

**Myanmar Plan to Curb Interfaith Marriage Gains Support**  
*Radical Buddhist Group Gathers Signatures Under Monk's Auspices*  
By Shibani Mahtani  
21 July 2013

YANGON—Moves to curb interfaith marriage in Myanmar—designed to keep the country's Muslim minority away from Buddhist women—are gaining traction, with a radical monk who has spearheaded the movement saying he has gathered broad support for the proposals he put forth weeks ago. A draft of the law, which has circulated across Myanmar for two weeks, would mandate that Buddhist women seek official permission before marrying a man of another faith, or her marriage would be deemed illegal. It also includes a clause that the man must convert to Buddhism.

New bills or laws in Myanmar can only be put forth by parliamentarians, but the monk and his supporters are using the number of signatories, which they claim to be 3 million, to try to prove mass support for the proposals. They will later take this petition to members of parliament.

"This is the biggest gap in Myanmar law," said the 45-year-old Venerable Wirathu, who leads the radical Buddhist 969 movement, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal. "We must protect Buddhist women from Muslim men, who lie to them, force them to convert, and do not allow them to practice their religion freely."

In sermons to thousands of adoring devotees, the monk, who has been involved with the anti-Muslim movement since 2000 but emerged as its leader in 2012, likens Muslims to dogs or parasites that threaten to engulf the country's Buddhists.

His proposals come as members of Myanmar's Muslim minority—roughly 5% of the country's 60 million people—find themselves increasingly isolated and vilified. Sectarian clashes over the past year have unearthed and intensified deep-seated tensions between the two religious communities, fueled by newfound freedom of speech under Myanmar's nominally civilian government.

Muslims were overwhelmingly victims of the bloody clashes, with more than 200 of them killed and 146,000 others displaced. The Buddhist 969 movement is attracting thousands more followers as he takes his message around the country, advocating the social exclusion of Myanmar's Muslims that he hopes will soon be cemented in the country's laws.

"The Muslims assault our women," said Khin Mar Lar, a supporter of Buddhist 969 and the draft law. "It is more important to preserve Buddhist national rights in Myanmar, before we talk about human rights," she said.

Ko Ko Latt, a Muslim businessman and spokesman for the All-Myanmar Muslim Organization, a civil-society group, said, "Previously they were burning our homes, killing our people, but the international community is watching that so they seem to have stopped. Now they are looking at systematic discrimination against us, by using the law." While Mr. Ko Ko Latt said that the 969 movement and its followers continue to worry the Muslim community—particularly small-business owners, whose shops and restaurants are boycotted by an increasing number of Buddhists—he is confident in Myanmar's democratic system, and believes the marriage curbs won't pass.

The proposed laws represent a mounting challenge to Myanmar's stability, even as President [Thein Sein](#) promises the international community that his government is committed to reconciliation between the two groups.

A report released last week by U.K.-based risk consultancy Maplecroft lists sectarian tensions between Buddhists and Muslims as one of the biggest risks facing Myanmar, driven "by an extremist Buddhist monk movement using the number 969—which signifies the three core Buddhist tenets—to systematically discriminate against Muslim traders and agitate the Muslim population." The report adds that "all Muslims [in Myanmar] are all at risk of violence, regardless of their ethnic group."

Myanmar authorities and analysts are also growing concerned that Islamist elements from the region will react to the Venerable Wirathu's teachings with hostility, calling their supporters to wage jihad against the monk and his supporters for their treatment of Muslims. Risk consultancy Maplecroft, in the same report released last week, says while there is no immediate threat of armed resistance among Myanmar's Muslim community, "this could change in the medium term if external Islamist elements decide to...radicalise a critical mass of the population."

Meanwhile, police said Monday that [they were investigating an explosion that went off near the Venerable Wirathu](#) as he was giving a sermon in Myanmar's second largest city, wounding five people slightly, according to media reports. The cause of the blast wasn't immediately known.

Myanmar has relatively lax security at its airports, particularly compared with regional neighbors Indonesia and Singapore. In a recent visit to a monastery in Yangon, just half an hour from its crowded downtown area, the Venerable Wirathu was not traveling in a motorcade and did not have any bodyguards. Dozens of supporters mobbing the monk were able to take photos of him with ease.

Speaking in London this month, Mr. Thein Sein said these tensions could undermine the country's overhauls and vowed to punish perpetrators of this violence, both Buddhist and Muslim. He pledged a "zero tolerance" approach to those who fuel ethnic hatred.

Analysts and civil society groups say the leader's comments show the government is starting to respond to criticism that Muslims are being blamed almost solely for the violence even though they are also largely the victims.

But even as Myanmar's executive branch promises to ensure minority rights are protected, some lawmakers have embraced the Venerable Wirathu's teachings. The monk says members of the opposition National Democratic Forces in Parliament have helped collect signatures for the proposed marriage curbs and claims he also has strong support from Mr. Thein Sein's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The National Democratic Forces told The Wall Street Journal this month that some of its politicians supported the marriage curbs and were campaigning for the Venerable Wirathu, but that it wasn't official party policy. The government didn't respond to a request for comment. "We are now a democratic society, and once we put this bill into Parliament, democracy will decide the percentage of votes it gets," said the Venerable Wirathu, surrounded by dozens of followers at a monastery on the outskirts of Myanmar's commercial capital, Yangon. "I have 100% confidence that it will pass."

Observers say they worry, though, that the country's monks are abusing their religious authority, compelling thousands to support discriminatory laws they don't fully understand. On a recent campaign drive to collect signatures in support of the marriage curbs, monks and proponents of the 969 movement were asking rural residents to sign the law to "show that they support Buddhism," without explaining details of the proposals to them.

"I don't know the exact details of the law, or what information is in it," said Mya Aye, a 59-year-old Buddhist woman who signed the petition in support of the marriage curbs. "But I am Buddhist, and these Buddhist leaders say it is a good law."

In coming weeks, campaigners will take their message of social exclusion to the heart of Yangon's downtown, where thousands of Muslims are concentrated. Security forces, who sometimes trail the campaigners—often covertly—say they worry that large groups of radical Buddhist supporters could spark more clashes. Previous instances of sectarian violence in Myanmar, including bloody riots in Meikthila that left more than 40 dead in March, happened days after the Venerable Wirathu visited, though he denies any responsibility for the clashes.

In past weeks, local authorities have sometimes threatened to arrest or detain those campaigning for the marriage curbs, because they are doing so without requisite permits. These campaigners, so far limited to rural areas, will likely face sizable opposition to their proposals in downtown Yangon, particularly in Muslim-heavy areas.

"We have heard about these proposals, and it makes it very worried," said Aung Aung, a Muslim resident of Yangon. "[Supporters of the 969 movement] are spreading wrong information about our religious group, and we will try to tell our Buddhist friends not to sign this petition."

Still, supporters of the Venerable Wirathu, whose real name is Wiseitta Biwuntha, are defiant.

"We don't expect any trouble even if we campaign in areas where there are many Muslims," said Phoe Thar, a campaigner pushing for the interfaith marriage law. "This is Burma—we are the majority, after all."

—Myo Myo contributed to this article.

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