

# The Politics of Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar: History, Legitimacy and Democratic Transition\*\*

Saittawut Yutthaworakool\*

## Abstract

This article aims to explore the historical development of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, and the way it has been politicized by the state. According to the study, political legitimacy has been constructed by the revival of Buddhist nationalism in two ways. First, it is through policy implementation and legislation of religious protection laws, which declare Buddhism's superiority in Myanmar and to segregate as well as discriminate against non-Buddhists in the conduct of their daily lives. The state uses state authorities, including an unelected civilian government and National Legislative Assembly, with retired soldiers and representatives from the *tatmadaw* (the military) as members, to function in this process. Second, the state supports civilian movements to stage activities and to stimulate nationalist sentiments among the Buddhists. The state uses Buddhist nationalist movements that include monks and laypeople as the main actors for mass mobilization in accordance with policy and legislation. Unlike dictatorial rule, these two elements adjust the relationship between state and religion such that the old elites could retain its power. Furthermore, the state chooses to restore Buddhist nationalism through Islamophobia and historical memory about Rohingya Muslims in order to bring out the significance of the regime. In addition, Buddhist nationalism builds the political legitimacy of this semi-authoritarian government in order that it could retain power despite democratic transition, and contributes to its popularity for upcoming elections in the near future.

**Keywords:** Buddhist nationalism, Myanmar, history, legitimacy, democratic transition

---

\*M.A. in Politics and International Relations Candidate, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Phranakhon, Bangkok, 10200. Email: saittawuty@gmail.com

\*\*This article was presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Burma Studies Conference 2016 held by the Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, USA on October 6, 2016. It is a part of the author's MA thesis. Any mistakes found in this article would be the responsibility of the author only.

Received March 13, 2017; Accepted May 26, 2017

# การเมืองของชาตินิยมพุทธในเมียนมา: ประวัติศาสตร์ ความชอบธรรมและการเปลี่ยนผ่าน สู่ประชาธิปไตย\*\*

เสฏฐวุฒิ ยุทธาวรรณ\*

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ได้สำรวจพัฒนาการทางประวัติศาสตร์ของกระแสชาตินิยมพุทธในเมียนมา และการที่พุทธศาสนาถูกทำให้เป็นการเมืองเพื่อสร้างความชอบธรรมทางการเมืองแก่รัฐ จากการศึกษานี้สามารถระบุได้ว่าความชอบธรรมทางการเมืองที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นเพื่ออำนาจของรัฐเป็นผลมาจากการฟื้นฟูชาตินิยมพุทธในสองทางประการแรกคือ การดำเนินนโยบายและการออกกฎหมายปกป้องศาสนา เพื่อประกาศสถานะที่เหนือกว่าของพุทธศาสนาในเมียนมา และเพื่อแบ่งแยก กีดกันด้วยการสร้างอุปสรรคการดำเนินชีวิตประจำวันของผู้ที่ไม่ได้เป็นพุทธศาสนิกชน ซึ่งรัฐเลือกใช้ตัวแสดงที่เป็นองค์การภาครัฐ ได้แก่ รัฐบาลพลเรือนจัดตั้งและรัฐสภาที่มีเสียงส่วนใหญ่เป็นอดีตนายทหารและนายทหารจากกองทัพในการดำเนินการ ประการที่สองคือ การสนับสนุนขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวภาคประชาชนที่รัฐใช้ในการดำเนินกิจกรรมการเคลื่อนไหวและปลูกฝังกระแสความรู้สึกชาตินิยมในหมู่พุทธศาสนิกชนโดยตัวแสดงเป็นขบวนการชาตินิยมพุทธ ที่มีทั้งพระสงฆ์และพุทธศาสนิกชนคอยขับเคลื่อนมวลชนให้สอดคล้องกับการดำเนินนโยบายและการออกกฎหมายของภาครัฐ ทำให้การรักษาอำนาจของขั้วอำนาจเก่ามีความแตกต่างจากเมียนมาในสมัยที่มีรัฐบาลเผด็จการที่ขาดมวลชนสนับสนุน และเป็นคู่ตรงข้ามกับรัฐ ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น รัฐยังเลือกที่จะฟื้นฟูกระแสชาตินิยมพุทธผ่านกระแสความหวาดกลัวอิสลาม และความทรงจำประวัติศาสตร์เกี่ยวกับชาวมุสลิมโรฮิงญา เพื่อดึงขบวนการภาคประชาชนให้เล็งเห็นถึงความสำคัญ และเพื่อสร้างความชอบธรรมของการดำรงอยู่ในอำนาจของรัฐบาลถึงเผด็จการนี้ ท่ามกลางภาวะเปลี่ยนผ่านไปสู่ประชาธิปไตย และเพื่อเรียกความนิยมต่อการเลือกตั้งที่จะมีขึ้นอันใกล้

**คำสำคัญ:** ชาตินิยมพุทธ, เมียนมา, ประวัติศาสตร์, ความชอบธรรม, การเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่ประชาธิปไตย

\*นักศึกษาลัทธิรัฐศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาการเมืองและการระหว่างประเทศ คณะรัฐศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์ เลขาที่ 2 ถนนพระจันทร์ เขตพระนคร กรุงเทพฯ 10200 อีเมล saittawuty@gmail.com

\*\*บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอในการประชุมพม่าศึกษานานาชาติ ครั้งที่ 12 ค.ศ. 2016 ณ ศูนย์พม่าศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยนอร์ทเทิร์นอิลลินอยส์ ดีคาโลบ มลรัฐอิลลินอยส์ ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา ในวันที่ 6 ตุลาคม 2559 ซึ่งเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์ของผู้เขียน หากมีข้อผิดพลาดประการใด ผู้เขียนขออภัยไว้แต่เพียงผู้เดียว

ได้รับบทความ 13 มีนาคม 2560; อนุมัติให้จัดพิมพ์ 26 พฤษภาคม 2560

## Understanding (Buddhist) nationalism in Burma/Myanmar

The term, “nationalism”, has been differently interpreted. Gellner (2006, 1) defined nationalism as a primarily political principle and held that the political and the national unit should be congruent. In his view, nationalism has two elements, *sentiment* and *movement*. Sentiment refers to the feeling of anger or satisfaction; while movement is the activity resulting from such feelings. Because nationalism is considered as a political principle, a political unit can choose either to include all in the nation, or in another way, refuse to incorporate some people in it. Weber considered nationalism as a product of the state, the sole legitimate agency of violence (Gellner 2006, 3). Kellas (1991, 27) similarly sees nationalism as derived from both ideology and behavior with distinctive and unified forms. To Kellas, the nation is, in Anderson’s terminology, an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) that is socially constructed to serve as “official nationalism”.

King Thibaw, the last King of the Kingdom of Burma of the Konbaung Dynasty during 1878 - 1885, considered Buddhism as a weapon to resist the British colonial rule in the year before his throne succumbed to the British. The Burmese

Monarch had found that utilizing Buddhism could promote the king being righteous and thus a Dhammaraja (Schober 2011, 132). Furthermore, he asserted the importance of Buddhism as the tool to unify the Kingdom against British colonization. The British and the non-Buddhists, whom the Burmese viewed as “foreigners”, were significant elements that provoked the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Burma during the colonial period. The British ordered the distancing of Buddhism from the state by the “non-interference in religious affairs” policy. This resulted in the cessation of pagoda construction. Christian missionaries enjoyed secularism in spreading their faith; while laypeople replaced monks as teachers in the Buddhist-influenced education system (Smith 1965, 38-39).

The revival of Buddhism in Burma began following the establishment of Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1898 in Ceylon (today’s Sri Lanka), a Buddhist-dominated island nearby also under the British. As a result, the Burmese YMBA was formed as a political space for Buddhist followers similar to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) founded in 1844. Ling (1979, 81-85) added that the organization began with teaching Buddhism, but later anti-British nationalism started to be disseminated, for instance, on the issue of “footwear.”<sup>1</sup> YMBA continued to be the center of Buddhist activities in

<sup>1</sup>In 1916, YMBA started the campaign against wearing “footwear” in Buddhist monasteries. The issue of footwear became one of deep concern, when a group of Europeans were attacked by the monks at the Eindawya pagoda. Finally, the government of Burma at the time approved the law with some reservations to maintain peace and order that hat removal, not shoes, was the way to show respect according to British and/or European culture (Smith 1965, 88-90).

Burma when it held the All Burma Conference of Buddhists in Rangoon in support of the use of customary law as against the British ones. In 1920, the General Council of the Buddhist Association (GCBA) which represented the Buddhist monks, was created to engage Buddhist people in Burma in accusing the British as the destroyer of Burma. Following U Ottama, several monks captured the Burmese public sphere with the foundation of Sangha political organizations in 1921, including the All Burma Sangha Council, the General Council of the Sangha Sameggi (GCSS) (Smith 1965, 101).

Steinberg (1982, 35) explained that nationalism, socialism, and Buddhism were the three major influences that contributed to continuity and change within Burmese political, economic, and social attitudes during the initial period of state and nation building (1948 – 1962). At that time, various nationalist movements were established. There were of two main types. One was considered as anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist and was led by prominent figures including U Ottama, U Wisera, and Saya San who rejected the British (and Western) hegemony in Burma. Another was anti-foreign political and economic interference in Burma led by the Dobama Synyetha Asiayone, AFPFL, and the Burmese Independent Army (BIA: armed forces). However, the state played parallel roles of supporting secularism and empowering the Sangha. There were two significant changes in religious laws. First, the Ecclesiastical Courts Acts were implemented in 1949 and 1951 to restore the Sangha's power. On the other hand, the official

state institution of Buddhist laymen was also newly set up to directly “promote” and “propagate” Buddhism throughout the Buddha Sasana (Religion) Council Act in 1950.

## **U Nu, state and nation building, and the rise of Buddhist nationalism**

As a devout Buddhist, Prime Minister U Nu aimed to promote Buddhism as the state religion. Buddhism became the main source of government policies and activities during his government. In his view, Buddhism was to be nationalistically applied with democratic values in order to avoid the external interference of communism and internal unrest of different ethnic groups. The government also organized the Sixth Great Buddhist Council from 1954 to 1956, and decided to terminate non-Buddhist religious teachings in schools. Later, U Nu changed his tune because of resistance from non-Bamar and non-Buddhist leaders (Smith 1965, 117). The Islamic Religious Affairs Council announced in 1960 that politics and religion should be considered segregated. Likewise, the Burma Christian Council agreed that a democratic nation must come with the idea of the secular state; whereas the Catholics remained silent on the issue (Smith 1965, 247-249). However, some 8,000 monks stepped out asking for “only Buddhism” to be embedded in the school curriculum and to permanently forbid education in other religions.

In 1950, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was founded to supervise the implementation of a number of religious laws. The Buddha Sasana Council Bill was passed by the parliament to support the printing process of Buddhist texts and the foundation of the International Buddhist University and the International Institute for Advanced Buddhistic Studies (Steinberg 1982, 63). Moreover, the government formed the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee to supervise the behavior of Buddhist monks and laypeople. It was noted as one of the most powerful agencies in

terms of the spirituality of the Kingdom (Brohm 1957, 32). In addition, U Nu designated important Buddhist days and constructed and renovated a series of pagodas around the country including the Kaba Aye World Peace pagoda (Smith 1965, 177). All bureaucratic institutions were closed, and sin-engaged activities like selling liquor were prohibited on Buddhist Sabbath days. Nevertheless, a constitutional amendment process was going on. Section 21(1) of the draft constitution, stated as follows.

*“The state recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.”*

In 1960, U Nu won a landslide election after a strong campaign of making Buddhism the state religion (Ling 1979, 123-130). At the time, a series of nationalist movements gathered to meet him. These included the Union Sangha League of the Union Party, the All Burma Young Monks

Association, the Sangha Action Committee against the Constitution, All Burma Sangha’ Front, and the Committee of All Sangha Organizations. The fourth amendment of Section 21(1) was pushed, and released as follows.

*“Buddhism being the religion professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union shall be the state religion.”*

Though, with the strong sentiment in making Buddhism as the state religion, U Nu would like to withdraw the Bill from the amendment process for fear that the tension between Buddhists and non-Buddhists would lead to violence (Smith 1965, 278-279). Violence did in fact occur in the mosques with some Muslims

were killed. There were also riots, such as in North and South Okkalapa. At the end of these clashes, 371 people were arrested, 92 of them being monks. After that, U Nu and his colleagues offered yellow robes to 996 monks at the Lanmadaw Tazaungdaing festival, but were rejected. Violence provided legitimacy to General Ne Win to stage a

coup on the night of March 2, 1962, and to set up the Revolutionary Council (Smith 1965, 281). All the bills were terminated, and the country returned to being a secular state. “The Burmese Way to Socialism” was promoted by the subsequently founded Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Some expected that the military would only remain to serve for a short-term for security and stability (Steinberg 1982, 69).

## **From BSPP to SLORC/SPDC: The fall of Buddhist nationalism under secular state condition**

Keenan (2013, 12) supports the argument that nationalism under both the premierships of U Nu and Ne Win emphasized the three elements of “one ethnicity - Myanmar, one language - Myanmar, and one religion - Buddhism”. However, the means of utilizing nationalistic sentiment were different. Ne Win’s government was not interested in any religious matters despite the fact that Buddhism was practiced by the high-ranking military officers (Fink 2009, 37). Regarding Socialist promotion, it was said that building monastic places and taking care of monks would mean nothing for the state’s development progress (Smith 1965, 298). The number of members of the working class seemed to have shrunk since men became monks who were not entirely employed, while the state was required to take care of them. This implied the lack of disengaging the Sangha

from Ne Win’s regime. Thus monks did not favor the regime because they were not supported.

The state abolished the Buddha Sasana Council in 1962, the Vinicchaya Tribunal Act, the Pali Education Board Act, the Dhammacariya Act, and the Pali University Act in 1965 (Charney 2009, 118). The All Buddha Sasana Sangha Organization (BSSO) was established as the “centrally-state controlled sangha” to control monks’ behavior. Various Buddhist institutions and monks were forced to register with the authority, but some of them declined to do so (Silverstein 1977, 50). There were violent incidents in this period such as the protest against government from burying U Thant’s body outside Rangoon University in 1974. It saw casualties, injuries, and also the defrocking of a number of monks (Fink 2009, 40). The authority began to “keep monks out of politics” by dissolving the power of the Sangha (Charney 2009, 139). Also, state-supported Buddhist activities such as Buddhist Sabbath days ceased (Smith 1965, 286).

In the second decade of Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), his strong secularist policy was softened. Ne Win allowed local abbots to supervise their local monks with the implication that the younger monks must respect their abbots (Charney 2009, 116). In June 1980, the government awarded the “nationalist prize” to those who had fought for nationalism such as GCBA and the Saya San (Charney 2009, 115). In 1987, there was the demonetization of kyat notes to end insurgency

and black marketeering of the ethnic groups (Keenan 2013, 18). In addition, the economic recession as an outcome of Socialist adjustment created decreases in production and earnings. This also affected religious donations contributed by only the Buddhists, not the state. Buddhist nationalist movements such as the All Burma Young Monks Union (ABYMU) also supported the 1988 student uprising, but could not mobilize excessively because older monks disagreed (Schober 2011, 107; Seekins 2002, 151). However, the end of the Ne Win's regime led to a political vacuum in Burma, and monks were expected to lead the country (Fink 2009, 56). Saw Maung, who became Prime Minister after Ne Win, made the claim that elections would be held following the Sangha's advice (Houtmann 1999, 220-221).

Buddhist nationalist movements continued their silence during the post-BSPP regime. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) barred their involvement in politics (Schober 2011, 107). Clashes between the state and the movements when the 1990 election results were announced led to losses. With limited freedom, some monks turned the alms bowl upside down as a sign of "sanction/boycott" against the state. Merit-making offered by the military or their family members were cancelled following the monks' boycott. Although it faded away from the political arena, the movements turned to advocate social work instead. Temples became shelters for student activists where they could escape arrest (Fink

2009, 68). In 1997, SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Buddhist nationalist sentiment slightly influenced its political role while monks' roles were extremely limited. The power abbots were given during Ne Win's period once again became the government's as the SLORC leaders saw Buddhism as a means to influence people (Charney 2009, 198-199; Houtmann 1999, 218). In addition, the government tried to build trust among the people through different methods such as bringing back Buddhist TV programs (Houtmann 1999, 122).

## **The rise of Buddhist nationalism: A challenge for the state of secularism and democratization**

Religion, state and people were originally interconnected. While the state regulates citizens' behavior through legal and institutional arrangements, religion provides a set of moral and ethical rules. State and religion thus mutually interact with each other in various ways. Cheng and Brown (2006, 14-15) argue that cooperation between an authoritarian regime and religious organizations can bring political legitimacy. However, the concept, "Separation of Church and State", has long been debated among social science scholars. This idea was initially derived from the term, "saecularis" in Latin or "secularism" in English. It means that religion is "invisible" in a pluralist community with

a liberal democratic ideology (Keane, cited in Marquand and Nettler 2000, 5-7). Secularism can also refer to “worldliness” that implies that those who believe in world affairs without a spiritual element. However, secularism, in the current context of Myanmar, is challenged by “other-worldliness”. While Buddhism resisted the making of the modern nation-state, it instead serves the state as a source of power (Schober 2011, 147). “Legitimacy” is something all rulers wish to maintain; otherwise, the regime would fail (Fox 2013, 51).

In 2008, Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar seemed to arrive at a hiatus in the beginning of the twenty-first century when mass protest marches were staged against the government’s failure in reducing oil and gas prices known as the “Saffron Revolution”. This 2007 protest was led by thousands of Buddhist monks, indicating the power of Buddhism and that the Sangha no longer relied on dictatorial rule. Similar to what had occurred during the Ne Win era when the cost of living increased, monks were unhappy about the decrease in alms offered them by people. Monks and laypeople recalled 1988 as the way to respond to harsh political and economic constraints. The regime ordered riot police but the tatmadaw to take control of the situation (Fink 2009, 104-105). In the end, at least 7,000 monks were imprisoned. In the post-Saffron Revolution period, monks turned to focus on the plights of the marginalized authorities, ranging from people living

with HIV/AIDS to natural disasters such as Nargis Cyclone in 2008 instead of on nationalism (Fink 2009, 101). As Perry (2009, 385) stated, human rights and social justice are part of the morality which religions teach (Medroso 2007, 233). In 2010, the SPDC terminated its authority with the general elections held in November 2010 with the landslide victory of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) led by the former tatmadaw officers.

The Saffron Revolution in 2007 became the lesson learned for this new democratic government that the SPDC had better consider compromising with the Buddhist nationalist movements. Otherwise, the regime would repeat its own failure in 1988. With images showing the regime’s disrespectfulness of monks, the Saffron Revolution pressured the SPDC to change its political agenda toward monks. Looking at Myanmar as a (disciplined) democratic country, Stepan (2000, 37) argued that democracy and religion might be able to cooperate with each other as “twin tolerations”. In 2010, U Thein Sein became the new President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. This semi-authoritarian/civilian government found policy implementation and legislation as a way to reconcile with the monk movements. The regime made its use of power to control to deliver the 2008 Constitution with a particular element of Buddhist nationalism in order to build its political legitimacy. Article 361 of the 2008 Constitution states:

*“The Union recognizes special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.”*

Compared to the third constitutional amendment during U Nu period, Article 361 in this latest constitution of Myanmar duplicates all texts from Section 2(1) of the draft 1947 Constitution.

Not only was Article 361 entirely taken from U Nu’s constitutional draft amendment, religious-related articles such as Article 364 was also taken from Section 21(4), as can be seen below.

*“The abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden. Moreover, any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution. A law may be promulgated to punish such activity.”*

However, despite the Article, Rohingya Muslims have faced difficulties in accessing the national census, the constitutional referendum itself, the general elections as well as personal legality until today. The authorities do not recognize them as citizens. State-controlled media claimed that the officials were unable to access the remote areas. Some groups of people were thus left out of the survey (The Burma Fund UN Office 2011).

## **The re-birth of Buddhist nationalist movements: Patriotism or political agenda?**

There are two major Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar. First, the 969 Movement supports the Sangha and the government’s anti-Muslim policy. U Thein Sein supported and defended the group’s actions by attributing to good intention in peacebuilding and in eliminating threats

from Islam-influenced people (BBC News 2013). Another important Buddhist nationalist movements is the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (Ma Ba Tha). This movements is also referred to as the Organization for Race and Religion Protection. It strongly supports and lobbies the Assembly of the Union to issue marriage laws in 2015 (Aung 2014). The movements shares with the 969 Movement nationalist sentiment and was founded after the Sangha’s ban on the use of the Buddhist Triple Gems symbol. Its founding was prompted by the concern that the 969 Movement would face negative reactions from some Buddhists (Walton and Hayward 2014, 14-15).

With the revival of Buddhist nationalist movements, made possible by the adoption of the relevant elements of U Nu’s draft constitution, international concerns prompted the state to do something about the rise of Islamophobia. During British colonial rule, Indian merchants were brought

to Burma. They were Hindu and Muslim followers with different ethnicities, Tamil, Rohingya, etc. To this day history books continue to portray these people as foreigners who would exploit and destroy the traditional culture and resources of Myanmar. They worked in different occupations such as recruited soldiers, entrepreneurs, and agricultural workers. The Rohingya Muslims especially have been referred to as troublemakers (Fuller 2013). However, the question at hand is why tension and conflict between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims became very violent during this period.

Normally, the clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar have occurred frequently since the colonial period, especially in the areas where Muslims resided, such as Arakan/Rakhine State. Since 1989, the Burmese Buddhists were relocated to various towns in Northern Rakhine/Arakan State, where Rohingya Muslims had been residing. Furthermore, a number of military personnel in the surrounding areas increased to 20,000 officers (Charney 2009, 185). This incident stimulated tensions along the border between Burma and Bangladesh as an accumulated number of 145,000 Rohingya Muslims were violently forced to migrate; some were also sexually molested and

assaulted. Rohingya Muslims were harmed in their everyday life. Muslim-owned shops were looted and burned down. In June 2012, Rumor spread across the region that three Muslim men raped and killed a young Buddhist girl in the town of Sittwe, Rakhine state. In consequence, Rakhine Buddhists violently stormed Rohingya Muslims' abodes and hundreds of injuries and deaths resulted. The incident that broke out in June went on for more than a month. This caused Rohingya Muslims to end up as internally displaced persons in state-provided shelters (Walton and Hayward 2014, 7).

As to the movements, we can witness their activities toward an extremely nationalist monk, U Wirathu,<sup>2</sup> who calls himself "Bin Laden of Buddhism" (Bengali 2005). This made him internationally known as the "Buddhist Terrorist" (The Time 2013). He used different types of media including the social media to fan the hatred claiming that the Buddhist women were raped by the Muslim men (Hodal 2013). Wirathu is a prominent member of the 969 Movement<sup>3</sup> that had labeled Muslims as troublemakers (Fuller 2013). Although some Buddhist nationalists were put in jail, they were soon released along with other political prisoners. Only a small number of them

---

<sup>2</sup>U Wirathu is a 49-year-old-monk residing in Mandalay who has represented as one of the leading Buddhist nationalists in the post-1988 Myanmar. He was once arrested and imprisoned for 9 years in 2003 as he had generated anti-Muslim riots in Mandalay. In 2012, he was granted amnesty by the government (Walton and Hayward 2014, 12-13).

<sup>3</sup>969 is derived from Buddhist symbol of the "Three Jewels" which are the Buddha, the Dhamma (Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (monks) (Walton and Hayward 2014, 13-14).

went on trial. These incidents caught international attention and brought debate about Myanmar's future amidst the ongoing peace process (Delius 2015).

## Population control laws:

### The politicization of Islamophobia

In mid-2015, a series of laws were enacted. The government passed four marriage laws. Together, they were called Race and Religion Protection Law under the Constitution's Article 361 that gave Buddhism a special position in the country. The process of enacting these laws was strongly supported by the 969 Movement. The fact that the laws were enacted a few months before the general elections indicates that the intention was to boost the political legitimacy of the tatmadaw and its inner circles. Prior to that, rumor was abroad of a Muslim conspiracy to demolish Buddhist religion and the Burmese race through exploitation and interreligious marriage (Walton and Hayward 2014, 17). The set of laws were (1) Monogamy Law, (2) Religious Conversion Law, (3) Interfaith Marriage Law, and (4) Population Control Law. They were submitted to Parliament in December 2014.

First, Monogamy Law, passed on August 31, 2015, stated that having more than one spouse or living with a partner to whom one is not married is a crime. Therefore, Muslims in Myanmar might be charged with their religiously permitted

polygamy. Those who practice polygamy are not allowed to enter Myanmar either. Second, Religious Conversion Law was signed by President Thein Sein on August 26, 2015. This law requires Myanmar people who would like to convert their religion to submit their intentions to the newly established organization called the Registration Board for Religious Conversion in their local township. Whoever is forced to convert or who do harm to other religions would face criminal charges. Third, Interfaith Marriage Law was signed on the same day. It requires permission from the parents if a woman under the age of 20 who would like to get married to a non-Buddhist man. The local registrar can postpone the marriage for 14 days to ensure that there is no objection against the marriage. Last, the Interfaith Marriage Law, approved on May 27, 2015, requires governments of divisions and states to request a presidential order in order to limit reproductive rates when the likelihood of population growth seems to negatively affect regional development. These four laws were criticized as being enacted to strengthen Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar.

## Rohingya Muslims:

### Reconstruction of a colonial memory

Some of the Rohingya Muslims can no longer stay in their localities because of threats to their lives, since migration across the administrative

states is not permitted by law, some of them decided to cross the border into Bangladesh. Others sailed across the Bay of Bengal to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia seeking asylum in the “third countries” (The Week 2015).

Before the elections took place in November 2015, one Muslim constituency candidate of the National League for Democracy (NLD) also struggled to become a candidate of the party. Finally he was removed from the candidate list. U Wirathu started to accuse the NLD of it supporting Muslims in Myanmar. He called on the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by Thein Sein, for support in ensuring that Muslim candidates would not be allowed to participate in Myanmar domestic politics. Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD were thus pressured to remove Muslims from the list of candidates (Mizzima 2015). The general elections were held in November. The NLD won a landslide victory, raising hopes for Myanmar to continue its democratization process.

However, religion and ethnicity in Myanmar seem to be overlapping. “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist” is a motto used since the country was under British colonial rule (Ling 1979, 81-85). It was produced by the YMBA when the struggle for independence was started by Buddhist laypeople. Fox (Cordell and Wolff 2011, 70) argued that while religion can lead to division along ethnic and interest lines, they often coincide. Cordell and Wolff (2011, 70-75) in a study of ethnicity and religion proposed a geohistorical perspective. Does

the state’s historical development of boundaries place state, religion and ethnic identities in conformity? Colonialism is considered as one of the reasons encouraging ethnic and religious divide. The rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar is fired by the reconstruction of history that Muslims, brought in from British India, occupied land and resources as well as dominated the business sector (Mendelson 1975, 173).

Among the Buddhist nationalist movements, Rohingya Muslims were perceived as a threat not only to the state of Myanmar herself but also to the everyday life of Buddhists. Therefore, extreme response is acceptable to destroy one’s opponent and defend one’s side. Another element that Fox (2013, 88) emphasized on religious movements is that they depend on protected status to gather force. Since popular support of a religious institution would deter opposition to and the regime provide legitimacy for it. Therefore, the violent acts of the movements might be condoned by the government that harbored concerns and fears of the rise of Islam. The movements also blamed the Muslims for provoking violence and conflict.

The activities of these movements can also be referred to as fundamentalism, a set of beliefs that aims to defend one’s religion against modernity and secularism. Fox (2013, 111-116) explained that fundamentalists also draw boundaries between “us” and “them”, so as to maintain their status in society. Fundamentalists are

additionally found where they are a majority in order to pursue the goal of state religion. Thus, it is not surprising to witness policy implementation and legislation by the authorities. The movements, namely both 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha, are afraid of the loss of Buddhist traditions by invasion by others (Walton and Hayward 2014, 26), witness their founding of Dhamma teaching schools.

Koesel (2014, 26-27) asserted that religious revivalism can serve national unity and identity. The movements' fear of the rise of Islam can be traced not only to the presence of Muslims locally but also to the global 'war-on-terror' that targets Islam and Muslim. Accordingly, the Race and Religion Protection Law is intended to support them. Because laws in and of themselves could not shape the behavior in society, the state must bring in Buddhist nationalist sentiment of being "us" and "them" to successfully limit the growth of the Islamic population. Fox's (2013, 81) argument that religious discrimination is a limitation on the religious practices of the minority religions, can't be applied to Myanmar's population control laws.

Buddhist nationalist discourses have changed overtime according to internal and external threats perceived by the state and the Buddhist movements. The present discourse against the Rohingya Muslims builds on a historical pain

to drive Buddhist nationalistic sentiment and movement.

## Concluding Remarks

The state in Myanmar has utilized Buddhist nationalism to legitimize its rule. Buddhist movements have also used it in order to acquire political space. Between 1962 and the 2008 Saffron Revolution, the state painfully learnt the lesson that limiting the movements' political expression brought instability to itself.

The constitution and the "population control" laws, in giving Buddhism a status superior to other religions, ensure religious freedom for the Buddhists and their movements and were also expected to contribute greater legitimacy to the regime. Yet the Buddhist nationalist movements could use the laws to justify their violent actions against non-Buddhists, Rohingya Muslims in particular. In the last analysis, the situation has worsened.

Further research could be done on changes and continuities in Buddhist nationalism in the post-Thein Sein period and into the reasons why Buddhist nationalism has not been positively contributing to political legitimacy since the NLD's landslide victory of 2015.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Aung Kyaw Min. Ma Ba Tha monks declare political independence. *Myanmar Times*, June 27, 2014. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/10833-ma-ba-tha-monks-declare-political-independence.html>. (Accessed on March 12, 2016)
- Bengali, Shashank. 2005. Monk dubbed ‘Buddhist Bin Laden’ targets Myanmar’s persecuted Muslims. *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-ff-myanmar-monk-20150524-story.html>. (Accessed on March 10, 2016)
- Brohm, John Frank. 1957. *Burmese religion and the Burmese religious revival, volume 1*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- The Burma Fund UN Office. The Burma Fund UN Office releases comprehensive election report documenting widespread political repression and human rights abuses. <http://www.burma-partnership.org/2011/01/the-burma-fund-un-office-releases-comprehensive-election-report-documenting-widespread-political-repression-and-human-rights-abuses/> (Accessed on March 12, 2017)
- Burmese leader defends ‘anti Muslim’ monk Ashin Wirathu. *BBC News*, June 24, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23027492>. (Accessed on March 12, 2016)
- Charney, Michael W. 2009. *A history of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheng, Tun-jen, and Deborah A. Brown, eds. 2006. *Religious organization and democratization: Case studies from contemporary Asia*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.
- Cordell, Karl, and Stefan Wolff. 2013. *Routledge handbook of ethnic conflict*. London: Routledge.
- Delius, Ulrich. 2015. Long prison sentences for bride, groom and wedding guests. <https://www.gfbv.de/en/news/long-prison-sentences-for-bride-groom-and-wedding-guests-6732/> (Accessed on March 11, 2017).
- The face of Buddhist terror. 2013. *The Time*, July 1, 2013. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html>. (Accessed on March 10, 2016)
- Fink, Christina. 2009. *Living silence in Burma*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

- Fox, Jonathan. 2013. *An introduction to religion and politics: Theory and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Fuller, Thomas. 2013. Extremism builds among Myanmar's Buddhists. *The Seattle Times*, June 21, 2013. <http://old.seattletimes.com/text/201235489.html>. (Accessed on March 10, 2016)
- Gellner, Ernest. 2006. *Nations and nationalism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hodal, Kate. 2013. Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma. *The Guardian*, April 18, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/buddhist-monk-spreads-hatred-burma>. (Accessed on March 10, 2016)
- Houtmann, Gustaf. 1999. *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
- Keenan, Paul. 2013. *By force of arms: Armed ethnic groups in Burma*. Delhi: Vij Books India.
- Kellas, James G. 1991. *The politics of nationalism and ethnicity*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Koesel, Karrie J. 2014. *Religion and authoritarianism: Cooperation, conflict, and the consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ling, Travor. 1979. *Buddhism, imperialism and war: Burma and Thailand in modern history*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Marquand, David, and Ronald L. Nettle. 2000. *Religion and democracy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Medroso, Leonardo Y. 2007. Separation of church and state: Its impact on the arena of politics. *Philippine Canonical Forum* 9(January-December): 233-242.
- Mendelson, E. Michael. 1975. *Sangha and state in Burma: A study of monastic sectarianism and leadership*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mizzima. 2015. Monk U Wirathu speaks of support of USDP, denigration of NLD. *Mizzima*, October 5, 2015. <http://mizzima.com/news-election-2015-election-news/monk-u-wirathu-speaks-support-usdp-denigration-nld#sthash.wOtYJGGP.dpuf>. (Accessed on March 11, 2016).
- National Convention of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. 2008. *Constitution of Republic of the Union of Myanmar*. Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Information.

- Perry, Michael J. 2009. A religious basis of liberal democracy. *Hebraic Political Studies* 4(4): 381-396.
- The Rohingya boat crisis: Why refugees are fleeing Burma. 2015. *The Week*, May 21, 2015. <http://www.theweek.co.uk/63745/the-rohingya-boat-crisis-why-refugees-are-fleeing-burma> (Accessed on March 10, 2016)
- Schober, Jane. 2011. *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural narratives, colonial legacies, and civil society*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Seekins, Donald. 2002. *The Disorder in order: The army-state in Burma since 1962*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Silverstein, Josef. 1977. *Burma: Military rule and the politics of stagnation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Smith, Donald E. 1965. *Religion and politics in Burma*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Steinberg, David I. 1982. *Burma. A socialist nation of Southeast Asia*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Stepan, Alfred C. 2000. Religion, democracy, and the "Twin Tolerations." *Journal of Democracy* 11(4): 37-57.
- Why is there communal violence in Myanmar? *BBC News*, March 3, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>. International Crisis Group. (Accessed on March 11, 2016)