



Consultation on Religion in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States: A Focus on the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh

The Berkley Center and WFDD hosted a consultation¹ on December 16, 2013 in Washington, DC to discuss anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state and the central but complex roles religious actors play in the unrest. The meeting was part of an ongoing multi-year exploration of the religious dimensions of conflict and fragility that will result in teaching materials, reports, and policy briefs. The consultation had three broad purposes: (a) to explore opportunities for expanded initiatives to support faith-inspired work and interfaith approaches in Rakhine State and in the region more broadly; (b) to discuss the potential implications of ongoing political and economic reforms on the violence in order to better frame interventions and (c) to provide an opportunity to "brainstorm" directions for future research. Participants explored current and potential inter- and intra-faith peace efforts and the role of the international community in supporting such efforts.

Context of the consultation

The Berkley Center and WFDD are working together to explore religious dimensions of global development challenges, with a focus on enhancing understanding of the development work of faith leaders and communities and faith-inspired organizations. The partnership has produced original empirically-grounded research on topics that are understudied or fraught with misconceptions. The long-term objective is to generate knowledge that can enhance the quality, sustainability, and reach of development work undertaken by both secular and faith-inspired actors.

Development in fragile and conflict situations where traditional development interventions and analytic approaches often fail is the subject of increased attention. International development organizations are seeking fresh approaches (see for example the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report and other reports highlighting societal dynamics and fragility²). While religion is often perceived to be an important, if not central, factor in many conflicts, only limited attention has been paid to the social engagement of religious actors in resilience and development strategies. Exploring the role of religious actors in country cases of fragility and conflict could offer new insights for development organizations, as well as peacebuilding actors. The Berkley Center and WFDD are focusing on tension and violence affecting Rohingya Muslim communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh as a case study, with the aim of increasing understanding of the religious dimensions of violent incidents and strategies to build resilience and reconciliation.

¹ An event hosted by the Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue. Supported by The Religion and Global Development Program of the Henry Marc, et al. "Societal Dynamics and Fragility: Engaging Societies in Responding to Fragile Situations". The World Bank. 2012.

Overview

The meeting brought together 26 participants (see Annex 1) from academic, government, and development communities for an informative two-hour discussion to explore the religious dimensions of ongoing violence affecting the Muslim community in Myanmar.

The discussion covered several key areas and included an assessment of the current situation in Myanmar broadly and Rakhine state more specifically, with a treatment of the major challenges and obstacles facing efforts to resolve the conflict. The potential of past and future inter- and intra-faith efforts in Myanmar was explored, drawing from recent peacebuilding efforts. The discussion also took a broad view in an attempt to identify key causes of conflict in hopes of better framing the issues to inform peace and resilience building strategies.

Current Situation

Dr. Wakar Uddin, Director General of the Arakan Rohingya Union described the current situation as improving and less violent than some months ago. Peace and security are evidently improved across the state but tensions remain and incidents of violence arise sporadically. As an example, an IDP camp burned on December 15, though the cause is disputed. The government has spoken out against the violence and engaged various stakeholders but has yet to take substantial action either to facilitate dialogue or diffuse the sporadic attacks. The rhetoric from some Buddhist leaders, particularly high profile figures such as Ven. Wirathu, has softened in part due to an appeal from the government. Dr. Uddin reiterated that the impact of the unrest is quite serious for Muslims, particularly in Rakhine state. Muslims are afraid to congregate in mosques, perform prayer services in mosques, or hold funerals in public for fear of attack. When gatherings occur they are typically clandestine and take place at night.

Challenges and Obstacles

Several participants agreed that rumors and misinformation pose some of the most serious challenges to peace and security across Myanmar. These cluster around several central concerns and are perpetuated and reinforced both within formal religious structures and among the public at large. One topic of rumor and misinformation is concern regarding the possible “Islamization” of Rakhine state. This concern is deeply ingrained in history and is expressed by proud Buddhists who fear the spread of Islam and propagate messages that stoke fears and suspicions related to the Rohingya. This fear of “Islamization” has spawned rumors of high and even increasing Muslim birth rates. Scott Flipse, Deputy Director of Policy and Research at the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, suggested that the next census is expected to show an extremely high growth rate for the Muslim community, which could become a flash point for future violence. Questions were raised as to the truth of the perception of such exceptionally high birth rates.

The discrimination facing the Rohingya based on ethnicity and bars to Burmese citizenship for this group are central issues. Participants discussed the longstanding identity concerns relating to the perception that Rohingya are often viewed as Bengali migrants. The Myanmar government does not legally recognize the Rohingya ethnic identity; this is clearly an ongoing issue at the heart of challenges for the community.

Rohingya are not the only ethnic minority in Myanmar, and religious affiliation has been a contentious issue for some other minority groups as well. Rachel Wagley, Campaigns Director for

US Campaign for Burma, drew parallels to the experience of Christian Kachin communities in Kachin State. While Christian communities have not seen violence and discrimination at a level close to that experienced by Muslim communities, concerns over proselytism could make them a target in the future. These concerns could be exacerbated as Myanmar continues to open up economically and politically and evangelical Christians, whether individuals or organizations, become more active.

Development strategies and impact are likely to be an increasingly important factor in intergroup relations in Myanmar, affecting different religious and ethnic groups and possibly exacerbating violence (or contributing to better relations). Christina Fink (George Washington University) suggested that as the pace of foreign investment quickens, unequal development (or the perception of inequality), with some groups better situated to benefit and others overlooked, is a factor to watch. Some Burmese are reported to fear that Muslims will be better positioned to succeed in this new economic reality.

Rumors and distrust between religious communities and institutions are also fueled by a lack of transparency. Susan Hayward, Senior Program Officer at US Institute for Peace, highlighted the significance of this factor in discussing her recent work in Myanmar, urging a focus on dialogue between religious groups, improved education, and access to accurate information at many levels of society and religious structures.

There was brief reference to the regional dimensions of the conflict, especially given the large numbers of Rohingya now in uncertain conditions in Bangladesh, but also Thailand and Indonesia. There is a need to better understand what linkages might exist with violence against religious minorities in other countries in the region, notably Sri Lanka.

Inter- and Intra-faith Efforts

Interfaith efforts, both homegrown and with support from international actors, have taken on increasing prominence. James Chen, Vice President of Overseas Programs at the Institute for Global Engagement, described an interfaith conference organized by IGE in Rangoon in October, 2013, in partnership with Ven. Sitagu Sayadaw and the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy. Susan Hayward outlined the growing presence of interfaith groups working to foster dialogue. They appear to be having some success in debunking misconceptions. Organizations such as USIP, Religions for Peace, Shalom, and the Spirit in Education Movement are among the most active.

In order for interfaith efforts to have the greatest possible impact, participants emphasized the need for intra-faith work within the Sangha. Susan Hayward described the challenges of the perpetuation of misinformation about Muslim communities within Buddhist structures, illustrated by her recent visit to the Buddhist Education Center, an institution where these views are deeply embedded. Scott Flipse suggested that to change attitudes within the Rakhine monk leadership, the impetus needs to come from within the Sangha itself if it is to be meaningful and lasting. Susan Hayward noted that Religions for Peace is using the strategy of intra-faith work with the hope it can help to reduce conflict. She highlighted the importance of addressing contentious issues through Buddhist philosophy. Some promising approaches include integrating peacebuilding modules into programs at

monastic schools, hosting training sessions that discuss coexistence and social harmony, and bolstering leadership.

External actors need to approach the Sangha hierarchy with humility and care. Susan Hayward emphasized that working with mid-level monks can be especially effective. These monks can be instrumental in pushing for changes in attitude within the Sangha and their communities because they have considerable reach and influence at the grassroots level and, operating somewhat under the radar, have more flexibility. However, speaking out against violence and discrimination makes many of these junior monks vulnerable and there needs to be adequate support to encourage their efforts. As international actors seek to promote peace in Myanmar, she urged support for grassroots efforts and leaders, such as forming entities to connect those monks who are active on peacebuilding issues. An important observation was the growing diversity within Islam in Myanmar, underscoring the need for Muslim intrafaith dialogue. A small but significant community of Muslims practice a more fundamentalist Islam but their importance can be inflated in the popular imagination and in policy circles. Poor communication and misperceptions have stoked worry in Buddhist and Muslim communities alike.

The discussion turned to Christians in Myanmar, and their potential roles in peacebuilding efforts. Some Christian leaders are involved in interfaith work through the Judson Center for Interfaith Dialogue; others, however, including the Catholic Church, are still struggling to find their role. The engagement of Christian leaders might serve several strategic aims; it might preemptively address concerns over proselytism and also provide the greatest opportunity to engage religious women. Christian communities have some of the stronger female religious figures in Myanmar.

Regional exchange is important and has been a component of ongoing interfaith work in Myanmar. This exchange allows lessons learned to be shared broadly.

Framing the Issues and Informing Peace and Resilience-Building Strategies

Christina Fink suggested that several overarching issues will continue to perpetuate tensions among identity groups in the country. It will be important to gain a better understanding of these issues for Rahkine, Rohingya, and other groups in Myanmar when working to foster peace and build resilience. First, issues relating to nationalism, citizenship, and identity have and will continue spark tensions. Second, as the country opens to investors and development organizations, there is a fear of unequal and unfair economic opportunities. The question was posed as to which of these two broader concerns need to be addressed first to minimize inter-group conflict and tension. Do identity issues need to be resolved before democratic reforms can succeed or could economic development serve as the enabler that will allow citizens to rise above sectarian disputes? Dr. Fink argues that development must be the first priority, as she sees the feeling of economic insecurity as the major driver of tensions.

Without adequate attention to the inequalities these two issues entail, it will be difficult to foster social cohesion across diverse Myanmar. The rapidly changing economic reality in Myanmar will likely create new social pressures that could inflame pre-existing tensions. Equitable and socially inclusive development, however, could boost efforts to engage in dialogue and reflection about deeply-rooted identity issues.

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that work on development issues face significant challenges in Rakhine state. However, the need for their support is substantial. Scott Flipse observed that the conflict has not allowed NGOs to operate with any kind of consistency. Network building and information sharing could be a great help in improving quality and consistency of interventions. Meetings such as this one offer one way for international agencies and organizations to collaborate and share lessons learned in order to design development interventions that can best contribute to broader resilience and peacebuilding strategies.

Conclusion: Potential roles for WFDD and the Berkley Center

There was a brief reflection on possible future work by WFDD and the Berkley Center. Suggestions focused on both knowledge building (especially mapping and assessing peacebuilding and related development work, focused on their religious dimensions) and on helping to define or support tools for monitoring and evaluation. More broadly there was recognition that a better understanding of religious resources specific to Myanmar's diverse religious communities would be useful for development organizations working there.

ANNEX 1:

Name	Title	Organization
Nathaniel Adams	Program Coordinator	World Faiths Development Dialogue
Melody Fox Ahmed	Asst. Director for Programs	Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs
Harrison Akins	Ibn Khaldun Chair Research Fellow	School of International Service American University
David Bartholomew		Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration US Dept of State
James Chen	Vice President of Overseas Programs	Institute for Global Engagement
Crystal Corman	Program Manager	World Faiths Development Dialogue
Dr. Christina Fink	Professor of Practice of International Affairs	George Washington University
Scott Flipse	Deputy Director of Policy and Research	US Commission on International Religious Freedom
Nava Friedman	Program Assistant	World Faiths Development Dialogue
Jose Gonzalez		Just Consulting
Susan Hayward	Senior Program Officer	Religion and Peacemaking Center of Innovation United States Institute of Peace
Sameer Hossein		Office of International Religious Freedom Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor US Dept. of State
Meredith Koff		
Joseph Mariampillai	Country Director Myanmar	Relief International
Katherine Marshall	Director / Senior Fellow	World Faiths Development Dialogue / Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs
Nich McGuire		Just Consulting
Amber McIntyre	Foreign Affairs Officer	Office of International Religious Freedom US Dept of State
Sarah McLaughlin	Asia Program Manager	Search for Common Ground
Greg Poling	Fellow	Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies Center for Strategic and International Studies
Himani Reddy		Office of International Religious Freedom US Dept. of State
Chris Riley	Program Assistant	World Faiths Development Dialogue
Dr. Wakar Uddin	Director General / Chairman	Arakan Rohingya Union / Burmese Rohingya Association of North America
Rachel Wagley	Campaigns Director	US Campaign for Burma