

Dangerous path toward religious extremism

Ma Ba Tha is known across the world as a racist Buddhist organisation. Its work fans the flames of hatred and violence against Muslims in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya in Rakhine State. Its most prominent leader is Ashin Wirathu, dubbed the “bin Laden of Buddhism” for his violent, religious extremism.

Last month, Ma Ba Tha, or the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, received an award in Thailand for being an “outstanding Buddhist peace” organisation. The firebrand monk attended the ceremony and received a red-carpet welcome by members of the Thai clergy.

Does this mean the clergy endorses militant Buddhist nationalism?

No Thai monk would openly admit to that. But shared Islamophobia and the clergy’s current push to make Buddhism the official state religion point to a dangerous precedent.

The questionable award first became public last week when a Facebook post by academic Somrit Luechai showed Ashin Wirathu at the award ceremony which was presided over by an elder from the Supreme Sangha Council.

Other pictures from Ashin Wirathu’s Facebook page showed “The Face of Buddhist Terror”, as the controversial monk is dubbed by Time magazine, receiving a hearty welcome at the Dhammakaya Temple and Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University.



Mr Somrit strongly condemned the award being given to a militant monk whose campaigns of hate have triggered mass killings of Rohingya Muslims. He also named Dhammakaya and Maha Chula as collaborators in the ceremony which he described as an abuse of Buddhism and an endorsement of hatred and violence.

Maha Chula is at the centre of the clergy’s campaigns to make Buddhism the state religion and another supporting Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangkalacharn, also known as Somdet Chuang, to become the next supreme patriarch.

Since Somdet Chuang and the centre’s links with the highly controversial Dhammakaya Temple are public knowledge, Mr Somrit’s posts immediately triggered an online outcry and concerns that Dhammakaya would lead the country toward religious extremism.

Maha Chula, Dhammakaya, and the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth (WFBY) quickly came out to distance themselves from the controversial monk, albeit unconvincingly.

A Dhammakaya spokesperson denied organising the World Buddhist Outstanding Leader Award on Feb 23 which took place at AIT Auditorium. The temple also denied inviting the militant monk to

Dhammakaya, saying he was there to attend the Maka Bucha ceremony. Photos from Ashin Wirathu's Facebook page showed he was not treated as just another ordinary visitor.

Maha Chula adopted a similar line, denying both involvement with the award and having extended an invitation to Ashin Wirathu to visit the Buddhist university, insisting the monk was there on his own to meet Myanmar students. Photos from his Facebook page also showed a hearty welcome from a group of monks who sported a banner that read "We love Wirathu".

The award was actually organised by a group called World Buddhist Leaders Organisation, chaired by Dr Pornchai Pinyapong who is also president of the WFBY. But the award was not for Ashin Wirathu, he insisted. It was for "peace organisation Ma Ba Tha" for its outstanding achievements to protect Buddhism in Myanmar.

Ma Ba Tha, a peace organisation? Does he pretend not to know Ashin Wirathu is the face of that organisation?

According to Dr Pornchai, Ma Ba Tha succeeded in pushing for a set of laws that promote religious harmony in Myanmar. They include a law prohibiting Buddhists from marrying people of different religions (read: Islam); the law on monogamy (read: to stop Muslim men from having multiple wives and too many children); and the law forcing some women (read: Muslim women) to space pregnancies by at least three years.

At present, he said poverty forces many Buddhist parents to sell their daughters into marriage with men of different religions (read: Islam again). The laws designed by Ma Ba Tha then protect Buddhist women from facing hardship and violence when marrying non-Buddhists, he added.

I reread his explanations several times and still failed to understand why the laws that reflect religious paranoia and racial hatred, portending to prevent an "Islamic invasion", are viewed as fostering religious harmony, and why the organisation propagating such oppression is considered peaceful.

The WFBY must really admire Ma Ba Tha's work. Last year, it reportedly donated over one million baht for the organisation to build two radio stations with the aim of spreading its message to a wider audience. Ashin Wirathu was reportedly present to thank the Thai delegation personally for the donation.

The organiser also praised Ma Ba Tha for setting up schools nationwide to teach youngsters about the traditions of Myanmar and Buddhism.

Whether we agree with Ma Ba Tha's ideology or not, it is a fact that it is a very powerful organisation.

Anti-Muslim sentiments spewed by Ma Ba Tha and Ashin Wirathu have been so fierce that even Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi chose to keep silent amid the Rohingya massacres. Her party did not even dare field any Muslim candidates.

Here, the clergy are so weak that their nomination for the next supreme patriarch can simply be ignored by the government, as can their proposal for a state religion.

They only have themselves to blame. Temple corruption, monk misconduct, luxurious lifestyles and the total inefficiency of the Sangha Council have resulted in declining public faith in the clergy, which is aggravated further by their meddling in divisive politics.

The positive side to the clergy's downgrading is that while they strive to become as powerful as Ma Ba Tha, it will not be possible for them to become as destructive. Although the clergy tries to find scapegoats for its own problems by blaming other religions, any moves by the clergy to strengthen its own power through ultra-nationalism will always be tamed by opposing forces that do not exist in Myanmar.

We need to avoid the lethal mix of ultra-nationalism, racism and religion currently spreading across Theravada Buddhist countries. What can save us from this destructive militancy is not the clergy's wisdom, but its own weaknesses. (Bron: Sanitsuda Ekachai, 23 maart 2016)

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