preservation of the nation and the protection of Buddhism trace back

to the 1940s (van Klinken and Thazin Aung 2017; Nanayakkara 2016). In Sri Lanka, the well-organised and -resourced BBS builds on experiences of earlier Buddhist nationalist political parties and lobby organisations. In Myanmar, authoritarian rule restricted civil society mobilisation, and the more loosely organised and grassroots based 969 and Ma Ba Tha are newer phenomena that emerged during the (quasi)democratisation process (Schonthal and Walton 2016; van Klinken and Thazin Aung 2017).

The relations between the Buddhist nationalist groups and the state have been ambivalent. On the one hand, the symbols and names of 969 and Ma Ba Tha have been proscribed by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee in Myanmar, and Wirathu was imprisoned for his divisive speeches in 2003 and banned from speaking publicly in 2017. On the other hand, prominent Ma Ba Tha monks campaigned on the side of the party of the former military regime in the 2015 elections. There is a widespread belief that the military supports or gives free reign to the group, hoping that religious divisions will destabilise the country and invite a more prominent role for the military (interviews, 2017; van Klinken and Thazin Aung 2017). The struggle against authoritarian rule – in which Buddhist monks played a significant role in 1988 and 2007 – involved people from all religious backgrounds. As there is no longer an obvious shared enemy, divisions, which can be exploited, have emerged (interviews, 2017).

In Sri Lanka, the war between the government and Tamil separatists had polarised society along ethnic lines. After the defeat of the separatists in 2009, the Muslims – who had mostly collaborated with the Sinhalese-dominated government – were framed as a new adversary. This enemy image served to strengthen the political leaders who had built their power on the fight against terrorism; BBS in Sri Lanka was believed to have close links to the semi-authoritarian post-war government run by Mahinda Rajapaksa (see Silva 2016, 123).

Although the nationalist movements spearheaded by Ma Ba Tha and BBS had historical precursors, two things were new. First, they appeared at a time when a global war on terror and anti-Muslim discourse was an important reference point. Second, the developments in communication technology made social media a new, effective vehicle for outreach and mobilisation (Schissler 2016; Ivarsson Holgersson 2018).

The nationalist organisations are made up of both Buddhist monks and lay persons, who engage in large-scale rallies and campaigns to boycott Muslim products and businesses, but also education and social welfare. Ma Ba Tha, for instance, has a strong local presence and appeal through its Dhamma schools (Buddhist 'Sunday schools') and the opportunities it offers women (McKey and Win 2018). Local conflicts around archeological sites, the placement of Buddha statues and the celebration of Muslim festivals have led to religiously framed confrontations. Although the violence against Muslims cannot be indisputably linked to organisations like Ma Ba Tha and BBS, the incidents have followed similar patterns. The triggering event has often been skirmishes between individuals, which have led to mob violence targeting Muslim property and individuals, against which the police have failed to act. Often, rumors on social media and speeches by key figures in the Buddhist organisations have spread hatred and legitimised violence (Silva 2016; Haniffa 2016b; ICG 2013).

Descriptions of 'religious conflict' tend to create impressions of homogeneous groups, ignoring considerable internal complexity. What all Muslim groups in the two countries share, though, is their minority status and a history of avoidance of confrontation with the Buddhist majority. The level of marginalisation of Muslims differs significantly between and

within the countries. The Rohingya in Myanmar are widely considered to be aliens from Bangladesh. They lack citizenship and thereby basic rights to health care, education and freedom of movement, and have been targeted by extensive violence. Other Muslim groups are officially recognised minorities, but face problems with access to identity cards, government jobs and resources, as well as widely held prejudices (ICG 2013). The escalation of violence in Rakhine 2016–2017 made Muslims all over the country targets of hate speech. Sri Lanka has a long history of peaceful coexistence between Buddhists and Muslims, which was dramatically broken with the Easter attacks in April 2019 carried out by local Muslims with links to IS. Long before that, Muslims had been accused of wielding undue political and economic power, and were the target of violent attacks in 2014 and 2018. Violent Islamist groups are a recent phenomenon in both countries. In Myanmar, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army launched attacks in 2016 and 2017, triggering the devastating military campaign against Rohingya (ICG 2016). The 2019 Easter attacks were the first instance of global Islamist violence in Sri Lanka, and prompted further hate speech, boycotts of Muslim business and violence against Muslims and their property.

A countermovement for inter-religious coexistence

Peace movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka

The strength of the Buddhist nationalist organisations and their spokespersons, and the backing they purportedly enjoyed from political and military leaders and the general population, deterred challenges to them. Despite this, a number of initiatives for peace and inter-religious coexistence make up what can be understood as a social movement opposing the Buddhist nationalist groups and anti-Muslim violence. This movement intersects with, or makes up a continuation of, other movements. In Myanmar, many peace and interfaith activists have a background in the democracy movement. In Sri Lanka, leftist and liberal movements – inside and outside the political system – have challenged Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism since independence. Some civil society actors who mobilised for interethnic understanding and a negotiated solution to the armed conflict have now become central in countering the Buddhist nationalists. The availability of foreign aid has been of some importance for the formation and maintenance of organisations working for peace. In Sri Lanka, economic liberalisation in the 1970s brought an influx of foreign funding, which in the 1990s increasingly was made available to civil society groups promoting peace and human rights (Orjuela 2008). The end of the war in 2009 and the subsequent authoritarian turn led some donors to withdraw, leaving fewer resources to the peace NGOs. Myanmar, with its military regime, was internationally isolated and largely lacked space for civil society mobilisation. The cyclone Nagis, however, which killed 138,000 people in 2008, brought about an opening for international aid and the creation of a local NGO sector. Steps towards democratisation, culminating in the 2015 elections which brought National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi to power, generated a massive interest among foreign donors to contribute to democratisation and peace, partly through civil society support (Matelski 2016). Interfaith activities were a prioritised area for some Western donors. There are overlaps between the movement against Buddhist nationalism and initiatives for peace related to the peace process between the government and ethnic rebel groups in Myanmar, and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Diverse actors and activities

The countermovement is made up of a diverse set of actors. Buddhist monks and representatives from the minority religions involve against radical Buddhist nationalism in their capacity as religious leaders. NGOs carry out interfaith and peace activities enabled by donor funds, while numerous laypersons and groups engage for peace and tolerance on a voluntary basis. Five (overlapping) areas of activities are discussed here:

Interfaith dialogue is by far the most common initiative. Bringing together religious leaders – as in the examples in the beginning of the article – enables dialogue, while symbolically showing that coexistence is possible. Learning about 'the other' is an important objective of such activities, which involve not only religious leaders but also laypeople. Examples include youth camps, visits to places of worship or homes of 'the other', joint development projects and celebrations of religious festivals.

The feasibility of carrying out interfaith activities has varied. Particularly in Myanmar, religious leaders and laypeople have been reluctant to take part, as they risk being framed as unpatriotic (interviews 34; 37). In Sri Lanka in the years after the war ended, inter-religious initiatives were less politically sensitive than peace activities (interview 2). Due to sensitivity, some organisations have chosen to first engage with one religious group, for instance through training in conflict transformation, and only later organise inter-religious activities. A representative of an organisation working in Rakhine described the delicate process of creating space for dialogue:

> We try to involve those who are willing to engage with the other community; those who have some influence in their own community – moderates on both sides. We bring them together, Rakhine [Buddhists] and [Rohingya] Muslims, [and take them] to Yangon for a couple of days or more. We […] encourage them to think about small-scale common problems where we can find a solution, rather than citizenship and big issues that local communities have no control over. […] We have seen some really interesting attitude changes on both sides, and also strong relationships being built. (interview 39)

While some have questioned how sustainable the relations built are (interview 28), the dialogue meetings can be understood as attempts to challenge the prejudices propagated by the Buddhist nationalists. There are also a few examples of how religious leaders or lay activists have engaged with nationalist monks, thereby contributing to changing their views (interviews 17; 36).

Another set of activities focus on *minority rights and protection*. An interviewee in Myanmar said that joining a civil society organisation enabled Muslims to raise their concerns: 'only in the CSO [civil society organisation] field I can share my experience. […] It is the only way to make a voice to the government' (interview 24). Several organisations documented human rights abuses against Muslims and shared their reports with government and international actors. Legal aid to victims of discrimination, threats or violence has also been organised by civil society groups, while some have taken legal action against perpetrators of hate speech and attacks (interviews 6; 8). The statement by 180 civil society organisations criticising the Ma Ba Tha-promoted race and religion bills in Myanmar in 2015 was an example of coordinated efforts against legislation that the organisations believed would incite hatred and cause discrimination (*Radio Free Asia* 2015).

Civil society actors have also made direct *interventions to handle or prevent conflict*. For example, local community monitors report risks of conflict escalation (interview 39). Most

common were local peace committees, formed by religious leaders from the area or established on the initiative of an outside organisation. In Mandalay and Meiktila, Myanmar, civil society and political figures locally formed peacekeeping committees after incidents of violence, to respond to rumors and prevent new violence. Often, prominent Buddhist monks are called on to mediate in conflicts. People may also turn to the monasteries for protection or conflict resolution when the police fail to act. One monk in Meiktila is known to have saved hundreds of Muslims during violence which killed over 40 persons there in 2013, while monks in Sri Lanka mobilised people to protect mosques against attacks during the upsurge of violence in 2018 (Watson and Maung 2015; BBC 2018; interviews 19; 20; 40). In some cases, mediation takes place through established organisations such as the Congress of Religions in Sri Lanka, while other times it is done through informal networks locally (interviews 2; 7; 11; 22; Haniffa 2016b). The Muslim Council of Sri Lanka has frequently written public letters, but also communicated directly, to urge the government and police to curtail anti-Muslim agitation and violence (eg Colombo Telegraph 2016; interviews 6; 8).

Spreading information and challenging the divisive discourse is done in preaching by religious leaders, and through art exhibitions, publications and training (interviews 9; 15; 21; 24; 25; 33). For instance, in Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena distributed a children's book with stories from different religions, while the International Center for Ethnic Studies produced films and cartoon exhibitions on inter-religious coexistence (interviews 9; 15; observations 2016). Much of the mobilisation and hate speech by Buddhist nationalist groups is spread through social media, as will be further discussed below. Some Buddhist monks have countered this propaganda with their own posts and videos about Buddhism as tolerant and non-violent (interviews 18; 37). Other groups monitor hate speech or strategically use counter-messaging against it (interviews 2; 30; 39).

A limited number of *public protests* against hatred and for coexistence have taken place. In Sri Lanka in April 2013, Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena organised a vigil. Rally for Unity arranged demonstrations drawing about 500 participants in Colombo, followed by smaller rallies elsewhere (interview 10; Wickrematunge 2013). In Yangon, a few young activists staged a rally in April 2016, protesting against extreme nationalism and discrimination against religious minorities (Naing Soe 2016). In Myanmar in May 2019, after nationalist Buddhist monks had forced Muslim prayer sites to close, interfaith activists launched the White Roses Campaign. As a sign of solidarity, people from all religions and in different parts of the country gathered to hand white roses to Muslims as they came out from their Mosques (Zaw 2019). These are rare exceptions, however, to the general lack of public demonstrations against hateful Buddhist nationalism.

Movement–countermovement dynamics

The movements opposing Buddhist nationalist agitation in Myanmar and Sri Lanka hence consist of a broad range of actors, who share concerns about violence, hate speech and Buddhist–Muslim divides. It is not a clear case of one original and one reactive movement, as both movements have historical roots. Some peace and human rights groups which had been formed in response to the civil war(s) redirected their attention to the Buddhist–Muslim tensions, while new organisations and constellations of involved persons emerged in response to the Buddhist nationalist mobilisation. The peace movement was hence triggered by the success of the Buddhist nationalist mobilisation, and the felt need to counteract its

polarising and violent impact on society. It was not obvious, however, that the counter-mobilisation would take the form of a movement for peace and inter-religious understanding. The Buddhist nationalist upsurge also risked triggering a radical Muslim response. Interviewees said: 'Sadly the counter movement will also be extremist' (interview 1); 'Because of the current discrimination faced by the Muslim community they also become more extreme, more radicalized' (interview 22). Avoiding such a spiral of radicalisation was a main task for the peace and interfaith activists (interviews 3; 4; 8; 10; 32). An interviewee in Myanmar feared that if the Muslims confronted the Buddhist nationalists they would face problems. 'In our [Muslim] community, many young people want to [mobilise] against, [but] we try to put it down' (interview 24). 'It is very dangerous to openly attack Sinhala Buddhist sentiments […] They [Muslim and Christian religious leaders] do not make their voice heard; rather, they try to talk to mainstream Buddhist monks [and] political leaders. They know that it may create a negative effect if they become outspoken' (interview 4; see also Bauman & Ponniah 2017, 74–75). The Buddhist nationalist mobilisation hence gave rise to intrareligious discussions about the response (cf. Appelby 2008, 126).

The peace movement was perceived as much weaker than the Buddhist nationalist movement and largely reactive. A peace activist in Myanmar said:

> The Ma Ba Tha group and extremist groups are quite well organised. When they want to do something, they can bring everyone to do it. They have strategy, commitment. Since 2012–13 they [have] gradually organised across the country. Now they even have the law, the race and religion law. It is a success story, and they even have their own high school now. For us, where are we? We do this and that; it is quite a reactive activity. They are quite pro-active, [and carry out] lots of attacks on us. (interview 33)

In Sri Lanka, a scholar and activist commented: 'In terms of … their ability to mobilise public support, the nationalist civil society is stronger. They have the upper hand. But the strength of the non-nationalist civil society is that they have a strong activist base' (interview 4). Some talked about the counter-mobilisation as attempts to 'fight back' (interview 8). An organiser of the Rally for Unity said:

> Five of us got together and said: If they [BBS] can put a stage in each place in the country, and on stage talk about hate, get the loudspeaker permit [and] police protection for these meetings, could we not do the same and talk about unity and understanding? (interview 10)

Here we see how the counter-mobilisation mimics the movement it wishes to oppose. Rally for Unity also appropriated BBS's symbols and slogans:

> [In our] graphics, we used the same colours as BBS. If they say 'Let's safeguard the country from falling to pieces', we put the same slogan, changing it to: 'Let's be united and go further together. Let's not make this country into pieces'. So we would hijack their slogan. You are small but going one-on-one [with them]. (interview 10)

The peace movement was not only triggered but also severely constrained by the Buddhist nationalist groups. Many Buddhist monks avoided interfaith activities due to fear. 'They [monks] don't like to do something against them [Ma Ba Tha and other groups] because they are the majority. We are a minority. So they hesitate to organise with the minority' (interview 34; see also Walton and Hayward 2014, 30–34). Peace and interfaith activists reported a wide range of threats and dangers. In Myanmar, monks faced pressure within the monastic community. 'It is sensitive issues. If a monk says something about peace, others

will misunderstand him' (interview 36). Monks participating in interfaith activities could face accusations of breaking rules, a decline in donations and even death threats (interview 22). Arrests, surveillance, obstruction of inter-religious festivals and attacks on social media also restricted the space for peace activism. Most interviewees, in both countries, had faced problems due to their activism.

To be able to continue their work, activists used various strategies. One Muslim interviewee used another name and worked with non-Muslim resource persons when organising workshops, to avoid threats from Ma Ba Tha (interview 24). Keeping a low profile and building trust with the local population were other tactics (interviews 7; 9; 24): 'It was our strategy not to talk against anything. Positive messaging. It was obvious that we were targeting them [BBS] but we did not directly say so' (interview 10).

Activists described a situation where few persons would openly speak out against the Buddhist nationalist groups: 'They [Muslims] are just quiet, they cannot do anything. If they do something against society or the people, the man [U Wirathu] will attack and the authority also. They cannot do anything, they cannot demonstrate' (interview 27, Myanmar); 'There are some counter-voices in the sangha [Buddhist clergy], but they are not seen as credible. They are being projected as supported by the West' (interview 1, Sri Lanka). Another reason that monks did not speak out against anti-Muslim agitation was that although they did not approve of the tactics of BBS and Ma Ba Tha, many saw Muslims as a problem (interview 18; Herath 2019).

Some, however, publicly challenged the nationalists and their use of Buddhism to justify hatred and violence. 'Buddha spoke about kindness to all beings', a monk who had opposed the anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka in 2018 said: 'A monk cannot advocate killing, assaulting, scolding, burning property and so on. Creating hatred is a powerful sin. […] We are here to get rid of suffering of ourselves and suffering of others. So, a monk cannot spread hatred' (interview 20).

The movement–countermovement dynamics hence involved contestations about how religion should be interpreted and practiced.

From this study emerges a picture of a peace movement which is very much shaped and restrained by the Buddhist nationalist movement. In the 'loosely coupled tango' that Zald and Useem talk about, the nationalists lead and the peace activists follow. The peace movement made some attempts to, like the Buddhist nationalists, organise public protests. But they mainly concentrated on counteracting them through public opinion formation, advocacy and direct interventions in conflicts.

As pointed out by social movement scholars, opposing movements also need to be understood in relation to the state (Zald and Useem 1987). Regime shifts in Myanmar in 2016 and Sri Lanka in 2015 meant that the governments to a larger extent endorsed the message of the peace movement, and condemned the actions of the Buddhist nationalists. Incidents of violence against Muslims initially declined, but increased again with the military campaign against Rohingya in Myanmar 2016–2017 and communal violence in Sri Lanka in 2018. The establishment of an Office for National Unity and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka in 2015 enabled collaboration between the government and civil society organisations on interfaith issues (interview 12). Inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation had also been part of government discourse earlier, with the organisation of peace camps by the President's office under Rajapaksa's rule, and the forming of local interfaith groups throughout Myanmar in 2015 (interview 35). In October 2017, NLD organised large

interfaith rallies in Yangon and other cities in Myanmar, with religious leaders advocating for inter-religious tolerance in the context of rising tensions in Rakhine. The message was not only directed to people in Myanmar, but also served to show the international community that heavily criticised state chancellor Aun San Su Kyi did care about inter-religious peace (see Mann 2017). On the one hand, leading government figures in both countries officially endorsed inter-religious tolerance; on the other, hate speech by Buddhist nationalist groups continued with impunity.

The peace movement also navigated what some would call the 'peacebuilding industry', as Western governments, international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations provided resources for work on peace and inter-religious coexistence. Donor funds were a mixed blessing, though. International donors could provide certain protection and enable more systematic work and capacity building. However, critics would accuse foreign-funded organisations of being bought by the West, spending lavishly, or doing peace work only to earn money (interviews 1; 16; 22). While some peace and interfaith organisations became attractive and established partners to donors, others avoided donor money to protect their credibility, or lacked capacity to receive donor funds. Aid recipients sometimes found themselves negotiating between donor pressure to challenge the Buddhist nationalists and their own assessments of what was feasible and desirable to do.

Online movements and countermovements

> There is […] in Myanmar a very significant crisis on three different fronts now – west, north, east – and I think that the digital part of all this cannot be understated. It is not like these things are happening in Rakhine or Kachin or Shan State and stay there; they are playing out on everyone's computer right now. (interview 38)

A crucial arena for movement and countermovement activity and confrontation is social media. Myanmar has rapidly moved from isolation to extensive connectivity, where almost 90% of the population has access to the internet, many on cheap smart phones.[4] In Sri Lanka also, internet use has quickly increased. In both contexts, Facebook is the dominant application and a main source of news. Hate speech has become widespread, and several of the incidents of Buddhist–Muslim violence were preceded by online rumors. One activist in Myanmar worried that 'people's adoption of internet has been very, very fast, whereas people's awareness and capacity [to handle it] is not that great' (interview 30). News reports about atrocities carried out by Islamists – such as beheadings by IS – often go viral, as do fake stories of attacks in Myanmar. One example is an animated photo of an attack on the famous Buddhist Shwedagon temple in Yangon allegedly by *kala*, ie Muslims/foreigners (interview 38). The violence in Rakhine further intensified the social media activity that portrays Muslims as threatening. In Sri Lanka, hate speech in social media ranges from the spread of bogus figures of population growth showing that by year 2050 there will be more Muslims than Buddhists in Sri Lanka (interview 1), to explicit calls for violence. That the government shut down social media to curb anti-Muslim violence in March 2018 testifies to its importance.

Both Ma Ba Tha and BBS are highly skilled in the use of social media (cf. Schissler 2016; Samarasinge and Hattotuwa 2014). An interviewee in Myanmar said:

> They definitely are taking the social media as a tool […] All those anti-Muslim [stories] were there before ICT [Information and Communication Technology] … these stories become much more compelling and convincing with images and videos. Internet becomes a medium of spreading that to the whole country. (interview 30)

In Sri Lanka, one interviewee commented: 'The hate at the time of the BBS against Muslims on the pro-BBS sites was by order of magnitude unimaginably greater than the worst hate of the Tamils at the height of the war' (interview 2).

Facebook has been slow to respond to the hate speech. Many posts do not violate Facebook rules. The burning Shwedagon, for instance, did not explicitly call for violence against Muslims, and news reports about Islamist terror are not in themselves defamatory, but contribute to an understanding of Muslims as dangerous and foreign (interviews 22; 38). Even content that breaks the rules stay up a long time. Facebook has also lacked competence to monitor hate speech in Sinhala and Burmese (interview 2; Stecklov 2018).

A crucial task for those wishing to counter the radial Buddhist groups is hence to engage with social media. *Panzagar* (Flower Speech) is one example of a campaign where activists developed online stickers urging people to 'end hate speech with flower speech'. From its release in February 2015 to May 2016, they reached 2.7 million downloads.[5] The My Friend Campaign launched in 2015 encouraged people of different religious or ethnic backgrounds to post selfies of their friendship (*The Observers* 2015). In Sri Lanka, the Not in Our Name campaign was created by activists and media persons in April 2012 following monk-led mob violence against a mosque. Numerous other initiatives followed, such as Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena and Sri Lanka Unites. Counter messaging against the Sinha-Le (Lion's blood) sticker fad of 2016 played on the word by saying that everyone has Manusat-Le (human blood), or made fun of the nationalists as having Bota-Le or Athul-Le (alcohol blood or jail blood) (interview 6). Peace activists hence used the same technologies as the Buddhist nationalist movement in their attempts to oppose it.

Civil society organisations also educated people on news literacy, the use of social media to combat hatred, and Facebook reporting mechanisms. Activists did counter-messaging and created social media content promoting harmony, but often not in a structured way (interview 30). 'Those who create awesome content which go viral are not the peacebuilding people', one interviewee in Myanmar commented (interview 38). An activist in Sri Lanka said: 'Civil society does not know what to do with social media. NGOs have no strategy, no vision, no human resources, no idea' (interview 2).

Online just as offline, the Buddhist nationalist movement was perceived to be stronger than the mainly reactive movement for religious coexistence.

> There are some monks and religious leaders who are writing against Ma Ba Tha, some who write about the real teachings of Buddhism, and some about the importance of human rights […]. Compared with the hate movement it is very small. Partly because systematic hate [messages on] fake accounts are very active; it is difficult to fight back (interview 22).

Also online, there was a risk of spiraling radicalisation: 'If the Sinhalese nationalists put a photo that was derogative, Muslims would also attack, and do something similar' (interview 37).

Buddhist radical groups actively used social media to fight back against the peace movement. Religious leaders and activists who openly promoted inter-religious coexistence frequently became targets of smear campaigns and mudslinging. A monk in Sri Lanka said:

> My name is prominent and famous. When I talked with Maulavis [Muslim religious scholars/leaders] to settle the halal problem … after that in every social media a picture of me was published where they had put the Muslim cap on me (interview 18).

There are many parallels between the offline and online interactions between the Buddhist nationalist movement and its countermovement. Social media has become a crucial arena for struggles around religion and national belonging – an arena where new young actors engage while traditional civil society actors struggle to keep up to date. Studying movement and countermovement dynamics in this arena is essential to understand contemporary peace work.

Conclusions

This article complements the growing scholarship on the recent upsurge of radical Buddhist nationalist movements and anti-Muslim agitation in South and Southeast Asia by offering an analysis of the civil society forces which strive to counter them. It shows how new nationalist movements and recent episodes of violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka have prompted the mobilisation of counterforces, consisting of a diverse set of actors. Religious leaders play an important role in the countermovement, particularly monks who evoke the Buddhist values of nonviolence and tolerance. Representatives from all faiths engage in initiatives promoting understanding between religious groups and involve themselves in mediation and prevention of hate speech and violence. Other activists focus on minority rights and protection, advocacy or legal assistance.

Together, these actors can be conceived of as a peace movement which through its diverse activities strives towards the shared goal of inter-religious coexistence and violence prevention. This movement is, to a large extent, shaped by the stronger Buddhist nationalist movement. The study has taken inspiration from, and contributes to, the theoretical discussion about movement–countermovement dynamics. It confirms the importance of understanding movements not in isolation, but as formed by inter-movement interaction. In the cases under study, the Buddhist nationalist movement tends to set the agenda, while the opposing peace movement finds creative ways of challenging it, but also has to navigate attacks by it.

The study provides support for the argument that social movement theory needs to liberate itself from a strict interpretation of movements and countermovements as formed in sequence, and of the first as change-oriented and the latter as reactionary. The recent upsurge of radical Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka can be understood as a response to societal change related to globalisation, democratisation and war-to-peace transition. Buddhist nationalists strive to preserve a status quo of Buddhist preeminence and devotion which is under threat. The peace movement, for its part, wants to preserve another status quo – a society characterised by peaceful coexistence between religious groups. Both have mobilised recently, but build on preexisting movements.

The article further shows that interaction between opposing movements takes place – and needs to be studied – in different arenas. The two movements struggle for influence and promote their messages among the general public, within the Buddhist sangha, in the policy arena, in the judicial sphere and through the production of cultural expressions. In these different arenas, representatives of the movements both mimic and attack each other. An arena of particular importance is social media, where messages are amplified and

mobilisation enabled. In a pre-social media era, social movement literature noted that (traditional) mass media encourages the emergence of countermovements through its logic of presenting claims and counter-claims (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1642). Social media, on the other hand, enables fast dissemination of hateful messages, and creates filter bubbles where opposing views and source criticism are averted. Mobilising for peace on social media thus requires new skills often not held by peace activists. Further research could usefully refine the theories of movement–countermovement dynamics by identifying and studying the interplay in different arenas, including in the quickly changing social media sphere.

Including Myanmar and Sri Lanka in the same study has enabled us to uncover similarities in the patterns of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation. We have noted the similar timing and messages of the Buddhist nationalist movements in the two countries. At the same time, the conditions for social movement mobilisation and the role of Buddhism differ greatly. In Myanmar, Buddhist monks are placed outside of politics and are not allowed to vote, but have still played a pivotal role in both challenging and legitimising the military regime. At the same time, authoritarian rule restricted the development of a free civil society, and gave rise to courageous mobilisation for democracy. The hesitant democratisation has triggered conflicts, but also provided some limited space for a new peace movement to mobilise. Civil society in Sri Lanka has a longer history. There, controversies over the role of Buddhist monks in society have circled around their involvement in political parties. In their efforts to counter contemporary Buddhist radicalisation, peace activists and religious leaders hence draw on different traditions and experiences, while navigating counter-attacks and the lack of democratic freedom. Additional research is needed to more fully understand how these contextual differences condition mobilisation for peace.

Literature on religious conflicts and peacebuilding has often taken its point of departure in the two faces of religion, highlighting how religious figures, resources and discourses can justify violence – or motivate peace work. This study of Myanmar and Sri Lanka sheds light on the contested interpretations of Buddhism and its role in society. While the Buddhist nationalist groups emphasise the need to protect Buddhism, peace activists use the legitimacy of religious leaders, Buddhist ideas of non-violence and ethics shared across religious divides to counter them. The ambivalent role of religion in peace and conflict hence finds an expression in and becomes a mobilising force for opposing movements concerned with shaping the future of religiously diverse, Buddhist-majority countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

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Notes

1. Observations by the author, Pyin Oo Lwin and Galle, 2016.
2. Such counter-forces have so far received scant scholarly attention (however, see Schonthal and Walton 2016, 86, 102–104; Walton and Hayward 2014, 30–34; Bauman and Ponniah 2017, 74–75).
3. Two interviews with individuals who actively opposed anti-Muslim violence in 2018 in central Sri Lanka conducted by a colleague, Dhammika Herath, in early 2019, were also included in this study.
4. https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/85-percent-myanmar-internet-use-smartphones-survey/, accessed April 2, 2019.
5. https://www.facebook.com/supportflowerspeech/, accessed March 7, 2018.

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