

Buddhist Islamophobia: Actors, Tropes, Contexts

Iselin Frydenlund

1 Introduction

In recent years, Muslim minority communities in Buddhist majority states have experienced an increasing number of attacks on their lives and properties, culminating in the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim Rohingya population in 2017. During the fall of 2017 nearly 800,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar into neighbouring Bangladesh in order to escape atrocities committed during the Burmese military's 'clearance operations' against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a small and ill-equipped militant group. In addition to massive violence against Rohingya civilians, allegations have been made that Rakhine Buddhist civilians (at least in certain villages) were active in the violence (Wa Lone *et al.* 2018). The atrocities in Rakhine followed repeated waves of violence since 2012, spreading from Rakhine to other parts of Myanmar, mostly affecting Muslim lives and property.

From 2012 onwards, Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka were also victims of intimidation and violence, the gravest being the so-called Aluthgama riots in 2014, resulting in the death of three Muslims, hundreds of displaced persons, and massive destruction of Muslim property. While anti-Muslim attacks do not mean that Muslims living in Buddhist countries are generally at risk of persecution, weak state protection of Muslim communities has left them at risk of violence and intimidation when other groups in society see benefits from starting a conflict.

Violence against Muslim minorities has taken place in the wake of intense anti-Muslim campaigns, most vociferously articulated by certain groups of Buddhist monks, who in sermons and public speeches have warned against the dangers of Islam. While there is reason to believe that anti-Muslim sentiments might be shared by a larger section of the Buddhist monastic order (the Sangha) in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, such systematic anti-Muslim discourses have for the most part been articulated by specific monastic groups.¹

1 So far, we have no quantitative data on Islamophobic (or xenophobic) tendencies in the Myanmar or Sri Lankan populations at large.

These movements are engaged in aggressive—and occasionally militant—anti-Muslim campaigns, based upon the fear of a global Islamic conspiracy to eradicate Buddhism.

The concept of Islamophobia is highly contested, due, among other things, to the implication that fear of Islam is rendered pathological. However, the term has established itself as an academic concept, broadly referring to an indiscriminate hatred of Muslims and of Islam, often followed by exclusionary social practices.² Thus, a distinction has to be made between general dislike of Islam or legitimate forms of critique of Islam, and Islamophobia as a religious, cultural, and political phenomenon (Esposito and Kalin 2011; Bangstad 2016). Consequently, it is not my concern here to analyse political disputes over religion in public space, access to sacred places, or state preference for Buddhism and its implications for religious minorities. Rather, my aim is to identify tropes and themes in Buddhist fears of anything Muslim when this fear of ‘anything Muslim’ is closely linked to theories about a global Islamic plot to govern the world. Thus, I distinguish Islamophobia from general anti-Muslim sentiments and opt for a narrow understanding of ‘Buddhist Islamophobia’, defining it as the deep fear about the existence of a secret and coordinated global Islamic plot to eradicate Buddhism and eventually rule the world. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to cross-cultural comparison of various forms of Islamophobia, and so far, most research has been carried out on Islamophobia in Christian and/or secular liberal contexts in North America and Europe. This article seeks to address this research lacunae and analyse various aspects of Asian Buddhists’ fear of Islam: how do Buddhist conspiracy theories envision the Islamic takeover, and how are individual Muslims seen as local agents of such larger schemes? Finally, the chapter discusses the political contexts of Buddhist conspiracy theories: why do Buddhist conspiracy theories about Islam flourish from 2012 onwards, and how are they related to domestic and regional politics?

2 Actors

A conspiracist worldview alone is “unredemptive,” O’Leary (1994) points out. The tale of the corruption of the world needs villains; its rectification needs heroes. The villains in contemporary Buddhist protectionist ideology are Muslims; its heroes are Buddhist monks who with all means will fight ‘islamisation’ and protect Buddhism. Buddhist fears of Islam is nothing new, but as recent research has shown (Kyaw 2016; Walton and Hayward 2014; Crouch 2016; Haniffa

² For a recent analysis of the genealogy of the concept, see Bangstad 2016.

et al. 2014; de Silva 2016), current radical Buddhist protectionist movements show a dislike of Islam previously not seen. Although not necessarily the *raison d'être* of new Buddhist protectionist movements, Islamophobic tropes certainly serve as their gravitational point. The three most influential Buddhist groups of anti-Islamic orientation in Asia are the 969 and the MaBaTha in Myanmar, and the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force [BBS]) in Sri Lanka. Post-independent Burma and Sri Lanka have a vibrant history of Buddhist pressure groups in public life, whose aim has been to 'restore' Buddhism to its 'rightful' place in society after the colonial dismantling of the traditional Buddhist polities. Buddhist revivalism overlapped with ethnic majoritarianism, leading to the axiomatic position of the term 'Buddhist nationalism'. The content and way of operation of the new movements require us to rethink the category of 'Buddhist nationalism'. The language of restoration (against Buddhist decline under British colonialism) is less prevalent now and the main foes are not Christians anymore. As we shall see, conflation of majority ethnicity and Buddhism still plays an important role, but to a lesser degree than in the post-colonial years. Rather, I suggest that what we see is a move towards a shared Buddhist identity vis-à-vis a defined religious 'Other' across national, ethnic and/or regional difference, which is better captured in the term 'Buddhist protectionist ideology'.

Generally speaking, we may say that in spite of internal variation, such protectionist movements belong to a broader tradition of 'political Buddhism'. By political Buddhism I refer to a set of ideologies, articulated and acted upon by both lay Buddhists and members of the Sangha, holding that Buddhism should guide social and political life, and moreover that it is a state responsibility to protect and foster Buddhism. The exact discursive content of such movements has varied during the course of time, but the most radical of them are all based upon notions of threats posed by non-Buddhist 'Others'. Moreover, it should be noted that in comparison to most groups and actors in Europe and North America that articulate strong anti-Muslim sentiments, the main producers and transmitters of Buddhist Islamophobic discourses do not belong to counter-cultural milieus, far-right extremist groups, or anti-elitist populist movements. Rather, we find such discourses among the religious elites—that is, among monks and nuns—imbuing conspiracy theories about Islam and Muslims with a certain religious quality, as well as authority, quite unprecedented in Western contexts. In the following, I shall briefly introduce the three Buddhist monastic groups of the 969, the MaBaTha, and the BBS, arguing that while they are far from identical and formed in different political contexts, they share two fundamental traits, namely conspiracy theories about Islam and Muslims and a militant language of the need to protect Buddhism against the Islamic threat.

2.1 *969 and the MaBaTha in Myanmar*

In 2012 a group of young Buddhist monks in Mawlamyine, the capital of the Mon state in south-eastern Myanmar, established a network to ‘protect Buddhism’ called the 969.³ The name 969 refers to the nine qualities of the Buddha, the six of the Dhamma, and the nine of the Sangha, which together constitute the ‘three Jewels of Buddhism’, thus drawing upon key Theravada Buddhist symbols. Additionally, 969 stands as the discursive anti-thesis to ‘786’, which is the numerical representation of the first verse of the Qur’an, and is commonly at display in Muslim shops throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The network produces artefacts, such as stickers and flags with the 969 emblem on it. The emblem depicts the Buddhist flag, the number 969 in Burmese script, and Emperor Ashoka’s pillar, the latter being one of the oldest symbols of Buddhist political power. Such emblems were soon on display in shops and taxis throughout Buddhist Myanmar, as a sign of Buddhist unity across geographical and ethnic boundaries within the country,⁴ but also as a boundary-marker vis-à-vis Muslim shopkeepers who were conceptualised as an economic threat. The 969 monks showed themselves to be efficient users of traditional means of communication such as sermons, print media, and videotapes, but—along with the Internet revolution since the 2011 political liberalisation—also of new social such as Facebook and YouTube.⁵

The 969 monks have become controversial for their strong anti-Muslim stance, the most famous member being U Wirathu—the 969 spokesperson—who became an international media figure after being on a *Time* cover, titled “The Buddhist Face of Terror.”⁶ He is accused of hate speech against Muslims in social media and during religious sermons. He was jailed in 2003 by the military for instigating anti-Muslim violence,⁷ but released in 2012, together with political prisoners, as part of former President Thein Sein’s political reforms.

Closely related to, but separate from, the 969 is the so-called MaBaTha, which is an acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe, or

3 Inspired by a book published in 1997 by U Kyaw Lwin, former general and director of Ministry of Religious Affairs.

4 While the majority of Buddhists in Myanmar belong to the Bamar ethnic group, ethnic minorities such as Karen, Mon, and Arakanese are also predominantly Buddhist.

5 Organisations and persons operate with numerous Facebook pages, and allegations of fake sites have been made. U Wirathu’s main site had in the beginning of 2017 close to 265 000 followers, a considerable number in the Burmese context.

6 ‘Wirathu’ is a pen name and means hero. His monastic name is U Vicittabivamsa.

7 The exact motive behind his imprisonment remains disputed. U Wirathu himself denies this was the real reason. Some of his prison inmates hold that the reason was internal monastic disputes, and that alleged anti-Muslim violence was just a pretext to remove internal opposition. Personal interviews, Bangkok and Yangon, 2015.

the 'Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion'. This organisation was formed in June 2013 and compared to the 969 it has a more senior and less militant profile. The MaBaTha has succeeded in building up alliances across monastic divisions and in close relations with the monastic top hierarchy; it has built up a strong lay division and worked closely with leading government figures of the previous semi-civilian regime.

The most important agenda of the 969/MaBaTha has been to pass four laws "to protect race and religion", in order to stop what they see as the "islamization of Myanmar."⁸ The laws seek to regulate marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversions, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country. The laws were passed by the parliament and the president in 2015 and is current law in Myanmar, partly overriding previous Buddhist and Muslim family laws. While U Wirathu is considered a controversial voice, other monks closely identified with the movement, such as Sithagu Sayadaw, enjoy enormous respect and influence throughout Buddhist Myanmar.

2.2 *The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)*

In Sri Lanka the so far most militant Buddhist group is the BBS, which was formed in 2012, by a small group of Buddhist monks and lay people. Following familiar tropes in previous configurations of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the BBS combines Buddhist fundamentalist concerns of secularisation, differentiation of society, and the alleged decay of Buddhism due to globalisation, with specific concerns regarding the protection of Sinhala Buddhist culture and heritage. It emphasises the dominance of Sinhala Buddhist culture over the island's multicultural past and present, and is critical of the international human rights paradigm, particularly minority rights. However, unlike earlier groups, the main foe in BBS discourse is Islam and Muslims, depicting them not only as threats to the state, but as we shall see, also as an economic threat to the urban Buddhist middle class. Like its counterparts in Myanmar, the BBS mobilises its temple networks for public rallies and public 'spectacles' where it stages its Buddhist protectionist and anti-Muslim agenda, and like the 969/MaBaTha it has shown itself to be a very efficient user of Facebook, and it live streams press conferences, mass rallies, or even confrontations with local Muslims at particular sites deemed to be of importance to Buddhism.

⁸ Personal interviews with U Wirathu and U Maung Chun, the general secretary of the MaBaTha, 2015. For more on the four race and religion laws, see Frydenlund 2017; Crouch 2016.

In Sri Lanka, the BBS is regarded as extremist and violent, and has become controversial for its alleged involvement in the Aluthgama violence in 2014. Some years prior to the violence, hate sentiment had been cultivated by the BBS via social media and through public protests statements,⁹ and there had been sporadic violence against Muslim communities throughout the country in the same period—for example the attacks on the mosque in Dambulla in 2012, but the Aluthgama riots showed an unprecedented level of organisation and orchestration. The antecedent to the riots on June 15, 2014, was a BBS public rally in Aluthgama following an incident between a Buddhist monk and three Muslim youths. In his speech, the BBS General Secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara concluded by saying that “in the future if another yellow robe is even touched, no need to go to the police, let the law of the jungle take over” (quoted in Haniffa *et al.* 2014: 19). Later, the rally formed a procession through town, which ended in massive riots. While the actual chronology of events, and the role played by the BBS or Muslim youth in the area, remains unclear and contested it is clear that the riots left the local Muslim communities far more damaged than their Sinhala Buddhist neighbours.

Like the 969/MaBaTha, the BBS is particularly concerned with sexuality and reproduction, and following familiar Islamophobic tropes in Europe and India, Muslim male sexuality is portrayed as aggressive and uncontrollable; Muslim men are accused of raping Buddhist women. To prevent “Buddhists from becoming a minority in their own country,” (a popular slogan) BBS call for family planning policies, including legal regulation of women’s reproductive health. BBS leaders have demanded a government shutdown of all family planning units so that Sinhala Buddhist women could produce more babies. At its inaugural meeting in Colombo in July 2012 the BBS declared its intention to pursue five goals: (1) to work for the increased birth rate of the Sinhala Buddhist population by challenging the government’s birth control and family planning policies;¹⁰ (2) legal reform to better protect the rights of the island’s Buddhists, to abolish legal pluralism and implement one civil code (thus abolishing Muslim family law); (3) reform of the education system in line with Buddhist interests; (4) the formation of a government-sponsored body to ensure Buddhist ‘orthodoxy’ in books and media; and (5) implementation of a series of recommendations for reforming Buddhism already suggested in the 1950s. This five-fold resolution

9 For more detail on hate speech in social media and anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka, see Wickremesinhe and Hattotuwa 2016.

10 In Sri Lanka, Buddhist identity implies Sinhala ethnic identity, while Sinhala identity includes both Buddhist and Christian identities. In Myanmar, the picture is far more complex as Buddhists belong not only to the Burmese ethnic majority group, but also to ethnic minorities such as Mon, Arakanese, and Karen.

also suggests a government ban of Sri Lankan female labour migration to the Middle East. Maltreatment of Sri Lankan labourers in the Middle East has for long been a contested issue in Sri Lanka, and is increasingly being perceived as a religious issue by radical political Buddhist groups, including the BBS.

3 Buddhist Historiography and Notions of Decline

Asbjørn Dyrendal (2016) suggests that perhaps the most obvious place for conspiracy theory in religion involves that of catastrophic apocalypticism. As is well known, Indic religions operate with a cyclical, not a linear, worldview, which implies that there is no such thing as final battles, only indefinite series of 'final battles' within repeated cycles of time (kalpas). Within our times, according to Buddhist eschatology, Buddhism will disappear five thousand years after the Buddha's passing away; gradually, people will lose knowledge of the Buddha's teachings (dharma). Until the next Buddha (Maitreya) appears, human society will degenerate into moral decay and violence. However, the dharma is eternal and will thus survive the cycles of the world.

In this regard it is important to note a distinction in Buddhist terminology, between dharma and sasana. Both is captured in the European term Buddhism, but Buddhists themselves distinguish between buddhadharma as eternal teaching and sasana (Sinhala: sasanaya, Burmese: thathana), which refers to the Buddha's dispensation, or Buddhism as manifested and materialised in this world. Myths of decline, but also the necessity of 'protection of the sasana' are thus central features of Buddhist teachings and practice. Tropes of decline and deracination have been activated by the monastic community in times of war and political crisis, the Lankan chronicle the Mahavamsa being the most famous example, and they came to be activated and expanded upon as part of Buddhist resistance to British colonialism (Turner 2014). Furthermore, decline and disappearance constitute central aspects of early Buddhist historiography, and early Indian Buddhist sources offer various explanations for the decline of Buddhism; scholastic texts tend to understand the decline or even disappearance of Buddhism as "part of an inexorable process, with few or any actors involved in the process" (Nattier 1991: 119), while narratives (sutras) tend to explicate decline as the result of human action.¹¹ Furthermore, early narratives differentiate between internal and external sources of decline: internal sources are identified as laxity of monastic rules, moral decay, and the human

11 By this I refer to both *suttas* in the Pali canon and to Tibetan and Chinese authoritative sources.

incapability to follow the dharma,¹² while external sources are identified as foreign invasions and excessive state control. Which actors are to be considered an external threat to Buddhism have—needless to say—been contingent upon historical and political contexts.¹³

3.1 *The Historical Reservoir of anti-Muslim Sentiments*

Most—if not all—anti-Muslim conspiracies in Buddhist societies ultimately evolve around two key themes: the destruction of Buddhism and the triumph of Islam. Thus, anti-Muslim discourses are tied to larger concerns about ‘Islamisation’ of Buddhist majority societies and subsequent eradication of Buddhism, expressed in what the Burmese scholar Nyi Nyi Kyaw has coined a “myth of deracination” (2016). However, Buddhist notions of ‘Otherness’ in authoritative texts or doctrinal notions of decline cannot in themselves explain current Islamophobic tendencies. After all, Islam is nearly a millennium younger than Buddhism. The first contact between Buddhists and Muslims took place along the Silk Road, and as Johan Elverskog (2010) has shown, the earliest Buddhist-Muslim encounter was marked by profound cross-cultural exchange. This multi-faceted story of exchange, but also competition, has been turned into a one-sided story of Muslim aggression and Buddhist victimhood, which now serves as a historical reservoir of anti-Muslim sentiments that contemporary Buddhist conspiracy theory taps into.

Today, Buddhists often point to the extinction of Buddhism in India in the twelfth century C.E. —symbolised by the Turkish destruction of the Buddhist monastic university of Nalanda—as proof that their fear of Islam today is reasonable. Exactly when the destruction of Nalanda became the symbol of the decline of Buddhism in India is not certain, but it is clear that with British colonial archaeological excavations (begun in 1915) and colonial historiography, knowledge of India’s past became accessible to colonial subjects throughout the Empire, including Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Myanmar (then Burma). It was picked up by Buddhist revivalists and modernist reformers such as Anagarika Dharmapala to champion the Buddhist cause. In a letter written in 1915, Dharmapala states about Islam that “The vestiges of Buddhism were

12 *Samyutta-nikāya*, SN 16.13 at SN II 225, 8 to 225. It is stated very clearly that keeping the *dharma* will prolong the *dharma*. Notions of decay are also linked to the very existence of a female monastic order; a traditionalist position in Theravada Buddhism claims that the establishment of a nuns’ order would result in the decline of the *sasana*.

13 Nattier explains that “early in the first millennium C.E., however, as the Buddhist community became aware that this initial figure of five hundred years had already passed, new traditions extending the life span of the dharma beyond this limit began to emerge” (1991: 211).

destroyed by this inhuman, barbarous race. Thousands of Bhikkhus were killed, temples were destroyed, libraries were burned and Buddhism dies in India” (Dharmapala 1965: 207). The decline of Buddhism in India, then, was the result of Islamic expansionism, according to Dharmapala. Furthermore, he states that “The Mohammaden, an alien people by Shylockian method, became prosperous like the Jews” (Dharmapala 1965: 207).

It is noteworthy that the point of reference for Dharmapala’s anti-Muslim sentiments is not local Buddhist-Muslim interactions, but in fact European (Shakespeare and the Jews). Economic interdependence, as well as competition, has marked the history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction in Ceylon, but the tropes of greediness and prosperity seem to be late nineteenth century imports. Thus, one aspect of today’s Buddhist Islamophobia can be traced back to European anti-Semitism: European anti-Semitic ideas about the greedy and prosperous Jew were transferred onto local Muslims in Ceylon. This conflation of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia has a long history in Europe,¹⁴ and was later exported throughout the British Empire—including Ceylon—informing Buddhist reformers such as Dharmapala.¹⁵ As research of Buddhist modernism has shown, the dark side of Buddhist anti-colonial revivalism was the exclusion of not only Christianity (as the colonial religion), but also other non-Buddhist religions, such as Hinduism and Islam (Holt 2016).

British colonialism also had a deep impact on Buddhist-Muslim relations in Burma, but in Burma this took the form of severe anti-Indian and anti-Muslim riots in the 1920s and 1930s. In the transnational British colonial economy, workers were moved from India to other parts of the empire, resulting in a large population of Indian workers in colonial and cosmopolitan Rangoon. The Indian political and economic dominance during British rule eventually resulted in Burmese Buddhist resentment and a ‘colonial trauma’, which help explain certain xenophobic tendencies in Buddhist majority society in the post-colonial period, particularly against Burmese Indians (Egreteau 2011).¹⁶ Furthermore, this has been nurtured and exploited by subsequent political and military leaders in post-independence Burma.

14 For example, Muslims were identified with the imaginary people referred to as ‘Red Jews’ who in German sources (dated between 1200–1600) functioned as the epochal threat to Christianity (Gow 2009).
■ Reference “Gow 2009” is cited in the text but not provided in the Reference list. Please check.

15 Anagarika Dharmapala was under strong European and North American influence: through a British schooling system in Ceylon, as well as through contact with Madam Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. To what extent Blavatsky’s racial teachings informed Dharmapala’s views on Jews and Muslims needs further research.

16 Still, hundreds of thousands of Burmese of Indian background enjoy only limited citizenship rights.

In fact, there is a historical legacy of islamophobia that can be traced back to the early days of the military regime. The regime of General Ne Win (1962–1988) actively engaged in politics of fear to legitimise the regime. For example, the Immigration Department in the early 1980s produced anti-Muslim material. Over the past decades, the anti-Indian rhetoric and anti-Indian state policies (in terms of citizenship laws and nationalisation programs) have taken a clearer anti-Muslim turn, while other Burmese Indian communities of Sikh, Hindu, or Christian background face less discrimination today (Egreteau 2011). During the years of military regime it was the military state—and not Buddhist groups—who made active use of anti-Muslim sentiments,¹⁷ tapping into conspiracies about a Muslim invasion from neighbouring India and Bangladesh. In the Myanmar case therefore, we see how conspiracy theories can be used as a modality of power for authoritarian regimes, not unlike autocratic regimes in the Arab world (Gray 2010).

At the folk level, Asbjørn Dyrendal (2016) notes, conspiracy ‘theory’ tends to live as a set of loosely related notions of agents involved in evil action, often for nebulous, but inner-motivated, reasons. Such dispersed notions of Muslim ‘evilness’ can be identified in Burmese lullabies (for example that the *kalar*—a pejorative term for Muslims—are bogeymen¹⁸), or in popular notions in Sri Lanka of Muslim economic protectionism and world economic leadership through the halal-certification system. Furthermore, Dyrendal, observes, the semi-coherent theories are the work of “conspiracy experts.” Conspiracy rumours tend to stay at the level of experts and interest groups, and only later, when the most common memes are used actively, a deeper commitment to a broader, specific theory may be adopted (Dyrendal 2016: 201).

Exactly how the dispersed anti-Muslim memes of stereotypes and conspiracy rumours came to be integrated into fully fledged theory about a Global Islamic Governance as we see it today remains so far obscure, but analysis of sermons, press statements, or postings on social media all indicate that 969/MaBaTha and BBS monks are crucial producers and transmitters of Buddhist conspiracy theory about Islam. The 969/MaBaTha and the BBS conspiracy theories fit into traditional conspiracy groups in that they are radical ‘nativists’ whose enemy is an evil, subversive power from the outside that has undermined true values and stolen away power and freedom from the ingroup (compare Dyrendal 2016; Gardell 2003). Conspiracy theories serve as explanations of the world’s fallen state, but are in themselves unredemptive. Furthermore,

17 The Buddhist order of monks and nuns, as well as lay Buddhist organisations, was under strict military regulation and surveillance between 1962 and 2011.

18 Field notes and interviews, February 2014.

they require particular forms of action to rectify what has gone wrong, by mobilising ignorant outsiders of the same ethnicity or religious background. The achievement of a Right Buddhist Social Order requires agency and ‘awakening’ of the unknowing majority. This has been transmitted to the general public through sermons, temple networks, social media, or through spectacles (such as public rallies, or even attacks on mosques) in public space. In addition, the actors engage in legal activism to protect Buddhism and to impose restrictions on Muslim religious practice. Such Buddhist legal activism has so far been most successful in Myanmar where, as we have seen, the 969/MaBaTha succeeded in pushing through the four laws to “protect race and religion.”

4 Buddhist Tropes of Global Islamic Expansion

Contemporary Buddhist theories about an Islamic conspiracy to govern the world relate to Buddhist eschatology, calls for protection of the sasana, anti-colonial tropes, myths of deracination, and, in the case of Myanmar, what the Burmese military government produced of anti-Muslim propaganda to consolidate its power. As the analysis below will show, old and new, local and global concerns and issues are interwoven into one, coherent narrative of Islamic expansionism. Furthermore, a close look at anti-Muslim conspiracies reveals that such discourses operate at different levels, serving various interests and concerns: some discourses relate to local business competition, while others portray Muslims and Islam as a security threat to the state.

In the following, I analyse six central tropes in Buddhist theories of a global Islamic conspiracy. The first two—Muslim minorities as local representatives of global conspiratorial forces and Islam as a security threat—are interconnected and concern majority-minority relations, national identities, and transnational religious networks as threat to the modern nation state. The third trope concerns capitalism and market completion, while the latter three consider another aspect of global Islamophobic discourses, namely that there is a plot to spread Islam around the world through population growth, or so-called Demographic Jihad. This in turn can be divided into three subfields according to the means by which Muslims are claimed to use in their Demographic Jihad to eradicate Buddhism: ‘Birth Jihad’, ‘Rape Jihad’, and ‘Love Jihad’.

4.1 *Local Muslims as Representatives of Global Conspiratorial Forces*

Theravada Buddhism’s close relations with the Burmese and Sri Lankan state have made it an ally to modern ethno-nationalism in both countries. Furthermore, Buddhism is identified with the majority ethnic group to the extent that

religious minority identities are often represented as non-national. In spite of a long tradition of peaceful interaction and co-existence (particularly prior to European colonialism), Buddhist conspiracy theories are built on a narrative of an inherent Buddhist-Muslim conflict, which excludes narratives of co-existence, tolerance, and inclusion. At the heart of such conspiracies is the idea that Muslims do not belong to the national community, thus representing something foreign, although the majority of the various Muslim populations in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have been living in these Buddhist majority societies for centuries.¹⁹ Thus, in comparison to Islamophobic discourses in Europe, Buddhist fears of Islam cannot be explained as the result of recent migration and refugee crisis, although the Rohingya issue in Myanmar bears some resemblance to the situation in Europe.

One prominent discourse found in both 969/MaBaTha and BBS material deals with issues of cultural diversity, citizenship, and human rights, portraying Buddhists as 'hosts' and Muslims as 'guests', only accredited with limited minority rights. For example, in public speeches in Colombo during 2013, the BBS argued that it was a global principle that minorities must reside in a country in a way that does not threaten the majority race and its identity, and, moreover, that the Muslims were ungrateful to their Sinhala Buddhist hosts. In an interview in 2014, BBS Chief Executive Officer Dilanthe Withanage claimed that "It is the Sinhala Buddhists who are in danger. We are the ones who live in fear. Our Sinhala Buddhist leaders are helpless due to the vast powers of these so-called minorities."²⁰ Moreover, during sermons, BBS monks have claimed that Muslims in Sri Lanka are like 'greedy ghosts' threatening the majority race and its identity. Such rhetoric neglects Sinhala Buddhists' thousand-year-long peaceful coexistence with the ethnically and linguistically diverse Muslim communities of Sri Lanka.

In Burmese Buddhist discourse, but increasingly also in BBS understanding, the Rakhine state, which borders the populous Muslim state of Bangladesh, is glossed as a frontier state between two distinguishable and separate worlds of Buddhism and Islam. The 969 spokesperson U Wirathu is also closely related to Arakanese Buddhist nationalist organisations in the Rakhine state such as the Arakan Human Rights and Development Organization (AHRDO) and has contributed financially to their report on the conflict in Rakhine state published in 2013. (AHRDO 2013). This report questions the suffering of the Muslim Rohingya population and claims that the real victims are the Rakhine Buddhists. Furthermore, the report claims that "The Muslims are beholden

19 The Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, for example, date back to the 10th centuries.

20 Bodu Bala Sena website, <http://www.bodubalasena.org>. Accessed 12/03/17.

to the insular dictates of their faiths, which does not encourage assimilation ... but upholds expansionism, superiority”(AHRDO 2013: 19). The AHRD goes on to claim that the Rohingya will establish “a purely Islamic land ... cleansed of infidels” (AHRDO 2013: 51). To substantiate this claim, the report points to Pakistan, Libya, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia and argues that local armed groups among the Rohingyas are trained by al-Qaida (82).²¹ Also, the report argues that the Rohingya claim for citizenship is just a means towards establishing an independent Islamic state.²² The notion of Rakhine as a frontier state is also echoed at the government level; according to the information minister of the semi-civilian Thein Sein government, for example, the only hindrance to make a continuous “green belt” of Islam from Saudi Arabia to the Philippines is in fact Myanmar.²³

4.2 *Islam as Security Threat*

Although Buddhist-Muslim coexistence in Sri Lanka is the rule rather than the exception, in Buddhist conspiracy thinking, local Muslims are seen as a threat to national security. While local political contexts are of paramount importance for understanding Buddhist Islamophobia, so too are the global processes that inform the discursive strategies and practices of these movements. Fuelled by new forms of communication, worldwide concerns over the rise of global jihadism, and the subsequent securitisation of Islam, local Muslims in Buddhist societies are increasingly portrayed as a threat to national security. Muslim associations are seen as representatives of international terrorist networks and local agents of Islamic global imperialism. Leading monks have called mosques “enemy bases,” and they have identified the niqab as a direct threat to the state and its territory. The BBS, for example, has published posters that show the island of Sri Lanka as a niqab-dressed woman with evil-red eyes, symbolically identifying the niqab as a direct security threat to the state and its territory.

These posters follow a historical pattern of cartographic representations of the island in which the conflicting parties during the war used such depictions either to promote their own national identity, or to scare people off by enemy symbols. Previously, Sinhala Buddhist patriotic movements had shown the island with a Tiger (the symbol of the LTTE, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

21 It should be noted that like numerous ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, both the Rohingyas and the Arakanese Buddhists have armed groups that since the creation of Burma have fought the Burmese central government in Yangon.

22 1.2 million Rohingyas are denied citizenship in Myanmar and live as stateless persons in the north of the Rakhine state, bordering Bangladesh.

23 Interview with the then Information Minister U Ye Thu, June, 2016, Oslo.

Eelam), pointing to a future in which the LTTE not only controlled parts of the island, but in fact the entire island, including Sinhala majority areas. Sri Lanka as an evil-red niqab-dressed woman follows a particular visual culture that expresses majority fears of extinction, or deracination, by a minority group. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that in post-war Sri Lanka, Islam fills an ideological vacuum in Sinhala nationalism after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009: Islam has replaced the LTTE as the significant 'Other' in Sinhala nationalist ideology.

Buddhist conspiracy theorists have garnered unexpected support by successfully interweaving local concerns with international alarmism. Such global concerns are reproduced to fit local-level social and political contexts. In this process, global discourses on terror seem to be a convenient myth in local competition for power and resources. As previously discussed, Rohingya militant groups in Rakhine are accused of international jihadist connections, even though Rohingya militancy rather must be understood in the local context of ethnic minority resistance to internal Burmese colonialism and state repression.

4.3 *Islamic Economic Expansionism*

One crucial, but all too often neglected aspect of Buddhist anti-Muslim discourses, relates to the economic sphere. Following similar anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish world economic dominance, Buddhist Islamophobic discourses often express grievances about alleged Muslim exploitation of the ethnic majority, trade monopolies, and transnational trade networks (Schontal 2016).²⁴

In Sri Lanka, the BBS monks have been particularly concerned with halal certification and slaughter, and in 2013 one BBS monk even went so far as to self-immolate over the halal issue, the first self-immolation by a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka's history, testifying to the heated debate over halal that surprisingly erupted in 2012. Animal rights are certainly high on the Buddhist agenda (not only among radical political Buddhists), but a closer analysis of the halal controversy in Sri Lanka shows that protection of animals—and the cow in particular—only tells us parts of this story.²⁵ At a press conference in Colombo in 2012, the chief monk of the BBS, Ven. Gnanissara, raised the specific issue of Sinhala-Buddhist business competition, claiming that the

24 As pointed out by Holt (2016), the theme of Muslim exploitation of the rural poor was also prevalent prior to the anti-Muslim riots on 1915.

25 It is beyond the scope here to discuss the cow protection movement, but it should be noted that although the cow has always been important to rural Sri Lanka, cow protection has taken on a political aspect and is related to the strongly anti-Muslim cow protectionist movements in India.

halal-certification system implied unfair treatment of Sinhala shopkeepers as Muslims then would boycott shops with no halal certification. "This is a Sinhala Buddhist country," Ven. Gnanissara argued, "from ancient times the Sinhalese have dominated and assisted the business society to build up and carry out their business. Now these businesses are threatened by these Muslims with the Halal symbol and certification just so they could make a business out of it."²⁶ Furthermore, BBS monks claimed that lay offerings (dana) to Buddhist temples contained goods with halal stamps on them, making the offerings less pure.

Thus high on the Buddhist political agenda in Sri Lanka we find Sinhala-Muslim economic competition, specifically between producers of non-halal and halal food items, product locations in the supermarket shelves, and the extent to which one could offer Buddhist monks food items with halal certification on them. In fact, the BBS explicitly address the concerns of the Sinhala business community. It should also be noted that there have been several attacks on Muslim-owned slaughterhouses, supermarkets, and shops.

Similarly, in Myanmar's environment of rapid economic liberalisation and foreign investment, Buddhist monks, like U Wirathu, have explicitly asked Burmese Buddhists to be loyal to the "Golden Burmese" by buying their goods from Buddhist traders only. During the height of the 969, in 2012, Yangon's market stalls were decorated with 969 stickers, indicating to the customers that the vendors were Buddhists. The very name of 969 could be read as a direct response to what is perceived as Muslim economic protectionism, expressed in the 786 symbol. Moreover, Buddhist monks asked the Buddhist public not to buy products from the Qatar-based telecom company Ooredoo when it established itself in Myanmar in 2012. This kind of protectionism has not come to the fore for example, in relation to the Norwegian-owned Telenor, which dominates the Myanmar telecom market. Thus, foreign investment and trade are perceived as a greater threat when perceived as representing 'Muslim international trade', compared to companies operating from secular/Christian backgrounds.

To what extent business competition can explain anti-Muslim violence, for example in Meiktila in 2013, is an open question. On the one hand, the strongest economic threat to the Burmese Buddhist business community is not the Muslims, but the Chinese, who have not (yet) been attacked. On the other hand, the conflict in Meiktila started as a dispute in a gold shop and involved (in its earliest phases) local actors who had ongoing disputes with the Muslim gold

²⁶ "Bodu Bala Sena press conference on halal certification," 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeJYoWkDVXU&t=1057s>. Accessed 20/02/2012.

shop owner and local Muslim taxi drivers.²⁷ Meiktila is an important location on the trading route between Mandalay and Yangon, and the severe destruction brought upon the Muslim communities there had a damaging effect on Muslim trade in the region. Similarly, Muslim shops were burnt to the ground during the anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka in 2013. Thus, although establishing a causal link between economic competition and anti-Muslim violence is difficult, a consequence of Buddhist-Muslim violent conflict has nonetheless been a weakening of Muslim businesses.

4.4 *Jihad Through Birth*

Changing global demographics and the expected increase in the Muslim population worldwide is another issue of concern to anti-Muslim Buddhist groups. While according to census data there is no significant increase in the Muslim populations of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the alleged growth of the Muslim population is of utmost importance to 969/MaBaTha and the BBS as an increase in the Muslim population is perceived as an existential threat to Buddhism as a social and cultural phenomenon in the world. The BBS argues that Buddhist societies will eventually turn Muslim, not only through external pressure but from changing ratios of Muslims and Buddhists in the population. It is then assumed that this population will be Wahabist and/or jihadist in nature.

To prevent “Buddhists from becoming minority in their own country” (as the slogan goes), radical Buddhist groups have called for family planning policies, even legal regulation of women’s reproductive health. As noted above, at the BBS inaugural meeting in 2012, BBS leaders demanded the government shut down all family planning units in the country so that Sinhala women could produce more babies. Finally, the BBS expressed a concern that a decline in the Sinhala Buddhist population would imply a drop in the number of monastic recruits, as small families are less likely to donate one out of perhaps two children of a small family unit to the order.

In 2012/2013, spurious allegations surfaced accusing Muslim shopkeepers of distributing sweets containing sterilising medications to Sinhala Buddhist women. This seems to be a reversed ‘Birth rate Jihad’ conspiracy, which follows a standard scheme of Muslim males tricking Buddhist women, but which deviates from the standard version of aggressive male sexuality. While it is tempting to rest with an instrumentalist explanation that this is only a wicked trick in local business competition, this trope points to something much

²⁷ Interviews with Buddhist monks in Meiktila who were engaged in humanitarian assistance of the Muslim and Buddhist communities suffering from the violence, Meiktila, May 2015.

larger, namely the alleged decline in the Sinhala Buddhist population and the increase in the Muslim population. While religious demographic competition is crucial to Buddhist conspiracy theories, I have not been able to identify this conspiracy rumour of Muslim sterilisation of Buddhist women elsewhere, although it should be noted that the general topic is recurrent in conspiracy rumour elsewhere, for example in Nigeria concerning Western sterilisation of Muslims through polio vaccines (for example Samba *et al.* 2004; Kaler 2009).

4.5 *Rape Jihad*

The trope of 'demographic jihad' emphasises the (alleged) growth in the Muslim population, either in absolute numbers through high birth rates, or in relative numbers through decline in the Buddhist population. A connected, but slightly different aspect of this, is the trope of jihad through rape. Here the emphasis is not on the possibility of Muslim reproduction through rape, but on the violation of the Buddhist female body. When violence erupted in the Rakhine state in 2012, between Muslim Rohingyas and Arakanese Buddhists, this came after allegations of rape and murder of a local Buddhist girl by three Muslim men. The rape and death of Thida Htway was soon turned into a symbol of what was now portrayed as general male Muslim aggression against Buddhist women, turning the female Buddhist body into an object for Buddhist nationalism. Pictures of Thida Htway's dead body also feature in the aforementioned report by the AHRDO and even on posters on U Wirathu's temple wall in Mandalay.²⁸

While the nexus between rape allegations and anti-Muslim violence is hard to prove, several scholars have observed how U Wirathu has posted reports of alleged rape of Buddhist women by Muslim males prior to incidents of communal violence, for example before the violence in Meiktila in 2013 and the violence in Mandalay in June 2014. U Wirathu has shown a particular concern for these rape cases; he has even carried out his own investigations about rape in Myanmar. His conclusion is that all rape cases in Myanmar are carried out by Muslims. According to U Wirathu: "There are lots of difficulties due to the Muslims, they cause problems. They rape Burmese Buddhist women in many towns and cities. They rape teenagers and children under age."²⁹

Sexuality and reproduction are core themes in Buddhist conspiracy theory about Islam. Like in Hindu nationalism, women are portrayed as passive and innocent victims and female bodies are considered as markers of communal identities. This theme is also prevalent in European Islamophobic discourses,

²⁸ Field notes, June 2014 and June 2015.

²⁹ Interview with author, translated from English to Burmese, Mandalay, June 1, 2015.

for example in Stop Islamisation of Norway (SIAN), which portrays Islam as an imminent threat to (relative) gender equality. In addition, there is also a very specific ultra-nationalist gender politics at work, wherein the ‘Muslim invaders’ are portrayed as a “hypermasculine violent threat to white and virtuous Norwegian females left unprotected by Norwegian men emasculated by state feminism” (Bangstad 2017: 161). ■ Reference “Bangstad 2017” is cited in the text but not provided in the Reference list. Please check. State feminism is far from the issue in Myanmar, but the trope of hypermasculinity and violent intrusion is similar. At one level, one could read the importance of rape in Buddhist nationalist discourse as a metaphor for what many Buddhists see as a Muslim intrusion from the outside into a country that was closed from the outside world for more than fifty years, and which the monks themselves consider to be the Buddhist heartland. Furthermore, when allegations of rape occur in Rakhine, it functions as a catalyst for geopolitics in the region regarding stateless persons, illegal immigration, refugees, and border disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Connected to the notion of ‘rape jihad’, then, is the notion of Rakhine as a frontier state between the Muslim Bangladesh and the Buddhist Myanmar. Rape of Buddhist women in Rakhine by Muslim men (who are seen as illegal immigrants) is seen as indicative of Muslim expansionism into the pure Buddhist heartland.

4.6 *Love Jihad*

Another aspect of the alleged Islamisation of Buddhist women in Myanmar relates to Buddhist-Muslim marriages and the idea that Muslim males force their Buddhist spouses to become Muslim. ‘Love Jihad’ refers to a claimed Islamist conspiracy whereby Muslim men trick non-Muslim women into marriage as a means to spread Islam. Love jihad is a tool for Islamisation of Buddhist women by their Muslim husbands. From this perspective, mixed marriages are conceptualised as a means of conversion and thus represent a danger to the very survival of Buddhism.

This trope also contains claims of Muslim male aggression, but differs from rape jihad in that it nurtures a picture of Muslim men as Janus-faced: on the surface the ordinary Muslim men might be gentle and generous, but once marriage is a reality the hidden evil nature of Muslim men will surface. For example, according to U Wirathu, Buddhist women are allured into marrying Muslim men, and once married they are forced to convert to Islam:

The women are very vulnerable (in marriage). The man pretends to be Buddhist, and then she is allured into Islam and she is forced to wear burqa. Some women are tortured if she continues the practices of her religion. If she is pregnant, she will be mistreated until miscarriage.

In one case, a woman was even killed. If a woman of another religion marries a Muslim man she loses all her religious freedom and all her human rights ... Then they are forced to commit sacrilege, for example to step on Buddha images. They force Buddhist women to sin ... When we as monks give sermons we inform laypeople about these stories so that they can shy away from Muslim males.³⁰

Crucial to the narrative of Buddhist-Muslim marriage is Muslim male aggression, and the 969 has organised a series of public events to document such cases, through presentation of “real life stories.” In such events, the identified Buddhist victim is interviewed by a Buddhist monk in front of a Buddhist audience.

One such event was written down and published in the form of a booklet that was distributed by U Wirathu and his monastic and lay supports in Mandalay during 2013 and 2014.³¹ In this text we are introduced to a story called “The victim’s voice who just escaped from Tigers,” which relates how a Burmese Buddhist woman called Ma War War Myint left her Muslim husband. Her story—a testimony of severe domestic violence—is framed within a Buddhist-Muslim dichotomy and conceptualised as a case of violations of the right to freedom of religion and violations of women’s rights. In the text, a binary dichotomy is constructed: ‘Islam–violence–unfree’ versus ‘Buddhism–non-violence–freedom’. In this narrative of violence and suffering, Buddhist monks are portrayed as rescuers of women who escape religious persecution, which can be said to represent a new dimension of the monastic role. Finally, ‘Muslim’ is referred to in the pejorative ‘dark’ (kalar) and juxtaposed to being a Myanmar citizen, underscoring the anomalous position of Muslims in the Buddhist Right Social Order as expressed in Buddhist conspiracy theory.

5 Political Contexts of Buddhist Islamophobia

Why did the new anti-Muslim Buddhist protectionist movements come to surface at this particular point in time? As previously discussed, anti-Muslim sentiments filled an ideological vacuum in post-war Sri Lanka. Furthermore, anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence clearly serves national political interests.

30 Personal interview, translated from Burmese to English, June 1, 2015.

31 Her story was recorded at a public meeting on October 22, 2012 and published in *Human Rights Violations by Human Rights Activist*, pamphlet circulated by U Wirathu in Mandalay during 2014. Undated.

The authoritarian Rajapaksa regime (2005–2015) in Sri Lanka built its legitimacy around victory in the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) under the banner of Buddhist nationalism. Buttressed by the regime's protective wings, various Buddhist nationalist groups, among them the BBS, came into being, and thrived.

In Myanmar, the political context was different, as anti-Muslim sentiments flourished under political liberalisation and transition towards democracy. During the years of the military-dominated transitional regime (2011–2016) the 969/MaBaTha received tacit support from the State Sangha Maha Nayaka (a state body to oversee the Sangha in Myanmar), as well as protection and support from the regime. For example, it was President Thein Sein who issued a ban on the *Time* issue featuring U Wirathu, calling him a good son of the Buddha. Therefore, the 'evil state' of the military regime was commonly seen as the source of anti-Muslim attacks, implying politically orchestrated violence between different religious communities. This violence benefits authoritarian regimes by giving them an excuse for curfews or even military intervention.

Political parties also deliberately use Buddhist concerns and hate speech against religious minorities to gain votes among religious majorities. Such processes were discernible in Myanmar prior to the 2015 elections. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) formed various alliances with the 969/MaBaTha monks and strongly backed the monks' laws "to protect race and religion." USDP politicians likewise donated large sums to high-ranking 969/MaBaTha monks during the election campaign, while MaBaTha circulated flyers encouraging voters to vote for parties (most importantly the USDP) that supported their laws preventing Islamisation. Also, one could argue that the idea discussed above of a 'green belt' of Islamic expansionism pressing its way through Myanmar—embodied and materialised as 'illegal immigration' from Bangladesh—plays a particular role in the current political transition. The 969/MaBaTha concern for Rakhine conflates Arakanese and Burmese Buddhist nationalisms, ignoring centuries old Arakanese Buddhist resistance to Burmese Buddhist rule. In this respect, ethnic difference among Buddhists in Myanmar is downplayed while boundaries based on religious difference are intensified.

However, after the Aung San Suu Kyi's electoral victory in 2015 the political climate for Buddhist protectionist movements has changed again. The MaHaNa sought to distance itself as the tide of the public opinion started to turn against these movements. In 2017 after numerous controversial statements, including public support to the assassins of U Ko Ni (the country's leading constitutional lawyer who also happened to be Muslim), the MaHaNa banned U Wirathu from preaching for a year (Htun 2017).

Although the political contexts in Sri Lanka and Myanmar are very different, it remains a fact that there are strong connections between authoritarian regimes and Buddhist groups and actors that transmit conspiracy theories. It should also be noted that in many post-colonial fragile (or even failed) states, rumours and conspiracies form part of ordinary political life. During military rule in Myanmar in particular, hearsay (*kola-ha*) was (and to some extent still is) the main form of political communication among state agents, political leaders, and the public. As elite politics is marked by secrecy and corruption, conspiracy theory about hidden plots and plans of the political and economic elites is considered a legitimate form of knowledge. When conspiracy theory is directed against minorities with little or no political influence (but occasionally economic power) it no longer functions as legitimate critique of power, but rather as a scapegoating strategy for the majority. In the early years of the 969 and the MaBaTha, it was inconceivable to many pro-democracy activists that Buddhist monks, who were held in such high esteem, could engage in hate speech against Muslims. Therefore, an explanation given for the rise of 969 and the MaBaTha in 2013 and 2014 was that these groups were created by the military itself. What we see then is a Buddhist conspiracy theory about hidden military plot to create Buddhist anti-Muslim conspiracy theory about global Islamic expansion. While research on the roots of the 969 movement indicate the involvement of military personnel in the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Frydenlund 2017; Kyaw 2016), as well as 969/MaBaTha-military relations, it is all too simplistic to reduce this to a military conspiracy to undermine civil society and democratic forces in Myanmar.

6 Conclusion: Global Islamophobia and Its Buddhist Vicissitudes

In many regards, the BBS and the 969/MaBaTha fit the classic pattern of neo-traditionalism (or fundamentalism) here defined as the wish to work against the institutional differentiation brought about by colonial rule, modernity, and secularisation. As such, all three of them fit a classic pattern of Buddhist protectionist movements, which thrive in times of rapid social and political change and subsequent ontological insecurity. There are, however, some important developments compared to previous movements. First, the new Buddhist protectionist movements have Islam and Muslim as their main 'Other', and to a much lesser extent Christianity. Second, the current rise in global Islamophobia also informs local expressions of Buddhist Islamophobia; new social media allows for a rapid transmission of tropes and themes in what can be seen as a global Islamophobic intertextuality. Third, unlike previous movements, which were closely

attached to ethno-nationalism and state-building in the post-colonial era, the new protectionist movements are more outward looking. It is my contention that these groups represent a novelty in that they transcend boundaries of the nation-state. The early stages of this process are seen in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by BBS and 969 in Colombo in 2014. According to the MoU there are “subtle incursions taking place under the guise of secular, multi-cultural, and other liberal notions ... funded from overseas ... subtly spreading into local situations” (*Colombo Telegraph* 2014). Thus, there is not only a global Islamic conspiracy to undermine Buddhism, but also a global liberal and secular order that will assist the growth of non-Buddhist religions—that is, Islam. The future strength of these collaborative efforts is still unclear, but the MoU’s signing indicates a stronger recognition of shared Buddhist political interests across the region. It also indicates a move from locally embedded ethnoreligious identities to a more clearly defined regional Buddhist political identity, which imbues their anti-Muslim message with greater importance as well as urgency.

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