

Buddhism and politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand

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On the face of it, a quietist and meditative religion like Buddhism that advocates compassion for, but withdrawal from, the world of suffering would seem to have little to do with politics. But it was the Buddha himself who established the first link between Buddhism and political power in North India, through the accommodation he sought with the rising power of Magadha and its king, Ajatasattu. From its origins Buddhism was an urban phenomenon: it drew its support from householders from the ksatriya and vaisya classes (varnas). The Sangha established the sites of its Lenten retreats close to towns, where monks could obtain alms, or be supplied by wealthy patrons.

Though the organisation of the Sangha is believed to be based on the republican institutions of government of the Buddha's own Sakya tribe, historically Buddhism has provided legitimation for political power, especially authoritarian political power in the form of absolute monarchy. The ideal Buddhist ruler is the *cakravartin*, or universal emperor, whose historical model is Asoka Maurya (ruled 268-239 BCE). Ideally the *cakravartin* creates his empire solely through 'righteous, or dharmic, conquest' (*dharmavijaya*); that is, through the example of his superior karma and rule as *dharmaraja*, in accordance with Buddhist moral precepts. Lesser rulers voluntarily acknowledge the moral superiority of the *cakravartin* and bring their kingdoms within the universal empire, whose justification lies in the opportunity it provides though just and ordered government for all individuals to pursue their spiritual path towards nirvana (liberation from the cycle of rebirth).

Asoka was proclaimed by Buddhist historians as the ideal king, because he turned away from bloody conquest after his Kalinga campaign to rule his extensive empire in accordance with Buddhist moral principles. In his edicts he praised the 'three gems' of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and established rules to ensure that the Sangha was

‘purified’, in the sense of not providing a refuge for rebels or criminals. He also gave generously to the Sangha, and is supposed to have assembled the third great Buddhist council, around 250 BCE. So was established the reciprocal relationship between ruler and Sangha that became characteristic of all Theravada kingdoms in Southeast Asia.

Buddhist Legitimation of Political Power

Legitimation derives from popular acceptance of the right by some person or persons within society to exercise political power. It thus depends on shared worldview. In Southeast Asia, those with the right to rule were kings who stood at the apex of civil society. Their right to rule was legitimised in two ways. The first was by descent: kings were either sons of brothers of previous kings, or could demonstrate their descent from some earlier ruler. In the case of Laos, all kings except two in the dynasty of Lan Xang traced their ancestry back to the first mythical Lao ruler, Khun Borom. But Buddhist notions of karma and rebirth provided a second powerful source of legitimation by propagating the belief that everyone was reborn into the position in society determined by their karma. To be reborn into the royal family in the position of crown prince required accumulation of positive karma over innumerable lifetimes, and thus to be well on the way towards Buddhahood. From this came the idea of the *cakravartin* as bodhisattva, (which is what King Taksin of Siam claimed to be.)

Traditionally karma and rebirth went hand-in-hand with Buddhist cosmology, as outlined in the very influential 14th century Thai text known as the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*. This described the 31 levels of existence in Buddhist cosmology to which one’s karma could consign one. For many modern Southeast Asian Buddhists, however, this cosmology is no longer central to their understanding of their religion. What do remain central are the notions of karma and rebirth – plus persistent belief in the reality of a spirit world inhabited by a variety of more or less unpleasant spirits and demons of one kind or another (*nats* in Burma, *phi* in Thailand and Laos, *neak* in Cambodia), which require propitiation, but which have minimal influence on politics. (chat on phi)

In popular belief, karma is a kind of accounting that balances merit and demerit, good deeds and bad. Also in popular belief, merit can be transferred (though there is little basis for this in Buddhist scripture). This is why sons often enter the Sangha for short stints after a parent dies, in order to transfer merit at the crucial time of their parent's rebirth. Karma might determine rebirth, but karma is not fate. Everyone has the freedom to act so as to improve one's 'karmic balance'. This is particularly true of those in positions of power. Kings may exercise their great power for good – but also for evil. Kings enhance their royal karma by creating conditions for others to achieve nirvana (through good governance and economic prosperity), and through donating generously to the Sangha (for new monastic buildings and their upkeep, and for the welfare of monks). In general, those born into higher social status, with greater wealth, have greater resources to create merit by such means, and thus greater opportunity to advance more rapidly towards nirvana. (cf widow's mite) Not to take the opportunity to make merit provided by rebirth into a wealthy family would likely result in rebirth lower, rather than higher, in the social scale next time around. The moral choice is up to each individual, but the results of actions, good and bad, will inevitably be paid for in future rebirths. For the law of karma is as inexorable as the law of gravity. (cf Protestant idea of social status as a mark of divine approval)

From this we can see that the reciprocal relationship between monarch and Sangha benefits both. The king gains legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects, who accept his accumulation of wealth and power as his right by virtue of his own moral stature and just rule, while the Sangha gains prestige, influence and a comfortable existence (within the limits imposed by monastic discipline – the 227 rules listed in the Vinaya). Relations between Sangha and crown were close. Abbots of major monasteries were often royal appointees and served as royal advisors. As the Sangha was the sole organisation providing education (and the only one offering a degree of social mobility), it provided the principal means by which the key elements of the Buddhist worldview were transmitted from generation to generation. At times of division within the Sangha, or when monastic discipline became lax, kings took it upon themselves to 'purify' the

Sangha in order to enhance its status, and so also its effectiveness in legitimising royal power.

The political legitimacy given to monarchy by the Buddhist worldview in Southeast Asia survives now only in Thailand (and to a lesser degree in Cambodia). King Bhumibol wields great political influence by virtue of the high esteem in which he is held by the Thai people. He holds that esteem because of the karmic merit he is believed to have accumulated, both to be born to succeed to the throne and from the good works he has performed since becoming king. That King Bhumibol is a constitutional monarch who uses his political power sparingly does not alter the fact that he possesses it, in a way that, for instance the Danish, Dutch, or even British monarchs do not. (eat your heart out, Charlie Windsor.) Anyone doubting the political power of the Thai monarch has only to recall how the king summoned generals Chamlong and Suchinda to put an end to the street violence of May 1992, when both men in the full glare of television advanced on their knees before the king. There will be no further coups while this king is alive, so it can be argued that credit for the political stability of Thai democracy is in large part due to King Bhumibol. Whether his successor will have similar power is, however, less certain.

To some extent Sihanouk benefited from a similar form of legitimacy when he was first king, then prime minister of Cambodia until his overthrow in 1970. In fact Sihanouk's position was reinforced further by the Khmer concept of divine kingship that goes back to the god-kings (*devaraja*) of Angkor. Some of the aura of royal merit continued to surround Sihanouk after he placed his father on the throne and assumed political leadership of the Sangkum party, but it faded as Sihanouk fiddled and his country began to burn in the late 1960s. His subsequent political antics seriously undermined his prestige in the eyes of many of his people, and he is today a sad figure waiting to die in Beijing. His son has inherited little of Sihanouk's charisma or popular veneration, and none of his political influence, So Buddhism now plays an ambiguous role in the legitimation of political power in Cambodia.

The other two Theravada countries of Southeast Asia are republics: Burma a military dictatorship and Laos a Marxist-Leninist one-party dictatorship (as Cambodia was, in one form or another, from 1975 to 1993). In Burma both U Nu and Ne Win acted at times as if they had royal pretensions, or at least sought Buddhist legitimacy as political leaders – perhaps because the British, not the Burmese, dispensed with the Burmese monarchy, and a certain nostalgia has remained ever since. U Nu, for instance, presided over the Sixth Great Buddhist Council in 1954 to mark the 2,500th anniversary, by some reckoning, of the Buddha's passing away (*parinirvana*). This recalled King Mindon's Fifth Council of 1871. In the national elections of 1960, U Nu ran on a platform promising to make Buddhism the state religion, and won a sweeping victory. Ne Win sought Buddhist legitimation for his military regime by constructing two huge pagodas in Mandalay and Rangoon (close to the sacred Shwedagon, and still unfinished). He also 'purified' the Sangha by creating a single hierarchy that included all nine officially recognised 'sects' (gaing, or nikaya) within a single Burmese Sangha and bringing it under much closer political supervision.

Subsequent relations between the Sangha and the military in Burma bring home the continuing significance of Buddhism today in legitimising political power, even in a secular republic. After the infamous events of 8-8-88, when the Burmese military slaughtered hundreds of unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators, and the oppression that followed, resistance to the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) was concentrated in the Sangha. Many monks had participated in the pro-democracy demonstrations, and many had been forced to flee reprisals. When soldiers attacked a meeting of 7,000 monks in Mandalay commemorating the second anniversary of the 8-8-88 massacre, the Sangha 'overturned the begging bowl', refusing to perform Buddhist ceremonies for military and government officials. The ban lasted two months, and involved up to 20,000 monks, before it was rescinded under intense military pressure. The military took the matter very seriously, fearing the Sangha would become the centre of internal political opposition to the regime. Subsequently numbers of activist monks were forced to de-robe, as the military brought the Sangha more closely under its control through the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Thereafter the military deliberately moved to shore up its own Buddhist credentials by providing state support for Buddhism. Pagodas were refurbished, donations made to the Sangha, and the military arranged for the Buddha's tooth relic to be flown from Beijing to spend 45 days touring around Burma. This was a particularly interesting event, not least for what it revealed about the role of Buddhism in the political legitimation even of a military regime in Burma. Worship of relics as repositories of spiritual power is well established in Buddhism, but at least since the time of Asoka relics have mostly been interred within substantial stupas. Only a few, like the tooth relics of Kandy and Beijing, are venerated in temples, and so can be moved, whether in procession for the faithful to worship, or for safe keeping. Relic pagodas became places of worship, whose location defined a path of pilgrimage around a sacred territory. Political power enforcing social order provided safety of access, and so the possibility of making merit – another example of the role of temporal power facilitating spiritual advancement, and thereby gaining legitimation.

This was exactly the quid pro quo for the Burmese military. In arranging for the tooth relic to be brought from China, by the prominence given to its veneration by senior army leaders, by the strong military presence escorting the relic around Burma for as many people as possible to worship (and thereby gain merit), the military greatly strengthened its credentials as defender of the faith, and thereby its right to govern.

None of the leaders of Laos since the country gained independence in 1953 sought to bolster their personal standing by way of Buddhist legitimation through demonstrations of piety and merit making, or to associate the state with religion (though oaths of office for government ministers were taken in a Buddhist monastery.). Souvanna Phuma was as much French as he was Lao, inspired more by the ideals of French parliamentary democracy than by any belief in Buddhist legitimation. He nevertheless benefited politically from his royal status in the eyes of the Lao people as a member of the collateral branch of the royal family of Luang Phrabang. Laos was a monarchy from independence in 1953 to 1975, with kings Sisavangvong and Savangvatthana as

constitutional monarchs. For Lao Buddhists (that is, most ethnic Lao), their right to reign derived from Buddhist legitimation, plus their royal genealogy traceable back six centuries to Fa Ngum, founder of the kingdom of Lan Xang, a heritage no other Southeast Asian dynasty could match. Lodged well away from the capital, however, they failed to provide either a focus for nationalism or an influence for political stability, as did in different ways Bhumibol in Thailand and Sihanouk in Cambodia.

Cambodia in 1970 became a republic and Cambodia and Laos in 1975 became communist 'people's democracies', albeit of rather different kinds. Under the Khmer Republic from 1970 to 1975 President Lon Nol certainly suffered from delusions of monarchical grandeur. Like Burmese leaders, however, he relied more on astrology than merit-making to enhance his political career. Under the Khmer Rouge, Buddhism suffered an almost total eclipse and provided no legitimation for the regime, but the situation in Laos was more ambiguous, with the Pathet Lao attempting to use the Sangha to propagate socialism. Repression of Buddhism was half-hearted and temporary in Laos, and even high-ranking members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party attended Buddhist festivals. Suppression of phi worship had even less effect. (eg of Bun Bang Fay)

There is one important point to note about Buddhist legitimation of revolutionary movements, both in Laos and Cambodia. Both the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Rouge portrayed themselves as embodying Buddhist values. Revolutionaries, like monks, were selfless in their devotion to their cause, accepted privation in the forest, and exercised moral discipline (of a kind). Such ideals attracted young and idealistic recruits to swell the revolutionary ranks. But whereas the Khmer Rouge saw the Sangha as parasitic on the body politic and as something to be destroyed, the Pathet Lao always accorded monks due respect, while at the same time bringing the Sangha under Party control – a policy that was subsequently adopted by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) after 1979.

Belief in karma and rebirth provides a singular worldview that pervades all four Theravada Buddhist countries. Its importance should never be underestimated because it

provides explanations for events that colour attitudes to both life and politics. Karma provides a ready explanation for anything that happens to a person in life, and one hears it frequently referred to. Everything from success in marriage to failure in business is put down to the workings of karma. Expressions of sympathy for someone's bad luck are met with a shrug and reference to his or her karma. Nothing happens by chance. Political success and failure are accounted for in the same way. There is a suggestion of fate here. No-one can escape one's karma, though effects may be delayed to a future lifetime. No-one without equivalent merit can challenge someone widely believed to possess superior karma, for this would be wasted effort. So political leadership often rests on individual qualities and charisma rather than on some organisational or ideological basis. This even applies to the military, and it is a factor in single-party states (even if reinforced by patronage networks, etc.)

The notions of karma and rebirth are profoundly conservative in the way they legitimise prevailing social structure and hierarchy. It is as if one's place in life was determined by natural law. This does not mean that social change and mobility are impossible, for one can never tell how one's karma will work out. Moreover, it is always possible to build up one's store of merit, not just by giving to the Sangha what one can (though this is certainly important), but also by acting in accordance with Buddhist values. By showing compassion for others, helping them where possible, they may well be in a position to return the favour later. What might be called reciprocity can also be explained as karmic effect. For those who do not succeed in life, there is always the consolation that as good Buddhists they will experience a better rebirth.

The conservative element in the Buddhist worldview does tend, however, to reinforce authoritarian political leadership. The notion of karma carries with it a degree of acceptance that those above one in the social and political hierarchy, even if incompetent and corrupt, somehow deserve to be where they are. Evil deeds may be compensated for by generously giving to the Sangha, or even becoming a monk for a while (as general Thanom did in Thailand, thereby precipitating a political crisis), or they will have their delayed effect in a subsequent lifetime. Punishment in this lifetime is not so essential,

therefore – which may be one reason why there seems to be less enthusiasm for trying Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity among Cambodians than in the West. [Popular belief in merit and karma makes it difficult for reformist Buddhists to argue for a more rational, or symbolic, or allegorical interpretation of texts – even more difficult for reformist Muslims]

Buddhist Political Activism

What I have been talking about so far is the effect Buddhism has in legitimising political power. I want to go on now to address Buddhist political activism and the direct involvement of the Sangha in politics. Here there are two matters to consider: Buddhism as motivation, and the Sangha as an organisation capable of mobilising political dissent. Both came together in the significant role Buddhism played in the rise of nationalism in all four countries.

The traditional form of Buddhist political activism was essentially millenarian, and centred on belief in Maitreya, the next Buddha due to be reborn on earth. At times of economic crisis or social disruption a ‘holy man’ (in Lao *phu mi bun*, one possessing great merit; in Burmese the *set kya min*, restorer of the golden age) would claim to be either preparing the way for the arrival of Maitreya, or be the bodhisattva himself. He would gather around himself a following of the credulous and disaffected, convince them of his magical powers, and challenge the authorities. Such rebellions might be quite successful at first, but were usually put down with savage reprisals. This was the pattern of the *phu mi bun* revolt of 1902 that spilled over from southern Laos into northeast Thailand. The Saya San rebellion in Burma in the mid-1930s contained echoes of millenarianism, but was more an attempt to restore a Burmese monarchy.

The most important political role played by Buddhism during the colonial period was through its contribution to cultural revivalism and nationalism. Religion was a major factor in distinguishing indigenous elites from their colonial masters. While tiny

intellectual elites adopted Liberalism or Marxism, for the great majority to be Burmese, Lao, or Khmer was to be Buddhist. In Burma as in Indochina, colonialism severed the link between the Buddhist Sangha and political power, leaving the Sangha unclear about where it stood and what role it was expected to play. This undermined both its hierarchy and discipline, and left the way open for younger monks (like U Wissera and U Ottama) to play a more overtly political role. Especially important were links between young monks and members of the YMBA, expressly founded (in 1906) to use religion to stimulate cultural, and so national, consciousness.

Buddhism was slower to play such a role in Cambodia and Laos, partly because the sanghas in both countries were organisationally weaker than in Burma, and partly because the elites of both countries were swayed by French arguments that only French protection prevented them from being swallowed up by their more powerful neighbours. So nationalism was more a product of the 1930s in Cambodia and Laos, rather than two decades earlier as in Burma or post-Chulalongkorn Siam. The founding of the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh in 1930, followed later by a branch in Viang Chan had as much to do with severing contacts between the Cambodian and Lao sanghas on the one hand and their counterpart in Thailand on the other, as it had to do with stimulating Buddhist studies and improving the quality of monastic education. But it also encouraged direct contacts between Lao and Cambodian monks, and stimulated cultural awareness.

French authorities were particularly suspicious of the close ties between the minority Thammayut communities in all three countries. The Thammayut school had been founded by King Monkut of Siam while he was monk. Stricter in discipline and more modernist and rationalist in its interpretation of scripture, it was closely linked through royal patronage to the Thai royal family, a pattern continued in Cambodia, though not in Laos, where it was stronger in the south than the north. Cambodian and Lao Thammayut monks often studied in Bangkok, where the French were afraid they would be indoctrinated with the virus of anti-colonialism.

The Buddhist Institute did encourage Buddhist studies, but it also stimulated wider studies into culture and history, folklore and language, which rekindled cultural pride that fed into the rising tide of nationalism. The failure of France to protect either Laos or Cambodia from losing territory to Thailand in 1940-41 had a similar effect. Monks took the lead in opposing clumsy French attempts to introduce romanised forms of Cambodian and Lao scripts. In Cambodia, the monk Hem Chieu, a leader in this opposition movement, was arrested for treason and sedition and imprisoned on Poulo Condore (Con Son Island), where he died (at the age of 46). The case generated considerable popular anger because Hem Chieu has not been permitted to disrobe in the ritually required way. Over 1000 people, half of them monks, demonstrated against his arrest. During the six months of French internment in 1945 and immediately following the Japanese surrender, monks in both Laos and Cambodia lent considerable support to democratic and nationalist movements calling for independence, and the Sanghas in both countries remained objects of French suspicion.

With the reimposition of French control in October 1945 in Cambodia, but not until May 1946 in Laos, monks in both countries became actively involved in politics. In Cambodia monks overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party, while in Laos they supported the Lao Issara. Many Lao monks fled to monasteries in Thailand when the Lao Issara government was forced into exile. In Cambodia two former monks, Son Ngoc Minh (also known as Achar Mean) and Tou Samouth, became prominent members of the Cambodian Communist movement and founders of the pro-communist Unified Issarak Front (1950). In Laos several former monks joined the pro-communist Pathet Lao, though none of its prominent leaders had spent extended periods in the Sangha. Both fronts stressed the monastic support they received as a ploy in their recruitment of new members.

In Laos the Pathet Lao joined three coalition governments (in 1957, 1962 and 1974), so it was essential for the communist Lao People's Party to have a clear policy towards Buddhism. The Party consistently claimed to 'respect and protect Buddhism', for the Sangha was a strong supporter of Lao neutrality and traditional Lao culture in the face of growing American cultural influence and political control. The Sangha became as

important means of transmitting the message of the Lao Patriotic Front, and it was not surprising that the Pathet Lao accepted the Ministry of Religion in the First Coalition government. For the Pathet Lao the Sangha was an organisation it could make use of, and so had no wish to destroy.

Not so the Khmer Rouge. Held in check by the Vietnamese, the Khmer communist insurgency only gained momentum after 1970. In the life-and-death armed struggle that followed there was little opportunity to make political use of the Sangha – especially as Buddhism had been enlisted by the Khmer Republic in the cause of anti-communism.. When the Khmer Rouge seized power they saw Buddhism as a ‘feudal remnant’ that had to be done away. For the Khmer Rouge 60,000 monks were an unproductive burden on the economy. All were forced to disrobe; those who refused were killed. Only an estimated 37% survived the next three years of starvation, disease and murder. Temples were desecrated, used for storage, or to house animals. Buddha images were smashed; palm-leaf manuscripts used to roll cigarettes. The Khmer Rouge boasted that Buddhism was dead, destroyed to make way for a new Cambodian revolutionary culture.

When the Pathet Lao seized power, it was through semi-legal means by decision of a Congress of People’s Representatives, in the front row of which sat a line of orange-robed Buddhist monks. Throughout the months leading up to the Congress, the Pathet Lao had used a willing Sangha to propagate its message of neutrality and socialism. After power was firmly in the hands of the Party, it moved to bring the Sangha closely under Party control, which is where the Lao Sangha remains today. Many Lao Thammayut monks fled to Thailand. Those who remained were incorporated with the Mahanikay into the United Lao Buddhists Association, which was reduced to a mere member organisation of the Lao Front for National Construction. Early controls on Buddhist festivals and alms-giving were soon lifted, and since 1990 Lao Buddhism has been allowed to flourish, though there is no room in the Lao Sangha for independent activism, let alone political opposition. (Kaison and Buddhism)

In Cambodia after 1980 the PRK allowed Buddhism to re-emerge. A Cambodian Sangha had to be re-established from scratch through re-ordination of a carefully selected group of surviving former monks by the necessary quorum of Khmer Krom monks brought in from Vietnam. By the time of the first national monastic conference in May 1982, there were officially 2,311 monks and 1,821 temples. Thereafter the policy of the ruling Khmer People's Revolutionary Party was modelled on that of the Lao Party (LPRP) – that is, to control and use the Sangha as an arm of government to promote government policy. Declaration of the State of Cambodia freed the Sangha from stifling state control, so permitting in 1992 the first independent Buddhist political activism in the form of marches for peace led by Buddhist monks. These became an annual event. With Sihanouk's return as king of the Kingdom of Cambodia, a small Thommayut Sangha was re-established. In Cambodia today, the Sangha has again largely come under the control of the ruling party of prime minister and political strongman, Hun Sen.

So into the 21st century, Buddhism remains under close political control in Burma, Laos and Cambodia, and no independent Buddhist inspired or guided political activism has been possible. There remains Thailand, the only democratic Buddhist country in Southeast Asia, and here the picture is much more interesting and diverse.

The relationship between Buddhism and politics in Thailand is unique for several reasons. Thailand is the only country of the four that was never colonised, and as indicated above, it is the only country that has maintained an unbroken monarchy that still draws its political legitimation in large part from the Buddhist worldview of its citizens, who are 90% Buddhist. Thailand now is the only functioning democracy out of the four states, the only one with a free press, an active civil society, and opportunities for free speech and association. It is the only one, in other words, where Buddhist activism is politically possible.

In Thailand, as elsewhere, there has always been a close relationship between state power and the Sangha – to the extent that the organization of state power has been reflected in the organisation of the Sangha. Let me quote Peter Jackson's summary:

After his reforms of the state bureaucracy in the 1890s King Chulalongkorn restructured the sangha administration in 1902 to provide for a parallel centralisation of bureaucratic control over all Buddhist monks in the country. Nine years after the 1932 revolution, Chulalongkorn's centralised sangha administration was replaced by a system of sangha councils and ministers modelled on the democratic patterns of the revolutionary government. Five years after Sarit Thanarat assumed power in a military coup in 1957 and instituted his highly centralised form of military authoritarianism the democratic sangha structure established in 1941 was abolished and replaced with a recentralised administrative system which closely resembled the structure originally established by King Chulalongkorn in 1902. (Jackson 1989: 63-4)

To this one might add that after the reintroduction of democratic government in the 1990s, the hierarchical structure of the sangha has been challenged by reformists who object to its authoritarian controls and cosy relationship with conservative political elites.

Before examining the state of Thai Buddhist activism, let first let me briefly outline earlier attempts by the Thai state to use Buddhism to pursue its own political agenda. The return of military government in Thailand after 1948 coincided with the Cold War, in which Thailand aligned itself with the West and against communism. Bangkok became the headquarters of SEATO; Thai 'volunteer' units fought Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces in Laos; while domestically the Thai army waged a relentless struggle against the Thai Communist Party, mainly in the north and northeast of the country. A version of this ideological struggle even took place within the Sangha itself, which resulted in the expulsion of leftwing monks labelled as communist. Conservatives claimed that the CPT was deliberately infiltrating the Sangha, with the intention of destroying Buddhism.

As communism appealed to the poor and marginalised, the principal non-military means of combating it was through American financed and backed village-level development

programs designed to improve living conditions in the rural areas. As local monks wielded great influence in the villages, the military government coopted them into promoting these government programs, through mobilising villagers to contribute their labour to them. Some monks were reluctant to become closely identified with an increasingly (by the early 1970s) unpopular military regime and with its American backers. Others felt that promoting social programs compromised their spiritual credentials. The strongest monastic support came from Thammayut monks, in the name of the monarchy, which by then had been coopted by the military for its own anti-communist aims.

Thailand's 'experiment with democracy' between 1973 and 1976 polarised opinions within the Thai Sangha, just as it did within Thai society. The sudden freedom to discuss politics and demonstrate led to the politicisation of young monks. One group confined itself to sangha reform, but others argued that Buddhists had a social responsibility to work for a peaceful and just society. A number even ran for parliament for leftwing parties. The most radical was the Young Monk's Front of Thailand.

The conservative reaction covered a similar spectrum. Some argued that monks should not involve themselves in any mundane affairs. Others opposed leftwing influence more directly, through argument and pamphlets and demonstrations. The most famous rightwing monk was undoubtedly Kitthiwuttho Bhikkhu, a characteristic and well-regarded teacher, whose claim to fame was his argument that the demerit accrued by killing a communist was outweighed by the merit gained in protecting Buddhism from those who would destroy it. Kitthiwuttho maintained that the Sangha should take an activist lead in creating a good society through a 'programme for spiritual development' that went beyond the religious responsibilities of a monk to include social welfare and even economic activities (through teaching practical skills and encouraging industriousness. Needless to say that with the return to authoritarian rule in 1976, Kitthiwuttho found himself in favour with the establishment, while leftist monks were expelled from the sangha.

But the sangha remained polarised. Debate focused on two areas: sangha reform, and Buddhism as providing a model for society (for example, through the ‘republican’ structure of the early sangha). Reform Buddhism also went back to the Tripitaka in search of an interpretation that would be relevant to a modern society. This quest had been initiated by King Monkut, but within the context of traditional Buddhist cosmology and relations between Sangha and monarchy. The world had moved on, however, and Thailand with it, and something more radical was required to wed religion, science, personal development and politics. This was provided by the teachings of the very influential monk, and Thailand’s most significant Buddhist philosopher of the 20th century, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

This is not the place to go into Buddhadasa’s radical interpretation of Buddhist Dharma, except to say that for Buddhadasa the macrocosmic cycle of rebirth should be understood at the individual, or microcosmic level, as the sequence of thought images that pass through the mind. Samsara, therefore, is our own mental construction, for thought follows thought according to the vector of desire, linked by craving or greed or the clinging of possession. Nirvana, therefore, is freedom from this mental state through moral practice and the self-knowledge that comes from meditation, and like samsara is of this world. Since Buddhism had to do with freeing the individual mind from desire, it was entirely compatible with modern science, and with a modern way of life: anyone could practice morality and meditation, so in principle a layman could attain nirvana just as easily as a monk. Buddhadasa’s Buddhism provided no support for social hierarchy. Like Socrates he taught self-knowledge and critical reflection as the way to living a good life that is selfless, compassionate and socially concerned. It was a message the rising middle class in Thailand found conducive to its own interests and concerns.

Buddhadasa attracted followers to his monastery in southern Thailand, but it was the movement known as Santi Asoke that took his ideas and codified them into a way of life followed by thousands. The founder of Santi Asoke was Phra Phothirak who was ordained a Thammayut monk in 1970, after a career in the TV and entertainment industry. He soon fell out with the Sangha hierarchy, however, so repudiated its authority

and founded his own order of monks, whom he ordained himself. The community he founded was strict in its observances of Buddhist morality, vegetarianism, and the work ethic. It rejected all forms of supernaturalism and the rituals associated with it performed by most village monks. Santi Asoke communities stress cooperation and oppose all forms of materialism. They are, in fact, “self-sufficient, organic farming communities” (Mayer, 1996, p.53) that are attractive to peasant families. But they are equally attractive to those seeking an escape from urban consumerism, immorality, and stress.

The most prominent politician influenced by the Santi Asoke movement was Maj-Gen Chamlong Srimuang, the popular, clean-living, governor of Bangkok, whose Palang Dharma party was backed by Santi Asoke. In fact in the 1988 municipal elections, fully half of the 300 or so candidates running for Palang Dharma were ordained members of the Santi Asoke. This was the highpoint of the movement’s political involvement, however, and since then it has been more politically circumspect, if just as socially active.

Another new Thai Buddhist movement with political implications (if not aspirations) is the Thammakai, meaning literally Dharma Body, a reference to the type of meditation it teaches, which consists of visualising an image of the Buddha within one’s own body. The movement was founded in 1970, centred on Wat Phra Thammakai, north of Bangkok, where the movement has since built a gigantic new temple. Like Santi Asoke, Thammakai took its inspiration from the teachings of Buddhadasa. Like Santi Asoke, Thammakai offers individuals a means of spiritual renewal and development based on meditation and morality, and at the same time poses a challenge to the established Sangha.

Thammakai differs from Santi Asoke, however, in its approach to modern living. Whereas Santi Asoke calls upon its followers to withdraw from the strains and temptations of urban life to live in a spiritually-guided, cooperative, rural community, Thammakai sees nothing wrong with enjoying the good things of life. It teaches that material possessions are not evil in themselves; it all depends on our attitudes towards

them. In fact material possessions may be evidence of personal development and achievement of personal goals through the application of mental and moral discipline and the merit to be gained from giving (especially to the Thammakai movement.) In other words, worldly success is evidence of good karma – a notion with deep roots in Buddhist societies.

The Thammakai thus bears an uncomfortable resemblance to evangelical Christian churches that preach the line that wealth is a sign of god's approval, so enjoy it. It is a message that appeals strongly to the moneyed middle class, and those who feel most comfortable when surrounded by lots of other people like themselves. The Thammakai organises very large gatherings of followers, who contribute large sums to the temple and its monks to gain merit. It has been extremely effective in getting its message out, using marketing techniques that target particular groups, such as business people, university students, etc. Its appeal is to the individual who is doing well in life, and takes little interest in social issues such as poverty and justice. But this does not mean it is without political influence. (cf the US and Australia)

Sekhiya Dhamma is a movement with just the opposite emphasis to the Thammakai. It is a loose organisation of so-called 'development monks' who work in rural areas to improve local living conditions. In this they are similar to the Thammayut monks of the 1960s, except that they are working independently of the state, organising and leading projects from the grassroots up. Many of these monks come originally from rural areas, or were ideologically motivated by the events of 1973-76, or fled with students after 1976 but have since been amnestied. Many of these monks have a strong commitment to environmental conservation, and have been active in preventing logging or dam construction. Some have been involved with forest monks in tree ordination in order to protect threatened forests for communal use. Sekhiya Dhamma was formed in 1989. It brings together like-minded monks on an annual basis to exchange ideas and coordinate planning, and has developed international contacts. Monks are politically influential primarily at the local level, though this may translate to the national level when projects attract media attention. They have also gained the support of some international NGOs.

In summary, the involvement of Buddhist monks in politics in Thailand was in response to several factors: to the changes that have taken place in Thai society as a result of modernisation, and the tensions this has produced; to the additional tensions produced by the Cold War and the presence and influence of the US in Thailand; to the conservatism of the Sangha hierarchy and its support for authoritarian regimes, in support of moves towards democracy, initially during the period 1973-76, then in the 1990s. Activist Buddhist monks and lay thinkers and critics like Sulak Sivaraksa have taken advantage of greater press and political freedoms to found new Buddhist movements, which challenge both the power of the state to control the Sangha, and the comfortable position of the Sangha in relation to the state (as still providing ideological legitimation for both the monarchy and government – which explains why opposition to the activists from within the Sangha has often been so bitter and sustained).

Nothing similar has happened in the other three politically authoritarian Theravada countries, except for support from young monks for the democracy movement in Burma (until it was crushed), and the peace marches in Cambodia. In the event that some political space and freedom opens up in these countries, one can be sure that among these taking advantage of it will be Buddhist activists, both monastic and lay, intent on re-exerting Buddhist influence on politics. In the meantime, because of the link between Buddhism and national identity, and because of need for the three repressive regimes to appeal to nationalism, Buddhism will continue to contribute to their political culture, even if in manipulated ways, rather than through free and open discussion.