Monastic Authority and Legitimizing Religio-Political Activism: Buddhist Nationalist Monks in Myanmar

Niklas Foxeus | ORCID: 0000-0002-1859-4789
Department of History of Religions, ERG, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
niklas.foxeus@rel.su.se

Received 9 July 2022 | Accepted 17 April 2023 | Published online 4 September 2023

Abstract

The Buddhist nationalist movements that emerged during the political and economic liberalization of the second parliamentarian period (2011–2021) in Burma/Myanmar provide unique material for the study of monastic authority. The aim of this article is to examine two overlapping dynamics regarding how monastic authority is established and undermined. As for the first dynamic, the article examines three strategies in Buddhist nationalist sermons aiming to provide legitimacy for the nationalist monks. The second dynamic is a political outgroup criticism that became more common during the period in question. The article makes a distinction between generic monastic authority, which is the fundamental one, and nationalist monastic authority, as they are legitimized and established in different ways. Finally, the article argues that recognition of monastic authority by laypeople is based not merely on trust and respect but tends to be a more complex process.

Keywords

Buddhism – Buddhist nationalism – authority – Burma/Myanmar – legitimation

It has frequently been noted that Burmese monks – like the monks in other Theravāda Buddhist societies – exert a strong impact on the laypeople. In the
second parliamentarian period (2011–2021) in Burma/Myanmar, Buddhist nationalist monks appeared in the public sphere and authorized nationalist agendas. In 2012–2015, their public nationalist sermons targeted the Muslim minorities. While comparable groups were a fringe phenomenon during the military dictatorship of the SLORC-SPDC period (1988–2011), the impact of the Buddhist nationalist movements and nationalist sermons was, in the second parliamentarian period, considerable before the general elections of November 2015.1 Since the nationalist monks contributed to creating an anti-Muslim moral panic that lasted until around late 2015 (see Foxeus 2023), it is important to examine the sources of their authority.

Nationalist religiopolitical activism, with monks protecting the Buddha’s dispensation and the Burmese nation, has been a recurrent phenomenon since the colonial period in Burma. Starting in 2012, during the second parliamentarian period, monk-led Buddhist nationalist movements emerged – especially the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha – that disseminated an anti-Muslim discourse seeking to protect their nation, Buddhism, and the country. Despite this long history of Burmese monks being engaged in political activism in a modern sense, monastic involvement in politics has remained controversial. Monks must therefore carefully navigate this contested religiopolitical monastic space and avoid trespassing over its socially accepted limits. In their sermons, nationalist monks mainly sought to negotiate such boundaries by means of legitimation strategies. To address questions as to how nationalist monks were able to retain their authority and impact for some time, despite disseminating what critics have referred to as “hate speech” and engagement in political affairs, it is necessary to examine not merely the local social and cultural sources of authority of the Burmese nationalist monks, but also the local category of “politics.” In modern Burmese history, there has thus been ambivalence regarding the participation of monks in “politics.” The political and economic liberalization of the second parliamentarian period provides unique material for the study of issues of monastic authority.

This article examines two overlapping dynamics regarding how monastic authority is established and undermined. As for the first dynamic, the nationalist sermons mainly used three strategies for the legitimation of the monks’ religiopolitical activism, especially the trope of defense of Buddhism-in-danger, and a Buddhist textual framing. The latter was a more integral feature of sermons in 2013–2015 than what has previously been noted (exceptions are

---

1 SLORC is the abbreviation for State, Law, and Order Restoration Council (1988–1997) and SPDC for State, Peace, and Development Council (1997–2011). These constitute the two consecutive names of the military government.
This framing is important to take into consideration, as it not only provided a clear Buddhist identity to political discourses but also demonstrates how the process of establishing nationalist authority frequently took place within a traditional monastic textual space. The article argues that recognition of monastic authority (of any monk) by laypeople is not merely based on trust and respect but tends to be a more complex process involving religious socialization producing a certain *habitus*, the teaching of *karma*, and so forth. The nationalist monks benefited from these social and religious resources to retain their support from the laypeople. The second dynamic is a political outgroup criticism which seems to have undermined the authority and the impact of the nationalist monks. Furthermore, this article suggests that it is helpful to make a distinction between a generic monastic authority, which is the fundamental one, and nationalist monastic authority, as they are legitimized and established in different ways.

This article is based on Buddhist nationalist sermons collected in the form of DVDs in Burma/Myanmar, interviews, fieldwork, and Buddhist nationalist publications in Burmese. I have made the translations from Burmese into English. In this article, interviews have mainly served as supplementary material. I interviewed about ninety people (in 2016, 2017, and 2019) within Ma Ba Tha and other Buddhist nationalist organizations. The majority were monks, some were laypeople, and a few were nuns (thila-shin). I mostly selected informants through snowball sampling; most of the interviews were semistructured lasting from about one hour to more than three hours. They were mainly conducted in Upper Burma, particularly in Mandalay, but also in smaller cities there, and some in the Yangon area (in 2016 and 2017). I also conducted fieldwork and socialized with the nationalist monks using participant observation as a method.

1 Monastic Authority: Generic Authority and Nationalist Authority

The authority granted nationalist monks and their sermons cannot be understood apart from the ritual veneration and respect monks enjoy in Burmese society. As in other Buddhist countries in South and Southeast Asia, monks in Myanmar exert a strong influence on the laypeople. As an institution, the Sangha is attributed significant authority and symbolic capital (see Bourdieu [1991] 2010: 230) in Burmese society, that is, it is accorded immense prestige, honor, and authority. As Melford Spiro put it, “there is probably no other clergy in the world which receives as much honor and respect as are offered the Buddhist monks in Burma” (1982: 396). Historically, their main roles have
been to preserve Buddhist teachings by scriptural learning (P. pariyatti)\(^2\) and to protect them from disappearing, as well as serving as teachers providing basic education to Buddhist boys (literacy and basic knowledge of Buddhist texts). The monks represent a learned elite in Burmese society, and they may also serve as community leaders.

The separation of the monks of the Sangha and the laypeople is fundamental in Theravāda Buddhist societies. It is a status hierarchy corresponding to a normative distinction between supramundane (lawkuttara) and mundane (lawkī) spheres, or the sacred and the profane in Émile Durkheim’s sense (1995: 33–39). The high status of monks and the respect they are shown also reflect their perceived superior karmic capital (kan), as only those with an immense accumulation of favorable karma and moral perfections (P. pārami) can remain in the monkhood (Spiro 1982: 405–408; see also Walton and Jerryson 2016: 804). The monks’ role as a field of karmic merit (P. puññakkhetta) for the laypeople amplifies this authority. Moreover, laypeople can acquire karmic merit by paying respects to monks (see Spiro 1982: chapter 17; Nash 1963). The moral authority of the monks especially rests with their having undergone the ordination ritual (institutional authority), which is a rite of separation from the mundane sphere; their vow of celibacy, normative observance of the 227 disciplinary rules of the Vinaya, and ideally their curbing the moral vices of greed, hatred, and delusion (P. lobha, dosa, moha), which would make them more impartial (see Spiro 1982; Walton 2017: 139–140, 148). Hiroko Kawanami, who discusses some further cultural sources of monastic authority, including the concept of hpon that is related to karma, claims that the social influence (awza) of monks is a sort of “reverential authority that makes people spontaneously want to offer their services, but without any coercion” (2009: 222–224). The Sangha’s cultural sources of authority are thus manifold.

Although the authority of the monks is thus based on their cultural authority, which is inextricably integral to their institutional authority (see also Walton and Jerryson 2016), it is a social phenomenon. It mainly rests on a social relationship between the monks and the Buddhist laypeople. Accordingly, as Bruce Lincoln claims, authority should be understood in relational terms and as an effect, and, more precisely, as “the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience” (1994: 4). Authority entails a voluntary submission, in which, as will be demonstrated below, not merely confidence, respect, and

---

\(^2\) P. is an abbreviation for Pāli.
trust, but also other factors are decisive to bring about such compliance among laypeople in Burma/Myanmar.

Both Lincoln and Pierre Bourdieu outline some conditions necessary to produce authority: (1) the appropriate speaker who has a capacity to produce an effect of authority (by virtue of being authorized by an institution, that is, institutional authority, and possessing related insignia of office); (2) the recognition by the audience that the speaker has that capacity; and (3) the social sources of their recognition of the speaker's authority. The latter are the historically and culturally conditioned dispositions or habitus acquired through socialization, which make people disposed to attribute authority to a speaker and his or her discourse (see Lincoln 1994: 10–11; Bourdieu [1991] 2010: 113). The first point (institutional authority) corresponds to what will here be called, when transposed to the Sangha, the generic monastic authority, that is, the authority any monk might exercise by virtue of being properly ordained, having shaved head, and wearing a monastic robe (thingan), which are their insignia of office. The generic monastic authority can be compared to Max Weber’s concept of charisma of office (Amtscharisma) or institutional charisma, that is, a "specific state of grace of a social institution" (1978: 1140). It is linked to the institutionalization of charisma, meaning that charisma is dissociated from the person and resides in the office, and that can be transmitted by, for instance, ordination rituals for priests (248–249, 1139). This distinction between the worthiness (or unworthiness) of the incumbent and the charisma of office is something that Weber refers to as depersonalization of charisma (1135). Burmese Buddhists should likewise pay respects to any wearer of the monastic robe (institutional authority) irrespective of the moral standards of the monks (see Nash 1965: 291–292; Min Zin 2015: 390). As noted by Matthew Walton and Michael Jerryson, the cultural dimensions, which are intertwined with institutional authority, are decisive for the authority of Buddhist monks (2016: 801). Some of the cultural sources of monastic authority were discussed above.

As Bourdieu ([1991] 2010: 109, 111) points out, the institutional authority of a speaker is a delegated authority of the group, which, in this article, is concerned with the Sangha. Speaking as representatives of the Sangha amplifies the authority of the monks, as they can draw on the Sangha’s symbolic capital. Nationalist monastic authority is yet another aspect of this delegated authority, which cannot be understood apart from Burma’s sociopolitical history since the colonial period. The contemporary nationalist monks serve as representatives of the nationalist organization Ma Ba Tha led by well-respected senior monks, thereby drawing on their authority. These monks are regarded as among the most venerated monks in Myanmar (see Foxeus 2023). By serving as
delegates of such prominent monks, the authority of less conspicuous nationalist monks is likewise amplified. The nationalist monastic authority of monks is especially amplified by the cultural reverence that is shown to their role as monks (generic monastic authority) (see Walton and Jerryson 2016: 796). The laypeople recognize their authority primarily because they are monks. Besides such external factors, the personal reputation of some nationalist monks, such as U Wirathu, is integral to their authority.

Although the three conditions of authority are important, without recognition there is no authority. The laypeople can always decide to withdraw their support. I will argue for the importance of the audience, the laypeople, and that the socialization process is decisive for the authority of the monks to be recognized (the second and third points). In this view, authority is potentially unstable, as it might be affected by shifting sociopolitical conditions.

2 Religiopolitical Activism of Monks: Defending Nation and Buddhism

The cultural and social resonance of the trope of the defense of the Buddha’s dispensation and the Burmese nation/race must be understood within the context of the collective trauma of British colonization. At that time, it was felt that Buddhism, local culture, language, and Burmese race/nation were threatened by an imminent elimination, especially by interreligious marriages between Burmese Buddhist women and Indian immigrants (mainly Muslims) and perceived unfair business competition, with Indians dominating the economy (Chakravarti 1971; Foxeus 2019, 2023; Ikeya 2011). This defense was assumed by the monks who have the duty to preserve and protect the Buddha’s dispensation, that is, the sāsana, as a social phenomenon (Walton and Jerryson 2016; Foxeus 2022). That was especially the case with the monks’ role in the nationalist movements of the 1920s and in relation to the 1938 Indo-Burmese riots, the latter of which was mainly anti-Muslim (Foxeus 2023; Smith 1965; Maung Maung 1980).

Nationalist sermons and other kinds of monastic activism aiming to defend the nation and the Buddha’s dispensation began in the 1920s during the colonial period, with U Ottama (1879–1939) and U Wisara (1889–1929) as the most illustrious monks in the nationalist movements (see Maung Maung 1980; Cady 1958). Through U Ottama, who urged monks to leave their monasteries to defend Buddhism, many monks entered the nationalist anticolonial movement (see Cady 1958: 231; Maung Maung 1980: 23–24). U Ottama was a member of the Indian National Congress and had learned modern political campaigning
techniques that he implemented in Burma, especially Gandhian techniques such as civil disobedience, noncooperation with the government, and boycott of British products (Chakravarti 1971: 110–111; Maung Maung 1980). In the 1920s, the religiopolitical monks reached their zenith of political power and impact and constituted an autonomous political force. They had established the General Council of Sangha Sameggi (GCSS), which became a major political force that even controlled the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), an influential nationalist organization. They mobilized the rural population by monastic grassroots campaigning in villages, delivering anticolonial sermons, and engaging in other forms of religiopolitical activism. In the 1930s, and in the early postindependence period (1948–1962), which was the first parliamentarian period, the role of the religiopolitical monks changed. They mainly served as supporters and advisors of certain political leaders and political parties (von der Mehden 1961; Taylor 2009: 183–184, 186–187; Smith 1965). For instance, in the 1960 elections, a variety of Sangha organizations supported contending political parties through speeches and publications because of the perceived ability of the latter to defend Buddhism (von der Mehden 1961: 65, 71; see also Smith 1965). This pattern of grassroots religiopolitical activism and campaigning (mainly in the 1920s), and/or support of political parties recurred in later periods. During the SLORC-SPDC period, some monks supported the military dictatorship, and many monks supported the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Regularly held nationalist sermons depicting Muslims as the main threat to the Burmese nation and the Buddha’s dispensation began during the SLORC-SPDC period. A leading figure was U Wirathu (b. 1968), who delivered Buddhist nationalist, anti-Muslim sermons from the late 1990s until he was arrested in 2003. In the second parliamentarian period, when the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) came to power in 2011 under the former general Thein Sein as president, the government brought about political and economic liberalization and democratization. With the tacit support of the Thein Sein government and the USDP (2012–2016) of Buddhist nationalist movements (Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017; ICG 2017; Foxeus 2023), the abolition of the censorship board, and easy access to the internet and social media (Egreteau 2016; Lall 2016), these movements, which had previously been a marginal phenomenon, could expand. The magnitude of the impact of the nationalist monks, especially in 2012–2015, was unprecedented in Burma’s history. However, the fortunes of the Buddhist nationalist movements turned when the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in March 2016 (see ICG 2017). In this period, Buddhist nationalist
monks experienced not only immense popularity, but they were also severely criticized. Historically, it is rather unusual for Burmese monks to be publicly criticized. For these reasons, this period provides ample material for the examination of the dynamic of monastic authority, how it was established and maintained, and how it crumbled in the face of public criticism.

In June 2012, riots broke out between Rakhine Buddhists and mainly Rohingya Muslims in the western province of the Rakhine State in Myanmar. In 2013, the violence spread to other parts of the country, including Meiktila in central Myanmar. The Buddhist nationalist movements emerged in response to these conflicts (see Cheesman 2017a; Foxeus 2023). The agenda of the Buddhist nationalist 969 movement, which was founded in October 2012, was mainly a buy-Buddhist campaign, thereby boycotting Muslim-owned businesses, and a marry Buddhist campaign, meaning that Burmese Buddhist women should marry only indigenous Buddhist men. This movement was largely absorbed by Ma Ba Tha, which was founded on June 27, 2013, and lobbied for four nationalist family laws (amyou-saung-upaday) aiming to protect Buddhism, which passed in the parliament in 2015 with the support of the USDP. During the second parliamentarian period, Ma Ba Tha unofficially supported the USDP. Ma Ba Tha has constituted an autonomous political force and engaged in grassroots campaigning as well as serving as advisors to politicians and political parties.

3 Appropriate Monastic Politics: Bodhisatta Politics Versus Party Politics

In this article, two kinds of dynamics regarding monastic authority will be explored: first, legitimation strategies aimed to buttress authority (the first dynamic of authority); second, the criticism by political outgroups (the second dynamic of authority), which can undermine authority. Few monks observe all the 227 disciplinary rules of the Vinaya. In modern society, many monks make minor infringements such as handling money or eating in the afternoon, and some even attend noisy spirit ceremonies with music and dancing, but they do not normally cause alarm, although some laypeople might be annoyed. Despite the normative divide between the monks and the laity, between the supramundane and the mundane, monks tend to assume roles within the mundane sphere – in villages as well as in urban areas – as community leaders or engaging in charity work (see examples in Walton 2015: 512–513; 2017; Brohm 1957: 53–59). Monks mostly occupy a liminal space between the supramundane and
mundane spheres. Some of them engage in what could be termed “politics” (see Walton 2017: 150). What is seen as problematic is therefore not necessarily mundane activities per se or minor breaches of monastic discipline.

Laypeople and monks have opposed the political involvement of monks from the colonial period until today, especially pertaining to party politics (see Walton 2015: 508, 2017; Spiro 1982). For instance, in the late 1930s, several political parties had advisory boards of monks, but the practice was criticized and some demanded that it should be discontinued (Taylor 2009: 184). In all constitutions from 1947 to 2008, monks and nuns have been debarred from voting (Larsson 2015). Moreover, the abuse of religion (bhāthā-thāthanā) for political purposes (naing-ngan-yay) and mixing religion and politics have been prohibited in all constitutions and in electoral laws (von der Mehden 1961; Ministry of Information 2008: paragraphs 121h, 364, 407d; Walton 2017: 147). These constitutional provisions are probably the reason why Ma Ba Tha and the USDP have tried to avoid public endorsement of each other. In more official circles (like the constitution), the concept of bhāthā, “religion,” as well as bouddha-bhāthā, “Buddhism” (lit. “Buddhist religion”), both of which were invented during the colonial period, tends to be understood as a set of doctrines and ethical principles. These concepts were historically shaped by missionaries and the British colonial concept of religion, a secularist concept in which religion was divorced from politics (see Schober 2011: 43, 67; Turner 2014: chapter 3).

What is regarded as “politics” is an ambiguous and contested issue among Burmese (see Walton 2015, 2017). It is therefore necessary to examine what is viewed as acceptable forms of monastic politics. In the second parliamentarian period, nationalist monks engaged in social work, demonstrations, charity work (parahita), and signature campaigns; they delivered nationalist sermons, taught children and teenagers about Buddhism and nationalism, lobbied the government, and the like. Many of these activities are what Westerners and some Burmese would classify as “politics.” The corresponding Burmese word is naing-ngan-yay, literally “affairs of the country” or “politics.” The Burmese word is not entirely synonymous with the English word “politics.” It has mostly a narrower connotation of state-centric, elite-level practice and is associated with partisan “party politics” (pāti-naing-ngan-yay) and winning elections (see Walton 2017: 65–66, 127; Houtman 1999). This connotation of the Burmese word, which can undermine the monastic moral authority, is probably the reason why some monks would rephrase their religiopolitical activism and avoid using the word naing-ngan-yay (see Walton 2015: 512–513; 2017: 65–66). However, some Ma Ba Tha monks I interviewed admitted that they were engaged in naing-ngan-yay (but not in party politics).
Ma Ba Tha monks tend to understand *naing-ngan-yay* as a more inclusive concept that is not based on the assumption that “religion” and “politics” belong to different domains. In a Ma Ba Tha journal, a monk wrote that “some people criticize monks saying that they should only engage in religious affairs (*bhāthā-yay*), but not in politics (*naing-ngan-yay***). That criticism thus assumes a secularist concept of religion separated from politics. The monk explicates the meaning of *naing-ngan-yay* as “affairs of the country” (*naing-ngan-i-ayay*). That definition is in line with the narrow concept of elite practice mentioned above. According to him, “national affairs (*amyou-thā-yay*), religious affairs (*bhāthā-yay*), business, social affairs, health matters, education, administration, enactment of laws, and judgments at court are all political matters,” that is, affairs of the country (Thītagū Ashin Deweindā Bhiwuntha 2014: 244). This inclusive understanding of “religion,” which views it as an integral part of politics, is more akin to fundamentalist or maximalist stances on religion and politics than the secularist concept from the constitution discussed above. However, people criticizing nationalist monks tend to operate with a more secularist concept, in which religion is normatively separated from politics.

A common denominator of forms of politics accepted by both Walton’s monastic informants (2015, 2017) as well as my informants, nationalist publications, and nationalist sermons is that it should be concerned with work for the community, work for the greater good, in contrast to “party politics,” which tends to be viewed negatively as being driven by egoism and greed, hate, and delusion (see Walton 2017; Houtman 1999: 69; Foxeus 2019). This politics for the community is in accordance with both the nationalist appropriation of the Buddha legend – the Buddha as a nationalist – and the concept of *amyou-thā-naing-ngan-yay* (“national politics”), that is, political actions for the benefit of the nation (*amyou*) and the Buddha’s dispensation (P. sāsana), which is a concept that the nationalist monks seem to have adopted from the Tatmadaw, the military. During the SLORC-SPDC period, the military dictatorship claimed to be engaged not in party politics (negatively portrayed as above) but in “national politics,” protecting their entire nation and country in a selfless manner (see Walton 2017; Houtman 1999: 69–70; Crouch 2019: 11, 54). The beneficiaries that the contemporary monks attempt to protect and promote are the 135 national races, which constitute the nation for the 969 movement, and Ma Ba Tha (see below), and the Buddha’s dispensation.

---

3 The concept of “national politics” seems to have been in circulation since about the 1940s, but it was later associated mainly with the Tatmadaw during the SLORC-SPDC period; see Walton 2017: 65–66; Houtman 1999: 68–71.
Contemporary nationalist monks refer to the Buddha as a political model in at least two senses: (1) as an advisor of kings; and (2) as a nationalist mainly in his previous lives as a bodhisatta (a Buddha-to-be) but also in his last life as a Buddha (Foxeus 2019). Nationalist monks have applied the concept of national politics not merely to the precolonial period in Burma but also to the Buddha himself. In an article in the Ma Ba Tha-run Thākī-thway Journal, a Ma Ba Tha monk claimed that the Buddha, mediating between kings to prevent war, was a form of “national politics” (amyou-thā-naing-ngan-yay), and that the monks in Burma’s history, who served as advisors and teachers of kings and who wrote treatises on law, were likewise engaged in national politics. The monk claims that monks should engage in national politics as much as they can. He defines national politics as the opposite of party politics: as politics (naing-ngan-yay) to fulfill perfections (P. pāramī); politics not for gaining political power but for political instruction of others; not egoistic politics but politics for the sake of others (Thītagū Ashin Deweindā Bhiwuntha 2014: 244–245).

The politics to fulfill perfections here corresponds to the path of the bodhisatta. This bodhisatta politics – the national politics – is what is considered appropriate politics for monks. From the point of view of the secularist concept of religion mentioned above, it is thus a mixture of religion and politics. Another way in which this fusion of religion and politics is imagined by nationalist monks is an interdependence between nation (the 135 national races), religion (Buddhism), Buddhist cultural traditions, the country, and its territorial boundaries (see Foxeus 2019: 681–682). The one cannot exist without the other. Protecting one of them entails a need to protect the others. A threat to one is a threat to the others. This protection is thus what some monks referred to as national politics.

The political role of monks and their position as community leaders in the precolonial period – in villages and at the court – seems, at times, to have been rather extensive (see Brohm 1957: 53–59; Cady 1953: 150–152). In the colonial period and postindependence periods, as noted above, this monastic religious-political role expanded. A recurrent feature is that monks have served as advisors to kings in the precolonial period, and to politicians and political parties since the colonial period. In 2013–2015, nationalist monks (but also laypeople) claimed that political parties failed to take issues of protecting the nation and Buddhism into consideration (see, for instance, Wirathu 2013a). This created a political space for the nationalist monks claiming to be engaged in national politics (just like the Buddha) to protect Buddhism and the nation rather than party politics, thereby serving as advisors to the people, politicians, and the government.
In contemporary Buddhist nationalist sermons, the main strategies to legitimize the religio-political role of nationalist monks were three kinds of Buddhist framing: (1) Buddhist narratives were employed to make sense of social and political events, as a source of meaning and identity within a Buddhist imaginary; (2) a politics for the greater good (the nation and Buddhism) or “national politics” (amyou-thä-naing-ngan-yay); and (3) a justification of the religio-political role of nationalist monks as defenders of the Buddha's dispensation and the Burmese nation against perceived threats. All three framings intersect in the concept of the Buddha as a nationalist (see below).

The Buddhist framing in the first sense appears in the form of the use of texts, narratives, and rituals. Monks constitute the unrivaled authorities of Buddhist texts. Just like other preaching monks, nationalist monks tend to take their point of departure from a specific Buddhist text and then elaborate on it. Nationalist monks drew on canonical, commentarial, and postcanonical texts. This textual authority provided their sermons with additional credibility. This kind of framing can genealogically be traced back to the colonial period. Sarkisyanz maintained that the nationalist monk “U Ottama gave the Buddhist ethos a political interpretation which endowed the independence struggle with Buddhist meaning among the traditionalist masses” (1965: 132). Religio-political activism was also justified by normalization and naturalization by being integrated into the traditional ritual structure of Buddhist sermons (see Foxeus 2022; Walton and Jerryson 2016). The second sense of framing was discussed in the previous section.

The third Buddhist framing, which is the most important one, is concerned with monks assuming the role of defenders of the Buddha's dispensation and the Burmese nation. On that basis, they can authorize religio-political discourse, and their statements tend to be accepted by the laypeople because they wish to support actions that are claimed to be aimed for the defense of Buddhism (see Walton and Jerryson 2016: 896–899; Foxeus 2019, 2022, 2023). Since the colonial period in Burma, this threat has been perceived to be posed by the Muslim minorities regarding interreligious marriages, through which Buddhist women would be converted to Islam, and perceived unfair business competition. These alleged threats are ingrained in social memory. As anti-Muslim discourse resonates with grievances, perceptions, and experiences of people, defending Buddhism against Islam by monks therefore tends to be viewed as legitimate (Foxeus 2022, 2023). Justification of discrimination and violence in defense of the Buddha's dispensation has been a recurrent
A widespread anti-Muslim conspiracy theory about a Muslim takeover of Burma and the entire world during the twenty-first century through business, interreligious marriages, and political means has shaped the Islamophobic rhetoric of contemporary Buddhist nationalist sermons that has justified discrimination against Muslims (see Foxeus 2023). By framing local tensions and conflicts, business competition, domestic violence, etc. with Buddhist narratives (framing in the first sense) and depicting them as a threat to Buddhism and the nation (framing in the third sense), these conflicts not merely assume a Buddhist meaning but also shift into the Buddhist domain of the nationalist monks and their responsibility of protecting Buddhism. In this way, these two framings tend to be inextricably intertwined but are nevertheless distinguishable. As Walton and Jerryson maintain (2016: 808), the claim of defending Buddhism created an “interpretive space” for the nationalist monks enabling them to expand their domain of authority. In these ways, the generic monastic authority (textual, institutional, and ritual authority) and the nationalist monastic authority were closely interlinked. These legitimation strategies are what Lincoln refers to as constructive of authority (Lincoln 1994: 10–11).

In the following, nationalist monastic authority and its fragility will be examined. First, three examples (two from U Wirathu and one from Ashin Thawpaka) demonstrate how nationalist monks sought to establish authority using the legitimation strategies discussed above (the first dynamic of authority). The last section deals with political outgroup criticism (the second dynamic of monastic authority) of the nationalist monks. The aim is to discuss the dynamics of authority, the ebb and flow of support of nationalist monks. Buddhist nationalist sermons were delivered amidst growing criticism from various groups. The excerpts from sermons discussed below provide arguments as to why laypeople should accept nationalist monks as kinds of religious-political advisors to protect their nation and Buddhism. Most contemporary nationalist sermons drew on narrative jātaka texts (the Buddha’s birth stories).

5 A Buddhist Narrative Framing of Nationalist Sermons: The Buddha’s Birth Stories

In Southeast and South Asia, jātakas have been the most politicized genre of Buddhist literature throughout the ages. The collection of jātakas is the literary genre that most patently relates to social issues, everyday life, gender roles, politics, community, and conflicts, as well as protection and sacrifice for one’s own group (see Collins 2016; Jory 2002). In contemporary sermons, narratives from the jātakas were employed to provide a Buddhist frame, as well as key
tenets, wise sayings, and moral principles. Thereby, contemporary friends and foes could be homologized with figures portrayed in Buddhist texts.

Buddhist framing with an emphasis on the first sense will be illustrated with a 969 sermon of U Wirathu (2013a), which does not explicitly portray the bodhisattva path as a nationalist path. His sermon “Don’t think lightly about national affairs!” that was delivered on January 15, 2013, in Yangon, is probably his most well known. However, sources in English do not seem to have highlighted the fact that this sermon was framed by a Buddhist jātaka – the Kapi Jātaka (no. 404, Jātaka III). In his sermon, U Wirathu weaves together the Buddhist jātaka with Burmese historical narratives, gods like Thigyā Min (Indra/Sakka), and the contemporary situation, thereby providing a Buddhist meaning to local events for the audience. This sermon is about the importance of following wise leaders (especially nationalist monks) and loyalty to one’s group.

The story is about the Buddha in a previous life and Devadatta, his arch enemy in many lives. According to Kapi Jātaka, U Wirathu claims, Buddha was, in a previous life, a monkey leader of 500 monkeys, and Devadatta was also a leader of 500 monkeys. A mischievous monkey let his feces fall onto the head of a Brahmin ritual specialist (P. purohita) at the court. As a result, the Brahmin wanted to take revenge on all monkeys. The bodhisattva monkey heard about this danger and advised Devadatta to move to another place, but he did not listen to him. The bodhisattva and his group of monkeys moved to another place, while Devadatta and his monkeys stayed. A fire broke out that injured some elephants. The Brahmin claimed that the fat from a monkey could cure them. The king therefore ordered his men to kill all the monkeys, whereby Devadatta and his group of monkeys were killed. U Wirathu drew out the moral of the story saying that those who live among enemies (read: Muslims) and do not listen to wise people (that is, nationalist monks) will be eliminated. The main point of the story, U Wirathu claims, is that all the monkeys were eliminated because the bad leader thought lightly about the threat and did not listen to the advice from the wise leader (the Buddha as a bodhisattva). Thereby, he became a danger to his own group. U Wirathu outlines the qualities of an exemplary leader like the bodhisattva saying that a leader, who should be wise, learned, and moral, works not merely for himself but for the benefit of his people and his country. U Wirathu claims to have developed these qualities himself. Devadatta represents the inversion of these qualities. In his sermon, he portrayed the NLD as a threat (like Devadatta) to their Buddhist nation because it had been infiltrated by Muslims and was claimed to be pro-Muslim.

This story, U Wirathu claims, made him think about the Rakhine State and how the Rakhine Buddhists protect, while living among their enemies (Muslims), their nation/race, for instance, by preventing Muslims from...
marrying Rakhine women. However, Burman Buddhists, he maintains, lack a nationalist spirit. For that reason, Burman Buddhists should not think lightly about their nation/race (amyou) like Devadatta, although the Buddhists are in the majority and Muslims in the minority. The Muslims, he maintains, have a dangerous plan to take over Burma, but Burman Buddhists are unaware of it. Instead, they are only thinking about enjoying themselves with food and pleasures. They are living among their enemies and Buddhist women marry Muslims, and they are buying from Muslim-owned shops. Here, he connected to the jātaka saying that the monkeys who followed the wise and moral leader (like U Wirathu) survived, and those who followed the bad leader (probably the NLD) were exterminated. Here, U Wirathu admonished the audience: “Whatever you do, do it with a nationalist view (amyou-thā-yay-amyin-ne)!” He exhorted the audience to eat, buy and sell, marry, and so forth for the sake of their national affairs (amyou-thā-yay-atwek), that is, avoiding interactions with Muslims. At the end of the sermon, he reconnects to the Kapi Jātaka and the 500 monkeys who the bodhisatta saved. He states that parents, leaders of parties, and the leader of the country must think deeply about national affairs. They can save their country from dangers (Muslims) – just like the Buddha did in his previous existence as a monkey.

In this excerpt, U Wirathu utilizes Buddhist narratives as a lens through which contemporary conflicts could be interpreted and resolved. The sermon served as a justification of the role of the nationalist monks, depicted as emulating the Buddha as a wise advisor saving – in the contemporary context – the nation and Buddhism, and the NLD as being homologized to Devadatta, the foolish leader who is a danger to his own group. Like other nationalist monks, he tends to select jātaka texts in which the Buddha in a previous life saves his group, mostly as various animals (see below). In this way, this narrative helps U Wirathu to make his main points: good and bad leadership, and being a savior of, versus a danger to, one’s group facing an imminent threat. By claiming that Muslims have a cunning plan to take over Burma by infiltrating the NLD, dominating business, and by interreligious marriages, U Wirathu contributed to creating a conflict between people, for whom religion might be insignificant in everyday dealings with others. By framing it as a conflict between Buddhism and Islam, he justified the role of the nationalist monks as defenders. All three senses of Buddhist framing were utilized in this sermon: especially Buddhist narratives, but also defending Buddhism for the greater good, and protecting

4 The Burmans (bamā-lū-myou) constitute the ethnic majority population in Myanmar (68%).
5 For more on the conspiracy theory, see Foxeus 2023.
Buddhism against a threat. In this way, U Wirathu employed a jātaka text ideologically, seeking to persuade the audience to adopt the fears of the nationalist monks regarding what dangers the sociopolitical reality might unleash in the democratization and liberalization at the time and thereby to protect Buddhism by discriminatory acts. That is something Burmese Buddhists would not normally do, but which became a common practice due to sermons like this one (see also Foxeus 2022). Other sermons portrayed the Buddha explicitly as a nationalist.

6 The Bodhisatta Path as a Modern Nationalist Path: The Buddha as a Nationalist

The audience of the Buddhist nationalist sermons was probably familiar with the notion of the bodhisatta path as a nationalist one because it has long been so linked to politics: first, through the ideology of the Burmese Buddhist monarchy and, later, through Buddhist nationalist movements during the colonial period. However, there is an important difference between how the bodhisatta ideal was imagined and operationalized in the premodern Buddhist kingship and during the colonial period. In South Asia (Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia, the kings embodied the bodhisatta ideal, emulating the Buddha on his long path of fulfilling the ten perfections to achieve awakening and Buddhahood. The jātaka texts constituted the main genre (as well as Buddhavamsa, Carīyāpiṭaka, and the commentarial text Nidānakathā) from which the royal bodhisatta path drew its inspiration. The path of the bodhisatta thereby served as a premodern political model for kings and local rulers that was part of the ideology of Buddhist kingship that provided political legitimacy (see Jory 2002; Koenig 1990). That Buddhist source of royal political legitimacy, epitomized by Prince Vessantara from Vessantara Jātaka, largely became irrelevant during the colonial period in Burma. Since that time, it is instead the narrative of how the bodhisatta protects his group, mostly as various animals, that has been a key tenet of nationalist ideology. In the nationalist imaginary, it is the people who are the political community. This change reflects the shift from a monarchy with a sovereign king ruling over subjects to a colonial order, in which the Burmese people, to some degree, came to serve as an electorate (and ideally the bearer of political sovereignty), starting with the first elections held in 1922. They became involved in nationalist movements that first sought to achieve self-determination (“home rule”) for the Burmese people within the British Empire (mainly in the 1920s) and later (since the 1930s) to achieve...
independence from the British Empire to create a Burmese nation-state (see Cady 1958). This structural change, with semidemocratic elections focused on the people, was one way in which the Burmese people learned about the people as the political community.

In contrast to the kings, the contemporary nationalist monks do not generally claim that they are *bodhisattas*. The nationalist monk Ashin Thawpaka, who serves as a leading monk within Ma Ba Tha, claimed that while he would not say that he is a *bodhisatta*, he follows the path of a *bodhisatta*. For them, the *bodhisatta* path is understood to be a nationalistic one that should be embarked upon by monks, nuns, and laypeople. In the relevant scholarship, there are brief discussions about how the path of the *bodhisatta* as a nationalist practice and the Buddha as a nationalist was employed during the colonial period, especially with U Ottama as having followed that path (Mendelson 1975; Sarkisyanz 1965: 132–134). During the postindependence period, the notion of the nationalist Buddha was a role model among nationalist monks (Spiro 1982: 394–395), and among nationalist monks during the second parliamentarian period (Foxeus 2019). This view of the path of the *bodhisatta* as a nationalist path also corresponds to what some contemporary nationalist monks referred to as “national politics” (*amyou-thā-naing-ngan-yay*).

7 **Justification of the Role of Nationalist Monks: The Buddha as a Nationalist**

In 2012–2015, U Wirathu and Ashin Thawpaka were the nationalist monks who elaborated the most on the theme of the Buddha as a nationalist. Both monks are well-known representatives of Ma Ba Tha, and U Wirathu was also a famous representative of the 969 movement. U Wirathu’s sermon discussed below was a 969 sermon that he delivered in Muse, Shan State, on May 19, 2013, based on *Mahākapi Jātaka* (no. 407, *Jātaka* I), which is about the Buddha in a previous life as a monkey king. Ashin Thawpaka’s (2015) sermon was a Ma Ba Tha sermon delivered in August 2015 in Mawlamyine at a Ma Ba Tha event celebrating the passing of Ma Ba Tha’s four nationalist laws in the parliament. He sought to provide justification of Ma Ba Tha’s nationalist agenda by situating its origin in the Buddha’s previous lives. Moreover, he addresses criticism to which Ma Ba Tha has been subjected (see below). Both portray the Buddha as a

---

6 For more on the shift from the king to the people (the nation) as the bearer of political sovereignty, see Greenfeld 1992: 6–10; in Burma, see Lieberman 1978.

7 Interview, Yangon, September 2016.
nationalist role model. U Wirathu’s sermon was delivered after the March 2013 riots in Meiktila. The 969 movement was criticized for having incited violence, an accusation that U Wirathu addresses in his sermon and rejects.

In this sermon, U Wirathu seeks to demonstrate that he and other nationalist monks – just like the Buddha himself – merely aim to protect the Buddha’s dispensation and their nation. U Wirathu (2013b) outlines a framework for how to interpret the Mahākapi Jātaka, which is concerned with the modern reinterpretation portraying the Buddha as a nationalist. In the beginning of his sermon, he explains the following:

Nationalism (amyou-thā-yay) is not merely the path on which the Buddha-to-be (bodhisatta) embarked but is also the path on which he practiced in the life in which he became a Buddha. If he had not embarked on the nationalist path, he would not have fulfilled perfections and been able to attain Buddhahood. First, you should know the three paths on which the Buddha embarked. You should know what the nationalist path (amyou-thā-yay-lansin) is which is included among the three paths. You should know how the bodhisatta practiced and how he acted in a selfless manner for national affairs.

Therefore, I will speak about three kinds of practices (sariya; P. cariyā): first, bouddatthasariya, “practice to become a Buddha”; second, nyātatthasariya, “practice for the sake of the relatives,” and, third, lokatthasariya, “practice for the sake of [all sentient beings] in the world.”8

... But practice for the sake of the relatives is a work for national affairs (nationalist work). In his life as a crow, the bodhisatta released all the crows from a danger that they faced. Thereby, the problem was resolved. That is called practice for the sake of the relatives. In a previous life, the bodhisatta was a rooster, a king of chickens. He had to protect all the chickens. When the chickens were in danger, he completely wiped out the danger to their species (amyou-thā). He had to protect them. That is nyātatthasariya. Nyāti (P. ńāti) means “relative” (hsway-myou). “Relative” is not the same as siblings here but refers to the 135 national, indigenous races (taing-yin-thā) who live in Myanmar. All of them are called nyāti.

Wirathu 2013b

In this passage, U Wirathu makes a definition of the Buddha’s path as a bodhisatta in his previous lives as a nationalist path. It is an emic definition of Burmese Buddhist nationalism. The word amyou-thā-yay, which he uses, 8 In Pāli, the three practices are called buddhatthacariyā, ētatthacariyā, and lokatthacariyā.
literally means “national affairs.” However, here and in other cases it refers to an ideology with a set of normative values and principles. Therefore, “nationalism” is a more apt translation. It goes without saying that this constitutes a modern reinterpretation of premodern sources. U Wirathu homologizes the Pāli term for “relative” (nāti) with the modern concept of the 135 national races (taing-yin-thā), which is the nation (amyou) of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha.\(^9\) The concept of the 135 national races was invented in 1983 during the late Ne Win period and corresponds to the older concept of eight national races but with additional subdivisions. From the Ne Win period until today, this concept constitutes the official position of the state about who belongs to the nation of the nation-state of Burma/Myanmar (see Cheesman 2017b).\(^{10}\) It should be noted that U Wirathu uses the word amyou for both the “species” of the animals and the modern understanding of “nation” or “race.” This linguistic identity probably made it easier for U Wirathu to persuade the audience to adopt his nationalist interpretation: the Buddha, in his previous lives as well as in his life as the Buddha, and the contemporary nationalist monks defend their amyou.\(^11\) Following the passage quoted above, U Wirathu explains “nationalist work” in rather broad terms, as any work for the national races: their national health, education, development, religious affairs, and the like. As these activities largely correspond to those of the nationalist monks, they serve as a justification for their nationalist religiopolitical activism. In other words, it is a claim that the nationalist monks act just like the Buddha did in his previous lives.

Ashin Thawpaka defines the three kinds of practices of the Buddha-to-be in a similar way as U Wirathu. However, he uses the words amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā, “nation, religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation (P. sāsana),”\(^12\) which here refers to the 135 national races and the Buddha’s dispensation. The defense of these three entities (with the addition of pyinnyā, “education”) seems to have begun with the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) in the 1910s and have been catchwords within Buddhist nationalist movements until today (see Maung Maung 1980; Phyo Win Latt 2020). Moreover, these three entities are included in the name of Ma Ba Tha, which is an acronym for “Organization for Protecting Nation/Race, Religion, and the Buddha’s Dispensation” (Amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā-saung-shauk-yay-ahpwe). Ashin Thawpaka repeatedly claims that “work for the relatives” (nyātatthasariya) means protecting nation/race,

---

\(^9\) It should be noted that the term nātatthacariyā also occurs in the Pāli original of Mahākapi Jātaka.

\(^{10}\) From this taxonomy of the nation, some ethnic groups are excluded, such as people of Indian descent and the Muslim Rohingyas.

\(^{11}\) The word amyou can mean race, breed, lineage, family, kind, sort, species, nation, national, relative, etc.; see Stewart and Dunn 1969: 282–283.

\(^{12}\) For more on the meaning of the words amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā, see Phyo Win Latt 2020.
religion, and the Buddha's sāsana, which the Buddha supposedly did selflessly in countless lives as a Buddha-to-be (*bodhisatta*). By using these three signifiers anachronistically, he seeks to provide a Buddhist justification not merely for nationalist monks in general but also for Ma Ba Tha. Thereby, he reads a modern nationalist ideology into premodern texts.

Later in his sermon, U Wirathu illustrates this practice for the sake of the relatives with the *Mahākapi Jātaka*. In a previous life as a monkey king, the *bodhisatta* (the future Gotama Buddha) sacrificed his life for his group and saved 80,000 monkeys when they were in danger. He let all the monkeys use his body as a bridge from a tree while holding a branch of the tree in one hand and a rope to a tree on the other side of the river with his other hand when the king's soldiers had been ordered to kill the monkeys. By letting the monkeys run over his body, he was badly injured and passed away soon after that incident, but, in the last moments, he managed to instruct the impressed king about leadership and sacrifice for one's group. Again, U Wirathu uses this narrative as a Buddhist frame for the interpretation of contemporary events and to justify the religio-political activism of the nationalist monks. He brings up a variety of perceived dangers to their nation and the Buddha's dispensation that are considered as being posed by the Muslims: religious intermarriages, perceived Muslim domination of business, expansion of Islam, the violence between Buddhists and (Rohingya) Muslims in the Rakhine State, and so forth. Like the monkey king, Buddhists should protect their national affairs from dangers. He asks them to look after and to provide security to the lives, homes, and wealth of their whole nation. Like the monkey king, who saved his relatives, the monks, U Wirathu explains, are doing selfless work using their lives, sweat, and blood for the sake of their whole nation. This is what the nationalist monks, including U Wirathu himself, elsewhere call “national politics” (*amyou-thā-naing-ngan-yay*). In this way, U Wirathu seeks to portray the nationalist monks as heroes, who are merely emulating the Buddha in defending Buddhism and the sovereignty of Myanmar.

Both U Wirathu and Ashin Thawpaka claim that the Buddha, when he was a *bodhisatta*, protected his *amyou*. However, the latter word had quite different meanings in the premodern texts and within the contemporary nationalist movements (see Phyo Win Latt 2020). The main source of the justification for nationalist monastic authority is the trope of Buddhism-in-danger. One important reason why Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement initially enjoyed rather broad support is that their agendas represent values and fears that are embedded in Myanmar’s society, including anti-Muslim conspiracy theories (McCarthy and Menager 2017; Foxeus 2023). To some extent that also holds for the view of the Buddha protecting his group in previous lives. Buddhist texts have been reinterpreted along nationalist lines since the colonial period,
including the path of the bodhisatta as a nationalist one. The teaching of nyātatthasariya is rather well known in Myanmar. Many male children learn about it in monastic schools.

Although the three legitimation strategies were important in persuading the audience into viewing the religiopolitical activities of the nationalist monks as justified, there were also other aspects of Burmese society that contributed to the recognition of nationalist monastic authority. These are related to the generic monastic authority, with which the nationalist authority is inextricably intertwined, pertaining to processes of socialization, social reasons, and the teaching of karma.

8 Recognition of Generic Monastic Authority and Its Social Foundations

The cultural and social dimensions of generic monastic authority, on which the nationalist monks primarily draw, can best be characterized by outlining the expected behavior of the laypeople vis-à-vis the monks. In Burmese society, monks are, as noted above, normatively set apart from the laypeople in the manner of the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, thereby creating a hierarchy: socially and spatially (monks are to be seated higher, monks and laypeople are not allowed to eat at the same table, and laypeople must eat after the monks); and ontologically/linguistically (a certain respectful vocabulary must be applied when speaking to monks, clearly differentiating between monks and laypeople). When laypeople meet monks in a monastery, they ought to pay obeisance (shikho) by prostrating three times, with folded hands, in a squatting position, and touching the ground with their forehead. That is called hti-khyin-ngā-bā, “five touches” (feet, hands, forehead, elbows, and knees), that is, paying obeisance by prostrating in five steps, something that boys and girls learn as part of the socialization process.

It should be noted that this ritualized and formalized respect was also directed to the nationalist monks during their sermons, as the latter were part of a ritual event evoking the same respectful attitudes as any monk-led event. The socialization process and learning how to perform such ritual veneration generate a respectful and submissive behavior toward monks. It is rather a bodily and emotionally inculcated moral discipline, a proper conduct, than something concerned with an interior state (see Nash 1963: 289). As Talal Asad argued, ritualized discipline is less expressive of moral virtue than productive of such moral dispositions. Medieval Christian monastics regarded ritual as instrumental for creating moral character, such as obedience and humility (Asad 1993: 130, 165). The socialization of children in Burma is similar. Thereby,
respect for monks becomes a moral disposition and an integral part of the *habitus* of the children (see Bourdieu [1991] 2010). It could be understood as a form of what Bourdieu (chapter 7) calls symbolic power or symbolic domination, which comprises religion, ideologies, and the like. The idea of symbolic power is related to his concept of *habitus* and refers to processes going on beyond consciousness. It challenges, he explains, the dichotomy of freedom and constraint. Among those who submit to it, it presupposes “a form of complicity which is neither passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values.” People may be unaware that they are subjected to this power (50–51, 164). These socially conditioned dispositions, which also serve as a form of social control, should be taken as the point of departure for understanding the complexity of monastic authority. These dispositions that are mostly acquired through the socialization process may also inhibit open criticism of monks.

Many of my informants belonging to the category of religious lay and monastic authorities made the same observation. Most of them came from Ma Ba Tha or from its support organizations, especially the Wunthanu Dhamma Rekkhita Aphwe;\(^{13}\) some were monks and female laypeople affiliated with Buddhist Sunday Schools, who were not supporters of Ma Ba Tha.\(^{14}\) They articulated the same perception: Buddhist children do not pay respects to Buddhist monks as before. For that reason, they stated that Buddhist Sunday Schools and similar forms of education for children are decisive for inculcating respect for monks and teaching them basic Buddhist teachings and morality, and how to pay obeisance to monks. Irrespective of the accuracy of their perceptions, it is obvious that the socialization process is decisive for the perpetuation of the recognition of the monks’ authority.

9 Social and Karmic Reasons for Not Criticizing Monks

Without the recognition by laypeople there is no monastic authority in a social sense, and authority can therefore be unstable. However, compliance is not necessarily grounded in trust and respect. It could be an effect of social control, a mechanism through which the Buddhist community is held together and prevented from dissolving. Criticism of monks by laypeople tends to be something akin to a taboo in Burmese society, although laypeople may disagree and be critical of their actions and behavior (see Walton 2015). That is related to the fact that Theravāda Buddhist societies are based on the symbiotic

---

\(^{13}\) Interviews with leaders, Yangon, September 2017.

\(^{14}\) Interviews, Sagaing, September 2016; interviews, a village near Meikthila, August 2016.
and complementary relationship between the Sangha and the laypeople. Open criticism could pose a danger to the social foundations of Burmese society. That could be regarded as a social reason for not criticizing monks. This is reminiscent of Durkheim's idea of taboos (a system of prohibitions) that can maintain the boundary between the sacred and the profane, which protect the fundamental divisions of society and, ultimately, its existence (1995: 316–321). The stakes are too high, and Buddhists therefore tend to turn a blind eye to monks’ misbehavior, or they may rationalize their respectful behavior toward unworthy monks by claiming they are merely paying obeisance to the monastic robe, not to the person (see Spiro 1982: 408, 410; Nash 1965: 291–292), that is, they honor their institutional authority alone.

There are also karmic reasons for compliance. Paying respect to monks is a way to acquire karmic merit. Therefore, criticizing monks could bring demerit, bad karma. Moe Thu, a Burmese monk who is critical of nationalist monks, wrote that a layman once asked him if it is true that if one criticizes monks it is a misdeed and that one will suffer in hell, and if it is true that laypeople have no right to criticize monks. Moe Thu explains that the “majority of the Buddhists are very afraid of criticizing matters pertaining to religious affairs, because even if a layperson criticizes [religious matters], he/she can be seen as just a non-Buddhist (meisshā-deiṭṭhi, lit. ‘wrong view’).” He maintains that Buddhists have grown up since childhood with the language that they will suffer in hell if they commit misdeeds, and that creates fear among almost all of them (Moe Thu 2014: 81). However, he claims, if laypeople criticize a monk aiming to improve his morality and purify the Buddha’s dispensation, it is not a misdeed, and they will not suffer in hell. In such cases, he adds, they should criticize monks (84). Although views differ, and there is ambiguity, some (or most) may find it safest not to criticize monks. For instance, U Win Htein, an official spokesman of the NLD Central Executive Committee, replied that he had refrained from criticizing the Ma Ba Tha monks out of self-preservation. Criticizing such high-ranking monks might, he said, lead to a rebirth in a lower existence in the next life (Wade 2017: 176–177).

The taboo could be said to be determined by all three factors: socialization processes, social reasons, and karmic reasons. However, despite these three factors, as well as the legitimation strategies that buttress authority, nationalist monks were criticized in the second parliamentarian period.

---

15 This taboo also creates a methodological problem. Critical attitudes to monks can mainly be detected by declining support. Manning Nash (1965: 292–293) noted how Burmese Buddhists may punish allegedly morally corrupt monks by refraining from giving donations to them and from inviting them to ceremonies.
The Second Dynamic of Authority: Outgroup Criticism and the Politics of Monastic Authority

The taboo of criticizing monks changed during the second parliamentarian period. Representatives of civil society organizations educated urban people, and the media became, Min Zin claims, more and more opposed to the political agenda of the nationalist monks in 2014–2015, who were seen as a political tool of the military to undermine the NLD. Media reports and op-ed articles also criticized the nationalist monks (Min Zin 2015: 389–391). As he summarized the changing climate: “The taboo has been shattered. Treating a class of males in robes as though they were demigods is now questioned” (390). Public criticism of monks had previously been rare and mostly voiced by political outgroups (mainly state officials) in tense and polarized political situations. For instance, the military government SLORC-SPDC criticized the demonstrating monks who supported the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi during the so-called 2007 Saffron Revolution, as being “bogus monks” (yahan­tu, yahan-­yaung) in state-controlled media (see Schober 2011), mainly because they were perceived to pose a threat to their political interest to remain in power. The criticism of monks seldom, if ever, comes from their political ingroup (with the same political interests). For instance, NLD people seemingly refrained from criticizing these demonstrating monks, although they engaged in a kind of party politics, probably because they supported these monks and were united with them in their common political cause of bringing down the military dictatorship. This politicized dynamic – the politics of monastic authority – is different from the first dynamic of authority.

During the second parliamentarian period, political outgroup criticism became more dispersed, following the new freedoms, democratization, political liberalization, and the lifting of censorship that allowed people to voice their opinions in various media outlets (newspapers, social media, etc.) about almost anything, except criticism of the military. In this climate, mostly educated urban people began to criticize nationalist monks, as noted by Min Zin, although most Buddhists still observed the taboo. Their criticism was that of a political outgroup in which the monks were seen as threatening their political interests, mainly human rights, or women’s rights, or were NLD supporters concerned about the political preferences of the nationalist monks. There is an interplay between this dynamic of the political outgroup and the first dynamic of monastic authority because the nationalist monks sought to defend themselves against criticism, which shaped their legitimation strategies.

16 By “political outgroup” is meant critics having different political interests than the group to which the criticized nationalist monks belong.
This changing climate was also reflected in Ashin Thawpaka’s 2015 sermon (see above) about the four nationalist family laws. He refers to criticism of Ma Ba Tha’s four laws, which would regulate interreligious marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men but did not reveal the identity of the critics. According to the criticism, monks should not engage in women's and marriage affairs, which have never been the domain of the monks. In his sermon, Ashin Thawpaka (2015) claims that Ma Ba Tha has been subjected to criticism and insults. He responded that “the audience needs to know that this work is in accordance with the path of the Buddha. Whatever repulsive [things they say about us] and whatever criticism [they subject us to] you need to trust in the activities of the monks.” He also claimed that the Buddha had provided instructions for marriage and women's affairs in certain texts (Maṅgala Sutta, Sigalovāda Sutta, and Ariyālimāla Sutta). His point was that, just like the Buddha, the Ma Ba Tha monks are engaged in such affairs. He thus drew on the textual authority of the monks to persuade the audience. However, Ashin Thawpaka’s appeal to the audience to trust the monks and to ignore the criticism was a sign of crumbling authority. In Burmese society, monks do not usually need to ask the audience to accept their statements, and it therefore seems to indicate a crisis of (nationalist) monastic authority.

Since Ma Ba Tha monks addressed criticism from various groups, it denotes that they understood that their authority is precarious and fragile. Ashin Thawpaka seems to counter criticism from Burmese human rights activists and the like. In 2014–2015, many civil society organizations, human rights, and women’s organizations publicly opposed Ma Ba Tha and their four laws for breaching human rights (see Walton, McKay, and Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2015; Min Zin 2015: 390–391). During the second parliamentarian period, very few groups in Myanmar (not even the NLD) supported human rights (see Doffegnies and Wells 2021). This outgroup criticism was not primarily concerned with the political leanings of the monks but rather their laws.

The politics of monastic authority, which is a form of outgroup criticism, here refers to how the authority of nationalist monks might be undermined by their political affiliation. In this case, it was concerned with Ma Ba Tha’s tacit support of the USDP and the military, and their related criticism of the NLD as an Islam-friendly party, which amounted to party politics. Some followers of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha were NLD supporters (see ICG 2017: 14). As noted above, U Wirathu, who had also voiced support of President Then Sein and the USDP, criticized the NLD. Unofficially, there was apparently extensive cooperation between Ma Ba Tha and the USDP before the general elections of November 2015, with some Ma Ba Tha leaders even asking for forgiveness of past misdeeds of the USDP (and the military), with the USDP hoping that Ma
Ba Tha would help them win the election (Lawi Weng 2015; Hnin Yadana Zaw and Slodkowski 2015). Moreover, there was a widespread suspicion that Ma Ba Tha supported the military (see Holt 2019; Wade 2017; Min Zin 2015) that had oppressed people for decades (since 1962). For instance, the Buddhist layman and NLD representative Htin Lin Oo criticized Buddhist nationalist monks in a speech delivered on October 23, 2014. Having accused these monks of inciting riots due to their anti-Muslim rhetoric, he even stated that they are “bogus monks” (ayaung-hsaung), and that “our Buddhism is being destroyed by those [nationalist monks] wrapped in monastic robes.” He claimed that nationalist monks (Ma Ba Tha) were allied with the Tatmadaw and its USDP party, and that these monks were used as an instrument by the military for their own purposes and that helped them to remain in power (Htin Lin Oo 2014).

Ma Ba Tha initially enjoyed broad support. Although many Burmese Buddhists of various political preferences supported Ma Ba Tha’s narratives of Buddhism under threat from Muslims, including some NLD supporters (see McCarthy and Menager 2017: 409–410; ICG 2017: 13–14), the NLD won a landslide victory in the November 2015 elections. In the run-up to the elections, it became increasingly obvious that the nationalist monks supported the unpopular, military-backed USDP, and supposedly also the military and the dictatorship, which most people disdained.

Although monks enjoy significant authority and influence in Burmese society, their authority is thus not unchallenged. The public criticism of Ma Ba Tha brought about a crisis of monastic authority – at least to some degree (see also Min Zin 2015). A decline for Ma Ba Tha support occurred gradually after the November 2015 election that also seems to be reflected in surveys. In 2019, one Ma Ba Tha leader in Mandalay claimed that his impression was that many disliked Ma Ba Tha. The reason for that, he thought, was that Mandalay Ma Ba Tha had followed the instructions from the headquarters in Yangon stating that they should encourage laypeople to vote for a party supporting their four nationalist family laws, which meant the USDP (and thus not vote for the allegedly pro-Muslim NLD). That policy, as he and other Ma Ba Tha monks explained, was party politics, something that monks must avoid. In the fall

---

17 In May 2016, eighty percent still claimed that they had trust in “religious leaders,” that is, monks (PACE 2016: 61). However, in 2019 only forty-eight percent claimed they have trust in religious leaders (Buddhist monks) (PACE 2019: 16, 43). This decline, which seems to entail a general erosion of monastic authority, is probably directly related to the activities of Ma Ba Tha (see also Walton 2019).

18 Interviews, Mandalay, July 2019. In the Mandalay Ma Ba Tha, there was a tension between a more moderate faction led by U Eindasekka Bhivuntha and a more extreme faction led by U Wirathu that constituted the majority. The monk above belonged to the former,
of 2016, a famous singer in a rock group, who had written a song critical of Buddhist nationalism, claimed that he did not want to call himself a Buddhist anymore due to the activities of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha. One important reason seemed to be that some of the leaders of Ma Ba Tha were the most well-respected and venerated monks in Myanmar, including Sitagu Hsayādaw. Being a Burmese Buddhist thus entails venerating such monks. In such cases it could be said that nationalist monastic authority is parasitic on generic monastic authority and that it contributes to the erosion also of the latter.

Public criticism of monks – mostly by various elites or activist groups protecting their political interests – became more common during the second parliamentarian period. That development intensified after the February 1, 2021, military coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing, who sought to dismantle the political opposition, that is, the NLD, which had won the 2020 general elections. Sitagu Hsayādaw, who was formerly an immensely popular monk (see Walton 2017; Foxeus 2023; Swe Win 2023), became closely allied with General Min Aung Hlaing, thereby providing legitimacy to the military dictatorship. In contrast to previous periods, ordinary people have more widely begun to criticize that monk (and similar monks) on Facebook for being morally corrupt (desiring wealth, fame, and influence) because he supports the military dictatorship oppressing the people. People – mainly supporters of the political opposition – have come to view him with “loathing and disgust” (sek-hsoup-yun-shā), many of whom formerly respected him (see Swe Win 2023). As noted throughout this article, without the recognition by the laypeople, monks have no monastic authority in a social sense. The reason why monks are criticized publicly is that they and the Sangha constitute formidable political forces that can, for better or worse, contribute to bringing about political change.

Conclusion

This article has distinguished between generic monastic authority and nationalist monastic authority. This analytical distinction aims to differentiate between different yet overlapping sources of authority, with the generic monastic authority as the fundamental one. The latter (institutional authority) whereas those who embraced this form of party politics belonged to the latter; interviews, Mandalay, July–August 2019.

19 Interview, Yangon, September 2016.
mostly entails that laypeople are predisposed to recognize the authority of the monks due to their *habitus* (through socialization). The nationalist monastic authority has developed since the colonial period and is predicated on a defense of the Buddha's dispensation and Burmese nation/race against perceived dangers. In Burma's history, this protection has been justified by *jātaka* texts and other texts from the Pāli canon, the nationalist reinterpretation of the path of the *bodhisatta* as a role model (the Buddha as a nationalist), and nationalist monks, especially U Ottama, from the colonial period as role models. In contemporary Buddhist nationalist sermons, the political and nationalist agenda was framed by Buddhist texts, narratives, and the ritual framework of the traditional Buddhist sermons that normalized the religiopolitical agenda and provided legitimacy. Buddhist framing (the three legitimation strategies), especially the defense of the Buddha's dispensation and nation, served as a means by which the nationalist monks could create a religiopolitical space. The nationalist monks operated with a concept of religion that is mixed with politics in what some refer to as "national politics" (*amyou-thā-naing-ngan-yay*). By claiming to engage in that kind of politics allegedly appropriate for monks in the emulation of the Buddha, they aimed to serve as nationalist advisors to both the people and the politicians. That also created a religiopolitical space for the monks and was intended to be a counterargument to those maintaining that monks should not engage in politics. Through such legitimation strategies, nationalist monks sought to expand the boundaries of the socially accepted limits of monastic involvement in politics. All their justifications drew on the same source of authority: the Buddha. They claimed to be simply emulating the Buddha and therefore the criticism was misguided. The compliance of the laypeople to recognize their authority is not necessarily based on trust and respect but may also be determined by socialization processes producing a certain *habitus*, as well as social and religious reasons. These strategies and conditions belong to the first dynamic of monastic authority. Despite these factors, nationalist monks were thus criticized.

Burmese Buddhists, at least publicly, tend to be rather tolerant of deviant monks. Some may pay obeisance to the monastic robe alone (institutional authority) rather than to its unworthy wearer. However, during the second parliamentarian period, nationalist monks were sometimes criticized publicly, despite the taboo, mainly by various political outgroups. This kind of criticism is part of the politics of monastic authority (the second dynamic of monastic authority). The monks were criticized mainly because of their political impact, that is, because they sided with the political opponents of the critics (rather than for engaging in party politics per se). This public criticism was a significant change that characterized the second parliamentarian period, a development
that has accelerated after the 2021 military coup. The declining popularity of the nationalist monks, especially among their NLD supporters, after the 2015 general elections was probably related to their political affiliation. Few wished to return to military rule with which the USDP was associated. Moreover, criticism of the nationalist monks also shaped their legitimation strategies.

Both forms of monastic authority are potentially unstable, especially nationalist monastic authority, and depend on the conjunction of a variety of conditions. The most important is the recognition of authority by the laypeople, without which the monks are, in a social sense, merely laypeople wearing monastic robes. The nationalist monks must therefore be cautious and, as it were, balance on a tightrope. The monks’ awareness of the fragility of their authority is indicated in their justifications of their nationalist role. Moreover, nationalist monastic authority also depends on a favorable climate in society and is more volatile than generic monastic authority.

Acknowledgments

The research for this article was supported by the Swedish Research Council (“Vetenskapsrådet”) under grant number 2019–02601. The fieldwork was funded by travel grants from the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.

References


Sermons and Speeches
Htin Lin Oo. 2014. Speech delivered at a literary festival held in the village Thoun-panhla, Kyaung-U township, October 23.