

# The Changing Pattern of Religion and Politics in Burma

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The recent successful effort of Burmese politicians to use Buddhism to gain political support is but a contemporary manifestation of similar attempts made by Burmese leaders since the advent of British rule in the nineteenth century. Developed by the early nationalists, this technique has been employed by the entire spectrum of Burmese politicians from monarchist to communist. The role of religion in politics has, however, undergone a transition from being a controlling and governing force to its present status as a propaganda tool which may set the tone to politics but very rarely governs it. This paper attempts to analyze the changing pattern of Buddhism in politics in Burma.

## I

Foreign observers have often commented on the fact that the *pongyi* (Buddhist monk) in Burma differs from his counterpart in neighboring Thailand in that he actively participates in politics. Yet today's monk is but a shadow of his old political self. During the high tide of *pongyi* activity in the nationalist movement in the 1920's the *sangha* (monkhood) influenced political life on both an individual and a collective basis. Monks were to be found as members of the executive boards of nationalist parties, on the managerial staff of newspapers, as political speakers, and generally in the forefront of the nationalist movement. The *pongyis* also formed organizations such as the General Council of Sangha Associations which were influential among all sections of the nationalists during the 1920's. As a group *pongyis* often screened candidates for office, once audited the funds of the

major nationalist party, and, after that party split, controlled its most radical splinter. As one former *pongyi* politician described the situation in the early twenties, "all was yellow" (the traditional color of monks' robes).

This power had waned by the beginning of World War II under the impact of reactions to excesses by *pongyi* nationalists, an increasing sophistication among lay politicians, and a return to religious values within the *sangha*. The final blow to mass political activity of the monks was the advent to power of the Marxist-minded, secularly oriented leadership of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). Led by Aung San, a man suspicious of *pongyi* political ambitions, and containing a number of young university graduates, this group sought to contain *sangha* activity in the religious realm. Even U Nu, a man of undoubted Buddhist sympathies, wrote bitterly of *pongyi* wartime efforts to influence government policy.<sup>1</sup> These reactions were partly ideological and partially due to memories of the use of *pongyis* by their old political rivals.

Thus when the AFPFL came into undisputed power at the end of the war, the *sangha* found itself with less political power than it had held during the colonial period. Instead of their being accepted as a controlling element in the nationalist movement, the immediate postwar attitude was that the religious were to remain outside of politics. In line with the recommendations of the older apolitical *pongyis* who had withdrawn from politics during the 1930's (but in opposition to the traditionally more politically oriented Young Sangha Associations), all monks were constitutionally prohibited from voting or standing for parliamentary elections.<sup>2</sup> The *sangha* was also cautioned by AFPFL leaders to partake only in religious duties and to eschew religious intolerance. Aung San denounced the previous political activities of the *sangha* and what he termed the confusion and quarrels of "priestcraft" (which he differentiated from priesthood).<sup>3</sup>

The first years of the AFPFL were the nadir of *pongyi* political influence, but subsequent years have not brought a return to the prewar situation. Efforts during the first decade of AFPFL rule to achieve *pongyi* aspirations such as support for monastery schools and the establishment of a Buddhist state were abortive. Nor did three laws which Nu introduced in 1950 to reform the

*sangha* meet with universal *pongyi* approval. The objections to the bills, which established ecclesiastical courts, founded a Pali university, and formed a national *pongyi* organization, were based upon criticisms of government interference with religion as well as upon disappointment at not being chosen to sit on various boards and organizations.<sup>4</sup> One case in which the *sangha* did sway the government was in the field of religious instruction. In 1954, according to U Nu, certain *sayadaws* (abbots) called upon him to meet the threat of Communism by means of Buddhist instruction in the schools. He agreed, but also advanced the idea of Moslem and Christian instruction in their schools. Three monks from Mandalay objected, so he changed his mind and withdrew all religious teaching. Again the monks objected, so he reinstated only Buddhist instruction.<sup>5</sup> This was a rare case, for in the legislative field the *sangha* has generally been unsuccessful or disinterested.

This does not mean that the monks are without political power in contemporary Burma. It is true that they cannot vote and as a group have little interest in national policy, but the respect which the *pongyi* receives in the village allows him to influence the villagers in areas outside of religion if he so desires. The extent to which the monk can influence political events varies, with his greatest strength in rural areas in general and upper Burma proper in particular. In the villages this impact is more on a personal level, whereas in the cities *pongyis* often attempt to operate on a group basis. Generally, these individuals and groups refrain from political activities, but when a religious issue is before the country and during elections they are apt to appear upon the scene. For example, during the 1959 municipal elections, one newspaper found it noteworthy to report that in one municipality *pongyis* had *not* been active. Although the *sangha* as a whole remained neutral during the 1960 elections, various *sangha* organizations supported the party of their choice through speeches, statements, published propaganda, and the more subtle method of a word-of-mouth campaign. It should be observed that these monks rarely explain their advocacy of various candidates on any basis other than religion. Traditionally, their candidate is characterized as one who can best defend Buddhism or support particular religious issues which the *pongyis*

advocate. The voter is at times confused by having different *sangha* organizations supporting opposing candidates on similar grounds.

In their efforts to gain votes by displaying their religious ardor, the candidates continually publicize acts of obeisance to the *sangha*. Parties and nominees provide food and robes for *pongyis*, announce that *sayadaws* have been approached for advice, and attempt to gain the backing of the *sangha* organizations. It is, however, no longer considered proper to follow the prewar practice of touring one's constituency with *pongyi* supporters. The urban population now reacts somewhat cynically to the political use of *pongyis*, but in spite of this it remains a politically effective weapon. The pattern differs most markedly from that of the prewar period in that the politically conscious monks no longer determine policy and now often find themselves the pawns of politicians.

## II

The diminishing role of religious personnel in politics may partially be explained by the diluted content of religion in the national ideology. Members of older prewar parties such as the General Council of Burmese Associations found it impossible to define national goals without including Buddhism. A major reason for desiring freedom from the British was to eliminate foreign religious control and establish a state in which Buddhism could prosper and political life would be based upon Buddhist principles. According to one prewar nationalist newspaper, "Without being free from bondage . . . one can hardly find peace in one's heart or in one's environment in which the Buddhist way of life may be practiced . . ." <sup>6</sup> Older *pongyi* politicians whom the author has interviewed stated to a man that they entered into nationalist activities to preserve and protect Buddhism, and their views were repeated by a number of politicians who described the religious issue as a vital factor in the nationalist ideology.

Buddhism remains an essential ingredient in the Burmese way of life, but the leaders who articulate the nationalist ideology no longer emphasize it as did their predecessors. Two exceptions have been U Nu, who continually expresses himself

in Buddhist terms, and more recently the army, which has used religion to develop national unity against the Communists.<sup>7</sup> Even these two exceptions must be regarded with care. Nu, although he is apparently sincere in his religious leanings, has displayed marked caution in allowing the *sangha* any influence in the decision-making processes of his government. The army, on the other hand, used religion as a manipulative device against the Communist movement in what recent evidence has shown to be only a short-lived experiment. Other leaders such as Kyaw Nyein, U Ba Swe, U Tin, and most of the men who came into power with the AFPFL have reflected more Aung San's secularist leanings. These men were not anti-Buddhist, but did tend to be somewhat anticlerical and in favor of the separation of church and state. Describing the Thakin group from which most of the younger leaders came, Aung San boasted, "In fact, it is the only non-racial, non-religious and impersonal movement that has ever existed in Burma. Formerly and still now among a certain section of the Burmese public, nationalism was conceived in terms of race and religion."<sup>8</sup>

This attitude led the early AFPFL to emphasize equality and freedom for all religions, and party statements usually neglected any mention of the Buddhist faith. For example, the original AFPFL Manifesto of 1944 declared, "Freedom of conscience should be established. The State should remain neutral on religious questions."<sup>9</sup> When the Constitution was formulated, this position was firmly supported by Aung San when he argued against Deedok U Ba Cho's positions that independence would be empty without a Buddhist state religion. To this Aung San replied that Burma was a secular state. Among the young AFPFL leaders religion just did not have a part to play in defining national goals and was rarely discussed at party conferences.

In the years since independence, many politicians have toned down their secularist statements as they have found them politically unwise. It is interesting to see men such as Kyaw Nyein, Ba Swe, and even Nu compromise with their previous positions under the exigencies of political life, for there can be little doubt that the successful politician must play to the people's belief that the state has a duty (possibly its only duty in their minds) to foster and protect Buddhism. This U Nu masterfully developed

during the postwar period and particularly during the 1960 elections. At the same time, there is a certain tolerance toward other religions, a degree of anticlericalism, and an interest in form rather than content which was not so prevalent in the pre-war nationalist movement.

### III

A further aspect of this changing pattern revolves around the question of the role which religion is to play in the state. Again, early nationalists hoped that following independence Buddhism and its clergy would be returned to the place it was conceived to have held prior to the British conquest. During the period of the Burmese monarchy there existed a state religion which helped to set the character of the government, and the monks intermittently influenced state politics. Upon the final victory of the British in 1885, direct religious influence on the governmental apparatus ceased with the nonrecognition of Buddhism as the state religion, deterioration of the *sangha's* role in education, and elimination of the formal place of the monk in the councils of state. Those religious nationalists who hoped to see Buddhism as an integral part of the state after independence were disappointed. Although Buddhism was constitutionally recognized as having a "special position" as the majority religion of the Burmese, there was no official acceptance of Buddhism as the state religion.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, Burma found herself in the somewhat anomalous position of having no state religion but with a prime minister who on the one hand preached religious equality, and on the other granted special favors to the Buddhist faith. For example, U Nu agreed to have Buddhism taught in state schools, once declared that only a Buddhist could become President (upon which the Constitution is silent and his colleagues ambiguous) and got Parliament to grant six million kyat (approximately \$1,250,000) to build the grandiose Peace Pagoda, artificial cave, and surrounding Buddhist University for the Sixth World Buddhist Synod. Critics of the latter claimed that Indian traders received import licenses for aiding the building fund and that the whole project was a useless expense to a country vitally in need of money for social improvements.<sup>11</sup> Finally, there have been allegations that U Nu has often accepted the advice of religious

leaders in opposition to members of his cabinet. For example, U Tun Pe resigned from his position as Minister of Union Culture on the basis (among other reasons) that religious elements were interfering with government decisions. There is no question that Nu's personal interest in Buddhism helped to set a religious tone for his administrations.

If Burma under Nu can be described as sympathetic toward Buddhism, it can also be characterized by its interest in the outward forms of religion rather than by the direct influence of Buddhism on the decision-making process. An interesting example of this situation has developed in the religious state issue. When I left Burma in April 1960, few of those proposing a Buddhist state considered that its adoption would presage any real change in the structure of processes of government. In a revealing statement the Organisation to Establish Buddhism as a State Religion answered a series of questions on the impact of a state religion on Burma and its people. Among other points, it declared that 1) no religion would suffer, 2) the principle of aiding other religions would continue, 3) the question of the necessity of having the President and ministers Buddhist would be decided in accordance with the Constitution and democracy, 4) the *sangha* would not run for seats in Parliament, 5) Buddhist citizens would be expected to live by the principles of Buddhism and other religions according to their own tenets, 6) Buddhism would be compulsory for Buddhist students, and 7) the establishment of a Buddhist state was not against socialism, science, or good international relations.<sup>12</sup> In other words, no change other than form was contemplated.

#### IV

Possibly the best contemporary example of the impact of religion on politics was the 1960 parliamentary election.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, although religion was a key element in the victory of U Nu and his "Clean" faction of the AFPFL, it was not officially recognized as an issue in the campaign. This can be partially explained by the feeling that religion and politics should not be mixed, but a more important factor was the Constitutional prohibition of "the abuse of religion for political purposes." Officially interpreted, this meant religion must be kept out of the cam-

paign. In fact, it displayed the devious means by which religion is injected into postwar Burmese politics.

The major protagonists in the battle were the Clean AFPFL under U Nu and the Stable AFPFL under U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein. These men had been part of the united AFPFL until that party had split in 1958. The army caretaker government which ruled for sixteen months following the deterioration of civilian politics allowed completely free elections in February 1960 in order that the politicians might again rule the country. This started the electoral battle in which religion was an important weapon. The opening salvo came from the Clean camp prior to the official start of the campaign when U Nu promised a Buddhist state if elected. Having reiterated a promise that he had previously made but never kept, and after having pointed out that his statement was before the campaign and therefore not unconstitutional, Nu entered a monastery for six weeks.

The Clean position immediately put the Stable forces on the defensive. At first the idea of a state religion was attacked as a violation of the united AFPFL's previous stand that a Buddhist state would divide multireligious Burma. It was further declared that Nu was extremely vague in describing the value of such a situation, only promising that it would in no way endanger other religions. Of what good then was a Buddhist state, his enemies asked. Finally, the action of the Clean leader was described as an unconstitutional use of religion for political purposes. However, the Stable faction soon discovered that the Clean tactic was winning favor in upper Burma and among the women voters, and in mid-December the Swe-Nyein faction succumbed to the religious issue. In fact, it came out with an eleven-point program which promised more specific aids to Buddhism than had its opponents.

The Stable forces were working under a number of handicaps. On the religious state issue, as in others during the campaign, they moved too slowly and too cautiously. The co-heads of the party, Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein, had never publicized their devotion to Buddhism as had Nu, and in fact both were rumored to be rather indifferent toward religion. During the campaign the Stable leaders attempted to change this image of themselves by giving food and gifts to *pongyis*, and Ba Swe followed Nu into a



monastery. These acts were almost futile, for their opponent is the symbol of Buddhism to large numbers of his countrymen. It was Nu who convened the Sixth World Buddhist Synod, a feat which only monarchs had previously accomplished. It was Nu who had for years sprinkled his speeches with Buddhist stories and sayings. It was Nu who was looked upon by many people as a Buddha in the becoming. (Some of his opponents called upon the people to help him become a Buddha by depriving him of office so that he could spend full time at the job.)

During the weeks prior to the election, the religious issue was in a curious never-never land in which the man who initiated it denied that it was an issue, while his colleagues praised his devoutness and his critics attempted to diminish the public character which he had built over the years. The Stable charged Nu with being an opportunist and called the Buddhist yellow color on the Clean ballot boxes a trick to fool the people. None of these efforts appears to have been overly effective. The picture of Nu as a devout defender of the faith had been too long in the making, and attacks upon him had a tendency to backfire.

The Clean and Stable were not the only forces interested in the battle. The deputy prime minister, U Lun Baw, speaking for the electoral watchdog Ne Win government, warned against using religion for political ends and warned the monks to confine themselves to Buddhism. The monks on their part maintained a tenuous neutrality, although obviously pleased that both parties were so vigorously defending the faith. Some *sangha* organizations in Rangoon and Mandalay did take the traditional path of party affiliation. The monks in Mandalay were largely pro-Clean, but only a minority joined pro-Nu political *sangha* associations. In Rangoon, the Union Sangha League, another small pro-Clean organization, applauded Nu's position on a Buddhist state and called the Stable fascist. The Stable also had its *sangha* groups in Mandalay and Rangoon, which were active in both the municipal and parliamentary elections.

Neither the charges of the opposition nor the warnings of the constitutionalists could change the Nu tide. There were, of course, other powerful forces behind the Clean victory, including Nu's popularity, poor strategy on the part of the Stable party, and the dislike for the army rule which was linked to the Stable.

At the same time, it is impossible to deny the religious flavor of the campaign which could only aid U Nu and his party.

It can be argued that this election marked a return to the pre-war pattern of religious politics. If so, it was more reminiscent of the late thirties when politicians used religion and the religious as tools. It was not a parallel situation to the twenties when the Buddhist clergy acted as a powerful decision-making force within the nationalist movement. Most observers agree that Nu has successfully used the religious issue to gain an important electoral victory, but few expect that this will mean a significant resurgence of *pongyi* political power or that the state, even if it is a Buddhist state, will have its policies much more defined by Buddhist principles than are the United States' policies by Christian principles.

In conclusion, Burma remains a Buddhist nation, proud of its religious heritage, and the government, at least under Nu, is sympathetic toward the idea of fostering the faith. Surface manifestations of governmental interest in Buddhism can be seen in obeisance to monks, the import of holy relicts, speeches and pilgrimages by political leaders. At the same time, the direct influence of Buddhism and its clergy on the daily operations of the state and the actions of most politicians appears minimal. This diminished strength of religious influence is in striking contrast to the high tide of prewar *pongyi* power when the clergy was a vital political force. Even if Nu stands by his promise for a Buddhist state, the consensus is that its advent will not re-establish the old order.

#### NOTES

1. Thakin Nu, *Burma under the Japanese* (London: Macmillan, 1954), p. 91.
2. Constitution of the Union of Burma, Section II, and Parliamentary Elections Act, 1948.
3. Aung San, *Burma's Challenge*, mimeographed, n.d.
4. John Cady, *A History of Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 611-612.
5. This is Nu's version given in reply to critics during the 1959-60 election campaign. *Nation*, November 24, 1959.
6. *The Knowledge*, September 1, 1923 (translated by the author from the Burmese).
7. See Fred R. von der Mehden, "Burma's Religious Campaign against Communism," *Pacific Affairs*, xxxiii: 3 (August, 1960).
8. *New Burma*, May 10, 1940.

9. *The New Burma* (Rangoon: Nay Win Kyi Press, n.d.).
10. See Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), pp. 98-99.
11. See U Tun Pe, *Why I Resigned from the Cabinet; Statement before Press Conference on August 13, 1953*, Rangoon, 1953.
12. *The Burman*, March 7, 1960.
13. See R. Butwell and F. von der Mehden, "The 1960 Election in Burma," *Pacific Affairs*, xxxiii: 2 (June, 1960).