

# Violence in transition: Lessons for Myanmar

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By BRIDGET WELSH  
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SINCE the historic by-elections that brought Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and her party into Myanmar's Parliament last April, political liberalisation has been overshadowed by the focus on the economy.

Yet violence between Muslims and Buddhists in the western Rakhine state brings political considerations squarely back to the fore. Given the ongoing bloodshed - at least 80 people killed and tens of thousands displaced - it is necessary to understand the factors contributing to the sectarian conflict. Lessons of violence during political transition, especially from Indonesia, are relevant.

Communal violence in Myanmar is not new. In the 1950s, a similar incident of rape led to violence. In the latest incident in May and last month, the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by a group of Muslim men sparked vigilante killings of Muslims that fuelled riots.

Ethnic conflict has been an integral part of the country's history, shaping its path towards independence and serving as the basis for military rule for more than 60 years.

As the country has opened up, this sort of conflict was predictable. One needs only to look at the violence during Indonesia's political transition between 1998 and 2004 to appreciate the reality that after years of military governance, violence is unfortunately one of the likely outcomes. History has also taught us that patterns of violence are repeated, often taking the same form as the past. This is the very reason not to misdiagnose what is going on.

To date, the call has been support for emergency rule and a military return to these areas. But lessons from Indonesia suggest that bringing the military into the solution is no guarantee of peace. In fact, it was only after significant reforms took place in the military and after Indonesia's military played a constructive role in post-tsunami Aceh that its armed forces earned credibility and a hard-won reputation for professionalism. Calls for military intervention in Rakhine have the potential of making the situation worse.

The challenges Myanmar's military faces in addressing the conflict are multiple. Foremost is the fact that the military is responsible for fostering the conditions for the conflict in the first place. From the segregation of the communities and statelessness to the lack of faith in the rule of law, decades of military rule have left deep scars.

Compounding the difficulty is the composition of the security forces, overwhelmingly Burman and Buddhist, contributing to a perception of bias. On the ground, there is already a lack of faith in the police force.

This is exacerbated by the decay of professionalism. Current Commander and Chief Min Aung Hliang has done a good job in moving the military towards higher standards, but this has been only a recent phenomenon. Ultimately, the ultimate goal should be to reduce, not increase, the security forces' role in domestic affairs in conflict areas.

Myanmar's security personnel lack training in peacekeeping. The situation can only worsen if security personnel are compromised by involvement in the conflict, as occurred in Maluku in Indonesia.

Early non-partisan interven-

tion can significantly reduce violence, and here is where Asean and other international partners can offer assistance. The time for sharing peacekeeping knowledge is now.

Viewing events through the lens of "violence in transition" offers other important lessons.

The most important is that solutions to conflict need to be holistic. The reliance on security obscures the underlying causes of the tensions. Ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims live uneasily together in Rakhine. Many Rohingya Muslims have lived in the state for generations but are not recognised as citizens of Myanmar.

This is not a problem of religion. Rather it is a product of poor governance and dismal conditions in the periphery state. Analysis has centred on the plight of the Rohingyas, who lack citizenship rights. The dynamic is more complex.

The need to resort to vigilante justice rather than rely on the court of law is telling testimony to the problems of rebuilding a viable judiciary. Local conflict resolution mechanisms have decayed. At the same time, there are conflicts over land and water, making for tense conditions between ethnically segregated villages.

Muslim marginalisation also relates to religious freedom, including the construction of mosques and practice of their faith. The ethnic predominance of the civil service of Burmans has not brought local Rakhine adequately into government, and although the Rakhine nationalist party did among the best of the ethnic minorities in terms of representation in the national Parliament, they are not adequately included in national affairs.

There are multiple levels of exclusion, of the Rakhine and other

ethnic minorities within Myanmar politics, and of Muslims in particular in the Rakhine. This exclusion extends beyond politics to economic opportunities and even access to basic services. As news reports centre on Myanmar's two famous leaders, the voice of the Rakhine is noticeably missing in their own conflict.

Humanitarian activities have begun in earnest with the outpouring of global support. The Rakhine communities need assistance and the minority Rohingyas in particular need to be granted protection and rightful citizenship for those with long-term residence.

Providing shelter and food and calling for reviews of laws are just first steps. There needs to be a proper multi-party commission tasked with assessment and formulating recommendations. Rakhine leaders from both communities, including religious leaders, need to be vested in the solutions. Simultaneous support needs to be given to civil society to strengthen the peace constituency, as the silent majority wants peace. Given that the Rakhine state is rich in oil and gas deposits, part of the discussion has to centre on better allocation of resources to the state, and the need for regional balances between the centre and the periphery.

From Aceh to the Maluku in Indonesia, curbing violence in transitions is not easy. They are part of change after decades of military rule and when power vacuums occur. Myanmar can learn from other transitions. It is time for Myanmar to reach out to solve this conflict with targeted peacekeeping and reach in to its own people for solutions and a long-term peace.

The writer is an associate professor in political science at the Singapore Management University.

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# Mexico's President-elect to get cracking on reform

By ENRIQUE PENA NIETO

ON SUNDAY, Mexicans turned out in large numbers to vote for change - a change in priorities and approach, and a generational change focused on can-do governing. I am honoured that, in me, Mexicans saw that opportunity for change and a new direction.

There may be considerable hand-wringing in the international community that my election

mic economic growth, which the Mexican National Institute of Statistics says averaged 1.7 per cent between 2000 and 2010. Second, an end to the polarisation that has paralysed our politics, making impossible urgently needed reforms in the energy sector, labour market, education and social security, to mention a few. We cannot postpone those changes any longer.

To those concerned about a return to old ways, fear not. At 45, I am part of a generation of PRI politicians committed to democracy. I

egy. Developing countries like India, China and Brazil have shown the way to significant and lasting poverty alleviation through institutional reforms and economic policies focused on growth. It's time for these improvements to come to Mexico.

I want to address the issue of organised crime and drug trafficking head-on. There can be neither negotiation nor a truce with criminals. I respect President Felipe Calderon for his commitment to ending this scourge; I will continue the fight, but this time

What must be improved is coordination among the federal, state and municipal crime-fighting authorities. I will create a 40,000-strong National Gendarmerie, a police force similar to those in countries like Colombia, Italy and France, to focus on the most violent rural areas. I will expand the federal police by at least 35,000 officers and bolster intelligence-gathering and analysis. I will consolidate the state and municipal police forces and provide greater federal oversight, to crack down

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