



December, 2015

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## Latest News



The impetus for the threat to the decline of Karen traditions and culture is the decades of war that have pushed the people to flee their villages and live in another country that has diluted the influence of their culture, especially on the youth. (Photo from [www.burmapartnership.org](http://www.burmapartnership.org))

## Protecting Karen Traditions

### *Saw Mort*



Pu Hsaw Hpah Wa, 85, is concerned that the traditions and culture of the Karen people from Burma is being eroded after living for decades in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Saw Mort explains the factors that have contributed to this

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threat to Karen culture in this blog at Interfaith Cooperation Forum's (ICF) new website. [\[Read more\]](#)

## **Sounds of War Taint the Cheers of Election Success in Burma**

*Burma Partnership*



While many people inside and outside of Burma have applauded the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the Nov. 8 elections, the work for peace with the country's ethnic groups is a major issue that awaits the new government. [\[Read more\]](#)

## **Interfaith Peace on the Banks of the Samisuri**

*Sara Klassen*



As the general secretary of the local YMCA in Birisiri, Biplob Rangsa has a good relationship with Christians in his community in Bangladesh; but in this blog, he describes how and why he built bridges of friendship with Muslims in the community as well. [\[Read more\]](#)

## **Voices for Peace from Poso**

*Gunawan Primasatya*



Poso is a community in the Indonesian province of Central Sulawesi that has witnessed tension and violence between Muslims and Christians since 1998. Efforts are now being made to remind people, especially the youth of the area, about the peaceful relationships of the past that existed between all members of the community

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regardless of their faith in order to nurture these same relationships today. [\[Read more\]](#)

## **Fanatic Fringe the New Mainstream in India**

*Avinash Pandey*



Ever since the election of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014, there have been concerns that his past association with communal violence would lead to increasing attacks on the country's religious minorities. In the view of the author, these apprehensions are being realized.

[\[Read more\]](#)

## **Deal with Muslim Expulsion through Geneva Process**

*National Peace Council*



The world is largely familiar with the suffering that Sri Lanka's decades of civil war caused its Tamil and Sinhalese citizens. However, most people, especially those living outside of the country, are not aware of the hardships endured by the country's Muslim population. This article highlights their expulsion from their homes 25 years ago

from the North and offers a remedy. [\[Read more\]](#)

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## Sounds of War Taint the Cheers of Election Success in Burma

Burma Partnership



A major challenge awaiting the new NLD-led government in Burma is to conclude the peace talks between the government and the country's ethnic groups that have been periodically taking place since outgoing president Thein Sein's peace initiative began in 2011. (Photo from Myat Hnin Phyu's blog)

With the National League for Democracy (NLD) [cementing its place](#) as the incoming government by achieving a supermajority in Parliament, the ongoing armed conflict in northern Burma, especially in Shan State, only highlights the pressing need for the new government to facilitate a genuine and inclusive peace process that works towards national reconciliation.

An offensive by the Burma army that began on Oct. 6, 2015, which is aimed at taking the headquarters of the Shan State Army–North, has resulted in the displacement of at least 7,000 people thus far. As people across Burma enjoyed an optimistic and positive voting day, along with the resulting NLD victory, bombs were being dropped from airplanes, heavy artillery was being used and civilians were inevitably caught in the firing line. For example, on election day itself, two civilians, including a 15-year-old-boy, were [seriously](#)

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[injured](#) when Burma army troops shot at a group of farmers in Mong Nawng in Shan State. The airstrikes are continuing.

This only highlights the importance of a genuine and inclusive peace process and how this process must not be marginalized in the context of the 2015 elections. As [the report by Burma Partnership](#), Elections for Ethnic Equality? A Snapshot of Ethnic Perspectives on the 2015 Elections, emphasizes, the 2015 elections are not sufficient to realize the aspirations of many ethnic communities: ethnic equality, self-determination and a federal system of governance. The 2015 elections, and the democratization process as a whole, must proceed together with the peace process.

The importance of finding a political solution to the decades-long civil war was apparent at a meeting that President Thein Sein had with more than 80 political parties on Nov. 15. At the [meeting](#), each political party had four minutes to make a statement or ask questions, of which more than one-third of the questions were related to the peace process, highlighting its importance for the future government.

Yet the incoming NLD government faces a challenging task. While it may have the political will to engage genuinely and substantively with ethnic armed organizations, it is still constrained by the institutional framework of the 2008 Constitution—the very document that centralizes government control and entrenches power in the hands of the Burma army. The Burma army has long remained intransigent in regards to its relationship with the country's ethnic groups. As Zoya Phan of Burma Campaign UK pointed out when talking about the relevance of the 2015 elections, “The international community may call this a significant step in Myanmar’s transition to democracy, but the key issue responsible for dictatorship in the first place, the refusal of the military to accept the rights and aspirations of ethnic people, is no closer to being resolved.”

The NLD must find a balance between dealing with the still-powerful Burma army while addressing the deep-held concerns and problems that the Burma army itself has created over the years in ethnic areas. The NLD would do well to cooperate with not just ethnic armed organizations but also ethnic political parties, such as the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). While many ethnic political parties did not fare as well as expected in these elections, they are still a key stakeholder in arguably the most important and most complex issue that the NLD will face as the new government.

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The overwhelming victory that the NLD achieved in the 2015 elections is a victory for the democratic will of the people of Burma. Yet this also places a great responsibility on the NLD as a government to address the marginalization and bondage of the ethnic people of Burma in order to secure a just and lasting peace in the country for the first time since independence. This important task necessitates a delicate, skillful, yet principled, approach to changing the 2008 Constitution and placing the Burma army under civilian control. Until this happens, the Burma army will continue to launch military offensives, displace thousands of ethnic people and communities from their homeland and commit human rights violations against civilians with zero accountability in ethnic areas, thus perpetuating civil war and blocking any further progress towards sustainable peace and democracy.

The NLD coming into power as a truly elected government provides the international community with an unprecedented opportunity to work together with a Burma government that has more legitimacy than any other ruling administration in more than 50 years. The international community must take this opportunity and help Burma realize the long-held aspirations of its ethnic people to achieve equality, self-determination and a genuine democratic federal union.

*Burma Partnership is a network of organizations throughout the Asia-Pacific region that advocate and work toward realizing a movement for democracy and human rights in Burma. Based in Thailand, it acts as a link between groups inside the country and solidarity organizations around the world.*

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## Voices for Peace from Poso

Gunawan Primasatya



Members of Gen Peace use a poetry performance with drama to share their message of living in harmony through building relationships between different faith communities during the roadshow at the Christian University of Tentena.

National Heroes Day is celebrated every Nov. 10 in Indonesia. There are many heroes that have had a significant impact on Indonesia's independence. Poso too, in the province of Central Sulawesi, has several leaders as well who have contributed to harmony and peace in our history. Two of them are King Talasa and the Muslim leader Baso Ali. King Talasa was the greatest king in Poso's history. He accepted all people who wanted to live in Poso as long as they respected others and local wisdom. In addition, Baso Ali was one of the Muslim leaders that welcomed the Dutch missionaries to spread Christianity in Poso.

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Today, however, there is a crisis of identity among our young generation that has become a major problem; the values of harmony and peace in our local history and culture have slowly been forgotten. The young generation must have a strong identity and must preserve these stories of harmony and use them in the campaign for peace. The youth must also cultivate critical thinking and be creative, using innovative ideas to make changes in society.

Poso Youth Peacemakers is a movement that was initiated by the participants of the peace sustainability workshop that was held in April 2015 in Poso, a program that was conducted by the local School of Peace (SOP) alumni and supported by Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). This movement has used their potential power, creativity, and networking to organize a number of activities to strengthen the peace process.

Between Sept. 28 and Oct. 2 this year, for instance, they hosted the Generation Peace, or Gen Peace, training program that traveled to seven cities in Indonesia, including Poso. Gen Peace invited 30 students from several universities in Poso to take part in a program to learn how to become social change agents in the community. Two SOP alumni, Gunawan Primasatya and Suwarti Ningsih, spoke during this training program about the role of youth in the peace process based on Poso's experiences of reconciliation.

Through this group, the youth peace movement in Poso has become larger. After this program, the follow-up plan was to make a peace movement to preserve the history and culture of peace by celebrating the National Heroes Day. Working together on the same issues, the youth, using such creative tools as music and theatrical poetry, shared information at five large universities in Poso about the area's history, culture and peace.

There is also a team to investigate the harmony between Muslims and Christians in Poso's past history. The team wrote an article after finding various references, interviewing people and visiting historical sites. They used their research to campaign during the peace roadshow so that people, especially the young generation, can understand how peaceful Poso was in the past.

The peace roadshow, held from Nov. 2 to Nov. 9, involved many youth, such as students from the Christian University of Tentena. They were so excited during the peace roadshow. "I realize that to protect our land the role of young people is really important,"



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said one of the students. The purpose of the roadshow was not only to spread peace but also to build friendships among the universities.

The High Muslim Academy was the second venue for the roadshow. This event was significant because it helped to gather students from different faiths together for the same issue, i.e., to preserve the historical sites of King Talasa and Baso Ali.

On National Heroes Day on Nov. 10, Poso Youth Peacemakers, Gen Peace Poso and Ongga Bale (Poso's tourism ambassador) worked together to clean the graves of King Talasa and Baso Ali. When young people work together, it can strengthen the interaction and togetherness among the youth and build relationships between people from different faith communities. In addition to cleaning these graves, the ceremony on National Heroes Day was held at these graves to remember their service and contribution toward building peace and harmony in Poso and the surrounding area.

Two of the 2015 SOP participants, Fira Tyasningsih and Ade Nuriadin, joined these activities. They supported the plan and assisted in the technical preparations for this program using what they learned during SOP. Ade, for example, launched his short film, and Fira applied her knowledge in structural analysis and used drama to educate the youth. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, said, "The great nation is the nation that honors the heroes' services."

We clearly understand this quote through these activities. When the youth begin to respect their history and culture, they will have a strong identity; and when they acknowledge their unity that is rooted in a similar culture and history, it motivates the youth to address the same issues, build relationships and maintain peace from the campus to the community.

*Gunawan Primasatya has been active for years in building relationships between Muslims and Christians in Central Sulawesi, a province that has witnessed tension and violence between the two faith communities. Focusing largely on women, children and youth, he currently works for the Women's School that has programs in 30 villages in five districts of Central Sulawesi. He attended SOP conducted by ICF in 2010 in Bangalore, India.*

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## Fanatic Fringe the New Mainstream in India

Avinash Pandey



The family of Mohammad Akhlaq, a 50-year-old Muslim farmer, mourn his death allegedly because he ate beef and kept it in his refrigerator at his home in the village of Bisara. A subsequent forensic test revealed that the meat was mutton. (Photo from [www.dnaindia.com](http://www.dnaindia.com))

“Incidents like Dadri and Ghulam Ali are really sad, but what is the role of the Center in them?”

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These are the words of Narendra Modi, prime minister of India, who finally appears to have broken his silence in this statement made to the Bengali newspaper Anandabazar Patrika on the increasing instances of sectarian killings in the country.

The “incidents” he refers to include the mob lynching of a Muslim man in a village near Dadri over a rumor of him having eaten beef. Eating beef is not a crime in the state of Uttar Pradesh where the murder took place. Local members of the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), i.e., the party Mr. Modi leads, announced this “rumor” from a temple loudspeaker.

Moreover, it has taken him more than a year to speak up after the first such hate killing, which resulted in the death of Mohsin Sadiq Shaikh, a 24-year-old Muslim in Pune. This murder occurred within weeks of Modi becoming the prime minister of India. He maintained similar stoic silence over virtually all other hate crimes committed by various Hindutva organizations, including those affiliated with the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) whose political arm the BJP is. Meanwhile, he chose to tweet during this period even on local inconsequential BJP victories and even to congratulate individual players of India’s World Cup cricket team. His silence on hate crimes has continued in the face of murders of writers and activists, like Govind Pansare and M. M. Kalburgi, allegedly, again, by members of Hindutva groups. Modi has remained steadfast in his silence until he was hit by an avalanche of writers returning their awards, including those by the Sahitya Akademi, the apex literary body of the country, which is government-funded, but autonomous. He has been forced to speak when protests escalated to the extent of Dalip Singh Tiwana, an 80-year-old celebrated Punjabi writer, returning her Padma Shri, i.e., one of the highest civilian awards in the republic. The avalanche of protests made the possibility of his stoic silence unfeasible. Only then has he spoken—to a Bengali newspaper.

Now that he has spoken, apart from the fact that he has spoken, attention naturally needs to be paid on what he has said. And what he has said should bother the country more than his studied silence in the face of attacks and rising intolerance across the country.

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This violence in Dadri is not the first time, of course, that India has seen a spurt in sectarian tension. Modi himself presided over the violence in the state of Gujarat in 2002 when one of the nation's worst communal pogroms that ensued after a ghastly attack on a train in Godhra rocked the nation. Many people will recall that his—controversial at best, and partisan at worst—handling of the pogrom and riots earned him a rebuke from none other than Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then-prime minister of India and a founder of the BJP. Vajpayee had asked Modi then to follow “rajdharmā” (duty of the rulers) and not discriminate on the basis of caste, creed or religion.

Modi might claim to be sad over “incidents” like the Dadri killing, but his actions betray both the hollowness of the claim and that he never took Vajpayee's advice seriously. Immediately after the murder in Dadri, Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma pontificated on the nature of the injuries, which, for him, showed that there was no desire for the mob to engage in a lynching. As if that was not enough, he also took pride in the fact that the 17-year-old daughter of the victim was not touched by the mob. Mahesh Sharma is not the first minister of the Modi cabinet to indulge in such a brazen defense, or legitimization, of Hindutva fanaticism. Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti, for instance, is notorious for having exhorted the Delhi electorate to choose between Ramzades (sons of Lord Rama) and Haramzades (illegitimate children).

Moreover, these two ministers do not represent anomalies in the Modi cabinet, which is known for rewarding and not penalizing such behavior. One can recall how Modi had inducted Giriraj Singh, a first-time member of Parliament (MP) from the state of Bihar, despite him facing criminal charges for allegedly delivering a hate speech that suggested that after Modi became prime minister his critics would be banished to Pakistan. Similarly awarded with a ministerial berth in the Modi cabinet was Sanjeev

Baliyan, who is facing criminal charges over his role in inciting the Muzaffarnagar riots, which claimed more than 60 lives in 2013. The writing on the wall is clear. Rioting, as well as less intense forms of communal polarization, has long been a prized weapon of politicking in India; even the so-called secular parties have employed them time and again. However, no party has ever dared to bring the associated rioters into the mainstream until now; they have been accommodated and rewarded by different means until now. The republic remembers how many of those involved in rioting against Sikhs in

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1984 were rewarded, but it also remembers how even major leaders of the Indian National Congress, like Sajjan Kumar and Jagdish Tytler, were made to pay a heavy political price for their alleged involvement in the riots. They had to be relegated to the fringe, and they never found their way back into the mainstream.

Even that pretense has now been done away with since the rise of rabid Hindutva politics led by Modi. The experiment that started in Gujarat when a violent murderous fringe began being accommodated in the mainstream has now become successful with the induction of riot-accused ministers in the national government.

It is in this context that Modi's self-claimed helplessness becomes a significant marker of the times to come, and not only because his claim is plainly wrong. India, after all, is a union, and the union government has a plethora of constitutional rights to intervene if state governments fail in their mandatory duty of protecting their citizens' lives, in this case those of their minorities.

Furthermore, these provisions are not limited to the much-misused Article 356 of the Indian Constitution that allows for the imposition of presidential rule in the states. There is also Article 365 that authorizes the national government to intervene in cases where state governments fail to follow its directions. Article 365 reads as follows in its entirety:

*"Effect of failure to comply with, or to give effect to, directions given by the Union  
Where any State has failed to comply with or to give effect to any directions  
given in the exercise of the executive power of the Union under any directions  
given in the exercise of the executive power of the Union under any of the  
provisions of this Constitution, it shall be lawful for the President to hold that a  
situation has arisen in which the government of the State cannot be carried on  
in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution."*

The writing on the wall is clear. It is not constitutional provisions that have prevented Modi from speaking up or asking the chief ministers of states that are witnessing increasing violence to ensure that the rule of law is maintained and to punish the troublemakers, most of whom are, in any case, from the RSS that Modi himself owes allegiance to. This inaction is why Modi's decision not to ask even the chief ministers of states ruled by his party either alone or in alliances, never mind the ones ruled by

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opposition political parties, becomes tacit approval for such attacks by the erstwhile fringe. This apathy toward violence is exactly what Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut has exposed when he lashed out at Modi's "sadness" over the mob lynching in Dadri and the cancellation of a ghazal concert by Ghulam Ali. One does not get an ally exhorting to Modi's Godhra past every day, and here is a senior Shiv Sena leader speaking the obvious: Modi is known around the world for Godhra, and this association is why Shiv Sena respects him.

The irony hidden in the outburst is startling. Shiv Sena has long been the violent fringe of Hindutva politics—the violent and uncouth fringe. It was never known for lacking in guts to call anyone any names, but then exhorting the prime minister's not-so-inspiring past with sound logic exposes how far the fringe has traveled. The problem with the fringe becoming the mainstream does not augur well for the future of the republic, and not just for the future of its beleaguered minorities. Once the fringe entrenches itself in power, it turns against everyone, even those instrumental in bringing it there. Experiences from recent history bear witness to this fact. Pakistan has learnt the lesson that no amount of pretensions can turn a faction of the Taliban into a good faction without high cost. India too will arrive there if the governments, both at the national and state levels, fail to crack down on the fringe decisively. Being sad is fine, but one cannot fight crime with sadness: it requires prosecution and punishment for those responsible. Unfortunately, with ministers accused of inciting riots and delivering hate speeches, the current regime does not seem to be particularly interested in the punishment of such crimes.

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## Deal with Muslim Expulsion through Geneva Process

National Peace Council



Muslims in the North of Sri Lanka who were forced to leave their homes in 1990 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are still waiting to return home. (Photo from <http://srilankamuslims.lk>)

The 25th year of the mass expulsion of Muslim people resident in the North of Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fell this October. The eviction of the 90,000-strong northern Muslim population continues to be a humanitarian and political problem of national proportions. An estimated 80 percent of these Muslim citizens

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continue to live outside their original places of residence. However, the problems faced by this section of the Sri Lankan population and finding a just solution have not been given either the public attention or priority that it deserves. The government's decision to co-sponsor the U.N. Human Rights Council resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka provides an opportunity for the country, and the international human rights community, to come to terms with this problem and find a just solution.

The National Peace Council (NPC) welcomes, and appreciates, the introspective and self-critical statement of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which was chosen by a large majority of Tamil people in the North and East at the recent general elections. The TNA stated in its response to the U.N. Human Rights Council investigation report that "we also accept and undertake to carry out our responsibility to lead the Tamil people in reflecting on the past and use this moment as a moment of introspection into our own community's failures and the unspeakable crimes committed in our name, so as to create an enabling culture and atmosphere in which we could live with dignity and self-respect as equal citizens of Sri Lanka." The NPC believes that this call needs to be appreciated, emulated and adopted by the government, other political parties, by opinion makers and leaders of each of the Sri Lankan ethnic and religious communities and the international human rights community as well.

Even today, six years after the end of the war, the fact that such a large proportion of Muslim people who were displaced in 1990 remain in temporary residences is an indictment on the justice and reconciliation process in the country. This ongoing displacement is in violation of their right to return, which is accorded to them by the international covenants that Sri Lanka has signed. The failure of successive governments to vindicate their right to return has led to ad hoc resettlements that have exacerbated inter-community tensions. Recently, the issue of resettlement of displaced Muslims took on controversial proportions and was linked to the alleged encroachment of the Wilpattu National Park.

The government's decision to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a judicial mechanism for accountability with international participation and an office of reparations, provides the basis for a just solution that will be in accordance with



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international standards. This mandate should include the expulsion of the Muslims and their continued inability, in practice, to exercise their right of return. The NPC calls on the government to ensure that the mandate of the TRC extends beyond the period from 2002 to 2009, which was the limited time frame of the investigation report of the U.N. Human Rights Council. It needs to go back in time to cover the events of the expulsion of the Muslims of the North in 1990 and also beyond this period to cover other serious human rights violations that occurred in the course of the war so that injustices that occurred to all communities are taken into account and remedies are found.

*The National Peace Council (NPC) is an independent and non-partisan organization that works towards a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. It has a vision of a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all communities in the country are respected. The policy of the NPC is determined by its governing council of 20 members who are drawn from diverse walks of life and who belong to all the main ethnic and religious communities in the country.*



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