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BUDDHISM UNDER A MILITARY REGIME

The Iron Heel in Burma

_____ Bruce Matthews

As a community of believers, Buddhism in Burma is involved in a continuing and intense ideological struggle against a repressive military regime. A “church” (*sasana*) comprising both lay and clerical (*sangha*) devotees, Buddhism is the religion of the majority of the Burmese and the leading cultural institution in the country—what one Western observer over a century ago called “the soul of a people.”¹ For the Burmese of today, tired and demoralized by three decades of military rule, Buddhism plays a crucial role.

For two years prior to the May 1990 national elections, the highly visible *sangha* participated in, and even led protests against the government; since 1990 the Buddhist resistance has been made to adopt a less aggressive posture. Although the election was won overwhelmingly by the leading opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma has since experienced a disappointing reimposition of direct military rule, as embodied by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).² Demonstrations have been banned and protest of any sort is now ex-

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1. H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (London: MacMillan, 1889). Since 1989 Burma has been officially called Myanmar, a traditional, written name for Burma. A view popularly endorsed is that the word is comprised of *myan* (strong) and *maa* (hardy).

2. NLD leader and nationally acknowledged champion of democratic rights Aung San Suu Kyi was not able to participate directly in the 1990 election due to her arrest ten months before it was held. The SLORC regime seemed genuinely surprised that its National Unity Party was completely routed in the voting, which was surprisingly open and free. SLORC at

tremely dangerous. The *sangha* in particular has known stringent reprisals and suffered the sort of persecution that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago for the traditionally most respected element of society. Just as significantly, the political and economic constraints have affected traditional Buddhist practices associated with merit-making, sharing, and charity. Opportunities to exercise these values have been reduced.

Nonetheless, irrevocable changes in Burma have been set in motion since the ruthless suppression of the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988; the country is undergoing a revolution of sorts, albeit quietly and slowly. In this regard, despite the difficulties and the present grim reality of what appears to be a self-perpetuating military hegemony, Buddhists await the chance to reassert themselves in the cause of political freedom. This article will examine Buddhism in contemporary Burma from three perspectives. First, since the monastic order is the most visible aspect of Buddhism in Burmese society, some observations about its size and structure are set down; second, an attempt is made to explain the attitude of the SLORC regime toward Buddhism (in particular the *sangha*) since 1988; and third, the reaction of the *sangha* toward the politics of the SLORC is briefly reviewed.

Sangha Organization in Contemporary Burma

The *sangha* is a salient feature of a religion that is based to a large degree on the notion of mendicancy as the principal way to salvation. Of course, Buddhism is much more than the *sangha*, and to limit one's appreciation of the religion's outreach to the work of its clergy is clearly insufficient. But in the case of countries where the Theravada tradition is entrenched, as in Burma, the clerical order is so large and so closely interwoven with the salvific aims of the faithful that in many ways it becomes representative of the religion as a whole.

In his efforts to ascertain the number of monks in the Burmese *sangha*, Michael Mendelson once rightly remarked that "the situation in regard to statistics is a little short of disastrous." This is partly due to the "confusion of terms" used to define "different categories of religious practitioners."³ Further, unlike the Theravada tradition in, for example, Sri Lanka,

once argued that it alone had legislative and administrative authority, and that the elections were only for an elected body that would help draft a new national constitution.

3. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, J.P. Ferguson, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 120. There are numerous terms for clergy (all male) of various ranks, based on date of ordination and sometimes used along with the monastic name for the place from which the monk comes. There are single monasteries (*kyaung*); groups of monasteries (*taik*), with their own level of ecclesiastical leadership and organization; and

where males traditionally enter holy orders for life, in Burma a large number of boys and young men are in the *sangha* for only limited periods of time. This represents a somewhat more transient monastic community, one that is harder to enumerate even with the 1981 government registration policies in place, and estimates vary widely according to different sources. Thus, Michael Aung Thwin cites a possible 1,250,000 monks, based on a traditional projection of 3% of the total population, which was 38 million in 1985.

This is far higher than the last official government monastic census (1984–85), where the total monastic population (monks and novices) is estimated at 313,000, or .8% of the population.⁴ Undoubtedly this census is itself somewhat flawed.⁵ But estimates of about 300,000 monks in present day Burma should be considered reliable, including some 125,000 fully ordained monks and 185,000 novices living in about 47,980 monasteries.⁶ Buddhists represent about 80% of the population, with the rest divided among Muslims (5–10%), Christians (5%), and Hindus (3%).

Although essentially unified in matters of dogma and theological worldview, the Burmese *sangha* is not a monolithic institution. Diversified into as many as ten *gaings* (branches), the origins of this fragmentation go back more than a century to the time of King Mindon (1853–73). The phenom-

factions or sectarian divisions of monasteries collectively known as a *gaing* or *nikaya*. Other categories of male “clergy” (unregistered hermits or *yathe*) and women (by custom not ordained) are not normally included in statistical surveys. Mendelson cites about 5,000 “nuns” in 1958 (*ibid.*, p. 345), and Heinz Bechert cites 20,000 in 1984 (“Neue Buddhistische Orthodoxie: Bemerkungen zur Gliederung und zur Reform des Sangha in Birma,” *Numen*, 35, July 1988, p. 33). In June 1992 I was informed that the number of women entering convent life was rapidly increasing, possibly in part because of the difficult economic environment.

4. Michael Aung Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 232; and *Divisional Sangha Numbers, Was Season (Pye-ne hnint Waso Thango Sayin-choke), 1984–1985* (Rangoon: State Administration Office, 1985). The government breaks down the monastic population according to Myanmar’s geographic sectors: seven divisions for the Burmese people and seven states for the ethnic minorities; its report also provides statistics for major cities, towns, and townships.

5. For example, when I showed the state monastic census for 1984–85 to the well-known Mon *achan* (abbot), Ramanya Kelasa, at Wat Prox in Bangkok in May 1992, he claimed the figures were too low in Mon areas like the Tenassarim. This was in part due to the refusal of Mon monks to register for state-controlled *sangha* examinations because they were conducted only in Burmese or Pali. Similarly, Shan monastic spokesmen, notably Phra Pan Thi Toe of Chiang Mai’s Wat Sridondu, claimed that only 30% of the Shan area was covered in the census, and it failed to enumerate those monks who for one reason or another were not legally registered.

6. *Divisional Sangha Numbers, Was Season, 1984–1985*. Myanmar’s *sangha* is much larger than Sri Lanka’s, where there are 32,000 monks to 12 million Buddhists, or .27% of the population.

enon of the Mindon Sects is well understood, and good reviews of the schisms are to be found elsewhere. At issue in the mid-nineteenth century were points of discipline and "intent," with puritanical divisions occurring regularly.⁷ Spiro rightly claims that four *gaings* remain significant: Thudhamma or Sudhamma, 85–90% of the *sangha*; Shwei-jin or Shwegyin, 5%; and the Dwara and Hngettwin, even smaller proportions. Of these, the Sudhamma and Shwegyin remain the two major branches. Bechert further emphasizes that since the May 1980 All Sangha All Sects convention, no new *nikayas* (*gaings*) have been permitted and that the epoch of further schism is over.⁸

To some degree, the sectarian structure of the *sangha* also affects the non-Burmese or "ethnic" Buddhist order (notably among the Rakhine or Arakanese, Mon, and Shan). Buddhism traditionally was a powerful link between these ethnic communities and the Burmese, although by the time of Prime Minister U Nu (1947–58, 1960–62) ethnic secessionist aims had upset some of this good will.⁹ Nonetheless, today several ethnic monks (e.g., the Rakhine leader of the All Burma Young Monks Union, U Khemasera, and the Mon abbot, Achan Ramanya Kelesa, a former leading activist on the part of the NLD in Moulmein) take prominent roles in supporting the prodemocracy struggle in Burma. Thousands of ethnic monks have fled the depredations of the Burmese army (*tatmadaw*), but in general it can be argued that most of these monks support the aim of a democratic nation rather than political separation. There is some suspicion among the ethnic *sangha* that no Burmese political leader, including Aung San Suu Kyi, has a viable policy worked out for the country's minorities. My impression, however, is that the spiritual links between the various ethnic components of the *sangha* in Burma are stronger than divisive, communalistic elements.¹⁰

7. These particular "branches" or "sects" are sometimes referred to as the *paramat* (from *paramatha*, "highest good"). They have traditionally shunned both monastic ritualistic practices and community-oriented social work. The most thorough reviews are in Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, p. 84f., and Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 316.

8. Heinz Bechert, "Neue Buddhistische Orthodoxie," p. 33.

9. Interviews I conducted with several ethnic monks who had lived in Rangoon at one time or another revealed a wide range of opinions about Burmese monastic attitudes toward non-Burmese monks. Not surprisingly, each ethnic Buddhist *sangha* community retains a strong cultural identification, reinforced by specific monastic organizations.

10. Interview with Shan monks and with Siri Pathuman, former president of the Shan State Progress party and Shan military leader, at Wat Sridondu, Chiang Mai, Thailand, May 20, 1992. Estimates of the number of ethnic monks displaced because of political conditions in Burma are 6,000 Mon and 5,000 Shan monks in Thailand (or along the border), and about 50 Rakhine monks in Bangladesh. It should be noted that sizeable Shan and Mon communities have lived in Thailand for centuries, and that until fairly recently (especially with the

Apart from the denominational and ethnic divisions of the *sangha* in Burma, there have been other groups that have helped define the place of the monastic order in the society and polity. One of these has its roots in the Sangha Parahita Aphweyok (Sangha Social Service Group) established in 1924. It was well ahead of similar efforts elsewhere in the Theravada Buddhist world as it challenged the traditional passive "receiving" role of the *sangha* and instead urged an outreach to the poor and marginalized elements of society. It also initiated the Burma Hill Tracts Mission, a group that no longer formally exists but whose social philosophy is expressed in the Yahan: nge Aphwe and whose missionary work has been taken over since the late 1980s by a state-sponsored Directorate for the Propagation of Buddhism. Possibly modeled along the lines of the Thai *Thammathut* (envoy of the Dhamma) program, established in the 1960s to disseminate Buddhism and state policy in the hill country of Thailand, this kind of organization has not been a success in Burma. Buddhist missionary efforts do persist, largely in remote areas traditionally open to Christian influence.¹¹

More important are two major monastic action groups, the *Yahanpyo Aphwe* (Young monks association or YMA) and the *Kyaungtaik Sayadaw Aphwe* (Presiding abbots association). Formed in 1938, the YMA was initially comprised almost solely of Sudhamma clergy specifically opposed to forces perceived as threats to Buddhism, such as colonialism and communism. It was also anti-Russian, anti-Chinese, and anti-Indian—at a time when 7% of Burma's population was of Indian extraction. Further, after independence in 1948, the YMA opposed equal privileges being extended to other faiths in Burma; it took on a "patriotic" and what Mendelson calls a "quasi-militaristic fervor."¹²

The Yahanpyo monks became cultural "police," setting standards of dress (non-western) and stringent rules for society, to the extent that an important branch of the association split away because of disagreement with this fundamentalist and politicized approach. For the most part, however, in early post-independence Burma, the YMA monks became the "monastic spokesman for the army point of view."¹³ The situation ab-

introduction of the Burmese monastic registration card in 1981), ethnic monks traveled freely across the borders. Reliable statistics are not available, however.

11. Christian spokesmen in Rangoon informed me that obstacles such as monks expecting offerings of food (*dana*) and obeisance (*shiko*) prevent their making any notable missionary impact. The strategy appears to be to show the "privileges" of being a Buddhist in a largely Buddhist state. But the consensus is that, in the final analysis, a missionary spirit is simply absent in modern Burmese Buddhism.

12. Mendelson, *Sangha and State*, p. 327.

13. *Ibid.*

ruptly changed when General Ne Win's military government took over in 1962. It did not take long for the Yahanpyo monks to realize that the new regime would ultimately threaten their aims and organization as well as Buddhism as a whole. More recently, in the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations, the YMA played a major role in organizing protests. The SLORC has since moved to abolish the Yahanpyo, but even a formal order from political or religious authorities is not likely to succeed in destroying or neutralizing the Yahanpyo legacy.

The other major monastic group, the Presiding Abbots Association, had its origin in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1950s when U Nu's "Clean" Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (which became the Union Party or Pyidaungsu) and the schismatic "Stable" AFPFL both used Buddhist organizations for political support. Not unexpectedly, the Abbots Association was a conservative group whose aim in part was the advancement of Buddhism with government support and assistance. Although less politicized than the Yahanpyo, it nonetheless supported U Nu on every issue except the matter of extending state-sponsored privileges to other religions. These two organizations may have shared many aspirations but they were not unified in their intent, and they squabbled over unimportant issues even as the military took over the country in 1962. Further, the Abbots Association since 1980 has been undercut by the introduction of a government-controlled Supreme Sangha Council (*Sangha Maha Nayaka*). A completely new, more centralized administration of the *sangha* has reduced the significance of once powerful monastic associations.

In summary, until recently the *sangha* was a large, loosely organized, and essentially autonomous order. Its various branches, including substantial ethnic monastic groups and professional organizations, indicate how complex the *sangha* was in Burma. Further, ever since the British decided to ignore the significance of a formal state-appointed prelate (*thathanabaing*), who was theoretically able to bring some centralized leadership to monastic life, the *sangha* was unable to speak with one voice. Three decades of military rule following General Ne Win's takeover has altered this situation to an important degree. The *sangha* is now much more regulated and circumscribed by the government in matters of administration.

Military Attempts to Confront and Control Buddhism

We now turn to an examination of how the military government has affected both the *sangha* and lay devotional life. When Ne Win seized control of the polity, he inherited a relationship between church and state that for various reasons had become increasingly close during the premiership

of U Nu. Certain elements of the *sangha* had also made important contacts with the armed forces. Some have argued that Ne Win quickly identified both his political authority and religious policy with that of the Old Burmese kings, a relationship Bechert describes as “closely linked” (*angeknüpft*, suggesting “taken up again”). This was part of an attempt to introduce a style and function of government, albeit authoritarian, that would somehow more authentically represent the traditional Burmese polity of the precolonial era.¹⁴ Nor can there be much doubt that Ne Win and his Revolutionary Council at that time firmly believed they were acting in the best interests of the country. They were persuaded that they had popular support for the newly introduced nationalist and socialist policies, despite the fact that these were based on isolationism and rigid state control. But Ne Win was unable to persuade any political party to actually endorse his strategy by joining with him in some kind of “national front,” and he then established his own party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), and made it the only legal political party in the country.

In April 1962 the BSPP set down a political ideology in the statement, “The Burmese way to Socialism,” followed in January 1963 by the “System of Correlation of Man and his Environment.” Both documents were based at least in part on a Buddhist interpretation of reality, but this endeavor was convincing neither to the clergy nor to the Buddhist literati. Ne Win’s one-party state was a poor disguise for direct military rule. The *sangha* in particular remained suspicious and aloof, refraining from giving the military government the symbols of support and legitimacy it wanted. The regime quickly realized that if the *sangha* was not controlled it could become politically unpredictable. For one thing, political dissidents could conceal themselves in it, and for another, when there were protests, particularly by students, monks could usually be found participating. In December 1974, for example, monks joined in protesting the low-profile funeral arranged by the state for U Thant, the former U.N. secretary-general. Some monks were killed and hundreds arrested.

The military government has tried in several other ways to control the *sangha*. The first of these is through the tradition of monastic conventions

14. Heinz Bechert notes how U Nu had permitted Buddhism and the state to be linked with army leadership (*armeeführung*) (“Neue Buddhistische Orthodoxie,” p. 34). In a controversial article, Michael Aung Thwin argues that the 1962 “coup” was not a “revolution” but a “resurrection” of a precolonial system of rule. Further, he argued that the Burmese people would feel more comfortable with this military/kingly image of a ruler than with some foreign democratic model. “The British ‘Pacification’ of Burma: Order Without Meaning,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 16:2 (September 1985), p. 256. Other important scholars support the conclusion that Ne Win’s “court politics” generated considerable loyalty and respect, notably R.H. Taylor in *The State in Modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 366.

or “reforms.” Michael Aung Thwin has argued that throughout Burmese dynastic history, *sangha* (or *sasana*) reform occurred in cycles because “it was a periodic institutionalized reaction of the state to the material growth of the *sangha*.”¹⁵ More recently, however, the emphasis of reform seems to lie more with control of the ideological or political independence of the *sangha*. Consequently, three reform councils have been held—in 1965, 1980, and 1985. When Ne Win promoted the first of these at Hmawbi in 1965, he was aiming to assume the customary role of the head of state as a propagator of the faith. Although 2,000 monks assembled for this event, not much enthusiasm was generated for the military government. A number of measures, including the abolition of the Buddha Sasana Council (set up in 1950) and the withdrawal of the State Religion Promotion Act, were introduced without *sangha* support. Further, the command that the *sangha* register its members was largely ignored, to some degree an act of passive resistance.

In the fifteen years between the first and second councils, the rift between the *sangha* and the regime widened, with the state largely ignoring the monastic order. Indeed, the government appeared eager to distance itself from Buddhism, declaring that the state was no longer the patron of the faith (a formal separation of “church” and state was included in the 1974 constitution), eliminating religious holidays, lifting restrictions on animal slaughter, and halting the proselytizing of non-Buddhist minorities.

However, the second *sangha* convention in May 1980 “fundamentally altered” the relationship between the state and the monastic order.¹⁶ The event was styled as the “First Congregation of the *Sangha* of All Orders for the Purification, Perpetuation and Propagation of the *Sangha*.” It began with a proclamation of amnesty by Ne Win for 4,000 prisoners (in the style of the old monarchs), and nearly all of the 1,235 invited delegates attended. Under state-imposed direction, the convention created a new Supreme *Sangha* Council (*Sangha Maha Nayaka*—sometimes also called the Central Union Council or the Ruling *Sangha* Organization), with the aim of unifying, purifying, developing, and stabilizing the Burmese Buddhist religion or church. It also set down procedures for settling conflicts over monastic discipline, succeeded in introducing a uniform policy for the registration of monks, and established control over monastic appointments through a system of examinations. The formation of this unified *sangha* organization cut across sectarian and regional boundaries and instituted a

15. Michael Aung Thwin, “The Role of Sasana Reform in Burmese History,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 38:4 (August 1979), p. 672.

16. R.H. Taylor, *The State in Modern Burma*, p. 358.

hierarchical structure “intended to guide and supervise the nation’s monks, backed by the power and authority of the state.”¹⁷

This second council had succeeded in bringing the structure of *sangha* leadership and administration closer to that of the state, something that also had been achieved in neighboring Thailand. In theory, the Supreme *Sangha* Council is still empowered to speak for the whole order of monks. Currently composed of 47 senior monks (with an additional secretary and chairman), the council convenes two or three times annually; three sub-committees charged with Buddhist education (*panna*), monastic discipline (*vinaya*), and doctrine or philosophy (*abhi-dhamma*) meet more frequently. The council and its committees, however, have only limited authority. For example, despite the fact that all its members are appointed by the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, they were not entrusted to judge what the state perceived to be the *vinaya* infractions of the 1988–90 pro-democracy monks—a task that was given instead to what one senior exiled monk told me were special “puppet” committees.¹⁸

Beneath the Supreme Council, lesser monastic councils operate at the state/divisional, township, city, and village levels. The effect of this has been to “streamline the *sangha* into the state machinery,” and even to make it into an “undeclared state religion.”¹⁹ This reorganized *sangha*, clearly the most important feature of the 1980 council, was ratified by a third council in 1985. These events, Taylor argues, “are indicative of greater control by the state over the Buddhist monkhood than for many years previously. The purpose of the organization of the *sangha* body was clearly to strengthen the authority of the state over the monkhood: one of the goals of the state throughout Buddhist history.”²⁰

It is still unclear how responsible these various appointed *sangha* councils are to state orders. For example, notwithstanding the state-imposed “purification” of the *sangha* and the centralizing of its administration, the various councils deftly chose to ignore both the independent actions of thousands of prodemocracy monks in 1988–90 and orders from the government to curtail this kind of activity. In this regard, the military regime has shown no tolerance for anti-state behavior on the part of activist

17. Tin Maung Maung Than, “The *Sangha* and *Sasana* in Socialist Burma,” *Sojourn*, 3: 1 (February, 1988), p. 26. A structural chart is to be found on p. 42 of the article.

18. Interviews with Achan Ramanya Kelasa, 2 June 1992, Bangkok. Both Kelasa (a Mon) and other ethnic monks point out that although the Supreme Council theoretically represents the *sangha* at the national level, the ethnic minorities are poorly represented; for example, there is only one Mon delegate.

19. Interview, Bertil Lintner, 3 June 1992, Bangkok; and Byaing Myo Thar, “Myanmar Situation,” Cyclostyled, Bangkok, April 1992.

20. R. H. Taylor, *The State in Modern Burma*, p. 358.

monks. The *sangha* has suffered many reprisals since the first mass demonstration of August 8, 1988, drew widespread monastic support. The attitude of the authorities, in particular the *tatmadaw*, toward the *sangha* has been punitive. Monks thought to be supportive of Aung San Suu Kyi or of the National League for Democracy have often had to pay with their lives or with long-term imprisonment. The SLORC claims that these monks are communists in the pay of foreign agents or traitors who aim to overthrow the state by violence and therefore deserve punishments formerly unimaginable in such a devout society.²¹ On the other hand, older monks who might underestimate or misunderstand the seriousness of the nation's discontent are often co-opted by the government, and those who offer support to it are often liberally favored with special donations to their temples or outright personal gifts such as television sets and automobiles.

What is one to conclude about Ne Win and the continuing military regime in its public embrace of Buddhism? It would be wrong to suggest that all of Ne Win's devotional acts, as well as those of members of the present SLORC military junta, are merely the record of religious manipulation. Ironically, at the same time that political repression entered its harshest phase, the SLORC regime encouraged programs for the promotion of Buddhism, including the teaching of the faith in high schools and improving standards of monastic education, and the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs continues to offer support for the upkeep of pagodas.²² But the central impression one gains is that Buddhism is exploited wherever possible to bolster the government's beleaguered image. In one of these moves, the regime attempted to offer honors to foreign Buddhist prelates in February 1990 when it extended 68 honorary ecclesiastical titles. Few attended from abroad, but a significant exception was the fa-

21. Report of Maj. Gen. Khin Nyunt, 'Secretary Number One' of SLORC, "Web of Conspiracy: Complicated Stories of Treacherous Machinations and Intrigues of the Burma Communist Party Underground and the Democratic Alliance of Burma," 7 December 1990.

22. Two major Buddhist (*sasana*) universities in Mandalay and Rangoon operate under the authority of the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs but are financially supported by lay donors. Both have over two hundred student monks, and since only one in ten applicants is accepted, high standards are indicated. The net result of monastic education in general, however, is that 80% of Burma's *sangha* is not well-educated. The average life-professed monk enters the order at age nine or ten with a grade five education. His schooling thereafter is usually sporadic and of indifferent quality. (These observations are based largely on conversations with staff at Tharthana (*Sasana*) University, Mandalay, 27 May, 1992). The Ministry also provides limited financial support to non-Buddhist religions and assists those religious dignitaries whom it permits to travel abroad. But this is counterbalanced by the imposition of regulations and orders that are often introduced without dialogue or compromise, for example, the recent decree to eliminate cemeteries in Rangoon. Even historic Christian burial grounds have been razed, but Muslims protested so strongly that, for the time being, their cemeteries have not been touched.

mous elderly monk from Sri Lanka, Aggamahapadita Walpola Rahula, who went to Burma, unselfcritically and without demur, to receive his title. His presence was celebrated in a manner befitting royalty.²³

Although in many ways the *sangha* appears to have borne the brunt of BSPP and SLORC control, lay devotional attitudes and practice may also have felt the impact of these past few decades. Sarah Bekker has recently maintained that stress due to political and economic change has resulted in an increased reliance on the supernatural or magical.²⁴ In an attempt to confirm her observations, I found, for example, that the bizzare Ahlaingnasint Paya pagoda near Rangoon is still the focus of much devotion. With its amusement park-style statutory of buddhas, *nagas*, and mythical beasts (to say nothing of the preserved remains of a once-popular charismatic monk), this pagoda is a visible expression of a widespread interest in the occult. Other features, such as the change in the color of monks' robes (from saffron to brown and maroon, formerly only associated with forest or hermit monks thought to have special powers) to gigantism in Buddha images, are also clearly observable.

Certainly Bekker's argument is plausible, and elsewhere in the Theravada Buddhist world, political and economic uncertainty has produced similar reactions on the part of devotees.²⁵ Notwithstanding the evidence of apparently arcane religious practices, it is difficult to determine whether they are on the increase or whether they are more in evidence now than they were before the Ne Win-SLORC era began. Many with whom I spoke in Burma claimed that there had not been much of a shift toward the magical or superstitious—at least no more than in the U Nu era. After all, Burmese Buddhism has always had a close relationship with *nat* worship and other "Little Tradition" practices. Although my recent journey was brief and admittedly somewhat superficial, I saw nothing in outward religious practices (from pagoda *pujas* and rituals, such as lustrating Buddha images, to the prevalence of spirit houses) that I did not encounter there twenty years ago. My impression is that current devotional practices and attitudes have not changed much over the decades and are largely consistent with the traditional religious conduct of previous generations.

Economic decline may have contributed to a general decay in both public and personal morality and in the generosity of lay Buddhists toward the

23. Personal interview, 20 June 1992, Colombo. When I spoke to Ven. Walpola Rahula about this award, he appeared unaware of its political ramifications.

24. Sarah Bekker, "Changes and Continuities in Burmese Buddhism," in Josef Silverstein, ed., *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1989), p. 52.

25. Gananath Obeyesekere, Richard Gombrich, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 53, 98, 100.

sangha. There are those who argue (like the 96-year-old renowned Rangoon prelate, U Thitila) that the reason for these changes has nothing to do with the SLORC regime but with modernity in general and the loosening of traditional values everywhere.²⁶ This is not a position most monks would accept, although there is doubtless some truth to it. U Thitila maintains that the nostalgic image of the Burmese as a sharing, nonacquisitive people began to disappear right after independence in 1948, when the cost of living suddenly began to accelerate. In more recent times, with survival a matter of dependence on Burma's ubiquitous black market and state corruption something to be endured by everyone, there has been a further deterioration in public spirit and honesty. Cheating has become commonplace, and prostitution (though not visible on the streets of Rangoon) has grown alarmingly, especially in the Irrawaddy delta region, indicative of worsening economic conditions.

Likewise, and not unexpectedly, there are those who insist that Burma's straitened economic circumstances have had an impact on traditional daily patterns of religious devotion for lay people. This may be seen in the reduced availability of time for meditation, fewer opportunities to take part in ritual acts of discipline (*sil*), and a reduction of support for the *sangha* by way of traditional merit-making activities.²⁷ None of this is to suggest that the role of Buddhism as the hallmark of Burmese civilization has diminished. It is not a question of a falling-off in the number of religious adherents, but seems to point to a lowering of capacity to carry on a traditional spiritual life because of harsh political and economic conditions.

Sasana Reactions to the Military Regime

The third issue this article seeks to describe is the way in which the Buddhist church, and particularly the *sangha*, has reacted toward the policy and actions of the present military government. As it is widely suggested that 80% of Burma's monks directly support or have sympathy for the prodemocracy movement, the seriousness of the issue is apparent. From the beginning of public protests in 1988, monks were in the forefront of demonstrations, although they never served as "storm troopers" but only as supporters of the often massive assemblies.²⁸ The activist monks took on a role similar to that of the Yahanpyo monks of a previous generation, acting as moral chastisers and offering quiet but visible leadership in the

26. Interview, Ven. U Thitila, 30 May 1992, Rangoon.

27. Not all monasteries have been affected by diminished charity; this appears to be partly a regional question. The Ven. U Tha Tha Na of Mandalay's renowned Emerald Hill (Mya-Taung) Monastery spoke to me of an increase in support (personal interview, 27 May 1992, Mandalay).

28. Interview, Bertil Lintner, 2 June 1992.

name of their cause. In this regard, the omnipresence of monks probably lessened the incidents of violence in 1988–90, having on occasion prevented the summary execution of government agents caught by the crowds.

The modern history of Burma shows a record of a politicized *sangha* and religious activism in politics going back to such figures as U Ottama (1879–1939) and to such organizations as the Buddha Sasana/Noggaha Association of 1897, the Young Men's Buddhist Association of 1906, and the General Council of Burmese Associations (1920). And in 1988, despite 26 years of uncompromising military rule, during which the *sangha* was not permitted to speak freely about political or ideological matters, it suddenly broke away from these constraints. In the period of intense activity between the formation of the main opposition group, the NLD, and the elections of May 27, 1990, the *sangha* was at the forefront of agitation. Charges by the state that monks actively supporting the NLD were breaking their own code of conduct (*vinaya*) had little impact on the monastic order.

Indeed, when the state-controlled Supreme Sangha Council was obliged to label activist monks as impostors (*singang woot*), it immediately provoked a strong reaction in Mandalay, Burma's "holy city." The government, in no mood for compromise, attacked a massive gathering of 7,000 monks in Mandalay on August 8, 1990, assembled to commemorate the second anniversary of the beginning of the democracy movement. The upshot of this was the imposition of a ritual boycott against members of the armed forces and their families, an action that quickly spread to the capital and other parts of the country. Sometimes referred to as "the power of overturning the begging bowl," the *patta ni kauz za kan* was in effect an act of excommunication.²⁹ This was not the first time the *sangha* had exercised this authority—it was imposed on the Burma Communist Party in 1950—but it was a rare enough act to show real defiance. In a society where merit-making is a central religious responsibility, not being permitted to give *dana* (alms) or receive religious instruction (*dhamma sambawga*) and blessings is a serious matter.

After two months, the government required the Mingon Sayadaw (a most respected prelate) to urge the lifting of the proscription, and it issued a state order (6/90) to this effect. But the incident clearly showed the political strength of a unified *sangha*. Altogether, an estimated 20,000

29. The official text from the Mandalay *sangha* reads: *From the "Mandalay Federation of the Monks Union of the Four Quarters." 27 August, 1990.* "In respect of the wishes of the majority of the *sangha* and in respect of the rules of the *Vinaya*, all *sayadaws* are asked to undertake a boycott, and to refrain from accepting robes or medicine from the *tatmadaw*, or giving sermons."

monks participated in the spiritual boycott, and throughout this turbulent period, the government continued a systematic closure of hundreds of monasteries. To add to the tension, a sympathetic public showed its support for the *sangha* by such actions as not riding in the same buses as soldiers and refusing to sell goods to the families of armed forces personnel. There were also public references to omens thought to be cosmic indicators of the SLORC's venality.³⁰

There is little doubt that many monks interpreted the events following 1988 as a justified uprising by the people against the military dictatorship. Those identified as involved in the protests, or in the civil security and supervision roles that some monks took on during periods of apparent lawlessness, quickly became "wanted men." Three hundred monks fled to the border with Thailand, joining an estimated 10,000 student refugees who were already there. Some monks, mostly of Shan or Mon extraction, subsequently crossed over into Thailand, but whether of Burman or ethnic background, these monks still seem eager to support prodemocracy endeavors by highly activist measures.

One important group is the All Burma Young Monks Union led by 37-year-old Khemasera, a Rakhine. Khemasera operates between his official headquarters at Manerplaw on the Moie River in Burma, across from Thailand, and from Bangkok. It is difficult to ascertain the precise number of ABYMU members in Burma, largely because there it is an underground association, but about 200 members are thought to be in Thailand. Formed in 1988, the ABYMU claims that Buddhist monks have an "historical duty" to participate in resistance to the SLORC regime. Other ethnic Buddhist organizations—Mon and Shan monks do not generally join Burmese associations—show surprisingly similar allegiance, oddly enough not for secessionist ambition but for the cause of a united Burma.³¹

30. When the Kyauk-daw Gyi Buddha image at the foot of Mandalay Hill became "swollen" and "cracked," the superstitious regarded it as corresponding to wounds inflicted on monks. "It was believed to be a sign that the celestial beings could not bear SLORC's desecration of the Buddhist religion" (*The Buddha Sasana and the Burma Military Regime*, All Burma Young Monks Union, November, 1991, p. 8).

31. Personal interview, U Khemasera, 1 June 1992, Bangkok. See also *All Burma Young Monks' Union (Revolutionary Area) Third Anniversary Declaration*, February, 1992. Likewise, in *Seeds of Peace*, 8:2 (August 1992), Khemasera notes that "each group has its own responsibility to help get rid of this regime." Achan Ramanya Kelasa, executive chairman of the Overseas Mon Young Monks Union, claims it is no longer a time for Mon monks "to one-sidedly spend their days in religious affairs and hide from responsibility to spiritually and physically take part in the struggle" (*Mon Young Monks Magazine*, 1: 1 (April 1992), p. 4). High-ranking Shan monks in Chiang Mai, Thailand, told me that "at some intolerable point Buddhism maintains you have the right to defend yourself." Interviews, 20 May 1992.

Conclusion

It has been shown that despite the efforts of the Ne Win government and its successors to bring Buddhism (especially the *sangha*) under state control, thousands of monks in 1988–90 stood at the forefront of protests against the state. As Burma's great cultural and religious force, Buddhism currently appears to be serene and untroubled, but beneath this facade lies a restlessness and disquiet that cannot be indefinitely contained. Should Burma's prodemocracy movement erupt again in the near future, Buddhism will be its most important ally.

Five major points can be made about the place of Buddhism in the Burma of the SLORC regime. First, the spirit of Buddhism does not appear to be as compromised or devitalized as some critics maintain. Without underestimating the tragedy of SLORC's inhumane treatment of political opponents, it can nonetheless be claimed that a subdued resistance continues to unfold and that it involves Buddhist encouragement. Second, although outward moral conduct may have been changed by the rigors of life during years of authoritarianism and poverty, this has not necessarily compromised a general faith in what Buddhism has to offer soteriologically and culturally. Buddhism has afforded an essential patience and endurance to its followers in Burma, and this imbues them with a quality of steadfastness that remains undiminished, even if it is not always apparent in daily life.

Third, although from time to time Buddhism in Burma has shown itself to be ethnically exclusivist, this is not the general impression one gains of the faith today. Like other parts of the Theravada Buddhist world, Burma has had a long tradition of politicized and even militant Buddhism, but in the words of a Rangoon Roman Catholic priest, "there is no horrid Buddhist xenophobia" in Burma today.³² How different this is from the ethnically chauvinistic stance that Buddhism has assumed in Sri Lanka, where the religion has been used to support an ethnic majority that sees itself as beleaguered, friendless, and misunderstood. It is true that from time to time the military regime has tried to use the issue of Burmese ethnic "purity" to its advantage, notably in its campaign in the Arakan against indigenous Rohingya Muslims and in periodic slander against Michael Aris, the British husband of Aung San Suu Kyi. But in general such cynical manipulation of Buddhism for political purposes is not popularly endorsed in Burma. Most of Burma's minorities are Buddhist so any religio-cultural quarrel has not successfully invoked Buddhism as a specific source of support. Although Buddhism is correlative with national identity in Burma,

32. Interview, 29 May 1992, Rangoon.

it is not an aggressive nationalist force as in Sri Lanka, and it avoids dogmatic, public political endorsements.

Fourth, Buddhism is not by itself an urgent element in political choice in Burma. This can be seen by the fact that in the May 1990 national elections, former Prime Minister U Nu, considered to be an archetypal Buddhist premier in the 1950s, fared poorly at the polls. And fifth, Buddhism in Burma may appear in many ways to be intellectually old-fashioned and out of touch with the rapidly changing world. The fact that Burma never experienced the full force of an intellectual and social renaissance, as India arguably did, has been alluded to by some scholars as an important factor in understanding Buddhism in the country today, especially the *sangha*. In this regard, it could be argued that because Buddhism in Burma has not had the opportunity to become a "modern" religion, it is condemned to a questionable future, possibly marginalized in the forums of political and social change. This appears to me to be an unwarranted and pessimistic assessment. It may also be simplistic to maintain that a culture that bases its world view on the notion of *karma* or earned destiny can better endure the vicissitudes of life. The mass protests of 1988–90, however, show that Buddhists can be as activist as anyone else if given the opportunity.

There are undeniable challenges confronting the Buddhist faith in Burma. Most of these are political, as religion and state seek ways to work out an appropriate relationship. Other challenges are purely internal to the *sangha*, such as the strains of a generation gap between older and younger monks, or are representative of changing ritual needs among lay devotees. Notwithstanding these anxieties, Buddhism still remains a potent integrative power, the "soul of the people" and a force that will yet have its say in the destiny of the nation.