

Buddhism and Political Power in Burma

WINSTON L. KING

Grinnell College

1. *The Background*

A view of the ancient political tradition of Burma is essential for understanding contemporary developments in that land. Hereditary monarchy was the traditional form of Burmese government until its destruction by the third and final stage of the British conquest in 1885 and the deposition of King Thibaw. Moreover, the Burmese monarchy was, like most contemporary oriental monarchies, an absolute one. Father Sangermano, who lived in Burma at the end of the eighteenth century, wrote:

The Burmese Emperor . . . is considered by himself and others absolute lord of the lives, properties, and personal services of his subjects, he exalts and depresses, confers and takes away honor and rank. . . . Every subject is the Emperor's born slave; and when he calls anyone his slave he thinks to do him honor. . . . The possessions of all who die without heirs belong to the king. . . . To the king it belongs to declare war or to conclude peace; and he may in any moment call upon the whole population of his empire to enlist themselves in his army, and can impose on them at his pleasure any labour or service.¹

The king's power was enhanced further by the absence of an hereditary nobility. Whether royal supremacy was cause or effect of this situation may be debatable; but the resulting arrangement made every position of political power solely a matter of the king's creation. This circumstance has produced two curious results in recent years: first, when the British destroyed the power of the ruling dynasty in 1885, there were none but the peasants to offer further resistance. And secondly, when independence

came again to the Burmese in 1948, there were no hereditary nobles to take over political power. This made the shift to democratic forms quite easy on paper; but by the same token, there were all too few, above the village headman level, who had any experience in government.

Now the mythos of the emperor's absolute ownership of the realm and its inhabitants is of considerable interest and also has a bearing on the present. After the fashion of Indian emperors, he claimed direct descent from Manu, the Hindu Adam. Or, in a local variation on this theme, he had descended from the Naga spirits, the primordial lords of Burma. The Indian-Buddhist motif of rebirth made it easy, of course, to interpret this descent quite loosely so far as *biological* inheritance is concerned, for parents provide only the physical vehicle for rebirth. Therefore a blood-son, or even a complete stranger, might be a "descendant" of Manu or a Naga spirit, indeed even a reincarnation. This mythological uncertainty about inheritance was further complicated by the large number of eligible royal princes from polygamous royal marriages.

There was another aspect to royal power. Although royal blood was always preferred, actual possession of power was the primary test of kingship. And here the religious and semireligious factors had great importance. There were first the royal regalia, whose possession in itself carried with it considerable magical power, supported and buttressed by Hindu wise men and astrologers who were maintained as royal adjuncts down to the very end. At their advice the royal capital of Burma was moved on several occasions to a more auspicious place, sometimes only a few miles away.

Even more important than this was the possession of the royal court precincts themselves. This almost *ipso facto* made a person sovereign, though of course there were many assassinations of ruling monarchs during the years within their own palaces. It might be put thus: Anyone who desired to reign *must* possess the court precincts to secure the loyalty of officers and army, and the respect of the common people. And why? Because the royal precincts were what Mircea Eliade calls "sacred space." The emperor's palace was not a mere palace; it was the center of the

earth, embodying the charismatic power of that sacred earth-mountain, Mount Meru, on and above whose slopes and summit dwelt the gods. Here in the royal palace and through the person of the emperor, the nation made contact with heavenly powers. Thus in a sense somewhat similar to, though not as strong as, the Japanese worship of their emperor, the possessor of the palace was a holy person. Indeed a king might reign, after a fashion, by remaining completely within the palace-fortress compound. Especially if he was insecure, he tended to remain quite a homebody. British failure fully to appreciate this viewpoint led to fateful complications of Anglo-Burmese relationships.

A subsidiary factor here was also the Indian tradition of the Universal Monarch. This species of monarch was in some sense a messianic ruler, a powerful sovereign of saintly virtue who would promote true religion and peaceful welfare throughout his realm. In Buddhist legend, Gotama might have been either such a monarch, or a great sage—which latter he chose to be. Several Burmese monarchs appear to have cherished this next-best-to-Buddhahood ambition for themselves; and in Thailand it has become the tradition that the sovereigns are *actual Buddhas-to-be*.

Now there was a most important implication of this aura of sacredness surrounding the kingly office: *The piety of the king was central to his control*. Even though Burmese kings were seldom if ever considered Buddhas-immediately-to-be, they were kings by virtue of their great merit in past lives; and it behooved them, both for their own sakes and that of the realm, to keep their merit account in a healthy condition. Hence the king, as such, was The Patron of Religion; such patronage was the main function of his office—which from the time of King Anawrahta in the eleventh century onward, meant patronage of Buddhism. Cady puts it thus in his *History of Modern Burma*:

The most important positive basis on which popular allegiance to the king was acknowledged . . . was that royalty functioned as the promoter and defender of the Buddhist faith. . . . For this reason, Burma's kings bestowed lavish patronage on Buddhist shrines and on the Sangha or monastic community. A ruler's proudest title related to his role as a promoter of the Buddhist faith, a function which was regarded by Burmans as the very *raison d'être* of the state. Despite the manifold abuses

of power arising from royal despotism, which led Burmans traditionally to identify the government itself with such basic scourges as fire, flood, famine, and evil enemies, kingship merited popular appreciation because of its dedication to religious ends. Princely aspirants invariably stressed their capabilities as promoters of the faith.²

In a word, the traditional government of Burma was a *sacralized* entity, a religious statehood, most of whose popular support derived from its sacredness. The lavishness of the pagoda-building at Pagan demonstrates how seriously the kings took this sacred trust.

There was one further factor which both strengthened and qualified the power of the king: the position of the Sangha or brotherhood of Buddhist monks. The Buddhist monk traditionally took no part in politics. He was bound for Nibbana.³ The king's chaplain might counsel the king personally, intercede with him in behalf of a condemned man, or appear beside him on great festival occasions, but essentially the monk left political authority undisturbed in the exercise of its power. On the other hand, a sovereign touched the monkhood only at his own great peril—provided that monkhood was tending to its spiritual business in a proper manner. And because of its nonhierarchical character, the Sangha could scarcely become a political tool. Hence monks were free from political pressures, and they did, on occasion, rebuke and discipline the king: for failing to provide for the support of true religion; for being an unworthy ruler; on at least one occasion for seizing the throne by treachery; or for professing to be a living Buddha.

2. *Religious Consequences of British Rule*

Given the Burmese sense of the sacredness of the kingly office and habitation, consider the profound shock of the deposition of King Thibaw in 1885 and the British appropriation of the royal palace for a pleasure place. Emanuel Sarkisyanz puts it thus in his *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients*:

With the collapse of the throne of Burma its conception of the world collapsed also. The kingly palace in Mandalay, which had its archetype in the World Mountain of Meru, and was thought of as the World Axis, the Golden Palace, which the

Burmese revered as central support of the cosmic and ethical world orders—this was transformed into an English club, the 'Upper Burma Club.' And the very place which, according to the traditional world-view, would alone stand unshaken when the world itself should disappear, when it should quake and shudder, in this place where the king as the sustainer of the Law should turn the wheel of life, now English officers drank whisky and played the English shopkeepers' game of cricket. The State had lost its cosmic archetypal character.⁴

In a word, *the basic political consequence of British rule was to desacralize the central government in the eyes of Burmese peoples.* Government became solely one of the traditional scourges of the Burmese peasant, on a level with fire, flood, famine, and invading enemies. Of course the government, during this period, *was* an invading enemy, and one of foreign faith to boot, one that refused to appoint a primate to regulate and maintain the Sangha, to contribute to the support of religion, or fittingly to honor the sacred places. Not only so, but this secular enemy government allowed those of its own faith to convert substantial numbers of nominal or long-term Buddhist prospects (the Karens), and to establish their missionary schools, as well as to set up the system of government schools that weaned Burmese children away from their traditional monastery education.

There is also one interesting side effect of this period of foreign rule: the Sangha began to enter politics. The reason for this is obvious. The Sangha came to view the British government as the enemy of Buddhism, despite the government's rather contemptuous tolerance of Buddhism. As a result, not only of the increasing indiscipline in Sangha ranks but also because of an anti-British, antigovernment feeling, increasing numbers of monks took an active part in politics. At least one, U Wisara, whose yellow-robed statue stands at the head of a Rangoon avenue named in his honor, was martyred by a self-imposed fast to death for the cause of Burmese independence.

The *Burmese* interpretation of the period of British rule, in terms of religion, may be summed up in a recent statement of the "Organization to Establish Buddhism as the State Religion":

It is an undeniable fact that not only have the morals and culture emanating from Buddhism degenerated from day to

day, but Dhammantarayas (dangers to religion) have increased since the dethroning of King Thibaw, the last Buddhist Monarch of Burma. This is because Buddhism has lost the status of the State Religion.

When this lack has been remedied, the mere acknowledgement and glory of the status will increase the fervour and zeal of the citizens of the Union of Burma. Morals and culture will correspondingly improve and progress and enthusiasm will be also so great that Dhammantarayas will be resisted with the very lives [of the people of Burma].

3. *The Era of Independence*

With the coming of independence in 1948, Burma was at last free to mold her own independent political-social destiny. But the question was, of course, who or what group within Burma would be able to guide her in this most important hour of her destiny? For Burma was caught between a past and a future at odds with each other. How could a past, deeply tinged by Buddhist values but set in a context of age-old isolation, be creatively joined to a future of completely new and totally different proportions, across the meaningless, even somewhat deteriorating cultural hiatus of a hundred years, more or less, of alien rule?

We know something of how General Aung San hoped to do it. He wished to turn rather resolutely away from the past into a completely new day of socialistic democracy, heavily influenced by Marxian values, but cross-fertilized, particularly in its actual governmental and constitutional structures, by British parliamentary and judicial tradition. This new Burma was to be essentially a secular state. While the constitution recognized Buddhism as the religion of the majority of Burmese and accordingly gave it some special privileges, it specifically guaranteed the freedom of other minority religions and carefully defined the role of the Sangha, or order of monks, as nonpolitical. To this latter position Aung San was moved both by his socialism and by his memory of the Sangha's political activities of the 1920's and 1930's—a general position apparently shared by General Ne Win during his premiership in 1958-1960.

Whether Aung San's political views would have become integrally Burmese by virtue of his own dynamic leadership can only

be conjectured. But per se the secular-socialist democratic pattern had no real root in either the affections or traditional values of the mass of Burmese people. For these values were deeply affected by Buddhism; and socialism as such seemed to have little to say or do with Buddhism, despite many valiant efforts by some writers to equate Marx and Buddha. In the area of religion, socialism left the people unmoved, even apprehensive; it seemed to be irreligious and secular. What would be its effect upon Buddhism, or how would Buddhism fare under it? The ideal solution would be the discovery of a mode of *somehow blending the methodology and political structure of socialism with the values of Buddhism.*

And this of course is where U Nu, Burma's present premier, enters our picture. He, as no one else in Burma, has been able to articulate the unspoken sentiments of a vast majority of the Burmese people and to offer them the hope—whether genuine or illusory remains to be seen—of again joining in one structure their traditional religious values and national political power.

The man and his career might easily have been the subject of this entire paper. But in these closing paragraphs I wish to indicate what seems to me to be the main thrust of his entire career and of his future program for Burma. His return to political power in 1960 resulted from a combination of factors: (1) Popular resentment against the brusque, businesslike army rule contributed to the U Nu's comeback. During all this period, he spoke feelingly of the misery of Burma's people, flirted with nonviolent resistance, and spoke vaguely of the Fascist oppressors of the people. Thus he tabbed himself as the common man's champion. (2) He is a clever politician with notable charismatic gifts. He can speak the common people's language; he is witty, full of stories from the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*, folklore, and popular proverbs. He exudes a flavor of sincerity and friendliness. His party chose yellow, the color of the monk's robe, for its ballot boxes, and U Nu's smiling countenance appeared on every one of those boxes. As the dear old lady, coached to vote for the opposition, said, "What could I do but vote for him? There he was smiling at me." (3) He promised various ethnic groups, notably Arakanese and Mon, some form of special representation and privilege. (4) He was the champion of Buddhism. He spent suc-

cessive weeks in meditation in the monastery at least twice during his retirement. He was universally reputed to be a pious man (a future Buddha, perhaps?) and promised to make Buddhism the state religion. Some supporters termed a vote for U Nu a vote for the Buddha. Consequently, how could he help but win?

Now what does U Nu hope to do for Burma? Much could be said here about economic, educational, and political hopes, but I will venture to put the real kernel of U Nu's special plans into two statements. First, he hopes to establish a type of *socialism* consonant with Buddhist principles. I quote from a private memo and his 1959-1960 campaign speeches, not yet nor perhaps ever to be translated officially:

The Buddhist scriptures provide a considerable number of instances which show that Buddhism favors a Welfare State in which the government has assumed responsibility for the care of the poor, the unemployed, the sick, the aged, etc.

He finds Buddhist principles in full accord with the basic Socialist goal of eliminating competition and unfair distribution:

The profit motive should be eliminated. . . . The miseries of the world are due to the lack of Socialist principles. . . .

The main aim of Buddhism, to my mind, is to gain liberation from the rounds of existence. . . . Yet I believe that only one percent of the Buddhist population [of Burma] can aspire for Liberation. This is because under the defective economic system which we see before our eyes, much time and energy must be spent to earn the bare necessities of life. . . . The economic set-up of human society allows no way for the practice of the Noble Virtues.

So under the new society people can spare their surplus money and property to set up a common pool for the establishment of a Socialist state. This is true Dana [charity] . . . and the practice of Dana leads to Nibbana.

I believe the dawn of Socialism is not far off. We can establish this State in Socialism in our time.

But, secondly, this is to be a *Buddhist* socialism. Therefore, not only will U Nu ban beef slaughter, sponsor tension-easing meals, seek reconciliation with political enemies, and use persuasion rather than coercion wherever possible, but he will make Buddhism the state religion. Why? Simply to get elected? I think not.

In order to curtail the exercise of other religious faiths in Burma? Probably not, despite some Buddhist-nationalist pressure to do so. One can scarcely overemphasize the crucial seriousness of U Nu's purpose here. During debate on the State-Religion Bill he publicly stated that he would expect every member of the Union Party in Parliament to vote for it or face expulsion from the Party. For one who has seldom invoked party discipline before, this alone suggests considerations of overriding importance. It may be summed up thus, in the words of earlier terminology: *The main thrust of U Nu's politics is to resacralize government.*

For this purpose, no matter how fully compatible with Buddhist principles Socialist political philosophy may be, mere Socialism is not enough. Or at least not enough, or right, for Burma. Here, it must be a *Buddhist* socialism. For Burma is solidly Buddhist in a way that the West was probably never, and certainly is not now, Christian. Buddhism is the deep well out of which practical Burmese living-values are drawn; it is Buddhism alone which seems able to unite the dissident factions and ethnic groups in Burma; it basically was Buddhism that bound the Burmese peoples to the throne in "national" loyalty in times past. Nowhere else, in nothing else, can such a unifying force be found for Burma in these difficult times, one which will bind people to people, and people to government. Therefore, though a king cannot be restored to Burma, the central government must play the king's former religious role and become the official Patron of Religion. To U Nu as a *politician* who knows his people well, this makes good practical sense. And to U Nu, the devout *Buddhist*, this action, which he terms "the noblest deed, the greatest deed for Buddhists," is the climax of his persistent hope of joining together the world's one true faith with the world's one religiously desirable political method in the government of his own fatherland. Indeed it is much more than likely that he sees the resacralizing of the government as significantly advancing Burma along the road either to a Loka Nibbana (Perfect World, somewhat equivalent to the Kingdom of God on earth in Christianity), or, what is much the same, into greater readiness for the Maitreya Buddha, the coming Buddha, in whose near advent some Burmese believe.

And what has the U Nu government done practically to promote a *Buddhist* socialism? According to the parliamentary act of August 1961, passed by a twelve to one majority, it initially means the following: compulsory education in Buddhism for children of Buddhist parents and prospective Buddhist teachers in government schools; placing the scriptures in all libraries and Buddha images in public courtrooms; establishment of some new primary schools in monasteries; separate hospitals for monks; closing of government offices and schools and prohibition of liquor sales on Buddhist lunar sabbath days; establishment of a committee to guard against religious discrimination against minorities.

What more than this official branding of the Burmese government, holidays, and school as Buddhist will ensue? With welfare-state socialism as U Nu's declared socio-economic policy, present trends in this area may be expected to continue. Obviously he hopes also for a permeation of the total national life from the top down by Buddhist principles. Will the raiment then be Buddhist, but the voice of policy be secular-socialist, and politics go on as usual? Will the law become a dead letter with U Nu's passing from the political scene, an historic monument to a chauvinistic, nostalgic Buddhist ideal? Will the officializing of Buddhism stop Communism in its tracks within Burma? Will the law in the hands of Nu's successors become an instrument of political power and policy and of a divisive-oppression of minorities? These are fascinating questions, but they are as yet unanswerable.⁵

NOTES

1. Quoted in John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
3. *Nibbana* is the Pali form of Sanskrit *Nirvana*.
4. Emanuel Sarkisyanz: *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients* (Mohr: Tübingen, 1955), p. 348. (Author's translation.)
5. The *coup d'état* of General Ne Win on March 2, 1962 has undoubtedly put a crimp in U Nu's Buddhist socialism. (The article was written before the coup.) How much and what sort of crimp is somewhat conjectural, but not totally obscure.

Obviously Ne Win is not *anti-Buddhist*. It was under his government that a long-term move to rehabilitate monastery education was undertaken. Moreover, his cabinet (reappointed) were all staunch traditional

Buddhists. But, although he recognizes the predominantly Buddhist nature of Burma, he will keep that predominance under careful control.

Ne Win, who might be termed a "secularized" Buddhist with no patience for "mixing religion and government," will predictably concern himself primarily with Burma's economic solvency, her national safety, and her internal harmony. He will fight, eliminate, or suppress whatever threatens these vital interests, even though some religious sensibilities must be sacrificed. His previous government (1958-60) destroyed thousands of stray dogs and crows in the interests of sanitation; it likewise refused to sanction government *nat* (spirit) feeding ceremonies and will doubtless halt work on U Nu's government-sponsored *nat* shrines. Shortly after the coup Ne Win lifted the ban on cattle slaughter (imposed by U Nu in 1960) in the interest of an adequate food supply. It may be that he will consider two sets of sabbaths (Buddhist lunar and British-Christian Sundays) to be too expensive a luxury—and possibly might opt for the latter on purely practical grounds.

In view of Chin (Christian and animist) restiveness under the establishment, and the resulting violent anti-Moslem demonstrations in Rangoon, will he consider the *total* state religion setup dangerously divisive? (Probably he does not feel deeply committed to his predecessor's legislation; and even some of those who favored the establishment appear to be having second thoughts.) Almost certainly he will firmly enforce the freedom-of-religion provision of the constitution. And his plans will not include a specifically Buddhist socialism or any utopian attempt to sacralize the state. If genuine sacralization ever were a hope, even under U Nu, its golden hour has fled, probably forever, with his second loss of power to the army.