Negotiating *Dhamma* amid Uncertain Democratization: A Perspective on Myanmar's Buddhist Responses to Sociopolitical Change

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Abstract

This essay examines some ways that the Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*) in Myanmar has been part of the political transition in that country after 2010. It relates these recent Buddhist-state interactions to deeper developments in Myanmar society and culture, especially those from the early 20th century. It argues that current developments in the Buddhist *sangha* and Myanmar's political transition toward democracy are part of an ongoing and uncertain negotiation process. These negotiations are between a new, hybrid, and still embryonic democratically-elected government constrained by military power and diverse evolving forms of Buddhist organization and practice. Both are entangled within an anxious and fractious society that is experiencing uncertain socioeconomic

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changes and conflicted transnational forces. The negotiations of a diverse Buddhist community thus have complex and unresolved relations to Myanmar's society and its fledgling democratization.

Keywords: Myanmar Buddhism, sociopolitical change, nationalist monks

Introduction

Buddhism and politics have had complex and sometimes confusing relations in Myanmar. During the last decade, international media have shown divergent images that are hard to reconcile and puzzling. Familiar images from August 2007 depicted hundreds of monks in Myanmar cities protesting the authoritarian government of the time and promoting democracy before being crushed by the military a month later. In June 2012, in the wake of violence against Rohingya people in Rakhine state promoted by some monks and in the aftermath of the 2012 by-elections won by the National League for Democracy [NLD] and discussion of democratization, the July 2013 *Time* magazine cover depicts the firebrand monk U Wirathu with the caption "The Face of Buddhist Terror." More recently, a landslide election victory by the NLD and its Nobel Peace Prize winning leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in November 2015 occurred despite nationalist monks advocating votes for the military-backed party. Moreover, since the new NLD-led government came to power in April 2016, but especially since August 2017, monks have been accused of involvement in the Myanmar military's violent expulsion of some 750,000 Rohingya from Rakhine state, while many critics lament that Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's State Counsellor, has offered little condemnation or equivocal responses to these events. And in June 2018, after Facebook shut down the accounts of several hardline monks and a nationalist Buddhist organization just days after meeting with Myanmar government

officials and NGOs, citing their divisive hate speech, these banned monks and their supporters publicly protest the NLD government's role in limiting their free speech, while also seeking ways around the Facebook ban. What are we to make of these episodes? What do they say about the relations of politics and Buddhism in Myanmar? Rather than providing a clear view of state-*sangha* relations in Myanmar or between democracy and Buddhism, these contrasting images confound presumptions and expectations of their relations, raising more questions than providing answers. Their puzzling nature has two main sources. First, they seem to undercut common views of Buddhists in Myanmar as being peace-loving promoters of democracy like many saw on their TV screens in September 2007. Second, they question whether a democratically-elected government headed by the Nobel Peace Prize winning leader and human rights promoter can bring about a peaceful and harmonious society based on respect for minority rights and religious freedom – or at least to clearly condemn unjustified anti-Muslim violence and ethnic cleansing.

Some of our puzzlement may dissipate if we remind ourselves that Buddhism, politics, and democratization in Myanmar are as complex, messy, diverse, uneasy, and multifaceted as is Myanmar's rapidly changing society. The above divergent images and the stories behind them point, moreover, to richer possible stories of their relations, ones which are grounded on recognizing a more diverse set of roles of the Buddhist *sangha* in Myanmar's current transition than presented in most media accounts or which are

part of the public imagination. To understand these richer stories of Buddhism's complex roles in a changing Myanmar, more attention to historical and cultural contexts is warranted, and that attention may need to recognize their entanglement in messier sociopolitical processes. When Buddhism is understood as part of Myanmar's remarkable, but fitful, transitions toward a kind of hybrid military-democratic government amid dramatic socioeconomic changes that are also open to fractious and ambiguous links to the rest of the world, we can better see Buddhism as more complex than many familiar storylines normally allow.

While many observers admired Myanmar's moves from a military dictatorship toward democracy in recent years, these changes did not repair deep communal conflicts between Buddhists, Muslims and other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Firebrand monks continue their anti-Muslim hate campaigns even though state agencies, the State Buddhist Council, and even Facebook condemn them. Like the rest of Myanmar society and its fledgling democratically-elected hybrid government, the Buddhist *sangha* in Myanmar is not unified or able to speak with one voice, but is part of an evolving Burmese society. The *sangha* is no less messy, diverse, and uneasy about the changes going on in the country than the laypeople who support its monks. And the public ties to the *sangha* and to the new government are no less fraught than they have been in the past. The new government is nominally run by an elected parliament chosen in November 2015 filled overwhelmingly with NLD representatives, but headed by Daw Aung San Suu

Kyi who is serving as the Supreme Councillor, since she is constitutionally barred from being named President. The powers of the elected government are also constitutionally limited, with the military retaining control over three key ministries – Defence, Border, and Home Affairs – as well as being guaranteed 25% of the seats in parliament, and its Commander-in-chief retaining power over the President. Myanmar's democracy is limited in many ways, and highly constrained by the military.

This essay explores some of the ways that the Buddhist monastic community in Myanmar has been part of the sociopolitical reforms undertaken in that country in the last decade. It relates these involvements to wider developments in Myanmar society and culture, and touches on earlier 20th century developments and dynamics in Burmese history. The research is based on examining a wide range of journals, videos, news reports, scholarly analyses, social media tied to Myanmar monks and political economy, as well as a series of interviews with several dozen monks at 16 separate visits to monks and monastic organizations in the Mandalay and Yangon area in 2016.[2] The essay argues that current dynamic roles of the Buddhist *sangha* in Myanmar's political transition are part of a continuing and fitful negotiation

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process that has been going on between a new and still embryonic elected government heavily constrained by the military and evolving forms of Buddhist organization and practice at a time of great uncertainty and uneasiness. These claims are grounded on the notion that the identities and ideas like state, *sangha*, democracy are fluid, dynamic and negotiable – neither as innate as claimed by nationalists nor as fixed and essential as promoted by some monastic or government sources. In this time of change in Myanmar, the *sangha* is as the various parts of the *sangha* do, so paying some attention to the diversity and variety of various parts of Buddhism in Myanmar is important to understanding their evolving roles in the current transition.

By providing some historical context to the two episodes in Burma a century apart, we can better compare how the Buddhist *sangha* were part of political developments in the 1910s-1940s and how it has been part of Myanmar's transition during the past decade.

The structure of this paper is as follows. After a brief look at recent approaches to analyzing religion and democratization, I present a historical context of key ways that politics and Buddhism have been entangled and evolved in modern Burma in a complex negotiation process. I next examine some of the views of some monks and monastic organizations in Myanmar in 2015-6, and conclude by examining some of the dynamics between Buddhist *sangha* and political developments between 2007 and 2018.

Religion, Politics, and Democratization

Religion and politics have long been conceptualized separately, but in fact they are interdependent spheres of modern life. Many scholars used this conceptual separation until the 1980s to argue that modernization processes would lead to the separation of religious institutions from the state and the privatization of religion, and that this would be seen in a global decline in religion's social and political importance. This "secularization paradigm" expected religion to fade from the public sphere as nations modernized. Because this has been a key tenet of the 20th century social sciences, religion's roles in politics have been understudied. However, since the 1980s many were surprised at the continued value of religion in peoples' lives and in how they still shape political movements. Contrary to the expectations of the secularization paradigm, many have noticed a widespread resurgence of religion, and a strong role of religion as a political actor in many countries. José Casanova noted this fact more than 20 years ago, writing that "religion continues to have and will likely continue to have a public dimension" (Casanova, 1994, 66).

The current increase in various forms of spirituality and religiosity can be seen in how many religious organizations openly seek to articulate viewpoints on many political and social issues and to have political impact in many countries. Religious actors and forces are now involved in many political issues, processes and controversies. This "return" of religion in both politics and international relations has been confirmed by recent research.

A new perspective has come to realize that a simple dichotomy of state and religion cannot make sense of the complexity of recent changes. Religion remains an important part of political processes, both by stressing that there is more than one relevant interpretation of modernization and by noting that religion can and does play a role in political changes. Now governments, scholars, analysts and observers agree that religion is a significant domestic and international political actor in today's world, both because it is an important form of identity and belonging, and because of the impact of global processes, which have expanded the channels, pressures, and agents via which norms are diffused through transnational and international networks and interactions. These developments have led religious actors to pursue diverse political goals nationally and internationally as tied to concerns of the economic, social, and political consequences of globalization. Meanwhile, in many countries, the state plays a major role in shaping, if not determining, the limits of religious experience, by regulating aspects of religious belief, practice, property, education, and/or law (Kunkler and Leininger, 2011). The understandings of the relations between democratization and religion have also changed over time. A common assumption in the social sciences has been that modernization, democratization, and secularization were part of any process of political development. As such, many studies on religion and democratization once focused on aspects of religious traditions and often stressed that some of these traditions are more democratic (Christianity) while others are more anti-democratic (Islam). Several decades

of development have moved the study of the role of religion in democratic or political changes beyond the presumption of secularization to a recognition that religion matters to the state.

There are three major ways that religion and democratization have been related in recent research. First, the relations between religion and democratization are now seen as being both dialectical and interactive. Recent studies have argued that *state–religion relations*, more than *religious traditions*, may influence democracy (Kunkler and Leininger 2009). Second, since religions are creative parts of society and are constantly changing, their relations with democratization can also vary over time. This means that political actors and religious entities can only usefully be discussed in terms of specific contexts. Scholars now often examine how state institutions and actors interact with religious organizations and actors, recognizing the diversity and complexity of relations between religion and the state, especially the government. Beyond the commonly assumed tensions between religion and the state, the two may also show forms of competition, adaptation, and cooperation. Third, while earlier studies analyzed how religious beliefs or affiliations shaped political outcomes, including those related to democratization, now scholars attend more to specific political contexts and how they affect the roles of religious entities in democratization processes. By recognizing that state and religious actors may play multiple and complex roles and also work at dierent levels, it is important to note that religion works through

scholars, associations, clergy, laypeople, and educational institutions. When democratization is seen as a complex and evolving process involving diverse types of actors and activities beyond just what the political elites are doing or the ways that authoritarian rule ends, we can find room to include analyses of how state interacts with religious ideas, individuals and religious institutions in our explanations.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) has provided a new way to think about religion and governance that I will apply to recent developments in Myanmar. She distinguishes between "expert religion," "official religion," and "lived religion," in order to better understand religiopolitical realities. Taking Buddhism in Myanmar as an example, "lived" Buddhism would refer to the practices of ordinary Buddhists as they interact with monks, rituals, texts and monasteries as they seek to navigate and make sense of their lives, connect with others and find a place in the world. This rich area of human activity, relations, investments and beliefs may or may not be captured in the human activities identified as "Buddhist" for the purposes of democracy, politics or governance, however. "Governed" or "official" Buddhism is the religion as construed by those holding positions of political and religious power, whether in the state or in various forms of secular or religious law. Examples include the official Buddhism of state institutions – such as the *Maha Nayaka* in Myanmar – and the official Buddhisms of supranational institutions – including the World Fellowship of Buddhists, or the International Theravada

Buddhist Missionary University. Finally, "expert" Buddhism refers to Buddhism as construed by those who generate knowledge about Buddhism including scholars, policy experts, monks and government officials such as in the Myanmar Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture.

Disentangling Buddhism into these three categories shows that expert and official views of Buddhism do not contain all of contemporary Buddhist religiosity in Myanmar. Lived Buddhism does not line up with a view of Buddhism as a single, limited cause of political behavior. It often diverges from Buddhism as construed by the Myanmar, Thai, Lao, Cambodia, Sri Lankan, Japanese — or even American — state. The practices and traditions of lived Buddhism often differ from orthodox, elite or official understandings of what Buddhism is or should be. Neither "Buddhism" nor "Buddhist political actors" are unified agents or forces that can be easily analyzed, quantified, engaged, celebrated, condemned, or divided. Given this situation, references to Buddhist political activities per se should be met with scepticism. To rely for policy purposes on the category of a Buddhist actor or Buddhist state mistakenly presumes a type of factor motivated by Buddhism, but this is not sociologically tenable.

There is no singular Buddhism, just as there is no unified Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism. As Anthropologist Samuli Schielke (2011) notes for Islam, but also applies here: "...any major faith, is not simply something – it is a part of people's lives,

thoughts, acts, societies, histories and more. Consequently, it can be many different things – a moral idiom, a practice of self-care, a discursive tradition, an aesthetic sensibility, a political ideology, a mystical quest, a source of hope, a cause of anxiety, an identity, an enemy – you name it."

Singling out Buddhism as a cause of any political behavior and a motivation for some foreign policy ignores that religion is always entangled in economic, historical, geographic, political and religious contexts that permit discrimination, harmony, violence and coexistence. Social tensions and conflicts in a place are rooted in a complex ground of multiple factors, including political factors, which cannot be explained away by referring to religious ideology.

So the perspective used here is that religion is better understood as something that is part of the social and national culture rather than institutions and political parties, and therefore "requires a more historical and dialogic approach to religion and politics" (Cesari, 2016, 134). Religious actors – including hardline Buddhist groups in Myanmar – have had an impact on issues of Myanmar's democratization, democracy, and secularization, but not always in ways expected. By shifting "from a polarized state–religion situation to focus on complex sets of interactions between the two entities such as adaptation, cooperation, and competition ... [So] no religion is antidemocratic per se" (Cesari and Fox, 2016, 254). To understand them, history and context must be examined.

The Dynamic of State-Sangha Relations in Modern Burma

Relations between the Buddhist *sangha* and the political sphere have always been flexible and contested parts of Buddhist communities, subject to diverse forms of interaction. Monks, leaders and laypeople alike take part in these negotiations. Monks' presumed social detachment seems to limit their political activity. Laypeople, including political leaders, seem to oscillate between using Buddhist reasoning and action to support what they do or exploiting Buddhism for political legitimacy. Myanmar's style of Buddhist political thought has not developed much during the nearly half-century of military rule. But since its political reforms started in 2010, with greater opportunities for public political participation, we see a wider range of opinion and action tied to the relevance of Buddhist teachings to politics and the relationship of Buddhist identity to Burmese national identity. That includes diversity of thought and action among monks. Although the amount of research in Burmese Buddhist politics is still small, it has expanded in Myanmar's current sociopolitical transition.

Monastic involvement with political issues, whether supporting or challenging political authority, blurs the line between the mundane and the spiritual. A monk's moral authority rises from his presumed focus on religious practice. His effort produces a general respect that adheres to every member of the *sangha* as an institution, beyond any individual monk's accomplishment. Monks are also expected to protect the religion and reduce suffering,

but there are no universally agreed on means or reasons to do so. Since monks mediate the spiritual and the social realms, even though they live apart from the laity, they are close to lay society. As the details on what monastic work in the social realm can and should be and what politics is acceptable will never be settled, they are always subject to discussion, debate and negotiation. This truism is even truer in times of great change. In Myanmar, today as a hundred years ago, monks still hold much social respect and regularly contribute to the country's development, but because of this, they are also caught up in negotiating their place in the sociopolitical transition.

Buddhists have discussed and debated ideas of democracy in Burma since the late 19th century. As democracy is being realized in the current 21st century political transition, concerns and uncertainty reigns supreme. Many Buddhists – both monks and laypeople – worry about what democracy may mean and are concerned with protecting Buddhism and reclaiming its dominance in society and culture. These concerns ensure that democracy will be debated for a long time – likely with no clear result. This means that there have been, there are now and there will be a range of ways that Buddhists in Myanmar articulate and act in relation to democracy. This runs on a spectrum between a democracy based on liberal rights to a democracy mainly based on morality. Debates persist about to what extent each can be grounded in Buddhist ideas and what role secular ideas play in them. While moral discourse and reasoning are part of Burmese notions

of politics, tensions shaped the links between moral practice and democracy, and still need to be addressed by Burmese political thinkers as part of Myanmar's emerging democratic discourse. Buddhism alone will not settle the debate.

Buddhism and Political Resistance in Colonial Burma

Underlying the politics and ideals of precolonial Burma was a basic sociopolitical diversity and fluidity. Both ethnicity and sociopolitical status were fluid, porous and contingent. To provide some order, an ideal Buddhist king was expected to protect the Buddhist monastic establishment by not just defending and supporting it, but also by preventing its moral decay. Because of this royal support of Buddhism, the *sangha* will then be expected to legitimize the state. Donald Smith has shown that promoting and defending Buddhism confirmed a king's legitimacy, but also that the king was expected to protect the *sangha* (Smith, 1965). By defending the Buddhist faith, the king was duty-bound to show reverence to the *sangha* and to care for its welfare. He also was expected to be an exemplar of good conduct and righteous behavior. The precolonial Burmese polity distinguished between affairs of state (*nain ngan ye*, mostly affairs of the king and his advisors) and political practices beyond the court, which were often based more on local tradition and custom than royal decree (Sarkisyanz, 1965). Colonial independence in 1948 did not erase this basic distinction for many in Burma, meaning that many Burmese still tend to see politics (*nain ngan ye*) in general as a practice of and for elites – now mostly government officials and

leaders of political parties – whose actions were far removed from the customs of village life. During the 1950s and 1960s, *nain ngan ye* was used by villagers to refer to what government leaders in the capital were doing, while traditional community practices of cooperative action, compromise, and reconciliation were *ayu ahsa* (beliefs) or *atway ahkaw* (ideas) (Badgley 1965). To what extent these older ideas remain valid for Myanmar society today is unclear, since there has been little research on it during the last half century of military rule.

Buddhism was central to changes in Burma after Britain colonized it between the 1820s and 1885. From the late 19th century, after the British dismantled traditional Buddhist kingdoms in Burma, some Buddhist pressure groups sought to "restore Buddhism" to its "rightful place" in a colonized society. A key catalyst for the social and political change in Burma at the time was Britain's colonial occupation that lasted to 1948. British colonialists made Burma part of Britain's Empire of India and worked in Burma with tools that they had developed to colonize India. They created borders, religions and ethnic groups of people who often had little in common with anything Burman or Buddhist in a new territory. The British aimed to develop fixed and numerically clear classifications for territory, people, and resources using maps and the census toward these ends. Information from censuses may have helped outsiders control foreign areas, but they also froze the shifting categories of precolonial Burma into presumed fixed "races" with permanent

characteristics, mostly by tying individuals to one distinct language, religion, place, gender, etc. Indian censuses by the British that were used in colonial Burma do not define ethnicity, but are mostly based on language, including dialects and sub-dialects, and religions. A sidebar in the 1931 census lists 20 ethnic groups, as a kind of footnote to the rest of the text, but establishing ethnicity was not their main goal. The British colonial system also brought in many Indian government workers and money lenders to help with Britain rule in Burma, and they often displaced Bamar elites, which led to resentment centering on a narrow nationalism that excluded those thought to be colluding with the British colonial power. This included many ethnic minorities and eventually centered on Muslims. Many forms of resistance arose as a result of these developments, and they often used Buddhist symbols and ideas to communicate with Burmese people.

After a few rebellions whose leaders wanted to restore the monarchy after it fell to the British in 1886, most anticolonial activism in Burma from the early 20th century involved monks and laypeople. They often saw in British colonial rule over Burma signs of moral and religious decline, and shared common views about ending colonialism, even though they promoted diverse methods to end colonial rule and to start a postcolonial regime. Alicia Turner (2014) argues that these diverse efforts are less attempts to protect any Burmese nation than they are efforts to restore and strengthen a lapsed Buddhist identity by protecting

the *sāsana* (the Buddhist religion). Many of the anti-colonial nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s portrayed the populations from the Indian sub-continent that the British brought in as their biggest threat, since they were outsiders who had economically subjugated and culturally overwhelmed the Burmese natives. These migrants included both Muslims and Hindus. A key anti-colonial nationalist slogan of the time – *'Amyo, Batha, Thathana'* (race, language/religion and teaching of Buddha) – became the centerpiece of much of the Bamar Buddhist independence movement in the early 20th century. It implied a narrow religious and racial hierarchy that could counter the British-generated South Asian socioeconomic and religious threats.

Buddhism thus became a key part of Burmese nationalism. Hundreds of Buddhist associations formed to protect Buddhism in the early 20th century (Turner, 2014). Some resistance to British colonial rule took shape in new nationalist associations, like the *wunthanu athins*, or "Loving One's Race" associations. Buddhist revivalism largely overlapped with ethnic majoritarianism, and led to the popular slogan "To be a Burmese is to be Buddhist," coined by the Young Men's Buddhist Association in the early 20th century (Schober, 2009). U Ottama (1879-1939), a leading monk and national independence hero, promoted the *wunthanu athins* idea.

Much of the era's Buddhist political thought assumed that

individual and collective moral practice could produce concrete political results (Walton, 2017). The monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) articulated this view even before the British had fully taken over the country. His *Nwa Myitta Sa* ("Cow Letter") of 1885 saw Burma's defeat and humiliation by the British as partly due to the failure of Burmese Buddhists to uphold the precepts and act morally. To counter these lapses, he promoted new moral activities – like refraining from eating beef – to help return Burmese Buddhists to the moral path, and lay the foundations for gaining political independence. Ledi won support for these religious reforms by traveling around the country to promote *vipassanā* (insight) meditation practice and by organizing lay study and discussion groups on subjects previously done only by senior monks, such as the *abhidhamma* (Buddhist philosophy of existence). Erik Braun's (2013) study of Ledi Sayadaw shows that his stress on lay practice is a creative response to the colonial encounter that included Burma's Buddhist traditions.

From the early 20th century, politically active Burmese monks also linked religious and political liberation (Walton, 2017). U Ottama, who had been educated in India and was deeply influenced by India's independence struggle at the time, saw political freedom as providing the basis for being able to strive for enlightenment. He gave a speech in 1921 that contrasted Burma's colonialism with the political situation at the time of Buddha, arguing that life under non-Buddhist colonial rule was

keeping Burmese Buddhists from reaching enlightenment: "When Lord Buddha was alive, man had a predilection for Nirvana. There is nothing left now. The reason why it is so is because the government is English" (cited in Smith, 1965, 96). By linking political and moral practice, U Ottama suggested that Buddhists may have to temporarily focus on gaining political freedom so they could be able to seek enlightenment. Similar arguments have been used since 2012 by political authorities and monks tied to current nationalist movements in Myanmar.

Another monk of the time, U Thilasara, also saw colonial rule as negatively affecting the mental state of colonial subjects, and argued that spiritual and moral benefits would only come from Burmese self-government: "Without being free from bondage, which stems from the fact that one nation is subject to the rule of another, one can hardly find peace in one's heart or in one's environment, the environment in which the Buddhist way of life may be practiced or the compassionate love of a true Buddhist disseminated to humanity at large" (cited in Sarkisyanz, 1965, 125). He thus saw British colonial rule as bad for the Burmese people since it made it hard for them to effectively practice such moral ideals as cultivating *mettā* (loving-kindness). U Thilasara's view of spiritual and political liberation as complementary also appears in his desire for Burmese who "through the attainment of political and personal freedom, they may be more favorably and firmly placed on the road to Nirvana" (*ibid.*, 125).

Besides seeking to create new political conditions that could improve Buddhist practice in colonial Burma, some monks of the time also stressed resistance. Ascetic withdrawal, they argued, could lead to moral empowerment. Millennial movements have often arisen in times of social upheaval in Theravāda Buddhist societies, and some leaders of millennial movements gained recognition by withdrawing from the world to enhance their moral practice. Niklas Foxeus (2011) sees the rise of millennial cults in post-independence Burma as responding to modernizing tendencies of the new state, with some of these groups seeking to revitalize a tradition of ethical Buddhist kingship shaped by esoteric interpretations of Buddhism. Even when religious figures do not withdraw to cultivate their moral power and challenge authorities, political leaders often see the power that accrues to these figures as a threat. Since the late 1980s, Burmese governments have attempted to co-opt the legitimating moral authority of these forest "saints" as they aimed to centralize the *sangha* (Rozenberg, 2010).

Ingrid Jordt's (2007) study of an important mass lay meditation movement in Myanmar shows that the emergence of lay moral groups, constituted through *vipassanā* (insight) meditation were an indirect, yet culturally relevant, challenge to the ruling military regime. Although Buddhists in Myanmar may not have supported the regime, Jordt argued that their attitudes were ambivalent, since, by building pagodas and patronizing monks, ruling generals were in part governing as a good Buddhist king

ought to, creating opportunities for their subjects to make merit. People could also (privately) question the generals' intentions in making their donations. Jordt calls this questioning the "politics of sincerity." While direct political opposition was punished harshly during military rule, Jordt sees lay meditators as being critical of morality (as previously available only to monks), and creating an alternate vision of the moral community. The recent opening of spaces for political protest now in some parts of the country makes it unclear what political role *vipassanā* meditation might play in Myanmar's democratic future.

The Evolution of Democratic Politics and Sangha Activities in Independent Burma

As noted above, Buddhists have discussed and debated various ideas of independence and even democracy as part of political change in Burma since the late 19th century. Democracy was also discussed – and repressed – for much of the period of independent Burma after 1948 by monks, laypeople and political leaders. Some used Buddhist ideas to articulate these views. With democracy being realized in the current political transition after 2010, concerns and uncertainty reigns supreme. Many Buddhists – both monks and laypeople – worry about what democracy may mean and are concerned about protecting Buddhism and ensuring its dominance in society and culture during this time as a way of providing a source of familiarity amid change. These dual concerns ensure that democracy will be debated for a long time, and may not coalesce into a clear result. This means that there is a range

of ways in which Buddhists in Myanmar understand democracy, which may be seen on a spectrum between a democracy based on liberal rights and a democracy based mostly on morality. To what extent each can be grounded in Buddhist ideas and what role secular ideas play in this is still being debated.

Current developments in Myanmar in the relations of the Buddhist *sangha* and the state resemble those of a century or so ago. From the late 1800s to the 1930s, many Buddhists in colonial Burma experienced dramatic changes that came with colonial rule and responded with a variety of ways to ensure that Buddhism retained its value for Burma's future, and involved many aspects of society, social organization and anti-colonial nationalist politics. During this key historical juncture, diverse patterns of renegotiation occurred in Burma as a new state-*sangha*-society nexus slowly emerged that remains relevant for understanding the current Myanmar transition. The developments in Burma's state-*sangha*-society nexus up to around 1940 are comparable to changes in Myanmar from the last decade or so.

After Burma became independent from Great Britain in 1948, U Nu became the first elected Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, ruling from 1948 to 56, 1957 to 58 and 1960 to 62. Under democratic rule, U Nu's government encouraged Buddhist meditation and international Buddhist missionary work as part of the new state, and the *sangha* became key political influences and U Nu ruled as a *dhammaraja* in an independent and secular Burma.

U Nu had close relations to monks, and as a layman, he mixed Buddhism with Burmese beliefs in spirits (*nats*) and with politics into his speeches and government ceremonies. His government made the Ministry of Religious Affairs a strong agency of state policy. Some even criticized the U Nu era as one long Buddhist ceremony (Gravers, 1999). U Nu sponsored the Sixth Great Buddhist World Council in 1956, which led to the translation of the Buddhist textual canon, the collection of Buddhist relics from Ceylon, and the building of a World Peace Pagoda. U Nu's government also put Buddhist teachings into the school curriculum, and new national Ecclesiastical Courts and Pali universities took shape. His government likewise instituted the Buddha *Sasana* Council which, led by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, aimed to promote Buddhism as fully as possible (Ibid.; Spiro, 1982). When in 1960 the *sangha* pressured U Nu, his electoral campaign promised to make Buddhism the official state religion and, in 1961, he followed up on the promise by doing so.

Although striving to give ethnic minorities more independence, U Nu's efforts to meet the demands of radical monks and to officially make Buddhism the state religion fueled ethnic and religious divisions across the country, and contributed to the military coup that toppled him in 1962. Smith notes that U Nu took his quasi-royal functions seriously (Smith, 1965). Since Burmese kings felt a need to gain enough merit to overcome the consequences of their own immoral and sometimes bloody acts,

U Nu argued that the government had responsibility to look after the welfare of the people, both in the current world and in their countless future existences. This situation made it necessary to make Buddhism the state religion in Burma (*ibid*). U Nu also saw it as his personal duty to gain merit so as to help his subjects reach *nirvana* (Chirot, 1994). U Nu thus made the *sangha* a key part of the new independent and democratic state of Burma. He sought to extend the notion of responsibilities of the new democratic regime beyond just the welfare of the people and his potential voters, but also to shepherd non-voting monks who would assist the state by providing dharma to care for the recently deceased and future lives of Burmese citizens and its leaders. U Nu's downfall could thus partly be attributed to his excessive support of the *sangha* and its activities, and the neglect of social and political divisions. This neglect helped prompt the Burmese military to overthrow him in 1962.

Under the following regime led by Ne Win as President of Burma between 1962 and 1981, the "Burmese Way of Socialism" reworked Buddhism in a socialist direction. Due to the ethnic, religious, and communist divisions threatening the Union of Burma, Gravers argues that Ne Win, in 1962, assumed the position of a national savior like a *Cakkavattin* (a wheel-turning universal monarch) or a *min laung* (challenger to the throne), one who had ended the growing religious and ethnic split while also limiting foreign influence (Gravers, 1999). After gaining power, Ne Win undid U Nu's religious laws, nationalized much of the

economy, and monopolized foreign and internal trade for the state. Bechert notes that his policies were tied more to old Burmese tradition and royal monopolies rather than to Marxism (Bechert, 1995), while Matthews argues that the military regime, beginning with Ne Win in the 1960s, has always sought support from the animistic powers associated with various rituals to overcome bad omens, avoiding a loss of power that would follow their karmic destiny, and easing the guilt associated with clearly dreadful sins (Matthews, 1998). Chirot notes that when Ne Win isolated Burma in 1962 he acted more like a traditional Burmese king. From the mid-1970s, he married an heir of the last Burmese royal family and began appearing at state functions in full classical regalia, convinced that the last royal family were among his ancestors (Chirot, *ibid.*). Lintner believes that Ne Win saw himself more as an absolute monarch than a military usurper who had overthrown an elected government (Lintner, 1989). Gravers counters by arguing that Ne Win was hated, presumably because he had not openly assumed the guise of a *Cakkavatti* or a *Dhammaraja* (*Dhamma*-king or righteous ruler), likely since such claims could have backfired and made it hard for him to wield power (Gravers, *ibid.*).

For most of his rule, Ne Win aimed to control the Buddhism or the *Sangha*. The Burma Socialist Programme Party's (BSPP) guiding ideology was published in 1963 with the title *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment: The Philosophy of the Burma Socialist Programme Party* (BSPP 1973). Seekins

argues that this text shows the BSPP's philosophy as "a purely mundane and human doctrine," purely secular and with no connection to religion (Seekins, 2002, 46). He believes that although it uses Buddhist and metaphysical terminology, this text shows Ne Win's views on the relationship of religion and politics to be closer to Aung San's secularism than U Nu's religionism, seeing them as "separate spheres of life" (*ibid.*). The BSPP used Buddhist and metaphysical terms for rhetorical reasons, but Ne Win's rule mostly made Buddhism the work of the *sangha* and monks remain out of politics. The government tried in 1964 and 1965 to register monks and monk associations, and to set up a reform council, but these measures were mostly resisted by the *sangha* and the repeal of the State Religion Promotion Act along with government subsidies was compensated by donations from laypeople (Bechert, *ibid.*; Matthews, 1993). Ne Win arrested many monks several times, including in 1965 and in 1974, when he refused to allow a proper funeral for the former United Nations Secretary General, U Thant.

From 1980, a unified *sangha* organization which cut across sectarian and regional boundaries took shape in Burma under the Ne Win government. By establishing in 1980 the Sangha Maha Nayaka Council, Ne Win's government sought to control monastic institutions by requiring monastic registration and monastic examinations. This served to limit the sources of wealth and influence of powerful monks at the time. This institutionalization of the *sangha* in Burma was a key turning

point. By calling for in 1979 and then convening in 1980 the First Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders, and then by holding the subsequent election of the central and regional *sangha* bodies, a formal hierarchical structure for monks across Burma was formed, and was able to guide and supervise all monks and novices in Burma. Backed by the power and authority of the socialist state under Ne Win, efforts at "purifying, perpetuating, and propagating" the *sasana* took off in earnest (Tin, 1989). The 1980 Congregation sought to register all monks and organized a Supreme *Sangha* Council, or *Sangha Maha Nayaka*, that embodied both sectarian and regional differences and whose hierarchical structure sought to tighten the state's control over the *sangha* (Matthews, 1993). *Sangha* organizations or councils were also set up at the village, township, city and district levels, and their members were appointed by the government. Boards of trustees in charge of administering monasteries and pagodas were filled with retired military officers who took over the handling of finances and donations from the public. Bechert argues that this new religious policy allowed Ne Win to have continuities with both the tradition of Burmese kings and U Nu's religious policies. Unlike U Nu, however, Ne Win did not himself take part in the *sangha* convention, and all decisions were made by the *sangha* and not by government institutions. Ne Win managed to win over much of the population who had so far disapproved of government policy (Bechert, *ibid.*). Ne Win followed U Nu by seeing to the editing of Buddhist texts, openly donating to monks, and also began a pagoda-building project behind the Shwedagon

pagoda in Rangoon, personally raising the *hti*, or spire – a royal act symbolizing power, glory, and religious merit (Seekins, *ibid.*). In March 2001, Ne Win also hosted a lunch in a Rangoon hotel for 99 senior monks.

Some have wondered about Ne Win's Buddhist "conversion" because of these matters and reports that he wished to avoid going down in history as a tyrant (Chirot, *ibid.*). He was also openly involved in parallel Burmese sacred traditions of worshiping animistic cults of spirits and deities (*nats*), astrology, and numerology, all of which aimed to offer further guidance or perhaps the opportunity to neutralize the karmic consequences generated by worldly wrongs.

Ne Win's reorganization and institutionalization of the *sangha* hierarchy seem to have failed to protect him, since he lost power in 1988, partly due to protests on the streets by monks. Following the military's refusal to hand over power to the NLD after the May 1990 general election, in October 1990, the first chairman of SLORC, General Saw Maung, moved to suppress a rebellion by over 7,000 monks in Mandalay. This followed their senior abbots' (*sayadaw*) decision to discourage the performance of religious services for families of the military. Having ordered the end of the religious boycott, the dissolution of all independent Buddhist organizations and monks associations, the surrounding of monasteries, the arrest of over 400 monks, and the destruction of buildings near the monasteries, Saw Maung then claimed, in a

meeting with the senior abbots, that his regime's actions against the monks was "analogous to the action of King Anoryahtah of the 13th century in the purification of religion and monks during his reign" (Mya Maung, 1992, 184). Moreover, Mya Maung said that, "quoting the Buddhist scriptures and king's law, *yahzathart*, he claimed the right of the Buddhist rulers to invade and purify the domain of the Buddhist monks" (*ibid.*). Soon after, the SLORC issued a law stipulating the proper conduct for a Buddhist monk and penalties for their violation by monks or monk organizations. Monks would have to obey the orders of the state *sangha* organizations, whether or not they belonged to them, and any new construction in or around monasteries as well as traditional religious ceremonies would require the permission of local *Sangha Maha Nayaka* committees. By December 1991, Saw Maung announced that he was the reincarnation of King Kyanzitha of the Pagan period (Chirot, *ibid.*). Since then, the military government has sought after the blessing and support of senior monks with a carrot and stick policy. Those who resist joining local *sangha* committees have their monasteries placed under surveillance and are sometimes arrested, while those who join the ranks receive lavish donations, gifts, and sometimes elaborate ceremonies to grant honors and titles that were previously rarely awarded. Depending upon their level of support, they can also often find themselves shunned by the public.

Buddhism's links to political authority relate to the nature of that authority. Two key political players in Burmese politics during the

1980s and 1990s were the military regime that ruled in various forms since 1962, and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Gustaaf Houtman's study of Burmese Buddhist politics argued that this clash was tied to two distinct manifestations of power, associated with these two groups: *ana* is the idea of order, command, or authority, most commonly associated with the top-down disciplining power of the military, while *awza* denotes influence, most tied to self-purification through moral practice. Rather than existing in a binary relation, they are ideally part of a model that combines righteous and ethical rule. But Houtman notes that the story of political authority in Burma is mostly an *ana*-based, centralizing power faced by an *awza*-based moral opposition: "The idea of *ana* is that it is limited by boundaries and frameworks – a domain and some kind of lifespan such as a period of government; *awza*, however, is so fluid that it transcends and trickles through all boundaries of time and place" (Houtman, 1999, 169).

From 1987, there was a growing public resentment against military rule in Burma. This was intensified by ongoing police brutality, economic mismanagement and government corruption. Lacking other channels to address these grievances led to widespread demonstrations in 1988 that were generally in support of democracy. The demonstrations were started by students in Rangoon on August 8, 1988 (hence the name "8888 Uprising"), but protests quickly spread throughout the country. Hundreds of

thousands of monks, children, university students, housewives, and doctors protested the regime. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the slain General Aung San, father of Burmese Independence, who came to Rangoon to care for her mother in 1988 gave an important speech to hundreds of thousands of people at the Shwedagon Pagoda on August 26, below a portrait of her father at the same site that he had delivered some of his most important speeches. While quoting her father's thoughts in this speech, she did not discuss religion and politics, but urged the crowd not to turn on the army, and to find peace through non-violence. She became a symbol for the struggle for democracy in Burma. Other former democracy leaders also returned to the scene, including former Prime Minister U Nu and retired Brigadier General Aung Gyi, in what was described as a "democracy summer." The uprising ended on September 18, 1988, after the military, led by General Saw Maung, took power in a coup d'état. He established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), imposed martial law and laid down harsher measures than those of Ne Win. After violently breaking up the protests, the new military government announced on the state-run radio that it had taken charge "in order to bring a timely halt to the deteriorating conditions on all sides all over the country." Although thousands of people were reportedly killed by the military in the uprising, Burmese authorities claim around 350 people died.

The generals have been pressured into proving their worthiness to the people, as their *Cakkavatti*, so to speak, in response to Suu Kyi's *min laung* rhetoric. They renamed their country Myanmar and Rangoon became Yangon. Yet huge pressure from the international community forced it to arrange for elections in May 1990, the first held in thirty years. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won 80% of the seats in Parliament (398 out of 447), the results so surprised the military junta that it cancelled the election results and refused to hand over power. Besides arresting many members of the NLD and other opposition groups, the military put Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest in Rangoon and did not release her until 1995. In an essay written before her house arrest, she discussed the ten duties of Buddhist kingship and how they reinforced the Burmese desire for democratic government. Many took her to be the natural leader of Burma's pro-democracy movement. While under house arrest, she continued to advocate non-violence as the best way to achieve lasting political change. She developed an interest in Buddhist *vipassanā* practice and the sermons of Sayadaw U Pandita. Her commitment to meditation practice is seen in her writings. Upon her release, she visited U Pandita and the famous Karen-based monk, Sayadaw U Bhaddanta Vinaya (Thamanya Sayadaw).

The military government needed legitimacy beyond mere force, and so started promoting Buddhist culture. This need intensified after many members of the *sangha* had sided with protesters

and opposition parties in 1988 and 1990, and when the media reported the offerings made by National League for Democracy (NLD) candidates to the *sangha* prior to the 1990 elections. Suu Kyi developed her Buddhist political thought while under house arrest from 1990 to 1995, and paid visits to monks and monasteries after her release. The more than 80% of the Burmese who are Buddhist likely forced the military regime to respond both to vocal opposition to their rule in the *sangha*, and to the publication of Suu Kyi's actions, speeches, and writings by creating an image of themselves as better Buddhists than Suu Kyi and, more generally, as being responsible for the keeping and promoting of Buddhist traditions in Burma. By the mid-1990s, the ruling generals positioned themselves as promoting Buddhist sites and made roles for themselves in Buddhist ceremonies. Their efforts drew attention from local observers who sought to adjust to the generals' new roles, but also in international media circles.

Burma's military regime ruled like the old royal system, as a kind of counterpart to absolute kingship, and their "kingly" performance followed in a long tradition of Burmese leaders who, whatever their legal status, used folk beliefs to bolster their popularity and their legitimacy among the people. The military government strengthened their support from the mid-1990s for Buddhist traditions, perhaps partly in reaction to their earlier hardline tactics. Suu Kyi's imprisonment, with her NLD colleagues,

encouraged a turn to tradition to which the SPDC were forced to respond.

Since 1997, top SLORC-SPDC generals acted, spoke and appeared publicly in ways reminiscent of Burmese kings. The program focused on keeping law and order as well as a new reverence for Buddhist traditions. Promoting Buddhism helped the generals respond to the political rhetoric of the elected opposition while asserting their legitimacy as Burmese monarchs. The military government of the early 21st century showed a similar type of devotion to Buddhist traditions as U Nu had sought in 1961-2. The same reasons that prompted the unauthorized military intervention then are being adopted by the military to legitimize their rule.

Houtman further linked the Buddhist activities of NLD and the military rulers in Myanmar by tying military leaders to the meditation practice of *samatha* or concentration meditation which was designed to enhance one's ability to control the world, and NLD members to *vipassanā* or insight meditation, which is believed to take a more direct path to enlightenment by focusing less on controlling others than on developing and accepting a right view of the inherent impermanence and selflessness of human existence. Houtman's characterization of the clash between competing forms of meditation may have been useful for describing the 1990s (but mostly of a few elites in the military and the NLD), but it also remains an important effort to include different indigenous Burmese Buddhist notions of authority in analysis, and also led to similar research afterwards.

In 2007, monastic public involvement in politics returned in a big way during the large demonstrations of the so-called "Saffron Revolution." Thousands of monks marched in cities across the country, chanting the *mettā* (lovingkindness) *sutta*, and some refused to accept offerings from the military government. Some scholars have argued that by taking this private religious ritual into the public sphere, "the monks created a sacred space" in the social world and "thus laid claim to the city as a space ruled by the Buddha's law" (Zöllner, 2009, 72). Doing so elevated them above the political authority of the time. In chanting the *mettā sutta*, the protesting monks also chose an appropriate method of public action to their role as part of the premier religious order in Burma, which thereby protected them from charges of acting "politically." Even though they had criticized the military government for its negligence toward the population – and thus causing suffering – and for its violent actions toward monks, the *mettā* chant underscored how the *sangha* stood for a moral authority oriented toward the well-being of the whole community.

Aware of earlier debates on democracy in Burma, some monks who took part in the 2007 demonstrations stressed that their actions which focused on ideas of democracy did not mean that democracy would endanger traditional Burmese culture and argued that the idea of democracy was not a Western import. An author in an underground journal that circulated in the country prior to the 2007 protests stated that, "Without exception, democracy includes people's dignity, people's worth, and purity

of mind/spirit, things that are all included under the teachings of the Buddha" (Hti La Aung, 2007, 40; cited in Walton, 2016). Another noted that the Buddha's teachings already contain the essence of democracy: "Democracy is not something that only just appeared. The Buddha had already preached about it twenty-five hundred years ago. In the Buddha's teachings, he thoroughly discussed human rights. ... The Buddha's doctrine is in accordance with democracy" (Sanda Shin, 2009, 16; cited in Walton, 2016).

In the transition that Myanmar has undergone since 2007, monks and monastic organizations have actively been involved in many aspects of the sociopolitical processes. They have sought to organize themselves in relationship to a changing state and society, that was aligned with the ideas of political change grounded in electoral politics and democracy. After the military crackdown on the 2007 demonstrations, a new military junta-drafted constitution – still in effect today – aimed to start a new era of "discipline – flourishing genuine multiparty democracy." They put the constitution to a referendum in May 2008, which was approved despite wide criticism and boycotts. The vote took place even though the devastating cyclone Nargis had struck Myanmar just before the scheduled vote, killing 138,000 people and displacing more than 2.5 million people. The resulting controversial constitution lays out a hybrid governing system. The military is given control over the ministries of Defense, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs, as well as being guaranteed 25% of

all seats in the parliament and regional assemblies. All changes to major parts of the constitution require 75% approval and approval by a national referendum. The military Commander-in-chief has power over the President. This effectively gives the military veto power over any policy it does not like as well as the license to make changes in the country's power structure. Elections held in 2010 were also widely boycotted, and aside from some by-elections in 2012, full open elections only took place for the first time in late 2015. These developments have produced a new hybrid civilian-military government that has been ruling since April 2016, but has also invigorated civil society, and produced a cultural and economic openness to the rest of the world. This dynamic, with a political system created by the military to preserve their power, Myanmar has changed and will change in unknown and novel ways, where democracy and the Buddhist *sangha* have complex and evolving roles.

New Dynamics of Buddhism and Politics in Myanmar

Myanmar has been undergoing dramatic political and social upheavals while trying to modernize and to engage the world since 2010 (Jones, 2014). Because of the close connections between the state, lay society, and the *sangha*, changes in one arena affect the others, and tensions in one arena often appear in the others. Myanmar's "democratic transition," as it has been called, has produced patterns of social insecurity which have upset religious groups and sacred institutions, as well as disturbing the society that supports them. Although the government has permitted greater

freedom of expression and allowed for more political debate, episodes of religious-based conflict and intercommunal violence have erupted between the internally divided Buddhist and Muslim communities.[3] This has led the government, with support and under pressure from NGOs and media organizations, to limit forms of speech that incited violence and created social division, including several outspoken monks, monastic organizations, and writers.

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[3] Many reports in the mass media since the recent political transition began in 2010 underscore two extremist Buddhist groups – the Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement – as representative of Burmese political thought and ideology whose actions focus on anti-Muslim violence. Ma Ba Tha abbreviates the name of a Buddhist group whose English name is "Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion." Since 2012, intercommunal ethnoreligious violence has been in the headlines of major international media, especially reports of violence directed by Buddhist extremist groups against the Muslim Rohingya people living in Rakhine state. Two episodes have drawn most attention, one in 2012 and a larger one in 2017. In 2012, riots broke out in the western state of Rakhine, with hundreds being killed and 140,000 have been forced to leave their homes, and scores of Muslim owned homes and businesses have been burned down or destroyed. Similar anti-Muslim violence has occurred elsewhere in Myanmar, including the burning of Muslim owned homes and businesses. Such activities by Buddhist extremist groups include anti-Muslim propaganda, boycotts against Muslim businesses and false criticism of religions they do not like (such as criticism of other faiths and forms of Buddhism that do not agree with their extremist actions). In 2017, the forced displacement of Rohingya from Rakhine State exploded after a dozen police were killed, resulting in the Army forcing more than 750,000 to leave their homes to makeshift camps in neighboring Bangladesh.

The violent aspects of Myanmar's changes seen in religious life have captured the attention of international media and their publics. The photos, films and stories of horrible moments of ethnoreligious intolerance and cruelty in the media and reports mainly focus on the intolerance and violence directed toward Muslims, especially the Rohingya who had lived in Rakhine State, by some groups of Buddhist monks in Myanmar. But these headlines capture only aspects of a complex story of change, and by just focusing on those events, it is difficult to understand the larger significance of the changes occurring in Myanmar. During these national transformations, the *sangha* in Myanmar is looking to renegotiate its relations to both the state and to lay society, at a time when the priorities of all three are changing. These transformations have led to uncertainties about the future which some religious figures and groups feel threaten their identities without suggesting alternatives.

The renegotiation process occurring now in Myanmar is ongoing and incomplete, but it is not new. In order to understand the current renegotiations of the *sangha*'s relations to the state and to lay society in Myanmar, it is important to see them as part of a longer and deeper historical process and to link them to earlier periods of similar types of change in Myanmar. Shifts in state-*sangha* relations during times of sociopolitical transition have occurred before, so it is useful to explore earlier episodes of change in order to contextualize the current events that have ap peared in the news. As Michael Gravers (2015, 2) has recently put

it "In Burma, the sacralization of power appears in times of social crisis and uncertain political transition. Burma's society, politics, and economy are all in rapid transition." The current transition and its accompanying renegotiations are certainly one of these times of uneasy transformation.

The specific ways that these renegotiations have been worked out in the *sangha* and in society are part of new ways of imagining the endangered existence of once stable ways of living and being. Since these dangers seem fundamental – centering on developing new forms of identity and survival – they are often discussed in basic and existential ways, as matters of absolute urgency. This makes it easy for leaders of *sangha* groups in Myanmar who feel endangered due to changes to tie their concerns to matters of life and death, and even to legitimize violent behaviors – those that appear in the media.[4] But they are responses to the uncertainties that are part of larger transformations which have unclear sources and are leading to unknown ends.

Since 2010, monks and monastic organizations have actively been involved in many aspects of the sociopolitical processes of Myanmar's transition, seeking to organize themselves in relationship to a changing state and society, that was aligned with the ideas of political change grounded in electoral politics

[4] Stanley Tambiah (1996) has shown how ethnoreligious mob riots are often politically organized and sometimes linked to political phenomenon like elections.

and democracy. Monks have helped to negotiate the meaning of democracy in Myanmar at a time of its democratization, as well as to develop new relationships to lay society, to other monks, and to transnational society in a time of economic and cultural opening to the world. The research has shown that in times of sociopolitical transition, both in Myanmar's past and in the present, a diverse and complex *sangha* body has been integral to negotiating political change for Myanmar society. As a result, the *sangha* has evolved a range of new ways to relate to the emerging sociopolitical order. At present, in the last quarter of 2018, just a bit more than two years after the coming to power of a new democratically elected government, *sangha*-state relations remain diverse and complex works-in-progress, evolving both new modes of organization, connections to local lay society, diverse connections to the world outside Myanmar, and innovative ways to work with other monks, leaders, and laity.

In this still evolving situation, both the new government and the diverse *sangha* are still developing in contemporary Myanmar. Below I present reflections on the different perspectives on these developments, based on interviews and visits with 16 different monks and monastic organizations in May 2016.[5] These reflections suggest how Buddhist movements in the

[5] In May 2016, I went on a research trip to Myanmar assisted by Dr. Soe Myint. On the trip we made 16 different calls to monks and monastic organizations around Mandalay and Yangon and met with more than 50 different monks or important laymen during those visits.

colonial period and today have reshaped not only the lived experiences and opportunities for Burmese people, but also the conceptual landscape within which Burmese people understand themselves, their actions, their futures and their pasts. Although the forms, natures, and qualities of the current and future state-*sangha*-society nexus remain unclear, it will remain important to defining the new Myanmar, just as earlier negotiations helped to define Burma in the late colonial era.

This process of negotiation – seen in our interviews with a wide variety of individual monks and monks in monastic organizations – are helping to define the meanings of the terms "Myanmar," "nation," "democracy," "Buddhism," "religion," and the relationships among them for the people in Myanmar today. These negotiations have also led current shapes of Myanmar Buddhism and its new government to align themselves with common priorities and norms. A noticeable sign of these changes is the comeuppance of dominant aspects of Myanmar Buddhism in the global media since 2012 – the anti-Muslim monk U Wirathu and the Ma Ba Tha organization. They both seem to have become weaker since the new democratically elected government came to power in April 2016, and especially since July, when the government began asserting itself, supported by Myanmar's Supreme *Sangha* Council and the legal and court system. Since that time, a new set of more inclusive norms and monastic voices have become more normal and audible in the monastic community and across Myanmar.

To get some sense of how the *sangha* in Myanmar has been part of the sociopolitical reforms undertaken there since 2010, I have used various media sources, research analyses, databases, as well as observations and interviews conducted in Myanmar. Prior to going to Myanmar in May 2016, I collected more than 150 news articles form online news sources both in and outside of Myanmar and more than two dozen videos via YouTube of *sangha* activities in Myanmar since 2010. My research assistant was able to acquire from Myanmar more than twenty monastic publications issued by leading groups from leading monastic organizations in Yangon and Mandalay that were published during the summer of 2015 and up to the November elections. These materials provided a basis for understanding some of the ways that the *sangha* and the state in Myanmar related to one another, and suggested a strong relationship had been established between the military regime and the strident Ma Ba Tha organization that had formed in mid-2013.

The core part of the research project involved making 16 different calls to monks and monastic organizations around Mandalay and Yangon in May 2016, and meeting with more than 50 different monks or important laypeople during those visits. The monks and monastic organizations were selected to show a range of monastic voices and monastic organizations that were important in the contemporary religious landscape in Myanmar. I visited a range of monks, foundations and monastic organizations – from those involved in lay education and health care to the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee or State Buddhist Council (*Maha Nayaka*,

abbreviated as *Maha Na*) in charge of monastic life in Myanmar to key monastic education and training organization to various vocal individual monks and powerful groups like Ma Ba Tha that claim preserve the *sangha* and protect Myanmar. We were fortunate to be able to interview and record each of the individual monks or monastic groups or organizations that we met.

Among the discussions we had with monks were those in the *Maha Na* in Yangon and the State Priyatti Sasana University in charge of monastic education in Mandalay, a few government officials and academics, as well as several monastic foundations focused on socially-oriented charity work like hospitals, schools, and interfaith organizations. Aside with meeting with Ma Ba Tha leaders at their headquarters, we spoke with a wide range of monks individually, ranging from the revered Sitagu Sayadaw and the infamous U Wirathu, Ashin Thawbita, Sayadaw U Dhammapala, Shwenyawa Sayadaw, Ashin Ariya Wun Tha Bhiwun Sa, known as Myawaddy Sayadaw from Mandalay, among several others.

After the visits to the monks, temples, and monastic organizations, the impression is of wide diversity of views on politics and degrees and types of involvement in politics, but universal agreement that giving sermons and providing concrete beneficial services were key aspects of monk's work to the public. Another key type of service for the public was supporting laypeople through their moral education in Buddhism, especially to the Buddhist

schools set up on Sundays in different formal or informal settings, which some monks stress a lot at their local schools or monasteries, and which hybrid organizations like the Ma Ba Tha [renamed the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation since being banned in June 2017] promote around the country. There are also larger and more formal organizations concerned with maintaining quality standards for monks, whether by national Buddhist educational institutes, or by the State Buddhist Council or *Maha Nayaka*. Although meditation and study of scriptures were considered important, not all stressed them equally.

The State Buddhist Council or *Maha Nayaka* in Myanmar

The State Buddhist Council is a government-appointed body of high-ranking Buddhist monks that oversees and regulates the *sangha* in Myanmar. It formally began in 1980 and took shape over the next few years as part of Ne Win's efforts to reform and purify Buddhism. It is now led by 47 senior monks based in Yangon who nominally head the Buddhist *sangha* in Myanmar, which likely has between 300,000 and 500,000 monks, perhaps 15% of whom have taken vows for life. Because many of the members of this council are senior monks approved by the government, the council and its actions are often seen as both doing the government's bidding. Since many of the senior monks are elderly, they are also often seen to be unaware of key concerns of Buddhists and monks. And, because they receive titles and respect from high-ranking lay figures, many laypeople worry that these top monks are excessively controlled by wealthy people or government power.

The *Maha Na* remained influential until disputes arose in 2003 and 2004 about whether to support Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or not. The dispute shows the politicization of some monks, and it ended in ministerial intervention to exert greater control over the committee. After this, the *Maha Na* lost much of its legitimacy.

Against these fears, many in the *Maha Na* see their main interest as protecting the image of Buddhism in the country among both monks and laypeople, but many still see it as an arm of the government, definitely of the former military governments but also of the democratically elected NLD-led government. This means that both in the past and now, it is a conservative group, one that is constrained and pressured by whoever is in power. As such, it has generally been guided more by the intention to keep a stable status quo in Buddhism rather than to support either authoritarianism or democracy.

Most monks in Myanmar only know the *Maha Na* as a regulator acting at a distance by setting policy for monastic life. Many of its key actions only come into play when problems like disputes over monastic property or inappropriate monastic activities arise. Beyond this type of work, most local monks, abbots, and monasteries scarcely know about the different strata of action by Maha Na powers. In short, the central Maha Na appear to many monks as outsider interference into monks' activities, with implicit government support.

Given this situation, debates about the appropriate role of th

Maha Na are many. Some monks, laypeople, or government officials would like to see it play a stronger role in regulating monks' behavior or to keep the *sangha* "pure." Yet even among those who hope that the Maha Na will purify Buddhism in the country, many monks see their purification work as uneven, incomplete, and sometimes even unjust. Some such views may be self-serving, though, since monks often believe that *other* monks should be disciplined and held to the *vinaya* (rules of monastic conduct) more strictly, while they may view Maha Na attempts to impose punishments or criticisms tied to regulation on them as unfair meddling.

Because of these tensions, many monks seem to prefer a monastic authority that is not only more independent of the government, but also better able to defend monastic interests and Buddhism more generally. Promoting Buddhism could mean different things to different monks, but it may include engaging the government and more active encouraging, managing and supporting activities to strengthen the religion, such as efforts at *parahita* (social work) and *thathana pyu* (showing support by building religious edifices, Buddhist education, or providing monks with material support).

But the Maha Na worries about its actions and their effects on the monastic community at large, too. As such, they may feel a need to limit their actions, in vague and unspoken ways, so as to not intrude too much on how much monks can and should be involved in worldly affairs, including in politics. Senior Maha Na monks

might also worry about how their organization's dependences on government make it harder to limit monks from certain behaviors. But they are also part of a modern monastic bureaucracy that works slowly, and although the *vinaya* guiding them aims to guide the conduct of all monks, rulings may affect senior and respectable monks more than others.

The Maha Na has taken actions against monks. In February 2012, the Maha Na evicted Shwenyawa Sayadaw abbot of the Sadhu Pariyatti Monastery for his alleged disobedience, giving a sermon at the Mandalay office of the National League for Democracy in the previous September, calling for the release of political prisoners and the end of ongoing civil wars. In March of 2017, the Maha Na banned the monk U Wirathu from preaching for a year.

Between 2016 and 2018, the Maha Na has issued several rulings and orders related to the notorious Ma Ba Tha group and several monks tied to that group, and Ma Ba Tha's leaders and associated monks willingly signed onto them. It is through this lens that we can understand its recent actions to separate itself from the negative press associated with Ma Ba Tha.

Maha Na is also constrained in several ways from acting more directly against groups like Ma Ba Tha. First, it must be very careful at taking actions that could be portrayed as causing a schism in the monkhood, since this was strictly forbidden by the Buddha. More importantly (and problematically), Maha Na

simply does not have the popular support to overtly challenge Ma Ba Tha in a way that would threaten its continued existence.

Ma Ba Tha still has wide appeal and its leading figures are near-universally beloved monks like U Tiloka Biwuntha, known as the Insein Ywama Sayadaw, who commands much more respect among the population than most Maha Na monks.

In late February 2018, Minister of Religious Affairs and Culture, U Aung Ko, asked the Maha Na to more strongly enforce the disciplining of monks who speak or behave in ways that disgrace the religion. On 25 February 2018, another monk named Ashin Issariya (famous for his role in organizing the 2007 "Saffron Revolution," better known by his pen name "King Zero") sought to meet the press to ask the government and Maha Na to discipline U Wirathu for disrespecting Buddhism, but some "nationalist monks" disrupted the attempt. The next day U Aung Ko said that the government was not able to act against these monks because of a lack of consensus within society on the proper political role of monks.

So the *Maha Na* has an important administrative role in Myanmar with respect to monks, but it mostly aims to keep things as much as possible as they are rather than seek change. Lacking strong public support, its authority rests mostly in the government under which it operates. As such, it is best seen as a quasi-government agency, one limited from acting on its own and pressured by the reigning government. It is mostly guided by the goal of protecting

the image of Buddhism in Myanmar and trying to maintain unity among the diverse monastic community – or at least not to produce divisions in the *sangha*.

The Dynamics of *Ma Ba Tha*

A prominent feature of Burmese Buddhist politics since 2010 has been the rise of monk-led Buddhist nationalism. This is most often seen in international media as based on anti-Muslim rhetoric and discourse against the Rohingya people, and has resulted in riots and violence across the country. These views have been seen as stemming from government or military efforts, but they may be better seen as responses to the existential insecurity experienced in a time of rapid economic and social changes since Myanmar began its reforms in 2010 (Walton et al., 2015). As pointed out by Schissler et al. (2017), anti-Muslim sentiments seem widespread in Buddhist Myanmar, and have been articulated in public by Buddhist monks connected to a cluster of interrelated Buddhist protectionist movements, with the 969, and the *Ma Ba Tha* as those that are best known.

Some of these nationalist Buddhist organizations were favored by the previous president of Myanmar, U Thein Sein, his government and the military. Support for them grew with the current wave of Buddhist nationalist activity that began in 2012 under the banner of the so-called "969 Movement," a loose network of monks and laypeople that wanted to promote Buddhism and start boycotts against Muslim-owned businesses. This prompted outbreaks of communal strife between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine

State in 2012, with the nationalist groups claiming that the country's Buddhist foundations were under assault and needed to be protected. They expressed fears that the Muslim population was growing faster than the Buddhist one and that Myanmar needed to work against fundamentalist influence. They saw the Rohingya issue as one of state sovereignty and sought state support for their concerns.

The 969 group and *Ma Ba Tha* gained momentum as the government's program of gradual political reform took shape. These changes started in 2010, with the first general elections in two decades, and led to a transfer of power to a quasi-civilian government on March 30, 2011. These new Buddhist groups arose in an atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment that arose in this time of uncertainty. The new tense atmosphere after 2010 was also shaped by both global Islamophobic discourses and by increasing competition between Buddhists and Muslims over the limited amounts of economic development aid – spoils that are growing in Myanmar's opening market economy.

The 969 Movement was a loose network of monks and lay Buddhists that began mobilizing in 2012 and gradually gained prominence and notoriety in early 2013. The '969' is an old numerological shorthand for Myanmar's Buddhists, referring to lists in the Pāli scriptures of the nine great qualities of the Buddha, the six great qualities of the Buddha's *dhamma* (teachings), and the nine great qualities of the *sangha* (monastic community). A group of monks in Myanmar's Mon State officially used the

modern symbol of the movement in October 2012, adding the flag of the *sāsana* (Buddhist religion) and the pillars of Asoka, the third-century (BCE) ruler seen by many Buddhists as having paradigmatically spread the *dhamma* through peaceful conquest. The 969 Movement spread widely when linked to a 'Buy Buddhist' campaign of boycotting Muslim-owned businesses, endorsed by the firebrand monk U Wirathu in a February 2013 sermon that urged Burmese Buddhists to carry out every daily task in their lives with a 'nationalist perspective' (*a-myo-tha a-myin*). After this, 969 stickers became common, along with books, pamphlets and DVDs of monastic sermons all marketed with the same logo.

The 969 movement was a decentralized network of activists, but the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (*Ma Ba Tha*) that followed was more formally organized. *Ma Ba Tha,* founded in June 2013, led more specialized campaigns but only became significant after the founding of an Upper Myanmar branch in January 2014. *Ma Ba Tha's* name shows how many Burmese Buddhists see religious, ethnic, and racial identities as key components of national identity. *Ma Ba Tha* may have formed as a response to a ban placed on political uses of the 969 symbol by the *Maha Na*, but it quickly developed a separate identity from 969, partnering with political parties, organizing massive protests, and developing and championing a set of laws that proponents claim are designed to protect the Burmese nation and religion.

Ma Ba Tha sought to promote the Buddhist religion by establishing a network of Buddhist "Sunday schools," as well as by organizing

large protests and by allying with political parties to push for the passage of controversial laws that sought to restrict religious conversion and interfaith marriage. These groups spread nationalist and anti-Muslim ideas through books, journals, and pamphlets as well as through the preaching of prominent monks.

Key monks and channels tied to *Ma Ba Tha* have supported the expulsion of the Rohingya several times. This type of expulsion parallels anti-Indian and anti-Muslim riots that have recurred since the 1930s. Policies of successive military governments have also repressed non-Buddhist religious practice, especially in ethnic minority regions. At their peak from 2012 to the elections in November 2015, nationalist groups, especially *Ma Ba Tha*, were led by prominent Buddhist monks across the country. They organized activities and talks to encourage followers to boycott Muslim businesses and spread anti-Muslim hate speech. This sparked a series of deadly communal clashes between Buddhists and Muslims from 2012 to 2014. As a result, the image of compassionate Buddhism, in which much of the country believes, was distorted internationally as a religion that favored bigotry and violence.

As of mid-2014, four separate organizations were organizing *dhamma* schools across Myanmar: The Dhamma School Foundation, *Ma Ba Tha*, Hitadara, and Dhamma Yaungchi (Su Myat Aung, 2014, 3). These groups reach large numbers of students: The Dhamma School Foundation claims to have 1,800 schools

that teach 200,000 students, Hitadara has 450 schools that teach 60,000 children, and *Ma Ba Tha* measures the curriculum books sold, with 230,000 (*ibid.*). This shows the educational reach and the strength of religious organizations in Myanmar today.

An indicator of change in the *sangha*'s relations to the state during this time of transition between 2015 and 2018 is the apparent climax and eclipse – or dissolution into a more decentralized grassroots organization – of the Ma Ba Tha organization's public face and power. Ahead of the 2015 elections, *Ma Ba Tha* monks portrayed Buddhism as threatened by Myanmar's Muslim minority and said the military supporting political party, United State and Development Party or USDP, should continue to run the country in order to protect Buddhism. But the failures of the election in asserting a people's-led authority of the NLD-based government has helped to diminish the strength of *Ma Ba Tha* since June 2016.

Before the 2015 election, the previous government of the military-backed USDP focused less on issues like education, healthcare and democracy and more on nationalistic rhetoric and hostility against Muslims. The USDP lacked the political credibility of the NLD, and therefore tried to give tactical support to the *Ma Ba Tha* monks and their exploitation of pre-existing underlying distrust between religious groups in Myanmar from 2013 onward. After the elections, strong incentives for political actors to support *Ma Ba Tha* disappeared. In addition, since the NLD won

an overwhelming election victory, it has been able to consolidate its position as the ruling government based on a wide support of the majority of people in Myanmar and has less to fear. While *Ma Ba Tha* enjoyed support among Myanmar's ethnic Bamar majority in 2013 and 2014, it seems to have declined significantly as it became evident that central *Ma Ba Tha* leaders were attempting to thwart the NLD and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. During this shift in the country's political center of gravity, a wider range from in the monastic order that had been suppressed during the decades of military rule began to speak up and make their views known, both publicly and within the *sangha* organizations.

In the lead-up to the election in November of 2015, the general media and the opposition NLD party seemed concerned with possible disruptions of the elections. *Ma Ba Tha* overtly campaigned and promoted for the military-aligned NSDP in the elections, just as many individual monks promoted the NLD. Some prominent *Ma Ba Tha* monks supported the ruling USDP in the November 2015 elections as USDP candidates (and candidates from many other smaller parties) made 'protection of race and religion' a key component of their platforms. After the USDP's defeat, *Ma Ba Tha* was quick to turn against the USDP government in June 2015 when it threatened nationwide protests against a set of five high-rise projects near Yangon's famous Shwedagon Pagoda (Kyaw Phyo Tha, 2015). Spokespeople for the group have also insisted that they remain politically independent and that they simply support those parties and individuals that

support Buddhism (*ibid.*). The less formalized links between groups could be a product of the general popular disapproval of monastic political engagement displayed by most Buddhists in Myanmar but is also likely due to the particular relationships between the political and religious spheres. The NLD's victory showed the support not just of the majority of the voting public in Myanmar but also the approval of what appears to be a large majority of Myanmar's monks (who are not allowed to vote in political elections in the country). In campaigning for the USDP, *Ma Ba Tha* showed how badly it underestimated the national mood for change.

Ma Ba Tha returned to the news in June 2015, when members and supporters regrouped to celebrate its third anniversary at a two-day event at a monastery in Yangon's Insein Township. *Ma Ba Tha* said 5,000 people and about 2,900 monks attended the event on June 4 and 5, 2016 (but many reported lower numbers). Discussions at the anniversary event, which brought together the leaders of *Ma Ba Tha* groups from all around the country, were mainly about the group's achievements, especially issues like religious conversions and interfaith marriage, targets of the four race and religion laws. Some speakers vowed to defend "nationalism" for future generations and warned the NLD not to make any changes to the four "race and religion laws." The rhetoric that had often focused on patriotism and anti-Islam had largely shifted to highlighting the group's new-found emphasis on peace, complete with a sign depicting the third anniversary of

the "peace organization of *Ma Ba Tha*." Its chairman announced: "*Ma Ba Tha* was formed for the sake of unity and peace and I want Myanmar and the whole world to know that. After the arising of *Ma Ba Tha*, there are no more racial and religious conflicts anymore" (Mratt Kyaw Thu, 2016).

Most leaders spoke of popular misunderstanding over the activities of *Ma Ba Tha* monks. Many people were uncomfortable about what the monks were doing and believed that *Ma Ba Tha's* tactics needed to be less confronting, they said. One of the group's founding members, U Parmaukkha (known as the Magway Sayadaw), also announced his resignation from the group a few days after the anniversary event, at which he was conspicuous by his absence. Known as a core member like U Wirathu, U Parmaukkha's resignation came after differences over the group's political activities. He reported to Radio Free Asia that "I decided to quit *Ma Ba Tha* because I didn't like it when *Ma Ba Tha* was making speeches in many towns to vote for a certain party during the election campaign period. I want *Ma Ba Tha* to stand free from party politics. Now people are looking down on us because they say we are working for the USDP. I am resigning from *Ma Ba Tha* because it don't agree with their attitudes" (*ibid.*)

This did not stop *Ma Ba Tha* from supporting a set of four controversial "Protection of Race and Religion Laws" linked to race and religion that were passed by the previous military

government in the Fall of 2015. The four laws – The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Act, The Population Control Law, The Monogamy Law, and the Religious Conversion Law – were first proposed by *Ma Ba Tha* and made into law by the previous military-dominated government. One of the laws, that strictly limits religious intermarriage, originated in mid-2013 (before the formation of *Ma Ba Tha*) and was followed by drafts of three other laws dealing with monogamy, religious conversion, and population control. A sympathetic party at the time introduced drafts of each of these bills, followed by a monk-led nationwide signature campaign (Irrawaddy, 2013). The bills at first languished in the Parliament. However, after the formation of *Ma Ba* Tha's Upper Myanmar chapter in early 2014, the group could apply pressure to the government which, along with the endorsement of senior monks from the State Sangha *Maha Nayaka* Committee (Aung Kyaw Min), resulted in the President reintroducing the bills and sending them to appropriate ministries to be redrafted (Eleven News, 2014). The bills were passed into law in several stages throughout 2015 (Solomon, 2015).

The bills have not been without opposition, however. On multiple occasions coalitions of civil society organizations as well as some prominent individuals have publicly condemned them as being religiously discriminatory, in violation of women's rights and the freedom of religion, and in contravention of international treaties to which Myanmar is a signatory and even to Myanmar's own constitution. The first concerted public opposition from

civil society groups came with a public statement in May 2014; in response U Wirathu called them 'traitors on national affairs' and attempted to undermine them by linking them with foreign organizations (Nyein Nyein, 2014). After having been publicly demonized by a monk, some of the civil society activists even received death threats (Yen Snaing, 2014). Once the laws went up for parliamentary debate in early 2015, the groups again renewed their public criticism, warning that the laws, if passed, could 'destroy the stability' of Burmese society (Radio Free Asia, 2015). But they did pass and the four laws have been condemned domestically and internationally for discriminating against women and religious minorities.

After the elected NLD government took power in April 2016, Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar has had several turning points. It has slowly and unevenly tried to limit the influence of this group and some of its more outspoken monks. One blow from the new government came in July 2016. Ma Ba Tha, as the State Buddhist *Sangha* declared, was not properly formed and therefore illegitimate. Activities by *Ma Ba Tha* thereafter went more to ground and online. With hundreds of its sub-chapters and hundreds of thousands of its followers across the country, the organization became more active, focusing both on humanitarian work and on strengthening Buddhist practice. Online demonizing rhetoric about Islam terrorism and the Rohingya ratcheted up on Facebook, enflaming and raising fears among their followers.

Amid the changes in Myanmar's sociopolitical transition, contemporary Buddhist monks and movements show considerable interests in negotiating correct relationships between the state, public political discourse and the role of religion. Some groups, like *Ma Ba Tha*, argue that the state is a means to carry out projects to protect Buddhism from outside threats, especially by using law to enable or restrict. Other monks or groups, like the Pann Pyo Lett School or the Thabarwa Monastery, seem to encourage an equally active role for Buddhist institutions in the promotion of national identity, national development and cultural preservation with less explicitly xenophobic goals. International agents, such as Western ambassadors or NGOs in Myanmar, have actively endorsed some of the development projects and the Buddhist interpretations of particular monks and monastic factions, even as they sought, during disputes about government relations to religion, to cal for the separation of religion and politics.

In late June and early July 2016, two mosques were destroyed in Myanmar – one in Bago, east of Yangon, and one in the Kachin state. The Muslim communities supporting them sought the protection of the local police, and a few days later a few men said to be responsible for the torching of the mosque in Kachin were arrested. Likewise, early in July 2016, U Gambira, a leader of the All-Burma Monks' Alliance who had been arrested when he entered Myanmar from Thailand in January 2016, was pardoned and released from prison.

Tensions between *Ma Ba Tha* and the newly elected government had been rising since the NLD assumed power in April 2016, as the movement tried to pressure the NLD during its attempts to resolve the Rakhine crisis. Then, on July 3, the NLD's Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein, while on a trip to Singapore, said "We don't need the *Ma Ba Tha*." This led to *Ma Ba Tha* promising a large protest, before eventually backing out of that threat. This was the start of a series of events that seem to mark a turning point in the government's relationship to *Ma Ba Tha,* and after that time NLD members and senior monks have all begun to criticize and pressure Ma Ba Tha. In mid-July, the State Sangha *Maha Nayaka* Committee distanced itself from *Ma Ba Tha*, saying it had never officially endorsed the movement and that it was operating outside of *sangha* rules and regulations. In the same week, a key *Ma Ba Tha* leader, U Wirathu, was sued for defamation by a Yangon charity over highly insulting remarks he made against UN Human Rights Rapporteur for Myanmar, Yanghee Lee. This has been accompanied by increasing numbers of individual monks not only to distance themselves from *Ma Ba Tha,* but to outright criticize the organization, its positions and rhetoric and some of its leaders.

Since the *Maha Na's* ban on *Ma Ba Tha,* relations between the NLD government and nationalists worsened. Monks once tied to *Ma Ba Tha* accused the ruling party of failing to promote and protect Buddhism generally, while favoring the human rights of other groups, especially Muslims. They demanded the resignation

of the country's Religious and Cultural Affairs minister – someone who remains in that position to this day.

The ban on *Ma Ba Tha* and its responses in 2016 were followed in 2017 by further government-led actions. The Muslim lawyer and NLS ally, U Ko Ni was assassinated in late January 2017. Two months later, in March 2017, the State Sangha Council or *Maha Nayaka* banned the ultranationalist monk, U Wirathu from delivering sermons for a year for having "repeatedly delivered hate speech against religions to cause communal strife and hinder efforts to uphold the rule of law» and for taking sides with political parties to inflame tensions. To counter this ban, he turned to Facebook to deliver his views to a growing digital community of eager followers. On May 10, police arrested seven people, including two monks, tied to *Ma Ba Tha,* for having incited violence in Yangon. Then, most dramatically, in May 2017, the State Buddhist Council banned *Ma Ba Tha* from operating under its current name and ordered that their signboards be taken down across the country by early July, which *Ma Ba Tha* leaders agreed to. They promptly officially renamed the *Ma Ba Tha* organization as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. This was followed by an August 5 crackdown on sit-ins by nationalist monks in Yangon and Mandalay and an arrest of the prominent nationalist abbot, Parmaukkha in early November 2017.

Despite the *Maha Na's* decrees on *Ma Ba Tha* – now the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation – there is rising anti-nationalism

sentiment among liberal-minded Myanmar people, and the organization is still active and popular, especially at the grass-root levels, where it has refocused on providing humanitarian relief for Buddhists and on Buddhist education efforts. A leading monk of the organization, Ashin Sopaka, noted that the name change was made to avoid confrontation with the State Sangha. "Only the name has changed. The rest is the same," he told *Myanmar Udan Weekly*, a publication run by nationalists.

Ma Ba Tha has also been limited as a wider range of monastic voices have spoken up critically of the organization. But *Ma Ba Tha* has not disappeared and it could reassert itself unless larger issues tied to Buddhism in Myanmar society are addressed. These crucial issues include how the wider monastic community and government respond to two concerns that many see as key challenges to Myanmar society today. First is the feeling among many that Buddhist practice and Buddhist values are on the decline: many people do not go to the temple as often, neglect their duties of giving alms to monks, and do not live up to the moral standards of Buddhist practice. Monastic organizations worry about the numbers and the quality of the monks. A second concern is that, while many may see Buddhism as in decline, some people also feel that Islam is on the offensive and slowly taking over the religious domain along with the moral and spiritual compass that is commonly viewed as central to Burmese culture and an important set or resources to turn to in order to deal with the real and dramatic changes going on in Myanmar.

Although evidence from the national census dismissing any increase in the number of Muslims is clear, there is still a popular belief that Muslim culture is aiding in the decay of Buddhism and Burmese culture. During the ongoing phase of enormous economic and social change, it is likely that these perceptions will continue. The Buddhist nationalist movement will persist, but it should increasingly be confronted by political and religious counterforces that are gaining strength.

In August 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Muslim militant group denounced by the government as terrorists, launched a series of attacks in northern Rakhine state and killed at least nine soldiers. The military saw them as a threat to national security and interests and counterattacked. This atmosphere of distrust and unease in Myanmar led the Buddhist nationalists to side with the army during the sweeping crackdown, destruction and forced expulsion of the Rohingya people in Rahkine state from September. The nationalists sided with the military, both taking the attacks seriously. By September 2017, some leading Buddhist monks from Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation flew to Rakhine State, where they donated 200 million kyat (more than $140,000 US) to the army chief, Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, to be given to security forces in the area and displaced people and used for the rehabilitation process. In October 2017, U Wirathu and his followers went under state security escort to the affected area in northern Rakhine to distribute donations. In the same month, one of the country's

most prominent Buddhist monks, Sitagu Sayadaw, said during a sermon delivered to army officers at a garrison town in Karen State, that he wanted to see unity among the government, the military, the *sangha* and the people for the good of the country. The sermon was heartily welcomed by the nationalists. Then they organized pro-army rallies in Mandalay, Yangon, and in the Karen and Mon States in late November 2017.

On June 7, 2018, Facebook closed the account of the nationalist Buddhist *Ma Ba Tha* organization, along with the personal accounts of two extremist monks blamed for inciting hatred toward the Muslim Rohingya.

When seen together, as of August 2018, more than two years after the new government took office, diverse responses, tensions, patience, and public debates arose on monks being able to vote, as well as their involvement with promoting or criticizing laws. State efforts to weaken the Ma Ba Tha organization, and various decrees by the State Buddhist Council or *Maha Na* since mid-2016, have led to its lying low and to its rebranding as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation in mid-2017. But there are also an expansion of the range and scope of tolerant monastic voices, and challenges to government efforts to ally itself with international sociopolitical norms that would enforce tolerant views. These changes point toward a reorientation that differs from what it was in 2010, although no clear or firm crystallization of new state-*sangha* relations have emerged. Instead, both the monks and

the government agencies are still experimenting and developing both the terms and the nature of their relationships in Myanmar as the environment and the atmosphere of the state, the *sangha* and the society and economy evolve.

Some Burmese Buddhists justify their nationalist activity by claiming to defend the Buddhist religion [*sāsana*]. While defending the *sāsana* is central to the monastic vocation (and perhaps a responsibility for any Buddhist), claiming that the ends justify the means has led to much violence in the past (Walton and Hayward, 2014). Despite Buddhists being a large majority in Myanmar, their global minority status has engendered a "siege mentality" (similar to that of Buddhists in Sri Lanka), in which they envision themselves as the last line of defense preventing the total disappearance of the religion (Kyaw San Wai, 2014). By framing their actions as a necessary response to the imminent threat of Islam's expansion into the Buddhist community, nationalist leaders have claimed that any action can be justified (even if seemingly in violation of other core Buddhist principles) if undertaken in defense of the religion.

Groups like Ma Ba Tha and 969 and its new incarnation as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation claim their actions are needed to defend the Buddhist religion. This claim makes it hard for Buddhists in Myanmar to criticize or oppose them (Walton and Hayward, *ibid.*). There is huge social pressure to support or acquiesce to their arguments, especially when these arguments

are made by monks. Not only do laypeople find it hard to disagree with monks, but many monks themselves feel reluctant to offer their arguments, because of the Buddha's injunction against monks creating divisions in the *sangha*. The nationalist argument is strengthened more by the fact that Ma Ba Tha is tied to both anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence; many people see the group as a pro-Buddhist organization that aims to strengthen the religious and moral practice of Burmese Buddhists. Monks have argued that this type of activity is not only allowed, but that it is their obligation, thereby effectively veiling the Buddhist nationalist movement with the covering of religious and moral legitimacy.

Conclusion

Buddhism has always been entangled with the state in Burma. Buddhism has never been unified in Myanmar and political ideas and processes in Burma have long been enmeshed in Buddhist ideas, goals, monks and institutions. Precolonial Burmese Buddhist political ideas competed and overlapped with one another in the past, and this competition and overlap continue today as Myanmar undergoes its democratic transition. Moreover, political processes have always engaged Buddhist beliefs and practices of both the Burman majority and those outside it. Following the approaches used by Hurd (2015), Cesari (2016), and Walton (2017), it is clear that Buddhism and politics in Myanmar are always interconnected. They need to be contextualized, localized, and historicized more, just as ideas and practices of democracy need to be situated in a Myanmar context.

Critically examining normative conceptions of Buddhism and democracy held by both Burmese and foreign scholars remain important tasks. This can best be done by analyzing them in context.

Burmese Buddhists have creatively interpreted religious concepts and practices, from their ethical norms to their moral cosmology, showing how Buddhism is compatible with a wide range of political and economic ideologies. And this influence persists in Myanmar's political arena even without explicit use of Buddhist terms or rhetoric. Burma's Buddhist moral cosmology is relevant for politics since monks claim to be guardians of the religion. During Myanmar's exciting, but uncertain, democratic transition, Theravāda Buddhist resources will remain key for the public to make sense of and to assess politics. Knowing something of these dynamics will also be key to understanding Myanmar politics. Since 2012, monks have both helped strengthen Buddhist views of democracy as a type of moral political practice, and also sought to limit democracy in some ways to protect Buddhism and defend the Burmese nation, even by promoting specific laws and political priorities.

The entanglement of Buddhism and politics is not new. In colonial Burma of the early 1900s, many Buddhists interpreted the many changes they experienced as the loss of the Buddha's teachings in the world. They organized various movements aiming to preserve Buddhism that affected social forms and contributed to anti-colonial nationalist politics. The current situation in Myanmar resembles some aspects of the developments from a

century ago. As the country undergoes great social, political and economic upheaval, many Burmese are uneasy at the prospect of destabilizing change and worried that something stable is disappearing, and there are new movements with widespread support that aim to protect Buddhism, the Buddha's teachings and Burmese culture. In times of change efforts to preserve Buddhism arise. Part of this includes a language, a set of concerns and a style of thinking about who and what is a threat to Buddhism (Muslims, political parties, foreign NGOs, lifestyle changes) which has produced a sense of identity for many in Myanmar.

Since 2007, changes in Myanmar have been as remarkable as they have been contested, fraught, and tenuous. Democratization has not gone as many have expected or at least hoped. Economic growth has been uneven and sporadic across the country and its diverse population. Social tensions have worsened and erupted into widescale violence that some have called clear cases of "human rights abuses" and "genocide." The Buddhist *sangha* has been part of these sociopolitical changes, reflecting and sometimes enhancing the uncertainties of these transitions, but also promoting a variety of options toward the future for both the society and for political leaders. Some Buddhists have seemed more focused on hate and violence than compassion, peace and democracy, and this has surprised many outsiders. Other Buddhist voices – often quieter and less noticed – have called for interfaith and intercommunal work at building bonds of trust, and the promotion of more inclusive forms of democracy.

For more than a decade, Myanmar has experimented in the political and the religious arenas in ways that have sometimes fostered worries and uncertainty. While some earlier writings have stressed a presumed shift from military authoritarianism to a robust, fully formed democracy in Myanmar, recent scholars have produced more nuanced and richer types of analysis that see politics and religion as part of multifaceted and complex socioeconomic changes that occur in a global context. Buddhist monks, like political leaders, institutions, and interest groups in Myanmar, can now access a large and flexible set of resources ideas and practices, both those from Myanmar's traditions and those from outside, and both physically and digitally present. But lacking a single interpretive authority, source or goal, these monks, leaders, interest groups, and institutions have created a wide range of different interpretative models and policies that embody divergent concerns and point toward different goals. Being aware of such diversity, and their dynamics, allows us to see the fuller and more complex workings of Buddhism and politics in the opening of Myanmar to change and to the wider world.

But looking for parallels between those two movements in Burma and Myanmar will not uncover a common essence of Buddhist discourse or Burmese nationalism, but rather to allow us to see how each moment has constructed and reconstructed key modes of thinking like Myanmar/Burma, Buddhism and religion and processes like religious practice and democratization. By examining how these ways of thinking are fluid, contested

and able to affect how people organize themselves, we see a *politics of democratization and Buddhism in Myanmar.*

This essay sought to address how the *sangha* in Myanmar has responded to the sociopolitical reforms undertaken in that country since 2010. Using historical sources and printed materials, and a series of 16 interviews and visits with a range of monks at monastic organizations in Myanmar in 2016, just months after the new government came to power, it was not yet possible to answer to this question. Even now, in mid-2018, diversity and uncertainty reigns, and the renegotiations between the *sangha* and the government have both hit major hurdles that have made it difficult to fully resolve tense relations. What is clear is that the highly diverse and active monastic community in Myanmar and the new Myanmar government are still renegotiating their relations and doing so with renewed global attention.

These renegotiations between monks and politics are occurring on several fronts. First, monks and state actors are still developing an understanding of what democracy is all about in the new state and the ways that monks can and should relate to a society that is still tied up with different ideas of democratization. Second, the renegotiation involves developing new understandings of how the two sources of authority in Myanmar can and should interact with their lay supporters in communities that have local roots, but are also expanded into wider networks through improved transportation and communication systems such as phones and

internet groups. Increasingly since 2012, government actors and monks have been developing new relations to one another and to their publics through online platforms and networks, with Facebook being the most dominant. Finally, the *sangha* and the state are developing new ways to frame and to connect to governments, individuals, groups, and organizations beyond Myanmar.

This multidimensional renegotiation is part of a large political and religious reorientation taking place in Myanmar, where political and religious actors are testing the waters of the country's new political realities, and trying to build up a more diverse set of political and religious positions and voices. Three key aspects of this reorientation relate to a rebranding of *Ma Ba Tha* as it is challenged from the government and *Maha Na*, and rebuilding support from below in Myanmar society, an expansion of the range and quality of monastic voices who are willing and able to speak up in favour of tolerance and peace, and a new hybrid government which is slowly and unevenly seeking to see how laws and norms in Myanmar may be coordinated with international norms. This has been challenging and often ineffective, as the Rohingya expulsion crisis that has been occurring since 2017 has clearly shown. Buddhist nationalism has been banned but it has changed without disappearing. The military still is a dominant force in the governance of Myanmar and democratic structures and processes are still weak. Although these early changes are tenuous and uncertain, have met with resistance and are by no

means guaranteed to persist, they seem to signal an openness to a wider range of actors in Myanmar, but are still not able to accommodate to the global norms as many had hoped just a few years ago.

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