

## ISLAM IN CHINA SEA: ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN MYANMAR

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### *ABSTRACT*

In China sea, Malakka strait has been a center of trade zone for Asian countries today. It has been a strategic maritime root where kingdoms of Majapahit, Tiriwizara, Malakka Kingdom, Pagan, Hantawaddy and Konbong Kingdoms of Myanmar benefited tremendously. Trade and diplomatic relationship Between China and Burma has been traditionally excellent till date for they are connected by land as well as sea. Burma, presently called Myanmar has been an important country from the perspective of geo-politics in the region, but the history of Muslims with the population of 5 million in this country beyond the second World War II has been worse to the extent, they are struggling for survival. Muslims have been living in Myanmar for the last few thousand years. The previous Buddhist rulers of the country and the British administration that followed, provided full rights of citizenship to them without discrimination. Thus, they enjoyed every segment of life, business, the community, society, educational institutions and politics. In the light of these welcoming circumstances, Muslims were happy to contribute to the nation by joining the army, the police force, government institutions such as health care, education, trade, business, agriculture as well as in politics and as legislators in the parliament of Myanmar. Nevertheless, their unfortunate history began when military rule came into power in 1962. All the rights and responsibilities they had enjoyed over the years became restricted. Discrimination policies were applied in every segment of national institutions even their citizenship rights were threatened. The discrimination continued to the extent that their racial status as one of the 145 races of Myanmar was removed. Consequently, frequent riots, afflictions and violence against Muslim minorities became the norm, resulting in a peaceful coexistence between Muslim minorities and the majority Buddhists becoming impossible. The objective of this paper was to research the historical existence and identification of Muslims in Myanmar. It is hoped that the findings of this work will support a theory of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar.

Keyword: Islam, Muslim, identity, rights, discrimination, peace, coexistence.

### **Introduction**

The status of Muslims in Myanmar has been a controversial issue during the military rule in Myanmar. Although they were living in Myanmar for the last few thousands of years, their citizenship rights were still doubtful, as they were not recognized as one of the 135 officially approved ethnic groups of Myanmar. According to previous records, they were officially registered in the list of 145 ethnic groups of Myanmar during the first democracy rule (1948-1962). Muslims believe they are discriminated as they are denied service in national institutions and their religious rights are barely fulfilled. Their serious concern is that they are targeted in different domains by the government, and are utilized as political tools when the government regime

encounters any kind of political crisis. This claim has been proved true by hundreds of religious based confrontations between Buddhists and Muslims, particularly after the 1962 military coup.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, when a group of people live in a place for years without a criminal record, they are granted the right to be a citizen of the country. The Muslims in Myanmar have a record of stay of more than one thousand years. Moreover, they have significantly contributed to the country, but their rights are still denied. Scholars have likened the Muslims dilemma to a sandwich that can be eaten by the regime at any time. This sandwich is their religion, Islam, a sensitive tool that is used before easily emotional Buddhist mass. When Buddhists were convinced that the Muslims were a so-called threat, they became violent, they killed the Muslims, looted their properties, and burned their religious buildings and schools. The regime in power needed to use the Muslims, because they faced frequent challenges throughout their rule from democratic dissidents who were fighting for their freedom since the regime came into power. The strategy of oppressing the Muslims was successful because the regime has remained in power for more than sixty years. Since 2015, a new government, National league for Democracy, NLD, has been in power. Nonetheless, it seems that the NLD is incapable of fully controlling the country, as the army, and certain areas in Myanmar are still in control of the old regime. The Muslims status remains the same, the law and order is deteriorating, and the economy of the country is still declining. The objective of this paper was to highlight the history, loyalty and contribution of the Myanmar Muslims. Furthermore, it attempted to find ways for their national identity, suggestions for their future success and for a peaceful coexistence to occur between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup>

## Who are Myanmar Muslims?

Myanmar is a member of the ASEAN community. Geographically, the Republic of China is in the north, Thailand is in the east, Bangladesh and India border the west, while the Andaman Sea is in the southern part of Myanmar. The country has an area of 261,789 sq. miles (678,034 sq kilometers)<sup>3</sup> and its current population is about 55 million. Islam came into existence at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Arabia. It began to spread in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to different parts of the world including Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> The Arab Muslims mastered maritime trade and thus, started sailing through the Indian Ocean to various Asian countries such as China, India, Myanmar, Malacca, Indonesia, the Philippines, etc. The Arab Muslims disseminated Islam by manifesting generosity, friendship, technical proficiency in craftsmanship, business and administrative expertise through their businesses and maritime trade activities.<sup>5</sup> Muslims arrived in Myanmar as traders, settlers, military personnel, prisoners of war, refugees, and victims of slavery. As time passed, they became accustomed to the local culture and traditions. The Muslims enjoyed living as differing class citizens and held positions at different levels within the country as soldiers, royal advisers, administrators, port authorities and mayors, etc.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Myanmar* (Hawaii: University Press, 1972), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew D. Kaspar, "NLD Wins Supermajority, Will Form Next Government" *the Irrawaddy*, Nov 13 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Atlas of the World, South East Asia, Myanmar: *National Geographic* (Ohio: NG Society, RRD. CT. 7<sup>th</sup>, Edition, 1999), p. 34, 101.

<sup>4</sup> N. A. Baloch, *Islam Reached Southeast Asia 7<sup>th</sup> Century: Advent of Islam in Indonesia* (Lahore: Mansoor Publishing, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1980), 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> B. R Pearn, *An Introduction to the History of Southeast Asia* (Hong Kong: Longman, Malaya, Ltd, K1, 1963), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Yegar, *Muslim of Myanmar* (Wiesbaden: Germany, 1972), p. 20

## **The Arrival of Muslims in Myanmar**

There were four entry points used by the Muslims to enter Myanmar. The first group of Muslims to arrive in Myanmar through the Indian Ocean were the Arab traders, who set up their business centers and dockyards at the coastal cities of Arakan since 700 AD.<sup>7</sup> The second group of Muslims who had the same Arab and Persian origin settled their business centers at coastal cities such as Pathein, Yangon, Pegu, Muttama and Margui during 1000 to 1500 AD.<sup>8</sup> The second group were called Pati, because their capital was Pathein. In Pathein they set up business centers for trade, dockyards and enjoyed living and working there for three hundred years as a Muslim Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> The third group of Muslims were called Pantay, they entered Myanmar through the northern gate of China around 900 AD. Islam had already arrived in China since 700 AD, when Wahab bin Abi Qabsha and Saad Larbish Habshi engaged in Islamic daw'ah at Quankyo, China 628 AD.<sup>10</sup> The fourth group to arrive in Myanmar were Muslims from India, who arrived during the British administration (1923-1948). They were the largest group and their population was estimated to be one million when the British left Myanmar in 1948.<sup>11</sup>

According to early sources, the official presence of Muslims in Myanmar has been traced back to the Pagan kingdom period (1100-1286). Two concrete proof of contributions by Muslim soldiers in the Pagan army was the invasion of the Tathon Dynasty by King Anorratha and the digging of the Meikthila Lake, 11 centuries ago, where thousands of Muslim soldiers participated in both occasions. Without the presence of Byatta, a Muslim General, the conquest of Tathon would have been impossible. The role of Muslim generals, Byatwi, Byatta, ShwePhyin Gyi, ShwePhyin Galay and Rahman Khan (Nyayamankan) also cannot be omitted. After around 200 years the Pagan kingdom finally came to an end when there was a Chinese invasion led by the Chinese Muslim commander, Nasiruddin Khan, with his army in 1286. Since then, the migration of Chinese Muslims increased in the region and their descendants were still seen in different towns of northern Myanmar such as Mandalay, Sagang, Kyaukse, Meiktila, MayMyo, Mogok, Taunggyi, Kalaw, Heho, Lashio, Tibaw, Kyakme, Myikyina, Mogaung, Bamo, Muse, Mingyan, Pakukku, Chauk, Shweb, etc. Symbols associated with Muslim such as mosques, madrasas and maktabs were also seen in every town. There was also the grand Chinese Mosque called Pantay Mosque, which was built by Chinese soldiers in the capital, Mandalay.<sup>12</sup>

## **Muslims in the Pathein city state**

The presence of Muslims can also traced in Pathein, the capital of the Irrawaddy division since 12 AD. The Muslims were Persian sailors and Arab traders and they helped locals with business and shared their knowledge. This allowed them to establish city-states in the region as rulers. The Muslims also set up business centers for trade and dockyards at other southern coastal cities such as Yangon, Pegu, Muttama and Margui.<sup>13</sup> In this period, the city ,Pathein, at the southern coast of Myanmar was known as the Muslim Pathi kingdom, which ruled the coastal region for three

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<sup>7</sup> Abul Fazl Ezzati, *The Spread of Islam* (Tehran: Ahlul Bayt World Assembly Publication, 1994), p.301, 333.

<sup>8</sup> Khin Maung Gyi, *Translation of "In the Hidden Myanmar" by Morris Collins*, (Yangon: Rangoon University press, 1977), P. 211

<sup>9</sup> Ko lay Pati, *Indigenous Muslims of Myanmar*, (Rangoon: Islam Council Press, 2009), P. 5

<sup>10</sup> S.Q. Fatimi, "*The role of China in the Spread of Islam in South East Asia*", (Singapore: NUS Press, 1959), 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> John F Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1958), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Colonel Ba Shin. (n.d.). *Tartanar Ayaung Tun Se Bo*. 6

<sup>13</sup> Khin Maung Gyi, *Translation of "In the Hidden Myanmar" by Morris Collins* (Yangon: Rangoon University press, 1977), 211.

centuries (1200 AD-1500 AD).<sup>14</sup> The remnants of the Muslims ancient living quarters, trade centers, places of worship and graveyards are still available in many cities of Irrawaddy Delta, such as Hintada, Yeekyi, Atute and Dedaye.<sup>15</sup> To date, a large number of Arab and Persian Muslims descendants can still be seen in the cities of Baik (Margui), Bukpyin and Tavoy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Muslims in the Ava dynasty and Hantawadi dynasty**

A Muslim presence was also identified in the Ava period. Muslim sailors and soldiers from India were conscripted by regional authorities such as the Myanmar kings as well as the colonial Portuguese around 16 AD. In 1613, two thousand Muslim soldiers employed by Philip De Brito, the Portuguese administrator of Thanlyin, were captured by King Anauk Phet Lun. Later on they were allocated land at May Du and Shwe Bo. The Muslims were responsible to serve the king in the army during war but were engaged in agriculture when peace availed. In those days many people did not want to participate in war, but the Muslims preferred to be warriors and they excelled in it. When Tabinshwethi attacked Pegu, the capital of Mon, once again, thousands of Muslims soldiers were seen to serve the Mon king as artillery experts and on the ground. There were five hundred households that belonged to Muslim soldiers at the Ava capital when King Sanay was ruling the kingdom. Brintnaung (1698-1740), the founder of the second Myanmar kingdom, employed thousands of Muslim soldiers in his army. The Muslim soldiers were stationed at several towns in the middle of Myanmar such as Taungu, Yameithin, Nyaungyan, Yindaw, Meithilar, Pintalai, Tabatswe, Bawdi, Sitar, Sipautara, Nyethu and Dipeyin, etc.

### **Muslims in the Kone Baung dynasty**

In the period of Konbaung, there were already many Muslims civilians working in different sectors, including in the army. The Muslim population increased when King Along Phaya took over the west Indian Assam, the Rakhine kingdom and Sirlyan of southern Myanmar from the Portuguese. In Yangon, the Muslim presence was substantial, and they conducted business dealings in this area. Most of the Muslims conscripted from Assam and Rakhine were placed by the royal authorities in the middle of Myanmar,<sup>17</sup> in places such as Shwebo, Sakine, Maydu, Pinya, Khanlu, and others.

King Botaw Min Tayagyi (1781 AD-1891 AD) moved his old capital Innwa to a new place named Amarapura near Mandalay. The service of Muslim men and armed forces were also taken to the new capital. The Muslims were allowed to set up their religious buildings, centers, graveyards and schools, etc. Heavy Muslim populated areas in the new capital were BonOo, Sakyinwa, Kyimintine, Koyantaw and the Aa khyuktan township in Amarapura Twonship.<sup>18</sup>

At 1800 AD, the second last king of Myanmar, King Mindung, came into power. He moved the capital Amarapura to Mandalay in 1844. Thousands of his Muslim subjects went along with him to Mandalay, and continued to serve him until Myanmar lost their independence to the British in

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<sup>14</sup> Ko lay Pati, *Indigenous Muslims of Myanmar* (Rangoon: Islam Council Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Chai Saya, *The true story of Burmese Muslims* (Yangon: MMANO Press, 2008), 16.

U Kyi, *Burmese History* (Yangon: Rangoon University Press, 1965), 156-157.

<sup>16</sup> Khin Maung Gyi, 212.

<sup>17</sup> Khin Maung Chit, *Mahar Yazawindawgyi* (Yangon: Rangoon University Press, 1989), 144.

<sup>18</sup> Ba Oo, *Muslims of Myanmar, 100 years anniversary of Mandalay* (Mandalay: Kyipwayee Publishing, Mandalay, 1959), 18-23.

1885. Muslims also contributed to the kingdom at different professional levels and their services ranged from ministers to soldiers. Mindon King was benevolent towards his service men. Thousands of Muslims were authorized to live in the Mandalay palace and in the middle the town where hundreds of educational centers, mosques and teaching locations were constructed by the order of the king. There have been more than 70 official mosques in the capital, such as the mosques of Sakya New Sin, Ko Yandaw, Aa Chut Tan, Taung Palu, Gyun, Za Kine Dan, Kong Yo and Wali khan and others.<sup>19</sup>

Prominent personnel who served King Min Don were, General U Chon and Captain Yacoob in the infantry unit, Major Khan Sahib and his son Wali Khan in the chivalry unit, Major Bokar in the artillery unit, Mullah Ismail was a trade Minister, U Don was a Muslim Affair Minister, U Nu was a Muslim scholar and diplomat, Shah Abbas Husaini was the Imam of the Palace Mosque, Kabuli Molvi, U York, U Soe and U Bo Hla were information officers at the Palace, U Mau was an appraiser and U Yit was a great merchant. Furthermore, there were many Muslims officers and merchants such as U Esar, U Yan Aung, U Sein, U San Pyaw, U Shew Ban, U Bo, U Bo Mya, U Abdullah, U Chin O, that served the king. In 1858, three Burmese Muslim gentlemen, Ahmed U Bo Mya, Abdul Karim U Shew Baw and Hanif were ordered by the king to build a two-story rest-house for Muslim pilgrims in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The registration of the rest-house was made between the king of Myanmar and the government of Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup> Myanmar couldn't further stand as an independent state as the British invasion came into success in 1885, marking an end to thousands of years of the Burmese Kingdom reign.

### **Muslims in the British colonial period**

The British rule lasted for a century (1823-1948). The British rule developed a good administrative system in Myanmar and left Myanmar in 1948 when the country was ready for independence.<sup>21</sup> The British rule was helpful to Myanmar and particularly the Muslim community. The Muslims benefited in many areas of their interest: business, trade, administration, industry, agriculture, mining, export, import, education, sociology, politically and religious domains, etc. Since the British opened a new wave of business and agricultural sectors, the influx of Indians during the colonial rule was extensively higher. The Muslim population increased three time bigger than it was in the kingdom period, i.e., (100,000 to 400,000) within 20 years. The period under the British rule was a prosperous time for the Muslims because they excelled in every sector of life. It was as though Myanmar was part of an Indian society. The Muslim's presence and development of business, industries and commerce widely helped the colonial powers. Nevertheless, the Muslims did not know that the growth of the Muslim population and their business power became a reason for their oppression in the future.<sup>22</sup>

### **Muslims in the first democratic period, 1948-1962**

The Muslims expected that when Myanmar gained independence, it would be free from foreign interference. However, their expectations were shattered when power was switched to Myanmar authorities. Myanmar Authorities have no unity and they are divided since the time of the struggle for freedom where many independent fighters who rendered their lives for the freedom of the

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>21</sup> John F Cady, *A History of Modern Myanmar* (London: Cornell University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1958), 73, 567

<sup>22</sup> Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy*, 39.

nation. There were three groups in parliament who had their own political objectives and contended with each other to attain the power at hand.

The first group consisted of graduates from universities like U Aung San<sup>23</sup>, U Rashid, U Nu, U Kyaw Nyein, and U Ba Swe, etc. (In Burma, they were called the “U” group). They were soft minded, rational in their thinking and were friendly with the Muslims. The second group consisted of freedom fighters who were still belligerent although independence was gained. They were called “Takin”, for example Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Soe and Takhin Ba Thein Tin, etc. The attitudes of this group were tough and pessimistic. The third group consisted of ex-military personnel such as Bomu Aung, Bo Yan Nine and Bo Zay Ya etc. In Burma, they were called “Bo”. Apart from these dominant political groups, there were also representatives from ethnic minority groups who worked rigorously to have an autonomous rule in their respective regions. In addition to this, there were religious based political groups in parliament, looking out for the interests of religious communities such as Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. Finally, there were other political parties such as socialists, leftists or communist groups, conservative parties and peasant representative groups, etc. It was unfortunate for the country that it did not get the opportunity to experience real democracy and development. Instead, a decade of democratic ruling (1948-1962) was filled with political deadlock and racial indoctrination.<sup>24</sup>

U Nu was the first Myanmar Prime Minister of the democratic government. Unfortunately, however, most of his time was full of trouble as the objectives and struggles of the above political parties superseded most of the development programs planned. A few ethnic groups went to war with the central government in order to have a federal autonomous rule. Moreover, a Buddhist group forced the government to declare Buddhism as the state religion.<sup>25</sup>

During this period, Muslims had a very tough time everywhere, within parliament and in business domains. Most of the industries were controlled by the Muslims and thus they were targeted. No one heeded their requests and demands when they really needed assistance for their religious rights. For example, when their religious buildings were abolished and their citizenship rights were ignored. Most of the time the situation was confusing as the political parties and ethnic groups were busy struggling for the success of their own agendas in parliament. The government was pressurized and the country was close to getting into a civil war. However, many Muslim officers and educated personnel continued to work in the army and the civil service. Two Muslim ministers and five parliamentarians were motivational images and provided hope for the Muslims.<sup>26</sup> The Muslim representatives in government and the business sectors encouraged the Muslim youth to focus their attention on education and technical expertise.

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<sup>23</sup> 1. “Assassination of General Aung San,” *Deedok journal Weekly*, Vol.1, 20, July 1947,

2. “Assassination of National leaders,” *Hantaweddy*, 20, July 1947, Vol. 1.

<sup>24</sup> 1. “Assassination of General Aung San,” *Deedok journal Weekly*, Vol.1, 20, July 1947,

2. “Assassination of National leaders,” *Hantaweddy*, 20, July 1947, Vol. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Sein Aung Myint, *Pyin Manar, Zarti Tway Pwint Lan Yar Myay* (Working People Daily, 3, March 1991), 5.

<sup>26</sup> 1. The Islamic Center Magazine, *the origin of Muslims in Myanmar* (Rangoon: ICM Press at No. 91, 30<sup>th</sup> Street, 1983), 25.

2. Kyaw Win, Mya Han, Thein Hline, *Burma Politics, 1958-1962* (Rangoon: Universities Printing Press, 1962), 102.

## **Muslims during the first military rule-1962-1988**

As it struggled for survival, the destabilized government sought assistance from the military to quell the flagging situation of the country. Since the military took power, they restricted the movement of political parties and stopped military advancements of ethnic groups. The military remained in power for 2 years (1958-1960) and studied every aspect of the government administration. The 1960 election was the last for the first Myanmar democratic government as the military exercised a coup d'état and seized all the political opponents including the Prime Minister and the President of the Union of the Republic of Myanmar in 1962.<sup>27</sup>

In 1964, all the properties, lands, farms, factories, industries, transportation networks, water transport facilities, ships, markets, banks and housing complexes belonging to Muslims and foreigners were nationalized by the regime in power.<sup>28</sup> The sudden and quick declaration of nationalization had a tremendous impact on the Muslim communities and left many mentally and physically disturbed. Indeed, once the Indian business tycoons were afflicted, all the Muslims faced job losses, poverty, and instability.

After nationalization occurred, many Muslim service men, laborers and factory workers became jobless. This resulted in them and their family members becoming destitute. Consequently, increased crime, murder, fighting among different groups, communal conflict and violence frequently occurred. In 1977, a MOU<sup>29</sup> was signed between the Indian and Burmese governments whereby Indian nationals who wished to go back to India could go without any travel documents and fees. Under this repatriation programme, 200,000 Indians returned back home.<sup>30</sup>

The military rule brought undesirable consequences not only to the Muslims but to the rest of the people in the country, because the image of the country was totally collapsed. The administration of the country fell into the hands of soldiers, who only knew about battle and war. An economic breakdown was the root-cause of the total failure of the country. Indeed, Myanmar, the once upon a time the famous and richest, rice-pot of Asia was relegated to the status of a LCD, least developed country in the world. The fate of a state depends on its holder, who should be an expert at handling its politics. Politics means holding power, and transferring it to the rest of the ministers in charge for implementation. If the heads of a country are wise, it will be successful and prosperous. Myanmar was unfortunate to be led by leaders who proved to be incapable at running the country. This resulted in total failure and an economic breakdown. It was unfortunate for Myanmar that its people experienced poverty, destitution, illiteracy, moral decay, drug abuse and trafficking, religious riots, civil wars, discrimination among races and religious groups, inequality in its division of resources, educational decline, congestion in cities and town, a decline in the agricultural sector and its products, and increased difficulties in land and water transportation.

Nevertheless, it is not strange that the military rule has remained for more than fifty years in Myanmar. It is a strategy to divert any threat brought by enemies of the regime, while diverting

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<sup>27</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (California: Asia Publishing House, University of California, 1969), 248-251.

<sup>28</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Publishing, 1999), 62.

<sup>29</sup> MOU, *Between the governments of Burmese and India* (1967, July 20), *Burma Alin*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism*, 62.

strategically sensitive issues like racial, ethnical and religious tension. Therefore, extensive ethnic based civil wars and religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar are common political trends as the regime continues to tolerate and foster them.

The Muslims in Myanmar were already demoralized by nationalization, consequently, the removal of Muslim professionals, officers and laborers from all institutions and industries of the country doubled their suffering. When Burmese Socialist Programme Party, BSPP replaced the industrial based economic system with an agricultural one, many technicians were removed from their jobs. As a result, hundred of technicians and family members underwent great dilemmas.

The grave trouble faced by Muslims during the military rule was the continued violence and affliction against Muslims. This assisted the interests of the Buddhist religion and helped the regime maintain their power indefinitely. Whenever political tension occurred, the regime exercised tension between the Muslims and the Buddhist.

Since 1962, every year, a mosque or a madrasa (Muslims religious school), or several Muslim lives have perished in the name of religious tension and violence. Sometimes the destruction, burning and killing became so appalling, entire Muslim villages and towns turned to ash. The tension was so bad, it became known internationally and the world media and social organizations come to assist to cease the violence. The worst violence created during the military rule were the 2012 riots in Rakhine, Meikthila and La Shore, where hundreds of Muslim lives, religious buildings and properties were killed, destroyed and burnt.<sup>31</sup>

### **Muslims in the second military rule- 1989-2012**

An immediate nullification of intermarriages between Muslims and Buddhist was initiated when the military came into power .This process prevented Buddhist women from converting to Islam.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, a Buddhist nationalist group attempted to issue an order from the Buddhist Monk authority urging Buddhist people not to visit Muslims business areas and not to buy items from Muslims shops in order to marginalize their businesses. People normally went to Muslim shops because their business strategies were to gain less profit with increasing sales. However, Buddhist shop owners did the opposite, thus they had less customers. The concept behind this order was that visiting Buddhist shops would still benefit Buddhism, because the benefits of Buddhist businessmen would go to Buddhist charity work.<sup>33</sup>

According to Islamic religious teachings, calling Muslims for prayers five times a day at a mosque was obligatory. The Muslims had been doing this act ever since they came to Myanmar. Nonetheless, this act came to a standstill as local authorities forced it to cease. Ironically, in contrast, Buddhist Monks were authorized to sermon at communal places with loud speakers, sometimes even at the heart of Muslim communities.

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<sup>31</sup> Kyaw Phone Kyaw, *Frontier Myanmar Journal*, "Healing of Meikthila," April, 21,2016

<sup>32</sup> "Nullification of Intermarriage Law, between Muslim and the Buddhist", *Myaweddy Magazine*, Vol, 80, (11 November 1988), 88.

<sup>33</sup> UA: *Amyo Pyouk Mar Soe Kyouk Tai, one is afraid of extinction of own race*, (Yangon: July 1995), 5



Since the beginning of the military rule, construction of new mosques, madrasas, maktabas and Islamic schools were no longer authorized. Even permission for renovations of religious buildings took a long time to attain. Eventually, many religious buildings were close to collapsing. This helpless situation highlighted the total neglect of the Muslim community. The Muslim population had increased 3 times than it was 50 years ago, thus, existing mosques could not fit them anymore. Since authorizations for the construction of mosque weren't granted, the Muslims built maktabas and religious schools to teach religious studies for children and then used these buildings for prayer. This way, the Muslims tried to settle their problems internally. This type of madrasa cum mosque was available in satellite towns such as Dagon, Shew Phy Tar, Lhine Tar Yar, Tarkayta, Than layin and other rural areas. However, today, these maktabas are under threat as the Buddhist nationalist groups are pressuring the government to demolish them, because they are not a place of worship. Affliction by the nationalist group occurred just to destabilize the security situation of the country, as the NLD government faced a tough time before the international community. However, terrorizing Muslims this way disturbs their identity and stability.

A lack of Muslim educational buildings in rural areas makes a big difference for Muslims in a rural society compared to urban ones. This is because Muslim teachers are no longer available at rural areas when there are no schools and mosques teaching literacy, religious rights and responsibilities. Urban Muslim religious buildings are still intact; however, the lack of maintenance and renovation will cause deterioration and there are fears that the buildings will collapse.

After the removal of the majority of Muslim staff at government institutions, there were still some senior staff available in the department of education, schools and universities. The staff are also concerned about forced participation in Buddhist religious activities such as the Tasaungtine festival and the Tathinkyut festival, etc. They are not happy, but they have to follow the order of their superiors for fear they will be removed from their jobs.<sup>34</sup>

The growth of the Muslim population has been always a threat to local Buddhists, some may call it: Islamophobia. Therefore, one of the reasons for the oppression against Muslims in Myanmar was to create fear among the Muslims with the hope they would finally leave Myanmar sooner or later. According to official sources, the Muslim population in 2016 was 2.5 million, however local Muslims have reported that the figure was closer to a million.

The propagation of Islam or Dawah Islamia in Myanmar, also known as Tablig activities, was initiated around 1965. It gained great momentum in later years resulting in its followers being available in every town and village in the country. During the last decade, followers from foreign countries started visiting Myanmar. However, restrictions on foreign Muslims by local authorities occurred with the instigation of Buddhist nationalists. According to Tablig activists, the immediate problem faced was the National Identification card, 'NIC'. They said it was very difficult to attain, especially for Muslims. This resulted in it being very difficult to travel from one place to another

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<sup>34</sup> Halima's case represents many other cases of other Muslim government staff undergoing same condition. They must follow the order of the Buddhist senior officers and have no choice to deny it. Halima is not her actual name and she has her Burmese name. The researcher discussed with Halima at her residence in Yangon in August 2009. There are two Buddhist religious events called Tha Thing Kyut and Tha Saung Thing. Buddhists participates in these events and offer foods and clothing to the monks. Tha Saung Dine is a Buddhist religious ceremony; the Buddhist common people offer food and utilities to the monasteries.

for Muslims, as they didn't have a NIC. Particularly, the objective of the travel of the Muslims was known to the authority that they are doing Dawah, Islamic propagation work.

### Demolition of mosques and schools<sup>35</sup>

Since the beginning of the military rule, the life of Muslims in Myanmar has been in chaos. Indeed, they have been targeted by political outlets. When state affairs failed due to a lack of capability in politics and the government administration, the regime utilized Muslims to divert the democracy campaign. Therefore, Muslims faced trouble every time and every year, since the military continues to rule till the present day. The first encounter of the destruction of mosques was in North Ukkalapa in 1960, where three mosques were destroyed despite the fact that government protection was guaranteed.<sup>36</sup> The second one was destroyed by the U Nu government. It was an old mosque built by the Turks and the British Indian Muslim soldiers during the First World War at Saint June Road, near the Home Road Railway Station and the Rangoon Medical Institute.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in Mandalay, on 16 March 1997, The Buddhist extremists targeted mosques, shop-houses, and vehicles that were in the vicinity of mosques for destruction. Looting, the burning of religious books, acts of sacrilege, and vandalizing Muslim-owned establishments were also common. At least three people were killed. Attacks by Buddhist monks spread to the then capital of Myanmar, Rangoon, as well as to the central towns of Pegu, Prome, and Toungoo.

On May 15, 2001, anti-Muslim riots broke out in the Taungoo, Pegu division, resulting in the death of about 200 Muslims, the destruction of 11 mosques and the setting ablaze of over 400 houses. On May 15, the first day of the anti-Muslim uprisings, around 20 Muslims praying in the Han Tha mosque were killed and some were beaten to death by pro-junta forces.<sup>38</sup> On March 6, 2003, a group of people set 15 Muslim houses ablaze including a mosque and a *madrrasah* in the Kant Ba Lu township of the Sagaing division in upper Burma. The mosques in Taungoo remained closed since May 2002.<sup>39</sup>

The process of applying for a NIC for Muslims is a great task, because it is very difficult for Muslims to obtain one. In 1982, immigration law hindered Muslims from being granted a NIC easily. The law allowed those who came to Myanmar before 1923 to obtain a NIC easily. Many Muslims encountered trouble in attaining a NIC, particularly the later generations who faced more problems. If the parents of a Muslim were not citizens, they would not be granted a citizenship certificate. Muslim students who were eligible to attend higher education and universities could not be granted admission as they lacked a NIC. In addition to this, the government wanted Muslims to accept the National Verification Certificate, 'NVC,' which was a preliminary certificate issued

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<sup>35</sup> Tun Nyo, *Demolition of Medical Institute's Mosque. Medical Student Annul Magazine*, 1958, Vol.1, No.1.69-74.

<sup>36</sup> "Destruction of North Ukkala mosques," *The guardian Newspaper*, November 30, 1961), 1.

<sup>37</sup> U Rashid, *Burmese Muslim Organization* (Rangoon: Merchant Road, Maha Waizza Press,1961), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Chie Ikeya, (2006) "*The traditional High Status of Women in Burma, The Journal of Burma Studies Centre for Southeast Asian Studies*, 51-70.

<sup>39</sup> Ba Saw U, *Life of Muslims in Myanmar* (Yangon:1986), 395-400.

to those whose nationality was in doubt. The Muslims did not agree to accept it and the problem has continued to be a controversial issue.<sup>40</sup>

### **Dilemma for Buddhists**

During the days under the rule of the Kingdom, native Myanmar people were self-sufficient, mild in nature, helped each other, and they also followed their traditional belief, Buddhism. They were peace lovers, humble, had good attitudes, assisted the poor, neighbors and even Muslims who came to Myanmar in later stages. A majority of them engaged in farming and business transactions, brokering merchandises and some permanently worked in the army. Buddhism was their revered religion and they followed it with full respect. Thus, their social lives were better-off and peaceful. There were hardly any records that there were Buddhists involved in violence or killings. Buddhism teaches its followers to engage in a good worldly life, not to be involved in crimes, alcoholism, adultery, theft, and the killing of any creature. These five precepts of Buddhism completely control the daily lives of its followers.

The basic teachings of Buddha are how to attain relief from worldly circles. Man comes to live in this world which is full of problems (Dukkah). For example, they need to find food, clothes and shelter. Man has to struggle day to day and faces many troubles. These problems are caused by men's desires (Tanar), thus, to remove the problems (Dukkah) of the world, man needs to be free from his desires (Tanar) and needs to engage in (Niyawda), a liberation process through meditation, so as to attain paradise (Nivarna). Buddhists believe that if a man reaches Nirvana, he will no longer be reincarnated, and he is free from worldly Dukkah and the life circle.

The process of attaining Nivarna requires eight methods called the Eight Folds Path of Maggin. Essentially, this process is similar to the process of Tazkiyatul Nafs in Islam. The methods are: (1) Right understanding (2) Right thinking (3) Right actions, (4) Right speech, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right mindfulness, (7) Right Effort, and (8) Right concentration. All these procedures and rules make its followers peaceful, intelligent, wise, humble and self-satisfied. Many Buddhists who follow these principles are happy in their lives and they do not encounter difficulties in their lives.

Myanmar is a country full of natural resources, such as petrol and natural gas, has mining products such as silver, bronze, gold, precious stones, and different types of woods such as teak. The abundance of resources means Myanmar has the potential to be the richest country in the world. However, the question is, why such a beautiful and prosperous country, where a widow was able

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<sup>40</sup> In 1989, the researcher visited the immigration office situated at merchant road, Rangoon and found the said motto stuck at the main gate of the office. Same motto was found in many branches of immigration offices as reported by many Muslims.

Retired Major Tun Nyo lives in Kuala Lumpur and the researcher interviewed him at his residence in March 2009. Tun Nyo's views represent the Muslim personnels working in the armed forces as well as Muslims' medical staff.

<sup>40</sup> Tun Nyo, 69-74.

<sup>40</sup> Hajee Khin Myint<sup>40</sup> was head of the trust of Jami Mosque situated at the down town of Yangon. He lives near the mosque and is a close friend of the researcher. Both work together for Muslim community development work and he explained many problems regarding the administration of the mosque which are unnecessarily complicated by the Buddhist authority. He was last interviewed in Yangon in 2009. His views are concerned with Muslim merchants and business environments as he himself is a successful businessman.

to build a temple<sup>41</sup> , has become the least developed country, with a record of a 12-billion-dollar loan from international banks. This has shocked and confused many researchers.

It is shocking to discover that the beautiful teachings of Buddha have not reached the majority of people in Myanmar such as rulers, officers, leaders and teachers. These people are responsible to bring Myanmar to the brink of success and prosperity, while making people happy and able to stand equally with other developed countries.

The reason for this is, the society does not understand and exercise the 8-fold paths of Buddhism. In fact, the process of eight-fold paths has been the standard procedure of success for every human being. Buddha himself struggled with these rules and received enlightenment. There are thousands of people in Buddhism who became successful, for they exercised the rules seriously and were committed.<sup>42</sup>

It was sad for the people of Myanmar they have yet to find a good leader like Li Quan yu of Singapore or Mahathir of Malaysia, who are committed in their work and have brought their countries to the periphery of success. Both attained sufficient knowledge and experience to establish their countries to internationally accepted positions.

The day Myanmar was freed from colonialism, different types of problems were experienced such as, confusion, disunity among ethnic groups, civil wars, parliamentary disagreements, sectarian conflicts, religious discrimination, military coups, imprisonment of politicians, nationalization of public properties and business, deforestation, smuggling of natural resources, drug affiliated violence and crime, etc. Many still long for the colonial days where Myanmar was rich and an exemplary country in South East Asia.

## **The Process of Reform in Myanmar- A New Democratic country and National league for Democracy**

Daw Aung San Su Kyi (DSSK) and her party, the National league for Democracy (NLD) is the favorite party of the people of Myanmar. The NLD won a landslide election in 2015 with more than 80 percent votes, which indicated how much people trusted her and expected change in the country. Muslims approached the election with high expectations that they would receive national recognition and that the longtime discrimination would be ended. Despite solicitation of a vote by Muslim candidates, a majority of the people voted for the NLD. Nonetheless, the NLD has already been in power for one year, but the reality of change is still far away.

Many have complained that the situation in the country has continued to decline. Some have also criticized that the state counselor, Aung San Su Kyi favors the armed forces (Tatmadaw), which they see as the root cause of all her problems. The 2008 constitution gave the Tatmadaw a powerful role at the center of the government. Indeed, 25 percent of all seats in provincial and national assemblies have been reserved for military officers. Furthermore, the armed forces are directly

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<sup>41</sup> During Pagan period, the state was so prosperous, there was temples built by poor and widow.

<sup>42</sup> Bodhipaksa is a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, and a published author. He founded Wildmind in 2001. Bodhipaksa has published many guided meditation CDs and guided meditation MP3s. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/10-people-who-came-out-of\\_n\\_4086176.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/10-people-who-came-out-of_n_4086176.html) accessed on 30/4/2017

controlled by three key ministries: Home Affairs (which includes the police force), Defense and Border Affairs. In all security matters, the Tatmadaw have operated completely and independently from the government.<sup>43</sup>

The price for merchandise in Myanmar has increased. School fees and expenses for school children have also increased. The education system is still unimproved, despite promises made by the minister for Education. The treatment of officials in government offices continues with the same practices that used to be exercised by the previous government. Corruption and delay tactics continues because the new government continues to retain corrupt old officials using the excuse of reconciliation, but people are exhausted.<sup>44</sup>

NLD proclaims to change policies in ministries, regional government offices, business, commercial and trade segments, but they could not prove that changes have been made, particularly in mining, gas, forest, agriculture, health and education. The Ministry of Immigration is one of the worst ministries in the country. The immigration minister was called by parliament for questioning and was reminded of their correct functions and measures used to provide the national identification card, 'NIC'. In addition to this, a few state governments, such as Mon, Tanintayi and Maguie, were criticized for corruption and the embezzlement of government funds. The Prime Minister of Mon, Min Oo was forced to resign from his post as well from his party. The GDP of Myanmar under the previous government increased from 5 % to 7 %, and it was expected to further grow up to 8 %. Nonetheless, the expected GDP of 8% now seems impossible, as the NLD cannot keep its promise and momentum of the economic development plan they drew up in the early stages of their reign.<sup>45</sup>

DSSK was heavily criticized by the international community for her failure to effectively deal with the violence against the Rohingyas and her government's refusal to respond to what the UN has described as a genocide and crimes against humanity. In the north, ethnic groups and government troops continue fighting. So far, thousands of people have died and around 100,000 people have become refugees taking shelter in China, while other have been locally displaced. A national peace process, the reconciliation between ethnic minority groups as well as cessation of civil war programmes have attempted to progress to no avail, as there are a lack of good relationships between ethnic leaders and the NLD. Moreover, the government continues to battle in the border areas.<sup>46</sup>

### **Suggested Strategies for a Brighter Future of Muslims of Myanmar**

The Muslims in Myanmar have developed considerable experience on how to continue their mission without further deterioration and destruction. The Muslims have faced enough suffering

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<sup>43</sup> <sup>43</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/the-cowardice-of-aung-san-su-kyi/> Jeremy is a widely referenced political risk expert and weekly columnist for Global Risk Insights (GRI).

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2045262/one-year-myanmar-su-kyis-halo-slipping>  
ertil Lintner is the author of Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948 and Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Unfinished Renaissance

<sup>45</sup> <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/aung-san-su-kyi-honeymoon-over/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/suu-kyi-s-myanmar-one-year>, Andrew Selth,  
27th April 2017, 09:10 AEDT

by sacrificing their lives, properties and religious buildings. Joblessness, a lack of awareness of whether they will survive, a lack of technical skills and proper education are unfortunate aspects of their struggle. The suffering that they have faced are not necessarily just caused by the oppression of the military rulers and the Buddhist extremists, it is also caused by failures in the Myanmar economy. A majority of Buddhist people have also experienced the agony of economic failure, as well as the lack of pure Buddha teachings which could have guided them how to attain peace and prosperity, while avoiding violence and suffering. Indeed, the ethical values of Buddhism teach the highest level of morality; its followers are recognized as the most modest group in the world. In contrast, the image of Buddhists in Myanmar has been severely affected to the extent that the world media has started reporting them as Buddhist terrorists.

Myanmar Muslims have continuously struggled for their survival in their traditional ways and religious thought. A majority are still absorbed in their lives and have forgotten about changes in their environment. A newly crowned government along with a strong opposition party filled with ex-military officers is still not a promising situation for the Muslims. The Buddhist Nationalist group continues their threat of oppression of the Muslims. Thus, they (the Muslims) have been always living under fear or possible violence which might be on the way.<sup>47</sup>

Under these circumstances, peace is still far away, as the Muslims are living in distress and in economic chaos. The most important question poised here is what strategies need to be adopted for the development of their future generations.

Firstly, a literacy campaign should be embarked on, so that everyone can read and write. This will increase the literacy rate and awareness for their development in the Muslim community. Every single child should be given the right of education, and the attainment of at least primary and secondary education should be arranged. Every Muslim youth should be assisted to continue their higher education according to their merits and interests. Scholarship programs should be arranged for those who have difficulties with furthering their continued education. At the same time, vocational programs should be encouraged to be set up in Muslim societies, thus, helping those who do not show an interest in higher education. An increased number of educated Muslim youth is the foundation of development for the future of a Muslim community. Parallel to this, Madrasah education systems should be aided with modern science and technological subjects in their curricula. The success of co-educational systems applied in other Muslim minority communities could be an example for the madrasah education system in Myanmar.

At the same time, the Muslim business community needs to stimulate their business centers and also create progressive job opportunities, paving way for the employment of Muslim graduates. An increase of social awareness programs in Muslim societies are needed where people of every level can engage in different social interactions. These programs can create awareness of corporation, a spirit of peaceful coexistence and brotherhood among Muslims and other non-Muslim societies. Muslim religious organizations could also contribute to the programs and educate Muslims with concepts of understanding Islam and a peaceful co-existence with other religious stakeholders.

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<sup>47</sup> During 2012-17, this group caused several destructive conflicts including Meikthila, Lashore and Rakhine where hundreds of Muslims lives, properties and religious buildings were perished. Recent tactic of this group in 2017 is creation of violence in Muslim settlement areas

A Muslim administrative council inclusive of scholars from all religious organizations and institutions should be set up for proper administration and leadership roles in the Muslim community. This council should communicate with the existing government in order to have its leadership role for the affairs of Muslim communities recognized. This body may issue religious rulings, a standard sermon at the Friday congregational prayers, propose appropriate legislation, set up sharia offices and appoint a chief mufti for the Muslim community. A Muslim marriage bureau should also be set up so that this bureau could administer all types of Muslim marriage matters. They could also supervise Muslim Waqaf arrangements, the supervision of mosques and madrasahs, and the improvement of madrasah curricula.

All of the suggestions made were based on a close look at the development of the Singaporean Muslim community. Here, the role of the Singapore government was an important instrument for the development of the Muslim community. The logic behind the government support was that if any community left behind in the process of building the country, they can be a source of danger for the security and progress of the country.

The Singapore government has maintained a semi-official relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic religious council of Singapore (MUIS), a statutory board in Singapore that administers all other religious organizations, religious institutions, madrasahs, Maktab, cemeteries, waqaf, religious activities, zakat collection, Waqf minuteness (enrichment), Hajj journey undertakings, halal accreditation, the issuance of fatwas (religious decisions), construction and organization of mosques and the interests of Singapore's Muslim people. The MUIS advise the government on matters relevant to the Muslim community, draft approved weekly sermons, regulate some Muslims religious matters, and oversee a mosque building fund financed by voluntary deductions. The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) is a Council where individuals are designated by the President of Singapore.

Today, Singapore Muslims are very happy with their multi-dimensional development in their society. All Muslim children attend government funded education schools where there are no religious teachings and education is secular. Muslim madrasahs are not forced to teach other subjects except Islamic subjects. The government introduced a primary education program in madrasahs with the support of materials and financial aid. Now madrasahs are producing qualified secondary students who have the choice to proceed with their higher education either in Islamic studies or in education such as medicine and engineering etc. In addition to this, Muslim social institutions can operate independently in the country and can work to boost their members to engage in activities such as, care for the elderly and orphanages, income generating programs for widows, rehabilitation centers for the disabled and literacy campaigns, etc. In addition to this, the government appoints Muslim religious organizations independently irrespective of whatever sect they belong to, therefore different sects of belief such as Sunni, Shiah and Qadiyani, etc can operate their activities, as long as they do not contradict national security and the public order. Thus, it is very rare to see religious conflict among intrareligious or interreligious communities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the author sincerely believes that Singapore can be a good model for the development of minority communities. Singapore is a moderate and appropriate model for the Muslims of Myanmar, because Singaporean Muslims enjoy their share of developing their state. Singapore came out of a state of disarray and poverty with the help of state sponsorship and developed to a higher standard where their community now enjoys how other communities enjoy their rights equally. Therefore, it is highly recommended that Singapore should be the model of development for any society and country looking to improve.

In this respect, people tend to wait and seek assistance from many sources. It is suggested that an individual can start his own development first. If they have the will, there will be a way for it. As an organization, they must start from a primary and individual level. If every individual in society realizes this concept, it can lead to a collective development of society and the state. This way, Muslims of Myanmar can revitalize their lost morality and spirituality, and at the same time, they can revive their wonderful historical period of civilization. When intrareligious rights are fulfilled, this Muslim community can stand along with interreligious societies. At this stage, Muslims will be ready to participate in the usual process of political affairs.