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On the Wider Implications of Hate: Lessons from Myanmar

MICHELLE R. KIMBALL · 25 JULY 2026 · 5 MIN READ



History repeatedly demonstrates that hatred rarely begins with violence. It begins with stories. The tragedy unfolding in Myanmar is often discussed as a humanitarian crisis or a case of ethnic conflict. Yet its significance extends far beyond Myanmar's borders. It offers a stark lesson about how prejudice



becomes policy, how exclusion becomes institutionalized, and how narratives of fear can pave the way for atrocity.

The persecution of Muslims in Myanmar did not begin with the Rohingya crisis of 2017, nor with the military coup of 2021. It emerged through a long historical process in which a minority community was gradually recast as an outsider within its own homeland. Muslims have been present in Burma for nearly a thousand years. Traders, administrators, soldiers, and scholars formed part of Burmese society long before the modern nation-state existed. Yet historical reality proved less powerful than political narrative.

Over time, Muslims came to be portrayed not as neighbours or fellow citizens, but as foreigners, economic competitors, and threats to national and religious identity. Such perceptions were cultivated through political rhetoric, selective historical memory, and the exploitation of social anxieties.

The colonial era intensified these tensions. British policies encouraged migration from India, fuelling resentment among segments of the Buddhist majority. Anti-Muslim and anti-Indian riots in the 1930s left hundreds dead and numerous mosques destroyed. Long before legal discrimination was formalized, the groundwork had been laid through narratives portraying Muslims as alien to the nation.



The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in session concerning the case brought by the Gambia against Myanmar © UN Photo/ICJ-CIJ/ Frank van Beek

Following independence in 1948, citizenship laws, administrative procedures, educational narratives, and political discourse increasingly reinforced the notion that some communities belonged more fully than others. The declaration of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961 strengthened the fusion of religion, ethnicity, and national identity.

The lesson is not unique to Myanmar. Across history, persecution often follows a familiar pattern. First, a group is portrayed as different. Then it is portrayed as dangerous. Eventually, discriminatory policies are justified as necessary for the protection of the majority. By the time violence occurs, the moral barriers that might once have prevented it have already been weakened.

The 1982 Citizenship Law illustrates how exclusion became institutionalized. Rather than relying solely on overt repression, the state employed bureaucratic mechanisms: delayed applications, burdensome documentation requirements, restrictions on movement, and barriers to employment. Exclusion did not always arrive through violence; it often arrived through paperwork.

In recent years, Buddhist nationalist movements such as the 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha gained influence by presenting Islam as an existential threat to Buddhism and the Burmese nation. The result was not merely prejudice but a worldview in which Muslims were cast as permanent outsiders regardless of citizenship, ancestry, or contribution to society.

These developments culminated in the 2017 genocide against the Rohingya. More than 700,000 people fled to Bangladesh amid mass killings, village burnings, and widespread sexual violence. The United Nations, human rights organizations, and legal experts have recognized the campaign as involving genocidal intent. In 2019, The Gambia initiated proceedings against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice. Yet genocide did not emerge from a vacuum. It was the endpoint of a process that had unfolded over decades.

This is why Myanmar matters beyond Myanmar. The wider implication of hate is that it rarely remains confined to its original target. Once societies accept the principle that certain groups are less deserving of rights, dignity, or protection, the boundaries of exclusion tend to expand. Today, Myanmar's post-coup violence affects not only Muslims but also Christians, ethnic minorities, political dissidents, journalists, students, and ordinary civilians, during the current civil war. More than 3.5 million people have been displaced, while millions require humanitarian assistance.



Hate is therefore not merely a moral problem. It is a governance problem, a security problem, and ultimately a human problem. It weakens institutions, corrodes trust, undermines social cohesion, and creates conditions in which violence becomes increasingly likely.

Perhaps the most important lesson from Myanmar is that atrocity prevention must begin long before atrocities occur. It must begin when communities are scapegoated, when unequal treatment becomes normalized, and when exclusionary narratives first take root. By the time mass violence erupts, society has often spent years preparing itself to accept the unacceptable.

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Myanmar reminds us that genocide is not only an event. It is a process. And if hatred can be constructed over generations, so too can coexistence. The antidote to exclusion lies not only in legal reform and political accountability but also in rebuilding narratives of shared humanity. Societies are strongest not when they eliminate difference, but when they find ways to live with it.

The wider implication of hate is that it ultimately threatens everyone. The wider implication of dignity, by contrast, is that it protects us all. Based on the experience of Myanmar, that may be one of the most important lessons of our time.

Featured Image: A Rohingya refugee © IMAGO / NurPhoto

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received her BA and MA from the University of California. She compiled, *Muslim Women Throughout the World*, an annotated bibliography. She founded the International Peace Project, and took up the cause of the plight of the Iraqi people. She wrote articles, such as, “Let the Children Live,” traveled to Iraq, made media appearances, and organised events related to global peace initiatives. She wrote: *Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba: A Peacemaker for Our Time*. Her more recent articles have focussed on international relations, Muslim world affairs (including Iran and Palestine), global peace and justice narratives and Islamic spirituality.

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