The Nationalist Coup, Prophetic Church, and Engaged Buddhists

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Introduction

To most people in the West, Asian Buddhism means a religion of peace and compassion. Their perception of Asian Buddhism is the Dalai Lama's version of peaceful Buddhism. Yet the reality of Asian Buddhism is often something very different. If you do not look at Buddhism paradoxically, you would not see its full reality. In order to see its full reality, you need to look at Buddhism through the paradoxical lenses. If you do so, you would see at least two forms of Buddhism: an amoral Buddhism, which promotes and supports military violence and religious nationalism and—a moral Buddhism, which confronts military dictatorship and coup. We will first look at the amoral form of militant Buddhism and explore how religion plays a role in the politics of nationalism and coup. We will then suggest how we should look at the moral form of Buddhism and explore how moral Buddhism could play a role in promoting justice and peace.

The amoral form of nationalist Buddhism is found in two Asian nations—Sri Lanka and Myanmar. In Sri Lanka, we see how the ethnic majority Sinhalese Buddhists practice nationalism and violence against the ethnic minority Tamil ethnic Hindus and Christians. Likewise, we see how the majority Bamar Buddhists practice the politics of nationalism and violence against the ethnic minority Christians and non-Buddhist groups. History tells us that Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar has imitated the militant Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka since the British colonial rule.[1] We will explore why and how Buddhist nationalism and the coup arose and how the church responds to Buddhist nationalism and the coup. We will then show how the prophetic church and engaged Buddhists[2] interreligiously resist the nationalist coup.

The Movement of Buddhist Nationalism

I wish to highlight the movements of Buddhist nationalism in three different periods. First, Buddhist nationalism traces its roots to the British colonial period in the 19th century. Buddhist nationalism in the colonial period arose as an anti-colonialism or an anti-Westernism.[3] It was during this period that the Burma Independence Army (BIA) was formed in 1941 to resist the British. Today, military see themselves as the successors of the BIA. While one might agree that the BIA played an important role in the struggle for national independence on January 4, 1948, today the military fail to play their moral responsibilities as the protectors of nation and citizens. Instead, they adopt the colonial legacy and practice what I call an internal form of military colonialism. They become the post-colonial military oppressors of their fellow citizens.

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[1] Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 115-230.

[2] The term "engaged Buddhism" was coined in the 1960s by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. See Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, ed, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1-44.

[3] Along the same line of this thought, see Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

In the decades following the end of the British's external form of colonialism, the military regarded themselves as the rightful institution to rule the post-colonial nation. Their internal form of colonialism derives from their nationalist perception of state sovereignty. While most states in the democratic world possess the army, the military in Myanmar hold the claim that they possess the state and nation. This perception of state sovereignty derives from the first coup in 1962 when the regime took power 14 years after national independence from the British in 1948. They believe that their duty is not only to defend the nation's sovereignty from external colonialism, but also to prevent the disintegration of different ethnic groups. Whoever oppose their nationalist vision of military defense and national integration are regarded as criminals.[4]

The second movement of Buddhist nationalism emerged as an anti-ethnic minority or non-Buddhist groups. In his book *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Donald Smith observes that the post-independence Buddhist nationalism is rooted in U Nu's nationalist slogan: *amyo* (only the Bamar race); *barthar* (only Burmese language); and *tharthanar* (only Buddhist religion). U Nu was one of the ideological founders of nationalism and the first Prime Minister of Myanmar under the provisions of the 1947 Constitutions. According to U Nu, "To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist."[5] This nationalist slogan lies at the heart of Buddhist nationalists. The nationalist slogan proposed by U Nu has become the basis for Burmanization and Buddhistization that shape the post-colonial nationalist imagination of "faith (religious identity) and flag (political identity).[6] Buddhist nationalism has a strong sense of political and religious imagination.[7]

The idea of "Make Buddhism Great Again" has become a motivation for Buddhist nationalists' imagination of nation-building. They make Buddhism great again by nationalizing and politicizing it as a dominant state religion. It was during this period (roughly in 1966) that Buddhist nationalist government also expelled some Western missionaries from the nation. They then imagined the political and religious identity construction of Burmese community by assimilating the ethnic minority Christians into the dominant Buddhist cultures and by discriminating against their Christian identity. To mobilize Buddhist nationalism and political violence against non-Bamar ethnic groups, ultra-nationalist monks formed a nationalist organization called "Ma Ba Tha" in early 2014. At the core of Ba Ma Tha's worldview is a dissatisfaction with marriage between Buddhists and people of other religions and ethnicities.[8] Aung San Suu Kyi, a Noble Peace Laureate and State Counsellor—despite being a Bamar Buddhist—is seen by Buddhist nationalists as a national betrayer because she married a British.

Religion plays a role in national identity imagination. Religion provides ethnic Buddhist groups with a source of motivation for their imagination of communal and individual identity.[9] Religion for ethnic Buddhists provides a source for building what Southeast Asianist Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities."[10] Burmanization (race) and Buddhistization (religion)

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[4] Mikael Gravers, "Tatmadaw's coup in 2021: The return of totalitarian rule? in *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, et al. by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (London: T&T Clark, 2022): 249-256.

[5] Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 320.

[6] Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 18.

[7] I first talked about this topic at All Hands Myanmar at Stanford and Bay Area, California. I am indebted to Scot Marciel, former U.S Ambassador to Myanmar, for his invitation to talk to his colleagues.

[8] Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 31.

[9] See, for instance, J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-31.

[10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), xi-xii.

are two of the most potent forces that shape the post-colonial Buddhist nationalist imagination of what Joseph Liow states "faith" (religious identity) and "flag" (political identity). Buddhist nationalists imagine the political and religious identity construction of Burmese community by assimilating the minority ethnic groups and by discriminating against their cultural identity. In the following we will briefly explore the third movement of Buddhist nationalism in a post-coup.

The Rise of the Nationalist Coup in early 2021

A new kind of Buddhist nationalism in the post-coup emerged not only as an anti-ethnic minority, but also as an anti-ethnic Bamar majority groups. Now the conflict is not just between Buddhists and Christians, but among the Bamar Buddhists. Socially engaged Buddhists introduce the contradictory idea of *dharma* and *adharma*. *Adharma* or evil is an opposite of a Buddhist doctrine of *dharma*, which is truth. The conflict is not just about ethnic identity conflict, but also about ideology conflict between the regime's conception of "disciplined democracy" and civilians' conception of federal democracy. The regime focuses on the disciplined democracy, which implies the idea of discipline within the boundaries set by the military.[11] Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are strongly restricted by the regime. Civilians oppose such an undemocratic idea of "disciplined democracy" as *adharma*. The rise of the coup creates an opportunity for interreligious solidarity and ethnic reconciliation.

Coming Together: Prophetic Christians and Engaged Buddhists

As noted earlier, religion has played a dividing role in the politics of nationalism. Yet the rise of the nationalist coup creates an opportunity for different religious groups to come together in bridging their diverse faiths to resist the coup. The urgency of resisting the coup has brought the protesters from different religions together. Generation Z, who are the leaders of this movement often say, "There is no Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist; there is only people of Myanmar." It should be noted that the goal of this revolutionary movement led by Gen z is not to seek political status, but to end the nationalist regime. When it comes to the church's response to the nationalist coup, there are generally three different groups of Christians in Myanmar.[12]

The first group is represented by political Christians. For them, the church's response to the politics of coup is natural. They regard political involvement as their vocation. On the contrast, the second group is represented by apolitical Christians. They want to withdraw their faith from politics. They literally read Rom. 13:1-7 as a text for justification of their obedience to the ruling authorities. The third group is represented by prophetic Christians. They regard Moses and some prophets in the Old Testament as the models for their prophetic response to the nationalist coup. They are convinced that God is not neutral in the context of socio-political evil but resists evil. Thus, they justify their prophetic resistance to the coup as an embodiment of the prophetic God. Prophetic Christians share their political involvement with engaged Buddhists.

In his famous book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann argues that there is twofold ethic of prophetic church: "Prophetic criticism and the embrace of pathos."[13] The first task of prophetic church is to embrace the suffering people. The second is to criticize the regime

[11] See Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 167-181.
[12] I first talked about this topic at Harvard University, March 10, 2021.
[13] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniversary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018), 39-58.

that causes suffering and social injustice. For example, the narrative of the Exodus is designed to show the radical criticism and radical delegitimizing of the Egyptian empire.[14] Brueggemann also argues that the church's prophetic life is characterized by its prophetic imagination and prophetic implementation. Imagination comes first before implementation. Imagination energizes the practical implementation of the church in the context of political domination. The church should have the courage to imagine and then implement such an imagination.[15] A spiritual act of prayer is not enough. Likewise, engaged Buddhists believe that a spiritual act of meditation is not enough in the context of social injustice. Buddhist social engagement must be taken for liberation. It is in this common conviction that prophetic Christians and engaged Buddhists have decided to join the interreligious dimensions of Civil Disobedience (CDM) against the coup.

They consider the CDM to be the most effective nonviolent form of resistance to the coup. There are various forms of prophetic resistance to the nationalist coup. In a dictatorial context where life is highly risky, open resistance to the state is not the only option. The alternate option is hidden resistance.[16] Some are raising funds to support the families who lost their loved ones in the protests. Behind the scenes, others prepare meal for the protesters at the frontlines. The vast majority of people of Myanmar are quite generous in their compassionate actions for extending hospitality and healing to the people across religious and ethnic barriers.

Is Buddhism a Democratic Religion? An Ethical Approach

It is not enough to describe the problem of Buddhist nationalism. We need to propose an alternate solution for the problem of Buddhist nationalism. We ask a critical question. Is Buddhism a democratic religion? The answer depends on how we understand democracy. In 1958, U Chan Htoon, a Bamar Buddhist judge of the Supreme Court and Secretary General of the Buddha Sasana Council, declared that Buddhism is democratic and that its emphasis on self-reliance and freedom strongly supports democratic values. Chan Htoon declared:

> Buddhism therefore tends to promote an individualistic outlook which is characteristic of Buddhists, both in their personal relationships and their national life. The rejection of all forms of authoritarianism stems from the Buddha's insistence upon freedom of will and choice… It is thus the anthesis of the totalitarian concept in which the individual has only a group-existence subordinate to the needs of the state.[17]

Likewise, a Sri Lankan Buddhist R.S.S. Gunewardene, affirmatively declared:

> Democracy is not something new in Asia and is not Western-imposed as many people in the West used to think…Democracy is inherent in the very principles of Buddhism...Tolerance, individual freedom and responsibility, the spirit of understanding, the value of individual and collective service, all these constitute a part of the Buddhist philosophy of life.[18]

[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Ibid., 39-58.
[16] See, for instance, Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.
[17] U Chan Htoon, *Address to the Sixteenth Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom* (Rangoon: Union Buddha Sasana Council Press, 1958), here 9.
[18] R.S.S. Gunewardene, "South and Southeast Asia Look at the United States," in *Nationalism and Progress in Free Asia*, ed. Philip W. Thayer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 21.

Our concern here is not with how we impose Buddhism on democracy, but with how we discern the ethical role of Buddhism in shaping a public vision of democracy and human rights in a Buddhist nation. Using Buddhism as a local source for shaping a moral vision of democracy is helpful in response to Buddhist nationalism. Instead of adopting a Western style of liberal democracy, it is important to use Buddhism as a local source. In discerning the relationship between democracy and Buddhism, we recognize Buddhism's relation to human rights and freedom. In her classic book *Freedom from Fear,* Burmese Buddhist politician Aung San Suu Kyi argues that democracy is understood in Myanmar as freedom. She said, "the people of Burma view democracy not merely as a form of government but as an integrated social and ideological system based on respect for the individual."[19] People in Myanmar see democracy as freedom based on the needs of human rights and freedom of expression without fear.

This kind of ethical approach to Buddhism is contextually helpful for the exchange of Christian-Buddhist interreligious concepts of democracy. As I said earlier, if religion serves as a source of conflict, then religion should be seen as a potential source of conflict transformation in a religiously diverse nation. Of course, Christianity and Buddhism share theological differences, yet they share ethical similarities. Comparatively speaking, democracy is inherent in the principles of Buddhist and Christian doctrines of individual freedom, nonviolence, human rights, and human ethical responsibility for the social service of the common good of society (Jer. 29:7).

As Suu Kyi argues in her book *Freedom from Fear,* ten duties of Buddhist rulers are widely known as a yardstick for modern government. Ten duties include: "liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, austerity, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-opposition (to the will of the people)." In light of these duties, it is clear that the military rulers' actions are not democratic at all. Their duties are to respect for the will of the people, to seek the welfare of the country, and to protect the people. Instead, they are internal colonizers of their own people in the post-colonial era. As a non-democratic country, Myanmar has long practiced selection rather than election. The military rulers have selected themselves without the election by the civilians. The November election in 2020 was a free and fair election, but the regime complained that it was marred by frauds without showing evidence. On February 1, 2021, they seized power by detaining the civilian leader Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other civilian officials. Within nearly two years of the coup, thousands of protesters were killed, thousands of civilian houses and church buildings were burned down, and millions of people left their homes.

In *The New York Times'* interview with Capt. Tun Myant Aung, a deserted soldier who joined the anti-coup movement, on March 28, 2021, he said, "the military army see protesters as criminals." He added, "I love the military so much, but the message I want to give my fellow soldiers is: if are choosing between the country and the military, please choose the country." This shows that prophetic Christians and engaged Buddhists' resistance to the coup is necessary.

Moral and Political Liberation: Lament, Protest, and Hope

If Buddhism is a democratic religion, yet the self-claimed Buddhist dictators fail to practice the moral belief of Buddhism, then, our task is to condemn them as "anti-Buddhists" whose beliefs and practices oppose the moral teachings of the Buddha. We must confront and correct their amoral practices of dictatorship. The goal is twofold: (1) to liberate the self-claimed

[19] See Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 136-139. The idea that democracy as freedom. See Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, reprint (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 173.

Buddhist dictators from amoral ideologies and practices and (2) to liberate the oppressed civilians from political oppression of the regime. One is moral liberation and the other is political liberation. Myanmar needs this kind of reciprocal liberation. There is no genuine political liberation of the oppressed without moral liberation of the regime. A religious approach to moral liberation of the self-claimed Buddhist dictators does not merely aim at changing governing policies and constitutions, but it aims at their genuine changes of their beliefs and behaviors.

The reciprocal liberation would not come voluntarily. It is achievable only through the prophetic actions of confronting and correcting the Buddhist nationalism and totalitarianism. Journeying toward a vision of reciprocal liberation and democracy, people of Myanmar embrace a threefold ethic—"lament, protest, and hope." Lament calls for them to weep with the fallen heroes and wounded victims (feeling). As Soong-Chan Rah rightly argues in his book *Prophetic Lament*, lament is a missing essential component of Christian faith. Lament is not the weak action of the church, but it recognizes people's everyday struggle and concrete suffering, and embraces the people's pain.[20] Lament calls for people's prophetic action of protest against unjust regime who causes suffering. Lament comes first before the action of prophetic protest. Prophetic protest calls for the oppressed to confront and correct dictators (action). Then hope energizes their democratic vision in the midst of suffering, despair, and fear (imagination).

A Christian hope is rooted in the resurrection of Christ. Christ defeated the evil power and rules the world through the empowering power of the Holy Spirit. God takes a stand with those who challenge the status quo and lament for justice against social injustice. A Christian spirituality of relationship with God and solidarity with one another motivates the ethic of living hope. Hope is not just about expecting the coming of Christ, but about experiencing the liberating presence of the Holy Spirit as comforter, empowerer, and healer in this world.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the role of Buddhism in the politics of nationalism and military coup. I have shown how Buddhist nationalism is related to the military coup. Then I have demonstrated how prophetic Christians and engaged Buddhists exchange their interreligious ethics for resistance to the nationalist coup. Particular attention has been given to how they reconcile their ethnic and religious identity and resist the nationalist coup. It should also be noted that not just Buddhists and Christians, but people from other ethnic and religious background bridge their ethnic and religious divides for the sake of resisting the nationalist coup as common enemy. I have concluded the paper by suggesting the idea that we should approach to Buddhism from the ethical perspective. An ethical approach to Buddhism is helpful for recognizing the beautiful side of Buddhism and for transforming the ugly side of Buddhist nationalism.

[20] See Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).