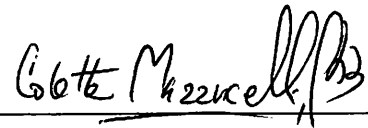


Exclusionary Nationalism:
Examining the conditions of identity-based violence during political transition

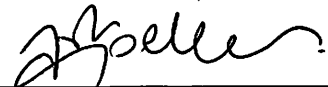
by

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Abstract

In 2011, Myanmar began a historic transition away from decades of isolated military rule, commencing a period of rapid social and political change. The heralded ‘democratic transition’ was regarded with optimism by the international community, ending years of economic sanctions on the regime and opening its access to the globalized world economy. However, this liberalizing period coincided with communal violence targeting Muslim minorities reaching previously unattained scales of organization and severity. In 2016-2017, military-led ethnic cleansing campaigns caused mass displacement and a human rights catastrophe in the Rakhine State. This thesis conducts a qualitative single case study analysis of Myanmar since 2011, to answer the research question: what effects did liberalization and the ‘democratic transition’ have on pre-existing ethnic tensions in Myanmar? The analysis will consider elite interests, changing political opportunity structures, pre-existing frames and narratives, and the introduction of new media into the “marketplace of ideas.” This thesis asserts that during periods of political transition and increased instability, altered political opportunity structures create incentives for elites to construct nationalist narratives or a credible threat in order to rally popular support and retain positions of privilege. In a case of incomplete liberalization away from military rule, these incentives are greater as democracy is not yet consolidated and the role of the military within the new political system is being redefined in the public image. This thesis also posits that opening to the global economy and introducing ICTs and the digital space, particularly in communities lacking digital literacy, creates a catalyst for unmonitored, targeted disinformation campaigns, as the distorted ‘marketplace of ideas’ allows extremist views and ‘dangerous speech’ to flourish.

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Introduction

In 2011, Myanmar began to open to the outside world after decades of isolated military rule, commencing a period of rapid social and political change. The heralded ‘democratic transition’ was regarded with optimism by the international community, ending years of economic sanctions on the regime and opening its access to the globalized world economy. However, this liberalizing period coincided with communal violence reaching previously unattained scales of organization and severity. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups organized anti-Muslim campaigns that drew on long-held fears of Islam, primarily targeted against the Rohingya ethnic group. Since a group of Rohingya insurgents incited violence against Myanmar authorities in August 2017, an estimated 725,000 Rohingya refugees have been forced to flee into Bangladesh amid the resulting alleged ethnic cleansing campaign led by the military. A prominent, highly destructive component of the crisis is the use of gender-based violence perpetrated by the military as well as armed civilian groups.

Despite the conventional wisdom that the global spread of democracy is inherently beneficial, instances of ethnic or communal violence have often taken place during such periods of democratic transition. For this reason, my research investigates the causal factors behind collective violent extremism to address the question: what conditions related to liberalization can lead to the popular radicalization of nationalist movements? By identifying sociological factors which catalyze the spread of violent extremism, the actions of national and international actors can be evaluated to ultimately determine better measures to prevent the outbreak of human rights violations, especially when there is a pre-existing pattern of identity-based violence. This will be analyzed through a qualitative single case study analysis of Myanmar since 2011, considering the specific research question: what effects did liberalization and the ‘democratic transition’ have on

pre-existing ethnic tensions in Myanmar? This research objective will also address how the case of Myanmar, where democracy is not fully consolidated and where the military dictatorship oversees the parameters of the transition, fits into the discussion of democratization. My secondary research objective is to consider the broader implications for the international system, including an examination of how international actors can better prevent violent extremism and human rights violations, especially in order to protect vulnerable groups, such as women and minorities.

The analysis will consider elite interests, changing political opportunity structures, pre-existing frames and narratives, and the introduction of new media into the “marketplace of ideas.” There is currently a lack of research on the challenges to statecraft and international institutions presented by the evolving domain of social media, digital communication, and personal data, and of research relating these concepts to ethnic conflict and international relations theory. I intend to expand on existing models, such as Jack Snyder’s elite-persuasion theory, by examining the effects of these variables on a modernizing society’s socio-political structure, and ultimately, to the ease of popularizing violence. In Myanmar, liberalization brought about national access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) like Facebook, opening channels of networked communication to a changing, economically modernizing public in an unprecedented way. This development had critical implications for the mobilization of violence.

This thesis asserts that during periods of political transition and instability, altered political opportunity structures create incentives for elites to construct nationalist narratives or a credible threat in order to rally popular support and retain positions of privilege. In a case of incomplete liberalization away from military rule, these incentives are greater as democracy is not yet consolidated and the role of the military within the new political system is being

redefined in the public image. This thesis also posits that the digital space, particularly in communities lacking digital literacy, acts as a catalyst for unmonitored, targeted disinformation campaigns to this end, as the distorted ‘marketplace of ideas’ allows extremist views to flourish.

Ultimately, this research attempts to address questions that loom larger than the single case study, such as the increasing role of identity politics in domestic and international affairs, threats to democratic practices in both consolidated democracies and liberalizing states, and the evolving spaces for communication that determine information flow along with the attitudes, stereotypes, and narratives that come to affect collective action. In conflict analysis, it is increasingly clear that to understand how nationalist violence becomes a rational act for its participants, one must first seek to understand both the underlying narratives, myths, and incentives, as well as the mechanisms and actors who determine the flow of these ideas.

Literature Review

There are various fundamental features to consider when analyzing the escalation of ethnic or religious tensions and the mobilization of identity groups to the point of violence. This research aims to identify *why* and *how* identity-based movements radicalize toward violence during periods of political transition. As such, the literature surrounding this research question covers a variety of issues and can be approached through a number of theoretical lenses. In order to identify appropriate causal mechanisms, scholarly works focusing on ethnic conflict, liberalization, globalization, and group radicalization will be in the context of the changing roles of civilians and elites due to social and political developments. Ethnic conflict literature asks: What motivates violence between ethnic groups? Is such violence the inevitable result of group differences? Literature on liberalization and globalization takes a step back to look at the context and ask: Why does such violence occur during periods of democratic transition? What effect does the context—such as a setting of *incomplete* liberalization—have on a conflict and its key players? And how might globalization change perceptions of the stakes for identity groups? Each of these subfields were chosen due to their explanatory power regarding ethnic violence or based on their proposed catalysts or force multipliers behind communal violence.

A. Ethnic Conflict

The literature on ethnic conflict must first examine the major paradigms of nationalism and ethnicity. The works of Anthony Smith, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Ernest Gellner inform the primordialist, constructivist, and instrumentalist understandings of ethnicity and the nation.¹ The primordialist school of thought posits that conflict between ethnic groups is

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 2nd Ed (London Cambridge University Press, 1992); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Ed. (London, New York: Verso, 2016); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1994).

inevitable due to the unchanging, essential characteristics of ethnic groups. Smith's ethnosymbolist theory falls within this school of thought, as Smith suggests that nations form around a pre-existing *ethnie* sharing common ancestry myths, values or culture, and/or historic territory.² This is often used as the foundation of the 'ancient hatreds' argument,³ which is now predominantly rejected by serious scholars of ethnic conflict. Investigation of the subject shows that the politicization and relevance of ethnicity as an identity marker has varied over time and place, negating the supposition that ethnic differences naturally and inevitably lead to violence.

Instead, instrumentalist theory argues that ethnic group identifications are the result of attempts to create coalitions to compete for scarce politico-economic resources. The constructivist school of thought, similarly, holds that ethnic identities are not static and can be constructed and instrumentalized differently over time, often incorporating discussion of the social-psychological aspects of identity formation and the manipulation of symbols and myths. Various scholars attribute the consolidation of these national identities to the manipulation of elites. Eric Hobsbawm presents such a theory of the formation of nations, arguing that the nation is an evolving construct that develops out of nationalist sentiment as an elite-driven process that ultimately serves the people below. In this understanding, conflict is viewed as less inevitable and more context-dependent. Benedict Anderson presents a constructivist perspective, positing that a nation is "imagined" because although its members will never personally know one another, the development of a national consciousness by way of language, print, and bureaucratization allows them to construct a shared, imagined common identity built from a

² Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 12-14.

³ Smith, himself, did not develop this argument.

changing cultural system.⁴ Given that the research question of this thesis attempts to link effect (conflict and violent extremism) to a specific temporal and situational context, the constructivist and instrumentalist schools of thought provide the strongest lenses through which to analyze the outbreak of conflict.

Within ethnic conflict literature, there are various analytical tools applied to unravel the motivations behind communal violence. The realist school of international relations theory considers the security dilemma. Barry R. Posen's well-known thesis argues that the breakdown of the imperial order in the post-Cold War world system led to self-interested groups fearing the threat posed by neighboring groups. As each group in the anarchic system seeks to protect its own security, the conditions for violence and war are set.⁵ Groups and states must determine the offensive and defensive capabilities and intentions of their neighbors and strategize accordingly. Posen argues that the security dilemma also applies to ethnic groups. Shiping Tang contributes to the discussion of the security dilemma and ethnic conflict by stating that "the security dilemma emerges when central authority gradually or suddenly breaks down," or when one group comes to dominate the central authority, causing one or more groups to fear each other.⁶ Written at a time when imperial rule was faltering (seen in the USSR's collapse), Posen was extrapolating that insecure ethnic groups would instrumentalize their 'groupness' to assure their own security *vis-à-vis* their neighbors in an anarchic world system. However, this theory is limiting and is not fully effective in a larger subset of modern ethnic conflicts.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Ed.* (London, New York: Verso, 2016), 12.

⁵ Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 28, accessed November 4, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/00396339308442672.

⁶ Shiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict: Toward a Dynamic and Integrative Theory of Ethnic Conflict," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 530, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23024607>.

Donald Horowitz's *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* is a foundational text in the literature on the subject. Horowitz considers the nature of ethnic affiliations, why certain regions seem to be prone to ethnic conflict, motivations behind secessionist movements, the roles of decolonization and the principle of national self-determination. Horowitz argues that "in deeply divided societies ... the permeative character of ethnic affiliations, by infusing so many sectors of social life, imparts a pervasive quality of ethnic conflicts."⁷ Threats to this ethnic affiliation, therefore, are likely to justify violence as a response. His explanation also looks into the sociology of ethnically divided contexts, such as the society's methods of categorization, the role of elites, and the structure of group relations within the socio-political space. James D. Fearon, similarly, determines that a conflict is ethnically motivated when "(a) it is motivated by animosity towards ethnic others, (b) the victims are chosen by ethnic criteria, or (c) the attack is made in the name of an ethnic group."⁸ Fearon's definition will be used for the purposes of this study. Fearon contributes to the constructivist explanation of ethnic violence by attempting to demonstrate the connection between the social construction of ethnic identity and the occurrence of ethnic violence,⁹ outlining three constructivist theories of identity formation by basing the process on broad structural forces, discursive formations, or individuals as agents. The study then traces the implications for ethnic violence from each process. The concepts introduced in this piece, particularly pertaining to discourse and structural factors, complement a study of how new spaces for discourse may change or expedite the process of identity formation. A third scholar to consider is Stuart Kaufman, who examines the role of symbols, myths, and internalized stories

⁷ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸ James D. Fearon, "Ethnic Mobilization and Ethnic Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*, ed. Donald A. Wittman and Barry R. Weingast (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 857.

⁹ James D. Fearon and D. D. Laitin, "Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity," *International Organization*, 54, no. 4 (2000): 845–850.

within ethnic groups. These myths and the symbolic politics that are produced can invoke loyalty to extremist leaders and create the conditions for violence to occur, according to Kaufman.¹⁰

Michael Brown *et. al*'s compendium on nationalism and ethnic conflict provides a similarly in-depth review of the most noted scholars in the field. Of particular interest is Stephen Van Evera's contribution to the work, in which he hypothesizes about the conditions behind the forms of nationalism that lead to violence. The mechanisms Van Evera proposes to study include levels of nationalist oppression toward minorities; relationship to other nations; divergent beliefs about history and current conduct; degree of perceived legitimacy of nationalist groups; and conditions for mythmaking.¹¹ The concept of mythmaking is of particular importance to this thesis, and is continued in the chapter by Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, who discuss the role of manipulation of imperfections in the 'marketplace of ideas' in driving nationalist myths and provoking conflicts. Snyder and Ballentine attribute this manipulation of public opinion to elites who wield power over the flow of information within the society, and who use this power to mobilize the population along ethnic lines in order to gain popular approval.¹² This literature regarding communication between groups within societies, and the manipulation of nationalist narratives, complements the theories to be presented below, which will expand the discussion of the 'marketplace of ideas' to the digital space.

Altogether, the literature on ethnic conflict proposes a number of mechanisms to take into account when considering any given case study, including group security, manipulation of symbols, mythmaking in a 'marketplace of ideas', the unique social character of ethnic

¹⁰ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern hatred: The symbolic politics of ethnic war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 28.

¹¹ Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War," in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29-30, 58.

¹² Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas," in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown *et al.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 61-96.

affiliations, and power-seeking elites. Each of these concepts is useful to consider when examining the causes and effects of violent interactions between groups. The next section of literature will examine liberalization and globalization, and the effects that these processes can have on the expression of identity-based tensions in a society.

B. Liberalization and Globalization

Often, states may enter a period of democratic transition but do not fully democratize or reach what is termed a *consolidated democracy*. According to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, a consolidated democracy exists when “democracy becomes routinized and deeply internalized in social, institutional, and even psychological life, as well as in calculations for achieving success.”¹³ As a result, it is necessary to differentiate between the process of *democratization* and the more broad process of *political liberalization*, observed in decreasing government authoritarianism, extension of civil liberties, and the introduction of economically liberal policies. As Linz and Stepan note, there can be liberalization without democratization.¹⁴ Because of the broader implications of the former, the term ‘liberalization’ will be used for the purposes of this research. The transition period of political liberalization is highly context-specific, with varying degrees of control retained by authoritarian regimes in different cases. As a result, it is necessary to clearly operationalize the concept of liberalization, and its features, for this thesis.

Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter provide a useful place to start. The four-volume text of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* is a noted work that sparked the field of research on transition periods. O’Donnell and Schmitter discuss the process of liberalization toward a possible democratic end as a set of bargaining negotiations

¹³ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

between those changing the state and those attempting to retain as much power as possible. The authors' analysis of the role of the military before and after liberalization is of particular importance to the case study of Myanmar. As they state, "the longer-term issues—and hopes—involve a gradual change in the military's image of itself as ultimate guardian of the national interest..."¹⁵ In line with this statement, the rest of the authors' analysis considers the role played by the various actors determining the state's political future, such as a rising civil society, and the layers of society who "may discover serious divergences in their goals."¹⁶ Simultaneously, the process of liberalization can create socioeconomic changes such as increased social mobility, market changes, and growing individuation.¹⁷ O'Donnell and Schmitter's image of a state in transition is illustrated to be, in a word, indeterminate. The society transitioning from authoritarian rule into a phase of incomplete democratization is a society in flux, with an increased degree of competition between players to solidify power over resources and over the national identity, ultimately creating the potential for instability and insecurity.

By contrast, Jack Snyder's prominent work on the subject, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, building on his previous research with Karen Ballentine, approaches post-liberalization violence by studying institution strength and elite interests across case studies. Snyder seeks to understand why democratic transitions sometimes spark nationalist conflict and sometimes do not. His elite-persuasion theory argues that during periods of political transition, self-interested elites become threatened by loss of status or power, so they propagate nationalist myths through the manipulation of the mass media or political

¹⁵ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1986), 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

institutions. In doing so, elites may exclude other ethnic groups from the political system and/or the national identity, inflaming tensions and leading to conflict.¹⁸ This analysis limits the variables at play, but it is generally a valuable addition to the overall body of theories. Elites may represent an ethnic, religious, political, or intellectual stratum of society, which allows the paradigm to be applied to a variety of case studies; however, the role of the mass media could be expanded to include new forms of mass manipulation, such as information and communication technologies.

Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast argue that elite-based theories, such as Snyder's, fail to adequately address why citizens participate in these "megalomaniac visions."¹⁹ In order to explain the process behind ethnic conflict in these situations, these scholars argue that "leaders with a tenuous hold on power, fear among the citizenry, and uncertainty about the true intentions of propagators of violence" interact and create the conditions for the mobilization toward violence.²⁰ Fear incentivizes populations to rally around ethnic leadership, which can lead to the mobilization toward violence.

Amy Chua presents a different approach to ethnic conflict, based in political economy. Like Snyder, Chua explores the reasons behind explosions of ethnic violence during periods of democratization and globalization; however, her analysis considers group relationships within the economic space. The introduction of free market democracy into developing states frequently creates the phenomenon of 'market-dominant minorities'—ethnic minorities who dominate

¹⁸ Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 48-50

¹⁹ Rui de Figueiredo and Barry R. Weingast, "The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict," in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, ed. Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 261.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

economically in the market system.²¹ Chua's analysis is useful for several reasons: first, it aptly points out the connection between democratization and globalization, which have tended to coincide; second, it introduces the interesting perspective of the political economy, and the relative distribution of resources, into the discussion of ethnic relations. However, Chua acknowledges that her theory does not apply to *every* occasion of ethnic violence.²² *World on Fire* can be taken into consideration along with Snyder's theory in *From Voting to Violence* to identify causal mechanisms, or rationale, behind the mobilization of nationalist violence. In the case study of this particular thesis, the theory that market-dominant minorities provoke ethnic conflict cannot be applied to the Rohingya, who lack political and economic access to play such a role in Myanmar. Instead, Burmese *perceptions* and collective memories on the topic of the nation's political economy may prove to be more instructive in the rationale behind violence.

Evidently, the literature on liberalization and conflict presents a varied set of possible causal mechanisms. Scholars largely focus on the concerns of political science (such as institutions, elite interests, or political economy), which contribute valuably to observations of the empirical features of a conflict. In the unique case of Myanmar, liberalization in 2011 opened up the state to the globalized world in an unprecedented way. Myanmar had been under isolated military rule for decades, causing the population to be deprived of ties to the external world, engagement in the world market due to strict economic sanctions, and access to modern communication technologies. The country's steps toward liberalization were welcomed by the international community, and with liberalization came Myanmar's entrance into the globalized world. Globalization, then, is a second critical force to be considered in examining the context of

²¹ Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 6-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

Myanmar's spike in ethnic violence. For this analysis, Arjun Appadurai provides the most compelling theory.

Appadurai's works *Fear of Small Numbers* and *Modernity At Large* critically examine the conflicts that are symptomatic of the globalized world system. Appadurai asks why such a proliferation of ethnic and political violence has existed since 1989, coinciding with globalization and the spread of economic and political liberalism globally. Appadurai presents a unique, powerful conceptual framework that argues that violence is the result of "the uncertainties about identity that global flows invariably produce."²³ In his analysis, Appadurai explains the perceived threat that minority groups pose to a majority's "national identity," claiming that the difference between majority and minority creates a felt "anxiety of incompleteness"—which, when mixed with a sense of social uncertainty, produces the "road to genocide."²⁴ Additionally, Appadurai illustrates that minorities often become reminders of unwanted memories of past violence, forced conscription, or colonialism, altogether becoming "embarrassments to any state-sponsored image of national purity and state fairness," becoming the perfect scapegoat tagged as the perpetrator behind the anxiety felt by the 'threatened majority' for its national project.²⁵ This research complements the nationalism and ethnicity literature well; in the age of the 'national state', and under conditions of instability and insecurity, the perception of minority groups becomes inherently entangled in questions of national identity. Appadurai can be paired with Heather Rae, who theorizes that "pathological homogenisation" is a symptom of the state-based international system, which Rae observes in the use of discriminatory and violent treatment by elite state-builders throughout history in attempts

²³ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: an Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

to create bounded political communities around exclusive moral communities. In this political process, the “other” is intentionally constructed as a threat in order to centralize authority and demarcate territorial boundaries.²⁶

C. Violent Extremism and Group Radicalization

The literature concerning radicalization and violent extremism is vast and spans disciplines, including social psychology, rational choice theory, social movement theory, and relative deprivation theory. For this thesis, only the literature regarding the sociology of group radicalization will be briefly reviewed, along with literature concerning the role of information and communication technologies in promoting violent extremism.

Political process theory (PPT) is a key explanation of social movement mobilization. Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing structures are essential components of PPT, which ultimately intends to present members of a social movement as rational actors.²⁷ Charles Tilly provided the foundational work for PPT in *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Tilly analyzed the interaction between interests, organization, and opportunity in the mobilization of social movements.²⁸ As the theory developed, the concepts of ‘cognitive liberation’ and ‘framing’ were introduced. Framing is of particular interest to this study’s analysis of mobilization; it is described by David Snow *et al.* as “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.”²⁹ The sociological understanding of ‘framing’ in the mobilization of

²⁶ Heather Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-4.

²⁷ Neal Caren, “Political Process Theory,” in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Blackwell Publishing, 2007). DOI: 10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.x

²⁸ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998).

²⁹ Caren, quoting McAdam *et al.* (1996).

collective action as well as the other key concepts introduced in the field of sociology and social psychology tie in to the discussion of the flow of information in society, and in the digital space.

A newer subset of sociological literature concerns the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into the modes of social contact and the ultimate success or failure of social movements. As Ralph D. Berenger writes, “Every technological innovation in the field of communication has caused disruption in how members of societies relate to each other, and each has resulted in a paradigm shift in civil discourse and behavior, sometimes with unintended consequences.”³⁰ Much of the early literature surrounding this topic in relation to politics and international affairs focused on the perceived positive benefits of ICTs in empowering previously repressed populations by giving voice to marginalized actors, with reference to these technologies’ prominent role in the Arab Spring. However, more recent case studies have also illuminated the role that the digital space can play in fomenting violent narratives and extremist rhetoric.

Katharine Allen’s chapter “Media and Political Transitions: Searching for a New Paradigm,” in the highly topical book *Social Media Go to War* presents an overview of the primary international communications theories regarding the introduction of the internet into communications.³¹ Allen’s literature review of international communications theory succinctly introduces important concepts such as *agenda setting theory*, which proposes that the controlled information flows and control of framing gives the media “inordinate power” in shaping policy and public opinion; and *network analysis*, building on Manuel Castell’s theory of the “network society,” the concept that individuals and groups are empowered toward networked social

³⁰ Ralph Berenger, “Introduction,” in *Social Media Go to War* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2013), 7.

³¹ Katharine Allen, “Media and Political Transitions: Searching for a New Paradigm,” in *Social Media Go to War* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2013), 46-47.

movements through the coordination of online and offline action, and Habermas' theory of the public sphere.³² Allen's analysis demonstrates the critical importance of the communications sphere (online and offline) during political transitions, and in determining how individuals and groups perceive each other and interact. A new paradigm of international communications theory, as Allen suggests, would add a complementary frame of analysis to the literature on ethnic conflict and conflicts during liberalization. The concepts presented in Allen's analysis support the research done by Jonathan Bright, who considers the role that internet-mediated communication can play in augmenting collective violence and extremist ideologies. Bright, searching for reasons behind political fragmentation on social media across 26 countries, investigates the lack of exposure to opposing ideologies online as a causal mechanism behind the rise of extremism.³³

Analysis also extends to the more intentional side of narrative manipulation within the digital space. The Computational Propaganda Research Project lays out the variety of strategies employed in the digital space to influence opinions and disseminate narratives.³⁴ The use of disinformation campaigns is increasingly relevant in the promotion of violent nationalist movements, and many of the strategies explored in the report can be applied to analysis of such contexts. Clearly, this has implications for the elite-motivated theories, like of that of Snyder, as it is evidence that elite manipulation of exclusionary or extremist narratives can be done more discreetly and more powerfully than ever before.

³² Allen, 50-53; J. Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An encyclopedia article," in M. G. Durham and D.M. Kellner (eds.), *Media and cultural Studies*: 73-78.

³³ Jonathan Bright, "Explaining the Emergence of Political Fragmentation on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23 (2018): 17-33.

³⁴ Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard. Working Paper 2017.12. Oxford, UK: Project on Computational Propaganda. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>

Another element to consider in this domain is that of “dangerous speech,” a term coined by Susan Benesch to describe any form of expression “that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group,” intended to be a less vague phenomenon to address than the comparable concept of “hate speech.”³⁵ The Dangerous Speech Project determines several key strategies that are employed in the dissemination of dangerous speech, including dehumanization, the promotion of fear, and a threat to group purity.³⁶ Identification of dangerous speech is intended to serve as an early indicator of communal violence, which allows steps to be taken to proactively counter this form of speech.

While technology itself is neutral to group violence or ideology, it clearly has far-reaching effects on how communication takes place and the flow of information within societies and has a noted function in recruitment toward violent extremism. As a result, it can be considered a useful frame within the study of the rise of violent social movements and of ethnic and nationalist conflicts. It is evident from the literature that the use of social media can have mobilizing and polarizing effects on connected communities, especially in communities that lack digital literacy. Consequently, the introduction of ICTs can therefore be considered a force multiplier or a catalyst in the outbreak of identity-based violence. The challenges to governing the digital space are great, and involve questions of corporate responsibility and determinations of when *freedom of speech* becomes *dangerous speech*. However, with the continued modernization of developing countries, and as states liberalize and become increasingly connected to digital networks, the risk is high that nationalist movements will radicalize during periods of political instability, and as perceptions of more traditional factors (like economic

³⁵ Susan Benesch, Cathy Buerger, Tonei Glavinic, and Sean Manion, “Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide,” Dangerous Speech Project (December 31, 2018), accessed March 18, 2019. <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>

³⁶ Ibid.

inequality, or lack of political power) create the frames for narratives that will justify and motivate violence.

D. Outcomes

The multidisciplinary literature makes clear that the rise of radicalized nationalism is a complex process with various types of possible causal mechanisms and catalysts. The anti-Muslim violence since the beginning of Myanmar's recent introduction of liberalization policies in 2011 was drastically brutal, and was motivated largely through the communication of commonly held myths and narratives among the majority Buddhist population. A great deal of mobilization toward violence took place through the pre-existing social structure, while the introduction of ICTs into the modernizing context had far-reaching effects of the flow of information and communications within the social context—a context made unstable by a period of dynamic political transition and socioeconomic change. For this reason, I will attempt to situate this case study within the above scholarly literature, endeavoring to examine how the conditions during Myanmar's political liberalization created the context for widespread, popularized ethno-religious violence.

Research Design

This puzzle will be addressed by employing qualitative methods and utilizing the constructivist school of thought. For the purposes of this thesis, “liberalization” will be understood as the reduction of authoritarian controls on the political and economic system, such as through the relief of restrictions on freedom of speech and the media. Given that it is difficult to demarcate the end of a democratic transition, the term “transition” will be used to describe the period following Myanmar’s loosening of restrictions by the military junta and the beginning of its transition to civilian rule in 2011. A movement is understood to be “radicalized” when its adherents are moved to extreme ideals or strategies apart from the status quo or norms.

The case of Myanmar is uniquely well-suited as a case study to examine the causal mechanisms behind ultra-nationalism during liberalization for several reasons. First, its historical trajectory includes distinct periods of political and economic reform, with indicators including Myanmar’s new constitution of 2008, its transition to civilian rule in 2011, its elections in 2015, and the lifting of restrictions on media and speech. Along this timeline are observable, traceable effects of liberalization—like the relief of international sanctions, the evolving role of the military, and the introduction of ICTs as a means of information consumption. Second, the rise of anti-Muslim violence has a traceable history and various distinct periods of escalation. This is puzzling, however, given the projected improvements in the areas of civil liberties and socioeconomic quality of life. Other less dramatic periods of transition in Myanmar did not feature similar levels of extreme nationalism or anti-Muslim violence, which presents the puzzle of why this particular time period of liberalization coincided with a human rights catastrophe. In order to determine causal factors, my research will use process tracing to establish links between these contextual developments and the responding perceptions and actions of both elites

and communities within Myanmar since 2011. This will be accomplished by establishing the timeline of reforms and effects, noting the changing opportunity structures and communication landscape that resulted, and overlaying the timeline of identity-based violence. The secondary analysis regarding the challenges facing the international community in countering violent extremism (CVE) will use discourse analysis of existing international law and practices regarding human rights and CVE to establish best practices.

This research will examine fact-finding reports conducted by the UN and human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. These reports draw on interviews with Rohingya individuals and provide detailed analyses of the alleged ethnic cleansing in the Rakhine State. Discourse analysis of such interviews and of public speeches and of memes and online posts collected by the author will be used to identify key narratives behind violence. Other scholarly works analyzing the historical and political context will also be used, along with statistics, Myanmar and Western newspapers, government statements, and relevant international law. Ultimately, this is an interpretive study that aims to illuminate causal connections between a vastly reshaped context and the outbreak of violence amongst its inhabitants. I hypothesize that during periods of political change and instability, and particularly when liberalization is incomplete, social and political elites seek to retain positions of privilege through the construction of a nationalist narrative, which is easily accomplished by establishing and fomenting a credible fear of an out-group. In the case of Myanmar, conditions of incomplete liberalization left the military with a high degree of power, allowing elites to manipulate insecurities rooted in social uncertainty and the uneven distribution of socio-economic benefits. In doing so, the alliance of military leaders and ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks constructed the perception of an existential threat within pre-existing national myths. The diffusion of

exclusionary nationalism was catalyzed by the introduction of digital media following liberalization, which expedited the spread of hate speech and rumors while embedding narratives in the discussion of morality. I argue that this process has critical implications within the domains of international law and countering violent extremism.

The first chapter will outline both the *longue durée* and modern historical background of the case study. The timeline will begin by analyzing the precursors for Myanmar's complex ethnic and religious environment, dating back to British colonization. A great deal of the state's national narratives and internalized myths draw from the colonial experience, the memory of foreign domination, and immediate post-colonial conflicts. The timeline will continue to be traced through the period of dictatorial military rule and gradual steps toward liberalization. With roots in the 1990s, the liberalization process has distinct stages and was initiated by the ruling junta itself. This brings into consideration the role of elite interests, not only in fomenting nationalist narratives, but in initiating liberalization. The changes in power relations, competition among elites, and the strengthening of the Tatmadaw's ties to the ultra-nationalist Buddhist monkhood will be laid out. The timeline presented in this chapter will provide the material for process tracing in the case study analysis.

Chapter two examines the evidence and timeline of escalating ethnic and religious violence in Myanmar. This chapter will reference reports, interviews, and investigations produced by the United Nations and various human rights organizations.

Chapter three will fully analyze the two timelines, in order to identify causal mechanisms and processes behind the rise of violent extremism. First, it will analyze the role of elites (both military and religious) in leading and disseminating extreme nationalist messages. The altered opportunity structures of the society will be considered, such as the need to secure electoral

victory or to preserve a role as the protector of the national identity. This section will consider the motivations and opportunities for nationalist myth-makers to defend privileged positions by use of a scapegoat. The role of the state's incomplete liberalization, leaving the military with an undue degree of power, will also be analyzed. Next, it will look at the effect of popularized extremism within the general population, in order to identify how the conditions of liberalization led to susceptibility to disinformation campaigns and dangerous speech. The effects of the unstable socio-political environment will be considered. This will lead to discussion of frame alignment with national meta-narratives of endangered nationhood, accompanying identity anxiety, manipulation of such pre-existing narratives, and the limitations and distortions of the 'marketplace of ideas'. This will naturally transition into an analysis of new media and dangerous speech, and the effects of creating an echo chamber with little to no effective oversight.

The concluding chapter will consider implications arising from this case within the international system, examining the greater crisis of multiculturalism and efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). A variety of variables are involved in CVE and it necessarily requires discussion of newer phenomena in foreign policy and conflict, such as the ethical and logistical problems of monitoring dangerous speech, and the role of governmental or intergovernmental bodies in countering violent speech online within a given sovereign territory. This chapter will attempt to address the most poignant and critical implications, and new approaches developing in the intergovernmental and nonprofit sectors for countering violent extremism.

Chapter One: Historical Background and Political Context

To provide a fully comprehensive historical background leading up to Myanmar's current socio-political context would be a lengthy undertaking. This chapter will instead lay out a brief overview of the political context during three distinct periods—colonization, post-colonial nation-building and military rule, and liberalization—paying close attention to the developments of power structures and relations between religious and ethnic groups.

Prior to colonization, Myanmar—then the kingdom of Burma—was Southeast Asia's greatest empire.³⁷ The British Empire annexed Burma during the three Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1824-1826, 1852-1853, and 1885. It is evident that colonization had far-reaching impacts on the sociological structure of the community and its national consciousness, creating the substance for nationalist myths that continue to be invoked in the modern day. This chapter will begin by examining this *longue durée* history in two processes: colonization and post-colonial nation-building. It will then move on to examine Myanmar under military rule and during liberalization.

A. Colonization

Important precursors for modern anti-Muslim sentiment were set during colonization. The British established administrative practices that treated Islam as an unnatural feature of life in Burma. After having annexed Burma and the Rakhine State, the colonists imported numerous immigrants from British India to work as laborers, introducing new Asian minorities who were favored economically in the socio-political system. Many of the British soldiers who populated Burma, often concentrated in urban centers, were Indian Muslims.³⁸ As a result, Muslims came

³⁷ Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

³⁸ Stephen Keck, "Reconstructing Trajectories of Islam in British Burma," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford University Press, 2016), 58.

to be associated with foreign intrusion and economic exploitation by the native population.³⁹ The Rohingya, specifically, are associated with Bengal immigrants, creating their image as foreign intruders in the nation.⁴⁰ As in other colonies, the British ruled Burma by administering the population through a system of ethnic classification; the concept of ‘race’ was introduced as the primary tool of social organization.⁴¹ With colonial institutions and administration came the paper census, which imposed categorization by race, religion, and identity in a society in which such identities had customarily been fluid, non-essentialized, or undefined.⁴² Consequently, early conceptualizations of the indigenous nation to the territory came to be based on the majority Burmese Buddhist ethnic group, and strict divisions between groups were established in the national consciousness. In this way, ethnic groupings began to socially construct unique collective identities with political and territorial implications.

British imperialists quickly enacted policies of separation of state and *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community), rule by racial division, Christian education, and the loss of the official status of monks.⁴³ As all Burmese individuals were mandated to greet British officers with a salutation of respect traditionally reserved for elders, monks, and the Buddha,⁴⁴ this period was viewed as a weakening of Buddhism itself among the Buddhist community.⁴⁵ The monkhood took an active leadership role in defending the national community’s moral and social

³⁹ Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1 (2015): 7. DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2015.10080902015.

⁴⁰ Keck, “Reconstructing Trajectories of Islam in British Burma,” 66.

⁴¹ Violet Cho, “Ethnicity and Identity,” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday (Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2017), 43.

⁴² Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, 8.

⁴³ Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar,” *Policy Studies* No. 71, Honolulu: East-West Center (2014).

⁴⁴ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, 7.

⁴⁵ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives,” 10.

order throughout the colonial period, resisting external threats like the imposition of Christian education, and using their moral weight in the community to merge early nationalism with a specific ethno-religious tradition. Times of uncertain political transition brought the community to fall back on the monkhood as the defining element of its culture, as the defender of its moral order, and as the strongest existing organization from Burma's illustrious past.

B. Post-colonial Nation-Building and Military Rule

With the outbreak of World War II, ethnic Bamar Burmans rallied around the Japanese while non-Bamar Burmans were recruited by the Allies, further establishing bad blood and mistrust that lasted into independence.⁴⁶ A significant portion of the Indian Muslim community fled Burma during Japanese occupation, leaving only a small, marginalized community to represent Muslim interests in a system that did not recognize them as a distinct group, and which had removed them from the national imaginary of Burmese identity.⁴⁷ During the process of nation-building, their legal status came to reflect this *de facto* invisibility. Official government statistics state that Myanmar contains 135 racial groups, with eight major races.⁴⁸ The main exception to Myanmar's system of ethnic politics are the Rohingya, who are primarily located in the northern Rakhine State. The Rohingya, referred to as 'Bengalis' by the government, are seen as foreigners or immigrants to the state, therefore lacking a legitimate claim within the national political community.⁴⁹

Following Japanese occupation during World War II, Burma won its independence 1948, leaving its leaders the task of building a state from a nation that had experienced only limited

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Keck, "Reconstructing Trajectories of Islam in British Burma," 67.

⁴⁸ Cho, "Ethnicity and Identity," 43.

⁴⁹ Gerry van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3: 357.

self-rule in the previous century, whose colonial economy was in ruin, and upon whose territory battled the Cold War's opposing versions of modernity. The added challenge of governing a populace composed of over 130 disparate ethnic groups necessitated unifying actions on the part of the nation-builders. To do this, nation-building required movement away from both British and Indian influences. Ethnonationalist protests, to be detailed further in the next chapter, had already erupted on the backdrop of global economic stagnation during the 1930s.⁵⁰ These early movements demonstrated that Burmese nationalism was, in certain ways, inextricable from anti-foreigner (and anti-Islamic) sentiment.

From 1948-1958, a democratic regime attempted to preside over the various insurgencies and infighting taking place within its borders.⁵¹ Charismatic leaders of the pre-independence movement who had aimed to form a secular state with socialist leanings, such as Aung Saan, were largely killed off. Prime Minister U Nu's government then introduced legislation to form an ideal Buddhist, socialist state, creating a constitutional amendment that named Buddhism the state religion.⁵² The amendment, however, rapidly exacerbated tensions among religious minorities in the state while also failing to appease its more extreme proponents. As a result of the stress on the state's fragile socio-political environment led to the military coup of 1962, which overthrew U Nu's government and ended the state's experiment with parliamentary democracy.⁵³ Stepping in to fill the leadership void were the generals of the Burmese military (the Tatmadaw), led by General Ne Win.⁵⁴ Following the state's independence, the military

⁵⁰ Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," 357.

⁵¹ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, 2.

⁵² Tin Maung Maung Than, "The 'Sanga' and 'Sasana' in Socialist Burma," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 3, no. 1 (Feb 1988): 27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, 71.

leaders had already started to become the main actors behind state-building. In overthrowing the elected government, they effectively eliminated the role played by civil bureaucrats or political parties.⁵⁵ The Revolutionary Council returned to a form of secular rule, once again attempting to limit monks' influence over political affairs. Instead, the *sangha* retained relevance through the process of alms-giving through personal, patron-client relationships with the lay population, who provided material and financial support to monks in exchange for spiritual good merit.⁵⁶

The military dictatorship remained in power in Myanmar for five decades, with only two consecutive leaders. The junta enacted the "Burmese Way to Socialism," which was accompanied with massive nationalization and economic decline while major resources were redirected to the military. As civilian poverty grew, armed rebellion became more and more frequent and long-lasting. Internal conflict was a common feature of the state under military rule; anti-government groups based on ethnic identity or political ideology commonly held national territory from the 1960s-80s.⁵⁷ Militant Muslim groups were only a fraction of the anti-government resistance during this time.

In 1988, a student-led, pro-democracy uprising attempted to challenge the military dictatorship. A harsh military crackdown and the introduction of martial law ended the uprising, although Ne Win stepped down in the turbulence. The seeds for change had been planted, as Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a pro-democracy leader and as detractors and soldiers left the government in support of the movement. In 1990, the first elections were held by the military junta, who expected that numerous small parties would be unable to defeat the military party.

⁵⁵ Fabio Armao, "The 'Tatmadaw' Legacy and Beyond: On the Risks for the Democratisation Process in Myanmar," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 14, no. 1, Special Issue: Myanmar's Tentative Renaissance (2015): 38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44163057>

⁵⁶ Than, "The 'Sanga' and 'Sasana' in Socialist Burma," 31.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Farrelly, "Anomalous Spaces," in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 107.

When the NLD party unexpectedly won a majority of seats, the results were ignored, and opposition politicians were jailed.⁵⁸ Between 1988 and 2010, the military is said to have dominated nearly all aspects of governance and civilian life.⁵⁹ It attempted to gain legitimacy among the Buddhist community following the 1988 uprising, initiating a newly critical political-religious patronage between the military junta and the monkhood.⁶⁰ It is important to note that during this period, the Tatmadaw continuously developed its unique self-image as the protector of the nation, with sole responsibility for defending the state's law and order and national unity—and it began to prepare its plan for democratic transition with this role in mind.⁶¹

C. Liberalization

Thematically, this section will consider Myanmar's liberalization in three interrelated spheres: political liberalization, economic liberalization, and communications reform.

i) Political liberalization

The military generals unveiled a “Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy” for the first time in 1993, laying out their intentions to introduce measures of power-sharing in the legislature while guaranteeing 25% of parliamentary seats to unelected military leaders. This ‘roadmap’ was not taken very seriously by international observers and was considered dubious by the opposition.⁶² Still, in 2008, a new constitution was approved which established a national framework to consolidate the influence of the entrenched armed forces, signaling the beginning of a peaceful transfer of power (while leaving the Tatmadaw with complete autonomy and

⁵⁸ Priscilla Clapp, *Myanmar: Anatomy of a Political Transition*, Special Report 369, United States Institute of Peace (April 2015), 4.

⁵⁹ Maitrii Aung-Thwin, “The State,” in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

⁶⁰ Van Klinken and Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar,” 358.

⁶¹ Andrew Selth, “The Defense Services,” in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 41-2.

⁶² Aung-Thwin, 21; Andrew Selth, 28.

control of its agenda). The new constitution officially heralded Myanmar's transition from military dictatorship to a unitary parliamentary republic (at least nominally).⁶³ Elections in 2010 granted a majority to the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), casting skepticism over the democratizing process and the military junta's intentions to share power. Nonetheless, March 2011 and the beginning of Thein Sein's democratic presidency is largely held to be the starting point of Myanmar's 'democratic transition'. Despite doubts, President Thein Sein challenged norms by meeting with his opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, and welcomed exiled activists back to the country.⁶⁴ These diplomatic moves did portray a shift toward political openness that was unprecedented under the military junta.

In 2012 the oppositional National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi was elected to the legislature, granting unprecedented legitimacy and hope to the newly democratizing system.⁶⁵ Indeed, despite the military leadership's oversight of the process of liberalization, the electoral process during the elections was observed to be largely fair, given evidence of international engagement and voter support and education.⁶⁶ The NLD party won the following 2015 elections in a landslide.

From 2010 onward, new space for political action was also opened to Muslims. Muslim communities formed and joined political parties to run in both local and national elections, with some success.⁶⁷ They were also able to bring up grievances in a democratic setting for the first

⁶³ Nicholas Farrelly, Ian Holliday, and Adam Simpson, "Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition," in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.

⁶⁴ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34, no. 2 (August 2012): 198.

⁶⁵ Farrelly *et al.*, "Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition," 4.

⁶⁶ Selth, "The Defense Services," 41.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Farrelly, "Muslim Political Activity in Transitional Myanmar," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford University Press, 2016), 114.

time in five decades; in 2014, for example, the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD) and the Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP) attempted, without success, to demand recognition of the Rohingya as a category in the census.⁶⁸

Given the military's continued prominence in the state's political and social systems, the process of liberalization has not yet created a consolidated democracy in Myanmar. However, these reforms, such as the relatively fair and independent elections of 2015 or the amnesty granted to political prisoners, clearly demonstrate a shift in the politics and governing of the state, introducing new opportunities and spaces for political participation. Even such gradual and controlled steps of liberalization can be observed in greater changes within the sociopolitical context. One such effect is the altered economic context that accompanied political liberalization.

ii) Economic liberalization

Heavy international sanctions were imposed on Myanmar during its decades of military rule, in response to its heavy repression. Following the military's crackdown on the pro-democracy movement of 1988, for example, various Western countries imposed or tightened sanctions on the regime.⁶⁹ This effectively cut the country's links to many states and tarnished its international image. The regime minimized most of the worst effects of sanctions by retaining trade with its neighbors China, Singapore, and Thailand.⁷⁰ The promising transition toward democracy, deemed necessary for long-term development by the ruling leaders, created relief from these sanctions and opened the door to foreign investment, market expansion, and trade relationships. President Obama, for example, lifted restrictions on humanitarian assistance and foreign investment in Myanmar in April and May 2012, while the EU suspended almost all

⁶⁸ Farrelly, "Muslim Political Activity in Transitional Myanmar," 112.

⁶⁹ Hlaing, "Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar," 202.

⁷⁰ Farrelly *et al.*, "Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition," 4.

sanctions.⁷¹ The resulting benefits can be seen in the development of a small middle class; however, it has been noted that economic benefits have not spread evenly across the population. As Farrelly *et al.* state, those who prospered most under military rule were positioned to continue to reap the maximum gains from the newly improved national economy.⁷² The 70% of the population that lives in rural Myanmar⁷³—who disproportionately lack access to education, healthcare, electricity, and clean drinking water, while facing resource depletion and extreme weather—and the inequity facing ethnic minority communities creates a distinct economic divide among Myanmar’s liberalizing citizens. In the Rakhine State, for example, the poverty rate is nearly twice the national average.⁷⁴

Political and economic liberalization in Myanmar together influenced a third domain of sociological change: freedoms of communication and telecommunications reform. This thesis will consider these changes next.

iii) Communications liberalization

Under military rule, access to information and freedom of expression were closely controlled by the government. Public discussion was directed through a central provision of propaganda, while heavy censorship measures limited the role of an independent media.⁷⁵ Throughout military rule, internet access was limited to only those who were trusted by the government; even sim-cards were kept at an artificially high price in order to limit mobile access

⁷¹ Hlaing, “Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar,” 208.

⁷² Farrelly *et al.*, “Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition,” 4.

⁷³ Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, “Rural,” in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 72.

⁷⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/64 (12 September 2018), 5, available from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_64.pdf.

⁷⁵ Farrelly *et al.*, “Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition,” 4.

to friends of the state apparatus.⁷⁶ Prior to liberalization in 2011, Myanmar's population was only reported to have a 2.6% mobile penetration rate, according to the International Telecommunications Union.⁷⁷ As a result, the democratic reforms introduced in 2011-12 revolutionized the flow of information in several key ways.

First, pre-publication censorship measures were repealed in 2012, freeing publishers to introduce new levels of public information and debate. Opposition leaders, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, were given new license to publish articles and opinion pieces.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, the population of Myanmar received access to Internet-enabled technology for the first time following liberalizing reforms. The globalized market's newfound access to Myanmar led to the rapid expansion of Telenor from Norway and Ooredoo from Qatar, each of whom established internet networks that collected millions of new users.⁷⁹ Over 43 million sim-cards had been sold by mid-2016, demonstrating a dramatic increase in private internet access and a significant reformatting of the country's information networks.⁸⁰ Facebook quickly emerged as the primary platform, often coming preloaded on cell phones. Its prominence was so noted that analysts have stated that "Facebook is the internet in Myanmar," used nearly ubiquitously as a main source of news, community, and communication by its users.⁸¹

The flow of information in a community is critical to political processes and the escalation of collective action. It is for this reason that the concept of the "marketplace of ideas" has been studied within politics. The ideal type of such a marketplace would allow ideologies

⁷⁶ Gerard McCarthy, "Cyber-Spaces," in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 92.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Hlaing, "Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar," 202.

⁷⁹ Farrelly *et al.*, "Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition," 4.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, "Cyber-Spaces," 93.

⁸¹ Ibid.

and concepts to freely compete and be evaluated based on merit, leading to the greatest outcome for society. However, distortions to the free flow of information and the manipulation of pre-existing myths and narratives can lead to the construction and spread of misinformation, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

Chapter Two: Identity-based violence

The liberalization of Myanmar's political, economic, and public spheres lies in stark contrast to the vast documented human rights violations committed during the same time period. Despite the relative optimism surrounding Myanmar's movement away from authoritarian rule, this timeline overlaps with increasing and startling levels of ethnoreligious violence, primarily targeting the Rohingya, as well as other minority groups. Having established the timeline behind the state's democratic transition, this chapter will proceed to establish the events constituting major outbreaks of ethnically or religiously targeted violence. Evidence will be presented from the investigations and interviews conducted by the UN and human rights organizations.

A. 20th Century

Anti-Muslim riots first took place in the 1930s, as an element of the wider protest against labor migrations under British rule.⁸² Early anticolonial nationalism sparked slogans like "Burma for Burmans" and "Master Race We Are, We Burmans," planting the roots of ethno-nationalist activism in nation-building and inherently emphasizing the threat to the state posed by non-Burmans.⁸³ Monks and activists used such language in establishing a movement to define Muslims as an existential threat to the nation's religion and language, emphasizing the suffering of Buddhist women brought about by intermarriages with Muslims.⁸⁴ Rumors were spread in 1938 that revered Buddhist pagodas were in danger of destruction, so the All Burma Council of Young Monks responded with violence, arson, and murder of Indian communities, in the name of protecting Buddhism, race, and language. These early instances of the anti-Muslim movement instrumentalized tactics and myths—such as the threat to the nation's women or pollution

⁸² Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," 357.

⁸³ Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka," 8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

through intermarriage—that would continue to be used through the process of scapegoating in the decades that followed. In 1997, the military junta spread a rumor that a Buddhist woman had been raped by a Muslim businessman, a strategic diversion to cause an anti-Muslim riot and simultaneously prevent a protest being planned by a group of monks in Mandalay.⁸⁵ Facing economic stagnation, the military general Ne Win made frequent use of the Chinese, Indian, and Muslim communities of Myanmar as scapegoats for the nation’s suffering.⁸⁶

Policies of both structural and direct violence were carried out periodically throughout the periods of nation-building and military rule. Direct violence was conducted through brutal operations under military rule forced Muslims to flee into Bangladesh in 1978 and again in 1991, while localized anti-Muslim riots took place sporadically throughout the 1980s.⁸⁷ Structural violence, however, takes place through legal and institutional mechanisms. In 1978 and 1992, two government campaigns which translated to ‘Dragon King’ and ‘Clean and Beautiful Nation’ were initiated, featuring crackdowns on the Rakhine State that forced Rohingya to flee. These periods encouraged resentment among the Rohingya, who increased their political activism and radicalization in response.⁸⁸ The 1982 Citizenship Law deprived the Rohingya of citizenship rights, institutionalizing their statelessness. The law established three categories of citizenship: citizenship, associate citizenship, and naturalized citizenship, codifying stipulations to provide proof of generations of residence in the country that effectively made it impossible for the

⁸⁵ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 125, vol. 32:1 (2008): 138.

⁸⁶ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford University Press, 2016), 192-3.

⁸⁷ Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," 371.

⁸⁸ Farrelly, "Muslim Political Activity in Transnational Myanmar," 107-8.

Rohingya to acquire nationality.⁸⁹ The identification cards that were introduced as documentation of citizenship status began to be used to limit movement of people and to limit benefits and various rights, such as the right to education, within the state.⁹⁰ Other laws were designed to block Muslims from attaining government positions. The use of structural violence, legally codified against the Rohingya, effectively established a pattern of asymmetry observed in the resulting violence between Muslim militants and the state. In such conditions of asymmetry, due to an absence of legal or political mechanisms for Rohingya to bargain for over the terms of their existence within the state, direct violence in the form of acts of terrorism emerged as a bargaining tool.

B. 2012: Anti-Muslim Riots

Anti-Muslim campaigns led by ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks took form in the early twenty-first century. The 969 Movement, and its *de facto* leader U Wirathu, promoted a radical Buddhist nationalist agenda that mobilized anti-Muslim sentiment among the general population. Its symbol “969” was chosen as the Buddhist counterpart to the Islamic symbol “786” often used in windows to identify shops that sold halal food. The 969 movement emerged initially to promote a “buy Buddhist” campaign, in order to boycott Muslim businesses and protect the Burmese race and religion.⁹¹ The movement actively reignited the idea nation-wide that Buddhism was under threat by Islam in Myanmar, requiring urgent action. Radical monks associated with the campaign produced sermons, videos, and pamphlets that were distributed, often incorporating stories of forced marriage of Buddhist women to Muslims and conspiracy

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Burma: The Rohingya Muslims: Ending a Cycle of Exodus?" (New York: Human Rights Watch), Vol. 8, No. 9 September 1996, p. 26.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Kyaw, "Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar," 185, 195.

theories about Islamization.⁹² As characters in their local community who hold immense moral authority and social respect, monks are considered credible and authoritative sources of information. The 969 movement grew into an institutionally-targeted campaign commonly called *Ma-Ba-Tha*, which advocated for the banning of intermarriage between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women, along with bills banning religious conversion and a bill on population control. These “protection of race and religion” laws were approved by the government of Myanmar in 2015.⁹³

Prior to 2012, relations between the Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya populations of the Rakhine State were reportedly positive and symbiotic.⁹⁴ However, not unlike earlier outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence, riots in the Rakhine State in June and October of 2012 were framed as a reaction to the rape and murder of a Buddhist Rakhine woman on 28 May 2012 by Muslim men, as reported by state media which sensationalized the images of her body.⁹⁵ Riots in June were largely spontaneous mob activity, while October’s violent acts were more highly coordinated. Violence then spread across the country, in a geographic scope that was unprecedented since 1948.⁹⁶ Framing of the conflict in the state media claim that Muslims provoked the conflict and that the illegal Rohingya were the primary perpetrators.

Reuters journalists were present in Myanmar to report on the events that followed. According to their reports, Buddhist mobs led by monks were seen with machetes and swords, rioting and perpetrating mob violence in at least 14 villages of central Myanmar. Killings were

⁹²Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar,” 185.

⁹³Ibid., 203.

⁹⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 5.

⁹⁵ Van Klinken and Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar,” 359.

⁹⁶ Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar,” 183.

witnessed and ignored by the police. Violence was perpetrated in both directions, but the motivating ideology that sparked the initial riots was found in the rhetoric promoted by the 969 monks.⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch reported that the riots transformed into a coordinated campaign to drive Muslims from the land, stating that the attacks in October “were organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese, at times directly supported by state security forces.”⁹⁸ Prior to these attacks, monks and political party leaders actively demonized the Rohingya, called for their removal from the country or denying their existence.⁹⁹ These tactics of public messaging and framing of the conflict resulted in mass mobilization toward violence. As a result of these attacks, 125,000 Rohingya were displaced.

C. 2016 Formation of ARSA

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) emerged in October 2016, amid the context of the Rohingya’s absence of citizenship status, increasingly tense relations with neighboring Rakhine Buddhists, and massive internal displacement from previous violence.¹⁰⁰ ARSA was organized with the purpose of fighting for the rights of the Rohingya; considered a terrorist organization by the state, its members consider themselves nationalists.¹⁰¹ On October 9, 2016, the militant group attacked border police in the Rakhine State. In response, Myanmar’s

⁹⁷ Jason Szep, “The War on the Rohingya as Buddhist Monks Incite Muslim Killings in Myanmar,” *Reuters* (April 8, 2013).

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “‘All You Can Do Is Pray’: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State,” (April 22, 2013): 4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Fiona MacGregor, “As Tragedy Unfolds in Myanmar, the People’s Heroine Stokes the Flames of Hatred,” *Foreign Policy* (22 September 2017), accessed 11 April 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/22/as-tragedy-unfolds-in-myanmar-the-peoples-heroine-stokes-the-flames-of-hatred-aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya/>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

security forces enacted brutal campaigns justified as counter-insurgency measures or “clearance operations” against the entire Rohingya population.

In the aftermath of the October attacks, a team commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) conducted interviews with Rohingya who had fled to Bangladesh following the violence. Statistics drawn from testimonies of witnessed and experienced violations were examined, followed by qualitative reports detailing Buddhist Rakhine villagers who participated in the violence and/or sexual abuse after having been armed and integrated into the security forces either in uniform or in civilian dress.¹⁰² Violations included gang rape; sexual violence; psychological torture; and innocent civilian deaths, including of children, by systematic, indiscriminate attacks, regardless of affiliation with ARSA. Upon return, villages were found to be completely burnt. The OHCHR concluded that this evidence indicated the likely commission of crimes against humanity.¹⁰³

The OHCHR Report is corroborated by evidence collected by human rights organizations, including Amnesty International. The investigation conducted by Amnesty also showed findings that the human rights violations in 2016 were widespread, systematic, and deliberately targeted civilian populations on the basis of religious identification.¹⁰⁴ The report cites eyewitness testimonies of random attacks and killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, rape and sexual violence, and scorched earth destruction.¹⁰⁵ It also references the government’s denial of human rights violations, concludes that the army’s response was disproportionate to its cause

¹⁰² United Nations, OHCHR, *Report of OHCHR mission to Bangladesh: Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016*, (3 February 2017), 9, 12-13.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 32, 42.

¹⁰⁴ Amnesty International, *“We Are At Breaking Point”: Rohingyas: Persecuted in Myanmar, Neglected in Bangladesh*, ASA 16/5362/2016 (London: Amnesty International, 2016), 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

of counter-terrorism, and notes the targeting of the Rohingya based on religion and ethnicity to make the claim that crimes against humanity were committed in 2016.¹⁰⁶

D. 2017 “Clearance Operations”

On August 25, 2017, ARSA conducted attacks on 30 police and security force outposts in the Rakhine State. As the UN Fact-Finding Report states, the attacks were conducted with the aim of attracting global attention.¹⁰⁷ The attacks were conducted by minimally-trained militants and untrained villagers; as a result, twelve security personnel were killed. Within hours of these attacks, the crimes against humanity documented in October 2016 were initiated once again as security forces began a campaign of violence in the Rakhine State, termed counterterrorism “clearance operations” by the Tatmadaw. Amnesty International’s research report “Caged Without a Roof: Apartheid in Myanmar’s Rakhine State” recounts a disproportionate degree of violence leveled against the Rohingya, as the entire population was targeted in multiple villages “on the basis of their identity,” regardless of affiliation with ARSA militants.¹⁰⁸ The report concludes that the indiscriminate shooting into houses and fields, torture, gang rape, and burning of villages by security forces and vigilantes has constituted crimes against humanity.¹⁰⁹ According to interviews, killings were conducted by soldiers as well as Rakhine men.

In a report compiled from interviews conducted in October 2017, Amnesty International demonstrates that compiled testimonies about the massacre of Rohingya civilians by security forces fulfills contextual elements of the legal definition of “crimes against humanity” according

¹⁰⁶ Amnesty International, *“We Are At Breaking Point,”* 9.

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Amnesty International, *“Caged Without a Roof”: Apartheid in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*. ASA 16/7436/2017 (London: Amnesty International, 2017), 99.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

to the Rome Statute.¹¹⁰ A report by Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, supported Amnesty International's findings, describing credible witness statements of burned villages, indiscriminate killings, sexual violence, targeting of Rohingya children, and the discovery of mass graves.¹¹¹ Altogether, this illustrates a pattern of ethnic cleansing that surpasses the credible limits of a governmental security response and illustrates its willful negligence of pursuing justice against perpetrators. Following the mass displacement of the Rohingya into Bangladesh, systematic burning and appropriation of the land was observed, apparently to erase all traces of the Rohingya communities and to erase evidence.¹¹² In her statement, Yanghee Lee concluded that the events in the Rakhine State "bear the hallmarks of genocide."¹¹³ The Special Rapporteur pressed for the international community to make efforts to ensure that the government immediately takes concrete measures toward the peace process and accountability, criticizing the increasingly perilous position of journalists, civil society, and human rights defenders.¹¹⁴ Following the situation report of 2017, the government of Myanmar denied further access of the Special Rapporteur to the country.

The prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated against the Rohingya by security forces warranted its own report produced by Human Rights Watch. The research includes information from 52 interviews with Rohingya women and girls who fled to Bangladesh, from 19 different villages in the Rakhine State who provided similar accounts of brutal rapes; humanitarian and intergovernmental organizations operating with the refugees; and two Bangladeshi government

¹¹⁰ Amnesty International, *"My World Is Finished": Rohingya Targeted in Crimes Against Humanity in Myanmar*. ASA 16/7288/2017 (London: Amnesty International, 2017), 43.

¹¹¹ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*. A/HRC/37/70. 37 sess. Geneva: HRC, 9 March 2018, 11.

¹¹² United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 11.

¹¹³ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur*, 15.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

health officials.¹¹⁵ The report shows evidence of an under-reported number of rapes, primarily perpetrated by uniformed security forces often in groups, and often conducted with added elements of violence and/or humiliation, such as rape in public or genital mutilation. The targeted nature of these acts against civilian Rohingya women and children constitutes a crime against humanity according to the Rome Statute, Article 7, Section 1(g).

This evidence is supported by the assessment of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, who visited refugee camps in Cox's Bazar from November 5-13, 2017. In her report to the Security Council, she recounted her own observations of physical wounds from sexual violence and the shocking accounts of victims and witnesses, to ultimately urge the Security Council to take action to end the atrocities, ensure justice, and create safe conditions for survivors.¹¹⁶

Finally, an Amnesty International article published on March 12, 2018 used expert analysis of satellite imagery to identify Rohingya villages that have been burned and bulldozed and which appeared to be under construction for security sites. This evidence of scorched earth tactics support the view that the Rohingya were the target of an ethnic cleansing campaign aiming to remove them from the land and make it impossible to return. The statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein on the situation in Myanmar highlights actions potentially intended to prevent the return of refugees, especially supported by Myanmar's history of discriminatory policies toward the Rohingya.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *"All of My Body Was Pain": Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), 1-2.

¹¹⁶ United Nations, Security Council. 8133rd Meeting Coverage, Minutes: The Situation in Myanmar. S/PV.8133. New York: Security Council, 12 December 2017.

¹¹⁷ United Nations, OHCHR, *Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein*, Geneva: OHCHR, 5 December 2017.

The evidence shows that the events following the August 25, 2017 attacks against the Rohingya were not isolated, but mirrored the parallel outbreak of systematic, targeted violence in October 2016. The evidence compiled by various independent humanitarian NGOs and UN offices shows widespread agreement among researchers that a targeted campaign of crimes against humanity and attempted ethnic cleansing was perpetrated in the Rakhine State, facilitated by the willful inaction of Myanmar's government. This evidence was supported by the findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar, which presented to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2018. The report details similar patterns of violence in Myanmar's Shan and Kachin States, where there has been an escalation of violence between the Tatmadaw and armed groups who have had periodic wars and ceasefires in previous decades. These groups largely fight for greater autonomy and a reduction of ethnic and religious discrimination, as well as in protest against the Tatmadaw's attacks on civilians.¹¹⁸

Efforts towards conflict resolution in a case as entrenched as Myanmar are vital, but uniquely challenging. Still, the inability to broker a solution for the Rohingya crisis will continue to have broad impacts. Mass displacement has left hundreds of thousands of refugees in Bangladesh and other parts of the region, many of whom refuse to return to Myanmar until such a time as improvements in their quality of life is guaranteed, such as through the extension of citizenship rights. As of November 2018, the UNHCR did not consider the conditions in the Rakhine State to be improved enough for the safe, dignified, and sustainable return of the displaced population, and under the principle of non-refoulement, refugees cannot be forced to return involuntarily.¹¹⁹ In the absence of the ability to return, the resources of Bangladesh are

¹¹⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 12.

¹¹⁹ UNHCR, *Statement by the High Commissioner for Refugees on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar* (11 November 2018), accessed 29 March 2019,

being depleted, and the risk of radicalization by internal or foreign influences within Rohingya refugee camps increases. If this occurs, a self-perpetuating cycle of communal violence may continue.

Evidently, there is an element of cognitive dissonance involved in analyzing the liberalization of Myanmar. The principles commonly accepted to be associated with democracy—such as government accountability, equality, and individual rights and liberties—are not evident when considering the events in the Rakhine State from 2011 onward, and particularly in 2016-2017. The next chapter will weave the two timelines together to examine the effects of liberalization on the leaders and populace of Myanmar's society, leading up to the outbreaks of identity-based violence. See Figure 1 for a visual timeline.

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/11/5be7c4b64/statement-un-high-commissioner-refugees-repatriation-rohingya-refugees.html>

Myanmar

Political Transition and Identity-Based Violence



Figure 1 — Timeline, Myanmar: Political Transition and Identity-Based Violence.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Graphic created by the author.

Chapter Three: Analysis

This thesis asserts that violent hatred does not ignite spontaneously. The fault lines between Myanmar's Buddhist and Muslim communities are well-established and well-worn by frequent manipulation throughout the nation-building project. Having established both the long-term and immediate historical context of Myanmar's liberalization, discussion can now turn to the causal factors behind the outbreak of violent nationalist extremism following the state's most optimistic transformation. Concepts drawn from the literature on liberalization, ethnic conflict, and violent extremism will be employed in this chapter, in order to trace an explanation for the evident human rights violations outlined in the preceding chapter.

This chapter will be divided into three main components. The first will consider what conditions motivated and empowered the leadership of extremist movements, with consideration given to economic and political factors, the implications of incomplete liberalization, and new tools for manipulation of the "marketplace of ideas." The second will examine the popular support of the general population, by examining the framing and conditions which made these communities susceptible to radicalization and disinformation campaigns to the point of violence. The third will engage a discussion of the marketplace of ideas itself, and the distortions and imperfections that were manipulated during this period of liberalization.

A. Elites

Eric Hobsbawm argued that nationalism is an elite-driven process that serves the people below. In this case study, it is clear that outbreaks of anti-Muslim violence are based on the rhetoric and actions of elites who mobilize otherwise dormant thought patterns, myths, and collective fears to construct the image of a threatening, common enemy. In Myanmar, the military and extremist religious leaders each played a role in framing the Muslim 'other'. The

context, a newly liberalized socio-political system with a new power structure in place, created incentives for former political elites to retain their status as the ‘protector of the nation’ within new opportunity structures. In order to accomplish this, long-standing myths and narratives were employed to radicalize the nationalist movement. The ability to manipulate information networks through use of newly pervasive and largely unmoderated ICTs acted as a catalyst, creating the conditions for heightened spread of misinformation and collective violence.

First, it is clear that the manipulation of anti-Muslim sentiment is a long-standing political tactic used by military juntas as part of Myanmar’s nation-building project. Scapegoating was strategically employed as a distraction and as an attempt to unify a disparate nation when it was convenient for the junta. Interestingly, similar acts of anti-Muslim violence promoted by U Wirathu and the ultra-nationalist segments of the monkhood were punished in 2003 under military rule, and U Wirathu was jailed for this behavior. However, the same acts in 2012 resulted in government support and widespread public acceptance.¹²¹ Van Klinken and Aung point to the newly opened opportunity structures as one plausible explanation for this change in policy. Political opportunity structures, a key concept from political process theory, are an analytical tool that examine changes to the institutional and informal power structures of a given system in order to explain the timing and outcomes of collective action.¹²²

As previously mentioned, O’Donnell and Schmitter theorize that the process of liberalization away from authoritarian rule provokes bargaining between actors who seek to retain as much power as possible in an indeterminate sociopolitical context. For the military, specifically, liberalization was intentionally introduced in a way that left the Tatmadaw with full

¹²¹ Van Klinken and Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar.”

¹²² D. McAdam, J.D. McCarthy, and M.N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29.

autonomy, while providing enough reforms to improve the state's economic and diplomatic performance. However, this political transition created the incentives for the military to justify its continued authority and its role as the protector of the nation—leading to what O'Donnell and Schmitter refer to as the “military moment.”¹²³ In an international system modeled around the ‘nation-state’, where a state's legitimacy is intimately tied to the conception of a ‘national identity,’ power over the conditions and parameters of this identity is of critical importance to power-seeking elites. As Andrew Selth states: “The 2008 constitution was designed to ensure that the armed forces retained overall control of a top-down reform process,”¹²⁴ creating a setting for incomplete liberalization; as a result, while extricating itself from full executive control, the military could aim to retain its *de facto* authority over the nation. One of the most distinct ways to achieve such authority is by actively determining the in- and out-groups of the national community.

Liberalization changed the political opportunity structure in which the Tatmadaw exercised its powers, by introducing new parties into positions of relative power, reducing state control over information, creating incentives to build a popular following to achieve electoral success, and bringing international attention to the “democratic transition.” The opening of the state to foreign investment and international trade and alignments also introduced pressure to retain control over the nation's image, and to protect against unwanted foreign influence. Consequently, opportunity structures have clearly come into play as a motivating factor for the implementation of anti-Muslim campaigns. The political party associated with the military junta, the Union and Solidarity Development Party (USDP), feared a weakened position *vis-a-vis* the NLD when the anti-Muslim Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), who quickly

¹²³ O'Donnell and Schmitter, 39.

¹²⁴ Andrew Selth, “The Defence Services,” 28-9.

coordinated with ultra-nationalist monks, formed and gained prominence post-2012.¹²⁵ As a result, the USDP aligned itself with the demands of the RNDP and placed blame for the violence in the Rakhine on the ‘Bengalis’.¹²⁶ The change in the power structure of the state and the need for former elites to retain a position of power had a direct effect in political opportunism behind the formation of this coalition. The asymmetry of the conflict is further entrenched, as a result. The national elites of the Tatmadaw and the monkhood hold the objective of maintaining the existing sociopolitical power structure, which emphasizes the protection of the nation and religion. The Rohingya, who lack citizenship status and a legal-political method of collective bargaining, primarily aim to establish a legal stake in the nation-state, a recognized claim within the Rakhine State, and equal exercise of human rights. As a result of these oppositional objectives and the power and resource allocations in place in the state, asymmetry is inherent. The result is a cyclical, protracted conflict between the parties.¹²⁷

Similarly, extremist factions of the monkhood aim to defend their sociological role as the community’s moral authority and the guardian of its moral identity. Having gained increased political authority during the Tatmadaw’s rapprochement with Myanmar’s religious sector following the 1988 uprising, the shifting opportunity structures and the introduction to a globalized modernity created incentives for Buddhist nationalists to mobilize as well. The formation and popularization of the 969 and Ma-Ba- Tha movements were clear demonstrations of this goal. Manipulation of public sentiment was successful; the Tatmadaw has, since 2017, gained greater popularity among the Bamar-Buddhist majority and reaffirmed its role as the

¹²⁵ Van Klinken and Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar,” 359.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ This discussion of asymmetry draws from C. R. Mitchell, “Classifying Conflicts: Asymmetry and Resolution.”

protector of an endangered nation.¹²⁸ Military actions were supported by the moral authority of Buddhist extremist monks, whose highly authoritative sociological function at the local level allowed the framing of anti-Muslim narratives to be effectively disseminated. A 969 Movement support page defends the Buddhist nationalist movement, stating:

There have been many attacks against Buddhists in Myanmar that have gone unreported in the Western media. Myanmar, like many other countries in the world, has a long history of Islamic terrorists killing, raping, and destroying. We have never said that all Muslims are bad nor do we have any interest in attacking or hurting Islam, we are Buddhists in a Buddhist country and we insist to the the [sic] right to maintain our culture and quality of life in the face of terrorism. As our founder has said, you cannot rest while sleeping next to a violent animal and the Buddhists of Myanmar and other countries around the world such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, and others are under constant harassment and persecution.¹²⁹

The dehumanizing rhetoric used in this passage supports a common narrative that the Buddhist nation is under attack, and the presence of the Muslim outsiders (Rohingya) constitutes a threat that legitimizes the use of violence. Parallel rhetoric appeared in the government-owned newspaper *The Global New Light of Myanmar* on November 26, 2016:

Those human fleas are destroying our world by killing people and harming others' sovereignty. Likewise, our country is also facing the danger of the human fleas. A flea cannot make a whirl of dust, but they are trying to combine with each other to amass their force. And they are trying to disintegrate our unity and strength in many ways, by waging armed attacks, spreading rumours and performing subversive activities. We should not underestimate this enemy. At such a time when the country is moving toward a federal democratic nation, with destructive elements in all surroundings, we need to constantly be wary of the dangers of detestable human fleas.¹³⁰

Even pro-democratic NLD party leaders, including Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi, refrained from condemning anti-Muslim violence, referred to the Rohingya as

¹²⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 5.

¹²⁹ "969 Movement: Myths," (2013), accessed 1 April 2019, <https://969movement.org/lies/>
Note: This website has no official connection to Ashin Wirathu, the 969 Movement, or the Myanmar government.

¹³⁰ Khin Maung Oo, "A Flea Cannot Make a Whirl of Dust, But —." *The Global New Light of Myanmar* (26 November 2016), accessed 1 April 2019, www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/a-flea-cannot-make-a-whirl-of-dust-but/

“Bengalis” and prevented humanitarian aid, as well as UN investigators, from entering the region.¹³¹ It is likely that the NLD are unwilling to risk alienating Burmese Buddhist voters by appearing sympathetic to Muslim minorities in the state. As a result of the changed political opportunity structure, in which such political parties require popular support in order to be re-elected, complacency in the Tatmadaw’s so-called clearance operations may be seen as the most politically viable option.¹³² In fact, given the military’s control over the liberalization process itself, the NLD are unlikely to take actions that would incentivize regression back to unchallenged military rule. As a result, Heather Rae’s concept of “pathological homogenisation,” the process by which elites construct a bounded political community within the state as an exclusive moral community, took place without contention.¹³³

This thesis attempts to address the question of how the conditions created by liberalization influenced the escalation of identity-based violence, but the evidence suggests a revision is needed. The conditions for the escalation of violence to the point of ethnic cleansing were facilitated by the effects of *incomplete* liberalization. Although democratic reforms were introduced and did partially restrict the powers of the Tatmadaw, and despite the fact that the state underwent significant reforms as a result, the reality shows that the “marketplace of ideas” remained under the effective control of the military. Only those reforms that were amenable to the military’s continued role as the protector of the nation were enacted—so while elections were held and communications restrictions were lifted, the space for expression itself was kept highly illiberal. The United Nations fact-finding report noted that Tatmadaw’s lack of tolerance for

¹³¹ Hannah Beech, “What Happened to Myanmar’s Human-Rights Icon?” *The New Yorker* (25 September 2017), accessed 11 April 2019.

¹³² Farrelly, “Muslim Political Activity in Transitional Myanmar,” 126.

¹³³ Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples*, 3.

scrutiny or criticism, as well as its encouragement of a culture of hate speech and exclusion.¹³⁴

However, the use of the same discursive tactics and myths from previous decades of anti-Muslim scapegoating reached a far greater audience, through a highly manipulative medium due to the newly liberalized telecommunications infrastructure.

The concept of the “marketplace of ideas” has been frequently invoked since its popularization by John Stuart Mills, who advocated for no-holds-barred debate in the free market of public opinion.¹³⁵ In modern invocations of the term, it has been used in the praise of democratization and increased freedoms of expression and the press.¹³⁶ In such a space, it is assumed that ideas are able to compete and the truth, or best idea, will be discovered by participants in the system. Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine’s analysis of the term, as mentioned in the literature review, argues that in a case of democratic transition, this marketplace is able to be manipulated according to an existing power structure in the interests of power-seeking elites—as they state, “promoting unconditional freedom of public debate in newly democratizing states is, in many circumstances, likely to make the problem worse” by leading to “bloody outbursts of popular nationalism.”¹³⁷ This is attributed to market imperfections, caused by a lack of the necessary institutions needed to break up information monopolies and allow diverse ideas to engage one another in a public forum. In this space, elites mobilize nationalist myths and use the media and mass education to gain a popular following. This will be further analyzed following discussion of civilian support for violent extremism.

¹³⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*, 14.

¹³⁵ Snyder and Ballentine, “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas,” 11.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

B. Civilians

Next, this analysis will consider what conditions made the general population susceptible to disinformation and violent extremism. While the “clearance operations” conducted in the Rakhine State were organized and perpetrated primarily by the security forces, public sentiment that supported these actions is rooted in pre-existing socio-economic grievances, the moral authority held by religious organizations, and the spread of familiar myths through communication networks. Benedict Anderson famously discussed the role of communicating common stories, myths, and news through the media and print publications in forming “imagined communities,” or nations.¹³⁸ In line with the social constructivist theory presented by Fearon and Laitin, the case study of Myanmar supports the theory that the construction of ethnic identity—in this case, that of the Burmese majority in line with Buddhist cosmology—linked strategic identity formation to the outcome of ethnic violence.¹³⁹ The ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing the national identity of Myanmar throughout colonial rule, immediate post-colonial nation-building, and military rule created a pattern of strategically leveraging ethnic identity and creating a predisposition toward violence.

As was introduced in the previous subsection, the capacity of political and religious elites for mythmaking in the modernized marketplace of ideas was expedited. The substance of these ideas, however, drew on familiar symbols, stories, and experiences within the national consciousness. Following the state’s liberalization in 2011, Myanmar’s society shared heightened communication and a new stake in the political future of the democratizing nation-state. For a great deal of the population, liberalization has only represented tentative improvements to life, as entrenched inequality and reliance on the resource-based economy, as

¹³⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹³⁹ See Fearon and Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” 846.

well as a lack of investment in many regions, left much of the population in a destitute state.¹⁴⁰ This rapidly changing political and social environment had also been thrust into the politics of globalization and the expectations of liberalism. The result can be seen as Arjun Appadurai described: the general population experiences the “anxiety of incompleteness,” a sense that the unity of the nation-state (perceived as inherently Buddhist by much of the population) is threatened by the presence of the “other” (Rohingyas and Muslims). This identity anxiety based on fear of replacement is fueled by the spread of provocative images and stories that instrumentalize commonly held symbols and myths.

The core narrative exploited in this manner is that of “Buddhism under threat,” or the decline of the Buddhist social and moral fabric of the national identity, which is part of a cosmological imaginary that gained prominence during British colonization and Indian immigration. The trope that Muslims are unnatural to the nation, regardless of how many generations they have been present in the territory, is a highly localized narrative. However, this narrative has been placed within a global scope in the twenty-first century, forming connections with Western Islamophobia, such as the postulation that Muslim communities are tied to terrorist organizations in the Middle East. International events, like the rise of ISIS, are commonly referenced to portray Islam as an inherently extreme and violent theology, as well as an expansionist religion plotting to overtake Myanmar’s Buddhist majority.¹⁴¹ This claim is often supported by reference to Indonesia, which gradually converted from Buddhism to Islam from the 13th to 16th centuries.¹⁴² In describing the scenario in this way, Buddhist nationalists position

¹⁴⁰ Farrelly *et al.*, “Explaining Myanmar in Flux and Transition,” 5.

¹⁴¹ Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol. 47, no. 3 (2017): 383.

¹⁴² David Dapice, “Rakhine State Policies: Considerations for the New State Government,” *Proximity Designs / Myanmar*, Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (October 2016), 3.

Myanmar within a global conspiracy about Islamic expansionism and its threat to nationally-defined states. When supported by instances of Muslim-instigated violence in Myanmar, these fears become justified.

Another element of this narrative is the oft-referenced myth that Muslims reproduce at a much faster rate than Buddhists in the nation (which has been debunked by researchers),¹⁴³ and that they aim to either rape or force Buddhist women into marriage.¹⁴⁴ 969 movement leader Ashin Wirathu stated in an interview, “Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly and they are very violent and they eat their own kind. Even though they are minorities here, we are suffering under the burden they bring us.”¹⁴⁵ The circulation of this form of myth, in particular, is likely to provoke a violent response. Organized attacks by Muslim militants provoke security responses by the Tatmadaw, while rapes or attacks on Buddhist individuals spark the formation of civilian militias. Vigilante justice is then undertaken through rioting and attacks on Muslims.¹⁴⁶ This occurs because of what sociologists call “frame alignment.” Framing, which is defined as “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action,”¹⁴⁷ is a clear element of the rise of identity-based violence in this case study. The dissemination of

¹⁴³ Patrick Winn, “Do ‘rapidly breeding’ Rohingya Muslims really threaten Myanmar’s Buddhist identity?” *GlobalPost* (14 October 2013), accessed 12 April 2019 <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-10-14/do-rapidly-breeding-rohingya-muslims-really-threaten-myanmars-buddhist-identity>.

¹⁴⁴ Charles Carstens, “Religion,” in *Routledge Handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, eds. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 131-2.

¹⁴⁵ Tin Aung Kyaw, “Buddhist monk Wirathu leads violent national campaign against Myanmar’s Muslims,” *GlobalPost* (21 June 2013), accessed 11 April 2019. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-06-21/buddhist-monk-wirathu-leads-violent-national-campaign-against-myanmars-muslims>

¹⁴⁶ Banyan, “Unforgiving history: Why Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state in Myanmar are at each others’ throats,” *The Economist* (3 November 2012), accessed 13 April 2019. <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565638-why-buddhists-and-muslims-rakhine-state-myanmar-are-each-others%E2%80%99-throats-unforgiving>

¹⁴⁷ D. McAdam *et al.*, “Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements,” 6.

individual tropes and myths within the broader meta-narrative of a perpetually threatened Buddhist nation acts to mobilize individuals toward restorative action. Frame alignment occurs when proof is presented of these pre-existing fears. When a story or image is spread in the community that confirms an unsettling belief, a passive threat becomes salient and requires action in response.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, attacks that are reported in an asymmetric supply of information are likely to align with predisposed fears of the general population, with the increased likelihood that the threat will be exaggerated, or the military's responding violence will be downplayed or justified. In this scenario, public support for targeted violence remains a strategic action based on the information that is available and the norms that are in place regarding security and identity. This fits well into Figueiredo and Weingast's theory of ethnic conflict: that a degree of uncertainty about the danger posed by the antagonist links the citizenry's fear-based support to the nationalistic appeals, and violent tactics, of social and political elites.¹⁴⁹

The gendered nature of this rumor draws attention to the social psychology of conflict-related sexual violence. Emphasis on the rape of and intermarriage with Buddhist women throughout the decades of the conflict shows the deep fear of pollution of the nation itself by outsiders. Women, who give life to the next generation of a given culture, thus become victims of nationalist and ethnic conflicts. In several cases, the rape of one Buddhist woman was used as justification for the rape of hundreds of Muslims. The duality of the myths surrounding the Muslim 'other'—that Muslims are both an existential threat to the Buddhist nature of the nation, as well as an immediate threat to Buddhist communities and neighbors—creates the necessary frames for moral and nationalistic panic to take place.

¹⁴⁸ Van Klinken and Aung, "The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar," 362.

¹⁴⁹ Figueiredo and Weingast, "The Rationality of Fear."



Figure 2 — Cartoon depicting ARSA militants as perpetrators of human rights violations.¹⁵⁰

C. Distortion of the Marketplace of Ideas

Under the strictures of military rule, information was passed by word of mouth and often incorporating rumors as a means of community building and to create a common frame of reality.¹⁵¹ Without the benefit of an independent press or reputable sources of information, rumor-sharing played a critical social function. When this communication structure was transmuted to the digital space, a similar pattern of communication naturally evolved. The intent of this discussion is not to portray the population as particularly gullible to rumor, but instead to

¹⁵⁰ Image collected by the author from a Myanmar national's Twitter account.

¹⁵¹ Matt Schissler, "New Technologies, Established Practices," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford University Press, 2016), 220.

demonstrate that sifting through and forming narratives from crowd-sourced information was a long-established and necessary strategy of comprehending reality and maintaining community under military rule. For many years, the marketplace of ideas existed within this communal practice of information sharing.

As it is clear that incidents of anti-Muslim violence have increased in frequency, severity, and degree of organization during the twenty-first century, additional research has been done specifically on the variables that influenced the spread of discriminatory rhetoric. The Computational Propaganda Research Project analyzes the manipulation of public opinion over social media platforms through the use of disinformation campaigns, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cyber troops.¹⁵² This is a known and increasing issue in politics and in international relations, as the intentional and veiled spread of disinformation along with the role of artificial intelligence and big data analytics play rapidly evolving roles in local and global politics.¹⁵³ In Myanmar, the introduction of the digital space and the newly liberalized (although still restricted) freedoms of expression acted as a catalyst for the spread of nationalist extremism. The previous subsections demonstrated that military and religious elites responded to changing opportunity structures by using this space in a project to secure a nationalist following and retain power over the parameters of the national identity. They also showed that this was achieved by manipulating the marketplace of ideas and utilizing familiar myths and frames, which exploited long-standing resentments and socioeconomic grievances. This section will now analyze the distortion of the marketplace of ideas further, positing that the digital age creates unique challenges for establishing truth and creating competition between ideas, which enables

¹⁵² Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, “Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation,” *Computational Propaganda Research Project*, Oxford: University of Oxford: 3.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

extremist and militant views to flourish—particularly in a population with low digital literacy. Analysis of this evidence will show that the introduction of digital media into common use and its ability to be manipulated by elites is, itself, a change to the opportunity structure and a vital element of nationalist radicalization.

Facebook was brought under international scrutiny following the 2017 violence in Myanmar, when it was observed that the network’s sudden introduction to the country’s public played a vital role in disseminating and amplifying disinformation and hate speech.¹⁵⁴ In response to these allegations, the company commissioned the Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) to conduct an independent human rights impact assessment on the case. The BSR analysis of the context begins by describing Myanmar’s crisis of digital literacy, caused by the country’s rapid liberalization and opening of the telecom sector: “A large population of internet users lacks basic understanding of how to use a browser, how to set up an email address and access an email account, and how to navigate and make judgments on online content. Despite this, most mobile phones sold in the country come preloaded with Facebook.”¹⁵⁵ As a result, Facebook itself was viewed as synonymous with the Internet. In some ways, the network played a democratizing role, by introducing its users to information on human rights and democracy, connecting them to their elected officials, and creating a new space for free speech where there had previously been none.¹⁵⁶ However, in a state where information was customarily passed in the form of rumors, and where a lack of digital literacy decreased the public’s ability to verify content or real news,

¹⁵⁴ Alexandra Stevenson, “Facebook Admits It Was Used to Incite Violence in Myanmar,” *The New York Times* (November 6, 2018).

¹⁵⁵ BSR, “Human Rights Impact Assessment: Facebook in Myanmar,” (2018): 12. https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/bsr-facebook-myanmar-hria_final.pdf

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

the platform was easily abused for the purposes of spreading misinformation and extremist content.

The BSR report observes that women reported being harassed or extorted; rural people and those with lower education and/or income were more vulnerable to hate speech and misinformation; older users were more likely to subscribe to extremist nationalist content; and shopkeepers who sold the mobile devices were known to sell devices having pre-set Facebook accounts, which could then be used to extort customers.¹⁵⁷ The report also analyzes Myanmar's existing legal framework, which limits true freedom of expression by establishing that one's freedom of speech "exists only when the views are not contrary to the laws of the country."¹⁵⁸

Attention has been drawn to Facebook's role in such violent situations in cases beyond Myanmar, such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines. But as the BSR report points out, its role in this case is unique in that it is nearly the sole source of information for a majority of users. The first instance of this connection was in July 2014, when communal violence and rioting broke out in Mandalay following a nationalist monk's Facebook post reporting the rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man.¹⁵⁹ This was the same year as Ooredoo and Telenor's massive investment in telecommunications infrastructure, following communications reform in Myanmar.

These vulnerabilities within the Facebook system directly contributed to the distortion of the marketplace of ideas, resulting in systematic violence perpetrated against the Rohingya. A *New York Times* investigation revealed that senior members of Myanmar's military used the social network, concealing their identities and spreading fear-mongering posts about Muslims

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵⁹ Schissler, "New Technologies, Established Practices," 211.

and stories about the rape of Buddhist women.¹⁶⁰ Using troll accounts and pop culture pages on Facebook, these political elites spread support for the military's ultranationalist campaign, posting photos of corpses attributed to Rohingya killers and spreading anti-Islamic memes, while also collecting intelligence on government critics. According to the investigation, the military's Facebook propaganda campaign had begun several years earlier. Yet its most dangerous tactic was employed in 2017. Rumors were spread directly via Facebook Messenger to both Muslims and Buddhists, stating that attack from the other was imminent, simultaneously utilizing 'news' sites and celebrity fan pages around the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks to foment an environment of fear.¹⁶¹ Given their relationship to the existing institutional power structure, these military leaders fall into the category of "cyber troops," as defined by the Computational Propaganda Research Project: government or political actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online.¹⁶²

Snyder and Ballentine state that a complete governmental monopoly over the press is not the most dangerous condition for nationalist mythmaking, because this context creates a skeptical audience.¹⁶³ Yet with digitally enabled distortions to the marketplace of ideas, a monopoly on information is able to be disguised through fake accounts and false identities, based on existing popular culture and news identities—another clear indication that the digital space is able to amplify and promote nationalist mythmaking. Technological advancement can serve the existing power structure and strengthen established frames and communication practices, including scapegoating. The concept of monopoly within the marketplace also comes into play,

¹⁶⁰ Paul Mozur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military," *The New York Times* (October 15, 2018).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Bradshaw and Howard, *Computational Propaganda Research Project*, 4.

¹⁶³ Snyder and Ballentine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas," 14.

as the use of a security threat allows the military to invoke its specialized expertise, and therefore raise the barriers for alternative voices—like a human rights lobby—to enter the public debate.

Segmentation of demand in an imperfect marketplace of ideas is described as a lack of individuals' exposure to diverse ideas.¹⁶⁴ Such a situation allows people to be exposed to pre-existing frames and myths without contestation, which creates incentives for elites to promote nationalist appeals and increases likelihood that they will be accepted, in turn. This is especially observable in the digital space. As Gerard McCarthy states, research on digital political spheres tend to show that people “herd into groups or ‘echo-chambers’,” rather than being engaged in a more diverse and democratic set of opinions.¹⁶⁵ The freedom of the marketplace of ideas is even further distorted by the use of algorithms that determine content distribution within such platforms; often, the most extreme or provocative posts and images will be presented to viewers first in order to drive usership. The markers of “dangerous speech,” such as dehumanizing rhetoric, justificatory mechanisms for violence, or threats to group purity, are permitted to thrive and justify offline action.

The result of these distortions to the marketplace of ideas, made particularly complex and difficult to govern by the use of digital platforms, is that violent extremism emerges as a rational choice based on self-defense and frame alignment.

¹⁶⁴ Snyder and Ballentine, “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas,” 17.

¹⁶⁵ McCarthy, “Cyber-Spaces,” 93.

Conclusion: Implications in International Relations

This thesis has demonstrated the strengths of social constructivism in analyzing the connections between sociopolitical context and escalations of identity-based violence. While conflict analysis in international relations often takes a structural or materialist approach, this research highlights the utility of understanding internal dynamics and driving forces behind protracted conflicts, particularly in cases where instrumentalist violence is employed. The analysis has shown that periods of political transition away from authoritarian rule can establish the context for the rapid escalation of identity-based violence in two distinct ways. First, the new opportunity structures of the state apparatus create instability and incentives for elites to retain a role as the protector of the ‘nation’ and the parameters of its identity. Political elites aim to establish and consolidate power and legitimate rule, but they do so by employing existing cultural resources to create a unified moral community within territorial boundaries.¹⁶⁶ In Myanmar, this was achievable by reconstructing the threat of the Muslim ‘other’ and utilizing dominant cultural constructions, including historical frames and myths, within the marketplace of ideas. Secondly, communications and political reforms that are tied to liberalization and modernization can essentially reshape the information flow of a society and can catalyze the spread of rumors and misinformation. The distortions present in this marketplace due to both incomplete liberalization of the state, segmentation of demand, and the limitations of moderating the digital space itself can allow elites to manipulate the flow of ideas, aligning new information with pre-existing fears and identity anxiety. Frame alignment results in and justifies the use of retributive or defensive action. The case study of Myanmar clearly demonstrates that this manipulation of the marketplace of ideas was uniquely effective and destructive in the post-2011 context, due to the instability and flux of its political and social environment.

¹⁶⁶ Rae, *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples*, 2-3.

Norms surrounding state behavior have developed over the course of the twentieth century, in attempts to avoid crises that spill over state borders (ie: refugees), or which constitute a threat to the stability of the system. As a result, UN agencies and non-profit organizations have formed to monitor and counter violent extremism and to hold governments accountable. When the international community observes authoritarian states undergoing liberalizing reforms, premature optimism should be avoided, and efforts should be made to support populations that are undergoing such major sociopolitical changes, while actively holding governments accountable for human rights violations. In this case study, it can be argued that the removal of international sanctions, without conditionality based on the full exercise of human rights or recognition of the situation in the Rakhine State, demonstrated international complacency in the ensuing crimes against humanity. It is clearly insufficient to reward the introduction of electoral processes without pushing for the inclusion of other key elements of liberal democracy, such as equal citizenship, non-discrimination, rule of law, and respect for human rights. However, the case study—and the various questions that drive it—has greater implications for the international order, falling at a time of a widespread “crisis of multiculturalism” and presenting troubling challenges in countering violent extremism (CVE).

The case study demonstrates a reality of the international system based on state sovereignty: elites retain the power and legitimacy to define insiders and outsiders of the national community. Discussion of how modern nation-states across the globe handle questions of diversity and multiculturalism is increasingly on the forefront of politics and international relations, in both new and established democracies. The study of international relations itself must reconcile questions of conflict and rationality with discussions of culture and the transnationality of movements and religions. As a result of the global migration crisis, in

particular, the international system struggles to handle large populations of displaced persons who enter into liberal democracies and present similar questions to Western populations—who can be part of the national identity? Is the nation itself under threat? Simultaneously, refugees and stateless populations like the Rohingya remain inherently vulnerable and disadvantaged in a system built around citizenship and statehood. Further research on how these questions define modern identity-based conflicts in domestic and international relations should continue to analyze who benefits from the manipulation of these ideas, and how they are monitored or countered in the marketplace of ideas.

The full exercise of human rights ultimately must be protected by states, who are the signatories of the human rights covenants enshrined in international law. Yet the influences on public discourse and the rise of dangerous speech fall within the private sphere. This case study, in addition to widespread global questions of cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and election interference demonstrates the responsibility of global corporations to actively engage with UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as well as the responsibility of state governments to hold such corporations accountable. In Myanmar, the construction of a threat online which led to violence offline took place in a localized context, but such security threats can easily be extrapolated to the broader international context.

Corporations that create spaces for speech and which allow content to be promoted, masked, or manipulated clearly have a determining influence on the spread of violent extremism and political messaging in the marketplace of ideas. To this end, Facebook is a member of the Global Network Initiative (GNI), a non-governmental organization whose mission is “to protect and advance freedom of expression and privacy in the ICT industry by setting a global standard for responsible company decision making and by being a leading voice for freedom of

expression and privacy rights.”¹⁶⁷ The GNI bases its guidelines on existing international law and human rights treaties. In its biennial assessment, Facebook was found to be in compliance with these guidelines, at the same time as identity-based violence flourished on its platform in Myanmar.¹⁶⁸

Facebook also has its own Community Standards, which establish the boundaries of what content is allowed on its platform. In order to monitor this content, the Community Operations Team is trained to flag and remove specific slurs and words. In 2018, following the backlash, Facebook committed to increasing the number of moderators in Myanmar including Myanmar language experts to better monitor the network.¹⁶⁹ It is also building artificial intelligence (AI) functions to proactively enforce Community Standards. Mark Zuckerberg has promoted AI as the major solution to future online moderation, although there is no consensus on whether this is the best option for countering violent speech online. It is not clear that current AI software has the capability to detect context or semantics behind hate speech or misinformation that is posted or attached as a link, and when it does successfully flag such content, it will not necessarily remove it.¹⁷⁰ This solution also assumes that AI and the algorithms of the platform are able to function without an implicit political bias. Future research should engage the domestic and international policy implications of these developments, expanding the theoretical international relations frameworks to include the modern challenges facing consolidated democracies and liberalizing states alike.

¹⁶⁷ Global Network Initiative, “Our Mission,” 2019. <https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/team/our-mission/>.

¹⁶⁸ BSR, 20.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Larry Greenemeier, “Can AI Really Solve Facebook’s Problems?” *Scientific American* (April 13, 2018). <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/can-ai-really-solve-facebooks-problems1/>

The challenge of monitoring speech is cause for concern in liberalizing states, in particular, due to the risk that such moderation gives authoritarian leaders the tools to repress information or criticism, and limit the freedom of expression itself. The “dangerous speech” framework should be incorporated more fully into these discussions within the GNI and UN CVE efforts, as it delineates specific elements of speech that are proven to lead to the outbreaks of violence.

The various implications of this research clearly demonstrate the modern challenges in countering violent extremism and managing diverse populations. At this time, it is increasingly important that governing bodies, corporations, and international organizations are collaborative and innovative in confronting these challenges. These efforts will be continuously critical for the future of liberal democratic values, and for the full exercise of human rights globally.

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