

Buddhist hardliners stop Muslim ceremony in Myanmar

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Yangon: Amid the heightening Islamophobic tensions following a bloody military campaign against Rohingya in northern Rakhine state, hardline Buddhist nationalists stopped a Muslim religious ceremony in Yangon today.

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Dozens of people, led by a handful maroon-robed monks, marched to the YMCA in Myanmar's commercial capital to shut down a service marking the Prophet Mohammed's birthday.

"We have celebrated this festival for my whole life. Now this seems like an attack on freedom of religion," Kyaw Nyein, secretary of the Ulama Islam organisation, told AFP.

"The monks tried to stop the ceremony without saying what we had done wrong... Why aren't authorities taking action?" he added.

Eyewitnesses said that monks barged into the ceremony immediately after it started demanding it to be shut down.

Surprisingly, police were called, but it did not intervene to stop the hardliners.

Tin Maung Win, vice president of the festival organising committee, alleged that Buddhist nationalists were trying to stir up political dissent against the NLD government led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

He said the religious extremists supported the military-backed USDP party and see the new elected government, which took power last year after winning the first free election in some 50 years, as being too soft on Muslims.

"We held the festival here for seven years without any violence, but today it happened. This is because of political interests," he told AFP.

The unrest has been on a rise in Myanmar since deadly communal violence erupted between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in western Rakhine state in 2012.

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