



Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear

JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

John Holt's latest publication is a most welcome addition to the body of research on the Rakhine State crisis, which has lasted for decades in the shadow of other more exposed ethno-political issues in Myanmar. The unending cycle of violence was pushed to the forefront of global attention with the communal riots soon after the country opened in 2011, the Rohingya boat crisis in 2015, and most strongly with the mass flight of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingyas to Bangladesh in 2016–17. Masterfully organized and richly informative, this is an audacious book, both scholarly and personal, mindful and challenging, deeply engaging yet unsettling. At its core, it contains extracts from series of interviews Holt managed to conduct between 2015 and 2018 with 15 people at various locations in Myanmar (Yangon, Rakhine State, and Mandalay). Holt's conversations, showing utmost patience, progress in many-sided dialogues flowing between the oppressive past and the ongoing Rohingya conflict, Buddhist-Muslim relations, critical events within the country (such as the 2015 elections), and individual life stories. They illustrate immutable self-perceptions and disputed interpretations, and, crucially, exhibit moral challenges and political tensions raised between the population within the country and audiences abroad, set apart by an abysmal gap in communicating and interpreting conflict and violence in Rakhine State (as elsewhere in Myanmar), where Muslims have formed the majority of victims. Presented with both empathy and scholarly rigor, the various dialogues invite critical reflections on Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim conundrum, the status of Buddhism as a cultural and mind-setting system, and ultimately the role of education.

Holt starts by noting, "this has been a very difficult book project, perhaps the most challenging I have undertaken as a professional academician, because of the heart-wrenching nature of the tragedy that forms a focal point of the book" (p. ix). Emphasizing the situatedness of his own role as a senior field researcher and expert grounded in religious studies, he expresses more than once the pervasive emotional as well as cooperative dimensions of his scholarly work. Such a self-reflective stance does not only convey transparency and respect; it also speaks to the reader. The

present reviewer, a historian of Rakhine mentioned several times in the book, gladly acknowledges links of friendship and ongoing exchanges with the author. Inevitably my own experiences within the region form an inextricable part of the valuations that follow. While the present review cannot summarize each dialogue, it provides an overview, assesses the book's contribution to forthcoming enquiries, and points to a few critical topics emerging from or reaching beyond the frame of the dialogues.

A substantial preface explains the author's motives and outlines the theoretical, practical, and methodological challenges of the project. Insidious attempts to undermine Holt's position as a respected academic in Sri Lanka pushed his interest in Buddhist nationalist militancy. In Myanmar, there was a sudden deterioration of relations after 2011 between communities of the Buddhist majority and Muslim minorities, quite different—though not entirely dissimilar—from the Sri Lankan conflicts but raising the same questions about Theravada Buddhist cultures, conflicts driven by ethnic identity formations, and conflicts' inherent politicization via rivaling contextualization. In academic terms, the underlying quest was to flesh out the thesis that “social, political and economic changes impact the evolving nature and character of religious culture so that a reflexive relation obtains between the two” (p. ix).

The 15 people whose conversations are presented in the book include five Muslim men and women (four of them Rohingyas), a Bengali Hindu-Buddhist family, and seven male Myanmar Buddhists (three of them monks). The interest of Holt's book derives less from the mix of relatively well educated, socially active, and open-minded profiles than the outcome of the author's project as a whole: a persistent and fruitful effort to engage in friendly relations over several years, remaining serene when confronting obstacles to meet and converse, and letting conversations develop a life of their own. Readers discover throughout the volume the challenges of taking forward a scholarly agenda built on listening and interacting in a positive way while facing “a total lack of conceptual apparatus” (p. xiv). This lack denotes an incapability to discuss social and political issues outside the constraints of the “Buddhist conceptual canopy,” forbidding a level ground to field dialectic arguments. In fact, as Holt shares occasionally with the reader his rhetoric strategies and question setups, it is he himself who arrests the reader's attention and gains their sympathy with his tenacity, hesitations, setbacks, and ultimately longing for closure.

The book's excellent introduction, titled “Problems, Narratives, and Backgrounds,” offers a clear analytical and readable overview of the complicated contexts and timelines of conflict in Buddhist Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. After decades of marginalization following 1962, the Muslim minority of North Arakan (Rakhine State after 1989), concentrated along the border with Bangladesh, were systematically deprived of their civic rights starting with the 1982 citizenship laws, with oppression pushing thousands out of the country. Their cause was picked up by international human rights organizations voicing Rohingya griefs. The 2012 communal riots led to the unprecedented creation of camps with tens of thousands of displaced people. The ethnic Rakhine

Buddhist majority population failed to get an international hearing of their own economic and political griefs as they were widely perceived as being the perpetrators. Holt provides a neatly balanced account of the narratives of siege and fear gripping both population groups as they remained entrenched in their hostile feelings toward each other. The legal issue of Rohingya Muslim citizenship and the denial of the self-identification of Muslims as Rohingyas are two threads running through the conversations, posing two unsolved points of contestation. Officially referred to as “Bengalis,” denoting their foreign origins, Rohingyas are required to accept a verification process to make sure about their identity. Accepting the name “Rohingya” could only comfort them in the wrong belief that they are an indigenous ethnic minority. With this approach, Myanmar’s authorities found themselves in opposition to international norms and world opinion. The Rohingyas’ hopes linked to the accession to power of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition’s leader, in 2015 faded when her party—the National League for Democracy (NLD)—did not support fundamental change. Her administration was henceforth viewed by many as perpetuating the dismal record of human rights violations in collusion with the army. Simultaneously, the rise of the monk Wirathu made the alleged threat of a Muslim takeover in Myanmar a common domestic belief, while his appropriation of the Rohingya issue in Rakhine State promoted his Islamophobic agenda in tune with MaBaTha, a Buddhist nationalist outfit.

The first three dialogues provide “classic” Rohingya accounts of victimization through the voices of Abu Tahay, a politically active businessman; U Kyaw Min, a party leader, elected parliamentarian, former political prisoner, and trained teacher; and his daughter Wai Wai Nu, an activist—all three based in Yangon. Wai Moe, a veteran journalist, appears as an indispensable guide and commentator for Holt, but like the “Commentator” in the subsequent chapter, his reiterated condemnations of leading political actors demonstrate the limits of convincingly carving out a Myanmar position that can stand up to Western legal-cum-analytical attacks. Khin Zaw Win, a widely traveled activist, the founder of Tambadipa Institute—which promotes seminars on conflict analysis—and a political prisoner, comes across as a more mature partner in a dialogue about pluralism, tolerance, and ethnic nationalism. Surely one of the book’s gems, the experience of an elderly Kaman Muslim teacher from Thandwe highlights Muslim lives in South Rakhine and enlightens little-known local history and Rakhine Muslim diversity. Her personal story is a poignant testimony to the growing humiliation of Muslims in a Myanmar outback. Holt’s encounter with a Bengali Hindu-Buddhist family in Yangon offers further insights into the city’s simmering xenophobia.

In Sittway, a former lawyer, dubbed “The Senior Citizen,” became the voice of the local Rakhine nationalists, uttering their grievances about Muslim demographic pressure, the burden of the Burmese military, the “threat” of an Islamic state in North Rakhine, and an ongoing lack of understanding from the international community. The double minority complex of the Rakhine (versus the Muslims *and* versus the Burmese state) is reflected also in the highly controversial writings of Khin Maung Saw, an expatriate Rakhine. Khine Kaung Zan, a Rakhine social worker

of a younger generation, presents a striking contrast to these middle-aged radicals with his dedication to the poor and disadvantaged. Kya Hla Aung (“The Spokesman”), a Muslim lawyer, had a regular public career until the communal violence of 2012 forced him—along with tens of thousands of others—into one of the IDP (internally displaced person) camps north of Sittway. Readers learn about his bitterness as conditions of Rohingya IDPs worsened under the NLD government. His social work in the camp earned him international recognition. In Mandalay, Holt met three monks: Ashin Wirathu, hailed as the most virulent Islamophobic agitator in the country; Ashin Jotika, a progressive teacher keen to develop peace education; and Ashin Kumara, the rector of Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, exemplifying in his contrasted reactions to the crisis the impact of the national frames of communication. At certain moments, even the most liberal minds in Myanmar were ready to deny the evidence produced by international experts.

The central issue emerging from Holt’s dialogues is clearly education for Buddhists and Muslims alike, knowledge building (thinking of “the dearth of fundamental factual information” [p. 239]), and the stimulation of intellectual curiosity. This is a problem seemingly well understood—“so much of the suffering occurring out of Arakan was the result of misconceptions that have inhibited an ability to generate concord” (p. 225)—but while it is obvious at the level of the masses and the younger generation, it still raises eyebrows when engaging with “educated” people conditioned by official narratives. Even the liberal monks did not care much to read Holt’s book on Buddhist Islamophobia in Sri Lanka, and Wirathu knew very little about Sri Lanka’s politically engaged monks. Similar experiences abound. From where should productive discussions emerge? The country has a culture of confrontational domestic viewpoints vying for a phagocytic unity, but not of debate striving toward respectful compromise.

An issue variously alluded to is leadership, or rather the perceived lack of it. This is a subject often limited to the paradigmatic army-government relations. Ashin Kumara asks, “Who is the real leader of the Rohingyas?” (p. 267), a question commonly faced in conversations with Western diplomats and echoed in the complaints of Abu Tahay concluding that “our own internal chief problem is that we have no leadership” (p. 67). Yet, the political strategy of the Rohingyas to bank on outside political support, their standard approach since the late 1940s, is nowhere questioned: “rather, U Kyaw Min believes that the fate of the Rohingyas lies with the ‘international community’” (p. 74; see also p. 89), while despairing about Bangladesh, which “does not show concern for our suffering” (p. 97), and embittered that expectations about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s moral leadership (“our last hope” [p. 87]) failed to materialize.

While multiple aspects of the Buddhist-Muslim crisis are illustrated, it may be worthwhile to point to the frictions that erode relations within groups seemingly united by oppression, be it the discursive gap between Rohingyas of Yangon and North Rakhine State, between the activism of the Rohingya diaspora framed by INGO strategies and the domestic communities, or between Buddhist political factions of Rakhine’s south and north. Or, for that matter, between Rakhine and

Burmese. Ashin Jotika, “The Anti-Nationalist,” who had never stepped into Rakhine State, maintained that “Rakhine leaders are very bad” and “have always hated Burma” (p. 236). Such divisive-ness should be underscored in the context of 2020, when the army is invested in its most important military campaign since 1948 against the ethnic Rakhine “Arakan Army” allegedly fighting for the region’s autonomy. One of the outstanding qualities of the book is that it succeeds in including an array of Rakhine viewpoints, too, “the least known and understood” (p. 153), making the volume a timely contribution in this latest phase of escalating violence.

The handy conflation of Buddhist-Muslim relations and the Rohingya question in Rakhine State, however, may suit Western media, international diplomats, and social scientists alike; it may even seem conclusive to casual observers, but unfortunately it continues to obscure distinctive though overlapping domestic conflict zones.

Holt’s panorama of field observations and analytical insights, curated in a scholarly manner, intersects with various areas. It is probably needless to point specifically to the anthropology of religion, ethnic and religious studies, as well as race and media studies. In the disconcertingly underdeveloped field of Myanmar studies, the book will stand out as an effort to document the sociopolitical realities of the last years and remain a treasure trove of easy-to-locate references. It surely illustrates the intellectual wastelands generated by decades of academic isolation, which have left the country deprived of the intellectual brainpower to address the demons of failed ethnic policies. Nonetheless, the embarrassment caused by rational self-confinement (“the Buddhist conceptual canopy”) should not lead observers to condescension or pessimism. Mind that Holt does not focus on interviewing young people. Against the odds, eagerly awaited educational improvements might pave the way toward a generational transition and incremental change.

Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis, offering an anthology of rich life-size profiles, provides much food for further thought and is warmly recommended. It is a must-read for scholars and students who take a serious interest in Theravada Buddhist societies and the diversity of their Muslim minorities.

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Scandal and Democracy: Media Politics in Indonesia

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Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Mary McCoy’s book contains an alternative way of viewing the role of the media in the Indonesian democratization process. Since its inception, the New Order regime had a hostile relationship with