

**Asia Research Institute  
Working Paper Series No. 127**

**Of Monarchs, Monks, and Men:  
Religion and the State in Myanmar**

**Michael A. Aung-Thwin**  
University of Hawai'i at Manoa, USA

aungthwi@hawaii.edu

*Religion and State in Southeast Asia Series  
with a Preface by Michael A. Aung-Thwin*

**December 2009**



This Paper is part of the RELIGION AND STATE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA SERIES with a Preface by Michael A. Aung-Thwin  
WPS 127: *Of Monarchs, Monks, and Men: Religion and the State in Myanmar* by Michael A Aung-Thwin  
WPS 128: *Religion and Ritual in the Royal Courts of Dai Viet* by John K. Whitmore  
WPS 129: *Paradoxes of State Islamization in Malaysia: Routinization of Religious Charisma and the Secularization of the Syariah*  
by Maznah Mohamad  
WPS 130: *Living Piously in a Culture of Death: The Catholic Church and the State in the Philippines* by Julius Bautista

The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

**Note:** The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, [www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm). For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, [www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm).

#### **Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee**

Maznah Binti Mohamad - Editor

Venni Venkata Krishna

Anjali Gera Roy

Zaide Joyce

Valerie Yeo

#### **Asia Research Institute**

National University of Singapore

469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: [www.ari.nus.edu.sg](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg)

Email: [arisec@nus.edu.sg](mailto:arisec@nus.edu.sg)

**The Asia Research Institute (ARI)** was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

## PREFACE

In May 2009, as visiting professor of the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, the National University of Singapore, I conducted a workshop entitled “Religion and the State in Southeast Asia: Past and Present”. It was also sponsored by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Department of History, and the Asia Research Institute. Focused on the *structural* connections between religion and the state, historical as well as current, it represented the world’s major religions found in the region. Because of the enormity of the subject and the modest nature of the workshop, however, it strove to be more of a reflective exercise that posed certain questions regarding the situation in Southeast Asia than anything else.

Taken from approximately a dozen papers and commentaries presented over two days at the workshop, the four papers contained herein are just a glimpse of it. And although few in number, they nevertheless represent the workshop’s diversity, particularly a spectrum of the pertinent religions, states, disciplines, and periods of study. The corpus includes, respectively, two historical treatments (Myanmar and Vietnam) by Michael Aung-Thwin from the University of Hawaii and John K. Whitmore from the University of Michigan, and two “modern” ones (the Philippines and Malaysia) by Julius Bautista and Maznah Mohamed both from the National University of Singapore.

Most other discussions concerned with this subject have tended to address ways in which the state has “dealt with” religion. That is, religion is regarded as a “problem” which the state has to somehow “resolve”. Even when Religion is not regarded as a “problem”, it is still considered an appendage of the state, a mechanism to “pacify the masses” (in Weber’s terms) or to manage some of its social and moral responsibilities. This approach, of course, is a state-centered one that gives “agency” to it rather than to religion.

Our workshop could have turned that perspective around and pursued a religion-based approach giving “agency” to it instead. But because most of those who participated were country rather than subject specialists, with language expertise for conducting original research in usually one country, our expertise was better served with a country-approach than a religion-approach that crossed boundaries but required competence in several major languages, both indigenous and “classical”.

Another (perhaps inadvertent) reason for privileging the state is that, except in theocracies such as Tibet prior to its integration into the Peoples Republic of China, it is rare to find a situation where religion dominates the state the way it used to in the past, especially during the last two centuries when the state has more often than not dominated religion. Thus, our familiarity with periods closer to the time in which we live have been given agency, which I have elsewhere called “present-centrism”. In the previous several decades, however, and in certain Islamic and Theravada Buddhist countries, religion has reared its head again and made attempts to reassert its traditional position vis a vis the state in the most politically conspicuous ways, some of it, admittedly, aggravated by external political interference.

In any case, the reason for religion’s “staying power” is the way in which it has been structurally embedded since early times in society, particularly in its economic, but also social, administrative, political/ideological, and legal institutions. Whereas the Theravada Buddhist Sangha and Roman Catholic Church in Southeast Asia once held and still hold considerable wealth in the form of tax-exempt landed property (and was therefore a major

land owner), Islam in the Island World appears to have had extensive economic links to communities of trade and commerce instead.

And while Islam's "structure" seemed to have been autonomous, dispersed and relatively un-integrated, Theravada Buddhism and Catholicism were entrenched as large, "national" ecclesiastical organizations that, at times were almost states within states, sometimes competing but most of the time cooperating with the state at many different levels.

That structure provided all sorts of administrative and social functions that otherwise would have fallen on the state, such as rural education and literacy, keeping demographic census records (of births and deaths), maintaining social justice at the village level, and ensuring that local cultural activities and festivities were performed. Monasteries were also homes for the aged, orphans, the destitute, the hungry, the lonely, and the outcaste. Religion also established standards for moral behavior of people from all walks of life, in the provinces as well as the centers, and were part of the daily lives of most of the people in psychological and other personal and intimate ways that the state could not be.

Religion also provided legitimation ideology for the state politically until modern times. Although that became less and less necessary as states managed to create their own secular ideological *raison d'être* independent of religious ideas and sanction, the state still needed religion for purposes of moral legitimation, while religion needed state patronage in the form of economic largesse and its tax-exempting authority.

Despite the unparalleled growth and development of the power of the nation-state during (at least) the past two centuries throughout the world, the state's attempts to "control" and limit the power and influence of organized religion did little to alter that symbiotic relationship. To be sure, the scope and character of that "embeddedness" has changed with the history of each country. Nonetheless, it continues to be very much a part of the modern nation-state, so that the relationship itself remains intact and important even in some of the most "secular" of societies where religion and state are deliberately and legally separated.

The question that is most often raised with regard to their relationship, then, is (not surprisingly) a binary one: the "balance of power" between them. In past centuries, that balance was expressed in various ways that ranged from outright battles (as in Japan between the *samurai* of the Shogun and those of the Sangha), to doctrinal disputes (between Pope and King in Medieval Europe) as well as contested rituals of religious "purification" (in Theravada Buddhist countries).

In modern times, that balance takes on more "modern" forms, using modern techniques and mechanisms (such as the polling booth, electronic media, and well-organized, financed, and publicized protests) along with often pointed ideological rejection or acceptance of "modern" ideologies such as communism, capitalism, nationalism, and democracy to suit their respective interests.

Other than direct confrontation (militarily or in ritual form), another way the relative balance of power between religion and state is revealed is the manner in which its "head" is selected. Who appoints the head of the "church" in societies with a national ecclesiastical organization: is it the state or the clergy who selects him? If it is the latter, is ratification by the state a requirement? If there were no official appointment procedures or ratification, then who controls the *legitimation rituals* of such ceremonies? In medieval Europe, the Pope (or his

representative) crowned the king in a very public manner that made clear the church's (at least ideological) power over the state. In pre-colonial Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, although it was just the opposite—the king appointed the head of the Sangha—it was nonetheless equally clear who appointed whom.

In the Islamic areas in Southeast Asia without such an ecclesiastical organization; how are the various and dispersed religious heads (*Imam*) selected? Did the state (at the provincial or other local levels) have any role in it? Indeed, did the Islamic states of pre-colonial and independent Southeast Asia even recognize the Caliphate as the supreme authority of Islam, or did local *Imam* consider themselves independent and autonomous interpreters of the Koran?

Then there are those states in Southeast Asia without an overwhelmingly influential religious sector, such as today's Vietnam and Singapore. In these cases, the modern state is avowedly secular and the separation between it and the religion is explicitly written into their Constitutions or implied by the state's definition of itself. The nature of the relationship between religion and state in these societies clearly favors the state. But even in them, potentially explosive situations exist, especially when religion and politics are combined, sometimes inadvertently but other times deliberately encouraged and financed by outside forces for political reasons.

Often the relative power of religion in these modern states is revealed by the official place of religion in the state; that is, its *legal* status. Besides religious law meant for the clergy and social norms regarding their behavior and certain tax laws that exempt religious property and people serving the religion, the sector of the state to which religion is assigned in the various national Constitutions is instructive. In Thailand, for example, the Sangha is officially located in the *Ministry of Education*, whereas in Myanmar, it is in the *Ministry of Religion*. That in itself is rather revealing.

Similarly, where the Catholic Church is legally “placed” in the official organizational scheme of the Philippines and East Timor should tell us how powerful they are. Where in the modern Constitutions of Malaysia and Indonesia is Islam “located”, or is the issue avoided? Where do the various religions of capitalist Singapore and Socialist Vietnam officially “belong”? Perhaps as important, how are their roles in the nation-state defined by these placements? What does it tell us about religion's power or lack thereof vis a vis the state?

It appears that in societies where religion is *strong*, it tends to define and legitimate the character of the state, shape its conceptions of leadership and authority, and influence the direction in which the state should go. Conversely, in societies where religion is *weak*, the state tends to define and legitimate the character of religion, determine its *raison d'être*, and control most of its activities. In the latter, religion can indeed become a “pacifying” arm of the state, while in the former the state can become the political (and sometimes military) arm of religion, although there is no evidence of the latter in Southeast Asian history.

Strong or weak, the history of the relationship between religion and the state in Southeast Asia, more often than not, seems to have been a rather cozy one, even if at certain times they were open adversaries. The reason for this “alliance” is that each was indispensable to the other in innumerable ways.

Finally, one of the “religions” neglected by the seminar (as most workshops and seminars on religion usually do) is supernaturalism (or to use the catch-all term, “animism”) that probably under-girds all the mainstream religions in Southeast Asia. But however emotionally and psychologically important “supernaturalism” may have been (and may be) in terms of the everyday life of most of the people, it is officially unrecognized in the modern Constitutions of any Southeast Asian nation, as far as we can tell. Thus, its relationship to the state is simply not as crucial politically as that of the mainstream religions.

Yet, in most cases, because supernaturalism’s beliefs (to a greater or lesser degree) have been historically integrated into the mainstream belief systems of Southeast Asia in any case, in practice this “unofficial” belief system has not been excluded entirely. Indeed, the way in which the state even today has co-opted supernaturalism is instructive: in Myanmar, signs are placed on select trees warning people who cut them down that the guardian *nat* (spirit) will be displeased by such behavior--just in case the law is not easily enforceable.

Our main hope here is that these four essays and the questions they raise will contribute some insights, or provoke more in-depth, comparative studies of Religion and the State, not only as it existed and exists in Southeast Asia, but the broader Asia region, and perhaps even other parts of the world.

**Michael Aung-Thwin**  
Professor of Asian Studies  
University of Hawaii at Manoa

## Of Monarchs, Monks, and Men: Religion and the State in Myanmar

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion<sup>1</sup> and the state during the pre-colonial period was the most dominant one in Burmese society for at least a thousand years if not more. With the dawn of the colonial period, it saw a hiatus, but revived when nationalism took center stage. After independence in 1948, the relationship once again became important and remains so until today. Whereas their *economic* relationship was more crucial in the earlier phases of the pre-colonial period, their *political* relationship increasingly assumed a larger role as time went on, until today it is predominantly political. Throughout this slow transformation, their *symbolic* relationship remained largely unchanged. This essay is a summary of that historical process beginning with the Pagan period in the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century until the present.<sup>2</sup>

### SANGHA AND STATE IN PRE-COLONIAL BURMA

In most of the pre-colonial period (say, from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), the Sangha seemed better integrated into state and society. Its head was usually the primate of the king, who had been the king's spiritual advisor when still a prince. The organization itself was clearly smaller and less complex with fewer Orders, so that it was likely less factionalized and more manageable, with little reason for opposition to the state since it was its main patron. As a result, their relationship was cozier and more often expressed in public rituals of legitimation centered on the religious donation. That, in turn, was based on a universal ideology called "the merit-path to salvation,"<sup>3</sup> whereby, as an astute observer put it, "one gave to the religion as much as one could afford rather than as little as one could haggle for."<sup>4</sup> The consequences of that ideology heaped material largesse on the Sangha continuously for ten centuries, a process that continues today.

Initially, these donations--which were in the form of cash as well as permanent land and labor endowments--stimulated the development of the agrarian economy by increasing the acreage of padi land and attracting scarce labor into the kingdom. The Kingdom of Pagan (perhaps along with Angkor) paid some of the highest salaries for skilled labor in Southeast Asia

---

<sup>1</sup> By "religion", I am referring to the Burma Sangha as an institution, the mainstream, ecclesiastical organization which represents the repository of society's most prevailing religious beliefs and to which nearly 95% of the population pays obeisance.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Eugene Smith's *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 1965) is the first and most explicit book in English to raise the issue regarding religion and politics in Burma. Melford Spiro's *Religion and Society* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982), also makes the connection but focuses more on issues dealing with the sociology of religion, while Michael Mendelson's *Sangha and State in Burma* ed. John P. Ferguson (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1975) attempts to describe the non-monolithic nature of the mainstream Sangha. But even before any of these was published, John Cady who lived and worked in Burma had published "Religion and Politics in Modern Burma", *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1953), pp. 149-162 which saw the importance of that issue in Burma's history.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase belongs to Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society*.

<sup>4</sup> This quote comes from Leach, E.R. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 149.

during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, the Sangha and state became the two major land-owners in the largely agrarian state, which meant the Sangha was the only institution in society that was economically independent of the state, thereby, also the only one that could counter-balance the power of the state. Ironically, then, the Sangha's independence from the state was derived largely from the largesse of the state.

But after several centuries of continuous wealth-flow from the taxable to the tax-exempt sector, the state began to feel the financial drain on its coffers that would eventually weaken its political stature as an exemplary Buddhist kingdom. Yet, it could not simply stop patronizing the Sangha, for its legitimacy and that of society depended on it. This "structural contradiction" persisted throughout Burma's pre-colonial and post-colonial history although its consequences to the state varied somewhat with the particular reign or period.

There were several ways in which Burmese kings attempted to resolve this problem. The most public and important was a ritual called "*sasana* reform," or purification of the religion, doctrinally justified by the Sangha's opulence that violated its own vow of poverty. In effect, *sasana* reform enabled the state to change the current composition of the Sangha leadership so that it favored the state, reduce its size and its holdings, and regain some of its wealth, and/or at least slow down its flow to more manageable levels.<sup>6</sup> (That such problems between king and Sangha in early Burma were resolved *ritually* reveals the underlying nature of the relationship between state and religion, in contrast, for example, to the way pitch-battles between the *samurai* of the Tokugawa Shogun and that of Japan's monasteries revealed *their* relationship.)

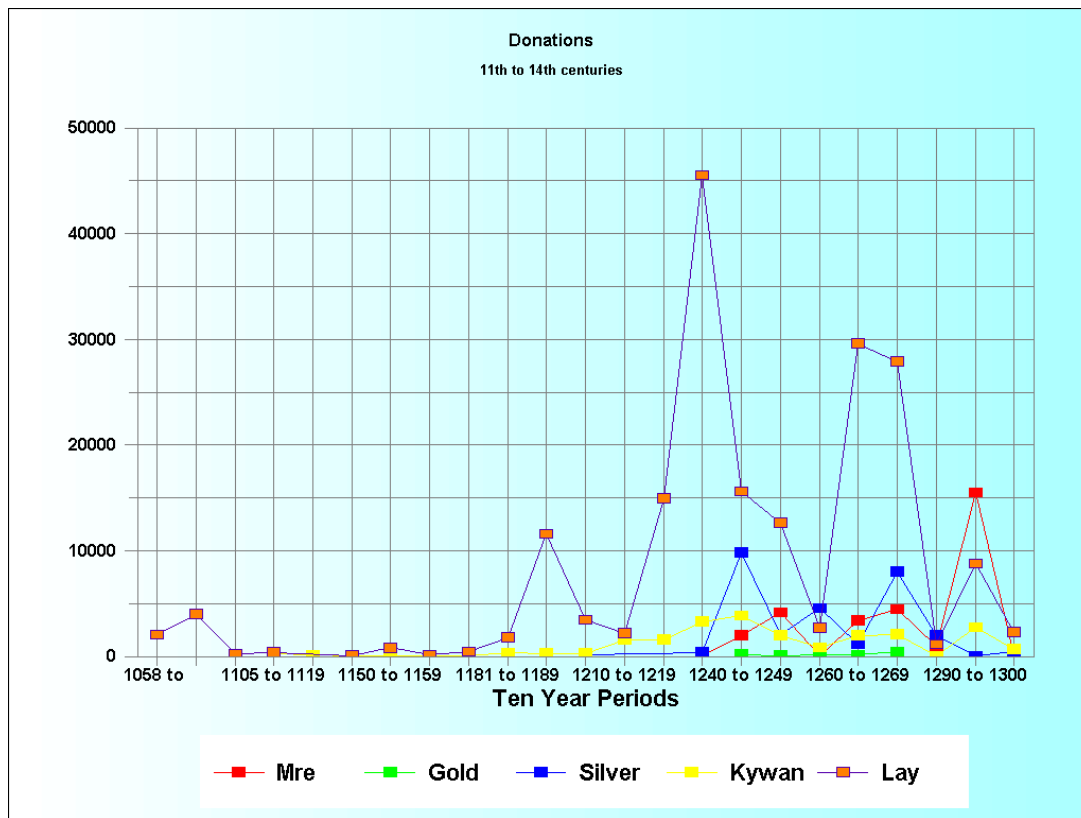
But *sasana* reform in Burma was only a temporary measure, and donations from both state and society would continue because the doctrine behind that behavior—the merit-path to salvation—remained intact. Indeed, donations to the Sangha would tend to increase after such a reform, for the *purity* of the monk to whom one donated determined the *quality* of the merit one received. And since religious donations were given and held in perpetuity, the whole process had a *cumulative* effect over time, so that each new dynasty began with less productive land for its own use, unless it was able to bring considerable acres of virgin land under cultivation with an increase in population, for which there is no contemporary evidence. So the problem of wealth-flow to the tax-exempt sector would recur, and did so in a predictably cyclic fashion throughout Burma's history. It is no accident that the decline of nearly every dynasty in the country's history coincided with a Sangha gorged with wealth, an economically weakened state, internal factionalism at court, and enemies at the gates.

---

<sup>5</sup> The high salaries (in both cash and kind) paid to the builders of Burma's temples and monasteries can be found in the thousands of original and contemporary inscriptions belonging to the Pagan and Ava periods. The original and contemporary evidence also suggests that the institution of slavery as we understand it, did not exist in pre-colonial Burma.

<sup>6</sup> In terms of the relationship between the economy and religion, although Dr. Than Tun's earlier works document the nominal amount of wealth that the Sangha held in Pagan times, Michael Aung-Thwin's "The Role of *Sasana* Reform in Burmese History, Economic Dimensions of a Religious Purification," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXVIII, No. 4 (Aug. 1979), pp. 671-688, and *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1985) were the first to raise the issue of the tax-exempt flow of wealth to the Sangha and its historical consequences on Burmese state and society; namely, creating a "structural contradiction" in that relationship between state and Sangha.





Thus, for example, after the Pagan Dynasty declined in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century for these internal, structural reasons exacerbated by external factors (the Mongols), the same problems plagued its successor, Ava, and thereafter, the latter's successor, Toungoo. The latter's move to the coasts to garner additional revenues found in maritime trade to replenish its dwindled agricultural resources that kept continually shifting to the tax-exempt Sangha, therefore, is not at all surprising. For, as long as the religious ideology that underlay the legitimacy of state and society remain unchanged, the state would face the same fate that its predecessors had faced. Yet, the Toungoo dynasty was not simply going to eliminate the basis of its entire conceptual system; so it chose to change its dependence on agriculture instead, a far easier (and opportune) task.

It did that by harnessing Lower Burma's growing maritime economy, particularly during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries when the region saw a surge in trade and commerce in the famous "Age of Commerce."<sup>7</sup> That helped alleviate the previous, near-total dependence of the state on agriculture and reduced its overall financial burden. This, in turn, not only changed the nature of religious endowments from land to cash, but also transformed state-Sangha relations from what were once overwhelming economic concerns to include more political ones, as cash was not the sole monopoly of state and Sangha as land was. By the time 15<sup>th</sup> century king Dhammazedi purified the Sangha in Pegu, for example, the concerns he expressed were clearly political, when he explicitly commanded the Sangha during a *sasana*

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Reid, Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450-1680*. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

*reform* not to “harbor friends and companions of the king amongst you,” an unequivocal reference to monasteries being used as sanctuaries by political opponents.<sup>8</sup>

Despite such occasions when the relationship between religion and state became overtly and publicly contentious, for the most part and for much of pre-colonial Burma’s history, it was primarily a cozy one, whereby state (and society) patronized the Sangha lavishly and the condition of the Sangha legitimated state and society.

### **THE SANGHA IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1886-1948**

With British colonial rule, this reciprocal and cozy relationship between state and Sangha for the most part ended. One of the reasons behind that change lay the near-obsession of the colonial state with regard to the principle of separating church and state, a bloody and prolonged experience in their own history. Add to that the problems wrought by the so-called Sepoy Mutiny in India which had serious religious repercussions that left the British extremely cautious and aware of anything tinged with religion.

Annexation and the exile of the last Burmese king, Thibaw, triggered fierce resistance, in which Buddhist monks for the first time in Burma’s history actually took up arms against the state, partly because it was a foreign one which showed little or no interest in their religion, but also because by eliminating the monarchy, the British had eliminated the chief patron of the Sangha and Defender of the Faith, with dire consequences in years to come.

The king’s religious counterpart and appointee, the *Thathanabaing* (Supreme Patriarch) continued in office after the monarchy’s demise. And although he still wielded considerable influence in Upper Burma, much of Lower Burma by Annexation had been a part of the British-Indian Empire for over sixty years, and his religious authority was no longer universally recognized there. The Lower Burma region had become a “frontier” area: demographically, with the influx of colonial laborers from India, China, and Southeast Asia; economically, with the draining, clearing, and cultivating of the Delta and the introduction of a colonial export economy (rice); and culturally, with the migration of many ethno-linguistic and religious groups who sought their fortunes there. In many respects, Lower Burma was much like the Wild West, disinclined to listen to *any* spiritual authority anyway.

When the Supreme Patriarch died in 1895, problems of succession arose since there was no reigning king to appoint another as was the custom. Whether the British should (or even wanted to) appoint another one; from which of the various Orders was the new Primate to be chosen; and what sort of authority would he have vis a vis the civil courts, all became important political and religious issues that remained unanswered.

After eight years without a *Thathanabaing*, one was finally chosen by a venerable assembly of monks at Mandalay, a choice which the British Government recognized officially despite objections by some Orders that wanted *their* candidates chosen as Primate. Thus, the new primate’s authority was contested immediately. Over the next several decades, his authority continued to weaken until, in 1935, the Rangoon High Court ruled that neither the

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, “The Role of Sasana Reform in Burmese History, Economic Dimensions of a Religious Purification.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (1979): 671-688.

*Thathanabaing* nor the Sangha had any special legal or constitutional status in society. Church was thus separated from state legally, probably for the first time in the country's history, although tax exempt status for certain types of glebe property remained viable along with other social norms that gave the Sangha privileged status.

Without ecclesiastical authority over even members of his own Sangha, the *Thathanabaing* could no longer impose disciplinary sanctions on unruly monks, chastise those who violated the *Vinaya* (monastic code of conduct), settle disputes over Sangha property, or intercede in doctrinal disputes. There was also no longer anyone with supreme religious or moral authority to whom truly devout and genuinely orthodox Orders could turn in order to maintain the integrity of the Sangha and the Religion. The *Thathanabaing* had become an impotent figure-head. And when he died in 1938, the British simply allowed the office to lapse.

Thus, the two pillars that had supported the Burmese state (the king and his Primate) were removed without anything meaningfully equivalent to replace them. With Burmese society now "headless," the body went into convulsions, some of whose effects one still sees today. (It is the reason I call the colonial period one of "order without meaning.")<sup>9</sup> In terms of the Sangha, left without its chief moral arbiter (perhaps equivalent to a situation in the Roman Catholic Church without the Pope, or the Philippines, without its cardinal), the discipline of many of its members also deteriorated rapidly.

The structure of the pre-colonial Sangha had more or less paralleled the state's, from court to countryside. With the top of the Sangha structure now removed (and that of the state eliminated earlier), the provincial and township *sayadaws* (abbots) were left to impose discipline on their members as they saw fit. Factions began to coalesce around personal ties to neighborhood *sayadaws* and monasteries. Monks and monasteries became more autonomous and a law unto themselves. This invited a return to the kinds of decentralized conditions one finds in Burmese political history between dynasties. But this time, no new king and dynasty stepped in to restore stability and central authority. Instead, a colonial power was in place with an aversion to dealing with religious issues of the colonized, a matter that had created some problems in India earlier with the so-called Sepoy Mutiny.

As the colonial state spread and the socio-economic mobility of the people became more and more connected to secular accomplishments within that "rationalized" state<sup>10</sup> (such as an English language education), the traditional role of Burmese monks as models for, and educators of society's children (in terms of literacy, religious instruction, ethics, and discipline) became irrelevant, so that they themselves became increasingly marginalized--socially, psychologically, and economically.

Having lost their status respect and much of their socio-religious functions in a secular colonial state, large segments of the Sangha became more corrupt and secular themselves. Many monasteries became less a haven for those desiring genuine spiritual respite from the secular, stressful world, and more a shelter for the marginalized of society. Virtually anyone could enter these monasteries for just about any personal reason, ranging from divorce, poverty, and escape from the hardships of secular life to hiding from the law, evading taxes,

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin, "The British 'Pacification' of Burma: Order Without Meaning." *JSEAS* XVI (1985): 245-261.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Robert H., *The state in Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

or political sanctuary. Many who donned the saffron robe did not have to pass the traditional exams or meet the earlier, stringent requirements. Many were never ordained.<sup>11</sup>

The Burmese people refer to these kinds of monks as “humans in yellow robes,” clearly a minority to be sure, but distinguishing them from bona fide members of the Sangha who had become monks for life and for the correct (religious) reasons. The latter are called *thada pappazita*, while those who enter for escaping the miseries of human life are known as *baya pappazita*, and those who simply wish to have an easy life without secular responsibilities are called *tanha pappazita*. (*Tanha* is a Pali word for “craving” and “desire.”)<sup>12</sup> There is quite a difference, therefore, between those who make religion their calling and those who do not, but all wear the saffron robe and shave their heads, so visually they look the same.

Although the number of such monks appears to have increased dramatically in the colonial and post-colonial periods, it can be found in the pre-colonial period as well. Observers like Bishop Bigandet, not entirely unbiased as a Catholic priest trying to recruit converts, recorded that the monastic life “is often looked upon now as one fit for lazy, ignorant, and idle people, who, being anxious to live well and do nothing, put on the sacred dress for a certain time, until, tired of the duties and obligations of their new profession, they retire and betake themselves anew to a secular life.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet, because society at large still revered those who wore the saffron robe, and devout Buddhists saw in the Sangha the only repository left for its traditions and values, it continued to support it economically and socially, especially in the face of a foreign state that did not behave as if it cared about the country’s mainstream religion. Public criticism of monks was (and is) rare, being the devotee’s vehicles on the path to *nirvana*. One of these exceptions was a novel published earlier in 1935 titled *Tet Pongyi* (“Modern Monk”), a bitter satire that attacked the immorality and breaches of discipline among the Buddhist clergy. It created such a stir amongst them that the book was banned by the colonial Government and the author had to apologize publicly.<sup>14</sup>

Nationalism had also compromised the status of the Burmese monk. During the 1930s many younger members of the Sangha were convinced by student activists at Rangoon University to get involved in the country’s nationalist movements. Many, who were friends of the students, complied and participated in general strikes and boycotts against the British, the kinds of activities they had vowed as monks to renounce. Perhaps to give some legitimacy to this forbidden activity, they made their “battle-ground” the sacred Shwedagon Pagoda, by then one of the holiest shrines in the country, whose sacred geography thereafter became not only a symbol of resistance to authority in general, but politically hallowed ground. A few venerable monks even became martyrs; their statues still stand atop high pillars on some of Yangon’s main arteries. The seeds that had been sown earlier at Annexation were now being reaped as modern Burma’s “political monk” emerged. He is still with us today.

---

<sup>11</sup> G. E. Harvey, Harvey, G. E. *British rule in Burma, 1824-1942*. London,: Faber and Faber, 1946.

<sup>12</sup> Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, p. 322.

<sup>13</sup> *Buddhism and Society*, p. 232. For Bigandet’s original account, see \*.

<sup>14</sup> Thein Pe Myint, *Tet Pongyi* [The Modern Monk], 1936.

## THE SANGHA IN THE “DEMOCRATIC PERIOD”: 1948-1958

At Independence, Burma’s political and religious leaders inherited this contentious and fissiparous Sangha which was extremely difficult to deal with. On the one hand, the *pongyi* was the symbol of moral authority and renunciation whose acceptance of one’s gifts provided merit that enhanced the donor’s rebirth on the ladder to *nirvana*. On the other, many were a disgrace to the saffron robe with their lawless and immoral behavior.<sup>15</sup>

As before, they also continued to be an economic a burden on society. One village headman in the 1960s put it rather bluntly: “if the monks were not so ‘spoiled’ by being provided for so liberally, there would be far fewer recruits to the Order. Because of their easy living, there are five times as many monks as there would be otherwise. This is a terrible economic drain. Why support five monasteries when one will do as well?”<sup>16</sup>

Devout Buddhists were in a bind, for although the quality of one’s merit was directly related to the “purity” of the monk and Order to which one donated, one could not simply pick and choose which monk to give to and which to refuse. Since every monk looked alike and one could not tell “pure” from “impure” monk, whichever one stopped in front of one’s house on his daily rounds for food with his alms bowl had to be accommodated. Indeed, when the time came for periodic religious festivals (such as robe-giving ceremonies) when more money was spent, one was inclined to give to one’s neighborhood monastery and its monks, whether or not they were considered “pure,” especially when relatives and friends in it were the ones wearing the saffron robe.

For the state, however, it had become less an individual economic and religious problem, and more a political one. The burden to once again “purify” the Sangha fell on U Nu, a devout Buddhist himself and the first Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, which was, in name and formal apparatus, a Parliamentary Democracy. Although he did not “purify” it, in 1949 he tried to register it as part of a larger, national registration program, expressing his efforts in doctrinal terms. But it was clear that the issue was a matter of regulating a large, unwieldy, ill-disciplined, lawless, and politicized Sangha, an effort that was welcomed by the most pious in society, as well as the most venerable and devout *sayadaws* who found the behavior of many monks deplorable.

U Nu publicly wrote in the newspapers that “everybody who puts on a yellow robe is not a *pongyi*...If (he) indulges in all sorts of evil deeds, like having an affair with a woman, gambling, and drinking, then ... he is just a rogue in a yellow robe.”<sup>17</sup> Another scholar on the subject similarly concluded that “there is a general neglect of the religious pursuits of study and meditation and an inclination to enjoy a life of idleness enlivened by forbidden worldly pleasures. Attendance at football games, movies, and theatrical performances is very common, and clandestine love affairs are far from unknown. Disputes over the ownership of monastic property frequently arise and in many cases have erupted into violence.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is no

<sup>15</sup> For contemporary newspapers and eye-witness accounts of such behavior, see John F. Cady’s *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 613-636; 231-234; 254-255; 260-261; 364-365.

<sup>16</sup> *Buddhism and Society*, p. 322.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics*, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, p. 205.

secret to scholars who have studied the modern Burma Sangha that monks during the so-called “democracy period” were involved in all sorts of serious crimes, including forgery, sedition, opium smuggling, armed robbery, destruction of private property, rape, assault with deadly weapons, and murder.<sup>19</sup>

Such behavior was not limited to individual rogue monks but large groups of monks, who, with strength in numbers were even more outrageous. In 1951 two monks who were refused free admission to a theatrical performance had an altercation with the theatre staff. So the next night, 150 monks came back and tore down the walls of the theatre. Further violence was avoided only when police arrived to intervene. In the same year, a Burmese language newspaper published a letter written by an anonymous Buddhist monk criticizing the disorderliness and violence of other monks. A group of fifty monks invaded the newspaper’s offices and demanded the name of the author. Upon refusal, the place was trashed.

In 1952 in Mandalay, an editorial in another Burmese language newspaper criticized the indolence and worldliness of some sections of the Sangha. A large group of monks entered the editor’s office and forced the staff to print a retraction the following day. A second group of monks visited the editor and violence was averted only when the police and army troops arrived. The editor, scared for his life in the hereafter as well as in the here and now, announced in the same newspaper several days later that all monks were invited to a nearby pagoda to receive his obeisance.

In 1954, there was a violent clash by two factions over who should be the presiding monk of a particular group of monasteries, resulting in the death of two monks. There were other intra-Sangha conflicts in 1956 over similar issues in Mandalay which escalated to the use of guns and daggers resulting in the murder of two monks. Another group of monks in Mandalay, believing false rumors that Indians had assaulted Burmese, destroyed several Indian shops in the market, stormed a police station, forced their way in, and flogged three men who had been detained. In 1959 a fight broke out between the residents of two adjacent monasteries in Yangon with an exchange of brick-bats that was stopped only when police intervened with teargas. Over 89 monks were arrested.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, lawless behavior by rogue and/or bogus monks is not new, neither are violent clashes with authorities. And as most of this behavior occurred in the 1950s during the period of Parliamentary Democracy in Burma, it has nothing to do with the type of government either; indeed, quite the contrary, as we shall see. Rather, the Burma Sangha mirrored lawlessness in society itself, one that was nearly out of control, where homicide rates were the second highest per capita in the world (second only to the United States) and ordinary citizens were simply not safe beyond their homes and neighborhoods. The countryside, which the Government could barely control, was not much better either, as it was in the hands of a dozen or more insurgent groups. One could not travel far outside the major metropolitan

---

<sup>19</sup> See *The Nation*, the premier English-language newspaper for the decade, especially the early 1950s, along with other Burmese and English language sources, such as the older, more established *Myanma Alin* [New Light of Burma], *The Sun*, *Rangoon Daily*, *The Burman*, *Hanthawaddy*, *The Progress*, *Bama Khit*, and other domestic newspapers for reports on these incidents. John F. Cady, in *Development of Self-rule and Independence in Burma* (New York, 1948), p. 31, 33, 48-49, 364; 252; 254, connects the problems to economic and social ones. G. E. Harvey in *British Rule in Burma*, cited above wrote the following about one of these monasteries: the chief monk was senile, half of the eighty residents merited unfrocking, twelve of them had never been ordained, and five were wanted by the police. p. 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> These accounts, taken from contemporary newspapers can be found in Smith, *Religion and Politics*, p. 206-7.

areas of Rangoon and Mandalay without an armed escort and even then nothing was guaranteed. Trains were being blown up nearly every week. Burma was in near total anarchy.

Unable to tolerate such behavior, more senior and orthodox members of the Sangha formed a group called the Sasana Purification Association and asked the Government to intervene. In one of its meetings, it resolved officially that the Government should enact special laws to eliminate undesirables from the Sangha, in effect, inviting Government to reform it with secular law as monarchs had done in the past in their capacity as Defenders of the Faith.

But it was easier said than done. Neither U Nu's piety, his building of 80,000 sand pagodas, nor his convening of the Sixth World Buddhist Council in the tradition of Asoka—generating intense religious fervor and devotion in the country—could bring all monks under one umbrella organization.

### **THE SANGHA AND THE “CARETAKER GOVERNMENT”: 1958-1960**

The only viable alternative to quell this anarchic situation during that period, not only with regard to the Sangha, but also state and society, was the army. To many outsiders, particularly in the present context, it may seem like an overstatement. But to those of us who lived in Burma during the 1950s, the army was obviously the only institution that could provide law and order. It was the only disciplined, national organization with a chain of command from top to bottom that was actually operational. It was also the most respected secular institution in Burmese society at the time, having saved the Union from the brink of disaster earlier when the insurgents were at the doorsteps of Yangon (at the present airport) only a few miles from city center. Although laced with some myth and legend, the army was also credited with having played a significant role in helping oust the Japanese when the Allies returned in 1945. It was regarded as the group that had been instrumental in the gaining of Independence (much like the Congress Party of India was at the time), while some of its leaders, especially General Ne Win were considered direct successors of Aung San, the “father” of modern Burma. In short, the Army was one of the most admired institutions to which young people looked for their future careers.<sup>21</sup>

In 1958, therefore, much like the Sasana Purification Association which had requested Government intervention to clean up the Sangha on its behalf, the civilian government of U Nu requested General Ne Win and the army to intervene temporarily (hence, the name, “caretaker government) to also “clean up” the state. It did so, figuratively and literally. (As a young boy, I remember my friends and I helping army troops sweep the neighborhood streets of Yankin with brooms.) It also quelled serious crime in the urban sectors, particularly Yangon, extended the safety net farther than it had ever been, having successfully won major offensives against the rebels, and enforced corruption laws. Indeed, the following is what the late eminent British historian, D. G. E. Hall had to say of Ne Win and the “caretaker” Government.

---

<sup>21</sup> The fictional literature of this period also reflected this sentiment. See for example, the introduction to Ma Ma Lay, Daw, *Blood Bond*, Translated by Than Than Win, Edited by Michael Aung-Thwin, *University of Hawai'i Center for Southeast Asian Studies Translation Series*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2004.

Ne Win... has scrupulously respected constitutional forms. His ministers are all non-political and non-military persons of distinction in various walks of life and of high character, and he himself has remained aloof from the struggle between the... divisions of the AFPFL [the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League, in effect, the only political Party of Burma]. His government functions with greater efficiency than has been witnessed ever since the coming of independence...<sup>22</sup>

There was no question that the army would hand power back to the civilians as promised. Not only was it a respected institution with a popular General at the helm, Ne Win was one of the legendary “Thirty Comrades,” a famous and revered group of World War Two heroes whom post-war Burmese historiography credits much with, even if unwarranted in some cases. All of them had been part of the nationalist movement, many had been undergraduates at Rangoon University together, and almost all had been involved in the war effort together.

The elections promised for April 1959 were delayed due to an offensive against the rebels and formally rescheduled by an act of Parliament which passed a bill on February 26 that permitted General Ne Win and his Cabinet to remain in power for six more months, until 1960.<sup>23</sup> The Army handed power back to the civilians that year as promised, elections were held and U Nu was voted back into office.

Almost as soon as the civilians regained power, however, the old divisiveness in the dominant party, the AFPFL, and lawlessness in the both the urban areas and the countryside that had been arrested under the “caretaker” government, returned. This included the factious Sangha, which was a microcosm of the country and its leadership: divisive, lawless, unstable, and nearly out of control. Particularly in the urban areas such as Yangon and Mandalay, the Sangha was just another of society’s many components that needed constraining.

Many monks with their newly won political power, virtually immune from secular law, and with no Primate to impose ecclesiastical law, would have nothing of the sort. Whereas under the monarchy, the legitimacy of state and king very much depended on the patronage and promotion of the Religion, “confirmed” by the material well-being of the Sangha; under a modern Parliamentary Democracy, however, not only were there no legal provisions for it, such a position was anathema. Yet, society still expected such (traditional) behavior from its leadership, especially from devout Buddhists like U Nu. He knew this and so to appease the Sangha, tried to make Buddhism the state religion after his re-election. But it met with secular political opposition from his own party, and the bill would not pass Parliament. The state’s hands were bound; one by traditional expectations, and the other by modern, secular law.

Moreover, the modern Sangha had grown in complexity, size, and scale. During the monarchy, the king had the power to appoint the Supreme Patriarch, who in turn, was known for his knowledge of the scriptures, propagation of the *sasana* (religion), and upholding of the *Vinaya*. His office functioned as a “pacifying” arm of the state. But neither the Prime

---

<sup>22</sup> D.G.E. Hall, *Burma* (London, Hutchinson University Library, 1960 [Third edition]), p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Contrary to this quite clearly historical fact, the opponents of the *current Government* and the media who takes its cues from them, have nevertheless attributed this extension of six more months of military rule to simply the army’s refusal to hand power back to the civilians.



Minister of a secular Parliamentary Democracy nor the Chairman of a Revolutionary Council had the religious (hence, moral) authority to appoint the Supreme Patriarch.

By 1962, the Union seemed on the brink of collapse once again, when two important ethnic groups, the Shan and the Kayah, threatened to secede from the nation, a right promised them under the 1947 Constitution as a condition for their participation in the Union and in signing the document.<sup>24</sup> So, on the early morning hours of March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1962, General Ne Win and the army staged a coup, and established the Revolutionary Government of Burma.

### **THE SANGHA AND THE REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT: 1962-1974**

The Revolutionary Council had relatively better success controlling Sangha political activity. The military Government was always concerned that opposition elements would infiltrate and use the Sangha as cover for their political activities, borne out several times, most recently during the 2007 demonstrations.<sup>25</sup> It thus took a no-nonsense approach to the secular behavior of monks and officially stopped all state support for Buddhism, deciding that U Nu's use of religion as a basis for state legitimacy not only tended to further politicize the monkhood, but also neglected the long-standing nationalist goals of Burma's leaders to build a true, secular, socialist state. Ne Win's government attempted once again to register the monkhood on a national basis but had to rescind its order when a monk immolated himself in protest.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this policy towards the Sangha, the Government's leadership would invariably contribute lavishly to the religion (as all good Burma governments must). Before he retired, then head of state Ne Win built a large, imposing pagoda called the Maha Wizaya (Great Victory) in the shadows of the Shwedagon, one of the most venerable of pagodas today.<sup>27</sup> As one astute scholar of the Revolutionary Government put it, the state ideology at the time, called "the Burmese Way to Socialism" was Marxist in inspiration, Leninist in implementation, and Buddhist in its goals.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Mention is made of a "secret side-letter" that vitiated this constitutional promise, but I cannot confirm it first-hand. It is stated in Koh, Kim Seng, "The Pitfalls of a State in Transition: Myanmar (1974-2000)." PhD, National University of Singapore, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> It is no secret now that members of the NLD (National League for Democracy) as well other opposition groups disguised as monks led the violent phases of these demonstrations. See for example, *USA Today's* October 26, 2007's account attributed to the *AP*, titled "Myanmar's monks, 1988 activists linked", front page of "World" section. In part, it states that "The uprising, which persisted for several weeks before being brutally put down by the military late last month, was portrayed at first as a protest against a government hike in fuel prices. In fact, protest leaders say, the marches were orchestrated by longtime activist groups that feared progress on the government's so-called 'road to democracy' would cement the military's power for generations more."

<sup>26</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 357.

<sup>27</sup> This pagoda is a history or political science thesis ready to be written with all its symbolism about state unification and religion's role in it, as its interior iconography and themes clearly display.

<sup>28</sup> Jon Wiant, "Tradition in the Service of Revolution: the Political Symbolism of Taw-Hlan-Ye-Khit, in *Military Rule in Burma Since 1962: A Kaleidoscope of Views*, ed. F. K. Lehman (Singapore, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1981), pp. 59-72.

## THE SANGHA AND THE BSPP GOVERNMENT: 1974-1988

The Revolutionary Government of 1962 was never meant to be a political end in itself. From the start, it was considered by its leaders to be a temporary phase in the development towards a socialist state, something all Burma governments since Independence, democratic and military, explicitly stated they wanted. The contentious question was: who was going to lead it? (Incidentally, that remains the question today as well.)

The new Constitution of 1974 represented the transformation from a provisional Revolutionary Government to a single party system headed by the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). The latter was developed during the twelve years between the coup of 1962 and the 1974 Constitution. General Ne Win stepped down as chairman of the Revolutionary Government and became civilian U Ne Win as President of the BSPP. Structurally, however, the military was closely embedded in the civilian organization of state, reminiscent of the pre-colonial kingdom under the monarchy.

The BSPP Government conducted a successful *sasana* reform on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1980, the first in modern times. Called the First Congregation of All Sangha Orders, its aims were to achieve unity and to purify and promote the *sasana*. One thousand two hundred and eighteen delegates from the nine different Orders from all parts of the country attended to draft a “constitution.” The document (as subsequently amended in the Second Congregation of 1985) adopted certain fundamental rules for the organization of the Sangha, procedures for solving *Vinaya* conflicts, and registration of members of the Sangha. Three organs of the Sangha were formed at the state and division (provincial) levels: the *Ovadacariya* Committee, its legal arm; the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee, its executive; and the Sangha Central Working Committee, its secretariat. This structure more or less imitated government structure. The stated goal of the organization was the supervision and centralization of the Sangha.

It also adopted an organizational structure that went all the way down to the village monastery, virtually paralleling the structure of government, both in ancient and modern times. It had a hierarchy of committees composed of representatives from the nine Orders led by a “president.” The largest of these nine Orders was (and is) the Thudhamma, followed by the second largest, the Shwegyin. The third is the Maha Dwaya with far fewer numbers. These three major Orders are followed by six smaller ones.

The Shwegyin considers itself stricter in discipline than the Thudhamma, the Maha Dwaya considers itself stricter than the Shwegyin, while the former’s own offshoots consider themselves stricter than it. But in fact, all these Orders are distinguished from one another more by the degree of adherence to the *Vinaya*--such as whether or not to wear sandals, or use umbrellas when going on their daily rounds for food--than by any substantive philosophical or doctrinal differences, hence my use of the term “Order” rather than “Sect.” Needless to say, involvement in political activities is strictly forbidden by *all* these Orders.

The amended version of the 1985 Sangha “constitution” not only lists these nine Orders, but also contains a detailed census of the number of ordained monks and novices in every urban ward, village tract, township, city, and province in the country. It showed, at the time, that there were about 280,000 properly ordained monks in the country, with almost as many

novices.<sup>29</sup> Today, it is reported that the number of monks and novices (around 500,000) far outnumber those in the armed forces (approximately 280,000).

With this “purification” of the Sangha in 1985, the Revolutionary Government was actually implementing the Parliamentary Government’s goals; namely, weeding out the criminal, lazy, and corrupt elements which had entered the Sangha especially during times of political and economic turmoil and crises. Although the Sangha was still not a monolithic institution after the purifications, under the BSPP Government, it was by far better unified, organized, and controlled than it had been since British Annexation. The appeasement of the Sangha under U Nu appeared to have been arrested and much of the lawlessness curtailed. Clearly, the BSPP government was as interested in Sangha discipline and its renunciation of secular affairs as were the Sangha’s most venerable and dedicated leaders. It was that common interest which allowed such a “purification” to even take place.

Yet, there remained monks and monasteries on the “fringes” of this mainstream Sangha. Although not entirely bogus, they boycotted, and so did not send representatives to the Central Council of Nayakas nor did they participate in the writing of the Sangha “constitution.” As a result, they neither honored its principles nor recognized its leaders. These monks would not have been properly ordained according to the rules of that “constitution,” and would not have passed their qualifying exams. And as noted above, almost anyone can enter these kinds of unaffiliated monasteries and for almost any reason. They can go in and out of the monasteries and remain monks for any length of time; whereas the majority of those who belong to the mainstream Sangha are usually there for life and live by the *Vinaya*. The latter have earned their right to wear the saffron robe in the same way a person “of the cloth” in Christianity would by having completed divinity school or seminary.

One of the reasons for the relative success in controlling the Sangha under BSPP rule had to do with the general success in quelling the problem of anarchy throughout the country. Regions of the country that ordinary citizens could not have gone to in the late 1950s, because of insurgencies or lawlessness, were accessible in the 1970s. The difference in terms of personal safety in both the countryside and the urban areas between the democratic government and the BSPP government was like night and day.<sup>30</sup> Economically, however, Burma fell behind other Southeast Asian nations, the result of a deliberate, non-market, self-sufficient policy called the “Burmese Way to Socialism.”

---

<sup>29</sup> Sasanato Sanrhan Tann Tam Pran Pwa Re Dutiya Akrim Guim Pon Sum Sangha Acan Awe Pwai Kri Pran Ton Cu Chui Rhay Lac Sammata Mranma Nuinnam To Sangha, *Ahywai Acann Akhe Kham Cann Myan nhan Lup Htum Lup Nann Mya* (Yangon, Sasana Reuici Htana Puim Hnip Tuik, Sasana 2525). Translated and abbreviated, it means, approximately, The Sasana Purification Association and the Socialist Republic of the Union of Myanmar, *Principles and Aims of the Federation of Sangha Organizations and Its Procedures* (Yangon, Department of Religious Affairs, Sasana 2525, [1985]).

<sup>30</sup> Having left the country in the early 1960s, but returning in the late 1970s, then to visit it nearly every year during the last decade, it is something I personally experienced.

**THE SANGHA AND THE SLORC/SPDC GOVERNMENT: 1988-PRESENT.**

This pattern of Sangha control appears to have continued under the current State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), whereby a relatively stable relationship exists between the state and mainstream Sangha. Indeed, until the 2007 protests, there have been no major eruptions by the Sangha for over 30 years. The last occurred in 1974 triggered by the tumultuous conditions created during the funeral of U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations. The 2007 protests are far more complicated and require much more research and analysis than the sensational picture of good and evil scenario depicted by especially the Western media. Besides, neither incident had much to do with state-Sangha *relations* per se, for mere involvement of monks in political affairs is nothing new or special.

The critical question with regard to the 2007 protests is who these (hundred or so) violent monks were, and to what extent they represented the mainstream Sangha, if at all. A distinction thus needs to be made between the mainstream Sangha, rouge monks, and bogus monks (people who had shaved their heads and dressed up as monks), as well as the time and place of particular incidents during the 2007 protests. The eight days of demonstrations in Yangon after altercations up-country were generally peaceful, so that security forces on hand simply watched the demonstrations without reacting. Large numbers of monks were cordoned-off by hand-holding people as if “protecting” them, the image that was most often broadcast. But when political opposition forces dressed in saffron robes and shaved heads high-jacked what had been a peaceful demonstration, it turned violent. At that point, an *ovada* (religious edict or command) was issued by the Yangon *sayadaws* (abbots), which ordered all its members to return to their respective monasteries. Apparently all did, except for a small group of about one hundred monks who disobeyed it. Towards the second half of September, they were bused in from outside the city, and led the violent phases of the protests inciting protesters with bull horns and flags, sometimes physically intimidating other monks who refused to participate, and bullying others to join them. Saffron robes in Yangon were said to have sold out; an unheard of phenomenon even during the *Kathina* (robe giving) season that follows the Monsoons. So clearly, there were secular politicians dressed up as monks with shaven heads.

Indeed, any monk who disobeyed the *ovada* would not only reveal his intentions, but that he probably did not belong to the mainstream Sangha. And even if they did, disobeying the *ovada* automatically made them rogue monks, forfeiting whatever protection they had under ecclesiastical law or social custom. It was also in fringe monasteries that arms, ammunition, and pornography were subsequently said to have been found.<sup>31</sup> What is rather curious and not published in any of the vaunted Western (and/or Westernized) “free press” is that the 2006 budget of the National Endowment for Democracy based in Washington DC revealed that \$15,000 was earmarked for “educating” monks in Burma on how to protest in “democratic”

---

<sup>31</sup> This has been confirmed not only by the domestic press (see, *The Myanmar Information Committee of Yangon*, dated October 7, 2007) which has a detailed list of names, events, monasteries, townships, and other information on the issue that can be checked, but by independent observers, a few of whom were in-country to verify the reports. See *The Nation* (Bangkok) for September 26<sup>th</sup> through October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007. While some of the AP’s accounts appear to have reported on the issue independently, perhaps first-hand, others such as the *Indian Express*, *USA Today*, and *The First Post* depended on secondary sources.

ways.<sup>32</sup> The total amount of money given by this organization to support “democratic activities” in Burma in 2006 alone totaled \$3,223,354. (See Appendix 1)

The point is that these monks who did not return to their monasteries no more represent the mainstream Sangha than Catholic priests convicted of sexual abuse in the United States represent the Catholic community, or the Taliban, mainstream Islam. They certainly cannot be said to represent the country’s moral authority as claimed. The truly devout Buddhist would consider them and their behavior a disgrace to the Religion, the robe, and the Sangha.

By the time the shooting itself occurred, which was on September 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, there were no monks left, even bogus ones, according to eye witnesses whom I interviewed personally. And the area of confrontation comprised approximately three blocks: from the traffic lights at the bottom of the railway bridge on Sule Pagoda Road to about the fire-station. This is hardly the “saffron revolution” so sensationally touted in the media. It was largely not “saffron” and certainly was not a “revolution”.

Thus, it is clear that the presence and activity of political, rogue, and bogus monks is not new, most of them probably belonging to the “fringe” Orders that are ordinarily marginalized by the general population, state, and mainstream Sangha, particularly in terms of donations and patronage, perhaps part of the reason for their behavior in the first place.

It would also be safe to conclude that the reasons for protests and demonstrations by monks per se have nothing to do with religious doctrine (or even religious issues), and certainly cannot be construed as evidence that they were clamoring for the installation of modern political ideologies such as democracy, or challenging the legitimacy and authority of the state. Rather, more personal, socio-economic, and local factors seem to have been at the root of their behavior, with of course, outside financial support, as demonstrated.

What is most telling about the overall Western image of “dissent” regarding recent Burmese history is that beginning only with 1988 did any kind of protest against the Government become associated with and characterized as “pro-democracy,” which, theretofore, had been interpreted intrinsically. Why? Because only after 1988 was Burma consciously and deliberately placed in a broader, “consolidated vision” (to use the late Edward Said’s apt phrase) that celebrated the “triumph” of democracy over communism, perhaps beginning with Perestroika and Glasnost, and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Thereafter, this triumphalist framework of analysis was used to reinterpret virtually all such incidents in the

---

<sup>32</sup> The information given below is public domain copied verbatim and can be (at least was) accessible via the web site of the National Endowment for Democracy. See Appendix I for the entire budget for financing “democracy” in Burma.

Burma

A. Internal Organizing and Coalition-Building

\$15,000

To monitor the human rights situation in Burma and educate monks and Buddhist lay people about the nonviolent struggle for democracy in Burma. The organization will produce and distribute material, including pamphlets, stickers, and calendars, on human rights and democracy and support efforts to organize the Buddhist community inside Burma.”

This page is dated September 27, 2007: the day after the shooting in Yangon began. See also F. William Engdahl’s piece called “Myanmar’s ‘Saffron Revolution’: Geopolitics Behind the Protest Movement,” in *Global Research*, October 15, 2007, where the protests are put into a larger framework.

“Third World,” some even retroactively: South Africa and Nelson Mandela, China and Tiananmen, Bhutto and Pakistan, Aquino and the Philippines, and of course, Suu Kyi and Burma.

Once placed in that binary framework of analysis, both the 1988 and 2007 protests became issues *only* of democracy and freedom versus authoritarianism and tyranny. Even violent, rogue, and bogus monks--the bane of Burmese society rather than their exemplars, having broken virtually every tenet of the Buddha's teachings--became, in the Western and Westernized Press, “pro-democracy” freedom fighters against an authoritarian government. This is the worst kind of revisionism one can imagine, whereby history is made (to use a famous phrase of the late Stephen J. Gould) “to be commensurate with its desired consequences”; in this case, of a currently fashionable and popular political ideology. Perhaps more important in terms of the focus of this essay, the 2007 incident does not speak to the long-term, structural relationship between state and Sangha, but to the many ways in which the saffron robe is used for a variety of non-religious purposes.

In any case, and regardless of how 2007 is interpreted, since the 1980 and 1985 “purifications,” the mainstream Sangha has been structurally integrated into the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs.<sup>33</sup> (The new 2008 Constitution has one sentence on the Sangha that essentially preserves the status quo.) What all this means is that the Sangha has been, since 1980, and is very much today an integral part of Government. It is about as close an integrated, structural relationship that one is going to get in Burma, given the Sangha's history as an extremely independent organization. How long the Sangha will stay integrated into the state depends upon the future make-up of the state itself—whether it remains strong or weakens—; the extent to which society changes fundamentally to alter Buddhism's role in it, and the degree to which outside financial support makes it in the interests especially of independent minded monasteries and their abbotts to assert their autonomy. Otherwise, the political, economic, and symbolic relationship between religion and the state will probably remain more or less the same in the near future.

## CONCLUSION

Several conclusions may be in order. First, as shown above, what was once mainly a religious and ideological relationship re-enacted in ritual and ceremony, shaped mainly by economic factors, became, in time, increasingly more political whose problems were resolved more and more in the political arena in which physical confrontation and other methods of the modern state increasingly prevailed, replacing ritual and ceremony. And that was not because the state had become more military (for that was also the modus operandi during the democratic period); rather, it was because the state had become more *modern and secular*. More specifically, the reason for this shift in character from an economic to a more political relationship was that during the pre-colonial period, the economy was almost totally agrarian and was the wherewithal on which *both* the state and Sangha depended; hence, the heart of their relationship was economic.

---

<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Thailand has placed the Sangha in the Ministry of Education.

In colonial and post-colonial times, however, the economy had become much more modern and diverse, whereby a large part of it was no longer agrarian, so that neither state nor Sangha was as dependent on agriculture as they had been before. Without the previous intense “competition” for the main material resource in society, the focus of their relationship also changed: to the political arena. Moreover, the heavily political nature of Colonialism and Nationalism which increasingly influenced members of the Sangha in the 20<sup>th</sup> century added to the character of that relationship. And most recently, the financial support of the Sangha by external forces to defy the state must be considered part of the equation as well. That, of course, is not to say that ritual, religious, and economic factors no longer play a part; they did and still do. They simply are no longer as paramount or pressing as the political ones.

Second, Burma scholars familiar with the subject have suggested that throughout the country’s history, the relative orthodoxy of the Sangha has gone hand in hand with a strong state while the relative unorthodoxy of the Sangha, with a weak state.<sup>34</sup> The stronger the state is, the “purer” and more cohesive the Sangha; the weaker the state is, the more impure and fissiparous the Sangha. This dictum can be relatively easily documented, and actually meant for the monarchical period;<sup>35</sup> but what about the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? If the 2007 protests are an event that epitomizes a true Sangha-State conflict, is it suggestive of a weak state and an impure Sangha, or a strong state and a pure Sangha?

I am inclined to interpret the current relationship as the latter: a strong State and orthodox Sangha rather than a weak state and impure. In terms of the strength of the state—its physical control of the country’s territory and population; its ideological and administrative integration of cultures and languages; its ability to collect taxes, enforce laws, and disseminate education in the bulk of the country; its development of many infrastructural linkages in the past twenty-years that did not exist before; its direct access to important raw materials and other resources in nearly every nook and cranny of the country—there is no comparison to earlier times.

As for the Sangha’s purity or impurity, the violent phases of the 2007 protests are no indication of its impurity for it was perpetrated by a miniscule number of “monks” (even had they not been politicians disguised as monks) and do not represent the “orthodox” Sangha of nearly 300,000 members. Moreover, protests on such a scale by the Sangha have not been seen in nearly thirty years, so that this event is more an exception than the rule. In addition, there was considerable financial support and interference by external forces that changes the nature of the relationship by taking it outside its indigenous contexts. Finally, because the original peaceful event was high-jacked by political groups, it rendered the event less a genuine tension between state and Sangha than one between state and its *secular* political opposition.

Earlier as well, under Ne Win’s (strong) Revolutionary Council, the Sangha was clearly more orthodox (both in image and in fact), whereas during U Nu’s (weak) Parliamentary Democracy the Sangha was obviously “impure” and uncontrollable (both in image and in fact). Indeed, that one of the most important events to ever occur in a Buddhist country (the sixth Buddhist Synod) was held during his regime reveals the state’s *weakness* rather than

---

<sup>34</sup> Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and state in Burma: A study of monastic sectarianism and leadership*, ed. John P. Ferguson (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> See Michael Aung-Thwin, *Sasana Reform...\**.

strength, for it was more reflective of appeasement than control of the Sangha. And as noted above, his attempt to make Buddhism the state religion also failed.

To be sure, and although in general and on the surface such a relationship suggested by Burma scholars seems to be borne out, it is more complicated, both in terms of analysis and evidence. The topic needs much more and better research, evidence, and analysis, particularly in the current atmosphere of the field of Burma studies where one's answer often depends on whether one *wants* the state or Sangha to appear weak or strong.

Third, when we speak of “the” Sangha or “the State”, there is often an assumption that both are monolithic entities: that everyone belonging to, and every component of each institution walks in lock-step and thinks alike. To be sure, *most* of the members of the Sangha are probably more similar to each other than different, as *most* of the members of the state probably share more similarities than differences, even if smaller elements within it might suggest otherwise. There is also no question that the majority of the monks in Myanmar's Sangha are in it for the right (that is, religious) reasons even if some numbers in it violate the *Vinaya* in the most profound ways. We can probably say much the same thing with regard to those who “belong” to the State: they share a “consolidated vision” even if there is a minority who may not. The question then becomes one of agency once again. What do we, as scholars, emphasize—the majority or the minority? I'm afraid this is an irresolvable issue of personal preferences and perspectives.

And finally, perhaps most important to Myanmar's overall history, it appears that the Sangha more often than not mirrored the way state and society was: when it was anarchic and divisive, so was the Sangha; when it was orderly and unified, so was the Sangha. In pre-colonial Myanmar, certainly, this was the case most of the time. In the modern history of Myanmar as well, it appears to have been true. Indeed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the Sangha often resembled a *political party*: with a common ideology, organization, membership, rules and regulations, and often exhibiting similar behavior.

Yet, and despite all of it, in the *longue duree* of Myanmar's history, more often than not the Sangha was “pacifier” and integrator of the state, the moral arbiter of society, the most important check and balance to the power of the state, than it was an agitator and divider, even if at times, the latter images are sensationalized and placed at center stage as if it were the rule rather than the exception.



**APPENDIX 1****THE 2006 BUDGET OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY****Burma****A. Internal Organizing and Coalition-Building**

*\$15,000*

To monitor the human rights situation in Burma and educate monks and Buddhist lay people about the nonviolent struggle for democracy in Burma. The organization will produce and distribute material, including pamphlets, stickers, and calendars, on human rights and democracy and support efforts to organize the Buddhist community inside Burma.

*\$80,000\**

To support the organizing efforts of prodemocracy groups in Burma. The organization will distribute human rights and democracy materials inside Burma, train party activists in effective techniques of nonviolent political action, and provide humanitarian support for party activists and others along the Thai-Burma border and inside Burma.

*\$53,300\**

To strengthen the ability of the Burmese people to participate in peaceful efforts to promote democracy and political reconciliation in Burma. The forum will offer community-organizing training courses and produce several Burmese-language reports on successful examples of democracy movements from around the world.

*\$33,000\**

To promote political capacity building in northern Burma. The project will consist of four interrelated components the translation and publication of a course on democratic theory, workshops in democratic theory and practice, political study groups, and a community library.

*\$35,000\**

To improve access to information and communications technology in Burma. The institute will establish three adult education learning centers in Burma, which will provide classes in subjects such as business management, journalism, and information technology, and offer reasonably-priced internet access.

*\$85,000\**

To support efforts to bring about national reconciliation and political reform in Burma. The coalition will work to increase contact, trust, and cooperation between ethnic and prodemocracy forces, expand its organizing activities inside Burma, and draw international attention to the political situation inside the country.

*\$15,000\**

To empower ethnic nationality political parties and to promote their inclusion in the political process. The organization will support efforts to educate key stakeholders about a federal constitution and democratic state constitutions within a federal framework, and support organizing efforts to promote ethnic nationality participation in resolving Burma's long-standing political and economic problems.

*\$50,000\**

To strengthen civil society in Burma by supporting former political prisoners and activists. The organization will work with partners inside Burma to establish two institutions for former political prisoners that provide educational opportunities, modern communication facilities, and an emergency medical support fund.

#### **International Republican Institute**

*\$47,002\**

To strengthen the technological capacity of prodemocracy groups working in Burma. IRI will create a team of technicians who can provide skills and knowledge to democratic forces and upgrade the existing computer technology of pro-democracy organizations.

#### **International Republican Institute**

*\$350,000\**

To support efforts to coordinate prodemocracy groups' activities inside Burma. The organization will work to expand its network of democracy activists in Burma, train more activists in nonviolent political action, and push for reform of the Burmese military.

#### **International Republican Institute**

*\$230,000*

To promote democracy in Burma. IRI will support the efforts of prodemocracy activists in exile to provide financial, logistical, and technical support to nonviolent political activists inside Burma.

### **B. Independent Media**

*\$22,777\**

To support increased access to information inside Burma by promoting the use of information and communication technology. The organization will provide technology training to Burmese journalists, distribute news and information inside Burma through the Internet, transcribe information into Burmese Unicode, and provide a secure website for users in Burma to share information.

*\$40,000*

To improve the professional capacity of Burmese journalists and to facilitate cooperation among Burma-related media groups. The group will organize and convene the fourth Burma Media Conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The conference will bring together more than 120 journalists who cover Burma to discuss issues, exchange ideas, and coordinate activities related to freedom of information and expression in Burma.

*\$175,000\**

To support Burmese- and ethnic-language radio broadcasts of independent news and opinion into Burma. The organization will improve the quality of its programs, invest in advanced training and education for its staff, and maintain regional infrastructure for its broadcasts.

*\$175,000\**

To promote access to independent media in Burma. The organization will produce and broadcast a Burmese-language satellite television program to complement its long-running daily shortwave radio program.

*\$133,741\**

To support independent media in Burma and to provide independent news and information about Burma and events in Southeast Asia. The organization will produce a monthly English-language news magazine, distribute a daily electronic news bulletin, and maintain a Burmese- and English-language website.

*\$15,000*

To inform people in Burma about news and events in eastern Burma and to expose them to basic principles of human rights and democracy. The organization will produce an independent, bi-weekly Burmese-language newspaper covering news and issues for the Karenni community in Burma, in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, and for ethnic and prodemocracy groups in exile.

*\$17,750\**

To inform Karen people in Burma about events and news and to expose them to basic principles of human rights and democracy. The organization will publish a 32-page newsletter in Burmese and Karen that provides an alternative news source for Karen people in Burma, in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, and for ethnic and prodemocracy groups in exile.

*\$15,700\**

To encourage a deeper and more critical understanding of democratic practice and theory within the Burmese democracy movement. The group will translate and print selected articles from each issue of the Journal of Democracy and distribute the Burmese-language translations to democracy activists and others inside Burma and in exile.

*\$40,000\**

To provide independent and accurate information about the state of Burma and a forum to discuss a wide range of issues. The news group will produce a daily electronic information service that covers developments in Burma, India, and the India-Burma border; maintain a Burmese- and English-language website; publish a monthly Burmese-language newspaper; organize forums on India's Burma policy; and run a journalism internship program.

*\$12,000\**

To provide accurate and reliable information about political, social, and economic developments in Arakan State. The organization will operate a daily news service in English and Burmese concentrating on current events and human rights in Arakan State.

*\$150,000\**

To support independent media in Burma. The organization will publish and distribute inside Burma an independent, monthly Burmese-language newspaper focusing on the struggle for human rights and democracy and maintain a Burmese- and English-language website.

*\$27,934\**

To publish a bilingual, monthly newspaper. The newspaper will provide accurate and reliable information to the Shan and wider Burmese communities, as well as Thai and international audiences, about political, social, and economic developments in Shan State. The newspaper will also provide information about the efforts of prodemocracy, student, ethnic, and labor organizations to promote peace and democracy in Burma.

### **C. Human Rights Education, Documentation, and Advocacy**

*\$50,000\**

To educate and empower teachers and promote civic education in Burma. The organization will continue a civic education program for Burmese teachers from Karen, Karenni, and Mon States in Burma and develop teams of teacher-trainers who will travel into Burma to reach even less accessible populations. The organization will also publish a small resource book containing essential democracy and human rights documents that can be used in training workshops and classrooms.

*\$125,000\**

To support human rights in Burma by raising awareness about, and supporting, political prisoners. The organization will research and document the situation of political prisoners inside Burma; provide assistance to political prisoners, former political prisoners, and their families; and raise international awareness about the human rights crisis inside Burma.

*\$90,000\**

To promote respect for human rights and the rule of law in Burma. The organization will manage a legal research and education program, produce a quarterly journal on legal issues, organize an in-depth training program, and advocate for rule of law and democracy in Burma.

*\$35,000\**

To document human rights violations and social conditions in Burma. Funds will support the work of a photographer and writer to produce photographs and essays on political repression, forced relocation, forced labor, and other human rights violations in Burma.

*\$45,000\**

To publicize the human rights situation in Chin State, Burma. The organization will publish and distribute a human rights newsletter, advocate on human rights issues internationally, and organize a conference inside Burma.

*\$60,000\**

To promote respect for human rights and to build the capacity of local human rights organizations through training courses, written material, and consultations. The organization will organize a human rights trainers' forum and training-of-trainer courses, offer a human rights internship program for ethnic-nationality youth, and publish an ethnic language version of its human rights manual.

*\$75,000\**

To document the human rights situation and promote human rights education in Mon State and among Mon refugees. The organization runs six core projects human rights documentation, human rights and civic education, human rights defenders, civil society development, ethnic-language publications, and women's and children's rights.

*\$45,000\**

To build inter-ethnic cooperation and solidarity through education programs for refugees and ethnic populations inside Burma. The committee's programs will strengthen local educational capacity through curriculum development, educational research, teacher training, educational material development, and management training workshops.

*\$18,150\**

To document human rights violations in eastern Burma. The organization will publish and distribute monthly ethnic- and English-language human rights newsletters to audiences in Shan state, the exile community in Thailand, and the broader international community.

#### **D. International Advocacy and Organizing**

*\$80,000\**

To support efforts in Southeast Asia to increase pressure for political reform in Burma. The organization will organize a campaign by parliamentarians from ASEAN countries to secure the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, improve the human rights situation in Burma, and encourage the Association of Southeast Asian Nationals (ASEAN) to adopt a policy toward Burma that supports political reform.

*\$300,000\**

To support efforts to create a political environment in Burma and in the international community conducive to resolving Burma's long-standing political crisis. The organization will support the coordination of international and domestic political action, coalition building, transition planning, and institutional development.

*\$40,000\**

To encourage and support grassroots activism in the ASEAN countries on the issue of democracy and human rights in Burma. The organization will conduct four core activities research and data collection, networking with regional and international NGOs, campaigning and public outreach, and an internship program for Burmese ethnic nationality youth.

*\$50,000*

To increase awareness about political developments in Burma and to strengthen international support for Burma's prodemocracy movement. The institute will work to ensure that important research and reports produced in Thailand by Burmese democracy activists reach a targeted audience in the international community, keep the international media informed of important political initiatives and developments in Burma, and coordinate various initiatives to increase pressure on the regime for reform.

*\$35,000\**

To strengthen support for democracy in Burma throughout Asia. The organization will engage and encourage governments, organizations, and individuals to take a supportive role in the effort to promote freedom in Burma, to secure the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and to ensure that any national reconciliation process includes the National League for Democracy and leading ethnic-nationality prodemocracy parties.

*\$40,000\**

To strengthen Thai support for democracy in Burma. The organization will engage in policy advocacy, public information campaigns, legal support to Burmese who suffer human rights violations in Thailand, and efforts to strengthen Burmese prodemocracy organizations in Thailand.

### **E. Ethnic Nationalities**

*\$32,000\**

To publish and distribute reliable information about federalism and the Chin State Constitution. The forum will support a series of training-of-trainers courses on issues of federalism, constitutionalism, and the role of Chin State in a future federal structure of Burma, and convene a meeting of its elected leadership to evaluate the forum's performance and plan for future activities.

*\$25,000\**

To support the institutional capacity of the committee to distribute humanitarian aid and to document the plight of the IDP Karen population. The committee will publish a bi-monthly newsletter, upgrade its computer equipment, and provide training courses for its field staff.

*\$20,000\**

To promote civic awareness and participation in Mon State. The organization will produce a Mon-language journal and operate a civic education program designed to encourage increased cooperation and understanding among Mon youth.

*\$25,000\**

To promote greater understanding of democracy and human rights among the Palaung people and empower Palaung youth to strengthen community networks and organizations. The organization will organize a series of three human rights and democracy trainings for Palaung youth from inside Burma.

*\$25,000\**

To build the capacity of youth from Shan State and to increase youth participation in the movement for social and political change leading toward a genuine democratic Burma. The school will educate, train, and empower ethnic young people from Shan State through nine months of English-language, social studies, and computer courses.

**F. Women's Participation and Empowerment**

*\$50,000\**

To promote understanding among Burmese women of human rights, women's rights, democracy, and community development. The organization will maintain community libraries; publish a bi-monthly Burmese-language journal; launch public awareness campaigns about women's rights, gender equality, and social change; run an internship program; manage a center for migrant workers; hold roundtable discussions and commemorative events; organize a week-long leadership workshop; and run a six-month long intensive women's leadership school.

*\$20,000*

To promote the rights of women and children in northern Burma and encourage understanding and cooperation among Burman and ethnic-minority women. The organization will maintain a central office to carry out a range of activities to support the empowerment of Kachin women, including the publication of a newsletter, booklets, and other materials on democracy and women's rights.

*\$17,500\**

To educate Karen people about democracy, human rights, and current affairs and to ensure Karen women's participation in the drafting of a Karen State constitution. The organization will conduct democracy and human rights courses and hold workshops to discuss and gather feedback on the Karen State Constitution in refugee camps, high schools, and for the broader community.

*\$35,000\*/*

To increase women's participation in Burma's democracy movement and provide Shan women with the necessary skills to assume decision-making positions in their communities and organizations. Projects will include women's empowerment and capacity building workshops, documentation and reporting on the situation of women in Shan State, and basic social services for Shan women.

*\$55,000\**

To promote increased understanding among Burmese women of human rights, women's rights, democracy, federalism, peace-building, community development, and health issues. Projects will include a series of women's rights and empowerment training workshops for Burmese refugees; capacity-building workshops for Burmese women in India, Thailand, and Bangladesh; and an ongoing peace-advocacy program.

*\$12,500\**

To educate, train, and empower Burmese women in exile in India to take a more active role in the prodemocracy struggle and to promote women's rights in Burma and among the exile community. The group will organize training courses on politics, democratic institutions, and organizational systems and create a forum for ethnic and Burmese women to discuss common issues and concerns.