How communal violence is prevented: Community mobilization in cases of potential Buddhist-Muslim violence in Myanmar

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Abstract

Communal violence does not usually happen once, but instead recurs in the same communities, in some cases for several generations. The threat of violence is thus part of the everyday lives of people who live in these communities. In response to this perpetual threat, people who live in these communities have developed strategies for avoiding conflict and have learned how to respond when conflict seems imminent. Residents work together with local organizations and local government in order to reduce the likelihood of violence, to quickly respond when such cases do occur, and to maintain peace once they have been de-escalated. Most of the time, these preparations stop violence from occurring at all. The efficacy of these tactics depends on the relationship between those who want to prevent violence from happening and those that have the power to prevent it. Although we have complex and empirically tested theories of why communal violence occurs, there is little scholarly work on how communities respond to these threats. This article develops an account of communal violence prevention using data from 93 interviews with politicians, community leaders, activists, religious leaders, and community members who responded to cases of potential communal violence in Myanmar. The article develops this account by presenting ethnographic and interview evidence from one particular case of prevented communal violence, which occurred in Yangon, Myanmar, in 2017.
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The vast majority of cases of communal violence are not isolated events or sudden outbursts of emotion and hatred, but are instead part of a larger pattern of recurrent violence that is predictable and preventable. As communities face violence over and over again, people learn to predict when violence might break out and they prepare accordingly. In most cases, these preparations prevent violence from breaking out at all. Although violence does occur, most of the time communal violence is prevented through the concerted effort of the community. When threats of violence arise, the community’s preparations form the foundation of a community’s response as residents and authorities work together to de-escalate the situation.

The way scholars usually analyze communal violence does not account for this pattern. Scholars have developed complex and empirically-supported theories of the various causes of violence, such as the role of political elites in orchestrating violence (Wilkinson 2009; Brass 2004, 2003, 1996), the impact of minority grievances on the likelihood of violence (Gurr 1993), and the influence of economic inequality on the likelihood of violence (Olzak 1996). Some carefully developed theories address how the incidents themselves work, including accounts of the process of target selection (Horowitz 2002), and how fear and emotional release drives violent behavior during incidents (Collins 2009). These theories, however, focus on the incidents themselves and on the perpetrators of violence, thus missing the actions of those who work to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

This article presents an analysis of communal violence prevention using interview data of from 93 participants who were currently or previously involved in responding to cases of communal violence in two cities in central Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay. The evidence in
this article focuses on one incidence of violence that occurred in Yangon during my fieldwork: a
violent encounter between nationalist Buddhist monks and a Muslim woman who was allegedly
harboring migrants from violence-torn Rakhine State. The article presents a close account of how
this community, Mingalar Taung Nyunt (MTN), prepared for and responded to the threat of
communal violence within the contemporary political and social context of the country as it
transitions from military rule.

The article argues that recurrent Buddhist-Muslim violence in Myanmar has
institutionalized a set of strategies and networks that actors use in responding to the threat of
violence. These strategies compose what Varshney (2002, 17) called an “institutionalized peace
system.” This article develops Varshney’s concept by exploring how the community in MTN
mobilized linkages between residents, civic organizations, and local government in order to de-
escalate the conflict. Unlike Varshney’s cases, inter-communal organizations were not the only
actors working to prevent violence in MTN; intra-communal organizations, as well as
government officials, elected representatives, recognized local leaders, and the community
residents themselves were also involved. Furthermore, the institutionalized peace system in
MTN had continuously operated for the prevention of violence beyond any one particular
incident. The community committed to specific strategies to reduce the likelihood of violence, to
de-escalate conflicts once they arose, and to monitor the situation after a conflict. Finally, the
article will show that although the type of ties matters, as Varshney suggests, the efficacy of any
actor or organization depends on their relationship to local systems of power. This article’s
analysis of MTN thus reveals a much wider and more complex system of preparations and
strategies that communities use in their attempts to prevent communal violence.
The Causes and Prevention of Communal Violence

Communal violence, sometimes called ethnic rioting, refers to violence between groups defined by identity-based characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. This excludes violence where one of the groups is the state, and it excludes violence that is non-ethnic in character, such as gang violence and non-ethnic riots. The kind of violence under scrutiny here is therefore analytically identical to the endemic Hindu-Muslim violence in India (Wilkinson 2009, Varshney 2002, Brass 2003), the Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia after the fall of the Suharto regime (Tajima 2014, Klinken 2007), as well as the White-Black violence in the United States between the 1960s and 1990s (Olzak et al. 1996, Spilerman 1970).

The literature on the causes of communal violence can be broadly divided into two general theories: elite manipulation, and inter-group contact. Elite manipulation theories suggest that political elites mobilize large groups of people using ethnic symbols as a means of achieving their ends, and that this manipulation can lead to communal violence or ethnic war by encouraging ultra-nationalism or through actual attacks on opposing groups (e.g. Wilkinson 2009, Brass 2003, Mansfield and Snyder 2002, Brass 1996, Veena 1995). Paul Brass (1996, 2003, 2004) offers the most complex version of this theory, where communal violence in India results from entrenched systems of riot production, or “institutionalized riot systems,” that are mobilized by businessmen and political elites to ignite violence for their economic and political benefit. Inter-group contact theories, on the other hand, argue that communal violence is the outcome of the relationship between members of the groups, with certain arrangements such as segregation or inequality creating situations where violence is more likely (e.g. Bhavnani et al 2014, Kopstein and Wittenberg 2011, Varshney 2002).

Drawing on inter-group contact theory and in response to Brass’ theory of
“institutionalized riot systems,” Varshney (2002) argued that where violence occurs is better explained by looking at where violence is prevented rather than on the immediate causes of violent incidents. Using evidence from India Varshney argued that cities with formal and informal ties across ethnic and religious groups, ranging from interfaith groups to business associations, allow residents to manage conflict through a kind of “institutionalized peace system.” When violence seems imminent, residents can mobilize these formal and informal ties to, for example, establish temporary peace committees and organize intercommunal foot patrols as a way of discouraging violence.

The evidence in this article points to a similar mobilization in Myanmar as that which Varshney found in India (2002), but through its close analysis of one case it reveals a greater complexity than Varshney expected. Varshney’s work focused on the role of civil society in maintaining peace in India, and thus looked particularly at the role of inter-communal associations and inter-group ties. Although such ties are undoubtedly important, evidence in this article will show that community preparations for communal violence also include a network of ties between intracommunal associations, local government officials, recognized community leaders, activists, and the residents themselves. Specifically, the article shows that while ties across ethnic groups are undoubtedly important, they are ineffective unless they are supplemented by ties to those with authority. Evidence from Myanmar will show that in order to understand when and how violence is prevented we need to theorize local systems of power.

The History of Buddhist-Muslim Violence in Myanmar

Communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims has occurred in Myanmar at least since the British colonial period (1824-1948). Although each incident occurred in a very
different context (Schissler et al 2017), violence that is locally labeled as Buddhist-Muslim has continued to recur for nearly one hundred years. According to available data, the first incidents of inter-group violence occurred in response to increased Muslim migration into Myanmar during the colonial period (Yegar 2002). The demographic shift altered power relations as the British provided Indians, who were trained as colonial bureaucrats, with access to positions in local government and police, and with land and technology for farming. Although communal violence between Indians and Burmese occurred throughout the colonial period, the first incident to be explicitly framed in religious terms occurred in 1938, in the colonial capital of Yangon (see Smith 1999), during a period of rising anti-colonial nationalism and emerging Burmese Buddhist identity. The incident, which began in Yangon after a newspaper reprinted excerpts from an anti-Buddhist book, spread northward into central Myanmar over one month and left an estimated 204 people dead (Yegar 2002, Human Rights Watch 2002, Smith 1999).

Since that incident in 1938, violence between Buddhists and Muslims recurred about once a decade until 1990, after which there was a sharp increase in the number of incidents. These incidents occurred in different economic and political contexts and for different reasons, although the majority of incidents occurred in the same three regions: the two largest urban centers of the country, Yangon and Mandalay, and Rakhine State. The violence in Yangon and Mandalay, like the 1938 riots, has been primarily urban violence between residents, whereas violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine State has been primarily characterized

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1 These are incidents that I have been able to identify and confirm by drawing on local and international newspaper sources, NGO reports, and government reports. Given the censorship and tight military control between 1962 and 1988, and to a lesser extent between 1988 and 2008, information on those periods is scarce and some incidents from those periods may be unrecorded. Nevertheless, according to available data, these are regions that have experienced recurrent Buddhist-Muslim violence for several generations.
by confrontations between armed groups and the state (Leider 2018). The conflict in Rakhine, just as other civil wars along Myanmar’s borders, have sought to establish independent countries or gain equal citizenship rights for ethnic minority groups (i.e. the 1970s Mujahideen Rebellion, the 1990s Rohingya Solidarity Organization, and the 2017 Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army).

Important Actors

The process of democratization in Myanmar, set in motion by the 2008 Constitution, has created a new system in which power is split between military and civilian leaders. The government was heavily influenced by military and ex-military officials in the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) until 2015, when a new civilian government, led by Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), was elected. Today the civilian government dominates the legislature and holds the Presidency, while the military controls executive functions and the state security apparatus. These changes have forced local authorities to develop new strategies for working with civilian elected politicians, and all have had to develop ways of dealing with old and new inter-communal and intra-communal associations.

The Military. Myanmar was under the control of various military figures for half a century, between 1962 and 2015 (see Callahan 2003, Gravers 1999). Although the USDP, led by former generals, is no longer the majority party in Parliament, the military still maintains a great deal of governmental power regardless of electoral outcomes, especially at the local level (Simpson et al 2018). According to the 2008 Constitution, the military retains 25% of the seats in Parliament, which gives it veto power over most legislation. The military also continues to control three important ministries for domestic security: Home Affairs, Border Affairs, and
Immigration. Furthermore, several government positions, especially those in the judicial branch, are also lifelong appointments, meaning that the military appointees will remain in those positions for the foreseeable future.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) is particularly important during cases of communal violence. The MoHA oversees the police, the Bureau of Special Investigation, the prison and fire services, and the General Administration Department (GAD). The GAD is the country’s “vertical core,” connecting all 36 ministries to each other as well as connecting the population to the government (Figure 1) (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw 2014). The GAD is the face of government for most of the population; citizens turn to GAD representatives for everything from complaints about electrical outages to disputes among neighbors. During cases of communal violence, the Chief of Police, along with the Township Administrator, a military official who governs the local neighborhood and is part of the GAD, are tasked with making many of the immediate decisions regarding the government’s response. The Township Administrator, and the locally elected Ward Administrator, who reports to the Township Administrator, will figure prominently in the following discussion of violence in MTN.

The National League for Democracy. The NLD, led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, gained a majority of the seats in Parliament in 2015. The NLD is the largest opposition party to the military regime and is widely supported, especially in central Myanmar, because its members are mostly former political prisoners and other activists. It has local influence through their party offices at the Ward and Township levels, and through elected Members of Parliament.
who represent Townships in the Regional Parliament, called the Regional Hluttaw, and the National Parliament, which is a bicameral legislature split into the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities) and the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives). Due to the recent elections, the majority of MPs are NLD members. Members of Parliament are generally expected not only to serve in Parliament, but also to work with local government officials on a variety of development projects and otherwise help maintain peace and stability in their township.

**Monks and Buddhist Nationalism.** Buddhist monks are highly respected and revered in Theravada Buddhism, the sect of Buddhism practiced by the majority of people in Myanmar. Monks in Theravada Buddhism are supposed to avoid engaging in any lay activities, especially politics. Nonetheless, monks in Myanmar have a long history of political engagement, dating back to the monarchical period when the monastic community had the power to legitimize, or de-legitimize, monarchs (Aung-Thwin 2013). Several monks have even gained fame for their involvement in political movements; for instance, U Wirathu (labeled the “Face of Buddhist Terror” by *Time* magazine in 2013) is a prominent member of the nationalist group called the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha). The MaBaTha was key to the passage of new laws restricting interfaith marriage and requiring official interviews for religious conversion. Associated monks have been accused of stoking anti-Muslim sentiment and even attempting to ignite communal violence themselves (Crouch 2016, Walton and Hayward 2014).

Ultra-nationalist monks like those in the MaBaTha do not, however, represent the majority. For example, there are many monks who work with interfaith organizations and have been part of democratic movements in the past, and many times more who avoid politics altogether. Although Theravada Buddhism is generally decentralized, the government has also organized the Sangha Mahanayaka Committee (MaHaNa), an organization of monks that is
tasked with policing the behavior of monks. This organization’s bureaucracy mirrors that of the GAD, with representatives at the local, regional, and national levels. Regardless of their political engagement, the status accorded to monks makes them very influential figures, and they often play a role in local peacekeeping.

The Study

Drawing on 93 interviews with local leaders and residents in two cities in central Myanmar, the article develops an account of how communities in Myanmar prepare for and respond to cases of potential communal violence. The interviews were conducted during field site visits totaling about 15 months between 2013 and 2017. They were conducted with a wide breadth of people including Members of Parliament, military officials, NLD officials, Buddhist monks of various political affiliations, Muslim leaders and Imams, political activists, community leaders, CSO and NGO members, journalists, businesspeople, teachers, students, and many others.\(^2\) During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to discuss their experiences with people of different religions, their general impressions of Buddhist-Muslim relations, and the ways that their community has responded to conflict in the past. The interviews lasted between one and four hours, with the average interview lasting one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in Burmese with simultaneous translation into English, with the help

\(^2\) The goal during sampling was to include an equal number of men and women in the sample, but the majority of interviews (81 out of 93) were ultimately conducted with men. Religious and political figures tended to be men, and were thus overrepresented in those samples. Men were also more willing to be interviewed by myself (male) and my translators (also men) than were women. Although we attempted to interview more women for the project by visiting spaces often frequented by women (public markets and parks), the majority refused to be interviewed. Due to limitations in time, funding, and availability, I was unable to hire female translators to overcome these issues.
of a translator. Four translators, two in each city, were hired for the project. The translators were all relatively young men between 20 and 30 years old. Three of the translators were Atheists, although they were coded as Buddhist by interviewees, and one was Muslim. The translators were selected based on recommendations from other scholars, their general aptitude, and their willingness to work on the sensitive topic of Buddhist-Muslim relations.

The majority of the interviews for the project were conducted in two cities, Yangon and Mandalay, which are the two largest urban centers of the country. Within each city, the interviews were divided between two neighborhoods: one with a history of communal violence, and one without. The sampling occurred in three stages. First, we approached individuals at tea shops, restaurants, and stalls in each neighborhood, making sure to interview an equal sample of Buddhists and Muslims. Second, based on the responses of residents and recognized local leaders, we interviewed people that they suggested had or would become involved in cases of communal violence. Finally, this sample was supplemented by a theory-driven sample of religious leaders, government officials, and civic organizations. This final sample was a used as means of testing findings against influential theories from the literature. These stages often overlapped as we scheduled interviews with local leaders and developed rapport within the different networks. By interviewing a variety of different people in each neighborhood we were able to triangulate information and test people’s claims of involvement in particular cases. This article is largely based on interviews with the community members and leaders of one particular township in Yangon, called Mingalar Taung Nyunt (MTN).

The Incident

At around 9:30pm, May 10, 2017, four or five nationalist Buddhist monks and several
laypersons associated with the Patriotic Monks Union (PMU) led police to a Muslim-majority Ward in MTN. The nationalists claimed that illegal migrants were living in an apartment building on the corner of a busy street. The police officers checked the documents of the members of that household but found that they were all citizens and that there was no evidence of illegal migrants. As the search dragged on, a large crowd began to gather around the house. The nationalists were not satisfied with the police’s conclusions, and accused them of negligence and even of protecting the illegal migrants. They demanded the police take the owner of the house to the police station, but the police refused.

When the nationalists, who accompanied the police during the search, finally exited the building, another nationalist in the crowd grabbed an iron pipe and struck a nearby Muslim man on the head, injuring him. The wounded man was quickly taken to the hospital, and the crowd dispersed to prepare for escalating violence. Ko Win Thu, a Muslim betel shop owner who works nearby, said,

As soon as the [nationalist] monks were in the car they shouted, “Beat them all!” Their people that were in the middle [of the crowd] were mad because the police didn’t do anything. So they started beating the people around the building. All the people, monks and the people around there and the police ran away immediately.

U Win Sein, a Muslim businessman who lives nearby and was there at the time of the incident, reported that he ran home and grabbed a weapon, a rod, and stood guard in front of his house along with his neighbors, ready for the nationalists to come. “If they ever came into the street we

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3 Most names in this article are pseudonyms, adopted to protect the anonymity of interviewees. If the individual is widely known and their identity could not be disguised without affecting the results of the study, however, the interviewees were asked if they would agree to include their real name in this article. National MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin and Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein agreed to these terms.
would attack them.” The crowd of nationalists gathered around the police station down the street to pressure the Chief of Police. According to Ko Win Thu, the nationalists then used slingshots to shoot pieces of bicycle chains at the police station, after which the police responded by firing two warning shots into the air. The crowd quickly dispersed. Residents took their places on their street with swords and rods to protect their neighborhood.

Tensions were high and there was a real possibility that the situation could become much worse. Rumors were spreading over social media that the Muslim man who had been injured earlier was already dead. Angry residents walked down the streets of the Ward, calling on their neighbors to arm themselves and help defend their neighborhood. According to a Buddhist businesswoman who works nearby and was hiding at her house, some men walked down the street shouting, “Kill all the Buddhists! Kill anyone not wearing a skullcap!” Some streets away, nationalists racing by in a car yelled epithets out the window. Neighbors grabbed weapons and ran at the car, scared that the nationalists would attack the nearby mosque as they did four years ago. Although the nationalists were Buddhist, several Buddhists in the Ward stood side by side with their Muslim neighbors, holding machetes and rods, ready to fend off any nationalists who might attack. Yet the situation did not escalate. No one else was injured that night.

**Preventing Violence in Mingalar Taung Nyunt**

This incident was not unlike many other such incidents that occur regularly around Myanmar. Most of the time, the incidents do not reach this level of intensity, and only rarely do they escalate into communal riots. A substantial number of people worked to prevent violence from escalating in MTN that night. These included members of the military-controlled government in the GAD and the police, elected and appointed members of the civilian
government, leaders and members of religious organizations, other local leaders and activists, and the local residents. These actors worked to prevent the occurrence and escalation of violence in their neighborhood. They did so by (1) preparing for the possibility of communal violence in advance of any particular trigger, (2) actively responding to the threat of violence, and (3) ensuring that the conflict would not recur through continued surveillance and by controlling the narrative of the conflict.

Phase One: Preparing to Prevent Communal Violence

Before the incident even took place, MTN community leaders and community members used a variety of strategies to reduce the likelihood of such incidents. First, the GAD and police monitored for suspicious activity in their neighborhood. Second, the GAD and Members of Parliament developed a working relationship that allowed for quick information-sharing and division of labor during the incident. Third, Members of Parliament and other local leaders in the community adopted a narrative of the recurrent communal violence that blamed violence on the manipulation of people from the previous government regime, instead of on hatred between community members. These tactics were employed before the incident occurred and have presumably continued to be in place.

Monitoring Muslims and Foreigners

Myanmar’s military government has a long history of monitoring its citizens, and although much of the government is now led by civilians, the security apparatus used by the
military regime is likely still in place. Throughout my time in Myanmar, the shadow of the government’s monitoring apparatus loomed large. Respondents and I carefully picked locations for the interviews, making sure they would be conducted away from others. Although people were much more willing to speak with foreign researchers like myself in 2017 compared to in 2013, most remained very cautious about openly discussing communal violence. Often people would only accept interviews once I mentioned I had interviewed a respected and trusted figure of their community. Although there is no direct evidence that the government was monitoring citizens in MTN, many interviewees, particularly Muslim interviewees, acknowledged that this was still the case and behaved accordingly.

Indeed, I was subject to GAD monitoring in the course of my fieldwork. In early 2017, I visited a mosque in the outskirts of Yangon. The Imam was forthcoming to my interview and research questions, but avoided me during a follow-up visit a week later. A staff member explained that the “secret police” had questioned the Imam and the staff shortly after my initial interviews. The staff member promptly asked me to leave. Some weeks later I interviewed the Township Administrator in that particular neighborhood. In an apparent attempt at intimidation, a second man sitting next to the administrator told me that he was the officer who had been following me in the neighborhood. “[When you visited the mosque] I was behind you. I know that you were there.” When I asked him why he questioned the Imam and staff at the mosque, the Administrator responded that the officer had done it to maintain peace in the neighborhood:

There might be people trying to start problems in this township. This township is very quiet and peaceful, from a religious point of view. But we need to know who is coming in and going out in order to protect the township. If something happens, we have to follow the cause. So if someone asks us to tell them who did what, we need to know everything
that happens in this township … What happened in other townships might be connected with some kind of organizing from behind, by unseen people … This township borders other townships that have had conflict, so we have to be very careful.

Although this encounter, and the notion of an always-watching government, was particularly intimidating to me and my translator, the township administrator’s argument for the role of monitoring to maintain peace should be taken seriously. Monitoring the activity of individuals deemed suspicious may not be ideal, particularly since Muslims are most likely profiled as suspicious, but it may help to prevent communal violence. When I attempted to approach MTN Imams at their mosques or through connections after the incident took place, the vast majority understandably refused to be interviewed.

Political Trust and Relationship-building

The response that a community expects from the state when faced with potential communal violence is crucial for explaining the form and likelihood of that violence. Due to Myanmar’s history and the military’s continued control over the police, residents in MTN and around Yangon tend to avoid contact with authorities whenever possible. As a Muslim businessman from Yangon explained, “Both sides [Buddhists and Muslims] don’t really trust the police. To be frank … the police only work whenever they are bribed.” Instead of going to the police, people tend to attempt to resolve issues on their own. While some avoid the police due to concerns over fairness or honesty, others distrust the police because they believe that they are working with the previous military regime. This “hidden hand” theory suggests that the police and local government are in league with a shadowy clique of former and current military officers who attempt to spark conflict between Buddhists and Muslims for their own benefit.
People in MTN do, however, trust the Ward Administrator, who is the highest-ranking popularly-elected individual in the GAD, and they also trust the popularly-elected civilian government, particularly the Members of Parliament. These leaders are therefore in the unique situation of having both the trust of the community as well as a relationship with or influence over the military-appointed GAD and the police. They are, in effect, brokers between the military regime and residents. During incidents of communal violence, community members are unlikely to trust the police or local government unless they are supported by people like U Ye Naung Thein, the MTN Ward Administrator, or Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, one of four MPs representing MTN.

The Ward Administrator’s unique position is a result of the 2008 Constitution, which gives the military the right to appoint officials to the State, District, and Township levels of the GAD, while the Ward level and below are popularly elected. As an elected representative of the people, the Ward Administrator is at least known to the constituents, if not actively supported. In May 2017, the Ward Administrator, U Ye Naung Thein, was in his second three-year term. Given the structure of the GAD, Ward Administrators have a close relationship with the Township Administrator and the police department in their Ward. U Ye Naung Thein met with the Township Administrator of MTN about once every 20 days and made regular reports to him. Although elected and civilian, the Ward Administrator has a direct relationship with the Township Administrator and the police, and thus has a connection to the military and to the information available to that network.

Although not part of the military-controlled government like the Ward Administrator, Members of Parliament are also in a uniquely influential position because they can use their status to exert pressure on the military-appointed GAD. The source of this authority for MPs is
not only their rank, but also the fact that MPs can report the ineptitude of local authorities and police to their military colleagues in Parliament. As a MP in the Regional Hluttaw explained,

> We don’t have direct control over the police or the administrators, but on the other hand we can present and submit our point of view in Parliament, and say publicly whatever we think is wrong … The minister in the Yangon Regional Government [who is part of the GAD] also attends Parliament … we can ask [him] questions in Parliament and he has to answer. In this way, we have some control.

Although the MPs do not have direct authority over the GAD, their position in the government structure gives them the authority, like Ward Administrators, to bridge the gap between the military and people.

**Narratives of Violence**

The narrative that residents, government officials, and non-state actors adopt affects incidents of violence by changing the way various actors respond to potential conflict, and by affecting the likelihood of these incidents occurring in the first place. Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar today understand violence through two competing narratives of conflict: first, that Muslims and Buddhists hate each other and violence can therefore break out at any moment; or second, that the violence is orchestrated by the “hidden hand.” Each narrative produces different responses (Schissler et al 2017). For example, if civic organizations and the state view conflict as a product of inter-group hatred, they might encourage interfaith engagement; while if they see conflict as instigated by a third party, they might focus instead on monitoring nationalist groups or potentially corrupt government officials and police.
The two narratives are adopted by people that are Buddhist and Muslim, as well as residents and government officials. From a Buddhist perspective, the first narrative suggests that Muslims are inherently violent and exploitative. At its extreme, it claims that Muslims are attempting to take over the country and destroy Buddhism (Gravers 2015). This narrative has garnered a great deal of attention domestically and internationally in media, government, and academia. The Muslim perspective on this narrative sees Buddhists as blind devotees of manipulative monks. This narrative, with both Buddhist and Muslim interpretations, foments mutual fear and distrust, such that misunderstandings and otherwise quotidian arguments are more likely to turn into cases of communal violence. The second narrative is more common among educated residents, as well as among civic organizers and members of the NLD. This narrative usually places suspicion upon the “hidden hand,” accusing the previous regime and their allies in the military today for trying to instigate communal violence in order to show the ineptitude of the current regime. One tool they use, according to this narrative, is religious nationalism. Whether this narrative is true or not, it encourages Buddhists and Muslims to work together against a common foe.

The dominance of the second narrative in MTN, among its MPs, NGOs, and residents, encouraged particular forms of civic engagement and preventative measures. Instead of developing interfaith networks or events, local intra-communal organizations and activists in Yangon coordinated their activity by focusing on eliminating rumors and otherwise hampering nationalist groups and others who are perceived to be instigating violence. For instance, one board member of a Muslim intra-communal organization explained, “We release a statement whenever a rumor occurs. But right now, we don’t have to solve the issues like we used to because it is very clear who is on which side. The public knows who is doing what. So
sometimes we don't even need to solve it, people can figure it out by themselves.” Whether or not the nationalists are working with the previous regime to attempt to instigate violence, the belief that they are undoubtedly reduces the likelihood of violence.

Phase Two: Responding to the Threat of Communal Violence

As police searched the building and the crowd gathered outside, community leaders contacted each other for information and to organize a response. The Ward Administrator and MPs acted quickly, organizing from afar and arriving at the scene as soon as possible to help de-escalate the situation. When the situation worsened, many of the residents armed themselves and barricaded the entrance to the streets of their neighborhood. Neighborhood leaders tried to restore calm by organizing and leading street patrols, and by encouraging residents at the barricades to trust in the police and the authorities to keep them and their families safe.

Mobilizing Networks and Organizing a Response

Both Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein and national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin were out of town when the incident occurred, but they worked through the night and over the next few days to de-escalate the conflict and restore the peace. U Ye Naung Thein was the first leader outside of the military-controlled branches of government to learn about the incident. He was preparing to sleep after a long drive to the beach for a short holiday with friends and family when he received a phone call from the Township Administrator at about 10:30pm. He quickly gathered everyone together in the car to return to Yangon. U Ye Naung Thein’s driver, a Street Administrator from the Ward, lent him his phone, as did U Ye Naung Thein’s wife, giving him a total of five cell phones, including his own three phones, to use on his way back to the city.
The whole night I was calling people and answering phone calls from everyone I know. I had to call every 10 Household and 100 Household Head that I know to go there and help calm the people down. I also called the three Parliament Members, one from the regional level and the two from the upper and lower houses. … I also tried to call all of my friends to go there and see what’s happening and try to help. I wasn’t just calling though. I also received a lot of phone calls because many people wanted to know what was happening.

The whole way back I was on the phone.

He talked to religious leaders, organizations, government officials, friends, and even the local secretary of the NLD, who assured him, like everyone else, that they would go there and stop the violence from escalating.

Among the first people U Ye Naung Thein called was national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin. She was in Nay Pyi Taw, and could not reach Yangon until the next morning. She called the two regional MPs representing MTN and began to organize a response. “When I picked up the phone during the riot I couldn’t put it down, because everybody was calling me. The public was reporting to me what was happening, and I needed to direct my people to their respective areas.”

After the group of nationalists around the police station had dispersed, Daw Phyu Phyu Thin sent a “mole” into the nationalist group in order to get inside information on their plans. She learned that they were planning on moving to Bahan Township after they failed in MTN, so she alerted one of the Bahan Township MPs. Later, when the MP called back to warn her the nationalists were planning on returning to MTN, she passed on the notice to her friends and contacts in the area. Daw Phyu Phyu Thin and her colleagues monitored the situation until around 3am, an hour after the nationalists finally dispersed near Bahan Township.
Barricading the Streets

After the Muslim man was wounded most of the residents of MTN dispersed, returning to their homes. Both Buddhists and Muslims recognized the possibility of violent attacks by the nationalists, and they knew from incidents of communal violence in Meikhtila and Rakhine State in 2012 and 2013 that police might stand by as homes were destroyed. Residents therefore took the safety of their homes and families into their own hands. A local garment worker who stood watch in the street that night explained,

I went back outside and sat, along with all the people in the neighborhood. For security. … One man from each household came out … We didn’t leave the street, we just waited here. If they [the nationalists] ever came into the street we would attack them … It’s just like what happened in 2013 after the Meikhtila violence broke out ….

Ko Aung Thu, a betel shop owner, emphasized the police’s slow response:

In my Ward there is no security. To protect my street and to protect my house is my responsibility. It is our responsibility. The police came after … Once they arrived we put our weapons away, our knives and rods and swords … We were a bit relieved when the security force and the police car arrived. But we were still aware that we have to take care of our own security.

MTN residents’ responses were tied to the history of military rule in Myanmar and particularly to police inaction during previous incidents of communal violence.

In addition to arming themselves and monitoring their streets, many residents barricaded the entrance to their streets. Streets in the neighborhood are generally one-way and connected to the main street on only one side. Residents therefore barricaded the exits to the main street with whatever they could find, including chairs and bamboo rods, creating makeshift checkpoints.
They questioned anyone who wished to enter, ensuring that they lived on the street or were at least friends with someone on that street. When Ko Aung Lay, a Buddhist activist from outside of the township, tried to enter the neighborhood in order to follow a truck occupied by suspected nationalists, he needed help to maneuver around these barricades.

Once [my Muslim friend and I] came into the street, the Muslim people surrounded us and asked us who we were. My friend, his name is Ali, he said “I am Ali, I am Muslim,” and he went out! He left me alone in the car! I said no, I’m with you guys, I’m here to help. One guy asked me to just go back, because the mob just came in and—because it was near the mosque. … I was scared so I did go back. But then, I took a wrong turn and went into the street again, but the wrong way. It was a one-way street, but I went in the opposite way. Then, I was alone, and all the Muslim people came down from their houses with swords! I was alone in the car, driving, and in the end—I thought the street was connected to the main road, but it was clearly not. So I had to turn again! One guy had a sword on the corner, so I closed my car’s window and turned again, and escaped.

Neither the local police nor many of the local leaders endorsed these barricades, but they were the primary means through which the community sought to defend themselves.

Street Patrols

Most of the crowd dispersed after the police fired warning shots, but several people remained to help de-escalate the situation and to organize street patrols. The two regional MPs mobilized by Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein and national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin remained on the scene, as did members of local religious organizations and other local leaders. They reassured residents that the police would handle the situation and protect them from the
nationalists. Yet convincing people in Myanmar that the police are on their side is often very difficult. As the chairman of a local NGO told me,

When I got there, they were swearing at the policemen. If you see them [these angry residents] with sympathy, they are not wrong. All the incidents that occurred like Rakhine and Meikthila, everything happened right before the eyes of policemen. Houses are burning and people are being killed right in front of the police … On that night people … said things like, “This is your job, if you do not stop it you are responsible.” When we speak to them they listen, they know me and they know my position. So maybe it’s because of this respect that they accepted [what I had to say].

To spread their message more quickly, he and other local leaders organized small patrols composed of trusted community members like Street Administrators, 10 Household Heads, regional MPs, and members of the Five Muslim Organizations. The patrols used their status to encourage residents to return to their homes, to put down their weapons, and trust the police for protection.

Buddhist residents stood by their Muslim neighbors in protecting MTN, even though Buddhist organizations, other than the PMU, were absent that night. The chairman of the Sangha Mahanayaka Committee for MTN, where there are several large and important monasteries, told me that he would have gotten involved, but that the Chief of Police never informed him of the conflict. He only learned about the incident the next day by reading the newspaper. Individual Buddhist monks and residents helped de-escalate the conflict, however. The local chairman for the Islamic Religious Affairs Council remembered,

There is [a mosque], which is not far from this area. There is not a single Muslim household around that mosque. The building next to it is a monastery. When [our patrol]
went there, the monks told us, “You can go back home, don’t worry, we’ll protect the mosque.”

Buddhist residents and monks worked together with their Muslim neighbors by joining the street patrols, helping barricade the streets, and by otherwise doing what they could to protect their Muslim neighbors.

**Phase Three: Maintaining Peace**

No more injuries occurred that night, but tension lingered on in the days after. In the early hours of May 10, U Wirathu wrote on Facebook that he was not satisfied with how the police had dealt with the situation. He declared that he would return to MTN on May 15 to “turn the township upside down” looking for illegal migrants. Throughout the next week the MoHA and the GAD scrambled to arrest the instigators responsible and to deter any further attacks, and community leaders worked to re-frame the incident as one related to the greed of malicious people instigating violence, rather than to communal hatred. The Five Muslim Organizations, a group of intra-communal organizations united by the government in order to represent Muslim interests, also issued a statement on the incident, encouraging calm and trust in the police. These efforts culminated in a Town Hall meeting organized by U Ye Naung Thein for the evening of May 14, where community leaders and NGOs disseminated accurate information, encouraged residents to trust the police, and demonstrated community solidarity.

**Catching the Instigators and Re-framing the Incident**

Through discussions with police and informants the day after the incident, the township administrator’s office gathered evidence suggesting that the case had little to do with illegal
immigration, but was instead the result of a dispute over money. According to the police, the conflict started when the woman who owned the apartment building under question, Daw Win, had asked her neighbor for loan using her house as collateral. Her neighbor’s wife, Aye Per Tun, acted as the broker. Daw Win was a construction contractor, and her business was not doing well. After seeing that she would never be able to pay back the loan, Daw Win sold the house and used that money to pay back the loan. When Aye Per Tun learned that Daw Win had sold the house for more than the loan, she demanded that Daw Win pay her a fee. The feud escalated when Aye Per Tun was contacted by a famous couple associated with the growing nationalist movement. They told Aye Per Tun that she should demand more money and paying the nationalist couple a fee in exchange for their help. Aye Per Tun agreed, and after Daw Win again refused to pay, the couple mobilized the group of nationalist monks and laypersons to pressure the police to arrest Daw Win on charges of harboring illegal Muslim migrants from the Rakhine State.

For the next two weeks after the incident, the GAD and Members of Parliament coordinated their efforts in order to find Aye Per Tun and the nationalists responsible. The day after the incident, Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein worked with the police and the Township Administrator’s office to clear Daw Win’s name and to officially begin their investigation of the nationalists. That same morning, national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, who had returned to MTN, met with members of the GAD to compare information about the case. She also spoke with the police to inquire why they had not acted earlier that night. “They said they didn’t because they didn’t receive a command from the higher level. So, I told them that if they are not going to arrest [the inciters], the next time this happens I would arrest them [the police].” That night, with the information from the GAD, Daw Phyu Phyu Thin sent a letter to
the Chief Minister of the Yangon Regional Hluttaw and to the Ministry of Religion and Culture, demanding the arrest of the nationalists. According to another local activist, it was Daw Phyu Phyu Thin’s efforts that resulted in the eventual arrest of the nationalists. “She forced the government to arrest all of those people. Without her it would not had happened. This was the first time that the government took action on those extremist groups—because of her.” Indeed, that same evening, arrest warrants were issued for seven people, including two monks. The nationalist couple was arrested quickly, and the three other lay people turned themselves in once the arrest warrants were issued. The two monks, however, were not apprehended.

In the weeks after the incident, the role of Aye Per Tun and the nationalists working with her to ignite violence was spread quickly through traditional and social media platforms. A Township Administrator that I spoke to even suggested that a news journal would be sued because it published an article linking the violence to communal hatred. In response to these accusations of incitement, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha), of which U Wirathu is a prominent member, held a press conference where they claimed no connection to the nationalists involved in the incident in Mingalar Taung Nyunt. They claimed that the PMU, of which the nationalists arrested for the incident were members, had no official relationship with the MaBaTha, and that although their ideals might be aligned, their strategies were different. The re-framing of the incident as one related to greed rather than ideology thus played an important role in making sure the conflict did not reignite or could be used by other nationalists to further their agenda. This narrative was reinforced on May 14th, during a Town Hall meeting organized by the Ward Administrator.

**Intra-communal Organizing**
Al-Hajj Karim, a leader in the Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC), one of the Five Muslim Organizations, spent the night of the incident monitoring the streets along with the police. Karim returned home and slept about three hours before organizing a meeting of the local branch of the IRAC. The organization decided its strategy for the next few days. According to Karim,

First of all, we wanted to release a statement. There were lots of rumors already on Facebook and other social media. So first of all the statement said not to believe those rumors spreading on social media. At the same time we had to work with the authorities, police, and the representatives. If they would like to know anything, we would provide the information … After that we went to [the] offices of our parliamentary representatives and spoke with them, built trust with them. All three representatives are very engaged with the community. We told them what we can provide and asked them what they needed.

Karim made his network available to local authorities and made it known that the IRAC was willing to help in any way the authorities deemed appropriate. But other than inviting the Five Muslim Organizations to the Town Hall meeting on May 14, local authorities and the MPs mostly ignored their offers of help. When I asked about their involvement, the Ward Administrator said, “I didn’t work with them or anything, but they came here to ask me questions and to get some information.” The IRAC helped de-escalate the situation during the incident, and they published their statement, but were otherwise underutilized by the GAD and the MPs.

Although Buddhist organizations could have helped respond to the violence in MTN, they did not do so in this case. Since Buddhist monks have been involved in many cases of communal violence in the past, the MaHaNa has a very important role in de-escalating conflict
and punishing transgressors. During that night in MTN, however, the township chairman of the MaHaNa was completely absent, and did not even learn about the incident until the following morning. Without a call from the GAD, MPs, or the Chief of Police, the MaHaNa was completely disconnected from the incident. As the chairman told me, “If they had called me I would’ve resolved it right away. It was like that another time, when I helped, but that was with the previous Chief of Police. This Chief of Police is new, he should’ve called me, but we don’t have much of a relationship.” It is unclear whether or not the chairman’s involvement would have resolved the situation as easily as he suggests. The MaHaNa does have the authority to curb the activities of monks, but given the reluctance of most Buddhist monks to get involved in anything related to the lay world, the power, influence, and authority of monks like the chairman of the MaHaNa is usually restricted to responding to others’ requests, rather than proactively engaging in the situation.

**MTN’s Networks and Tactics for Preventing Violence**

The case of MTN reveals the complex network of actors and strategies that are necessary for the prevention of communal violence. The actors involved included members of the local government, elected representatives of the neighborhood, intra-communal organizations, other community leaders, and the community members themselves. These actors mobilized their connections to build horizontal linkages across organizational types, and vertical linkages across different levels of power. These connections were mobilized in three different phases of violence prevention: preparation, activation, and explanation. The networks and strategies in place in MTN were mobilized both continuously in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of violence, and specifically in response to an incident of potential communal violence and its aftermath.
Actors and Networks: Horizontal and Vertical Linkages

The tactics that the actors employed sometimes required them to act individually, but more often encouraged linkages across organizations and along different hierarchies of power. Ward Administrator U Ye Naung Thein mobilized the initial response by using his network to inform Members of Parliament, local organizations, and local leaders. He was in a unique position to build these horizontal linkages because he works within the military-controlled GAD, under the authority of Township Administrator, and is locally elected and popularly supported. Through this position as a broker between the military and the citizenry, he was able to credibly inform a variety of actors about the situation with information from the Township Administrator. Of the actors he mobilized, national MP Daw Phyu Phyu Thin was probably the most influential. She used her authority in the national government’s hierarchy as a legislator to pressure the police and the GAD to arrest the nationalists, a consequence that instigators in other cases have evaded. Together, these two actors served as the brokers between different organizations and different levels of power, providing the foundations for peace in MTN.

Apart from the GAD and elected representatives, the most important actors in this case were the Five Muslim Organizations. Many scholars have investigated the role of civic institutions in preventing communal violence, particularly focusing on their ability to respond to cases of potential violence by themselves (Varshney & Gubler 2012, Varshney 2002), and to establish formal and informal arrangements between the communities involved (Tajima 2014, Fearon and Laitin 1996). According to this work, these inter-communal organizations can then help police neighborhoods, quell rumors, and spread accurate information. In MTN, however, there was very little inter-communal organizing. In contrast to Varshney’s findings in India (2002), the institutionalized peace system in MTN was not limited to inter-communal
How communal violence is prevented

organizations or their connections to local government. Varshney’s (2002) work suggests that intra-communal organizations usually exacerbate violence, since they lack the cross-community ties that help maintain peace. But in this case, intra-communal organizations were part of the positive response. The Five Muslim Organizations provided information and manpower to the Ward Administrator and the Members of Parliament to help de-escalate the situation. Leaders from this intra-communal organization furthermore legitimized the security patrols through their close relationship with much of the Muslim community. The evidence from MTN therefore suggests that community organizations, including both inter-communal and intra-communal, can play a variety of roles during incidents of communal violence.

Time: The Three Phases of Violence Prevention

MTN responded to the threat of communal violence before the incident occurred, during the conflict, and after violence had been de-escalated. This three-phase response mirrors the actions of Paul Brass’ “riot professionals,” who worked to instigate violence using the “institutionalized riot system” in cities in India (2004). Brass conceptualizes the operation of “institutionalized riot systems” in three phases: preparation, activation, and explanation. These phases share many similarities, in mirrored form, to the actions observed in MTN. During Brass’ preparation phase, “fire tenders” (2004, 33) perpetuated a narrative of communal hatred in order to retain continuous tension between communities. In MTN, on other hand, the community worked to reduce the likelihood of violence by, among other things, emphasizing the nefarious role of the “hidden hand.” Brass’ second phase, activation, includes the actual violence as ignited by “conversion specialists” (ibid), professionals who have learned how to instigate crowds based on past experiences and attempts (Brass 2004, 2003). In MTN, a wide variety of actors similarly mobilized using past experiences with communal violence, but did so in order to de-escalate the
conflict. The final phase of an institutionalized riot system, which Brass calls explanation, includes politicians and the media explaining the violence as intractable and blameless, in order to perpetuate the cycle and absolve themselves. In MTN, on the other hand, community leaders sought to apprehend the instigators, to attribute the conflict to greed instead of to ideology, and to maintain peace by organizing a Town Hall meeting in the face of threats to re-ignite violence.

**Conclusion**

What sparked the incident in MTN was not unlike the sparks that occur throughout Myanmar. Some of these do escalate to deadly communal violence, as demonstrated by the long history of communal violence in Myanmar. Yet this pattern obscures the far more common occurrence of incidents that are, like the one in MTN, de-escalated before they become cases of communal violence. Although existing theories would do well at explaining cases of communal violence, they are blind to the patterns of violence prevention that stopped the incident in MTN from becoming communal violence. In order to understand when and why quotidian conflicts escalate to communal violence, we must also understand the existence and efficacy of measures that communities use to prepare for potential violence and how they respond when violence seems imminent.

This article has focused on a particular incident that occurred within very unique circumstances, but systems of violence prevention like the one in MTN are undoubtedly more widespread. The changing political structure in Myanmar has created unique relationships of power between the military-controlled GAD, the civilian-elected representatives, local organizations, and the residents. Furthermore, the country’s history of military rule and past police negligence caused unique responses among MTN community leaders and residents, who
took drastic actions to protect themselves. These particularities aside, alliances between communities, local government, and civil society are not unique to Myanmar. Similar systems are in place in India (Varshney 2002), and are likely common to any country that faces recurrent communal violence. There is some evidence that similar systems even developed in cities across the United States in the 1960s (Knopf 1969, 1970; Warren 1970; Anderson et al. 1974). The preponderance of riots in that period led many cities to organize groups of “counter-rioters,” ranging from small grassroots mobilizations of some 20 people to government-sponsored patrols of over 500 (Knopf 1969, 1970), which would work with local government officials to prevent the escalation of violence. More research is necessary to determine just how common these institutions really are, and to explore why some of these communities are able to develop such strong systems of violence prevention while others cannot.
Tables and Figures

Figure 1. General Administration Department (GAD) Organizational Hierarchy

- State/Region Chief Minister
- District Administrator
- Township Administrator
- Ward / Quarter Administrator
- Street Administrator
- 10 Household Head
### Table 1. MTN's Local System of Violence Prevention

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Administration Department (GAD) &amp; Police</th>
<th>National League for Democracy (NLD)</th>
<th>Religious organizations</th>
<th>Other community leaders</th>
<th>Unaffiliated Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before</strong></td>
<td>Build relationship with NLD</td>
<td>Build relationship with GAD and other community organizations</td>
<td>Established rules for responding to such cases</td>
<td>Emphasize narrative blaming the military instead of hatred</td>
<td>Avoid talking about issues related to religion, close businesses early, or leave the city during tense times</td>
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<td>Monitor behavior of unknown people in the community</td>
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<td><strong>During</strong></td>
<td>Mobilize networks to gather information</td>
<td>Encourage residents to trust the police</td>
<td>Gather information, suppress rumors, and share correct information within own community</td>
<td>Encourage residents to remain calm</td>
<td>Either hide in home or gather weapons and return outside</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identify and apprehend suspects</td>
<td>Organize and lead street patrols</td>
<td>Help organize and conduct street patrols</td>
<td>Lead street patrols</td>
<td>Construct barricades in streets barring unknown people from entering</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Crowd control</td>
<td>Threaten to arrest residents with weapons</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify trusted sources of information and make them public</td>
<td>Outside activists use local contacts to help</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>After</strong></td>
<td>Imprison the instigators</td>
<td>Attend Town Hall meeting</td>
<td>Write a response to the incident, published on social media</td>
<td>Attend Town Hall meeting</td>
<td>Continue monitoring the streets first through visible sentries at barricades and later from windows</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hold a Town Hall meeting</td>
<td>Attend Town Hall meeting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Re-frame violence as due to greed</td>
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<td>Attend Town Hall meeting</td>
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References


