Buddhist Nationalism: Rising Religious Violence in South Asia

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1 INTRODUCTION

Buddhist nationalism has contributed to expanding religious violence in many South Asian countries[1]. The roots of this violent form of nationalism are complex and multi-faceted, making a clear solution difficult to achieve. Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Burma[2] are some of the most pressing and violent case studies in South Asia today and can illustrate the reliance of Buddhist nationalists on ethnoreligious identities to relegate non-Buddhists to second-class status, to the point of massive acts of violence and aggression[1]. This paper seeks to illuminate the complex social history driving the rise of Buddhist nationalism in these countries, particularly strong military-religion relationships, histories of colonial oppression, long-standing cultural tensions, and Western rhetoric regarding Buddhist values.

In the modern period, Buddhism has become increasingly politicized for the benefit of nationalist movements[2]. Buddhist extremism is largely derived from the political contexts of increased ethnic nationalism and the influence of monks in Buddhist communities. Buddhist extremism often has more to do with ethnic tensions than religious tensions, though religious motivations are still substantial in many of the conflicts involving Buddhist extremists. In South Asian countries, the most substantial Buddhist nationalist movements tend to practice Theravada Buddhism. This Buddhist practice differs from other forms of Buddhism on the topic of non-violence and peace, aligning more closely with nationalist values and the connections between religion and state power; some Theravada sects view non-Buddhists as subhuman or second-class[3].

2 HISTORY AND COLONIAL IMPACTS

The colonial legacy of many Buddhist nations is fundamental to the rise of Buddhist nationalism and the formation of national identity more broadly. With the exception of Thailand, all of the South Asian nations discussed in this paper have a history of British colonization. British occupation and colonization in Burma and Sri Lanka disrupted and ultimately ended thousands of years of royal patronage that Buddhists had enjoyed. In Sri Lanka, British colonists stripped local peasants of their land and forced many into indentured servitude. In Burma, both historical legacies and modern perceptions of Buddhism contribute to the religious persecution of Rohingya Muslims today. The British brought significant populations of immigrants from India, including Rohingya Muslims[4], to fill government positions, though there were already some populations of these minority groups in Burma before British colonization. Colonial attitudes that condemned the practices and beliefs of Hindus and Muslims as well as those that elevated Buddhist practices of tolerance and pacifism have been used by Buddhist nationalists to justify violence towards and othering of the Rohingya Muslim population in Burma. Today, the Western perceptions of Buddhism as a peaceful and tolerant religion are similar to the tactics used by colonists to divide and control minority populations in Burma and Sri Lanka and may support a global discourse that perpetuates beliefs that have contributed to the vilification of Islam[5]. This essentializing of religions has amplified the tensions in South Asia between the diverse ethnoreligious groups living in these countries[6] and diminishes the reality of the delicate and complex situational history of these conflicts.

[1]The definition of "nationalism" used throughout this paper can be found in Merriam-Webster, and is as follows:

> "loyalty and devotion to a nation
>
> *especially*: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups"
>
> https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism.

[2]The use of "Burma" throughout this essay is intentional. The name Myanmar was enforced by the military junta that took over Burma in 1989. This was not a choice of the people, and most in Burma still prefer Burma to Myanmar. See this article for more information regarding the choice: https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_burma-or-myanmar-one-country-two-names/6201633.html

3 WESTERN PERCEPTIONS

Western perceptions of Buddhism tend to paint the religion as a broadly pacifist and peaceful religion. The values and precepts contained within the dharma of Buddhism would reasonably support this belief; however, regardless of the morals and values entrenched in the teachings of world religions, religions reliably fail to uphold these values and practitioners tend to regress to the broader spectrum of human nature. Buddhism is no exception to this pattern. As aptly put by Jarni Blakkarly in his article on Buddhist extremism, "It does not take much knowledge of Buddhism to realize just how irreconcilable the thinking of Buddhist extremists groups is with what the Buddha Gotama taught and the way Buddhism is practiced throughout most of the world"[7]. Much of the language used by Buddhist extremists to justify the marginalization of Muslims is borrowed directly from the Western discourse around Islam as a "dangerous" or "brutal" religion. Western narratives of Islam and Buddhism ignore complexities and the unique situations in which both religions are situated; both excessively positive and negative discourses are harmful. Even in the face of evidence of extreme violence executed or supported by Buddhist extremists, Western society still perpetuates the idea of Buddhism as a wholly peaceful religion, while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypes of Islam as a violent religion. Western intervention in the Middle East and North Africa has caused immense turmoil, while South Asian countries have not had the same experiences of conflict. These experiences influence Western perceptions of these religions and impact their ability to be critical of Buddhist nationalism. If Western nations were equally involved in regular and consistent military action in South Asia in the same way as they are in the Middle East and North Africa, perceptions of the inherent values of Buddhism and Islam would shift; however, Western nations are not engaged in military actions in South Asia in the same manner and are often blinded by the excessively positive perceptions of Buddhism, making them hesitant to engage with acts of violence perpetrated by Buddhist nationalists.

4 BUDDHISM AND VIOLENCE

Buddhist beliefs, sites, and practices have often been co-opted by nationalist movements in order to establish legitimacy with the public. In Burma, the government routinely and publicly uses Buddhist sacred sites, the sangha, and Buddhist teachings to legitimize their rule and to justify the marginalization of non-Buddhist citizens[8]. In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist movements largely stem from Angarika Dharmapala, who was a Buddhist missionary and supporter of independence efforts in Sri Lanka. He used the story of a Sri Lankan king from the second century BCE, Dutugemunu, in order to justify violence against the Tamils. The story itself focuses on the king's campaign against non-Buddhists, accompanied by Buddhist monks who told him that he had committed no sin in killing non-Buddhists because they were nonbelievers[8]. Thai nationalists have developed their ideology around a reinterpretation of the Buddhist concept of the Triple Gem–the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha–that focused instead on the nation, religion, and king[9]. The precepts contained within the Eightfold Path, which specifically prohibits taking life from another or causing harm or injustice to others,[7] would seem to be in direct opposition to the actions of extremist Buddhist nationalists, yet many find justifications for their actions.

A perceived decline of Buddhist teachings and influence relative to other religions (namely Islam and Hinduism) may also be contributing to the rise of Buddhist nationalist movements out of a desire to protect Buddhism from outside threats[5]. Much of this discourse focuses on Buddhism's reputation as a peaceful and tolerant religion while perpetuating the belief that Muslims, specifically Rohingya Muslims are an "exclusivist and proselytizing religion that is bent on geographical and cultural conquest through conversion and marriage"[5]. This is directly related to Burma's colonial history and the movement of Rohingya Muslims into Burma. In Sri Lanka, very similar nationalist movements have established themselves, but have been focused on the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil Hindu minority, rather than Muslim populations; the Sinhalese regard the Hindu presence as a threat to the "last bastion of true Buddhism,"[5] and the nationalist movement has been focused on the creation of an exclusively Buddhist nation. In both situations, as with the ideology of other nationalist movements, the specific and deliberate othering of minority groups is key to establishing and legitimizing nationalist ideology.

5 CASE STUDIES

5.1 *Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country, known today as the traditional home of Buddhism. Since its introduction to the island in the third century BCE, it has changed and adapted in many ways. During its colonial era, Buddhism was oppressed by the British in order to maintain control, but it flourished again in the post-colonial period. Buddhist Sinhalese nationalists have frequently made justifications for the use of violence in the name of identity protection, and the protection of Sri Lanka as the home of Buddhism. Many of these justifications come from historical Buddhist documents, which have been utilized by the Sinhalese majority to

support the removal of Tamils from Sri Lanka in order to preserve its role in Buddhist history. The post-colonial era in Sri Lanka created conditions that were encouraging of pro-Sinhalese ideology and violence and exclusionary politics. Many Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka became involved in Sinhalese nationalist movements as a result of their desire to be more politically active for their constituents[1]. In tandem with the rise of Buddhist nationalism and extremism in Sri Lanka, one can also see a rise in Buddhist peace efforts, particularly following the end of a nearly 26-year-long civil war in 2009. In Sri Lanka, these peace efforts emphasize shared experiences over distinguishing minority differences and engage in meditation as a practice to prevent the thought processes that lead to violence. Additionally, they try to involve youth in grassroots social organizations and volunteering efforts in order to facilitate communal peace. Engaged Buddhism was one solution to the Sri Lankan war in 2009 and emerged as a major peace process in the wake of the war's conclusion[2]. Buddhist nationalism is a loud minority within the broader Buddhist community in many South Asian countries, and there are significant efforts to combat the impacts of these agendas, particularly in Sri Lanka.

5.2 *Burma*

Following the end of Britain's colonial control over Burma, the Burmese military established Buddhist majority rule over other ethnic groups, exacerbating tensions in order to distract from the worsening economic situation within Burma[3]. The Rohingya genocide has predominantly been executed by a heavily armed military junta against a poorly resourced and significantly outmanned minority population[6]. The actions of the Burmese military have been supported by Buddhist extremists as well as the government of Burma; the President of Burma, also a Buddhist nationalist, has explicitly voiced support for the actions of the military toward the Rohingya[4]. Burma's condition of being a transitioning state moving from military rule towards greater democratization has led to exacerbating anxieties and tensions toward ethnoreligious minorities like the Rohingya. This has allowed the military to redefine and legitimize its role in the political sphere. The genocide in Burma is not simply a product of the military junta but is driven by modern confrontations resulting from the historical tensions between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists. The Rakhine (the Buddhist population in the region of Burma where the genocide is occurring) are not a majority in Burma and are also a struggling minority group in one of Burma's poorest regions, though the land itself has substantial natural resources[10].

Atrocities and human rights violations have forced many Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. During the election in 1990, the military used White Cards, a temporary citizenship card that allowed cardholders to vote, in order to escalate tensions between Rohingyas and Rakhines. Many of the cardholders were Rohingya, and the election results incited violent clashes between the groups, to which the military responded with an intense crackdown and massive human rights violations[4]. In another example, following a rumor that a Buddhist woman had been raped and murdered by Rohingya men, mass killings of Rohingyas took place at the hands of Rakhines, the military, and security forces. Following this event, the military and government cracked down on the Rohingyas, with the government asking Rakhines to evict Rohingyas from their homes, displacing 140,000 Rohingyas[4]. These actions reflect a long-held sentiment from Buddhist nationalists and monks demanding that the government and military remove Rohingyas from Burma, supported by nationalist perceptions of the Rohingya as foreign invaders and destabilizers.

Burma lacks a robust constitution and consistent enforcement and protection of rule of law and civil rights. Citizenship laws in Burma have routinely disenfranchised Rohingyas since the end of British control in 1948. Citizenship laws in 1982, for example, made citizenship for Rohingyas incredibly restricted, requiring them to both prove that they could speak one of the official languages and that their families had lived in Burma prior to its independence from the British in 1948[4]. Rohingya civil and human rights are still severely limited; their movement, rights to marriage and children, and other liberties are restricted by the government. Birth control legislation has been implemented, targeting ethnic minorities like the Rohingya in efforts to reduce population growth of non-Buddhist groups and to protect the Buddhist national identity through homogeneity, with the government referring to Rohingya civilians as "Bengali,"[3] purposeful move to reinforce nationalist perceptions of the Rohingya as other and foreign.

5.3 *Thailand*

Thailand is the only case study covered here that does not experience colonization, yet still sees a rise in extremist Buddhist nationalist movements. As Thailand transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in the 1930s, the monarchy was relegated to a ceremonial status while the Buddhist sangha secured greater power and influence within Thai society. During the Cold War, prominent members of the Buddhist sangha were complicit or even participants in mass killings of those suspected to be communists or sympathetic to communism, which were often also ethnic minorities. These groups were arrested, tortured, and killed by military and para-military regimes backed by the United States. Many leaders in the Thai sangha

supported the military regime and often endorsed or minimized the violence. The monk Kittivuddho is a strong example of this. Known by many as the "exterminator monk," Kittivuddho was famous for delivering a speech: "Killing Communists is Not a Sin" and for advocating a holy war against communism. He often preached that killing communists did not violate the Buddhist precept against taking another life because communists were not human beings, and even further, that killing communists was a spiritual and civic duty to fulfill[9]. Justifications of violence such as these are contradictory to traditional Buddhist beliefs, particularly regarding the value of human life. The rise of a religiously motivated and supported nationalist movement is unique in Thailand due to the lack of colonial legacy within Thailand itself, though it was influenced by the colonial impacts seen in neighboring nations like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma; the religious violence and nationalist ideas from neighboring countries often spilled over into Thailand[8]. Thai Buddhist nationalism was supported by the government and the community rather than suppressed or operating in spite of pressure from either the top or bottom of society. Thailand was incredibly successful at reducing the impacts and sway of Buddhist nationalism within Thai politics since the 1990s, but elections and military juntas have destabilized Thai politics, allowing Buddhist nationalism to rear its head once again[8].

6 CONCLUSION

Buddhism encompasses many pacifist and peaceful dogmas and precepts, but that does not necessarily mean that the adherents of Buddhism will always abide by these tenets. Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Burma have all proven this in their individual experiences with Buddhist nationalism and the religious violence that stems from nationalist politics. From a Western perspective, it can be challenging to reconcile the Buddhism the West knows with the Buddhist nationalism that is rising in South Asia and to rationalize the news of atrocities perpetrated by Buddhist monks and laymen in the name of a religion the West considers to be pacifist and peaceful. Religions can set tenets and values for their adherents, but as Buddhist philosophers note, if everyone were capable of rational action and moral life, there would be no need for Buddhism[5]. It is ultimately the actions of the practitioners–like Kittivuddho and Dharampala–of religions that shape their existence in this world and their perception by other cultures. Not unlike extremist nationalists of other religions, many Buddhist nationalists have found ways to explain their actions within the context of Buddhism, absolving themselves of moral responsibility through scripture.

7 EDITOR'S NOTES

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