

BOOK REVIEW

Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim–Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging

Edited by MELISSA CROUCH (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), xx + 345 pp. Price HB £31.99. EAN 978–0199461202.

Ongoing Muslim–Buddhist tensions in Southeast Asia may turn aggressive in the near future and lead to the rise of an Asian Islamophobia in the form of Buddhist religious nationalism. This phenomenon, already a reality in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, is spreading elsewhere. The intimidation in those states of Muslim minority communities could make the Buddhist minority communities in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei vulnerable to retaliatory Muslim ethno-racism and discrimination.

The rise of religious nationalisms in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia needs to be understood against the backdrop of colonial era politics in the region which dismantled patterns of coexistence between the local Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus despite differences based in languages and affiliations. The last of the Dhammarajas of Sri Lanka Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1780–1832) and Burma Thibaw Min (1859–1916) were exiled by the British to colonial India. The last Mughal emperor was exiled to Rangoon, Burma. They all died outside their kingdoms. The small Indo-Malay kingdoms were dismantled, which prompted many of the Southeast Asian ulema to flee, some to the Hijaz. These events shattered Muslim–Buddhist relations, which have remained largely unrepaired and a factor behind the emerging Buddhist–Muslim turmoil in Asia.¹

The arguments of the essays in the book under review need to be read also against the background of local histories and networks in the Southeast Asia–Indian Ocean region as a whole. There are sectarian tensions and differences, with political and territorial effects, in the Buddhist, Muslim, and other religious communities. And there are narratives or myths that opposed communities have retained about each other which recent scholarship has challenged or shown to

¹ See Sudha Shah, *The King in Exile* (HarperCollins, 2015); Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace: A Novel* (Random House, repr. 2002); C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century: Daily Life, Customs and Learning. The Moslems of the East-Indian Archipelago* (Brill, 2nd edn., 2006); Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern ‘Ulama’ in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Francis R. Bradley *et al.*, *Forging Islamic Power and Place: The Legacy of Shaykh Daud Bin ‘Abd Allah Al-Fatani in Mecca and Southeast Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

be false.² Readers of the book under review will also need some knowledge of recent history. Useful in this respect are Jean A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2008), and Kin Oung, *Who Killed Aung San?* (Bangkok: White Lotus, [1993] 1996).

Melissa Crouch deserves high appreciation for putting together a collection of properly academic studies on the state of Islam in Myanmar, which is currently under intense international scrutiny on account of the Rohingya crisis.

The book opens with a comprehensive introduction by the editor which sets out the Muslim mosaic in Myanmar. This mosaic comprises four groups: 1) Indian Muslims known as Chulias, Kaka and Pathans, who were brought in by British colonizers to administer the colony. They resided largely in the colonial capital city of Yangon which at one time was 56% Indian; 2) the Pathi or Zerbadee are the Burmese-Muslim offspring of the intermarriage of Persian/Indian Muslim men and Burmese/other women. They see themselves as different from other Muslim groups both racially and culturally and as closer to Buddhist Burmese, both ethnically and culturally; 3) Panthay or Hui Muslims of Chinese background also remain culturally Chinese, engaging in business and trading occupations. They mostly migrated from the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan during the thirteenth century and again in 1949 when fleeing Chinese communist persecution. They have largely settled around the northern city of Mandalay; and 4) the Rohingya, now numbering around one million, are natives of the Rakhine state, formerly the Arakan Kingdom. The Rohingya, also known as the Arakan Muslims, have a long historical presence in the modern nation-state of Burma.

In her second essay in the book, 'Personal Law and Colonial Legacy: State-Religion Relations and Islamic Law in Myanmar', Crouch goes beyond the earlier studies of Moshe Yegar and M. B. Hooker.³ She examines in particular the status of Muslim Personal Law in Myanmar's legal system.

² See, for example, Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, repr. 1996). For critical refutations of such notions see Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003); Imtiyaz Yusuf, 'Islam and Buddhism: Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo', *The Muslim World*, 100/2–3 (2010): 177–86; id., 'Muslim-Buddhist Relations Caught between Nalanda and Pattani' in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in Buddhist Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2015).

³ Moshe Yegar (an Israeli diplomat stationed in Ragoon/Yangon in the 1960s produced the first documented research on the Rohingya, describing them as insurgents), *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lexington Books, 2002). See also Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Harrassowitz, 1972); M. B. Hooker, *Islamic Law in South-East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1984); id. (ed.), *Islam in South-East Asia* (Brill, repr. 1997).

The following essays by Michael Farrelly, Judith Beyer and Phyu Phyu Oo respectively discuss the social dimension of Muslim life in Myanmar, focusing on 1) the political activities of the Muslims and their diminishing political representation; 2) the effects of the changing urban property laws in the Muslim enclave of Yangon city; and 3) the distinctively different educational and social roles of the womenfolk among the Indian Muslim and Burmese Muslim communities and their challenges to the religious leaders of these communities. Nyi Nyi Kyaw surveys the history of the rise of the Burmese Buddhist Islamophobia and racism in the form of the Ma Ba Tha-969 movement and its anti-Muslim violence. Matt Schissler discusses the role of new technologies in the formation of narratives about the Muslim threat in Myanmar. Benjamin Schonthal probes the rising transnational Theravada Buddhist Islamophobic alliance between the Myanmarese and the Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalists which could become viral and dangerous for the future of Southeast Asia. Alistair D. B. Cook explores global and regional humanitarian aid to the conflict ridden Rakhine state—an issue which is becoming ever more critical as the conflict turns more violent. In the last chapter, Clark B. Lombardi discusses the political conditions of postcolonial Myanmar that lie behind our current state of little knowledge and information about Myanmar's Muslim communities. He raises the pertinent question: what can contemporary Muslim communities, governments, and the international community as a whole, do to improve human security conditions for Myanmar's Muslims?

In view of the recent rise of a new Rohingya resistance group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which is currently engaged in guerilla warfare with the Burmese army, there does not seem to be much chance of a resolution of the Rohingya issue or much hope for repair of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Myanmar. The current situation may have grave global ramifications. (See Ibrahim Azeem, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* [London: Hurst, 2016].)

Some commentators have suggested that resource-rich Myanmar will become the 'new Afghanistan'—a new geopolitical battleground for competition and control of its resources between America, China and India. The besieged Rakhine (Arakan) state has rich gas fields and the Arakan coastline abundant oil hydrocarbons. This geopolitical contest offers incentives enough for the beginnings of a new war, this time between Islam and Buddhism, the two main religions of Southeast Asia.

The ever changing scenario of Buddhist-Muslim political relations in Myanmar makes the critical essays in this book an impressive reference work on Myanmar in transition. It should be read and consulted by specialists in religious studies, Asian studies, international relations, global theory, as well as by policy makers.

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