

Buddhism Besieged

Anti-Muslim Narratives and the Emergence of a 'Securitising Alliance' in
Myanmar's Political Transition from 2010-15



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Abstract

Between 2010-15, Myanmar underwent significant changes as its former military regime initiated processes of democratisation and liberalisation. Yet, at the same time, the country witnessed an upsurge in anti-Muslim discourse and violence. This thesis examines the recent anti-Muslim developments in Myanmar as a case of securitisation in a context of political transition. While securitisation processes are often researched in Western liberal democratic contexts, their functioning and purpose in non-democratic contexts remain radically under-researched, whereas this thesis argues that the securitisation of Muslims in Myanmar must be understood in terms of the particular threats and opportunities generated by the context of political reform. Through a careful analysis of the securitisation process' development, this thesis seeks to understand how the political transition facilitated the growth of anti-Muslim discourse and violence, and gather insights into the factors that contributed to the securitising actors' success in convincing Myanmar's Buddhist population of the presence of a 'Muslim threat'. In doing so, this thesis moreover exposes the strong securitising potential of religious actors and uncovers a so far neglected phenomenon in securitisation research: the occurrence of strategic collusion between different securitising actors. This thesis introduces the concept 'securitising alliance' to better grasp and theorise this phenomenon.

Keywords: securitisation; securitising alliance; Paris School; Myanmar; Rohingya; Buddhist-nationalism; *Tatmadaw*; political transition; democratisation; anti-Muslim discourse; RNDP; 969 Movement; MaBaTha; inter-elite cooperation.

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Maps: Myanmar and Rakhine State

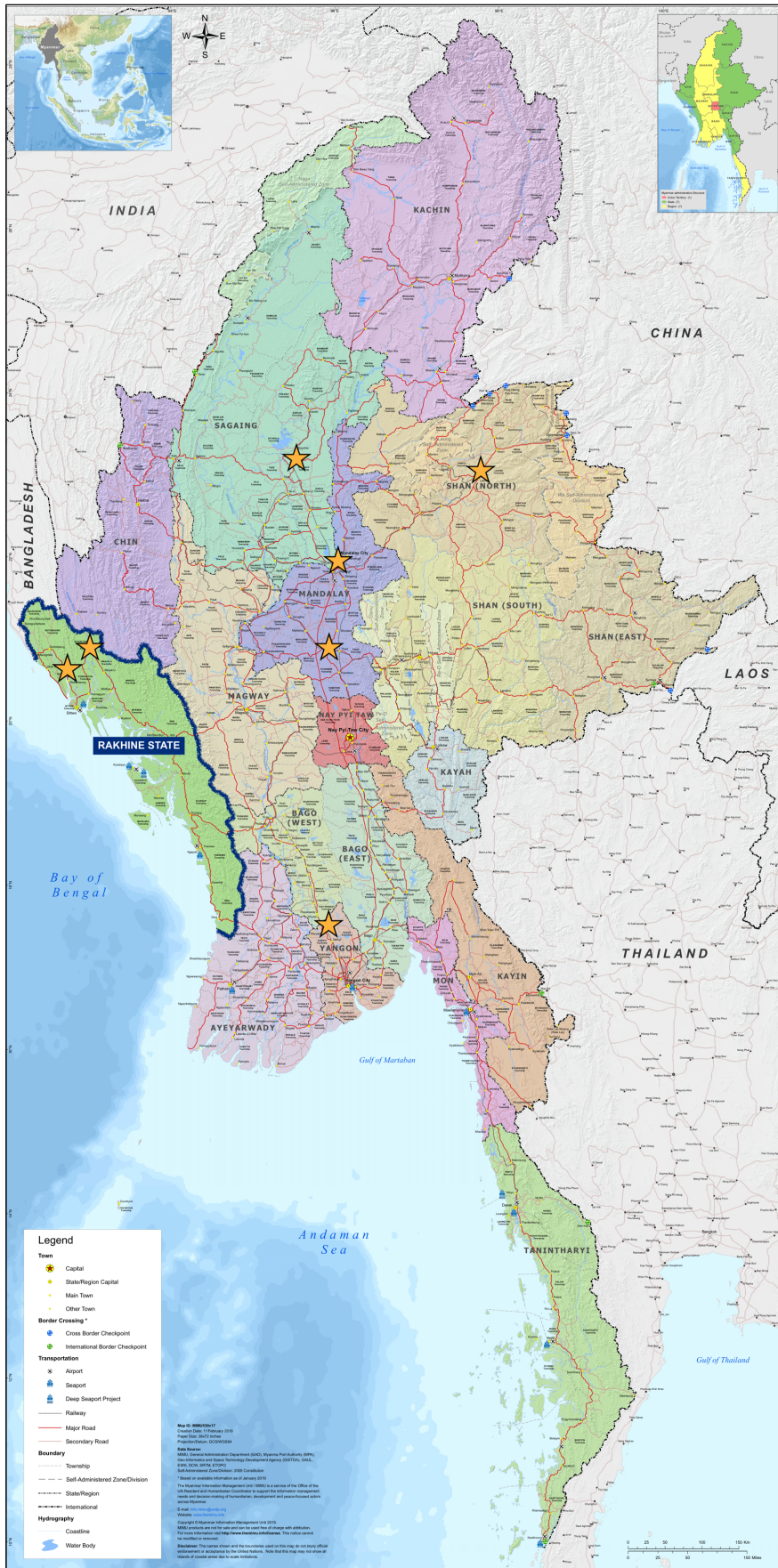


Figure 1 Map of Myanmar with stars indicating the occurrence of anti-Muslim violence between 2012-14.

Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit, adapted by the author.

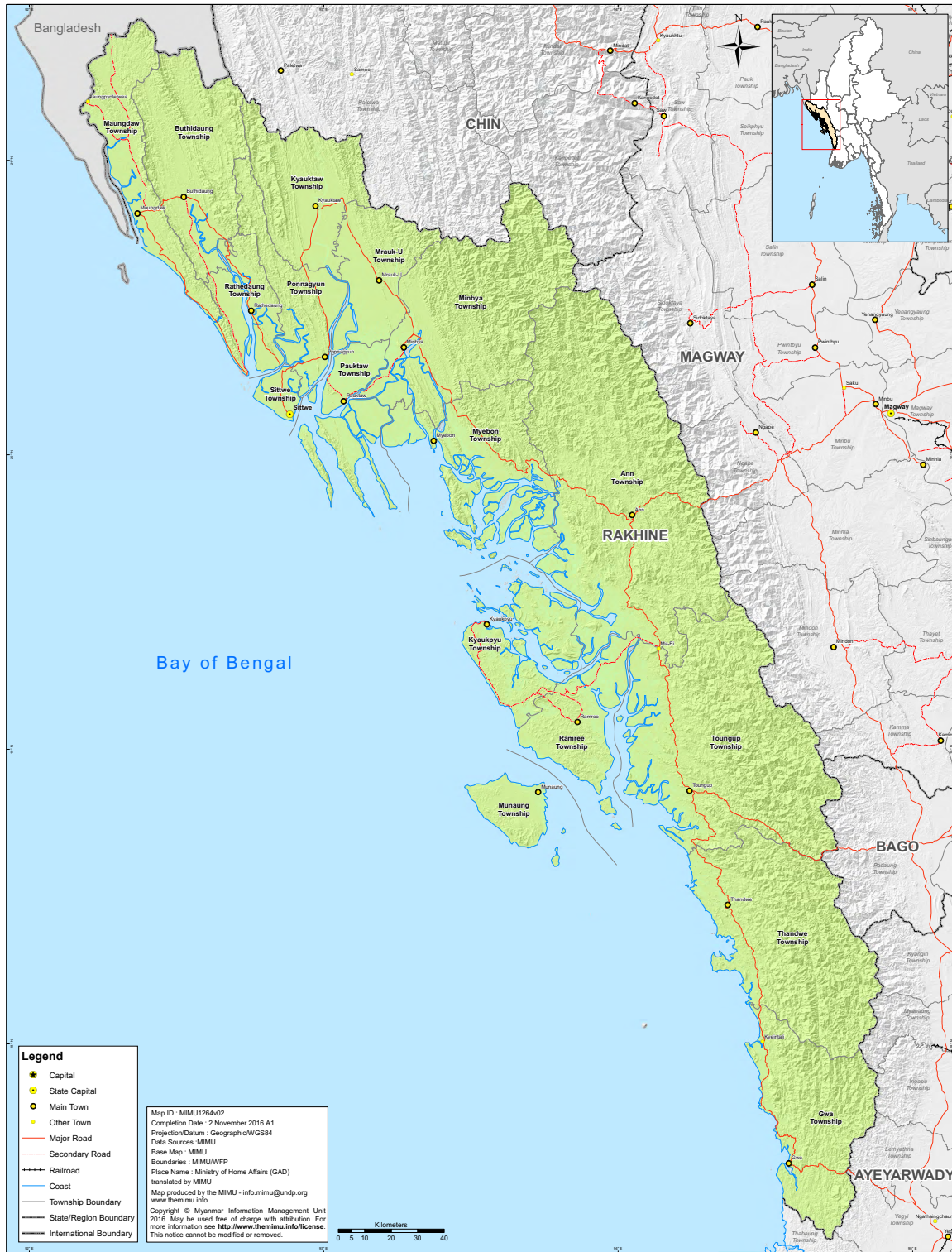


Figure 2 Map of Rakhine State, where the Rohingya live and where the most significant anti-Muslim violence has taken place. Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit.

List of Abbreviations

ALD	Arakan League for Democracy
ANP	Arakan National Party
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
CS	Copenhagen School
NLD	National League for Democracy
RNDP	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
RSO	Rohingya Solidarity Organisation
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

*In Aung Mingalar, I heard the echoes of my childhood.
You see, in 1944, as a Jew in Budapest, I too was a
Rohingya.*

George Soros at the 'Oslo Conference to End Myanmar's Prosecution of the Rohingyas', 26 May
2015

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1. Introduction

Long a pariah in the international community, Myanmar was received with open arms by leaders the world over when its military regime initiated a process of gradual liberalisation and democratisation around 2010. After decades of repressive authoritarian rule, one reform suddenly followed another. These included the installation of a civilian government and bicameral parliament, the release of political prisoners, and a reduction of media censorship, to name but a few (Holliday, 2014: 405). Soon, Myanmar President Thein Sein was seen shaking hands with numerous political leaders as the country emerged from its decades-long diplomatic isolation (Ibrahim, 2018: 72). Optimism soared when the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), emerged victorious from the 2015 elections and its leader, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, became Myanmar's de facto head of state (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2018: 2).

However, international jubilation soon made way for widespread condemnation when, two years later, the Myanmar military – or *Tatmadaw* – carried out clearance operations in Rakhine State in August 2017. Officially, the military's objective was to combat a Rohingya insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which had attacked several police and military targets on 25 August 2017 (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2018: 2). In reality, civilians of the Rohingya Muslim minority¹ indiscriminately fell victim to mass killings, torture and gang-rapes, as *Tatmadaw* soldiers – frequently aided by local Buddhist Rakhine – systematically burnt down Rohingya homes, schools and mosques (Ibid.: 8-9).

The consequences were staggering: Of the estimated 1.2 million Rohingya living in Rakhine State in 2014, approximately 800,000 fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, over 20,000 were killed in the clearance operations, and the majority of those who stayed behind were locked up in remaining villages, detention camps or the Aung Mangalar

¹ The term 'Rohingya' is highly contested and politicised in Myanmar where the state authorities consider it a false claim to an indigenous ethnic status to which the Rohingya have no right. This thesis uses the term in recognition of a people's choice to self-identify as part of a particular group and because other terms would either be equally controversial, such as 'Bengalis', or too vague like 'Rakhine Muslims', which would encompass non-Rohingya Muslims living in Rakhine State as well.

ghetto in Rakhine State's capital Sittwe (Green, MacManus & De la Cour Venning, 2018: 14). Satellite imagery analysis revealed that 75 per cent of Rohingya villages has been partially or completely destroyed (Ibid.). Sent to investigate the clearance operations, the UN fact-finding mission recommended that certain "senior generals of the Myanmar military should be investigated and prosecuted in an international criminal tribunal for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes" (UNHRC, 2018: 1). Meanwhile, both the *Tatmadaw* and Myanmar's civilian government continue to deny any wrongdoing and have sought to justify the military campaign by framing the ARSA and Rohingya as jihadist terrorists with ties to armed groups like IS and Al-Qaeda, despite a lack of evidence to support such claims (Ibrahim, 2018: 149; ICG, 2016: 18-20).

Far from an isolated affair, the clearance operations can be considered the culmination of a longer-term process of Rohingya marginalisation and demonisation. A historically vulnerable minority with limited rights, recent years have seen the development of a discourse that portrays Rohingya as an existential threat to Myanmar; a process, moreover, that increasingly displays more general anti-Muslim characteristics (Walton & Hayward, 2014; ICG, 2013). Mob-like anti-Rohingya violence first erupted in Rakhine State in June 2012, but similar violence has since then spread to many other regions in Myanmar, targeting Muslims regardless of their ethnicity (Cheesman, 2017a: 336-38).²

Two aspects of this development are particularly puzzling. Firstly, although Muslims constitute just four per cent of Myanmar's population (Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 356), political and religious actors nonetheless persistently portray Muslims as an existential threat to Myanmar and its majority Buddhist population. How can we understand a politically dominant majority coming to look upon a minority with such distrust and fear? Secondly, it is striking that the growth of anti-Muslim discourse and violence has run roughly parallel to processes of democratisation and liberalisation, raising questions about possible connections between both developments.

² See Figure 1 (page iv) for the map that shows the locations where significant anti-Muslim violence occurred between 2012-14.

1.1 Research Question

I argue that these curious developments make more sense when considered as a case of securitisation in a context of political transition. 'Securitisation' describes how a securitising actor frames an issue or group as a security problem in order to convince a relevant audience that security measures should be implemented to deal with the identified threat (Emmers, 2007: 112). Using securitisation theory, this thesis seeks to shed light on the development of anti-Muslim threat discourse, identify the actors responsible, and examine how this relates to the process of political reform in Myanmar. This has led to the following research question: *How and why have Muslims been securitised in a context of political transition towards a partial democracy in Myanmar from 2010 to 2015?* The time frame covers the period from initial political reform in 2010 until national elections in 2015. The clearance operations against the Rohingya themselves are not the focus of this research; however, I argue that in order to understand the occurrence of such large-scale violence that enjoyed significant support in Myanmar itself, it is essential to analyse these preceding years, in which securitisation took place and which produced the conditions that enabled the later violence.

More specifically, this research is informed by the *pragmatic* approach to securitisation, which emphasises the importance of context and actor analysis as a means to understand why securitising actors may sometimes be more or less successful in convincing the audience of the existence of a threat (Balzacq, 2010a; Salter, 2008; Stritzel, 2007). This has informed the following sub-questions: (1) What is the socio-political context in which the securitisation has taken place? (2) Who are the securitising actors driving the anti-Muslim discourse? Additionally, this thesis seeks to answer the sub-question: (3) How are Muslim framed as an existential threat? The empirical chapters discuss more in-depth how these questions aid in answering the main research question and how they relate to the theoretical framework.

While the pragmatic approach represents a useful means to analyse this case, the framework is characterised by certain gaps. It has, for instance, so far neglected to theorise the possible co-existence of multiple securitising actors with similar securitising objectives and its effects on the securitisation process (Gjørsv, 2012: 846-47). I intend to show that political and religious elites in Myanmar actively cooperated and fulfilled

complementary roles in the securitisation of Muslims, proposing the term 'securitising alliance' to better grasp and theorise this phenomenon. Additionally, this thesis addresses an often-voiced criticism of the securitisation framework, namely its predominant focus on securitisation processes in Western liberal democracies (Wilkinson, 2007; Vuori, 2008), by studying the process in a different context: a state in political transition. The following chapters argue that this particular context generated both opportunities and threats for Myanmar's former regime, which encouraged its strategic use of securitisation. Further research is needed to show whether both phenomena are unique to this case or, which I consider more plausible, occur regularly in securitisation processes.

1.2 Research Design

Based on the nature of the main research question and the employed analytical framework, this research is characterised by an approach that Snape and Spencer (2003: 16) define as 'subtle realism'. This approach presumes that there exists an external reality independent of people's beliefs and understandings, but that this reality is accessible and researchable only through the socially constructed meanings people have attributed to it. This presumption is evident in the pragmatic approach to securitisation as well – discussed more extensively in Chapter Two – which regards security threats as socially constructed through the interaction between a securitising actor and its audience, but as nonetheless influenced by external contextual factors (Balzacq, 2005: 174). In other words, external reality must be taken into account when examining how people come to an understanding that there exists a certain threat, regardless of whether that threat is objectively there. This has guided the focus of this research, which provides a substantial analysis of the context in which the securitisation has taken place and, crucially, examines how this has shaped the securitising actors' discourse, as well as how it may have affected people's perception of the possible presence of a 'Muslim threat' in Myanmar. Simultaneously, this research puts forward a contextual interpretation of the securitising actors' motivations to engage in securitisation. This calls for a qualitative research method, in this case secondary literature research, which is outlined more in-depth in relation to the theoretical framework in Chapter Two.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter Two provides a more extensive discussion of the theoretical framework and the surrounding academic debate, identifying a number of research gaps this thesis intends to address. Additionally, it discusses the employed methodology, its strengths and its limitations. Chapter Three offers an analysis of the context in which the securitisation has taken place, focusing in particular on Myanmar's history of Buddhist-Muslim relations and the process of political reform, and how these have affected recent anti-Muslim developments. Subsequently, the securitisation process' development itself is analysed in Chapter Four, thereby studying in particular the securitising actors' (inter)actions and securitising discourse. The concluding chapter presents the main research findings and their contribution to the wider academic debate, as well as offering some suggestions for further research.

2. Securitisation in Political Transition

Having established that the recent anti-Muslim developments in Myanmar can be considered a case of securitisation in a context of political transition, the analytical framework is discussed more in-depth in this chapter. Two prominent approaches within securitisation theory are its founding 'Copenhagen School' and the more pragmatic 'Paris School'. This chapter briefly discusses how these relate to each other, before outlining the relative advantages that the latter offers to this research. After a discussion of two areas of debate within securitisation theory, three research gaps that this thesis intends to address are identified. The final section explains how this will be achieved by outlining the employed methodology.

2.1 Securitisation Theory

Securitisation theory was established in the 1980s by the so-called 'Copenhagen School' (CS), which introduced the linguistic turn in the field of Security Studies: In contrast to then dominant (neo)realist theories, the CS did not regard threats to security as objective, observable phenomena that are simply 'out there' and that require the use of force to be managed; rather, it argued that security threats are social constructions, created through the interaction between those that identify a certain issue as threatening – the 'securitising actors' – and a larger audience that subsequently accepts that claim (Balzacq, Léonard & Ruzicka, 2016: 496). A central element in the CS framework is the 'speech act' with which a securitising actor first establishes the existence of a threat, declares that threat potentially existential, and then claims that its management requires special security measures (Wæver, 2011: 473). According to Wæver (1995: 52-53, original emphasis):

[The] utterance *itself* is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship). By uttering 'security', a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means necessary to block it.

Securitisation is considered successful once the audience accepts the securitising move and agrees to the use of special security measures (Emmers, 2007: 111).

However, various scholars have drawn attention to a contradiction in the CS framework, which maintains that 'security' is both the speech act itself, as well as the outcome of an intersubjective process whereby a securitising actor and its audience 'negotiate' a threat's existence (Stritzel, 2007: 362-63; Balzacq, 2005: 177). According to Côté (2016: 524) these conceptualisations are irreconcilable because one "implies a single, definitive instance of security definition, while the other implies a longer and more indefinite security construction procedure". A number of scholars, known as the 'Paris School', have proposed a different, more pragmatic securitisation framework, which drops the prominence of the speech act in favour of a stronger emphasis on the process' intersubjectivity.³

The main criticism of these more pragmatic securitisation theorists concerns the CS's heavy reliance on the speech act: They argue that the notion of security as a speech act – transforming reality purely through being said – turns securitising moves into 'conventional procedures' that achieve their outcome regardless of external factors (Balzacq, 2010a: 1-2; Salter, 2008: 327; McDonald, 2008: 570-73). Conversely, pragmatists focus more on securitisation as an intersubjective process, whereby a securitising actor actively seeks to persuade its audience of the existence of a threat. They argue that securitisation is then a highly context-dependent process as contextual factors like external reality and the audience's and securitising actor's characteristics influence whether a securitising move is likely to be successful in persuading an audience (Balzacq, 2010a: 1-2; Stritzel, 2007: 367). Put simply, a Minister of Defence is likelier to convince a population of the existence of a certain threat than a regular civilian is, especially if the audience also sees clues for that threat's presence in their environment.

In comparison to the CS framework, the pragmatic approach then has the advantage that it is better suited to explore why a particular securitising move at a particular time may be more or less successful. With regard to my case, it enables a more in-depth study into the conditions that have made people in Myanmar susceptible to securitising moves concerning Muslims and therefore enables a better understanding of recent

³ Balzacq et al. (2016: 498-99) rightly note that it is too simplistic to discuss securitisation theory strictly in terms of separate schools as many scholars do not fit neatly into one single category. However, for the sake of clarity it is here nonetheless chosen to differentiate between scholars that are more inclined to either the Copenhagen School or the Paris School approach to securitisation.

developments in the country. The following sections examine more closely two areas of continuous significant debate and uncover three research gaps that this thesis intends to address in order to contribute to discussions within the Paris School.

2.2 Securitisation: Religious and Colluding Actors

Much discussion among securitisation theorists has focused on phenomena at the 'actor level', consisting of the securitising actor and the audience. With regard to the latter, Stritzel (2007) has for instance questioned the effects on the securitisation process of having multiple audiences, Salter (2008) how a different type of audience may change the form of a securitising move, and Côté (2016) has been one of various scholars to call into question the often passive conceptualisation of the audience's role in securitisation processes – merely accepting or rejecting a securitising actor's claim – by arguing that audiences may actually actively influence a securitising actor by pushing for a particular issue's (de)securitisation, to mention just a few areas of discussion.

It is therefore all the more remarkable that there remain several significant research gaps with regard to that other actor in the securitisation process. The pragmatic approach recognises that not every securitising actor has the same claim-making capacity and much discussion has focused on identifying the factors that enable certain actors to more easily convince an audience of the existence of a threat than others. The most commonly singled out characteristic is the actor's power position, with state officials generally considered as being in a strong position to make credible security claims (Williams, 2003: 514; Stritzel, 2007: 368-70; Balzacq, 2005: 190-91). Balzacq (2005: 178-79) moreover mentions 'social identity' as an additional factor that can either constrain or facilitate a securitising actor's behaviour.⁴ Yet, such discussions have led to what can be called a 'state bias' among securitisation scholars as most research is focused mainly on state agents, thereby obscuring other potential securitising actors (McDonald, 2008: 573-75).

⁴ Although Balzacq does not explicitly explain what 'social identity' is and how it constrains or enables a securitising actor's behaviour, he does later mention trust, perceived knowledge and the perception that someone 'works for common interests' as factors that enhance a securitising actor's capacity of making credible securitising moves (Balzacq, 2005: 191), providing an indication of what 'social identity' is and how it influences the securitisation process.

Through empirical research on anti-immigration attitudes in Greece, Karyotis and Patrikios (2010), for instance, demonstrated that Greek religious elites were more influential than political actors in shaping public opinion. Consequently, they theorised that in cultures where religion has a prominent place in society, religious elites are potentially more effective securitising actors than state agents (Karyotis & Patrikios, 2010: 43). This thesis seeks to build on their work by examining the role of Buddhist-nationalist organisations – among the most vocal anti-Muslim actors in Myanmar society (Walton & Hayward, 2014) – in the securitisation of Muslims, thereby explicitly theorising how the qualities of religion and religious organisations influence the securitisation process. In doing so, this thesis contributes to theory-building in securitisation research as, apart from Karyotis and Patrikios' work, this body of research has generally been characterised by little attention for the role of religion and religious actors (Balzacq et al., 2016: 507).

There is a second research gap with regard to the securitising actor. Within securitisation research, there has so far been a conspicuous lack of attention for the possible coexistence of different securitising actors using similar securitising discourse, their interaction and the effects this may have on the securitisation process. Gjørsv (2012: 846-47) explicitly points this out when she criticises securitisation theory for neglecting to address and theorise the connections that can exist between various securitising actors and for failing to recognise that such actors can affect each other's perceptions on and practices of security. Through this neglect, the securitisation framework, while spending considerable attention to the power positions of individual actors, takes no notice of the power relations that may exist *between* such actors (Ibid.). In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that situations with multiple securitising actors occur – in Myanmar, both religious and political organisations emerged as securitising actors – and, moreover, that this can bring a new dynamic into the securitisation process when such actors start colluding.

2.3 Securitisation: A Context of Political Transition

A second area of debate concerns the 'context level'. A key difference between the Copenhagen and Paris School approaches is the latter's emphasis on context as a factor that influences securitisation processes (Balzacq, 2005; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008; Salter, 2008). According to Balzacq (2005: 182), a securitising actor's threat claim is

generally more convincing if it is related to, and thus resonates with, an audience's external reality. In other words, when the audience 'recognises' the threat.⁵ Karyotis and Patrikios (2010) have moreover demonstrated that context matters in another regard as well: The cultural context specific to Greece constituted a facilitating precondition for its religious elite to become an effective securitising actor. Yet, securitisation research has been criticised for its narrow focus on one type of context through its predominant use of Western liberal democracies as case-studies (Wilkinson, 2007; Vuori, 2008), even though 'security' is a strong legitimator for political action in non-democratic contexts as well (Vuori, 2008: 68). Vuori (Ibid.) rightly notes that if scholars are to gain a comprehensive understanding of securitisation processes – who can securitise, to what end and effect, under which conditions – these processes should be studied in a diverse range of contexts. This thesis then addresses part of that gap by introducing a new type of case-study to this body of research: securitisation in states in transition.

In this thesis, it is argued that the particular context in Myanmar, which began its process of controlled democratisation and liberalisation around 2010, has created unique opportunities (freedom to mobilise, new political 'arenas'), as well as threats (political opposition, possible loss of power) that greatly facilitated the emergence of securitising actors and encouraged inter-elite cooperation. In Myanmar, this combination led to the emergence of what I call a 'securitising alliance': Strategic cooperation between two or more securitising actors who share the message that a certain subject presents a threat, with different actors playing distinct but complementary roles in the securitisation process. This concept is further explored in Chapter Four.

Of course, the notion that democratisation and liberalisation may encourage socio-political division and even conflict is not new: It is reflected in a rich body of research on this topic, which most commonly sees political competition in newly democratising states, where actors may be encouraged to mobilise support along ethnic or religious

⁵ It must be noted that this does not mean that securitising moves necessarily have to correspond with external reality. In fact, the benefit of the securitisation framework is that it analyses threats as social constructions rather than objectively observable phenomena; what matters is how people *perceive* reality. Furthermore, Balzacq (2005: 193) points out that the relative weight of the factors that influence the success of a securitising move can differ on a case-to-case basis: If the securitising actor's power position greatly enhances its ability to make credible security claims than context may be of lesser importance and vice versa.

fault lines, as encouraging societal tension and conflict (see for instance Mann, 2004: 3-4; Snyder, 2000; Zakaria, 1997). To the best of my knowledge, however, the connection between democratisation and securitisation has not been overtly made. I will address this gap in the following chapters and argue that securitisation may be both encouraged by processes of democratisation and liberalisation, and that these may add a new dynamic to the securitisation process.

2.4 Methodology

Having discussed the assumptions underlying the analytical framework and the research gaps this thesis aims to address, it is necessary to outline the research methodology and explain how it aids in answering the questions posed in this thesis. In answering *how* Muslims have been securitised, this research breaks down the securitisation process in different components like context and actor analysis. The employed method – secondary literature research – then becomes a logical choice: It offers the advantage of being able to provide rich sources of information for such varied topics as Myanmar's religious context, the role of the army in society, and so on. For this research, data was drawn mainly from academic works and from reports by thinktanks, NGOs and international institutions, at times supplemented by data from news reports. I have purposively selected the data according to its relevance to the questions posed in this thesis, and its quality in terms of methodology and argumentation. In the data analysis phase, certain patterns emerged from the information gathered, which I have synthesised into one coherent analysis to answer the research question.

A number of limitations can be identified concerning this methodology. Firstly, reliance on secondary literature makes one vulnerable to possible gaps or bias in existing knowledge. While the first problem unfortunately is inherent to literature research, I have sought to minimise the effects of the latter by corroborating the findings either by confirming them through multiple sources or, wherever possible, by consulting the original data on which certain claims were based. Another limitation concerns the sub-question *how* Muslims have been framed as an existential threat. Ideally, this would involve in-depth analysis of the securitising actors' discourse. Yet, this was neither feasible with regard to the scope of the research, nor was there sufficient accessible data: Most relevant sources are in Burmese or are no longer accessible. Facebook, for instance,

removed much of the more radical anti-Muslim content posted by accounts linked to the *Tatmadaw* and Buddhist-nationalist organisations from its platform after widespread criticism that such content may have incited violence (Brooten, 2019).

This limitation is counterbalanced to some degree by using frame analysis in relation to information or examples of securitising discourse provided in secondary literature. I would argue that securitising actors are engaged in the production of meaning for an audience in a way that largely corresponds to similar attempts by social movement actors – as described in social movement theory – enabling the use of frame analysis based on Benford and Snow (2000). They have analysed frames as “schemata of interpretation” that enable people to make sense of external reality, with these interpretations guiding and legitimating certain action (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). They identify three core framing tasks: (1) diagnostic framing, which includes the identification of a problematic situation in need of change, as well as the identification of who or what is to blame; (2) prognostic framing, which includes the articulation of a solution to the problem and accompanying strategy to achieve this; and (3) motivational framing, or a ‘call to action’ (Ibid.: 615). These are highly relevant to the process of securitisation, whereby securitising actors (1) identify one entity to existentially threaten another entity, (2) call for the implementation of customised security measures to combat the identified threat, and (3) try to convince an audience to issue a mandate for the implementation of these measures.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

In a piece on securitisation methodology, Balzacq (2010b: 34) distinguishes between ‘typical’, ‘critical’ and ‘revelatory’ case-studies, a useful distinction to situate one’s research within the wider academic debate. With regard to theory, the first seeks to confirm existing knowledge, the second seeks to contribute to theory-building by testing hypotheses, whereas the third is aimed at analysing previously overlooked phenomena. This thesis represents both a critical and revelatory case-study: The former because it aims to test Karyotis and Patrikios’ theory that religious actors can be influential securitising actors, perhaps even more so than state agents; the latter because it contributes to securitisation research by addressing both a new context – securitisation in political transition – and a new phenomenon – the ‘securitising alliance’.

While this thesis by no means presumes to capture the full complexity of anti-Muslim dynamics in Myanmar, the outlined methodology does aid in providing a detailed account of the securitisation process through a thorough analysis of several of its components. Frame analysis can moreover provide insight into the ways in which Muslims were depicted as a threat, based on which their security treatment was justified. This is important because an increased understanding of securitisation processes and dynamics may help us to better understand how large segments of Myanmar's population were convinced that, ultimately, such far-reaching measures as the clearance operations were justifiable. The following chapter represents a first step toward that objective through its analysis of the context in which the securitisation of Muslims has taken place.

3. Buddhist-Muslim Relations and a Society in Transition

The previous chapter established that context analysis is a prime component of pragmatic securitisation research, as the success of a securitising move is argued to be contingent upon a number of factors, including the extent to which it resonates with the audience's external reality. Therefore, this research poses the sub-question 'What is the socio-political context in which the securitisation has taken place?' The answer to this question consists of two parts: (1a) What causes or drivers of historical grievances with regard to Muslims and/or Rohingya in Myanmar can be identified? (1b) How has the process of political transition enabled or constrained the spread of anti-Muslim discourse? In other words, both the past and the present require consideration.

Myanmar's past is discussed in section 3.1. The historical context is important because knowledge of past experiences forms a frame of reference, which in turn (partially) shapes how people perceive and interpret events in the present. In fact, pragmatists contend that people's interpretation of 'security' consists of a combination of textual and cultural meaning, whereby the latter refers to knowledge gained through previous situations and interactions (Balzacq, 2005: 182). Put simply, it is presumed that the presence of historical grievances or awareness of a past threat with regard to a certain entity would enhance an audience's susceptibility to securitising moves that depict that entity as a threat: The threat becomes more 'recognisable' and its existence therefore more readily believed (Ibid.). Section 3.2, on the other hand, discusses the more immediate context and analyses the recent process of political transition and its impact on anti-Muslim developments. This way, the chapter sheds light on one of the puzzles that prompted this research, namely the remarkably similar timing of both growing anti-Muslim sentiment and the process of political reform. Additionally, this section addresses the socio-political position of Myanmar's traditionally two strongest institutions – the national army and the Buddhist clergy – because of both their prominent roles in the securitisation process.

3.1 Past: Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Myanmar

This section identifies causes or drivers for historical grievances with regard to Muslims and/or Rohingya in Myanmar.⁶ Please note that it is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of historical instances of animosity; only the most pertinent events are discussed, which are presented in secondary literature as continuing to shape contemporary perceptions of Muslims in Myanmar, and which may therefore plausibly affect an audience's responsiveness to threat claims. These concern British colonial rule, the Second World War, and insurgencies in Rakhine State.

3.1.1 British Colonial Rule (1824-1948)

Intercommunal tensions could develop in Myanmar because, firstly, the previously fluid boundaries between different ethnic, linguistic and religious identities got mapped and classified by the new British rulers and, secondly, because the British then reproduced and 'politicised' these divisions by favouring certain population groups over others in their colonial administrative and economic structures (Rampton, 2016: 17-18). In general, this came down to preferential treatment of many of Myanmar's ethno-religious minorities, among which Muslim groups, at the expense of its largely Buddhist Bamar majority, as the British perceived the former as more loyal (Ibid.; Ibrahim, 2018: 7). Additionally, the British brought in many Indians – frequently Muslims – to fill newly created government positions or to serve as cheap labour; the consequent power and economic imbalance fuelled anti-Indian sentiment among Myanmar's indigenous population, who came to associate Indians with a foreign system of exploitation and oppression (ICG, 2017: 4; Oo, 2016: 160; Egreteau, 2011: 36-38; Osman, 2018: 21).

Importantly, Osman (2018: 21) argues that such negative associations are reproduced to this day through state discourse that consistently portrays the Rohingya as descending from these Indian migrants. In reality, the current Rohingya community is likely a mix of descendants from colonial-era migrants and from Muslims whose presence in Myanmar predates that of British colonisation (Ibrahim, 2018: 23-26). Here, history has political implications, as citizenship in Myanmar is largely dependent upon a community's pre-

⁶ Myanmar was long known as Burma before the then ruling military junta changed the country's name to Myanmar in 1989 (Akins, 2018: 239). To maintain consistency and clarity, I have chosen to refer to the country as Myanmar throughout this thesis, even when discussing events that took place prior to 1989.

colonial presence and is denied Rohingya on this basis (Cheesman, 2017b). Keck (2016: 66) similarly emphasises that Rohingya, more than other Muslims, remain associated with British colonial rule, leading many in Myanmar to perceive them as alien to their country. However, such 'Indophobia' has increasingly transformed into 'Islamophobia' and has extended beyond the Rohingya as, over the years and influenced by state discourse, many non-Muslims have come to think of Muslims across all ethnic groups as to some extent foreign to Myanmar (Egreteau, 2011: 35; Oo, 2016: 160).

If the colonial period made intergroup boundaries socially significant, the Second World War solidified and exacerbated these. When the Japanese invaded Myanmar in 1942, entire communities suddenly found themselves on opposing sides: The Bamar majority and the Rakhine allied with the Japanese, whereas the Rohingya, like most minorities, fought for the British (Akins, 2018: 234). Consequently, stories of in-group victimhood and out-group violence continue to nourish communally held grievances; many Rakhine today, for instance, still refer to a massacre allegedly committed by Rohingya in 1942 (Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 67-68; ICG, 2016: 3; Burke, 2016: 264). Tensions ran particularly high in Rakhine State where the British rewarded the Rohingya with better employment opportunities after the war:

Buddhists there saw these Muslims as [...] responsible for stealing local employment opportunities and cultivating fertile soils for the benefit of the British army. These factors, including the fresh memory of the war-time massacres, meant that Muslims became the subject of popular national resentment. (Green, MacManus, & De La Cour Venning, 2015: 47)

Significantly, Ware and Laoutides (2018: 100) and Lee (2016: 199-200) contend that the war has ongoing implications, as it has led to a persistent perception among Rakhine and Bamar in particular that Muslims are hostile to Myanmar and cannot be trusted.

3.1.2 Post-Independence Insurgencies in Rakhine State

Clearly, some level of general anti-Muslim sentiment among Myanmar's non-Muslim population developed under British rule; several post-independence developments contributed to anti-Rohingya attitudes in particular. After the war, the British promised

the Rohingya an autonomous area in northern Rakhine State once Myanmar became independent; post-independence, this encouraged a delegation of Rohingya to negotiate northern Rakhine State's incorporation into East Pakistan⁷ (ICG, 2016: 3; Cook, 2016: 262). Even though Pakistan rejected this, the attempt is important because, according to Ware and Laoutides (2018: 101), it "has to this day been etched into the minds of Rakhine and [Bamar] nationalists – who deeply fear that the central aim of the Rohingya [...] is to have them cede territory to Muslim control". It has contributed to a perception that Rohingya are outsiders within the state, whose loyalty lies elsewhere (Ibrahim, 2018: 27-28).

After negotiations had failed by the late 1940s, a group of Rohingya – the *mujahideen* – initiated a rebellion in northern Rakhine State, demanding autonomous Muslim territory under Myanmar sovereignty (Akins, 2018: 235-36). Although the insurgency remained small and unsuccessful, and enjoyed little support among Rohingya themselves (Ibid.; Crouch, 2016: 30), the violence nonetheless deteriorated local Buddhist-Muslim relations, and memories of the insurgency sustain perceptions among Rakhine and Bamar that the Rohingya pose a threat to national sovereignty (Ware & Laoutides, 2018: 102; ICG, 2016: 3; Burke, 2016: 264). This is further increased by a later insurgency by the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), a group with similar objectives – and similar lack of success – who were briefly active in Rakhine State in the 1980s (Ware & Laoutides, 2018: 77-78).

In conclusion, various causes and drivers of anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment can be identified in Myanmar's history. Importantly, those discussed are argued to continue to shape perceptions of Muslims in Myanmar, meaning that it is likely that Myanmar's particular historical context has made parts of its population – among Bamar and Rakhine in particular – more susceptible to securitising moves that designate Muslims a threat. Yet, overall, Buddhist-Muslim relations have been mostly peaceful up to 2012 (UNHRC, 2018: 5; C4ADS, 2016: 6), whereas recent anti-Muslim discourse and violence has been both unprecedented in scale, as well as remarkable for the fact that it has extended beyond the Rohingya to target Muslims across all ethnicities, despite their

⁷ Now Bangladesh.

relations to Myanmar's non-Muslim population generally having been good (Zin, 2015: 378-79). I argue that this new development can only be understood in the significantly altered socio-political context in Myanmar between 2010-15.

3.2 Present: Changes and Continuities in Myanmar's Transition

This section examines the socio-political context in Myanmar between 2010-15 to analyse how the process of political transition has influenced anti-Muslim developments. While spending considerable attention to the changes the transition has brought, it is equally important to discuss what has not changed. From this section it becomes clear that Myanmar has not become fully democratic and that much political power has remained in the hands of the country's former military rulers. Chapter Four subsequently shows that securitisation reached its peak only once these felt that their rule was genuinely threatened.

3.2.1 Political Reform in Myanmar

Since 1962, Myanmar had been ruled by an authoritarian military regime, a time characterised by flagrant human rights violations and widespread poverty (Brooten & Verbruggen, 2017: 441). Around 2010, the military initiated a process of political transition from a position of considerable strength. Its motivations for political reform have been the subject of extensive debate, but most scholars argue that it was motivated by the regime's desire to secure its political power for the foreseeable future (see for instance MacDonald, 2013; Huang, 2013; Croissant & Kamerling, 2013). It did this through a newly created constitution, and the subsequent establishment of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – whose members consist largely of former senior military officials and their closest business associates – before holding the 2010 elections (Bünthe, 2016: 375-76). These elections have been described as “deeply flawed” (ICG, 2012: 9) and “heavily scripted” (Bünthe, 2016: 376), and not surprisingly led to a large USDP victory and USDP-led government (Ibid.).

In the years that followed, the new civilian government implemented numerous reforms: National and regional parliaments were established, large numbers of political prisoners were released, and opposition parties, civil society and ethnic minorities all gained more rights and operational freedom (Win & Kean, 2017: 417; Holliday, 2014: 405).

Furthermore, the introduction of various new laws provided the population with more rights, such as the right to assembly and protest (Bünthe, 2016: 383). However, Holliday (2014: 408) warned against premature optimism concerning these developments. He pointed out that many older and more repressive laws from the military era have remained in place and can be used to restrict the newly acquired civil rights at any time. Even the new laws themselves provide some grounds for concern: The 2011 Peaceful Assembly Law, for instance, does not provide an absolute right to nonviolent demonstration as it requires organisers to obtain permission from the authorities beforehand (Bünthe, 2016: 383). In fact, this caveat has been actively put to use to silence protests around contentious issues like land ownership (Ibid.). Reform in most areas thus remains limited at best.

3.2.2 *The Tatmadaw and Politics*

The position of Myanmar's most powerful institution, the military or *Tatmadaw*, in particular seems characterised more by continuity than radical change. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution preserves (indirect) military rule for the foreseeable future: It grants the *Tatmadaw* the right to unilaterally declare a state of emergency, to appoint 25 per cent of all parliamentarians without elections⁸, to select at least one of two vice-presidents, and to appoint the ministers of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs (Dukalskis, 2015: 87-88; UNHRC, 2018: 4). As the regular police and Border Guard Police report to these ministries as well, the entire Myanmar security apparatus is thus firmly under the military's control (UNHRC, 2018: 4). The *Tatmadaw's* exceptional position is further confirmed through the protection it enjoys as an autonomous institution exempt from civilian oversight, meaning that the military effectively exists "above the law" (Ibid.: 4, 16). Moreover, the military enjoyed complete indirect rule from 2011 to 2015 when its proxy-party the USDP was in office.

This ended in 2016 when the NLD opposition party took office after a massive victory in the 2015 national elections (ICG, 2018: 2). Overall, the situation that followed is perhaps best regarded as that of two parallel governing forces: There is the *Tatmadaw*, fully in

⁸ This figure has important consequences: Constitutional change requires a 75 per cent parliamentary majority (Dukalskis, 2015: 88), which is thus very difficult to achieve without the military's consent. Even more so because the 25 per cent is occupied by military personnel currently in service and does not include the seats held by the USDP.

control of Myanmar's security affairs and able to block any attempt at constitutional change, as well as having the power to reinstate military rule once it declares a state of emergency; and there is the more vulnerable NLD, which acts as Myanmar's civilian government as long as the military allows it. Overall, the situation is aptly described by Kingsbury (2014: 368) when he states that Myanmar is "clearly undergoing a process of political transition, but [remains] a long way from being 'democratic'."

3.2.3 *Buddhism and Politics*

Because of the centrality of Buddhist organisations and religion to the securitisation process, it is essential to also briefly discuss Buddhism's place in Myanmar society and its relation to politics. Approximately 88 per cent of Myanmar's population practices Theravada Buddhism (The World Factbook, 2019) and, perhaps not unsurprisingly, it was increasingly used during the 1990s as a nation-building tool by the military regime, which sought to unite Myanmar's ethnically heterogeneous population: The national past became depicted as a Buddhist past, the national religion as the Buddhist religion (Ibrahim, 2018: 37; Hein, 2018: 373-74; Cheesman, 2017a: 3410-41). While Buddhist religious and Myanmar national identity thus became strongly intertwined, the regime simultaneously depicted non-Buddhist communities more often as 'foreign' to the state (Walton & Hayward, 2014: 5-6). This is echoed in the constitution that – while recognising freedom of religion and acknowledging the presence of various religions in Myanmar – states that Buddhism has a special position in Myanmar society as the religion professed by the majority (Holliday, 2014: 407, 410).

While Buddhism thus occupies a central position in society, most of its adherents believe that monks should generally remain detached from worldly matters, including politics, apart from one notable exception: When the *sāsana*⁹ ('Buddhist religion') is perceived to be threatened, monks may engage in political activism to protect it (Walton, 2015: 508, 513-14). Furthermore, since political and religious well-being is regarded as interwoven in Theravada Buddhism – meaning that a 'healthy' Buddhist religion requires a state that actively defends and patronises the religion – its adherents also look to the state to protect Buddhism when the latter is considered threatened (Walton & Hayward, 2014:

⁹ *Sāsana* encompasses both the entire Buddhist community (monks and laypeople), as well as the whole of Buddhist teachings or religion itself (Walton, 2015: 518).

20). Chapter Four shows that Buddhist-nationalist organisations have both justified their own anti-Muslim rhetoric and activities, as well as their pressure on state authorities to implement anti-Muslim security measures, as undertaken in defence of the *sāsana*.

3.2.4 *Media Liberalisation*

A final area of change worth discussing is that of media reform, as its influence on anti-Muslim dynamics has been significant. Prior to the transition, most media either stood under direct regime control or were heavily censored (Brooten, 2016: 185). However, the USDP-government implemented many changes from 2011 onwards, such as the removal of the press censorship body, and the 'unblocking' of exile, foreign and online media (Ibid.: 184). Furthermore, surveillance and harassment of journalists decreased, and journalists could increasingly report on formerly taboo subjects (Ibid.). But reform did not equal complete freedom. Topics like Buddhist nationalism, the Rohingya or criticism of the *Tatmadaw* have remained off-limits and from approximately 2014 onwards, reports of harassment and incarceration of journalists have again increased (Ibid.; Brooten & Verbruggen, 2017: 441). For instance, two Reuters journalists investigating the clearance operations against the Rohingya were arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison in 2018 (Fullerton & Goldberg, 2018).¹⁰ Finally, it is noteworthy that most media remain under indirect military influence as most are owned by senior military officials or their relatives, or because their ownership has been passed into the hands of regime-friendly businessmen when the *Tatmadaw* privatised many state-owned companies shortly before the 2010 elections (Brooten, 2016: 194).

3.2.5 *The Dark Side of Transition*

While the above has provided a picture of the political transition's main changes and continuities, its impact on recent anti-Muslim developments has remained unaddressed. I argue that the near parallel development of anti-Muslim dynamics and socio-political reform is far from coincidental; on the contrary, the transition has greatly facilitated the spread of anti-Muslim discourse in various ways. Firstly, many commentators see a connection between growing anti-Muslim discourse and media liberalisation: Because of

¹⁰ As of May 2019, the journalists have been released under a presidential amnesty, a recurring practice around the time of Myanmar New Year celebrations (Lewis & Naing, 2019). See Brooten (2016) for more and detailed examples of state action undertaken against journalists.

the lifting of authoritarian controls, increased freedom of expression, and access to more and diverse media sources, anti-Muslim propaganda is now more easily and widely disseminated than before (Akins, 2018: 229-30; Fink, 2018: 43; Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 368; Lee, 2016: 196; ICG, 2013: i). According to Brooten (2016: 186), social media especially have become fora “for racial slurs, insults, and incitements to violence”. Secondly, explicitly anti-Muslim organisations and political parties could emerge and mobilise around divisive messages because of greater freedom of association and the adoption of a multi-party political system; most prominent among these have been the Buddhist-nationalist organisations MaBaTha and 969 Movement, as well as the popular and strongly anti-Rohingya Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) (Fink, 2018: 43; Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 106; Burke, 2016: 263; Win & Kean, 2017: 430; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2013: 4). These actors and their role in the securitisation of Muslims are discussed extensively in the following chapter.

3.3 Concluding Remarks

The previous sections demonstrate, firstly, that past Buddhist-Muslim relations have not always been peaceful and that various historical events continue to negatively shape perceptions of Muslims in Myanmar, and secondly, that the political transition has greatly facilitated both the spread of anti-Muslim discourse and the emergence of vocally anti-Muslim actors. Putting two-and-two together, various commentators argue that recent anti-Muslim discourse and violence should be understood as the manifestation of longstanding prejudices and grievances, which liberalisation has simply enabled to be expressed more easily and freely (see for instance Akins, 2018; Osman, 2018; Holliday, 2014; ICG, 2013).

Crucially, this thesis distances itself from such analyses for several reasons. While most intercommunal tensions have historically existed between the Rakhine and Rohingya, anti-Muslim violence also spread to Muslim communities that had lived peacefully with their Buddhist neighbours for decades (C4ADS, 2016: 6). In interviews conducted by Schissler, Walton and Thi (2017: 387), a large majority of Myanmar interviewees moreover expressed their worries and negative feelings concerning Muslims to be of recent date. Neither is such an analysis consistent with empirical reality. The propagation of anti-Muslim content has not been limited to newly emerged organisations or political

parties; rather, state media and state and military officials have spread much anti-Muslim discourse themselves and the military has perpetrated the most severe violence against the Rohingya (Fink, 2018: 45; UNHRC, 2018: 14; Brooten, 2016: 186).

Instead, the following chapter puts forward a different narrative, whereby state and military authorities are largely complicit in and responsible for much of the recent anti-Muslim dynamics. While the historical developments described in the first section surely enhance an audience's susceptibility to securitising discourse with regard to Muslims, the existence of historical grievances by itself in combination with liberalisation does not convincingly explain the nature and scale of recent anti-Muslim developments. The next chapter presents a more complex picture that emphasises the collusion between state officials and non-state securitising actors, arguing that dynamics inherent to the process of transition have enabled – arguably even encouraged – the emergence of a 'securitising alliance' that has strategically framed a Muslim threat.

4. The Emergence of Myanmar's Securitising Alliance

The previous chapter demonstrated how Myanmar's political transition facilitated the development and propagation of anti-Muslim discourse. A changed media environment, the introduction of (relative) freedom of speech and association, and the establishment of a multi-party political system created a context in which actors could mobilise and disseminate anti-Muslim narratives. It was also argued that it is too simplistic to regard recent anti-Muslim developments as liberalisation and democratisation's natural by-product. Alternatively, this chapter puts forward a more agency-based interpretation of developments in Myanmar between 2010-15, in which a set of securitising actors deliberately depicted Muslims as a threat and even colluded to achieve full securitisation. This chapter traces the process of securitisation and the emergence of a 'securitising alliance': Sections 4.1 and 4.2 discuss different securitising actors that could mobilise because of new openings in political space at the regional and national levels respectively, 4.3 outlines the conditions that facilitated the emergence of a securitising alliance, and 4.4 examines the alliance's main motivations and securitising activities.

The second and third sub-question from the introduction guide the ensuing analysis: (2) Who are the securitising actors driving the anti-Muslim discourse? (3) How are Muslims framed as an existential threat? Both are broken down into multiple components. With regard to the securitising actors, I examine (2a) how their power position and social identity affect their securitising behaviour, and (2b) how and to what effect these actors interact. The first component stems from the presumption of the pragmatic approach to securitisation that not every actor has the same potential claim-making capacity (Stritzel, 2007; Balzacq, 2005). Social identity and power position were identified in Chapter Two as factors that can either positively or negatively affect a securitising actor's ability to make credible securitising moves, and are therefore discussed in relation to the securitising actors, wherever data is available.

Concerning the other sub-question, this chapter analyses (3a) what the securitising actors designate as being existentially threatened by Muslims, and (3b) what contextual factors or 'clues' may enhance the audience's susceptibility to the threat claim. With regard to the latter, the previous chapter already identified those contextual factors in

Myanmar's history that can be argued to make the audience more responsive to securitising moves; this chapter instead looks at contemporary clues.

4.1 Initial Securitisation of Rohingya in Rakhine State (2010-12)

Securitisation is a dynamic process and its clearly defined division here into different phases thus risks becoming a slightly simplistic representation of what is a more complex reality. Nonetheless, it does have analytical use: Between 2010-14, different actors emerge at the regional and national levels who develop and propagate narratives that depict Muslims as an existential threat, but who are not yet able by themselves to achieve complete securitisation by implementing consequent measures. This first phase begins in 2010 in Rakhine State, where the RNDP mobilises around the notion of a Rohingya threat. This section discusses the RNDP as securitising actor, its activities and securitising discourse, and the latter's resonance.

4.1.1 Rakhine State Context

Administratively, Myanmar is divided into seven regions and seven states.¹¹ Lying in western Myanmar and bordering Bangladesh, is Rakhine State (Akins, 2018: 230). Of its approximately 3.2 million inhabitants, two million identify as Buddhist Rakhine, over one million as Muslims, and the remainder as belonging to other ethno-religious groups (Burke, 2016: 259; Green et al., 2015: 27).¹² Not all Muslims in Rakhine State are Rohingya, although they make up the large majority: Some belong to distinct ethno-linguistic groups like the Kaman, officially recognised as indigenous group in Myanmar and therefore in possession of citizenship rights (ICG, 2013: 3; Holliday, 2014: 409). Although Rohingya enjoyed a largely similar status in the early post-independence years, they were gradually excluded from Myanmar society and citizenship rights under military rule (Zarni & Cowley, 2014: 701-05). In the period under research, the state denies Rohingya indigenous status and, instead, refers to them as 'Bengalis' as they or their ancestors are considered to have illegally entered Myanmar from Bangladesh (Howe, 2018: 246-47). Notwithstanding certain periods of tension between Rohingya

¹¹ The Bamar make up the majority in all seven of Myanmar's regions, whereas the states have a national minority as majority population, which generally lends its name to the state (Burke, 2016: 262).

¹² This estimate predates the 2016 and 2017 clearance operations, which caused high numbers of mostly Muslim casualties and refugees.

and Rakhine – outlined in the previous chapter – various accounts stress that intercommunal relations were mostly good before and around the initial period of transition (see for instance UNHRC, 2018: 5; Green et al., 2018: 39). In 2010, however, a transformation started in which Rakhine politicians played a key role.

4.1.2 Securitising Actor: The RNDP

Crucially, a significant consequence of the political transition was the materialisation of a new political 'arena' at the regional level. Democratisation introduced parliaments with elected representatives for all of Myanmar's states and regions, providing political opportunities for actors at the subnational level (Burke, 2016: 266). In anticipation of the 2010 national elections, Rakhine founded the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP): An ethno-nationalist party with the objective to protect Rakhine ethnic identity and to advance Rakhine sovereignty over state territory (HRW, 2013: 24; Tun, 2016: 184). For RNDP politicians, the fulfilment of this objective entails reducing the local Muslim population for which it claims there is no place in Rakhine State (Win & Kean, 2017: 430; Burke, 2016: 269).

The party's most notable securitising activities concern the organisation of public anti-Rohingya meetings and rallies and the production of pamphlets that depict Rohingya as a threat to Rakhine State (HRW, 2013: 7, 12, 24; UNHRC, 2018: 7). In a mass meeting in September 2012, for instance, the RNDP passed resolutions that called for, among other things, the establishment of Rakhine militias, the resettlement of 'Bengali Muslims' to other countries, and the implementation of special birth control laws (Cheesman, 2017a: 337; Burke, 2016: 269). Moreover, both the International State Crime Initiative and the UN independent fact-finding mission have publicly attributed responsibility to RNDP politicians for the incitement and orchestration of anti-Rohingya violence in October 2012 (see Green et al., 2015: 74-77; UNHRC, 2018: 7).¹³ The RNDP was aided by anti-

¹³ For more elaborate accounts of the 2012 violence, see reports by Human Rights Watch (2013), Green et al. (2015) and the UNHRC (2018). All these accounts stress that while there were 'mob violence' characteristics (spontaneous outbursts of violence between Rohingya and Rakhine) over the course of the violence, most of it displayed a significant degree of planning. For instance, Rakhine perpetrators have narrated how they were selected and armed by local Rakhine leaders, picked up by busses and taken to Rohingya villages they were told to attack, and how meals were provided to them on location.

Muslim sections of the local monkhood in the organisation of many of these activities (HRW, 2013).

4.1.3 Securitising Discourse

When examining the RNDP's statements and secondary literature on this topic, certain patterns or 'frames' can be recognised in its securitising discourse. Chapter Two provided an explanation of Benford and Snow's (2000) three core framing tasks – diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing – which can be used to clarify the RNDP's narrative. In terms of the identification of a problem and the attribution of blame (diagnostic framing), the RNDP claims that survival of Rakhine ethnic identity and its sovereignty over state territory are threatened by Rohingya, generally referred to as 'Bengalis' (HRW, 2013: 20, 25-27; Green et al., 2015: 33, 48, 62). The threat of the Rohingya lies in their alleged intent to take over Rakhine State through rapid population growth – a combination of illegal immigration and high birth rates – and through jihadist terrorism (HRW, 2013: 25-26; Green et al., 2015: 62; Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 361). As part of its prognostic framing, the RNDP calls for the implementation of strict security measures, such as enforced segregation between Rohingya and Rakhine, the Rohingya's removal from Rakhine State altogether, and the formation of Rakhine militias (HRW, 2013: 20, 26-27; Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 361; Cheesman, 2017a: 337). Lastly, in terms of motivational framing, the RNDP has called upon Rakhine to socially and economically boycott Rohingya as a means to compel their leaving (HRW, 2013: 26; Zarni & Cowley, 2014: 718).

Human Rights Watch (2013: 26-27) provides a telling example of these 'securitising frames':

A public statement released by the RNDP on July 26 [2012], attributed to RNDP chairman Dr. Aye Maung, says the 'present Bengali population causes threats for the whole Arakan people and other ethnic groups.' The party statement [states that] the 'Bengalis' are 'damaging Arakan people and national sovereignty.' Finally, it urges a 'complete solution,' including a call to 'temporarily relocate' Rohingya 'so that they do not reside mixed or close to

Arakan people in Arakan State territorial towns and villages,' and to 'transfer non-Burmese Bengali nationals to third countries.'

The above clearly demonstrates diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing by the RNDP, and its representatives and closely aligned actors like various Rakhine monk organisations have made similar statements on numerous occasions.¹⁴

4.1.4 *Resonance*

Crucially, securitisation requires that a relevant audience is convinced of the securitising actor's claim. While this is difficult to ascertain from a literature study, there nonetheless are some indications of success. Firstly, the mobilisation of Rakhine for attacks against Rohingya in October 2012 is a clear sign that at least segments of the Rakhine population were convinced of the existence of a Rohingya threat, even to such an extent that they felt compelled to take action. Another indication lies in the RNDP's electoral success: In the 2010 elections, it became the largest party in Rakhine State and the only party to surpass the USDP at the subnational level (HRW, 2013: 24). It was equally successful in the 2015 national elections, where it again became Rakhine State's largest party and, this time, the third-largest nationally (Burke, 2016: 271).¹⁵

Certain contextual factors may have enhanced a Rakhine audience's susceptibility to the RNDP's securitising moves. The first concerns a fear among many Rakhine that they will become a minority in their own state and lose their ethnic identity (HRW, 2013: 115; Brooten & Verbruggen, 2017: 446-47). Their susceptibility to threat discourse may then be increased, firstly, by seeing parts of northern Rakhine State where Buddhists have become the minority vis-à-vis Muslims, and secondly, by the closely felt presence of millions of Muslims in neighbouring Bangladesh; not coincidentally do Rakhine leaders often refer to themselves as protectors of the 'Western gate' that prevents mass Muslim immigration to Myanmar (Walton & Hayward, 2014: 19; Ware & Laoutides, 2019: 74; Green et al., 2015: 46).

¹⁴ See the reports by Human Rights Watch (2013) and the International State Crime Initiative (Green et al., 2015) in particular for numerous examples of such discourse.

¹⁵ While electoral success may not directly say something about the voters' opinion on Rohingya-related matters, it can nonetheless be taken as an indication of many voters' attitudes concerning Rohingya, as the removal of Rohingya from Rakhine State is the RNDP's core message (Win & Kean, 2017: 430).

Later, susceptibility to threat discourse may have been enhanced further through the experience of considerable intercommunal violence in Rakhine State in June 2012: After a Buddhist woman was raped and murdered by a group of Muslim men, a cycle of escalating violence between Rakhine and Rohingya ensued (HRW, 2013: 7). On media like Facebook, images of the violence were usually shown selectively, with Rakhine consequently often only seeing pictures of Rohingya perpetrators and Buddhist victims (Fink, 2018: 45). This is what Schissler (2015) warns against when he argues that social media in particular may exacerbate tensions and conflict, as these create situations where – through their personal networks – Buddhists may hear only of Buddhist victims and Muslims only of Muslim victims, each side thereby potentially becoming blind to the fact that the other side may suffer too. It is not hard to imagine that exposure to such images has made many Rakhine more responsive to threat claims concerning Rohingya.

Unfortunately, the literature says little about the RNDP as a societal actor, making it difficult in this instance to determine how its social identity has affected its securitising behaviour. Nonetheless, its power position certainly grants it some advantages, even though Burke (2016: 266) notes that political power is limited in Myanmar for politicians at the subnational level. The local population may regard the RNDP as a knowledgeable authority with regard to security issues, and it has access to official channels to disseminate information. While further research into the RNDP's societal position in Rakhine State is thus required, the above has clearly demonstrated that the RNDP purposefully sought to turn the Rohingya into a security issue and has been successful in this at the regional level. The following section explores the next phase in the securitisation process, which moves beyond Rakhine State and the Rohingya, and securitises Myanmar's entire Muslim population.

4.2 Buddhist Mobilisation for a National Muslim Threat (2012-14)

Much in the way that the political transition created opportunities for regional political parties, it enabled nongovernmental organisations to establish themselves in the public sphere. The most important development in this regard has been the emergence of Buddhist-nationalist organisations from 2012 onwards – the year that intercommunal violence took place in Rakhine State – which primarily sought to promote Buddhism and protect it against threats, most notably those perceived to be posed by Muslims

(Rampton, 2016: 26; Schonthal, 2016: 252). The most influential of these have been the 969 Movement and MaBaTha, both of which managed to become powerful socio-political forces in transitional Myanmar (Schissler, Walton & Thi, 2015: 2).

4.2.1 *Securitising Actors: 969 Movement and MaBaTha*

In 2012, a group of Buddhist monks founded the '969 Movement' with the objective to protect race and religion against perceived threats and to pursue a religiously 'pure' Buddhist state (C4ADS, 2016: 6; Walton & Hayward, 2014: 1; Kyaw, 2016: 204; Ibrahim, 2018: 67). It drew national attention through its claim that there is a global Muslim conspiracy to take over and 'Islamise' Myanmar and through its 'Buy Buddhist' campaign, which called for the boycott of Muslim businesses (ICG, 2017: 10; C4ADS, 2016: 6; Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 84-85). The organisation sought to raise awareness of the existence of a Muslim threat through a range of media, including pamphlets, journals, books, social media and songs (Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 106; Kyaw, 2015: 57-58; Walton & Hayward, 2014: 24). Sermons by 969-affiliated monks were moreover sold on the streets as DVDs, often containing stories about Muslim conspiracies or about women seduced by rich Muslim men and then converted to Islam under coercion (Kyaw, 2016: 185). Despite the group's apparent popularity and the resonance of its message,¹⁶ its informal, decentralised organisational structure hindered it in achieving anti-Muslim measures (C4ADS, 2016: 6). By the end of 2013, the State Sangha Council¹⁷ moreover officially banned the organisation for its unauthorised use of Buddhist symbols, which prompted the founding of MaBaTha in 2014 (Ibid.; ICG, 2017: 10).

Similar to the 969 Movement, MaBaTha¹⁸ sought to protect the *sāsana*, the health of which it regards as closely intertwined with that of the Myanmar state and national identity (Walton & Hayward, 2014: 1; Walton, 2015: 518). Due to its formal and centralised structure, with a Central Committee to provide the organisation with ideological direction, and in control of a powerful communication apparatus, it could

¹⁶ Indicated, for instance, by the large number of people attending the organisation's events and by the widespread display of 969 stickers in Buddhist homes and on shops (Kyaw, 2016: 205).

¹⁷ A government-appointed committee of senior Buddhist monks that oversees and regulates the monkhood in Myanmar.

¹⁸ MaBaTha is the acronym of 'A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shauq Ye a-Pwe', meaning 'Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion' (Walton & Hayward, 2014: 14).

widely disseminate its message (ICG, 2017: 11; C4ADS, 2016: 24). Consequently, the organisation could become a major socio-political force and the most influential propagator of anti-Muslim discourse in transitional Myanmar (C4ADS, 2016: 7-8; Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 84). MaBaTha spread its anti-Muslim message through its own newspapers, magazines, journals and social media, through highly attended conferences and rallies – some attracting over 300,000 people – and through the broadcast of their monks' sermons on Myanmar's largest television network SkyNet (C4ADS, 2016: 24-26).¹⁹ Moreover, MaBaTha appeared strongly aware of the power of modern media and communication technology and regularly provided media training to activists on how to spread the MaBaTha message (Ibid.: 31; Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 369; Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 106).

MaBaTha also engaged in activities to more directly hurt Muslim communities. From 2013 onwards, it began buying up cattle-slaughtering licenses to force the shutdown of many Muslim businesses, which are traditionally strongly represented in this sector (Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 89). Additionally, many analysts suspect a connection between speaking tours of both MaBaTha- and 969-affiliated monks and the subsequent outbreak of anti-Muslim violence in many towns and villages across Myanmar between 2012-14, reasoning that the monks incite violence through inflammatory anti-Muslim speeches, although there is no hard evidence of a direct connection (Burke, 2016: 256; C4ADS, 2016: 6; Kyaw, 2016: 184).

4.2.2 Securitising Discourse

The diagnostic framing by the 969 Movement and MaBaTha in their securitising discourse reveals some differences to that of the RNDP. Rather than Rohingya specifically, Muslims in general – or even 'Islam' – are presented as existential threat; this time to Buddhists and Myanmar as a predominantly Buddhist nation (Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 84-85; Kyaw, 2016: 191, 199-200; Fink, 2018: 44). Secondary literature points to two distinct ways in which Muslims are considered a danger. Firstly, Islam is depicted as a 'colonising religion' whose adherents take over Buddhist countries through rapid population growth, achieved through illegal immigration, the forced conversion of

¹⁹ See the report by C4ADS (2016: 28-31) for an extensive discussion of all media channels used by MaBaTha.

Buddhist women and high birth rates (Walton & Hayward, 2014: 17-18; C4ADS, 2016: 15-16; Kyaw, 2015: 57-58; Kyaw, 2016: 202). Secondly, Islam is depicted as an inherently violent religion. A claim which Buddhist nationalists base on cow-butchering practices²⁰, rumours of mistreatment of women, and by portraying all Muslims as potential jihadists (ICG, 2017: 7; C4ADS, 2016: 15, 20-21; Osman, 2018: 23). Consequently, Buddhist nationalists created an image of Muslims as what Schissler et al. (2015: 378) call a “fearsome Other”, whereby “all people who meet a category are considered threatening as a function of their existence and can therefore always be subjected to violence because of being Other”.

These diagnostic frames are evident in a translated excerpt of a sermon by the monk Ashin Wirathu – involved in the 969 Movement and later MaBaTha – from February 2013:

[Our] people are very weak in the affairs of our nation and thus we're losing our country and society to the invading Bengali-Muslims. [...] Believe me they [the Muslims] do not have any political ideology except that Islamic totalitarian ideology. [...] They have a lot of money [...] and use that money to get our young Buddhist women. Buddhist brothers in [Rakhine State] were being slaughtered by the illegal Bengali Muslims. (Wirathu quoted in Oo, 2013)

The solution to these problems was generally articulated in terms of special anti-Muslim laws and regulations, for which these Buddhist-nationalist organisations turned to the state, considered responsible for Buddhism's protection. This is discussed more in-depth in section 4.4. Additionally, both organisations sought to mobilise people for an economic boycott of Muslim businesses (ICG, 2013: 17; Walton, 2015: 519).

4.2.3 Resonance

Keeping in mind the same caveats that were discussed in relation to the RNDP, there are some indications that the message of the 969 Movement and MaBaTha strongly resonated. Both organisations displayed significant mobilisational capacity: Their rallies were at times attended by thousands of supporters (Kyaw, 2016: 205; C4ADS, 2016: 23),

²⁰ For Buddhists this may be a strong argument as the sanctity of animal life in general is respected within Buddhism, and because some Buddhists specifically venerate cows (C4ADS, 2016: 21).

the 'Buy Buddhist' campaign was a national success, and MaBaTha stated it managed to collect 4.3 million signatures – about eight per cent of Myanmar's population – for a petition to the government to implement various anti-Muslim measures (C4ADS, 2016: 28). In relation to MaBaTha specifically, political parties even adapted their behaviour to the organisation: The NLD admitted to not having selected any Muslim candidates for the 2015 elections for fear of MaBaTha's reaction (Ibid.: 35; ICG, 2017: i). Nonetheless, Walton (2015: 525) and Ibrahim (2018: 68-69) emphasise that support for these organisations is not necessarily absolute: Various monks have publicly opposed their more radical anti-Muslim views and even within MaBaTha itself not everyone shares the belief that Muslims pose an existential threat.

Similar to the RNDP, contextual clues may have enhanced a Buddhist audience's susceptibility to the securitising discourse. In fact, monks have sometimes actively drawn on such clues to increase their statements' credibility. For instance, when discussing Islam in relation to terrorism, both groups have often shown images of brutal acts committed by IS (Fink, 2018: 45). MaBaTha even added statements in favour of the Rohingya by foreign Islamic armed groups to such photos (C4ADS, 2016: 18). Monks 'substantiated' the claim of an Islamic plot by referencing formerly Buddhist countries in the region that have become largely Islamic like Indonesia and Afghanistan, or by referring to places within Myanmar in which Muslims outnumber Buddhists, such as Maungdaw in Rakhine State (Ibid.: 15-16; Walton & Hayward, 2014: 17). Additionally, some monks have claimed that the sum of the number '786' on Muslim shop windows – indicating they are a Muslim store or sell halal food – stands for '21', a secret message that refers to a plot by Muslims to 'Islamise' Myanmar by the end of the 21st century (Kyaw, 2016: 202).

Yet arguably most influential in determining the success of their securitising moves, is the social identity of monks and Buddhist organisations in Myanmar. Numerous scholars concur that Myanmar Buddhists are particularly receptive to anti-Muslim messages spread by monks, because they are considered to have more social and moral authority than laypeople and are perceived to be more knowledgeable in general (Fink, 2018: 45; Walton & Hayward, 2014: 17-18; Walton, 2015: 513). Kyaw (2016: 187) and Walton and Jerryson (2016: 805-06) argue that the particular power of monks' discourse can be

attributed to the fact that they are not perceived to speak as individuals but as representatives of the much-beloved Buddhist institution and that “donning the saffron robes and becoming a monk elevates a man in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies” (Ibid.: 803). One can therefore wonder if the 969 Movement did not deliberately draw on Buddhist symbols in its name²¹ and its emblem, the latter being identical to the Buddhist flag apart from one change of colour (Kyaw, 2016: 197-99). Additionally, Buddhist monks and organisations are generally beloved for their social work at the grassroots level, such as the provision of food relief and education for impoverished people (Ibrahim, 2018: 55; ICG, 2017: i).

Furthermore, it is very difficult for politicians or others to criticise Buddhist organisations. In Myanmar, it is inconceivable for a layperson to publicly question or contradict a monk and merely the threat of monastic criticism is often enough to influence a politician's behaviour (Walton, 2015: 520-22). If framed in religious terms, monks can easily make compelling political arguments, which others can only difficultly contest:

Monks' pronouncements on issues like nationalism are taken by many to have the force of doctrine when these secular interests are painted as inextricably interwoven with the health and the propagation of the *sāsana*. In this way, monks can compel political action by framing it as proper, even essential, Buddhist conduct. (Walton & Jerryson, 2016: 809)

Not only does this confirm the importance of 'social identity' in this case as a factor that influences a securitising actor's claim-making capacity, it also corroborates Karyotis and Patrikios' (2010) theory that a country's cultural context may shape its securitising dynamics.

²¹ The numbers 969 refer to the Buddha, the Dhamma ('teachings of Buddha') and the Sangha; see Kyaw (2016: 195-99) for a lengthier discussion on the 969 Movement's use of Buddhist symbols.

4.3 An Authoritarian Regime Under Threat of Democratisation (2012-14)

Between 2010-14, the RNDP and Buddhist-nationalist organisations thus successfully mobilised to project the notion of a Muslim threat to Myanmar. Yet, while their securitising discourse may have resonated, by themselves these actors were unable to achieve full securitisation. This section serves as the foundation for 4.4, which analyses the emergence of a 'securitising alliance', by discussing its facilitating conditions. I argue that two contextual factors spurred the USDP and *Tatmadaw* to collude with MaBaTha in the securitisation of Muslims. These concern the threat of loss of power to the popular NLD, and the popularity of Buddhist-nationalist organisations and growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar.

4.3.1 Threat: NLD Electoral Success

Chapter Three demonstrated that the transition did not lead to radical political change: The 2008 Constitution secured the *Tatmadaw's* political future and after the elections in 2010 the military moreover retained indirect rule through its proxy party, the USDP. These elections are worth looking into a bit more here. Firstly, it must be noted that the USDP had little competition. For years the main face of the opposition, the NLD under leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi boycotted the elections, leaving the USDP only with opposition from some ethnic and fringe parties (Bünthe, 2016: 376-77). Yet, one party surprisingly did manage to challenge the USDP, albeit on a regional level: The RNDP, which surpassed the USDP as the largest party in Rakhine State (HRW, 2013: 24). Part of its success can perhaps be attributed to displeasure among Rakhine at the USDP's effort to secure the 'Muslim vote': Prior to the elections, the authorities granted temporary identification cards – so-called 'white cards' – to many Rohingya, the majority of whom registered as USDP members (Ibid.: 113; ICG, 2013: 7; Holliday, 2014: 409). For a moment in 2010, the USDP thus actually courted Rohingya, presumably for electoral advancement.

By-elections²² were held in 2012, a by all accounts relatively minor affair as merely 45 seats were up for contention (ICG, 2012: 2). White card holders were again permitted to vote (Hein, 2018: 372), but there was one important change: In 2012, the NLD did

²² Elections held to fill seats that have become vacant during a government's term in office.

compete and it immediately secured an impressive victory by winning 43 out of 45 seats, whereas the USDP won just one seat (ICG, 2012: 2, 9). I concur with the International Crisis Group (2012: 9-10) that the scale of the NLD's victory is likely to have alarmed the political establishment, especially in anticipation of new national elections in 2015.

4.3.2 Opportunity: Growing Anti-Muslim Sentiment

A second important contextual development concerns the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence over the course of 2012-14. The outbreak of violence in June 2012 in Rakhine State was covered by media as a symptom of a national threat rather than a regionally isolated conflict (McCarthy & Menager, 2017: 401) and Buddhist-nationalist groups emerged that did not differentiate between different Muslim communities in Myanmar, but which depicted the violence as a manifestation of a conflict between Buddhism and Islam itself (Schonthal, 2016: 237-38). Between 2012-14, when Buddhist-nationalist organisations began to mobilise, anti-Muslim mob violence occurred in many regions in Myanmar: From Rakhine State in June and October 2012 to Meiktila in March 2013, Okkan in April 2013, Lashio in May 2013, Kanbalu in August 2013 to Mandalay in July 2014 (Ibid.; Cheesman, 2017a: 338; Kyaw, 2016: 183).²³ The degree to which MaBaTha and the 969 Movement can be held responsible for this violence is unclear; nonetheless, it is certain that most of the places above were visited by monks before the outbreak of violence, preaching and handing out leaflets, or had been the stage of MaBaTha speaking tours only shortly before (C4ADS, 2016: 12; Burke, 2016: 256).

Both the scale and rapid expansion of mob-like anti-Muslim violence, and the apparent popularity of Buddhist-nationalist organisations indicate that anti-Muslim sentiment ran high in Myanmar by the end of 2014 and that securitising anti-Muslim discourse clearly resonated among segments of the population. All this took place in a context where the former regime likely felt threatened by the NLD's popularity. I argue that the regime, threatened in its position, saw an opportunity for political advancement in greater polarisation and therefore became a securitising actor itself.

²³ See Figure 1 (page iv) for the map that shows the locations where significant anti-Muslim violence occurred between 2012-14.

4.4. The Emergence of the Securitising Alliance (2014-15)

The above should be interpreted as the facilitating conditions for the emergence of a 'securitising alliance', in this case consisting of the former regime and MaBaTha. I define a securitising alliance as strategic cooperation between two or more securitising actors who share the message that a certain subject presents a threat, with different actors playing distinct but complementary roles in the securitisation process. The following paragraphs first discuss the reasons for its emergence, present evidence of its existence, and finally analyse several instances of collusion at the expense of Myanmar's Muslims and Rohingya more in-depth.

4.4.1 A New Securitising Actor: The USDP/Tatmadaw

Up until approximately 2014, the *Tatmadaw* and the USDP were not actively involved in the securitisation of Muslims. Granted, the military regime discriminated against Rohingya for decades, denying them citizenship rights based on the claim that Myanmar does not have an indigenous Rohingya population (UNHRC, 2018: 14). Yet, overall, Muslims were mostly left alone, and in 2010 and 2012 the USDP even allowed significant numbers of Rohingya to vote in the elections and by-elections. By 2015, however, the USDP was consistently putting forward a narrative that depicted Buddhism as besieged by Islam and made this the primary focus of its election campaign (McCarthy & Menager, 2017: 407). I argue that this remarkable turn is actually a highly strategic move that must be understood in light of the context provided in 4.3: Faced with potentially significant loss of political power to the popular NLD, the USDP could benefit from greater societal polarisation as a means to gather votes, as observed by Zin (2015: 389), Green et al. (2015: 60) and Hein (2018: 375). In fact, by exaggerating a Rohingya or more general Muslim threat, the former regime created the perception that its presence remained necessary to defend the predominantly Buddhist state, justifying its continued political influence post-transition (Howe, 2018: 249, 252-53; Fink, 2018: 46).

What this does not explain, however, is the emergence of a securitising *alliance* rather than the regime functioning as independent securitising actor. Why did the regime and MaBaTha cooperate? The concepts of 'social identity' and 'power position' may provide insight into this development. It is important to note that the *Tatmadaw* – and the USDP by extension – for many people in Myanmar represents decades of repressive military

rule and widespread corruption (Tun, 2016: 189-90) and is considered “morally bankrupt” (Ibid.: 190). Its social identity would therefore appear to constrain rather than enable the *Tatmadaw's* securitising behaviour. Fink (2018: 45) and Schissler (2016a: 300) do reason that as state authorities and military, the USDP and *Tatmadaw* can add to the perceived validity of threat claims; in other words, that they have a strong power position. Furthermore, Chapter Three demonstrated that they are still in control of most of Myanmar's media channels, thereby facilitating the spread of their discourse. Nonetheless, it seems that the regime hoped to increase its credibility and popularity through the support of Myanmar's monkhood, whereas MaBaTha could use the USDP to advance its political agenda.

4.4.2 Indications for Collusion

There are various indications for mutual support and collusion between MaBaTha and the USDP, in spite of the fact that cooperation could not be too evident as it is forbidden by law in Myanmar for parties to use religion for political purposes (C4ADS, 2016: 35). That said, indications are present in the form of relatively large operational freedom for MaBaTha, public support, impunity and donations. Numerous observers reason that MaBaTha's remarkable operational freedom compared to other nongovernmental organisations indicates state support: It was completely free to organise rallies and protests, and to spread hate speech through sermons, in various publications and online (Ibid.: 34-35; Kyaw, 2016: 205-06; Schonthal & Walton, 2016: 96). MaBaTha monks themselves have publicly interpreted this freedom as government support (C4ADS, 2016: 35), which does not seem unreasonable given the evidence provided in Chapter Three that the USDP-government does not shy away from using its power to restrict press freedom or block protests when these do not align with its political interests. In fact, Green et al. (2015: 38-39) observed that anti-Muslim protests seem to be the only demonstrations that do not require the authorities' permission beforehand.

Interestingly, such leniency is a clear break with the past: In 2001, the popular MaBaTha-affiliated monk Wirathu was imprisoned for inciting anti-Muslim violence, yet a decade later he does the same thing unhindered (Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 358). In fact, President Thein Sein (USDP) personally banned the issue of TIME magazine in which Wirathu was called the face of 'Buddhist terror' and then publicly praised him as a 'son of

Lord Buddha' (Ibid.; Zin, 2015: 380). By not prosecuting or publicly denouncing the MaBaTha-affiliated monks who spread hate speech and plausibly incite violence, the authorities have effectively given their implicit consent to these monks' activities. Lastly, both USDP politicians and senior *Tatmadaw* officials are known to have on occasion made large donations to MaBaTha-affiliated monks (Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 369-70; C4ADS, 2016: 33).²⁴

4.4.3 *The Securitising Alliance*

There was thus clearly some degree of regime support for MaBaTha, but no evidence yet of active securitising cooperation. This section singles out two instances of active collaboration in the securitisation process, from which it becomes clear that where MaBaTha and others initiated the securitising moves with regard to Myanmar's Muslim population, the USDP finalised the process by carrying out the implementation of special security measures. The first illustrative case concerns the withdrawal of the 'white cards'²⁵ in 2015 that had enabled some 700,000 Rohingya to vote in the 2010 and 2012 elections (Burke, 2016: 270). Both Schonthal and Walton (2016: 88) and Zin (2015: 385) argue that the USDP reversed its decision as a favour to MaBaTha, which actively campaigned against the white cards. In fact, while parliament voted to again allow white card holders to vote in the upcoming elections, President Thein Sein personally intervened and ordered these cards' invalidation (Hein, 2018: 372; Ibrahim, 2018: 117).

The changes in northern Rakhine State's Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, where the number of eligible voters went down from 211,328 and 129,909 to 24,008 and 36,069 respectively (Tun, 2016: 181), are telling of the consequences. At the same time, the election commission disbarred both Rohingya and, seemingly arbitrarily, many Muslims from other ethnic groups from standing for elections (Burke, 2016: 270; Ibrahim, 2018: 118). Consequently, the post-2015 parliament became the first in Myanmar's history that has no Muslim members at all (Ibrahim, 2018: 140). Rohingya especially suffered a complete loss of political rights and, additionally, with the withdrawal of their white

²⁴ See the report by C4ADS (2016: 33) for several concrete examples of such donations, including the amount of money donated and the names of the recipient and donor.

²⁵ The 'white cards' were temporary registration cards issued to people in Myanmar that are not recognised (yet) as citizens.

cards, also lost the right to travel and work outside certain designated areas in Rakhine State (Ibid.: 117).

The USDP went even further in its accommodation of MaBaTha when it turned four of the organisation's concept bills into legislation in 2015. These 'Protection of Race and Religion' laws are clearly understood to restrict Muslim or Rohingya rights (Lee, 2016: 200; C4ADS, 2016: 19-20). The 'Population Control Health Care Law' enables the authorities to enforce birth regulation in areas where resources are considered scarce; amid widespread rumours of high Muslim birth rates, MaBaTha itself acknowledged that the law's main purpose would be to halt the spread of 'Bengalis' in Rakhine State (Lee, 2016: 200; Green et al., 2015: 73). The 'Religious Conversion Bill' seems similarly prompted by anti-Muslim narratives: It restricts the possibility of religious conversion by obliging people to get the authorities' permission (Lee, 2016: 200). Likewise, the 'Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law' seems inspired by stories of Muslim men that marry vulnerable Buddhist women in order to convert them (Ibid.; Walton & Hayward, 2014: 16).²⁶ Finally, the 'Monogamy Bill' forbids second marriages or living with another partner and is considered to be inspired by rumours that Rohingya men take more than one wife to increase their number of children as part of their efforts to 'Islamise' Myanmar (Green et al., 2015: 73).²⁷

MaBaTha had campaigned for these laws for some time before the president put pressure on parliament to turn the drafts into actual legislation in 2015 (McCarthy & Menager, 2017: 397; Win & Kean, 2017: 428-29). Their implementation can be argued to constitute the final stage of securitisation, as the laws were special measures presented as the solution to various of the threats allegedly posed by Muslims and Rohingya. Their implementation moreover occurred to the benefit of the USDP: MaBaTha-affiliated monk Vimala, for instance, stated that the people should forget what the USDP had done in the past, referring to decades of *Tatmadaw* authoritarian rule (C4ADS, 2016: 36). Not without

²⁶ The law requires Buddhist women under the age of 20 to ask their parents' permission to marry a non-Buddhist man, while also stating that non-Buddhist men should respect their spouse's religion and not insult Buddhists' feelings (Green et al., 2015: 73).

²⁷ The 'Population Control and Health Care Law' was passed in parliament in May 2015, the 'Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law' and 'Monogamy Law' in July 2015, and the 'Religious Conversion Law' in August 2015 (Green et al., 2015: 73).

reason have Green et al. (2015: 72) described the laws as “providing electoral advantage to the ruling USDP in the run-up to the November [2015] elections”.

This uncovers what I argue is the principal reason for the USDP to enter into this securitising alliance: MaBaTha support in anticipation of the 2015 elections. It is telling that the above took place over the course of 2014-15. As argued by Van Klinken and Aung (2017: 354-55), it made simple electoral sense for the USDP – challenged by the NLD – to seek to enhance its own popularity through that of the monks. And indeed, MaBaTha quite openly began to campaign in favour of the USDP: In 2015, the MaBaTha leadership issued a directive to its members to help the people in voting for candidates that would further the organisation’s objectives (C4ADS, 2016: 34). MaBaTha did this by sharing USDP content on their media channels and by handing out pro-USDP pamphlets (Ibid.; Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 369-70). Furthermore, many MaBaTha-affiliated monks targeted the NLD, either directly urging people not to vote for it or by depicting it as too ‘Muslim-friendly’ (Van Klinken & Aung, 2017: 365). Yet, support did not come for free: MaBaTha used the USDP to realise its anti-Muslim political agenda (C4ADS, 2016: 35). Together, they depicted Muslims as a threat and implemented special measures against them. In doing this, they fulfilled complementary roles in the securitisation process: Where MaBaTha had the social standing to convince a Myanmar audience of the existence of a Muslim threat, the USDP was in the position to then realise anti-Muslim measures like the withdrawal of white cards and the implementation of the four laws.

4.4.4 The Aftermath

While outside the scope of this research, this section briefly outlines some relevant post-2015 developments. Concerning the elections, some expected widespread anti-Muslim sentiment to correlate with weakening NLD popularity, as MaBaTha quite vocally attacked the party and Aung San Suu Kyi for being too Muslim-friendly (Tun, 2016: 179-80), although the party itself never developed a counternarrative to desecuritize Muslims. However, apart from Rakhine State, the NLD won resounding victories all over Myanmar, whereas the USDP sustained heavy losses (Ibid.: 177).²⁸ The most common explanation for this outcome has been that the Myanmar population was more concerned

²⁸ See Figures 3 and 4 in Annex 1 (pp. 56-57) for maps that show the 2015 election results per district in Myanmar and in Rakhine State.

with overall political change than with religious issues alone and continued to associate the USDP with authoritarian rule and corruption (Ibid.: 190). Interestingly, the few places where the USDP or RNDP²⁹ were more successful than the NLD concern Meiktila, Sittwe and places in northern Rakhine State; all of these are locations that witnessed significant anti-Muslim violence, suggesting that these parties' anti-Muslim messages resonated stronger in places that had actively experienced bloodshed and destruction (Ibid.: 187-88). This again appears to confirm the pragmatic approach's presumption that securitising moves are likelier to convince an audience if the depicted threat has some relation to external reality.

In 2016, the NLD-led state prohibited the use of the MaBaTha name and logo (ICG, 2017: 15). The organisation's reaction to this has been mixed: Some regional sections have reappeared under different names, whereas others have ignored the decision altogether (Ibid.: 15-18). What is certain, however, is that the ARSA attacks in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 provided Buddhist-nationalist organisations with new ammunition, and popular anti-Muslim sentiment appears to have again grown as a consequence (Ibid.: 14). Moreover, the *Tatmadaw* – retaining control over Myanmar's security apparatus – could conduct its violent operations against Rohingya in August 2017 with impunity, as briefly discussed in the introduction, thereby showing the effects of securitisation in its gravest forms.³⁰ While the military's intentions are difficult to ascertain, it may well have been an attempt to further enhance its status as protector of Myanmar, and legitimate its continued power as maintained by, for instance, Fink (2018: 4) and Howe (2018: 256).

4.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided a detailed account of Muslims' securitisation in Myanmar. It has argued that the political transition facilitated the emergence and mobilisation of securitising actors in Rakhine State and later nationwide; it has shown how these actors operated and how they framed Rohingya and Muslims as an existential threat; and finally,

²⁹ By this time, the RNDP had merged with the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) to form the Arakan National Party (ANP), retaining the RNDP's strong ethno-nationalist and anti-Muslim stance (Green et al., 2015: 40; C4ADS, 2016: 38).

³⁰ There are no indications that the new NLD-led civilian government was involved in the planning and/or implementation of the clearance operations in 2016 and 2017; yet, neither does it appear to have done anything to stop it. Rather, it has consistently denied the possibility of crimes by the *Tatmadaw* and has blocked independent investigations into the violence (UNHRC, 2018: 17-18).

it has demonstrated how the immediate context played a role in heightening the audience's sensitivity to securitising discourse. In doing so, this chapter's main theoretical contributions are twofold. Firstly, the analysis of the 969 Movement and MaBaTha as securitising actors has shown the importance of 'social identity' as a factor that can critically influence securitisation processes. It was argued that the monks in Myanmar could more easily convince a Buddhist audience of the existence of a threat, because of their perceived higher social and moral authority compared to laypeople. Yet, it was also shown that social identity by itself is not enough to achieve full securitisation: The implementation of customised security measures requires an actor that is in a position to achieve this. Likely, this encouraged the formation of a securitising alliance, whereby the USDP as political actor could complement MaBaTha's securitising activities.

Secondly, this chapter suggests that securitisation may be a particularly useful strategy in a context of political transition. The chapter demonstrated that a context of transition presents both threats and opportunities, and so adds a particular dynamic to securitisation processes. In Myanmar, democratisation threatened the former regime to the degree that it saw itself at risk of having to share its power with the immensely popular NLD. At the same time, the transition also facilitated the emergence of securitising actors and provided the regime with the opportunity to 'join' that securitisation process. In politically uncertain times, the regime pushed for greater polarisation as a means to increase its own appeal and enhance its status as protector of the state. This led to cooperation, the 'securitising alliance', with Buddhist-nationalist organisations, which similarly sought to secure influence in the country's altered political environment. All at the expense of Myanmar's Rohingya and Muslim population, which emerged as particularly vulnerable in this new context.

5. Conclusion

Prompted by the shocking course of military action in August 2017 in Rakhine State, this thesis set out to research the preceding anti-Muslim developments in Myanmar between 2010-15 as a case of securitisation in a context of political transition. The research objectives were to understand how the context of transition relates to the occurrence of anti-Muslim discourse and violence, to identify and discuss the actors involved in the securitisation of Muslims and their social identity and power position in Myanmar society, and to study the emergence of a 'securitising alliance' as an overlooked phenomenon. This conclusion offers an overview of the main research findings, and their situation in and contribution to the wider academic debate. Additionally, this chapter discusses this thesis's limitations and presents some suggestions for further research.

5.1 Research Findings

This thesis sought to answer the question 'How and why have Muslims been securitised in a context of political transition towards a partial democracy in Myanmar from 2010 to 2015?' As regards to 'how', Chapter Three analysed how the transition facilitated the securitisation of Muslims and argued that its effects have been twofold. Firstly, new rights like freedom of association and the introduction of a multi-party political system created space for actors to mobilise around divisive narratives. In Rakhine State, the RNDP achieved political advancement by spreading a narrative of a Rohingya threat to the region and to Rakhine Buddhist identity; nationwide, Buddhist-nationalist organisations rose to public prominence as they mobilised around the image of an imminent Muslim threat to Myanmar's Buddhist identity. The second important effect of the transition was that significant media liberalisation enabled these actors to freely and widely disseminate their anti-Muslim narratives. Chapter Four subsequently provided a detailed description of the securitisation process' development from initial securitisation of the Rohingya at the regional level, to later national securitisation of all Muslims, to the emergence of a securitising alliance that achieved full securitisation with consequent security measures.

As regards to 'why' securitisation occurred, it is again essential to take into account the context of transition. Earlier research on conflict in democratising states found that political entrepreneurs have an incentive to mobilise along ethnic or religious lines in the

initial phase of democratisation as a means to quickly establish a support base (Zakaria, 1997; Snyder, 2000; Mann, 2004). Indeed, the RNDP, 969 Movement and MaBaTha likely utilised anti-Muslim securitising moves for socio-political advancement in a rapidly changing and opening up society. Additionally, Chapter Four demonstrated that the transition generated both threats and opportunities for the former regime, pushing it toward securitisation as well: As the regime came under threat of losing considerable political power to the immensely popular NLD in the run-up to the 2015 elections, it had an incentive to magnify the perception of a Muslim threat as a means to gain Buddhist support and justify its continued political influence as 'protector' of Myanmar.

5.2 Research Contributions

With this research, this thesis goes beyond many existing analyses of anti-Muslim dynamics in Myanmar – which tend to either focus exclusively on the Rohingya (see for instance Ware & Laoutides, 2019; Burke, 2016; HRW, 2013) or on the effects of political reform (see for instance Fink, 2018; Lee, 2016; ICG, 2013) – by also examining the factors that contributed to the resonance of threat discourse among Myanmar's Buddhist population. This additional depth was achieved by using the pragmatic approach to securitisation, which maintains that context and certain characteristics of the securitising actor influence a securitising move's potential success in convincing an audience of the existence of a threat (Balzacq, 2010a; Salter, 2008; Stritzel, 2007). Consequently, Chapters Three and Four identified various 'clues' in the audience's environment – both historical and contemporary – that likely enhanced its susceptibility to threat discourse with regard to Muslims, as well as discussing each securitising actor's power position and social identity as features that influence that actor's claim-making capacity. This led to a detailed analysis that incorporated such varied elements as Myanmar's history of Buddhist-Muslim relations and Buddhist monks' standing in society.

This thesis' contribution to the academic debate on securitisation is threefold. Firstly, it adds a new type of case-study to securitisation research, which is often criticised for being too focused on securitisation processes in Western liberal democratic contexts. Instead, my thesis continues the line of work by Wilkinson (2007) and Vuori (2008) who have studied securitisation in non-Western and non-democratic contexts. Similar to Vuori (2008), this research found that (semi-)authoritarian rulers may strategically

engage in securitising moves to reaffirm their power position. Yet, in contrast to his research, securitisation was not studied in the more static context of a long-term authoritarian state like China, but in the dynamic context of a country undergoing political transition. Crucially, the transition, with its threats and opportunities, led to an equally dynamic securitisation process, where different actors joined the process at different times and collusion took place between some of them. This research then also contributes to the body of work on conflict in democratising states, which – as previously discussed – has observed that democratisation and liberalisation may encourage tensions and even lead to conflict, but which has not yet made the connection between transition and securitisation. My analysis suggests that such politically uncertain times may actually encourage elites' strategic use of securitisation.

My second contribution has been to demonstrate that securitisation research should broaden its focus in relation to securitising actors. The focus on 'power position' as a factor that influences an actor's claim-making capacity has led to a bias towards state agents as securitising actors, whose power position is perceived to aid them in making credible securitising moves (see for instance Stritzel, 2007; Balzacq, 2005; Williams, 2003). This thesis builds on the work by Karyotis and Patrikios (2010) who suggest that in certain cultural contexts, religious actors may actually be more influential in shaping public attitudes than political actors, thereby possessing more securitising potential. My thesis supports their theory, as it demonstrates that in Myanmar's specific context, Buddhist organisations have a stronger ability to make convincing security claims than state agents. This was argued to be a consequence of their 'social identity' in Myanmar society, where they are perceived to be more knowledgeable and higher in social and moral authority than laypeople, including politicians.

Yet, my research problematised religious securitising actors to some extent as well: While religious actors were shown to be in a strong position to convince an audience of the existence of a threat, by themselves they were incapable of implementing subsequent security measures. This leads to this thesis' final contribution, as the above arguably represented one of the conditions for collusion between state and religious actors in the securitisation of Muslims in Myanmar: MaBaTha needed the USDP's power position to realise its political agenda, whereas the USDP hoped to profit from MaBaTha's popularity

and standing in society in the run-up to the 2015 elections. Where MaBaTha initiated the securitising moves, the USDP realised the implementation of security measures, with both actors thus fulfilling complementary roles in the securitisation process. I have proposed the term 'securitising alliance' to better understand this, so far unaddressed, phenomenon of collusion between different securitising actors.

5.3 Research Limitations and Suggestions

Like every research, this thesis has its limitations as well. These concern the analysis of actors' intentions and the predominant focus on elite dynamics. The first limitation concerns the general use of the pragmatic securitisation framework. This approach regards securitising actors' use of threat discourse as a strategic move, inevitably leading to some speculation about these actors' intentions who, naturally, do not publicly admit to using threat discourse as a means for personal political advancement. Balzacq (2005: 190) is correct in stating that intentions "are notoriously hard to pin down", which this research nonetheless attempted to do. However, I would argue that the context provided strong clues as to most actors' motivations, those of the former regime in particular, with the ensuing analysis moreover being consistent with observations of elite responses in other democratising states.

Secondly, by choosing to focus mainly on the different securitising actors and their interaction in the securitisation of Muslims, this thesis became mostly focused on elites and inter-elite cooperation, and thereby obscured the potential influence of another important actor in securitisation processes: the audience. While the research did discuss factors that would make a Myanmar Buddhist audience more susceptible to threat discourse, it nonetheless presented a rather linear representation of securitisation with little agency for the audience, even though there is a growing number of securitisation scholars that argue that the audience itself is often actively involved in securitisation processes: Rather than merely accepting or rejecting a securitising actor's claim, it may actually push that actor to (de)securitise a particular issue (see for instance Côté, 2016; Van der Borgh & Savenije, 2015; Balzacq, 2010a). However, a more agentic analysis of the audience's role would have problematically broadened the subject of this thesis and was not feasible with regard to the employed methodology, as current secondary literature offers little information on this topic.

I see various avenues for further research based on the presented analysis. Concerning Myanmar and the limitation identified above, future research could benefit greatly from further study into the role of Myanmar's population in the securitisation process and the ways in which they may have pushed for the securitisation of Muslims or Rohingya. Additionally, the 'securitising alliance' requires further study as cooperation appears to have continued after the 2015 elections. For instance, following the first ARSA attacks in 2016, the *Tatmadaw* allowed MaBaTha-affiliated monks entry into otherwise closed off and highly guarded northern Rakhine State, and accompanied the monks on visits to villages where they organised local Rakhine resistance to the Rohingya (Green et al., 2018: 32).

Concerning securitisation research, my thesis has demonstrated a need to better take into account the role of religious actors in securitisation processes. I therefore recommend that this line of research extends its scope to include a wide array of different religions and diverse contexts in order to broaden analytical understanding of the potential effects of religion and religious actors on securitisation processes. This could moreover confirm whether 'securitising alliances' are a recurrent phenomenon in contexts where non-state actors require the support of state agents to realise the implementation of security measures. Finally, further research into securitisation as a political strategy in states in transition could garner new insights into its potentially destabilising effects on society and so deepen our understanding of why and how violence may occur in democratising states and hopefully enhance our ability to prevent such violence as occurred in Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017 in the future.

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Annex 1: The 2015 Election Results

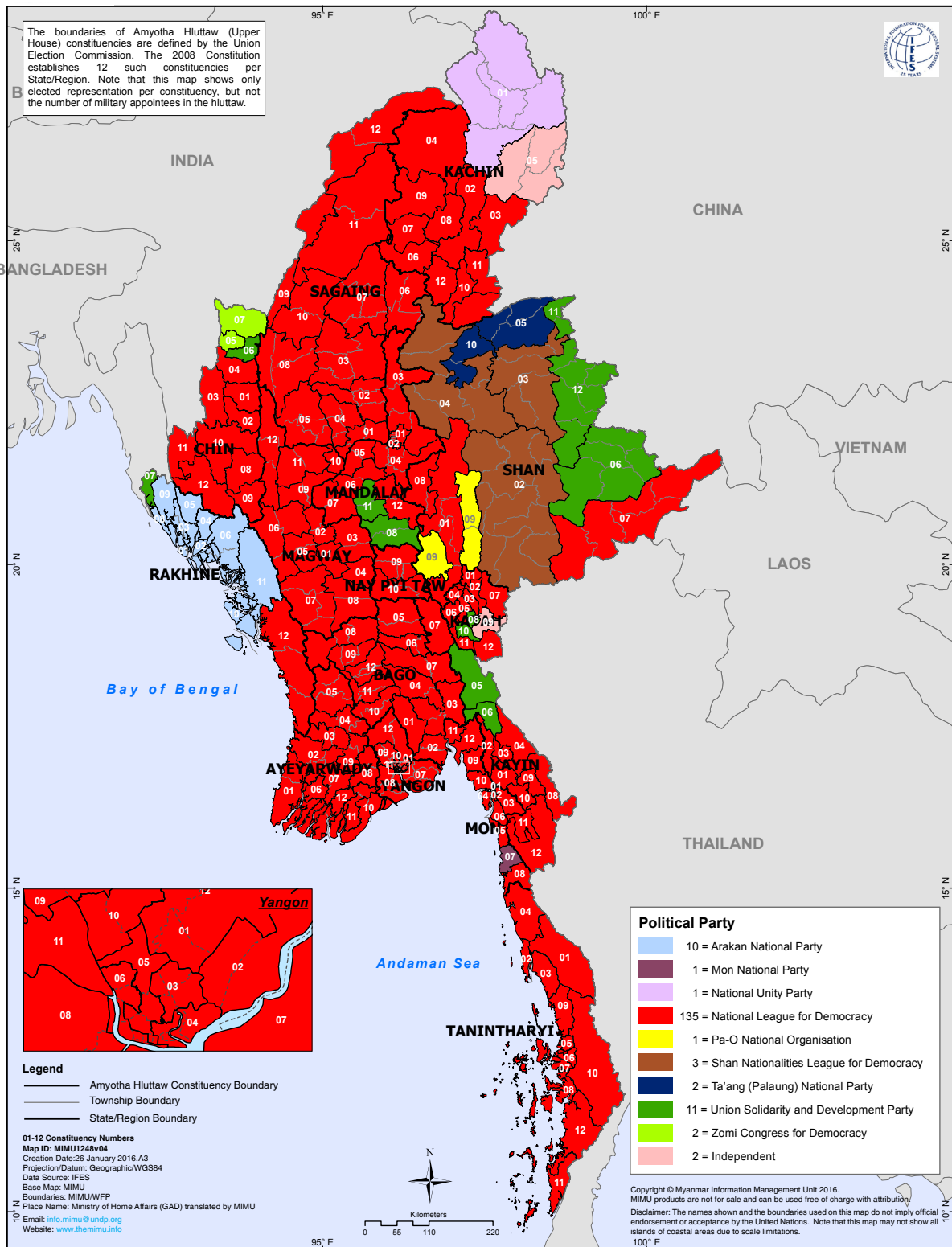


Figure 3 The 2015 Parliamentary Election Results in Myanmar. Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit.

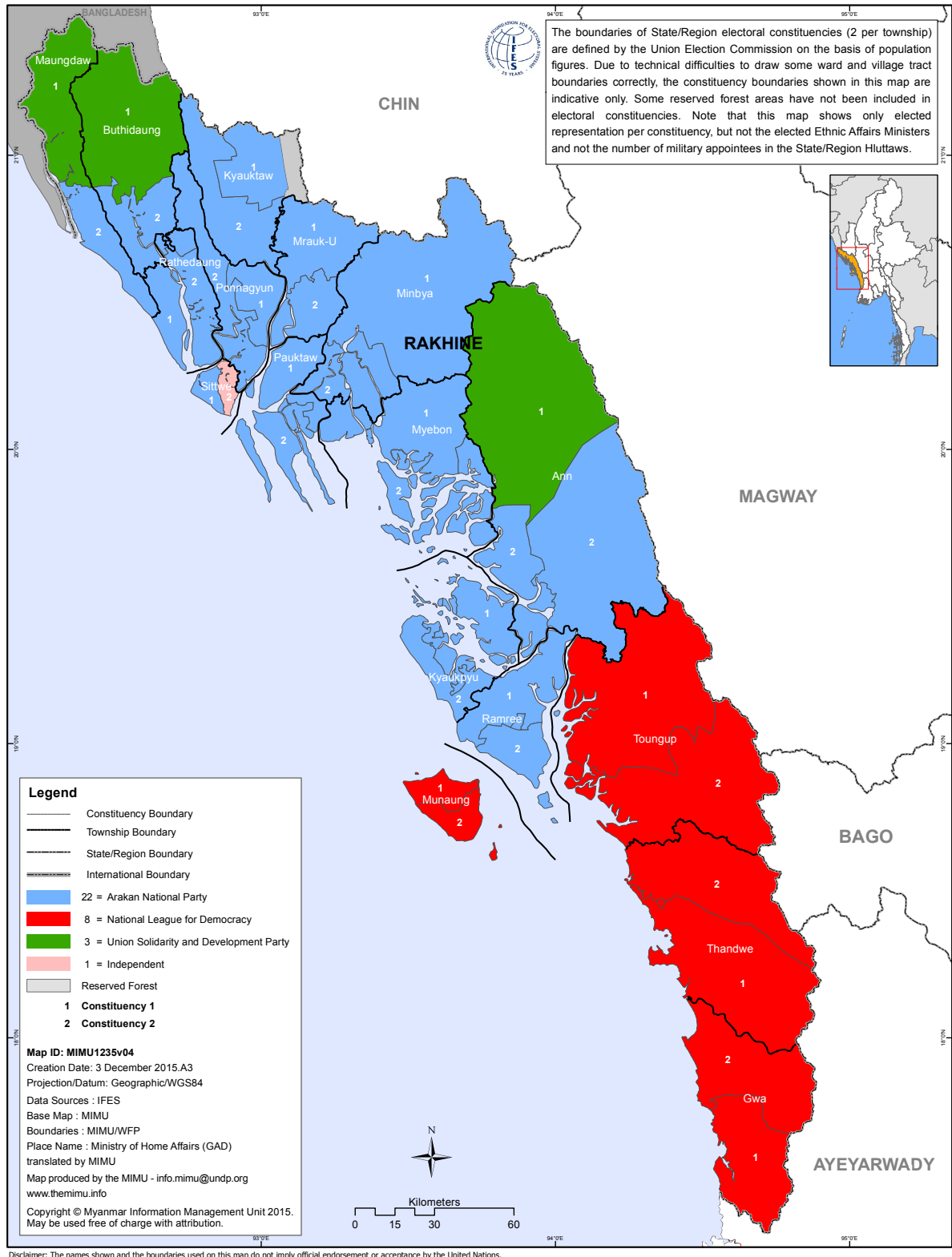


Figure 4 The 2015 Parliamentarian Election Results in Rakhine State. Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit.