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Securitization of Muslims in Myanmar's Early Transition (2010–15)

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ABSTRACT

Between 2010 and 2015, as Myanmar transitioned from authoritarian rule to a more liberal and democratic state, its Muslim population increasingly faced hate speech and violence. This article goes beyond analyses that regard the growing anti-Muslim sentiment as a consequence of a liberalized media environment, enabling people to voice long-standing grievances and prejudice. Rather, the notion of a “Muslim threat” to Myanmar’s Buddhist population is approached as the outcome of a dynamic process of securitization in which an alliance of political and religious elites was forged whose discourse changed the rules of the political field, forcing the reform-oriented opposition into strategic silence. It is argued that in the early period of liberalization, anti-Muslim frames were normalized and thus shaped the securitization of Muslims.

Introduction

For over fifty years, Myanmar was an outcast on the global stage and recently has become so once more, as per the February 2021 military coup. Half a decade earlier, in 1962, a previous military coup ushered in a long period of authoritarian rule, characterized by widespread human rights violations, economic hardship, and internal conflicts with minority armed groups. Many hoped that one-sided military rule was slowly coming to an end once the country embarked upon a process of gradual liberalization and democratization from 2011 onwards. The country’s leadership suddenly carried out one reform after another, established a bicameral parliament and multi-party political system, allowed considerable media liberalization, and released large numbers of political prisoners.¹ Optimism reached its peak in 2015 when the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won the national elections by a landslide, taking office under leadership of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Yet, in 2019, that same Suu Kyi stood before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, defending her nation against allegations of genocide against the Rohingya.² It is a striking image, that of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate in court, and it appears to stand in stark contrast to the initial jubilation with which the NLD’s (partial) ascent to power was greeted. But the mass forced displacement, killings and sexual abuse committed by Myanmar’s army against the Rohingya—a Muslim minority in Myanmar’s western Rakhine State—in August 2017 that were the cause of these proceedings were not a

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stand-alone incident.³ The clearance operations against the Rohingya were the culmination of a longer process of increased anti-Muslim sentiment and purposeful “threat creation” by a number of actors, which ran strikingly parallel to the political process of liberalization. Between 2012 and 2014, incidents of anti-Muslim mob violence—targeting not only Rohingya, but all Muslims regardless of their ethnicity—took place across Myanmar;⁴ in 2014 and 2015, the government enacted discriminatory, anti-Muslim legislation;⁵ and in 2015, for the first time in Myanmar’s history since independence, not one single Muslim was elected to parliament.⁶

The timing of anti-Muslim practices was far from coincidental, as the political transition provided both incentives and opportunities to different actors to use rhetoric that depicted Muslims as an existential threat to Myanmar and its majority Buddhist population. While many analyses and reports have tended to focus on the large-scale violence against Rohingya in 2017 as a manifestation of longer-term tensions of a distinctly anti-Rohingya nature, this paper zooms in on the general anti-Muslim developments in the period between 2010 and 2015. From 2010 onwards, several state and non-state actors began to depict Myanmar’s Muslims as a religious minority bent on achieving a hostile Islamic takeover of Myanmar, paving the way for anti-Muslim legislation and violence over the course of 2014–15.⁷ Moreover, we argue that the developments in this period of Myanmar’s initial phase of political liberalization are key to understanding both the occurrence of the 2017 violence by the army, as well as the considerable support this appears to have enjoyed within Myanmar.⁸ Between 2010 and 2015 these anti-Muslim frames were normalized and thus shaped the securitization of Muslims.

The notion that democratization may encourage the scapegoating of minorities, with elites playing important roles in stirring up tensions, and so contribute to conflict is not new.⁹ Yet, a fine-grained analysis of Myanmar’s early transition can enhance our understanding of why and how a new normative “field” emerged in which Muslims were effectively securitized. From our analysis it becomes evident that securitization efforts are part and parcel of the struggles in and about the new political field in Myanmar in its early transition period. It shows how securitization efforts take place at different levels and give rise to “ad hoc” securitizing coalitions promoting an “anti-Muslim” discourse.

Remarkable in this context is that no actor, not even Suu Kyi’s popular NLD, managed to effectively desecuritize Muslims. Rather, the NLD appears to have succumbed to the dominant view of Muslims as a threat when it chose not to actively contradict such discourse. It even admitted to not fielding a single Muslim candidate for the 2015 elections for fear of public condemnation by anti-Muslim, Buddhist-nationalist organizations.¹⁰ At the same time, the securitization efforts could not stop the electoral success of a moderate and reform-oriented elite like the NLD, even when it did little to counter the securitizing discourse and rather chose for a strategy of silence.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion about elites, securitization, and political transition. The next section examines the political transition in Myanmar and how it affected existing power distributions, as well as the prominent place of Buddhism and the Buddhist monkhood (the *Sangha*) in Myanmar society. We move on with an analysis of the securitization process between 2010 and 2015, distinguishing roughly between three periods: initial securitization of Rohingya at the regional level (2010–12),

nationwide securitization of Muslims (2012–14), and heightened securitization and the establishment of an ad hoc securitizing coalition in the lead-up to new national elections (2014–15). In the final section, we critically reflect on and draw several conclusions about securitization processes in contexts of states in transition.

Elites, liberalization and securitization

Our analysis of the role of different elites in the securitization of Muslims during Myanmar's political transition draws on three complementary strands of literature. Firstly, the literature on early democratization, which has paid ample attention to the ways in which changes in the political context can provide space to elites and “uncivil” agendas. Secondly, securitization theory, which looks at the processes in which threats are constructed, support is mobilized for particular threat definitions, and measures are defined to counter these. Thirdly, Wimmer's¹¹ work on ethnic boundary strategies, which relates securitization dynamics (a particular type of strategy) to the field in which these dynamics unfold. Together, these approaches can help us to understand the rather unpredictable and contradictory dynamics of securitization (as well as the limits thereof) in the case of Myanmar, which involved multiple securitizing actors with different and overlapping interests, and which took place across different spheres (political and religious) and levels (regional and national).

There is a rich body of literature in which the connections between political transitions and conflict are theorized, recognizing that democratization can have a “dark side”¹² and lead to new violence in contexts where the conditions for democracy are weak or even absent.¹³ Democratization may encourage political entrepreneurs to politicize ethnic or religious fault lines as a means to rapidly enhance and mobilize their support base.¹⁴ The most important mechanism at play is that, faced with the potential loss of influence, elites may frame themselves as “defender of the nation” or of a particular religious or ethnic group, and by doing so create a community of interest that unites them and “their constituency,” drawing attention away from matters like social injustices.¹⁵ This may eventually lead to electoral victory of parties that resist reforms, or even to a relapse of war led by elites who see their power position threatened.¹⁶ In many cases, the elites resisting reform will refer to threats to broader (ethnic, religious) groups, while the exact framing of such “appeals to the masses” will depend on an actor's social position, the nature of the “masses” in question, and which claims may appear more credible to the latter.¹⁷ Indeed, the ways in which political liberalization plays out and the backlashes it provokes, are always context specific.

Over the past decades a rich body of literature has emerged about the concept and theory of securitization, and different approaches to study the process have been proposed.¹⁸ Balzacq et al.¹⁹ argue that securitization theory seeks to explain “the politics through which (1) the security character of public problems is established, (2) the social commitments resulting from the collective acceptance that a phenomenon is a threat are fixed and (3) the possibility of a particular policy is created.”²⁰ Thus, securitization is both about the process in which (new) security threats are formulated, the efforts to win the public consent of relevant “audiences,” and the tailormade “extraordinary measures” to counter the threats. Claims about (new) security threats are not necessarily

accepted and can be highly contested and the legitimacy of the claim that something is threatening depends, among other things, on the capacity of securitizing actors to create a “collectively accepted reality.”²¹

Much of the literature on securitization processes focuses on the ways in which different elites discursively construct threats to security, trying to find support for these threats of an “audience,” which then legitimizes particular measures (often extraordinary ones) to deal with the threats.²² It is generally accepted that some actors are better placed to make convincing security claims than others. Despite the recognition by early securitization scholars, such as Buzan et al.,²³ that non-state actors also have a capacity to securitize, there tends to be a “state bias” in much of the literature.²⁴ Many scholars predominantly study political and state security figures as securitizing actors, arguing that their perceived expertise and access to information and resources put them in a strong position to convince relevant groups of a threat’s existence.²⁵ However, Karyotis and Patrikios²⁶ demonstrate the immense, but often overlooked securitizing capacity of the Greek Orthodox Church elite in Greece, while Pratt and Rezk²⁷ analyze how Egyptian civil society initiated securitization processes. These authors demonstrate the need for more attention for the cultural context in which securitization occurs, which may influence a (non-state) actor’s securitizing potential. Moreover, there has been very limited attention for the possible co-existence of *multiple* securitizing actors, using similar securitizing speech.²⁸

Securitization literature has been criticized for its “Eurocentrism,” but can also usefully be applied to non-Western, non-democratic contexts.²⁹ In a similar vein, only scant attention has been paid to the particular dynamics of securitization in contexts of political liberalization, where there is growing space for contestation between different actors. In order to grasp the changes in the political context, the suggestion to draw in field theory³⁰ is analytically useful. Wimmer³¹ argues that ethnic boundaries come into being through negotiations between different actors whose boundary-drawing strategies—the creation of an us-them divide between (newly) created or politicized population groups—are determined by the characteristics of the social field in which they operate. Three characteristics of the social field determine actors’ boundary-drawing strategies: what boundaries are drawn and where. The field’s “institutional framework” determines what kind of boundary—ethnic, religious—can be drawn in a meaningful way, while the field’s “power distributions” dictate the level of (ethnic, religious) distinction that best serves an actor’s interests, for instance supporting an actor’s claim to political power or moral authority. Finally, networks of “political alliances” will establish the precise location of the boundary, and who will be included and excluded from the actor’s own category.³² The social field makes some boundaries or, in this case religious differentiation, more appealing than others. Wimmer argues that changes in any of the field’s characteristics may lead to boundary-drawing processes, and it can therefore be expected that in periods of political liberalization, these processes and strategies become more important.

In the case of Myanmar, we will see that the political transition had a profound influence on the strategies of different social and political groups. This cannot come as a surprise, since political liberalization is characterized by volatility, the emergence of new actors, and changing power relations. As mentioned above, the political changes may

offer considerable incentives to actors to engage in threat discourse, potentially resulting in complex and dynamic securitization processes. In the next sections, we first discuss some of the characteristics of the changing political field, subsequently explaining how and why the efforts of different elites to securitize Muslims did have strong social and political resonance but were not able to delegitimize the reform-oriented political party, the NLD, who won two consecutive elections.

Military and Buddhist power in Myanmar

This section examines the changes in the political context in the period 2010–15, which provide insight into the interests and securitizing potential of several securitizing actors, in particular the military and Buddhist organizations that we discuss in the subsequent section.

Around 2010, Myanmar's military regime—in power since 1962—took its first major public steps toward liberalization and democratization. In rapid succession, the army, or Tatmadaw as it is commonly known, created a new constitution³³ and organized nominally free elections in which it participated through its civil proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP); most USDP members being former senior military officials and military-friendly businessmen.³⁴ The regime introduced an electoral, multi-party political system with national and regional parliaments, granted a range of civil rights to Myanmar's population, and allowed a degree of operational freedom for opposition parties and civil society that had been previously unimaginable.³⁵ The result was a semi-democracy: Many military-era repressive laws were still in place, and some new laws moreover had questionable clauses. The 2011 Peaceful Assembly Law, for instance, requires that organizers of nonviolent demonstrations obtain permission from the authorities beforehand, a requirement that has been put to active use by the government to prevent public protests around contentious issues.³⁶

Most notable with regard to the tenuous state of Myanmar's democracy between 2010 and 2015 was the continued power position of its military. When Suu Kyi's NLD boycotted the 2010 elections,³⁷ the USDP easily obtained a large victory in what the International Crisis Group³⁸ described as a “deeply flawed” electoral race. In practice, this entailed that the Tatmadaw could continue its rule, albeit indirectly, through a USDP-led government. Even before the elections, the military had already made sure that its power position would be safeguarded by the new constitution: The Tatmadaw was given the right to allocate 25% of all parliamentary seats to military officials, to unilaterally declare a state of emergency, and to appoint the ministers of Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs.³⁹ The latter put the police, Border Guard Police, and regular army under Tatmadaw command, thereby bringing the state's security apparatus firmly under military control. A further sign of the military's privileged position was its continued protected status as an autonomous institution exempt from civilian oversight.⁴⁰

The reconfigured political landscape thus continued to heavily favor the old ruling elite. Nonetheless, Myanmar's population did gain more freedom and rights, and civic space expanded. Some of these more positive characteristics of the transition—most notably increased freedom of expression, electoral competition, and a liberalized media environment—have enabled anti-Muslim developments, as a range of new actors and

media were provided a public platform on which to propagate their explicitly anti-Muslim messages.⁴¹ Yet, analyses that put the visibility and growth of hostility toward Muslims down merely as a consequence of Myanmar's transition, arguing that after decades of military suppression a newly liberalized media environment suddenly provided a channel to voice longstanding historical grievances, are too simplistic.⁴² They do not capture the complex and dynamic nature of the securitization process, which was shaped to a large extent by elite interaction. Nor do such analyses satisfactorily explain why the notion of a Muslim threat became so all-encompassing in Myanmar society and politics, drawing in otherwise tolerant and non-regime actors like the NLD.

While the changes brought on by the political transition tell us something about how anti-Muslim sentiment could spread as fast and wide as it did, they tell us little about the agents responsible, what drove them toward securitization, and the complexity of the overall process. Before taking this up in a following section, we first turn to the demographic and religious aspects of Myanmar society. These are crucial to later grasp the social standing of various securitizing actors and how this enhanced their securitizing capacity.

Myanmar is divided into seven regions, where the—largely Buddhist—Bamar make up the majority, and seven states, dominated by a particular national minority.⁴³ Since independence, the states in Myanmar's borderlands in particular have been the site of numerous civil wars between the army, part of Myanmar's Bamar elite, and minority-based armed groups seeking to resist Bamar dominance.⁴⁴ Despite a host of minorities of various religions—the authorities recognize 135 distinct ethnic groups—close to 90% of Myanmar's population identifies as Buddhist.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, the military regime turned to Buddhism as a nation-building tool during the 1990s—when it both faced several insurgencies and rising popular discontent—in an attempt to create a sense of shared nationhood among an ethnically heterogeneous population.⁴⁶ This nation-building process included the reimagining of Myanmar's past as a Buddhist past and the rearticulation of national identity in Buddhist religious terms.⁴⁷

The significance attached to Buddhism in Myanmar society is also apparent in the power and popularity of the Buddhist monkhood, the *Sangha*. People generally look up to the monks and regard them as being more knowledgeable and having more moral authority than laypeople.⁴⁸ The authority monks derive from being part of the nation's popular and beloved *Sangha* lends a credibility and power to their messaging that is difficult for non-religious actors, including politicians, to contradict or question in public.⁴⁹ In the following section, it is shown how this facilitated the emergence of nationalist monks as the most powerful driving force behind the securitization of Myanmar's Muslim population.

It is moreover important to note that people in Myanmar practice Theravada Buddhism: A brand of Buddhism that sees the health of the religion and the state as intertwined, with some followers considering violent (state) interventions a justified means to protect the religion when it is perceived to be threatened.⁵⁰ Not coincidentally, Theravada Buddhism is also practiced in Sri Lanka and Thailand, two other countries where threats to Buddhism have been invoked to legitimize conflict.⁵¹

The growing overlap between Myanmar national and Buddhist religious identity came at the detriment of Myanmar's non-Buddhist communities. This notion that “to

be Burmese is to be Buddhist” hints at the (symbolic) exclusion from nationhood of other, non-Buddhist people. Frequent civil wars with armed groups claiming to represent, for instance, the Christian Karen and Kachin has further contributed to general mistrust toward non-Buddhist peoples.⁵² The regime portrayed Muslims in particular as “foreign” to the state.⁵³ This has been most apparent with regard to the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Rakhine State. As of old, Rohingya are strongly associated with British colonial rule and immigration from Bangladesh and are thought of as potential secessionists disloyal to the Myanmar state.⁵⁴ Being on opposing sides during the Second World War resulted in further historical animosity between both Rohingya and Rakhine, and Rohingya and Bamar.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, neither Rohingya nor Muslims from other ethnic groups have been associated with particular wealth or influence, and have not fought significant insurgencies or civil wars, in notable contrast to many other minorities in Myanmar. Making up approximately 5% of Myanmar’s total population,⁵⁶ it appears far from evident that Rohingya, or Muslims generally, would widely come to be perceived as the most pressing threat to the state. Yet, between 2010 and 2015 this is precisely what occurred.

The securitization of Muslims in Myanmar’s early transition

This section analyzes three phases in the anti-Muslim developments between 2010 and 2015. While it risks simplifying the events that took place, the division in three phases is analytically useful to better understand the different levels at which securitization took place, each with different actors, motivations, and securitizing capacity, as well as the actors’ impact on the securitization process overall. We argue that what began as a regionally isolated conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya in Rakhine State (phase 1, 2010–12) was used by nationalist monks to feed into a narrative of a national Muslim threat as a means to reaffirm the monks’ relevance in a changing society (phase 2, 2012–14). When the military regime saw itself challenged by the popular NLD in the lead up to new elections, it too saw strategic use in the securitization of Muslims and began to cooperate with the religious elite in a mutually beneficial “securitizing coalition” (phase 3, 2014–15).

Phase 1: regional securitization of Rohingya (2010–12)

The first site where systematic anti-Muslim discourse widely took hold is Rakhine State, where a Rakhine ethnonationalist party emerged as a political contender at the regional level, mobilizing around the notion of a Rohingya threat. As part of the political transition, there is a trend toward (partial) decentralization of governance, with the state establishing 14 state and regional assemblies in addition to the national Parliament.⁵⁷ This created new political “arenas” at Myanmar’s subnational level, offering political opportunities to regional actors.⁵⁸ In 2010, ethnonationalists from the mostly Buddhist Rakhine majority in Rakhine State founded the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) with the explicit objective to advance Rakhine autonomy and ethnic identity.⁵⁹ Threatening this objective or even the preservation of Rakhine ethnic identity and influence, so argues the RNDP, are both (Bamar-majority) state dominion and the presence of a large Rohingya Muslim minority.⁶⁰ Referred to as “Bengalis” to emphasize

their supposed foreignness,⁶¹ the RNDP put forward a narrative of Rohingya plotting a hostile takeover of the region through illegal immigration, high birth rates and terrorist (jihadist) violence, to eventually outnumber the Rakhine.⁶²

The RNDP used the newly created political fora at the regional level to use rallies and political pamphlets to call for radical measures to manage the threat posed by the Rohingya to the Rakhine majority, such as the establishment of Rakhine militias and the Rohingya's enforced removal from Rakhine State.⁶³ A typical example is a public statement, dated July 2012 and attributed to the RNDP's chairman, where he stated that the "Bengali population causes threats for the whole Arakan people and other ethnic groups."⁶⁴ The chairman then called for a "complete solution," including the "transfer of non-Burmese Bengali nationals to third countries."⁶⁵

Various research reports moreover implicate the RNDP in a particularly violent episode of anti-Rohingya violence in October 2012: The RNDP selected and armed local Rakhine, and with buses brought them to villages they were tasked to attack.⁶⁶ Smith⁶⁷ estimates that approximately 125,000 Rohingya got displaced as a result. The October campaign constituted the second wave of intercommunal violence in Rakhine State since the transition. Earlier that year in June, hostilities occurred between Rohingya and Rakhine after a Buddhist woman was raped and left for dead by three Muslim men. There is less evidence to indicate the RNDP was actively involved in planning or coordinating the June violence.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, along with local monks, it certainly nourished the public anger that followed the rape incident.

Several points are important to stress here. Firstly, while there is a longer history of Rakhine-Rohingya animosity and institutionalized Rohingya discrimination,⁶⁹ what set the 2012 violence apart was both that it followed generally harmonious times of co-existence in Rakhine State, and that between June and October animosity took on a less specifically anti-Rohingya and a more generally anti-Muslim character.⁷⁰ This is evident, for instance, in the fact that in October, Kaman Muslims became the object of targeting too. Secondly, regional and national media very selectively reported on the violence by predominantly depicting Buddhists as helpless victims and Rohingya as savage perpetrators.⁷¹ Arguably, this made the Rakhine population more susceptible to the RNDP's threat discourse as it appeared corroborated by media reports.

While it is impossible to determine exact cause and effect, the RNDP clearly did well out of its vehemently anti-Rohingya stance: In 2010, the RNDP became the largest party in Rakhine State, the only party to win at the subnational level instead of the USDP. In 2015, the RNDP again won in Rakhine State and became the third party nationally.⁷² Its anti-Rohingya discourse, in combination with selective media coverage, moreover came to influence actors at the national level, who used it to create a sense of an imminent Muslim threat to Myanmar's majority Buddhist population.

Phase 2: national securitization of Muslims (2012–14)

Around 2012, increased freedom of organization had resulted in the entrance of numerous nonpolitical organizations into Myanmar's public sphere at the national level. Among those were several Buddhist-nationalist organizations that framed what until then was largely perceived as a regional security issue—the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict—as a manifestation of a larger, national Muslim threat to Myanmar. Two Buddhist-

nationalist organizations in particular, the 969 Movement and MaBaTha, managed to become highly influential socio-political actors in Myanmar's transition period, contributing to the development of widespread anti-Muslim sentiment.⁷³

Following the violence in Rakhine State, a group of Buddhist monks united in the 969 Movement, declaring that Myanmar's pure but vulnerable Buddhist race and religion require protection against Islam.⁷⁴ It claimed the existence of a global Muslim conspiracy to subjugate Myanmar, pointing to Rakhine State as the starting point of this process of enforced "Islamization."⁷⁵ While the group attracted a considerable following and its anti-Muslim message—spread through pamphlets, DVDs and social media—found traction among many Buddhist Burmese, it remained a loosely organized, decentralized movement with little political influence.⁷⁶ In 2013, the organization was banned for its unauthorized use of Buddhist symbols.⁷⁷

Following the 969 Movement's demise, MaBaTha⁷⁸ was founded in 2014, with similar arguments and objectives. It was, however, a more formal and centralized organization with an effective nationally organized communication apparatus that enabled the organization to spread its anti-Muslim discourse throughout Myanmar through its own newspapers, public rallies, popular social media accounts, education, and by broadcasting its sermons on national television.⁷⁹ The organization even organized media training sessions on how to spread the MaBaTha message.⁸⁰ MaBaTha quickly became a major socio-political force and the most influential propagator of anti-Muslim discourse in transitional Myanmar.⁸¹

Its main message was that Islam and its followers represent a threatening, inherently violent and colonizing religion: The organization proclaimed that Muslims take over Buddhist countries by seducing and forcefully converting Buddhist women, through high birth rates, illegal immigration and jihadism.⁸² To lend credibility to their message, MaBaTha monks pointed to historically Buddhist countries that have become Islamic, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia.⁸³ In effect, the Buddhist elite created an image of Muslims as what Schissler et al.⁸⁴ call a "fearsome Other": Someone who is considered threatening because of belonging to a certain category of people and, crucially, who may therefore always be subjected to violence out of self-defense.

This image is lent additional force by monks showing pictures of brutal acts of violence by foreign terrorist groups like Islamic State.⁸⁵ Describing anti-Muslim developments in India, Appadurai⁸⁶ calls forth the image of the "Trojan horse" to describe this linking of small national Muslim minorities to a threatening, larger Islamic movement: "global Islamic interests and forces [...] were seen as the Trojans hidden within the relatively small number of Muslims within [domestic] communities." In making this connection, MaBaTha effectively depicted Myanmar's Muslims not as a small, harmless minority but as part of a global "terrifying majority, the Muslim world itself."⁸⁷ Simultaneously, MaBaTha monks depicted the few more Muslim-sympathetic civil society organizations or activists as "traitors,"⁸⁸ creating a hostile environment that complicated desecuritization efforts.

For many Buddhists, MaBaTha's securitizing discourse certainly legitimized violence against Muslims. Not coincidentally do several authors suspect that inflammatory public speeches by MaBaTha and 969 monks contributed directly to the outbreak of anti-Muslim mob violence in towns across Myanmar.⁸⁹ At the same time, the monks argued

that the state should be the guardian of the Buddhist faith, and therefore called for state-sponsored anti-Muslim measures. This becomes relevant in the third phase of securitization. First, we turn to the Buddhist elite's interest in engaging in anti-Muslim securitizing discourse, and to the factors that contributed to their success.

The overwhelming attention for Buddhist issues in Myanmar's transition came as a surprise to many. Walton⁹⁰ notes that prior to the 2010 elections, hardly any reference was made to the Buddhist faith in campaigning or political rhetoric. So, what prompted a significant segment of the *Sangha* to mobilize around the notion of a Muslim threat? According to Bertrand and Pelletier,⁹¹ Buddhist monks used the localized Rakhine State conflict to create a larger anti-Muslim movement that would enhance their visibility and social credentials during a time where increasing liberalization threatened the religious elite's monopoly on civil society. "[F]or the first time in many decades, monks saw their status as primary societal leaders challenged" by the emergence of unions, opposition parties, student associations, and many others.⁹² The transition changed the existing power balance to the potential detriment of Myanmar's religious elite. Individual Buddhist monks and monasteries depend on private donations for their subsistence, and thus rely on visibility and social legitimacy. Through the scapegoating of Muslims, monks could position themselves as guardians of a threatened religion, while also creating a sense of urgency to their appeals, enhancing their visibility and social relevance in times of changing "power distributions." This put them in a more favorable position to obtain funds relative to other monks.⁹³

The Buddhist religious elite is moreover well-positioned to make effective securitizing claims. Among Myanmar's Buddhist population, monks enjoy great respect and authority, and by framing a security issue in religious terms, they may easily make compelling political arguments.⁹⁴ In Myanmar society, it is not considered appropriate for a layperson, including politicians, to publicly contradict or question the Buddhist elite.⁹⁵ This shows how an actor's social standing and identity can greatly affect a securitizing actor's claim-making capacity. With regard to Myanmar specifically, the monks' standing and influence moreover go a long way in explaining how the Muslim threat narrative could become such a dominant, difficult to negotiate frame.

Phase 3: a "securitizing coalition" of convenience (2014–15)

As MaBaTha's message gained popularity, new elections were rapidly approaching. In this period, the interests of MaBaTha and the military regime and its USDP proxy party aligned. The result was a "securitizing coalition" that put forward a threat narrative that pervaded Myanmar politics and society and which implemented anti-Muslim (security) measures.

The interests of both actors converged around 2014. By this time, Myanmar society and politics had changed considerably. Society had become characterized by a distinctly anti-Muslim climate: Hate speech was common, MaBaTha had risen to great prominence, and outbursts of anti-Muslim mob violence took place across Myanmar between 2012 and 2014. Cheesman⁹⁶ described the anti-Muslim atmosphere saliently: "Despite the disagreements of journalists, civil society activists, former army officers and insurgents on pretty much every other politically salient topic," their views of Muslims as threats and Buddhists as victims "tended to converge."

Politics had changed with the entrance of Suu Kyi's highly popular NLD.⁹⁷ In 2012, for instance, the NLD participated in by-elections⁹⁸ where it won 43 out of 45 seats: the USDP obtained merely one seat.⁹⁹ We concur with the International Crisis Group¹⁰⁰ and Min Zin¹⁰¹ that this resounding victory must have alarmed the old regime, particularly so with new national elections scheduled for 2015, which could further alter the power distribution. This combination of widespread anti-Muslim sentiment and the NLD's demonstrated and anticipated political success drove the military toward securitization of Muslims as well and, crucially, toward seeking collaboration with MaBaTha.

Interestingly, the turn to securitization represented a considerable change in the regime's dealing with Muslims. As recent as 2010 and 2012, the USDP had issued temporary registration cards—known as “white cards”—to about 700,000 Rohingya, allowing them to vote. Various analysts have recognized this as a strategic move: Many Rohingya registered as USDP members, providing the regime with additional votes.¹⁰² By 2015, however, the USDP's election campaign revolved primarily around the notion of a Muslim and Rohingya threat to Myanmar.¹⁰³ Key to this change is that the increased social polarization provided the USDP with an incentive for securitization: the regime could depict the NLD as too “Muslim friendly” and not serving the interests of Myanmar's Buddhist population, and itself as “defender of the nation,” thereby also justifying the military's continued power in a period of democratization.¹⁰⁴

Yet, after years of corruption and repression, many in Myanmar considered the Tatmadaw, and by extension the USDP, as “morally bankrupt.”¹⁰⁵ It lacked credibility and popularity and was much in need of new sources of legitimacy. This is where the regime's interests—although of a different nature—converged with those of MaBaTha. While the regime's social standing, or “social identity,”¹⁰⁶ was weak, MaBaTha's political influence was limited: It was a highly popular organization, but it lacked the means to implement its anti-Muslim political agenda as monks in Myanmar are barred from political participation.¹⁰⁷ Thus a “securitizing coalition” came into existence, where two (or more) securitizing actors put forward a similar threat narrative but play distinct, albeit complementary, roles in the securitization process: The monks, highly popular, were used by the regime to enhance its poor image, whereas MaBaTha used the regime to realize its political agenda.

The ensuing situation was one of mutual support.¹⁰⁸ The regime provided MaBaTha free reign to organize rallies and disseminate hate speech—in notable contrast to other civil society organizations that lacked such operational freedom¹⁰⁹—and made donations to the organization and its affiliated monks.¹¹⁰ The USDP moreover implemented a series of political measures that were advocated by MaBaTha: In 2015, the USDP withdrew the “white cards” that had enabled many Rohingya to vote, it took away Rohingya's rights to travel and work outside certain designated areas in Rakhine State, and disbarred many Muslims from other ethnic groups from standing for election.¹¹¹ Most striking was the regime's implementation of the MaBaTha-drafted “Protection of Race and Religion” legislative package: Four laws that were clearly focused on restricting Muslim or Rohingya rights.¹¹² While MaBaTha initially campaigned for these laws with little success, in 2015 the USDP suddenly allowed the bills to be turned into legislation.¹¹³ Among other things, they allowed the authorities to enforce birth regulations in “resource-scarce” areas, which MaBaTha itself has indicated was aimed at halting the

spread of “Bengalis” in Rakhine State, and to prohibit religious conversion without the authorities’ permission.¹¹⁴

In return, MaBaTha monks publicly praised the regime, handing out USDP pamphlets at rallies, showing USDP content on their social media, and encouraging people to forget about the regime’s past behavior. Some monks even explicitly urged people not to vote for the NLD, which they depicted as too “Muslim friendly” to serve the interests of Myanmar’s Buddhist population.¹¹⁵

The aftermath

Between 2010 and 2015, the securitization of Muslims occurred to great effect: Anti-Muslim sentiment became widespread and anti-Muslim legislation was enacted. Moreover, the NLD failed to produce a counter narrative. In fact, the NLD did not field a single Muslim candidate for the 2015 elections so as not to antagonize the influential MaBaTha, as has been admitted by party officials.¹¹⁶ This combination of “strategic silence and adaptation” is indicative of the considerable extent to which the rules of the field had changed over the course of a few years. This is not to suggest that the NLD supported these rules, but rather that they chose not to challenge the dominant anti-Muslim discourse for fear of harming its precarious position in Myanmar politics and becoming sidelined itself.

Interestingly, the securitization of Muslims did not translate into regime popularity. While various analysts had expected increased anti-Muslim sentiment to correlate with decreased NLD popularity,¹¹⁷ this was not corroborated by the outcome of the 2015 elections. The NLD won a resounding victory, leaving the USDP largely decimated, and went on to replace the USDP as the new governing party. The RNDP (by then renamed the ANP) did win victories in Rakhine State, possibly more indicative of regional dynamics than of a national trend. Likely, the NLD’s victory indicated that Myanmar’s population was more concerned with overall political change than with religious affairs alone; it did not speak to a more Muslim-sympathetic atmosphere.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

This paper discussed the securitization of Muslims in Myanmar’s early (and failed) political transition between 2010 and 2015. A number of lessons about securitization processes in a period of fragile political liberalization can be drawn from the case of Myanmar. These primarily relate to the potential appeal of securitizing strategies to incumbent and new political and religious actors in times of political transition, the complex and dynamic nature of securitization processes where multiple actors (including non-state actors) are involved, the limited capacity to counter securitization discourses by reform-oriented parties, and the lack of impact of securitization on electoral outcomes.

While securitization theory has predominantly been applied to the analysis of events in liberal democracies, the case of Myanmar demonstrates that the framework can usefully be applied to other political contexts as well. In fact, the volatile nature of states in transition—where power hierarchies are put under pressure as old elites are challenged by new actors—leads both to threats and opportunities for various actors, which make

engaging in securitization strategies more likely. Liberalization offered political entrepreneurs and non-state actors the space and means to mobilize around securitizing discourse. More importantly, the political transition initiated around 2010 changed Myanmar's "institutional framework," putting pressure on the existing "power distributions."¹¹⁹ While the ruling military regime itself set the democratization and liberalization processes in motion from a comfortable position, it nonetheless stood to lose at least some of its influence in the governance domain, particularly as the NLD proved immensely popular. The regime then sought to re-affirm its relevance by engaging in the securitization of Muslims. By feeding this notion of an existential Muslim threat to Myanmar's Buddhist population, the regime sought to justify its continued power position as "defender of the nation" and win the support of Myanmar's religious Buddhist elite.

The religious elite had a similar incentive in engaging in securitizing moves: As Myanmar's civic space expanded and opened up to new types of civil society actors,¹²⁰ the Buddhist monkhood was faced with a potential loss of relevance. For them too, depicting a Muslim threat to the population strengthened their newly contested position as they could position themselves as "guardians of the faith." In so doing, religion became a key component in Myanmar's securitization process: Not only was the religious elite the most influential securitizing actor, it also colored the threat narrative, increasingly depicting Islam and Buddhism as irreconcilable belief systems. While securitization theorists are predominantly focused on state actors, religion and the role of religious actors remain understudied.¹²¹ Our analysis demonstrates the need to consider a state's cultural context more carefully, as religion and its status in Myanmar society greatly influenced the securitization process.

Second, the case of Myanmar demonstrates that securitization processes are more complex, multi-layered, and dynamic than often portrayed. Two characteristics of the securitization process in Myanmar are particularly indicative of this complexity. On the one hand, the case shows that securitization may take place across different levels: Actions by the RNDP on the regional level (Rakhine State) spilled over onto the national level, where the Rakhine-Rohingya violence in 2012 was used by the Buddhist elite to convey the notion of a more general "Muslim threat" to Myanmar's entire Buddhist population.

What is more, the process involved multiple securitizing actors, with their own (converging) interests. The RNDP, 969 Movement, MaBaTha and the old regime influenced their respective behavior and securitizing moves. They "fed off" each other's threat discourse, for instance when MaBaTha used the RNDP's "Rohingya threat" to support its own notion of a "Muslim threat." This also explains why the Muslim-Buddhist dichotomy gained such force; it was a beneficial boundary to all actors involved. This is what Wimmer¹²² gets at when he describes that "consensus will emerge where institutional structures, power differences, and networks of alliance create a zone of mutually beneficial exchange [...], a sphere of overlapping interests around which strategies of boundary making can converge." In Myanmar, this went as far as a mutually beneficial ad hoc "securitizing coalition" between the regime and MaBaTha: Just before new elections, the monks sought to enhance the regime's legitimacy among Myanmar's majority Buddhist population in return for the implementation of a series of anti-Muslim measures. Such

convergence is also evident in the behavior of a party like the RNDP: While a strongly ethno-nationalist party that came into being to protect the interests of the Rakhine against two perceived threats—the Rohingya and the widely considered too dominant Bamar majority—the RNDP at the same time cooperated with many Bamar in its “othering” of the Rohingya.

Third, the absence of efforts to counter the securitization of the reform-oriented parties like the NLD in this process shows that the securitizing actors’ actions effectively changed the “rules” of the field: As the “institutional framework” changed, “power distributions” were put under pressure, and actors entered into (ad hoc) coalitions, the notion of a Muslim threat to Myanmar became the new dominant discursive reality that determined the behavior of all (other) actors in that field. Faced with potential opposition from (segments of) Myanmar’s Buddhist elite which routinely depicted dissenting voices as “traitors” when it came to the treatment of Muslims, the NLD chose a strategy of silence and adaptation: While not explicitly engaging in or pushing for the securitization of Muslims itself, the NLD also did not develop a desecuritizing counter discourse (“strategic silence”) and forestalled additional backlash through its choice not to field Muslim candidates for the 2015 elections (“strategic adaptation”). While not certain, it is likely that the NLD leaders remained silent about the securitization of Muslims out of fear to oppose and antagonize the influential securitizing elites as it sought to secure its precarious position in Myanmar’s partial democracy. Undoubtedly, securitization processes between 2010 and 2015 have resulted in a longer-term shift in the “rules” of the field. These changing rules also paved the road for later clearance operations against the Rohingya, which were largely supported by Myanmar’s population,¹²³ perhaps not surprisingly after having been subjected for years to anti-Rohingya rhetoric by a range of dominant societal actors.

Ultimately, the strategy of securitization did not uniformly translate into electoral gains. While the RNDP achieved considerable success in Rakhine State, the old regime and its USDP proxy party suffered an overwhelming defeat by the hands of the NLD in the 2015 elections. Analysts suspect the electoral defeat can be attributed to the regime’s lack of legitimacy and Myanmar’s population’s strong desire for a political overhaul.¹²⁴ Here, it may be worthwhile to look at more recent political developments. As of February 2021, the Tatmadaw ousted the NLD-led government and reinstated military rule.¹²⁵ While outside of the scope of this article, the recent events—which occurred shortly after another significant electoral victory for the NLD in the 2020 elections—underline just how tenuous the recent democratic developments in Myanmar were, but also how threatening the NLD’s popularity has become to the old regime.

Notes

1. I. Holliday, “Addressing Myanmar’s Citizenship Crisis,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 3 (2014): 404–21.
2. O. Bowcott, “Aung San Suu Kyi Passive as Genocide Hearing Begins,” *The Guardian*, 10 December 2019.
3. An estimated 22,000 Rohingya were killed and 75% of their villages destroyed; approximately 800,000 Rohingya escaped the violence by seeking refuge in neighboring Bangladesh (P. Green, T. Macmanus, and A. De la Cour Venning, “Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar,” *International State Crime Initiative* (2015)).

4. N. Cheesman, "Introduction: Interpreting Communal Violence in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 335–52; N. N. Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar: The 969 Movement and Anti-Muslim Violence," In *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, edited by M. Crouch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183–210.
5. R. Lee, "The Dark Side of Liberalization: How Myanmar's Political and Media Freedoms Are Being Used to Limit Muslim Rights," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 2 (2016): 195–211.
6. O. Holmes, "Myanmar's Muslims Win No Seats in New Parliament," *The Guardian*, 15 November 2015.
7. A. E. Howe, "Discourses of Exclusion: The Societal Securitization of Burma's Rohingya (2012–2018)," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2018): 245–66; Cheesman, "Introduction"; M. Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now?," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2015): 375–97.
8. M. J. Walton, "Reflections on Myanmar under the NLD so Far," in *Myanmar Transformed? People, Places and Politics*, edited by J. Chambers, G. McCarthy, N. Farrelly, and C. Win (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 311–8.
9. See, among others, M. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); E. D. Mansfield and J. Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 79–97; F. Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22–43.
10. International Crisis Group, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar* (Asia report No 290) (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017); C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar* (Washington, DC: The Center for Advanced Defense Studies, 2016).
11. A. Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 4 (2008): 970–1022.
12. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.
13. The discussion about the dangers of (too) early democratization goes back to S. P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1968). See C. van der Borgh, "In Favour of Sequencing?" [Conference presentation]. *Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law, Sequencing for Stability*, 24 January 2014. <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/296892> for a short overview of the relevance of this debate in relation to conflict situations and peace processes. See T. Carothers, "How Democracies Emerge. The 'Sequencing' Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 12–27, and R. Paris, *At War's End. Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
14. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*; J. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (Worcester, MA: Norton & Company, 2000); Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy."
15. Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratization and War."
16. Paris, *At War's End*.
17. Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratization and War."
18. T. Balzacq, S. Léonard, and J. Ruzicka, "'Securitization' Revisited: Theory and Cases," *International Relations* 30, no. 4 (2016): 494–531; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); R. Emmers, "Securitization," in *Contemporary Security Studies*, edited by A. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109–25.
19. Balzacq et al., "Securitization' Revisited," 494.
20. There are different approaches to study securitization (see, for instance, Balzacq et al., "'Securitization' Revisited," 494–531; Emmers, "Securitization"). We largely follow the 'pragmatic' approach developed by Balzacq and others.

21. Indeed, T. Balzacq, "Securitization Theory: Past, Present, and Future," *Polity* 51, no. 2 (2019): 331–48, 331, 332–3 places emphasis on the process in which "security issues emerge and acquire their legitimacy, which provides them with a social stickiness."
22. There is also debate about the role of (different) audiences in threat constructions. See, for instance, S. Leonard and C. Kaunert, "Reconceptualising the Audience in Securitization Theory," in *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, edited by T. Balzacq (New York: Routledge, 2010), 57–76; Balzacq et al., "'Securitization' Revisited"; O. Waever, "Politics, Security, Theory," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 465–80.
23. Buzan et al., *Security*.
24. M. McDonald, "Securitization and the Construction of Security," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 4 (2008): 563–87, 573–5.
25. See, for instance, H. Stritzel, "Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2007): 357–83; T. Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context," *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171–201; M. C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 511–31.
26. G. Karyotis and S. Patrikios, "Religion, Securitization and anti-Immigration Attitudes: The Case of Greece," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 1 (2010): 43–57.
27. N. Pratt and D. Rezk, "Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood: State Violence and Authoritarianism in Egypt after the Arab Spring," *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 3 (2019): 239–56.
28. G. H. Gjørsv, "Security by Any Other Name: Negative Security, Positive Security, and a Multi-Actor Security Approach," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 4 (2012): 835–59.
29. See Pratt and Rezk, "Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood"; J. A. Vuori, "Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization: Applying the Theory of Securitization to the Study of Non-Democratic Political Orders," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2008): 65–99; C. Wilkinson, "The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Useable outside Europe?," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 1 (2007): 5–25.
30. Balzacq et al., "'Securitization' Revisited"; Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries."
31. Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries."
32. Ibid.
33. The new constitution was finalized and approved in a widely criticized referendum in 2008.
34. M. Bünte, "Myanmar's Protracted Transition: Arenas, Actors, and Outcomes," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 2 (2016): 369–91.
35. Ibid.; C. Win and T. Kean, "Communal Conflict in Myanmar: The Legislature's Response, 2012–2015," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 413–39; Holliday, "Addressing Myanmar's Citizenship Crisis."
36. Bünte, "Myanmar's Protracted Transition."
37. The NLD stated that it thought the electoral laws were unjust and undemocratic and refrained from participation.
38. International Crisis Group, *Reform in Myanmar: One Year On* (Asia briefing No 136) (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 9.
39. A. Dukalskis, "Transitional Justice in Burma/Myanmar: Cross-National Patterns and Domestic Context," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2015): 83–97; United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (A/HRC/39/64)," United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2018.
40. UNHRC, "Report of the Independent Fact-Finding."
41. H. Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization: A Case Study of the Rohingya and Burmese Nationalism," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2018): 229–45; C. Fink, "Dangerous Speech, Anti-Muslim Violence, and Facebook in Myanmar," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 43–51; G. Van Klinken, and S. M. T. Aung,

- "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 353–75; Lee, "The Dark Side of Liberalization."
42. See, for instance, Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization"; International Crisis Group, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar* (Asia report No 251) (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013).
 43. A. Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions: History, Identity and Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (2016): 258–83.
 44. ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*.
 45. International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's Stalled Transition* (Asia briefing No 151) (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018).
 46. A. Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide* (Revised and updated edition) (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018); P. Hein, "The Re-Ethnicisation of Politics in Myanmar and the Making of the Rohingya Ethnicity Paradox," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (2018): 361–82; Cheesman, "Introduction."
 47. Hein, "The Re-Ethnicisation."
 48. Fink, "Dangerous Speech"; M. J. Walton, "Monks in Politics, Monks in the World: Buddhist Activism in Contemporary Myanmar," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2015): 507–30.
 49. Walton, "Monks in Politics."
 50. M. J. Walton and S. Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (Policy studies N°71) (The East-West Center, 2014).
 51. Ibid.; B. Schonthal and M. J. Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism: Symmetries and Specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar," *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, no. 1 (2016): 81–115.
 52. For both minorities, it should be noted that not all people identify as Christian. Christianity is either the group's largest religion or the religion of those historically most inclined to oppose the central state (ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*).
 53. Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*.
 54. S. Keck, "Reconstructing trajectories of Islam in British Burma," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, edited by M. Crouch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39–68; A. Ware and C. Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018); Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*.
 55. Ware and Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict*.
 56. M. Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities," *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1 (2015): 1–27.
 57. Win and Kean, "Communal Conflict in Myanmar."
 58. Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions."
 59. M. Smith, "'All You Can Do Is Pray': Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," Human Rights Watch, 2013; T. Tun, "Ethnicity and Buddhist Nationalism in the 2015 Rakhine State Election Results," in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, edited by N. Cheesman and N. Farrelly (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2016), 177–98.
 60. Win and Kean, "Communal Conflict in Myanmar"; Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions."
 61. The notion of Rohingya as 'illegal immigrants' as opposed to a group indigenous to Myanmar is a hotly disputed topic in Myanmar because 'indigeneity' is tied to (the right to) citizenship. For more discussion on this question of a Rohingya presence in pre-colonial Myanmar, see Ware and Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict*; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*.
 62. Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray'; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Van Klinken, and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim."

63. Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray'; M. Zarni and A. Cowley, "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya," *Pacific Rim and Policy Law Journal* 23, no. 3 (2014): 683–754; Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim"; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent Fact-Finding."
64. 'Arakan' is an older term for 'Rakhine'.
65. Quoted in Smith, "'All You Can Do Is Pray,'" 26–7.
66. See Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray'; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; UNHRC, "Report of the Independent Fact-Finding."
67. Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray.'
68. UNHRC, "Report of the Independent Fact-Finding."
69. See Ware and Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict*; Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions"; Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray.'
70. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*; Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray.'
71. Fink, "Dangerous Speech."
72. By 2015, the RNDP had undergone several changes and had become the Arakan National Party (ANP); its anti-Rohingya and Islamophobic stance never changed (Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray'; Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions").
73. Schonthal and Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism"; M. Schissler, M. J. Walton, and P. P. Thi, "Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities" (Working paper, University of Oxford, Myanmar Media and Society project, 2015).
74. C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar"; Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*.
75. ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Schonthal and Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism."
76. C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar."
77. ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*.
78. In English, this is generally translated into the 'Patriotic Association of Myanmar' or the 'Association for the Protection of Race and Religion.'
79. ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Schonthal and Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism."
80. Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics."
81. C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Schonthal and Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism."
82. Fink, "Dangerous Speech"; ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*; Schonthal and Walton, "The (New) Buddhist Nationalism"; Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*; Kyaw, "Alienation, Discrimination, and Securitization."
83. M. Schissler, M. J. Walton, and P. P. Thi, "Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 376–95.
84. *Ibid.*, 377–78.
85. Fink, "Dangerous Speech."
86. A. Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 70.
87. *Ibid.*, 111.
88. Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma."
89. See, for instance, Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions"; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*; Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar."
90. Walton, "Monks in Politics, Monks in the World."
91. J. Bertrand and A. Pelletier, "Violent Monks in Myanmar: Scapegoating and the Contest for Power," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 257–79.
92. *Ibid.*, 269.
93. *Ibid.*

94. M. J. Walton and M. Jerryson, "The Authorization of Religio-Political Discourse: Monks and Buddhist Activism in Contemporary Myanmar and beyond," *Politics and Religion* 9, no. 4 (2016): 794–814.
95. Walton, "Monks in Politics, Monks in the World."
96. Cheesman, "Introduction," 242.
97. The NLD has a longer history as a political opposition party in Myanmar. In 2010, however, it boycotted the elections and was not registered as an official political party.
98. A type of elections to fill seats that have become vacant in the period between two general elections.
99. ICG, *Reform in Myanmar: One Year On*.
100. Ibid.
101. Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma."
102. See Smith, 'All You Can Do Is Pray'; ICG, *The Dark Side of Transition*; Holliday, "Addressing Myanmar's Citizenship Crisis."
103. G. McCarthy and J. Menager, "Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat in Myanmar's Transition," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 396–412.
104. However, it was not merely a matter of opportunity: The RNDP used the earlier distribution of 'white cards' in 2010 to depict itself as a better protector of Buddhist interests than the USDP (Howe, "Discourses of Exclusion"; Fink, "Dangerous Speech"; Hein, "The Re-Ethnicisation"; Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence"; Green, *Countdown to Annihilation*). In a strategy reminiscent of so-called ethnic – or here rather 'religious' – outbidding (see, for instance, B. Stewart and R. J. McGauvran, "What Do We Know about Ethnic Outbidding? We Need to Take Ideology Seriously," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 405–20; C. I. Zuber, "Beyond Outbidding? Ethnic Party Strategies in Serbia," *Party Politics* 19, no. 5 (2013): 758–77), the RNDP stirred up religious tensions to draw votes away from the regime (Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions"). Arguably, it was up to the regime to follow.
105. Tun, "Ethnicity and Buddhist Nationalism" in *Conflict in Myanmar*, 189–90.
106. Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization," 178–79.
107. Walton, "Monks in Politics, Monks in the World."
108. Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
109. Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar"; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
110. Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim"; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*.
111. Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas*; Burke, "New Political Space, Old Tensions"; Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma."
112. Lee, "The Dark Side of Liberalization"; Win and Kean, "Communal Conflict in Myanmar."
113. McCarthy and J. Menager, "Gendered Rumours."
114. Lee, "The Dark Side of Liberalization"; Green et al., *Countdown to Annihilation*.
115. Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of anti-Muslim"; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*.
116. ICG, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*; C4ADS, *Sticks and Stones*.
117. Tun, "Ethnicity and Buddhist Nationalism."
118. Ibid.
119. Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries."
120. See Bertrand, and Pelletier, "Violent Monks in Myanmar."
121. Balzacq et al., "Securitization' Revisited."
122. Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries," 1008.
123. Fink, "Dangerous Speech."
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