



EXTREME NUMBERS: Wimala Biwuntha, standing next to the 969 symbol, is a prominent preacher in Myanmar's radical Buddhist movement.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

# Myanmar gives official blessing to anti-Muslim monks

Over the past year, radical monks have preached an anti-Muslim creed. The minister of religion, among others, approves.

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

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The Buddhist extremist movement in Myanmar, known as 969, portrays itself as a grassroots creed.

Its chief proponent, a monk named Wirathu, was once jailed by the former military junta for anti-Muslim violence and once called himself the “Burmese bin Laden.”

But a Reuters examination traces 969’s origins to an official in the dictatorship that once ran Myanmar, and which is the direct predecessor of today’s reformist government. The 969 movement now enjoys support from senior government officials, establishment monks and even some members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party of Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Wirathu urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages. He calls mosques “enemy bases.”

Among his admirers: Myanmar’s minister of religious affairs.

“Wirathu’s sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions,” Sann Sint, minister of religious affairs, told Reuters in his first interview with the international media. “It is impossible he is inciting religious violence.”

Sann Sint, a former lieutenant general in Myanmar’s army, also sees nothing wrong with the boycott of Muslim businesses being led by the 969 monks. “We are now practicing market economics,” he said. “Nobody can stop that. It is up to the consumers.”

President Thein Sein is signaling a benign view of 969, too. His office declined to comment for this story. But in response to growing controversy over the movement, it issued a statement Sunday, saying 969 “is just a symbol of peace” and Wirathu is “a son of Lord Buddha.”

Wirathu and other monks have been closely linked to the sectarian violence spreading across Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Anti-Muslim unrest simmered under the junta that ran the country



DEVOTION TO CAUSE: The 969 movement is growing rapidly across Myanmar as monks are more free to travel and preach now than they were under junta rule. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

for nearly half a century. But the worst fighting has occurred since the quasi-civilian government took power in March 2011.

Two outbursts in Rakhine State last year killed at least 192 people and left 140,000 homeless, mostly stateless Rohingya Muslims. A Reuters investigation found that organized attacks on Muslims last October were led by Rakhine nationalists incited by Buddhist monks and sometimes abetted by local security forces.

In March this year, at least 44 people died and 13,000 were displaced – again, mostly Muslims – during riots in Meikhtila, a city in central Myanmar. Reuters documented in April that the killings happened after monks led Buddhist mobs on a rampage. In May, Buddhists mobs burned and terrorized Muslim neighborhoods in the northern city of Lashio. Reports of unrest have since spread nationwide.

The numbers 969, innocuous in themselves, refer to attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. But 969 monks have been providing the moral justification for a wave of anti-Muslim bloodshed that could scuttle Myanmar's nascent reform program. Another prominent 969 monk, Wimala Biwuntha, likens Muslims to a tiger who enters an ill-defended house to snatch away its occupants.

"Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race," he said in a recent sermon. "We might even lose our country."

Officially, Myanmar has no state religion, but its rulers have long put Buddhism first. Muslims make up an estimated 4 percent of the populace. Buddhism is followed by 90 percent of the country's 60 million people and is promoted by a special department within the ministry of religion created during the junta.

## EASY SCAPEGOATS

Monks play a complex part in Burmese politics. They took a central role in pro-democracy "Saffron Revolution" uprisings against military rule in 2007. The generals – who included current President Thein Sein and most senior members of his government – suppressed them. Now, Thein Sein's ambitious program of reforms has ushered in new freedoms of speech and assembly, liberating the country's roughly 500,000 monks. They can travel at will to spread Buddhist teachings, including 969 doctrine.

In Burma's nascent democracy, the monks have emerged as a political force in the run-up to a general election scheduled for 2015. Their new potency has given rise to a conspiracy theory here: The 969 movement is controlled by disgruntled hardliners from the previous junta, who are fomenting unrest to derail the reforms and foil an election landslide by Suu Kyi's NLD.

“It is impossible he is inciting religious violence.”

**Sann Sint**

Myanmar Minister of Religious Affairs



MERCHANDISING THE MOVEMENT: T-shirts with the 969 symbol are popular items at street stalls, alongside ones depicting Aung San Suu Kyi. **REUTERS/ SOE ZEYA TUN**





SPIRITUAL LEADER: Wirathu, an abbot in a prominent Mandalay monastery and a leader of the 969 movement, calls mosques “enemy bases”.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

No evidence has emerged to support this belief. But some in the government say there is possibly truth to it.

“Some people are very eager to reform, some people don’t want to reform,” Soe Thein, one of President Thein Sein’s two closest advisors, told Reuters. “So, regarding the sectarian violence, some people may be that side – the anti-reform side.”

Even if 969 isn’t controlled by powerful hardliners, it has broad support, both in high places and at the grass roots, where it is a genuine and growing movement.

Officials offer tacit backing, said Wimala, the 969 monk. “By letting us give speeches to protect our religion and race, I assume they are supporting us,” he said.

The Yangon representative of the Burmese Muslim Association agreed. “The anti-Muslim movement is growing and the government isn’t stopping it,” said Myo Win, a Muslim teacher. Myo Win likened 969 to the Ku Klux Klan.

The religion minister, Sann Sint, said the movement doesn’t have official state backing. But he defended

Wirathu and other monks espousing the creed.

“I don’t think they are preaching to make problems,” he said.

Local authorities, too, have lent the movement some backing.

Its logo – now one of Myanmar’s most recognizable – bears the Burmese numerals 969, a chakra wheel and four Asiatic lions representing the ancient Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Stickers with the logo are handed out free at speeches. They adorn shops, homes, taxis and souvenir stalls at the nation’s most revered Buddhist pagoda, the Shwedagon. They are a common sight in areas plagued by unrest.

Some authorities treat the symbol with reverence. A court in Bago, a region near Yangon hit by anti-Muslim violence this year, jailed a Muslim man for two years in April after he removed a 969 sticker from a betel-nut shop. He was sentenced under a section of Burma’s colonial-era Penal Code, which outlaws “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings”.

“It’s like building a fence to protect our religion.

**Aung Lwin Tun**

Son of the 969 creator, about the movement’s purpose

## QUASI-OFFICIAL ORIGINS

The 969 movement’s ties to the state date back to the creed’s origins. Wimala, Wirathu and other 969 preachers credit its creation to the late Kyaw Lwin, an ex-monk, government official and prolific writer, now largely forgotten outside religious circles.

Myanmar’s former dictators handpicked Kyaw Lwin to promote Buddhism after the brutal suppression of the 1988 democracy uprising. Thousands were killed or injured after soldiers opened fire on unarmed protesters, including monks. Later, to signal their disgust, monks refused to accept alms from military families for three months, a potent gesture in devoutly Buddhist Myanmar.

Afterwards, the military set about co-opting Buddhism in an effort to tame rebellious monks and repair its image. Monks were registered and their movements restricted. State-run media ran almost daily reports of generals overseeing temple renovations or donating alms to abbots.

In 1991, the junta created a Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS), a unit within the Religion Ministry, and appointed Kyaw Lwin as its head. Sasana means “religion” in Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism; in Burma, the word is synonymous with Buddhism itself.

The following year, the DPPS published “How To Live As A Good Buddhist,” a distillation of Kyaw Lwin’s writings. It was republished in 2000 as “The Best Buddhist,” its cover bearing an early version of the 969 logo.

Kyaw Lwin stepped down in 1992. The current head is Khine Aung, a former military officer.

Kyaw Lwin’s widow and son still live in his modest home in central Yangon. Its living room walls are lined with shelves of Kyaw Lwin’s books and framed photos of him as a monk and meditation master.

Another photo shows Kyaw Lwin sharing a joke with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, then chief of military intelligence and one of Myanmar’s most feared men. Kyaw Lwin enjoyed close relations with other junta leaders, said his son, Aung Lwin Tun, 38, a car importer. He was personally instructed to write “The Best Buddhist” by the late Saw Maung, then Myanmar’s senior-most general. He met “often” to discuss religion with ex-dictator Than Shwe, who retired in March 2011 and has been out of the public eye since then.

“The Best Buddhist” is out of print, but Aung Lwin Tun plans to republish it. “Many people are asking for it



LYNCH MOBS: Religious rioters have killed nearly 200 people and forced more than 150,000, mostly Muslims, from their homes.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

now,” he said. He supports today’s 969 movement, including its anti-Muslim boycott. “It’s like building a fence to protect our religion,” he said.

Also supporting 969 is Kyaw Lwin’s widow, 65, whose name was withheld at the family’s request. She claimed that Buddhists who marry Muslims are forced at their weddings to tread on an image of Buddha, and that the ritual slaughter of animals by Shi’ite Muslims makes it easier for them to kill humans.

Among the monks Kyaw Lwin met during his time as DPPS chief was Wiseitta Biwuntha, who hailed from the town of Kyaukse, near the northern cultural capital of Mandalay. Better known as Wirathu, he is today one of the 969’s most incendiary leaders.

Wirathu and Kyaw Lwin stayed in touch after their 1992 meeting, said Aung Lwin Tun, who believed his father would admire Wirathu’s teachings. “He is doing what other people won’t – protecting and promoting the religion.”

Kyaw Lwin died in 2001, aged 70. That same year, Wirathu began preaching about 969, and the U.S. State Department reported “a sharp increase in anti-Muslim violence” in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment

was stoked in March 2001 by the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and in September by al Qaeda's attacks in the United States.

Two years later, Wirathu was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in jail for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited communal riots in his hometown. At least 10 Muslims were killed by a Buddhist mob, according to a State Department report. The 969 movement had spilled its first blood.

## 969 VERSUS 786

Wirathu was freed in 2011 during an amnesty for political prisoners. While the self-styled "Burmese bin Laden" has become the militant face of 969, the movement derives evangelical energy from monks in Mon, a coastal state where people pride themselves on being Myanmar's first Buddhists. Since last year's violence they have organized a network across the nation. They led a boycott last year of a Muslim-owned bus company in Moulmein, Mon's capital. Extending that boycott nationwide has become a central 969 goal.

Muslims held many senior government positions after Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948. That changed in 1962, when the military seized power and stymied the hiring and promoting of Muslim officials. The military drew on popular prejudices that Muslims dominated business and used their profits to build mosques, buy Buddhist wives and spread Islamic teachings.

All this justified the current boycott of Muslim businesses, said Zarni Win Tun, a 31-year-old lawyer and 969 devotee, who said Muslims had long shunned Buddhist businesses. "We didn't start the boycott – they did," she said. "We're just using their methods."

By that she means the number 786, which Muslims of South Asian origin often display on their homes and businesses. It is a numerical representation of the Islamic blessing, "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful". But Buddhists in Myanmar – a country obsessed by numerology – claim the sum of the three numbers signifies a Muslim plan for world domination in the 21st century.

It is possible to understand why some Buddhists might believe this. Religious and dietary customs prohibit Muslims from frequenting Buddhist restaurants, for example. Muslims also dominate some small- and medium-sized business sectors. The names of Muslim-owned construction companies – Naing Group, Motherland, Fatherland – are winning extra prominence now that Yangon is experiencing a reform-era building boom.

However, the biggest construction firms – those involved in multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects – are run by tycoons linked to members of the former dictatorship. They are Buddhists.

Buddhist clients have canceled contracts with Muslim-owned construction companies in northern Yangon, fearing attacks by 969 followers on the finished buildings, said Shwe Muang, a Muslim MP with the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. "I worry that if this starts in one township it will infect others," he said.

## "OUR LIVES ARE NOT SAFE"

For Zarni Win Tun, the 969 devotee, shunning Muslims is a means of ensuring sectarian peace. She points to the Meikhtila violence, which was sparked by an argument between Buddhist customers and a Muslim gold-shop owner. "If they'd bought from their own people, the problem wouldn't have happened," she said.

Her conviction that segregation is the solution to sectarian strife is echoed in national policy. A total of at least 153,000 Muslims have been displaced in the past year after the violence in Rakhine and in central Myanmar. Most are concentrated in camps guarded by the security forces with little hope of returning to their old lives.



A few prominent monks have publicly criticized the 969 movement, and some Facebook users have launched a campaign to boycott taxis displaying its stickers. Some Yangon street stalls have started selling 969 CDs more discreetly since the Meikhtila bloodbath. The backlash has otherwise been muted.

Wimala, the Mon monk, shrugged off criticism from fellow monks. “They shouldn’t try to stop us from doing good things,” he said.

In mid-June, he and Wirathu attended a hundreds-strong monastic convention near Yangon, where Wirathu presented a proposal to restrict Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.

In another sign 969 is going mainstream, Wirathu’s bid was supported by Dhammapiya, a U.S.-educated professor at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon, a respected institution with links to other Buddhist universities in Asia.

Dhammapiya described 969 as a peaceful movement that is helping Myanmar through a potentially turbulent transition. “The 969 issue for us is no issue,” Dhammapiya told Reuters. “Buddhists always long to live in peace and harmony.”

## NO MOSQUES HERE

The only mass movement to rival 969 is the National League for Democracy. Their relationship is both antagonistic and complementary.

In a speech posted on YouTube in late March, Wirathu said the party and Suu Kyi’s inner circle were dominated by Muslims. “If you look at NLD offices in any town, you will see bearded people,” he said. Followers of Wimala told Reuters they had removed photos of Suu Kyi – a devout Buddhist – from their homes to protest her apparent reluctance to speak up for Buddhists affected by last year’s violence in Rakhine. Suu Kyi’s reticence on sectarian violence has also angered Muslims.

The Burmese Muslim Association has accused NLD members of handing out 969 materials in Yangon.

Party spokesman Nyan Win said “some NLD members” were involved in the movement. “But the NLD cannot interfere with the freedoms or rights of members,” he said. “They all have the right to do what they want in terms of social affairs.”

Min Thet Lin, 36, a taxi driver, is exercising that right. The front and back windows of his car are plastered with 969 stickers. He is also an NLD leader in Thaketa, a working-class Yangon township known for anti-Muslim sentiment.

In February, Buddhist residents of Thaketa descended upon an Islamic school in Min Thet Lin’s neighborhood which they claimed was being secretly converted into a mosque. Riot police were deployed while the structure was demolished.

A month later, Wimala and two other Mon monks visited Thaketa to give Buddhists what a promotional leaflet called “dhamma medicine” – that is, three days of 969 sermons. “Don’t give up the fight,” urged the leaflet.

Today, the property is sealed off and guarded by police. “People don’t want a mosque here,” said Min Thet Lin.

As he spoke, 969’s pop anthem, “Song to Whip Up Religious Blood,” rang over the rooftops. A nearby monastic school was playing the song for enrolling pupils.

(Additional reporting by Min Zayar Oo.; Editing by Bill Tarrant and Michael Williams)