

Moral Authority in Burmese Politics¹

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Summary

This article analyses moral authority as a power resource in Burmese politics. Which strategies did Burmese power holders pursue to stabilize political rule? Did the Burmese sangha employ moral authority merely to legitimize the political rule of the regime, or did it influence Burmese politics? Tracing back the religious and ritual practices that constitute legitimate authority in post-independence Burma, I argue that in order to study Burmese politics, one needs to distinguish legitimate authority from the Western notion of democratic accountability. In contemporary Burma, it seems as if a change has taken place since Ne Win seized power in 1962. Even though the military government tried to use Buddhist norms and rituals as 'traditional' values to legitimize their power, the power holders stopped being the traditional 'patron' of the sangha. Instead, the State Law and Order Restoration Council officials employed a strategy of 'ritual displacement' to transfer moral authority from religious communities directly to the state. What is more, the way Burmese rulers use religion as a moral power resource opens a field of essentially contested meanings of legitimate authority, in which political actors struggle for discursive hegemony. Different social actors tried to discursively influence the interpretation of what counts as morally acceptable political behaviour. Specifically, I examine the different ways in which the state under the successive leadership of U Nu, Ne Win and Than Shwe tried to employ moral authority to stabilize their power. The political relevance of these contested meanings could be witnessed during the events in Burma in 2007.

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1 Introduction

„In Southeast Asia, the powerholder – whether divine king, army general, chairman of a revolutionary party, or tribal chieftain – does not seek to gain compliance with obligations. If you have power it is irrelevant whether other people comply with your decisions or condone your actions, i.e. whether your use of power may be considered

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legitimate. You act as you please because this is what power permits you to do. And if you cannot any longer act as you please, it is a sign that you have lost your power."²

This paper seeks to analyse the role of moral authority as a power resource in Burmese politics. Burma seems to be a good case study as the Buddhist faith is of paramount importance for all aspects of Burmese social and political life.³ Since the advent of Hindu-Buddhist ideas about legitimate authority in pre-colonial times, political actors in Burma have frequently tried to „cloak themselves in the robe of sacral legitimacy.“⁴ Several questions are pertinent: How does moral authority serve as a source of power in Burmese politics? Which strategies did Burmese power holders pursue to stabilize political rule? Did the Burmese *sangha*, the community of Buddhist monks, merely legitimize the political leadership of the ruling regime, or did it employ moral authority to influence Burmese politics?

In contemporary Burma, it seems as if a change has taken place since the military regime under General Ne Win seized power in 1962. Even though the military government tried to use Buddhist norms and rituals as ‘traditional’ values to legitimize their power, Burmese rulers stopped being the traditional ‘patron’ of the *sangha*. Instead, the State Law and Order Restoration Council officials employed a strategy of ‘ritual displacement’ to pursue moral authority. Ritual displacement refers to a strategy of „contestation for ritual space and control over how ritual practice is represented“. Thereby, the government tries to transfer authority from religious communities directly to the state.⁵ What is more, the way Burmese rulers use religion as a moral power resource opens a field of essentially contested meanings of legitimate authority, in which political actors struggle for discursive hegemony. The political relevance of these contested meanings could be witnessed during the events in Burma in 2007.

In the following sections, I will analyse how religious ideas and social norms about legitimate rule were used to stabilize political authority in post-independence Burma. After clarifying my key concepts in a theoretical framework, I will trace back the religious and ritual practices that constitute moral authority in Burma. I argue that in order to study moral authority in Burmese politics, one need to distinguish legitimate authority from the notion of democratic accountability that derives from the Western concept of popular sovereignty. Thus, I will present

² I. Trankell and J. Ovesen, „Introduction,“ in: I. Trankell and L. Summers (eds.), *Facets of Power and Its Limitations. Political Culture in Southeast Asia* (Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 24, Uppsala, 1998), p. 11.

³ See for an example L. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics. The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

⁴ The metaphor is from R. Hall, „Moral Authority as a Power Resource,“ *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), p. 595. For a brief summary of the argument on localization of norms see A. Acharya, „Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,“ *International Organization*, 58:2 (2004), pp. 245-50.

⁵ See A. Anagnost, „The Politics of Ritual Displacement“, in: C. Keyes, H. Hardacre and L. Kendall, *Asian Visions of Authority. Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 221-254.

Buddhist notions of legitimate rule as a key to understanding the social construction of moral authority in Burma. In the following step, I will show how different social actors tried to discursively influence the interpretation of what counts as morally acceptable political behaviour in Burmese politics. Specifically, I will examine the different ways in which the state under the successive leadership of U Nu, Ne Win and Than Shwe tried to employ moral authority to stabilize political power. In a last section, I will draw my conclusions and discuss the political consequences of the uprising in 2007.

2 Theoretical Framework

Even though the notion of power as a core concept of political science is „essentially contested“⁶, the availability of power resources is regarded as an important variable in determining a regime's stability. This paper proceeds from the assumption that power holders try to legitimize their political power in order to decrease costs. Since it is too costly to maintain social order on the basis of coercion alone, political rule is predicated on conceptions of legitimate authority. If rationalist models of politics proceed from the assumption that political actors want to stay in power, they take certain social and cultural factors for granted. Following a constructivist approach, I will analyse moral authority as a relational power resource. This does not mean that material facets of power are of no importance; rather, the meaning of material power resources is constituted by ideational factors.⁷

In his study of the pre-sovereign system of medieval Europe, Rodney Bruce Hall showed how ecclesial and politico-military actors competed for moral authority as a power resource they derived from religious norms and principles.⁸ Feudal Europe was an ideologically charged environment in an „age of faith“, where principled beliefs about moral authority were employed „to a specific and empirically observable effect.“⁹

According to Hall, compliance with rules is a moral act that is predicated on conceptions of moral authority. As moral authority — a term borrowed from Emile Durkheim — is rooted in religion, it has to be studied by tracing the religious and ritual practices that constitute moral order in a society.¹⁰ Drawing on Friedrich

⁶ See S. Guzzini, „The Concept of Power: a Constructivist Analysis,“ *Millennium*, 33 (2005), pp. 509ff.

⁷ See R. Hall, *National Collective Identity. Social Constructs and International Systems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 39. As Alamgir puts it, the use of brute force against all opposition by itself does not explain much, see J. Alamgir, „The Survival of Authoritarianism in Burma,“ *Pacific Affairs*, 70:3 (1997), p. 338.

⁸ See Hall, *Moral Authority*, pp. 591-6. Scholars like Muthiah Alagappa applied the concept to study legitimate rule in contemporary Southeast Asia, see M. Alagappa (ed.), *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia. The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

⁹ See Hall, *Moral Authority*, pp. 591-6.

¹⁰ See Hall, *National Collective Identity*, p. 40.

Kratochwil's work,¹¹ Hall argues that material sanctions are not solely legitimized by their role in enforcing order, but also by the belief that compliance with rules is a moral act, the fulfilment of an obligation to a moral and therefore legitimate social order.¹² But the use of moral authority is not only a question of utility. Kratochwil's discussion of Durkheim reveals significant analogies between moral authority and 'the force of the sacred'. These analogies to the sacred make the use of power possible. As moral authority is rooted in religion, Durkheim reminds us to study authority by tracing back the religious and ritual practices that constitute moral order. However, the interpretation of what counts as morally valid in a society may be contested and subject to discursive interaction.¹³

Moral authority was employed in medieval Europe, for instance, to domesticate a troublesome and belligerent class of vassal-knights and to place its material capabilities at the service of the Church and crown. In the Investiture Controversy, the Papacy even employed moral authority to assert its supremacy over the Holy Roman Emperor. In response, medieval monarchs invented their own source of moral authority with the social institution of a sacral kingship that enabled them to challenge the rival claims of the papacy. In medieval Europe, the common notion of what counted as legitimate authority was embedded in a social structure of identities that was shared by all social actors. Moral authority could be used as a power resource because it was socially embedded in a system of actors whose social identities and interests impelled them to recognize it as a power resource.¹⁴

Hall compares this 'relational' conception of power with the notion of money as a convention among social actors. Money can be used as a medium to quantify the value of goods and services because its meaning is socially shared among actors in a society. Moral authority, like any convention, is thus established by societal recognition and its exercise is consistent with moral beliefs.¹⁵ The sources of moral authority can vary, however. Therefore, analysts of social concepts of power need to enquire into historically contingent structures of identities and principled beliefs.¹⁶

In the following section, I will describe how moral authority was constituted in Burma as a convention on principled ideas about the legitimacy of political power.

¹¹ F. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

¹² See Hall, *National Collective Identity*, p. 40.

¹³ See Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions*, pp. 124-6.

¹⁴ See Hall, *Moral Authority*, pp. 591-4.

¹⁵ See Hall, *National Collective Identity*, p. 29.

¹⁶ According to Goldstein and Keohane, principled beliefs can be defined as „normative ideas that specify criteria from distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust“, see their „Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytic Framework,“ in: J. Goldstein and R. Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 10.

3 The cultural construction of moral authority in Burma

Scholars have traced the origins of political authority in Southeast Asia back to the Indian cultural influence. Robert Heine-Geldern described a belief in the parallelism between the cosmic universe and the world of men. According to this belief, cosmological forces constantly influenced the life of the people. In order to maintain harmony between the worldly and the overworldly realm, the former had to be organized as an image of the latter. This cosmological principle came to Southeast Asian kingdoms by way of India and China and was adapted to local beliefs.¹⁷ These beliefs were expressed in the organization of the early Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms according to a ritual structure of state.¹⁸ The capitals of Burmese kingdoms represented the cosmic beliefs of the rulers and were organized in a circular form. In Mandalay, the last capital of pre-colonial Burma, the royal palace was located in the center of the city and was identified with the mystic Mount Meru, the spiritual center in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. King, court and government all had to enact cosmic roles. Every aspect of the monarch's life, even the number of his wives, had a ritual meaning that corresponded with the Hindu-Buddhist mythology of cosmic harmony between the secular and the sacred. In pre-colonial Burma, the king was considered a semi-divine personage who was isolated from the public and hence from power struggles at the court. During the Pagan dynasty (1044-1287), *Theravada* Buddhism became the dominant religion of the kingdom. In *Theravada* Buddhism, the idea of divine incarnation as justification of kingship was replaced by that of rebirth and religious merit.¹⁹ In the *Theravada* kingdoms, ritual and religious activities were shared between the king and the *sangha*.

„The king was the protector of Buddhism and its highest secular officiant, but in theory he was ritually inferior to the monkhood. Outside the *sangha* he was the person considered to have accumulated most merit and because of that radiated power.“²⁰

But a ruler does not possess power due to his ability, morality, or his charisma. In Burmese belief, the human body has specific material and spiritual qualities, which enable a power holder to rule and which can be identified by interpreting some inalienable features.²¹ Due to his inner virtuousness, the ruler will use his power for

¹⁷ On the interaction between Buddhism and local practices, see M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Vicissitudes* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971) and Acharya, *Whose Norms Matter?*

¹⁸ See the classic account of Robert Heine-Geldern, „Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,“ *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 2:1 (1942), pp. 15-21 for further illustrations. On Indian cultural influence on Southeast Asia, see O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Revised Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ See Heine-Geldern, *State and Kingship*, pp. 19-24.

²⁰ G. Evans, „Political Cults,“ in: Trankell and Summer, pp. 21-2.

²¹ Steinberg distinguishes two specifically Burmese concepts of power: *ana* and *awza*. In traditional Burmese belief, *ana* is an individual property that is the result of a meritorious former life, but it is not necessarily related to actual moral behaviour, while *awza* is a positively connotated influence, see D. Steinberg, *Burma. The State of Myanmar* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2001), pp. 40-2 and Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, pp. 102-4.

the public good. The origin of the physical ability to rule is not located in the present, but in the previous lives of the ruler. As the legitimacy of power depends on the features of its owner, he does not need any external moral justification for wielding his power. This cosmological legitimation of authority produced a highly personalized rule: loyalty was focused on the ruler as a person and not on the concept of kingship as such.²²

To stabilize his rule, the Burmese monarch drew his authority from two sources: first, from his office and the control of the symbols of his authority, the palace and the regalia. Second, royal claims to authority were based on heredity. But both factors were sources for insecurity as they also contained the inversion of the argument: if a ruler lost his power, he apparently lost his ability to rule. Power was not absolute, definite or unimpeachable; a change of leadership was no sacrilege. In pre-colonial Burma, a king's murderer could even become the new king.²³ Heine-Geldern illustrates this dilemma of the Burmese ruler:

„The palace was the symbol of the celestial mountain, nay, more than a mere symbol, it was 'the Mount Meru' of the micro-cosmos Burma [...] It worked as a constant temptation for would-be usurpers, be it from the ranks of the royal family or outsiders, as the occupation of the palace might be achieved by a coup-de-main with relatively small forces and usually meant the conquest of the whole empire. Many Burmese [...] kings therefore were virtual prisoners in their palace which they did not dare to leave for fear it might be seized by an usurper. The last king of Burma, Thibaw, preferred even to forego the important coronation ritual of the circumambulation of the capital to offering one of his relatives a chance to make himself master of the palace while he was away.“²⁴

These cosmological sources of authority — the deification of the king, the importance of religious merits and the possession of royal regalia — legitimated a ruler's power, but it did not lead to its stabilization.²⁵ As a consequence, Burma's political history between the Pagan dynasty and the colonial conquest of the British in the 19th century can be characterized as an endless series of internal and external struggles.

Colonial rule did not change traditional patterns of authority. The modernizing appearance assumed by Burma under the British could not displace deeply held Burmese traditions.²⁶ However, the colonial effect on Buddhist institutions was important: the abolishment of the monarchy by the British colonial administration after the third Anglo-Burmese war (1885) also meant the end of the royal religious

²² See Steinberg, *Burma*, pp. 37-8.

²³ Furthermore, the ruler had numerous wives and even more offspring, but the Burmese monarchy lacked a prescribed pattern of succession. As a consequence, the death of the king always produced a period of political instability with rivals fighting for power; see J. Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 6-9.

²⁴ Heine-Geldern, *State and Kingship*, p. 24.

²⁵ Heine-Geldern, *State and Kingship*, p. 27.

²⁶ See Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 22-23 and Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 37.

council. The Burmese *sangha* had never been rigidly institutionalized. The monks could only be disciplined by the head of the *sangha*, who „served at the pleasure of the king and the religious council.“²⁷ As no new governing body to discipline the monks was established, discipline in the religious orders deteriorated. The introduction of Western schools slackened the demand for traditional education, which deprived the *sangha* of its most important social function.

„Having lost a central source of discipline and one of their principal occupations, many monks assumed a new role – that of political leaders – filling the void created by the colonial government's displacement of the traditional hereditary leaders. Political monks became a major force in the nationalist movement.“²⁸

Even though the politicization of the *sangha* was criticized, Buddhism became a political vehicle for Burmese nationalism in the early 20th century. Young and politically active monks set up associations which soon became the nucleus of Burmese nationalism.²⁹ In the 1920s, Buddhism gradually became a symbol for national anti-colonial resistance as monks openly interfered with politics by supporting the anti-tax movement of local village committees. U Oktama, an activist monk who was named after an early hero of the wars against the British, legitimated the Buddhist resistance against the British authorities by arguing that the colonial regime posed a threat to Buddhism. Only after gaining independence could Buddhist monks go back to prayer and contemplation.³⁰

This behaviour contradicted Buddhist teachings whereby monks should not intervene in politics. Especially, conservative monks and Buddhist orders rejected the political activity of monks. The ‘deterioration of the Buddhist order’ was, according to Silverstein, one of the main causes for the breakdown of traditional society in Burma.³¹ This breakdown was symbolized by the shift of the Burmese capital from Mandalay to Rangoon: in pre-colonial Burma, the royal capital was the religious and political center of the country. Mandalay was located in the heartland of the country; its specific location was determined both on the basis of religion and astrology.³² Under colonial rule, the capital was moved to Rangoon, which was

²⁷ See Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 8 and D. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), chap. 2.

²⁸ Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 24, see also J. Cady, „Religion and Politics in Modern Burma,“ *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 12:2 (1953), pp. 149-162.

²⁹ In 1906 the first national Burmese organization was founded, the ‘Young Men Buddhist Association’. More and more Buddhist associations came up and finally merged in 1920 into the ‘General Council of Buddhist Associations’, which was renamed soon the ‘General Council of Burmese Associations’.

³⁰ Out of this movement came the most direct challenge to British rule, the Saya San Revolt in 1930. During anti-British insurrections rumours about the arrival of a new king spread. In times of economic hardship, Saya San, a former monk, claimed to be the promised king and led a rebellion against the colonial authorities which affected parts of Southern Burma. Saya San gathered a growing number of followers and used rituals and ‘magical practices’ to protect them. He also started to build a palace into the jungle to restore Burmese kingdom, see Smith, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 92-107.

³¹ See Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 12-3.

³² For a cosmologically grounded concept of political space in Southeast Asia see Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*.

closer to the sea. Thus, „the unity of politics and religion, as symbolized by the precolonial capitals, was broken.“³³

However, it is important to notice that moral authority should not be confused with the idea of democratic legitimacy as deriving from popular sovereignty like in Western political theory. In Buddhist thinking, the goal of living is to escape an endless cycle of birth and rebirth; in this view, the desire for power, prestige, and material things is false. But the Buddha offered a way out of this endless cycle through the Eight Fold Path of right living, right thought and right actions. Therefore, *Theravada* Buddhism places full responsibility upon the individual; this individual responsibility, however, does not carry over into the political realm.

„Government, the Buddhist was taught, was one of the five evils all men must endure. Man, therefore, lived in a political order he could not change, and his responsibilities did not extend to politics.“³⁴

The people are entitled to a caring ruler, but they also owe loyalty to the king. The well-being of king and people are interwoven as the people take part in the virtuousness of the ruler. From this point of view, an opposition must cooperate with the ruler, but not compete for power. Politics was confined to the king. The traditional model demands from the ruler to take care of his subordinates but also to exercise severity against potential rivals. Trankell and Ovesen point out that

„[i]f the source of power is homogeneous and cosmological rather than heterogeneous and social, and it accrues to individuals in ways eluding social control, it follows that the idea of bestowing political power on people by means of democratic elections does not make sense. This does not mean, however, that elections as such cannot make sense. What may be accomplished by election is a confirmation that the elected candidates have power. There would be no point in voting for a politician who has no power, and the number of votes a person gets reflects the amount of power he possesses, or, in Anderson's sense, his charisma.“³⁵

Several patterns of authority may derive from this cultural setting: the religious origin of power inhibits its sharing. Since power is conceived of as finite, its delegation or devolution on an individual or institutional basis becomes problematic.³⁶ As a result of the concentration of power in the monarchy, power became extremely personalized. Today, patron-client relationships structure Burmese society. Since the politicization of the *sangha* in the struggle against the British, it has played a central role in voicing discontent and organizing opposition. Keyes et al. noted that Buddhism in Burma

„has been vulnerable to control and manipulation by the state. But because Buddhist practices are part of the endemic religion for a large majority of

³³ Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 21.

³⁴ Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 9.

³⁵ Trankell and Ovesen, *Introduction*, pp. 13-4, refer to Benedict Anderson's discussion of political power in Java and its wider relevance for Southeast Asia.

³⁶ See Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 38.

peoples in these societies and because the Buddhist sangha must serve the religious needs of their congregations before carrying out the policies of the state, authoritative voices speaking in the name of Buddhism can and do question the state's hegemony. [...] In Burma monks have been at the forefront of the movement questioning the government's legitimacy."³⁷

4 Moral authority and power in Burmese politics

Keyes and his colleagues argue that the modernization and nation-building projects led Asian states into a „modern crisis of authority“.

„It is the experience of having a problematic relationship with the past, of being alienated from traditional certainties in which cosmology reflects community and vice versa, of being offered and often pressured to accept an identity with one particular version of one's heritage rather than another that constitutes what we term the modern crisis of authority.“³⁸

Their nation-building stance led Asian governments to promote selected ritual practices and even to invent new rites.³⁹ In this section, I will analyse how Burmese governments under U Nu, Ne Win and Than Shwe tried to use Buddhist norms and rituals to gain moral authority. These three governments were chosen as they represent major changes in post-independence Burmese history.

4.1 U Nu of Burma: the cooptation of Buddhism

After Burma gained independence in January 1948, Burma's first Prime Minister U Nu tried to use Buddhism as a uniting force during the constitutional period to strengthen the central government. U Nu initiated decrees in the 1950s to foster the political position of Buddhism in the new state. For instance, he established two government-sponsored ecclesiastical courts to restore order within the *sangha* and the Pali University which regularized the standards for teaching the Buddhist scriptures.⁴⁰ The government built and restored pagodas, held examinations, and awarded prizes to monks who showed exceptional ability in learning and reciting the scripture.⁴¹ U Nu's most important religious act was the establishment of the *Buddha Sasana Organization* as central Buddhist organization representative of all Buddhists in the country. According to Cady, U Nu endorsed the act enthusiastically in parliament declaring

³⁷ C. Keyes, H. Hardacre and L. Kendall, „Contested Visions of Community in East and Southeast Asia,“ in: Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall, *Asian Visions of Authority*, p. 14.

³⁸ See Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall, *Contested Visions of Community*, pp. 3-4.

³⁹ See Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall, *Contested Visions of Community*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ See Cady, *Religion and Politics in Modern Burma*, pp. 158-160.

⁴¹ See Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 50, 70.

„that the usual casual practices of Buddhism, such as visiting pagodas, reciting prayers, and telling beads, were not enough. Buddhist Burmans must be made to live and act according to the Lord Buddha. Only thus would a solid and lasting basis for Buddhism be established in Burma, so that the people would be able to resist the intrusion of dangerous foreign ideologies.“⁴²

The *Buddha Sasana Act* committed the Burmese government for the first time to actively support the propagation of the Buddhist faith. On the occasion of the 2,500th anniversary of Buddha's death, U Nu even held the Sixth World Buddhist Council in Rangoon. After U Nu had transferred political authority to a caretaker government under Commander-in-chief General Ne Win, ruling the country from October 1958 to February 1960, U Nu was again elected prime minister in April 1960. On this account, Silverstein argues that the caretaker government

„lacked compassion, its leaders were direct and legalistic rather than indirect and moralistic [...] This was a new experience for the Burmese; they reacted by returning U Nu as prime minister and by casting an overwhelming vote against his rivals who promised to continue the work and style of the caretaker government.“⁴³

U Nu was especially appealing to the rural masses. The purpose of his rhetoric sought to „reassure the people that the speaker was motivated only by kindness.“⁴⁴ Therefore, his government called for the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion and promulgated a Buddhist-oriented welfare state.⁴⁵

In 1961, the parliament made Buddhism the state religion, however, U Nu's plan to use Buddhism as a unifying factor encountered serious obstacles. Especially, it alienated non-Buddhist minorities. The democratic period of Burmese history ended as several minority groups started secessionist movements against the central government.⁴⁶

4.2 General Ne Win: the suppression of Buddhism

The structural base of support for authoritarianism was put in place in Burma during General Ne Win's rule between 1962 and 1988: in March 1962, Ne Win seized power by a coup and established a military regime under a Revolutionary Council.⁴⁷ The state's relationship with Buddhism was ambiguous: on the one hand, the government tried to blend Buddhist concepts about change with Marxist notions of dialectics. This ideology can be traced back in two documents, *The Burmese Way to Socialism* and *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment*. The

⁴² Cady, *Religion and Politics in Modern Burma*, p. 160.

⁴³ Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, pp. 101-2. See also Gustaaf Houtman's study, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Monograph Series 33, Tokyo: University of Foreign Studies, 1999).

⁴⁵ See Steinberg, *Burma*, pp. 16 and 44.

⁴⁶ See R. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), pp 283-290.

⁴⁷ Alamgir, *Against the Current*, p. 334. See also Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 81-2.

documents used moral announcements based on Buddhism to legitimate the socialist path of the government. The Ne Win government frequently stressed the compatibility of the Burmese Way to Socialism with 'traditional values'.⁴⁸ In doing so, the military government followed a continuous pattern as it had already used Buddhism during the caretaker period to legitimize the fight against communist movements by publishing materials indicating that the communists were set on destroying Buddhism.⁴⁹

But on the other hand, — and in spite of its own appeals to Buddhism and 'traditional values' — the Revolutionary Council declared that U Nu's use of religion had created disunity and raised fears of non-Buddhist minorities. Accordingly, one of the first actions of the government was to cease state support for Buddhism. As a consequence, the regime was frequently challenged by the Buddhist clergy. After that, all religious laws were declared void and Burmese monks were barred from political participation. Immediately after seizing power, the Revolutionary Council asked the monks to register with the government, which they refused to do. In 1962, the regime dissolved the *Buddha Sasana Council*. The government introduced an identification card for monks and a program for reforming religious education. In the following months, the conflict between the military and the *sangha* led to the arrest of monks and the open suppression of Buddhists' political activities.⁵⁰ In contrast to pre-colonial traditions, the military regime under Ne Win had separated itself from Buddhism.

After the military crackdown, the *sangha* refrained from challenging the government until the so called 'U Thant incident' brought the monks back into politics. In December 1974, the military rulers refused to give former UN Secretary General U Thant a fitting burial when his body was returned to his homeland. This decision led to violent demonstrations of university students and Buddhist monks. As the funeral procession moved toward the cemetery that the government had proposed as burial site, students and monks seized the coffin and took it to the university campus where the remains were given the Buddhist rites for someone who had achieved distinction. After that, U Thant was buried on the site of a student union building that had been destroyed by the military after student protests in 1962. The government sent soldiers who arrested students and monks, reclaimed the coffin and reburied it at a cemetery near the *Shwedagon Pagoda*. Ensuing riots in Rangoon led to the proclamation of martial law.⁵¹

This incident demonstrates the importance of the symbolic use of Buddhism and reflects a broader struggle over moral authority in Burmese politics. The government

⁴⁸ See Silverstein's discussion of the key documents in *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 81-7 and Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 20.

⁴⁹ See Steinberg, *Burma*, pp. 14, 18-9, 44-5.

⁵⁰ See Taylor, *The State in Burma*, pp. 356-4.

⁵¹ See Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, pp. 49-51, 97-100, 142-3.

underestimated the highly symbolic meaning of the ceremony when it failed to pay proper respect to the former Secretary General of the United Nations. Students and monks, in contrast, used the incident to express their antagonism to the government.

In May 1980, the relationship between the state and the *sangha* became more cooperative after the state organized a *sangha* congregation that eventually succeeded in putting the Buddhist orders under greater state control.⁵² Interestingly, even though the government denied the use of religion as a legitimizing ideology for the state, Ne Win personally tried to comply with traditional concepts of authority. While he defended the government's actions against Buddhist monks and denounced their „misuse of religion“, Ne Win declared that „he personally was a good Buddhist“.⁵³ What is more, Ne Win tried to emulate U Nu's construction of a celebrated pagoda by building a pagoda right besides the *Shwedagon* Pagoda in Rangoon.⁵⁴

4.3 Than Shwe: the displacement of Buddhism?

As Burma's economic situation worsened in the eighties, student- and clergy-led opposition mounted. Under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military suppressed political activities of monks in the aftermath of the 1988 events. The military invaded monasteries and pagodas to cleanse the clergy of 'political' elements.⁵⁵ But at the same time, the government demonstrated an increasing interest in religion. While both U Nu and Ne Win had built pagodas, Than Shwe, the chairman of SLORC/SPDC, has even built two. Moreover, the extensive refurbishing of pagodas, the obeisance to monks and the paying of appropriate homage became front page stories in Burma's controlled press.⁵⁶ Institutionally, the government controlled the *sangha* through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the so called *All-Nikayas Council*, an executive body of forty-seven abbots.⁵⁷ But under Than Shwe, the government started to pursue „quasi-religious or arcane spiritual practices as part of their strategy to hold on power.“⁵⁸ Although the government did not appeal directly to a pre-colonial dynastic heritage, it assumed an „aura of court politics.“ As the cosmological concept of power requires the power holder to demonstrate that he is motivated by moral impetus, the military government continuously claimed that

⁵² See Taylor, *The State in Burma*, pp. 358-9.

⁵³ The quotes are from Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, p. 98.

⁵⁴ Besides these efforts, Ne Win reportedly relied on supernatural factors like spirits and numerology for magical protection, for examples see B. Matthews, „The Present Fortune of Tradition-Bound Authoritarianism in Myanmar,“ *Pacific Affairs*, 71:1 (1998), pp. 19-20.

⁵⁵ The SLORC retained power in the aftermath of a popular election victory in 1990 and changed its name in November 1997 into State Peace and Development Council (SPDC); see Matthews, *Authoritarianism*, p. 7 and Alamgir, *Against the Current*, p. 344.

⁵⁶ See Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 45.

⁵⁷ See Matthews, *Authoritarianism*, pp. 12, 18 and Taylor, *The State in Burma*, p. 358-9.

⁵⁸ Matthews, *Authoritarianism*, pp. 7-8.

„when it is taking some action or indeed is in power, it is distributing benefits with *cetana* (goodwill), an extremely important Buddhist concept that is constantly reiterated in the press and in government slogans. Under such circumstances, no one could possibly disagree or object to the actions taken, and thus social protest against the military requirements imposed on the public is completely inappropriate in this essentially Buddhist context.“⁵⁹

From this point of view, the military actions against Buddhism could be considered as an attempt to ‘purify’ the *sangha*, as

„SPDC’s connection with Buddhism is a corollary of its perceived role as ‘head of state’ with traditional responsibilities of purifying (*lawka thara*) the *sangha* and preventing schismatic fragmentations and other deviations (such as transgressions against the monastic rule, *vinaya*).“⁶⁰

Another strategy to gain moral authority pertains to what Anagnost terms the ‘politics of ritual displacement’⁶¹: regime officials employed religious practices to transfer moral authority from religious communities to the state through the patronage of Buddhist relics and reliquaries. The Burmese military government tried to employ these religious beliefs by creating a national cult of Buddhist relic veneration, when the SLORC patronaged a forty-five-day-long nation-wide procession of the Chinese Tooth Relic in 1994.⁶² In the aftermath of the 1988 resistance movement and the resulting crisis of authority, the government used the Buddhist tooth relic as a vehicle for constructing a hegemonic vision of a Burmese nation. As Schober points out,

„[s]ignificant aspects of popular Theravada practice, such as relic veneration, the construction of stupas, and, more generally, state patronage of *rupakaya* [the physical body of the Buddha and its remains, S.E.], create a field of merit and source of political legitimization separate and distinct from merit-making patronage of the *sangha*.“⁶³

The ritual veneration of relics endowed the patron with the charisma of a just ruler whose homage and generosity toward the Buddha’s remains are seen by Buddhists as indications of religiosity, social status, and political legitimacy.

„SLORC seeks to strengthen its hegemony through patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic, through the creation of historically linked and socially overlapping fields of merit throughout the nation, and through mobilization of diverse communities and resources. The state’s appeal to the symbols of cosmological Buddhism in a modern setting aims to create a particular ethos and vision of this nation and its culture,

⁵⁹ Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 42.

⁶⁰ See Matthews, *Authoritarianism*, p. 18.

⁶¹ See Anagnost, *Politics of Ritual Displacement*, pp. 221-254.

⁶² The Chinese Tooth Relic visited Burma from April to June 1994 before it was conveyed back to the People’s Republic of China. The report of the ritual procedures is taken from Juliane Schober, „Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture: State Patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Myanmar,“ *History of Religions*, 36:3 (1997), pp. 218-243.

⁶³ Schober, *Buddhist Just Rule*, p. 220.

community, territory, and history that is 'essentially' Burmese and 'essentially' Buddhist."⁶⁴

During the ritual procession of the relic in 1994, Than Shwe and his family members, high-ranking SLORC ministers and military officers participated in large-scale state rituals throughout the country. The participation in these rituals was considered the highest honour for a lay-person and was supposed to portray the recognition of the SLORC as the rightful patron of the relic. It was reported widely in the state-owned media. Despite of its cosmological character, the state cult of the Chinese Tooth Relic served the power objectives of the Burmese government. The rituals legitimated SLORC's political institutions and facilitated the regime's vision of a modern Burmese nation by portraying the present state as a culmination of early Burmese kingdoms.

Thus, the state permits a certain religious discourse that furthered its hegemony by transforming ritual service to Buddhist relics into political patronage. The state rituals enabled the creation of fields of merit, status and power that could be appropriated by the government to achieve moral authority. Facing a crisis of authority after 1988, the civil and military elite in power employed traditional ritual patronage to consolidate its political hegemony. What is more, the appropriation of sacred objects by the military indicates a change in the patterns of moral authority: the role of the Burmese *sangha* as a religious institution and as the primary field of merit may be diminished by the state's efforts to venerate Buddhist relics itself.⁶⁵

But while the government inhibited the expression of political dissent and aimed to monopolize the religious discourse, it also set the parameters for the expression of opposition views: political opponents started to voice their discontent in religious terms as well. Opposition leaders and especially Aung San Suu Kyi frequently displayed themselves as devout Buddhists:

„the power of the opposition was augmented after Aung San Suu Kyi began to use the regime's own weapon against it. She argued that democracy, checks and balances, and human rights are compatible with Buddhism as well as with Burmese traditions [...]“⁶⁶

Even some Western scholars attributed to Aung San Suu Kyi the characteristics that are associated with the traditional Burmese image of a just ruler: respectability, wisdom, as well as virtue and grace.⁶⁷

Furthermore, political dissent was voiced in Burma in „disparaging remarks about the legitimacy and splendor of the grand *Mahawizaya* Pagoda, built by the preceding Ne Win government“. Religious donations circumvented the official collection

⁶⁴ Schober, *Buddhist Just Rule*, p. 222.

⁶⁵ See Schober, *Buddhist Just Rule*, pp. 242-3.

⁶⁶ See Alamgir, *Against the Current*, pp. 340-44 and J. Silverstein, „The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,“ *Pacific Affairs*, 69:2 (1996), pp. 211-228.

⁶⁷ See Matthews, *Authoritarianism*, p. 17.

network. For example, while „perfunctory donations“ were given to the state's religious causes, more generous offerings were made to other non-state sources of merit. Donators refused to participate in the state rituals and even questioned the authenticity of the venerated relics. These „countertexts“ challenge the state's discursive hegemony and reveal political resistance.⁶⁸

5 Conclusion

My analysis has shown that moral authority plays a constitutive role as a power resource in Burmese politics. Buddhism and Buddhist moral values are among the strongest ideational foundations of the Burmese society. Steinberg is right when he points out that Buddhism was an essential element of legitimacy for any regime in Burma and that no leader could afford to be seen as acting against it.⁶⁹ The engagement in Buddhist merit-making activities has always been a prerogative of the head of state to stabilize his political authority. Burmese rulers — be it U Nu, Ne Win or Than Shwe — all needed to display their personal devoutness in order to employ moral authority successfully. By confessing his faith in Buddhism, every ruler has tried to achieve moral authority by using the religious beliefs of the majority of the Burmese people. High ranking officials have been taking part in Buddhist ceremonies, building pagodas and supporting the *sangha* financially. The power holders took the role of the early modern ‘just king’ and tried to comply with traditional norms of legitimate authority.

Even though the military government under Ne Win tried to use Buddhist norms and rituals as ‘traditional Burmese’ values to legitimize its power, the state stopped being the ‘patron’ of the *sangha*. During Ne Win’s rule, the military seemed to have succeeded in preventing the emergence of any effective alternative center of power. But although the *sangha* has repeatedly been put down by the state as a possible rival source of power, its ideas constitute the essence of moral authority and hence legitimate rule. This clearly stresses the importance of moral authority as a power resource in Burmese politics. At the same time, this confronts the government with a dilemma: on the one hand, the power holder needs moral authority to legitimize his rule, but on the other, the regime is suspicious of the *sangha*’s potential as a force of political resistance. Thus, after trying to eliminate the *sangha* as a possible veto player, SLORC officials employed a strategy of ritual displacement in order to achieve moral authority.

The study of moral authority opened a field of essentially contested meanings about legitimate rule, in which political actors struggle for discursive hegemony. In this struggle, a change seems to have taken place since the military regime under Ne Win seized power in 1962. The current state's patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic

⁶⁸ See Schober, *Buddhist Just Rule*, pp. 239-241.

⁶⁹ See Steinberg, *Burma*, p. 45.

can be regarded as an effort to transfer authority from religious communities directly to the state. Buddhism is no longer only used to achieve moral authority for a single person, rather, politics of ritual displacement aim at bypassing the *sangha* as the traditional source of moral authority and thus diminishing its religious role. But the state's strategy to determine how ritual practice is represented is contested.

A cautious interpretation of the events during the 2007 crisis suggests that the government's efforts to monopolize the meaning of moral authority have failed.⁷⁰ Instead, the *sangha* continues to play a central role in organizing opposition to the regime. The refusal of the monks to accept the alms of the military was a powerful countertextual symbol that challenged the state's discursive hegemony directly. The uprising reached its symbolic peak when the protesting monks managed to pay homage to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. These protests revealed the political resistance of the *sangha*. They are a sign that the crisis of authority is still ongoing in Burma.

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⁷⁰ For a summary of the uprising, see J. Lorch, „Stopgap or Change Agent? The Role of Burma's Civil Society after the Crackdown,“ *Internationales Asienforum*, 39:1-2 (2008), pp. 21-54.

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