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# POLITICS AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY BURMA: BUDDHIST MONKS AS OPPOSITION

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*Since the advent of military authoritarianism in 1962, social movements in contemporary Burma have relentlessly pursued the path toward seeking a vibrant economic and political polity. These social movements act as opposition against the military junta. Opposition parties, civil society, student organizations and Buddhist monks are among the key actors of socio-political vanguards representing society at large. The crucial role and position of Buddhist monks in voicing dissent against the excesses of the military junta's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime is indeed significant. Buddhist monks who are intermediaries between the ruling elite and society become the final bastion of representing dissent towards the SPDC regime's political authoritarianism and economic mismanagement. This paper will elucidate the development of Theravada Buddhism in Burma and the role of monks as the socio-political vanguard of the Burmese people. Finally, the primacy of Buddhist monks as a socio-political force is evaluated.*

## Introduction

Buddhism occupies an important role in the lives of mainland Southeast Asians, the majority of whom are Buddhists. Other religions, such as Islam and Christianity, fail to exert their extensive influence in mainland Southeast Asia today, although they play more significant social and political roles in maritime Southeast Asia. The presence of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism in Southeast Asia suggests that as a region, Southeast Asia is one of the most religiously diverse regions in the world. Religion in Southeast Asia has also been a crucial part of the political, social and economic lives of Southeast Asians. Beyond the stereotypical notion that all religions promote socio-political docility through a doctrine of peace, these major religions in Southeast Asia often motivate civil and civic movements to work for or against the state. Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, Buddhism in Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand as well as Catholicism in the Philippines have demonstrated the potent role that religion and religious personalities can play by mobilizing the people toward either support or antagonism to the state. From peaceful protests to violent agitations, these major co-religionists have been contending forces for

modern states to face, central to which is the legitimacy and political longevity of the government in power. In the case of Burma, Buddhist monks have been playing an influential role in shaping public policies and governing principles since the dynastical eras, through colonial rule up to the present military government in Burma in their institutionalized and socially acknowledged role as the socio-political vanguard of the Burmese people.

### The Role of Religion in Burmese Politics: A Historical Overview

The politicization of religion in Burma can be traced back to the Konbaung Dynasty. With Buddhism as the main tenet of Burmese religious life, the Konbaung Dynasty understood the necessity to patronize Buddhism. Using central Buddhist tenets such as the universal ruler, rulers claim divinity in order to uphold their position as the revered overlord of the masses.<sup>1</sup> One of the Konbaung Dynasty's rulers, Bodawpaya, went to the extent of claiming himself to be a bodhisattva. This pretense of a Burmese ruler to claim divinity rather than subscribing to values of Buddhism which promote mercy and kindness to the people illustrates the religious limits that rulers such as Bodawpaya had transgressed.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the undermining of the economic independence of the Buddhist monkhood as well as intervention in clerical disputes to favor one sect at the expense of another reflected an interplay between religion and politics. Thus, elements of the Buddhist monkhood were hostile not only because of Bodawpaya's economic reassessment and his partiality to favor some Buddhist sects, but also because they rejected the king's religious pretences such as his claim to be a bodhisattva.<sup>3</sup> However, supporting the monarchy as an institution was still within the domain of the Buddhist monks' political objectives. The reciprocal relationship between the state and the *Sangha* (monastic order) prevented political dissidents from becoming influential and the *Sangha* from becoming an independent nucleus of political power, as well as to uphold legitimacy and protect the people from tyranny of the monarchy.<sup>4</sup> Thus, religion and monarchy became distinct features of Burmese society. However, the British colonial administration disrupted this social and political arrangement.

It was during the time of colonial Burma that links between the *Sangha* and political power were severed, which brought about the rise of monks such as

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1 Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 41.

2 John P. Ferguson, "The Quest for Legitimation by Burmese Monks and Kings: The Case of the Shwegyin Sect (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)" in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (USA: ANIMA Books, 2004), 68.

3 Norman G. Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 86.

4 Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, Second Expanded Edition, 1982), 382.

U Ottama and U Wissera to lead public opinion against the British.<sup>5</sup> During the period of British colonial rule, Burmese monks disfavored the British colonial administrative system which they viewed as corrupt and secular since it represented foreign rule. Additionally, actions such as the British colonial government's refusal to support the *Sangha*, accord Buddhism as the state religion, and the removal of the traditional form of social hierarchy of which the monks were a part, were seen as a removal of the basis of social and political stability.<sup>6</sup> Young monks like Hsaya San organized the *wunthanu athin* (own race society) to agitate against anything that was deemed British and foreign in Burma's socio-political life. Agitations, riots and protest became central features to these monk-inspired movements that viewed British secular rule as an anomaly to Burmese social and political life.<sup>7</sup> The British colonial administration's indifference towards religious practices and social norms created more dissent, which pushed Burmese monks to become more resolved in using religion as a basis for political action. For example, on May 2, 1896, the Burmese Buddhists of Rangoon engaged the services of two well-known advocates to present a petition for them to the government of India through the Burmese government. They asked that the orders of the collector of Buddha Gaya regarding the removal of one of the images at the Buddhist temple be stayed. The image in question was forwarded to Buddha Gaya by the Japanese Buddhists to be placed in a *zayat* built by the late Burmese king Mindon Min. The collector had ordered the removal of the image, threatening to send it to the Calcutta Museum in the event that it was not moved.<sup>8</sup>

In post-colonial Burma, politicization of religion and the desire for religion to remain free of political control were two key issues in the state-*Sangha* skirmish. Similarly, the ill-treatment of the population through authoritarian impulses and mismanagement of the economy were also key triggers for the religious institution of Buddhism to counter the Burmese state's excesses. In this respect, Buddhism has therefore remained a sustained feature in Burmese history as the socio-political vanguard of the people. Religion serves as both a unifying and rallying point for the masses as much as it is used for managing potential power play and dissent. Thus, the military junta, British colonial masters and the Konbaung Dynasty could not escape this potent role played by the Buddhist monks. In fact, the military junta is depicted as being an extension of the secular and morally corrupt British colonial administrators. These reasons provided the basis for Burmese Buddhist monks' continued role as the socio-political vanguard of the Burmese people. Buddhism, the *Sangha* and monks are therefore associated with anti-colonial protests, nationalist

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5 Martin Stuart-Fox, "Buddhism and politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand," (paper presented at the Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand Summer School, Asia Pacific Week, 2006).

6 Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 383.

7 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia*, 327.

8 School of Oriental and African Studies Bulletin of Burma Research, "Burmese Buddhism in Colonial Burma" (2003): 43.

movements and nation-building.<sup>9</sup>

The Burmese military junta was involved in contemporary Burmese politics from 1962 onwards. After enjoying fourteen years of democratic governance upon independence from the British in 1948, the military-run government supported the official policy of the Burmese Way to Socialism.<sup>10</sup> With the socialist-capitalist conundrum in the form of proxy war in Southeast Asia, the pandering of the Burmese junta towards socialism stifled the pre-existing institutionalized political democracy. Through the rhetoric of progress and social stability, civil and political movements that were deemed as antitheses to the state's agenda of the Burmese Way to Socialism were dealt with severely. It was only when the socialist party was defeated by the 8-8-88 Movement and power returned to the military junta to stage another set of elections that pro-democratic elements became a renewed force. Unfortunately, like their counterparts in the socialist worldview, the military junta nullified the election results, according to which the pro-democratic movement had won. To the disgust of the Burmese people and the international community, the military junta strategized a convention to root its control more firmly on the political landscape of Burma.<sup>11</sup> Authoritarian governing culture in Burma therefore manifested itself through military and socialist platforms.

During the period of the multi-party government which saw U Nu in power from 1948 to 1962, Buddhist monks and monasteries received generous state funding and support from the socialist government. U Nu's recognition of Buddhism as the official religion of Burma and his pledge of support for the Buddhist monasteries' legitimate role enhanced the position of Buddhism and Buddhist monks in contemporary Burma.<sup>12</sup> However, with the overthrow of U Nu by General Ne Win in 1962, a secular socialist state was created whereby the military junta deliberately brought the *Sangha* under the unified and hierarchical order of political supervision.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the official disciplining of the *Sangha* did not tamper with the role of the Buddhist monks as social representatives and political vanguards of Burmese society. Monks remained active as a potent opposition force and appeasement. The monks' potency as an opposition force is an interesting phenomenon that has baffled the military junta, since the problem of the monks as a political force was thought to have been sufficiently dealt with through institutional support and cooption. The unification and strategic merger of all *Sanghas* under one single Burmese *Sangha* in the post-colonial period was deemed to be a sufficient method to control the advancement of monks as an oppositional force in Burmese socio-political life. However, it turned out that the reverse was true. Monks and monasteries remained

9 Kerstin Duell, "Buddha's Footprint in Burma," *Goethe Institute Bangkok* (2004).

10 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no.1 (2008): 127.

11 *Ibid.*, 128.

12 Donald K Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (New York: State of New York Press, 1995), 98.

13 Fox, "Buddhism and politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand," 5.

revered, and the Burmese military's creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which was renamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), opened itself up to criticism and public protest as a result of mismanaging the country's economy and politics.

With the Burmese junta assuming direct control of the government, it became engaged in political skirmishes. Furthermore, by bringing the *Sangha* under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Religion and disrobing and defrocking monks in the 8-8-88 movement, the Burmese junta effectively took the position of the socialist government as the "number one adversary of the people."<sup>14</sup> Similarly to the colonial era, Buddhist monks who viewed indigenous political leaders and British colonialists as ersatz authority took over the role as political opposition in Burmese society. These monks serve as a legitimate alternative power base in opposition to the established secular authority of the Burmese state.<sup>15</sup> Buddhist monks were and are the rallying and unifying points for the masses to display protest and dissent against the Burmese state. Additionally, political and civil impulses are garnered from the socio-political ideals of Buddhism buttressed with extensive experience of engagement with the Konbaung Dynasty, the British colonial administration and the Burmese socialist government.

### Socio-Political Ideals of Theravada Buddhism

Practitioners of Theravada Buddhism recognize Buddha as the founder and the sole focus of veneration.<sup>16</sup> As a focal point of worship and reverence, the esteemed position of the Buddha in the cosmic set-up is deemed unparalleled, which thus minimizes the position of minor saintly figures such as bodhisattvas. For Theravada Buddhists, personal salvation is achieved through personal actions and deeds. At the level of social manifestation, the cosmic position of the Buddha is depicted in the form of the abbot. The abbot's authority and his ecclesiastical organization, the *Sangha*, are in higher regard than the institution of the village headman.<sup>17</sup> It is through the *Sangha* that able men and women who wish to dedicate their lives in service of Buddhism or seek another avenue to move up the social hierarchy of Burmese society will find opportunities for social upliftment and recognition. Theravada Buddhism's focus on the Buddha's charisma suggests a drive towards believing in the power of social liberation through cosmic assistance. Thus, the Buddha is viewed as a transmundane (*lokuttara*) force of power and authority.<sup>18</sup>

Another important concept of Theravada Buddhism covers the idea of *Dhamma* (Teachings of Buddha) and *Sangha*.<sup>19</sup> In the teachings of Buddha, *Dulla-*

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Owen, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia*, 323.

16 Ibid., 37.

17 Ibid., 40.

18 Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 95.

19 Ashin Nayaka, "Buddhism Under Siege in Burma," *International Burmese Monks Organization*, 4.

*bha* (human life) is regarded as precious. Each person has his or her own social values and therefore social contributions. Thus, the violation of human rights and dignity allows for retaliation to fight any form of injustice that dehumanizes the people. Through the concept of *Dullabha*, the Burmese people are empowered to better their spiritual, social and political conditions rather than leaving things to the cyclical notion of birth and rebirth (*samsara*) that lasts until one reaches enlightenment.<sup>20</sup> The social implication of *Dullabha* thus inspires the exhortation for social change and justice. For human life to be best enhanced, the ruler must understand his or her role in instituting peace and stability in the country. In the *dasa-raja-dhamma* (ten duties of the king), liberality (*dana*), sacrificing for the people (*pariccaga*), non-violence (*avihimsa*) and non-opposition (*avirodha*) must be adhered to for the people to pay homage to and respect the ruler in power.<sup>21</sup> These key concepts in Theravada Buddhism suggest that the rights of the ruler and the ruled are clearly defined. The ruler must rule with compassion and inclusiveness in governance, whereas the ruled must remain calm in adversity and firm in overcoming injustices.

Asoka Maurya is a manifestation of the notion of the ideal Buddhist ruler, *chakravartin*, who must be cited. Asoka patronized Buddhism to great lengths in India. Asoka's quest to support the thriving of Buddhism and abstain from the bloody conquests that he was formerly famous for was in line with the concept of the ideal Buddhist ruler, who must be compassionate and just.<sup>22</sup> Hence the socio-political ideals of Theravada Buddhism, where the ruled enjoyed the mercy and kindness of the ruler, becomes an ideal for the people on how they should be governed. It impresses on the people the responsibility of the ruler to ensure that his people live in peace and tranquility, away from the fear of being repressed, oppressed and violated. Additionally, monks and abbots are considered "sons of Buddha." Politically active monks are known as *pongyis*, a powerful categorization that enroots their esteemed position and provides another dimension of respect. These *pongyis* are the socio-political vanguard of society, social actors who mediate between the *chakravartin* and the people at large. Thus, they are responsible for the collective welfare of the people and are justified in engaging in political action to stop others in their evil ways. To labor for the good of others is in line with the teachings of Buddha, who busied himself with worldly matters and the welfare of people while working towards attaining nirvana.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, as a mode of religious life and a symbol of their link to society, monks use their bowls to seek food and alms from the people of the village or the city they live in. Through this interaction with the people, monks establish themselves as both dependents and guardians of the local population. Similarly,

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20 Min Zin, "Burmese Buddhism and its Impact on Social Change" in *Burma's Modern Tragedy*, eds. Daniel A Metraux and Khin Oo (Queenstown: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

21 Rewata Dhamma, "Buddhism, Human Rights and Justice in Burma," *Church Centre for the United Nations* (1989): 1.

22 Fox, "Buddhism and politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand," 1.

23 Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 395.

through monastic life, monks who leave the *Sangha* obtain a social status that is higher than what it was before. Renewal of social standing creates indebtedness to the institution of the monastery. Additionally, monasteries are also crucial institutions for educating the people in rudimentary reading and writing. The institution of the monastery therefore builds an emotional and psychological proximity with the people at large. It is this proximity that becomes the basis for mass mobilization when monks protest against the military junta, something which led to their persecution and subsequent response from the Burmese people. Monks therefore can be said to represent “the public conscience.”<sup>24</sup>

### Monks as the Socio-Political Vanguard

In the context of mainland Southeast Asia, contemporary Burma has witnessed the rise of Buddhism as a powerful source of inspiration in response to the excesses and mismanagement of the Burmese junta-run government. The first traces of monks serving as a socio-political vanguard can be found during the British colonial period. Together with Buddhist activists from the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, monks such as U Wisara and U Ottama led non-violent protests against the British for impoverishing the people and removing the monarchy that was a supporter of the *Sangha* and a symbol of social unity. These monks led non-violent protests, such as public speeches condemning British excesses and employed hunger strikes in prison that lasted until they perished.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when Bodawpaya of the Konbaung Dynasty claimed sainthood, the institution of monkhood responded in protest of his excesses.

The SPDC, which consists of political leaders and military-affiliated bureaucrats, is facing both the support and opposition of the Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks, who serve as an intermediary between the government and the people at large, derive inspiration from the teachings of Buddhism on whether to align or de-align themselves from the Burmese junta. Although dependent on the military-run government for financial funding and political endorsement, Buddhist monks rose on occasions that needed their role in defending the socio-political rights of the Burmese people, thus inflating their position as the final bastion of social justice preservation in Burmese society. Moreover, monks and monasteries are more dependent on the people for alms and support than the government, whose funds are limited and commitment to the religion deemed superficial.

Additionally, social justice in Burma encompasses the rights to freedom of association, freedom of action and to a good standard of living. Thus, when one or all of these rights are violated, Buddhist monks emerge to be a powerful opposition force against the Burmese junta’s SPDC regime. Their role and position as a social and political vanguard of the Burmese society is the final sealing factor

24 Min Zin, “Burmese Buddhism and its Impact on Social Change,” 118.

25 Emily Hallgren, “Burma: A History of Repression and Resistance,” *Manchester College Peace Studies Institute* (2007): 1.

to the established roles of other political actors such as opposition parties, student movements and civil society. Buddhism therefore has been associated with nation-building, nationalist movements and anti-colonial protests.<sup>26</sup> State and religion have a reciprocal relationship in Burma; the Burmese state depends on Buddhism and monks for legitimacy. Buddhist monks in Burma symbolize the moral and social order. As the custodians of sacred learning and literature as well as educators of the youth, monks garner great respect from the Burmese people. Moreover, the monastic system is a democratic leveler because sons of both elites and ordinary people have similar status in the monastery.<sup>27</sup> Military personnel and bureaucrats do not enjoy any special privilege because most segments of Burmese society are acculturated to believe in the equality of existence from the monastic experience. Social appointments are therefore viewed as a trust-position from society, a responsibility rather than a right.

Through the monastic experience, monks have a social and political relationship with their lay disciples, known as *dajaka*. Lay disciples originate from various backgrounds; monks who have disciples mainly from the general public will thus support their disciples' cause for social justice. On the other hand, monks whose disciples are from the ruling regime will support the quest for stability and the status quo.<sup>28</sup> This, however, does not mean that monks are an absolute supporter of the military junta or the people. Although dependent on the Burmese state for funding, monks represent the people's rights especially when issues of human rights and economic pressure become unbearable by the people. Since monks come from the ranks of the people themselves, they comprehend the concerns and difficulties that the people are facing. Moreover, the Burmese military regime does not have sufficient resources to co-opt all monks into their fold. Most monks and monasteries therefore remain independent. Thus, as a social and political vanguard of the people, this independence assists in them in their role as the vanguard of the Burmese people. As reported in *Time* magazine, the public perceives the monks to have been successful figures in supporting the cause for socio-political justice once they are imprisoned or killed. In this sense, monks are the impetus and inspiration for heightening dissent.

Furthermore, when protesters against the military regime wanted to seek refuge against state backlash towards pro-democratic movements monasteries became places of shelter.<sup>29</sup> Sheltering political renegades and social dissidents forms another layer of the existing relationship built by religious ties and knowledge acquisition. Although not all monks vehemently support the Burmese state or the pro-democratic movements, monks who are deemed to be recipients of state's finan

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26 Duell, "Buddha's Footprint in Burma," 2.

27 Soe Minyt, *Burma File: A Question of Democracy* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2004), 7.

28 Hlaing, "Challenging the Authoritarian State," 133.

29 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Burma," *East-West Center Washington Working Papers* (2007): 19.



cial support do have influence on the military regime whenever they decide that the socio-political situation is against the betterment of the country. Similarly, excesses of the military-run government are also taken into consideration by “cooperative” monks, hence rendering them to be of influence in ensuring that the government panders to the state of civility and adheres to peace and stability.<sup>30</sup> Sadly, monks are unable to definitively stop the repression and oppression of the military regime whenever a blitz to arrest protestors from among the people and monks takes place. Although human rights violations are against the Buddhist ideal of a universal ruler who is compassionate and just, monks have limitations as custodians of the people. Monks themselves are subjected to police brutality when they turn up on the streets from their monasteries to join the opposition as peaceful protestors against the state. Yet, this remains their mode of dissent because through this they feel unified with the people.

### Monks and Political Opposition

After the fall of the socialist government and the takeover by the military junta, monks continued to play a critical role in protesting against social injustices. In the 1990s, the death of a monk who was killed by the military led to situations where monks refused to perform rites for military officers.<sup>31</sup> The refusal to perform rites is a critical factor in discrediting the position of the military junta, therefore undermining the military junta’s legitimacy. As alluded to earlier, monks have disciples who come from the military fraternity. The intertwined moral, physical and psychological relationship between the monks and their disciples explains the concern military leaders have when monks refuse to legitimize their position using rites as symbols of legitimatizing. Subsequently, in order to ease the situation, the chairman of the military council had to beg for pardon from the monks, a public apology was made and henceforth there was a normalization of the relationship between the monastic order and the military regime. In 2007, a similar act of brutality against monks occurred and the *Sangha* demanded a public apology from the military. The ability of the monastic order to use soft diplomacy through protests, criticism and demands for apology illustrate the entrenched position of the monks in the socio-political landscape of Burmese society.

At the level of diplomatic engagement, some monks continue to criticize the government and juxtapose their rule with the ideals of the king in Buddhist doctrine. It was during this period of the 1990s that the concept of *pattam nikkujjana kamma* (overturning the bowl) was first coined by Venerable Yewata of the Mandalay *Sangha Samaggi*. The Burmese military made a critical mistake by injuring and killing protestors in order to disperse the protest and respond to the ‘recalcitrant’ behavior. As a result, the military transgressed Buddhist principles of non-aggression towa-

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30 Ibid., 20.

31 Ibid., 19.

rds monks and became involved in non-beneficial activities.<sup>32</sup> Tension between the state and the *Sangha* heightened.

The tension between political and religious leadership stems from the inability of the political apparatus to ensure that socialism and military authoritarianism can offer a better life for the people economically and politically. While the conflict between the monastic order and the British colonial master was primarily due to the removal of the monarchy, who had been an ardent supporter of the monastic order and ill-treatment of the people, the socialist and military regimes shared similar traits of oppressive governance. Furthermore, problematic indigenous governance brought about economic impoverishment and hence plunged the country into financial crisis. People therefore lived in poverty and were no longer able to support the monastic order by proceeding with religious rites and offerings. Monks therefore became motivated to oppose the military-run government's mismanagement and excesses. Subsequently, matters were pushed to the extreme when representatives of the monastic order themselves were embroiled in the military's brutal approach to crush peaceful protests. To the monks, the military regime had violated pure doctrinal and sociological features of Burmese life, hence subjugating religion to mere symbolic expressions, lacking in substantial commitments.

The tight political control of the military regime towards the monastic order also provided another cause of dissatisfaction towards the government. Recognizing only nine *Sanghas* which has existed since pre-colonial days and banning the others, established monks who had contributed to the development of Buddhism in Burma become more distant from the ruling elite. Furthermore, the control of the monk population by limiting it to three hundred monks for large monasteries convinced the monastic order that the political sphere had unnecessarily intruded on religious affairs.<sup>33</sup> One of the major mistakes that a government can make is using legislation to control the mushrooming of religious revivalism and fervor. Although legislation is an easy method to contain the development of religious ideologues and figures, a legalistic approach shows the lack of success of other methods such as propaganda and counter-missionary work to limit the advancement of religion in contemporary Burma. Moreover, other religions in Burma such as Islam are used to buttress the state's legitimacy by focusing on co-religionists as an obstacle to national cohesion. Hence the ability to use one religion as a force to outweigh another through counter-missionary work becomes a missed opportunity.

The inception of new leaders mainly from the military sector and the absence of a meritocratic framework to co-opt educated people who could come from the monastic order suggest that the people now have a decreased chance of social mobility. The military junta claimed that limitations to monastic enrollment are to ensure that no overwhelming protests can be organized to the detriment of social stability. Moreover, monasteries have been used by the opposition parties to hijack

32 Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, *Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks are Disrobed and Detained in Dungeons* (November 2004), 14.

33 Hlaing, "The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement," 31.

the delicate establishment of *Sangha* for their own oppositional cause.<sup>34</sup> To the Burmese people, however, the latter accusation is invalid since they believe that it is through the monastic order that people find peace, tranquility, true self, social status upliftment, education and the justification for a genuine struggle against social injustices brought about by the military regime.

Presently, 212 monks are detained in notorious prisons which are evidently labor camps.<sup>35</sup> Other than those who were killed and injured, these monks in labor camps were primarily charged for peaceful protests and therefore defrocked. Surveillance by military personnel and plainclothes police of the monasteries and monks included the close monitoring of movements of monks suspected of inciting the street protests of 2007. Going around pagodas and monasteries, this tight-knit surveillance has imbedded the distaste that the monastic order and the Burmese people have toward the military government. When the political intrudes into the realm of the religious and the profane within the territory of worship and faith, the resulting effect is the increasing unpopularity of the party that exercises surveillance, and sympathy for the people being watched. Monks and the monastic order benefited from the state policing activities. Hence the encroachment into religious turf proceeds to discredit the legitimacy of the Burmese state although it simultaneously creates a situation of fear and obedience.

In retrospect, the recent resurgence of protests began on August 18, 2007, when the people of Burma, whose annual per capita income is 170 dollars, woke up to a 500 percent rise in diesel oil prices. The spike in the oil price was intended to cover a budget deficit that resulted from a wage hike for civil servants.<sup>36</sup> It is widely believed that the building of a new capital city in Pinyinmana, now called Naypyidaw, contributed to the budget deficit as well. The decision to move the capital city from its current location in Rangoon, the commercial center of the country, is considered bizarre by many Burmese citizens and analysts. The relocation of the capital is part of a military strategy, chosen because the new location is isolated and located in the center of the country.<sup>37</sup> The military junta feared an international army led by Americans attacking Burma proper. Thus, the retreat into an unknown area is a reaction to an external force that could displace the military government.

Subsequently, protests were held in all major cities. The demonstrations had three messages: the lowering the price of oil and other commodities, the release of political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, and to engage in bilateral dialogue with the country's opposition party, the National League for Democracy. Although the new wave of protests was sparked by economic injustice, the protests also undoubtedly included an anti-regime, pro-democracy theme. As per many other non-violent protests, violent reactions by the military, ordered by the SPDC,

34 *Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks are Disrobed*, 20.

35 "Many Burmese Monks Arrested," *The Irrawaddy*, October 15, 2009 [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=17002](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17002) (accessed on December 1, 2009).

36 *Ibid.*

37 Hallgren, "Burma: A History," 2.

crushed the peaceful demonstration. The tactics employed were more of the same: attacks with automatic rifles, batons, tear gas, mass arrests and an imposed curfew.<sup>38</sup>

As with other politically inspired and socially motivated agitations, the Buddhist monks stepped in as leaders of the revived democracy movement. The presence of monks meant even more legitimacy for the movement. As walking symbols of struggle, non-violence and strength, they embody the soul of the people's movement for democracy. Their link with the tradition of non-violent resistance is evident even in their language. Similar to the phrase *pattam nikkujjana kamma*, *pongyis* revitalized the idea of protest towards the military government by clamoring for an effort "to strike," *thabeik hmauk*, which also means "to turn the alms bowl upside down."

Turning the begging bowl upside down and refusing alms is possibly the greatest insult to practicing Buddhists, for by accepting alms the monks permit the person to be a good Buddhist through their act of generosity. This non-violent tactic was employed against the military in both the 1988 movement and in the 2007 protests.<sup>39</sup> However, the monks' status as religious leaders has not shielded them from violent retaliation. The military has been systematic in its use of violence against monks and all peaceful protesters. Monks were also arrested during raids on monasteries. Moreover, in the Buddhist doctrine, true Buddhists do not make use of the monastic order by corrupting monks and abbots in order to give credence to a repressive regime such as the SPDC. The military junta has crossed the ethical-religious and socio-political boundaries of the Burmese conscience.

## Conclusion

Monks as a force of political opposition in contemporary Burma have the support of the people primarily because of the deep relationship that the monastic order has built with the people since the advent of Buddhism in Burma. From a basic level of providing education, the performance of religious rites and the provision of legitimacy to the power holders in Burmese society, the continuing presence of the institution of Buddhism and Buddhist monks as representative of ethical doctrines of Buddhist teachings explains the significant role monks can play as the social bastions and political representatives of the Burmese people. As one of the key social actors in village, town and city life, the sustainability of religious life in Burma points to the great effect Buddhist monks can play in opposition against mainstream authoritarianism. Even the Sangha Organization Act, which states that monks will be defrocked if they remained as members of an outlawed *Sangha* organization or become involved in political activities, does not deter monks from peaceful dis

38 Hlaing, "The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement."

39 Hallgren, "Burma: A History," 3; Hlaing, "The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement."

sent.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, monks have been rooted in engagement with power institutions since the dynastical and colonial era right up to the present day. These persistent roles will remain intact, as they have been for many years, as the Burmese people look towards the spiritual guides and “sons of Buddha” to sustain their cause and struggle against unjust rule, something the Buddha himself would certainly endorse.

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40 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, “Burma: Civil Society Skirting Regime Rules” in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 406.