

Myanmar's radical monk targets interfaith marriage
By Auskar Surbakti for Newline
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The Myanmar man dubbed 'The Face of Buddhist Terror' by Time magazine wants a law restricting marriages between Buddhists and Muslims.

Radical monk U Wirathu has been leading hundreds of Buddhist monks in protest.

"This law is my dream," he said.

"I've given speeches like this in different places so that we could propose this law."

Last month, he joined around 200 other monks in Yangon to discuss ways to end rising religious violence that began in Rakhine state last year between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims.

It was here that U Wirathu, who is accused of fanning the tensions, announced his controversial proposal. Senior leaders at the meeting have distanced themselves from the proposal, but U Wirathu and his followers are determined to present the idea to parliament.

"This marriage law means Myanmar girls can marry people of different religions, but their future husbands have to become Buddhist," he said.

"When Myanmar girls get married to Muslim men they're pressured to convert to Islam, so this marriage law will prevent this and protect our society."

Around 1,500 monks across the country have endorsed the proposal, and women are gathering signatures in support of U Wirathu's law.

Lwin Lwin is one of those who supports the marriage bill.

"Buddhist women tend to be patient, and don't go against what's happening, so they're tolerant and submissive," she said.

"In the beginning, Buddhist women don't see Muslims as being from a different religious background so they treat them as neighbours or friends."

Meanwhile, U Wirathu's opposition to interfaith marriage has been condemned by the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other groups.

Zin Mar Aung from the Rainfall women's group believes the law is sexist.

"The law's only focus is on the woman, so what this means is the concept of this law is based on sexism and nationalism," she said. Growing support

U Wirathu heads the 969 Buddhist movement which is fast gaining momentum across Myanmar.

The numbers 9, 6, 9 refer to the virtues of Buddha, the practices of the faith and the community.

What sounds like a peaceful organisation has come to embody a rabid nationalistic and religious sentiment used to stir up hatred against minorities, particularly the country's Muslim community.

Members of 969 call for Myanmar's Buddhists to band together to defend their faith and to do business only with other Buddhists.

They want to exclude Muslims who have a strong tradition as merchants in Myanmar.

Buddhists make up around 90 per cent of the population in the country, while only around five per cent are Muslim.

At protests, U Wirathu delivers sermons that play on the fear among some Buddhists of a rising Muslim population.

U Wirathu says restrictions on interfaith marriages will reduce religious violence.

"If Muslims cannot marry Buddhist girls easily, their population will decrease," he said.

"Where they have more Muslims there is more violence.

"Like in case of Rakhine state, where they have a higher population of Muslims."

President of the Islamic Centre of Myanmar Al Haj U Aye Lwin says while Myanmar is a multi-racial and multi-religious society, the majority Buddhist culture is easily able to mobilise.

"The majority of them are Theravada Buddhist, and Buddhism has a very stirring effect on the people," he said.

"It can be a cohesive force for the people uniting."

Rising religious tensions

U Wirathu has a history of inflaming religious tensions in Myanmar.

In 2003, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison by the previous ruling junta for inciting religious hatred, but was released last year under a general amnesty.

U Wirathu and his followers blame the recent religious violence on Myanmar's Muslims.

Since last year's clashes in Rakhine which left nearly 200 dead, the violence has spread to other parts of the country, including the north-eastern town of Lashio and the central city of Meiktila.

Win Htein, the National League for Democracy representative for Meikhtila, was there at the time of the riots.

"Some angry mob passed through the police lines and dragged the Muslim youth and killed in front of them. In front of me," he said.

"During my stay, about half an hour or 45 minutes there, seven people were killed."

Most of the victims have been Muslim, but so far only Muslims have been jailed.

The rising religious tensions in Myanmar have marred the country's transition to democracy.

On a visit to Myanmar this week, Australia's Foreign Minister Bob Carr has met with President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi with the issue of religious violence high on his agenda.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Chulalongkorn University says the United States and Europe, as well as fellow ASEAN members, must exert more pressure on the leadership to turn back the extremist campaign led by the 969 Movement.

"Otherwise, we will see more violence, the death toll will climb, and the road to 2015 will be very unruly and uncondusive to a clean, free and fair election," he said.

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