

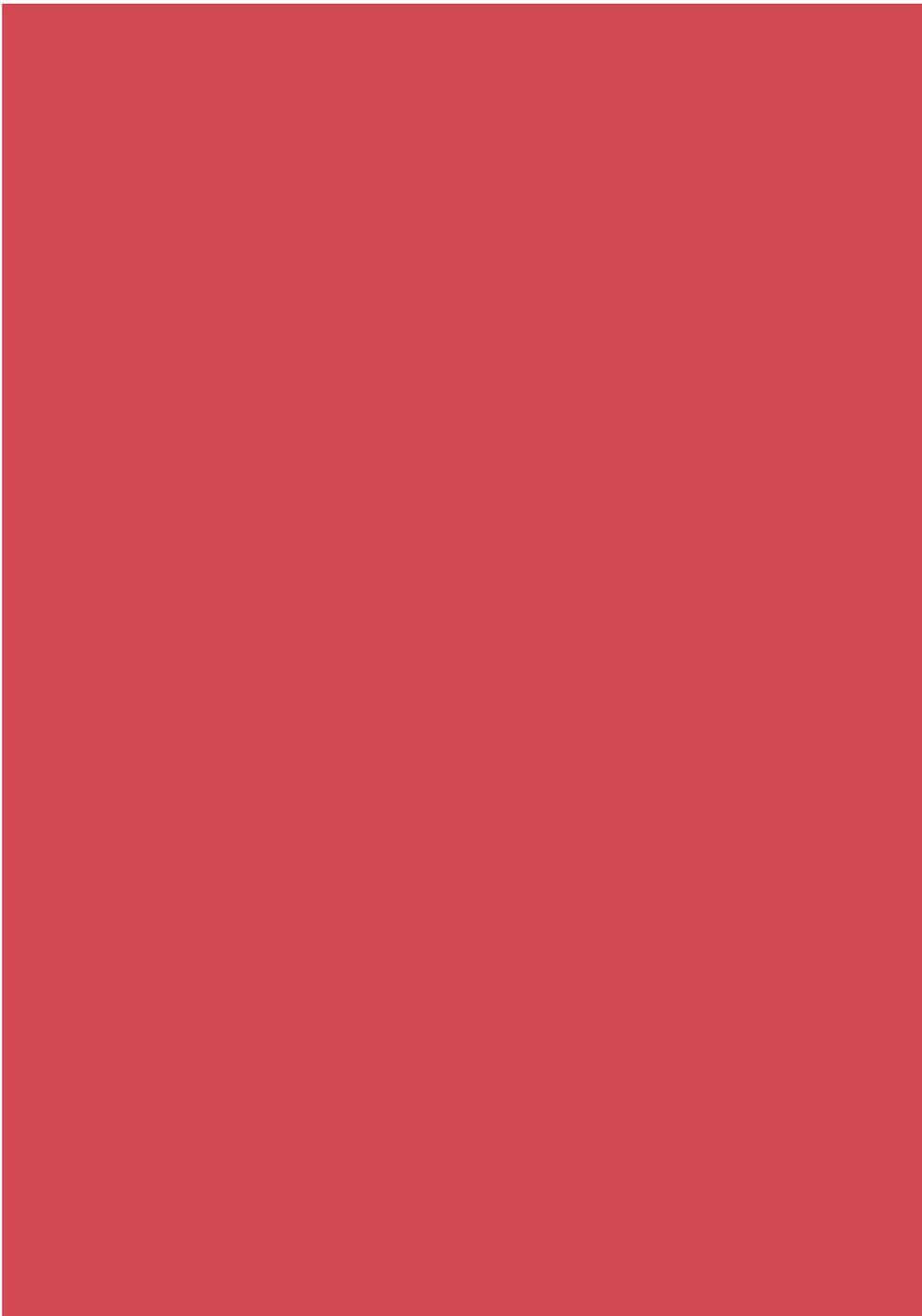
Mir Mubashir



## **BASELINE STUDY**

Tradition- & Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs)  
as Crucial Actors in Conflict Transformation

Case Study: **Myanmar/Burma**



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## Background of this case study

In mediation processes, usually an *outsider* and *impartial* third party mediator is sought. In certain contexts, especially in traditional and high-context societies, an insider mediator who is intrinsic (geographically, culturally and normatively) to the conflict context, and thereby *partial*, often gets more legitimacy to mediate than an outsider. Tradition- & faith-oriented insider mediator (TFIMs) are those who take an assortment of concepts, values and practices from culture, tradition and faith (among other sources) as inspiration, motivation, guidance and as methodological support towards mediation. TFIMs may include traditional and religious leaders/ authorities, but also other actors who may, on principle and/ or strategically, draw tools and inspiration from (multiple) faiths, cultures and traditions, as well as from non-religious (secular) and non-traditional concepts/ values. This case study is part of the empirical research that was carried out to understand the mediation roles, potential and constraints of TFIMs.

## About the author

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## Availability

All case studies, the main study, and a synopsis are available at [www.peacemakersnetwork.org/tfim](http://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/tfim).

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# 1. Introduction & background

Myanmar/Burma's<sup>1</sup> recent emergence from five decades of military rule, its gradual transition to democracy, and the religious and traditional dimensions of its multiple conflict contexts, make the country a highly relevant example for the present baseline study on tradition- and faith-oriented insider mediators (TFIMs). The body of literature on Myanmar is vast and growing, and the present case study aims to supplement it with some observations and insights on Myanmar's TFIMs, in order to provide an impetus for (much needed) further research that could inform praxis. The study is primarily based on a seven-day field visit to Yangon and various parts of the Mandalay region in April 2015,<sup>2</sup> during which a series of conversations were held with a range of actors comprised of religious leaders from the Buddhist, Muslim, Baha'i and Christian faiths; interfaith groups; prominent writers, intellectuals and academics; and representatives from NGOs, CSOs, women's groups, as well as a number of state agencies. Due to stringent time and budget limits and travel restrictions, actors in other ethnic states who would have been very relevant for this study, particularly with regard to their role in the ethnic armed conflicts, could not be taken into account. A modest review of the relevant literature and news sources aims to fill in the broader picture across the country.

The paper is structured as follows: the subsequent paragraphs of this introductory section will provide an overview of the traditional and religious dimensions of Myanmar's conflicts and the associated actors. The sections that follow then present some of the diverse roles played by TFIMs (section 2), the resources and approaches they draw on in performing these roles (section 3), the challenges and limitations they face (section 4), and the support they require in order to overcome these challenges and limitations (section 5). The paper ends with some concluding reflections. Unless otherwise stated, the material presented in this paper is a synthesis of the conversations held with the different actors, whose names have been denoted with *ITALICISED INITIALS* to ensure their anonymity and safety.

## 1.1 Tradition and religion as dimensions of conflict

During a conversation, KKL made the illuminating remark that her faith is Christian and her culture is Buddhist. This is a profound statement about how Buddhist traditions shape the country's culture. While her own experience of the relation between faith and culture may well be a positive one, most non-Bamar ethnic nationalities and non-Buddhists<sup>3</sup> have a story to tell of cultural, linguistic, or religious repression, which can be traced back to colonial and pre-colonial times. To date, this repression remains the most significant source of grievances among non-Bamar ethnic nationalities and of the armed struggle for self-determination led by ethnic armed groups and organisations (EAGs and EAOs respectively, or simply denoted as 'EAG/Os' hereafter) against the post-independence Burmese state.

Grievances are inevitable when, in one of the world's most diverse multi-ethnic contexts, a nation-building agenda based on one religion (Theravada Buddhism), one language (Myanma Bhasa – Myanmar language/Burmese), and one ethnicity (Bamar/Burman) is enforced by successive governments and the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar military). "Burmanisation/Bamarisation" – as the coercive assimilation policies and processes are widely referred to among non-Bamar ethnic nationalities – is based on "Buddhist nationalism" or "political Buddhism", and ranges from the sidelining of ethnic languages, through the imposition of Bamar as the exclusive language of the public education system, a ban on ethnic/religious festivals, Bamar-only/Buddhist-only criteria for certain jobs (at least at certain pay grades) and business opportunities, all the way up to rape and forced impregnation by Tatmadaw soldiers (cf. Sakhong and Keenan 2014; Smith and Allsebrook 1994).

The religious dimension in particular has shown forced conversion of Christians and Muslims to Buddhism, destruction of holy books and places of worship, restrictions on building/repairing places of worship and illegal construction of pagodas.<sup>4</sup> Non-Bamar Theravada Buddhists such as the Shan have their own monasteries and pago-

1. For the sake of simplicity, 'Myanmar' will be used in this paper.

2. Slight updates have been made during the drafting of the final version of this paper in March 2016.

3. The official census data in Myanmar is highly contentious and unreliable, yet the following figures from various sources provide a rough picture of the ethnic and religious make-up of the country. Ethnicity (as a % of the population): Bamar/Burman 68; Shan 9; Karen 7; Rakhine 3.5; Mon 2; Kachin 1.5; Kayah 0.75; Indian 1.25; Chinese 2.5; approx. 130 other groups including Wa, Naga, Lahu, Lisu and Palaung 4.5; Religion (%): Theravada Buddhism 80.1; Christianity 7.8; Burmese folk religion 5.8; Islam 4; Hinduism 1.7; others including Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism 0.6. Sources: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_in\\_Myanmar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_Myanmar), [www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/burma-myanmar](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/burma-myanmar), Hre (2013).

4. Myanmar is ranked number 25 on the list of countries in which Christians face the highest levels of persecution. See [www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/myanmar](http://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/myanmar). The Chin are predominantly Christian, there are significant Christian groups among the Kachin and the Shan, and the Karen, Karenni, Lahu, and Naga also have sizeable Christian populations (cf. Ling and Mang 2004; CHRO 2012; Harvard Divinity School).

Islam is widely practised in Rakhine State, mainly by the Rohingya, and is also practised by some Bamar people, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis in the Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Magway regions and in some Mandalay Divisions.

The issue of statelessness and citizenship among Rohingya people (an ethnicity that many people in Myanmar do not appear to recognise, preferring to call this group Bengali Muslims) has a very complicated historical, geographical and socio-political background, which it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss (cf. ICG 2014; Cox, Orsborn, and Sisk 2015; Stein 2013).

das, which have not escaped desecration and destruction. Non-Theravada Buddhist sects likewise feel persecuted, as they are recognised neither by the Sangha (the traditional monastic community/clergy) and thus nor by the state (cf. Human Rights Resource Centre 2015; ICG 2014).

Decades of civil war have woven a dense social fabric of mistrust among the different ethnic groups in Myanmar. Since the government and the members of the Tatmadaw are almost exclusively Bamar, “Burmanisation” has instilled in other ethnic nationalities a strong image of Bamar people in general as the enemy and oppressor. Nevertheless, a number of other social fractures and conflicts revolve around the relations between indigenous and non-indigenous groups (e.g. Muslim, Rohingya, Indian and Chinese), in the context of smaller ethnic groups living among larger groups, as well as around those who have been internally displaced as a direct result of armed conflict and communal violence.<sup>5</sup> There have also been rifts between the various EAGs, and between the EAGs and their own communities (cf. Dittmer 2010; Kuppuswamy 2013; Bu 2013). Some critics have remarked that the post-independence regimes have quite successfully upheld the colonial divide and rule strategy by politicising these elements of social incohesion within a deep-rooted generational discourse of social antipathy.

In Myanmar, a traditional Buddhist way of life is pervasive: monasteries are the centre of cultural and social life and the Sangha has an overwhelming influence in society – not only spiritually and socially, but also politically. Although many senior monks in the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (the highest administrative body of the Sangha) have purportedly been co-opted by the Tatmadaw, the traditional Sangha still acts as a significant catalyst in civil and political affairs. Throughout history, monks have been crucial players in the demand for political and economic change, particularly during the 8888 nationwide popular pro-democracy protests of 1988 and the *Saffron Revolution* of 2007. On the other hand, however, the rise of the MaBaTha<sup>6</sup> and the 969 Movement in recent years amid considerable public and state support has stirred up unprecedented xenophobic (largely Islamophobic) tendencies in Myanmar’s Buddhist society, which came to be manifested through anti-Muslim riots.<sup>7</sup> In countering an off-held image of Buddhism and Buddhist monks as the most ideal embodiment of nonviolence, these developments have shocked the world.

Myanmar’s various conflict contexts, however, seldom revolve around tradition and religion alone, but rather a complex amalgamation of political, economic, social, religious, cultural and psychological factors (cf. Miller and Frazer 2015).

## 1.2 Tradition- and faith-oriented conflict transformation actors

Among the range of actors involved in attempts to constructively transform the various conflicts in Myanmar, tradition- and faith-oriented actors are particularly relevant here, since tradition and religion are taken very seriously by the people. These actors fall under five categories, each of which involves different forms of action, of varying scope and relevance:

- **Religious elites: authority figures and institutions.** These include monks of the high monastic authority, bishops and high priests from Catholic and Baptist churches, and prominent individuals representing Muslim groups. They are visible within elite circles and also increasingly internationally, and have varying degrees of influence in the political domain. While, as Myanmar continues to open up, they are increasingly voicing their views in public and directly addressing the state, critics have deemed their contribution and community-presence insufficient.
- **Non-elite religious leaders.** Abbots and monks attached to Buddhist monasteries, Christian bishops, priests and pastors and imams and leaders of Muslim groups. These leaders have access to wider networks, and the scope of their work and influence is broader.
- **Faith-based organisations (FBOs).** NGOs, CSOs and CBOs with implicit or explicit associations with certain faiths. They are very well networked and some are affiliated with regional and international (faith-based) NGOs.<sup>8</sup>
- **Elders/traditional leaders.** Individuals in villages and tribal communities who are traditionally respected within their communities, in part as conflict mediators. They do not represent a particular religious authority, but preside over village-level or tribal associations and indigenous civil society networks. Very little research, however, has been devoted to such traditional actors and mechanisms (cf. Leone and Giannini 2005; Petrie and South 2014; Petrie and South 2013).
- **Civil society and community actors.** NGOs, CSOs and CBOs that have a secular mandate, but that also manifest tradition and religion in their work and engage with the above-mentioned sets of actors in order to establish a cohesive network. This group also includes community leaders and highly motivated and passionate individuals who are not necessarily part of any organisation but who sometimes receive organisational support from external actors.

In Myanmar, religious institutions, organisations and establishments have earned legitimacy and trust among

5. As of March 2015, the number of these IDPs was estimated at 662,400; see [www.internal-displacement.org/south-and-south-east-asia/myanmar/figures-analysis](http://www.internal-displacement.org/south-and-south-east-asia/myanmar/figures-analysis).

6. The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion or the Patriotic Association of Myanmar.

7. Recently, the MaBaTha successfully promoted the promulgation of four laws concerning religious conversion, interfaith marriage, polygamy, and family planning, which many critics linked to its anti-Muslim agenda and feared that this would trigger further violence against Muslim communities. These laws are regarded as violating Myanmar’s constitutional provisions on religious freedom and non-discrimination (Horsey 2015; Kuok 2015). There has also been a further move by the MaBaTha to institute a ban on schoolgirls wearing headscarves; see [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/buddhist-monks-seek-to-ban-schoolgirls-from-wearing-headscarves](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/buddhist-monks-seek-to-ban-schoolgirls-from-wearing-headscarves).

8. As of 2006, 48% of CBOs and 63% of local NGOs were affiliated with religious groups or classified themselves as religious; 43.2% of these were Buddhist, 43.2% Christian, 6.6% Muslim, and 4.5% Hindu (Heidel 2006). One can assume that these figures have risen since 2011, following the political changes.

the population over several generations, having instituted community-based social development and welfare schemes in areas where the state has not. The unofficial monastic education system, for example, is provided on a massive scale by the monasteries, which in certain areas also organise healthcare services. In predominately Christian areas, Baptist and Catholic communities and organisations, being very well networked at both the international and local levels, have played a crucial role in development activities and in channelling international aid (cf. Benson and Jaquet 2014). The Myanmar Council of Churches, the Myanmar Baptist Convention and the Catholic Bishops Conference are the umbrella entities under which many Christian organisations are grouped. Similar Muslim and Hindu entities also exist, but are smaller in scope.

Interestingly, Myanmar's civil society began to be established prior to 1900, in the form of informal village-level

religious organisations that convened socio-religious activities. These organisations created social welfare and development programs, at first in their local communities and then on a broader scale, morphing into formal community organisations in the early 1900s. Towards the end of the 1900s, these associations came to focus on the religious and cultural aspects of society; some later evolved into ethnic and political movements (cf. ADB 2014). To a certain extent, they can be seen as the nonviolent counterparts of the ethnic armed groups, with similar aspirations: greater autonomy, ethnic rights, and a federalist democracy. The political changes that started taking place in 2011 seem to have created an environment that has allowed community-based religious organisations to upscale their activities.

## 2. Peace mediation roles

This section considers the various ways in which TFIMs engage in peace mediation in Myanmar's diverse conflict contexts, whether or not religion or tradition are dimensions in these conflicts. Their engagement revolves around dialogic processes that aim to create space for conflict transformation and that range from the facilitation of dialogues between EAG/Os and the state to very low profile grassroots dialogues that aim to (re)build social cohesion. It would likely be difficult to find many individuals in Myanmar who would shy away from affirming their religious faith, and the TFIMs interviewed for this study have been observed to be drawing on their faith to varying degrees and manners to guide and strategise their peace mediation work.

### 2.1 Mediating ethnic armed conflict

The official peace process to resolve the protracted armed conflict between various EAGs and the Tatmadaw has now been running for some time.<sup>9</sup> TFIMs have played a substantial mediating role in this process, and are commonly referred to as 'go-betweens' who have kept ceasefire talks going by communicating messages back and forth between the EAG/Os and the state. In the context of the new dynamics of the peace process since 2011, TFIMs have also come to take on the role of observers (e.g. Nyein Foundation representatives) and ceasefire monitors (eminent civil society and community actors).

TFIMs (in all but the first of the categories mentioned in section 1.2) generally enjoy high levels of trust among communities, which see EAGs either as their saviours from Tatmadaw violence, or as those who cause and exploit their suffering. In the latter case, TFIMs represent their communities in negotiations with EAGs to ensure the safety and security of the very people that the EAGs purport to fight for. While Buddhist monks are rarely known to become involved in issues concerning the ethnic armed struggle, the Christian Church and church-based institutions, particularly in ethnic states with a sizeable Christian population, have exerted some influence on EAG/Os. They encourage leaders at various levels within EAGs to engage in ceasefire and dialogue processes with the state and the military (or with other EAGs). Some TFIMs, despite being of non-Bamar ethnicity, have managed to earn the respect of state and Tatmadaw actors, which has allowed them to secure safe zones for their communities. The following list indicates some of the crucial mediation roles played by TFIMs in some ethnic states.

- **Kachin.** The leaders of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) have long been instrumental in mediating between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)/Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the state. In 1994, Reverend Saboi Jum of the KBC was instrumental in forging a ceasefire agreement that was to last for 17 years.<sup>10</sup>

9. For an overview of the process, see:

- <http://en.pyidaungsinstitute.org>, website of the Pyidaungsu Institute for Peace and Dialogue  
- <http://mmpeacemonitor.org>, website of the Myanmar Peace Monitor (a project run by Burma News International)  
- Oo (2014); BNI (2015)

10. This agreement, however, did not involve a guarantee of political talks, and consequently failed to produce a political solution to the Kachin people's right to self-determination. The reverend is thus remembered by some as the strongest mediator they have had, and by others as the one who compromised their ethnic rights.

by working together on common projects, usually humanitarian community development initiatives of various kinds (cf. Mason and Kartas 2010; Mason and Stein 2011; Mason and Sguaitamatti 2011).

Staff at the Nyein Foundation founded by Reverend Jum continue to carry out mediation work today, although in a broader manner. In 2009, Kachin church leaders of various denominations played a crucial role in talks on transforming the KIA into the Border Guard Force (BGF).

- **Kayah/Karenni.** The Catholic bishop Sotero Phamo is well-remembered for the leading role he played in intra-EAG/O mediation in Kayah. The persistent advocacy work undertaken by an informal group of religious, business and cultural leaders had succeeded in bringing the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) to the negotiation table with the state.
- **Karen/Kayin.** The Karen Peace Mediator Group, comprised of Rangoon-based church leaders from the Myanmar Council of Churches and the Anglican Church, is well known for its mediation efforts between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the state between 1995 and 2004. Although the talks broke down twice in this period, the group is still well remembered by both the Karen people and the state. A more local Karen body, the Karen State Peace Committee (KPC), formed in 1999, is also exemplary on account of its interfaith formation (which brings together leading Buddhist monks and Christian clerics), and its outreach and collaboration with Karen CSOs and FBOs.<sup>11</sup> Since 2012, the Karen Unity and Peace Committee (KUPC), comprised of various TFIMs (elders, as well as cultural and religious groups), has played an active role in mobilising civil society groups, the media, and public participation in the peace process, while simultaneously helping the KNU to implement and facilitate negotiations.
- **Chin.** The Chin Peace and Tranquillity Committee (CPTC) is composed of Chin religious and community leaders, who liaise between the Chin National Front (CNF) and the state, and take pre-emptive action to prevent the CNF from engaging in destructive actions that would derail the peace process. As of 2012, a network of Chin churchmen and women have been given an official mandate to monitor the peace agreement (cf. South 2012).

## 2.2 Mediating social cohesion and change

Since Myanmar began to open up around 2011, more information has become available on the wide range of initiatives undertaken by TFIMs whose peace mediation work focusses on enhancing social cohesion and coexistence at the community level through dialogue, as part of a larger framework of national reconciliation. Interethnic tensions are omnipresent in Myanmar, as indicated in section 1.1, but interethnic dialogic initiatives are not widespread, and are not seen as a priority among TFIMs.<sup>12</sup> Precedence has understandably been given to interfaith initiatives, in light of the sectarian tensions and violence in the last few years concerning Rohingyas and Muslims in general. Alongside

certain religious institutions, almost every other CSO and NGO appears to have some connection to interfaith dialogue, and there are even some state-sponsored dialogue initiatives. Elite interfaith dialogues have generally been seen merely as sending a message and as ineffective in transforming conflict. This appears to be changing in recent times, as some top religious leaders are becoming more vocal and active, including Myanmar's first cardinal, Charles Maung Bo, who expressed his intention to push for an end to sectarian violence in the country two days after his appointment in 2015. Nevertheless, such elites have yet to play a game-changing mediation role.

TFIMs who are non-elite religious and civil society leaders are involved in a wider range of interfaith dialogue activities, ranging from ad-hoc rapid-response and conciliatory community dialogue in the event of communal riots, to long-term, awareness-raising dialogue processes. A number of examples are noted below:

- In the Mandalay region, an interfaith group organised primarily by a 'progressive' monastery, led by Buddhist, Muslim, Bahai, Christian and Hindu religious leaders, and incorporating young volunteers from all religions, engages in what can best be described as diapraxis.<sup>13</sup> It brings together community members of different faiths to solve locally relevant environmental or economic problems.
- Another interfaith group that originated in Mandalay consists of troubadours who tour the country and work with faith-based organisations to improve the social fabric of communities by shedding light on misconceptions about different religions.
- The action-oriented teaching and practice of '(socially) engaged Buddhism' has also inspired some TFIMs to take on interfaith issues. In conjunction with regional networks like the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), they have established interfaith dialogue initiatives throughout the country, ranging from public dialogues to training programmes.
- *NPL* is a writer and journalist and a prime example of a TFIM who might not usually be considered a faith-oriented actor. It is due to the respect he enjoys within society for his social engagement, which he himself sees as being based on Buddhist teachings, that he is trusted as a leader in interfaith dialogue processes.
- Although not exactly mediative or dialogic in nature, mass preaching by some Buddhist monks and abbots attempt to counteract the prevalent hate speech voiced by intolerant monks. Some have conducted group counselling for monks and community members who seek to escape their very own fear and hatred toward Muslims. Younger monks are increasingly utilising social media to engage in this the public discourse around this.
- A number of organisations have adopted a long-term and sustainable social change approach, using educa-

11. Some suggest that the formation of the KPC was largely due to the dissatisfaction of Karen leaders over the fact that Christian Karens from Rangoon were leading the mediation process (Dittmer 2010).

12. Civil society activism around interethnic issues, particularly by left-leaning journalists and writers, has nevertheless always existed in certain forms and to a certain extent, despite persecution by the state. Dissident writers and journalists such as Ludu U Hla and Ludu Daw Amar from Mandalay have written powerful books promoting interethnic understanding and peaceful coexistence.

13. Diapraxis = dialogue+praxis, in the sense of 'dialogue as action'. It is an interfaith practice that aims to develop mutual appreciation among people of different faiths

tion as a tool to instil interfaith sensitivity. Among the organisations interviewed for this study, the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) is engaged in transforming the monastic education system, the Smile Education and Development Foundation engages heavily with young people on interfaith issues, and the Judson Research Center at the Myanmar Institute of Theology promotes high quality theological education and scholarly academic research in the fields of interfaith relations, and has recently partnered with the Nyein Foundation to establish and enhance collaboration between research and practice.

- Intrafaith dialogue, seen by many as the crucial precursor to interfaith dialogue, is organised by the INEB's partner organisations in Myanmar, which provide spaces for and facilitate intra Buddhist dialogue in order to address the recent turn toward religious nationalism.

Such interfaith dialogues clearly do not have the means to adequately address the proximate or root causes of interfaith tensions, including economic factors and structural violence. These limitations have been compounded by the unpredictability of the transition period, and particularly by the volatility of people's hopes and fears in the aftermath of the 2015 elections. Despite assessments that the 'impact' of these initiatives is unclear (Marshall 2014), it is important to acknowledge that they have developed organically according to the needs of communities. What is perhaps more in need of discussion, however, is the conflict sensitivity of those regional and international actors who tend to make a project out of 'impact'.

### 2.3 Creating spaces for encounters and transforming worldviews

The most interesting role played by TFIMs in Myanmar is the creation of safe spaces for encounters between religious and traditional/community leaders who had previously remained indifferent or even bigoted towards neighbouring communities of different faiths or ethnicities. Here TFIMs very sensitively facilitate dialogical processes that challenge participants' worldviews in creative and non-disparaging ways, and by rekindling emotional intelligence, seek to transform these worldviews so as to foster constructive action. There are examples of participants that emerge from such processes having transformed into TFIMs, who start to passionately engage in mediation work in their own communities and beyond. Though only a small number of stories concerning such processes were related during this study, they were powerful and enlightening. These processes have a very low profile, and for understandable reasons, the TFIMs and the supporters involved prefer to keep it that way. Following are some examples.

- KKL is a passionate TFIM who is masterful in crafting TFIMs and who does not shy away from highlighting how her religious and cultural upbringing shapes her

work. She also notes that her exposure to other cultures and conceptions of conflict transformation has informed her work. Her creative and human-centred approach is based on a very simple idea, namely that bigotry is rooted in a fear of the 'unknown' and that if a safe space can be created, an otherwise unlikely encounter can be staged, which will allow the unknown to become known, and the rest will simply follow from basic human instincts and needs. The experiential learning process she designs serves to challenge perceptions and worldviews, helps alter attitudes and negative stereotypes and provides a way of re-humanising the 'other'.

- Although he is not entirely comfortable with being called a TFIM, KT has given a great deal of thought to how the tenets of Buddhism have in fact shaped and reinforced his secular thinking and thus his peacebuilding efforts. Heavily involved in intensive dialogue and training processes with young monks, he provides them with the necessary tools for becoming leaders who will build a tolerant and peaceful future for Myanmar. This may well be deemed the training ground for Myanmar's next *Saffron Revolution*.
- Cyclone Nargis had a life-changing effect on Reverend SDD. The abbot of a Buddhist monastery, he used to be rather dogmatic, harbouring deep prejudices against other religions. While conducting post-Nargis humanitarian work with a range of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, his perceptions about the latter began to change. He subsequently became involved in interfaith initiatives and training, which further transformed his worldview. He is now one of the leading monks engaged in conflict mediation in sectarian violence hotspots.

### 2.4 Mediating in traditional spheres

Elders and traditional leaders play a localised (towns and villages) role in mediating resource-based, inter/intra-ethnic civil conflicts in their communities. These largely undocumented mechanisms constitute crucial human capital and strategic capacity for peace mediation and social change (cf. Petrie and South 2013; Leone and Giannini 2005). In some towns and villages inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, instances of conflict are not uncommon and are usually mediated collaboratively by elders and traditional leaders from each group. The process involves intensive introspective questioning involving different groups of actors in different settings over several weeks, until all of the belligerents arrive at a largely shared understanding.<sup>14</sup> A further interesting characteristic of such tradition-oriented mediation is that it is grounded in indigenous knowledge and religious and cultural philosophies that place the environment and ecosystems at centre stage (ibid.).

14. This very interesting mediation process has been documented in some detail by EarthRights International (Leone and Giannini 2005), citing narratives from Karen State and from a town in the southern Shan State inhabited by Pa-O, Chinese, Shan, and Kachin people.

### 3. Assets and approaches

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The mediation roles played by the TFIMs discussed above are driven by a wide range of factors. The interesting insight offered by these summaries is that although religious texts or doctrines may influence TFIMs' orientation, TFIMs do not 'employ' such texts or doctrines in and of itself as mediation tools. The factors mentioned by various TFIMs and other commentators include:

- Respect for nature and the universe in traditional indigenous practice
- Basic teachings – of respect and support for other human beings – common to all religions
- Peacebuilding as an integral element of Catholic social teaching
- Active listening and reflection during dialogue processes
- Experiential learning
- The message of love, reconciliation, restoration and justice contained in the Gospel
- A sense of humanitarian work and philanthropy as 'responsibilities'
- Human rights
- The spirit of the *Saffron Revolution*
- The need for theological education – learning about one's own religion and the religions of others as key to promoting tolerance
- Empowering people to transform their own communities
- Persuading softly but firmly; being polite and patient
- 'Gently' challenging perceptions
- Questioning one's own prejudices
- Speaking from the heart and not so much from religious texts
- Believing in 'one Myanmar for all'

### 4. Constraints

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The following are a number of general and specific constraints that adversely affect TFIM peace mediation efforts. The challenges listed were primarily noted by TFIMs' themselves, drawing on their own experience, while the limitations were indicated either by individuals commenting on TFIMs or by one category of TFIMs reflecting on another.

#### 4.1 Challenges

- The state has not tolerated peacebuilding efforts that challenge the status quo; this has meant that TFIMs have had to keep a very low-profile, which has limited their effectiveness.
- The Unlawful Associations Act (Section 17/1) places major restrictions on relations between civilians and EAG/Os.
- It has always been difficult to connect community level mediation and political policymaking; advocacy work and lobbying efforts have generally had little influence on decision makers.
- Interfaith initiatives face resistance from those swayed by hate speech, who are generally intolerant of counter-narratives.
- The Sangha is widely seen as being allied to the government. The absence of influential Buddhist religious leaders in the peace process is seen as a shortcoming. The failure to include and constructively engage with 'hardliners' in dialogue processes renders these unsustainable.
- Monasteries are largely autonomous: Myanmar's hundreds of thousands of monks are highly decentralised, which makes communication and coordination between them difficult and rare (except for the few instances when critical mass was achieved, e.g. during the *Saffron Revolution*).
- The regional organisation ASEAN is generally regarded as having been ineffective in influencing policymaking on religious and ethnic issues.
- International support primarily focusses on interfaith efforts and particularly on Rohingya/Muslim persecution, leaving interethnic tensions and ethnic struggles with a lack of support.<sup>15</sup>
- Rights-based approaches among international actors often tend to disregard the important role of faith within the country, thus limiting engagement and cooperation with TFIMs in certain contexts.
- There is great concern that Myanmar's recent and ongoing 'gold rush' of development aid seriously undermines local peacebuilding processes, as international actors tend to take over processes and make prescriptions.
- Myanmar's aid is primarily channelled into business and infrastructural development, some of which touches on peacebuilding efforts, though largely in an inefficient and impractical manner.

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15. There is a tendency among many to run together the respective discourses on the Rohingya and sectarian conflicts. A nuanced approach is required here, however, since the contexts and root causes in question differ, as must the strategies used to address them (cf. Clarke 2013).

## 4.2 Limitations

- Almost no religious group is devoid of fractionalisation where issues of legitimacy and the 'legal authority' to represent the religion are concerned. This complicates intrafaith dialogue and the establishment of joint processes.
- Interfaith dialogues have mushroomed on an ad hoc basis in the last couple of years in response to a number of crises, but many such processes have not been strategically organised so as to effect sustainable change. Many

have failed to acknowledge and incorporate the political dimensions of the relevant conflicts.

- Women rarely occupy positions of leadership or authority in religious institutions. Buddhist women cannot be ordained or participate in the Sangha, according to the rules of the latter's governing council.<sup>16</sup> Similar positions for women in Muslim institutions are also unheard of. In the Christian Church, women can occupy various leadership roles, although not at the very highest level.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Current support and needs

Myanmar's peace process has received significant attention and support from regional and international bodies. How useful this has been for TFIMs' mediation efforts is unclear. In general, Christian entities enjoy the highest levels of support from donors and faith-based INGOs and networks. Regional support for Buddhist organisations is strong, due to the regional demographics. Muslim entities say that they are deprived of the support of Muslim INGOs and networks, since it is difficult to circumvent the growing collective Islamophobia seemingly embodied by the state. Regional interfaith entities like the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF) and Buddhist networks like the INEB have been networking very well for collaborative action on these issues. International entities have been keen to engage directly with interfaith issues and the Rohingya question, though they have encountered a great deal of resistance from the state (cf. Frazer 2015). Despite this, a number of regional and international entities have been able to establish a significant number of collaborative projects with TFIMs in the last few years.<sup>18</sup> Where interfaith initiatives in particular are concerned, processes are in place that foster regional knowledge exchange between TFIMs.

While TFIMs are appreciative of the engagement and support of external actors, they are also cautious of and disturbed by the 'gold rush' of donors that has apparently already begun to negatively affect their work (cf. Bächtold et al. 2014). Many TFIM initiatives in Myanmar are slowly

but surely taking shape and are making a difference only because they have not been 'hijacked' by external actors. Two TFIMs in fact stated that it would be better not to receive any form of support. While one might jump to the conclusion that this is due to a fear of state persecution, this is not the whole of the story, since there is also a need for a slow, undisturbed, organic process. A strong wish among TFIMs is that external support be structured on a long-term basis, building on their expertise and experience and without introducing artificial priorities and expectations. The following are some of the further support needs expressed by TFIMs, with particular regard to national actors:

- The dovetailing of TFIM and civil society efforts.
- The strengthening of existing networks and the expansion of their scope and reach.
- Opportunities for meaningful engagement with policy and decision-making actors and institutions, the state, and regional entities.
- Stronger leadership from religious elites to challenge the status quo and support grassroots movements.
- Training for religious leaders and monks to 'upgrade' their theological and peacebuilding knowledge.
- Greater engagement of the diaspora community into TFIM initiatives.
- The establishment and enforcement of the rule of law.
- Media support: large scale reporting on interfaith events and talks, and on the peace process.

## 6. Concluding reflections

It is a peculiar time in Myanmar's history: a transition that became especially visible post-2011 (and credit is due here to the groundwork carried out by the people of Myanmar) has developed into something that is by and large more acceptable and promising than a military regime. Myanmar still has a long way to go before it can transform its conflicts, and given the pronounced religious and tradi-

tional dimensions of these conflicts, the political dialogue and national reconciliation processes being planned will need to frankly, adequately and constructively deal with the questions of ethnicity and religion. TFIMs are well-suited to facilitating dialogue in this arena, and need to be given the necessary space and leverage for effectively contributing to transforming Myanmar's multitude of conflicts.

16. For a nuanced discussion of this, see Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2015).

17. Nevertheless, female community and civil society TFIMs are very active throughout Myanmar.

18. Examples include Religions for Peace (RfP), The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), Swisspeace, PacRIM Associates, The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre).

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