Religion, Politics and Development: The Thai Sangha's Role in National Development and Integration

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Introduction

The interaction of politics with Buddhism and the Sangha (Buddhist monkhood) has become increasingly apparent in Thai society. In the past, Buddhism provided ideological support for the kingdom and symbols of legitimacy for its rulers. Later, in the early nineteenth century, the intrusion of Western ideas gradually weakened the Thai traditional religio-political system. Today, Western notions of "democratic government" have superseded the religio-political system of government and its mainly religious legitimation. Of course, only a small part of the ruling elite who have been exposed to Western ideas have developed a real comprehension of, and presumably a commitment to, Western modes of political modernization. The masses remain steeped in conservative modes of thought, and in any event they are far removed from the decision-making process.

In an age when modernization has increasingly become a symbol of an advanced or developed country, ruling elites have frequently mobilized traditional institutions and values to legitimize government-sponsored modernization schemes. Religion, as a traditional source of legitimacy, can also legitimize modernization.

In Thailand religion ranks highly among the nation's traditional institutions, and so the close association of religion with political authority would appear to be an invaluable source of legitimacy. By exploiting the consummatory values that Thai Buddhism so obviously provides, the government can legitimize itself and build sufficient popular support to carry through the modernizing plans which it envisages will, given time, legitimize its rule through instrumental values.

Though it is difficult to specify the legitimizing function of religion in today's political system in Thailand, the evidence suggests that religion is still reinterpreted and used to legitimize change and support rulers committed to modernization. Since the late 1950s, and especially during Sarit's era, the ruling elite has made special efforts to invoke and popularize the oldest and most potent of Thai collective symbols—religion and the monarchy. These two institutions have been used to
initiate, explain and defend political actions. Of these two, the Sangha has been increasingly mobilized.

In this article I seek to delineate the political mobilization of Buddhism and the Sangha by the Thai Government to legitimize its modernization policy. The justifications for political mobilization and the Sangha’s response will be discussed. I will also consider the nature of government programmes and the Sangha’s involvement in order to illuminate the interaction of politics and development with Buddhism and the Sangha. Concluding remarks will consider the possible effects on Buddhism and the Sangha of this political mobilization and government involvement.

The Political Mobilization of the Modern Sangha

The political mobilization of Buddhism and the Sangha began when political rulers thought that national security and integration were threatened, and when they wanted to enhance their legitimacy as a government. The threats, in the eyes of the government, were seen as coming from the two major overlapping problems of communist subversion and a lack of national integration arising from regionalism and ethnic minorities, especially the hill people in the North.

For many years the Thai Government tried to solve the problems of communist subversion and rural and regional dissidence through suppression and anti-communist campaigns. Only in the late 1950s did the government realize that military coercion and political repression exacerbated the problems and further alienated the dissidents. It became clear to them that the first priority was to “win the hearts and minds” of the people; that is, to secure the people’s loyalty to the nation through drastic social and economic development programmes. These programmes have come under the name of national development (Kan patthana prathet) and national integration.

In Thailand, national development has encompassed building up of the armed forces, road and dam construction, rural development, expansion of education, extension of bureaucracy, and sponsoring of economic development schemes by ministries and departments. National integration has meant integrating the country politically, socially, and economically. It has ranged from the coercive resettlement of migratory hill peoples to the appeasement and development of the relatively poor and undeveloped Northeast as well as the spreading of the Thai language, religion and custom among upcountry ethnic and cultural minorities.

In the early 1960s the government became increasingly aware that its secular development schemes were insufficient to counter subversion and regionalism. Over time, evidence had accumulated of its remoteness from the rural populace and the barriers between its officials and the people. Using the Sangha in development came to be seen as one solution to these difficulties. This new policy seems to have been based on the following presuppositions: the great majority of Thais are Buddhist; the Sangha is held in esteem and enjoys great prestige; rural monks are influential in village affairs; and the Thais trust the Sangha. For these reasons the political leaders believed that the Sangha was the best possible agent to implement national welfare, development and integration plans as well as to mobilize popular support and