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Hyper-nationalists celebrate four 'race and religion' laws

Myanmar Times (15.09.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/45014/> - The legislative package, which sped through the normal parliamentary slog in under a year, enacts measures that have been slammed by rights advocates for perpetuating gender and religious discrimination. The laws prohibit polygamy, force people to seek government approval before converting, restrict interfaith marriage and "organise" family planning with a 36-month birth spacing stipulation.

Ma Ba Tha, the organisation that put forward the controversial bills and is widely seen as an anti-Muslim pressure group, plans to hold festivities in every state and region to honour the lawmakers who supported the bills. Marches and rallies are already set for Magwe and Mandalay regions, according to the group's Facebook page.

The celebrations started yesterday morning as members of Ma Ba Tha and hundreds of supporters gathered in the west of Shwedagon Pagoda. A procession of vehicles then headed to Pidakat Thone Bone Nikae monastery in South Dagon township, blaring nationalist songs along the route to mark the victory. Comedian Anyain – who secured a K 2.5 million contract for the event – entertained the revelers in the afternoon after a short presentation about the laws.

While opponents have criticised the controversial bills for violating human rights and ostracising minorities, the accusations are baseless, said U Aye Paing, a legal consultant for Ma Ba Tha.

"If we responded to all the criticisms, we would never be able to finish arguing. So instead, we proceeded to implement the correct actions," he said.

He added that the four laws are aimed at protecting Buddhist women, so if non-Buddhist women desire protection they should convert.

The celebrations will next head to Mon State and in two weeks a victory ceremony will be held on the full moon of Tawthalin when supporters will circle back to Yangon, U Aye Paing said.

As the celebrations gear up, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo condemned the law for "institutionalising and mainstreaming extremist ideologies".

"That these four bills were conceived not by the elected representatives of the Myanmar people, but by an extra constitutional fringe element – with its hate speech, packaging

primordial anxieties into a national agenda for parliamentarians and the President – is a dangerous portent for the fledgling democracy,” the cardinal said in a statement.

The UN-backed Center for Diversity and National Harmony released a situation report that flagged the nationalist celebrations as evidence of how religion has become “highly intertwined” in the elections process, fueling the possibility of religious tensions boiling over.

“Given the increasingly evident role of religion in the election, any incidents stemming from malpractice between parties could conceivably degenerate into religious incidents, making their avoidance essential,” the situation report said, adding that Ma Ba Tha’s celebrations should be “closely monitored”.

USCIRF condemns passage of religious conversion bill

USCIRF (24.08.2015) - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) strongly condemns the passage by Burma’s Union Parliament of the religious conversion bill. This bill is one measure in a package of “race and religion bills” which a group of nationalist Buddhist monks have advanced. Each discriminates against and restricts the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims, and diminishes women’s rights.

“By word and deed, Burma’s government continues to further entrench and legalize discrimination based on religious beliefs and sex,” said USCIRF Chairman Robert P. George. *“Burma’s leaders once again have disregarded internationally agreed human rights standards. The government claims that these bills protect women and religion, but civil society groups in Burma have exposed them for what they are – tools the government uses to continue to violate the freedom of religion and related human rights,”* said Chairman George.

Under the religious conversion bill, individuals choosing to adopt another faith confront special bureaucratic hurdles – including requiring applicants to provide extensive and intrusive personal information, to receive “approval,” thereby creating a system that effectively would discourage and reject conversions.

“This measure is discriminatory, period. It is gravely wrong for the government to presume to dictate whether an individual can change their religion or belief,” said Chairman George. *“We call on President Thein Sein immediately to reject this ill-conceived measure.”*

One of the extremist movements led by a group of nationalist Buddhist monks, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion – also known as Ma Ba Tha, created the race and religion bills and has been pushing the government to adopt them ever since. USCIRF has criticized these efforts. Burma’s government has failed to implement meaningful protections for religious and ethnic minorities, and instead has adopted politically expedient discriminatory measures, such as the population control law and interfaith marriage law.

USCIRF again recommended in 2015 that Burma be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999, most recently in July 2014.

Myanmar passes extreme religion bills targeting marginalized Muslim population

Think Progress (21.08.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/44880/> - Myanmar's parliament passed two bills on Thursday that are widely believed to offer further legal cover to the country's harsh policies toward its Rohingya Muslim population. Proposed by hardline Buddhist nationalists who claim that their traditions are threatened by the country's Muslims, the bills regulate religious conversion and polygamy.

While details about the bills have not yet been released, advocates believe the measures targeting the country's Rohingya, who are denied citizenship despite the fact that many of them have lived in Myanmar for generations.

"These discriminatory draft laws risk fanning the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment," Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, told ThinkProgress in an email.

The bills are particularly vexing ahead elections which are slated for early November.

"Parliament has not only shown disregard for basic human rights norms, but turned up the heat on Burma's tense intercommunal relations and potentially put an already fragile transition at risk, with landmark elections right around the corner," Roberston added.

The election is expected to be the freest and fairest seen in Myanmar for decades. The country has been transitioning from military rule towards democracy since 2011.

Aung San Suu Kyi, an opposition leader and Nobel Laureate who lived under house arrest for 15 years, is expected to win the upcoming elections.

While she is widely seen as an advocate for democracy in the country, she has remained largely silent on the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya population. While many believe she has not addressed the issue for fear of alienating voters ahead of the election, others, including the Dalai Lama, have urged her to take a decisive stance on the matter.

While Myanmar has opened up to foreign businesses and visitors and allowed for increased press freedoms in recent years, it has continued to persecute the ethnic Rohingya through a series of discriminatory laws. Myanmar has limited the number of children the Rohingya can have to two and restricted the frequency of their pregnancies to one every three years. Hundreds of Rohingya have been killed in religion-fueled violence, and 140,000 have abandoned their homes to live in "apartheid-like" conditions. Over the course of the last year, tens of thousands of them have fled Myanmar on dangerous, often over-crowded boats.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has deemed the treatment of the Rohingya to constitute early warning signs of genocide.

"We've seen a deterioration in the living conditions of the Rohingya [after 2012]," Naomi Kikoler of the Holocaust Memorial Museum told ThinkProgress in May. "What is so particularly concerning right now is the very public and overt discriminatory practices of the government, but also the very virulent hate speech that's being espoused by religious leaders."

Authorities in Myanmar set "Rakhine State Action Plan" into motion last year, and as such have given Rohingya people a choice between accepting second-class status as "Bengali" residents of Myanmar, or be forced into government-built camps.

"It's a perfectly oiled plan," one unnamed Rohingya activist told France 24. They want to get rid of the entire Rohingya population. This is just like Hitler and the Nazis: they used the concentration camps to exterminate the Jews of Europe. Here, the first step is to force us to live in these camps in Arakan, and then it'll be death."

Dalai Lama urges Myanmar pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi to speak out for Rohingya Muslims

AP (28.05.2015) - The Dalai Lama has urged Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's pro-democracy icon and a fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to speak out to protect her country's persecuted Rohingya Muslims amid a human trafficking crisis, a newspaper reported Thursday.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, told The Australian newspaper that the world cannot ignore the plight of the more than 3,000 desperate migrants who have landed on the shores of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand in recent weeks, often abandoned by human traffickers or freed after their families paid ransoms.

"It's not sufficient to say: 'How to help these people?'" the newspaper quoted him as saying in an interview in the Indian hill town where he lives in exile. "This is not sufficient. There's something wrong with humanity's way of thinking. Ultimately we are lacking concern for others' lives, others' wellbeing."

The refugees are a mixture of poor Bangladeshis in search of work and Rohingya Muslims fleeing widespread persecution from Myanmar's Buddhist majority. The Dalai Lama said he had discussed the Rohingya in earlier meetings with Suu Kyi.

"I mentioned about this problem and she told me she found some difficulties, that things were not simple but very complicated," he was quoted as saying. "But in spite of that I feel she can do something."

Suu Kyi became an international hero during her years of house arrest for speaking out against the generals who long ruled Myanmar. She entered politics after her 2010 release, when the junta handed over power to a nominally civilian government.

In a predominantly Buddhist country where there is much animosity toward the Rohingya Muslims, she has remained silent about their persecution.

She now says she never sought to be a human rights champion. Critics say that defending the Rohingya could cost her support if she runs for president.

Myanmar court finds trio guilty of insulting religion

BBC News (17.03.2015) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31918269> - A New Zealander and two Burmese men have been found guilty of insulting religion in Myanmar over a poster promoting a drinks event depicting Buddha with headphones.

Philip Blackwood, who managed the VGastro Bar in Yangon, was arrested in December along with bar owner Tun Thurein and colleague Htut Ko Ko Lwin.

They have each been sentenced to two and a half years in jail.

Burmese law makes it illegal to insult or damage any religion.

The poster, which was posted on Facebook to advertise a cheap drinks night, showed Buddha surrounded by psychedelic colours. It sparked an angry response online.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has seen growing Buddhist nationalism in recent years.

All three men had denied insulting religion during their trial. Tun Thurein told the court that Blackwood alone was responsible for the posting. Blackwood had said sorry online and repeated his apology in court.

But the judge, Ye Lwin, said that though Blackwood apologised, he had "intentionally plotted to insult religious belief" when he uploaded the poster on Facebook, reported AFP news agency.

Blackwood, 32, said he planned to appeal against the sentence.

Speaking after sentencing outside the court before being bundled into a car, he said that he was "pretty disappointed" with his punishment, which was "more than the maximum sentence".

"I have said that I was sorry so many times," he said. "It was nothing to do with me."

Before sentencing he said that he had removed the image and posted an apology when he realised it was being shared online and provoking outrage.

The New Zealander's family say they hope the government will intervene to deport him.

Blackwood's lawyer, Mya Tway, was careful with his assessment of the ruling which has been welcomed by some Buddhist groups.

"It will be difficult to say whether this verdict is fair or not because this is Myanmar, not like other democratic countries. That's all I can say," he said.

Human Rights Watch Deputy Asia Director Phil Robertson said that the three men acted in a culturally insensitive way but should not have been sent to prison.

"By using the Religion Act to criminalise these three individuals, rather than accepting an apology and dealing with it in another way, the government is, sort of, setting up more witch hunts against persons that these Buddhist groups view as being insulting to their religion," he said.

Mr Robertson said that freedom of expression in Myanmar is under greater threat than ever as the country heads into a pivotal election year.

While free speech in Myanmar has improved under the country's semi-civilian government, Buddhist nationalism has been on the rise in recent years, with extremist monks such as Wirathu growing in popularity. At the same time and Muslim minorities have been targeted, particularly in Rakhine state.

About 90% of Myanmar's population is Buddhist.

Religious persecution in Myanmar persists despite reforms

The Huffington Post (17.02.2015) - Despite democratic reforms and international pressure that have pushed Myanmar to improve its human rights record in recent years, religious freedom remains heavily constrained across the country.

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in this majority Buddhist country has attracted much international media and foreign policy attention. But in Chin State, along Myanmar's northwest border, a predominantly Christian population faces its own challenges and restrictions.

"There is no improvement with regard to religious freedom in Chin State," said Pu Zoe Ram, chairman of the Chin National Democratic Party. "Authorities destroyed crosses during the military regime and continue to do so."

Teak and steel crosses atop clocktowers, hillsides and Chin State's nearly 2,000 churches have long identified the local majority religion. Area Christians consider their destruction, at the behest of government agencies, a direct attack on their faith community.

The Chin Human Rights Organization documented 13 incidents of large crosses being destroyed by order of the Ministry of Religious Affairs during the country's half-century military regime, which formally ended in 2011. Since then and under nominally democratic rule, at least four more large crosses have been destroyed.

"The previous regime repressed the Christian religion. The army pulled down crosses, which are sacred. The new government is doing the same and is refusing permission to build new churches," said Daw Zar Tlem, a member of Myanmar's House of Representatives, who represents Thang Tlang township in Chin State.

In July 2011, shortly after Myanmar's military junta was officially dissolved, two crosses were burned in the townships of Kyin Dawe and Kan Pat Lat. Local Christians in Hakha and Falam were ordered to replace crosses with Buddhist shrines, and a cross in Tiddim Township was removed to make way for a new road, officials from Myanmar's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party told villagers.

"Religious symbols should be built for people in that area. They should not be misused for political purposes," said Saya Mya, who is Buddhist and secretary of the Chin Progressive Party.

According to data from Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are 108 Buddha images and shrines in Chin State, compared with 1,958 churches — a close reflection of the state's Christian majority.

The Rev. Thang, a pastor at an Assemblies of God Church in Tiddim Township, said the rate of cross destruction has slowed since 2011 and some are now being replaced. At Kennedy Mountain in Tee Tain township, steel crosses were erected in 2012 and 2013 to replace a teak cross destroyed in 1985.

Pu Zozam, a member of parliament from Chin State, said that although army and local authorities have tried to block the replacement crosses, "it is our belief and our responsibility" to continue to replace them, with or without government permission.

"There are 13 crosses that still need to be replaced. We put up the crosses on our land originally, so we do not think it necessary to ask permission to replace them," he said.

Cross destruction isn't the only problem plaguing Chin State's Christians.

Salai Ling, program director of Chin Human Rights Organization, said that youth development schools in border ethnic regions have been set up to convert Christians to Buddhism.

There are 29 border development schools around the country, established under President U Thein Sein's current 30-year plan. One-third of these schools are in Chin State.

"Thirty years is a generation. This project is targeting us. The government's plan is to intentionally change our beliefs and mindsets," said Salai Ling.

Some say the discrimination goes both ways. Although Buddhists do not face official discrimination in Chin State, Saya Mya, a Chin Buddhist teacher, said they feel it indirectly.

"When Christians hold youth gatherings or public forums, they start or close the ceremonies with prayers, which makes non-Christians uncomfortable," he said.
