

Trends of Monk Roles in Thai Politics in the Next Two Decades*

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1. Introduction

Buddhism is an important religion in Asia; its role and influence are indelibly imprinted in the educational, social, psychological, and socio-economic development of the continent. Its manifestation can be seen in the philosophy, rites, beliefs, cultural practice, and way of life adopted by Buddhist monks and laypersons.¹ When one analyzes the influence of Buddhism in Thai society, it can be seen that monks and the public have enjoyed mutually good relationships for over 700 years.

The role and significance of monks as individuals and as organized bodies can be analyzed on the basis of the relationships between the *Sangha*, the ruling class, and the public since the Sukhothai period. Monks have played an important role as advisers to the monarchs; on occasions they even recommended alternative solutions to administrative issues for the monarchs, as evidenced in the reigns of King Ramkhamhaeng, King Lithai, and King Naresuan. When the villagers of Bang Rachan were caught in the battle against the Burmese invaders, monks helped to boost

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¹ Jerrold Schecter, 1967: XI

their morale. Thus, they have played an important role in inspiring and empowering political figures and the public as a whole and played no small part in helping the country pull through various crises. It can be seen that in the course of the nation's historical development since the Sukhothai period monks have acted as a "bridge" between the ruling party and the public, making it possible for them to co-exist peacefully under Buddhist principles.

During transitional times, monks of the Theravada sect in such countries as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand do not just act out their customary roles of "advisors to the rulers" on the basis of *Dasarājadhamma*, but they are also politically involved, directly or indirectly. Monks in Sri Lanka participated in the election of politicians; some even ran for election. Monks in Myanmar staged demonstrations in an attempt to sanction against the military regime or openly showed their support for the politicians who wanted to pursue a new political policy in line with what they most desired.

Organized and pronounced demonstrations against the government or politicians have also been a clear trend in Thai society, especially during the time when the country is advancing on the road to democracy. On several occasions monks were seen demonstrating for certain rights and justice, for example, seeking justice for Phra Phimontham (Ac Āsabhamahāthera), staging a demand to include Buddhism as the State religion in the Constitution, or recently showing support for the "red-shirt" or "yellow-shirt" movements.

Their involvement was not seen only in the protests against the government or for specific demands. Sometimes, they came out to urge the government to take more action. Some even went as far as interpreting Buddhist principles to justify certain political decisions. For example, Phra Kittivuḍḍho once stated that "killing a communist is not evil." Incidents like this have caused a number of academics to criticize monks for trying to legitimize government actions in stopping demonstrations, making arrests, and detain politicians, students, private citizens, including

left-winged monks.² Such argument is in line with the research findings on Buddhism and politics by Rattanaphon Phongphatthana that “the government and Buddhist national leaders attempted to use religious principles to legitimize a political cause.”³

Her conclusion significantly reflects the similarity seen in the roles played by the *Saṅgha* in the political movements in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Lankan King Duṭṭhagāmī-Abhaya deployed monks to fight in the front line against Tamil groups. The king was distressed on learning about heavy Tamil casualties because he had violated one of the major Buddhist precepts. The monks tried to console him by saying: “Please, do not worry too much. Killing anti-religious people is not considered evil.”⁴ In Myanmar in 1949, wishing to see the *Saṅgha* and religion play a greater role in Burmese politics, U Nu declared the country’s ideology of “Buddhist socialism”, integrating Marxism into the Buddhist principles.⁵ This act endeared a lot of monks who decided to join and support his cause.

All this has led to an important question on the role and attitude of the *Saṅgha*, individually or collectively, whether and how such acts “correspond with the basic principle or belief of Buddhism.” Indeed, did the Buddha intend or design the *Saṅgha* in such a way that monks are absolutely not allowed to get involved in politics, or did he permit them to intervene in politics in some flexible manner under certain circumstances?

The phrase “under certain circumstances” is inferred from the incident in which the Buddha intervened as “a mediator in the war between his kinsmen”⁶ and “in an attempt to stop King Viḍūḍabha’s massacre of the Sakka clan.”⁷ What does the Buddha’s intervention mean in the context of conflicts and violence in which politicians and the public are caught?

² Somboon Suksamran, B.E. 2522 (2009): 15.

³ Rattanaphon Phongphatthana, B.E. 2547 (2004).

⁴ Phra Methithammaphon (Prayoon Dhammaditto), B.E. 2535 (1992): 14-15.

⁵ Melford Spiro, 1982: 389-390.

⁶ Mahamakutrajavidyalaya, n.d.: 363.

⁷ *Sn.* (Pali) 25/47/25; *Sn.* (Thai) 25/47/41.

Questions like this continue with other incidents when the Buddha chose to remain silent in the midst of war or violence. For example, when King Ajātasattu sent an army to attack the city of Vesālī⁸ or when the same king ordered an ambush on his father, King Bimbisāra, who was also a friend of the Buddha, the Buddha chose not to intervene. Furthermore, when the Buddha heard about the war between King Pasenadikosala and King Ajātasattu, he said to his disciple monks that “the victor begets hate, while the defeated lives in pain.”⁹ Still, he made no attempt to intervene.

An analysis of his stance on the aforementioned fighting and violence might lead some monks of the Theravada sect to interpret and conclude that “if the conflict and violence have something to do with their kin, monks can intervene, especially when it comes to the conflict among Thai people.” In this case, monks could go out to stop the dispute, or symbolically or directly intervene between the dissenting parties. However, if it concerns a war between two states, monks need to be more careful in their intervention or acts.

Some of the situations in which the Buddha forbade the monks to get involved happen to be the point cited by State rulers or by the public that it is inappropriate for monks to intervene in the affairs that have nothing to do with their mission or duty. This begs further questions as to how one should interpret the word “appropriate.” In the case of King Pasenadikosala, the commentary¹⁰ avers that monks should stay in the monastery to do their monastic duties rather than concern themselves with knowing how an army should be organized. Such knowledge is a worldly matter that relates to *Sīla* No. 1 and, therefore, not appropriate for the monks to get involved.

In comparison, in Thai society in the past, monarchs would request monks to sprinkle holy water on the troops who were about to go into

⁸ *A.Sn.* (Thai) 23/22/33; *A.Sn.* (Pali) 23/22/15; *A.Sn.A.* 3/22/170.

⁹ *S.I.* (Thai) 15/125/146-148; *S.I.* 15/126148-149; *S.I.A.* 1/125-125/146-147; *S.I.T* 1/125-126/198.

¹⁰ *Vin.* (Thai) 2/322/458.

battle in order to uplift their fighting spirit. In other words, the soldiers would be encouraged to breach *Sila* No. 1 in the process. The point is that, in the Buddha's time, as in the case of King Pasenadikosala, it was deemed inappropriate for the monks to get involved in military affairs, including visiting the army or staying overnight in their midst. In the current situation, on the other hand, political factions are trying to get monks involved, asking them to give the troops their blessing and encourage them to harm fellow beings. How then should we explain the role of the monks and their relationships with politics to justify the correctness and appropriateness of their acts?

In this connection, it is necessary to return to the question “What are the real roles of the *Saṅgha*? If one analyzes the context in light of the Buddhist principles, one will see that “the *Saṅgha*’s roles lie in the study, practice, and dissemination of the Dhamma, including protecting and upholding Buddhism.” Now, is their political involvement the role they should take up or is it in line with the Dhamma-Vinaya at all? Many have tried to tackle the issue by first asking for a definition of “politics.” If we understand clearly what politics is, we will then be able to say whether or not monks should get involved. Those who tried to seek clarification about this issue included **Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu**,¹¹ **Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto)**,¹² **Nithi Iaosiwong**,¹³ and **Suraphot Thawisak**.¹⁴ Nevertheless, some Western thinkers have made an observation that such an approach is “a corruption of the teachings of the Buddha” (Ian Harris, 2007: 3), for in fact there is nothing in Buddhism from which it can be inferred that monks are allowed to get involved in politics. This is just an attempt by Theravada monks to interpret the Dhamma-Vinaya in such a way that would make it possible for them to serve political elements. The Scriptures were never intended that way.¹⁵

¹¹ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, B.E. 2545 (2002).

¹² Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2531 (1988).

¹³ Nithi Iaosiwong, B.E. 2547 (2004): 36.

¹⁴ Suraphot Thawisak, B.E. 2554 (2011): 42.

¹⁵ Richard F. Gombrich, 2006: 88.

Thus, this research tries to answer the following questions: (1) What are the roles of Thai monks in relation to Thai politics, taking into account the context of monks in Theravada countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia, focusing especially on their roles in both absolute monarchy and democracy? (2) Are their involvements or roles in the political arena in various guises in line with the original concept of Buddhism? If so, in what ways? Is it possible that in reality the Buddha did not specify such stance or role? The extent to which monks became involved in politics has been advocated by the *Saṅgha* today in the attempt to justify their approach by citing such pretexts as the security of Buddhism and the right to participate in the formulation of public policy. In such attempts to expand the scope of the roles, principles and practices of the *Saṅgha*, it is only right to ask whether they are in line with the Dhamma-Vinaya and how appropriate they are to the ecclesiastical status.

The above-mentioned questions led the researcher to find and design an approach that would best reflect the social and political reality based on the current situation or context – one that bears little or no similarity to the time of the Buddha or the past. Would the monks today have the right to make an interpretation in light of the changing context? The answers to these questions would lead to an explanation and recommendations on the possible roles that they should play or act out at present and in the next two decades in relation to politics, making it possible for the *Saṅgha* as individuals and organization to best respond to the current social situation and ensure the survival of the institution in the midst of the current social and political conflicts.

The methodology adopted consists of two parts: documentary research whereby studies were made of the *Tepiṭaka* texts, *Aṭṭhakathā*, *Tīkā*, *Anuṭīkā*, and other books related to this research, e.g. theses and newspaper researches, including such media as the internet and television, as well as field research. The researcher himself attended an Advanced Certificate Course in Politics and Governance in Democratic Systems for Executives Program, Class 15, King Prajadhipok's Institute. The class consisted of 140 politicians (Members of Parliament and Senates), high-level government officials, leaders of non-governmental organizations and

the private sector, and academics. Their input greatly contributed to the research by way of observations, interviews, group discussions, and seminars at various forums. After careful analysis, clarification, interpretation, and synthesis, the study yields the following interesting results.

2. Roles of the *Sangha* in Thai politics: from absolute monarchy to democracy

The researcher began by studying the contexts governing the roles of the *Sangha* and politics of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia. As Theravada Buddhist countries with democratic government similar to that of Thailand, they yielded valuable lessons and provided a useful framework for the research and insight into the analysis of the trends in Thailand in the next two decades.

The roles of the *Sangha* in the above three countries could be divided into the following categories: (1) advisory role, (2) advocacy, (3) protesting and making demands to the State, (4) exercise of the voting right, (5) protection of the country and religion, (6) mediation of disputes, (7) support and promotion of public affairs, (8) support of political parties, and (9) role as politicians.

An interesting observation is that countries like Sri Lanka have witnessed the status of monks develop from being merely interlocutors with politicians to becoming full-fledged politicians themselves. In the researcher's view, such role goes beyond the scope expounded in the Dhamma-Vinaya. The Dhamma-Vinaya has been interpreted to suit the social and political context. In other words, the interpretation is now made on the basis of social and political parameters – reminiscent of the attempt by some Thai monks to justify that “killing a communist is not evil” in light of the political context at the time. This is also similar to some Sri Lankan monks who tried to console Dūṭthagāminī-Abhaya, who was devastated by the breach of *Sīla* – killing many Tamils – by saying “Please, do not worry too much. Killing of anti-religious people is not considered evil”.

It could be seen that social and political contexts as well as ethnic survival have had an impact on the interpretation of the Dhamma-Vinaya to

serve certain ideologies. This was evident in Myanmar with the Rohingya case in which a number of monks, citing Buddhist principles, aroused their Buddhist followers to massacre the ethnic minority and destroy their homes, resulting in a lot of injuries and loss of lives.

Beside these attempts to interpret the Dhamma-Vinaya to serve social, political and ethnic causes, one has seen another phenomenon in Sri Lanka and Myanmar – “the preservation of Buddhism from the threats of forces from other doctrines and religions.” The colonial powers that occupied these two countries brought with them their religious faiths and tried to impose them on the locals. Such acts led the faithful Buddhists to put up resistance on several fronts. For example, monks from both countries led the armed insurgency against the occupying forces and started debates and counter-arguments in kind.

Such leadership roles by monks were not seen only in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, but also in Thailand. For example, Chao Phra Fang led a group of monks and villagers to take over the administrative power from the local authorities, claiming to preserve the integrity of the country. Thus, in the final analysis, monks in countries facing social, political, religious and ethnic crises would use religious principles as tools to serve ideology and ensure national survival. Such interpretation could be viewed as a kind of “distortion” for survival purposes. Evidently, in light of their fighting experience, monks would regard religious principles as “choices” rather than as hard and fast rules. The only significant variables they would consider are social, religious, political, and ethnic “survival”.

The roles of the *Saṅgha* in politics in Thai society from the past to the present have taken a number of dimensions: (1) advisory role, (2) promotion of the peace-building process, (3) advocacy and guiding of political leaders, (4) assistance in national affairs, (5) fulfillment of the State policy, (6) disobedience to the State power, (7) protest against the State and making demands, (8) support of political parties, and (9) running as candidates in the election of MPs.

Their roles in politics in two different periods and regimes – absolute monarchy and representative democracy – share a number of similarities,

especially the advisory role, advocacy role, mediation in dispute resolution, assistance of the State, and fulfillment of the State policy. It is noteworthy that their advisory role in the democratic age is no longer based on the “rule of Dhamma”, when compared to the absolute monarchy rule under which the ruler adhered to the framework of “*Cakkavatti-Vatta*” under the “*Paripucchā*” principle – an important principle observed and practiced by all rulers.

With regard to disobedience to the ruler, protest against or opposition to the State power, evidence could be found from the reign of King Narai the Great to the Rattanakosin period, to the transitional democracy period, to the democratic rule in 1932. Monks began to be more visibly involved in demonstrations to make demands of political leaders. For instance, they demonstrated to seek justice for Phra Phimontham (Ac Āsabhamahāthera), joined the farmers in their demonstration for justice, and pointed out injustice that the working class suffered at the hands of the capitalists.

Such expressions led to ideological and physical conflicts between two groups of monks, the left-wing group led by Phra Maha Chat and Phra Maha Phong and their right-wing counterpart led by Phra Kittivuddho. The former participated in political activities, supporting certain political parties and running for election of MPs. The latter, on the other hand, showed their disapproval, seeing that such act would support the Socialist Party of Thailand, a communist-oriented element, and justify statements such as “killing a communist is not evil.” This eventually opened up an opportunity for the government to subsequently take action to suppress politically dissenting monks and public members.

Ideological and political differences of the two groups of monks have continued and are visible even today. Today, more Thai monks, whether main-stream or sub-stream, would openly show their support and participate in activities of the political parties or groups with similar viewpoints. They were seen siding with the left-wing “red-shirts” who claimed to favor democratic ideology and belief, or with the right-wing “yellow-shirts” with conservative political outlook and nationalism.

Nevertheless, monks' involvement and participation in activities organized by politicians or political groups have begged a lot of questions. At the same time, the *Saṅgha* Supreme Council of Thailand has issued rules forbidding monks to get politically involved in any way. Yet, monks, both with right-wing and left-wing inclinations, take little or no notice of the proclamation. Worse, they try to explain and interpret Dhamma-Vinaya principles to justify their way of thinking, claiming it is legitimate for them to do so.

Still, the comparison of Thai monks with their counterparts in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia shows that they all performed similar roles. First, they played the “role of advisor to political leaders”, especially to the monarch under the *Rājādhipateyya* rule, similar to the role of “a spiritual *Purohita*” or counselor to the king. At the same time, they acted as leaders or “guides;” again this leading role varied from country to country. In some periods Lankan, Burmese and Thai monks tended to guide their political leaders on the path of war and “ethnic” conflict as well as on issues of survival of the political and *Saṅgha* institutions. Cambodian monks, on the other hand, despite being subjected to the power of various political groups, were able to maintain their advisory role to King Sihanouk, giving rise to the concept of “Buddhist Socialism” in the country.

Another interesting role similarly played by the *Saṅgha* in the four countries was seen in their “protests and making demands” when the State’s implementation of public policy had an impact on public feelings and emotion, as well as on social, political, ethnic and religious survival. Sri Lanka and Myanmar, for example, are cases in point as far as the ethnic issue is concerned. Therefore, any policy, designed by politicians and having an impact on the feelings of the *Saṅgha* and the general public, would be more likely to draw monks onto the street to protest against the government and demand a change of policy. Similarly, if a policy was seen to affect a well-preserved way of life and culture, monks in these countries would stage a demonstration to show their disapproval.

Thai monks were also found to launch an anti-government protest, although their reasons usually would have more to do with the survival

of Buddhism. Their demands included the inclusion of Buddhism in the Constitution as the State religion, establishment of the Ministry of Buddhism, and demand for justice for certain monks who suffered from a politically motivated action, as was the case with Phra Phimontham (Ac Āsabhamahāthera). Thai monks would come together to ask for a redress of justice. Similar incidents were also seen in King Narai the Great's reign when the *Sangha* disagreed with the king's allowing followers of another religion to act in ways disrespectful of Buddhism and became more distrustful of his approach.

In addition, monks in the “TMSC” countries – Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia – have played a similar role in their political participation in the protests with political groups. Monks in these four countries showed a clear stance when they joined political groups with similar ideology and goals. Sri Lanka is a case in point when monks acted as election canvassers and publicly persuaded their listeners to choose Prime Minister Rajapaksa. In Myanmar some groups of monks joined Aung San Suu Kyi's party; in Cambodia some sided with Prime Minister Hun Sen, while others supported the Opposition Party. Similarly, some monks in Thailand are staunch supporters of the Red-Shirt movement, and others are in favor of the Yellow-Shirt cause. It is only fair to say, however, that the mainstream monks in each country, who are usually close to the seat of the State power, have tried to act neutral without displaying any clear sign of their preference of a political group.

At any rate, Lankan monk roles are completely different from those of other countries in that they tend to be “political monks” directly involved as MPs. The reasons they have cited for this political role are to “protect their ‘Singhalese Only’ identity, to protect Buddhism when it is affected by the public policy, and to promote Buddhism in all dimensions. Such involvement is met with much disapproval by mainstream Buddhists and monks. One *Mahānāyaka* of the Siamvangsa School made a point that “monks should stay in the monastery, not in the house.” He seemed to advocate that “if a monk wants to enter politics, he should leave monkhood and go to Parliament or stay in the house just like any layperson. If he chooses to stay in the monastery, he should not assume a political role.”

3. Roles of the *Saṅgha* in Politics as evidenced in Theravada Buddhism

A study of the *Saṅgha* role in politics in the *Tepiṭaka* texts reveals the following salient features: (1) advisory role, (2) advocacy and political guide, (3) mediation of disputes, (4) protest against political leaders, (5) development of State citizenship, (5) guidance of politicians to create mass support for a separate *Saṅgha* administration.

The role of the Buddha in politics could be seen as part of his duty related to and based on Dhamma. In his view, besides Dhamma study and practice, the *Saṅgha* had an important task to disseminate what they learned to political leaders or the ruling class. He declared his “first instructions” to his disciples thus:

Go forth and wander for the good of many, for the happiness of many. Do not go together in two in one direction. Preach the Dhamma that is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end. Proclaim a holy life complete with meaning and expression, perfect and pure. There are still beings with little impediment in their eyes. They will fare worse because they do not hear the Dhamma from you, O Bhikkhus. I myself will go to the district of Uruvelāsenānigama to teach Dhamma.¹⁶

It is evident that to preach such beneficial Dhamma in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end was an important duty on which the Buddha placed an emphasis. However, in this context, he made it clear to the first group of his disciples that the preaching of the Dhamma was intended for the good and happiness of many. This corresponds with the principle of “*Lokatthacariyā*.” The underlying notion could generate at least two topics of Dhamma: “*Brahmavihāra* and *Saṅgahavatthu*.” These two sets of Dhamma focus on performing one’s duties based on loving

¹⁶ *caratha, bhikkhave, cārikām bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānām; mā ekena dve agamittha desetha, bhikkhave, dhammām ādikalyāṇām majjhekalāyāṇām pariyoṣānakalyāṇām, sāththām sabyājanām kevalaparipūṇām parisuddham brahmacariyām pakāsetha* (Vin. Mahāvagga 4/32/40).

kindness, attention, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They were designed to help fellow beings by offering insight into Dhamma with a friendly spirit, benevolent intent and fair mind, and on equal terms.

It is noteworthy that preaching or propagating the Dhamma was the “duty” of the Buddha and His disciples. This could be seen in such principles as *Disā 6* in which the Buddha wanted the monks to conduct themselves by refraining from doing evil deeds, whether physical, verbal or mental, keeping virtue, giving a helping hand with loving kindness, helping people to listen to something not heard before, explaining and providing greater insight into what was already heard, and showing the way to Heaven by pointing out what was or was not good, as well as what should or should not be done,¹⁷ taking into consideration what was going on at that particular moment. He gave the following guidelines for preaching the Dhamma:

This was not easy to do. When a Bhikkhu wanted to preach to others, he must observe the following five principles: (1) I will preach Dhamma sequentially,¹⁸ (2) I will explain by referring to the causes, (3) I will preach Dhamma with compassion,¹⁹ (4) I will preach without thinking of material gains,²⁰ and (5) I will not preach to hurt self and others.^{21,22}

Furthermore, in the Dhamma-preaching role, the Buddha taught the following:

¹⁷ *DIII* (Thai) 11/272/216.

¹⁸ *Anupubbikathām kathesasāmi*, preaching Dhamma sequentially, means showing Dhammaprinciples in an orderly manner without making shortcuts or losing the train of statements, e.g. teaching *Sīla* after *Dāna*, and *Sagga* or Heaven after. (*Sīla*, *A.III Pañcaka*. *A.* (Thai) 36/334.)

¹⁹ *Anuddayatam paticca*, with compassion, means assisting on the assumption that I will rid beings who suffer from the suffering. (*A.III Pañcaka*. *A.* (Thai) 36/334.)

²⁰ *Na āmisantaro*, without thinking of *Āmisa* or material gains, means not expecting material gains for oneself (*A.III Pañcaka*. *A.* (Thai) 36/335.)

²¹ *Attānañca parañca anupahacca*, not teaching to hurt self and others, means not preaching to show that one is superior to others. (*A.III Pañcaka*. *A.* (Thai) 36/335.)

²² *A.III Pañcaka*. (Thai) 22/159/263.

A person who harms another cannot be called a *Pabbajita*; a person who makes another suffer cannot be called a *Samaṇa*. Therefore, when one disseminates the Dhamma, one must not talk ills of others or make them suffer. Rather, one must observe the *Pāṭimokkha* rules, partake of food in moderation, keep *Senāsana* in solitude, and constantly strive for further mental development.

He made it clear that “this is the teachings of every Buddha.”²³

Yet, with a great vision (*Lokavidū*) and desire to see a long-term result after his *Parinibbāna*, he mentioned that “after my passing away, the Dhamma-Vinaya will be your teacher”²⁴ and laid down “*Mahāpadesa 4*,” a set of principles whereby a monk on hearing a word or statement from another will consider whether or not it is Dhamma or Vinaya, as well as another set of principles on “eight criteria for considering the Dhamma-Vinaya.” These would serve as a tool to consider whether or not something was Dhamma or Vinaya and, on that basis, to lessen desires for pleasure and for material accumulation and to be content with frugality, solitude and quiet away from the crowd. If the subject under consideration was in line with these principles, i.e., a quest for Dhamma-based peace and happiness, it was Dhamma or Vinaya as regulated by the Buddha.

At the same time, in one sense the political role of the *Saṅgha* needs to be related to the “Vinaya”, a Dhamma-based practice. Examples of the Vinaya designed by the Buddha include what to do in the presence of an army, acts likely to be interpreted as inappropriately importuning a layperson, and entry into someone’s house at night – actions that would pose potential danger to the monks concerned. All this reflected the socio-political and economic realities in his time and could change with the passage of time. Nevertheless, explanation and interpretation of those

²³ *Na hi pabbajito pariūpaghātī samaṇo hoti param viheṭhayanto Anūpavādo anūpaghāto pāṭimokkhe ca samvaro mattaññutā ca bhattasmiṃ pantañca sayanāsanam adhicitte ca āyogo etam Buddhāna sāsanam* (*D.II* (Thai) 10/90/50-51.)

²⁴ *D.II* (Thai) 10/141/178.

acts need to correspond to the Dhamma. Corresponding to the Dhamma here means “corresponding to the role and duty or nature appropriate to the monks.”

4. Trends of Roles of the *Saṅgha* in Thai Politics in the Next Two Decades

In an attempt to answer what the trends of the *Saṅgha*’s roles in Thai politics may be in the next two decades, the researcher believes that first it is important to explain “politics” in a clear and comprehensive manner. Indeed, many thinkers and academics explain and interpret the word “politics” differently according to their perspectives and experiences in a variety of situations. A comprehensive understanding of politics would enable us to position the *Saṅgha*’s roles in politics appropriately and avoid doing damage to the *Saṅgha* and Buddhism in the long run.

In the researcher’s view, politics could be tackled from two different angles: (1) politics as goal and (2) politics as tool.

(1) Politics as goal is a validation of political acts as part of the work of the State or national administration designed to maintain peace, order, and harmonious coexistence, observe rules and regulations, resolve differences and foster human dignity, on the basis of liberty, equality and fraternity, and solve disputes by peaceful means, including inculcating public-mindedness, responsibility towards self and others in the society.

(2) Politics as tool, on the other hand, focuses on the management or means to ensure that people could live together without resorting to criminal acts, that justice could be sought, that opportunity is made available, and that benefits and needs are shared by all on a fair and equitable basis. It is politics built upon a moral base, using the Dhamma as a tool to create immunity, mold and reinforce the relationship between citizens and politicians. It is not used as a tool for self-seeking purposes or for the benefits of a particular group or political clique. It is not used as a competitive tool of materialism and consumerism intended to drive the citizens relentlessly forward without caring for any long-term damage that may follow.

It is the researcher's view that defining "politics" according to these two dimensions would provide a basis for monks to be involved in and associated with political affairs without losing track of the Dhamma-Vinaya. The Dhamma-Vinaya will serve as a criterion for the monks' positive political involvement in "white politics" or "politics of compassion." The principles on which such politics is based consist of *Disā* 6 by which monks would be allowed space to offer advice and express the concerns of the citizens as well as their own to political leaders. Their action would be meant for the good of the self, the relatives, and the world. The Buddha himself repeatedly said that it was the monks' duty to wander about in order to bring help and happiness to the world.

However, the Dhamma-Vinaya²⁵ in Buddhism denies the space for political expression by the *Saṅgha* if their involvement falls under one or more of the following categories: (1) joining a political group for self-seeking and power-seeking purposes, (2) showing prejudice, taking sides and sowing seeds of divisiveness, (3) acting as election canvassers, (4) causing unfair advantage or disadvantage to a particular group, and (5) playing a role or showing an attitude indicative of lack of neutrality. As a result, (1) society would lose a pillar of support if the monks decide to take sides for one or another conflicting party, (2) the *Saṅgha* would become a tool of politicians who could use them as election canvassers and for a political base, and (3) the *Saṅgha* would lose credibility from those who hold different views and political ideology.

When one looks at the issue of the "*Saṅgha* and politics in Thai society" against the background of both absolute monarchy and democratic rule, one will find that despite the change of the form of government the

²⁵ With regard of the Dhamma, decision is made on the criteria of 18 aspects of the Dhamma-Vinaya (*Vin.* 6 (Thai) 7/606/324) concerning prejudice and loss of neutrality of a group of people on whom all social groups are supposed to depend, as well as their falling under the influence of *Akusalamūla* and *Papañcadhamma*. For the Vinaya, the criteria would be based on the *Sikkhāpada* in *Acelakavagga Pācittiyakanda* (*Vin.* 4 (Thai) 2/322-33/458/459) explaining the presence of monks in inappropriate places, their behaviors, or involvement in affairs unbecoming for monkhood.

Saṅgha and monarchy have always enjoyed a positive relationship in cultural and traditional matters. Despite the change of government to a more democratic rule in 1932, the Thai Constitution has acknowledged the relationship between the *Saṅgha* and monarchy as expressed in Article 9 of the 2007 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand that “the King is a Buddhist.” On the other hand, the role of the *Saṅgha* and politicians in the democratic rule see no such legal, traditional and cultural bond in any practical or ceremonial way.

As to the question what roles the *Saṅgha* should play in relation to politics in a way that is acceptable and responsive to social needs, the researcher believes the following set of priorities needs to be examined in order to reach a satisfactory answer.

(1) The *Saṅgha* as a conflict-managing engineer through peaceful Buddhist means

With the Thai society recently being caught in the middle of conflict and violence, the actors consist of various factions and interest groups, while the political groups concerned who could contribute to reconciliation have rarely shown any appropriate positive attitude or response. As a result, it is rather reasonable to foresee less than peaceful political circumstances in the next two decades. Thai society will be compelled to turn to religious organizations for help, asking what they can do to put an end to conflicts and restore reconciliation. In this connection, the Independent Investigation for Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand has called for religious personnel “to increase their roles in the efforts to reduce divisiveness, promote peace and resolve social conflicts through peaceful means.”²⁶

This engineering task will, therefore, be an important role for the *Saṅgha* who will need to work with agencies, both public and private, to find ways and means to manage ongoing conflicts and violence in Thai society. The *Saṅgha* has a considerable social capital compared to other social organizations. On the Dhamma-Vinaya basis, the Buddha designed the *Saṅgha* community to be free from interest-seeking scenarios and

²⁶ Independent Investigation for Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand, n.d.: 275.

power structure of the political elite. However, the *Saṅgha*'s social capital alone will not adequately equip them to take on this role if they do not have the capacity and tool to act as peace engineers to promote the peace-building process in Thai society.

It is imperative, therefore, for the *Saṅgha* to join hands with both public and private organizations in order to develop monks to be effective peace engineers in line with a recommendation made by the Independent Investigation for Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand which states that “every party attach importance to the restoration of moral and ethical principles and encourage religious institutions to play a role in reducing conflict and ending violence.”²⁷ At any rate, one still feels confident that the *Saṅgha*'s social capital, together with their capacity, will contribute to peace-building attempts in Thai society today and in the future.

(2) The *Saṅgha* as an advocacy and political guide

Historically, political leaders have had confidence and faith in the *Saṅgha*'s way of life and the principles of Dhamma on which their behavior is based. Thus, their advice had been constantly sought by politicians as to the administration of the country. Such advice is known as “*Paripucchā*”, as propounded in the *Cakkavatti-vatta* principles, encouraging the political leaders to seek counsel and guidance from *Samāṇa-brāhmaṇa*,” spiritual mentors who lead virtuous lives and avoid temptations at all times.

The *Saṅgha* will need to maintain this role and develop their counseling techniques even further. Indeed, one of the most prominent qualities of the *Saṅgha* is their skill in “mindful listening.” Since they are believed to have no conflict of interest with any group, they will be in a favorable position to give counsel to political leaders. At any rate, when performing the role of “*Purohita*” or “guide,” they will need to act on the principles and practice beyond political interests and not expect to receive any self-gratifying rewards, as such practice has been known as “fawning on certain families” and is against the Buddhist principle.

²⁷ Ibid.

(3) The *Sangha* as a developer of democratic civic citizenship

In a democratic rule, it is commonly believed that “a good democracy begins with a good citizen.” A good citizen possesses a number of attributes such as responsibility for self and society, public-mindedness, respect for rules and regulations as well as for law, and management of conflict through peaceful means. It could be seen that the development of democracy does not focus simply on “form” but rather on “human development” to ensure that an individual will turn out to be a good citizen of the country, as well as of ASEAN and the world.

Although monks are Buddhist ascetics, they are also citizens of the country and as such are subject to the same laws as other nationals. Their role in the future should be bound with helping the State develop “good people” in a religious sense into “good citizens” of the country and of the world. Buddhist principles can facilitate such development, through tenets like *Saṅghavatthu Dhamma*, *Sucarita Dhamma*, *Gārava Dhamma*, and *Santi Dhamma*. The monks need to learn how to apply them in order to assist the State accordingly. At the same time, it is the duty of the latter to develop the former’s capacity more fully in this regard by opening up more space for them to perform this duty accordingly through various programs and activities and by providing necessary budgets and tools.

It is noteworthy to point out that there is no reason for the State not to support this role. Having morally good citizens will be good for the State in that it could manage the country more effectively. The Buddha talked about this in *Kuṭadantasutta* that “the enemy of the State is not bandits but poverty.”²⁸ Poverty is not manifested only physically only but also in the form of happiness experienced by the citizens of the State. Therefore, support given to the *Sangha* can ensure that democratic development will be secured and sustained.

In summary, the more democratic and developed the country becomes, the harder the *Sangha* organization needs to work in order to apply its Buddhist moral principles accordingly. In present-day democracy, the State can no longer keep Buddhism out of the political

²⁸ *D.I.* (Pali) 9/323-358/127-150; *D.I.* (Thai) 9/323-358/124-150.

arena, especially when it comes to issues of morality. It needs to open up the space for the *Sangha* to step in to help in the moral and ethical development of politicians and, through the application of Buddhist principles, foster good democratic civic citizenship in a proper manner.

(4) The *Sangha* as a commentator exercising the right to criticize politicians and State policies

An honest criticism may well be the function of mass media or critics in general. Yet, we have seen more monks acting as political commentators in various guises. For instance, they criticized certain behaviors of political leaders or politicians and State policies that might lead to loss of life and property or to greater materialism and consumerism as a way of life.

The Buddha mentioned that criticism of this kind is “like showing the way to the treasure.” Various studies have pointed out that such gesture was often met with a negative response from several politicians and political leaders. Well aware of this fact, the *Sangha* Supreme Council as the highest authority of the *Sangha* issued announcements about sermons or discourses of political nature to prevent any possible confrontation between monks and State leaders. In any case, a number of monks have continued to perform this role on a regular basis.

The question remains: “What kind of political comments should monks make in order to prevent political leaders having an adverse response to them?” There are at least four factors or variables that can enhance this role in the next two decades: (1) The issues raised in the comments must be clear; (2) the monks or *Sangha* institutions must show proper understanding of the public policy implementation and its positive and negative impacts on the basis of clear information; (3) the monks need to learn and possess political communication skills and an understanding of the communication process of **SMCR** (S standing for Source, M for Message, C for Channel, and R for Receiver); and (4) the monks must have an open mind, willing to also listen to the State, leaders and politicians.

At the same time, a commentary should be made and properly phrased on the basis of truth and respect. In other words, (1) the issue raised is a truthful statement about a subject that society at large is aware of as being deficient in some way. (2) The presentation should be made

with a proper language and attitude, as, in several instances, the issue is not about the contents but about how they are presented. Presentation should sound right and respectful. (3) The presentation must be made in a timely and proper manner. (4) A commentary must be geared toward fostering a cordial relationship between the commentator, the person in question, and their supporters. (5) The commentary in essence must be beneficial to the community, society, and the nation as a whole, especially to the political leaders who should be given diverse and more circumspect treatments. (6) A commentary should be made on the basis of *Mettā Dhamma* or loving kindness. The objective of the communication is to bring about positive results. Any kind of communication that may cause conflict leading to verbal and physical violence should be avoided at all costs.

(5) The *Saṅgha* as a protestor making political demands

At present more monks are seen engaged in this activity and will likely continue to do so in the future, as Thai traditional practice, the Dhamma-Vinaya, and the Constitutional law have enabled them (a) to pass a resolution, at a village level up to the national level, to boycott individuals or groups of individuals who have committed verbal or physical offences against Buddhism or undertaken a policy that adversely affects or violates the Dhamma-Vinaya, the objectives being to ensure the sustainability of Buddhism and to give well-intentioned warnings against doing such unwholesome acts, and (b) to boycott the State or politicians who have implemented a policy that adversely affects the way of life of the citizens, community, society and religion, the objective being to protect the interests and culture of the Thai society.

However, in doing so, monks should avoid participating in political rallies in favor of any political group, especially as individuals, in issues that have little or nothing to do with Buddhist boycotting. They should also be careful that their verbal, physical and spiritual expressions do not lead to violence, especially when under the influence of *Lobha*, *Dosa*, and *Moha*, making it easier for them to take sides or want to cause good or harm to others. This is something against Buddhist principles that forbid fawning on an influential group for material gains, as it will adversely affect the survival of Buddhist organizations in the short and long run.

When assessing the appropriateness of political participation by the *Saṅgha*, attention must be paid to the following considerations: (1) Concept on the basis of which are built the demands, intent, objectives, rationale, cause, interests and needs, (2) Content, including its presentation, scope, plausibility, possible advantages and disadvantages, details, credibility, source, and methodology, and (3) Context covering the historical background and significance of the issue; history of the demonstration; people or group of people involved, venue, time and occasion of the demonstration; political/economic situation; and attitudes of the community and society. These three considerations need to be in line with the principles of the Dhamma-Vinaya, as well as the traditions and laws that govern the monks' behaviors in Thai society.

An observation made by a large number of people is that, in joining a demonstration to make political demands, monks need not join any one political group, as it may lead to divisiveness and loss of neutrality. If they disagree with the idea or action of political leaders, they could directly make known their intention without going to any one side. Their inclination to one side or another may become a tool for political groups to justify their cause in the name of the *Saṅgha*. Examples of such cases could be found in Sri Lanka and Myanmar where political leaders were not fully aware that the participating monks were not representative of Buddhists as a whole but rather elements with political interests and inclination one way or another.

(6) The *Saṅgha* as individuals exercising voting rights

While Sri Lanka and Cambodia opened up the space for Buddhist monks to exercise their voting rights in the election of politicians at every level, the Thai constitutional laws since 1932 have barred monks from political activities. Of course, the laws state that voting is a duty rather than a right of the citizen. Such restriction has led to much debate in Thai society with regard to its pros and cons, each with its own rationale and explanation.

Those in favor of the monks' exercising their voting rights argue that (1) monks are good quality people, (2) they are honest people without self-seeking interests, (3) voting can decide their fate, (4) voting

is a tool to protect Buddhism, (4) voting is the right of every citizen, (6) the country is Buddhist and therefore it is natural that monks should vote. It is evident that these arguments are partly attributable to the quality of the monks, while some groups cite examples of some Buddhist countries that have opened up the space for monks to do so.

Those against monks' exercising their voting rights present the following argument: (1) Politics is concerned with vying for interests and power. (2) Casting a vote shows taking sides with one group or another, although the group chosen may have a better quality. (3) Voting is likely to lead a number of monks to act as canvassers and serve the interests of politicians. (4) There will likely be a conflict between monks supporting different political groups. (5) Casting a vote can be advantageous or disadvantageous to different groups. (6) Society will lose its pillar of support if monks take sides. (7) Monks will become tools for politicians. (8) Voting is a worldly activity that monks should not get involved in. (9) Voting is not the monk's duty. (10) The Dhamma-Vinaya does not allow monks to do so. (11) The law does not allow such possibility, and (12) voting is not in line with the accepted practice by which monks are not supposed to vote.

An analysis of the voting role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka and Cambodia shows that today the mainstream *Saṅgha* in these two countries are not willing to see the exercise of monks' voting right. The interviews also reveal that if they could choose, the monks would rather not vote for any politician, because the political situation was such that the politicians would use them as tools to win the election or promise to give something in return. Sometimes they even invited the monks to speak on their behalf; some monks even became their canvassers. As a result, monks in the monasteries found themselves in conflict with one another because of ideological differences.

Yet, the analysis of the future trends of the roles of monks in Thailand and elsewhere points in the same direction. An important variable governing the monks' growing demand to exercise their voting right in political election will come from the following factors: (1) The State's policy on Buddhism lacks understanding and does not seriously support the religion even though the majority of Thai people are followers

of Buddhism. (2) Politicians do not really have personal or legal awareness of the fate of Buddhism. (3) Action taken by followers of other religions or religious faiths has an adverse emotional impact on Buddhists, or it is not possible to stop the former from hurting or undermining Buddhism in some way or other.

There is an interesting lesson that prompts the monks to exercise their voting rights and the right to run for political election. In this matter, “an important variable is that politicians or political leaders do not fully realize or care enough for the survival of the religion, whether in terms of the application of its Dhamma or its continuity.” This fact can be substantiated by an establishment of a political party of “Jathika Hela Urumaya: JHU” by monks in Sri Lanka. Phra Sumaṅgala, the political party chief in Colombo, averred that “an election is just a *Dhamma Yuddhaya* to protect Buddhism and the Singhala. Phra Mettānanda and Dhamlogā pointed out that “the government failed so miserably to protect Buddhism that the monks had to come out and fight for a law that could prevent an unethical change of religion... Thus, monks had to run for election to protect the country and stop power-hungry politicians from self-seeking and adversely affecting Buddhism.”²⁹

A number of monks and Buddhist academics have made a salient point that an important variable leading to the growth or decline of Buddhism is associated with politicians responsible for policy formulation and national administration. Still, the pressure from external variables seen in the form of religious aggression, ethnic conflicts, and political policy implementation is an important factor causing monks in the four countries to perform their duty through political activity, demanding to exercise their political rights and becoming politicians to protect the survival of Buddhism. This, of course, sometimes led to the question whether or not religion was used as a pretext for something else. Nevertheless, an analysis of various external factors lent a greater weight to political movements of those monks.

²⁹ H.R. Perera, 1988: 3.

5. Recommendations

In relation to politics, Buddhism has been “a symbol of cooperation in the development of the State since the Buddha’s time.” In this matter, politics is an important variable in the physical and material developments. To harmonize these developments, it is necessary to design some kind of order, rules and regulations to ensure that the citizens can live together happily in mutual respect. In this regard, Buddhism can take on the task of spiritual development, aligning morality and natural truth with the said order, rules and regulations, including legal provisions and people’s way of life. Buddhism and politics are, in fact, “two sides of the same coin as far as the development of the State is concerned” whether in physical or psychological terms.

This study wishes to make recommendations on the political involvement of the *Saṅgha* to politicians and various organizations concerned and provide proper guidelines for monks and politicians as follows:

5.1 Recommendations to individual monks:

(1) To participate in political activities, monks should adopt a correct and fair stance. They should not support or oppose any political system, political groups or politicians on a personal basis of like or dislike but should at all times show *Upekkhā*. Monks may function as “guides” pointing the ways to politicians and providing appropriate Dhamma and advice to political systems, groups and politicians in a timely manner in tune with social, economic and political needs and contexts.

(2) The dangers against which monks should guard themselves in their political involvement are pursuits of material and financial gains, honors and recognition, as they all give rise to *Agati*, loss of objectivity and loss of freedom necessary for their spiritual guidance. Without such moral symbols of Dhamma and spiritual leadership for the general public and politicians, they are more likely to turn into tools and followers of politicians and political interest groups.

(3) A number of situations shed light on the fact that, despite the laws against monks’ exercising their voting and election rights, in

practice they are encouraged by politicians or political groups to do so. Some political groups were seen to participate in and provide support for activities of some monasteries. An adverse result that follows is that these monastic centers may start to consider their own survival rather than that of the religion. When a rival political power comes to power, the activities associated with the former administration will become minimal or less significant. Thus, keeping one's neutrality, regardless of whether or not one likes a politician or political group/party, and not making a public display of favor or disfavor, will be an important variable in sustaining Buddhism in the long term.

5.2 Recommendations to *Saṅgha* institutions

(1) On recommendations made by academics who expect the *Saṅgha* institutions to play an important role in promoting public and social peace, the researcher thinks it suitable to set up an institution or a work cluster responsible for managing conflicts in every province. Each province should have a center for dispute resolution whether it concerns the environment, family, monastery, community, or any other local issue. The center should act as a place for study and analysis of local wisdom on the basis of which conflicts are managed, as well as a place for the management of political conflicts at the local and national level in an effective manner.

(2) As Thai academics and advocates of democracy expect the *Saṅgha* to work with the State and private sector organizations to develop democracy from the grassroots community level, the *Saṅgha* institutions should review the monk development direction to ensure that monks have a better education and understanding of democratic government. They could work with State organizations in designing and implementing certificate-level education programs on monks in the modern era and democratization, after whose completion qualified monks could perform work to develop desirable citizenship in the 26th Buddhist century from the grassroots community level onward.

(3) At present a number of monks have been more politically involved on a clear and regular basis. They have been seen expressing their opinions on stage and criticizing various political groups. Such acts

will have wide repercussions on a wide scale in the *Sangha* institutions. If there are certain monks who have been engaged in the expression of their political opinions with a positive and appropriate result, the mainstream *Sangha* institutions with monks well-versed in Buddhism should recruit them to work in the subcommittee to answer questions posed by the media or do research on how to solve some specific issues.

5.3 Recommendations to politicians and political leaders

(1) As a large number of monks and Buddhist academics have little confidence in the way Buddhist sustainability and security have been treated, they have come out to demand more political involvement, especially in exercising their political election rights and to ensure that their elected politicians can more effectively defend and protect Buddhism. It follows therefore that politicians or the ruling elite must explain and find ways and means to develop Buddhism in response to the concerns of those monks and academics. If such attempts are properly made, they will put an end to excuses given for siding with various political groups, an act that will complicate the problem even further.

(2) Article 100 of the Constitution bars Buddhist monks from any political expression, especially in the exercise of their right to vote at an election of members of Parliament. Such prohibition is in line with the traditional political practice initiated in 1932. As time has long since elapsed, what explanation will the State provide to the new generation of monks who have been making demands for the removal of such restriction? The existing prohibition clause is a constitutional contradiction in itself. When a new constitution is drafted in the future, the new generation of monks will surely demand a change in the clause. A recommendation is, therefore, made to political leaders to open forums for public hearing on this issue as comprehensively as possible. When each side gives its consensus, the explanations will become even more legitimate.

(3) Several politicians may have observed that making political commentaries is “not the job of the monks,” and entertained a negative reaction to the act. Be that as it may, it is advisable to provide space for them to perform their duties as citizens of the country or as members of the media. If the comment is not made in good faith, giving rise to libel

or slander, the politicians concerned can always resort to legal action. As a matter of fact, politicians should welcome such move and proceed in the framework of “*Paripucchā*,” i.e. going to the *Samana* and engaging in an exchange of views – an act likely to be more beneficial to their policy implementation.

(4) As a number of people have criticized the politicians’ attempts to induce or persuade monks to act as their “canvassers” to gain victory, it is recommended that politicians guard against such act or tendency. Their ploys may obtain the result they want, but may have a long-term adverse impact on the *Saṅgha* or *Saṅgha* institutions. Monks or monasteries in the community are not personal possessions of politicians; they are public assets that every political party needs to preserve to ensure that the *Saṅgha* remains a true dependable pillar of every social group and community as intended by the Buddha with his saying “*Saṅgham saranam gacchāmi*.”

(5) Politicians should coordinate and cooperate with the *Saṅgha* in civic development, providing budgetary support and necessary development tools. They should study and understand the Bhudda-Dhamma in a proper manner under the guidance of the monks in theory and practice. Equipped with all the means, they should be able to facilitate monks in the following attempt: “let any monk who is not yet there come and let those who are already there conduct their *Samaṇadhamma* in peace.” They should ensure safety and do everything possible for the *Saṅgha* to perform their duty of civic development alongside their political counterparts.

(6) The political conflict and violence in the administrative power struggle over the past 12 years (2002-2014) has divided the country and provoked much animosity. Politicians should not exploit the situation by using individual monks or *Saṅgha* organizations as their allies or as a symbol to legitimize their political cause. Those with a political stake in national administration should keep monks away from the arena and open up space for them to play an appropriate role in making demands or bringing about national reconciliation in a more concrete and systematic manner and with full support of all parties concerned.

(7) A large number of academics and monks have pointed out that ever since 1932, the State or political elite have kept religion or

morality separate from politics. Religion has been confined to being just a political ceremonial tool. As a result, politicians or political leaders have been engaged in immoral, unethical, or corrupt practice seen in various activities and programs. It is appropriate, therefore, for political leaders to encourage and promote moral integrity and ethical behavior in members of Parliament in a speedy and effective fashion. Such principle should then be made part of the “lifestyle” of politicians in pursuit of good governance.

5.4 Recommendations to the Office of National Buddhism

Many Buddhists have been more vocal in their demands and concerns about the monks’ behaviors and participation in various political groups. Under such circumstances, the *Saṅgha* cannot remain the true pillar on which Buddhists are supposed to depend; many have lost their confidence and faith in Buddhism as a whole. It is advisable, therefore, for the Office of National Buddhism to undertake the following measures:

(1) Short-term measures: A multilateral sub-committee should be set up, consisting of an appropriately proportional number of members from the Office of National Buddhism, members of academic and ecclesiastical working groups and experts from agencies concerned such as Buddhist universities, the Thai Royal Police, Intelligence Department, mass media, and lawyers. This sub-committee will answer all the queries and demands on Buddhism and policy implementation of public authorities in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

(2) Long-term measures: Attempts should be made to study, analyze, and formulate guidelines for managing the existing problems in a realistic manner responsive to the needs of Buddhists. Such plans should then be submitted to the *Saṅgha* Supreme Council of Thailand that will instruct the agencies concerned to effectively take further action.

5.5 Recommendations to Buddhist Universities

Observations have been brought to the attention of the Thai Buddhist Universities by groups of academics and members of the public regarding the escalation of conflicts and political violence. The Universities, who are supposed to act as the resource centers in supplying correct information and answers, have not been able to come up with any concrete solutions for the society.

(1) Although at present more faculty members have taken on the task of providing information, they tend to act on an individual basis. In this regard, both Buddhist Universities may already have in place some working groups assigned to answering questions or giving clarifications concerning political matters, especially issues that affect the way of life of the people as a whole or their morality.

(2) Buddhist Universities should serve as technical database on which correct informations could be passed on to political leadership and citizenship. To be able to do so, it is imperative to open up greater opportunity for research on Buddhism and politics in various aspects including the Dhamma principles, good governance, and Buddhist-based political structure, for this will provide the Thai society with alternative means to better develop a political system in consonance with the Thai way of life.

5.6 Recommendations to the mass media

An increasing number of people have shown lack of confidence in the way the *Sangha* behaves recently, especially as a result of a number of monks involved in political activities and parties. It is recommended that the *Sangha* image be presented in the following manners:

(1) News presentation should be geared toward developing the *Sangha* or their organizations in such a way that can bring about better organizational management. The presentation should be based on facts and not on sensational material, although it is true that sensationalism is good for business but at the expense of Buddhism.

(2) Amidst political conflict, attempts should be made to cooperate with the *Sangha* organizations to sensitize society about possible solutions. Presentations should be made in a positive light, reflecting a happy way of life conducted through such activities as praying and meditation. Peaceful society should be constantly presented with the message showing how the *Sangha* and the community work together to promote positive coexistence within religious, linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences.

5.7 Recommendations to the general Buddhist public

(1) As a result of monks joining political demonstrations, many people have begun to lose confidence in their faith. It is, therefore, recommended that the Buddhist public be more tolerant and understanding about the *Sangha* role and objective in the matter. Some monks may feel that their action is good for the society, for example, in their protests against listing alcohol businesses in the Stock Market, liberalization of illegal lottery, and opening of casinos in Thailand. All this is in line with the Thai social ethical standard and the *Sangha* as the country's ethical symbol needs to participate in it.

(2) As a result of monks participating in political activities and parties or expressing their political ideology for or against various groups, the society has become more concerned about their political neutrality. The Buddhist public needs to adhere to “the Dhamma principle” rather than to the activist monks. It should consider whether their action is meant to facilitate or bring about happiness for the public good or whether it is spurred by their individual cause. If the action has a negative intent, the Buddhist public should impose social sanction against them in order to lead them back to the more acceptable lifestyle of monkhood.

6. Suggestions of topics for future research

The present study has come across a number of other related issues that the researcher feels should be taken up further in future studies as follows:

(1) There should be a study on “patterns and ways to develop democracy in an integrated Buddhist manner in line with Thai society in the 26th century of the Buddhist Era.” The rationale is that present-day democracy is mainly copied from the Western model without really reflecting the Thai way of life. Democracy should be studied in terms of how its structure and contents could be adopted. How should the *Sangha* institutions or monks be positioned in light of the new democratization? This is relevant, considering how the democratic rule since 1932 has kept the *Sangha* away from the government and in some aspects has led to alienation with politics.

(2) There should be a study on “patterns and ways to develop citizenship in an integrated Buddhist manner in the desired democratization.” Citizens are an important variable in the development of quality democracy. It can be seen that “the quality of democracy depends upon the quality of citizenship;” therefore, a study of this kind should analyze and find a pattern conducive to civic development. Essentially, it should recommend how opportunities should be made available for monks to help develop citizenship so that they will not be “a surplus” force in the democratic rule and civic development as is currently the case.

(3) There should be a study on “possibility of monks voting in the 26th century of the Buddhist Era: problems, obstacles and desirable solutions.” Some guidelines for the approach could include a presentation of problems, obstacles, demands, history, law and the Dhamma-Vinaya, and the possibility of the exercise of the *Sangha* voting right in Thai society. Its findings could then be used as the basis for further analysis and debate, as studies on government administration over the years have left out this aspect. It could provide some interesting answers.

(4) There should be a study on “roles and desirable status of *Sangha* institutions under democratic government in the 26th century of the Buddhist Era.” The objective should be to provide answers to how the *Sangha* institution as the country’s unifying force should be positioned in the 26th century of the Buddhist Era against the background of economic, social and cultural change and how it should be managed in line with the Buddha’s intention and in response to the needs of the people, society, nation, and global community.

Such studies, in the researcher’s view, would help project the images of the *Sangha* and politics in other dimensions, with substance rather than ceremony or form. Their findings should be beneficial to Buddhism as an organization and help to put Buddhism even more firmly in the people’s way of life and social fabrics in all possible dimensions. When that becomes reality, Thai society will be able to confidently answer the question as to why it needs Buddhism as the unifying force for the people, society, politics, nation, and global community.

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