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Buddhism and Politics - The Case of Burma

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There are sayings such as, to quote from Bechert, "To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist", or, to quote from a Burman, "Some say that Buddhism is not a religion, but a way of life".¹ Both quotations suggest a very strong position of Buddhism in Burma (which has been renamed into "Myanmar" on 18 June 1989).

I propose to, first, provide some very basic facts to demonstrate the importance of Buddhism to Burma; then to outline government policies towards Buddhism; and finally to briefly describe attitudes of Buddhist monks or the sangha towards politics in various instances. I shall not delve here, however, into the highly complicated subject of whether, or to which extent, individual rulers and governments may or may not have based their politics and actions on Buddhist thought.²

1. Buddhism in Burma

History, when looked at in detail, never is simple.

This has been proved by Theravada Buddhism, which arrived in Burma even prior to the Burmese: Part of the Mon people, who once had settled in vast areas of present-day Burma and Thailand, were already followers of Buddhism. The true Burmese, or "Myanma", descended only later into the Irrawaddy valley, where in 849 they set up their capital of Pagan. The animism in which they believed, soon was rivalled by, or mixed with, tantric Buddhism of which the Tibeto-Burmese Pyu people (whose kingdom was conquered in 832) were followers.

About two centuries later, King Anuruddha of Pagan (1044-1077) was converted by a Mon monk to Theravada Buddhism, which thus became firmly established in Burma in the 11th century. Since then, it has remained the predominant religion - during several dynasties that followed, during the British colonial re-

gime which was established through three wars between 1824 and 1885³ and which ended, after a brief Japanese interregnum in World War II, with Burmese independence on 4 January 1948, and ever since.

Ample proof of the acceptance of Buddhism are the numerous pagodas throughout most of the country. Just the area of the ancient capital of Pagan comprises 5,000 pagodas or remains of pagodas.⁴ Kings used to have them constructed for better karma, and much in the same manner, some observers believe, former prime minister U Nu had the Kaba Aye Zedi, or World Peace Pagoda, completed by 1952, or former general U Ne Win, who was strongman of a socialist regime from 1962 through 1988, in 1980 ordered construction of the Maha Wizaya Zedi.⁵ The cost of Maha Wizaya Zedi was estimated at 50 million Kyat;⁶ up to 28 October 1989, close to 39 million Kyat, or almost 5.7 million US\$ at the official exchange rate, were received in donations for this purpose.⁷ When renovation work at Sule Pagoda in Yangon had ended and cash donations were formally handed over on 20 October 1989, they amounted to almost 15 million Kyat.⁸

Village monasteries are the focus of village life and traditionally provided education.⁹ Only in more recent years their educational role has been reduced by the public education system and literacy campaigns.

Even now, many young men still spend a short period, ranging mostly from some weeks to several months, as Buddhist monks, thus concentrating on Buddhist teachings and living them.

In 1954, a (possibly unrealistic) figure of 800,000 monks in Burma - which would have been equivalent to 10 % of the adult male population - was quoted in a government statement in parliament, whereas pre-World War II estimates were to the tune of 100,000. For 1984, a foreign newspaper gives the following figures: 124,319 monks and 188,532 novices in 47,987 monasteries.¹⁰

Amnesties for prisoners are another example of the presence of Buddhism. Thus when the 6th Buddhist Council was opened in Rangoon in May 1954, all prisoners serving sentences of less than 3 months were released, the rest were granted a remission of 3 months, and all death sentences were commuted to life terms.¹¹

Whether a much farther-reaching amnesty on 20 July 1989, under which 19,378 prisoners with terms of less than two years were released up to 19 October 1989 and many others had their sentences commuted,¹² was due to Buddhist benevolence (*cetana*) or politically motivated may be open to discussion, but certainly there is a Buddhist reluctance to execute those condemned to death. According to an official statement at a press conference on 20 October 1989, the only prisoner executed in recent years was North Korean major Zin Mo¹³ who in 1983, together with two other North Korean military officers, had murdered 21 persons through a bomb exploded when South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan was visiting Rangoon.

2. Government policies towards Buddhism

Buddhism as a religious belief has never been prohibited in modern Burma.

Thus the policies of various governments towards Buddhism, apart from sometimes actively supporting it or making use of it for their own purposes, have mainly revolved around three practical questions:

First, should Buddhism be the official state religion or not?

Second, should the monks, or the sangha, be allowed to participate in politics?

And third, should the monks, or the sangha, be controlled by the government?

Bechert has compared the alternating tendencies between separating state and sangha and linking state and sangha, with alternating political tendencies to modernize the state or to restore the old order.¹⁴

Already under king Anuruddha in the 11th century a strong link between monarchy and Buddhism became apparent: The king was the main promoter of Buddhist faith - a role that was accepted by later kings, too. Buddhist teachings basically helped to confirm a king's position - for he must have reached it according to the laws of karma.

Under the rule of king Anuruddha, we also find the roots of the development of an ecclesiastical hierarchy in Burmese Buddhism; for out of the office of his highly influential chief religious adviser by and by developed that of a kind of primate or archbishop (sangharaja - or thathanabaing ("lord owner of the Buddhist religion")). The thathanabaing was appointed by the king and assisted by a council of 8 to 12 sayadaws (senior monks) who were also appointed by the king. The country was divided into ecclesiastical districts, and so on. Thus in theory there was a chain of command (though individual monks would not always accept it), with organs to preserve discipline among the monks through internal jurisdiction. The thathanabaing and his "subordinates" were, however, not invested with any executive power; this rested exclusively with the king and his secular representatives. Monasteries had to file annual reports on their residents to the office of a high-ranking government official titled "mahada wun" (ecclesiastical censor), who then compiled annual lists of all ordained monks.¹⁵

The comparatively close interconnection between government and sangha disappeared with the advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century. Based on their experiences gained in India, the British applied the principle of religious neutrality, i.e. strict non-interference by the government in religious matters, to their new province of Burma, too. Unlike all previous governments since the 11th century, they did not promote Buddhism, they did not build pagodas, they did not enforce decisions of the Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy, and they even failed to fill open positions in the hierarchy with new appointments. At the same time, Christian missionaries were allowed into the country.

The result was that the structure of the sangha weakened and internal discipline suffered. The monks' role as teachers declined through the introduction of public primary education and missionary schools. The rising new English-educated class was largely divorced from the traditional system connected to Buddhism.¹⁶

Anti-British activities of monks, however, sometimes led to actively unfavorable attitudes in the British colonial administration. This became evident, for example, before the elections in April 1947 of a "constituent assembly", in preparation for independence. After the question of whether monks and nuns should have a voting right already had been discussed for some time, Acting Governor Sir Henry Knight on 25 June 1946 wrote in a telegram addressed to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for India and Burma in London:

"Monks and Nuns: Here I think we must take firm stand. Participation of monks in politics gave rise in past to internal dissension in Burma Sangha and seriously affected discipline of younger monks. In view of strict injunction in Vinaya (rules of Buddhist Order) that monks should not participate in secular and controversial matters there is strong and definite public opinion against monks and nuns taking part in elections. Moreover, this feeling is shared by Sangha Council of leading Pongyis. .. Government should in my opinion respect and support public and religious opinion in this matter."¹⁷

Three days later, Henderson sent his reply to Sir Henry: In a parliamentary debate criticism, both by the opposition and government back benchers, of "any provision that aimed to disqualify any person on religious grounds" had been so strong that the government chose to give voting rights to monks and nuns.¹⁸

When the elections were held at the appointed date, the "Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League" (AFPFL) led by Burmese national hero Bogyoke Aung San captured 248 out of 255 assembly seats, but Aung San was murdered on 19 July of the same year.¹⁹ He had resisted pressure from older politicians to proclaim Buddhism the state religion. Thus the 1947 constitution of Burma guaranteed freedom of faith and worship, but recognized Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of citizens.²⁰ At the same time it included a clause forbidding the abuse of religion for political purposes.²¹

Aung San's successor, and first prime minister of independent Burma, was U Nu, known as a devout Buddhist. After his initial "Leftist Unity Plan" failed due to a hard-line communist position, U Nu - who actually was an outspoken anti-communist - moved to bring Buddhism closer to politics. Several laws improving matters in the sangha were passed by parliament in 1949 and 1950, including one to set up a "Buddha Sasana Council" to co-ordinate Buddhist affairs. Within the government party AFPFL, discussions led to a compromise formula that Buddhism und Marxism were not incompatible - a theory not adhered to, however, by all of the leading politicians.²²

U Nu was successful in bringing the 6th Buddhist Council to Burma (1954-1956), but his plans to establish a central body controlling the sangha met with stiff resistance from monks and failed. In his campaign for the 1960 parliamentary elections, U Nu promised voters to make Buddhism the official state religion. After his party came out a strong winner, this promise was realized through a constitutional revision in 1961.

- The revised constitution provided, among others, that the government should
- render a minimum of 0.5 % of its annual current budget expenditure for matters connected with religions;
 - "promote and maintain Buddhism for its welfare and advancement in its three aspects, namely, pariyatti sasana (study of the Teachings of the Buddha), patipatti sasana (practice of the Teachings), and pativedha sasana (enlightenment)";
 - "honour the Tiratana, namely the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha";
 - "protect the said religion in its three aspects and the Tiratana from all dangers including insult and false representation, made by words, either spoken or written, or by other means";
 - "properly maintain and preserve the Tripitaka Pali Texts, the Commentaries and Sub-Commentaries thereof";

- convene a meeting of certain (listed) sayadaws at least once a year and submit to it a report on the "measures taken for the State religion" and "hear the observations, advice and instructions made by the Sayadawas in connection with the measures taken";
- give assistance and aid in the restoration of ancient pagodas;
- provide hospitals for the sangha throughout the country, which should not be housed under the same roof and within the same walls with hospitals provided for the laity.

A "State Religion Promotion Act", also in 1961, provided for Buddhist texts to be taught to Buddhist students in all state schools and in all State Teachers' Training Schools (where it would be a compulsory subject for Buddhists and optional for non-Buddhists) etc.²³

Provisions for Buddhism as the state religion therefore were quite concrete, including the supplying of public funds. The 1961 constitutional amendment is believed by some observers to have been one of several reasons why the Armed Forces under General Ne Win seized power in February 1962, overthrowing U Nu.

General Ne Win, who in 1974 switched to a civilian one-party parliamentary system, remained the "strong-man" of Burma until July 1988, i.e. for more than 26 years.

He and many of his associates were Buddhists themselves. This is shown by the official ideology propagated through publications in 1962 and 1963 which were (anonymously) co-authored by Buddhist monks. Though calling for nationalization of economic assets - a policy which was slowly, but increasingly realized -, it differed from Marxist concepts in basic points (e.g. by not including class struggle and a dictatorship of the proletarian class) and, according to Bechert, contained all basic elements of Buddhist cosmology.²⁴

One of the means of control the Ne Win administration used was mass organizations (e.g. of the farmers, the workers, etc.). Thus it set out to bring under control another potential trouble factor, the sangha, by similar methods. Religious freedom was guaranteed, and in 1965 the government presented drafts for a basic law regulating sangha hierarchy etc., to an "All-Burma All-Sect Sangha Convention" - but it failed, as had U Nu, due to militant resistance of part of the monks. After carefully nurturing good relations with monastic circles, and with a stronger power basis than in 1965, the government succeeded at last in 1980 to push through a sangha reform - which has been extensively covered by Bechert. The result was a "centralized organizational structure for the national Sangha and the creation of an effective ecclesiastical jurisdiction. .. only those who were ready to submit to the authority of these regulations would be recognized as bhikhu (fully ordained monk). .. Provision was made for the registration of all monks and for their being supplied with identity cards which were to be issued in close cooperation between ecclesiastical and secular administration." (Bechert) The reform also applied to the community of nuns.²⁵ According to a foreign newspaper, as of December 1985 registration cards had been issued to 128,270 monks, 109,137 novices and 20,897 nuns.²⁶

Heterodox monks subsequently were expelled from the sangha. The government, through "supplications", official appointments and so on was able to keep the monks out of politics and in effect control much of their activities.²⁷

If we look at the present military government, which came into power by a coup on 18 September 1988 and professes itself to be a dictatorship on an interim basis, preparing the transition to a democratic system, the basic attitude still is to keep monks essentially out of politics. This is manifested, for example in the law governing the parliamentary election announced for 27 May 1990: "members of religious orders" are not entitled either to stand for election or to vote.²⁸

Looking back, we thus can very roughly identify the period up to the 19th century when Burma was ruled by kings, and the brief rule of U Nu as prime minister, as periods during which Buddhism was supported by government, British colonial rule as a period of a certain decline of Buddhism, and the Ne Win era and the subsequent time as a period during which Buddhism was neither discouraged nor strongly encouraged, but brought or kept under a certain degree of state control.

3. Attitudes of Buddhist monks or the sangha

Buddhist monks have always commanded great respect in Burmese society - first for their religious achievements, and second, under the kings, because as a social group they were supported by the kings and stood largely outside normal administration competences.

The sangha has generally not got involved in politics - although sometimes trying to mediate or to placate. Individual monks according to monastic rules also should have abstained from politics; most of them did, but quite a number did not - both under the kings and afterwards.²⁹

During British colonial rule, when Buddhism declined under official policy, it became increasingly identified with nationalism. A rebellion in 1886 was in many places headed by monks, some of whom actually took part in the fighting.³⁰

A frequently-quoted example of Buddhist political activities is the "Young Men's Buddhist Association" (YMBA), founded in 1906 after the example of a YMBA in Ceylon, which again was modelled on the Christian YMCA. The organizers and most other initial members were Buddhist laymen, who for a decade mostly concerned themselves with religious, social and cultural matters. But in 1916 the YMBA committed itself to fight the total disregard of Burmese, and Buddhist, customs by foreigners in walking on pagoda premises with their shoes on. The issue soon crystallized nationalist sentiments, and finally Britain gave in and left the right to determine rules for visitors' footwear, except in the case of police or soldiers, to the head of each pagoda.³¹

The "General Council of Buddhist Associations", which grew out of the YMBA movement, in 1920 changed its name to "General Council of Burmese Associations", but still included monks in its leadership. The influence of monks in the 1920s, according to one source, was so great that even candidates for parliament had to be cleared in their constituencies with sangha organizations.

Involvement of monks in politics was encouraged by various factors: Due to the British policy of neutrality in religious matters and the resulting weakening of sangha discipline, monks found it easier to attend to secular matters. As "robed persons" they enjoyed more immunity from governmental control than other citizens, and on the other hand they had next to nothing to lose in worldly possessions when in trouble.³²

A Western researcher into Burmese Buddhism, who certainly was no sympathizer of British colonial rule, has stated about the political methods used by the pongyi (monks):

"Most of the pongyi politicians were extremists, and their anti-British propaganda was frequently characterized by utter irresponsibility."³³

Many of the monks' political activities were coordinated by a "General Council of Sangha Sametgyi" (GCSS) which was set up in 1922. Relations between the GCSS and the "General Council of Burmese Associations" in the 1922-1925 period were characterized by frequent tensions.³⁴

Some monks of the anti-colonial movement, however, became national heroes or martyrs - notably U Ottawa, who was jailed several times and died in prison in 1939, U Wizaya, who died in 1929 after a 163-days hunger-strike started because monks had been forbidden to wear their customary yellow robes when in prison. A former monk, Saya San, started an armed rebellion in 1930 and had himself crowned a king (raja). Though supported by itinerant monks, his uprising soon was put down by the British.³⁵

Large-scale civil unrest also occurred when in 1938 excerpts from a book written by a Muslim were perceived as an insult to Buddhist religion. At a mass meeting at the Shwedagon Pagoda which had been called by an "All Burma Council of Young Monks Organization" and was attended by over 10,000 people, including 1,500 monks, a resolution was passed which warned that, if the Muslim author should not be punished, "steps will be taken to treat the Muslims as enemy No.1 who insult the Buddhist community and their religion, and to bring about the extermination of the Muslims and the extinction of their religion and language".³⁶ The disturbance spread within a few days to most cities and larger towns in Burma and at the same time also became anti-government and anti-Hindu. "Monks everywhere played a leading role in instigating and directing the rioters; monasteries became armed strongholds and sanctuaries for those sought by police." A total of 139 Muslims, 25 Hindus and 17 Burmese were killed by the rioting.³⁷

Compared to the often turbulent pre-independence days, political activities of monks have been much more restricted in independent Burma. The general trend has been towards concentration on religious matters.

A notable exception, however, have been the large-scale civilian anti-government protests and demonstrations in summer 1988, and to a lesser extent even the period since then up to the present.

In this connection, we can clearly distinguish between the placating attitude of the official sangha organization, which should have been welcome to the government, and active participation in the protests by an unknown proportion of monks who apparently did not belong to the leadership.

The official "State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee" at a very early stage, on 18 July 1988, put out a "request" to help promote love and goodwill etc., as was stated, "in response to the supplication submitted by the government".³⁸ An appeal of the same committee on 20 September 1988 - two days after the military coup - and not referring to any supplication, was directed at both sides and called for, among other things, direct talks between both sides and "sympathy and compassion" on the government side.³⁹

On the other hand, monks were seen in comparatively large numbers in demonstrations;⁴⁰ in Mandalay, Burma's second-largest city, monks were instrumental in setting up an interim administration together with normal civilians after public administration had broken down, etc. Some monks were later reported to have harboured arms, and apparently a number of monasteries were used as bases of the opposition groups while demonstrations were still going on. It is unclear to which extent protesting "robed persons" were ordained monks or just novices. (When on 17 July 1989 about 100 monks tried to enter Shwedagon Pagoda, trustees of the pagoda found that part of them was not carrying identity cards.)⁴¹

A Thai newspaper on 18 September 1989⁴² carried an article in which one Rammanya Ketosa was quoted as saying that he and 32 other Buddhist monks of Mon descent were staying at a temple in the Mon-controlled Three Pagoda Pass area, and that about 200 monks had taken refuge along the border. This figure describes as refugees only a very, very small portion of Burmese monks.

Ketosa at the same time was identified as chairman of the "All Burma Young Monks Union" (ABYMU), which according to him was originally set up 27 years ago during the premiership of U Nu (who was overthrown in February 1962) and later suppressed under U Ne Win. The abbot gives the ABYMU membership as over 100,000 young monks, which would make it one third of the total figure of roughly 300,000 monks in Burma he mentions in the same interview - a percentage which may be open to serious doubt. A total figure of "about 300,000 members of Sangha and samanera in Burma" was also mentioned by a government source in 1989.⁴³

The abbot confesses to not objecting to the taking up of arms against the government by laymen, though for himself and the monks he advocates a peaceful path. If, with such a politicized opinion, he should be representative of ABYMU, and if his membership figure was correct, then a large portion of Burmese monks would be politically engaged at the moment.

If we try to relate government policy towards the sangha and political activities of monks, the result is that only on some occasions such activities were in direct response to sangha-related government policies, such as steps to curb the sangha; mostly there were other reasons - like nationalism, or recently support of opposition to the military government, or ideological support of guerilla organizations of ethnic minorities.

I am not in the least qualified to pass moral judgement on anybody else, and there are many different scales according to which a borderline between what a monk could do outside his religious activities and what he should not do, can be drawn - Professor Bechert in his presentation has pointed out the numerous modernist theories. But, if I may be provocative, one thing I personally cannot see is, why a monk who becomes strongly politically involved still should hold the venerated position and privileges of a monk.

In Burma, a number of monks at present apparently still want both - privileges and politics; but the sangha as a body has distanced itself from this attitude. Buddhism will stay in Burma - which way, also may depend on future general political developments.

Notes:

1. Bechert, H., "Das Lieblingsvolk Buddhas': Buddhisten in Birma", p.174, in: Bechert, H. and Gombrich, R., *Der Buddhismus - Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München, 2nd ed. 1989, pp.169-189. Htin Lwin, "Myanmar Hospitality and Etiquette", *Working People's Daily*, 1 October 1989, p.11.
2. V. remarks on this subject in: Sarkisyanz, E., *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, The Hague 1965, pp.235 ff. The book provides a thorough study of the impact of Buddhist thought on political ideology in Burma throughout history up to the U Nu area.
3. Bechert, "Das Lieblingsvolk", pp.169-172.
4. Far Eastern Economic Review Ltd. (ed.), *All-Asia Guide*, Hongkong, 1986, p.89.
5. Steinberg, D., *Burma - A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia*, Boulder (Colorado), 1982, pp.107-108. The decision to construct Maha Wizaya Zedi was made by the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs (*Xinhua*, 21 June 1989), not primarily by a religious body.
6. *Xinhua*, 21 June 1989.
7. *Working People's Daily* (published in Yangon (formerly: Rangoon)), 29 October 1989.
8. *Working People's Daily*, 21 October 1989.
9. Steinberg, *Socialist Nation*, pp.105-106.
10. Tinker, H., "The Union of Burma, London/ New York/ Toronto, 1957", p.168. *Times of Papua New Guinea*, 16.-22.8.1986.
11. Tinker, "The Union", p.174.
12. *Südostasien aktuell*, July 1989, p.332. *Working People's Daily*, 21 October 1989.
13. *Working People's Daily*, 21 October 1989.
14. Bechert, H., *Buddhimus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada-Buddhismus*, vol.2, Hamburg/ Wiesbaden, 1967, p.95.
15. Smith, D.E., *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton (N.J.) 1965, pp.14-17 and 22.
16. Smith, *Religion*, pp.38-39.
17. Tinker, H., *Burma. The Struggle For Independence 1944-1948. Documents From Official and Private Sources*, vol.I, London, 1983, p.862.
18. Tinker, *Documents*, p.867.
19. Steinberg, "Socialist Nation", p.33.
20. Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, The Hague, 1959, p.98.
21. Bechert, H., "The Recent Attempt at a Reform of the Buddhist Sangha in Burma and Its Implications", *Internationales Asienforum*, 20(1989)3/4, pp.93-113, section 2.
22. Bechert, "Das Lieblingsvolk", pp.176-177.
23. Texts of "The Constitution (Third Amendment) Act, 1961", and "The State Religion Promotion Act, 1961", as quoted in Smith, *Religion*, pp.329-335.
24. Bechert, "Das Lieblingsvolk", p.177.
25. Bechert, "The Recent Attempt", section 3.
26. *The Times of Papua New Guinea*, 16 - 22 August 1986.
27. Derived from Bechert, "The Recent Attempt", section 7.
28. Sections 7(a) and 10(a) of the "Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law" of 31 May 1989; text as published in: *Working People's Daily*, 2 June 1989.
29. Cady, John F., *A History of Modern Burma*, Ithaca & London, 5th printing 1978, pp.52-55.
30. Furnivall, J.S., *Colonial Rule and Practice*, New York, 1956, p.199.
31. Smith, *Religion*, pp.86-90. Bechert, "Das Lieblingsvolk", p.174.
32. Smith, *Religion*, pp.92-94.
33. Smith, *Religion*, p.99.
34. Smith, *Religion*, p.106.
35. Bechert, "Das Lieblingsvolk", p.175. Smith, *Religion*, pp.107-108.
36. Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee, p.X; quoted from Smith, *Religion*, p.110.
37. Smith, *Religion*, p.111.
38. *Working People's Daily*, 19 July 1989.
39. *Rangoon Home Service*, 20 September 1988, according to (BBC) *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 22 September 1988.
40. Bechert, "The Recent Attempt", section 8, quotes a figure of "at least several thousand" for demonstrations during the last days of U Sein Lwin's rule.
41. *Rangoon Home Service*, 17 July 1989, according to *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 19 July 1989.
42. *The Nation*, 18 September 1989.
43. *Working People's Daily*, 17 June 1989. The Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 29 November 1989 gave the following figures to the author during a brief visit to Yangon (formerly: Rangoon): about 140.000 bhikkhus and about 180.000 novices.