

Working on Religion, Peace and Conflict in Theravada Buddhist Countries: Reflections by Practitioners

Rising inter-community and inter-religious tensions are a threat to peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the wider region. Diverse efforts are under way to address these tensions, particularly in the areas of education, countering of hate speech, advocacy, engaging women, interfaith dialogue and activities, intrafaith dialogue, and early warning and early response.

These efforts could be strengthened by:

1. Deepening understanding of current and evolving dynamics;
2. Improving collaboration and co-operation between peacebuilding efforts;
3. Adopting a more strategic, action-oriented approach to dialogue;
4. Investing in prevention;
5. Employing inclusive, multi-level and multi-sector approaches;
6. Strengthening work on education;
7. Avoiding compartmentalization.

Introduction:

Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand are all countries with a strong Theravada Buddhist tradition. They also all have significant minorities of people who adhere to other religious and cultural traditions. In the last few years rising tensions between communities, particularly Buddhist and Muslim, are manifesting in a number of ways which are themselves contributing to further escalation and polarization. Violence in Rakhine State and other parts of Myanmar, confrontation between Buddhist nationalists and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, and the ongoing situation in southern Thailand have all attracted national and international attention in recent years. Tensions and violence have led to people being displaced from their homes, moves to pass legislation that targets or favours one particular religious group or faith tradition, increased controversies over religious and cultural symbols and practices, and a growth in hate speech.

A number of organizations working to address some of these challenges to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence met in March 2015 to share their experiences, learn from each other and explore ways to improve their effectiveness through strengthened collaboration and co-operation. This short paper aims to share some of the insights from that meeting with the wider community of interested policy-makers and practitioners and encourage all to contribute to an ongoing exchange on how best to address inter-community and inter-religious tensions in the region.

The Issues:

There are many political, economic, social, religious, cultural and psychological factors contributing to inter-community tensions and violence and the accompanying rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. While the situation in each country has its specificities, there are also many commonalities.

Political factors include discrimination against particular communities, in policy or in practice, historically or currently; the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism; politicians and community leaders use of identity politics to mobilize communities and consolidate power bases; the relative weakness of democratized politics; the outmaneuvering of traditional moderate leaders by more radical groups who are becoming increasingly politically savvy and thinking institutionally; corruption and lack of trust in authorities leading people to relate more to ethnic and religious identities rather a common national identity based on citizenship; lack of strong leadership by political authorities to tackle inter-community tensions; and reactions against criticism and interventions by the international community that are perceived as one-sided.

Economic factors include economic inequalities and economic competition between communities; historic and ongoing economic grievances related to issues such as land-grabbing and access to resources. These factors are often being aggravated by the larger trends of increasing socio-economic inequality in the context of economic globalization, foreign investment and external aid.

Social factors include a lack of access to quality education; linguistic barriers making communication between communities difficult; the spreading of rumours and misinformation including via social and mainstream media; the increasing development of regional narratives and alliances based on the idea that Buddhism is under threat from Islam and fed by narratives of a global Islamic threat; and the perception that modernization and consumerism are undermining traditional religious values and ways of life.

Religious and cultural factors include the side-lining of non-majority cultures; proselytizing and sensitivities about conversion and inter-faith marriages; ignorance and prejudice regarding the religion and cultural traditions of one's own and other communities; declining interaction with, and exposure to, the religion and culture of other communities; patriarchal religious structures limiting the role of women at senior level; Buddhist historical narratives of loss of former glory coupled with a fear of being overwhelmed by a growing Muslim population in the region; fear of a loss of cultural identity; antagonistic and exclusionary attitudes reinforcing defensive and reactionary sentiments in targeted communities; and the perception that religious symbols are used to claim space and to provoke.

Psychological factors include trauma; fear; feelings of powerlessness and insecurity; a sense that communities and religions are under attack; prejudice; a desire for justice and acknowledgement of past injustices; and a sense in sections of the Buddhist community that the nature of Buddhism makes it weak to confront well-organized, expansionist religions.

What is Being Done:

There are a wide range of activities underway intending to address inter-community tensions. In many parts of Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, individuals and organizations are working in quiet ways to bridge divisions and build social cohesion. What follows are a few examples of how various organizations are supporting these efforts.

Education: strengthening monastic education in Myanmar (Spirit in Education Movement), development of a Buddhist Peace Education curriculum (United States Institute of Peace and partners); trainings on peacebuilding and community leadership (e.g. PacRIM Associates in Myanmar, United States Institute of Peace (USIP)); regional exchange visits for religious and community leaders (International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and others).

Promoting pluralism and religious freedom: work with monks and Buddhist scholars across the region to affirm Buddhist values concerning religious pluralism (Buddhist Federation of Norway); programmes on religion and the rule of law in Myanmar (Institute for Global Engagement with Ministry of Religious Affairs and Sitagu International Buddhist Academy).

Countering hate speech: bringing media, technologists, peace activists from across the region together (Nexus Fund, United States Institute of Peace); joint statements by religious leaders correcting misinformation and calling for tolerance and peace (Religions for Peace (RfP)).

Advocacy: drawing attention to issues of injustice, needs of communities, and drivers of conflict (many local, national and international humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding organizations).

Engaging women: inclusion of women into global efforts to look at extremism, religion and gender (University of San Diego Women's Peacemakers Programme); establishment of interreligious networks of women of faith (RfP).

Interfaith dialogue and activities: dialogue between religious leaders of different faiths at local level (e.g. Mahidol University in southern Thailand), national level (e.g. inter-religious councils supported by RfP) and regional level (e.g. the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations supported by RfP, INEB, JUST, Muhammadiyah)); interfaith behavior change communication through arts project (RfP and Treasure Land in Myanmar); interreligious child protection projects (R4P Myanmar and Sri Lanka).

Intrafaith dialogue: strengthening moderate voices through a regional platform of exchange (HD Centre); exploring Buddhist nationalist concerns through intra-Buddhist dialogue between different movements within Buddhism (Mahidol University and Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich; INEB in Myanmar and Sri Lanka).

Early warning and early response: establishment of local interfaith committees (INEB, RfP); security dialogue to build relationships between authorities, security services and religious and community leaders in Myanmar (USIP); emergency multi-religious solidarity visits (RfP).

How Peacebuilding can be Strengthened:

Despite the many important efforts being advanced, there is a real risk of continuing polarization across the region. The space for common ground and voices promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence is shrinking. Despite the many obstacles, there are a number of things that remain to be done to strengthen the impact of efforts to promote peace and social cohesion.

- 1. Deepen understanding of current and evolving dynamics:** While it is categorically stated that there are rising tensions between communities, particularly Buddhist and Muslim, there remains a dearth of analysis and in-depth research on current and evolving dynamics. It is vital to invest more resources into analysis and research in order to effectively evolve action-oriented strategies to processes at, and between, all levels. The way in which the dynamics in other regions (e.g. Africa, Europe, MENA) are inspiring anti-Muslim sentiment in the region must also be taken into account.
- 2. Improve collaboration and co-operation between peacebuilding efforts:** This can be achieved by more systematic information-sharing and analysis on who is doing what; collaboration which leverages the diverse strengths, resources and networks of different organizations; the creation of safe spaces for exchange between practitioners; increased efforts to connect moderate voices (peace practitioners, civil society, religious leaders); support from donors for co-ordination and collaboration in order to reduce mistrust and competition between organizations; exposure visits to see effective projects in action; more critical reflection on inter-religious peacebuilding work in order to identify lessons and disseminate them across the region; and a mechanism or institution dedicated to promoting such exchange and collaboration.
- 3. Adopt a more strategic approach to dialogue:** Dialogue efforts, whether interfaith or intrafaith, need to be sustained and lead to strategic action if they are to result in lasting change. Joint statements by religious leaders in support of peace are to be welcomed but they should be seen as a beginning, and not an end in themselves.

There also needs to be stronger linkages between dialogue efforts happening at different levels (local, national, regional) in recognition of the fact that the issues have local, national and regional dimensions. Convening and facilitating institutions need to have legitimacy in the eyes of those being convened. Ways need to be found to engage hard-liners so that dialogues do not end up being meetings of like-minded moderates while at the same time care is taken to avoid that dialogues reinforce or propagate hard-line attitudes.

- 4. Invest in prevention:** While a great deal of focus is placed on response, prevention is key to the evolving dynamics in the region. Most efforts globally remain in the response phase. Prevention efforts in Asia could most certainly result in the reduction of tensions and anticipated violence as well as be an example of good practice for those working on countering the rise of religious-based violence in other regions.
- 5. Employ inclusive, multi-level and multi-sector approaches:** In every sector there are people who, intentionally or un-intentionally, are contributing to the escalation of tensions while there are others promoting social cohesion. Responses therefore need to engage with a wide range of actors across sectors and at many levels, both the “troublemakers” and the “peacemakers”. Where feasible, projects should consider multi-stakeholder partnerships that connect the religious, government, business, security, human rights, development, political, media, and civil society sectors. Recognizing and supporting the vital role of women (e.g. women faith leaders and groups) and young people is key to addressing tensions as well as spreading and enhancing peace dividends. In addition, while there are many efforts at community level, there need to be more links to the political and policy levels. Advocacy efforts should reinforce awareness of decision-makers at national level of the needs and initiatives at community level.
- 6. Strengthen work on education:** Education efforts to counteract misunderstanding and ignorance of others similarly need to target all levels. This requires work within school systems (both public and religious), in professional trainings and with the media. As well as educating people about the tradition and cultures of others, knowledge and understanding of one’s own history and culture needs to be strengthened and young people made more aware of the traditions of peaceful coexistence that historically existed between many communities.
- 7. Avoid compartmentalization:** Work on religion and conflict should not be considered a specialist activity separate from other peacebuilding efforts. All peacebuilders engaged in these contexts should be sensitized to how religion is playing a role and how to take it into account in their activities. Engagement between the religious sector and the wider peacebuilding sector can also be further strengthened.

Next Steps - Join the Conversation:

Participants at the March 2015 practitioners’ exchange have established an online working group in order to promote ongoing exchange, co-operation and collaboration. If your organization would like be involved or learn more, please contact either Martine Miller at martine@mediation-leadership.com or Owen Frazer at ofrazer@ethz.ch.

Working on Religion, Peace and Conflict in Theravada Buddhist Countries: Practitioners’ Exchange, 19-21 March 2015

The meeting was co-organized by the Center for Security Studies of ETH Zurich and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and hosted by the Rotary Peace and Conflict Studies Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. It was attended by 26 practitioners representing organizations including American Friends Service Committee, Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Humaniti, Institute for Global Engagement, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University, Interfaith Youth Coalition on Aid in Myanmar, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Buddhist Federation, Pacific Rim Associates, Religions for Peace, Search for Common Ground, Spirit in Education Movement, Swe Tha Har, USIP .