Religious violence in South(East) Asia: domestic and transnational drivers of intolerance against Muslim minorities

Monday 15 June 2015
9:15 - 18:00
VU University Amsterdam
Metropolitan building, Room Z-009
Information: M.C.van.den.Haak@iias.nl
Buitenveldertselaan 3, Amsterdam

The majority Buddhist and Hindu societies of South(East) Asia are not traditionally associated with conflict and intolerance. Yet recent years have seen a surge in international reports of religious tensions and violence by Buddhist and Hindu majorities towards Muslim minorities in the region. In Sri Lanka, Muslims have been an often forgotten minority during the conflict, and a rise in hostilities against them has been reported since the defeat of the Tamil Tigers. India’s political leadership since 2014 has been associated with repressive practices and episodes of violence against Muslim minorities. The government of Myanmar has long repressed the Rohingya minority, but in recent years this hostility has spread to the larger population, with Buddhist monks playing a seemingly significant role in inciting hate speech and violence against Muslims and their perceived supporters. In Southern Thailand, long-standing grievances of the Muslim population have largely remained unaddressed by the central government. In all these cases, religious diversity has been perceived as a source of nationalism and conflict, but also as a starting point for peacebuilding efforts.

While much attention is being paid to transnational networks of radical Islam, anti-Muslim sentiments in the religious and political sphere are also acquiring a transnational character, and international media increasingly report on supposed cross-border alliances between religious extremists from various sides. This seminar will analyze these developments by comparing regional dynamics and local circumstances, and look beyond the simplistic notion of religions that cannot co-exist. Historical patterns and newly emerging trends will be discussed in order to contextualize the rise in hostility towards Muslim minorities in the South(East) Asian region in recent years. What has been the role of governmental and non-governmental forces such as religious leaders and the media in this process? To what extent are these sentiments created by cross-border networking, and how are they linked to specific political transitions or domestic policy imperatives?
Program

9:15-9:45 Registration

9:45-10:00 Opening by Ton Salman and Maaike Matelski, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (SCA), VU University

10:00-12:00 Panel 1 – chair: Ellen Bal, SCA Department, VU University

Prof. Jonathan Spencer (University of Edinburgh) - Sri Lankan Muslims: between aggressive Buddhist nationalism and aggressive Tamil separatism

Dr. Iselin Frydenlund (PRI0/University of Oslo) - Conflicting notions of religious freedom in Sri Lanka

Dr. Ward Berenschot (KITLV Leiden) - Patterned Pogroms: Patronage Networks as Infrastructure for Religious Violence in India and Indonesia

Discussant: Prof. Nira Wickramasinghe (Leiden University)

12.00-13.00 Lunch break

13.00-15.00 Panel 2 – chair: Freek Colombijn, SCA Department, VU University

Dr. Matthew Walton (University of Oxford) - Buddhist Narratives of Islam as Threat in Contemporary Myanmar

Dr. Khin Mar Mar Kyi (University of Oxford) - Religion, rumor, rape and engendered violence in ‘reformed’ Burma/Myanmar

Dr. Alexander Horstmann (University of Copenhagen) - Civility and Uncivility in Southern Thailand. The Demise of Exchange Relations and the Domination of Violence

Discussant: Prof. Gerry van Klinken (KITLV Leiden/University of Amsterdam)

15.00-15:30 Coffee break

15:30-16:45 Roundtable – chair: Thijl Sunier, SCA Department, VU University

16:45-17:00 Conclusion – Marina de Regt, SCA Department, VU University

17.00-18.00 Drinks
Abstracts and biographies

Morning panel 10:00-12:00

Sri Lankan Muslims: between aggressive Buddhist nationalism and aggressive Tamil separatism - Prof. Jonathan Spencer, University of Edinburgh

My presentation will concentrate on the experience of Sri Lankan Muslims caught in the narrow space between aggressive Buddhist nationalism and aggressive Tamil separatism in the closing years of the civil war. Drawing on research in the island’s Eastern Province, I will analyse the emergence of new political formations that emerged in the course of the conflict - mosque federations at a local level and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress at a national level - as well as the multiple religious divisions that came to the surface as the immediate threat posed by the secessionist LTTE receded. In the final part of the presentation I will bring the account up to date, with the story of the rise and fall of the Bodu Bala Sena, an extreme Buddhist nationalist group that led a wave of anti-Muslim agitation between 2012 and January 2015.

Jonathan Spencer has carried out fieldwork in Sri Lanka since the early 1980s, concentrating at first on rural change and local politics, but writing more recently on ethnic conflict, political violence and political non-violence. His current research looks at the fraught boundary between the religious and the political in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. His book on the anthropology of ‘the political’ in South Asia, *Anthropology, Politics, and the State* appeared in 2007. A new book, *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque*, written with colleagues from SOAS, Zurich and Peradeniya, on the work of religious organizations in war and peace in Sri Lanka, was published in late 2014. He is a series editor for Cambridge New Directions in Anthropology, and has been a member of the ESRC Training and Development Board, the 2008 RAE sub-panel for Anthropology and the 2014 REF sub-panel for Anthropology and Development Studies.

Conflicting notions of religious freedom in Sri Lanka - Dr. Iselin Frydenlund, PRIO/University of Oslo

Buddhist-Muslims relations have deteriorated in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war in 2009. One crucial aspect of Muslim-Buddhist tension concerns issues relating to freedom of religion or belief, particularly religion in public space. Informed both by global discourses on religious freedom as well as local notions of ‘religion’ as well as ‘freedom’, religious freedom debates in Sri Lanka indicate conflicting notions of the concept of religious freedom; what it entails and for whom. This talk will focus on various contentious issues in this field, including current debates on banning female veiling. Particular attention will be paid to contemporary currents in Buddhist intellectual and political thinking regarding religious freedom, religious minority rights and the identity of the Sri Lankan state and their location within regional and global dynamics.

Iselin Frydenlund is Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO and Research Fellow at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Oslo. Her
research interests include the role of religion in war and peace and religious freedom issues. She works specifically with Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, currently focusing on Buddhist-Muslim relations. Since 2013 she has been working together with the Buddhist Federation of Norway and monastic organizations in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand on religious minority rights in Buddhist majority states.

**Patterned Pogroms: Patronage Networks as Infrastructure for Religious Violence in India and Indonesia - Dr. Ward Berenschot, KITLV Leiden**

This paper relates the production of religious violence in India (Gujarat) and Indonesia (North Maluku) to the functioning of patronage networks. Patronage networks are informal channels through which political elites provide access to state resources to followers in exchange for (electoral) support. These networks are sometimes riot networks: the anti-Muslim pogrom that engulfed Gujarat in 2002 and the Christian-Muslim clashes that took place in North Maluku in 1999/2000 have in common that they enfolded along the fault-lines of competing patronage channels. Using ethnographic fieldwork in both Gujarat and Maluku, this paper proposes two mechanisms linking the character of patronage networks with the production of violence. First, the way in which patronage networks mediate access to state resources generates the necessary infrastructure for the organization of violence. The mediated access to state resources shapes local patterns of authority and facilitates the mobilization for violence - particularly the mobilization of those in lower rungs in patronage channels like local party members, local criminals, police officials, etc. Second, a widespread dependence on patronage networks incentivizes a political exploitation of social identities. When, as in Gujarat and North Maluku, patronage networks are organized along different, cross-cutting social divides, religious violence serves political elites to polarize society along a targeted us-them division. Studying the nature of the networks through which people gain access to state institutions can thus serve to understand both the circumstances and the manner in which political competition generates violence.

Ward Berenschot is a postdoc at KITLV researching local democracy, clientelism and identity politics in India and Indonesia. His Veni research project ‘Shades of Clientelism: A Comparative Study of Indonesia’s Patronage Democracy’ compares clientelistic practices throughout Indonesia. Berenschot obtained his PhD cum laude from the University of Amsterdam with a dissertation on Hindu-Muslim violence in India. He has managed a collaborative research project with UNDP and World Bank on Access to Justice in Indonesia, and worked with Open Society Institute as well as Dutch development agencies on civil society building and legal aid. Berenschot is the author of *Riot Politics: India’s Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Everyday Mediation of the State* and several other publications on ethnic violence, public service delivery and access to justice. He also coordinates the KNAW-SPIN research program ‘From Clients to Citizens? Emerging Citizenship in Democratizing Indonesia’.

**Discussant:** Nira Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University.
Conflict between religious communities in Myanmar since 2012 has spurred doubts about the country’s reforms and challenged superficial global images of Buddhism as an inherently peaceful religion. One of the aspects of the recent violence that many find hard to reconcile is the way in which Burmese Buddhists defend discriminatory policies and anti-Muslim sentiment as justified by the need to defend Burmese Buddhism against an existential threat posed by Islam. Based on preliminary results of a research project in Myanmar funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and based at St Antony’s College, Oxford, this talk will share the results of 68 in-depth interviews in 6 cities across Myanmar, as well as focus groups with youth networks in each of those cities. A nuanced picture of this threat narrative emerges from the interview data, albeit one that is expressed in ways that might be surprising, given recent research and writing on this topic. The findings from this project also suggest policy directions that move away from rhetoric of human rights, religious freedom, or social harmony, as it is clear that these discourses are not effectively challenging the logic or content of what has become a master narrative among Buddhists in contemporary Myanmar of Buddhism under threat.

Matthew J. Walton is the Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. His research focuses on religion and politics in Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on Buddhism in Myanmar. He also specializes in ethnic and communal conflict in Myanmar, having published articles on this topic in Asian Survey and the Journal of Contemporary Asia. In 2014, he published (with Susan Hayward) a report on Burmese Buddhist Nationalism and anti-Muslim violence in the East-West Center Policy Studies series and he has also written on this topic for Asia Times Online and East Asia Forum.

Religion, rumor, rape and engendered violence in ‘reformed’ Burma/ Myanmar - Dr Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi, University of Oxford

Myanmar is, at last, entering a period of democratization, with aims (and claims) of reform after six decades of military reign. Unfortunately, Myanmar’s mysterious, magical, striking political performance ended just a year after the country opened its iron door to the world. Within a year, there was sporadic sectarian violence that interlocked with racial, religious and ethnic tensions. This violence between communities indicated various deep-seated problems facing Myanmar. Disturbingly, three major deadly communal riots, primarily associated with racism and religion, were also linked with reports of Burmese Buddhist women being raped by Muslim men. In this difficult context, it has become vitally important to craft more nuanced approaches to the investigation of history, political identity and the discursive practices involved in making modern Myanmar. My paper, therefore, intends to undertake an analysis of some of the most deeply-rooted dichotomies in Burma, examining the intersection of
sexism, xenophobia and Islamophobia, and its relationship to structural, cultural and gender-based violence in Myanmar.

Khin Mar Mar Kyi is a social anthropologist, gender specialist, and filmmaker, and has a background in education. She is the winner of the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s Gender Research Fellowship and is based at the University of Oxford. She completed her PhD thesis ‘In Pursuit of Power: Political Power and Gender Relations in New Order Burma/Myanmar’ in 2013 at the Australian National University in Canberra, for which she received the Australian ‘Excellence in Gender Research’ award. She has worked as a lecturer at ANU, and as an advisor to the Australian Federal Police, the Department of Foreign Affairs, and AusAID. Her documentary film *Dreams of Dutiful Daughters* highlights the plight of Burmese illegal migrant women’s lives in Thai-Burma borderlands.

Civility and Uncivility in Southern Thailand. The Demise of Exchange Relations and the Domination of Violence - Dr. Alexander Horstmann, University of Copenhagen

In my talk on Southern Thailand, I am interested to explain relations between Buddhists and Muslims in the context of transformation and violence. I like to explain the emergence of the conflict by outlining the incorporation of Muslims into Thailand and the colonization of the frontier as part of internal colonization. I then explain how a unique exchange culture has developed in a third space beyond the state. This is followed by a picture of exchange relations in different parts of Southern Thailand. Then, I shall return to the conflict and the consequences of the violence on Buddhist-Muslim relations. I am doing so by outlining the situation of the Malay Muslims, and Thai Buddhists, respectively. I conclude by looking at the remainders of civility and civil society efforts in Southern Thailand that are however weak and also harassed both by insurgency and the Thai military.

Alexander Horstmann is Associate Professor at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Trans-Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen. He published five books and 35 research articles on majority-minority relations, refugee studies, borderlands, anthropology of violence and religion. Alexander is a specialist on modern Southeast Asia and has worked for decades on Thailand, Burma, and more recently, Cambodia. He is working on a social history of refugees in Southeast Asia and looks into the role that religion and especially Christian humanitarianism has played for refugees from different ethnic minorities. He also works on multiculturalism and the predicament of cultural rights in Asia.

Discussant: Gerry van Klinken, senior researcher at the KITLV and Professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Amsterdam.