

ศาสนาพลเมืองในบริบทเมียนมา: จากแนวคิดการสร้างชาติสู่เครื่องมือทางการเมือง

Civil religion in the context of Myanmar:
From nation-building concept to a political tool

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้ได้ใช้ศาสนาพลเมือง (Civil religion) เป็นกรอบความคิดเชิงทฤษฎีในการพิจารณาสังคมพม่า ซึ่งถือเป็นสังคมที่ยึดโยงกับศาสนาพุทธอย่างแยกออกจากกันไม่ได้ คำถามสำคัญคือ ผู้นำทางทหารและผู้นำที่มาจากการเลือกตั้ง นายพลเน วิน และนางอองซาน ซูจี ตามลำดับได้นำศาสนาพลเมืองมาใช้ เพื่อสร้างความชอบธรรมให้แก่ตนเอง และขอแรงสนับสนุนจากประชาชนอย่างไร ในขณะเดียวกัน ศาสนาพลเมืองก็เป็นเครื่องมือทางการเมืองที่ผู้นำต่าง ๆ นำมาใช้เพื่อปราบปรามประชาชนของตนด้วยเช่นกัน

คำสำคัญ: ศาสนาพลเมือง นายพล เนวิน นางอองซาน ซูจี วิถีพม่าสู่สังคมนิยม เหตุการณ์ 8888

Abstract

This article applies civil religion as a theoretical framework arguing that Myanmar society inseparably engages with Buddhism. It examines how civil religion had been adopted in Myanmar by the military leader, Ne Win, and democratically-elected leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, to gain legitimacy and political support from the people. On the other hand, civil religion can also be utilized as a political mechanism to suppress citizenship.

Keywords: Civil religion, Ne Win, Aung San Suu Kyi, The Burmese Way to Socialism, 8888 Uprising

Introduction

After gaining its independence from the British Empire in January 1948, Myanmar had the newly formed civilian government under U Nu as the first Prime Minister of the Union of Burma. General Aung San, who played an important role and led the Burma National Army to fight for independence, was assassinated by his political rivals backed by the British Empire in July 1947. At that time, Myanmar was confronted with several domestic issues, such as ethnic conflict, insurgency, and

corruption. U Nu surrendered to the chaos and consequently invited the military junta into power.

Led by General Ne Win under the umbrella of the ‘caretaker government’ between 1958 and 1960, the military junta built state capacity, such as combating corruption and improving bureaucracy. U Nu came into power once again after the 1960 election but failed to maintain peace and stability. General Ne Win subsequently seized power by staging a coup d’état for the second time in March 1962 and using ‘peace and stability’ as the justification. The coup led the country to fall into a dictatorship regime, i.e., the era of Ne Win, for almost thirty years. It can be divided into two periods, i.e., direct military rule under the Revolutionary Council in 1962 - 1974, and constitutional dictatorship under the Burma Socialist Program Party’s rule in 1974 - 1988. (Devi, 2014, pp. 46)

During the first period of the military regime, General Ne Win issued ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’ (BWS), consisting of Buddhism, Marxism and nationalism, (Devi, 2014, pp. 47) as ideological guiding principles for economic development and national independence. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 189) Also, the one-party socialist state adopted the policy of Burmanization; for example, the land was deprived of foreigners, and affirm that Burma has its independence, especially business investment, which should not be largely held by the foreigners. This caused a huge amount of Chinese and Indian businessmen to leave the country, and finally influenced the country’s economy. (Devi, 2014, pp. 47)

At the end of the 1980s, ‘BWS’ had still prolonged a severe economic crisis. A long and tolerant time under direct military rule was thereby changed to the period of public outrage. The protest towards democratization, called the 8888 Uprising, including Buddhist monks, university students, professionals, etc., was then widely spread across the country. (Devi, 2014, pp. 48) Amidst the crackdowns, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San, had been risen as a national icon as her father. (Gnanasagaran, 2018)

The main question of this research paper is how Burmese leaders adopted ‘civil religion’ as a political apparatus to govern/mobilize the people. The paper will explore, how General Ne Win put ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’ into the practice and impacted upon the Burmese society in positive (nation-building), and on other way around, negative (subjugating their own citizens) manners. Secondly, how ‘civil religion’ bestowed the supreme authority on the military, the military then utilized it as a weapon against their people, who violated the ‘good’ norms of the country, in the 8888 Uprising. Thirdly, how Aung San Suu Kyi could gain support from the public, and connect the people’s souls amidst a fragile incident due to a civil religion perspective.

Therefore, the argument is that civil religion would be suitable to assemble individuals in the early nation-building stage; however, it will become dreadful and subsequently bloodthirsty when the authority abuses power in a tyrannical way.

The Burmese Way to Socialism

After becoming independent Myanmar, the Revolutionary Council under the leadership of General Ne Win launched ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’ as an ideological policy for intertwining Burmese culture and economy with the Communist world, particularly with China to reduce the Western influence on cultural and economic dimensions. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 188) Under the Revolutionary Council, the three main discriminatory practices on foreigners had appeared.

(1) The nationalization of the basic industries was one of the first acts to eliminate foreign economic control. The first sign of nationalization was exposed when the military government claimed that Burmese laborers could operate a shoe factory rather than Chinese laborers. Then, the government immediately terminated the contracts of 200 Chinese laborers in June 1962. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 189) The government afterwards passed the ‘Enterprise Nationalization Law’ in February 1963. All major industries were nationalized under the Law on June 1, 1963, and newly

founded factories were prohibited from building up by private industrial investors. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 190)

Most of the Western owned-enterprises, i.e., British, Indian, Chinese, and American ones, had been struggled from these regulations. The government had then acquired an opportunity to take over various businesses, such as rice, teak, rubber, mining industry, banking sector, and import & export. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 190) The Indian businessmen, who had gained loads of privileges as a bourgeois class in Myanmar under the rule of the British Empire, were impacted most by the nationalization laws because they had run large businesses, such as the agricultural sector, in Myanmar. The Burmese were also perceived Indians as an antagonist due to charging usury rates on loans to the Burmese debtors. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 191) The laws consequently caused Indians, Chinese and Pakistanis to emigrate from Myanmar in 1964 as a massive exodus. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 191 - 192) In addition, the military government also previously issued the 1948 Land Naturalization Act to redistribute lands with the limit of ten acres to each Burmese peasant as compensation from exploitation in a long reign of the British colony. (Stein, 2016, pp. 9 - 10)

(2) The expulsion of foreigners could also be considered when the government terminated the services of American philanthropic organizations, i.e. Ford and Asia Foundations. The professionals, who had worked for these two agencies, were deported from the country in six months. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 189)

(3) The forcefully ban the media of Western countries was a significant tactic to control information in the country. The government ordered to ban all embassies from propagating ‘propaganda films’ and the distribution of foreign publications. At the time, a law enforced all foreign diplomatic missions had to transmit news contents to Burma Foreign Office before publishing to the people’s eyes. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 189 - 190) The News Agency of Burma was subsequently established to disseminate world news, which conformed to the neutralist principles

and practices of Burmese foreign policy to balance Western and Communist influences within Myanmar. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 190)

Under the rules of Ne Win, Myanmar's economy had been shaped from socialism to market liberalization. (Stein, 2016, pp. 1) Although 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' could be considered a positive effort of the military government to shape Burmese way regarding nation-building after the long-standing rules under the British Empire and Indian-dominated large businesses, the isolation policy from the international community and the economic privation simultaneously severely affected on the Burmese economy. It turned the country into the poorest one in Asia. This had increased resentment at Ne Win's dictatorship among Burmese people. Then the 8888 Uprising, a student-led massive, emerged to overthrow the regime.

The 8888 Uprising

At the outset, Burmese students found out that their tuition savings would be worthless because General Ne Win withdrew several large currency denominations and wiped out many Burmese citizens' savings overnight. Those students then started rallying in September 1987, a year before the 8888 Uprising emerged. Although Ne Win resigned from the country's leader in July 1988, he appointed Sein Lwin, (Gnanasagaran, 2018) known as the 'Butcher of Rangoon' for the notorious reputation of his brutal suppression as his successor. This stirred up the people's anger and expanded the students' alliance leading to the 8888 Uprising on 8 August 1988. This was recognized as a catalyst. (Gnanasagaran, 2018)

The Uprising was the largest nationwide protest since its 1948 independence led by student leaders due to the systematic oppression under the long regime of Ne Win. There were hundreds of thousands of protesters across the country participating in this pro-democracy demonstration. (Gnanasagaran, 2018) Ne Win ruthlessly stated that "when the army shoots, it shoots to kill". The Tatmadaw, the official armed forces of Myanmar, was strategically commanded to open fire at the protestors. "There were well-organized bodies of troops roaming the city,

shooting at groups of demonstrators.” Estimates of 3,000 - 10,000 protestors died, and thousands were imprisoned during the intense weeks. The military consequently tightened its grip on power by returning the use of the martial rule and abused its power to punish the protestors in September severely. (Gnanasagaran, 2018)

In addition, according to Ne Win’s orders, all demonstrations recognized as ones against the devout core of the country were never allowed for more than a few days. The authorities were ready to immediately shoot and arrest the demonstrators. Only one was excepted, i.e. the anti-Chinese riots, which were supposedly supported by the military. (Boudreau, 2004, pp. 101)

Date back in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution, the Burmese society was divided into a contingent supporting Mao’s revolution and another one backing the Republic. The Chinese students appeared to have more privileges than other students; for example, students in Chinese schools owned Mao’s red book receiving from the Chinese Embassy. The xenophobic reaction then increased. Consequently, Chinese teachers, schools, businesses, and the Embassy were attacked, mere two months later, Chinese establishments across Myanmar were destroyed, and hundreds of Chinese were killed. In response to what happened to their citizens, China subsequently funded the Burma Communist Party (BCP), the hostile party of the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). These resources from China helped the BCP to practice more insurgent operations against the state under the administration of BSPP. (Boudreau, 2004, pp. 90 - 91)

This reveals why the official armed forces of the country backed the anti-Chinese rioting. Only one kind of demonstration and a yet radical one, which held the core value of Myanmar, i.e. nationalism, was supported. The 8888 Uprising or other demonstrations, which were against the good norms of the country; the Burmese Way to Socialism and the supreme authorities; General Ne Win, the BSPP and the military, were discriminately brutally suppressed. As a result, this part illustrates how the tyrannical leader abused the concept of civil religion.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of General Aung San, Myanmar's independence leader. After spending her married life in England, (Popham, 2011, pp. 37) she returned to Myanmar to look after her dying mother in March 1988, four months before the 8888 Uprising emerged in August. Although she did not plan to involve at the very first place politically, the state violently suppressed the demonstration drew her attention to the political situation in her own home country. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 72)

Suu Kyi later developed her Buddhist-oriented rhetoric to touch Burmese people's hearts, differently from her father. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 72) Because she realized that a considerable number of Burmese people had been blocked to access any knowledge from abroad including democracy for a long time. Also, they had believed in Buddhism indeed, and 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' was related to Buddhism. If she would suggest any other political systems against the Burmese Way, those people might criticize and not support her. Her understanding of the depth of Burmese culture brought her to choose 'Buddhism' as a strategy to gain more support. Hence, Suu Kyi suggested that the liberal democratic government could be adapted to Buddhist concepts. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 68)

In her first public speech in front of around 500,000 people on 26 August 1988, Suu Kyi, as her father's daughter, indicated that she is participating in this struggle for freedom and democracy in the footsteps and traditions of my father, and this incident is the second struggle for national independence below a portrait of her father at the Shwedagon Pagoda, the holiest Buddhist site of Burmese people in Yangon and as the same place as her father gave his important speeches when he was alive. While she emphasized her father's thoughts on his support for democracy, she had not pointed out any Buddhist thoughts yet. Only the symbolic location she chose connected to Buddhism. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 72)

With a command from the military, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest on 20 July 1989. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 74) However, 'In Quest of Democracy', her

writing before undergoing house arrest, left some traces on Buddhism and how she politically adopted it to mobilize the mass. She mentioned ‘a sermon on the four causes of decline and decay’ and elaborated ‘how traditional Buddhist views should be interpreted to help build a just and prosperous society in the modern age’. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 72) Also, she reiterated the contribution of Buddhism to a future democratic society in Myanmar by discussing the ten duties of Buddhist kingship. Suu Kyi easily touched the souls of peasants across the country due to her direct and simple speeches, and humble appearance. (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 73) Kane deliberately explained the simple way she practiced but was powerful enough to convince Burmese people to believe in democracy and support her.

In a still predominantly peasant country like Burma, direct communication with people is essential, and Suu Kyi proved to have a gift for making emotional contact. Her speeches were short and to the point, and people responded eagerly to her lucidity and directness. Her capacity to convert crowds of people into admirers and supporters set in motion a swift cycle of accumulation that swept her rapidly into the leadership, symbolical and actual, of the nation. (Kane, 2001, pp. 166)

During the years under house arrest, Suu Kyi had been interested in Buddhist vipassana meditation practice, or the insight contemplation. After her release in July 1995, she had developed ‘her brand of Buddhist political rhetoric’ based on her beliefs, her Buddhist meditation practice, and her ideas on how to balance between her opposite stance of the military, yet in a reconciled manner and simultaneously her ongoing encouragement to the people to voice what they needed; democracy. Suu Kyi once mentioned ‘mindfulness’, which she learned from the meditation from the famous Karen monks i.e., Sayadaw U Vinaya and Sayadaw U Pandita. (Kane, 2001, pp. 74)

... He [U Pandita] advised me to concentrate on saying things that will bring about reconciliation. And that what I should say should be truthful, beneficial, and sweet to the ears of the listener. ... (Suu Kyi, 1997, pp. 28)

To sum up, Suu Kyi successfully gained more supports from most Burmese populations with her Buddhist rhetoric. She became an icon of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. The people were encouraged to fight with the tyrannical leaders of the military again. In this sense, a civil religion perspective was undoubtedly successful in assembling scattered individuals to be a collective action as a demonstration.

However, after a 15-year house arrest, Suu Kyi assumed office as the state counsellor since the National League for Democracy won the 2015 election. She has kept silent on the accusations of the Rohingya genocide. (AUazeera, 2020) Although Myanmar's military operated massacre with cruel tactics including killing babies, mass rapes, and burning Rohingya's villages, she still defended her homeland at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019 that 'there had been no orchestrated campaign of persecution'. Also, even though her international reputation would extremely be diminished, Suu Kyi chose to speak in what she has always believed in, i.e. Buddhism.

Due to the above-mentioned 'mindfulness', she has afterwards compromised with the military with whom she has had to share power. More importantly, Rohingya is a Muslim group, which has lived in a country where the Buddhists are a majority. Undoubtedly, Suu Kyi, with a strong Buddhist thought in power, is prone to choose 'religious' over 'international' concepts, i.e. democracy and human rights. Based on this controversial issue, she is not the icon of democracy and human rights as the world had portrayed her that way for over three decades, but she is a good leader and also an authentic Buddhist for Buddhist-Burmese people

Conclusion

Since Myanmar gained its independence from the British Empire, the Myanmar leaders have always been adopted civil religion to govern the Burmese. General Ne Win exercised his power through 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' consisting of Buddhist principles and made the people obedient for several decades.

Until the economy was shrunk, subsequently the 8888 Uprising emerged. Even though the people organized their demonstrations at the very beginning, Suu Kyi was later politically involved and has been depicted as the pro-democracy leader since then. To be fully accepted by the Burmese, Suu Kyi chose ‘Buddhism’ as same as Ne Win in the past. Subsequently, she developed her own version of ‘Buddhist political rhetoric’ and successfully gained tremendous supports from the people. Finally, her Buddhist thoughts, such as ‘mindfulness’, brought her to compromise with the military and ignore the Muslim ethnic minority’s problems, i.e. Rohingya. Since ‘they’ are Muslim and do not belong to ‘us’, Buddhists as the majority. In conclusion, civil religion might be useful in the early stage of collective action, both nation-building and demonstrations, but it will be awful after nation-building sets to places and discriminates ‘them’

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