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Pageantry and the Struggle for Buddhism in Burma**

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The Politics of Piety: Pageantry and the Struggle for Buddhism in Burma

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Abstract

The *Tatmadaw's* search for political or moral legitimacy has not managed to repair their defective title to rule since 1962. Lacking this status, in the 1990s the military elite were forced to respond to the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi and return to what has traditionally provided the greatest source of legitimacy in Burmese politics - Buddhism. In the course of doing so, the generals must appeal to the traditional beliefs on the people's idealized Burmese king even though their actions, like the actions of their royal ancestors towards whom they turn, fall far short of the Burmese ideal.

Military rule in Burma (Myanmar) has been justified on a number of grounds since 1962, including the army's (*Tatmadaw*) claims to possess a unique ability in suppressing communist and ethnic insurgencies while effectively managing the economy. Following elections held in 1990, the *Tatmadaw* also sought to placate domestic strife by sporadically holding conventions and proposing constitutional reforms. Elections aside, attempts to establish the legitimacy for military rule being based upon historical and cultural interpretations of the traditional relationship between Burmese rulers and their subjects have become more prominent over the past decade or more. Because the Burmese generals' rule is neither based on law nor a monarchical rule over willing persons, their legitimacy would always be questionable. This reason, as well as the nation's size, ethnic composition, poverty, and relative international isolation, might explain the tendency of the Burmese rulers to pursue a harsh strategy to preserve their rule. Yet it is revealing to discover how they have attempted to transform their defective title, especially since the 1990 election result, into a valid one by promoting the duties of 'kingship.' By way of their Buddhist political rhetoric - the promotion of Buddhism to legitimize their rule - the generals have appealed to the mass political culture and the traditional beliefs of the Burman majority. In order to make their rule longer lasting and their defective title more legitimate - both domestically and in the eyes of the international community - the *Tatmadaw* have attempted to mask their harsh demeanor with a more moderate sort of superintendence that also attempts to make their rule appear kingly.

That only a small minority of the people were willing to be ruled by the *Tatmadaw* in 1990 was evident in the outcome of the May elections. Improving this imbalance could depend, to some degree, upon the success of the generals' kingly performance and the Buddhist political rhetoric which accompanies their activities. Examining the importance of Buddhism in the political landscape and the political culture of the Burman majority is often downplayed by analysts in their haste to discuss institutional reforms. Yet understanding the *Tatmadaw's* self-appointed role as the protectors and preservers of Buddhist traditions in Burma is appropriate, not only because the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) have been strongly promoting

Buddhism in recent times, but because they have also failed to achieve any lasting moral or political legitimacy during times of relative peace.

This article addresses the use of Buddhism as a form of political rhetoric and the reaction of the current regime's use of Buddhism to that of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's. Because political rhetoric is a means by which the political elite may persuade the masses towards a particular end, successful rhetoricians cannot ground their arguments in complete falsehoods but must appeal to at least partial truths that are grounded in history or traditional beliefs. The SPDC, therefore, must use their experiences to narrate history in accordance with their objectives. Their legitimacy must be based upon a certain historical interpretation of Buddhism and order in society that conforms to the rule of kings and kingdoms, like Pagan. Because citizens have no direct experience with ancient history, the perceived truth of their traditional beliefs may be influenced by both the officially sanctioned history, as well as by more democratically leaning interpretations. Yet credibility also influences rhetorical persuasion and it is here that the generals may have encountered significant obstacles.

'Kingship' and the *Tatmadaw*

The nature of the monarchy that ruled Burma from the 11th to the latter part of the 19th centuries was harsh. Maung Maung Gyi believes that while the Burmese kings formally subscribed to certain golden rules of behavior and may have tried to live up to the moral precepts, they were never consistent, devoted, regular, nor uniform in their efforts (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 22-23). Indeed, their erratic behavior confirmed the fact that it was their whims rather than the rules that often guided their conduct and these moral laws turned out to be little more than pious platitudes. Since the king was responsible to himself alone, his conscience alone determined his actions, and the personality of the king determined the character of the government. The only moderating influence over his rule came from the intervention of the *Sangha* (monks). According to Smith, while promoting and defending Buddhism confirmed a king's legitimacy, protecting the *Sangha* was also a primary

religious function of the king (Smith 1965: 26-27). As defender of the faith, the king was bound by his duty to uphold the traditional custom of displaying reverence towards the *Sangha* and concern for their welfare, and as head of state, he had to set an example of good conduct and righteous behavior. Yet Maung Maung Gyi maintains that “his concept of moral duties and public welfare was neither broad in scope nor profound in depth...the king’s concept of national welfare never extended beyond the confines of religion, religious needs, and institutions (Maung Maung Gyi *ibid.*: 26).” Works performed in the interest of the people included the building and repairing of pagodas and other religious edifices; building monasteries and providing them with food and other necessities; feeding the monks and the Brahmin priests; holding monthly feasts according to custom; designating lands and lakes as sanctuaries for animals; digging and repairing tanks, lakes, and canals; and founding capitals (*Ibid.*).

The rule of the Burmese king was, in the absence of the rule of law and, with responsibility for the executive, legislative, and judicial functions of government resting with the king, a rule of absolute monarchy which lasted unchallenged in Burma until its abolition when King Thibaw surrendered to General Pendergast in 1885. There was no hereditary aristocratic class in Burma to consider the various forms of government that could best protect their rights in property. Since the local nobility were appointed at the king’s favor, and because new kings were known to have purged and slaughtered hundreds in establishing their rule, the ruling class consisted only of the king, his royal family, and his appointed officials. Nor was there any middle class, only the royal family and the common people. Nevertheless, many Burmese maintained a belief that supported the authority of the kings - that their kings were *Bodhisattvas*, or future Buddhas, and the kings, in turn, could easily take advantage of this belief (*Ibid.*: 22-23). Pye notes that the Burmese fantasy about the omnipotent nature of their god-king’s powers became a dogma which could not be challenged by anyone in the court or among the local nobility (Pye 1985: 97). Paradoxically, it seems that while the people would hope that a king would live in accordance with the *Dhamma* and by the precepts, rules, and laws laid down by tradition, they also seemed to have

lived in fear of the king - while they hoped that a king would not exercise tyrannical power, more often than not he did.

The abolition of the Burmese monarchy by the British in 1885 created a wave of resentment and nationalist sentiment among both the Burman people and the *Sangha*. Returning the *Sangha* to their rightful place as a revered, politically influential, and legitimizing authority would only take place if Burmese leaders drew from the traditional beliefs and conducted themselves as if they were reinstating their monarchy. Accordingly, the political and military elite have adopted the practice of assuming the role, and the duties, of a Burmese monarch on several occasions, both before and during the Second World War and following independence. From 1930 to 1932, for example, a former monk named Saya San led a peasant rebellion against the British imposition of tax collection. The rebellion transformed into a movement to overthrow the British though Saya San was eventually caught and executed. Born in Shwebo, home of the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, King Alaungpaya, some believed that Saya San was of royal lineage and his followers proclaimed him to be the new king of Burma, the *thupannaka galon raja* (Naw 2001: 17-18; Collis 1938: 208-210). The Galon, a mythical eagle who conquered the Naga dragon, symbolized the Burmese victory over all foreigners, particularly the British. Following the Saya San rebellion, two young independence-minded lawyers, Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw, entered politics, and U Saw called himself "Galon" after Saya San (Naw *Ibid.*: 19). When Aung San marched into Burma alongside the Japanese Army in 1942, songs were composed about the Bogyoke, glorifying him as the great military leader who liberated the country from the British and associating him with ancient Burmese kings, including King Alaungpaya (*Ibid.*: 89). Yet perhaps it was Dr. Ba Maw who set the stage for what was to follow the withdrawal of the British colonial administration after the war when, in 1943, the Japanese granted Burma nominal independence and he was installed as head of state in a grand ceremony mimicking the royal tradition of enthronement.

Following Burma's independence from Great Britain, when U Nu was Prime Minister of Burma, from 1947-58 and 1960-62, Buddhism and the

Sangha once again became dominant political influences. Indeed, U Nu himself was at many times a monk, and as a layman, blending Buddhism and his beliefs in spirits (*nats*) with politics in his speeches and ceremonies, his administration could have been criticized as one long Buddhist ceremony (Gravers 1999: 56). Under U Nu's patronage, the Sixth Great Buddhist World Council was held in 1956, wherein Buddhist texts were translated, Buddhist relics were collected from Ceylon, and U Nu approved the building of a World Peace Pagoda. Under U Nu's administration, Buddhism also became part of the school curriculum, and Ecclesiastical Courts and Pali universities were created. His government also formed the Buddha *Sasana* Council which, headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was devoted to the promotion of all aspects of Buddhism (Gravers *Ibid.*: 55; Spiro 1982: 385). In 1960, facing pressure from the *Sangha*, U Nu's electoral campaign included a desire to make Buddhism the official state religion and, in 1961, U Nu used his parliamentary majority to do so which became a factor prompting the military's coup the following year. Granting the ethnic minorities more independence on the one hand while attempting to meet the demands of radical monks and officially sanctioning the Burman majority's religion would fuel the already widening ethnic and religious divisions across the country. Nevertheless, Smith notes that because the Burmese kings were strongly motivated by the need to acquire sufficient merit to overcome the consequences of their own bloody and ruthless acts, 800 years later U Nu declared that it was the responsibility of the government to look after the welfare of the people, not only in the present existence, but in countless future existences, and that it was therefore necessary to make Buddhism the state religion in Burma (Smith *ibid.*: 25-26). U Nu also saw it as his personal duty to acquire merit in order to help his subjects reach *nirvana* (Chirot 1994: 327). U Nu's downfall could in part, therefore, be attributed to the fact that he was not a good Machiavellian prince - his constant observance of religious things became politically harmful, prompting the *Tatmadaw* to conspire against him.

In light of the ethnic, religious, and communist divisions threatening the Union, Gravers believes that Ne Win, in 1962, stood as the nation's savior, almost as a *Cakkavattin* (a wheel-turning universal monarch) or a *min laung*

(challenger to the throne), the one who had stopped the growing religious and ethnic split and who had stemmed the foreign influence (Gravers *ibid.*: 57). Upon coming to power, Ne Win repealed U Nu's religious laws, nationalized most of the economy, and monopolized foreign and internal trade for the state - a policy which, Bechert believes, can be traced more to the old Burmese tradition and the monopolies of the king rather than to Marxism (Bechert 1995: 151). Chirot also notes that by isolating his country in 1962, Ne Win was behaving like a traditional Burmese king and, in the mid-1970s, he married a descendant of the last Burmese royal family and began to appear at state functions in full classical regalia, being convinced that the last royal family were among his ancestors (Chirot *ibid.*: 332). Lintner believes that Ne Win clearly viewed himself as an absolute monarch rather than a military usurper who had overthrown an elected government (Lintner 1989). Gravers, on the other hand, claims that Ne Win was hated, presumably because he had not openly assumed the guise of a *Cakkavatti* or a *Dhammaraja* (*Dhamma*-king or righteous ruler), probably intentionally since such claims could have easily backfired and intruded on his exercise of power (Gravers *ibid.*: 62). Indeed, it would be hard to argue that for most of his rule, Ne Win was at all interested in openly politicizing Buddhism or the *Sangha*. The Burma Socialist Programme Party's (BSPP) guiding ideology, for example, was published in 1963 under the heading *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment: The Philosophy of the Burma Socialist Programme Party* ((BSPP 1973: 36-39). This document, according to Seekins, posited the BSPP's philosophy as "a purely mundane and human doctrine," without any connection to religion (Seekins 2002: 46). Seekins believes that "despite its use of Buddhist and metaphysical terminology, this statement reflected Ne Win's opinion concerning the relationship of religion and politics, closer to the secularist Aung San than U Nu: that they are separate spheres of life (*Ibid.*)." While the BSPP may have initially used Buddhist and metaphysical terminology for rhetorical reasons, therefore, it would be difficult to deny that for most of Ne Win's rule Buddhism was the preserve of the *Sangha* and monks should avoid politics. Attempts were made in 1964 and 1965 to impose a registration of monks and monk associations, and a reform council was convened, yet these measures were largely resisted by the *Sangha* and the repeal of the State

Religion Promotion Act along with government subsidies was compensated by donations from laymen (Bechert *ibid.*: 151-152; Matthews 1993: 415). Ne Win arrested large numbers of monks several times, including in 1965 and in 1974, when he refused to allow a proper funeral for the former United Nations Secretary General, U Thant.

In 1979, however, Ne Win seemed to change course when he called upon his Minister of the Interior and Religion to request the *Sangha* to convene a conference the following year at which delegates of all groups within the *Sangha* would take part. The program included a registration of all monks and the creation of a Supreme *Sangha* Council, or *Sangha Maha Nayaka*, that included sectarian and regional differences and whose hierarchical structure aimed at tightening the state's control of the *Sangha* (Matthews 1993.: 415-416). *Sangha* organizations or councils were also created at the village, township, city and district levels, and members were appointed by the government. Boards of trustees in charge of administering monasteries and pagodas were filled with retired military officers who took over the handling of finances and donations from the public. Bechert believes that through this new religious policy, Ne Win was carrying on the tradition of the Burmese kings as well as the religious policy of U Nu. Yet unlike U Nu, it is significant that Ne Win did not personally take part in the *Sangha* convention and that all decisions were taken by the *Sangha* and not by government institutions. He did, however, manage at the time to gain the sympathy of a large part of the population who had so far disapproved of government policy (Bechert *ibid.*: 154). Ne Win engaged U Nu to edit Buddhist texts, openly gave gifts to the monks, and later began a pagoda-building project behind the Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon, personally raising the *hti*, or spire - a kingly function symbolizing royal power, glory, and religious merit (Seekins *ibid.*: 46). In March 2001, he also hosted a luncheon in a Rangoon hotel for an auspicious number of 99 senior monks. Speculation over Ne Win's 'conversion' included reports that he wished to avoid going down in history as a tyrant (Chirot *ibid.*: 309). Existing alongside the formal Buddhist practices in Burma has been the traditional animistic cults of spirits and deities (*nats*), astrology, and numerology, all of which could be argued to offer further guidance or perhaps the opportunity to neutralize the

karmic consequences generated by worldly wrongs. Matthews argues that the military regime, beginning with Ne Win in the 1960s, have always sought after the animistic powers associated with various rituals to overcome bad omens, avoid a loss of power that would follow their karmic destiny, and to ease the guilt associated with clearly dreadful sins (Matthews 1998: 19-20).

Among the numerous kings in Burmese history, perhaps the three most noted for uniting the people were King Anawrahta in the 11th century, King Bayintnaung in the 16th century, and King Alaungphaya, founder of Konbaung, Burma's last dynasty, in 1798. It could also be argued that Bogyoke Aung San was the fourth person to reunite Burma and, being the father of both the *Tatmadaw* and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, became the founder of the current political dynasty. Following in this glorious tradition, it was not surprising that in 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) too claimed to have a government that reunited Burma. If they could assimilate their rule to the glorious royal tradition - where power was concentrated at the top, extending downwards to the lower classes of the population, with obligations returning to the center - the *Tatmadaw* could use this argument to justify the forced conscription of labor for conducting military exercises, public works, and in general, promoting loyalty to the state. Viewed as such, their 'kingly' rule would be a reciprocal relationship, with authority and responsibility, or caring, flowing in return for loyalty and order from the rulers to the people. Smith believes that it was the monarch's unique role as defender and promoter of Buddhist religion which in the final analysis confirmed his legitimacy (Smith *ibid.*: 23). Pye also claims that "the Burmese kings not only became defenders of the Buddhistic faith, they even claimed as a basis of their legitimacy the myth of consanguinity to the noble house of Lord Buddha (Pye 1962: 75)." And Houtman notes that the promotion of Buddhism during times of political crisis is a long-standing cultural tradition in Burmese politics, dating back to the 11th-century kingdom of Pagan. Where a government has faced erosion of political legitimacy, it returns to Buddhism (Houtman 1999: 160).

Yet it would be difficult to return to Buddhism when thousands of monks had taken part in the mass demonstrations of 1988 and had also come

out in support of the democratic movement in 1990. Ne Win's reorganization and institutionalization of the *Sangha* hierarchy, it appeared, had failed the ultimate test. Following the *Tatmadaw's* refusal to hand over power to the NLD after the May general election, in October 1990, the first chairman of SLORC, General Saw Maung, moved to suppress a rebellion by over 7,000 monks in Mandalay. This followed their senior abbots' (*sayadaw*) decision to discourage the performance of religious services for families of the military. Having ordered the revocation of the religious boycott, the dissolution of all independent Buddhist organizations and monks associations, the surrounding of monasteries, the arrest of over 400 monks, and the destruction of buildings near the monasteries, Saw Maung claimed in a meeting with the senior abbots that "his regime's actions against the monks was analogous to the action of King Anoryahtah of the 13th century in the purification of religion and monks during his reign (Mya Maung 1992: 184)." Moreover, according to Mya Maung, "quoting the Buddhist scriptures and king's law, *yahzathart*, he claimed the right of the Buddhist rulers to invade and purify the domain of the Buddhist monks (*Ibid.*)." Soon after, the SLORC issued a law stipulating the proper conduct for a Buddhist monk and penalties for their violation by monks or monk organizations. Monks would have to obey the orders of the state *Sangha* organizations, whether or not they belonged to them, and any new construction in or around monasteries as well as traditional religious ceremonies would require the permission of local *Sangha Maha Nayaka* committees. The following year, in December 1991, Saw Maung would pronounce that he was the reincarnation of King Kyanzitha of the Pagan period (Chiro *ibid.*: 309). Since then, the government has sought after the blessing and support of senior monks with a carrot and stick. Those who resist joining local *Sangha* committees have their monasteries placed under surveillance and are sometimes arrested, while those who join the ranks receive lavish donations, gifts, and sometimes elaborate ceremonies to grant honors and titles that were previously rarely awarded. Depending upon their level of support, they can also often find themselves shunned by the public.

For the past decade, all of the top SLORC-SPDC generals have been performing their roles, in speeches and public appearances in a manner that

could only prompt an observer to question whether they are reinterpreting, and adopting for themselves, the roles and duties of Burmese kings. Their ideological program, as such, has gravitated towards linking the maintenance of law and order with a renewed reverence for Buddhist traditions. By promoting Buddhism, the generals were responding to the political rhetoric of the elected opposition while at the same time assuming the legitimacy of a Burmese monarch for themselves. Like Spartan kings who held generalship for life, the *Tatmadaw* generals assumed not only leadership in matters relating to war, they also usurped leadership over matters related to the gods (Aristotle [1984]: 109-110). It is indeed ironic that, today, institutions of the military government promote a similar kind of devotion to the Buddhist traditions that U Nu's government institutions were advancing in 1962. The same reasons that prompted the unauthorized military intervention then are being adopted by the *Tatmadaw* themselves now to legitimize their rule. Also, ironically, ethnic minorities have had to come to terms yet again with policies that promote Buddhist nationalism. For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi believes that in one sense the generals do constitute an improvement on the rule of the old Burmese kings because they are ashamed to admit atrocities, even though they commit them (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997: 171).

The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of the *Tatmadaw*

If the nature of the SPDC's rule is of a monarchical kind, a sort of counterpart to absolute kingship, then their 'kingly' performance follows in a long tradition of Burmese leaders, both rulers and rebels, who, whether or not their status was lawful, turned to the beliefs found in folklore and tradition to bolster their popularity and their legitimacy among the people. It could be argued that the strategic redirection adopted by the current generation of *Tatmadaw* generals towards promoting Buddhist culture intensified following the decision by a large number of the *Sangha* to side with protesters and opposition parties in 1988 and 1990; the publication of offerings made by National League for Democracy (NLD) candidates to the *Sangha* prior to the 1990 elections; the theoretical development of Suu Kyi's Buddhist political thought - much of which transpired during her years spent under house arrest,

from 1990 to 1995; and Suu Kyi's subsequent visitations to monasteries after her release. Since over 80 percent of the Burmese are Buddhist, the military were forced to respond not only to vocal opposition within the *Sangha*, but also to the publication of Suu Kyi's actions, speeches, and writings by creating an image of themselves as better Buddhists than Suu Kyi and, more generally, as being responsible for the preservation and promotion of Buddhist traditions in Burma. Since the early to mid-1990s, especially, the generals have made themselves obvious in consecrating Buddhist sites and engaging and inventing roles for themselves in Buddhist ceremonies. While their efforts intrigued local observers in attempting to adjust to the generals' new role, their performance may also have been pitched to the foreign media.

Winning the Hearts and Minds of the Burmans

That the current regime's renewed reverence for Buddhist traditions may not have been chosen voluntarily but came about as a consequence of their own actions might be understood in terms of the events that transpired in the early 1990's. Aung San Suu Kyi's imprisonment, along with her NLD colleagues, encouraged a traditional turn of events to which the SPDC were forced to respond. In terms of Burmese folklore, the generals have been pressured into proving their worthiness to the people, their *Cakkavatti* status as it were, in response to Suu Kyi's *min laung* rhetoric. Suu Kyi arrived in Burma in 1988 and was drawn into the political morass within five months. She delivered her first major speech below a portrait of her father at the same sight that Aung San had delivered some of his most important speeches - the Shwedagon pagoda. While quoting her father's thoughts in this speech, she did not discuss religion and politics, but in an essay written before her house arrest she discussed the ten duties of Buddhist kingship and how they reinforced the Burmese desire for democratic government. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in 1989 and was not released until 1995. It was during this time that she developed an interest in Buddhist *vipassana* practice and Sayadaw U Pandita, her commitment to meditation practice being reflected in her writings. Upon her release, she visited U Pandita and the famous Karen-based monk, Sayadaw U Bhaddanta Vinaya (Thamanya Sayadaw) and

began openly encouraging monks and nuns to preach democratic principles to the public and to seek a dialogue with the authorities. She would travel to Thamanya Hill in the Karen state to visit Thamanya Sayadaw at his monastery again upon her release in 2002. The highly respected Sayadaw earned a reputation for refusing to show the generals any admiration,¹ and was revered for his generosity shown to the local population through donations, development projects, and the building of local pagodas.

In 1996, a supplication addressed from the Minister for Religious Affairs to abbot members of the state *Sangha* organization accused the NLD of infiltrating the *Sangha* to promote the party and commit subversive acts against the government. *Sangha* organizations were instructed to prevent NLD members entering the ranks of the *Sangha*. Later that year, Suu Kyi and the NLD took part in a *kathina* ceremony, donating new robes to the monks of Panditarama Monastery, home of U Pandita. While she and the NLD were critical of the government's attempts to curtail their freedom to gather within the walls of the *Sangha*, the authorities' response was not altogether without reason. The consequences of Suu Kyi's brand of socially engaged Buddhism, the politics of active *metta*, posed a direct threat to their legitimacy. Her political use of Buddhism, born of a deeper marriage between the spiritual and political lives, although based upon her genuine beliefs, would naturally intimidate the generals and provoke the kind of response that has been played out in recent years. Suu Kyi, in other words, adopted the persona of a modern-day *min laung*, a king in the making or contender to the throne, seeking to prove that she had the religious merit necessary to claim her legitimate *Cakkavatti* status. While this may be considered an extremely theoretical persona for a modern day politician to adopt, it should not be forgotten that practically the NLD wield no effective political power whatsoever within Burma. The NLD executive's decision to pursue this line of political rhetoric came as a direct consequence of their being denied political power by the *Tatmadaw* (Myint Zan 1997: 49-69). It is debatable, although unlikely, that events would have developed along

¹ Despite being awarded the highest religious title by the government, for example, Thamanya Sayadaw refused to travel to Rangoon to receive the award, forcing the authorities to travel to Thamanya Hill to present their honor to him. Finally forced to travel to Rangoon to receive medical treatment in 2002 and having all his travel expenses paid for by General Khin Nyunt, upon discharge from Yangon General Hospital he visited Suu Kyi while she was under house arrest.

these lines had they not been silenced by years of imprisonment. Perhaps it is important to note that, unlike U Nu, whose deep Buddhist faith manifested while holding political power throughout his administration, the NLD executive's faith deepened through their denial of political power.

The *Tatmadaw* could neither ignore Suu Kyi's Buddhist political message nor fail to take symbolic measures to counter the threat she posed to their leadership. To negate the influence of Suu Kyi and the NLD, the SLORC embarked upon a massive campaign to promote its own version of nationalism and order through Buddhist culture. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), for example, a mass organization which the *Tatmadaw* uses for rallies in support of the government and to launch attacks upon the NLD, has offered free courses in Buddhist culture since it was established in 1993. According to Steinberg, the USDA was the regime's attempt "to recreate civil society in its own manner while suppressing alternative possibilities (Steinberg 2001: 110)" In order to carry out this enterprise, the *Tatmadaw* interpreted Buddhist traditions in a way that conformed to their orderly vision for society and promoted one monolithic Burmese culture.

The government's political rhetoric is imbued with a sense of national survival and any opposition to the government's policies is considered traitorous, unpatriotic, and must surely be backed by a neocolonialist plot to destroy national unity and cause disaster. The *Tatmadaw's* siege mentality and its distrust of foreigners have, to a large degree, been fostered by Burma's long period of isolation from Western influence following independence. Order is instilled to stave off supposed threats to the very survival of the nation. Yet unlike many of their regional neighbors whose economic development was driven by liberal capitalism and tied closely to foreign interests, the Burmese elite exhibit an exaggerated fear of all foreign influence often to the degree of paranoia. Political paranoia in Burma, according to Gravers, is based on "a failure of and a seemingly profound distrust in the Western model of modern social order and its plurality of identities (Gravers *ibid.*: 132)" Yet the promotion of an alternative national identity in a way that conforms to the military's strategies and corporate interests requires a particular interpretation of

Burmese history and traditions. In this sense, the promotion of Buddhist cultural and national identity, which began under the rule of the *Tatmadaw* in the early 1990s, has occurred very much along the lines of cultural and national identity policies promoted elsewhere. The SPDC's three main strategies, or "national causes," for promoting national identity often appear in the state's daily publication, *The New Light of Myanmar*. They are the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity, and the perpetuation of national sovereignty. According to Philp and Mercer, while the first two of these create a sense of shared history and national pride for all ethnic and religious groups, it is a unity predicated on the subordination of all minority interests in the promotion of a Burman Buddhist national identity. The last cause is a response to the perceived threats to the Burmese national identity from "neocolonialists" and "cultural imperialists" and is the military's attempt to preserve its Asian values and cultural identity. The military's attempts to invent connections between themselves and the monarchy and between the NLD and Western powers both serve its nation-building agenda (Philp and Mercer 2002: 1592).

Reinterpreting history to accord with orderly visions for society required that the *Tatmadaw* downplay the importance of certain political figures who inspired the opposition. Houtman argues that the *Tatmadaw* have for the past ten years set about "re-assassinating" Aung San, or at least his image. This is because, according to Houtman, Suu Kyi has become so identified with her father's views that they were left with no option but to practice "Aung San amnesia (Houtman *ibid.*: 27)." Furthermore, Houtman claims that political controversy has been inflamed over the past decade by the *Tatmadaw*'s abandoning Aung San's views on politics, in which he strongly argued against reserving a central role for either culture or religion. Moreover, because the word "culture" was not in usage in Burma until the mid-20th century, and because there is no equivalent word in the Burmese language, the *Tatmadaw* have effectively set about inventing their own culture (*ibid.*: 180-181).

It is certainly true that the generals of the *Tatmadaw* have been meddling in what Seekins calls "'monumental Buddhism,' building or

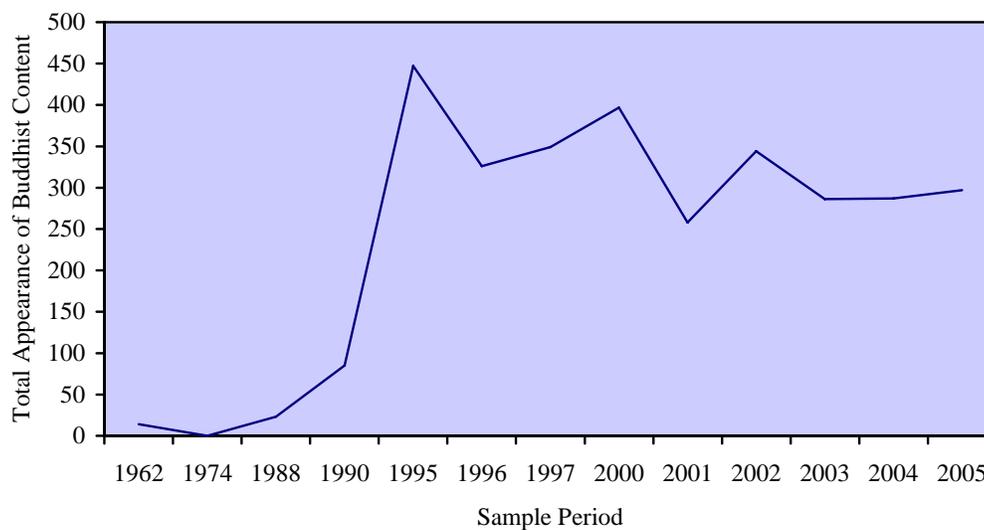
renovating pagodas and centres of devotion in order to acquire legitimacy (Seekins 2005: 273).” Indeed, an observer might ask whether Suu Kyi and the generals have, for the past decade, engaged in a race to win the hearts and minds of the Burman majority by attempting to prove themselves as the better Buddhists. In this struggle, both Suu Kyi as *min laung* and the SPDC as *Cakkavatti* could be viewed as harnessing the masses through the medium of Buddhism, using their Buddhist political rhetoric to convey their traditional bona fides and to support their claims - either for democracy, or for order. Because Suu Kyi’s actions are restricted, she participates by projecting her rhetoric through some actions but mostly through her speeches and writings. Her nonviolent tactics, it could be argued, prevent her rhetoric from being labeled sophistry. But since the generals control all the media (radio, television and newspapers) and most public activities in Burma, their sophisticated rhetoric knows no bounds. Their conduct could illustrate not only the continuation of an historical tradition in Burma to utilize Buddhism in the service of legitimizing one’s rule, but also a concerted attempt to annex Buddhism for themselves.

The Cakkavatti Rhetoric of the Tatmadaw

While Aung San Suu Kyi maintains that Buddhist traditions are consonant with a democratic form of government, the *Tatmadaw* promotes the idea that their legitimacy is based on an ancient kingly duty to maintain order through the preservation of Buddhist traditions. Being based upon the commonly held belief that past kings were charged with this duty, their argument is reflected in the rhetoric of the current regime. To substantiate the proposition that the generals have been conducting their religious activities along the lines of the Burmese kings of old, it would be helpful to cite the actions performed by the ideal *Cakkavatti* monarch, Asoka, during his rule in accordance with *Dhamma*. These include his restrictions on sacrifice and animal slaughter, his pilgrimage to the place of the Buddha’s Enlightenment and other pious tours, his sponsorship of festivals of the *Dhamma*, his support for religious establishments, his concern for the unity and well-being of the *Sangha*, his acts of beneficence to the *Sangha*, his appointment of ministers of the *Dhamma* with responsibilities to oversee and encourage the activities of

the *Sangha*, his missionary efforts to spread the *Dhamma*, his construction of 84,000 *stupas* throughout his kingdom, and the convening of a Buddhist Council to interpret the orthodox canon (Reynolds 1972: 27-29). While the generals may not have placed restrictions on sacrifice or animal slaughter, they have either performed most of these functions or are currently performing them. Unlike Asoka, however, and far more so than U Nu, the generals utilize the state apparatus to project their performance. A useful way to observe this phenomenon is by examining the evidence displayed in Burma's state owned-and-run media at critical times since independence. The results of content analysis conducted on a designated sample of *The Nation*, *The Working People's Daily*, and *The New Light of Myanmar* using a time series design are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Buddhist Political Rhetoric of the Tatmadaw



While state media coverage of U Nu's religious activities in 1962 was modest, and that of Ne Win's government in 1974 was totally absent, the media coverage of the SLORC and the SPDC's religious activities is telling. Discounting the U Nu period, at times where it was not present, under Ne Win's rule in 1974 and during the mass demonstrations of 1988, for example, there was either a stated or at least clearly understood government policy not to mix religion with politics and, therefore, not for government institutions to project Buddhist practices. Alternatively, other political events simply overpowered the effectiveness of such rhetoric and dominated the media.

Although newspapers may have remained independent under the U Nu government, U Nu was viewed by all as extremely devout, and his government's various policies embraced Buddhism and the *Sangha*. Coverage of the *Sangha's* activities presents the *sayadaws* as far more vocal in their protests, presenting petitions to Parliament and to U Thant, then Secretary General of the United Nations. Yet the media's coverage of U Nu himself and his religious activities dwarfs in comparison to that of the SLORC-SPDC, a fact which suggests that while U Nu was indeed devout, his faith, unlike the generals', was more or less accepted and perhaps more credible in the eyes of the people.

Whereas the SLORC's rhetoric in the state-owned media remained minimal during the 1988 demonstrations, and mostly centered upon winning over the *Sangha's* support in helping to control the people, this also reflects a period during which Aung San Suu Kyi had only recently decided to enter politics. The SLORC's rhetoric, however, significantly increased leading up to the 1990 elections, perhaps also countering the threat of Suu Kyi. Indeed, the generals' activities have generally corresponded in time with, and followed in response to, the Buddhist message promoted by Aung San Suu Kyi. Beginning from a modest coverage in 1988, reportage rose significantly in 1990 when Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. By 1995, her speeches and publications linking Buddhism and politics had become well known. SLORC's nation-building program began in 1993, and by the time of Suu Kyi's release in 1995, state coverage of their Buddhist political rhetoric had reached staggering levels. Since then, coverage has been maintained, though it has fluctuated at times due to coverage of other political events. Because the SPDC's Buddhist rhetoric increased noticeably again before Suu Kyi was re-released in 2002, this suggests that overall the SLORC-SPDC's rhetoric came as a direct response to the threat posed by her presence.

Prior to 1995, the generals paid relatively little attention to attending or hosting religious ceremonies and observing holy days. By 1995, however, they had taken it upon themselves to do so in an official capacity, as well as to be seen publicly making offertories and donations to the *Sangha*. The very public

nature of their acts of piety can be inferred by the fact that photographic coverage of the generals' religious activities in 1990 had remained generally small in size, though by 1995, both the volume and the size of photographic coverage had increased enormously. Ten days prior to the NLD convention in 1996, for example, all of the top four senior SLORC generals were pictured presenting offertories to monks. The *Tatmadaw* have developed ceremonies to complement their public piety and these are broadcast on state television and replicated in their newspapers. Depending upon the occasion, they may consist of generals wearing white sashes over their uniforms, solemnly standing in a circle reciting prayers, receiving the Nine Precepts and a sermon from the leading *sayadaw* or the *Sangha Maha Nayaka sayadaw*, the presentation of offertories (alms or soon), robes, or cash donations to *sayadaws* while kneeling in submission, a recitation of the *Paritta* texts by the *Sangha* - from which both *Sangha* and laymen gain merit, and concludes in the sharing of merits gained.

In addition to their public acts of paying obeisance to the *Sangha*, attendance at important Buddhist functions, their state sponsorship of religious activities, and their publication of the military's donations to monasteries, one activity which makes the generals' performance particularly 'kingly' is their attempts at merit-making through the construction of pagodas and the intricate ceremonial roles they play in founding and consecrating them. Wearing white sashes, the generals recite prayers and sprinkle scented water over the site or the *htidaw* (gold umbrella spire) before raising it atop a pagoda. In the 1990s, the generals' restoration and construction of pagodas may have also reflected their concern for restoring their credibility with the *Sangha* following Saw Maung's activities in Mandalay. In line with their nation-building program, the generals' construction, renovation, and timely consecration of pagodas and Buddha images had doubled by 1995, increasing again in 1996, and has maintained a steady pace through to the present. A pagoda with *hti* symbolizes the accumulated merit of the Buddha, the previous Buddhas, the future Buddha, the *Cakkavatti*, and the *Sangha*, and those who donate pagodas also accumulate merit (Gravers *ibid.*: 91). The hoisting of the *hti* symbolizes royal power, the crown on the king's head, and was a function previously reserved

for a king, either at his inauguration or otherwise. Yet the SLORC-SPDC's Chairman and Senior General, Than Shwe, along with the former Secretary-1 and Prime Minister, Lt.-General Khin Nyunt, performed these duties with much pomp and ceremony at numerous occasions and locations across the country, including the most prominent of Buddhist sites in Rangoon - the Shwedagon pagoda. According to Gravers, the future ruler would be the person who put the *hti* on the pagoda, an act that can be interpreted to radiate a traditional mixture of prestige, glory, and power, as well as religious merit (*Ibid.*: 107). Ten days prior to the 1996 NLD conference, Than Shwe proudly placed a diamond bud atop a pagoda, and three days prior to the conference, Khin Nyunt performed the same feat and laid the foundation stone for the construction of a new pagoda. In 1997, following SLORC's change of name, in another elaborate ceremony, Khin Nyunt in his former role as "Patron of the Leading Committee for Perpetual Renovation of the Shwedagon," laid a cornerstone of the northern stairway of the Shwedagon. The day following the government's Proclamation 1/97 - constituting the SPDC - the state media announced the renovation of 287 pagodas and the excavation of another 890 pagoda sites "to be rebuilt with original style and taste of 11th century," along with the addresses at which cash donations would be received. Similar state coverage followed the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2002 and, several days prior to her re-arrest in 2003, Khin Nyunt hoisted a *hti* and inspected the construction of stupas. In the days and weeks following her arrest, Khin Nyunt and Than Shwe hoisted *hti*'s atop pagodas, attended a ceremony opening a missionary training course for monks, donated soon to the *Sangha*, and visited a reclining Buddha image.²

While the state media often publishes articles by the Department of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Information interpreting Buddhism and the religious significance of certain holy days or sacred Buddha images, beginning in 1991-92, by 1995, religious messages were appearing outside the normal text of state newspapers. These include pre-Sabbath reminders, whereby the

² Seekins cites further examples of the regime's promotion of 'monumental Buddhism' in recent years, including the building of an International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, a pagoda housing a replica of the Buddha Tooth Relic donated by the Chinese government, and a complex at Mindhamma Hill containing a large marble Buddha image from the Mandalay region (Seekins 2005: 274).

government earns merit by reminding its people of keeping precepts on the Sabbath day, the days of the half and the full waxing and waning of the moon; the appearance of an alternative record of the date - in terms of the waxing and waning of the moon; and the appearance of proverbs and words of auspiciousness from the Mingala Sutta - the sermon given by the Buddha containing the 38 rules for a beatific life. In addition, for a number of years the Ministry of Information published on the front page of the daily papers 138 of the 167 stanzas from the *Loka Niti* (guidance), a collection of proverbs for social conduct and social discipline originally compiled by a minister of the government during King Thihath's (Sihasu) reign in the 14th century and originally published as texts for use in monastic education. Cartoons have also carried Buddhist themes or references to the State's successful efforts in preserving Buddhist tradition and culture, and photographs often depict persons publicly greeting the generals with a *shekho* or *wai*, a custom adopted by the generals and encouraged among their subordinates since the late 1980s but which was normally reserved to show reverence towards monks or elderly relatives. Criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD was often placed in a sacrilegious context, both in text and in cartoons. This stood in marked contrast to earlier coverage when, for example, in 1990, photographs appeared of NLD candidates making offerings to the *Sangha* before the election. In fact, for much of this period, there was a major reduction in the religious activities of the generals because the focus was the election, and the generals, still under the direction of Ne Win, were reluctant to use Buddhism as a means of securing electoral popularity. This changed dramatically following the NLD's success at the polls and the popular attraction of Aung San Suu Kyi.

In what appears to have been an attempt to establish a monopoly over the performance of some private merit-making and the more public religious services, in recent years the *Tatmadaw* have assumed a high profile in the collection and donation of monies for the restoration and construction of pagodas and Buddha images. Their appeals for public donations and their management of these funds now commonly appear in the daily papers, along with the involvement of local *Tatmadaw* units in the renovation of religious sites. According to Philp and Mercer, state-sponsored ceremonies and rituals

associated with the construction of the *Lawka Chantha Abhaya Labha Muni* image on Mindhamma Hill in Rangoon, for example, illustrates how the traditional merit-making rituals for individual lay patrons have been appropriated by the military regime in favor of state-sponsored religious devotions (Philp and Mercer *ibid.*: 1602). The forced relocation of people from Rangoon and Mandalay also served this purpose as they were denied their traditional places of worship and the opportunity to perform their customary merit-making rituals. The Protection and Preservation of Cultural Heritage Regions Law of 1998 ensured the maintenance of the *Tatmadaw's* monopoly by restricting the independent construction and renovation of Buddhist structures, effectively assigning the accompanying merit-making ability over to the generals. The SPDC has also used museums to promote their piety. Both the National Museum and the Historical Museum of Six Buddhist Councils advance Burma's monarchical heritage and its importance in upholding Buddhism and the unification of the country. The generals have constructed statues of monarchs in public places, renamed important streets after Burmese heroes, and the Mandalay Palace, home of the last Burmese monarch, King Thibaw, has undergone a complete reconstruction since 1989 - an act interpreted by Philp and Mercer to signify that the rule of kings has been reinstated (*Ibid.* 1592-1600). In August 2000, Khin Nyunt was observed standing in front of a large, unfinished Buddha image and chanting out loud: "Victory, Victory, Victory (Aung Zaw 2000)." Perhaps the generals believed they had already won the rhetorical battle over Buddhism.

The *Tatmadaw's* religious activities have continued unabated since Khin Nyunt's demise in 2004 and in some cases have become even more remarkable. Shortly before his sacking, for example, in the absence of the senior SPDC generals, their wives (sans Khin Nyunt's) took over the religious duties of their husbands in an elaborate ceremony, hoisting the *htidaw* atop the *Maha Sakkja Muni* Buddha image at Kyaunggyi Taik monastery. Following an investation of the Nine Precepts and a recitation of the *parittas*, the wives wearing sashes presented the Vice-Chairman Sayadaw of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee with alms and documents before proceeding to a cash donation ceremony for a new building, further presentations of alms to

sayadaws and monks, flowers and light to the Buddha image, and elaborate hoisting rituals that included the sprinkling of scented water on the diamond orb and vane placed inside a decorated carriage, the sharing of merits gained and golden and silver showers marked the completion. The wives of SPDC generals continue to perform *htidaw* hoisting and consecration, robes offering, and donation ceremonies in the presence of State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee *sayadaws* of the state, division and township levels.

It would appear that while the generals have been seriously attentive to the things pertaining to the gods, unlike U Nu their constant observance of religious things could seem to be politically advantageous for them. Given the presence of the NLD's Buddhist political rhetoric, they may not fear any conspiracy directed towards their excessive use of religion, and since they hold both the power and the most public means of persuasion in Burma, it would appear that the generals are, therefore, acting as a good Machiavellian prince should. In 2003, Thamanya Sayadaw died and, unlike Ne Win whose passing received no state media coverage, the passing of the influential abbot was broadcast on the state radio, television, and in newspapers. The SPDC donated cash for his final rites and the *Tatmadaw* attended the ceremony, carrying his remains to his tomb. It is ironic that one monk who shunned the *Tatmadaw*, and yet was genuinely loved by the public for his Buddhist piety and good works - including pagoda building - could attract such attention from the authorities.

While the generals may think they have conquered the high ground in the rhetorical battle over Buddhism, not so much through their argument, but by acting out their piety with the aim of persuading their audience, their own harsh actions outside of their religious activities affect their character, and this conditions their credibility in the eyes of the citizenry. There is no evidence to suggest that the Burmese people are passive consumers of the state-controlled media propaganda but that often this is the only avenue for people to learn of the activities of the military (Philp and Mercer *ibid.*: 1607). It may not be implausible to consider that the generals' performances could be as much for their own self-consumption, to improve their morale in light of their

harsh actions. Yet regardless of their motives, the challenge that the generals may face could be the same that confronted U Nu's controversial religious policies in 1962 - promoting one monolithic interpretation of Theravada Buddhism through various institutions of government, overtly and not subtly, not only clouds the distinction between 'church' and state, it also fosters a quasi-state religion that could inevitably alienate the non-Buddhist, non-Burman ethnic minorities, as well as Buddhist minorities living in more remote parts of the Union. It is quite likely that, particularly for non-Theravada Buddhist Burmese, the Buddhist nationalism advanced by the state has become increasingly xenophobic and racial.

Conclusion

The *Tatmadaw's* regime remains harsh and unapologetic. This is apparent despite the generals' attempts to transform the regime into a more moderate and lasting one through playing the kingly role while manipulating the traditional beliefs on 'kingship' and Buddhism with political rhetoric that aims to legitimize their power. The generals continue to act immoderately, visibly exercising excessive force on the one hand, while appearing to act piously and benevolently on the other. But a successful 'kingly' performance relies largely upon their credibility in the eyes of the public, and in a country where Buddhism plays such a central role in the political culture of the people, their credibility has suffered. Their brutal actions betray the substance of their rhetoric and reveal their true character - they have become dictators who attempt to persuade the people to accept extraordinary laws by interpreting prodigies in their favor (Machiavelli [1996]: 35, 39-40, 113-114). The SLORC-SPDC's need to address the Buddhist tradition arose as a consequence of public demonstrations by the *Sangha* and a real rhetorical threat posed by Aung San Suu Kyi. They are, however, at a disadvantage if faced by a more credible challenger who also takes this into account because they must use force, fear, and intimidation to hold onto their power. Appealing to Buddhist principles while using force, either in seizing or in holding onto power, would transform persuasive rhetoric into sophistry. While all human governments require the use of force to some degree, to use brute force in the

name of Buddhism equates Buddhism with violence. This is why Aung San Suu Kyi's Buddhist rhetoric is more credible in the eyes of the public than either the *Tatmadaw's*, or her father's. It may also help to inform Aung San's position on religion and politics and why any references he made to Buddhism were subtle, rather than overt and excessive.

Like the Burmese kings of old, the generals attempt to turn their vices into virtues by symbolic, very visible, acts of piety. Lacking the valid title of 'kingship,' the generals carry on regardless as if they were continuing in a royal tradition to which they have no legal claim. On 6 November 2005, the *Tatmadaw* began the mass relocation of government ministries - including civil servants and their desks - from Rangoon to a site it had been developing for a number of years near remote Pinyinana, 240 miles to the north. While no official reasons were given for the secretive move to the new administrative capital,³ on 27 March 2006 (Armed Forces Day) state television broadcast pictures of troops parading at the site in the shadows of three massive statues of kings Anawrahta, Bayintnaung, and Alaungphaya. Than Shwe has officially named the new capital Naypyidaw (Royal City). Although the SPDC harbors their own pragmatic reasons for the move, by heeding the advice of astrologers and founding the new capital, Than Shwe is nevertheless honoring tradition while asserting his own 'royal' legacy. Furthermore, since it could be considered sacrilege to question the intent behind religious acts performed by him, his regime's appropriation of the Buddhist concept of *cetana* (intent) has become an extremely effective means of imposing its power and authority (Philp and Mercer *ibid.*: 1591). Despite this, perhaps in the minds of the people what their rulers truly lack is a deep faith because while appearing religious has been useful to them, they certainly know how to change to the contrary (Machiavelli [1980]: 107-109). This contributes to making their royal acts of piety, unlike U Nu's, not so much politically naïve actions as sophisticated political rhetoric. They have repeatedly, and increasingly, adopted this rhetoric since the coup of 1988, and more emphatically following their nation-building

³ Of the many theories advanced for the move some of the more pragmatic included the generals' desire to protect their administrative institutions by relocating them away from the population and any future mass demonstrations, and to provide a geographically more convenient military command from which troops could respond to trouble in Rangoon as well as the frontier areas.

program in 1993. Moreover, the *Tatmadaw* have come full circle since 1962 by actively promoting Buddhism as, if not the state religion, then at least the next closest thing to one.

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