Monastic Activism and State-Sangha Relations in Post-2014 Coup Thailand

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

What kind of relationship should the state have with the sangha, or Buddhist monastic order, and who has the authority to decide? This dissertation examines these questions through the case of the monastic reform in Thailand after the 2014 coup. Based on field research carried out between 2014 and 2018, the study employs methods of participant-observation, interviewing, documentary research and internet-based data collection to explore how the state, sangha and lay reformists competed to control the meaning of what the monastic order could or could not do. In the first part, the dissertation traces the development of contemporary lay Buddhist intellectuals from their role as passive adherents to passionate activists, prior to their assumption of positions within the military government when they were able to a monastic reform agenda in motion. I argue that underlying the impetus to discipline the sangha emerged both from a desire to realize the positive potentialities that Buddhism could offer as a source of social change and from the state's emerging recognition of the sangha's political salience.

The second part attends to the growth of the sangha as a powerful economic and political institution following geopolitical and national security shifts of the 1970s. As a semi-autonomous field, the sangha was governed not only by the sangha law instituted by the Thai state, but also the *vinaya*, or the framework of monastic disciplinary code, which allowed the sangha to maintain its relative autonomy. The affinity between the sangha and increasingly active civilian political groups in the last few decades turned the sangha into a liability in the eyes of the state, who employed a set of increasingly coercive measures to contain the monastic establishment. The dissertation concludes that as the political establishment seeks to consolidate its power, increasing efforts at monastic regulation will be inevitable, even if a complete control of the sangha remains an elusive goal.

Abbreviations

AMLO	Anti-Money Laundering Office
ASB	Association of Scholars for Buddhism
BPCT	Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand
CBA	Committee for Reform of Guideline and Measure for the Protection of Buddhist Affairs
CCD	Counter Corruption Division
CPBR	Committee to Promote Buddhism as the National Religion
DSI	Department of Special Investigation
LDP	Land of Dharma Party
NACC	National Anti-Corruption Commission
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
NLA	National Legislative Assembly
NTBC	National Thai Buddhism and Culture Mass Media Association
ONAB	Office of National Buddhism
PDRC	People's Democratic Reform Committee
PONB	Protection Organization of National Buddhism
SPBAC	Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre
TPSP	Thai People Sovereignty Party
UDD	United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship

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INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of February 15 in 2016, a saffron army descended upon Phutthamonthon, the largest Buddhist Park in Thailand outside of Bangkok. Arriving through dozens of double-decker buses, thousands of monks waded through the barricades put up by the military and police blocking entrances to the park. They marched alongside lay followers in separate lines before settling into neatly organized columns in a purposeful display of religious hierarchy: monks sitting in the lawn directly in front of the park's standing Buddha image flanked by groups of laypeople at the tail end of the assembly, placing the monastics at the center between the Buddha statue and the laity. In the outer ring, tents were set up to provide cover for the participants as they took turn between keeping the formation and leaving to rest under the shade. Among lay supporters, those sitting outside held their umbrellas high in one hand with another hand swinging stickers that read "Buddhism is the National Religion," a nod to a longstanding campaign by the sangha, or Buddhist monastic order, to ask for the granting of an official status to Buddhism in the constitution. Throughout the day, one speaker after another took the microphone to address the crowds through the amplifiers around the areas. "We are convening here today as an assembly," Phra Methi Thammachan, one of the leading organizers said, "to thwart an attempt by a group of people who have repeatedly denounced the sangha and are behind the plan to overthrow the current monastic administration." Now, according to Phra Methi, was the time to take a stand against the state intervention into monastic affairs.

This assembly came on the heels of the escalating tension between the military government and the sangha on the issue of the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch, or head of the monastic order, left vacant by the passing of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon in 2013. After much speculation and uncertainty in the wake of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon's death, the *Mahathera*

Samakhom, the governing body of the Thai sangha, had finally convened and unanimously approved the nomination of Somdet Phra Ratchamankhalachan, popularly known as Somdet Chuang, to the Supreme Patriarch position. The military government, however, declined to endorse the candidacy of Somdet Chuang, prompting several groups of monastic activists to come out and issue open letters denouncing the refusal. Despite the relentless effort by these activists to rally public support and pressure the government into accepting the *Mahathera* resolution, the campaign proved futile, and members of the sangha grew increasingly frustrated. In the months leading up to and after the *Mahathera* nomination of Somdet Chuang, monks that I met could not help but show sign of repugnance on their faces and in their tone when we spoke about the subject of the next Supreme Patriarch. Insistence on the monastic autonomy and right to self-determination echoed in these conversations. "They [the government] have no right to dismiss the wish of the sangha, and doing so is intervening into monastic affairs," as one of the monks told me, "we [the sangha] have our own deliberation process sanctioned by both the *vinaya* [monastic disciplinary code] and the sangha law. If they said that they could do what they want, are they challenging the authority of the Buddha? Are they ready for us to take to the streets?"

And take to the streets the sangha did. After a month of tense standoff between the government and the sangha, the Buddhism Protection Centre of Thailand (BPCT) and Buddhist activist groups led by Phra Methi Thammachan, Vice Rector of Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU) and BPCT secretary, announced that they would host a gathering to observe the *Macha Bucha Day*, the day to celebrate an assembly held between the Buddha and his 1,250 disciples.[1] The highlight of the

[1] There are four major Buddhist holidays in Thailand, which are *Macha Bucha*, *Asanha Bucha*, *Visakha Bucha* and Buddhist Lent. *Asanha Bucha*, taking place on the full moon in July, is a day to commemorate the first sermon that the Buddha gave to his first five disciples, while *Visakha Bucha*, or *Vesak*, perhaps the most important Buddhist holiday, is a day to memorialize the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. The beginning of the Buddhist Lent, which always proceeds the day after *Asanha Bucha*, marks a period where monks begin an extended retreat for three months, usually from July to October, in a designated location, typically temple, to practice meditation and study scriptures.

meeting was a seminar titled “Stop the Plan to Overthrow Thai Monastic Administration” (*sakat phaenlomlang karnpokkhrong khanasong thai*) (*Post Today* 2016). According to the organizers, the seminar was intended to send message to the government to stop interfering in monastic affairs as well as to demand an end of the plan to topple *Mahathera*. The estimate of participants was initially as high as 30,000 (*VoiceTV* 2016). The actual number, however, was much less than the early forecast and remained in the province of more than four thousand protesters. Nevertheless, the defiance exhibited by the monastic order was a spectacle, not the least because the military government had issued a ban on any political assembly consisting of five people since the 2014 coup and consistently applied that protocol to its political opposition. The last time the monastic protest reached this kind of height was in 2007 when thousands of monks and lay supporters marched to call for Buddhism to be recognized in the constitution as the national religion.

The news of the gathering spread like wildfire. Photos and livestreaming flooded social media and sparked a frenzy of condemnation from the public. The protest came at an unfortunate time for me. I had just travelled to Chiang Mai, the second largest city in Thailand located in the North, to meet and interview monks. As I checked the phone on the way to meet my monastic informants, my Facebook feed was blowing up with updates on the situation. “This behavior is unbecoming of monks,” one user commented in the link to the news. “If they wanted to protest, they should just disrobe,” wrote another. “The sight of these monks is so pitiful,” added another, “Buddhism must be in decline when monks have forgotten what their duty is and only care about their benefits.” The online response from laypeople was unmistakably overwhelmingly unfavorable to the mobilization. Members of the monastic order, however, had a different take. When I called one of my informants, a young student monk who also held an administrative position in his temple and district, “I’m in a car and about to reach Phutthamonthon,” he spoke hastily. “I will call you

when I get there," his voice was brimming with excitement. When I arrived at Wat Suan Dok, the first thing that the temple's assistant abbot told me was to "go to Phutthamonthon now, you will learn a lot." Among members of the monastic order, the protest was not only predictable but had also marked another manifestation of monastic resistance that had long been repressed at the hands of the secular authority.

In the past two decades, Thailand has begun to see the rise in the monastic activity unprecedented in the last two-hundred years. Although the political expression of the sangha is generally considered a taboo in Thailand where monkhood is associated with asceticism and purity, Thai history is animated with instances where monks expressed themselves politically whether in assuming political leadership, leading uprisings, holding demonstrations in defiance of official warnings or criticizing the secular authority. After the fall of Ayutthaya, for instance, a charismatic monk named Chao Phra Fang led his followers to exert control over the areas that are now known as Phitsanulok and Uttaradit Provinces prior to his suppression at the hands of King Taksin in 1770. The *Phu Mi Bun* rebellion of 1901-1902 spanning the areas in the Northeast of Thailand, Southern Laos and parts of Vietnam witnessed monks participating in the uprising against the encroaching power of Bangkok. In a more recent memory, instances of monastic activism are still referenced in the discussion pertaining to the cultural autonomy of the sangha, whether in the case of Khruba Siwichai and his detentions in Bangkok in 1920 and 1935-36, or the imprisonment of Phra Phimontham in 1960 and the demand for the return of his monastic ranks in 1975. These are incidents when the monastic and lay followers of these charismatic monks gathered to protest the actions taken by the central authority. The number of monastic participants in these demonstrations, however, was in the province of hundreds or in the low thousands and did not reach the same level of the political campaigns led by the monastic order in contemporary

times. In contrast, monastic activism seems to have picked up momentum at the turn of the millennium. One of the largest demonstrations staged by the monastic order, for instance, took place in 2007 when two thousand monks and lay supporters staged a rally for three months to demand that the government institutionalize Buddhism as the national religion in the new constitution. The 2016 protest at Phutthamonthon marked the largest monastic demonstration in the history, and even though the number provided by the organizers was wildly excessive, the actual turn-out still surpassed the previous occasions.[2]

The protest, however, came to an anti-climactic conclusion in that very same day, despite the tense standoff that saw multiple skirmishes breaking out between the protesters and the military and the burning of coffins and dummies decorated with names and photos of the monastic order's critics. As the rally was gaining momentum, Phra Methi Thammachan was escorted away in late afternoon to attend a closed-door meeting with General Prawit Wongsuwan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. After the meeting, Phra Methi came out to announce that the military government had acknowledged monastic demands that: 1) every state agency must promote Buddhism in accordance to the tradition and shall not interfere in monastic affairs; 2) the state must adhere to the tradition that any action involving the sangha must first be in consultation and given approval from *Mahathera*; 3) the Prime Minister must tender the *Mahathera* resolution nominating Somdet Chuang as the next Supreme Patriarch; 4) the government must order all bureaucratic agencies to treat the sangha with respect and in accordance to the legal framework without resorting to intimidation or threat; and 5) Buddhism must be legislated as the national religion in the constitution (*KomChadLuek* 2016a).[3]

[2] My monastic informant estimated that there were at least three to four thousand protesters, a figure that was also corroborated by other observers at the protest site.
[3] For a comprehensive account of the turn of events, see *Matichon Information Center* (2017, 76-80).

And just like that, by the morning of the next day, the demonstration was no more, much to the dismay among observers. “The sangha has been had,” my monastic friend who traveled all the way from his temple in another province to observe the protest told me, “they [the organizers] have no fortitude to stand up to the military government, and it shows.” His view tended to echo other monks that I interviewed afterwards that the junta could not be trusted to deliver on its promise. Sure enough, the tension between the government and the sangha later intensified and led to a series of increasingly coercive measures being deployed to contain the monastic order.

The monastic protest at Phutthamonthon marked the ceiling of monastic activism in the post-2014 coup period. As one of the most organized and largest monastic political demonstrations in Thai history, the event represented an articulation of monastic dissent that had long been in the making. The institutional growth of the sangha was accompanied by the desire for recognition and self-determination, elements underscored by the campaign for Buddhism to be institutionalized as the national religion in the constitution. In a similar manner, the mobilization to stop the state intervention into monastic affairs was an effort to communicate the claim to autonomy to the junta and reformists, particularly Phuttha Itsara and Paibun Nititawan, who had been waging a campaign to obstruct the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch. What the sangha did not consider, however, was that the military government was beginning to view such mobilization as part of the developing pattern of resistance that had to be contained. The short duration of the protest revealed that the monastic order was not prepared to take on the military government, despite the confrontational tone present in the rhetoric of the organizers as well as the mobilization of a large number of both monastic and lay participants.

Central to the confrontation between the state and the sangha was a struggle to determine what kind of relationship the state should have with the sangha, or Buddhist monastic order, and who

had the authority to decide for the monastic order. While the ruling authority was usually considered patron of Buddhism, state-sangha relations were an issue fraught with contradictions, and its configuration did not stay permanently stable. Instead, the dynamics of these relations depended largely on prevailing social and political environments as well as shifting structural constraints and value systems that dictated the terms of engagement. In particular, underlying the arrangement of religious patronage and governance was a long-held cultural assumption that social order in Theravada civilization mainly consisted of worldly and religious spheres, reinforcing each other.[4] The power relations, however, had not always been equal. The introduction of the first sangha law in 1902 began a continuing process by which the monastic order gradually over the course of several decades came under direct control of the state, whose objective was to penetrate localities through the influences brought about by the centralization of administration of all provincial monastic communities under the Bangkok sangha. The unification in effect placed the national monastic community under the oversight of the political authority.[5] Even with a strong effort from the political center, the process took years to achieve due to monastic resistance in the peripheries.[6]

[4] Such conception is normally expressed in the metaphor of the "two wheels of the dhamma," where one represents power and another righteousness. The metaphor points toward the relationship between political authority, usually with reference to Buddhist kingship, and religion from which the monastic order stands for. The role of Buddhist kingship, according to this articulation, is to rule with righteousness and issues laws to allow people to prosper and practice the teachings of the Buddha, while supporting the sangha. The role of the Buddhist king also entails an intervention to purify any corruption within the sangha when necessary. The sangha, in turn, keeps strict adherence to the *vinaya*, practices meditation and propagate the Buddha's teachings to the lay community, so that they would stay on course in their pursuit of spiritual development. The health of the sangha, according to this view, is crucial to the well-being of the polity, and thus the ruler has vested interest in monastic affairs. For further discussions on the state-sangha relations in the Theravada world, see Obeyesekere et al (1972), Tambiah (1976) and Obeyesekere (1979).

[5] For discussion and analysis of the centralization of the sangha and emergence of modern Thai Buddhism, see Ishii (1986) and Tiyavanich (1997).

[6] Regional responses to the centralization effort were not unitary, and each locality had its own particular context and development. For details on the Northern Sangha and its resistance to Bangkok in the early period of the centralization, see Bowie (2017; 2014). In the case of the Northeastern Sangha, see Taylor (1993).

Even though the sangha and the state were locked in a symbiotic relationship in Theravada polities, various acts of resistance did consistently appear over times, especially when members of the sangha felt like the monastic capacity to determine its own affairs was impinged upon by the secular authority. These instances provide telling examples of the monastic struggle to maintain the autonomy of its rules governing monastic affairs as well as its relation to the state. Notwithstanding the fluctuating balance between control and independence depending on shifting conditions at particular times, the monastic order was shown to have expressed itself politically to disavow control and claim autonomy in situations where its members deemed that the state had markedly intruded into their affairs. Particularly in the period following the centralization, the examples included, among others, the mobilization to replace the existing sangha law with the 1942 Sangha Act (Chanthabut 1985) and protest to demand justice for Phra Phimontham (At Asaphathera) in the 1960s and 1970s (Suksamran 1982). The line drawn between the state and sangha was thus a negotiated border. Because of the potential power of the sangha's cultural and political persuasion, the dynamics of monastic control and autonomy had long been a concern for the ruling regime, who sought to contain or, given the circumstances, purge the "impurities" within the sangha under the guise of religious reformation.

This dissertation explores the politics of monastic reform in the aftermath of the 2014 coup where the state, sangha and lay Buddhist activists competed over the capacity to determine the role of the sangha in society. The research is located at the intersection between law, morality and politics pertaining to the struggle between the state, sangha and laity during the military rule. Underlying this struggle was a set of assumptions concerning the questions of who should be in charge of disciplining the sangha and how should the project be executed, a process that was contested on the political, legal and physical grounds.

In this struggle, claims of purity and tradition were made to defend the position of each side. Similar to the argument put forth by Mary Douglas (1994 [1966]) that dirt is "matter out of place," the proponents of state-centered monastic reform viewed monastic impurities as part of the disorder expressed through the popular perception of moral decline within the sangha caused by conspiracy, corruption and consumerism. Riding on the dissatisfaction with the situation of monastic affairs, the state claimed that the reform initiative was an enterprise consistent with its perceived role as the patron of Buddhism. Their efforts were framed as acting on behalf of Thai Buddhists, who wished to see the sangha become an institution above the contamination of dirty worldly matters such as profit and politics. While the military government sanctioned the reform, it was instead a group of lay social activists, adherents to a notion of socially engaged Buddhism, who used their position to set monastic reform in motion. The role of Buddhist reformists complicated a conventional narrative that viewed the state as a general category.

In contrast, the sangha argued that the monastic order was governed by its own set of rules that defined its identity and validated its status as an institution distinct from the laity. It was perilous enough that the sangha was subject to the sangha law, which was designed by the state and not always compatible with its own regulation. Any attempt to impose additional measure could disrupt the observance of the *vinaya*, which not only included the guideline for monastic conduct, but also prescribed the procedure to classify offence, deliberate wrongdoing and mete out punishment. Principal to this position was the notion that according to the *vinaya*, monks determined their affairs on the basis of collective deliberation, and outside interference constituted a breach. The capacity for self-determination was thus crucial to the maintenance of order within the sangha, especially in the Theravada tradition that looked at itself as inheriting the most authentic form of teaching and practice as imparted by the Buddha.

The attempt to restructure the monastic order without adhering to the *vinaya*, in this regard, seemed contradictory to the claim of well-intentioned patronage. The sangha thus made a case that the wellbeing of the sangha as an institution and its capacity to perpetuate the teaching and practice of Buddhism rested on its capacity to adjudicate its own affairs. While these competing claims lie at the center of the tension and struggle between the state and the sangha, they are also not new. Rather, the location of authority over the sangha has been a longstanding debate that reveals at once the fraught relations between the sangha, society and state as well as the intricacies of power and rule and the contested nature of social relationships that form the basis of Buddhism as a lived religion.

This project does not presuppose a clear line demarcating the secular and religious realms or operate on the assumption that there are qualities inherent in the monastic and lay categories. Instead, I examine how relationships and practices constitute the social world and seek to look at how the imagined boundary is constructed between the monastic and secular as well as the worldly and other-worldly. I focus on events, ideas and actions as well as attend to historical context of the phenomenon in question, actors' testimonies that reveal the articulation of sentiments and desire; and the interconnectedness that bring people, ideas and things together as well as set them apart. In particular, I investigate the development of the state-sangha relations in post-2014 coup Thailand and ask how the role of the sangha is defined through the process of monastic reform engaged by the state, sangha and lay reformists. Monastic disciplining, as I aim to show here, is a work in progress, always incomplete and laden with contradictory expectations. The project also addresses pertinent questions, which include, among others: why do monks protest and why does the state see the monastic order as a challenge?

Methodological Concerns

The field research for this dissertation began in April 2015 when I unknowingly stepped foot into Wat Prayoon. What started out as a casual interest that might have relevance to my then project at the time on mass lay meditation in Thailand somehow took on the life of its own and turned into this dissertation as it is now. Doing research on the sangha and its political entanglement came with challenges. Similar to the process of "studying up" that Laura Nader (1969) discussed, I paid close attention to learning etiquette of how to form rapport with monastic informants in order to gain access to this particular social world because monks are usually held in high regard in Thai society. This aspect of the research process uncovered an unexpected complication in my status as neither an insider nor outsider of the community. On the one hand, I was a Thai national and Buddhist. I had been ordained as a novice and monk before, and the encounters and experiences as a novice living for more than a month in the Northeast of Thailand gave me an invaluable access to the world of monkhood. On the other hand, I was not ordained during the fieldwork and thus considered an unfamiliar, suspect person. The fact that I was a layperson became a barrier to gain approval for interviews. At the same time, my identity as a student from a Western university was able to sometimes lead to new access because a good number of monks and activists felt that they did not have a proper channel to communicate the rationale behind their action and thus wanted me to lend my ears to their concerns.

Another complication was the prevailing political environment in Thailand. I began my research at the time when the military government was in the process of curtailing political dissent and focused on setting up an infrastructure to carry out its social and political reform agenda. The atmosphere was tense and filled with uncertainties. People were afraid to speak directly and honestly for fear of being reprimanded or potentially inviting unnecessary attention that might

result in them being called into the barracks for questioning, arbitrarily detained or charged with dubious crimes.[7] Even though the research process for this project was not embedded in the areas of war and extreme precarity, "fieldwork under fire" this was not, the pressure of the military government had effectively installed an unease in the people's minds, its presence ready to surface when conversation turned to political issues, whether sensitive or not. This environment proved to be an issue when trust and rapport were not securely established, and many monks and laypeople turned down a request for an interview or declined to say anything at all, especially given the contested nature of the ongoing monastic reform at the time.

As a student of anthropology, I spent an extended period of my field research developing strong bonds and building trust in the relationship with several monastic informants over the course of several years, which allowed me to gain an insight into the perspectives, concerns and aspirations of these monks who generously let me into their world. The constricting political environment, however, meant that much information that I obtained from these interviews was politically sensitive and could lead to serious legal repercussion for both my informants and me. I have thus taken a precaution in this regard and tried to protect my informants through the omission of their names and information that could lead to the identification of their identity. Due to the culture of litigation in Thailand where libel laws are liberally exercised and utilized as political weapon to silence critics or opposing views, I have heavily utilized articles in newspapers and other documentary sources to create a "factual" backup to the dissertation's narrative. I have also substituted quotes from the interviews that I conducted with quotes from newspaper accounts. These practices inevitably make the tone of this dissertation become more depersonalized than what actually transpired in the fieldwork process. Nonetheless, the analysis and selection of these

[7] For a summary of the coercive measures employed by the junta at this time, see Human Rights Watch (2017, 585-92).

sources is principally informed by my fieldwork participation and experience. The strategy to employ various tactics to depersonalize the writing is intended to avoid potential legal problem and misunderstanding that could lead to an act of retaliation.

This research took place between 2015 and 2018 and employed a mixed-method approach that included participant-observation, interviewing, documentary research and collection of internet-based data, particularly from social media platforms such as Facebook. I first gained an entry into the world of the monkhood through a group of young student monks from Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU), who were part of the collective called the **Associate Student Monks for the Reform and Protection of Buddhism** (*phakhi phra nisit naksuksa pheu kanpathirup phra phutthasatsana*). This group of monks organized a seminar titled "Hope or Catastrophe: The Problem of Monastic Reform" (*araya rue haiyana: panha kanpathirup khanasong*) and invited lay Buddhist Studies scholars to speak. After the seminar, I approached the group and met with each one of the members for a follow-up interview. It was at this time that I developed relationships with each of the members. These monks later took me under their wings and began to provide me with leads for further interview with their colleagues, friends, followers and key figures in the monastic establishment in both the ecclesia and activists. I also accompanied them to seminars, public forums and press conferences related to the debate and discussion of the religious protection at MCU and other locations.

While I was in the field, the tension between Buddhists and Muslims was escalating, and several protests in the provinces broke out due to the refusal by Buddhists to allow the construction of mosques in their communities. In a Buddhist-majority country, Muslims are a minority with the exception of the three southernmost provinces (Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala) where they are a majority. The tension between Buddhists and adherents of other faiths is not new and plays a

central role to the formation of the identity of the Thai sangha. In the 1980s, for instance, the sangha alleged that there was a plot by Catholics to undermine Buddhism, and monastic intellectuals publishes books in hope of exposing the scheme to dominate the religious landscape of Thailand.[8] Although the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001 and the global rise of Islamic terrorism in the 2000s piqued the interest of the Thai sangha, it was the outbreak of armed insurgency in the southernmost provinces after January 2004 that made the threat abroad become the possibility at home. Since 2004, Deep South Watch (2018, 2) reports that the conflict has claimed 6,871deaths and 13,460 injuries. Among these casualties, there have been 23 monks killed and more than 20 wounded (Human Rights Watch 2019). While the southernmost provinces have long been a site of ethno-religious separatist insurgency, the recent recurrent conflict has become highly complex with increased and indiscriminate violence that continues until the present.[9] With the reality of violence within the body politic of Thailand, the anxiety over what the monastic order perceives as the encroachment of Islam has contributed to a heightened awareness of Muslims as the religious "others" that the Buddhist sangha must contain.[10] This view has also led to multiple protests organized by Buddhist groups to oppose mosque-building and the creation of the halal industrial estate in various provinces throughout Thailand.[11]

[8] For example, Chao Khun Rabaep, then Phra Sophonkhanaporn (Rabaep Thittayano), wrote a book titled "Plan to Destroy Buddhism" (phaen thamlai phra phutthasatsana) in 1983 to uncover a historical plot of the Christian aggression toward Buddhism by tracing the development of Catholicism and its polemic against Buddhism, particularly in Sri Lanka during the colonial period when Christian missions openly challenged the Buddhist monastic order (Sophonkhanaporn 1983).

[9] For a summary of the conflict, see McCargo (2008).

[10] This view has recently surfaced in the public outcry against the plight of the Rohingya from Myanmar in 2015. Members of the monastic order openly opposed any humanitarian effort by the Thai government and demanded that the Rohingya refugees be expelled from Thailand as soon as possible.

[11] An overview of such development could be found in Pathan et al (2018).

As a result of the growing anti-Islamic incidents, I travelled with my monastic companions to visit areas where such conflicts took place. My field of research, therefore, was not limited to only Bangkok and urban centers. Aside from the locations of religious tension, I also visited various provinces in all regions in Thailand from the North to Northeast, Central Plains, East and South to gain regional perspectives on the issue. Getting outside of Bangkok gave me an opportunity to detect differences in the argument, sentiment and experience from monks in different geographical locations. It was at this juncture that I began to notice the importance of monastic universities and social media as platforms to communicate ideas, form relationships, build networks and mobilize for political campaigns. My informants also introduced me to a group of peace activists from Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University that actively organized interfaith dialogues as a space for people of different faiths to share their concerns and discuss ways to de-escalate tension and cultivate peace. Attending these dialogues allowed me to cross paths with Buddhist activists from all sides and opened my eyes to the dynamics of disagreement and alliance within the seemingly harmonious Buddhist community.

Knowing that the issue of monastic reform could not be understood only through the monastic perspective, I also approached members of the Buddhist Reform Committee led by Paibun Nititawan and interviewed several committee members. These reformists were eager to speak to me on record and offered an insightful perspective into the working of the monastic order and rationale behind their agenda. Behind a strong-arm approach was the belief that Buddhism held promise as a force of good with potentials that could lead to societal progress. Even though most of the committee members were known for their political activism in the conservative movements associated with hyper-royalism (Winichakul 2016), they had also long been involved in pushing for the legal recognition of female monk ordination and alternative educational and curricula

inspired by Buddhist ethics. Their involvement in the campaign for female ordination was based on the principle of equality in democratic constitutionalism, a position that seemed to contradict the general appearance of these reformists as abnormally irrational national royalists. This unique brand of political, social and religious activism broke down any convenient attempt to place them into a single category and forced me to critically examine the underlying criteria that these activists used to selectively decide where and when to draw the line separating these spheres.

At the same time, although the criticism from the public and lay reformists levelled against the sangha produced an image of the monastic order as a highly corrupt and incompetent bunch, the interviews with Buddhist monks on all sides of the political spectrum and orders led me to see how there was much more to learn about the sangha and individual monks that made up the monastic order. Beyond the supposition that the ecclesia was an institution of self-interest and dishonesty, I came across both overbearing characters and thoughtful and generous figures, who were willing to share their views and experiences with me, even if I did not agree with them at all. Similar to the lay reformists that I interviewed, well-known monastic activists were active within their own temples and communities. They looked at themselves as leaders who fought for the prospect of the younger generation. Senior monks and activists believed that the sangha was an institution of opportunity that could allow those with humble background and troubled past to rehabilitate and transform themselves into productive members of the society through monastic education. The emphasis on community and reciprocity gave me a better appreciation of the social basis of monastic activism. Even when I might oppose their politics, I could understand why monastic activists were insistent on their demand that prioritized the official recognition of Buddhism, potentially at the detriment of other religious groups. The details on the monkhood and its social world are discussed at length in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

On the opposite side of the monastic establishment, my encounter with Phra Phuttha Itsara, a fire-brand monk who led his followers in a protest against the Yingluck government in 2013-2014, deepened the lesson that I learned from the engagement with other informants. The image of Phuttha Itsara was highly polarizing in the public. His followers deemed him a brave warrior who stood up against injustices and fought to uphold the nation, religion and king. The critics instead labeled him a "thug" who acted as a proxy for the military. When I went to his residence to interview him, I saw his experiment with organic rice fields bearing fruit, and the workers in his temple actively tended to the fields and harvested other produce. He told me that he intended to give his followers a bag of rice as gift on his birthday. Similar to other monastic figures who engaged with community development projects, Phuttha Itsara had been involved in educational, agricultural and religious projects that drew in a considerable number of people from both rural and urban areas. His commitment to the betterment of the sangha and rural communities was an aspect that had often been overlooked. Indeed, Phuttha Itsara was also implicated in many controversial cases such as wrongful land acquisition, extortion and other charges, but focusing on his image as a criminal did nothing to advance an understanding of his activism and actions. Although what Phuttha Itsara did may seem highly erratic to the eyes of casual observers, there was a cultural logic informing his action much like other figures that I met during the field research. These aspects constituted his allure and helped me to understand the cultural foundation of charisma and authority, or the notion of moral authority (*barami*), in the Buddhist context that applied not only to the case of Phuttha Itsara, but also to both lay and monastic leaders. The encounter with these figures further convinced me of the importance of fieldwork and foregrounded the central role that personal and social relations played in making possible my understanding of my informants' concerns and issues at hand.

Theravada Politics

The relationship between Buddhism, politics and the state are an enduring issue that has long attracted attention from the academic community. One of the insights informing the contemporary study of Theravada Buddhism is the view that presupposes the worldliness of Buddhism and refutes the claim that Buddhism was the other-worldly religion championed by Max Weber (1963) in his analysis of world religions. One of the pioneering studies advancing this claim comes from S. J. Tambiah, who argued in his seminal work *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (1976) that the structure of the relationship between the state and the sangha in Buddhist polities in South and Southeast Asia could be traced back to the time of King Ashoka (304-232 BCE), whose patronage of Buddhism became the basis for the model of Buddhist kingship. According to Tambiah, Buddhism functioned as the cosmological source that underlined the structure of thought and action, such that it could be considered a "total social fact" that encompassed civilizational structure and history. This was also true in the realm of governance. Fundamental relationship between the sangha and the traditional Buddhist polities existed as the Theravada polities were cosmologically ordered, and the perception of the world was distinctly divided into the worldly and other-worldly spheres.

This paradigm, Tambiah contended, found continuity when Theravada Buddhism came from India to mainland Southeast Asia. In this traditional configuration in a Buddhist polity:

> there are two foremost or superior beings, the *bhikkhu* and the king, but the former is superior…[the] king is the mediator between social disorder and the social order; the *bhikkhu* is the mediator between home and homelessness, between a world of fetters and a free state of deliverance. The king is the fountainhead of society; the bhikkhu is of that society and transcends it (Tambiah 1976, 15).

Deriving from this Buddhist scheme of things, the role of the ruler was thus the protector of Buddhism, and the sangha was the basis for the king's claim to legitimacy to rule. As a result, the conception of Buddhist kingship provided a crucial basis for the articulation of religion and society. In order to develop the groundwork for his argument, Tambiah looked to early Buddhist writings and historical records to trace the Buddhist transformation of the Hindu conception of kingship and located the case of King Ashoka as a paradigmatic model of the relationship between the king, sangha and society. For Tambiah, this "galactic polity" placed the king at the center of cosmic order with the task of purifying the sangha to legitimate his position as the protector and upholder of Buddhism. Consequently, this model of polity became a framework in which rulers in Theravadin polities self-consciously fashioned themselves after. Such historical development, suggested Tambiah, entailed the consciousness among Buddhists of being situated in the larger, pan-regional reality, while signifying patterns of history in which any claim to authority, religious and secular had to be achieved through the purification of the monastic order, a process that repeated itself when new king came to power. The cosmological underpinning of the galactic polity thus defined the structure of thought and action within the Theravadin world as history repeated itself, even if the details of this process could differ according to the shifting circumstances and localities.

When Theravada Buddhism took root in Thailand, the tradition also experienced "creative transformations in the politico-legal dharma charters to suit the different local political contexts" (Tambiah 1976, 188). One of the most important changes in the case of Thailand, in view of Tambiah, was the development of the unequal relations between the Thai state and the sangha in the early twentieth century as the latter became gradually centralized under a bureaucratic structure and came under a strong control of the former through legal and political measures instituted by

the central Thai state. Still, Buddhism remained politically and socially significant, and strong links had been forged between Buddhism and national identity as well as between the secular government and the sangha after the 1932 political change. Even in a relatively more recent period, Tambiah looked to the persistence of the sangha in missionary programs and national integration policy during the counterinsurgency period in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the creative transformation that he envisioned.

Tambiah's insight informs much of later scholarship, which attends to how the traditional arrangement of state-sangha relations has been complicated by economic, political and social changes in the last millennium. Subsequent to the changes brought about by colonialism, the process of decolonization in the twentieth century was a global phenomenon that saw an emergence of new nation-states where religion was considered to play a crucial role in constructing the identity of new nations (Juergensmeyer 1995). Subject to this development, Theravadin societies became an object of academic scrutiny, where Buddhism was perceived as instrumental in the legitimation of power in the new nations and the cultivation of the emergent collective consciousness. It was at this historical juncture that Buddhism was given identity according to geographical boundaries. Influenced by Max Weber, the early cohort of scholars working on Theravada Buddhism and Southeast Asian politics prioritized the role religions played in worldly affairs and how they could shape and be shaped by historical and social processes.

The early scholars primarily attended to the institutional aspect and historical development of modern Buddhism, seeking to understand the shift in state-sangha relationship as political modernization took full effect. In this case, attention focused on questions ranging from: the organization of authority within religious institutions; the incorporation of the sangha into the apparatus of the state; the historical development of official Buddhism as the state religion; and

the role of the sangha in such projects of national integration as the conversion of the hill tribes in Thailand, among others (Smith 1965; Bechert 1966, 1970, 1973; Obeysekere 1972; Keyes 1971). Central to such approach was an assumption that religion was distinct from the secular order of the state and politics, such that the interaction between these two spheres became the location of analysis. Reflecting the dominance of the secularization thesis within the academic discourse of that time, this distinction continued to lend itself as a conceptual lens for later works.

The view of Buddhism and politics as separate spheres was increasingly contested as the religious character of political development became visible to even casual observers. Influenced by new approaches in sociology of religion and anthropology, a cohort of scholars initiated a dialogue that problematized the discourse that portrayed Buddhism as a religion of peace and isolated it from political and social processes. Elaborating on the model of civil religion after Robert Bellah (1967), Reynolds (1977) argued that Thai Buddhism could be considered a civic religion, or a religious tradition that consisted of multiple forms responding to the needs and concerns of the national community, as Buddhism provided the ideas, symbols, institutions and practices that would accommodate such broad complex of requisites. Charles Keyes (1977) also argued that in order to understand millenarianism as a "cultural system" in Geertzian manner that viewed religion as a model of and for reality (Geertz 1973), its religious formulations had to be examined within the context of local beliefs and history. Additionally, Keyes highlighted how millenarianism could not be identified as purely religious or political but was intertwined with concerns about power and change. The edited volumes of Trevor Ling (1979) on Buddhism, imperialism and war, and Bardwell L. Smith (1978a, 1978b) on religion and legitimation of power in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Burma centered their analyses on the role of Buddhism in facilitating such political processes as anti-colonial resistance and nationalist movements in the

new Theravadin nations. In addition, Somboon Suksamran (1977, 1981) focused on the role of the sangha in the modernization of Thailand, noting patterns of state control and patronage of the sangha.

Even though Buddhism was seen to have a limited political function, the analytical focus usually centered on the state/sangha relationships, and there was no substantial attempt to theorize the role of religion in the working of politics beyond the institutional level. A newfound appreciation in interrogating the category of nation as a product of collective imagination opened up new possibilities for the study of religion, nation and politics, while contributing directly to the growing interest in postcolonial studies that sought to unravel the operations of power within the dominant narratives of Western civilizational superiority and nation as the source of identity.[12] In the case of the scholarly treatment of Buddhism, this approach provided a powerful way of thinking about the intimate relationship between Buddhism, national identity and legitimation of power.

At the same time, with the increasingly important role that Buddhism played in the ideology, guidance and operation of cultural and political nationalism, scholars such as Keyes (1989), Yoneo Ishii (1986) and Peter Jackson (1989) argued instead for the need to situate the study of Buddhism in the process of change that placed Buddhism in the forefront of social and political formations. With a turn in the academia, Buddhism came to be viewed as a decisive element in defining national identity and forging the consolidation of the emergent collective consciousness. In the

[12] The publication of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities in 1983 inaugurated this trajectory of scholarship. Anderson famously argued that the nation was made possible through the collective imagining facilitated by print capitalism. Anderson illustrated the role that religious change in Western Europe played in constituting cultural roots for the imagining of the nation-ness, particularly with regards to an increasingly secular attitude that no longer viewed religious texts as embodying truths and that society was organized around and under sacral kingship (Anderson 1991). While Anderon's argument was contested by scholars due to its ethnocentric use of Western Europe as a model of nationalism in which other cases derived their form, this framework gave a lasting impression from its insight that the nation was not a given construct. Further, the role that religion played in shaping the emergent collective consciousness was also raised in Anderson's analysis. Subsequent works that critically and productively engage Anderson's seminal publication, see Chatterjee (1993) and Ashcroft et al (1995).

case of Thailand, Buddhism became incorporated as an element of national identity during the reign of King Wachirawut (1910-1925). King Wachirawut initiated a tripartite composition of the nation, religion and king as the ideology of the Thai nation and asked his subjects to publicly announce their identity as Buddhist through his proposal of the concept *phutthamamaka*, or "one who holds the Buddha as the refuge."[13] Because Buddhism has been integral in the political and ideological process, the notions of the nation and citizenship are inevitably linked to the study of Buddhism in Thailand.

One of the remaining legacies of the scholarship on Buddhism and politics in Thailand from the previous periods is the emphasis given to the formal relationship of Buddhism and the state on a general level. The state-centric approach prioritizes the generalized analysis that often comes at the price of neglecting social actors who make the process possible, in addition to other cultural and social aspects of Thai Buddhism that underscore and animate the state-sangha-society relations in the first place. The preoccupation with the state largely stems from the legacy of dominant intellectual paradigms employed to understand the turbulent years of the past. In particular, Justin McDaniel (2008, 54) comments that the "staggering" number of this type of study that represents "a scholarly obsession for forty years caused partly in no doubt by the popularity of neo-Marxist trends in the field, the student revolutions in Thailand in the 1970s, and the influence of Charles Keyes and Stanley Tambiah's excellent studies on the subject." Although the literature on Buddhism and the state is voluminous and conforms to a long tradition of scholarship, the assumption that state-sangha relations are limited to the relations between the government and the monastic order is likely to overlook the dynamics within the general categories of both the state

[13] For a historical analysis of the origin of modern official state ideology in Thailand, see Murashima (1988).

and the sangha as well as their interaction.[14] Rather, following the warning by Abrams (1988) and analysis of the Village Scout Movement and the Thai state by Bowie (1997), the state is not a monolithic entity, nor is the sangha. Instead, both are marked by internal class differentiation and constant adjustment resulting from shifting values, norms and alliances.

Even though the relationship between Buddhism and politics is not something new, the recognition of the religious resurgence in public spheres throughout the world has brought a renewed attention on how Buddhism can be directly implicated in different forms of violence. In Sri Lanka, it has been documented extensively as to how Buddhist monks participate in political violence against the ethnic minority Tamils (Tambiah 1992). This situation bears similarity to how monks in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand, which have been under constant unrest, have been militarized and incorporated into the network of state apparatus (Keyes 2007; Jerryson 2011), while the ecclesiastic order supports the state intervention that often, if not always, proceeds with force and coercion (McCargo 2009a, 2009b). Such empirical cases dispute the view of Buddhism as a peace-promoting religion. This recognition also generates an interest that leads to the identification of doctrinal sources that would justify killing and violence (Zimmermann 2006; Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010). Continuing the interest in the intersection between Buddhism, history and power laid out by predecessors like Tambiah, Schober (2011) also examines critical moments in modern Burmese history to understand how religion, culture and politics converge to produce new trajectories of Buddhism as public religion. Recent trends in the study of Buddhism and politics thus dispel a romanticized notion of Buddhists and their religion and prompts a critical

[14] Examples of this literature can be found in Kitagawa (1962), Smith (1965, 1978), Keyes (1971, 1995, 1999), Kirsch (1975), Tambiah (1976, 1984), Taylor (1993a, 1993b), Jackson (1997, 1989), Stuart-Fox (1996), Ishii (1997), Jory (2002), Schober (2002), Harris (2005), Mackenzie (2007).

reexamination of Buddhism and its complicity in militarization and mobilization. Beside Schober, anthropological studies of Buddhism and politics, however, remain limited

Thai Buddhism

This dissertation seeks to examine monastic politics from the perspectives of those involved in the process, paying attention to the "cultural intimacy" between Buddhism, Buddhists and national belonging and attending to how the contestation over the notion of monastic reform produces state-sangha relations.[15] In a country where more than 90% of the population identify themselves as the faithful, Buddhism is intimately woven into the social fabric of Thailand, whether in the mundane or official contexts.[16] The national calendar is punctuated with important dates from the biography of the Buddha, which are declared public holidays and celebrated with the public broadcasting of members of the royal family attending Buddhist ceremonials at Wat Phra Kaew and other royal temples.

In general, concepts such as karma, the Four Noble Truths and the Buddhist ethics on suffering and enlightenment, pervade everyday speech and provide idioms of expression among ordinary

[15] The notion of cultural intimacy here is directly from Herzfeld (2005, 3), who proposes that in investigating within the confine of the nation-state and making sense of its contradictions, anthropologists attend to the idea of cultural intimacy or "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation."

[16] According to the survey on conditions of society, culture and mental health compiled by National Statistical Office (2014), Buddhists comprise more than 94% of the number of populations aged 13 years and over in the survey, followed by Muslims (4.2%) and Christians (1.08%). Still, these numbers do not suggest the level of religiosity and merely follow the identification that individuals broadly indicate. For example, the category of Buddhist does not distinguish between Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism, and the Christian category also does not indicate whether a person is Catholic or professes her/his faith to some form of Protestant Christianity. Attention should also be given that even though Buddhists are the national majority overall, their number is substantially lower than their Muslim counterparts in three southernmost provinces, which are Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala, where Muslims are the majority. The variation in the majority-minority relations between Buddhists and Muslims between Deep South and the rest of the country contributes to a peculiar kind of political dynamics that informs the spillover effect of the protracted political conflict in other parts of Thailand. See McCargo (2009) for an analysis of how this contradiction is played out with regards to the situations in Deep South.

Thais (Cassaniti 2015). Traditionally, men at the age of 21 and over are expected to ordain, even as briefly as a week, to fulfill their filial piety as it is customarily believed that merit from their ordination would go toward their parents. Common people also frequent temples on regular basis to make merit, receive blessings from monks and participate in religious ceremonials throughout the year. Ceremonials, from housewarmings to birthdays and funerals, are imbued with Buddhist symbolism and require monastic presence to provide blessings and auspices to the hosts. Buddhism is a social fact in Thailand.[17]

Doctrinally, Buddhism is composed of three important institutions usually referred to as the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the *thamma* (his teaching), and the *sangha* (monastic order who practices the *thamma*). With the Buddha's prophecy that the *satsana*, or religion, will come to an end in 5,000 years, the sangha acts as an agent that sustains Buddhism through its practice of the *thamma* and strict observance of the *vinaya*, or the rules of ascetic conduct governing the daily affairs of the sangha as outlined by the Buddha. The role of the sangha is thus vital to the health and future of Buddhism, whether in terms of preservation or propagation. There are, however, different traditions of Buddhism with their own distinctive trajectories of beliefs and practices. In Thailand and other Buddhist kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia, the primary form of Buddhism is Theravada, regarded as the orthodox form of Buddhism due to the insistence on the *Pali Canon*, or the collection of Pali language texts believed to contain the words as directly spoken by the Buddha, as the doctrinal foundation. Mahayana Buddhism is also practiced among a section of the population, especially those with Chinese and Vietnamese heritage in Thailand.[18] Theravada

[17] For a detailed discussion of the crucial role of Buddhism in Thailand's everyday life, see Anuman (1986).
[18] Theravada, or translated from Pali as the "Doctrine of the Elders," is one of the two major traditions of Buddhism, the other being Mahayana, and considered to be the more conservative tradition due to its emphasis on the preservation of the teachings of Gautama Buddha in the Pali Canon, which Theravadins believe to the direct words of the Buddha, and traditionalist approach to doctrines and monastic discipline. For more details on the history and differentiation within the tradition, see Gombrich (2006).

Buddhism entails important cultural and political implications regarding the secular authority and sangha, which will be discussed in the section below.

Plural World

Central to the existence of the Theravada tradition is the role of the monastic order in perpetuating the doctrines and practice of Buddhism. In general, it is understood that governing the monastic conduct are the standards of comportment known as the *vinaya*, considered the principal regulation that functions like a legal code for monks. Monks are expected to strictly follow this guideline where any deviance can result in the condemnation of lax practice and transgression. At the same time, monks live in society alongside laypeople and are thus subject to the same laws that people must conform to such as constitutional, criminal and civil laws. As Ben Schontal (2018, xxvii) points out, Buddhist monks in contemporary Theravadin societies "live in profoundly plural legal worlds" that include "not only multiple categories and codes of state law, but local traditions and social norms, as well as multiple categories and codes of Buddhist law: from the *vinaya*, to commentaries, to handbooks, to the judgements of laity and beyond." The recognition of multi-level order affirms that the sangha is not a closed-off or bound entity but is connected to a larger social order. It also foregrounds the interaction and competition among these multiple legal orders at the center of the analysis of the sangha and society.

The notion of order was an important subject among early anthropologists, who sought to understand how order was maintained despite the lack of the existence of the state, a political organization that the West was familiar with. Classic ethnographic accounts in legal anthropology looked to examine customary law as lawlike mechanisms, whose function in settling dispute within

a social milieu became the object of analysis.[19] Underlying this endeavor was a political project that attempted to show that non-Western peoples had systems of governance that were not primitive and could even rival the complexity of their Western counterparts.[20] These accounts, however, looked at Western legal categories as universal and exported them into the analysis of non-Western law, an approach that proved controversial with an influential debate between Paul Bohannon, who was against the use of universal categories, and Max Gluckman, who was in support of the method.[21]

The identification of plural legal orders was an important contribution that anthropologists in later generations took up and explored. While the focus of legal anthropology was on dispute due to their assumption that the function of law was to settle conflict, a new direction in anthropology of law looks to examine legal pluralism, an idea that has been used to capture and understand this multiplicity of legal orders. Defining the term, Merry (2012, 67) describes legal pluralism as "the multiple forms law takes within particular communities, regions, or nations," where "different but coexisting conceptions of permissible actions, valid transactions, and ideas and procedures for dealing with conflict in the same social field" appear in these legally plural situations. Growing out of work in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the colonial legacy could still be observed in a hybrid legal order where the Western-based laws co-existed with traditional legal systems, resulting in the maintenance of plural legal orders and differential barrier to access justice.[22] At the same time laws do not stand for only the formal laws but also other legal forms, especially

[19] For example, see Bohanon (1957), Gluckman (1967) and Hoebel (1954).
[20] Sally Falk Moore (2001, 97-99) draws attention to Max Gluckman as an example of this trend in her succinct summary of the history of legal anthropology.
[21] For a summary of this debate, see an edited volume by Nader (1997).
[22] Erin Moore (1993), for instance, shows the hierarchies of access to justice in rural northeastern Rajasthan in India where powerful men control the councils and courts, and women and low-status men have to seek out justice in other forms, particularly through visiting a maulavi, or Muslim spiritual teacher and healer, to find remedies to their social and physical problems.

customary law. The interaction between these different normative orders is the focus of scholars who aim to understand the situations and criteria that lead to contestation or produce consensus within a given social context.

Drawing on the literature on anthropology of law, I argue that the monastic order represents a "semi-autonomous social field" that Sally Falk Moore (1973, 720) describes as a field that "can generate rules and customs and symbols internally, but that it is also vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which it is surrounded." Even though the Thai sangha has to conform to secular legal order through the imposition of the sangha law, its adherence to the *vinaya* and capacity sanctioned by the state to issue its own internal rules means that the sangha is not entirely governed by the state. Viewing the relationship between the state and sangha in this manner allows for an analysis that examines layers of legal pluralism as well as interactions, on normative levels, between not only these two categories but also the society as well. The approach also suggests the notion of cultural autonomy that my monastic informants strongly believed and sought to defend. At the same time, as principles of human rights and role of modern legal institutions come to bear on local lives, these layers add to the examination of how these values, norms and discourse are localized and become integrated into part of local struggles. Attending to legal pluralism opens up the possibility to consider monastic subjects as legal actors, who belong to a particular legal culture with a unique legal consciousness due to their legal status as both monks and citizens.

Drawing on legal pluralism also entails a consideration of power. As Laura Nader deftly shows in her ethnographic fieldwork in Talea, a Zapotec village in the Villa Alta District of Oaxaca, Mexico, and subsequent works on alternative dispute resolution in the United States (Nader 1990, 1993), the ideal of social harmony is often used to conceal and justify coercion. Advancing the

concept of "harmony ideology," or a "pattern of dispute settlement dominated by compromise and conciliation" (Nader 2002, 30), Nader first examined the ideology of harmony in her study of Zapotec village, which had its own local style of legal procedures. Highlighting the village's legal pluralism, Nader attended to multiple levels of the harmony ideology, particularly with respect to how the indigenous rhetoric stressed balance and equilibrium as the prized values as well as the effort that local residents put into containing their conflict at the local level in order to avoid the interference from state agencies. Nader found that this ideology naturalized control because it made people value harmony more than justice. Nonetheless, the ideology did not exclusively originate from within. It was a result of the encounter between villagers and European Christian missionaries, who actively promoted this ideology during the colonial times. The ideology of harmony, Nader argued, was not limited to just Talea but could be found in other sites as well. At the same time, this very ideology was not some kind of abstraction but practice that could be utilized both as an important idiom of cultural control by the state and a strategy of resistance by the people (Nader 1990).[23]

The theme of power remains central to Nader's analysis and is substantiated in her conceptualization of controlling ideologies or what she terms "controlling processes," which are defined as "the mechanisms by which ideas take hold and become institutional in relation to power" (Nader 1997, 711). The notion of controlling processes, according to Nader, refers to "the transformative nature of central ideas such as coercive harmony that emanate from institutions operating as dynamic components of power." The case of harmony ideology, for instance, is considered part of these controlling processes as the ideology establishes coercive harmony at the detriment of justice. The concept, however, works on both levels as it "looks at how central dogmas

[23] For a comprehensive overview on the development of the anthropological notion of harmony as well as a discussion on Nader's use of this concept, see Beyer and Gerke (2015).

are made and how they work in multiple sites (often arrayed vertically)" and also "focuses our attention on…how individuals and groups are influenced and persuaded to participate in their own domination or, alternatively, resist it, sometimes disrupting domination or putting the system in reverse" (712). Nader's investigation thus offers an insight into the contestation between competing normative orders as well as political aspect of legal pluralism. This perspective also provides a lens into understanding legal hegemony and examining the dynamics of power in social configuration that would otherwise appear congruent on the surface.

The ideology of harmony is a productive approach to understand the sangha and its political activism. The monastic order, in general, is highly averse to internal conflict and considers schism one of the most serious offences. In contemporary Thailand, because the sangha is under controls of the state, conflict with the government is a serious issue as state patronage could be in jeopardy if disagreement escalates into confrontation. As a result, the sangha remains very conscientious in how it handles relation with the state. This cautious attitude, however, does not necessarily entail docility or mean that the sangha is satisfied with everything that the government or the military does. The sangha also faces challenge from the general public, who believes that monastic propriety consists of monks acting as peaceful agents and not making noisy demands or getting involved in worldly affairs. These are values and norms that constrain the sangha and prioritize social harmony and equilibrium. Attending to these forces that demand the harmonious relations between the state and the sangha reveals not only the presence of plural legal institutions but also how control operates and is contested.

On the other side of the state-sangha equation is the problematic category of the state. In political scientific terms, the state connotes a political organization with centralized government with authority over a given territory. According to a conventional definition of the state by Max

Weber, the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory" (Weber 1946, 78). As an agent of modern political power, the state is thus usually thought of as monopolizing the claim to wield absolute authority within the body politic of the nation through legal and institutional mechanisms available at its disposal. In this regard, laws are considered a normative order as well as an instrument of the state to maintain the political order. This portrayal, however, has increasingly come under scrutiny due to a growing recognition that such coherent, bound object misrepresents its reality. According to Philip Abrams (1988), using the state as a general category risks mystifying the notion of the state as a thing and thus obstructing our understanding of how power and social subordination work.

In response to a generalization of the state, anthropologists have questioned the limitation posed by this approach and propose instead that, despite the concern that globalization might have undermined the authority of the state, the reverse is true, and that the state also does not have an exclusive control over the sovereign power. As Aretxaga (2003, 396) notes in her posthumous work, "there is not a deficit of state but an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state." The locations, she adds, of the state are also not necessarily within the national boundary. The diffusion of state functions among non-state actors has also become a recurrent theme in anthropology of the state as "shadow" entities such as paramilitary groups and arms deals have come to assume state functions in terms of the provision of security and welfare as well as administering justice and tax collection (Nordstorm 2004; Krupa 2010). The examination of these competing sovereignties provides a productive starting point to consider the experience of government from non-state actors. The project of monastic reform in Thailand, as such, could benefit from these perspectives when looking at how lay reformists have taken the state function to discipline the sangha.

Monastic Order

Within Thailand's Theravada Buddhism, there are two *nikayas*, or sects, which are the Thammayut and the Mahanikai. The former was founded by King Mongkut, the fourth king in the Chakri Dynasty, in the nineteenth century and is considered closely affiliated with the palace, while the latter is an umbrella term coined by King Mongkut to group various non-Thammayut monastic traditions into one general category. On a whole, the two sects do not have any significant disagreement on doctrine, and the difference lies more in the realm of discipline and how robes are worn. Thammayut, in general, is perceived as the "royal order" due to its entitlement and prestige from the royal patronage. As a rule, male members of the royal family from the time of King Mongkut, when they are at the age suitable for full ordination, have traditionally received ordination under Thammayut order. The position of the Supreme Patriarch, or the sangha leader, is predominantly taken by Thammayut ecclesia. Despite its status as the majority, Mahanikai order is regarded as a commoner sect, and many Mahanikai members, if not most, view such disparity created by the power differential between the two orders with contempt. This perception has fueled sectarian conflicts in the past, resulting in the introduction of the second sangha law in 1941 that implemented relatively more democratic procedures in the sangha administration paralleling the secular government which was then led by the civilians. The law, however, was overturned by the military government in 1962. Even though the relations between two monastic orders have now improved, the tension does remain, especially when questions regarding sectarian representation in monastic governance come up in such cases as the succession of the Supreme Patriarch.

The sangha contains a relatively sizeable portion of the population, which presents a challenge to the secular authority. According to the survey conducted by Office of National Buddhism (ONAB) in 2016, the total number of monks in Thailand is around 258,995 and can be divided

into 33,639 Thammayut and 292,592 Mahanikai monks. At the same time, there are 59,439 novices in which 53,230 are Mahanikai novices, and 6,712 are Thammayut novices (ONAB 2017, 2-5).[24] These monastics take up residence in more than forty thousand temples across the nation. These temples are classified according to sectarian lines, which means that Thammayut temples would be the designated residence for monks from the sect. Even though the monastic population has declined in recent decades, the community still represents a group of population that, for better or worse, demands political attention given its size and cultural standing derived from the special status that monks have in Thai society. The sangha, at any rate, is far from its seemingly homogenous character. The unitary sangha is a relatively recent organizational form that began only a little over a hundred years ago when King Chulalongkorn, the fifth king of the Chakri Dynasty and son of King Mongkut, collaborated with his half-brother, Prince Wachirayana, an eminent scholar monk responsible for the birth of modern monastic education who later became the Supreme Patriarch, to institute the first Sangha Act in 1902 that centralized the administrative structure of the national sangha. The centralization program did away with the autonomy of regional monastic traditions and placed the sangha under the control of the secular rule. The state-sangha relations at present are a legacy of such state initiatives by which the sangha no longer retains their self-rule but conforms to state norms and acts as its accessory.

Even though monks need to adhere to the regulatory framework outlined in the scriptures, the sangha must also observe the legal regulation prescribed by the secular government. There have been several versions of the sangha law, which are the 1902, 1941 and 1962, the latter which was revised four times and as recently as 2018. Historically, changes in the administration of the sangha

[24] The difference between monks and novices is the level of precepts that each must follow. Monks must strictly follow 227 precepts, while novices only keep 10 precepts, which include refraining from taking life; theft; sexual misconduct; false speech; intoxicants; consuming food after midday; entertainment such as dancing and singing; use of cosmetics, perfume and personal adornment; use of luxurious bedding; accepting gold, silver and money.

mirror changes in the secular political system. The monastic governing body, *Mahathera Samakom* or the Supreme Sangha Council, was a creation of the 1902 Sangha Act designed to represent a hierarchical order where the *Sangharacha*, or Supreme Patriarch, acted as the ruler of the ecclesia but remained under the jurisdiction of the king. After the introduction of the constitutional monarchy in 1932 that saw civilian and military elites taking the helm of the national administration in place of the king, the Mahanikai order took the initiative brought by the opening of the political space to push for a new sangha law, which eventually materialized in the 1941 Sangha Act. The new law, reflecting a more democratic governance on the secular counterpart, abolished *Mahathera* and modelled the monastic organization after the secular government with the legislative, executive and judicial institutions. With this new arrangement, the government would no longer hold the ultimate authority to appoint the Supreme Patriarch and administrative positions, and the sangha had its own process to deliberate its affairs akin to the representative government. In doing so, the monastic order enjoyed the autonomy to determine its own decrees, rules and orders regulating the sangha, while the Supreme Patriarch played the role of the ceremonial head, not the ruler.

To many members of the sangha, this period of the sangha administration is considered the "golden age" due to the sangha being allowed a relative autonomy to manage its own affairs. In the eyes of the laity, however, the development in this period represents what is wrong with letting the monastic order regulate itself. Allowing monks to have too much authority to administer their own affairs permits monks to act in manner inconsistent with what they were expected to do so. In the 1950s, for example, the existence of the monastic parliament modelled after the secular one "polluted" the purity of the monkhood because it became a platform where an unsightly shouting

match between monks with different views took place, a fact that was later cited by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who staged a coup in 1957 and introduced the new sangha law in 1962.

In times of such monastic resurgence, it is important to note that one ecclesiastic member stood out, and his legacy underlines a problematic relationship between the state and sangha. Phra Pimontham (At Asapo), the abbot of Wat Mahatat in Bangkok from the Mahanikai order, was a promising young monastic leader responsible for innovative measures within the sangha, particularly the introduction and popularization of vipassana, or mindfulness meditation in Thailand. Born in the Northeast, Phra Pimontham represented a new wave of Mahanikai monks, who came from the provinces, made their names through monastic examination and enthusiastically welcomed change in both the political and monastic order after a long period of Thammayut-dominated rule. Mahachulalongkorn University, the monastic university formed for Mahanikai monks as opposed to Mahamakut University, the Thammayut university, expanded with Phra Pimomtham and his peers pushing for the development of monastic education among the Mahanikai order. The excitement, however, was short-lived as Phra Pimontham was later falsely accused of being a communist sympathizer, forced to disrobe and put in jail for an extended time by the military government led by Sarit Thanarat.

Because the meetings of the monastic council were often characterized as chaotic due to impassioned speeches and debates, Sarit insinuated that monastic self-rule only resulted in spectacle where monks would be debating and shouting, something that was “out of character” of what esteemed monastic members were supposed to act. The military government, as a result, instituted the 1962 Sangha Act and reverted the monastic organization back to the hierarchical structure reminiscent of the first centralized monastic governance. The 1962 sangha law, albeit

with revisions, is still in use.[25] Even in prison, Phra Pimontham refused to acknowledge the forced disrobing as legitimate and continued wearing white clothes and observing monastic precepts while continuing to prove his innocence through the legal struggle. Mahanikai monks came out to protest what they perceived to be an injustice. After several years of imprisonment, Phra Pimontham was later proven innocent, re-integrated into the sangha and rose to the position of the Acting Supreme Patriarch. The legacy of Phra Pimontham has become a narrative of monastic struggle against unjust state intervention that is still popularly used as a point of reference in contemporary monastic activism, particularly among Mahanikai monks.

With the revision of the 1962 Sangha Act in 1992, 2004, 2017 and 2018, the authority over organizational oversight of the monastic affairs is presently granted to *Mahathera*, but the authority to appoint the *Mahathera* members lies in the hands of the king. This has not always been the case. The revision of the 1962 Sangha Act in 1992 is the exception when a stipulation on the appointment of the Supreme Patriarch was amended to allow the *Mahathera* members to deliberate among themselves before submitting the candidacy to the prime minister, who would then forward the nomination to the king for approval. At the same time, the *Mahathera* membership was not under the decision of the king. The new revision in 2018 changes this tradition. While the *Mahathera* membership remains limited to no more than twenty members, its appointment is at the discretion of the king and depends on the ecclesiastic ranking or seniority and behavior deemed befitting the ecclesiastic ranks. Sitting at the top is the Supreme Patriarch, the highest dignitary of the monastic order who has no real power in the selection of *Mahathera*. The council is responsible for the ecclesiastic matters such as deliberating on the sangha's projects

[25] The efforts to change the sangha law not only represent a political struggle between the state and sangha, but also various factions within the sangha as well. For extended discussions of such process, see Somboon (1982) and Jackson (1989).

and ranking recommendations as well as managing monastic education in terms of curriculum, teaching and examination. The council convenes three times a month and is supported by Office of National Buddhism (ONAB), who acts as the Secretariat and the intermediary between the government and sangha in terms of financial and administrative matters such as budget planning and allocation to support and promote monastic affairs, in addition to overseeing the management of movable and immovable properties belonging to the sangha, but not of any active temple.[26]

The sangha enjoys support from the government, which comes from the annual budget granted to ONAB for maintenance and restoration of temples, monastic education and propagation projects as well as stipend for monks with administrative positions or ranks awarded by the monarchy. ONAB is responsible for the state administration of the sangha. Founded in October 2002 after a series of protests by the sangha to demand the creation of a bureaucratic arm that would exclusively respond to monastic needs and concerns, ONAB reports directly to the Prime Minister, who usually delegates the supervision to the minister of Prime Minister's Office. Since its inception, the budget for ONAB has increased significantly over the years and now accounts for more than four billion baht per annum.[27] There are other streams of financial support for the sangha from such agencies as Religious Affairs Department, Ministry of Culture, Crown Property Bureau and the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), in addition to different levels,

[26] The monastic properties can be divided into two general categories, which are temple and non-temple, or what is called the "Central Ecclesiastical property." The former concerns movable assets and real estate within temples, or officially declared monastic lands. This type of property is managed by the abbot of the said temple. The latter, however, has to do with properties given to the sangha, which may not be part of the temple such as land and real estate donated to the sangha in which rent could be obtained, in addition to abrogated temples. ONAB oversees this category of property.

[27] The budget for the fiscal year 2016, for example, is reported to be around 5,406 million baht and divided into 3 main categories, which are: (1) 279 million baht for the plans to solve problem and develop three southernmost provinces; (2) 1,568 million baht to support monastic education; and (3) 3,557 million baht to preserve and promote arts and culture. The last category can be split into various sub-categories from monthly stipends for administrative and title-holding monks (1,225 million baht), commoner temple renovation (500 million baht), monastic administration-related expenditures (38 million baht), royal temple renovation (24 million baht) and grants for the Supreme Patriarch-related missions (23 million baht) (Prachatai 2017).

from sub-district to province, of Local Administrative Organization and other agencies that provide grants for temples located in the areas under their jurisdiction. Popular ceremonials such as the chanting at midnight on December 31 to welcome the New Year are organized by the sangha and supported by various governmental agencies as well as corporations. The amount of financial assistance from ONAB is thus a portion, regardless of how extensive it may seem, of the total contribution that the sangha receives; even now, the statistics on how much the government supports the sangha remains unavailable. The public, however, also plays a significant role in supporting the sangha, as the financial support from ONAB could not cover the expenses of more than 40,000 temples across the country that still house monks and novices. The scope of the donations from non-governmental entities such as individual Buddhists or corporations contributing to certain temples is also not fully known, but according to a research project on financial management of temples by Nada Chunsom (2014), which surveyed 490 temples across 5 regions in 2012, a temple receives an average of 3.2 million baht per annum with annual expenditures around 2.8 million baht; donations specifically related to construction and renovation, the largest category, is estimated to be around 2 million baht per temple per annum. If the projected average is applied to all temples in Thailand, the amount of money in the temple economy could be as high as one hundred billion or more per annum, indicating that the monastic order still enjoys a wide support from the public. The issue of money, at the same time, inevitably attracts criticism from the laity, who view monastic wealth as antithetical to the monastic way of life.

Because the notion of Buddhist community and task of upholding Buddhism is not limited to only the sangha, who could not survive on its own but must depend on the support of the laity, the monastic-lay divide plays a crucial role in both limiting and enabling the sangha. Doctrinally, the Buddha specifies that the pillars supporting the religion are found in the four-fold assembly, which

consists of *phikkhu* (monks), *phikkhuni* (female monks), *ubasok* (layman) and *ubasika* (laywoman).[28] As along as these congregations exist, Buddhism will prevail. The role of each group is complementary of each other, and female and male monks are believed to be tasked with the duty to learn the Buddha's teachings and practice meditation to cultivate spiritual insight so that the knowledge from the practice would then allow them to teach laypeople. The laity, in turn, is expected to study and follow the teaching of the Buddha, while also having the duty to provide the monastic class with the necessities ranging from food, clothing and shelter to medicine. The ideas of Buddhist community and reciprocal relationships between the sangha and laity are integral to the furtherance of Buddhism and posit the monastic-lay divide that informs the interactions and expectations between these communities. At present, Thai Buddhists continue to look to the monastic order to uphold the religion through their continuance of strict ascetic practice and vigorous study of the Buddha's teaching. Importantly, the laity expects that the monastic order should be "above politics" at all cost, which means that monks should not become involved in any political activity or express opinions on political issues. The worldliness of politics is deemed inherently hostile to those whose calling is to pursue truth in the *thamma* and seek to transcend worldly affairs, even if what counts as "political" is not often clear. At the same time, when the monastic order is facing a challenge from within their ranks with regards to internal depravity, many lay patrons of the sangha do believe that they have the duty to expose monastic corruption not only to purify the religion, but also as a form of support to the true sangha, a stance which complicates the relations between monastic and lay communities.

[28] Even though these four congregations are currently present in Thailand, there is much controversy surrounding the existence and ordination of Bhikkhunis, or female monks, who are not the same as "mae-chii," or white-robed female ascetics that hold only 8 precepts. Bhikkhunis are not officially recognized by the government as clergy, nor are they accepted formally by the sangha administration, who views them as heretical due to the argument that the lineage of Bhikkhuni ordination ceased from existence hundreds of years ago due to the absence of the preceptor to perform the ordination ceremonial, and thus any ordination at present time is illegitimate. For more details on the controversy and the issues of women in Buddhism, see Falk (2007) and Seeger (2008).

In practice, the monastic role extends beyond studying the scriptures. In the past, monks were considered literati, whose knowledge encompassed astrology, medicine, agriculture, ritual and conflict resolution. Temples were also important social institutions and functioned like community and education centers where local children would learn how to read and write from monks; villagers held meetings to discuss community matters; and traditional festivals were organized with monks and villagers celebrating together (Tiyavanich 1997). Provincial children coming to urban centers in pursuit of educational or social opportunities have also sought room and board accommodation from temples, especially in Bangkok, and many have gone on to become civil servants, police and soldiers. The situation, however, has changed in the last several decades due to rapid socio-economic development, urbanization and bureaucratization of the sangha, which has contributed to the loss of temples' social functions and the widening gap between the sangha and local communities. At present, monks are perceived by the laity primarily as ritual specialists because their roles in public health, education and conflict resolution have been replaced by secular institutions like hospitals, schools and bureaucratic agencies. The position of monks as the intermediaries between Buddhist doctrines and the public, moreover, is increasingly compromised by the liberalization of religious knowledge enabled by educational and technological development that allows the laity to easily access and engage with the scriptures without monastic guidance. As a result, the lay community has become less dependent on the sangha, and many lay people have challenged the sangha's claims to authority in the domains of doctrinal interpretation and meditation, which were previously dominated by monastic professionals (Satasut 2015). This divide and growing anxiety among the sangha is a critical factor that informs monastic activism of the present day.

Establishment

Historically, Buddhism is closely related to political authority, both on ideological and practical levels. Buddhist teachings such as the principles of karma and rebirth provide an explanation for the relationship between individuals and the social world by placing them in a larger cosmological scheme; they are also used by different political actors, particularly by those in support of the status quo, to justify the legitimacy of political concepts and institutions.[29] The cultural concept of monarchy in Thailand and other countries in mainland Southeast Asia, for instance, is based on Buddhist ideals fashioned after King Ashoka, an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty whose conversion to and patronage of Buddhism represents the paradigm of a Buddhist king. One who is a Buddhist king rules with righteousness; creates righteous laws; teaches people to live in accordance with Buddhist doctrines; and exercises his power in defense of Buddhism (Heine-Geldern 1942; Pillalamarri 2016). Fundamental to the duty to protect and promote Buddhism is an assumption that the continued existence of the *thamma*, or the Buddha's teachings and practice, is intimately connected to the welfare of the kingdom, and the *thamma* prospers when the monastic order strictly follows ascetic practice and upholds the right interpretation of the *thamma*. The Buddhist king has the duty to intervene and reform the sangha when it ceases to abide by its monastic rule of conduct and is plagued with impurities because the king's right to rule is derived from his possession of great religious merit. The example of King Ashoka, whose program of extensive monastic reform brought prosperity to Buddhism and his

[29] *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, or the Three Worlds According to King Ruang, an ancient text composed by a royal author, is one such example that outlines the cosmos and provides justification for social hierarchy. The text is considered an important foundation of Thai religious thought, and for the translation and discussion, see Reynolds and Reynolds (1982). "By describing the hierarchical structure of traditional Thai society as a reflection of the structure of the cosmos itself," according to Peter Jackson (1989, 2), "as realized by the Lord Buddha, and by describing each person's place in the social hierarchy as being determined by the impersonal law of moral retribution of *karma*, Buddhism provided a common intellectual and cultural identity for the Thai people that encouraged collective allegiance to the social and political order."

kingdom, sets a trajectory for the rulers, be they the monarchies or military rulers, of Theravadin world to follow (Tambiah 1976). Throughout history, newly enthroned kings, or rulers, follow a custom of seeking to implement religious reform by purifying the doctrines, monastic code, and sangha as part of their claim to be the righteous ruler.[30]

To the extent it supports the status quo, the sangha thus enjoys the patronage of the state in the form of material support and conferred prestige, especially those sections of the monastic community that share a high level of affinity with the secular establishment. In the past, the sangha was granted land and slave endowments along with the assistance on temple building (Reynolds 1979). Even long after the era of the absolute monarchy, the symbiotic relationship between the monarchy and sangha continues. Monastic sponsorship can be a potent form of control and legitimation as the royal patronage becomes the source of class differentiation within the sangha, while the sangha provides their interpretation and religious services to the establishment. The palace has long had a custom of bestowing honor and recognition to the monastic order through the provision of ranks to members of the ecclesia, and this practice continues until the present. *Samanasak*, or the system of ecclesiastical peerages, confers members of the monastic order with title and rank, which signals class distinctions among the monastic community. For example, the Supreme Patriarch is the highest rank in the sangha, and the current Supreme Patriarch has the royally assigned title of *Somdet Phra Ariyawongsakhatayan*, which demarcates a supreme

[30] In Thailand, for example, King Taksin, who founded the Thonburi Kingdom after the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, organized the collection and compilation of religious texts to promote monastic scholarship and enforced disciplinary measures against abuses within the ecclesia. Rama I, the founding father of the Chakri Dynasty who succeeded King Taksin, also sponsored the compilation of the Pali Canon and issued decrees of the ecclesiastic laws to regulate monastic behavior (Keyes 1989; Wyatt 1994). In Burma, King Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, also sponsored the fifth Buddhist Council in Mandalay, which attracted more than two thousand Burmese monks to a convention where monks examined the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon to determine whether there had been any distortion, omission or modification and correct such aberration (Thwin 1979). Such pattern, especially in terms of patronage, repeats even after the change in political system. In the post-independence Burma, U Nu, a devout Buddhist, is known as a driving force behind the popularization and spread of vipassana meditation movement, and the military government has long played the role of Buddhism's patron (Jordt 2007).

patriarch who is a commoner.[31] Ranks and titles indicate royal acknowledgement and thus signal the proximity of individual ecclesiastic monks to the monarchy. During the king's birthday each year, monastic members are promoted and bequeathed with certificates and ceremonial fans corresponding to their newly given ranks. Each fan is embroidered with exquisite patterns and symbols to indicate the status and honor of its holders (Somboon 1981, 10). The ceremonial is usually followed by privately organized ceremonials by the monastic and lay followers, or sometimes the monks themselves, of those awarded rank and title to celebrate the occasion. Having rank and title also facilitates potential invitations by the palace, aristocratic families and people of influence to perform ceremonials at their private residence, which adds to the stature and wealth of the invited monastic members.[32] Monks with ecclesiastic ranks also are allotted monthly stipends with varying amount depending on administrative responsibility. These stipends range from 1,200 baht for the entry-level rank to 37,700 baht for the Supreme Patriarch. The total amount of stipends granted to the ecclesia per annum reaches a level of more than 1.1 billion baht, and such grants come from the annual budget of the government through ONAB. Given that most of the ecclesia hold positions in a hierarchically ordered administrative structure, the monastic establishment is dependent on the secular authority, especially the monarchy, for the distinction that they hold among their peers as well as commoners.

[31] Second to the Supreme Patriarch is a group of the ecclesia of the rank Somdet Phra Rachakhana, which is limited to only eight positions, or four for each sect, and each one is given a specific title. The third highest rank is Phra Rachakhana, which can be divided into two classes, special and ordinary, and this rank has different levels and extensive number. The special class can be divided into four levels, which are Chao Khana Rong, Tham, Thep and Rat, all of whom promoted to the ranks have their own titles. The ordinary class also consists of four groups which are Parian, Parian-equivalent, Vipassana and Saman Yok, and members of each group have their own titles. The last category of rank is Phra Khru, which has three classes, or Sanyabat, Thananukrom and Prathuan.

[32] I was told a few years ago by a student monk, who was a student leader at Mahachulalongkorn University, that he was invited to perform a blessing for the opening of a new shopping mall in Bangkok. Among hundreds of monks invited, he was placed at the tail end of seniority, but still received more than a few thousand baht in the form of donation from the host. Being there, moreover, also acquainted him with other monks with more seniority in both the years in monkhood and rank, which contributed to his growing social network.

The intimacy and clientelism that Buddhism enjoys from close affinity with the palace also means that when the concept of Thai nationalism was articulated during the reign of King Wachirawut, Buddhism predictably became incorporated into the conceptual basis of Thai nation, which included Nation, Religion and King as the fundamental pillars of the nation. Even though the integration of Buddhism into the nationalist discourse began in the reign of King Wachirawut, the foundation for such development was laid out in the period prior. During the times when Western colonial powers posed a critical threat to Siam, King Chulalongkorn commenced a state-building project that aimed to unify semi-independent vassal states under a unitary rule, and the sangha became an important component. The merging of multiple local monastic traditions into a centralized administrative structure sanctioned by the 1902 Sangha Act was intended to serve the purpose not only of creating a common outlook among diverse populations, but also of exerting control over vassal states through influence over the sangha (Kamala 1997). As a result, the sangha, which in some regions used to hold authority that rivaled the local lord, became a state functionary, and not a countervailing force like what it used to be.[33] In the following reign, King Wachirawut employed a similar approach in building Thai nationalism. He saw the advent of World War I as an opportunity to create and promote the idea of what the Thai nation was. Buddhism occupied an integral place in this conception. According to King Wachirawut, the concept of Thai nation was founded on the tripartite basis, which was Nation, Religion and King. These were pillars that defined the national identity and placed Buddhism in the same category as the monarchy, even if the sangha was in practice under the control of the king. Thai nationalism as invented by King Wachirawut became a basis for the concept of Thai national identity, or "Thainess," which was

[33] An example is the northern sangha before the centralization in which Khruba Sopha, the abbot of Wat Faihin, could argue and challenge the secular authority, even going as far as to refuse the enforcement of military conscription by central Thai officials (Bowie 2014, 726).

later manipulated by the military governments under Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram and Sarit Thanarat to induce allegiance from and mobilize the population. Claiming to protect Buddhism and monarchy from the Communists, for instance, was a principal theme in political persuasion by the military government during the Cold War; this claim effectively led to the successful mobilization of the armed civilian groups and suppression of the student movement in 1976 (Bowie 1997).

In the contemporary period, the central role of the monarchy as the principal patron of Buddhism can still be observed in the constitutional clause which stipulates a condition that the monarch is a Buddhist as well as upholder of religions. The prerequisite of the monarch's religious identity serves as a reminder of how important Buddhism is, while also making a distinction between Buddhism and other religions. Even though the political system changed from the absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932 with the king becoming the symbolic head of the state without administrative authority, his role with respect to Buddhism and the sangha remains. The government also shares the role of benefactor of Buddhism through its dedication of national budget toward temple and monastic affairs. In recent years, state patronage of Buddhism has become even more conspicuous; the 1997 constitution was the first to feature a clause that guaranteed the patronage of Buddhism, and later constitutions incrementally added more Buddhism-related provisions. This trend can be seen to corresponds to the rise in monastic activism that emerged the 1990s to demand for the enhanced representation of the sangha bureaucratic process as well as the inclusion of Buddhism as the national religion in the constitution.

Taking note from the anthropological works on the state, the Thai state presents a challenge in terms of its definition and composition. While Thailand is characterized as a country with constitutional monarchy and representative government, the fact that there have been nineteen

coups, including both successful and unsuccessful ones complicates the idea that sovereign power is vested in the government alone. In a typical democratic nation, the military is under the control of the executive branch, and institutions such as the government, public agencies, courts and parliament are independent from any force beyond what is stipulated in the constitution. In Thailand, however, the monarchy and the military are known to have influenced domestic political affairs through informal means. The military, in particular, has become excessively dominant in the political landscape, and after the 2014 coup, military generals controlled a majority of ministerial positions within the military government. The notion of the Thai state, therefore, must include both formal and informal institutions, and the nature and character of the Thai state at a particular time has to be understood through examining shifting power relations and positions of these institutions.

Monastic Political Activism

Despite the taboo surrounding the issue of monastic involvement in worldly affairs, monastic participation in political process has a long tradition and can be found in both scriptural and historical sources. For instance, one of the most popular examples of the monastic role in mediating political conflict is recorded in the Buddhavamsa, a hagiographical text that narrates the life of Gautama Buddha and other twenty-four previous Buddhas. The text describes the occasion when Gautama Buddha decided to intervene into the dispute between his relatives, who were arguing over water rights. Because monks are considered a special class of person, whose charisma and religious significance provide a cultural basis for political efficacy, there are also examples of monastic figures acting as conflict mediators and political leaders. In the period prior to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, monks were known to assume the role of active political

leaders and conduct popular resistance against the central authority. There are historical records of monks leading the masses during such times as the Holy Men Rebellion, or a series of millenarian movements that sprung up from 1901-1936 in parts of what are now known as the borderlands next to Laos from the seventeenth to early twentieth century (Nartsupha 1984; Wilson 1997). After the fall of Ayutthaya Kingdom, one of the emerging warlords was Phra Fang, a charismatic monk who led a band of villagers and maintained control over a territory in the North and was subsequently suppressed by King Taksin (Wyatt 1994).

Monastic occupation of political leadership, at any rate, became increasingly restricted as the sangha was gradually brought under political control of Bangkok with the implementation of the sangha law. As the sangha becomes incorporated into the state apparatus, a significant aspect of monastic activism is inevitably inward-looking, or in other words, manifested in the form of reaction to the political control underlined by the debate regarding how much autonomy should be allowed for the sangha; who has the right to determine monastic administration; and how should state-sangha relations be arranged.

After the issuance of the first sangha law, the initial period of monastic consolidation highlighted the opposition of regional monastic traditions against the center, and Khruba Sriwichai (1878-1939), a highly revered monastic leader in Lanna Kingdom, or what is now Chiang Mai, emerged as one of the most notable examples of the resistance led by Mahanikai monks. Sriwichai refused to follow the criteria designated for becoming a preceptor and thus being able to legitimately perform ordination ritual by Bangkok and defied the command to register monks and novices under his care, which subsequently led to him being detained and sent to Bangkok twice (Bowie 2014). The dissent over the central administration of the sangha controlled largely by Thammayut order came to a head after 1932 as disputes broke out in several temples in Bangkok

and provinces. The dissatisfaction culminated in the formation of Thai Young Sangha, a group of young Mahanikai monks who demanded changes in the administrative structure of the sangha. The protest resulted in the 1941 Sangha Act, which the Mahanikai order considered their "victory" (Khanungni 1985). The case of Phra Pimontham in the later period also exemplifies this trend. When Phra Pimontham was arrested in 1962, a group of monks came out to protest. When he was released in 1966 but stripped of the rank that he originally held prior to his imprisonment, thousands of young Mahanikai monks protested to demand full restoration of rank to Phra Pimontham (Somboon 1981). In 1975, Pimontham's rank was returned.

Even though the monastic order is under the control of the political authority, monastic political activism is not uniform and is best characterized by its ambivalence due to the reality that the sangha consists of various elements, many of which share an interest divergent from the central state. During the Cold War, for example, the sangha was mobilized by the government to join its anti-communist efforts. Monks were enrolled in programs to travel to border areas in the North and Northeast of Thailand on missionary programs to propagate Buddhism and provide aids to the population deemed vulnerable to the communist persuasion (Keyes 1971). These initiatives were designed to bring about national integration in a time of instability and anxiety born from the regional expansion of communism. Although many senior ecclesiastic monks provided active support to the program, many young monks without rank were sympathetic and lent their support to the growing peasant movement (Ford 2017). Many of these young monks also took part in the protests surrounding the Pimontham case, which were the last large-scale initiatives by monastic members before the rallies after 1997.

The fragmentation within the sangha can also be observed in contemporary times. After the 2014 coup, the monastic leadership initially threw their endorsement behind the junta and proposed

the Village of Five Precepts Project as a nation-wide policy to promote Buddhist morality in parallel to the junta's reform agenda that sought to combat corruption and restore traditional morality. Other members of the sangha participated in the red shirts movement, which comprised the regional political networks of Thaksin Shinawatr and the Pheu Thai Party, as well as the provincial middle class and groups of academia, activists and students (Keyes 2012).

Chapter Outline

In this introduction, I have provided an overview, framework and background of the dissertation. The dissertation is divided into two major parts. The first part consists of chapter 1 and 2 and focuses on the development of lay intelligentsia and their role in pushing monastic reform into a national reform agenda, leading to a critical engagement of the monastic order with the military after the coup of 2014. The first section draws attention to the often-neglected role that lay social activists played in not only ushering the moral discourse in politics and allowing the military to appropriate popular political sentiment. The second part shifts the focus to the monastic side and traces the formation of the monastic establishment, revealing how monastic elites participated in various overlapping networks involving factions in the armed forces, civilian political groups and the media. I argue that despite a conventional scholarly view that assumes the sangha to have become significantly diminished in its importance as a state apparatus, it has become a powerful economic and political institution in the post-Cold War period due to advancements made by the leadership and activists within the monastic establishment. I map political actors, their networks and their relationships in this part in order to illustrate the growth of the sangha as well as the nature and scope of its activism.

CHAPTER 1

Spirit of Reform

A couple in their late-fifties walked in and greeted me at a table in an open patio tucked away in a corner of the large Salaya Campus of Mahidol University. Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, the man carried in his arms several large oversized books. I stole a quick glance. Three volumes of the ancient Three Seals Law, edited volumes of past and present sangha acts and books on monastic governance were in his arms. "These are important," he said as if reading my mind, "because they concern what we are going to be talking about today." The man was Santisuk Sophonsiri, a well-known author and social activist. At his side was his wife, Rasana Tositrakun, a former elected senator and prominent activist known for her leading role in the formation and development of People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a political movement that inaugurated the color-coded politics and shaped the contour of Thailand's political landscape in the last decade. More importantly, Santisuk was a member of a committee created by the junta at the beginning of 2015 tasked with conducting a study on Buddhist affairs and providing its findings to assist with the national reform process.[1]

During the period of a little over a month when it was operational, the committee's call for transparency in monastic wealth as well as legal threat against the leadership of Wat Phra Thammakai, a temple immensely popular among the urban middle class, attracted intense criticism from the monastic order and stirred up a spirited debate on how the sangha should be reformed. Because the plea for monastic reform had long been a central issue among lay Buddhist intellectuals, figures like Santisuk had grown to become the thorn in the sangha's side. This meeting was an opportunity to gain an understanding of the impetus behind intervening into the

[1] More on the committee in the next chapter.

monastic affairs as well as an ongoing struggle between the sangha and state. I had come to see Santisuk today to get a glimpse into the rationale of the religious reformists.

In religious and social terms, what Santisuk brought with him was significant. In a country where the majority identified Buddhism as their primary faith, many would assume that monastic conduct ought to be evaluated on the basis of the *Vinaya*, or the disciplinary code of the sangha as laid out by the Buddha. In fact, the monastic order was also regulated by another set of rules designed by the state. First introduced in 1902, the sangha law had been the primary framework of monastic governance and continued to define state-sangha relations. The tradition of legal regulation over the monastic affairs could, however, be traced much further back than the twentieth century. The Three Seals Law was an important precedent. Compiled in 1805 on the order of King Rama I, the founder of the Chakri Dynasty, the Three Seals Law comprised a collection of legal texts drawing from laws existing in the Ayutthaya period, or the kingdom proceeding the Chakri Dynasty that fell in 1767. These texts represented the laws used in Siam until the coming of modern legal system in the early 20th century and were usually taken to demonstrate the cultural and religious underpinning of not only the ancient mode of governance, but also contemporary Thai political and legal system.[2] In this sense, the sangha was governed by two legal orders, religious and secular, which were not always in tune with each other.[3]

Over the course of four hours, our conversation touched on an assortment of issues from the historical development of Thai Buddhism to challenges that the sangha was facing and what constituted an appropriate proposal for monastic reform. What emerged from the discussion, however, was a view that the sangha could not help itself if left on its own, and there must be a

[2] For more discussions of the Three Seals Law and its relation to Buddhism and underlying legal culture in Thailand, see Reynolds (1994) and O'Connor (1981).
[3] The conflict between these two legal orders will be the subject of discussion in Chapter 3.

legal mechanism designed by the state in order to check the sangha and uphold Buddhism. The necessity for such intervention, in Santisuk's opinion, came with several explanations ranging from the inability of the sangha to adapt to changing time to the possibility that the sangha, or factions within, could develop an independent political will and utilize its cultural capital for mobilization against the existing political order. Despite these trepidations, what Santisuk offered as a principal argument for monastic reform was concerned with the authenticity of the Theravada school of Buddhism. The need to keep the sangha in its place, Santisuk proposed, was connected to the problem of doctrinal interpretation arising during the formation of the Theravada tradition as certain principles had been distorted over time to allow the sangha to accumulate wealth. While the tradition was believed to embody the original form of Buddhism with heavy emphasis on asceticism, Santisuk insisted that the tension between world renunciation and materialism had long been a problem within the doctrinal framework. This contradiction was the basis for not only the contestation over the meaning of what the Theravada was, but also lay at the heart of the dispute concerning how the sangha ought to behave and what role the state should play in regulating the sangha.

According to Santisuk:

> Reading the Three Seals Law, one could see that Rama I adhered to Theravada principles. Having been a nobility during the Ayutthaya period, when Rama I became king, he promulgated the Three Seals Law and claimed that Buddhism in his kingdom was passed down from Mahakassapa and 500 enlightened monks, who formed the First Council.[4] The sangha, therefore, must adhere to the Theravada principles…The history of the First Council, however, excluded what was happening at that time because in actuality Mahakassapa was not the only important figure in the effort to settle doctrinal and disciplinary disputes after the passing of the Buddha. There was also Phatthiya, one of the

[4] Mahakasspa was one of the principal followers of the Buddha, who led enlightened monks in a gathering after the passing of the Buddha to settle doctrinal and disciplinary disputes. The gathering is regarded as central to the formation of Theravada Buddhism because the resulting sutras are considered direct teachings from the Buddha. The event would later be known as the First Council in Buddhist historiography. The word "Theravada," translated as the "Doctrine of the Elders," is an indication that this lineage of Buddhism is distinguished from other schools due to its strict adherence to the canonical texts as the sole authoritative source of Buddhism.

> first five disciples of the Buddha, who was alleged to play an important role before the First Council. But we now only remember Mahakassapa, not Phatthiya…and there was also the case of Purana, who disputed the resolution from the First Council. Because of how we learn about the history of Buddhism, we are made to remember only that Purana did not disagree with Mahakassapa and only complained about the eight indulgences,[5] which were mostly about whether monks would be able to keep food indoor or take food of their own accord. Simply put, the dispute was about whether monks could accumulate. These eight indulgences later provided the basis for the proposal of ten points during the Second Council because Purana's influences from the First Council remained. These ten points allowed for accumulation and are conspicuous among Thai monks now, who have money and bank accounts. According to the Three Seals Law, such behavior is forbidden because everything is considered public among the sangha, not private assets. The laws also state that if monks have any assets, those assets will become temple assets when they die if and only if they do not make any will designating who will inherit their asset…if we follow Mahakassapa and the Three Seals Law, monks cannot accumulate.[6]

Evident in his statement, Santisuk was concerned with the emergent interpretation from the Second Council that granted the sangha the capacity to accumulate wealth. Even though Santisuk did not deny that the Second Council was critical to the historical development of the Theravada tradition, he did not believe that the interpretation genuinely conformed to the religion's integrity, which he considered to emphasize asceticism over materialism. Worse, in Santisuk's view, the legacy of doctrinal bias could still be felt in the present as the sangha was plagued with rampant consumerism where monks hoarded riches and succumbed to their self-interest. When the problem between the sangha and wealth was understood to be structurally present, the use of legal mechanism became justifiable. Protecting the integrity of the Theravada school, Santisuk contended, required the state to intervene, and examples from various legal mechanisms such as the Three Seal Laws verified that a legal tradition of religious reform had long existed. Even if legal governance would indicate an added burden on the sangha where both the *Vinaya* and secular

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[5] According to the account on the First Council provided by Edmunds and Suzuki (1904, 280), Purana disputed "the insertion of the following eight indulgences, which had been plainly approved by Buddha, and unmistakably kept in memory by himself. The eight things were: (1) Keeping food indoors ; (2) Cooking indoors ; (3) Cooking of one's own accord ; (4) Taking food of one's own accord ; (5) Receiving food when rising early in the morning ; (6) Carrying food home according to the wish of a giver ; (7) Having miscellaneous fruits ; (8) Eating things grown in (or by?) a pond."

[6] Santisuk Sophonsiri (social activist), in discussion with the author, September 19, 2015.

laws complicated the monastic administration, the distinction came down to the details of the regulation, something that would best be undertaken by those with knowledge of Buddhism and the sangha, but not necessarily from the sangha itself and definitely not random government figures.

The particular form of historicism exhibited in Santisuk's comments illustrated a critical shift in the relationship between the sangha and society. On the surface, the discussion of Buddhist history seemed like a normal activity that Buddhists did. The act of problematizing a dominant Buddhist historiographical narrative and offering one's own interpretation, however, had not always been permissible. Popular lay criticism only became an accepted reality in the last few decades of the twentieth century at the time when the monastics and nobility, traditionally the literary class, lost sole control and access to religious and legal knowledge. Attempts made by commoners such as Thianwan Wannapho (1842-1915) and Narin Klueng (1874-1950) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to critique the sangha often led to severe repercussions like imprisonment, for instance.[7] The fate of those reform-minded people provided a sharp contrast to the creation of the recent Buddhist reform committee, which consisted entirely of commoner laypeople backed by the military government. The gathering of the members of the Buddhist reform committee, however, did not happen by accident and should be placed in the context of the argument put forth by Charles Hallisey (2005) that large-scale processes of colonialism, modernity and globalization had profoundly shaped Buddhist moral experience, value and practice and produced unique trajectories that remained consequential to the development of contemporary Buddhist thought and practice.

[7] Thianwan was a merchant and lawyer, who advocated for the poor and social change, while Narin Klueng, or Narin Phasit, was a social and religious critic. For more information on these commoner intellectuals who called for political, social and religious reform, see Phongpaichit and Baker (2009, 74-6) and specifically on Narin Klueng in Koret (2012).

As such, the contemporaneous iteration of the Buddhist activism exhibited among these lay advocates must be viewed as an ethical trajectory produced through a particular historical juncture from which the laity began to gradually grow out of their perceived customary role and take on a new task as Buddhist defenders. As they came to see in themselves the agents of change, they also blurred the imagined distinction between other-worldly and worldly spheres by expanding the meaning of religious reform to include social issues and human well-being as directly correlated to the health of Buddhism. These lay activists thus viewed the development of Buddhism, monastic affairs and socio-economic development through a lens that conflated religious and social concerns. They were especially keen on what they deemed to be the correlation between an increasing gap between the sangha and society, a rise in the reports of monastic offences and economic, political and social disorder. In this chapter, I argue that instrumental to the contemporary monastic reform was the role of lay intelligentsia, who not only challenged the authority of the sangha over the doctrinal and disciplinary interpretation but also acted as the driving force behind the disciplining of the sangha.

This chapter explores the development of lay intelligentsia in protecting Buddhism and changes in the cultural basis for the laity's religious and political activism and the ascent of moral politics that a faction of lay Buddhist activists embraced. These reform-minded lay activists, as will be illustrated in Chapter 3, played a critical role in initiating a program of monastic reform, both formally and informally, after the 2014 coup. Underlying their rise was a historical process where, beginning with the religious reform of King Mongkut in the nineteenth century, the sangha gradually became centralized and bureaucratized as the monastic control over religious knowledge, a province long guarded by the nobility and sangha, began to come undone in the wake of radical demographic and social change. Underscoring this process was the rise of the Buddhist

public sphere and the expansion of literacy ushered by the proliferation of print media and increased access to education in the twentieth century, which enabled commoners to access and appropriate a wealth of religious scriptures and praxis formerly under the control of the monastic order. The empowerment of the laity would not have been possible without changes within the monastic order. The standardization of monastic education in textbooks, curricula and examinations allowed an increased number of novices and monks to access scriptural knowledge. Once the program was opened to the public, interested laypeople followed suit.[8]

The development of monastic education incorporated an expanded pool of personnel and contributed to an enlargement of the monastic literate class. As a result, a new group of religious thinkers and leaders, both monastic and lay, began to appear and assert their presence in the religious and political landscapes. Central to this development was Phra Phutthathat Phikkhu (1906-1993), a scholar monk widely known for his innovative reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines that became the source of religious renewal in the subsequent period. His prolific output and teachings stressing a rational approach to Buddhism gained him a large following, most of whom were urban intelligentsia who began to view Buddhism as the foundation of social action. The religious interpretation offered by Phutthathat and his students, as will be discussed later in this chapter, shaped the way that laypeople saw themselves as Buddhist as well as the understanding of their role in the promotion and protection of Buddhism. The doctrinal renewal came at the time when the sangha steadily came under criticism by laypeople who had amassed

[8] According to Ito (2012, 19), the introduction of the textbooks written by Prince Wachirayan and a system of ecclesiastical examination called the *nak tham* in the early twentieth century made scriptural knowledge become accessible to a larger pool of monks, novices and laypeople, all of whom would otherwise have not been able to do so under the traditional system of religious education. "The examination," Ito stated, "became far more popular than was originally envisaged, not only among monks and novices, but also among lay Buddhists who wanted to learn the *dhamma*, the contents of which had been unfamiliar to them but which had always been respected as sacred. In 1929, a similar ecclesiastic examination for lay Buddhists, *thammasuksa*, was introduced…and became very popular…candidates for the *nak tham* examination grew from 44,167 in 1931, to 50,922 in 1932, and 54,397 in 1933; and those for the *thammasuksa* increased to 3,512 in 1931, 4,799 in 1932, and 6,525 in 1933."

the resources and knowledge allowing them to confidently exert themselves in the religious realm as rivals to the sangha. The emergence of the laity, I argue, provided the basis for contemporary monastic reform.

Custodians of Buddhism

While Buddhists believe that the truth uncovered by the Buddha is universal and infinite, the religion is generally considered to only last for a period of 5,000 years before the corrosion into its absence. Recognition of the end time constitutes the cultural basis underscoring the impetus to protect Buddhism, which taps into the narrative of religious decline, and a sense of vulnerability in the Buddhist imagination. Commonly found across Buddhist cultures is a prophecy, believed to be directly from the Buddha, that the religion will gradually decline over the period of five millennia after his demise. According to the narrative, as time passes, people will become increasingly ignorant of the Buddha's teaching of the universe's true nature, or *thamma*, and the monastic order will become increasingly polluted with monks seeking profit instead of religious truth. When those supposed to uphold the *thamma* are no longer fulfilling their duty, Buddhism ceases, and the world falls into a prolonged period of depravity until the coming of the next Buddha, which initiates a new cycle.[9] Even though this proposed timeframe promises a long duration of the religion, historical events of external conquest such as the fall of Nalanda in India and colonialism in the countries neighboring Thailand, have set precedents that force Thai Buddhists to acknowledge that the decline is always a possibility that could arrive sooner than

[9] There are variations to the prophecy, but the narrative core is similar throughout. For a detailed treatment of the variation of this narrative through textual sources in different Buddhist traditions, see Nattier (1991). In the case of mainland Southeast Asia, see Hansen (2007), Koret (2007) and Turner (2014) for discussions pertaining to the narrative and its role in shaping Buddhist practices and subjectivities, especially in the colonial context.

predicted.[10] In the face of the constant threat of such a prospect, the responsibility of saving Buddhism falls in the hands of its followers.

As both a condition of and means to their elevated status relative to laypeople, the monastic order is generally seen as shouldering most of the responsibility to defend the *thamma*. Considered one of the three refuges beside the Buddha and his teaching, the sangha has traditionally played an integral role in perpetuating the religious tradition through its strict adherence to the monastic code and propagation of the doctrines. Culturally, the sangha derives its authority from the prevailing notion of monkhood as "field of merit" afforded by its world renunciation and asceticism. The monkhood represents an important location of religious gift-giving where greater merit could be attained than giving of other kinds.[11] Aside from such cultural significance, the sangha has also been historically considered a class of literary elite, whose religious knowledge from the textual scholarship of the Pali Canon and ritual expertise confers status and authority that sets the monastic order apart from the laity. The latter, at any rate, is perceived primarily as the provider of material support to the sangha in hope of accruing merit to stay on path toward spiritual development. This kind of relationship signifies a division of labor that prioritizes the monastics, whose regulation, conduct and knowledge authenticates them as "true" Buddhists and thus superior to lay religiosity.[12] In this case, when the sangha diligently follows the Buddha's teaching and prescribed

[10] The decline of Buddhism, for instance, is thought to also come from outside invasion such as the fall of Indian Buddhism due to Muslim invasion in the early 12th century, which has been a dominant plot underpinning a sense of terror of Buddhists with regards to Islam and other faiths. See Truschke (2018) for the discussion on this issue.

[11] For historical, textual and cultural discussions on religious giving in Buddhism with respect to the notion of "field of merit," see Brekke (1998) and Egge (2013).

[12] The image of an ideal monk as a learned and world-renouncing subject is at any rate not only a common trope among Buddhists in Theravada countries, but also found among Western scholarship on Buddhism. Part of the reason that such image is so prevalent until now may have to do with the fact that there is an emphasis on textual sources, which propose a certain view of monkhood despite the existing variation of monastic practices and experiences. Even in early ethnographic accounts, such bias toward textuality is present and used as a measuring stick, often to the detriment of the resulting analysis. Melford Spiro (1971), for example, in his classic ethnographic study of Burmese Buddhism, argues that there exists an essentialized image of monkhood, which would indicate not only a particular type of conduct such as being lettered, austerely following the Vinaya and acting as the field of merit for laypeople, but also a certain aesthetical form as well. Instead of recognizing that there are layers of perception at play, however,

code of conduct, it in effect perpetuates the presence of the religion and keeps secure the fate of Buddhism. Conversely, the monastic order's inability to maintain its unity and purity symbolizes religious deterioration, and religious figures are expected to live up to the ethos of asceticism and regulatory framework of conduct.

Throughout Theravada polities, the decline of Buddhism has also been a source of political anxiety due to the ideological role that Buddhism plays in the legitimation of rule. From ancient kings to military governments and statesmen, political leaders in mainland Southeast Asia have long sought to portray themselves as righteous rulers who act as patrons of the religion and reign in accordance with Buddhist ethical principles. Worldly authority, however, does not only see the patronage of the sangha as the only means to sustain Buddhism. Religious reformation, whether sponsoring a gathering of learned monks to settle any doctrinal and disciplinary disputes or purging impurities from the monastic order, is also a possibility. Particularly in mainland Southeast Asia, reform efforts have customarily been within the domain of the throne, reflecting the intimate links between Buddhism and indigenous modes of power. Culturally derived from the model of Buddhist kingship fashioned after King Ashoka, the Buddhist king is one who rules with righteousness; creates righteous laws to allow his subjects to practice the religion; teaches people to live in accordance with Buddhist doctrines; and exercises his power in defense of Buddhism (Heine-Geldern 1942; Pillalamarri 2016).[13] In doing so, he forms a reciprocal relationship with the sangha, whose propagation of religious doctrines and ritual performances endorses his reign. It is

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Spiro makes a case that monks that he interviewed do not live up to such ideal and in effect projects his own assumption onto the diverse and dynamic field of lived Buddhist monasticism. Newell (2010), in her critical review essay on approaches to the study of Buddhism, focusing substantially on Theravada tradition, suggests that a necessary intervention is to examine deeply held assumptions of various approaches, while combining both textual and ethnographic focuses to produce an interdisciplinary approach that is mindful of the ethnocentrism and rich diversity of Buddhism.

[13] King Ashoka is an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty living around the period between 268-232 BCE, whose conversion to and patronage of Buddhism represents the pinnacle of the Buddhist kingship paradigm. The concept of monarchy in Thailand and other Theravada countries follows the Ashokan ideal.

believed that the continued existence of Thamma is intimately connected to the welfare of the kingdom, and Buddhism prospers when the monastic order strictly follows the ascetic practice and upholds the right interpretation of the Buddha's teaching.

Were the opposite to occur, according to this view, the king has the duty to intervene and reform the sangha when it ceases to abide by its code of conduct and is plagued with impurities. This function is particularly significant because the king's right to rule is perceived to originate from his possession of great religious merit, and a monarch's fall from power is understood to stem from the loss of merit. King Ashoka, whose program of monastic reform is regarded as a contributing factor to the prosperity of Buddhism and his kingdom, offers a dominant frame of reference for political succession in Theravadin world which the new king or government, especially military, seeks to emulate (Tambiah 1976).[14] Throughout history, newly enthroned kings, or rulers, follow a custom of seeking to implement religious reform to purify the doctrines, monastic code and sangha to legitimate their claim to moral authority and righteous rule.[15] The notion of religious decay and reform, in this regard, underscores a driving force behind the initiatives in "saving Buddhism," whether against external threat from colonial powers and other

[14] This view is representative of what Charles Keyes (1989, 136) terms as "cosmological Buddhism," which is characterized by "a perspective which situated the person in a cosmological hierarchy according to one's past karma." This type of Buddhism, as one would expect, legitimated the feudal order.

[15] The usual practice of ancient kings would be to disrobe, or persecute, suspect monks and sponsor a convention where learned monks would be able to gather and settle any disciplinary and doctrinal dispute. The agreement from the meeting would lead to the revision and creation of the sutras, which would function as the standard for monastic education and practice. In Thailand, for example, King Taksin, who founded the Thonburi Kingdom after the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, organized the collection and compilation of religious texts to promote monastic scholarship and enforced severe disciplinary measures to eliminate abuses within the ecclesia, sometimes going as far as employing corporal punishment that led to death. Rama I, who succeeded King Taksin, also sponsored the compilation of the Pali Canon and issued decrees of the ecclesiastic laws to regulate monastic behavior (Keyes 1989; Wyatt 1994). In Burma, King Mindon, the penultimate king of Burma, was known for his patronage of the fifth Buddhist Council in Mandalay, which attracted more than two thousand Burmese monks to a convention where monks examined the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon to determine whether there had been any distortion, omission or modification and correct such aberration (Thwin 1979). Such pattern, especially in terms of patronage, repeats even after the change in political system. In the post-independence Burma, U Nu, a devout Buddhist, is known as a driving force behind the popularization and spread of vipassana meditation movement, and the military government has long played the role of Buddhism's patron (Jordt 2007).

faiths, or internally from the rank and file of the sangha.[16] Because the sangha plays an important role in determining how a regime could be favorably accepted or defied, there is a vested interest from the establishment in its control. The sangha, nevertheless, also has the potential to be a source of resistance to authority due to its cultural position and capacity to command veneration from the populace. Monastic purity and conformity are thus instrumental to the practice of statecraft as state interfering in monastic affairs is authorized by the cultural narrative of decline and religious ideas of the righteous ruler.

While this narrative paints a picture of reciprocity where worldly and other-worldly institutions reinforce each other, religious reformation is of the world and distinctly connected to the exercise of power because it prescribes action and is concerned with the question of who has the authority to decide for the monastic order. In Thailand, the tradition of monastic reform is a recurring theme that illustrates a fundamental tension between the state and sangha because critical reform attempts have generally been taken by the state with political intention, often disrupting the order of monastic affairs and producing new possibilities in monastic development. On the one hand, the birth of the Thammayut order in 1833 by King Mongkut and the centralization of the sangha through the 1902 Sangha Act by King Chulalongkorn are considered turning points where a new, modernist form of Buddhism is articulated as a rational response to superstitious beliefs and rituals widely practiced in popular Buddhism.[17] These events, however, also represent moments when the monastic order is restructured to serve important political agenda. The centralization of the sangha during the fifth reign, for example, was critical to the state-building project that sought to cultivate

[16] Bartholomeusz (2002), for example, shows that in the case of Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, the narrative of Buddhism in peril in religious stories commonly told among the populace played a crucial role in justifying violence against the Buddhist "other," who in this case was the Tamil.

[17] Important religious changes initiated by Rama IV and V are considered by scholars to reflect changing epistemology among the ruling class to begin prioritizing rationality over cosmological conceptions attributed to a growing encounter with the West. For a comprehensive discussion on the issue, see Wisalo (2003).

a common outlook among and establish control over diverse populations amidst the looming threats of colonial powers (Tiyavanich 1997). The unified administrative structure would become the basis for the emergent monastic establishment that assisted the authority in imparting teachings consistent to the messages that the state wanted or carrying out a policy of national integration during the counter-insurgency period to legitimate the political order (Keyes 1971).

Consolidation of State Control

Even though monastic intervention is customarily seen as a royal tradition, the 1932 overthrow of absolute monarchy did not change the pattern of monastic control by the state. While the monarchy is still closely associated with Buddhism and the notion of Thai nation (*chat thai*), the authority and responsibility of religious patronage is in large part transferred to the government. However, the monastic leadership does not view the association with the crown in the precise manner as that of the government. In particular, the former is regarded a source of great stature, while the latter is a provider of material support such as budgets for monastic education, ceremonials, administration and renumeration. The significant distinction is that the royal affinity highlights the perception that the sangha is part of the long history and glory of the Thai nation that has been upheld by the continual existence of the kingship. The monastic status quo thus identifies its position and aligns its interest with the crown to a great extent, even if such a relationship may mean that the sangha has to accept the moral authority of the palace, in addition to the state control. Worldly and religious powers are intertwined.

Rather than seeking full autonomy from the state, control has become relatively acceptable among the monastic order. The emphasis on monastic reform has instead shifted to the question of which design of monastic administration would best regulate the sangha and reflect the interest

of the political regime at each time. Significantly, even though the sangha has been under the state control, its day-to-day affairs and promotion are largely left to the deliberation of the sangha, which allows the institution to maintain a relative level of autonomy. A significant part of the struggle has thus been contested on the legal grounds pertaining to terms of governance and how much control that the sangha may have over its internal administration. At the same time, political control over the sangha also includes material aspects as well as the prestige and honor bestowed from the sangha's association with the palace and government. These benefits, however, are not equally distributed and tend to be reaped by those with monastic and administrative ranks, whose positions are sanctioned by the state. Even though the introduction of the sangha law was initially challenged by local monastic leadership, the centralization of the sangha has had a significant impact on the reorientation of internal power relations within. The result has been the development of the monastic governing class, or what I call the monastic establishment, which represents a fortress of power that rules through a network of dependency, clientelism and state patronage.[18] In this sense, there is a class distinction within the sangha that informs differential social action from the monastic domain, and the interest of the monastic elites may not align with the interest of the monastic order as a whole.

Given the monastic establishment and its vested interest, it is not hard to see that any initiative to change the sangha law has often been met with resistance from within the monastic order. One of the reasons is due to the reality that the sangha is not a monolithic organization, and various interests and factions within the centralized order continually compete for the discursive power over the others (Keyes 1999b). This circumstance thus complicates any attempt to reach a consensus for the reform internally. What has normally happened is that sections of the sangha

[18] The discussion on the monastic establishment is in Chapter 4.

have to assist the government, whether civilian or military, to bring about reform. As far as a norm goes, the ecclesiastic leadership tends to corroborate with the ruling regime to either obstruct or make change possible. The rank and file, in contrast, have played a relatively passive role due to their distance from the center of power, and their consequent inability to effect change from the bottom. The fragmented nature of the sangha makes the impact of reform marginal for those in the peripheries. Still, while the politics of monastic reform is usually regarded as a negotiated process between the secular and religious elites, forces from below do play a role and lead to change in some cases. One of those moments was the passage of the 1941 sangha law, which saw the dissent among ordinary monks developing into a movement that was eventually recognized by the ecclesia and government. Given that the government assisting the monastic order to revise the original sangha law was the first civilian government formed after 1932, the nature of the existing political order determined the direction and substance of the monastic reform.

Legal changes in the sangha testify to the argument that monastic reform reflects prevailing political order and serves the political interest of that particular time. The introduction of a more democratic sangha law in 1941 initiated from within the sangha during a process of democratization and the subsequent reversal in 1962 to the hierarchically-ordered sangha law modelled after the 1902 version under the military dictatorship are exemplars of how monastic administration mirrors secular administration. Still, both these events were made possible through the cooperation and push from the ecclesiastic leadership. The 1941 legal reform was a result of the push from the Mahanikai order to demand for equal representation and enhanced self-determination in monastic governance, while the 1962 return to the top-down administrative structure was part of the plan from the ecclesiastic establishment, particularly those in the Thammayut order, who wanted to eradicate the growing influences of young monks within their

ranks (Khanungnit 1985; Jackson 1989). While these events reflect a continuing reality that the mode of monastic governance parallels the existing political system, they also suggest an ongoing interest in maintaining control over the sangha, an institution which is considered to represent tradition and national identity, and latent possibilities for dispute to arise from within as well.

Modernist Buddhism

> *What are the consequences of the crisis of morality in the world today? People accuse one another of not dealing properly with the problems of society. They blame economics, politics and so on. However, they do not see the real cause, namely a lack of morality. For example, even with very good political leaders, if the people lack morality, they cannot be governed. Things will be unmanageable, and there will be no progress…Morality by its very nature means that which is right or good and beneficial.*
>
> - Phra Thepwisutthimethi (Nguam), commonly known as Phutthathat (1986, 122)

In parallel to administrative changes in the monastic order, the approach to religious doctrines also underwent a significant transformation. In particular, two developments contributed to a changing view regarding the monastic role and emergence of new group of people, who would subsequently lead the directive to reform the sangha. The first was the rising literacy and education of commoners. The arrival of the printing press in the reign of King Mongkut and development of modern education by his son, King Chulalongkorn, brought about technologies that played a critical role in facilitating new regime of knowledge, even if these elements were strictly limited to the aristocracy in the beginning. During such period, literacy was concentrated at the top, and the first university in Thailand, Chulalongkorn University founded by King Vachirawut (1880-1925), did not allow for much participation from commoners.[19] The situation, however, changed

[19] For discussion on educational reform during King Chulalongkorn that would become the foundation for what would be considered modern education in Thailand, see Wyatt (1969).

after 1932 when civilian and military factions began to exert control in place of the crown, and education was made accessible to a larger section of the population. The second university, Thammasat University, was established in 1934 with the purpose of granting higher educational access to commoners and led the way for the establishment of others such as Silpakorn, Kasetsart and Mahidol Universities in 1943 and a host of universities since then.[20]

Given changes in the policy promoting compulsory education and granting entrance to university, the number of commoners going into university drastically went up, and the increase reflected an enhanced rate of literacy. When Thammasat University began, for instance, 7,094 students were enrolled, a figure that stood in contrast to the number of graduates that Chulalongkorn University produced in 1932, which was around 68 people. Even though the number came down from its initial surge and consistently stayed at around 500 students per cohort per year afterwards, the development suggested a boom (Kasetsiri 2006, 22-3). In addition to the expansion of educational opportunity, the economy was also growing consistently at an average annual rate of around 6.6 percent between 1950 and 2000, which represented one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Siriprachai 2009, 152). These socio-economic changes produced a growing section of the population that looked at themselves in a new manner. Left in the world where feudal system was a thing of the past, these educated subjects looked for a new source of meaning that would explain their place in the world and guide the direction that they should be headed. In Buddhism, this burgeoning social class found its inspiration.

With this changing political environment, the cultural meaning ascribed to the role to protect and promote Buddhism had been diffused from the royal grasp to other sections of society, who found the duty to be of importance, but with a more nuanced perspective. Even though the

[20] According to a report in 2018, there are more than 300 universities and colleges in Thailand with 4,100 academic programs offered (Mala 2018).

traditional trope of monastic decline tended to focus on monastic transgression, contemporary meanings were not limited to only the occasion when monks misbehaved. In Thailand, there had been changes in how monastic decline was perceived among the public. The perception had been expanded to include other monastic "failings" such as the increased insularity of the sangha, its administrative competence to solve internal problems and outdated educational curriculum. In other words, the cultural frame to evaluate the monastic order had shifted, and there was now an added social aspect to the interpretation. This new understanding was a product of historical and social processes permitted by the growth of middle class and print media, both of which signaled the formation of a Buddhist public sphere in which the laity were actively participating. Such development is similar to the formation of what Donald Lopez Jr. (2002, xxxvii) calls "modern Buddhism," or an emergent type of Buddhism which has "blurred the boundary between the monk and the layperson, with laypeople taking on the vocations of the traditionally elite monks: the study and interpretation of scriptures and the practice of meditation."

The second development leading to the rising power of the laity was derived from an innovative interpretation of Buddhist thought suggesting that social engagement could provide an avenue to cultivate spiritual development. This notion was central to the teachings offered by Phra Thammakosachan (Nguam Inthapanyo, 1906-1993), commonly known as Phutthathat, a scholar monk whose unorthodox approach to religious doctrines provided an ethical foundation for religious concepts to be applied to everyday life. Widely held as a pioneer who modernized Buddhist teaching, Phutthathat placed emphasis on meditation and social action as means to return to the authentic teachings of the Buddha to overcome suffering, a position considered unorthodox at that time given the monastic preoccupation with scriptural study, religious ceremonial and advancement in the ecclesiastic peerage system. Phutthathat prioritized the traditional Theravada

doctrine of nonattachment and believed that, even though most people assumed that the highest principles of Buddhism called for a retreat from the world and were too profound for ordinary people, they were possible to achieve in this very life, even among the laity. He was known for his eschewal of popular religious practices such as ritual chanting and magical rites, which he deemed superstitious and opposed to the original purpose of Buddhism, which was a religion of rationality.

In Phutthathat's view, according to Donald Swearer (2010, 170), "emptiness and nonattachment are at the heart of a truly socialistic society where people work for the benefit of the whole and overcome their acquisitive interests." This doctrinal elucidation located social action at the intersection between the worldly and other-worldly because, as Phutthathat argued, engagement with the world, whether in political, social or economic aspect, served spiritual goals.[21] Because his interpretation, while radical, still reaffirmed continuities with the Thai Theravada tradition, Phutthathat was described as a "radical conservative" (Sivaraksa 1990). In this sense, while Phutthathat's reinterpretation of Buddhist thought represented a critique of the monastic order, it also argued for the place of morality in society and politics. Phutthathat himself was known to speak openly about politics after gaining national prominence in the 1940s on topics related to democracy at a time when Thailand was under military rule. One of his most famous, albeit controversial, proposals was his doctrine of "Thammic Socialism" (*thammic sangkom niyom*), or the idea that Buddhism was socialist by its nature, but not in a materialist and individualist sense that the Western ideology of socialism usually assumed. Rather, Buddhist thought prioritized collective good because it saw nature and Thamma as inseparably one and the

[21] According to Tomomi Ito (2012, 4), Phutthathat's main contribution to contemporary Thai Buddhism is "his discovery of *lokuttara dhamma* (supra-mundane Buddhist teaching) in the classical scriptures and his popularization of its for practical use by general Thai Buddhists who knew Buddhism only as *lokiya dhamma* (mundane teachings, particularly the notion of *kamma* (causality of one's actions—do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil results." This distinction serves as the basis for Phutthathat's conviction that the supra-mundane (lokuttara) and the mundane (lokiya) are inherently interconnected, and that enlightenment is of this world.

same. Buddhism could be utilized for the good of the world, Phutthathat contended, if it was defined by spirituality, not materialism.

In this regard, Phutthathat believed that worldly involvement must be grounded in Buddhist ethical insights. While many might think that politics was antithetical to religion, Phutthathat instead asked for an understanding of politics as a moral system and argued that, in his view, liberal democracy failed because the system neglected morality in favor of individual rights, which allowed personal interest to encroach upon social well-being. Phutthathat went as far as to say that a "righteous despot" (*phadetkarn doi tham*), or courageous ruler who was morally guided and decisive in her/his action, was preferable to the model of liberal democracy even if the power was concentrated in the hands of a few.[22] Phutthathat's ideas were seen as the basis for social and political reform, especially with regards to the environmental movement and among the educated in the urban sector (Jackson 2003).[23] Still, the notion of benevolent and ethical dictatorship, whose rule rested on moral foundation, was not without its detractors. The idea would come to be increasingly challenged in recent years as critics saw it as a potential justification for authoritarianism and overriding the rule of law, given the history of military and strongman rule in Thailand.[24] As will be illustrated later in this chapter, this concept was influential in laying the groundwork for the rise of royal-nationalist political movements centered on the pledge to save the monarchy and nation. While Phutthathat's teachings were highly contested, they undeniably informed a myriad of social issues and actions and exemplified the intersection between religion and politics in the Thai context.

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[22] Such suggestion is indeed exceedingly provocative and remains a point of debate among Buddhist intelligentsia. For a thorough treatment of this complex idea, see Swearer (1993) and Jackson (2003, 235-58). For a critical argument of the concept, especially in its relation to the 2006 and 2014 coups in Thailand, see Pinyapan (2011).

[23] For the discussion on the influences that Phutthathat had on the environmental and reform movement, see Taylor (1993b).

[24] For the discussion on Phutthathat's notion of righteous despot and political development, see Potjanalawan (2018) and Buangsuang (2013).

Generation Reformist

The teachings of Phutthathat spawned a new understanding of Buddhist doctrines and found a ready audience in the sections of the monastic order as well as the growing middle class, especially the urban and university-educated professional class.[25] Coincidentally, the time when Phutthathat began to garner national attention in the 1940s overlapped with, and could be argued to be bolstered by, the expansion of higher-education. This new educated class found Phutthathat's religious explanation meaningful and instructive for what would otherwise be a body of abstract concepts difficult to apply in daily life. Even though disagreement and difference remain to this day within the group, those following Phutthathat's principles shared the sentiment that Buddhism could be used to make sense of their action and society at large. In other words, one of the most significant influences of Phutthathat was the reorientation of Buddhist doctrines as a force informing social action in contrast to the solitary world renunciation that asceticism was usually associated with. This conceptualization provided the cultural frame of reference underpinning social and religious activism in the following period.

Perhaps most relevant to the development of a new religious activism, Phutthathat followers grew to become an influential group with social and political influence in Thailand. Their social mobility was underlined by the rise of the middle class and urbanization that propelled the process of economic and social differentiation. In addition to holding positions in public and private sectors, many played a role in establishing religious foundations, non-governmental organizations and printing presses as well as becoming consistent critics of the monastic order. Driven by the aspiration to see real, tangible change happening in social and religious spheres, this reform-minded group consisted of both monastic and lay intelligentsia. The early generation included

[25] For more information and discussion of Phutthathat, the movement that he gave birth and his legacies, see Payulpitack (1991), Jackson (2003) and Ito (2012).

figures ranging from highly regarded monastic intellectuals like P. A. Payutto to lay people like Sulak Sivaraksa and Dr. Prawet Wasi who were renowned public intellectuals, social activists, and proponents of monastic reform (Swearer 1993).[26] Common among this group of like-minded individuals was their conviction of the prominence of Buddhist ethics in personal and public affairs, in addition to their conviction in the role of Buddhism as the source of morality. Inadvertently, at the time when Phutthathat's interpretation began to gain public recognition, the sangha was also headed toward a more engaged role given its involvement in social development programs in the 1960s at the behest of the government as part of counter-insurgency measures to pacify rural dissent in sensitive areas (Suksamran 1981). These processes paved the way for a change in the perspective of what the monastic role should be, even if the reasons were different.

True to his teachings, the lay followers of Phutthathat were no strangers to political activism. What they saw in Phutthathat's religious interpretation was an idiom in which they could express their political and religious dissent (Jackson 1989). In the 1970s, young people growing up in the era of extended military dictatorship were looking for sources of meaning alternative to the prevailing conventions of the days. With its insistence on the worldliness of Buddhist ethics, Phutthathat's message sparked the interest in the potential of Buddhism as an approach to engage with the world. It was no surprise then that Phutthathat's doctrines inspired many student activists in the 1970s, whose progressive ideals were infused with Buddhist ideas. At the center of the activity and learning process of these young students was Sulak Srivaraksa, a scholar, social activist and prolific writer who graduated from University of Wales, Lampeter, and passed the Bar in London in 1961 prior to coming back to Thailand and beginning his involvement in the

[26] These three figures are celebrated writers and public intellectuals, whose contributions to the understanding of Buddhist thought and studies of Thai Buddhism still very dominate the Buddhist public in Thailand. For more on P. A. Payutto, see Olson (1989). For Sulak, see Swearer (1996). Scholarly work on Prawet Wasi, however, remains disappointingly scant.

intellectual circle as an editor to many academic journals. Sulak began publishing and teaching once he was back, but the role that earned him the recognition and influence as a public intellectual was, beginning in 1962, his position as the first editor of the *Social Science Review* (*sangkhomsat parithat*), a seminal academic journal that provided a platform for scholars from within and outside of the university confines to share, discuss and debate ideas. As the editor of this highly influential journal, Sulak played an advisory role to many university students, who looked at him as their mentor and were encouraged to start the student edition of the *Social Science Review* and organize a club to discuss public affairs (Rujirachoon 1984, 24-5).

In conceptual terms, Sulak played a critical role in translating the interpretation offered by Phutthathat into practice. While Phutthathat proposed that one did not have to sit still and meditate to practice thamma, and that work in the everyday context could be considered religious practice to cultivate one's self, Sulak went further to suggest that Buddhist ethics could be directly applied to social engagement and activism.[27] This position contradicted the customary approach that used to be propagated by monks, which emphasized precepts and practice of thamma on an individual level. Sulak instead pointed to a famous teaching by the Buddha, after his enlightenment and realization of the community of ascetics known as the sangha, that encouraged monks to "go forth" and spread his teachings to the world for the good of the masses.[28] The insertion of the social into Buddhist ethics became an inspiration for the young students, who were already interested in how to resolve social problems. Student activists such as Pipop Thongchai, Pracha Hutanuwat, Weera

[27] Perhaps one of the most important public intellectuals in contemporary Thailand, Sulak was the first to elect that Buddhism must be an integral part of social AND spiritual development, which greatly contributed to the reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines to serve the present. These ideas could be abundantly found in his writings throughout the years. See, for example, his select publications in Sivaraksa (1981, 1988, 2005). Also, for an overview on his life and works, see Rujirachoon (1984) and Swearer (1997).

[28] See Sumana (1995) for the details and discussion regarding the declaration of the Buddha for his followers to go forth after the emergence of the three integral components of Buddhism, namely the Buddha, his teaching and the sangha.

Somkhamkid, Rosana Tositrakul, Santisuk Sophonsiri, Paisal Wongworawisit (subsequently ordained under the name of Phra Pisal Wisalo) and Bancha Pongpanich were influenced by both Phutthathat and Sulak and would go on to become important figures in the non-governmental and public sectors as well as among the emergent Buddhist public sphere.[29]

In the heydays of the political activism of the 1970s, anti-Vietnam War protests and democracy campaigns were important agendas of the student movement in which many student activists were involved, both on and outside of university premises.[30] Their politics was informed by Phutthathat's teachings, particularly on the critique of capitalism, as well as the idea that ideal politics must be based on morality and common goods, characteristics that democracy did not necessarily share. Perhaps due to the moralist position produced through their reading of Phutthathat's teaching, many of these figures later became involved in the royal-nationalist movements after the turn of the new millennium, movements such as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). They believed that politics without morality only led to disorder and suffering. These moralists also participated in several political reform programs since the 1990s, which included but were not limited to the drafting process of multiple constitutions, participation in anti-government movements and taking up position in the reform councils appointed by the military. Beside their call for social reform

[29] Pipop Thongchai was a PAD and well-known non-governmental organization leader, while Rasana Tositrakul was a former Senator, well-known political activist on issues of food security, traditional medicine and fuel monopoly as well as PAD leader. Santisuk Sophonsiri was a writer and had also sat on several government committees. Banchar Pongpanich was a founder of Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives, which functioned as an archive of Phutthathat's writings as well as museum and learning space for meditation class and other religious and educational activities. Pracha Hutanuwatr was ordained for a few decades and studied closely with Phutthathat. Later, he would become a writer and meditation teacher. Possibly the most important figure, Paisal Wongworawisit chose to ordain and entered monkhood with the name Phra Paisal Wisalo. He became a highly regarded scholar monk and published a seminal work on the history of Thai Buddhism. He had also been socially and politically engaged on various issues from peacebuilding and conflict resolution to environmental campaigns and religious reform. Pipop, Rasana, Santisuk and Phra Paisal were all students of Sulak when they were attending university in the 1970s.

[30] For an extensive treatment of the cultural politics and social formation of the student movement in the early 1970s, see Kongkirati (2005).

consistent with the doctrines of Buddhist morality, religious reform remained a persistent issue through which intellectuals and activists like Santisuk would later play a crucial role in shaping the attitude and policy toward the monastic order as they campaigned for national reform and assumed positions within the government.[31]

Expectations of Buddhism

The ascendancy of the laity could be observed from the shift in how problems in the monastic order were framed. Perceiving the monastic order to have been experiencing crisis caused by internal transgression and institutional constraints, many in the laity held the view that because the sangha was fraught with corruption and thus incapable to act on its own, intervention was necessary. At the same time, the recognition of religious decline in the contemporary period represented their conviction that Buddhism had the potential to be a force of good if given proper adjustment, especially with regards to the monastic order. The desire to see monastic reform came from an expectation that Buddhist doctrines and practices could contend with pressures from globalization and bring about social change. This understanding was also informed by an emerging form of localism, which appeared at a historical juncture of the late 1990s when Thailand was rendered vulnerable by the financial crisis, and fingers were pointed at economic liberalization and globalization as the cause of the national malaise. Given this confluence, the sangha thus came under the gaze of the public, who expected the religion and the Buddhist clergy to fulfill its potentials for the good of the people. This interpretation, however, also gave Buddhist reformists an opportunity to appropriate the terms of engagement and assert their authority over the sangha.

[31] For more information on the PAD and how middle-class activists, especially those inspired by Phutthathat's teachings mentioned above, come to ally themselves with the palace and military, which would lay the groundwork later for the PDRC, see Tejapira (2006), Thongchai (2008) and Kitirianglarp and Hewison (2009).

The ideas and sentiments for monastic reform could be found in academic seminars as well as scholarly and popular writings on the state of contemporary Buddhism, which acted as avenues to articulate and circulate a notion of crisis among the Buddhist public. An example was a seminar in 1998, a year after the beginning of the financial crisis. Organized by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, the seminar was titled "Crisis in Buddhism" with Prawet Wasi serving as the keynote speaker.[32] Prawet had been heralded as a leader of the budding civil society, which began to gain traction in Thailand's political landscape after the rise of urban middle class in the early 1990s and retreat of the military.[33] A hematologist by profession, Prawet was also a social activist and prolific writer, whose publications on political reform, social change and Buddhism were celebrated.[34] Inspired by Buddhist ethics, Prawet was influenced by Phutthathat's teaching and believed that Buddhism could play a central role in development, a common position held by the other invited speakers such as Sulak Sivaraksa, Phra Payom Kanyalano and Pipop Thongchai. The event was well attended by both monks and laypeople, who shared a sense of curiosity concerning the possibility that Buddhism may act as a fortress protecting Thailand and its people from forces that brought decline to the society.

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[32] The discussion in this section is based on Sri-arun (1999).

[33] Thailand had been under either direct military control or influences for several decades prior to the late 1980s in which a civilian government under Chatchai Choonhawan, former Thai army officer and diplomat, rose to power as a premier. Due to the charges of widespread corruption, the military staged a coup against the Chatchai administration in 1991. The military leaders promised that they only intended to restore Thailand back to its democratic and "clean" state and did not desire to usurp power from the civilian government. When General Suchinda Kraprayoon was nominated as the premier by five parties after the 1992 general election, many viewed this move as a clear indicator of a broken promise and took to the street to protest his appointment. The protest, known as "mobile phone mob," due to its popularity among the urban middle class, was dispersed with force by the military and ended with hundreds of injuries, 52 confirmed deaths, and thousands of disappearance cases. The event came to be called the Black May and served as an impetus for a subsequent mobilization among the intelligentsia, non-governmental organizations, select business groups and activists to demand for a new constitution, decentralization and political inclusion. One of the supposed victories was the creation of the 1997 constitution, which came to be called the "people's constitution" due to the popular struggle paving the way for its conception. For an anthropological account of the Black May, see Klima (2009). In terms of an overview with insightful look into the political development of this period, see Connors (1999).

[34] Prawet was also acclaimed for his role as a staunch advocate of the rural health care development and considered an integral figure in the activism of medical professionals to call for healthcare reform. See Bamber (1997) for an overview and analysis of the political activism of health professionals and the role of Prawet.

In this two-day seminar, the highlighted issues ranged from debates on divergent doctrinal interpretations and religious practice to appropriate monastic roles in social development, monastic education and sangha administration. The subsequent deliberations revealed a set of fundamental presumptions driving lay Buddhist activism. According to the prologue in the final report, these concerns were tied to the four questions that Prawet raised in his keynote speech, which were: 1) why did severe moral decay arise in the Buddhist Thailand; 2) what was the crisis that Thai society was now facing; 3) what were the causes; and 4) how could the crisis be resolved (Sri-arun 1999, 7). These questions highlighted a principal belief that Thailand's status as a Buddhist society did not guarantee a strict adherence to basic ethical principles laid out by the Buddha, and Prawet opened his talk with that exact criticism. In his eyes, the basic five Buddhist precepts, which prohibited killing, false speech, sexual misconduct, theft and intoxicant consumption, were a guideline for how Buddhists should comport themselves. The reality, however, was complicated by overwhelming economic, political and social evidence of violations as exemplified by the high rate of homicides, rampant political corruption, a thriving sex industry, misinformation among the media and the spread of alcohol and amphetamine use. The bewildering aspect of these violations was that they were committed by the very people who identified themselves as Buddhists.

These transgressions underpinned the crisis and showed an absence of a central aspect of Buddhist perspective that sought to understand the world in accordance to what Prawet (Sri-arun, 13) termed the "dynamic interconnectedness" between politics, economy, society and environment. In other words, the essence of Buddhism was forgotten among the populace, despite the fact that the majority of the country still claimed the identity of being Buddhist. In his view, such deviation was believed to largely be the work of an epistemological shift caused by the domination of Thai mentality by Western thought system, which Prawet viewed as too

compartmentalized and in opposition to a holistic approach that Buddhists ought to take. The consequence of this change, Prawet argued, was the path toward destruction as the nation followed a Western model of development leading to the focus on material prosperity above all else, such that people lost themselves to the allure of money at the expense of spirituality, community, environment and culture. Given other challenges such as the excessive power that the state held over its citizens, socio-economic inequalities and a culture of consumerism, Thailand was heading toward a downward spiral.

Seen in this light, the rationale offered by Prawet was at once a commentary on the financial crisis and a call for Buddhism to play a critical role in saving Thailand. Indeed, while his viewpoint was informed by a growing concern regarding national economic sovereignty and resulting social ills, a significant part of Prawet's speech also constituted an attempt to draw attention to what he and others deemed a broken moral system, which Prawet believed had an all-encompassing impact on society at large and partly resulted from the sangha not fulfilling its promise. Were the sangha an institution that could still sufficiently uphold and promote morality, such disorder would not have been realized the way that it was. But because the sangha was fragmented and further aggravated by social bankruptcy, it could not serve as the force that it was supposed to be. Such sentiment was prevalent among the speakers and reiterated throughout the seminar. Sulak, for instance, later elaborated in the seminar that the crisis of Buddhism emerged not only because the sangha was situated in a broken society, but the institution also had become severely compromised by doctrinal disagreement among various schools, distorted teachings that promoted wealth accumulation and a rigid monastic administrative structure that prohibited any meaningful change to emerge from within. Restoring the sangha to the ideal image that the laity had in mind came to be the logical course of action.

One of the ideals that the laity believed the sangha should exhibit was a notion of ideal community. When Prawet proposed that Buddhism should become the basis for social development, it was to convey a conviction that Buddhism represented an example for how a community ought to be. Prawet viewed monkhood as originally conceived as a community of learning, and the disciplinary code functioned as a mechanism to encourage a strong sense of community through its emphasis on communal rules and activities from which each member would adhere, contribute and keep each other in check. These bonds among the members functioned as a check and balance that also fostered the growth of its members. In this regard, social relations and cultural bonds were prioritized as a driving force behind a process of change. Nevertheless, Prawet did not come to this conclusion on his own. He was part of a group of intellectuals, academia and NGO practitioners concerned with the direction that Thailand was headed in terms of its socio-economic development, which emphasized economic growth at the detriment of environment, local communities and social cohesion.

Underlying his proposal to look at Buddhism as an ethical guideline and the sangha as an institution to maintain a healthy moral system was a set of ideas shared among the intellectual circle, who believed that the village community was a social unit that had long prevailed before capitalism and the state and had functioned as a repository of culture and values. Known as the "Community Culture School," the group argued that the strength of village community stemmed from the cultural bonds among villagers that allowed for self-sufficiency to be possible and represented the essence of Thai culture.[35] The adoption of a Western-based development paradigm

[35] The community culture school was led by Chatthip Nartsupha, a renowned political economist at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, who was a pioneer in redirecting a scholarly examination from the state and economy in general terms to the perspective of villagers in the margins. In one of his monumental works, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past* (1999), published in 1984, he provided a historical treatment of the village economy, which he believed to have existed before capitalism and the state and thus had a relative autonomy in its governance. Internal bonds among villagers, or what Chatthip called community culture, lied at the essence of Thai culture and provided the source of vitality to village life. The external influences shaping village economy such as the state, capitalism and

and encroachment of globalization, however, had weakened the community culture, and only through empowering local communities could Thailand contend against external forces and set itself on the right path to a more sustainable and equitable development trajectory (Reynolds 2001). In the debate on whether to look within or without for the future of Thailand, Buddhism became an appealing choice for those keen on an indigenous approach due to its status as a fundamental component of the national identity and as the majoritarian religion.

The current state of Buddhism, in view of Prawet, was still far from being able to realize the religion's true potentials. One of the barriers was the sangha's inability to become an independent institution capable of deliberating its own affairs and inspiring members of the society to effect change due to its status as a bureaucratic agency. Even so, Buddhism and the sangha remained in his opinion capable of becoming the source of resistance to the culture of consumerism and vices that afflicted Thai society if given proper strategy and management. Prawet thus proposed for Buddhism to be included as a guideline for future economic development on the national level, and religious reform to be pursued to resolve doctrinal disputes, especially on wealth accumulation; regulate monastic behavior in accordance to the disciplinary code; improve monastic education; and reorganize monastic administration to allow for improved governance, decentralization and a competent system of check and balance (Sri-arun 1999, 28-36). Prawet was not alone in calling for Buddhist ethics to be the conceptual foundation of socio-economic development and the sangha to be purified of tainted elements. His proposal was also voiced by other figures such as Sulak and other social activists, who believed that immoral individual actions

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Buddhism were things that subordinated local beliefs and practices as well as weakened the strength of the village as a social unit from which Chatthip deemed a fundamental part of Thai social life. Chatthip's ideas and prolific output spearheaded a movement with large following, especially among non-governmental organizations who saw their work with villagers as a way to revitalize community culture and give power to local communities. Critics of Chatthip's works, however, pointed out that his portrayal of village life as unchanging and inherently autonomous may prove too romanticized and essentialized. For a comprehensive discussion of the criticism of Chatthip's works and the community culture school, see Reynolds (2013).

led to adverse social phenomena, and morality cultivated from Buddhist ethics and praxis could restore peace, stability and human well-being. Masked by the plea for ethical conduct and moral personhood was a supreme belief that viewed individual as the single most important category because when a person came to have the right mindset, right decision and action would inevitably follow without fail.

Partial Agreement and Fissures

Even though what Prawet said about Buddhism may have echoed the sentiment of Buddhist social activists and was well received in the seminar, it would be a mistake to assume that there was a unanimous agreement among lay reformists. As the seminar proceeded, the conversation revealed not only the continuity in the customary concept of who defended the religion, but also rifts, particularly between the monastic and its lay counterparts. In one of the commonalities, the notion of "crisis" appearing in the title of the seminar indicated a rhetorical shift that suggested a newfound sense of urgency that the decline was imminent, if not already progressively underway. The crisis, however, seemed to be evaluated on the basis of a modernist interpretation of Buddhism, which assumed that Buddhism was the religion of rationality, as well as the orthodoxy known for the Theravada school through the emphasis on the notion of tradition, purity and asceticism. Agreement, for example, was found on the issue of the corruption of religious doctrine from which speakers and participants concurred that present Buddhist teachings had deviated from their original purpose and permitted superstitious practices and consumerism to dominate the landscape of religiosity among Buddhists. Attendees also believed that the sangha now found itself in a predicament where it could not adjust to the changing world and did not have the right mechanism and knowledge to do so as well. In a general sense, the sentiment among the

participants converged on the idea that excessive state control reduced the sangha into docility, and the sangha was also too complacent about its situation. There was thus a recognition that the problem was both individual and structural, and any effort to address such challenge must be mindful of such dynamics.

Nonetheless, differences remained, and the monastic-lay distinction seemed to be an important marker that produce differential perception with regards to the cause and handling of crisis. Among the monastic attendees, for instance, there was a feeling of weariness that the sangha was to blame for the religious challenges. For instance, during the panel on interpreting Buddhist ethics, Phra Thamma Kosachan (Panyanantha Phikkhu, 1911-2007), a well-known scholar monk and close associate of Phutthathat, began by pointing out that Buddhism as a religion and its doctrines were not in crisis. The problem instead lay in social trends that promoted religious commercialization and preference for popular religiosity oriented around the aspiration for prosperity. The mass, according to Panyanantha, had strayed from the course of true Buddhism. He did not mention anything about the sangha. While Panyanantha's insight found much sympathy among the crowds, another speaker on the panel, Sulak Srivaraksa, contended that shifting cultural pattern was only an element in a larger scheme of the situation. Instead, Sulak argued that monastic behavior was an underlying problem, especially considering that those with the responsibility of upholding the doctrines failed to fulfill their role and thus allowed for the corruption to occur. In saying so, Sulak made a case that the monastic ineptitude, whether intentional or not, shared a significant part of the blame, and the monkhood had to be held accountable for its failure to maintain the right interpretation of Buddhist doctrines and instead allow their members to seek profit from false teaching (Sri-arun 1999, 43-94).

Sulak's statement reflected a growing view among the laity that attributed a central part of the crisis to the sangha as well as the changing power relations between the sangha and society. The fact that monks and laypeople were actively engaged in the dialogue on how to improve religious affairs was telling because it showed that laypeople began to publicly assume an active role, despite the emphasis traditionally placed on the ruling power and monastic order. More importantly, the event demonstrated a developing influence that the laity came to assume over the monastic order. While the monastic order still largely maintained its control on important religious rituals such as ordination and merit-making and religious knowledge, the laity became progressively involved in producing a new understanding of the style and substance of Buddhism, and their diversity could be found to exceed the rationalist confine as well.[36] Still, a common theme emerged in the form of lay disdain toward the existing state of monastic affairs as well as their wish to see change, which had come to hold cultural purchase among the public and contributed to a challenge on customary norms that privileged the monastic standing.[37] Because the sangha became a morally broken institution with allegations of consumerism and transgressions, as several lay speakers pointed out in the seminar, it needed to be fixed to restore the faith and veneration that it once deserved.

As demonstrated in the previous section, because the notion of religious decline in contemporary Thailand had been tied to social wellbeing, there was an added sense of importance to monastic reform as well as the reorientation of the issue as a social agenda and national priority. Still, the discussion among the speakers and attendees showed contradictions and limits to the

[36] Beside lay-based religious movements like Santi Asoke or Thammakai, laypeople were immersed in various forms of religiosity from popular practices oriented around prosperity themes, which were shunned by religious reformists committed to rationalized form of Buddhism, and transnational mass lay meditation movements led by lay figures such as S.N. Goenka. For discussions on the diversity of Thai popular religiosity both rational and popular sides, see Cook (2010), Feungfusakul (2012) and Kitiarsa (2012),

[37] For the discussion and cases of monastic transgressions from the lay reformist perspective, see Ekachai (2001), a well-known journalist that had extensively documented the development of the sangha as well as its scandals and predicament. Ekachai was also known as a staunch advocate for monastic reform.

prospect that the laity held toward the issue of monks and their social role. On the one hand, the speakers agreed that the monastic role should not be limited to temples and religious ceremonials. Rather, monks ought to be engaged in worldly affairs for the benefit of their social surroundings, including the areas of conflict resolution, social works and education that were part of the sangha-society relations in the past to begin with (Tiyavanich 1997). Even though the laity looked favorably to monastic social engagement in the supposedly positive issues, the viewpoint remained that monks should not participate in anything that would contribute to the promotion of self-interest or personal gains, specifically in material and political issues. Perhaps the most important aspect came in a seeming contradiction between admitting that disproportionate state control over the sangha contributed to religious decline, while at the same time debating the necessity of the state intervention as a primary approach to correct the situation. This dilemma would not be easily resolved, and this fissure on the nature and extent of state control and intervention remained a point of contention between various reform groups, both monastic and lay.

The recommendation coming out from the seminar, however, was ambiguous. A common understanding was that in order for the sangha to become the force for good and return to its original promise, it must be liberated from political control to return to governance by its disciplinary code, and not secular sangha law. The idea that lay activists should capture the state and take a top-down approach to correct the situation was, at any rate, not a dominant choice. If pursued, this approach would in effect preserve the importance of state oversight over religious affairs and disregarded the multiplicity of concerns from various groups within and outside of the monastic order that had been excluded from deliberative process.[38] At this stage, it appeared that

[38] Non-administrative monks, in particular, did not usually have any channel to voice their concerns and had to accept the command of their abbots and those in administrative positions. There were also Buddhist ascetics not officially recognized by the sangha law as Buddhist clerics such as female monks, or *phiksuni*, and Santi Asoke, a Buddhist movement that emphasized asceticism, vegetarianism, anti-capitalist position and self-sufficient agriculture. These

the view for the state to discipline and put the sangha under control received little support. The shift from the ambivalence to determination to use state power to initiate monastic reform in the post-2014 coup was thus a remarkable transformation of attitude that warrants a close examination.

These new circumstances provided the basis for contemporary criticism of the sangha to have arose. Their significance was in the capacity to signal an increased interest and willingness of the laity to play the role in reforming the monastic order, even to the point of disciplining the sangha. Concurrent to the new explanation of Buddhist teachings, laypeople had steadily expanded their roles as both supporters and critics of the sangha. Their opinions became the basis for differential interpretations of the challenges that the monastic order faced. This was an ongoing process that had been in the making for the last several decades. An example preceding Prawet and sentiments demonstrated in the seminar, for example, could also be found in the writings of M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, a statesman and well-known conservative intelligentsia who had a much publicized and controversial debate with Phutthathat on empty mind (Tomomi 2012, 113-9). In a speech titled "Crisis in Buddhism" (*wikirt nai phra phutthasatsana*) given at Wat Suan Dok to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Mahachulalongkorn University's Chiang Mai campus in 1989, Kukrit (1990) did not specifically identify any imminent emergency but called attention to a set of issues that he thought the sangha must adapt itself to survive. According to Kukrit, the inability of the sangha's current administrative structure to effectively monitor and curb monastic behavior, in addition to increasing deviance from the Vinaya and outdated monastic education and propagation, were challenges that needed rectification. Despite his status as a blue blood elite, what Kukrit said illustrates a changing inclination among the Buddhist public to only view monastic decline as a

groups commanded a substantial following of their own and consistently made known their desire to see monastic reform that would be more inclusive and tolerant than the contemporary paradigm through publications, public talks and teachings that figures in each group gave to their followers.

failure to practice Thamma. The unaccountability of the sangha to society at large was also considered a failure of its own. Resonating with the call by both monastic and lay intelligentsia for the sangha to be acclimated to the changing world, this perspective also demonstrated how laypeople began to gradually assert their expectations over the sangha.

Criticism as Ethical Engagement

In what would be a critical turn in the monastic-lay relations, the role of religious protection began to expand beyond the confines of lay and monastic elites. Criticism of the sangha provides a form of ethical engagement for laypeople, who finds significance in their contribution to "correct" monastic aberration. In the eyes of the public, the monastic order is losing its way and becoming corrupt and incompetent. This prevailing view is a result of a combination of increased lay exposure to behavior within the temples and a newfound sense of empowerment on the part of the laity to speak on behalf of the sangha. Since the 1980s, several scandals involving well-known monks and their malpractices pertaining to the issues of money and mistresses have hit the sangha, who, to the dismay of the observers, did not seem to exhibit any capability or willingness to deal with the problems at hand.[39] The problem of governance was exacerbated by the increasingly common news of monastic abuse, ranging from typical violation of the Vinaya such as substance abuse, sexual relations and financial mismanagement to criminal activities such as narcotic trafficking, sexual assault, theft, fraud and homicide. Even though abuses within the monastic order are a common aspect of monasticism, and historically its pervasiveness was the reason that

[39] Scandals involving Phra Yantra and Phra Nikorn, two of the most famous monks at the time, were a major source of controversy that turned people against the sangha. For an account detailing these scandals, see Keyes (1999).

the *Vinaya* was created to regulate such behavior, increased media exposure has heightened public perception of the problem and led to the mounting distrust of monkhood.[40]

While negative news report may reinforce pessimism toward the sangha, there is a larger issue at play here. Traditionally, the sangha played an integral part in everyday life, and a local temple was considered a center of community. Such relations were, however, disrupted by a long trend characterized by the growing distance between the sangha and society due to the diminished role of temples in the communities and as social welfare provider. The rise of secular institutions such as hospitals, schools and courts have displaced the social role that temples and monks used to have.[41] In parallel to such developments was the liberalization of religious knowledge such that, thanks to technological development, the laity now could access the scriptures and various sources of interpretation that they could pick and choose to suit their needs. The task of interpretation and propagation, previously controlled by the monastic order, has now become the terrain for new lay religious virtuosos who command mass following for their meditation courses. Within this context, lay Buddhist organizations also have begun to compete with the sangha in proposing alternate visions of true Buddhism.[42]

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[40] Phra Preeyapong (2010), member of the monastic order, compiled criminal offences committed by members of the monastic order during the period from 2003-2007 that were reported in popular daily newspapers and found that there were 117 cases reported in the news. These offences could be separated into four categories, which were homicide (37 cases), sexual assault (35 cases), theft (30 cases) and narcotic-related (15 cases). A majority of the cases involving sexual assault, Phra Peeyarong found, were committed against minors and by monks with the age group in the range of 41-60 years with average year in the monkhood to be in the minimum of five years. Most of victims were close acquaintances of the perpetrators, and victims in 34 out of all the cases were female, while the rest were male. The total number of criminal cases against monks, however, is not known. Similar to cases of sexual assault in the US, many victims do not feel safe to come forward and report directly to the authority for fear of reprisal, since they still live near and have normal interaction with the perpetrators.

[41] Despite the view that the monastics should restrict their role to studying scriptures and performing ceremonials, Tiyavanich (1997) provides an account of the existence of rich and diverse monastic traditions throughout parts of what are now considered Thailand. In her research, Tiyavanich shows that monks had important social functions in such areas as, agriculture, astrology, public health, dispute resolution, education and counselor, among others. The notion that monks should behave in a limited manner, Tiyavanich contends, is a recent product of what she terms "official Thai Buddhism," which emerged from the centralization of the sangha through Bangkok's initiative to consolidate power over small polities and create a common outlook among such multitude.

[42] For discussion on the rise of lay Buddhism through the lens of mass meditation and lay Buddhist associations in Thailand, see Satasut (2015).

The changing relations between the state, sangha and society have contributed to the widening gap in the public understanding between the ideal and the actual. In other words, the discrepancy is heightened between the romanticized image of monkhood traditionally defined by asceticism and purity and the ways that monks usually live. Because monkhood is an avenue that offers a wide variety of possibilities, from social mobility and spiritual development to even refuge from penal offence, for different types of people who enter, it is bound to have those with different goals and pursuits (Tambiah 1976; Wyatt 1994, 207-18).[43] The criticism of the sangha is usually leveled at those who are ordained for such worldly purposes as prestige. Incidents of monastic misbehavior are part of the disenchantment of the sangha.[44] Monks, at the same time, understand that they are under watchful eyes of the public. During my fieldwork, my monastic informants, especially young ones, often told me that they did not know how to handle themselves under public scrutiny.

[43] Thepchusuk (1996) suggests in her research, which was conducted in the mid-1990s through documentary research and survey, that while there existed a tendency for news media to portray the monastics in negative light, especially on the criminal issues and mostly pertaining to abbots, or monks with administrative responsibility, lay Buddhists tended to view monks in a much more positive light. Still, those lay Buddhists responding to her survey also suggested that they were concerned about what they seemed to be an increasing trend in monastic consumerism and commercialization. The increased frequency and magnitude of the scandals in the 1990s, among which Wat Phra Thammakai was a principal event, would change the way that laypeople viewed the sangha.

[44] What did the public expect of the sangha, one may ask. In his highly controversial dissertation, Phra Ratchapanyarangsi (Veeravet Phachareon) (2010), then assistant abbot of Wat Phitchaya Yatikaram, a prominent Mahanikai royal temple, and sangha head of Klong San District, surveyed ten temples in Bangkok, half of which were temples with high incident of complaints filed against resident monks, while another half were temples with large following and had low level of complaint. Out of the sample of a thousand from the age of 35-60 and with varying occupation, Phra Ratchapanyarangsi found that there were seven primary characteristics of contemporary monastic behavior that people responded to be most repulsed, which were: 1) not following monastic precepts 2) having sexual relations 3) being in places inappropriate for monks 4) seeking material wealth through improper means 5) not verbally and physical well composed 6) acting out of propriety and 7) not fulfilling monastic obligations. Behaviors from drinking alcohol, having meal after noontime, gambling, substance abuse, having mistress, buying pornography, frauds and seeking only profit repulsed laypeople, and Veeravet provided ample anecdotes to back his argument. On the other hand, his survey showed that people were keen on monks, who propagated *thamma* through various media channels, participated in social works without class discrimination, used proper language and had good manner, and led people to practice *thamma*, keep basic precepts and chant. More importantly, the respondents shared their opinion that even though severe monastic abuse happened, people remained faithful to Buddhism because they believed in the Buddha's teaching more than monks as individuals. When the dissertation was complete, news channels picked up a lead and started publicizing the findings because this was one of the few occasions when a monastic member with administrative and ecclesiastic rank spoke up. The news was received with much dismay and criticism from many members of the sangha, who thought that the research painted the sangha in negative light and that any problem within should be dealt internally. Veeravet, as a result, had to keep low profile and not provide any interview for fear of more criticism from the sangha, which could have serious consequence on his monastic career.

They felt anxious when going outside of their temples to run errands because laypeople would look at their movement with dissecting eyes, sometimes showing disapproval on the faces, which prompted them to question whether they might have done something that these laypeople did not agree with such as their robes came loose while walking or using money to pay for things.[45] The same concern is also true within the sangha where the more senior monks would use the charge of impropriety to discipline young monks or monks with lesser rank. For those monastics in positions of power, public propriety is a serious matter that needs policing because anything that deviates from the norms of monastic etiquette could result in a negative portrayal and be harmful to the sangha as a whole, even if those monastic leaders are also accused of the very thing that they try to police.[46] Then again, many other powerful monks do not care as much about such activisms, especially those with large following who do not have to depend on the monastic hierarchy for opportunity or support.

In recent years, public suspicion of the sangha has deepened with the increasingly politicized role of the monkhood. Recent controversies suggest that because of the influence that well-known and high-ranking monks command over their followers, these monks could somehow get away with their abuse. In 2013, for instance, a controversy broke out when photos of monks wearing designer aviation sunglasses in a private jet with a Louis Vuitton bag surfaced on the internet, went viral and became a headline for both national and international media. Luang Pu Nen Kham

[45] Some of the monks I talked to even went so far as to suggest that negative depiction of monks in the news was intentional and could be done by either the media who could sell their news on misbehaving monks to the hungry public or those with malicious intent who could benefit from the fall of the sangha, like certain Muslim groups, for example. I was also told that there was a pattern to the reporting as unfavorable news of monastic expose would usually occur around important Buddhist holidays, perceived as an attempt to tarnish the sanctity of the occasion. When I asked academia or researchers about this observation, they informed me that they had yet to see the evidence.

[46] One of my monastic informants told me, for example, a rumor that an assistant abbot of a prominent royal temple in Bangkok, who was known for his tirade against gay monks and their inappropriate conduct, was himself guilty of the same charge due to an open secret concerning his preferred sexual orientation. The phrase that my informant told me was that the assistant abbot "could not throw the snake away from his neck," which was meant to indicate that he was hypocritical of what he preached, and that it would come to haunt him.

Chattiko, or Venerable Grandfather Novice Kham, was identified as one of the monks in the photos. He soon became a target of public inquiries as to where his wealth came from. Criticism of his lavish lifestyle led to the revelation that he might have committed a severe breach of the monastic code when women came out to allege that he slept with them and paid them to silence their voices. Nen Kham, as a result, fled the impending charges and sought exile in the United States.[47]

Even though the case of Nen Kham may be the most publicized example of monastic abuse in the last five years, the controversy involving Wat Phra Thammakai in the early 1990s was regarded as a more gravely serious matter. The case of Wat Phra Thammakai is commonly referenced when criticism of the decline of Buddhism and the sangha is brought up. The temple has grown at an exponential rate since its establishment in the 1970s, attracting large urban following. During the 1990s, the temple began one of its most controversial projects: the construction of a mega cetiya, or a dome-shaped stupa, as symbol of world peace that could accommodate millions of temple followers in one single space. The project attracted much criticism from the public, especially after the 1997 financial crisis. In that financially volatile time, many observers saw the project as an attempt to drum up consumerism in the name of merit-making. Debates on the proper meaning of

[47] Nen Kham, or Novice Kham, whose secular name was Wirapol Sukphol, held the position as an abbot of Wat Pa Khantitham in Ubon Ratchathani and was considered a highly revered monk, who claimed to have had a vision of himself as a monk in the last reincarnation. In this life, because he continued his monkhood, the years added up, and hence why he called himself "Venerable Grandfather Novice" to add the years from his last reincarnation to this life. He also added the word "Nen," or novice, to this title to indicate his young age. Nen Kham gained his notoriety through the publication of his biography and miracle stories and attracted a large group of followers, most of whom were the affluent crowds from Bangkok and other urban centers. Soon enough, he had accumulated a substantial amount of influences and money from his following and even bought luxury cars and properties in California to use for his retreat. The hype, however, came crashing down in 2013 when photos of jet setting lifestyle unbecoming of monastic behavior appeared followed by photos of him sharing intimate moments with women. Criticism from the public was harsh and led to an investigation into the claims that he had sexual relations with minors and women, which was a severe violation of the Vinaya and thus considered a legitimate ground for defrocking, in addition to a complaint filed to the police by a woman alleging of intimidation. Nen Kham later fled the country, apprehended in the US and brought back to Thailand in 2017 to face charges. He was defrocked upon his return in Thailand (Laohong 2016).

merit-making and role of the sangha in guiding people to the "right" direction ensued. These deliberations, however, did not stop the construction, which was completed in 2010 (Scott 2009).

Public outcry over the case of Wat Phra Thammakai, however, led to an investigation into its abbot, Phra Thammachayo (Chaiyabun Suddhipo), a highly charismatic figure that founded and led the temple into prosperity. In 1999, Thammachayo was accused of many wrongdoings from illegal acquisition of lands and money embezzlement to doctrinal distortion. These charges led to an investigation by *Mahathera Samakhom* (heretofore "*Mahathera*") that included setting up a committee to oversee the process and assess the charges of monastic offense. Thammachayo emerged as a target of the investigation due to an accusation that his own name appeared on deeds of lands that had been donated to the temple. When the review was complete, however, *Mahathera* declared that the temple and Thammachayo had not violated the Vinaya to the degree that would merit defrocking. Instead they ordered the temple to focus on monastic education, meditation practice, and strict adherence to monastic code of conduct and regulations by *Mahathera*. The result sparked an outrage among the public as well as discord among the monastic order. Then Supreme Patriarch, Somdet Phra Yannasangwon (Charoen Suwattano) from Wat Bowornniwet, was among the minority faction in *Mahathera* who believed that Thammachayo had committed serious offences and should be defrocked. Sensing that *Mahathera* was dominated by Thammachayo's influence, he wrote his opinions in five letters explaining why Thammachayo should be defrocked after the conclusion of the investigation in 1999. Three of the letters were acknowledged by all *Mahathera* members present in the regular meeting, but no further action took place. Even though the Department of Religious Affairs filed charges of embezzlement against Thammachayo, the case was dismissed by Office of the Attorney General in 2006. Many took notice that the dismissal happened under the Thai Rak Thai administration, led by Thaksin

Shinawatra, and questioned whether the government had any hand in influencing the decision to dismiss the case. The legacy of this incident, especially the opinions expressed by Somdet Phra Yannasangwon and the perception of collusion between the ruling party and Wat Phra Thammakai, would be central to the conflict between the monastic order and the junta in post-coup Thailand.

Prelude to the Moral Coup

I have outlined the development of lay intelligentsia and argued that its formation provides a cultural foundation and conceptual guideline for the subsequent movement to implement monastic reform and discipline the sangha. Traditionally, monastic reform was located within the domain of the ruling authority, but after changes in political order since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, there was more room for commoners to lay claim to the issue. This chapter has argued that the emergence of innovative doctrinal interpretations in the twentieth century provided the foundation for criticism of the sangha by a new group of Buddhist intellectuals among the laity.

The effort of these lay social activists, as can be seen from this chapter, did not just suddenly appear after the 2014 coup. Rather, the reformists had been working to make their claims and agenda publicly acceptable. Surviving the period of extended military rule in the 1940s and coming of age during the transition of Thai economy from humble to explosive growth starting in the 1950s, this generation was both familiar with the military-led administration and willing to participate in protests to oust leaders that they deemed morally corrupt and failing to fulfill the criteria of benevolent dictator that Phutthathat proposed as a model for an ideal governance. In this sense, the monastic reform in the post-2014 coup could be seen as reflective of the maturing role of lay Buddhist activists and their longstanding call to purify and return the sangha to its supposed state.

In the next chapter, I will attend to how the reform attempt led the junta and those in power to believe that the sangha was too powerful and must be contained. Compounded by a series of scandals and a growing recognition that the sangha was its own worst enemy, the call for monastic reform by laypeople gave a justification to the junta to interfere in monastic affairs. The initial military attempt proved to be just a formality with no real bite, and its agenda was subsequently contained by the monastic establishment and its bureaucratic allies. The situation, however, was reversed with the formation of a religious reform committee headed by Paibun Nititawan and other activists, who shared similar sentiments that there were issues within the sangha that must be rectified to restore the institution back to its venerated status. While monastic resistance led to the dissolution of the committee, it also illustrated the power that the sangha had and contributed to the awareness of the state in recognizing the importance of reforming the sangha.

CHAPTER 2

Reform Before Elections

> *The most important task is maintaining law and order in the country. [The NCPO] has prepared laws related to several issues to support all kinds of operations for now and in the future. A procedure for reform will be established in order to solve all conflicts. There will be a new legislative procedure for solving the country's problems so that the country can move forward in a stable manner and without conflict (*Prachatai *2014a).*
>
> -General Prayuth Chan-o-cha after the royal appointment as the Head of the NCPO
> Monday 26 May 2014

On 22 May 2014, after declaring the imposition of nation-wide martial law two days prior, the military staged a coup d'état against the democratically elected government headed by Yingluck Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai Party and assumed power under the name of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Riding on the popular support of conservative elites, large sections of the urban middle-class and constituents from the South, the junta vowed to enact extensive national reforms and bring back "stability and order" after more than a decade of political turmoil (Hewison 2014). As soon as the issuance of the royal endorsement to appoint General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, former army chief and head of the NCPO, to the head of the government a week after the coup, the junta announced its plans to focus on reconciliation for the first three months, followed by at least a year of political reform. Only when the government carried out the necessary reforms, and a draft constitution was in place, could elections be held (Agence 2014). In a nation where the military was thought to have retreated to the barracks in the 1990s, the 2014 coup represented one of the twelve successful coups out of at least nineteen attempts. This successful coup then began the latest extended period of the military rule in Thailand.[1]

[1] The number of failed coup attempts, at any rate, remains a debate, which could be found in Farrelly (2011).

The political rhetoric contained in the opening quote and later implemented in a continual manner by the NCPO would not have been plausible were it not for the moral fervor that anti-democratic leaders had drummed up to ensure that nothing but a full coup would be an acceptable solution to the country's perceived problems. The coup succeeded on the strength of a populist protest movement that identified itself as a moral force locked in a struggle to force out a corrupt government that, according to the movement, threatened the very existence of the Thai nation. The rise of the military, in other words, was made possible by the support of those who believed that the monarchy and nation were under attack. Under the guidance of conservative social activists, royalists and political groups, they formed into royal-nationalist forces, which appeared under such names as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). These groups were more popularly known as "the yellow shirts" and "whistle mobs" respectively. These iterations, despite differences in names and a few details, shared common ground in terms of values, leadership and mobilization tactics that centered on notions that equated the moral to the political, and identified Western norms of democratic principles and human rights as its opposition. The royal-nationalist movement viewed Thaksin Shinawatra, the tycoon-turned-prime-minister ousted in the 2006 coup, as its nemesis as the embodiment of corruption and immorality. Their political rhetoric employed distinctly Buddhist vocabulary and idioms as tactics to claim legitimacy, mobilize their base, and gather popular support (Winichakul, 2008; Kitirianglarp and Hewison, 2010).

In the first part, this chapter provides an overview of the events that led to the 2014 coup and the ideas that not only made the coup possible, but also created the context and justification for monastic reform. Prominent in the leadership of the royal-nationalist forces were reform-minded Buddhist activists, particularly Pipop Thongchai, Rasana Tositakul, Santisuk Sophonsiri,

Chermsak Pinthong, Paibun Nititawan and Phra Phuttha Itsara. Several of these activists would come to be part of the initiative for monastic reform and play a critical role in subsequent confrontations with the monastic order.

In the middle section of this chapter, I attend to the transition from which the question of monastic reform changed from a general into an urgent issue. Initially, the military government did not list monastic reform as a priority. Despite the initial passivity exhibited by the junta, the initiative advanced by these Buddhist social activists in creating a committee to deliberate on monastic reform set the agenda into motion and turned the sangha against the junta. Activism of those within the government was seen by many monks as a challenge to the sangha, an institution that had long been held in veneration. Underlying the change in the attitude of the state, I argue, was the growing recognition that the monastic order presented a liability to the military government due to its command over cultural capital, affinity with opposition political groups and increased political activism.

In the last part of the chapter, I outline a brief summary of the Buddhist Reform Committee with regards to their proceedings and findings. I examine the underlying legal issues informing the position taken by the committee on the subject of monastic reform as well as how the sangha law granted unchecked power to the sangha over its own rank and file and helped the ecclesia to build a strong economic base that went largely unaccounted for. A central barrier to monastic reform was an entrenchment of interest between the ecclesia and powerful members of the public offices, especially between *Mahathera* and Office of National Buddhism (ONAB). The case of the proposal to create a supplementary blasphemy law provides an opportunity to under the close working relationship between ONAB and the ecclesia, which illustrates the intimate connection between sectors of the government and the monastic leadership. The blasphemy law, as the

analysis suggests, was intended to not only solidify the power the sangha had over monastic matters, but also religious affairs, in effect equipping the sangha with political weapon to silence its critics and concentrating the power within the hands of the Buddhist ecclesia.

Moralizing Politics

The junta's talk of political reforms echoed a familiar phrase employed among the protestors who helped to bring the military to power and believed that declining morality and electoral politics were the primary causes behind the political conflict. Leading up to the 2014 coup, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)—an umbrella group consisting of conservative royalists, members of the Democrat Party, student activists and populations from Bangkok and the southern provinces of Thailand[2]—made the slogan "Reform Before Elections" a central theme in its anti-government protest. For months, PDRC leaders and supporters occupied central business districts in Bangkok and disrupted the 2014 national election by blocking polling stations. They called for an end to the Yingluck administration and demanded political reform of corruption and vote-buying. Fundamental to their demands was a widespread notion that moral dissipation had led to rampant corruption and cronyism. The figure at the center of their ire was Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was a controversial figure generally regarded as the personification of greed, money and corruption due to the association between his immense business fortune amassed through state concessions. His authoritarian leadership in an administration plagued with one corruption scandal after another.[3] Not coincidentally, leaders of PDRC also included PAD activists

[2] For a general breakdown of and discussion on the PDRC constituency, see Sinpeng (2014b).

[3] Rising to power in 2001 with a landslide victory in the national election, Thaksin and his party, Thai Rak Thai, changed the Thai political landscape. Through their innovative public policy that allowed citizens access to welfare schemes such as universal healthcare, microfinance and local enterprise development, Thaksin's administration weakened the provincial and traditional political networks that once controlled their constituencies. As a result, power was consolidated in the hands of the executive branch and party leadership, and Thaksin emerged as a formidable figure who became a threat to both the status quo, urban middle class and civil society, who all felt that Thaksin's

like Rosana Tositrakul, Santisuk Sophonpanich, Chermsak Pinthong, Paisal Puechmongkol and Pipop Thongchai, who considered themselves followers of, or drew inspiration from, Phutthathat's teachings.[4]

During the period of the PDRC mobilization in 2013 and 2014, I regularly attended its rallies both on my own and with my informants who were lay meditation practitioners and supporters of the movement. While PDRC was a popular movement active in all regions, its strongholds were in Bangkok and provinces in the South.[5] In its early phase, the movement started as a small gathering led by Suthep Thuagsuban, a former deputy premier and then Secretary the Democrat Party, to protest the amnesty bill that would pardon Thaksin Shinawatra and allow him to return to Thailand. Since 2006, anti-Thaksin sentiment had already been a potent force in Thai political landscape and played a crucial role in supporting political movements that sought to drive out Thaksin, his influences and associates from Thailand through whatever means necessary.

In the eyes of the anti-Thaksin coalition, Thaksin and his cronies were plundering the national budget and resources through populist policies at the expense of everyone else. Thaksin, according to this view, was given license to loot by the support from the provincial population, whose vote was "bought" by Thaksin's populism and hence were ready to cast their ballots for him and his associates to win in any election, given their overwhelming numbers.[6] Democracy, in this view, was rotten from the inside because, without morality, the system instead fostered a tyranny of the

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power was too excessive to contain and had serious implication toward the system of checks and balances. After the scandal involving the sale of his telecommunication conglomerate and tax evasion, public outrage developed into a movement, called People's Alliance for Democracy and known informally as the "yellow shirts" as a reference to the color of King Bhumibol, a figure of integrity and benevolence who is viewed as the opposite of Thaksin. Thaksin was forced into exile by the 2006 coup, but his influences remain in Thai politics to the present. For more information and discussion of Thaksin Shinawatra, see Pasuk and Baker (2009).

[4] For information and discussion of political activism of Phutthathat's followers, see Buangsuang (2013).

[5] For an overview of the events leading to, during and after the PDRC protest, see *International Crisis Group* (2014).

[6] Thaksin's political base is primarily in the North and Northeast where the number of populations exceeds the rest of the country and thus carries enough popular vote to decide the election outcome. For discussion on political development and voting trend, specifically in the 2011 general election, see Pasuk & Baker (2013).

majority. Corruption and vote-buying were then no longer issues of isolated moral failures but perceived as related. Educated urbanites looked at electoral politics as a threat with wide-ranging consequences that could jeopardize public well-being and the overall integrity of the Thai body politic.[7] From this perspective, Thaksin was the embodiment of malevolence and elections were his instrument for seizing power.[8] The attitude of the anti-Thaksin crowds, therefore, was to deny any electoral process that would guarantee political representation of those who would potentially vote for Thaksin and his associates.

The sentiment, however, was not able to stop Yingluck Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai Party from winning the 2011 general election. When Yingluck Shinawatra, the first Thai female premier, assumed office in 2011, the fact that she was Thaksin's younger sister and leader of the political party closely connected to him led people to regard her as just a puppet of her older brother. Even though the Pheu Thai administration withstood a wave of attacks over the first two years, the turning point came when the government proposed a new law that would grant amnesty to all who were affected by the color-coded politics, including political prisoners and those in exile. The amnesty included Thaksin, then living in exile in Dubai. With the furor over the amnesty bill, it took only a few pieces to fall in place to revive this political emotion that constituted the formation of anti-Thaksin coalition. When the Yingluck administration refused to withdraw and attempted to pass this unpopular bill through a parliamentary session at the wee hours of the night, the response was overwhelming. Moral outrage broke out and people on both sides of the political spectrum condemned the proposal as unacceptable. "They [the Yingluck government] are trying

[7] The debate on vote-buying as a political disease began to widely spread in the 1990s during the height of the struggle for political reform, which led to the formation of the 1997 constitution, or the "people's constitution." Vote-buying was, and remains to this day, considered a failure of incompetent individuals, and not the result of structural or ideological issues (Callahan 2005). Such position shares much in common with how corruption was perceived by PDRC to be the responsibility of civilian politicians, who are corrupt and corrupting (Hewison 2014).

[8] For discussions and rationale as to why it was necessary to dispose Thaksin provided by anti-Thaksin forces in the lead-up to the 2006 coup, see Tejapira (2006).

to rob us," my informant, who identified herself as an anti-Thaksin supporter and royalist, told me when the news came out the next day. "I am so angry right now. If they think they can do what they want," she continued, "we will show them what we can do."

The anti-Thaksin forces came out to protest and eventually led to the formation of the PDRC. Believing that the government's agenda behind the amnesty bill was purely driven by shameless self-interest, the protesters insisted that the current political predicament could only end when the administration was completely removed from power, and that everything had to be reset before Thailand could move forward. Crowds of the residents of Bangkok and groups from the South and other provinces began to assemble and occupy areas in downtown Bangkok. They set up stages, tents, portable bathrooms, kitchens and first-aid areas to prepare for a long, drawn-out campaign, which escalated from the original protest site at Ratchadamnern Avenue to other locations in Bangkok. During the day, most protest sites were generally quiet with provincial protesters resting and prepping for the night when PDRC leaders took the stage to address the crowds. Replay of speeches from the previous night could be heard throughout the day while people were going about their normal lives. At night, people in collar shirts and office dresses began to appear after five in the afternoon, and tables were set out with merchandise for sale from shirts, whistles, bags, hairpins to other accessories bearing white, blue and red, the color standards of the Thai national flag.[9]

Designated tents distributed freshly cooked food to lines of people as the speakers began to sound out the welcome from the organizers. In the early hours of the evening, each protest site became enlivened with speeches by PDRC leaders and cheers from the crowds. "Brothers and sisters," a familiar phrase sounded from the stage at the Asoke intersection as I was watching my friend running to grab a quick bite from one of the tents, "we are about to start with today's update."

[9] The flag of Thailand has five horizontal stripes in red, white, blue, white and red. These colors represent nation (red), religion (white) and king (blue).

When the speakers took the stage, my friend ran back with a plastic bowl with noodles and soup. "Did I miss anything?," he asked, "did they say anything important?" I told him that no, he did not miss anything, and that the festivity was about to start. This was a typical day for any PDRC stage in 2014 where daytime was a downtime where it was hard to find many protesters or anything going on at each protest site, but everything came alive when night fell and PDRC supporters came from their work or residence. In those days, it was easy to spot who was going to the protest. The dress code of the protesters dictated that at least one item in the attire must contain the color standards of the national flag. Many people found that using the ribbon with the color motif of the flag was a good way to identify their status as PDRC supporter, and thus every night, protesters, especially those leaving their offices to attend the rally before going back home, could be seen tying the ribbon to their designer handbags or making the ribbon into their necklaces. They came every night with the hope of hearing more expose or claims of victory to deepen their conviction that their movement was about to achieve the purging of Thaksin and his influences from the body politic. Right around ten at night, before the audience's focus reach the point of diminishing return, speakers would wrap up their talk and let their devotees return home to rest for the night.

Central to the demand made by the anti-government and royalist alliances was a call for national reform before election to address what they thought as the chronic problem of corruption and vote-buying. The PDRC, however, did not envision the reform to be democratically engineered. During the protest, for example, Suthep Thuagsuban, the face of the PDRC, raised the possibility of invoking Article 17 from the 1959 Administrative Charter. This article had previously allowed the military dictatorship under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat absolute authority to order public executions and to manage national affairs (Haberkorn 2014).[10] The statement made

[10] Suthep spoke of onstage on April 2014. Article 17 of the 1959 Interim Constitution states that "whenever the Prime Minister deems it appropriate for the purpose of impressing or suppressing actions, whether of internal or external

by Suthep not only anticipated the subsequent military intervention, but also demonstrated a popular sentiment that reform was necessary and that dictatorship, as Suthep's assertion suggested, was a price worth paying for the eradication of the political disease plaguing Thailand. People in the audience seemed receptive as well. I asked one of my informants who regularly attended the rally to tell me why he supported the PDRC agenda that reform must come before any election. "Isn't it obvious," he answered me with a question, "that nothing will come of it if we pursue a normal process in parliament?" Looking at my puzzled face, he corroborated his question: "Because Thaksin and his people control the majority of politicians and can buy the support of voters through his populist policies, we need to have a suitable playing field where change can come about." One of the common rumors at the time was that the military was siding with the protesters, and many PDRC supporters looked to the army as a possible ally that could effectively assist in their quest to purify Thailand. "Is it ok if the military intervenes and stages a coup," I asked my fried. "Do you see any alternative? We only want the nation to be able to move forward again. If we let Thaksin supporters participate in the process, things will always remain the same." Reform before election was unmistakably meant to indicate reform without representation.

Camouflaging Sentiments

Such widespread sentiment among the anti-government protesters and their mobilization to demand reform precipitated and legitimated military action. As the events leading to the coup exhibited, the appeal for the toppling of Yingluck and the Pheu Thai administration was grounded in the moral imperative to purify Thailand and take control of its future. The moralist discourse

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origin, which jeopardize the national security or the Throne or subvert or threaten law and order, the Prime Minister, by resolution of the Council of Ministers, is empowered to issue orders to take steps accordingly. Such orders or steps shall be considered legal" (Chaloemtiarana 1979, 129). For an account of Thailand under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, see Chaloemtiarana (1979).

and demonstrations alone, however, could not have led to any success, were it not for assistance from the military, who used the popular sentiment as its impetus to intervene. Even though the military was supposedly under the directive of the government, Army Chief Prayuth rejected Yingluck's plea for the military to contain the protest. Instead, the army publicly claimed neutrality to both sides, a move that, as political scientist Paul Chambers (2014) observes, "amounted to a mere veneer for concealed hostility toward the Yingluck government." The military's refusal to enforce order and their public announcement of possible intervention, raised critical questions regarding the army's proclaimed "neutrality". In effect, this allowed the rumor of an imminent coup to spread amidst the public as the PDRC protest raged on (Apornrath 2013).[11] The ensuing coup and reactions from PDRC leadership and supporters, who welcomed the takeover with great enthusiasm and came to constitute the political base of the junta, deepened suspicions of hidden collusion between the PDRC and military.[12]

Given the enthusiasm exhibited by the protesters, it would come as no surprise then that the junta regarded the positions of the PDRC favorably, not least because the PDRC could now be considered their political base.[13] Having such support served as both a basis for further action as

[11] Even though it was clear that PDRC pinpointed corruption and vote-buying as the root cause of the current political crisis and argued that the government, bureaucracy and laws needed to be reformed before any election could take place, the details of such reform, at any rate, were not specified, except the proposal that suggested the establishing of "people's council," consisting of representatives from professional sectors and provinces, to determine the areas and content of the reform. For more information on PDRC, see Prajak (2016).

[12] Rumors had been floating around during the protest that PDRC leadership acted with the understanding that they were creating conditions to "invite" the military intervention. Right after the coup, for example, PDRC leadership threw a private military-style camouflage-themed lavish party on May 29 to celebrate a birthday of one of the leaders as well as their "victory," which drew criticism that the theme was a reference to their collaboration with the military (*Bangkok Post* 2014). The basis for this argument, in any case, became highly credible when Suthep Thaugsuban, former Democrat Party MP and PDRC leader, was reported to say in a post-coup fundraising dinner with 100 PDRC supporters in June at the Pacific Club in Bangkok that he had been in regular contact with General Prayuth during the protest via the Line chat app. According to the Bangkok Post, Suthep spoke to his supporters that "Before martial law was declared, Gen Prayuth told me 'Khun Suthep and your masses of PDRC supporters are too exhausted. It's now the duty of the army to take over the task'" (Suksamran 2014).

[13] The role of the PDRC as the political base for the junta could also be observed from the time right after the coup the National Reform Council was created to deliberate on the details of reform agenda, at least 13% of the total 250 seats were PDRC leaders (*Prachatai* 2014).

well as a necessary buffer to the masses who remained loyal to the ousted government. More importantly, the concerns of its political constituency could also be used to as justification for military action, especially on such issues as censorship, law and morality. In the case of monastic reform, as will be seen later in this chapter, an ongoing call for intervention into monastic affairs permitted the military action. The ground for the translation of PDRC agenda into practice was thus assisted not only through military might, but also mass support from the anti-Thaksin protesters, which consisted of large sections of urban middle class, technocrats and business groups, among others. Their status and influence, despite being outnumbered by Thaksin's followers, gave weight to their support of the military.

The junta also employed a coercive approach to control public opinions. Ann Stoler suggests that the sentiments of colonial subjects were a principal concern of the Dutch colonial state in the Indies because feelings, if not properly managed, could spread and grow into the resistance (2004). The NCPO, in a similar vein, also sought to shape public sentiments through censorship and the creation of a narrative that its role was crucial to the stability and happiness of the nation. After rising to power on the strength of popular support from the PDRC, the junta's first step in enforcing morality-based reform was to silence potential critics. The junta suspended the constitution, censored all media and detained politicians, academics and activists. Claiming that reining in the current political configuration was a necessary measure toward restoring "genuine democracy," the junta set out to create conditions that would minimize opposition to its rule while accommodating the demands of its political supporters. Control was especially important in the aftermath of the coup since large sections of the populace did not agree with the coup. Even after the coup, for instance, a group of protesters gathered on an elevated walkway connected to the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre. Right after the coup, small protests continued to occur in

downtown Bangkok in such places McDonalds, shopping malls and Thammasat University despite the ban on political gatherings of more than five or more people. Thousands of troops had to be deployed to keep watch and stifle protests, which led to arrests of protesters in multiple locations (Williams 2014; Mooney and Webb 2014).

The situation began to ease up when military rule was normalized by royal approval, which set the stage for the formation of a new cabinet and administration. With the royal endorsement and ratification of the interim constitution in late July 2014, the NCPO proceeded to establish five core agencies to streamline the reform program. Called the "five rivers," these agencies were the NCPO, National Legislative Assembly (NLA), Cabinet, National Reform Council (NRC) and Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC). In particular, the NRC, whose membership was by appointment and consisted mostly of elites from the military, bureaucracy, academia and PDRC, was tasked with drafting reform recommendations on a wide range of issues that included economic, political, social, environmental and judicial considerations, among other matters (Saiyasombut 2014). On July 19, the NCPO enacted announcement number 97 that ordered all forms of media including print, electronic, broadcast and social media to cease presenting information that might create or escalate conflict, distort facts or lead to violence. The announcement, in effect, functioned as a ban on criticism from both journalists, citizens and social-media users (*Bangkok Post* 2014b).[14]

In cultural terms, the junta opted to conduct a political offensive through the production of cultural activities and artefacts that sought to uplift the public mood and strengthen its political legitimacy. In addition to organizing street parties and music festivals, the junta instituted a regular national broadcasting program where Prayut gave speeches to the nation every Friday. They flooded the airwaves with a song called "Return Happiness to Thailand," which was allegedly

[14] For details on the orders issued by the NCPO right after the coup to restrict media freedom, see iLaw Freedom (2015).

penned by Prayut himself (*The Guardian* 2014).[15] Puangthong Pawakapan (2017) has pointed out that civil affairs have become an important avenue for the military's political offensive, which is legible in the cultural activities the NCPO employed to craft an image of the military and construct favorable sentiment from the public.[16] Simply put, the junta's goal, as these efforts implied, was to remake the image of military rule in post-coup Thailand through creating affective bonds between the military and society.

Rhetoric and activities oriented towards the theme of a return to happiness were, however, only meant as mitigating actions. Underlying the junta's reform was the idea that declining morality among the Thai populace instigated political disorder. This notion was shared among various groups, especially among the royalist and anti-Thaksin circles, who deemed Thaksin's populism as the source of moral disorder that had distorted traditional values and undone the ties that bound all elements of the Thai body politic together. This notion was articulated most directly in Prayut's speech during his regular Friday broadcast on July 11, 2014:

> The persisting problems in Thailand that need to be solved urgently require inclusive cooperation from people of all levels, gender and age. I suggest that we firstly define clear core values of Thai people so that we can build a strong nation. The people must be strong. Therefore, the people should possess the following attributes
>
> 1. Upholding the nation, the religions and the Monarchy, which is [sic] the key institution
> 2. Being honest, sacrificial and patient with positive attitude for the common good of the public
> 3. Being grateful to the parents, guardians and teachers
> 4. Seeking knowledge and education directly and indirectly
> 5. Treasuring the precious Thai tradition
> 6. Maintaining moral, integrity, well-wishes upon others as well as being generous and sharing

[15] Subsequent reports later reveal that Wichian Tantiphimonphan, a freelance songwriter behind many hits, has been behind the melody and arrangement of the majority, if not all, of the songs "allegedly" written by Prayuth. The findings question the authenticity of the claim made by Prayuth that he himself has penned the lyrics of the songs (VoiceTV 2019; Panyalertwut 2019).

[16] The case study that Puangthong examines is the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) which was empowered and increasingly assumed a more political role after the 2006 coup,

> 7. Understanding, learning the true essence of democratic ideals with His Majesty the King as the Head of State
> 8. Maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority
> 9. Being conscious and mindful of action in line with His Majesty's the King's statements
> 10. Practicing the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King. Saving money for time of need. Being moderate with surplus used for sharing or expansion of business while having good immunity
> 11. Maintaining both physical and mental health and unyielding to the dark force or desires, having sense of shame over guilt and sins in accordance with the religious principles
> 12. Putting the public and national interest before personal interest.
>
> These are the 12 core values of the Thai people that I have compiled (Chan-o-cha 2014a).

Introducing what he believed to be the core values that defined the ideal Thai citizen, Prayut's proposal put forward a vision that prioritized hierarchical relations and conformity to the traditional institutions of family, religion and monarchy. Throughout the speech, Prayuth repeatedly mentioned "religions" as source of morality that could guide people to right conduct. The specific mention of "religions" in the plural served to remind the audience of different religious persuasions that social harmony was a result of conformity to true religious values and practices. There was also a warning of the "dark forces" and danger of self-interest. This vision of social order was unmistakably a moral one where compliance to authority and purity were necessary virtues. This was, in short, a conservative interpretation of citizenship that reflected the military and its alliance's understanding of how individual Thai citizens ought to behave, and what social equilibrium ought to be. The moral foundation upon which the junta grounded its exercise of power constituted a form of authoritarian control where the status quo must be protected at all cost. To instill the right values, coercive measures in the forms of censorship, arbitrary rule and

detention became the instruments through which social control was instituted. Morality by force became the new normal.[17]

Reforming the Sangha

Immediately after the establishment of the NCPO, the military's concern with monastic affairs appeared at first to correspond to the perception that Buddhism and the sangha were facing challenges from within. Instead of adopting a hardline approach, the junta proceeded rather conventionally, collaborating with official entities in charge of monastic governance, which allowed religious authorities to retain control over the terms of reform. The process, at the same time, happened at a volatile moment when the monastic order found itself without an official head. The passing of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon (Charoen Khachawat, 1913-2013), the nineteenth Supreme Patriarch of the Chakri Dynasty, abbot of Wat Bowonniwet and close confidante to King Bhumibol, created a vacancy at the top of the sangha hierarchy. Secondly, monastic misconduct had become a concern among the public and contributed to the mounting criticism of the sangha. These conditions generated much anxiety within the sangha and created an incentive for the monastic leadership to work with the military government to resolve its situations. This context informed much of the political dynamics that took place between the military government and monastic order.

Even though monastic reform did not initially appear as a priority in the junta's original plan, a call for monastic reform was expressed by PDRC leadership prior to the military takeover. Phra Phuttha Itsara (Suwit Thammathiro), a PDRC leader in charge of a protest site during the campaign to shut down Bangkok and pressure the government to dissolve, was a pro-military monk and

[17] For an excellent analysis of arbitrary rule and detention as well as discussions on the history of human rights and impunity in Thailand, including the post-2014 coup period, see Haberkorn (2018).

known outspoken critic of the sangha. In an interview given on March 2014 during the height of the PDRC demonstration, Phuttha Itsara expressed to a reporter from his compound at the Government Complex in Chaengwattana District that even though people criticized his political activism as not befitting of monastic comportment, it was not as unscrupulous as monks indulging in money and taking a wife.

> I'd say that if I can bring about a successful reform, it would mean that all Thais win, and I will reform Buddhism. Rich monks will have their assets confiscated. All temples [will be reformed] because some of these monks are excessively rich with hundreds of millions in their bank accounts. If we do not do anything and let these monks eat away at the belly, then Buddhism is undermined because they will keep devouring until only the skeleton is left and then collapses. My task is to terminate termites (*Post Today* 2014).

What Phuttha Itsara said reverberated with the thought of many PDRC leaders and followers, particularly those in the PAD wing, who shared his position that increasingly corrupt behavior within the sangha must be effectively dealt with once and for all. Central to this position was a recognition of the monastic order's inability to self-regulate because the interest of the monastic establishment was too entrenched for any meaningful reform. A penetration of the bastion that the sangha had become must come from the military working as a decisive, even absolute, power, which could only be possible with popular support.[18]

Still, the junta's religious policy in the beginning seemed to be business as usual. When Prayut gave his policy statement speech to the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) on August 12, 2014, the policy on religious affairs was provided in general terms with no specific objective.[19] Members

[18] When I interviewed Phuttha Itsara at his residence, Wat Onoi, I asked which monk most influenced this line of thinking. He identified Phutthathat to be one of his greatest monastic influences (Phra Phuttha Itsara, in discussion with the author, 4 November 2015).

[19] The sole agenda listed on religious policy designates the government to "nurture and patronize Buddhism and other religions; support religious organizations to have an important role in instilling morals and ethics, including improving the quality of life, building peace and harmony in Thai society in a sustainable way, and participating in developing society according to readiness" (*The Secretariat of the Cabinet* 2014, 7).

of the new administration also did not include any figures who would seem to have problem with the sangha. According to the structure of monastic governance, even though *Mahathera* was the governing body of the sangha, it was still subject to the supervision of the Office of National Buddhism (ONAB), which reported directly to the Prime Minister. The normal protocol was that the premier assigned the oversight of ONAB and monastic affairs to the Deputy Prime Minister and a lower-ranking minister. ONAB itself acted as the secretariat to *Mahathera* and intermediary between the government and the monastic order to facilitate the distribution of national budget to assist the sangha. Within the first cabinet, Witsanu Krue-ngam, a well-known jurist and now Deputy Prime Minister, and Suwaphan Tanyuwatthana, former Director of the National Intelligence Agency and now Minister of the Office of Prime Minister, were assigned to keep watch over ONAB (*Thairath* 2014b). These names unsurprisingly did not cause any stir among the sangha. Suwaphan, a former technocrat appointed primarily to supervise the National Intelligence Agency, had notably never critiqued the sangha. Witsanu was also known as a fixer for the monastic order because of his intimacy with the monastic leadership.[20]

To understand Witsanu's close relationship to the monastic establishment, one has to look at his track record. During a contentious period in 1992, when the demand to amend the existing

[20] Witsanu was a controversial figure in Thai politics, who served many administrations on both sides of the color-coded politics. Born in Hatyai, Songkhla Province in 1951, Witsanu was an exceptional student and was the first in his hometown to receive a doctoral degree in law from University of California-Berkeley on prestigious government scholarship. When Witsanu returned to Thailand, he became a star in the legal field and taught at Ramkhamhaeng, Thammasat and Chulalongkorn Universities, respectfully. He obtained full professorship in 1986. Beside teaching, Witsanu also served as a councilor of the Council of State, a bureaucratic agency that performed consultative functions in drafting laws, providing legal advice to state agencies and submitting opinions to the cabinet for the new legislation and revision or repeal of the existing one. He was also a senator from 1992-1996, government spokesperson in 1992 and deputy premier during the Thai Rak Thai administration. While working for the TRT administration, he was known as a legal fixer for Thaksin, along with Borwornsak Uwanno, Pokin Pallakul and Michai Ruchuphan, all well-known legal scholars. Each was criticized as "barrister for hire" due to their willingness to bend legal principles for political objectives when ordered by the authorities. After the 2006 coup, Witsanu still served in several state committees and accepted the position of deputy premier. I was told by a well-connected informant that prior to accepting the position, Witsanu sought out an advice from a well-known monk, who was famous for fortune telling. His main question was: if he accepted the position, would he be able to pull off what he was tasked to do. The answer was that it would be so severe that he would "vomit blood" (rak luat), but possible.

sangha law grew amongst sections of the ecclesia , Witsanu and Michai Ruchuphan were appointed by the government to advise to the Supreme Sangha Council on the matter. Witsanu was also known to have personal relationships with several members of the monastic establishment.[21] The fact that the assignment went to Witsanu seemed to indicate that the NCPO did not see monastic affairs as a pressing issue and wanted someone who had familiarity with monastic concerns to fulfill the task of oversight, not intervention. Military leadership rhetoric seemed to show signs that Buddhist reform was on the agenda. The interest, however, was only a performative formality that sought to tender its promise to remove any impurity that might compromise the integrity of the Thai body politic. In view of the early military rule, the sangha was important because of its role as a traditional institution that had held proximity to the monarchy and conceptions of Thai citizenship. This notion changed after the junta realized that the sangha was not just a docile organization but could command loyalty among their many followers and mobilize action against the military government.

The actions taken by military leaders prior to the formation of the initial cabinet seemed to indicate that the junta was simply paying attention to issues that its political base deemed important, and not yet considering the sangha a politically salient institution. Rather, the subject of monastic reform appeared on a superficial level. On June 16, 2014, less than a month after the coup, the issue of monks misbehaving came up in a daily meeting of the NCPO at the army

[21] Romadon Panjor has drawn my attention to the fact that Witsanu's life is deeply tied to a miracle story related to a southern Buddhist saint, Luang Pho Thuat, or Venerable Father Thuat. According to an account provided by Patrick Jory (2008, 300), Witsanu originally was named Phithan, and as a boy, he "had poor health and was a weak student," who one day "was sent to pay his respects to Luang Pho Thuat at Wat Chang Hai, where he met Abbot Achan Tim. After testing the boy's intelligence the abbot changed his name to Witsanu (from the Sanskrit Vishnu). Following this visit to Wat Chang Hai Witsanu's health markedly improved, thanks to a miracle that was attributed to Luang Pho Thuat, and he excelled in his studies. Apart from these improvements the boy also began to show signs that he had become possessed by the spirit of Luang Pho Thuat. As news spread of the boy's special gift, the Khruea-nagm house, located near the Kim Young market, became crowded with people seeking the assistance of the boy's supernatural powers. The possibility that her son might pursue a career as a spirit medium worried his mother so much that she quickly decided that young Witsanu should leave Songkhla to continue his studies in Bangkok."

headquarters. Prayut ordered the social and psychological affairs working committee to quickly attend to causes that undermined Thai society.[22] Prayut then relayed a request to Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) and ONAB to set up a working committee to monitor this issue in order to "purify the religion" (*Thairath* 2014a). The call led to a swift response by ONAB Director, Nopparat Benchawatananun, who announced the next day that ONAB planned to open a 24-hour hotline for reporting any inappropriate conduct committed by monks, especially monastic misbehavior on social media. The hotline, according to ONAB, would be up and running in the next three days (June 20), and any complaint received was to be forwarded from the office to the responsible local sangha supervisor (*KomChadLuek* 2014).

Prayuth's indication that Buddhist reform was on the agenda generated responses from many, especially among royalist and conservative activists, who wished to see monastic reform become a possibility. Phra Phuttha Issara, for instance, posted on his Facebook page after Prayuth's remark to urge the NCPO to send trusted officials to investigate the budget allocated by the Yingluck administration to Wat Phra Thammakai. According to Phuttha Issara, Wat Phra Thammakai was a bona fide example of monastic corruption in the monastic order that resulted from the collusion between civilian government and monastic establishment, which contributed to the exponential growth of Wat Phra Thammakai and the decline of Buddhism (*MGR Online* 2014b). Paisal Puechmongkol, PDRC activist and advisor to the junta, also published an article in *Naewna* Newspaper on June 22 under the pen name Sirianya to ask the junta to consider regulating monastic properties, which consisted of temple lands, assets and properties that temples rented out for residential and commercial use. Paisal estimated the value of these properties to be more than

[22] The social and psychological affairs committee was headed by Navy Commander Admiral Narong Pipatanasai, who was also the NCPO Deputy Head and in charge of Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

twenty trillion baht and argued that without proper guidelines, rent and benefits from these assets, which otherwise could be gainfully distributed to other temples and monks in need, would remain concentrated in the hands of a corrupt few. If the junta was to initiate monastic reform, dealing with the issue of property would be akin to "a massive merit-making for Buddhism which warrants our felicitations" (Sirianya 2014).

Responding to these voices, the prospect for reform became more plausible when Prayuth, appearing in his then daily "Return Happiness to People in the Country" television show on July 18, reiterated the need to purify Buddhism toward the end of his almost hour-long speech:

> On the issue of religion, everyone must help. We will use all available mechanisms to accelerate the inspection, rid deviants and heretics and support Buddhism and every religion to be respectful for the Thai people throughout the whole country, with full confidence and faith (Chan-o-cha 2014b).

On August 8, Prayut's concern materialized in form of the NCPO Order 115/2014 leading to the creation of the Protection and Correction of Problems in Buddhism Committee to be headed by General Adul Saengsingkaew, former police chief and the NCPO deputy chief. The rationale provided in the order was that the formation of this committee was to "promote Buddhism's prosperity and security and lead society and people's way of life to happiness and peace sustained by Buddhist principles." The responsibilities of the committee included recommending policy to protect and correct problems in Buddhism to the NCPO; facilitate and monitor the policy process; approve any plan, project or measure related to Buddhism; create criteria and conditions in protecting and correcting problems in Buddhism; appointing necessary sub-committees when the

situation calls for; and performing any duty in accordance to further instruction from the NCPO (*MGR Online* 2014c).[23]

The news was favorably received by a group of activists, especially the PAD crowds. Similarly, Chermsak Pinthong, a long-time critic of the sangha and PAD activist, posted on his personal Facebook page on August 17 to show his support for the move. Applauding the NCPO's meritorious act for its potential benefit to the security and prosperity of Buddhism, Chermsak went on to state that temples nowadays functioned more like "convenience stores for Buddhist commercialization" and were engaged primarily in "the business of selling merit" under the guise of supporting Buddhism. According to Chermsak, fortune-telling, performing ceremonies to ward off bad luck, tattooing, amulet blessing and lottery prediction were some examples of activities that temples were now providing to their "clients," often at the expense of doctrinal integrity because the message used to promote such activities was centered on the idea that the more one donated, the more auspicious or closer to heavenly bliss in the afterlife one became. As such, temples accumulated significant profit, and very often a significant percentage of the donations went into the possession of individual monks within temples, whose charisma attracted followings and support directed at them individually, and not necessarily toward the temples.[24] Worse, these circumstances inflated the egos of many abbots and resident monks, who came to believe that their oversight of their temples and their supposed greatness led to the material prosperity their temples

[23] The committee consisted of Adul Saengsingkaew as the chair along with Secretary-General from Ministry of Interior as the deputy chair and Secretary-Generals from Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (changed to Ministry of Digital Economy and Society in September 2016), Police Commissioner General, Director-General of the Public Relations Department and Permanent Secretary for the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration as committee members with ONAB Director as committee member and secretary. The number of committee member was thus ten in total.

[24] Anthony Irwin drew my attention to this point. Even though the conspicuous donation to temples and individual monks is a red flag for many, who believe that the distance from material possession defines monastic purity, Irwin (2018) has shown in his exceptional work that temple-building and material engagement are themselves integral part of Buddhist ethical self-fashioning and construct key ethical values in the religious lives of northern Thai Buddhists, a position that takes into account social practice and perspective that are often made a caricature of themselves.

accumulated. Monks, as such, became competitive against each other through construction projects which were used as a criterion to evaluate how superior they were. These monks, Chermsak contended, neglected their study and meditation, while pretending to be learned and exploiting that image for personal profit. Chermsak called these monks "profit-seeking merchants or vulgar capitalists disguised under saffron robes," who desecrated the faith that people had in them and contributed to the prevalence of negative social values that had people intoxicated on the ideas that making merit with monks would help get them closer to prosperity and heaven (Pinthong 2014). Chermsak, along with Paibun Nititawan, would later play the role as the pioneers behind the creation of the Buddhist Reform Committee.[25]

While the committee was the first concrete action taken by the junta, the effort seemed to run into a bureaucratic trap. ONAB jumped at the opportunity once the announcement was made and readily set up the first meeting that took place a little over two weeks later on August 25 at the Government House. The response from the monastic establishment, however, was curiously quiet, and only a few voices from the monastic order were made public. One of the few sangha statements was that of Phra Maha Narin Narinto, abbot of Wat Thai Las Vegas in Nevada and a famous blogger of monastic affairs, who questioned why no representative from *Mahathera* served on the committee (Narinto 2014). The resolution reached in the meeting of the Buddhist affairs committee led by Police General Adul, however, did not produce any direct solution to the problem of power abuse or corruption within the monastic order. Instead, the report only indicated that the committee approved a model temple project proposal in which temples with exceptional administration could be designated as exemplars for others to model themselves after. This policy, however, was an

[25] Santisuk Sophonsiri (social activist), in discussion with the author, September 19, 2015.

agenda that the monastic order and other Buddhist groups had already been engaged in.[26] Another proposal was to create a database, starting from Bangkok, to keep track of complaints filed against monks to assist in the investigation and monitoring by Phra Winaithon, or a group of monks well versed in disciplinary code tasked with the responsibility to police and settle monastic misbehavior. The committee also assigned ONAB to supervise a vetting process of those seeking ordination and assemble a manual for the model temple project, including details on the best practice of temple management, propagation and strategic planning in creating more temples with good administration and proper monastic behavior among its residents (*Prachatai* 2014b). These measures, as will be shown in later section, were topics of consideration long before the formation of this committee.

Given that the head of the committee, Adul Saengsingkaew, and the rest showed no prior knowledge or interest in monastic reform, it was likely that Nopparat played a lead role in guiding the direction of the meeting. The role of other members was, in this regard, just a performance to carry out the task relegated to them by the NCPO. ONAB controlled the agenda, and the agreement reached provided more grounds for ONAB to reaffirm its role over the monastic affairs because certain plans such as the database on monastic malpractice had already been proposed by ONAB Director, Nopparat, to the junta to begin with. At the same time, there was also a conflict of interest because ONAB also served as the secretariat to *Mahathera*. This dual role raised a question concerning whose side ONAB would take if monastic interests did not align with those of the

[26] Locating model temples for a blueprint to betterment is a practice best summarized as an attempt to create the best practice guide for monastic affairs. Groups within the monastic order and academia have popularly been engaged in the last decade or so in this endeavor, which was also definitely before the time when the proposal was made by the committee to the NCPO. It seems that the proposal did not come out organically from the committee. Rather, it could have been attributed to the role of Nopparat in preempting the committee with ONAB's existing agenda. At any rate, there are several projects by different parties on the issue, and some were underway even before the proposal. For one of the research projects illuminating this trend, see Ngamwittayapong et al (2016). It should be noted that Orasri Ngamwittayapong, the principal investigator of the project, has also written books on the teachings of Phutthathat and conversation with Prawet Wasi, which shows an interest in religion, morality and development.

junta. In addition, there was a distinct possibility that the monastic establishment would be able to exert its influence through the connection with ONAB. Yet, these issues would not be easily resolved because this first meeting proved to be the last one: there was no follow-up meeting. The conclusion of the committee seemed to suggest that the agenda on monastic reform was just a formality that as suddenly as it appeared, it would just as soon be forgotten.

The reality, however, would be far more nuanced. Throughout the process, ONAB succeeded in containing the committee and advocated plan that would allow more influence and jurisdiction of ONAB and control over the monastic establishment and monastic affairs. In one of the interviews that Nopparat gave right after the first committee meeting, it became clear that ONAB did indeed play a substantial role in guiding the direction of the committee toward a system of control through a law-and-order approach. In the interview, Nopparat took the liberty to speak on behalf of the committee, saying that one of the measures proposed to the NCPO was that in order to protect Buddhism, relevant bureaucratic agencies needed to "tighten the screws." The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, for example, must act to stop street vendors from selling amulets on public pavements, and the police must arrest monks taking amphetamines or watching pornography. Perhaps the most important legal plan, as Nopparat suggested, was the legislation of a new law to criminalize monastic transgression:

> If there is a violation that cannot be examined through the *vinaya* such as proving a case of monk having sexual relations that leads to a child, then scientific procedure needs to be used as part of the investigation. There must be legal regulation as well because such things would damage the sangha. The same is true for monastic administration. The Sangha Act specifies that an abbot must supervise monks in his temple, but if he neglects his duty, is there any penalty for that? The Sangha Act only includes monastic discipline as the penalty, which at worst is defrocking. Even with that, society says that it is not enough, and that monastic transgression should be considered criminal offence [sic], so that people are afraid to do so (Lepnak 2014).

According to Nopparat, criminalization of monastic offenses would be accompanied by a strict vetting process to screen those about to enter monkhood. This screening would ensure that monastic candidates were in good standing and would not bring harm to the sangha's reputation. The process would determine whether they were drug addicts, sexually deviant or mentally challenged. Transgression against the monastic order would also be criminalized. Those seeking gains from the sangha, for instance, through the making of amulets, collusion with monks to make profit, siphoning money out from temples to personal accounts, or even giving monks luxury items and cars would all be punishable. All temples, Nopparat added, were to be required to keep accounting books that contained detailed records of revenues and expenditures so that their finances could be audited. In what could be considered the most problematic proposal, Nopparat argued that because there was no equivalence of the controversial lese majesty law for Buddhism in Thailand, "it is now time to issue a law that if there exists any case of defamation and debasement of Buddhism such as insulting the Buddha or alleging that basic five precepts are lies, such acts should be considered a criminal offense, and procedures to file complaints and deliver punishment should be available." At the same time, contrary to a common expression used to indicate that monastic affairs should be left alone (*chua chang chi dee chang song*), Nopparat made a strong statement that "if monks are bad, we must punish them" (Lebnak 2014). Interestingly, as opposed to focusing specifically on disciplining the sangha, Nopparat introduced the criminalization of criticism and opened up the possibility that the laity could be held legally accountable for what they said about the sangha, regardless of how well-intentioned that may be. Absent from the proposal, however, was the criteria to classify "defamation" as well as who adjudicated and had a final say in this matter.

The Case of Blasphemy Law

Even though Nopparat's rhetoric might sound partially hostile toward the sangha, the proposition was not new, and the status of his proposal as a threat to the mainstream sangha leadership was questionable. In the first instance, there remained an unresolved question regarding who should have the authority to discipline monks. Because ONAB was going to work closely with *Mahathera* anyway, it was most likely that the ecclesiastic leadership would be entrusted with disciplinary powers. This scenario would guarantee that the monastic leadership maintained an advantageous position to dictate the process, not the other way around. In addition, even though the legal regulation proposed by Nopparat had historically been part of the effort to reform the sangha in the late 1990s and early 2000s, its original intention had been transformed under the care of ONAB in subsequent years. In 1999, a call for monastic reform emerged within a section of the government as the sangha was subject to mounting public criticism from the controversy connected to Wat Phra Thammakai and religious commercialization. It was also the time when the sangha began to exert itself politically in a campaign to demand enhanced representation in bureaucratic and legal processes, which led to the creation of ONAB.[27]

In response to these developments, the government introduced in the same year an idea for the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Act, which recommended the use of punitive measures against transgressions of the *vinaya* and a requirement for temple finance audit. The premise was

[27] The 1997 constitution was drafted on the premise of political reform in which one of its offshoots was a bureaucratic reorganization to allow for flexibility and efficiency within the bureaucratic sector. One of the plans thus was to create a religion and culture committee in place of Department of Religious Affairs (DRA), which oversaw Buddhism and other officially recognized religions from Christianity, Islam, Brahmin-Hinduism and Sikhism. The function of DRA was to administer Buddhism and the rest, which meant that Buddhism was considered to have a privileged status that demanded more attention from DRA. The new religion and culture committee was expected to have a representative from each religion, together with a group of experts, to form a twenty-member committee. Together with the dissolution of DRA, this move meant that the sangha now would have a diluted representation, a situation that called for its own independent agency. The early demand from the sangha was unsurprisingly a call for the Ministry of Buddhism, which was subsequently rejected. For more on the monastic struggle to improve its participation in the bureaucratic process during this time, see Kulabkaew (2013).

to hold the sangha accountable for what the government viewed as excessive malpractice. The sangha reacted negatively to the proposal, which it saw as a clear effort to discipline the sangha from outside, and for good reason. Normally, if monks committed a serious monastic offense, the worst outcome was defrocking with no other subsequent punishment. Manop Polpairin, a Religious Affairs Department official, told the press that "regional monastic governors across the country had voiced disagreement with the patronage bill because it was written without the knowledge of the monastic order." At the same time, Phra Thep Kittipanyakhun (Kittisak Kittiwutto, 1936-2005), popularly known as Kittiwutto and famous for his declaration that "killing communists is not a sin," told a reporter that the bill was drafted "with the purpose of robbing the monastic order of its wealth in the wake of the economic crisis," referring to the 1997 financial crisis that left Thailand in a desperate state (Bunnag 1999).[28]

With resistance from the monastic order, the law did not successfully materialize but resurfaced again as a draft prepared by ONAB after the 2006 coup. In what was considered a worrying reversal, the focus was shifted toward enhancing patronage and reprimanding any sacrilege against the monastic order. The draft equated the protection of Buddhism with the protection of the sangha from any interference, and new provisions advocated penalizing any violation of the Buddha, his teachings, temples, religious personnel, artefacts, property and ceremonies. What many found problematic was the vagueness of its language, especially with regards to what exactly constituted the notion of violation. Article 9 of the draft stated that: "any defilement, infringement, imitation, distortion or any act that would bring harm, blemish or

[28] Kittiwutto was himself a highly controversial monk due to not only his anti-communist role, but also his involvement in many fraud cases. He was, however, never reprimanded by the monastic authority and promoted to the monastic rank of Phra Raj in 1987 and Phra Thep in 1992. Previously, Kittiwutto was given monastic rank from the quota of Somdet Phra Ariyavangsagatayana (Pun Punnasiri, 1896-1974), in 1972. In this sense, Kittiwutto was an establishment monk. For more information on Kittiwutto, see Ford (2017).

perversity to the Buddha, doctrines, education, personnel, place, artefact, property or ceremonial is prohibited" (National Legislative Assembly 2007). As one could see, there was no specification as to the criteria to consider which action would fall within an acceptable parameter or be considered a violation. One of the most concerning aspects of this draft, as religion and philosophy scholar Surapot Thaweesak (2012) commented, was that the law would not only contradict democratic principles such as freedom of speech and religion, but its unclear language would also open itself to a radical interpretation similar to the oppressive use of the lese majesty law and thus became weaponized for a political witch hunt.[29]

The draft also had provisions for a committee and other mechanisms to be set up to monitor and enforce the law, which privileged the monastics at the expense of the laity. Anyone found to have sexual relations with monks, novices and *maechiis* (white-robed nuns), as well as those providing or recruiting sexual service for these monastics would be legally punishable.[30] The same went for the physical assault of monastics. Notably absent was any punitive measure for monks who committed those same offenses (National Legislative Assembly 2007). In other words, the responsibility for wrongful acts was transferred to laypeople, not the monastic order, which was a far cry from its original intention. The draft in effect turned the reform law into a blasphemy law

[29] The violation indicated in the draft recommended criminal penalty for anyone violating the law. For instance, violation of Article 9 and charged with defilement of the Buddha and religious doctrines would potentially face up to 10 to 25 years in prison and be fined from THB 500,000 to 1 million baht. The same would go for any defilement of Buddhist education, personnel, place, artefact, property and ceremonial, which carried the sentence of 5-10 years in prison and fine up to THB 100,000-500,000. For more information on the draft, see National Legislative Assembly (2007). For history, discussion and analysis of the political use of the lese majesty law in Thailand, see Streckfuss (2011) and Haberkorn (2016, 2018).

[30] Even though Buddhist community is in principle composed of four groups, which are monks (Bhikkhu), female monks (Bhikkhuni), laymen (Upasaka) and laywomen (Upasika), maechii is a special category that follows eight basic precepts, which are not killing; not stealing; not engaging in sexual relations; not lying or using false speech; not consuming intoxicants; not having a meal after noontime; not indulging in entertainment; and not sleeping on high or luxurious place. In legal terms, maechiis are considered "lay nuns" and not considered part of the monastic class. They are thus not eligible for state support, but also disenfranchised like monks. The ambiguity in the status is reflected in social attitude toward these women, and many consider them to be inferior to monks and not a proper target of veneration. For a detailed analysis and study of maechii in Thailand, see Falk (2008).

from which the sanctity of the sangha must be protected at all cost, even if freedom of speech and other rights would be impinged. The draft was proposed to the National Legislative Assembly, the legislative branch of the government, in 2007 by General Preecha Rojanasaen, former deputy military chief, NLA member and head of the Committee on Religions, Ethics, Arts and Culture. It was later forwarded to the Council of State, the consultative body of the government on legal issues, since many NLA members expressed concern regarding the severity of the recommendations, which they believed could become a serious social issue. The Council of State, having reviewed the draft, recommended that the proposed provisions should not be made a single legal entity but incorporated into the existing sangha law. This was, in practice, a subtle way of shelving the law for the time being.

Despite the expressed concern, ONAB kept pushing, and in 2012 during the Pheu Thai administration, the law again surfaced. This time, three drafts from ONAB, the Pheu Thai Party and the Democrat Party, the opposition party, were up for consideration in Parliament. The final draft selected for the deliberation, however, did not alter its emphasis on blasphemy, but was more carefully worded to propose a comprehensive administrative structure and expanded monastic representation in the policy process directly related to the issue of the protection and promotion of Buddhism. A new addition of the law emerged that included a proposal to establish a fund to assist the "efforts" to keep Buddhism safe, though without the clarity of what those might be. Financial contribution was expected to come from a starting fund provided by the government as well as the annual national budget and donations from the private sector. The call for the creation of the Buddhist protection committee was expanded to include both central and provincial levels with a guarantee that enough monastic leadership from various levels would be represented in all committees. A central office was to be established as a unit within ONAB to coordinate and

streamline the agenda prescribed by the law. Phra Winaithorn and a group of monastic disciplinary specialists, would also be sanctioned to monitor, investigate and bring any culprit to the local monastic authority for adjudication. More importantly, if the law came into effect, Phra Winaithorn and the staff of this newly created office would be given the public officer status, ensuring that their duty was legally protected. The implication was that if the alleged target showed any sign of resistance, defamation or reporting falsehood, such action would be deemed punishable by law as stated in the Criminal Code (*iLaw* 2015).[31] In this sense, the law signified at once an expansion of the secular bureaucracy as well as the bureaucratization of the sangha.

News of the law was met with much scorn, and the ensuing public debate was centered on what utility and impact the law, if passed, would have on the future of Thai Buddhism. Concern about the looming blasphemy law led Chulalongkorn University Center for Buddhist Studies to host a public forum titled "Defaming Buddhism: How and Who to Handle" on January 11, 2013. The organizers invited Amnat Buasiri, ONAB Deputy Director, and other academics to share their thoughts and engage in a discussion. During the forum, Amnat told the participants that the impetus to legislate the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Act was due to the increased frequency of the incidents in which people, especially foreigners, desecrated the images of the Buddha and temples. He specifically cited an example from a viral photo of Chinese women in bikinis prostrating in front of an image of the Buddha in the middle of the road. He said that ONAB had

[31] According to Thailand's Criminal Code, or sometimes referred to as Penal Code, Article 1 (16), public officer is "a person whom the law prescribes as a public officer or who has been authorised under the law to execute an official duty, whether regularly or temporarily, and whether entitled to receive compensation or not' (Wikisource 2017). Even though this definition was recently added in the Penal Code Amendment Act (No. 22) in 2015, the category of public officer had long been employed in the Criminal Code, which also entailed the penalty for any resistance to the officer's duty as well as legal repercussion for officers charged with abuse of power. The category of "public officer," at any rate, is distinguished from other categories of personnel in the employment of the state, and according to the Sangha Act, any monk with administrative position is considered public officer. Given the status, administrative monks are then in principle subject to criminal complaint filed by those affected by their abuse of power or negligence, but there has not been an example of successful complaint.

submitted the draft to the Secretariat of the Cabinet to be presented to the cabinet. The Prime Minister and responsible minister, Amnat added, had been sympathetic to the law (*KomChadLuek* 2013).[32]

The rationale provided by Amnat, however, was not without opposition. Channarong Boonnoon (2013), a former monk and well-known scholar of Buddhism and philosophy, shared his concern at the forum that the emphasis on the protection of Buddhism occurred under an assumption that Buddhism was the same as Thainess, which effectively swept religious and cultural diversity under the rugs and limited the meaning of what it actually meant to be Thai. According to Channarong, because imagined threats—whether that was the invasion of Muslims that led to the fall of Nalanda monastic university in 1193 C.E. and disappearance of Buddhism from India or the intrusion of colonial powers as in the case of Christian missions in South Asia—were already prevalent among Buddhist intellectuals, implementing blasphemy law could add fuel to fire. In Channarong's view, the belief of monastic intelligentsia that Thai Buddhism could potentially encounter aggression from other faiths someday, if not already, added to a volatile situation in which confrontation could easily occur and escalate. Instituting blasphemy laws, thus risked encouraging a short-sighted interpretation, which would likely lead to immoral outcomes and contradict Buddhist morality. The defamation charge and its potential imprisonment, for example, could be weaponized against those who spoke truth out of the wish to provide constructive criticism for the betterment of the sangha. Channarong also pointed out that the proposed measure could in fact undermine the very foundation of Buddhism itself. This fear, at any rate, would remain unrealized. Because domestic political turmoil was troubling the Pheu Thai

[32] The news article, written by a reporter in attendance, also mentioned two other cases, which were a photo of shoes on a temple in Ayutthaya Province on the website of Filipinos shoes company, Suelas, and a Dutch entrepreneur from a city of Masstricht, who made and sold soap bars in the shape of the Buddha's head through a website and on Facebook (Ibid).

administration in its last months in office, the law was forgotten. It would turn up for consideration again in the aftermath of the 2014 coup at Nopparat's suggestion (Jongkraijak 2017).

The re-introduction of the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Act at first seemed like an attempt to rush legislation. ONAB sensed that the military government might not be prepared to deliberate every proposal and thus would be more inclined to lend their ears to bureaucrats rather than politicians.[33] The movement within the monastic order at this time, which will be discussed in the next chapter, would suggest that Nopparat and ONAB were indeed moving in the same direction as the sangha was trying to force its own agenda onto the junta. If successful, these efforts would result in furthering the interest of both the monastic establishment and ONAB. One of the most significant attempts by the former was the nation-wide project to promote basic Buddhist precepts among the populace initiated by Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangalacharn (Chuang Worapunyo), abbot of Wat Paknam and then Acting Supreme Patriarch. With the position of the Supreme Patriarch being left vacant by the passing of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon (Chareon Suwatthano) in October 2013, Somdet Chuang emerged as the next in line for the title, and it seemed the only thing in his way was the approval from the government. In this sense, the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Act was a puzzle in this struggle for the sangha and its

[33] The observation that the NCPO-led administration had the tendency to pass the laws more quickly than other administrations, and that NCPO leadership would listen to bureaucrats more than others could be seen in the number of legislations passed in the span of four years since the NCPO took power, which amounted to 315 out of 347 legislations being considered by NLA and resulted in an average of 78 legislations per year as of September 27, 2018 (*Daily News* 2018). In comparison, the period from 29 January 2008-7 May 2014 when the popularly elected administrations were in power only saw 119 legislations passed, or an average of 19 legislations per year (*Voice TV* 2018). One of the well-placed sources in the previous government led by Yingluck Shinawatra also told me that because of his stint at the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, he was informed by a group of bureaucrats in the first few months after the coup there that the newly installed leadership at the ministry, consisting exclusively of military personnel, did not know how to administrate and had to seek out advice from the long-time bureaucrats on within the organization. It was at this time that many mid and high-level bureaucrats pushed their agenda onto the military and found a high rate of success in passing policy and legislation, which would otherwise be more carefully screened and most likely rejected if considered under normal circumstance.

bureaucratic agency to assert themselves publicly and push for the position closer to the center of state power.

Looking at the renewed effort of ONAB to advance the monastic agenda after the first meeting of the coup-appointed committee, Nopparat's suggestion to criminalize monastic offenses, particularly the desecration of Buddhism, showed that blasphemy remained a crucial aspect of ONAB initiative. Considering the position of Nopparat relative to the monastic establishment both in personal and professional capacity, it was indeed difficult to see him dropping an axe on the sangha. Personally, Nopparat was a monastic order insider. The rumor among the rank and file of the sangha was that Nopparat had been working closely with *Mahathera* and other high-ranking monks to consider what could be and could not be proposed to NCPO. This perception explained the relative silence from the sangha in response to the interview given by Nopparat when he seemed to propose a hardline stance. An engineer by training, his design for a Thai temple in Nepal and Wat Phutthakaya in India put him on the map. When ONAB was founded in 2002, he joined and soon rose through the ranks to become a deputy director in 2007. Because of his career growth within the agency, he was considered a homegrown talent. Nopparat took the helm of ONAB when he was appointed as the sixth director of ONAB in 2010 when the Democrat Party administration was in power with Aphisit Wetchachiwa as the premier. Because he was with ONAB since its inception, Nopparat himself had forged close relationship with *Mahathera* members and was also known as a go-to person for the monastic establishment. He was rumored to have close ties with Wat Phra Thammakai due to his involvement in several high-profile merit-making ceremonials organized by the temple. Later in 2017, Nopparat would be implicated in one of the biggest scandals of the last several decades involving *Mahathera* members, royal temples and other ONAB

higher-ups on charge of temple fund embezzlement and had to flee the country. He is now living in exile abroad (*Post Today* 2017).

Even though the Protection and Patronage of Buddhism law was approved by the NCPO on 24 August 2014 and forwarded to the National Legislative Assembly for further consideration, the attempt to pass the law was halted when the Law Reform Commission (LRC), an independent body created after the 2007 coup to assist in the process of legal reform and compile feedback on proposed laws, submitted its opinion to the government. In a memo dated 8 May 2015, LRC suggested that implementing the law would do more harm than good. Specifically, LRC pointed out that Article 4 of the law, which stated that "the State must provide patronage and protect Buddhism," would in effect turn Thailand into religious state and transform Buddhist doctrines into part of the state ideology. In doing so, the relationship between the state and Buddhism would be altered and become detrimental in the long run because Thailand was a multi-ethnic society with diversity in culture, belief and faith. Moreover, the specification concerning the creation of a committee to monitor and enforce the law would infringe on religious freedom because doing so gave the state excessive control over religious affairs. This would prove problematic because many Buddhists practiced differently from the official form, and adherents of other faiths could likely be discriminated or denied freedom of religion. At the same time, the state may find in this law an opportunity to exploit its power in interfering in religious affairs for political purpose.

LRC believed monastic administration must be the sole responsibility of the sangha. In terms of the proposal to create a monastic police task force, or arming Phra Winaithorn with the ability to arrest and enforce the law, LRC deemed such proposal inappropriate and counter to the spirit of ordination. This was because, according to LRC, the role to interpret and control monastic behavior in accordance to the *vinaya* should belong to a religious organization, not a secular one (*TCIJ*

2015). When the news of the LRC recommendations broke, Phanom Sornsin, the ONAB Director succeeding Nopparat, quickly told reporters that the consultation with *Mahathera* was in order, and that the issue would be an important agenda in the upcoming meeting with administrative monks in charge of regional and provincial administration next month at Phutthamonthon, the largest Buddhist Park in Thailand where ONAB office was located (*MGR Online* 2015c).[34] The meeting that Phanom mentioned, however, did not lead to any resistance to the recommendations made by LRC. The law has remained in limbo until the present time.

The Buddhist Reform Committee

> *Buddhists ought to understand and appreciate their own religion as well as other faiths to avoid any perverse practice. If we are to compare, the situation is analogous to an image of parasitic plant shrouding a sacred fig from which the substance of Buddhism is neglected and fading…Buddhist thought does not garner interest anymore, and only a few people care. Non-essential elements should be sorted out. Monks should not fall prey to the power of money or take the bait of depraved capitalism and make a living from religious belief. I agree that the fourfold assembly of the Buddhist community should have equal roles in managing monastic and temple assets.*
>
> Naowarat Pongphaiboon, member and advisor to the Buddhist Reform Committee, 10 February 2015 (CBA 2015, 44)

While the early military-led effort to reform the sangha was routinized into the bureaucratic process and coopted into the monastic agenda, a real challenge emerged from a group of activists that helped to bring the military to power. The issuance of the National Reform Council (NRC) Order 8/2015 on February 2, signed off by Tienchay Keeranant, President of the NRC, marked the

[34] In the same report, Phanom indicated that *Mahathera* had already set up 3 working committees to examine the impact of the law led by Phra Phrom Bandit (Prayoon Thammajitto), rector of Mahachulalongkorn University and abbot of Wat Prayoon, Phra Phrom Moli (Suchart Thammaratano), assistant abbot of Wat Paknam, and Phra Phrom Muni (Suchin Akkachino), assistant abbot of Wat Ratchabophit. All these monks were members of *Mahathera* and considered upcoming leadership to one day reach the rank of Somdet and replace the older generation of the sangha leadership.

official inauguration of the Committee for Reform of Guideline and Measure for the Protection of Buddhist Affairs (hereafter "the Buddhist Reform Committee" or CBA). Led by the chairperson Paibun Nititawan, former Senator, PDRC leader and NRC member, the committee consisted of twenty members that included critics of the sangha such as Chermsak Pinthong, Paisal Puechmongkol, Dr. Mano Laohavanich and Santisuk Sophonsiri.[35] Committee members also came from a variety of backgrounds ranging from PDRC activists like Paibun, Chermsak, Santisuk and Wanchai Sornsiri, to social activists (Ticha Na Nakorn), retired general (Ekachai Sriwilat) and academics from various universities, including Mahidol, Walailak, Nation and Mahachulalongkorn University.[36]

At first glance, the committee did not look out of the ordinary from the previous attempt by the NCPO. According to the rationale furnished by the establishing order, the committee was created to "reform the guidelines and measures to protect Buddhist affairs in a concrete manner" and "promote people's participation and direct role in the protection of Buddhism." The objectives of the committee were listed as: 1) examine important problems of Thai Buddhism to determine the approach to the reform of Buddhist affairs; 2) promote people's participation and expression of opinions with respect to the reform and amendment of the 1962 Sangha Act; 3) prepare

[35] Other members of the committee included General Ekachai Sriwilat, retired general and Director of the Office for Peace and Governance, King Prajadhipok's Institute; Naowarat PongPaibun, award-winning poet and national artist; Associate Professor Suebpong Thammachat, Walailak University; Somsook Boonyabancha, expert on urban housing issues and former director of Community Organizations Development Institute; Ticha Na Nakorn, social worker focused on juvenile delinquency issues and Director of Training School for Boys (Baan Kanchanapisek); Pannee Jarusombat, former senator; Wiwat Sanyakhamtorn, former technocrat, self-sufficiency agriculture activist and later assumed the position of Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives in 2017; Sira Jenjaka, follower of Phra Phuttha Itsara, businessman, owner of a Muay Thai gym and member of the National Reform Council; Wanchai Sornsiri, lawyer and PDRC activist; Assistant Professor Tavivat Puntarigvivat, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University; Assistant Professor Suraphon Suyaphrom, Mahachulalongkorn University; Sasinapha Nitithampapon, later critic of other committee members due to her role in protecting Wat Phra Thammakai during its siege in 2017; Suthada Mekrungruengkul, Vice Provost, Nation University; and Phirom Charoenrung and Phim Butpeng, both of whom are public officials from the Secretariat of the House of Representatives that act as secretaries for the committee.

[36] General Ekachai handed his resignation to the NRC President with no specific reason being provided, though given his role in other committees, the committee was an unnecessary repetition for him.

recommendations to the NRC President on the guidelines and drafting of the law to reform Buddhist affairs and measures to protect Buddhism with the emphasis on the inclusion of all Buddhist groups; 4) report any progress to the NRC President; 5) carry out any task designated by the NRC President; and 6) appoint any sub-committee or working committee to perform any assigned duty (CBA 2015, 1-2). The importance of the committee, gleaned from its objectives, seemed simply to conduct a study, and possibly hold a public hearing or forum if required, to identify problems that Thai Buddhism was facing and come up with a set of recommendations that would be used toward instituting further measures or drafting new laws to supplement or amend the existing sangha law.

The new Buddhist Reform Committee was unusual precisely because the NRC already had a committee devoted to religious issue. From the beginning, one of the NRC reform agendas was a plan to strengthen religions into the pillars of Thai society. The responsibility was originally assigned to the Committee to Reform Values, Arts, Culture, Ethics and Religions (hereafter "the Culture and Ethics Committee" or CEC) that was established in November 2014 with 27 members. In the committee, Naowarat Pongphaiboon assumed the position of chairperson, and General Ekachai was a deputy chair, while Pannee Jarosombat and Associate Professor Suebpong Thammachat from Walailak University also sat on the committee. These names also appeared in the Buddhist Reform Committee. To address the issue of religious reform, the Sub-Committee on Religious Affairs Reform (SRR) was created as an offshoot to deliberate on this specific subject, a fifteen-person ad hoc committee with General Ekachai at the helm as the chairperson[37] and a ten-

[37] The original sub-committee members consisted of General Ekachai Sriwilat; Sukanya Sudbanthad, communication arts professor; Niran Pantarakit, comparative religion professor and Muslim; General Vichit Yathip, former deputy army chief; Kitti Kosinsakul, businessman in fishery from Trat Province; Niasae Si-useng, retired Ministry of Interior technocrat and Muslim; Winai Dahlan, food science professor and former director of a halal center at Chulalongkorn University; On-Usa Lamliengpol, advertising expert and President of Advertising Association of Thailand; and Kobkul Panchareonworakul, a nursing professor and former senator. Six more members were added later, who were: Kasem Munjan, former deputy director-general of Department of Probation, Ministry of Justice; Thira Suwankul,

person advisory body with Brahmin-Hindu, Sikh, Catholic and Protestant representatives.[38] The primary objectives of the sub-committee were to 1) produce recommendations on religious reform to assist the constitutional drafting process and present the report to the Culture and Ethics Committee as well as constitutional drafting committee; and 2) create and present a strategic plan for religious reform to the Culture and Ethics Committee for approval and subsequent submission to the NRC, National Legislative Assembly and the cabinet. With the total of 25 meetings spanning the period of nine months, the sub-committee convened for the first time on November 24 and concluded its role on July 23, 2015 (SRR 2014). Remarkably, the findings from the sub-committee, which formed the basis for the report prepared by CRC, diverged greatly from what the Buddhist Reform Committee proposed, a break that reflected two positions within the government with respect to the issue of monastic reform and conflicting attitudes toward the sangha.

The First Meeting

> *Monastic reform must be accomplished. If not, what we don't want to see will happen, which is the decline of Buddhism. Buddhism will only remain in form without substance. If the government is serious about its reform program that it is doing right now and still cannot reform the monastic order, don't even think about reforming the nation. There are only two-hundred thousand monks, but the national population is seventy-three million. If you think monastic reform is Mission Impossible, then stop thinking about national reform because it is much harder.*
>
> Phra Paisan Wisalo, February 26, 2015 (Wisalo 2015)

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architect and former senator; Pichet Kalamkaset, comparative religion professor; Manoon, Rambutr, halal business entrepreneur and consultant; Amnat Buarisi, ONAB deputy director and later director; Sompong Kaewjaroenpisan, financial accounting professor. Later, in the second meeting on December 1, three more members were added: Sermsiri Akaraputipun, businessman and lecturer at Mahachulalongkorn University; Jamnong Suamprakham, former secretary-general of the Secretariat of the House of Representatives; Kampee Ditthakorn, former deputy secretary-general of the Secretariat of the House of Representative and later director of Sheikhul Islam Office, the Islamic authority of Thailand. In this list, Buddhist and Muslim representation was strongly visible.

[38] With regards to the advisory team, the members were Thavorn Chaichak, former school principal, Buddhist activist and Thammakai follower; General Thongchai Kuasakul, retired general, Buddhist activist and leader of Buddhists' Network of Thailand; Pornchai Pinyapong, a doctor, president of World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth and Thammakai follower; Supoj Liadprathom, former senator; Sermsook Patmastana, former banker and practicing Buddhist; Athit Sapbunseri, massage and spa businessman; and representatives from Brahmin-Hinduism, Sikhism, Catholic Christianity and Protestant Christianity.

The Buddhist Reform Committee met for the first time on 10 February 2015, and the tone was set early. Paibun began the meeting with a request for the members to look at important documents that he had prepared.[39] The article by Tavivat Puntarigvivat (2018), titled "200 Years of Thai Buddhist Reform" (*200 pi haeng karn patirup phutthasatsana khong thai*), was the first that the committee reviewed. Providing a perspective on the origin and achievement of modern Buddhist reform movements, Tavivat argued that the reform could be differentiated into two distinct aspects, namely doctrinal and organizational, beginning with the birth of the Thammayut order initiated by King Mongkut (1804-1868) and continuing into contemporary period. In doctrinal terms, Tavivat identified King Mongkut's adoption of Western methodology and application of rationalism to religious interpretation as a radical change that curtailed mythical aspects in popular Buddhist religiosity and turned Buddhism into a religion of reason. As opposed to vernacular forms of Buddhism, in other words, the article positioned the supposedly "rational" analysis of Buddhist thought put forward by King Mongkut as the articulation of a rational form of Buddhism as well as the foundation for religious reformation. While the creation and standardization of modern monastic education under Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Kromphraya Wachirayan Warorot (1860-1921), or Wachirayan, a son of King Mongkut and half-brother to King Chulalongkorn, represented another major development, Phuttathat, whom Tavivat called a principal reformist of

[39] Other documents under consideration were the NCPO Order 115/2014 that created the first religious reform committee headed by General Police Adul; the 1962 Sangha Act; report on a seminar on religious promotion on 13 December 2014 organized by Standing Committee on Religion, Art and Culture of the NLA; and a report from Office of the Permanent Secretary for Defence, titled "Frame of Agreement to Reform Thailand, Other Issues," part of which was a project to compile feedback on what problems people were facing and wanted to see change through public forums organized around the country. The group responsible for the production of this report was Working Group to Prepare for the Return of Happiness to People of Thailand, Ministry of Defence. The report was one of the eleven final reports, that touched on the issues of politics, public administration, law and justice, local governance, education, economy, energy, public health and environment, mass communications, society and others.

contemporary Buddhism, was the one to complete the doctrinal reform with his original approach to religious interpretation.

Even though the modernization of Buddhist teaching and popularization of Buddhist thought among the educated class were hallmarks of advancement made on the doctrinal front, Tavivat stressed that organizational reform had yet to achieve any progress. Rather, the introduction of the first sangha law by King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910) began an uneven process that witnessed the restructuring of monastic administration at the expense of the sangha losing its integrity in exchange for political patronage. Despite changes over the years, the organizational aspect of the sangha gradually worsened because the distribution of power within the sangha had been concentrated in the hands of the ecclesiastic and administrative class such that any consequential change could not take place. Monastic governance wound up resembling autocratic rule, or what Tavivat likened to the "dark age of military dictatorship" that, in his view, was worse than the absolute monarchy.[40] The article, in this regard, not only reiterated a common position that new legal amendments and organizational restructuring was necessary to productively govern the monastic affairs, but also indicated the tone of the committee's upcoming deliberation process. The emphasis on rational analysis and authenticity, standing in contrast to the popular Buddhism interwoven with local beliefs and practices, would come to inform much of how the committee viewed their position.

As Paibun opened the floor for comments, the concerns expressed by the committee members focused on how to restore the integrity of the sangha regarding issues of monastic comportment and financial integrity. In particular, emphasis was placed on the issue of abuse of power in temple affairs via the control of assets and finances by monks with administrative authority. Mano

[40] The phrase mentioning the dark age of the military dictatorship was omitted in the report but existed in the original version of the article. For the omitted part in the article, see Tavivat (2018).

Laohavanich, former Phra Mettananto and follower-turned-critic of Wat Phra Thammakai,[41] was the first to suggest that asset accumulation and the handling of money were urgent issues that required immediate attention in order to protect Buddhism. According to the *vinaya*, while the practice was considered a minor monastic offense, it was pervasive, and monks could generally be seen using money to purchase commodities or services in public places such as convenience stores or coffee shops.[42] Mano further insinuated that there were monks investing money in commercial enterprise in pursuit of profit, which was a blatant violation of the *vinaya*. Such brazen acts only became possible because of the absence of legal regulations and, if not properly managed, could gravely undermine Buddhism.

An emerging consensus in the first meeting was that abbots had been given too heavy a role in temple oversight. Because of this, temple finances must be made transparent to protect against any abuse of power. The committee found that out of an intention to preclude monks from involving themselves with money, the sangha law contained a clause that designated a lay temple manager (*waiyawatchakorn*) to manage financial transactions and assist abbots in the upkeep of temples.

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[41] Mettananto was one of the most well-known leaders of Wat Phra Thammakai. His dispute with Thammachayo and subsequent desertion of the temple created a significant impression among the public due to his standing within the movement and publication of articles that revealed the illicit financial management and extensive business dealings between Thammachayo, his temple, and their followers. After the departure from Wat Phra Thammakai, he resided at Wat Ratcha-orot and later disrobed. Mettananto was also a controversial figure due to his publication of a book titled "B.E. 0001," which detailed the last year of the Buddha's life and events after his death that led to the First Council. Mettananto's historical treatment of the Buddhist historiography became scandalous due to his argument that the First Council was an attempt by Mahakassapa and his monastic accomplices to stage a coup to seize the control over doctrinal interpretation and dispose of female monks. Accordingly, because Mahakassapa and his followers successfully sculpted doctrinal meaning that has become the basis of the canonical texts, Mettananto claimed that intrinsic misrepresentation existed at the very fundamental level of the doctrines that have been passed down since that time. This assertion did indeed stir much discussion and draw negative response. Notably P. A. Payutto, a modern authority in doctrinal matters, wrote a rebuttal to Mettananto's argument. For details, see Mettananto (2002) and the response in Phra Thepidok (2004).

[42] Accumulating money belongs to the category of Pachitti, or a lighter degree of monastic offense that does not entail expulsion or a probationary period and can be remedied with confession. The issue of monks handling money to buy things is a contested issue because many laypeople feel that monkhood connotes a renunciatory stance toward the world and thus monks should not have anything to do with money, which is seen as a gateway to moral corruption. Many laypeople debate whether making donation in the form of cash to monks is wrong because doing so could enable malpractice, while monks protest that if they cannot use money, how could they perform basic tasks such as using taxi services and buying necessities such as detergent and medicine if laypeople do not donate them.

The appointment of temple managers, however, lie largely within the jurisdiction of the abbots. Commenting on the danger of granting too much decision-making capacity to the monastics, Mano suggested to the committee that while the abbot had the authority to appoint a temple manager, a procedure should be put in place to enlist a group of laypeople to play a role in selecting the temple manager, in addition to instituting requirements for official registration and a term limit for the position. Further, as opposed to appointing a single individual to the role, a committee ought to instead be set up to manage assets and allow for increased lay participation and transparency in temple management. If the administrative structure was designed to resemble a cooperative, Mano argued, such change would work to the interest of protecting the integrity of the *vinaya*. The recommendation made by Mano, in short, reflected a view that power was too concentrated in the hands of abbots without any mechanism to check that power.

The call for financial audit and lay empowerment was well received by the committee. Central to its appeal was the idea that lay representation in monastic affairs must be reclaimed as a response to resolve the predicament faced by the sangha. In principle, the Buddhist community was doctrinally known to comprise both the clergy and laity, or what was known as the four-fold assembly (*phuttha borisat si*) that included female and male monks as well as laywomen and laymen. The emphasis, however, tended to traditionally privilege the former over latter, and as the discussions unfolded in the first meeting, asking for increased lay visibility in the decision-making process emerged as a strategy to counteract the entrenched power that the ecclesia commanded over the monastic order. The proposal was seconded by Chermsak Pinthong, while Tavivat further proposed the possibility of issuing an ancillary law requiring temples to provide full disclosure of inventories, revenues and expenditures. Concurring with the others, Suebpong Thammachat asserted that there was a common saying “half for temple, half for the committee” (*wat*

khrungnung, kammakan khrungnung) that people usually used to explain the benefit-sharing in temple economy between the abbot and lay attendants, which illustrated the extent to which temples were perceived to function like a commercial organization.

In addition, Suraphon Suyaphrom, who taught at Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU), the largest monastic university in Thailand, pointed out that the ambiguity in temple administration was a common theme found in MCU student monks' theses. Young monks were curious about the extent of power that an abbot had over a temple because provisions on the authority of abbots, and protocol regarding temple revenue in the sangha law were written in an uncertain manner and could potentially contradict the *vinaya*. The dilemma between two overlapping legal regimes, namely secular law and monastic disciplinary code, underlie Suraphon's main points. Even though the authority to expel monks from a temple, for example, was sanctioned by the sangha law, the proper approach consistent with the *vinaya* would be to convene all monks in the temple to deliberate and reach consensus on the matter, a process that depends on more than the jurisdiction of the abbot alone. Because of their legally sanctioned authority, abbots could thus exploit the gap between the sangha law and the *vinaya* to take control of their temple to advance the personal interest, which Suraphon considered an enabling condition that permitted the spread of religious commercialization (*phuttha panit*). If financial issues were to be reformed, in the view of Suraphon, an executive committee consisting of laypeople as well as lay participation in the process of temple management would strengthen temples and break this vicious cycle. The issue of enhanced lay participation in monastic reform was supported by Pannee Jarusombat and Santisuk Sophonsiri, especially Santisuk who agreed that inclusivity and salvaging the four-fold assembly would contribute to a healthy system of checks and balances.

As these discussions demonstrated, an agreement among the committee members converged on how to make monastic behavior conform to the guideline of monastic regulation and teachings of the Buddha, particularly in accordance to a Theravada tradition that expected the monastics to renounce the world and maintain both material and spiritual purity. This stance was reaffirmed at the closing of the meeting when Paibun concluded that the extent and approach to the protection of Buddhist affairs, which the committee sought to undertake, ought to abide by the following principles: 1) the reform must proceed in accordance with *thamma-vinaya*, or the teachings and regulations laid out by the Buddha; 2) the committee had to conduct a study to determine which areas of Buddhist affairs to reform and what could actually be accomplished; 3) Buddhist affairs, including both monastic and lay constituents, must follow *thamma-vinaya* because any violation of this framework, if perpetuated for an extended period, could lead to misunderstanding and acceptance of the wrong view; and 4) even though a proposal was made by a member for a comparative study of other religions in conjunction with the investigation of Buddhist affairs, the committee would focus solely on Buddhism. The committee then unanimously agreed to ask the members to write and present reports for the next meeting on the topics of: 1) the background and rationale of reform (Mano Laohavanich, Santisuk Sophonsiri and Tavivat Puntarigvivat); 2) the assets and revenues of temples and monks (Mano, Tavivat and Suraphon Suyaphrom); and 3) doctrinal interpretation (Mano, Tavivat and Suraphon) (CBA 2015, 44-5).

Authorized Ambiguity and Unimpeded Power

Pertaining to the critical comment that monastic abuse could evade legal guidelines for monastic conduct, Mano was not the only one who held the view that the issue of monastic property and revenue for both temples and monks needed critical attention. In response to the preposition,

Paibun asked the committee to review stipulations in the 1992 revision of the 1962 Sangha Act on monasteries, especially Section 31, 34 and 40 that included the following details:

> **Section 31** Monasteries are of two kinds viz.
> (1) Those where the consecrated boundaries (*Sima*) have been officially granted or recognized
> (2) Ecclesiastical Abodes (*Samnak Sangha*)
> Monasteries are juristic persons.
> Abbots are representatives of monasteries in general affairs.
>
> **Section 34** Transference of ownership of the area within which various structures of a monastery are situated or of a piece of land belonging to a monastery can be accomplished only through an Act with the exception in accordance to the second paragraph.
> Transference of ownership of the area within which various structures of a monastery are situated or of a piece of land belonging to a monastery to administrative agency, state enterprise or state agency without objection from the Supreme Sangha Council and with renumeration from that agency can be accomplished only through a royal decree.
> Nobody shall be allowed to file a case against a monastery by right of **prescription** concerning the property which is either a monastery compound, monastery estate or central ecclesiastic property.
>
> **Section 40** Ecclesiastical property is of two categories as follows:
> (1) **Central Ecclesiastical Property**: This refers to one belonging to the Order of the *Sangha* as a whole, not to any particular monastery.
> (2) **Monastery Ecclesiastical Property**: This is (*as opposed to the previous category*) the kind that belongs to a monastery in particular.
> Administration and maintenance of the Central Ecclesiastical Property is vested with the Office of National Buddhism, which is also considered its owner *ex officio*.
> Administration and maintenance of the Central Ecclesiastical property is to conform to the ministerial regulations.[43]

While Paibun may have drawn the committee's attention to these stipulations to provide an overview of how management of monastic property was written in the sangha law, doing so also revealed the intricacies underlying the management of monastic property, which were implicitly understood among many committee members. Since early times, the ownership of monastic property was, in principle, classified as belonging to the religion, not the state. At present, however, ownership of monastic assets was not clearly defined as the state was not directly designated as

[43] Parts of this translation come from the 1962 Sangha Act rendered in Mahamakuta Educational Council (1963, 43-5).

the owner of temple lands, and these lands could be converted into normal status if and only if the transfer was made into a legal act, which required a parliamentary process and approval. The ambiguity of ownership, according to those skeptical of how the sangha handled temple affairs, was alleged to provide a loophole for the abuse of power for two reasons. First, the abbot could gain excessive control over temple affairs because he could make a decision whether one could stay on the property or must leave; and second, because even though the abbot was bestowed the responsibility to oversee temple affairs and received monthly renumeration, regardless of how small that was, he was not a civil servant or state official who could be legally held accountable if found to have breached the scope of responsibility.[44]

In this regard, even though the sangha in general was under state control, the management of temple had been an area where immunity to interference existed due to the vagueness of guidelines in maintaining transparent and organized records of temple proceeds and expenses. Because the 1992 revision of the 1962 Sangha Act added a clause that classified temples as juristic persons, the law imparted temples the rights to legal transactions and contracts as well as rights over the management of temple lands and properties. Despite the responsibility to represent the temple in general affairs relegated by the sangha law, financial transactions were a critical aspect of temple administration. The government therefore felt that the monastic order would be better off having a lay person or a group of lay people in charge, because handling money was unbecoming of monastic conduct. In response to this concern, regulations were made to supplement the sangha law. One of the additions was a ministerial regulation by Ministry of Education in 1968, which

[44] Rather, abbots were considered "officials" (chao phanakngan) and not "state official" (chao nati khong rat), which meant that abbots were legally appointed by the state and enjoyed legal privileges of such appointment, according to Section 136-146 of the Criminal Code. State officials, on the other hand, were legally liable for their action if found to be negligent or abusing their authority and could be taken to trial in the Administrative Court in accordance to Section 157 of the Criminal Code. This ambiguity was a key issue in the debate on how to hold monks with administrative ranks accountable for their action.

made the appointment of lay temple manager a requirement, so that the manger could keep an account of revenues and expenditures as well as produce an annual account book at the end of each year.[45] Another regulation came from *Mahathera* in 1993 that specified the role of temple manager as one who was in charge of distributing the monthly allowance from the state to the abbot and other monks with monastic ranks in that particular temple as well as overseeing temple upkeep as designated by the abbot in writing. The *Mahathera* regulation also contained a list of qualifications that the candidate for the temple manager position should meet, including being a male above the age of 25 years with good morality, being free of debt and having never committed serious crimes, among others.[46]

Still, these ancillary measures did not specify the criteria and procedure for the appointment, and many temples, for one reason or another, did not usually keep their account books current, and many maintained their accounting outside of public scrutiny.[47] The opacity left by the sangha law,

[45] This ancillary law is known as "Ministerial Regulation No. 2 (B.E. 2511) Issued in Accordance to the Sangha Act of B.E. 2505 (1962)" (kot krasuang chabap thi 2 (porsor 2511) ok tam khawam nai phra ratchabanyat khana song porsor 2505), which was issued on October 10, 1968 due to the designation in the 1962 Sangha Act that the maintenance and management of temple properties had to be in accordance to ministerial regulation. For more information, see ONAB (2015, 19-20). The position of temple manager could be in the capacity of either as an individual (waiyawatchakorn) or a group of individuals (khana kammakarn wat). In present time, many temples opt to select a committee to circumvent potential problem and scandal from having just one person overseeing temple finances, which would thus place too much power in one individual and can bring unwanted attention to the temple.

[46] For more information on this regulation, see ONAB (2015, 60-3).

[47] There are multiple reasons why temples do not keep their account books current. For temples in rural areas, one of the problems is lack of monks and lay patrons, especially in the areas where rural-to-urban migration has left only the elders and children in the communities. Also, rural monks may not have the knowledge and time to record donation proceeds and expenses as many of these monks are also elderly. In urban areas, however, royal temples are usually divided into different quarters, each with its own protocol and regulation. Finances for these different quarters are not necessarily aggregated, and oftentimes, donation to individual monks is not disclosed, as opposed to donation to the temple during merit-making ceremonials, or patrons make a point of designating their donation for the temple or particular purpose. There are also cases where rural temples with large urban followings due to charismatic abbots may also have the problem of urban lay patrons taking control of the temple and excluding the locals from administrative tasks. These followers may keep the account book but hide the number due to their anxiety that the locals may know and demand money from the abbot. There are also temples where local lay patrons form a committee and help the abbot with the upkeep and maintenance, but do not necessarily keep the account book themselves. If the abbot, however, does not seem to spend that money toward temple restoration or improvement, they will demand to know where the money has gone. In short, there are scenarios as to why revenues and expenditures of a temple may not be made public.

as a result, produced several possibilities. The appointment of temple manager could in general lead to either collusion between the abbot and lay committee, where abbots appointed acquaintances or relatives to the position to retain control over temple finances, or domination of the temple by laypeople, who controlled the abbot and temple affairs. In case of the former, there was no mechanism to audit a case of an abbot abusing his power because Article 34 of the 1962 Sangha Act explicitly stated that no one "shall be allowed to file a case against a monastery by right of prescription concerning the property which is either a monastery compound or a monastery estate" (Mahamakuta Educational Council 1963). These legal provisions created a condition that guarded the monastic order from critical examination and allocated power, often unchecked, to the abbot.

For critics of the sangha, the sangha law afforded abbots excessive control over the management of temple finance and monastic assets. The abbot, according to the sangha law, was appointed as the supervisor of temple lands and assets, which in turn gave him considerable power not only as a representative of the state but also as a holder of authority to adjudicate internal affairs of a given temple. This aspect of the abbot's authority had long been a contested issue among the sangha, particularly resident monks without monastic ranks or administrative position, who felt that their fates were dependent on how much they could get along with or please their abbot. The 1962 sangha act, in this instance, was perceived to provide the abbot with the authority to manage financial transactions and legal contracts, which many believed to be the basis for temple corruption as the abbot may select his own people as temple committee members to direct financial matters as he pleases. In addition, the same concern was extended to central ecclesiastic property because if ONAB conspired with the monastic establishment, revenues received from

such property could be manipulated through bookkeeping tactics to hide the real figures and launder the money through various means without serious examination.[48]

In this sense, the call by several committee members to decentralize the power held by the abbots and give laypeople the capacity to participate in monastic affairs was in short intended to counter the conditions that exempted administrative monks from critical inquiry into their property management and financial activities. These legal constraints to audit monastic wealth became even more of a concern when individual monk assets were considered because records of private donations were even more scarce than temple accounts, and monks did not have to any legal obligation to declare their assets. In short, legal ambiguity allowed for a temple's economy and private monastic wealth to evade the watchful eye of the state. This situation occupied the committee's attention in their first meeting.

Weaponizing the Past

The innocuous beginning of the committee soon turned controversial due to the unexpected direction that the committee took as well as its increased association with Phuttha Itsara. In its second meeting, the committee shifted its focus from the general topics of monastic affairs to Phra Thammachayo. The focus was set on the controversy surrounding the charges of embezzlement against Phra Thammachayo and the letters written by the late Somdet Phra Yannasangwon after most of *Mahathera* voted against disciplining Thammachayo. In a series of letters expressing his opinion regarding the case, Somdet Phra Yannasangwon conclusively made his verdict that with

[48] Such concern was aptly pertinent due to previous attempts in trying to make transparent revenues generated from central ecclesiastic property were met with strong resistance from the monastic order. In 2003, for example, Banthun Lamsam, then Managing Director and majority shareholder of Kasikorn Bank, was forced to resign from the post of Chairman of the Board of the Mahamakut Foundation due to his effort to clean up the book of the foundation, whose revenues were largely derived from central ecclesiastic property under its control including rent from various lands in downtown areas.

all available evidence, Thammachayo indeed had committed monastic transgressions severe enough to warrant disrobing. Inviting a representative from ONAB to the meeting, many members expressed the wish to revisit the case and hold Thammachayo accountable for his wrongful action (*Post Today* 2015). This was a significant move because the committee unexpectedly reopened an investigation into a matter that many believed closed but did so at a time when Wat Phra Thammakai also was coming under increased public scrutiny. In recent years, for instance, Wat Phra Thammakai faced intense criticism from its annual pilgrimage walk, known as *thudong thamchai*, that mimicked an ascetic practice in which monks wandered the forest to observe a set of austerities to cultivate spirituality.[49]

More importantly, only a few months previous to the decision to reopen the investigation, Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai had become embroiled in another controversy that involved a case of massive embezzlement. The charge involved one of the most prominent followers of Thammachayo, Supachai Srisupaaksorn, chairman of Credit Union Chumchon Klongchan Limited (CKL). In 2013, the controversy broke when the CKL management was alleged to have misappropriated and laundered more than 10 billion baht of the credit union's funds through various channels, which subsequently led to a group of members filing a complaint with the Department of Special Investigation (DSI), who then opened an investigation into the matter. In a surprising twist to the case, the probe by *ThaiPublica*, an investigative journalistic outlet, uncovered that Supachai donated close to a billion baht to Thammachayo and Wat Phra

[49] Thudong Thamchai began in 2012 as a multi-day merit-making event to rehabilitate the spirits of people after the 2011 floods with the procession comprising monks accompanied by cars and followers, who would be waiting on the roadside to provide moral support, make merit and spread rose petals on red carpet as participating monks walked by. The march was designated to pass through different locations and conclude at Wat Paknam for an audience with Somdet Chuang. Due to overwhelmingly positive response from temple followers and ecclesia, the event later became an annual occurrence that involved many resources and personnel from the temple as well as assistance from the ecclesia. The project, however, has drawn intense criticism from the public that such campaign is too extravagant, symptomatic of religious commercialization and unbecoming of monastic conduct, in addition to charges of traffic congestion and public disruption (*PostToday* 2012)

Thammakai. The exposé led to a host of questions regarding the relationships between Supachai and Thammachayo and the role of Wat Phra Thammakai's leadership in this case. As a result, charges of conspiring to launder money and receiving stolen property were filed against Thammachayo in 2015. Faced with mounting criticism from the public and investigation by the authorities, the saga came to represent one of the biggest, if not the biggest, challenges to Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai.[50]

The sudden change in the committee's proceedings caught the sangha off-guard and set the stage for a confrontation between the committee and the sangha. Well-known Buddhist activists came out to express their concerns upon hearing the direction that the committee was headed. The Association of Scholars for Buddhism (ASB), led by Sathien Wiphonmaha and Methaphan Phothithirarot, issued the first official statement two days after the second meeting of the committee to voice their worry that certain committee members were driven by prejudice against the sangha, and because committee members did not have sufficient knowledge in Buddhism, any decision coming out from the committee could prove detrimental to Buddhism and the sangha. The association thus asked the government to request close consultation with the sangha before any monastic reform attempt could move forward. Furthermore, when ONAB informed *Mahathera* that the issue of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon's letters was raised with regards to the legitimacy of the ruling on Thammachayo, Phra Phrom Methi, *Mahathera* spokesperson, held a press conference after *Mahathera* meeting to announce that *Mahathera* agreed to maintain the validity of the 1999 resolution from *Mahathera*, which found Thammachayo not guilty (*Thairath* 2015a).[51]

[50] For an overview of this case, see *ThaiPublica* (2018), and for a detailed analysis of what ThaiPublica calls "Thammakai connection" in this case, see *ThaiPublica* (2015).

[51] It would come to light later that *Mahathera* did not vote to stand its 1999 resolution but just listened to the report given by ONAB representative, Somkiat Thongsi. Phra Phrom Methi's press conference obscured this fact due to his

Upon learning of the announcement, Phuttha Itsara went with his followers to Wat Paknam the next day to protest the *Mahathera* resolution. He brought along a large blue plastic basket filled with sandalwood flowers, incense, candles, clothes, used underwear, tampons, shoes, pestle and other miscellaneous items, in addition to a gift basket and envelope with a thousand baht as offerings to monks at the temple.[52] He requested to see Somdet Chuang but was met instead by Phra Phrom Moli (Suchat Thammaratano), assistant abbot of Wat Paknam and an *Mahathera* member. Phuttha Itsara had a number of questions concerning the proceedings. He asked if it was possible that the *Mahathera* resolution contradicted the *vinaya*; whether Somdet Phra Yannasangwon's letters were considered illegal; if the case of Thammachayo would be considered a precedent for how *Mahathera* would deliberate such case in the future; and whether the contradiction between the *Mahathera* resolution and Somdet Phra Yannasangwon's letters would mean that the latter might be deemed to have violated monastic conduct because the allegation was without merit. In short, Phuttha Itsara was forcing the monastic establishment to acknowledge the cultural authority of its monastic leader, given that the status of the Supreme Patriarch was a highly revered position for the ecclesiastic and administrative class, and pressure *Mahathera* to move toward the disciplining of Thammachayo.[53] He also noted the absence of the members from the Thammayut order at the most recent *Mahathera* meeting and at the press conference held

wording that *Mahathera* had a resolution on the matter, which casted him as a defender of Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai (*DailyNews* 2015).

[52] The symbolic meaning of these offers was that they were all lowly, polluted objects like the money that *Mahathera*, particularly Somdet Chuang in this case, received from Wat Phra Thammakai. Sandalwood flowers, for instance, are commonly used in cremation ceremonies.

[53] Phuttha Itsara repeatedly confesses his reverence for Somdet Phra Yannasangwon and said that he met Somdet Phra Yannasangwon while he was still a child and went to meditate in an assembly hall of Wat Bowonniwet. According to his FB, Phuttha Itsara asserts that Somdet Phra Yannasangwon came to visit him at his temple three times when he was away, and they finally met at Wat Onoi on 21 September 1998. Afterwards, he was given tasks by Somdet Phra Yannasangwon to test his capacity and later entrusted with a mission to find ways to deal with Thammakai to restore the sanctity of *thamma-vinaya* and Buddhism, a promise that he said was the impetus for his political activism and religious crusade (Phuttha Itsara 2017).

immediately after the meeting. Phra Phuttha Itsara suggested that Mahanikai members were protecting Thammachayo, who belonged to their order (*Thairath* 2015d).

Underlying the contention expressed by Phuttha Itsara were the questions whether the authority of the sangha lay in the hands of the late Supreme Patriarch, who was directly select by the king prior to the 1992 revision of the sangha law, or an institution that functioned as a governing organization of the sangha. According to the *vinaya*, even though the Supreme Patriarch was a leader of *Mahathera* he did not have the authority to deliberate any matter on his own and had to rely on the sangha's consensus to proceed. In the same way, the sangha law did not give the Supreme Patriarch any extraordinary power to adjudicate the case of Thammachayo alone. In view of Phuttha Itsara, however, the Supreme Patriarch was a ruler of the monastic realm, much like how the king was viewed as a ruler of the lands by many, especially among the yellow shirts and PDRC followers, even if the monarchy was under the constitution with no real political power. Such difference between cultural perceptions and legal principles may seem self-evident, but the boundary remained uncertain as different views competed for a leading position.

Public perception, at any rate, still looked to the Supreme Patriarch as a critically important position that commanded moral authority over both the sangha and laity. In what would later prove to be an effective tactic, Phuttha Itsara argued for the recognition of the Supreme Patriarch as the authority of the sangha to counteract *Mahathera*. His stance was suggestively similar to the proposal advanced by the royal-nationalist protesters, who looked to the monarchy as a countervailing force that would offset the increasingly powerful political faction of Thaksin Shinawatra. Arguing for the moral authority of the Supreme Patriarch was a tactic that recurred throughout the course of antagonistic relations between the PDRC activists occupying positions of influence in the government and the sangha.

The attempt to discipline Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai soon escalated to the sangha threatening to mobilize a protest. Two days after Phuttha Itsara's visit to Wat Paknam, the Buddhist Reform Committee met for the third time and invited a representative from the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO), an independent agency directly tasked with the enforcement of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing law, to present their preliminary findings from their ongoing investigation of Credit Union Chumchon Klongchan and its connection to Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai. Prior to the meeting, Phuttha Itsara came to Parliament House to submit a petition to Paibun and asked for an investigation into financial flows of Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai, in addition to all abbots in Thailand. Phuttha Itsara also requested a thorough examination of the financial disbursements of *Mahathera*, monastic universities, close associates of abbots and assistant abbots as well as administrative monks of all levels to determine if any illicit activity could be detected. According to Phuttha Itsara, legal enforcement was ineffectual to uphold the integrity of the *vinaya*. He wished to see an investigation into the donation of an image of Lung Por Sot made from a ton of gold from Wat Phra Thammakai to Wat Paknam on Somdet Chuang's birthday, which he claimed to have seen and which had raised his suspicions while visiting Wat Paknam a few days ago (*NationTV* 2015).

If there was any reservation among Buddhist activists in the beginning, Phuttha Itsara's visit to Wat Paknam removed any indecision and provoked them to come out in full force. Representatives from the Network of Buddhist Organizations of Thailand, led by Phra Methi Thammachan and Phra Maha Cho, and the Association of Scholars for Buddhism, fronted by Sathien Wipornmaha, went to Office of the Permanent Secretary in person and submitted a petition to the prime minister.[54] The petition expressed a concern that the Buddhist Reform Committee

[54] Phra Methi Thammachan, now MCU vice rector on public relations and propagation, and Phra Maha Cho were also advisors to SBA, and there was no clear list of membership of both the Network of Buddhist Organizations and SBA.

might have acted in breach of their duty and impinged on *Mahathera*. They asked that any aggression toward *Mahathera*, implicitly referencing the incident at Wat Paknam, and Buddhism be stopped. Phra Methi Thammachan said that he was mostly concerned with the lack of monastic participation in the process. He was also concerned that some of the committee members, especially Paibun, had radically dangerous ideas about Buddhism without a genuine interest in monastic reform. He asked that the government dissolve the committee within 15 days due to worries that its continuation would only create further divisiveness. If the government ignored this demand, the sangha would be forced to deliberate on how to proceed within the parameters that the *vinaya* would allow. In other words, Phra Methi Thammachan was threatening the government with monastic mobilization. The groups went on to the parliament to submit another petition to Tienchay Keeranant, the NRC President, to demand for the committee's dissolution. Even though Tienchay did not come out to receive the petition personally, he told reporters later that there would be no dissolution (*Khaosod* 2015b).

The response from the government was mixed. As the committee chairperson, Paibun came out in the same day to say that the committee was only acting in according to the task given by the NRC. Paibun, however, insinuated that the committee did not have the responsibility nor the authority to audit *Mahathera*; the duty to do so would lie within the jurisdiction of the Office of the Ombudsman. He further dismissed the petition by saying that he believed someone had already filed a complaint concerning the issues at hand. He was also quick to clarify that the committee did not have any hidden agenda to use the case of Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai to impede the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch. Still, Paibun insisted that the committee

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The previous, however, was a name used for monastic activism from the 2007 national religion campaign, while SBA was recently inaugurated as a lay activist group to carry out public campaigns that may be perceived by observers as unbefitting of monastic conduct. Still, these two groups are based on personnel associated with monastic universities and can be considered the same group with the BPCT.

would continue, and pointed out instead that those coming out to protest were benefactors of the existing monastic hierarchy. In response to Paibun's statement, the government, however, created distance between the cabinet and committee. When asked for his opinion on the matter by reporters, Prayut Chan-ocha stated that the proceeding was the responsibility of NRC, and that the cabinet did not know anything about it. Witsanu Krua-ngam, taking a more sympathetic approach towards monastic expression, warned that NRC must watch their words when dealing with the sangha. He stressed that the sangha should be given time to deliberate and reach a verdict whether Thammachayo was guilty and warranted disrobing before the government could step in (*Thairath* 2015c).[55]

With mounting pressure from a multitude of Buddhist groups (see the next section) and threats made by Phra Methi Thammachan that monks from around the country would mobilize for a large rally, Paibun finally announced on March 6 that the Buddhist Reform Committee would not proceed further. The committee thus concluded its task after only five meetings over a span of less than a month (*KomChadLuek* 2015b). The committee then held a press conference on March 22 to present their findings and recommendations to NRC. Over the course of its deliberation, according to Paibun, there were four major problems that the committee identified. First, because assets of temple and individual monks were not audited or fully disclosed, many monks could exploit such ambiguity to seek profit over religious study and practice. Second, centralization of monastic administration and insufficient monastic education contributed to deviance from the practice and teaching of the Buddha. Third, distortion of doctrines and practice was rampant and

[55] It should be noted that Witsanu has long had a close working relation with the monastic establishment and could be considered an ally of the sangha. During a contentious period in 1992 when the demand by sections of the ecclesia to amend the existing sangha law was growing, for example, Witsanu and Meechai Ruchuphan were appointed by the government as advisors to the Supreme Sangha Council to provide consultation on the matter. Witsanu is also known to have personal relationships with several of the senior ecclesiastic monks in *Mahathera*, which would explain why the NCPO put him in charge of ONAB alongside Suwaphan Tanyuwatthana, former Director of the National Intelligence Agency and now Minister of the Office of Prime Minister.

readily observable, as exemplified in the case of Wat Phra Thammakai's promotion of religious consumerism and embezzlement. This issue required the creation of a committee to purify falsehood. And fourth, the government must promote and protect monastic affairs through restructuring monastic administrative structure to become more flexible than its current state (*Bangkokbiznews* 2015).

In the final report submitted to the NRC, the recommendations were listed with the four major points, which emphasized asset management of temples and individual monks; monastic administrative structure and decentralization; protection against deviance in teachings and practices; and reform of monastic education. First, the committee proposed the creation of a new law on the management of temple and individual monastic assets, which would require temples to prepare account books fully detailing their assets and revenues. Any benefit accrued by individual monks during their tenure in the monkhood must be designated as belonging to the religion, not individuals. Further, asset management of temples and individual monks ought to involve the four-fold assembly, which would mean equal participation by monks, female monks, laywomen and laymen to build transparency. In doing so, Commercial Code Section 1623, which allowed for monks to create a will designating where their assets would go after death, ought to be amended to specify that assets obtained by individual monks must belong to their resident temples and could not be transferred to any party through the will.

Second, monastic administration should be decentralized from a top-down approach to a model where temples could preserve their independence and be managed by the four-fold assembly consisting of the local sangha and local people. Monks should also be allowed to contribute their opinions on monastic governance and participate in policy-making process. This would allocate decision-making power away from the center to provincial, district and sub-district levels, thus

permitting regional and local sangha the flexibility to manage their affairs and enhance lay involvement. At the same time, temples must be designated as the center of reform and given the independence to determine their own management, appointment and discharge of abbots and practices that were in line with *thamma-vinaya*. Third, the committee proposed the establishment of mechanisms to turn the regulatory framework of monastic conduct as laid out by the Buddha into a clear guideline for the four-fold assembly to follow. Doing so would enable a critical examination of any deviance or arrogation fabricated to accrue personal profit, which led to the declining faith in Buddhism. Lastly, monastic education must be reformed to adapt to changes in contemporary times. Bureaucracy must not neglect this issue or leave it to monks to manage on their own because the outdated curriculum was leading to the diminishing popularity of monastic education among novices and monks, who had lost confidence in conventional model of monastic education and instead sought to learn worldly subjects (CBA 2015, 11-2).

Taming the Shrewd Sangha

In this chapter, I have provided the political and social context that led to the creation of the Buddhist Reform Committee, which became a vehicle for Paibun Nititawan and social activists from the royal-nationalist camp to contest the monastic order. In particular, I argued that the critical challenge did not directly originate from the junta. Rather, lay reformists, who had long been the critics of the sangha, had captured the state and used the coup as an opportunity to initiate their long-awaited project of getting rid of impurities within the monastic order in hope of restoring Buddhism to its ideal image. The incident marked a significant turning point as the sangha began to exert itself in an increasingly antagonistic manner toward the state.

Through the analysis of the Buddhist Reform Committee's proceeding, I have also outlined the political, social and legal foundation that acted as a barrier to the monastic reform, a concern that became the basis for the criticism of the monastic administrative class and its disproportionate power relative to other groups within the sangha. These considerations are an attempt to explain the impetus behind the monastic reform agenda in the post-2014 coup from the lay reformist and state perspectives. In the next chapter, I will shift the discussion to the monastic side and make a case that principal to the sentiment supporting the reform is a recognition that the sangha has become a powerful economic and political institution, despite its increasingly diminished role in national security. The development of the monastic establishment and its growing affinity with civilian political groups, I suggest, are conditions that led to the confrontation between the state and sangha. In the next chapter, I will examine the monastic perspectives on the confrontation and conflict with the state on the issue of monastic reform.

CHAPTER 3

The Monastic Establishment

The bright light of May sky glistened off the golden arc of Wat Tapoparam's main gate where a white-robed nun sweeping the ground at the entrance seemed to be the only movement in sight. Located in Ranong Province in the South of Thailand, Wat Tapoparam was one of a few monastic schools in the province, making it an important node of the national sangha; but just like most temples, late morning was the down time, and resident monks had retreated back to their quarters or off to classes after their first meal of the day at seven in the morning. The main office of the temple, however, was surprisingly animated. Seated in the middle was Phra Thep Sittimongkol (Sanoe Siripinyo), commonly known as Luang Por Sanoe, or Venerable Father Sanoe, a central figure in the local sangha who, at the age of eighty-six, remained an active presence as the temple's longstanding abbot. His position as the former provincial sangha head of the Mahanikai order meant that he also commanded a high level of respect among his peers. In front of Luang Por Sanoe sat a young boy with freshly shaved head, his scrawny figure clothed in green soccer shirt and shorts. With a set of orange robe and lotus flowers beside him, he sat on his knees, head lowered, hands pressed together at the chest. Flanked by his father on the left, they were brought in to see Luang Por Sanoe by another novice from the temple, who informed the abbot of the family's intention to have the boy ordained as a novice and seek enrollment and residence at the temple.

"Why do you want him to ordain?" Luang Por Sanoe asked. "My son is now 12, but he has not matured much," the father responded. "Our family's economic situation is also not very good; I want my son to ordain here so that he could study and live with his brother, my son from the previous marriage, who has been a novice here for seven years." The novice introducing the family

to the abbot, as I realized then, was that older brother the father mentioned. Luang Por Sanoe fixed his gaze at the boy. A moment passed, and he began the first lesson, one of many that was to come during the course of the boy's stay.

> If you want to become a novice and stay here, you have to learn to persevere and abandon bad habits that you have at home because when you are here, you assume a monastic status. Let me get this straight: life is not easy here. This is not like your home where you can do whatever you want, do you understand this? There are rules here, and you need to comply with my words because ordaining is like adhering to me as my child. If you believe me, you will be successful.

After making sure that the boy understood his points that ordination indicated a new beginning where the boy would become a new person, Luang Por Sanoe instructed the boy to prostrate in front of his dad, hands to his chest, and ask for forgiveness for all the wrongs that he might have done against his father, whether verbally, physically or ideationally as well as intentionally or accidentally. The novice was then asked to take the boy to change into a monastic robe. In this way, the boy was thought to have wiped the slate clean and left no regret in the world before his transition into novicehood.

While we were waiting for them to come back, a car drove up to the office, and a man and two women exited, walked up to the office and started peeping inside before inviting themselves in. One of them began by introducing a woman in the group as the wife of the current provincial governor of Ranong and that she would like to make donation before leaving for Bangkok. Because the title of provincial governor was by appointment and considered to represent a high-level position for regional governance under the Ministry of Interior, the sight of the provincial governor or his wife choosing to make merit at a certain temple would indicate a level of prestige or recognition of the said temple. Upon hearing their intention, Luang Por Sanoe nodded his head. The governor's wife walked on her knees to his seat, brought out an envelope sealed with donation

money inside and placed it on a piece of cloth that the abbot laid out in front of him. According to one of the rules in the disciplinary code, monks are not allowed to touch women, and thus when women in Thailand make any donation, they would customarily place it in a piece of cloth that monk set in front and held by its tip. After receiving the envelope, Luang Por Sanoe performed a chant to bless the group, while the governor's wife poured water from a small container to an old brass bowl, a metaphorical act where the movement of pouring water represented the flow of consigning merit to others designated by the maker of that merit, whether that be family member, spouse, guardian spirit or the merit-maker herself. When the ceremonial ended, the visitors exchanged pleasantries with Luang Por Sanoe before excusing themselves and retreating to the car.

As the group was leaving, the boy came back in orange robes, and thus began the final part of the ordination. Contrary to the full ordination for monk which required several monks to collectively perform the ritual, the novice ordination was short and could be undertaken by only a senior monk because a novice only observed ten precepts, which he had to recite during the ceremonial.[1] Luang Por Sanoe led the chant, and the boy struggled to keep up. It was evident that the boy had no familiarity with long passages of Buddhist chanting. Many times, he had to stop and collect himself, but every time Luang Por Sanoe patiently repeated the part that he missed. It was evident that Luang Por Sanoe had seen and been in this kind of situation countless times before. The father, along with myself and others present in the room, sat anxiously, not fully knowing whether the boy could pull this off but expecting him to somehow do so. And he finally did get through. By eleven in the morning, the ordination was completed. The boy was now fully

[1] These ten precepts include refraining from 1) taking lives; 2) theft; 3) sexual activity; 4) incorrect speech; 5) consuming intoxicants that lead to carelessness; 6) eating after noon; 7) forms of entertainment such as dancing, singing and music; 8) wearing garlands and using perfume and cosmetics; 9) lying on a high or luxurious place; and 10) accepting gold, silver and money.

recognized as a novice. Luang Por Sanoe asked the older novice to bring his brother to where the boy would stay and provide the full guideline of the rules and protocol in living at the temple. All of them prostrated and thanked the abbot before attendant monks came in to help Luang Por Sanoe get up and walk to the assembly hall for the mid-day meal.

Monkhood is the world of dependency, opportunity and reciprocity. In Thailand, ordination represents not only a passage into adulthood for Buddhist men, the ritual itself also marks a transformation of lay to monastic status, from raw to cooked, profane to sacred. In particular, the ritual allows access into a distinct social and cultural world in which membership is exclusive to men and bound by allegiance to the disciplinary codes as well as the hierarchy of seniority; and where social mobility and cultural acceptance is promised, albeit with an increasing cost. As the case of Luang Por Sanoe and the young novice may indicate, when any novice or monk is ordained, he enters into a network of patron-client relationships with his abbot, preceptor and teacher at monastic school, who grants him access to opportunity. Prior to the ordination, for instance, he must be granted permission to stay at the temple by the abbot first. If the new novice or monk would like to attend the nearby monastic school in case that his temple does not have one, then the abbot is the one to introduce him to that school. If one does well in this school, the chance to advance to the next level may demand that he moves to another distant school and temple. The transfer requires another introduction by either his abbot or teacher. This is a typical experience for the majority of novices and monks. When monks have to move for other reasons, they also need the permission from the abbot of the designated temple to stay and are at risk of getting

evicted from the premises anytime depending on the abbot's jurisdiction. Without patronage, the prospect of a career in monkhood greatly diminishes.[2]

Monkhood, like other professions, is also a career, and there are paths that a novice or monk takes to advance his standing. One such path is through education. Exceling in the study of Pali and passing advanced levels of Pali examination, of which there are 9 levels, is highly valued due to the emphasis that the official sangha places on the scriptural study. The path to the elite status in the sangha is not only evaluated on academic excellence, but also the ability to seek out good patrons that could provide opportunities and support to enhance one's life chance. Having rank and title also entails potential invitations by the palace, aristocratic families and people of influence to perform ceremonials at their private residence, which adds to the stature and wealth of the invited monastic members. These trajectories are what Luang Por Sanoe meant when he promised success for the young novice, even if the novice might not have imagined anything greater than a basic monastic education and opportunity to possibly continue his education at Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU) in order to obtain an undergraduate degree before disrobing and returning home to find employment and take care of the father. Luang Por Sanoe was himself part of this social field, and at his old age, was known as the oldest graduate student in the history of MCU.[3]

The new novice is not alone: his case is representative of thousands of new novices entering into the monastic order to pursue educational opportunity and find refuge from troubles at home. Many will be able to see through their initial object, many may give in midway, and some will be

[2] One of the metaphors often used in the monastic patron-client relationship is that of the family where the patron is looked at as a father figure, who takes care of his children, or clients. As Maria Lepowsky (1990) suggests, these gendered categories signal power relations between the parties involved as well as forms of authority.

[3] Luang Por Sanoe graduated with Ph.D. in Buddhist Educational Administration in May 2018 at the age of 87. The ordination ceremonial described in this section was on May 6, 2016.

able to see even greater heights depending on their abilities and luck in finding the right patron. In this sense, both Luang Por Sanoe and the young novice share something in common: these are people who would otherwise not be able to access the educational opportunity that they received were it not for the sangha to have the institutions and infrastructure in place for this section of population to access. Still, the picture is not all rosy. Because good patronage demands excellent service, the patron monk can expect his clients to receive his orders and deliver results on matters ranging from administrative and educational to religious and personal. In many cases, loyalty could come with a high price as conformity may lead to the detriment of those in the powerless and vulnerable position. Given unequal power relations within the hierarchy of the monastic order, coercion and exploitation are a common aspect of monastic life.

This chapter explores the development and political role of the monastic establishment, an enclave of monastic elites that extends beyond the sangha into various overlapping networks. The first part argues that underlying this fortress are the reciprocal relations that are vertically ordered and structure life chances and terms of relationships from the temple to central ecclesiastic levels. As the case of Luang Por Sanoe shows, ordination plunges one into a system of relationships where hierarchy and patterns of mobility matter to how one's life trajectory is determined, and many novices, monks and those with ordination experience identify a high level of allegiance to the monastic order due to what they feel as debt of gratitude. This chapter also delineates monastic activism and identifies important institutions, groups and individuals involved in the process. I argue that even though the state control and shifting concern of national security may have diminished the political significance of the sangha, a situation generally termed by Peter Jackson (1997) as "withering centre, flourishing margins" where the official sangha becomes less relevant while new Buddhist movements gain more and more public relevance and followers, the reality

complicates such claim. Instead, since the end of the Cold War, the sangha has become a powerful economic and political institution, owing its growth largely to the unintended consequence of the centralization and legal control of the sangha that has produced new possibilities that contribute to the formation of a new monastic elite class.

The chapter also looks at the development of the monastic activism prior to the 2014 coup. Since the 1990s, the sangha has asserted itself more and more in the political arena, beginning with the protest against the restructuring of the bureaucratic oversight over religious and monastic affairs to its campaign for Buddhism to be included in the constitution as the "national religion" as well as its involvement in the color-coded politics. Principal to this process is a growing perception that while members of the sangha have demonstrated a variety of positions in the ongoing political conflict, its leadership is seen as being partisan to the civilian political groups associated with ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by a coup in 2006 and is now living in exile. The role of Thaksin in supporting the sangha and intervening into the appointment of the Acting Supreme Patriarch, in particular, means that political conflict from the worldly realm spilled into the monastic sphere and gave rise to an awareness of the sangha's political affinity starting from this period. This perception, I contend, shapes the course of engagement between the sangha, state and society as a growing distrust in the neutrality of the sangha undermines its moral authority and places the monastic order under intense public scrutiny and criticism.

In the last part of the chapter, I outline monastic activism after the 2014 coup and provide an overview of various monastic responses to the junta ranging from complicit to defiant. Immediately after the coup, the ecclesia showed a willingness to cooperate with the junta in hopes that the new administration would approve and help to push its agenda. The creation of the

Buddhist Reform Committee led by lay reformists, however, changed that outlook and began a highly contentious process between the junta and lay reformists on one side, and the monastic order on the other. Throughout this chapter, I identify actors and networks associated with the monastic establishment that have come out to protest or support the monastic agenda. One of the most important shifts in contemporary form of monastic activism, I argue, is the continually increased role of lay activists on the monastic establishment's side as a result of adopting a tactic to evade the public expectation that monks must remain above worldly matters. I also consider figures and groups that acted as critics of the sangha and came out against the monastic establishment. The conflict between the sangha and government came to head when thousands of monks gathered at the 2016 rally in Phutthamonthon to demand that the government cease intervening into monastic affairs. The protest, at any rate, lasted only a day and represented the height of monastic activism in the post-2014 coup period.

On Monastic Loyalty and Life Trajectories

Even though there exists a multitude of groups within the national sangha, all groups, with the exceptions of Santi Asoke and the Bhikkhuni order, are subject to the sangha law and remain under the administration of *Mahathera Samakhom* and Office of National Buddhism (ONAB). This model of monastic governance is hierarchical in design and has, since its introduction through the first sangha law in 1902, given rise to an ecclesiastic class and network of power within the monastic order. Those with monastic and administrative ranks are considered not only officials for the sangha, but also parts of what is called the monastic establishment, or the principal amalgamation within the monastic order that holds authority, prestige and control over resources with its own specific entrenched structure. In addition to *Mahathera*, the network of the monastic

establishment comprises the administrative and educational structure of the monastic order along with those who have sought refuge under the guardianship of the sangha. This latter group may have entered the monkhood to access education and lived as temple attendants, especially provincial children going to schools in urban areas, in order to receive room, board and other assistances.

The power of the sangha has to do with how its influences pervade the society in cultural, economic, political and social terms. As one of the most significant rituals in Thai society, the sangha controls the ordination ceremonial, which marks a transformation from adolescence to adulthood, a rite of passage that most, if not all, Thai men go through. The monopoly on this symbolic transition of human development imparts a significant amount of cultural significance to the sangha. But the sangha does not only hold cultural influences. There are material aspects to the monastic order's moral authority as well. Because of the sangha's position as an intermediary between Buddhism and the world, monks encounter people from all walks of life on a regular basis and are connected through such activities as merit-making ceremonials, counseling, funerals and sermons. Senior ecclesiastic monks are figures that command veneration from nobility, businesspeople, high-level bureaucrats, military and police personnel, parties that often seek fortunetelling and counseling on various matters. Among an assortment of requests, they also frequently invite these monks to perform religious ceremonials in order to bring auspiciousness to their businesses and families. The personal relationship and interconnectedness between the ecclesia and social elites is thus an important aspect underpinning the moral authority of the sangha.

At the same time, temples and monks have long been providers of welfare to local communities and individuals, even within the monastic order itself. Some forms of assistance include delivering

food and necessities donated by their followers to give to the needy; offering shelter and money for those in emergency situations; and connecting people for job placements, career promotions or other economic prospects. Prominent temples such as Wat Saket, Wat Paknam and Wat Phra Thammakai are known to organize merit-making ceremonials to obtain funds and necessities for provincial temples in need as well as provide financial and material assistance to those affected by natural disaster. Wat Phra Thammakai, in particular, is known for its large-scale merit-making ceremonials such as mass alms-giving and religious processions where the former is also used to mobilize donations, dry food and other provisions to support the military as well as monks and temples in three southernmost provinces. The social welfare function, as will be illustrated later in this chapter, is one of the most important avenues through which the sangha exercises its cultural influence to create the connections and networks relevant for its potential campaigns.

The sangha thus plays a role in opening doors to more life opportunities. The higher ranked monks are, the more connections they have in making dreams become reality. Monkhood also provides access to education for provincial and underprivileged children. Many young men have traditionally chosen to ordain because this will exempt them from having to pay tuition, and they can rely on their resident temples for room, board and necessities to a large extent. Those below the age of 20 are ordained as novices, while older men are eligible for full ordination. Once successfully ordained, novices and monks can be enrolled in temple schools and advance to monastic universities, whose certification standards are officially recognized as equivalent to those of higher educational institutions. There is, however, a caveat to the scenario. The achievement and social mobility of these monastics largely depend on whether they can locate and form relationships with the right patrons who are able to promote and advance their interests. Young monastics enter patron-client relations the moment their parents bring them to a local temple and

ask the abbot to ordain and care for their children. In a typical situation, the local abbot would become the guardian to these youngsters, keeping watch and instructing them on how to behave. When young novices or monks need to change schools in order to pursue a higher level of monastic education, this very abbot would introduce them to another abbot, whose temple in provincial centers or Bangkok could become a place that these young monks could rely on for the next few years.

Loyalty to the monastic order is forged through reciprocity and personal relationships. If the local abbot has close connections with senior monks in royal temples, young monks may catch a break as they enter into a more elevated system of clientelism where influences congregate and expose them to network of powerful patrons and opportunities. Young monks can climb up the ladder of monastic hierarchy only through serving under senior monks in various capacities such as acting as personal attendants, managing temple facilities, teaching younger monks and novices, or fulfilling administrative duties within and outside of the temple. In some cases, they may engage in political maneuvering such as publicly speaking out on behalf of their patrons or filing petitions to support the causes that their patrons wish to see accomplished. Even if young monks decide to leave monkhood after the completion of their education or for other reasons, they can expect their abbot or seniors to provide job contacts through the connections that they have with their followers.

Former monks may go on to become lay disciples of these senior monks and other monastic friends that they have. When times call for their help, these followers will do what they are asked as a gesture of gratitude toward the institution and the people who have made them who they are. Such is also true for laypeople who rely on temples for shelter and assistance in dire times. Indeed, remaining in this network also means that one does not merely serve the monastic order, but also that one will be rewarded for one's effort and accomplishment in the form, for instance, of good

words being put to the superior at work, or the opportunity to lead an important merit-making ceremonial that is guaranteed to bring prestige to the organizers. Loyalty to the sangha, therefore, rests on reciprocal relationships that are hierarchically defined. This is how the monastic establishment functions and commands action.

At present, one of the questions pertaining to the sangha is how much authority the monastic leadership maintains. The answer can be found in both the continuing role of the sangha as the source of benefits to a large group of people as well as its continuing capacity to influence the selection process of mid and low levels of monastic administration. These two general aspects affirm that, while the authority of the monastic establishment may be reduced as Peter Jackson (1997) argues in his influential work that the official sangha has become a "withering centre," a certain level of influence exists, and the ecclesiastic class has not been dismantled.[4] In other words, the system of clientelism persists. In official terms, furthermore, the monastic establishment also commands loyalty through its power to enable or obstruct possibilities. This is especially so given that its governance structure is widespread expanding from the village to the national level. Even though *Mahathera* does not have the ability to control all monks, a majority of monks do adhere to norms of seniority because administrative monks still hold authority over important matters such as granting signatures for monks wishing to apply for passports to travel abroad, providing recommendations for administrative or ecclesiastic promotions and giving financial assistance to construction projects or large merit-making ceremonials, among many other practical matters.

This context informs the social and political dynamics of monastic activism in post-coup Thailand, which has seen a proliferation of Buddhist political groups and increased monastic

[4] In his analysis of the official sangha, Jackson (1997) makes a case that even though the sangha played an important role in the security policy during the Cold War, the priority of the nation has shifted as a new set of challenges present themselves to the government, particularly the destabilizing effects of globalization.

activism. This expansion has come largely in response to the controversy revolving around the issues of the succession of the Supreme Patriarch and state interference into monastic affairs, primarily in the cases of the initiatives on monastic reform, amendment of the sangha law and Wat Phra Thammakai.

Old Guards

Monastic activism has a long tradition, and while its contemporary manifestation is unquestionably shaped by the aftermath of the 2014 coup, its impetus and personnel can be traced to earlier developments. In the transitional period from the military to civilian rule between the late 1980s and 1990s, the sangha, like other social groups came into its own and began asserting itself politically and publicly as electoral politics became normalized.[5] One of the first articulations of the sangha during this era came with a call for the designation of Buddhism as the national religion in the constitution. In 1994, during the deliberation process to consider the drafting of a new constitution, **Dusit Sophitcha**, then Social Action Party Member of Parliament (MP) from Ubon Ratchathani, proposed the addition of a clause stating "Buddhism is the national religion" to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Amendment of the 1991 Constitution.[6] Dusit argued that because Buddhism was considered a traditional institution that had long stood together with the monarchy, the time was right to allow such language to be included in Section 27 of the constitution, the provision on freedom of religion. In doing so, the majority religion would be properly safeguarded

[5] For more information on this period, see articles in a volume edited by Hewison (1997).
[6] Dusit was one of the members of Parliament from the provinces who benefitted from local monastic patronage at young age. Many of these MPs used to be novices or "temple boys," children living in temples and serving monks in exchange for room, board and education. Other politicians who have close connections to the sangha and similar life trajectories to Dusit's include: Kuthep Saikrachang, former MP from Sri Saket and People Power Party spokesperson; Boonthan Dokthaisong, former Senator and professor at Mahachulalongkorn University; Wanchai Sornsiri, former Senator and member of the National Reform Council; Nakorn Machim, former MP from Phitsanulok and now member of the Pheu Thai Party (Riuphaluang 2016).

and promoted. Being a member of the Ad Hoc Committee as well as the Standing Committee on Religion, Art and Culture in the House of Representatives, Dusit used these two channels to push the agenda through the parliamentary process. Still, even with support from various Buddhist groups such as the Buddhist Association, Young Buddhists Association, Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU), Mahamakut University (MMU), the Supreme Patriarch and Buddhist ecclesia as well as a group of politicians, the motion by Dusit was eventually dropped.

Since then, the impetus to secure official recognition of the state and fortify the supremacy of Buddhism through constitutional channels has been one of the issues associated with monastic activism. Leading up to the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution, or the "people's constitution," Buddhist groups also collected signatures to petition for the constitutional inclusion of Buddhism as the national religion, allegedly totaling more than 2 million signatures, but the effort did not lead to any concrete outcome (Sophitcha 2002, 225). Monastic mobilization, at any rate, came in the aftermath of the 1997 Constitution. The new constitution was predicated on the promise to bring about comprehensive political reform. One of the reform attempts was to dissolve Department of Religious Affairs and create a new religion and culture committee, which would include a representative from each officially recognized religion and experts on the topics of religion and culture. Deeming such a move to be a devaluation that would lead to lay domination of the sangha, members of the ecclesia and their followers came out to protest and demanded the cancellation of the plan as well as the creation of the Ministry of Buddhism.

The monastic protest gained momentum once an organizational form was created to direct the dissent in an orderly manner. In 2001, the Buddhism Protection Centre of Thailand (BPCT) was created to streamline the campaigns of politically-minded members of the monastic establishment; it was led by **Phra Thep Dilok (Rabaep Thitayano, 1934-2015)**, assistant abbot of Wat

Bowonniwet, a prolific writer, lecturer at MMU and half-brother of prominent red-shirt leader **Chatuporn Phromphan**.[7] Located at Wat Rachathiwat, the original members included **Phra Rat Kawi (Kasem Sunyato)**, assistant abbot of Wat Rachathiwat[8]; **Phra Sri Yanasophon (Suwit Piyawitcho)**, assistant abbot of Wat Rama IV[9]; **Phra Sri Pariyatmoli (Somchai Kusonlachitto)**, assistant abbot of Wat Chantharam and lecturer of MCU[10]; **Phra Maha Cho Thatsaniyo**, MCU lecturer[11]; and **Phra Maha Bunthung Chutinatro**, abbot of Wat Talom. These monks had monastic ranks, administrative duties, high levels of Pali education and were associated with monastic universities. These monks were supported by influential laypeople, many of whom would also sit on the advisory and executive boards of the BPCT.[12] The objectives of the BPCT were to: 1) protect and promote Buddhism so that the religion remains with Thai nation and is maintained as cultural heritage for future generations; 2) function as a center for collaborative learning in Buddhist ethics as well as a network of struggle for the justice and legitimacy of Buddhism and its personnel; 3) propagate Buddhist doctrines as well as news of Buddhist affairs and monitor any

[7] Phra Rabaep was later promoted to the title of Phra Tham Methaphorn in 2010. Chao Khun Rabaep, as he was affectionately known, was a principal force behind monastic activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but his activism could be traced to as early as the 1970s when he began to publish widely on the issues of religious protection. One of his most famous, or perhaps most notorious, publications is a 1983 book, "The Plan to Destroy Buddhism," which details the conspiracy by Christian missions to undermine Thai Buddhism (Phra Sophonkhanapon 1983). Rabaep was also the mind behind the founding of the BPCT, and he engineered the movement that would come to leave much influence on the trajectory of monastic activism in the present day.

[8] Phra Kasem was promoted to the title of Phra Tham Kittimethi in 2016.

[9] Phra Suwit was later promoted to the title of Phra Rat Yanakawi in 2010.

[10] Phra Maha Somchai was promoted to the title of Phra Rat Panyamethi in 2005.

[11] Phra Maha Cho was promoted to the title of Phra Suthiwirabandit in 2016 and now is an assistant abbot of Wat Srisudaram as well as a professor at MCU.

[12] The chair of the advisory board was Phra Tham Pidok (Payut Payutto), a renowned intellectual monk and prolific writer. The advisory board consisted of 18 members, with 10 monks and 8 laypeople, while the executive board comprised 40 people with 13 monks and 27 laypeople. Well-known laypeople in these boards were Dr. Ratsami and Khun Ying Sompong Wannitson, former owners of Siam Hospital; Chamnong Thongprasert, fellow of Office of the Royal Society and well-known linguist; Colonel Thongkhao Phumrodphan (1944-2014, later promoted to Lt.-General); and Sathian Wiphornmaha, later red shirt leader and MMU lecturer, among others. Dr. Ratsami and Khun Ying Sompong were major benefactors of the sangha and donated lands and funds toward the construction of the current main campus of both MCU and MMU. Other laypeople involved in the original lineup had been ordained and received monastic education prior to leaving monkhood, and many remain, until now, associated with monastic universities.

movements that may pose danger to Buddhism; and 4) organize non-political activity (Phra Rat Kawi 2003, 5-6).

The founding of the BPCT not only gave the sangha a channel to express its demands, but also demonstrated the emergence of a coherent group of political activists from the sangha as well as an institutional process of the monastic struggle. The center staged a protest in front of the Parliament House in April 2001, and their pressuring led to the materialization of Office of National Buddhism (ONAB) in 2002. At this time, the sangha was as united as it had ever been because various factions were able to overcome their differences to join forces as members of both Thammayut and Mahanikai Order came together. The movement was also supported by **Phra Phisan Pattanathorn (Thawon Chittathawaro, 1952-2015)**, assistant abbot of Wat Pathumwanaram and well-known meditation teacher identified with the forest tradition that was highly revered among the urban middle class.[13] The success propelled the BPCT forward with a campaign to demand a new sangha law during 2001-2002 and the constitutionalizing of Buddhism as the national religion in 2003, which again did not lead to any concrete outcome. Because those involved in the mobilization were monks and laypeople who held teaching posts in Mahachulalongkorn University and Mahamakut Univeristy, their influences were passed down to their students through classroom discussions, articles written by the likes of Phra Sri Pariyatmoli, radio programs hosted by Phra Maha Cho and Phra Maha Bunthung and seminars organized by Phra Rat Kawi, who taught at MMU and later rose to the position of vice provost. Their viewpoints guided the participation of student monks. One of the important groups during this time was **the Young Monks Group** (*khana yuwasong*) led by **Phra Maha Davit Yotsi**, then an MCU student,

[13] Phra Thawon was later promoted to the position of Phra Rat Phiphattanathorn in 2003 and Phra Thep Wimonyan in 2012. For more information on the forest tradition, which was a reform movement that emphasized asceticism and forest wandering as primary modes of praxis, see Tiyavanich (1997).

which played a role in representing student monks in demonstrations and media. In this regard, monastic universities became the fortresses of political activism of the sangha.

The inception of monastic activism in this period would shape its contemporary trajectory. The same group of personnel would continue to play a role in subsequent political maneuvering, particularly in 2007 when the monastic order orchestrated perhaps the biggest monastic demonstration in modern history. After the 2006 coup that ousted the Thaksin Shinawatra administration, the drafting of the new constitution became an opportunity for the sangha to re-articulate its demands, which soon gained support around the country. One distinct characteristic of the 2007 movement was the involvement of the provincial sangha. The previous struggles in 1997 and 2007, by contrast, had been contested mainly in the center, while provincial monks played a marginal role in the process. This time, however, political leaders in the provinces began to assert themselves more visibly in the movement, particularly those with administrative positions and close ties to the ecclesia and activists in Bangkok, as well as their own local monastic and lay followings. From April to July 2007, the BPCT and its network of Thai Buddhists led hundreds of monks and laypeople in setting up camp and remaining in front of the Parliament House to put pressure on the constitutional drafting committee. Their symbolic protests included turning over a statue of an alms bowl to indicate that the sangha was boycotting the government. Monks were also going on hunger strikes. The rhetoric of this campaign maintained their previous stance: constitutionalizing Buddhism would signify official recognition of the majority religion and status of Buddhism as the cultural heritage of the Thai nation. The underlying supposition, at any rate, was a call by the sangha to secure the legal rights to state patronage as well as the capacity to initiate its own reform and maintain self-governance.[14]

[14] For a summary of monastic activism from 1994 to 2007, see Pornsuk (2010). On the 2007 campaign in particular, see an account in the report from the US Embassy in Bangkok available on Wikileaks (Embassy Bangkok 2007).

The national religion crusade was a popular movement that garnered support across the sectarian divide from Vietnamese and Chinese monastic orders in Thailand. It was led by an influential contingent of laypeople like retired **General Thongchai Kuasakun** and enjoying endorsements from many senators and politicians. The protesters persevered even when the constitutional drafting committee refused to tender the sangha's request on grounds that religious beliefs should not be the basis for the constitution and that the issue of religious prosperity was a matter of private individuals upholding the religion. But the movement itself was a concern for the status quo, who worried that this development could sow the seeds of social discord along religious lines. In August 2007, Queen Sirikit came out to publicly express her concern that calling for Buddhism as the national religion could lead to tensions among religious adherents. After hearing her statement, the protesters decided to abruptly end the protest (*MGR Online* 2007c). Throughout this ordeal, the ambivalence of *Mahathera* toward the issue was noticeable because, while it never officially endorsed the campaign, the *Mahathera* members did express their support as individuals. Such gestures demonstrate a typical pattern of the official sangha's political engagement in recent years, by which the upper echelon typically refrains from official endorsements and chooses to provide support in a discreet manner. Conversely, the activist group, comprising the BPCT and both lecturers and students from monastic universities, becomes the public face of the movement.

Despite having gained support for the movement, the sangha's political engagement provoked strong reaction from sections of the government, academia and even within the sangha. Some members of the sangha deemed such action to be politically motivated, unbecoming of monastic conduct and tainting the purity of Buddhism. Until now, disagreement over the issue of monastic engagement with the world constituted an imagined boundary that separated critics of the sangha from the monastic establishment, as many critics continued to oppose monastic activism. These

critics are proponents of monastic reform. Prominent figures include, among others: **Sulak Srivaraksa**, a public intellectual and prolific writer; **Chermsak Pinthong**, a former senator, political activist and yellow shirts leader; **Nithi Ieosriwong**, a prominent historian; **Phra Phaisan Wisalo**, a monastic intellectual, peace activist and abbot of Wat Pa Sukato; **Phra Metthanantho (or Dr. Mano Laohawanit)**, formerly a prominent member of Wat Phra Thammakai, who later became a politician and political activist after his exit from monkhood; **Phiksuni Thammanantha**, a well-known female monk, Buddhist Studies scholar and female ordination activist; **Thongtong Chantharangsu**, a legalist, expert on royal ceremonial and later the Permanent Secretary for the Prime Minister's Office during the Yingluck Shinawatra administration (2011-2014); and **Prasong Sunsiri**, a former air force squadron leader, foreign minister, and head of the Thai National Security Council. As these names suggest, the critics are a group of urban-middle class, college-educated Buddhists, and many, if not most, are close to the status quo.

All of these reformers oppose the call for Buddhism as the national religion. In recent years, even many of supporters of the monastic cause have also shifted their position due to what they perceive to be the political alliance between the monastic establishment and civilian political factions under the influence of Thaksin Shinawatra. In contrast to the provincial population that sees Buddhism as a form of popular religion and an avenue for social mobility, these critics are concerned with the question of purity, and they position themselves in opposition to the monastic establishment due to their role as reformers. The stance of these reformists on the politically active monks, however, remains ambivalent. On the one hand, Sulak is known to support the idea that monks could be politically involved in a manner consistent to the *vinaya*, particularly performing an advisory role to the government and those in power to maintain a righteous approach to

governance (Sulak 2013). Lay reformists tend to agree with this stance, and when I ask Santisuk and other figures from the Buddhist Reform Committee, they agree with Sulak that monks can have a productive role in advising the secular government. Most, if not all, also share a view that the monastic involvement in the political process in such aspects as running for public office and protesting should be prohibited in order to protect the purity of the sangha. In this sense, the notion of politics takes on the meaning of a struggle for self-interest and represents a form of pollution that is antithetical to the monkhood. At the same time, these lay activists are mum on the case of Phuttha Itsara's political activism. The rationale given to me was that Phuttha Itsara's action was justified on the grounds that he acted on behalf of the people affected by the Yingluck government's mismanagement of the rice subsidy scheme and corruption, even if his actions might have transgressed the *vinaya*. The issue of monastic political participation thus remains a contentious issue that defies any convenient categorization not only among lay reformists, but the general public as well.

Institutional Growth of the Sangha

The period when the sangha exerted themselves more politically was also a time of significant change for the sangha. These changes included institutional growth with respect to the creation of ONAB and the BPCT to serve the sangha; legal validation and growth of monastic universities; an increase in the number of ecclesiastic and administrative ranks; and the creation of media infrastructure, among others. The institutionalization of monastic activism has equipped the sangha with necessary infrastructure and resources that enhance its capacity to negotiate with the government. While the founding of the BPCT gave much leverage and momentum to the sangha's political campaign and resulted in the establishment of ONAB, it also clarified a center from which

efforts and resources could be aggregated from disparate locations and translated into effective action. Once functioning, ONAB began receiving national budget allocations for its operations as well as grants toward the monastic order's activities. Not limited to direct financial assistance, the funds are also allotted for monastic education, temple restoration, study tours for select monks and laypeople, monks and temples in the three southernmost provinces and monthly allowances for monks with administrative duties; monastic ranks and achievement in the highest level of Pali study.

The amount of resources committed to the sangha by the government has significantly increased since the beginning of ONAB. According to the annual reports prepared by ONAB, the organization was allocated around 1.6 billion baht in 2004, its first year of operation. Allocations went up to 5.3 billion baht in 2016, or more than three times the original amount. There is also another source of revenue for ONAB and the sangha, which comes from central monastic property. This comprises a set of properties and assets under the control of the sangha, in most cases either deserted temple lands now occupied by paying tenants, or lands and other properties donated to the sangha with rents being designated to the monastic order.[15] From 2004 to 2016, revenues from central monastic property have gone up from around 188 million to more than 373 million baht (ONAB 2005, 2017).[16] Even though a substantial amount of ONAB budget is expended toward the administrative and personnel costs, such an upsurge still trickles down to monastic activities and local levels of monastic administration. The returns on central monastic property are under the supervision of ONAB, but its distribution remains an issue for many reformists who wish to see more transparency and accountability.

[15] For the history of monastery lands and labor endowments, see Reynolds (1979).

[16] Because the ONAB report concludes its data collection at the end of the previous year, statistics provided in the report reflect those of the year prior to the date specified in the report. For instance, the 2005 report concluded its data gathering on December 2004 and thus should be considered to best represent the state of 2004.

Indeed, the substantial increase in financial contributions to the monastic order has undoubtably contributed to the increased capacity of the sangha to organize its activities, but the hierarchical ordering of the sangha means that resources are likely to be controlled at the top and distributed at the behest of the leadership.[17] Parallel to the rise in budget, the number of monks with ecclesiastic and administrative ranks has also gone up considerably, signifying an expansion of the ecclesia. In 2004, there were 16,474 monks with monastic ranks from the lowest to highest (ONAB 2005, 7). The number went up to 20,241 monks in 2016, excepting only the highest levels of the Supreme Patriarch and Somdet Phra Racha Khana, the position secondary to only the Supreme Patriarch that is allowed for only eight members. All monastic ranks saw an increase in their numbers (ONAB 2017, 21). To look at the same time period, administrative positions ranging from abbot to regional head were recorded at 26,727 monks in 2004 (ONAB 2005, 8). This number rose to 48,940 in 2016, a significant increase as well as a substantial proportion of the monastic population because in the same year, there were around 298,580 monks in the sangha. In other words, one sixth of the sangha had an administrative position (ONAB 2017, 1 & 20). Interestingly, the number of Thai monks living abroad on missions has also grown from 4,597 to around 5,700 between 2004 and 2016 (ONAB 2005, 2017). The last number is noteworthy due to the increased visibility of these monks during the state-sangha conflict between 2014 and 2017 when monks participating in the Phra Thammathut program, a program for overseas missionary monks, filed petitions in support of the monastic order and condemned the military government for its monastic reform initiative.

[17] Within the sangha, monks without administrative positions and are far from the center of power can be that they are not granted the kind of support that they need to maintain their temples, which is a contrast to the growing budget of ONAB. One popular explanation is that the growth of resource allocation from the state feeds into the consolidation of power in the hands of the monastic elites.

Another important development came in 1997, when both Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakut University were issued legal validations that formalized their status as public higher-educational institutions capable of granting undergraduate and graduate degrees recognized in accordance to the criteria set by the Ministry of Education. At what had generally been referred to as "illegitimate universities" prior to this, the Mahachulalongkorn University Act and Mahamakut University Act legitimized these monastic educational institutions. It also permitted direct budget allocations from the Ministry of Education and expanded their pool of students to include laypeople as well.[18] Between the two monastic universities, MCU is the largest because monks and novices from the Mahanikai order are the majority of the monastic order. Since the 1997 legal issuance, the number of enrollments has significantly increased. In 2002, there were 6,844 students enrolled in MCU. The number went up drastically to 26,330 in 2014 (MCU 2016, 4). This number was partly a result of new population of laity also being given access to enroll at MCU due to its relatively low tuition and the convenience of many MCU campuses that were created in the provinces to accommodate a large population of monks and novices outside of Bangkok. The number of old monks, who could not access formal secular education, also contributed to the rise in enrollment, as programs such as certification for administrative monks or undergraduate degrees in Buddhist administration and education, provided opportunities for monks, especially those of the older generation who would not otherwise have any opportunity to earn certificates or degrees.

The changing legal status of monastic universities is significant not only because of the resulting increased budget allocation, but also for the physical expansion that ensued, as well as their enhanced functioning as nodes where networks of interest converged, and ideas were

[18] MCU and MMU do not derive their budgets from ONAB but are given direct budget allocations from the Ministry of Education. In the report on the budget allocated for the fiscal year 2019, MCU is set to receive 1,789.8 million, and MMU to receive 856.9 million baht (*Thaipost* 2018). Such financial assistance is not part of the budget allocated to ONAB.

transmitted to other sections of the sangha. With respect to physical development, MCU and MMU have acquired new lands and relocated their campuses to outside of Bangkok to accommodate their development. MCU has established more colleges and classrooms since the 1990s in the provinces throughout Thailand from the Northeast (Loei, Nakhon Phanom, Buriram, Sri Saket, Chaiyaphum, Roi Et, Petchabun), North (Lamphun, Nan, Chiang Rai, Lampang), Central Plains (Nakhon Pathom, Phitsanulok, Petchabun and Ratchaburi), East (Chachoengsao) and South (Pattani). Beyond the main campus in Wang Noi, Ayutthaya Province, there are additionally 10 campuses, 17 colleges, 3 classrooms, 14 educational centers and 7 affiliated institutions (MCUNP 2016). In contrast, MMU has 8 campuses (including its primary campus at Salaya, Nakhon Pathom Province), and 3 colleges, most of which are in the Central Plains and the Northeast, while Chiang Mai in the North and Nakhon Si Thammarat in the South each has a campus (MMU 2017). Both monastic universities, and especially MCU, have also established connections with foreign monastic universities in India, Taiwan, Singapore and other countries and have organized international seminars on Visakha Bucha (Vesak) Day in the last decade or so. Such a leadership role for these educational institutions leads many within the monastic order to regard Thailand as the global center of contemporary Buddhism (*MGR Online* 2007a).

Looking at such developments, the Mahanikai order seems to have advanced more than its Thammayut counterpart. It should come as no surprise that contemporary monastic activists tend to generally be associated more with MCU than MMU due to the influence that MCU has over the sangha as well the number of personnel involved with the university. Under the guidance of **Phra Phrom Bandit (Prayun Thammachitto)**, abbot of Wat Prayun and former MCU rector, who was appointed to the position in 1997 and just stepped down in 2018, MCU has become a higher educational institution that provides prestige and pride to those involved. MCU also provides space

for different groups of people to come together and build networks. Because many MCU professors and associates are involved in monastic activism, their positions allow for discussions and ideas to reach larger audiences, particularly those monks and novices eager to listen in hope of currying favor with their teachers, who also hold administrative and ecclesiastic ranks that could determine their future in the sangha. Some of the best-known lecturers and students are **Phra Methi Thammachan (Prasan Chanatsaro)**, MCU vice rector; **Phra Maha Cho Tatsaniyo**, lecturer and director of the Office of Buddhism Promotion and Social Service at MCU; **Banchob Bannaruchi**, lecturer at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn and Master of Arts in Peace Studies, MCU; former Phra Maha Apichat, a former student in the MCU communications program; **Saman Sutto**, a former student and journalist at Post Publishing, which owns the Bangkok Post and PostToday; **Samran Somphong**, a former journalist at the Nation Group and student of the MCU peace studies program, among others.

Thaksin and the Monastic Establishment

As Thailand entered a wave of democratization in the 2000s under the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party administration, the monastic order became polarized along political lines. Thaksin Shinawatra's government had divided public opinion since its initial rise to power. After their victory in the 2001 general election, Thaksin and other TRT members were charged with assets concealment and tried in the newly established Constitutional Court. Many public intellectuals, media moguls, businesses and Buddhist groups vouched for Thaksin's acquittal due to their wishes to see him lead Thailand out of the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. These figures included, among others: **Chamlong Srimuang**, former Bangkok mayor and leader of the Palang Tham Party; **Photirak** and followers of Santi Asoke; **Phra Thamma Wisutthi Mongkhon (Bua**

Yannasamphanno, 1913-2011), or Luang Ta Bua, a charismatic monk of the forest tradition with a large urban middle class following and ties to the palace; **Sonthi Limthongkun**, a media mogul; **Sulak Srivaraksa**, public intellectual and prolific writer; and **Prawet Wasi**, public intellectual. Facing pressure from the protestors, who urged the court to consider Thaksin's charge the result of an "honest mistake" and adopt the principles of "political science" over "legalism," the court finally came down to a conclusive, but divided verdict: seven judges found Thaksin guilty, while eight judges found him not guilty.[19] Even though the monastic order did not publicly demonstrate its support at the time, the majority of its members were on the side of Thaksin. The monastic order would come to considerably benefit from the Thaksin administration, and as this occurred it solidified the monastic support for Thaksin and his political associates. This support continues until the present time.

Under the TRT administration, the sangha was a recipient of governmental support that helped to form the basis for its identification with Thaksin and his political parties. Among these forms of support were: an increase in monastic renumeration; financial assistance for the organization of the international Visakha Bucha Day; and, perhaps the most important and controversial measure of all, the promotion of **Somdet Phra Phutthachan (Kiaw Uppaseno, 1928-2013)** to the position of Acting Supreme Patriarch and later the head of the committee appointed to fulfill the duties of the Supreme Patriarch in place of **Somdet Phra Yannasangwon (Charoen Suwatthano, 1913-2013)**. In 2001, for example, right after the TRT ascension to power, Thaksin and the cabinet approved a proposal from Ministry of Education to permit an allocation of monthly allowances to newly created administrative positions in the sangha for the budget year 2002 that would amount

[19] The decision by the court would come to overshadow the arbitrary process of adjudication by the Constitutional Court and other courts on political cases in subsequent period. See a critical study of the judicialization of politics in Thailand in McCargo (2014) and arbitrary detention and legal process in Haberkorn (2018).

to more than 53 million baht. These three positions were secretary to vice provincial sangha head, secretary to vice district sangha head and secretary to sub-district sangha head (*RYT9* 2001). In 2005, ONAB proposed a raise in monastic renumeration that the cabinet approved in May 2006, significantly increasing the rates for administrative and ecclesiastic monks across the board. The position of abbot for a common temple, which is considered the base payment for administrative monks, went from 500 to 1,500 baht, while the position of secretary to sub-district sangha head, a starting position for secretarial rank, was given an increase from 500 to 1,000 baht (Narintho 2006).

Since 1999, Visakha Bucha Day, a celebration of the birth, full awakening and passing away of the Buddha that is considered the most important Buddhist holiday, has been recognized and celebrated by the United Nations. Even though the initiative came at the behest of Sri Lanka, the event has become an important showcase for the Thai sangha to assert its presence on an international stage. Having successfully secured the opportunity to host the first summit in 2004 at Phutthamonthon, the largest Buddhist park in the vicinity of Bangkok and where ONAB is located, MCU and Mahanikai leadership played host to representatives from 13 countries for the celebration and conference over the period from May 25-28. In a sign of cooperation, Somdet Kiaw and the monastic leadership invited Thaksin and other ministers to the event and had a discussion regarding the prospect of receiving government assistance for future events. The following month, MCU held an international conference on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism at Phutthamonthon and the UN Conference Center on Ratchadamnern Nok Avenue in Bangkok with 800 Buddhist leaders and scholars from 17 countries in attendance. The conference concluded

with representatives from different nations signing an agreement to designate Thailand as the host for the next year.[20]

The momentum continued as the cabinet approved financial assistance for the next Visakha Day celebration and international conference, which took place in Bangkok and was attended by delegates from 42 countries representing both Theravada and Mahayana sects.[21] The 2005 event led to a unanimous decision among participants to endorse Phutthamonthon as the center of global Buddhism, approve Thailand as the host for the next occasion and appoint MCU as the coordinator and organizer (*MGR Online* 2005d).[22] In 2006, the government increased the budget for the event to 69,197,740 baht and expanded the scope of the celebration to include exhibitions and activities in several locations around Bangkok and at Phutthamonthon (*MGR Online* 2006). The 2006 international summit was joined by delegates from 47 countries with 1,261 participants in total (*Matichon* 2006, 5).[23] The fact that this initiative occurred under the TRT administration was

[20] With a budget of 17.5 million baht, the conference was given financial assistance to the amount of 5 million baht from the government, 4.5 million from private donors and the rest from the global Chinese sangha council (Secretariat of the Cabinet 2004).

[21] This governmental support came at a time when Thaksin and his administration faced a challenge from the sangha due to the controversy surrounding the contentious process of monastic reform in 2004, which saw a sangha divided between the monastic establishment pushing for a new sangha law and the faction led by Luang Ta Bua opposing such a measure. In the same year, a proposal for a new land reform law also provoked strong response from the sangha due to the possibility that temple lands would not be exempted from land reform measures. Even though the content of the land reform measures were not specified, the sangha recognized that there was a distinct possibility that monastic lands could fall under the jurisdiction of the government, which would overrule their status under sangha law as properties of Buddhism that could only be transferred with approval from the Senate (Narinto 2004). One of the events that led many to assume that this conflict would arise had to do with the fact that Thaksin himself was involved in a scandal early in his rise with the purchase of Alpine Golf Course from Sanoh Thienthong, a prominent politician, which was built on monastic lands. For an overview of this case, see *Isranews* (2017).

[22] The budget for the 2005 event was 24,628,600 baht and could be assigned from the central fund, which was usually used for emergency purposes not previously specified in the annual budget allocation, if needed (*RYT9* 2005). Also, there was a conflict concerning the agencies in charge of the event because Chamlong Srimuang, then director of the newly established Moral Center, was supposed to take part in the organizing committee, but the sangha objected to that decision on grounds that Santi Asoke, being the sect that rejected the authority of *Mahathera* and in which Chamlong was a follower, would have a role in the process. In the end, *Mahathera*, MCU, ONAB and Ministry of Culture were the primary organizers. For more information, see *MGR Online* (2005b, 2005c).

[23] From 2006-2018, Thailand would play host to an international Vesak summit almost every year, coinciding with Visakha Bucha day, with the exceptions being the year 2008 (Vietnam), 2014 (Vietnam) and 2017 (Sri Lanka).

significant because it reaffirmed the perception that Thaksin and his political associates had fulfilled the role of Buddhist patron as expected from the ruling authority in a Theravada nation.

Most importantly, the most polarizing act of the TRT administration, which created deep division within the sangha, was the appointment of Somdet Kiaw as the Acting Supreme Patriarch in January 2004 due to Somdet Phra Yannasangwon's hospitalization and inability to administrate. Because Somdet Yannasangwon was a member of the Thammayut order, the change to the Mahanikai order, of which Somdet Kiaw was a member, marked a major shift in power relations between the two orders. The decision proved to be a lightning rod due to much disagreement stemming from Luang Ta Bua, his followers and various Buddhist groups, who deemed the action to be illegitimate. They questioned whether Somdet Phra Yannasangwon was ill to the extent that he could not act, or whether the move was politically motivated to allow for a senior Mahanikai monk to ascend to the position. The critics also believed that the authority to appoint the Supreme Patriarch, or the Acting Supreme Patriarch, was not the responsibility of the government, but instead under the jurisdiction of the monarchy (*MGR Online* 2005a).

The promotion of Somdet Kiaw, in this regard, was perceived as a power play because Thaksin's then wife, Khun Ying Photchaman Shinawatra, was his follower.[24] The response from the monastic establishment, especially the Mahanikai order, however, was overwhelmingly positive because the last Mahanikai Supreme Patriarch was Somdet Phra Ariyawongsakhatayana (Pun Punnasiri, 1986-1974), an abbot of Wat Phra Chetuphon, who reigned for only a year and four months from July 1972 to December 1973. In the eyes of Mahanikai order, a turn for their leader to be at the helm of the sangha was long overdue, and Somdet Kiaw was the fitting figure

[24] It was widely known that Khun Ying Photchaman was a loyal follower of Somdet Kiaw, and the annual merit-making ceremonial for Photchamans' family was usually held at Wat Saket, where Somdet Kiaw was the abbot (*MGR Online* 2008). Khun Ying Photchaman and Thaksin later divorced in 2008 and took up the last name Na Pomphet from her maternal side.

due to his charisma, his role in the development of MCU, the overseas missionary program (Phra Thammathut) and his administrative role in regional monastic governance. Due to the opposition, Somdet Kiaw's tenure lasted only a few months, and a committee was created in July 2004 instead to fulfill the duties of the Supreme Patriarch. Somdet Kiaw then sat as the chairperson of the committee until his passing on 10 August 2013.

The patronage of Thaksin and his family of Wat Saket also extended to other family members and close associates of Thaksin, particularly **Somchai Wongsawat** and **Sudarat Keyuraphan**,[25] who maintained personal relationships with senior monks at Wat Saket, especially **Phra Phrom Sitti (Thongchai Sukyano)**, who would become the abbot of Wat Saket and get arrested on charge of temple fund embezzlement in 2018. The close relationship between these politicians and Wat Saket added to the confidence of the monastic elites. These developments, along with the 2006 order by Office of the Attorney General to withdraw a complaint filed against Phra Thammachayo, abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai, on charges of embezzlement, left an imprint in the minds of the monastic establishment that they had finally found a reliable ally in Thaksin and TRT. Part of the decision for large sections of the sangha pledging support to Thaksin in the aftermath of the 2006 coup could thus be attributed to these favorable treatments that the sangha received during the TRT administration. The rise of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), or the red shirts, was endorsed by members of the monastic order, who came out to show their support for Thaksin, the politician whom they perceived as their patron.[26] This monastic expression in

[25] Somchai Wongsuwan is married to Thaksin's sister, Yaowapha Wongsawat, and acted as an executive in the People's Power Party and Prime Minister in 2008. Sudarat Keyuraphan has been a prominent member of political parties under Thaksin's influences and is considered one of the intermediaries between the civilian political group and the sangha.

[26] The red shirts were a political movement aggregating various groups from anti-coup/democratic activists, political networks of Thaksin and the new middle class in urban and provincial areas. UDD, in this sense, was a formal group under the influences of the political networks closely tied with Thaksin, but many people, especially activists and intelligentsia associated with the movement, maintained their distance and independence from Thaksin and his political parties.

favor of the red shirts also served to endorse the political position of their kin, who were the beneficiaries of Thaksin's welfare policies and part of the TRT political base. Because most monks have their origins in the provinces, especially in the North and Northeast, and maintain close relationship with their family members, these monks are familiar with their kin's views.[27]

Monastic Polarization

The appointment of Somdet Kiaw split the sangha into two sides: the monastic establishment and the reformists. The reformists believed the appointment to represent a religious decline that saw secular and monastic elites colluding to advance their own interest at the expense of the sangha's integrity. This trend coincided with what they viewed as political and moral corruption under Thaksin, and it further proved that Thaksin and his cronies must be terminated before the damage to the nation and religion become too severe to recover from. After the news broke that Thaksin and his family had sold their shares in a telecommunications empire without having to pay taxes in 2006, the anti-Thaksin forces came together under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the yellow shirts movement. Consisting of former supporters of Thaksin such as Chamlong Srimuang, Sonthi Limthongkun, Sulak Srivaraksa, **Rotsana Tositrakun**, Santi Asoke, **Phra Phuttha Itsara** and **Phiphob Thongchai**, the yellow shirts garnered extensive support from the urban middle-class.[28] While not participating directly in the protest, Luang Ta

[27] For a survey on the attitudes of monks on political affiliation, especially the red shirts, see Taweesak (2011), whose findings indicate that a substantial number of monks, if not a majority of the sangha, expressed their support for the red shirts at the time of the survey.

[28] Rotsana was a senator and part of the 40 Senator group, which played a critical role in opposing Thaksin-influenced administrations. Phiphob Thongchai is a political activist and follower of Phutthathat, a Buddhist reformist whose brand of rational Buddhism is a source of inspiration and principle for many royal-nationalist activists in the yellow shirts and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Phra Phuttha Itsara, abbot of Wat Onoi in Nakorn Pathom and teacher to Sondhi Limthongkun, is a pro-military figure who led a stage during the campaign to shut down Bangkok during 2013-2014 by the PDRC. In May 2018, he was later charged on illegal association and royal forgery, arrested, disrobed and placed in prison awaiting the trail. He was later released on bail in August 2018 and now wears only white cloth, not saffron robe.

Bua openly supported the PAD, and many of his followers joined the demonstration. In September 2006, the military, led by the army chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, finally staged the coup in September 2006. Even though the sangha did not openly oppose the PAD, a few figures associated with the monastic establishment played a role in the anti-coup protest in the aftermath of the 2006 coup. Among them were **Methaphan Phothithirarot** and **Sathien Wipornmaha**, former monks and lecturers at MCU and MMU respectively. They joined **the Saturday People Reject Dictatorship Group** (*klum khon wansao mai ao phadetkan*), a collective with more than a thousand members that was active after the coup and prior to the formation of the UDD.[29]

When the red shirts became a full-fledged political movement, monastic members began to show themselves among protestors during the public demonstrations and through various media channels. Phra Maha Cho, for instance, became the monastic face of the movement due to his appearances on stage, his political speeches and his community radio program, as well as the BPCT radio show that he hosted. During the 2010 protest, monastic members lent a hand to the red shirts. Groups like **United Sangha** (*khana song sangha samakkhi*) and **Volunteer Monks for Compassion and Peace** (*khana song asa metta samakkhi*) comprised of more than a thousand monks from the Northeast, primarily from the provinces of Khon Kaen, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, Roi Et, Mahasarakham and Kalasin. Both groups showed up on the UDD stage on Ratchadamnern Road to affirm the right to assembly and ask security forces to cease violence against the protesters (*Prachatai* 2010). Beside reports that temples such as Wat Mahathat, Wat Chana Songkhram, Wat Samphraya, Wat Rachathiwat and others were willing to allow the protesters to use their bathrooms, many also took notice that Phra Tham Khunapon, the abbot of

[29] Methaphan would go on to become a member of the acting leadership of the movement in 2007 after the original leaders were arrested for demonstrating in front of General Prem Tinsulanonda's house, while Sathien is a close associate of former PM Somchai Wongsawat and claims to have been the intermediary between Somchai and politicians associated with Thaksin and the monastic establishment. For more information, see Buraphawithi (2015).

Wat Samphraya, allowed a fleet of boats transporting several thousands of the red shirts coming in through Chao Phraya River from Ayutthaya, Ang Thong and Pathum Thani to dock and unload at the temple's pier for their big protest on March 14, 2010 (*Thairath* 2010b).

Alongside a rumor that tens of thousands of monks from the provinces would be joining the protest, news emerged that several senior monks in the ecclesia were placed on a black list compiled by the government under the leadership of the Democrat Party. These monks were **Phra Tham Kittimethi (Chamnon Thammachari)**, then the *Mahathera* spokesperson, member and assistant abbot of Wat Samphanthawong;[30] **Phra Tham Sittinayok (Thongchai Sukkho)**, then assistant abbot of Wat Saket and secretary to Somdet Kiaw;[31] **Phra Tham Suthi (Pi Suchato)**, abbot of Wat Mahathat and then head of Bangkok sangha;[32] **Phra Tham Khunapon (Uan Hatthammo)**, abbot of Wat Samphraya and head of Region 14 of the sangha;[33] **Phra Tham Kosachan (Prayun Thammachitto)**, abbot of Wat Prayun, tutor to Prince Dipangkorn and then MCU rector;[34] **Phra Thep Pariyatwimon (Sawaeng Thammetko)**, assistant abbot of Wat Bowornniwet and then MMU rector; **Phra Thep Wisutthikawi (Kasem Sunyato)**, assistant abbot of Wat Rachathiwat, then MMU vice rector and member of the BPCT;[35] **Phra Rat Yanwisit**

[30] Phra Tham Kittimethi was later promoted to **Phra Phrom Methi** in 2010. He has been charged with temple fund embezzlement and is currently seeking asylum in Germany.
[31] Phra Tham Sittinayok was later promoted to **Phra Phrom Sitti** in 2011 and rose to the position of the abbot of Wat Saket as well as *Mahathera* member. He has also been charged with temple fund embezzlement, disrobed and placed in custody in prison
[32] Phra Tham Suithi was later promoted to **Phra Tham Panyabadi** in 2016 and became an advisor to the head of Bangkok sangha.
[33] Phra Tham Khunapon was later promoted to **Phra Phrom Dilok** in 2010 and became the head of Bangkok sangha in 2013. He has been charged with temple fund embezzlement, disrobed and placed in custody in prison
[34] Phra Tham Kosachan was later promoted to **Phra Phrom Bandit** in 2012 and became *Mahathera* member. He later resigned from the post of MCU rector in 2018 but still maintains great influences among the sangha. Phra Phrom Bandit is known for his ability to give persuasive sermon and scholarship.
[35] Phra Thep Wisutthikawi was later promoted to **Phra Tham Kittimethi** in 2016. He has assumed the position of BPCT President since 2015 as well as acted as the head of Region 16-17-18 sangha for the Thammayut order since 2016.

(Sermchai Chaimangkhalo, 1929-2018), abbot of Wat Lung Phor Sot Thammakayaram;[36] and **Phra Maha Cho Tatsaniyo**, MCU lecturer and political activist (Narintho 2010).[37] As the list suggests, these monks were in the upper echelon of the ecclesia with powerful administrative positions or association with monastic universities.

Even though the government denied the existence of a black list and nothing came of it, these monks came to be associated with the red shirts in subsequent periods, especially Phra Tham Kittimethi, Phra Tham Sittinayok, Phra Tham Khunpon, Phra Tham Kosachan, Phra Thep Wisutthikawi and Phra Maha Cho. Another name not on the list was **Phra Prasan Chanthasaro**, assistant abbot of Wat Mahathat. Acting as the secretary of **the Buddhist Organization of Thailand** (ongkorn chao phut haeng prathet thai),[38] Phra Prasan announced in anticipation of the red shirts large scale demonstration in March 2010 that 10,000 monks would be coming to join the protest (*Thairath* 2010a). The close association with Phra Prasan, the red shirts and Thaksin would continue as news and photos later surfaced that Phra Prasan led representatives of **the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the USA (CTU)** to meet Thaksin in Washington, D.C. on 9 June 2013 (*KomChadLuek* 2016b).[39] In addition, at the inaugural ceremony for Peace TV, one of the red

[36] Phra Rat Yanwisit was later promoted to **Phra Thep Yanmongkon** in 2011 and known for his propagation of meditation technique from Luang Phor Sot, who rediscovered and popularized Thammakai meditation technique. He passed away in 2018.
[37] Phra Maha Cho was later promoted to **Phra Suthiwirabandit** in 2016. He is an assistant abbot of Wat Sri Sudaram.
[38] **The Buddhist Organization of Thailand** is an ad hoc, loosely-organized Buddhist collective comprising both monastic and lay membership with no known number of members or organizational structure. It played an active role in the 2007 campaign for the national religion. At that time, **General Thongchai Kuasakun** was the chairperson of the group and claimed that the group had a network of around "800-900 organizations," though the names and details of that claim never materialized (*MGR Online* 2007). Rather, the group worked closely with the BPCT. Since then, the group has been active not only when the sangha is under attack, but also as a camouflage when those associated with the monastic establishment are involved in partisan politics, particularly during the 2010 red shirts demonstration and the PDRC protest leading to the 2014 coup. Sathien Wipornmaha, for example, came out in January 2014 to announce that as the secretary of the Buddhist Organization of Thailand, he would file complaint against Phra Phuttha Itsara on the charge that Phra Phuttha Itsara violated the ban on political involvement issued by *Mahathera*. After the 2014 coup, the group became less active and less visible. It does not seem to be functional at this moment.
[39] CTU is a working organization that acts as a center to accommodate and coordinate a growing number of Mahanikai temples in the United States, working not only among the temples themselves but also between the Thai monastic authority and these temples. The council was registered as a non-profit organization in 1976. For more information,

shirts' television channels, on 15 November 2014, Phra Phrom Sitti (formerly Phra Tham Sittinayok), the newly appointed abbot of Wat Saket, and Phra Prasan, now Phra Methi Thammachan, presided over the merit-making ceremonial to bless the new channel (Somphong 2014). While it was common for senior monks to lead merit-making ceremonials for businesses, political parties or nobility, the fact that these monks accepted the invitation to bless a television channel associated with the red shirts, who were usually viewed in negative light among the urban middle class, meant that their participation risked affirming public perception of their partisan support for the group.[40]

The expression of monastic support for the red shirts would come to be a category of its own: monks identified with the movement or occupying an anti-coup position and supporting democratic activism were labelled as "red shirts monks" (*phra suadaeng*). Besides the ecclesiastic monks, examples of monks labelled as red shirts monks are **Phra Rat Thamnithet (Phayom Kanlayano)**, an abbot of Wat Suankaew, disciple of Phra Phutthathat and well-known for his social work and propagation, and **Phra Maha Dr. Somchai Thanwuttho**, a prominent member of Wat Phra Thammakai famous for his eloquent sermons. The reverse is also true; monks who are considered pro-military and political establishment are called "yellow shirts monks" (*phra sualuang*) by the red shirts. Some of these monks, notwithstanding their actual political positioning, are **Phra Maha Wutthichai Wachiramethi** (popularly known as Wor Wachiramethi), a famous Buddhist teacher, prolific writer with a celebrity status among the Buddhist public and head of the highly popular international meditation center Rai Chern Tawan in Chiang Rai; and **Phra Kittisak Kittisophano**, a follower of Phra Phutthathat known for his

see CTU (2018). **The Dhammayut Order in the United States** is the counterpart to CTU for the Thammayut order, but is less organized than CTU.

[40] For a discussion of the perception of the red shirts as portrayed in the popular media and among the urban middle and upper middle class, see Winichakul (2010).

environmental activism, support for social development and anti-Thaksin stance (*VoiceTV* 2011). Such identity politics is critical in the polarization of public opinions regarding the monastic order because it informs the basis of understanding of the anti-Thaksin crowds as well as the anti-coup masses.

At the same time, the repercussion from monastic activism does not hold equal weight among all members of the sangha. Factors like social and political influences as well as ecclesiastic standing can contribute to contradictory standards. Ecclesiastic monks associated with the red shirts, for instance, did not face punitive repercussions from the sangha. Instead, many, if not all, have been promoted to higher ranks and given more administrative responsibilities. Now holding the position of MCU vice rector, Phra Paisan was promoted to the position of Phra Methi Thammachan and BPCT secretary in 2011 and 2015 respectively. Despite the *Mahathera* ban on political involvement and public disapproval of monastic participation in the political process, two of the most well-known monastic activists seem to have been rewarded by breaking the rule. These promotions arguably illustrate both their influence in the monastic order and the ambiguity inherent in the relationship between monks and politics. For one thing, there is ambivalence in the exercise of the monastic authority, which seeks to discipline only select groups of the sangha, while others are exempt. Also, the notion that monks should refrain from politics is differentially understood among the public. If people perceive that certain monastic figures express themselves in a manner consistent with their own political orientation, they are likely to overlook the political activism of these monks and justify that such action does not constitute a transgression due to its utility for public benefits. Particularly with charismatic monks with sway over the military, police and urban middle-class population, the social influence held by these followers safeguards their monastic teachers from potential harm.

One example is **Phra Phuttha Itsara**, abbot of Wat Onoi and a pro-military monk, who was a leader of a PDRC stage during the Shut Down Bangkok campaign in 2013 and 2014 in Bangkok.[41] Phuttha Itsara has long been known as a charismatic monk with a large urban following. He first began to make his mark on the political landscape during the 2005 yellow shirts demonstration as a monastic teacher and advisor to Sonthi Limthongkun, a principal leader of the royalist and anti-Thaksin movement. He also presided over the alms-giving ceremonial for the PAD and spoke on stage.[42] Despite repeated warnings from the administrative monks in his area and from *Mahathera* concerning his political involvement, Phuttha Itsara has never been disciplined by the PDRC. Having long been a thorn on the side of the monastic establishment due to his fierce criticism of moral decline within the sangha, the inaction toward his activism is not

[41] According to his profile from *Matichon* (2012), Phra Phuttha Itsara was born Suwit Thongprasert on 1 January 1956 in Bangkok. His father is Chompu Thongprasert, and his mother is Amporn Thongprasert, who worked for the Tobacco Authority of Thailand, which was located within walking distance from his original home in Khlong Toey community. Suwit completed his formal education at the level of fourth grade and entered monkhood when he was 20 at Wat Khlong Toey Nai. After completing his first Lent period, he disrobed and entered compulsory military service for 2 years before re-ordaining at the same temple. This time he was given the monastic name "Thamathiro," which meant "sage of *thamma*." Phuttha Itsara spent 6 years at Wat Khlong Toey Nai prior to beginning the construction of Wat Onoi in 1989. Once the temple was officially recognized in 1992, he spent the next 5 years wandering and practicing meditation before coming back and assuming the position of the abbot of Wat Onoi in 1995. In October 1999, Phuttha Itsara was appointed as the head of Huay Kwang sub-district sangha in place of the former head who had recently passed away, but he made a shocking move by handing in a resignation letter from all administrative positions to the head of Nakhon Pathom sangha, disrobed and then ordained again on the same day. The cause of this peculiar series of events was arguably the controversy surrounding an age and seniority differential in his biography: when he became the abbot of Wat Onoi in 1995, his age was reported at 35 years and 11 monastic years; in 1999, when he was appointed the Huay Kwang sub-district head, his age was recorded at 44 years and 21 monastic years.

[42] In an interview given to Matichon (ibid), Phuttha Itsara recounted the story of his relationship with Sonthi, explaining that Sonthi came to see him for advice after the first bankruptcy case that Sonthi faced as the result of the 1997 financial crisis. Knowing that Sonthi was close to Thaksin, he wrote a letter to Sonthi to recommend Sonthi remain neutral and objective, even if he was on the best of terms with Thaksin, because a potential conflict could be on the horizon. In 2009, when Sonthi's van was ambushed and shot, Sonthi survived and made a claim that, due to the efficacy of an amulet from Phuttha Itsara, he was able to emerge from the shooting without serious harm. In this interview, Phuttha Itsara claimed to have made this amulet--an image of Luang Pu Tuat, the most famous southern Buddhist saint--by infusing his blood with the materials for the period of one Buddhist Lent before molding all materials into the image of Luang Pu Tuat and performing the ceremonial to bless the finished amulets. His purpose was to give these to people who attended the kathin ceremonial after Buddhist Lent, and Sonthi was given 200 of them to give to his family and associates. In a personal interview that I had with Phuttha Itsara, he claimed to have written a letter to Sonthi telling him not to trust Thaksin, and to keep an eye on him (Phra Phuttha Itsara, in discussion with the author, 4 November 2015).

motivated by the sangha wanting to protect him. The ambivalence demonstrated by *Mahathera* most likely stems from the recognition that his supporters are influential figures in the military and government.[43] Phuttha Itsara is also known to have connections with palace insiders, even though this claim would come back to haunt him when he was later arrested in 2018 on charges of illegal association and royal forgery (*Straits Times* 2018). His leadership role on one of the most violent PDRC protest stages, which many deemed unbecoming of monastic conduct, garnered much support among the PDRC protesters, who venerated his no-nonsense approach and shared his view that the sangha has been bought out by Thaksin and must be reformed.[44]

Support for monastic activism can also be found among those who vouch for the monastic establishment. Monks like Phra Maha Cho are viewed by their followers as safeguarding the religion and thus having legitimate reasons behind their political action, while receiving endorsements from individuals who identify themselves with the red shirts and consider Phra Maha Cho a "democratic monk." Claims made by different political actors, however similar they may be, can be perceived in drastically different ways depending on which side that claim supports. Due to the perception that the red shirts are anti-royalist forces, monks associated with the movement tend to be regarded in the same manner as well, and vice versa. Criteria to judge monastic conduct are not permanently fixed but can shift according to social and political changes,

[43] The perception of Phuttha Itsara's close relationship with the military leadership is well documented. One of the most famous events that is usually referenced by the public with regards to this relationship is the ceremonial to cast the garland of rays for a Buddha statue at Wat Onoi on 27 January 2012. Three former army chiefs--General Prawit Wongsuwan, Anuphong Phaochinda, and Suthat Attanan--and then active army chief General Prayut Chan-ocha attended. They were seen to prostate in front of Phuttha Itsara, who applied gold leaf to their foreheads as part of the blessing ceremonial. According to Watsana Nanuam (2014, 156), when Phuttha Itsara left monkhood the first time to join the military, he was a member of the 21st Infantry Regiment, known as the Queen's Guard, which was where Generals Prawit, Anuphong and Prayut first started out. After the 2014 coup, Phuttha Itsara also created a collection of amulets titled "I am the Victor" (*ku khue phu chana*) to celebrate the occasion.

[44] In an interview of his followers on his PDRC stage, Puttha Itsara's supporters were quoted as saying that they had supported his activism, which had begun as early as the yellow shirts protest as well as his confrontations with misbehaving monks over the years in order to protect the integrity of Buddhism. These moments, rather than turning people away, in fact attracted more endorsements from like-minded individuals, who believed that politics should be moral, and that polluting elements within Buddhism must be purged (*BangkokBizNews* 2014).

and because of this, color-coded political polarization thus plays an important role in determining conditions in which certain acts by certain figures are permissible, when these acts would otherwise be prohibited. These socio-political dynamics inform the interaction between the military government and sangha in post-coup Thailand as the junta views the monastic establishment as an active political institution on the side of Thaksin.

Responses to the Coup and New Faces of Monastic Activism

On 22 May 2014, the Royal Thai Armed Forces staged a coup and established the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), whose membership comprised the army, navy, air force and police chiefs, to administer the nation. The 2014 coup was initially received with mixed reactions among the monastic order. While monks supporting the red shirts found the coup to be a disappointment, the ecclesia was ambivalent. Even though individual members of the monastic establishment may have privately expressed their disapproval, there was no sign of collective disagreement and no clear message coming out from the sangha as a group. Rather, the gesturing of the monastic establishment seemed to indicate a willingness to work with the junta. A few months before the coup, Somdet Chuang had already launched a nation-wide initiative to promote the adoption of five basic Buddhist precepts on the village level, or the "Village of Five Precepts" project, which was made into an official policy of the national sangha and assisted by ONAB.[45] When the junta expressed an interest in social and religious reform during the first few months prior to the formation of the new government, ONAB Director, **Nopparat Benjawatthananan**, proposed the integration of the Village of Five Precepts project into the national reform agenda and established a hotline to report monastic misconduct (*KomChadLuek* 2014). Underlying such a

[45] In general, the five ethical precepts in Buddhism are abstinence from taking lives; theft; sexual misconduct; false speech; and consumption of intoxicants.

move was a power play by the monastic establishment to push for the nomination of Somdet Chuang, the most senior ecclesiastic monk due to his longest tenure in the rank of Somdet, as the next Supreme Patriarch in place of the recently deceased Somdet Phra Yannasangwon, abbot of Wat Bowonniwet, who had passed away in October 2013.

The succession of the Supreme Patriarch and sectarian tension around the issue formed a critical context to monastic struggle leading up to and after the coup. Since 1973, the Supreme Patriarch position had been exclusively occupied by senior monks from the Thammayut order, a reality that Mahanikai monks detested because they believed that their order represented the majority of the sangha, and that the highest leadership should reflect this veracity. At the very least, according to Mahanikai monks, the position of the Supreme Patriarch should alternate between the orders so that the perception of fairness would improve among the monastic population. Even if there was no written rule regarding the composition of *Mahathera*, the distribution should be made with consideration toward equal representation of the two orders. In secular legal terms, the 1992 revision to the sangha law added an amendment in Section 7 that, when the position of the Supreme Patriarch became vacant, the prime minister was allowed to nominate a candidate for the Supreme Patriarch with the approval of *Mahathera* to the king for the appointment.[46] As such, Somdet Chuang became the de facto candidate because he had already

[46] According to the 1992 revision of the 1965 Sangha Act, Section 7 states that "the King shall appoint the Supreme Patriarch. In case that the Supreme Patriarch position becomes vacant, the Prime Minister may, with the approval by the Supreme Sangha Council, nominate name from the most senior member from the Somdet rank to the king for the appointment. In case that the most senior member from the Somdet rank cannot fulfill the duty, the Prime Minister may, with the approval by the Supreme Sangha Council, nominate another name from the second most senior member from the Somdet rank and can fulfill the duty for the appointment to the position of the Supreme Patriarch" (translation by the author, Wikisource contributors 2018). This is a drastic departure from the original stipulation in the 1962 Sangha Act, which gave the king an exclusive power in appointing the Supreme Patriarch. One of the explanations behind this change is that when Somdet Phra Yannasangwon assumed the Supreme Patriarch position, he requested that the law be changed to allow for the most senior monk in the Somdet rank to be nominated for the position because his ascent bypassed other senior Mahanikai monks, particularly **Somdet Phra Phuttha Kosachan (Fuen Chutintharo, 1905-1996)**, abbot of Wat Samphraya, and **Somdet Phra Phutthachan (At Asapo, 1903-1989)**, commonly known as Phra Phimontham, abbot of Wat Mahathat who was wrongfully accused and imprisoned prior to being given back his monastic ranks and having his integrity restored. Prior to the appointment of Somdet Phra

been promoted to the Somdet rank in 1995, which was earlier than the other *Mahathera* members with the Somdet rank (*MGR Online* 2015d). After the passing of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon in October 2013, however, the funeral was suspended, which was an unusual sign and left the succession of the Supreme Patriarch in uncertainty. While the delay was seen by the sangha as a deliberate plan by the palace, who preferred a candidate from the Thammayut order, to block Somdet Chuang from the position, the rationale was never publicly clarified.[47] The official funeral would take place in December 2015, more than two years later.

Unlike the powerful members of the sangha, student monks expressed their concerns more visibly regarding the coup, both in opposition and in support. Their voices were given a platform as a result of the emergence of a digital public, particularly the rapid growth of internet and social media use that allowed marginalized figures a channel to express and circulate their messages.[48] One of the most vocal monks to take advantage of this emerging digital public to speak out against the coup was **Phra Maha Paiwan Worawanno**, a resident of Wat Soi Thong renowned for his political activism with the student movement.[49] Within the monastic order, Phra Maha Paiwan was

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Yannasangwon, these two senior monks submitted a note to **Army Captain Adul Rattanon**, then Director-General of Department of Religious Affairs, expressing that they would like to give up their rights to be nominated for the Supreme Patriarch position, thereby paving the way for Somdet Phra Yannasangwon to become the Supreme Patriarch (Sutto 2016a). The prevailing narrative behind this story, as I was told by inside sources, is that Rama IX, who was mentored by Somdet Phra Yannasangwon while ordained in 1956 when he was 30, wished to see his monastic confidante at the helm of the monastic order. When other senior monks received the news, they had to concede their rights to the nomination.

[47] Members of the sangha, particularly those in the Mahanikai order, suggested that it was due to the status quo's preference for a senior monk from Thammayut to succeed Somdet Phra Yannasangwon. Others believed that, due to the perception that Somdet Chuang was too close to Wat Phra Thammakai in his roles as the preceptor of Phra Thammachayo, abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai, and because of the various forms of assistance he provided to Wat Phra Thammakai, his rise to the apex of the sangha would mean the ascent of Thammakai movement as well. See the discussion in MGR Online (2015).

[48] Ranked eighth among countries with the most active Facebook users, and with an average number of 4.56 hours per day spent on mobile internet in the Digital 2018 Global Overview report, Thailand is a country with a high level of internet use growth and social media penetration. The number of Facebook and Instagram users, for instance, rose from 47 million and 11 million in 2016 to 48 million and 13 million in 2017. The number of internet users is estimated to be around 51 million (Leesa-Nguansuk 2018).

[49] Phra Maha Praiwan was born Praiwan Wannabut in Chanthaburi Province to a family of humble background. When he finished sixth grade, he was recommended by his parents to become a novice and to pursue monastic education because his parents could not financially support him in pursuit of a higher educational level. Going the monastic

known as an accomplished student of Pali due to his success in passing the highest level of examination in Pali studies while still a novice. As a result of this feat, his ordination was royally sponsored and took place in the main hall of Wat Phra Kaew from which the eight necessities of a monks were bestowed to him by the king.[50] At the ceremonial, Somdet Chuang acted as his preceptor. This moment was important to the young monk's career not only because having such a preceptor was a source of prestige, but the ceremonial also placed him into a distinctive class of the monastic elites as well as Somdet Chuang's network of patronage. This distinction would prove helpful to Phra Maha Paiwan as the respect given to his educational attainment and association with Somdet Chuang saved him on several occasions from disciplinary action. These relationships meant that his temple superiors and the authorities were careful not to do anything that could potentially appear disrespectful to the influential figures and institutions to which he was related.

Outside of the monastic realm, Phra Maha Paiwan was one of many young monks drawn to the freedom and opportunity afforded by the social media sphere. On Facebook, Phra Maha Paiwan posted opinion pieces regarding social events and attracted a relatively sizeable following. His reputation blew up when he posted a photo of himself making a three-finger salute in support of the anti-coup protesters, who had been employing the same gesture to express their messages to the public.[51] After that, Phra Maha Paiwan became a monastic face of the anti-coup resistance. He

education route, however, would mean that he could enter Mahachulalongkorn University if he passed a series of examinations that would provide him with the equivalent of a high school diploma and undergraduate degree. Because the local temple did not have the proper facilities and personnel for his Pali education, he was ordained as a novice in Sukhothai Province and studied there until he was forced to move to Bangkok to attend a more advanced Pali class at Wat Soi Thong. When he passed the ninth level of Pali examination, the highest rank that was equivalent to an undergraduate degree, Phra Maha Praiwan then went on to enroll in a master program in Buddhist Studies at Mahachulalongkorn University.

[50] These necessities are: 1) an outer robe; 2) an inner robe; 3) a thick double robe for winter; 4) an alms bowl for gathering food; 5) a razor for shaving; 6) a needle and thread; 7) a belt; and 8) a water strainer for removing impurities from drinking water.

[51] In the months following the 2014 coup, anti-coup protesters and democratic activists came up with several symbolic protests to communicate their messages from reading George Orwell's "1984" silently in public to eating sandwiches and employing the three-finger salute gesture from the blockbuster movie *the Hunger Games*. See a report on this

made a strong case on the importance of freedom of speech. In May 2015, having heard that student activists were arrested for their silent protest campaign in front of Bangkok Art & Culture Centre, he went to the Pathumwan police station to show his support for the detained students. When the student activists were transferred to Bangkok Remand Prison, Phra Maha Paiwan, along with **Phra Narong Sangkhawichit** from Wat Lakorn Tham, attended a candlelight vigil with others coming out to show their solidarity with the students (*Khaosod* 2015c). In addition to his fame as a political activist, Phra Maha Paiwan was known as a social critic as well as for his reformist stance on monastic governance issues. As was the case with many other reform-leanings monks such as **Phutthathat**, **P. A. Payutto**, **Phra Phayom Kanlayano** and **Phra Phaisan Wisalo**, all of whom criticized the monastic administrative regime and its capacity to uphold the integrity of the sangha, the political positions of Phra Maha Paiwan cannot be neatly placed in a single category. The fact that Phra Maha Paiwan was part of the sangha meant that he often spoke out against the prejudices that laypeople had toward monastic professionals and defended the sangha, even if such a viewpoint might be opposed by the laity, particularly many democratic activists and royalists who wished to see radical monastic reform.[52]

On the other side, pro-coup monks also voiced their opinions loud and clear, especially **Phra Maha Aphichat Punnachantho**, resident of Wat Benchamabophit whose personal Facebook page became famous during the PDRC protest in 2013 when he wrote about the negative impact that police barricades around the temple had on monks (*Sanook* 2013). Posting his own narratives on

trend in Chandler (2014). As of December 2018, Phra Maha Phraiwan's Facebook page (@PhramahaPaiwan) has around 82,333 likes and 83,971 follows.

[52] Phra Maha Phraiwan was one of many student monks who had expressed their disapproval of the coup on social media. Monks who expressed their anti-coup sentiments initially included Phra Narong, **Phra Palad Wisarut Thisattho**, **Phra Chai Worathammo**, a LGBT activist and writer, and **Phra Maha Chumphon Ramphai**, a development monk from the Northeast, among others. Later, Phra Maha Phraiwan, Phra Narong and Phra Palad Wisarut would form a group called **The Associate Student Monks for the Reform and Protection of Buddhism** in 2015 in which dissenting voices within the student monk population came together.

being unable to go on normal morning alms rounds, having to manually transport necessities in and out of the temple through the barricades and almost getting kidnapped by the police, Phra Maha Aphichat's viewpoint reached the PDRC leadership, who made a routine of reading his Facebook posts on their stage to rouse the audience sentiment. Soon, Phra Maha Apichat came to garner much recognition among PDRC protesters, and because he was from the South, many Southerners in the PDRC looked at him as one of their own. In the aftermath of the coup, Phra Maha Apichat regularly posted his messages in support of the junta, even if that stance was not popular among his peers, who were wary of the military government. Among those in the monastic order, Phra Maha Apichat belonged to a minority because his pro-coup stance was not a popular view among the sangha. Only a few groups within the sangha shared his political stance like Luang Ta Bua's followers and few other individual monks. His position, however, would change when the junta appointed a Buddhist Reform Committee led by PDRC activists like Paibun Nititawan, Mano Laohawanit, Jermsak Pinthong and Santisuk Sophonphanit, all of whom were reformers who believed that the monastic order had become corrupted and needed to be reformed through legal and regulatory measures to restore its integrity. Siding with the official sangha, Phra Maha Apichat frequently targeted these reformists in his social media posts, attributing their actions to a systematic effort to undermine the sangha and Buddhism.

Resistance to the Buddhist Reform Committee

> *The problem stems mainly from a lack of monastic representation in the committee, even though what they are doing directly involves Buddhism and monks. Without monks present in the committee, if there is any question on monastic matters, who will answer? Laypeople will of course, but that answer would only come from the experiences and perspectives of laypeople and be addressed to laypeople. The question, however, is about Buddhism, the field in which monks hold deep, specialized knowledge. Regardless of how the committee answers, it will not be the same as monks who are familiar with the issues. This is our principal concern because there is no one to truly speak on behalf of the monastic order.*

> *Even though they may claim to be Buddhist, but how much do they really know about Buddhism? Monks know both* pariyat *[scholarship] and* patibat *[praxis], and the* vinaya *is their life.*[53]

It was a humid afternoon in the first week of April 2015, and news of potential monastic reform had grown abuzz throughout the country. The controversial proposal, which included drafting a new law to audit monastic finances and pushing for disrobing as a measure to be used against property-related transgression, had drawn the ire of monks. Some prominent members of the sangha, or monastic community, threatened to mobilize monks from all over the country for a large-scale protest (*Bangkok Post* 2015). It was this context that I found myself at Wat Prayoonwongsawat, sitting across from Phra Kru Wichit Mongkontham, a senior monk who obliged me to an interview. Wat Prayoon was renowned for its rich history as an old, established royal temple in Bangkok and its abbot, Phra Phrom Bandit (Prayoon Thammajitto), held several prestigious positions. Among them were a council membership *Mahathera*; the rector of Mahachulalongkorn University, the largest monastic university in Thailand; and a tutor to Prince Dipangkorn, the youngest son of King Vajiralongkorn. The temple, in short, was a center of the mainstream sangha.

Throughout the interview, Phra Kru Wichit made his disapproval of the current initiative on Buddhist reform clear. According to him, if the monastic reform did not include monks in the deliberation process, any effort would only prove futile. Being careful not to suggest direct confrontation as a viable outcome of this disagreement, Phra Kru Wichit explained that from the monastic standpoint, not only was reform without representation illegitimate, the attempt by the secular government to regulate the sangha could itself also violate the very principles of the *vinaya*, or monastic code of conduct outlined by the Buddha:

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[53] Phra Kru Wichit (Wat Prayoonwongsawat), in discussion with the author, April 9, 2015.

> Some of these reform proposals sound like they are driven by laypeople's emotions to discipline monks. We need to question whether monastic offence and its proposed punishment, disrobing in this case, is consistent with what is prescribed in the *vinaya* by the Buddha. There are four offenses, or *parachik*, considered the most severe transgression of the monastic code, which warrant disrobing. Does monastic offence proposed by the committee fall into this category? If not, using lay criteria to make a new sangha law raises the question: how could you create law governing monks to overrule what the Buddha already laid out? Three months after the Buddha's passing, a group of monks gathered to settle doctrinal and disciplinary disputes. Similar to what is happening now, opinions differed. Isn't it peculiar that even though those participating were all enlightened beings, disagreement still persisted? It was then decided once and for all that whatever the Buddha had said would be left untouched, and that no provision would be added in order to protect the integrity of the Buddha's teaching. This is the resolution of the first council and what the Theravada school holds as its major principle. Even those enlightened beings did not dare to make any change, who are you to add more to the Buddha's teaching? Even subsequent monastic scholars in previous times dare not to make any change. Does this committee have more capability than those enlightened monks from the first council to come up with something beyond what the Buddha already determined?

In other words, Phra Kru Wichit was arguing that the religious and lay spheres adhered to different sets of rules, and even though overlaps did exist, their distinct difference could not be reconciled. Worse, the punishment designed by the state could compromise the rules laid out by the Buddha, which acted as the very integrity of the sangha. These monastic rules, Phra Khru Wichit contended, were sacred because even when the enlightened monks met and differed on what to do after the Buddha's passing, they were unwilling to change the monastic codes that the Buddha created. The implication was clear: the *vinaya* represented an area of autonomy that the monastic order must uphold, and any attempt to undermine it was a threat to the sangha with dangerous consequences. Governmental regulation, without monastic representation, was that threat.

Central to the sentiment expressed by Phra Kru Wichit was a contradiction inherent in the relationship between the state and sangha in Thailand. Since the centralization of the sangha in the early twentieth century, the monastic order was not only governed by its own set of decrees but was also subject to governmental control through the Sangha Act as well as other laws in cases when the monastic subjects violate the criminal or commercial codes. The *vinaya*, in this monastic

view, represented not just a set of rules, but the outline of conduct that all monks must rigorously observe and defend because it defined the meaning and experience of monkhood and distinguished the monastic from lay status. A plea for the defense of the *vinaya*, in this case, was a call for monastic autonomy. Despite his concern for state interference, Phra Kru Wichit did not in fact deny reform. He instead suggested that reform was possible under the condition that there was sufficient monastic representation in the process, a gesture hinting at a willingness to collaborate. This strange mixture of refusal and acceptance pointed toward an ambiguity intrinsic in the relationship between the state and sangha: the presence of the state, while foreboding, was also a source of new possibilities for the monastic establishment, who sought to assert their own authority over secular laws as well as participate in the exercise of its power.

If there was any sense of ambivalence regarding the Buddhist Reform Committee in the beginning, members of the sangha soon came to the view that the committee presented a threat to its order. Once the realization set in, they acted. The formation of the committee was a pivotal moment that sparked the proliferation of new Buddhist actors vying to draw attention of the public toward what they deemed a threat to the monastic order. Alongside the Network of Buddhist Organizations and Association of Scholars for Buddhism, new groups of Buddhist activists emerged in response to the Buddhist Reform Committee. Organizations of both domestic and international origins employed the tactic of filing petitions to demand the dissolution of CBA and asking the government to stop harassing Somdet Chuang and the sangha. The following list details names and dates in which the statements were released to the media:

19 February	1. Association of Scholars for Buddhism (Sathein Wipornmaha and Methaphan Phothithirarot)
22 February	2. New Generation Sangha (Phra Khru Kanchana Kitcharak)
27 February	3. Government of Uttrakhand Minority Commission 4. International Buddha Education Institute (IBEI)

1 March	5. The Council of Thai Bhikkhus in USA 6. The Committee of MCU Student Association, Khon Kaen Campus (Phra Maha Sirisak Siriwutthipanyamethi and Phra Maha Methi Kamphiyano) 7. Network of Northeastern Buddhist Youth Model under Office to Promote Morality, Ethics and Security of the Nation, Religion and Monarchy (OPMES), Wat Saket 8. Network of Buddhist Assembly Association 9. Network of Overseas Thammathut Bhikkhus in the UK and Europe 10. Thai Thammathut Bhikkhus Organization in China (Phra Maha Thawatchai Thammachayo) 11. Nirvana Peace Foundation, Bangladesh (Sabuj Barua)
2 March	12. Volunteer Monks in 5 Southernmost Provinces 13. Network of Buddhists in Australia, New Zealand and South Pacific Islands
3 March	14. The MCU Student Association, Sri Saket Campus 15. Wat Khlongmuang, Phitsanulok[54]

At first sight, these groups might appear diverse and overwhelming to regular observers, but a pattern of affiliation can be detected among them. Primarily, these groups were associated with MCU, Wat Saket and Wat Phra Thammakai. Many of these collectives were made up of overseas Thammathut monks from the Mahanikai order living abroad on proselytizing missions, while other groups were associated with MCU from the Northeast where Phra Methi Thammachan (Roi Et) and Phra Maha Cho (Buriram) were originally from. The presence of monastic groups abroad at the time reflected a trend in the growth of the Thai sangha around the world, which indicated the global ambition of the monastic order. According to statistics compiled in 2015, Thai temples could be found in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa with 389 Mahanikai and 128 Thammayut temples counted in total. The United States (157), Malaysia (72), Singapore (42), Germany (38), Finland (36) and Australia (26) were reported to have the highest number of Thai temples established (ONAB 2017, 11-2). While overseas monks living abroad on propagation missions were reported to total approximately 553 in 2015, which meant that missionary monks

[54] For more information, see *Thairath* (2015b), *Khaosod* (2015a), *Bangkokbiznews* (2015) and *MGR Online* (2015a, 2015b)

were a select group, the number of monks approved to travel outside of Thailand was as high as 8,893. This high number indicated a large volume of monks traveling in and out of the country as well as connections that the Thai sangha had with other monastic communities (ibid, 30). In 2017, 89 temples in 31 countries across four continents were listed as satellite temples of Wat Phra Thammakai. This number represents more than 20% of the total number of Mahanikai temples outside of Thailand (*Bangkokbiznews* 2017).[55]

Aside from many monks journeying to pilgrimage sites in India, the sangha also has an overseas missionary program, known as **Phra Thammathut**, that allows monks to travel to propagate Buddhism abroad. Even though both Thammayut and Mahanikai orders have such programs, each order runs its own program independent of the other. For the Mahanikai order, MCU is responsible for the training, while the **Regulatory Office for Overseas Thammathut Bhikkhus (OBHIK)** at Wat Saket oversees the administration. In general, Mahanikai monks wishing to travel overseas on missions are required to apply and attend a compulsory course run by **Dhammaduta College** under MCU. As for the Thammayut order, the training and administration is under **the Training Institute for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus Going Abroad** (TIDGA) located at Wat Phra Si Mahathat in Bangkok. Once certified, these monks must submit applications and pass the criteria of assessment set by OBHIK to become eligible for placement abroad.[56] OBHIK hence plays a critical role as a gatekeeper that regulates the flow of Mahanikai monks traveling in and out of Thailand, thus underlining the influence and authority of those with

[55] Because meditation centers founded by Wat Phra Thammakai in certain locations might not be reported as "temples," the number of temples and meditation centers affiliated with Wat Phra Thammakai is estimated to be around 100 (Phanichrat 2017).

[56] In general, OBHIK would be responsible for submitting applicant names to *Mahathera* for approval and forwarding the names of successful applicants to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the issuance of passports and coordination for visas from destination countries. In addition, OBHIK would: keep records of those in the program; monitor the creation and functioning of any overseas monastic council; manage budgets allocated by the government; and oversee any documentary and administrative work necessary for the maintenance and development of the program.

the decision-making capacity and high position within this structure. In the case of the Thammayut order, the missionary program plays a much less important role within its order, and the power tends to focus on a few royal temples and positions with the oversight on Pali education and examination.

As a superior royal temple, Wat Saket has long played a critical role in promoting and administering the overseas missionary program since the time of Somdet Kiaw, who was a pioneer of the project. During the time of Somdet Kiaw, Wat Saket grew to become a center of the monastic establishment due to his charisma, influence and high-profile following that included Thaksin Shinawatra and his family. Somdet Kiaw was known to have an interest in propagation abroad and hold an interest in bringing monastic education up to date. He promoted novices and monks, especially from Wat Saket, to study English and practice meditation as tools to spread Buddhism outside of Thailand, in addition to encouraging monks to pursue higher educational degrees to assist in their propagation work. In 1972, he traveled the world with Somdet Chuang and P. A. Payutto and spent almost a month in the United States, a year after the establishment of the Phra Thammathut program, where P. A. Payutto gave an invited lecture at University of Pennsylvania. They also surveyed the conditions of living to determine whether Thai monks could settle down and promulgate Buddhism.[57] Somdet Kiaw is thus highly instrumental to the development of the overseas Thammathut program and the establishment of OBHIK as the coordinating and monitoring entity for the program, which is accordingly located at Wat Saket.

[57] These three monks spent 80 days in total travelling from Thailand to the US and then to Europe and India as part of the program for P.A. Payutto to give lectures to various educational institutions and for the rest of them to determine the possibility of the Thai sangha to be established abroad (*PostToday* 2016). At the time, P.A. Payutto and Somdet Kiaw were active in the development and management of MCU. They believed that monks needed to update their knowledge to become competent in spreading the teaching of Buddhism not only within Thailand, but also in foreign lands.

Underlying Somdet Kiaw's pursuit of Buddhist propagation was his vision that while one's life would inevitably pass, Buddhism must remain. With the perpetuity of Buddhism in mind, Somdet Kiaw was keen on creating organizational structures to support the sangha in terms of proselytizing and outreach. One of the most important legacies of Somdet Kiaw is the **Office to Promote Morality, Ethics and Security of the Nation, Religion and Monarchy (OPMES)**, which was established in 2009 to promote Buddhist morality through programs that include training and developing youth groups into role models for others and representatives of the network of the center in the future. Since then, OPMES has expanded its role to include the development of training program for monks to become both capable propagators and social workers for those affected by natural disasters or social conflict. The creation of OPMES has provided a platform for resident monks of Wat Saket to take up leadership roles and launch initiatives in several projects. It has allowed for the development of necessary skills for Buddhist propagation as well as networking opportunity among the younger crowds of the Mahanikai order. For instance, groups like **Good Life Group** (*klum phua chiwit thi dingam*) and **Under the Shade of Buddhist Morality** (*klum tai rom phutthatham*) have been active in religious educational and social activities ranging from monastic training in deep listening to providing humanitarian relief to people affected by floods and performing religious ceremonials in the Buddhist communities in three southernmost provinces.

At the same time, because Somdet Kiaw was a southerner born in Surat Thani, his affinity with the region and status as monastic leader played an important role in his decision to establish a program of **Volunteer Monks in 5 Southernmost Provinces** in 2013 to create a network of monks in the provinces of Satun, Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and train them to conduct rehabilitation works in the southern conflict areas. The training is organized and carried out by

monks from Wat Saket. In the early stages of the effort, members of Good Life Group such as **Phra Maha Naphan Santiphattho** and **Phra Maha Kwanchai Kittimethi**, played an important role in devising and running training programs for monks from the South. The primary tasks of volunteer monks consist of meeting and providing moral encouragement to Buddhist villagers living in the areas of conflict as well as conducting surveys of temples and villages deserted by Buddhists who moved out due to fear of potential violence. Volunteer monks also organize youth morality camps and peace dialogues, in addition to developing their own training curriculum. At present, the executive committee of the program is comprised mostly of local monks, and the chairperson of the program is **Phra Khru Kositsutaporn (Chariang Khosathammo)**, abbot of Wat Burapharam in Pattani.[58]

It is worth noting that just a few months prior to the outpouring of statements by Thammathut groups to condemn the Buddhist Reform Committee, the new leadership at Wat Saket had just solidified its control of the overseas Thammathut program. In January 2015, **Phra Phrom Sitti (Thongchai Sukyano)**, then acting abbot of Wat Saket, was appointed as OBHIK president in place of the disgraced **Phra Phrom Suthi (Sanoh Panyawachiro)**, who had succeeded Somdet Kiaw as the abbot of Wat Saket but was later accused of misappropriating the government budget for Somdet Kiaw's funeral and relieved of all administrative duties.[59] As such, Phra Phrom Sitti

[58] For more information on the program, see its website (https://dhammatootarsar.com/)

[59] Phra Phrom Suthi and Phra Phrom Sitti were considered the right and left hands of Somdet Kiaw, who was the preceptor for both monks. While Somdet Kiaw was still alive, both grew up under his care and were later appointed as assistant abbots of Wat Saket, which demonstrated the level of trust that Somdet Kiaw had for these two. While Phra Phrom Suthi was entrusted the responsibility of overseeing Wat Saket's finances, Phra Phrom Sitti was to manage the Golden Mountain, a landmark of the temple that attracted a high volume of tourists and generated great revenues, as well as some other facilities of the temple. After the passing of Somdet Kiaw, Phra Phrom Suthi relieved Phra Phrom Sitti of the responsibility of managing the Golden Mountain. Phra Phrom Sitti then filed a complaint against the former at a police station, on charges of embezzling revenues from the Golden Mountain. The contentious relations between the two continued until Phra Phrom Suthi was alleged to have misappropriated the money for Somdet Kiaw's funeral and thus demoted from his administrative positions. Phra Phrom Sitti then emerged as the leader of Wat Saket. On the morning of 29 January 2016, Phra Phrom Suthi was found dead in his residence. The cause of death was suicide.

came to re-assert his control over the overseas Thammathut program, which he had previously held before Phra Phrom Suthi took the position from him after the death of Somdet Kiaw, at the time of less than a month prior to the formation of the Buddhist Reform Committee. Having influence over these programs previously created by Somdet Kiaw would provide channels for the monastic establishment to "voice" their concerns and disseminate their messages to monastic communities in other localities throughout and outside of the country.

At any rate, these groups were not the only actors that came out during this time. There were also groups associated with Phuttha Itsara and Luang Ta Bua that came out in support of the Buddhist Reform Committee. In particular, these groups were **the Network of Universities for Thailand's Reform** (*kruakhai mahawitthayalai phua kanpatirup prathet thai*), led by **Wirangrong Thappharangsi**; and **Network of Women for Buddhism Protection** (*kruakhai satri phua pitak phutthasatsana*), led by **Sam-ang Chomphunut**, **Kanlayanee Juprang**, a provincial leader of PDRC in Ayutthaya areas, and **Ploywiporn Thammasirisunthorn**, all of whom belonged to a group of Phuttha Itsara's followers and appeared to work in collaboration with Paibun. In addition to submitting petitions to the National Reform Steering Assembly, MCU and other agencies to urge investigation into Wat Phra Thammakai and call for monastic reform, the latter group organized a seminar on monastic wealth in February 2016 at Rangsit University and invited critics of the sangha such as Sulak Srivaraksa, Paibun Nititawan and Mano Laohawanit as speakers (*Matichon* 2016b). These two groups were composed of PDRC activists, who had been active during the Shut Down Bangkok and anti-Thaksin campaigns.

As for the Network of Universities for Thailand's Reform, the group was led by Wirangrong Thappharangsi, a well-known PDRC activist. At times, the organization would seem like a vehicle for Wirangrong to conduct political campaigns in alliance with other PDRC activists. Although

the group was active on the issue of educational reform, it was also known to conduct other activities unrelated to education, including submitting a letter to the army after the 2014 coup asking for the prompt deportation of Thaksin back to Thailand to be tried in martial court (*MGR Online* 2014a). In February 2015, the group played a critical role in submitting a request to Office of Ombudsman to investigate whether *Mahathera* had violated the laws due to its refusal to discipline Thammachayo. This petition came while Phuttha Itsara announced that he would visit the Office of Ombudsman and Crime Suppression Division of the police force and file a complaint against *Mahathera* (*KomChadLuek* 2015a). Another key figure was **Rattana Siriphanit**, who acted on behalf of the followers of Luang Ta Bua, issuing a public statement in February 2015 to call for the return of the authority to appoint the new Supreme Patriarch to the king. It should be noted here that Rattana has issued many petitions over the years, usually under her name and claiming them to be on behalf of Luang Ta Bua followers, but less is known whether her voice really reflects others who consider themselves disciples of the late charismatic monk.

Conclusion: Sowing the Seeds of Dissent

Throughout the chapter, I have argued that the centralization and state control of the sangha has produced an unexpected consequence in the form of the growth of a new monastic class, which draws its strength and support from the relative autonomy sanctioned by the sangha law, cultural capital from its control over religious ritual and expertise and its status as an institution that defines the national identity. Since the 1950s, the national sangha has made advancements in rationalizing its control over provincial and local monastic communities and established important institutions that would later provide the infrastructure for its governance and expansion. With the opening up of the political space in the late 1980s and the normalization of civilian government, the wave of

democratization also benefited the sangha, which saw an astounding institutional growth and contributed to its public assertion in the 1990s leading into the new millennium. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai Party, however, signified a significant turning point in state-sangha relations. Through the momentous material support and recognition imparted to the sangha by the Thaksin administration, the association between the monastic establishment and Thaksin was forged. This association informed the dynamics of both public perception and terms of engagement governing monastic activism on both sides of the political spectrum in the subsequent period.

Throughout the chapter, I have traced and outlined monastic political activities, figures and groups that are part of the monastic establishment and its detractors, many of whom have played a critical role in the royal-nationalist movements and lent their support to the military takeover of Thailand. The conflict between these groups, on the one hand, is centered on the issue of legitimacy and questions of who controls the sangha. The monastic establishment represents one end of the continuum where the belief that as a guardian of Buddhism, the state should unconditionally support the sangha and allows the institution to have its own say in determining its leader and administering its own affairs. On the other hand, the critics and reformists view the sangha as a location of purity and goodness whose stature provides an example to the society at large, and its integrity thus should not be compromised at any cost. The ideal image of the sangha and monkhood informs the engagement of this group as well as the public, who expect monks to follow propriety as prescribed by the monastic disciplinary code as well as the emergent social script that looks to monks as an important force in morality building and social development. The contradiction in the interpretation of the sangha's role continues to play a crucial role in the contestation between the sangha and society. While the discursive power of religious purity partly explains the impetus to

capture the state to discipline the sangha by lay reformists, it is the realization that the sangha has become a powerful economic and political institution that draws the state attention to the sangha as a liability.

The sangha, however, is not a homogenous entity, and differential response to the coup illustrates this point. The case of Phra Maha Paiwan, his political activism and involvement with other monks in the Associate Student Monks for the Reform and Protection of Buddhism, a group that called for the monastic participation in religious reform that would also take into account the voices from the margins of the monastic order, indicates a growing dissent within the members of the monastic order, particularly among the younger generation that has grown up amidst the political debate concerning democratic principles and human rights. The voice of these young student monks, however, is not in complete agreement and remains at odd with their seniors in the ecclesiastic and administrative positions, who view them as troublemakers, as well as sections of lay observers that believe monks' political expression violates the monastic code of propriety. Still, these young monks do not represent a large group within the monastic order, and the majority of student monks tends to demonstrate their support for the ecclesiastic hierarchy, even though in private conversations, many student monks have voiced their dissatisfaction with how the monastic affairs are run and what they perceive to be abuse of power within the sangha. Because these student monks see no alternative to the existing order, they feel as if supporting the hierarchy is the best option they have. With its command over economic, social and cultural capital, the military government, in collaboration with lay reformists, has increasingly come to see the monastic order as a challenge that needs to be contained.

CHAPTER 4

Containing the Monastic Establishment

At one in the morning of February 16, 2016, the website of the Royal Thai Government Gazette announced that Prayuth Chan-ocha, head of the junta and Thailand's Prime Minister, had exercised his power in accordance to Section 44 of the interim constitution to issue an order imposing control over Wat Phra Thammakai and its surrounding areas effective immediately after the publication. The order came on the heels of the military government's unsuccessful attempt in the past several days to conduct a search of Wat Phra Thammakai to find Phra Thammachayo, the temple's abbot wanted in connection to embezzlement, money laundering and other charges and believed to be hiding in the temple. As soon as the order came out, more than four thousand personnel from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI), police and military were deployed. They barricaded all of the roads leading in and out of the temple and began an attempt to enter the temple to search for Phra Thammachayo. The hunt for Thammachayo, however, was met with resistance and resulted in the standoff between the troops and monks and supporters of the temple. Even though the armed forces were keeping control over the temple, the enormous size of the temple and opposition from Thammachayo's followers meant that the search was like a cat-and-mouse game that kept intensifying as each side refused to yield.

The public was polarized over the issue. On the one hand, those sympathetic to the government argued that Wat Phra Thammakai was not only a bona fide example of Buddhist commercialization, but temple had also grown too big and powerful that only a decisive measure such as this could bring about change. On the other hand, the temple's disciples were convinced that their teacher, Phra Thammachayo, was wrongfully accused and denied due process. They looked at the situation as a clear example of the injustice driven by the desire to dismantle the

temple. Members of the monastic order also shared the view that the siege was part of the plan to undermine the strength of the sangha as an institution, given that Wat Phra Thammakai was the most popular and successful temple in Thailand, if not the world. The next logical step, these monastics argued, was for the military government to overthrow *Mahathera Samakhom* and consolidate a complete control over the sangha. This view highlighted a longstanding anxiety that had driven the monastic order to conduct public campaign to obtain the official status of Buddhism in the constitution as the "national religion" in order to guarantee state patronage and protect Buddhism from the decline.

But the ascent of the military government and the hijacking of the monastic reform agenda by lay reformists changed the dynamics of state-sangha relations and further aggravated the fear that the ecclesiastic hierarchy might come undone in the wake of the government's insistence to reform the sangha. "They [the military government] have already had a plan on how to topple Wat Phra Thammakai," one of my monastic informants told me during the confrontation between the government and the temple. "Wat Phra Thammakai was the biggest temple in Thailand, they know this," the young monk said and added that "if they are going to bring down the sangha, they have to start there." After almost a month of the siege, the military government finally lifted the order. Thammachayo remains elusive to this day.

In the period between the 2014 coup and the royal succession in 2016-2017, remarkable developments in state-sangha relations occurred. The attempt to reform the monastic order was not only met with the rise of monastic activism but also led to two of the biggest demonstrations of might by both the government and the sangha: the 2016 monastic protest at Phutthamonthon and the 2017 siege of Wat Phra Thammakai. The former involved the mobilization of thousands of monks and lay supporters to protest against what the sangha deemed state interference into

monastic affairs, which took place at an unprecedented scale and amidst a heightening conflict between the military government and the sangha centered on the issue of the Supreme Patriarch nomination. The friction between these two parties escalated into the siege of Wat Phra Thammakai, which was a spectacle that affirmed the monastic order of the junta's intention to contain the monastic establishment.

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the growth of Buddhist activism leading up to the protest at Phutthamonthon to highlight the tension between the state and the sangha manifested in the issues of the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch and impunity of Wat Phra Thammakai from criminal charges. The first part of this chapter also includes an outline of key actors and groups that played important roles in post-coup monastic activism. Increasingly, lay followers of the monastic establishment began to assert themselves more publicly and forcefully on behalf of the sangha. Most of this group of new Buddhist activists had undergone ordination for an extended period of time, received advanced monastic education, and still maintained active involvement with monastic universities or *Mahathera* in various capacities. As the struggle intensified, the trend of increased involvement of lay Buddhist activists deepened and began to include more lawyers and a focus on formal legal procedures. The conflict, at any rate, came to a standstill as the junta refused to nominate the candidate that the sangha wanted, and the sangha also could not successfully pressure the junta to comply with its wish.

Perhaps the most significant break came after the passing of King Bhumibhol when a series of changes began to occur. The new reign began with new high-level ecclesiastic appointments, an amendment of the sangha law to allow more power of the king over the sangha and decisive action against Wat Phra Thammakai and high ecclesiastic monks. The last part of this chapter provides an overview of this development and argues that while observers may attribute to the junta the

actions the state took toward the sangha, the return of the power over the sangha to the palace indicates a new trajectory of the state-sangha relations that sees further subordination of the monastic order as the new reign commands an expanding authority over the military and public life.

Growth of Buddhist Activism in Post-Coup Thailand

The friction between the Buddhist Reform Committee and the sangha that signaled the beginning of the state-sangha conflict broadly centered on the question of monastic autonomy. It was specifically expressed through the issues of the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch and disciplining of Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai. In the eyes of the military government, the defiance exhibited by the monastic order toward proposed reform and the influence that Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai held over their followers and the ecclesia were perceived as a liability that needed to be contained. By virtue of being the preceptor of Thammachayo and having presided over and given blessing to the Thudong Thamchai ceremonials, Somdet Chuang became a target of intervention by former members of the Buddhist Reform Committee, particularly by Paibun Nititawan, Phuttha Itsara and the military government. They all believed that having Somdet Chuang as a successor to Somdet Phra Yannasangwon would lead to Thammachayo being sanctioned by the highest level of monastic authority.

In the first week of January 2016, a few months after the funeral of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon, *Mahathera* finally formalized its agenda and reached a unanimous decision to nominate Somdet Chuang for the position of the next Supreme Patriarch. In a move showing how united the ecclesia was, the *Mahathera* members in the Thammayut order nominated the name of Somdet Chuang, who was from the Mahanikai order, in the meeting (*Thairath* 2016a). While the

meeting took place without any public knowledge and did not lead to any immediate public announcement afterwards, the rumor soon circulated and was later confirmed. As soon as the news broke, Paibun Nititawan and other activists from the Network of Women for Buddhism Protection and Network to Protect the Honor of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon came out to protest the nomination. They submitted a petition to Surachai Leangboonleodchai, First Vice President of the National Legislative Assembly and PDRC activist, at the parliament to demand a delay in the nomination of Somdet Chuang on grounds of a technicality and Somdet Chuang's questionable integrity. According to Paibun, the procedure to nominate the new Supreme Patriarch in the sangha law ought to be interpreted in a manner that allowed the Prime Minister the discretion to consider the candidate's suitability prior to forwarding the name to *Mahathera* for approval, and not the other way around. Due to the allegation that Somdet Chuang provided protection to Thammachayo and was himself embroiled in the car tax scam, Paibun argued that nominating him for the most esteemed position in the sangha in the face of mounting criticism from the public would inevitably agitate Buddhists across the country (*MGR Online* 2016a).[1] The battle for the Supreme Patriarch's nomination thus came to be waged on the issue of how the sangha law would be interpreted as well as the insistence from the military government and its associated groups that the nomination must wait until Somdet Chuang cleared his name, or else the sanctity of the position would be tarnished.[2]

Out of this process, new Buddhist groups emerged along a spectrum of supporting or contesting the issue of the nomination. Many affiliated with the monastic establishment went on to engage

[1] Names of the group/organization that came out to protest Somdet Chuang and Wat Phra Thammakai were: Network of Women for Buddhism Protection; Network of Universities for Thailand's Reform; Network to Protect Honor of Somdet Phra Yannasangwon; Network of Samut Sakorn Buddhists to Protect Buddhism; Network to Protect Thamma-Vinaya; and People Upholding Buddhism and Monarchy. These groups were mostly centered on a few individuals like Wirangrong Thappharangsi, Ploywiporn Thammasirisunthorn and Kanlayanee Chuprang, among others. All of them were PDRC or yellow shirts activists, and many had close connections with Phuttha Itsara.

[2] For more discussion on the contestation over the nomination of the Supreme Patriarch, see Dubus (2018).

with other issues related to the protection of Buddhism, especially the anti-Islamic campaign. Underlying this development was a feeling of injustice that emerged from the dissatisfaction at the diminished significance of the sangha with respect to state patronage. According to Katewadee Kulabkaew (2019, 4), the sentiment could be traced back to "Thailand's political order after the political reforms of 1997," which "deprived the Sangha of the privilege that it had taken for granted – the official superiority of Buddhism over other religions in the country." Such concern, in view of Kulabkaew, gave rise to what she termed "the Buddhism protection movement," which identified the cause of monastic decline as the result of "malevolent persons," who conspired to defame and spread false rumors about monks to the general public through mass media.[3] Fundamental to this process was the introduction of the equal representation principle in the 1997 constitution that designated the state to provide patronage not only to Buddhism, but also to other officially recognized religions.[4] This provision made the sangha feel anxious that its status was no longer secure. In this Buddhist country where the majority of the population professed Buddhism as their faith, the sangha deemed the equality principle unfair. Even though preferential support given to the sangha from the Thaksin administration contradicted the claim of the decline in state support, the sangha remained anxious over the fact that what it used to take for granted could be taken away at any time. The rise of new Buddhist activist groups, as will be shown below, reflected this ongoing perception that the sangha had with regards to its own vulnerability and the need to emphasize the Buddhism protection agenda.

[3] These "malevolent persons," as Kulabkaew pointed out, were meant to implicate Muslims in Thailand as a threat to the monastic order and national sovereignty.

[4] The stipulation can be found in Section 73 of the 1997 Constitution, which states that "The State shall patronise and protect Buddhism and other religions, promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions as well as encourage the application of religious principles to create virtue and develop the quality of life."

From the side of the supporters of Somdet Chuang and Wat Phra Thammakai, there were both familiar and new faces. In organizational terms, certain collectives were more formally defined while others were loosely structured as ad-hoc units. Most of them, however, remained centered on individuals, rather than organizational structures with clear objectives, operational stability and well-defined procedures regarding the recruitment and participation of membership. Common among these groups was the affiliation to either monastic universities, influential members within the ecclesia, or programs administered by the monastic establishment such as the oversea Thammathut program and Volunteer Monks in 5 Southernmost Provinces. Particularly after Phuttha Itsara, Paibun Nititawan and associated groups successfully pressured the government to postpone the nomination of Somdet Chuang, activist groups affiliated with the monastic order mobilized for a one-day protest at Phuttha Monthon, the biggest Buddhist Park in Thailand where the ONAB and *Mahathera* were headquartered.[5] The list below provides the name of organizations and groups affiliated with the monastic establishment that focused its polemic on Paibun Nititawan and Phuttha Itsara seen by these groups as the active agents behind the disruption of the nomination process.

Category	Name of organization/group associated with the monastic establishment before the appointment of the Supreme Patriarch
Groups with more stability and formal arrangement	Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand Association of Scholars for Buddhism Association of 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology Thailand Buddhists Federation

[5] The sangha staged a large demonstration on 15 February 2016 at Phutthamonthon under the Sangha and Buddhists Alliance of Thailand (SBAT), led by the BPCT leadership such as Phra Methi Thammachan. Phra Khru Winaithorn Thirawit, BPCT vice secretary and other Buddhist activists. This was perhaps the largest rally that the sangha organized with the number of participants estimated at around 3,000 or so. The demonstration, however, only lasted a day after Phra Methi Thammachan went to see Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan. Pol. Gen. Chakthip Chaichinda, the police chief, later said that there were monks from Wat Phra Thammakai involved in the protest (*Matichon* 2016c). Some observers, however, pointed out to me that the formation of the mass rally and the use of flags to organize the column bore resemblance to how Wat Phra Thammakai organized its mass merit-making ceremonials, which required a lot of planning and deliberation. This mass rally, as the reasoning of these observers went, would not have been possible without the capacity found at Wat Phra Thammakai.

	Protection Organization of National Buddhism
Ad-hoc groups	Southern Buddhism Protection Organization (Southern Thailand) Network of Thammathut (Europe and the UK) Various MCU student groups (i.e. MCU Student Council Khon Kaen Campus and Northeastern Assembly of Students to Protect Buddhism) Global Peace Association Network of New Generation Monks Network of Thai Administrative Monks Sangha Protection Forces Group (Nakorn Ratchasima) Buddhism Protection Group (Ubon Ratchathani) Network of Phra Thammacharik Sangha for Peace in Southernmost Provinces

Two of the most active groups in this period were the BPCT and Association of Scholars for Buddhism (ASB), whose connections could be seen through the collaboration between Phra Methi Thammachan, Phra Maha Cho, Sathien Wipornmaha and Methapan Photithirarot, all of whom were active in issuing public statements to put pressure on the government and undermine the creditability of Paibun Nititawan. They submitted petitions of grievances to various governmental agencies and filed charges against Phuttha Itsara (*Thairath* 2015e; *DailyNews* 2016a). The ad hoc groups, on the other hand, were typically groups centered on individuals associated with the ecclesia and monastic universities. Even though they came out to submit petitions and letters to condemn Phuttha Itsara and Paibun as well as put pressure on the government to acknowledge the sangha's wish for the next Supreme Patriarch, they did so in a sporadic manner to compliment the campaign of larger groups.[6] In some cases, however, legal action was also carried out. In May 2016, the Sangha Protection Forces Group (*klum phalang phitak sangkha monthon*) in Nakorn Ratchasima and the Buddhism Protection Group (*klum phitak phutthasatsana*) in Ubon

[6] Southern Buddhism Protection Organization (*ongkorn phitak phra phutthasatsana phak tai*), led by Phra Atikan Chatchai Atichitto from Wat Bang Yai, Nakorn Si Thammarat, and Phra Palad Narutchai Apinanto from Wat Koh Yai, Songkhla, was instrumental in inviting all monks to perform a ceremonial to boycott Phuttha Itsara beginning in May 2016 that triggered a chain of statements issued by various monastic groups across Thailand endorsing the boycott. The organization was also involved in the 2015 protest at Wat Phra Mahathat in Nakorn Si Thammarat, due to a building that the group deemed conspicuously influenced by Islamic architectural style rather than normal Buddhist aesthetics and form, which thus represented a sign of invasion.

Ratchathani charges against Phuttha Itsara and Paibun Nititawan on grounds that they defamed Somdet Chuang and created monastic schism.[7]

Another noteworthy aspect of Buddhist activism in this period was the use of social media as a platform to voice concerns, mobilize sentiments, and give identity to various groups that may not have been able to access conventional channels of popular media. Many of the accounts, however, were anonymous and page administrators made their identities hard to decipher to avoid backlash from the public and security forces. These accounts provided a channel for issuing statements, usually through Facebook. Examples of these pages were Wake Up Buddhist[8]; Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, which was the official page for the BPCT; Buddhist Affairs News (*khaosan ngan phra phuttasatsana*); Protection Organization of National Buddhism (*ongkorn phitak phra phutthasatsana haeng chat*), also an activist group that will be discussed below; Protecting the Sangha (*pokpong sangkha monthon*), a now defunct page[9]; and Children of King Taksin for Nation, Religion and King (*luk chao tak phuea chat sat kasat*),[10] among others. At present, many of these Facebook pages are no longer active, except for Wake Up Buddhist and Buddhist Affairs News and Protection Organization of National Buddhism, which post news links concerning the sangha with commentaries expressing dissent or remarks toward the government

[7] Sangha Protection Forces was led by Ekachai Deesenatrakun and Kritsada Banphacha, and Buddhism Protection Group was led by Apichat Tonkaew and Chirawat Chaem-ngoenwatthanakun. Because these two filed charges within days of each other and were from the Northeast, their action was likely a signal of the fermenting of Buddhist activism in the Northeast as a result of the recent formation of the Isan wing of Thai Buddhists Federation led by Duangchai Chueakhampheng.

[8] It is rumored that Wake Up Buddhists, which is one of the most popular pages on Facebook and has posted the messages primarily focused on the protection of the monastic establishment and anti-Islamic provocation, is administrated by Phra Maha Cho, but no verification is given. The page has received 198,698 likes with 203,617 followers as of January 2018, and one of the most popular, if not the most, posts is titled "Conspiracy to Destroy Buddhism" (*khabuankan lom phut*), which was published on April 7, 2015, with more than 415,000 likes, more than 20,000 comments, and more than 31,000 shares.

[9] Before the page became inactive, it garnered as many as 28,815 likes.

[10] The page has 5,372 likes and 5,709 followers, and is known to be run by Naphondet Maneelanka, spokesperson for Thai People Sovereignty Party, a political group led by Group Cpt. Khamphi Khamphirayannon, with ties to Chavalit Yongchaiyut, former prime minister and army chief, and military factions.

and other faiths. The prevalence of these groups also represents an increase in the use of Facebook by individual monks. The creditability of individual monks, typically based upon educational background and temple affiliation, determines the volume of traffic that each individual monk would garner in his posts. There are several personal Facebook profiles that acted as a channel where monks conveyed their political ideas and created networks to further their agenda. One of the most prominent profiles was that of Phra Maha Apichat Promjan, a monk from Wat Benjamabopit who rose to fame due to his use of Facebook to criticize the police barricade around his temple during the Shut Down BKK campaign by PDRC and later used Facebook to portray Muslims as the violent others that need to be contained. He was later arrested and disrobed in 2017.[11]

Key Buddhist Organizations

Among Buddhist activist groups with ties to the monastic establishment, the following groups are collectives that were functional in the period after the Buddhist Reform Committee. While some are now dormant, their members remain actively involved in the splinter groups or political parties, which are offshoots of these groups. These are:

Association of 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology: This group was founded around the same time as the Association of Scholars for Buddhism (ASB) and consisted mostly of former monks who passed the 9th level of Pali education prior to disrobing. Established in February 2015 with the blessing from Somdet Chuang at Wat Paknam, the original members were Raksiam Namanuphap, president; Kaew Chittakhop, vice president; Ekapop Laolapha, secretary;

[11] According to several sources, he was recruited by the palace and has joined the royal guard.

Phatthanachai Bai-ngen, registrar; and Prasert Sermsuk, treasurer (Narinto 2015). The first event that the association organized was a seminar in June 2015 titled "Is Education in Monastic Universities a Social Problem?," which was a direct response to Paibun Nititawan's claim that monastic universities ought to focus on religious, not secular, education as well as his criticism that monastic universities took advantages of the public veneration and taxpayer's money because they provided free tuition, room and board to their students, which was not fair to others (Somphong 2016). Participants of the seminar included influential figures in monastic education such as Phra Rat Yannakawai, assistant abbot of Wat Phra Ram IX; Chamnong Thongprasert, member of the Office of Royal Society; Banjob Banaruji; Lt. Col. Akkarin Kamchaibun, naval chaplain; Professor Uthit Siriwan; and Natthanan Sutprasert, MCU adjunct lecturer.

In particular, Chamnong and Uthit were considered among the monastic order excellent scholars of Pali, and Akkarin was a member of the Chaplain of the Armed Forces Association, which consisted exclusively of former monks who had passed the advanced level of Pali education, disrobed and joined the armed forces as Buddhist ceremonial specialists. The association also had a role in threatening to file charges of wrongful exercise of duty against Paibun and those who disrupted the nomination process of the Supreme Patriarch (*Thairath* 2016b). Both ASB and Association of 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theory, however, have become relatively inactive since the later part of 2016.

Protection Organization of National Buddhism (NBPO): At the beginning of 2016 when *Mahathera* nominated Somdet Chuang, many Buddhist groups saw the occasion as an opportunity to promote the national religion campaign and conduct their offensive on Phuttha Itsara and Paibun. An important group appearing at this time was the Protection Organization of National

Buddhism (*ongkorn phitak phra phutthasatsana haeng*) led by Phra Maha Bunthung Phonpunyo, Wat Wang Hin Ploeng in Phichit; Phra Sittisak Sirinanto,[12] vice chairman; Phra Maha Thanong Wisutthasilo, secretary; M.L. Kantaphong Worawut; and Prasit Wichai.[13] The role of this group was largely limited to issuing statements in protest of the constitutional drafting committee's refusal to legislate Buddhism as the national religion in 2016 (*DailyNews* 2016b). In 2017, the group also submitted a petition to Office of the Prime Minister to investigate the Sheikhul Islam Office and the Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT) on the issues of where the fees for the halal trademark went and how the grants to assist mosque-building projects were used (*Seridhamma* 2017).[14] The figures within PONB are also connected to other groups of Buddhist activists and at present remain active with other groups such as Buddhist Power of Lands (*Chao phut phalang phaendin*), which has been active since the early part of 2018 and is led by Charun Wannakasinanon.[15] Other figures associated with Buddhist Power of Lands are Worakorn Phongthanakun,[16] Capt. Winai Sewakawi, Wichai Prasertsutsiri[17] and Phongnarin Amornrattana.

[12] Phra Sittisak has acted in the capacity of a representative of NBPO; advisor to Association of Thai Buddhism Security, an ad hoc group active from 2015-2017 with activities mostly focused on organizing cultural events; representative of Buddhist Power of Lands (BPL, or *chao phut phalang phaendin*), which has been an active group from 2017 until now; and associate of Network of Buddhists for the Protection and Promotion of Buddhism (NBP, or *kruakhai chao phut phua khumkhrong songserm phra phutthasatsana*), which is led by Wichai Prasertsutsiri and Somnuek Rakhang, a Buddhist lawyer from Yala, and has been active in southernmost provinces and part of the 2017 protest in front of the Yala office of Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SPBAC).

[13] NBPO has an active campaign on FB, and its page has more than 11,420 likes and more than 11,950 followers as of December 2017.

[14] The group would also be part of the campaign by the monastic order in 2018 to demand that the government provide its rationale behind the arrest of high ecclesiastic monks charged with temple fund embezzlement (*Workpoint News* 2018b).

[15]Charun is by training a lawyer who has filed charge against ONAB Director and other officials involved in the prosecution of senior monks in temple fund embezzlement.

[16] Worakorn also operates under another group named Federation of Lawyers for Buddhism Protection (*samaphan thanaikhwam pokpong phra phutthasatsana*), which has worked closely with Buddhist Power of Lands. The group, however, seems to be a one-man type of group and is part of the tactics employed by Buddhist activists on both sides to operate under the guise of a collective for the benefit of added stature.

[17] In 2017, Wichai has filed a lese majeste charge against Phuttha Itsara for the unauthorized use of the royal symbol on the amulets, which would become one of the charges behind the arrest of Phuttha Itsara in 2018. At that time, Wichai did so under the name of the coordinator of Buddhism Promotion and Protection Organization (*ongkorn songserm lae pokpong phra phutthasatsana*), which was an alias for his individual action.

Thailand Buddhists Federation (TBF): Beside the BPCT, perhaps the most organized group of all is TBF, founded by Banjob Banaruji and Korn Meedee. Banjob has long been known as a renowned scholar of Pali and Buddhist Studies but took on a more politically active role when he headed the Committee to Promote Buddhism as the National Religion (CPBR, or in Thai: *khana kammakan ronnarong satsanaphut pen satsana pracham chat*) with Phra Thep Suwannamethi (Suchart Kittipanyo), vice ecclesiastic governor of Bangkok, as an interest group that campaigned on the national religion issue. Korn Meedee was the secretary of the group.[18] The committee conducted a public relations campaign and encouraged temples across the country to put up signs supporting constitutionalizing Buddhism as the national religion; urging citizens to file a petition to the constitutional drafting committee; giving public lectures in various locations throughout Thailand; spreading the message through social media platform and other Buddhist media such as DDTV and radios; and sending letters to every temple in the country to ask for cooperation with the campaign (CBPR 2016). The campaign came on the heels of the monastic order's drive to fill the vacancy of the Supreme Patriarch position and thus should be considered as part of the monastic struggle for public relevance and recognition.

The activism of TBF is centered on the notion of shared Buddhist identity as well as the belief that Buddhism is a foundation of all national institutions. Its continuance, therefore, determines the survival of the nation.[19] According to the TBF view, one of the most conspicuous signs of the decline of Buddhism can be observed in how state patronage of Buddhism and the sangha has

[18] The committee, according to its FB page, consisted of several Buddhist activist groups such as ASEAN Buddhists Federation, European Buddhists Federation, ASEAN Buddhist Radio Media Federation, DDTV, Voluntary Buddhist Council of Civil Society, Moderate Practice Association, Global Peace Association, Center for Mahayana Buddhism of Thailand, Buddhist Association of Thailand and NBPO (CPBR 2016).

[19] In a FB post that would come to represent much of what TPF's underlying assumptions and approach are, Banjob suggests that because one of the shared characteristics presupposing the commonality and objectives of the struggle among various groups is the fact that "we are Buddhists." In saying so, there is a mutual agreement that if "Buddhism survives – all Thai institutions are saved." The goal is thus to "recover Buddhism, refresh the Nation, resave Monarch and People" (TBF 2016).

receded at an alarming rate, while the support for other faiths, particularly Islam, has suspiciously expanded over the years. The refusal to include Buddhism in the constitution affirms this trend, and in the early incarnation of TBF, Banjob and his associates sought to bring this awareness to the public. The aim for the CPBR was to foster an understanding of the significance of the national religion campaign through a nonviolent approach, without resorting to monastic protest and by operating within the parameters set by the government. The group submitted three letters to the constitutional drafting committee asking for Buddhism to be included in the constitution as the national religion, along with 10,000 signatures of those in agreement with the national religion agenda collected separately from the BPCT (*MGR Online* 2016b; *Matichon* 2016a). Banjob, however, did not participate only with the committee. He was also involved with Association of the 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology in its early phase but later terminated any collaboration due to personal differences with the association.[20]

After the national religion campaign, Banjob and Korn Meedee founded Thai Buddhists Federation with the objective to realize what Banjob called a "theory of three pillars," which were to: 1) awaken Buddhists; 2) strengthen Buddhist organizations; and 3) organize political campaigns to realize the Buddhist agenda. In doing so, both collaborated with a group of former monks in the Northeast, who had achieved high level of Pali education and thus were considered elites by the standard of the monastic order even if they were no longer in robes. Principal among them was Duangchai Chueakhampheng, a graduate of the 8th level of Pali education from Nakhon Phanom whose influences among the Northeastern monastic order were extensive due to his

[20] According to the rumor, the split was due to the claim that Raksiam, chairman of Association of the 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology, asked for money from a senior monk to help with a legal case and used the names of Banjob and another influential figure to guarantee trustworthiness. Banjob later learned of this claim and decided to cease relation with the association.

familiarity and cooperation with high-level administrative monks in the areas.[21] According to Banjob, there was a plan prior to the 2014 coup to create a Buddhist political party to move the agenda on the promotion and protection of Buddhism toward reality.

The coup, however, derailed the plan. Banjob instead created a chat group for Buddhist activists in the instant messaging application Line in order to exchange ideas and continue the discussion. The chat group primarily included those, like himself, with backgrounds in advanced Pali education and ties to the monastic establishment. The dialogue soon materialized into a working group that would focus its efforts mainly in the Northeast.[22] In the beginning, the group began working with Association of the 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology, led by Raksiam Mananuphap and Ekapop Laolapa, and Assembly of Khon Kaen Buddhists (*samatcha chao phut khon kaen*), led by Pramuan Pimsen.[23] With a large number of people expressing interest in joining, the group finally organized an entity that would come to be known as TBF in 2015.

The aim of TBF is not to have a central committee acting alone. Rather, the organization aims to have multiple levels of operation, each of which would have the ability to determine its own activities, while moving in concert with other branches of the organization. TBF thus planned to expand its structure from central to regional, provincial, district, sub-district and village levels, in addition to creating a political party to put ideas into practice. In doing so, the founding members, particularly Banjob and Korn, travelled throughout Thailand to meet and set up key individuals in each region and province to act as local leadership and intermediaries between the central

[21] Duangchai would later become the chairperson of the Northeastern chapter of Thai Buddhists Federation before leaving to establish his own group named **Phutthaphum** that focused mainly in the Northeast and drew individuals and groups that used to be part of TBF in the areas.

[22] This working group consisted of Duanchai Chueakhampheng; Lamkhong Thanthanasak, a lawyer; Prasit Wichai; Ratchamongkon Saensuriwong; Chak Chatirat; Pichit Bunma; and Mahasong Chaikrua.

[23] Pramuan is the director of Khon Kaen Chalermraja Cultural Cente and has also led the assembly in the 2017 protest of mosque-building in Khon Kaen (*Banmuang* 2017). The name has later been changed to Assembly of Khon Kaen Buddhists for National Security (*samatcha chao phut phua khwam mankhong khong chat changwat khon kaen*), and the group remains active until present.

committee and the local chapters. TBF has also set up another institutional entity under the name of Foundation for Buddhism as a channel to accept donations and provide support to the operation of TBF when necessary. Even though TBF has not been able to establish its committee in all provinces, it has set up contacts in all regions and key provinces in the Northeast, North and three southernmost provinces.

In the public eye TPF is considered mostly as an interest group that submits letters or petitions to express the concerns of the sangha or condemn what it deems to be transgressions against Buddhism. For instance, TBF has come out to protest the actions of ONAB Director, Pol. Lt. Col. Pongporn Pramsaneh, who had launched investigation into the temple fund embezzlement that led to arrest of senior monks in 2018. In practice, however, Banjob and Korn have visited temples around Thailand to give rousing lectures to local Buddhist communities as part of their campaign to awaken monks and laypeople to the threats that Thai Buddhism is facing. Their travel is also critical to their aim to build a bridge between local administrative monks, lay leaders and central TPF committee. The network would become the base and infrastructure for its political party. In 2017, however, Duangchai decided to go his separate way and took with him the networks in the Northeast. In the same year, Banjob also made an announcement that he would not be assuming the leadership role with the new political party that TBF was setting up. Instead, Korn Meedee would assume the headship of the Land of Dharma Party (LDP), which has been officially registered with the Election Committee in 2018.[24]

These organizations illustrate an important development in Buddhist activism. As opposed to the previous generation where monks were held as the face of the groups in such cases as Phra

[24] LDP has its own webpage (https://www.facebook.com/พรรคแผ่นดินธรรม-172039257031173/), which has more than 6,000 likes and follows as of December 2018. For more information on the policy platform of the party, see Prian10 (2018). Later, in the period leading up to the 2019 general election, Banjob would appear again as a Prime Minister candidate of LDP alongside Korn Meedee.

Methi Thammachan, lay people with proximity to the monastic establishment became active operatives that claimed to act on behalf of the sangha and tended to show more conspicuous connection to civilian political groups as well as political ambition. Similar to the demographic composition of the sangha, most of the members of these groups were men with provincial backgrounds and experience as the monastics. The tactics deployed by these groups also signaled a turn toward a more confrontational approach. Lawyers, working on behalf of the ecclesia, began to press their agenda through judiciary channels. This shift in the strategy of the sangha was a response to the offense mounted by the reformists, whose lay status allowed them to employ several tactics that monks could not easily do so such as aggressively filing charges and give an interview with a threatening tone. Doing so would run counter to the social expectations of monastic conduct that view monks as a compassionate and well-mannered beings. While the monastic establishment hoped to avoid a public backlash and chose to conduct their political campaign through lay proxies, the result was the opposite of what they wished for. Instead, the contention over the nomination of the Supreme Patriarch became a mainstay in news headlines and brought increased visibility and scrutiny to the state of monastic affairs. The unnecessary attention drawn to the sangha did not prove positive for the monastic agenda. As one of my friends remarked to me in 2016 that even though she had no idea what *Mahathera* was, she wanted to know why monks were so obsessed with superficial things like power and prestige that they acted with such impropriety.

The New Reign

The passing of King Bhumibol in October 2016 marked a pivotal moment for both the nation and state-sangha relations as a series of change took place in a dramatic manner. With Crown

Prince Vajiralongkorn ascending to fill the vacancy left behind by his father, new developments began to appear. The first major change came with the news that, for the annual promotion of monastic ranks at the end of 2016, P.A. Payutto, or Phra Phrom Khunaporn, would be promoted to the rank of Somdet to fill the vacancy by the passing of Somdet Phra Kosachan (Weera Phatthachari), abbot of Wat Suthat, in 2010. P.A. Payutto, a prolific writer, was widely considered an extraordinary scholar monk whose analysis and re-interpretation of scriptural sources were highly lauded as innovations that contributed to the adaptation of Buddhism to the changing world.[25] Payutto, however, was neither active in monastic administration nor had any role with MCU in the last couple decades. Despite his monastic rank, which many believed was bestowed on him through the direct request of the late King Bhumibol, he was considered an outsider, even if his academic excellence and austerity made him a model for other monks in the court of public opinion. With the new title granted by King Vajiralongkorn on 5 December 2016, P.A. Payutto became Somdet Phra Kosachan (Prayut Payutto). The news came to much delight of the populace (Na Thalang 2016).

Just weeks after Payutto was promoted, the NLA passed an amendment to Section 7 of the sangha law on 29 December 2016, which granted full authority to the king to appoint the Supreme Patriarch. The deliberation only lasted an hour with 182 members voting in favor with 6 abstaining from the vote (*BBC* 2016). The news caught the sangha off-guard because there was no prior sign indicating that such a move, which would have surely warranted strong monastic resistance, would occur. The situation became apparent that the new Supreme Patriarch would soon be appointed, but Somdet Chuang was no longer guaranteed the position because the newly revised sangha law meant that the *Mahathera* resolution to nominate Somdet Chuang had become void. After years

[25] For discussion on Payutto, see Evans (1999).

of waiting, the royal decree was issued on 7 February 2017 to formally appoint Somdet Phra Mahamuniwong (Amporn Amparo), abbot of Wat Ratchabophit from the Thammayut order, as the 20th Supreme Patriarch of the Chakri Dynasty with the title Somdet Phra Ariyavongsagatanana (Wongcha-um 2017).

The appointment came amidst whispers of disappointment among the Mahanikai order. Somdet Amporn, as the new Supreme Patriarch used to be commonly called, was a dark horse in the race due to his limited role in monastic administration and personality that preferred meditation practice and quiet living. Among the royalist camp, however, his name had long appeared as one of the top candidates for the Supreme Patriarch because he not only had no record of working with or receiving any donations from Wat Phra Thammakai but also because his lifestyle was humble and frugal; he was deemed pure and thus suitable for such a significant position (*MGR Online* 2015d). Nonetheless, during the 2016 *Mahathera* meeting when the highest level of the ecclesia unanimously voted to nominated Somdet Chuang, Somdet Amporn chaired the meeting and also voted in favor of the resolution. Although activists from the Thammayut order did not approve of the process by which the Supreme Patriarch was chosen, they did not object the outcome, which was a visible contrast to Mahanikai monks who usually exhibited clear signs of dissatisfaction and even anger when the issue was brought up in the conversation.

As the celebration for the new Supreme Patriarch was underway, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha without prior notice invoked Section 44 of the 2014 interim constitution to allow for the military and police, led by the Department Special Investigation (DSI), to surround Wat Phra Thammakai and conduct a search for Thammachayo, who was now a wanted person due to charges of money laundering and conspiring to commit fraud stemming from the case of the Credit Union Chumchon Khlongchan. The effort involved thousands of troops over a two-month period for the

search which saw skirmishes break out, dozens of charges filed against monks and lay followers of the temple and the revocation of monastic ranks of Thammachayo and Tattachivo, an assistant abbot and second-in-command at the temple by the king. In April, DSI announced its withdrawal from the temple. Until now, Thammachayo remains at large.[26]

This incident is a historic event; it marks a rare occasion, perhaps even the first time in modern Thai history, that the state directly employed a large number of armed troops in an attempt to arrest a highly popular monk on criminal charges.[27] Usually, if a monk possesses high charisma and popularity, the state would be very mindful in taking any action that might upset the followers of the said monk, which thus could lead to disorder and protest. The policy of handling a high-profile monastic corruption case is thus highly sensitive to the environment and circumstance of that particular case, which often result in the accused being able to flee and escape arrest. The reluctance to deploy force against the monastic order could be observed in all interactions prior to this siege. The swift shift in policy left many wondering how much the junta was behind this realignment and how much of this initiative was driven by someone with great authority from outside of the junta leadership.[28]

The Invisible Hand

A week after the siege, the government made another surprising announcement on 25 February 2017, namely that Phanom Sornsin, then ONAB Director, was to be replaced by Pongporn Phromsaneh, Director Bureau of Taxation Crime from DSI. The move was viewed by many as an

[26] For a comprehensive summary of the event, see Satasut (2017) and a report by *Prachatai* (2017).
[27] Even though monks have been arrested by police or military personnel and forced to disrobe in such cases as Phra Pimontham in the 1960s, the scale of the operation has never seen this level that was employed against Thammachayo and Wat Phra Thammakai. For an overview of the debate of disrobing and cases of political disrobing in Thailand, see Borchert and Darlington (2017).
[28] The speculation among political activists on both sides of the spectrum was that the palace was behind this shift, though no real clear motive was ascertained.

attempt by the government to intensify pressure on Wat Phra Thammakai as Pongporn, an expert of taxation crime, was familiar with fraud cases and could prove useful to the probe into the connections between Wat Phra Thammakai and Credit Union Chumchon Khlongchan.[29] The arrival of Pongporn, in any case, marked the beginning of the investigation into temple fund embezzlement, a case that became another scandal shaking the very top of the monastic order. In June of the same year, only a few months after the appointment of Pongporn, the Counter Corruption Division (CCD) of the police and State Audit Office opened an investigation into temple fund embezzlement in response to the complaint filed by Phra Anan Khemanantho, abbot of Wat Huay Ta Klae in Petchburi.

According to the news report, Phra Anan alleged that ONAB officials only allocated one million out of eleven million baht of the restoration funding that was granted to the temple (*Workpoint News* 2018a). With cooperation from ONAB, the probe led to the uncovering of temples allegedly involved in a massive scam in which ONAB officials would allocate budget to various temples and ask each one for a cut of substantial sum. In some cases, assigned funds were found to be used for purposes other than the designated objectives, a deviation that was considered a legal violation and thus punishable by law. Notably, many temples on the list appeared to be renowned royal temples such as Wat Saket, Wat Sam Phraya and Wat Samphanthawong, in addition to normal temples in the provinces and Bangkok. As the investigation proceeded, Pongporn became a target of Buddhist activists, who grew increasingly concerned over his persistence. They tried to lobby for his dismissal.

[29] Phanom was moved to the position of Inspector General at Office of the Prime Minister, which was generally considered as demotion.

At this particular juncture, Buddhist activism took on a more confrontational tone as the temple fund embezzlement was a direct challenge to the monastic establishment.[30] The method employed by Buddhist activists changed from voicing dissent through public petitioning to legally challenging the government action and key figures involved in delivering the policy that the sangha found unsettling. To protect the ecclesia from the government intervention, the activists coming out in this period consisted of lawyers who represented such groups as Buddhism Promotion and Protection Organization (*ongkorn songserm lae pokpong khumkhrong phra phutthasatsana*), represented by Wichai Prasertsutsiri, who filed charges against Phuttha Itsara; Buddhist Power of Lands (*klum chao phut palang phaendin*), led by Charun Wannakasinanon, Pongnarin Amornrattana, Group Cpt. Winai Sawaekwi and M.L. Kantapong Worawut; Network of Lawyers and People for Buddhism Protection (*kruakhai thanai lae prachachon pokpong phra phutthasatsana*), led by Worakorn Phongthanakun, Benjarat Meetian and Phra Kru Palad Theerathat Mettathammo; and Network of Buddhists for Buddhism Protection, led by Somnuek Rakhang, a lawyer from Yala.[31] The list of groups involved in the protection of the sangha during the investigation into the temple fund embezzlement is below:

Category	Name of group/org coming out to protect the ecclesia
Groups with more stability and consistent activity	Thailand Buddhists Federation Association of the 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology Protection Organization of National Buddhism Buddhist Power of Lands

[30] Change in Buddhist activism could be attributed partly to a heightened sense of danger and anxiety with regards to the perception that Islam is dangerously growing in Thailand, particularly pertaining to the physical expansion in the form of mosque-building, development of halal industry and representation of Muslims in bureaucracy and political office. The protracted conflict in southernmost provinces also contributes to this feeling of unease and underlines the notion that Islam and its adherents are the enemy. For discussion on the conflict in the Deep South and national anxieties, see McCargo (2012), and see Keyes (2009) for a discussion on the perception of Muslims as the "others" in Buddhist Thailand.

[31] Somneuk Rakhang is a lawyer and activist that has been active in southernmost provinces. In early 2017, for instance, he led a group of around 300 Buddhists in a protest in front of the Yala office of Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) to demand protection and financial compensation for families of Buddhist victims affected by the conflict (*Bangkok Post* 2017). Somnuek is also connected to the BPCT as he has been regularly invited to provide updates on the situations in southernmost provinces. As such, he is a link, one of several individuals, between Buddhist activists in the center and Deep South.

	Network of Lawyers and People for Buddhism Protection
Ad-hoc groups	Buddhism Promotion and Protection Organization Theravada Buddhism Promotion Club (Prasit Saengthap) Network of Buddhists for Buddhism Protection Network of Women Protection Buddhism[32] Ideological Companions Club[33]

With pressure from these Buddhist groups, on August 29, after only a little over six months in the office, news broke that Prayut Chan-ocha had approved the transfer of Pongporn to the position of Inspector General at Office of the Prime Minister. The suspicion of the public was that the monastic establishment had again exercised its influence to make this change.[34]

The decision to transfer Pongporn out of ONAB exposed the compromised nature of the junta's authority because the initial order was soon overruled. Although Pongporn initially protested the order, he reported to his new post. Yet, something was going on within the establishment because on September 26, the government suddenly announced that Pongporn would return to his former position at ONAB. On the very same day, Witsanu Krua-ngam and Omsin Chaiwahruek, Minister of the PM's Office, were relieved of their duty over ONAB and replaced by General Thanasak Patimaprakorn, one of the deputy prime ministers. Later, Suwaphan Tanyuwatthana was also re-assigned back to his former position as Minister of the PM's Office to oversee ONAB and the sangha alongside General Thanasak. These changes indicated that the government was becoming more and more serious about monastic reform, especially with regards to the case of temple fund embezzlement. Bringing Pongporn back and removing figures within the junta that could be

[32] The name of this group may sound like the one associated with Phuttha Itsara and Paibun Nititawan, but it is mostly a one-person operation affiliated with the monastic establishment. This group is led by Waraporn Atthasuk, who previously used this name to file complaint against Paibun Khumchaya, former Minister of Justice and now member of the Privy Council, when Paibun was at the helm of an investigation into Somdet Chuang's involvement in the car tax scam due to Wat Paknam's possession of old Mercedes cars in its museum.

[33] This is also another one-person ad hoc group led by Group Cpt. Winai Sawaekwi, who was also involved with Buddhist Power of Lands.

[34] I was told by my informants that one of the figures suspected to be behind Pongporn's dismissal was Witsanu Krua-ngam, who had close relations with the ecclesia.

obstacle to monastic regulation also sparked a rumor that the palace intervened into the matter. The rationale was that why else would the junta have decisively reversed its original position, after having caved in to the monastic demand to defying that very action, if the order did not come from a "higher" place. While there was no way to affirm such report, the seemingly erratic handling of the situation represented a trend since the passing of the late King Bhumibol in which a heavy-handed approach was adopted with regards to the management of the sangha and monastic activism.

Adding to the rumor of the "invisible hand" working from the behind the scene to orchestrate an intervention into monastic affairs, a series of orders issued by high-level administrative posts warning monks to cease unsightly behavior and strictly follow the monastic code of propriety suddenly appeared in September 2017, only a few weeks before the royal cremation of King Bhumibol. The orders were primarily directed toward the Mahanikai order and banned "unbecoming" behaviors such as religious commercialization, exhibiting conduct unfitting of the biological sex assigned at birth and criticism of the nation, religion and monarchy. The first order was issued by Phra Thep Phiphatthanaporn (Chuchart Kantawanno), abbot of Wat Phatthanaram and Ecclesiastic Governor of Surat Thani Province of the Mahanikai order on September 22; the order prohibited monks in Surat Thani from soliciting funds, selling amulets and placing Buddha images in unfitting locations for the upcoming boat race and merit-making ceremonial. The next day, Phra Kru Wisit Phatthanaporn (Thonglor Sawaro), abbot of Wat Klang and Ecclesiastic Officer of Mueng District, Ubon Ratchathani (*chao khana amphur mueng ubon ratchathani*) also issued an order referencing a phone call from the Ecclesiastic Governor of Region 10 to instruct

that monks in his control were forbidden from displaying any signs for amulet-blessing ceremonials and must remove any signs of such nature that was in the temple vicinity.[35]

On September 26, Phra Phrom Dilok (Uean Hatsathammo), abbot of Wat Sam Phraya and Ecclesiastic Governor of Bangkok, also issued an order for monks in Bangkok to keep watch on any advertising or production of amulets, charms and talismans to ensure that the "clear and correct" propagation of Buddhist doctrines was upheld, in addition to a ban on the sale of any amulets in the temple's assembly hall. These orders were followed by Somdet Phra Phutthachan (Sanit Chawanapanyo), abbot of Wat Traimit and Chief Superintendent of the Eastern Ecclesia (*chao khana yai hon tawanok*), who wrote a letter to Phra Phrom Sitti, Ecclesiastic Governor of Region 10, to check for any deviant behavior, restore order under his control, and ban any display of promotional signs or any signs advertising amulets. Somdet Sanit also issued an order to monks under his command as the Chief Superintendent of the Eastern Ecclesia to prohibit any violation of secular and sangha law; criticism toward the nation, monarchy and Buddhism as well as false speech that would encourage division and violence; and any behavior unbecoming of monastic propriety such as displaying behavior inconsistent with the biological sex assigned at birth or inappropriate use of social media. Those violating this order, according to Somdet Sanit, would be held accountable by adjudication through both the monastic disciplinary assembly and court of law (*Matichon* 2017). On the Thammayut side, Somdet Phra Wannarat (Chan Phrommakatto), abbot of Wat Boworniwet and Chief Superintendent of the Thammayut order, also issued an order on September 28 with the exact wording that Somdet Sanit included in his order.

In this regard, as the nation was preparing for the royal cremation of King Bhumibol, the sudden issuance of these orders indicated a strong desire to institute order within the sangha, so

[35] The administration of Region 10 of the Mahanikai order consists of six provinces that are Ubon Ratchathani, Nakorn Phanom, Srisaket, Yasothon, Mukdahan and Amnat Charoen.

that the ceremonial would be properly honored. When these orders came out, there was no confusion in the minds of monks and novices, who knew the force behind such action as well as the repercussion that might befall those who disobeyed. The most remarkable order, however, was from Somdet Sanit, whose temple was one of the hubs of the amulet trade. His student, Phra Phrom Mankalachan (Thongchai Thammathacho), was one of the most popular makers of amulets. Known as Chao Khun Thongchai, he shot to fame when the sacred cloths (*pha yan*) that he blessed and gave to the owner and players of Leicester City Football Club were believed to be the underlying factor behind the team's rise from obscurity to winning the English Premier League in 2016. His amulets, the blessed cloth with sacred scriptures printed on in particular, became much sought-after items both in Thailand and abroad.[36] While many wondered if Somdet Sanit's order would complicate his relationship with his student, news began to come out in early October that Chao Khun Thongchai had decided to stop blessing amulets and would instead seek solitude to observe the *vinaya* and practice *thamma*. As soon as the news was out, amulets and statues belonging to Chao Khun Thongchai were collected from his residence and throughout Wat Traimit, placed into two six-wheelers and transported out of the temple without any public explanation (*KomChadLuek* 2017). Rumor circulated that Chao Khun Thongchai was made an example of the purification effort to "clean up" the monastic order before the royal ceremonial.

The intervention, though direct, was clothed in secrecy as to the origin of the order, but all signs signaled to an institution that few dared criticizing due to the fear of being accused of and charged with the lese majeste, a draconian law used to silence critics of the establishment. The attack on popular religiosity, which was understood as religious commercialization due to its orientation toward prosperity, was based on the notion that the customary role of the newly

[36] Chao Khun Thongchai even claimed that he gave Donald Trump a piece of holy cloth that he blessed that allowed Trump to win the election and become the President of the United States (*Bangkok Post* 2016).

enthroned Buddhist king was to protect the purity of Buddhism through monastic reform that would restore the integrity of the disciplinary code and religious praxis back to its pristine form. This notion, as I have shown in Chapter 2, found much resonance among the general public as well. Words whispered around the ecclesiastic circle from sub-district to national level were that the higher power would like to cleanse the sangha so that the upcoming ceremonial could auspiciously proceed and conclude. There was an even greater rumor that high-level ecclesiastic monks could be disciplined and stripped of monastic ranks. Many anticipated this possibility with heavy hearts because if someone with the stature and charisma of Chao Khun Thongchai was chastised, anybody could be next, especially among those who had trafficked in amulet production and trade. The abbot of Wat Srisathong in Nakorn Pathom, a temple widely known for its veneration and production of amulets with the image of Rahu, a dark celestial god known for eating the moon and thus creating eclipse, went as far as to place a metal cage to close off the famous Rahu statue from visitors in the first week of October after the issuance of the order against religious commercialization (*Post Today* 2017b).

A New Scandal

The return of Pongporn became the subject of the offensive mounted by several Buddhist activist groups, who came out to condemn his persistence in the temple fund embezzlement case. They submitted petitions and filed charges with the police against Pongporn to intimidate and pressure the government to remove him from his position. Despite the pressure, Pongporn kept on; the list of temples involved in the case kept growing. Finally, on 23 May 2018, the Criminal Court approved an arrest warrant for Phra Phrom Sitti (Thongchai Sukyano), abbot of Wat Saket, *Mahathera* member and Ecclesiastic Governor of Region 10. They also approved arrest warrants

for Phra Sri Khunaporn (Bunthawee Khamma), Phra Kru Siriwiharnkan and Phra Wichit Thammaporn (Therd Yannawachiro), all of whom were assistant abbots of Wat Saket. The next day, the police went to Wat Saket to arrest those on the list. In addition, they also arrested Phra Phrom Dilok, abbot of Wat Sam Phraya, *Mahathera* member and Ecclesiastic Governor of Bangkok; Phra Attakitsophon (Somsong Attakit), secretary to Ecclesiastic Governor of Bangkok; and Phra Phrom Methi (Chamnong Thammachari), assistant abbot of Wat Samphanthawong, *Mahathera* member and spokesperson.[37] Phra Phrom Sitti and Phra Phrom Methi, however, were not present in their respective temples. Others were detained, denied bail and forcefully disrobed. A few days later, Phra Phrom Sitti turned himself in and was disrobed. Phra Phrom Methi has since fled the country and is now waiting for his application for political asylum to be approved by the German authority. These arrests all stemmed from charges of temple fund embezzlement.

The mass arrest is part of a growing list of evidence that the government has taken a forceful approach toward the sangha. Forced disrobing, for example, was not limited to the temple fund embezzlement case and a group of senior monks from the monastic establishment. Prior to the recent defrocking incident, for instance, Phra Maha Apichat was taken into custody by the police and forced to disrobe in September 2017. A set of photos of him in white robe attire with a smile on his face soon emerged before his disappearance when any information regarding his whereabouts became unavailable.[38] Furthermore, on the same day of the senior monks' detention, the police also arrested Phuttha Itsara on charges of illegal association and extortion occuring when he was leading a PDRC stage during the Shut Down Bangkok campaign as well as lese majeste

[37] For an overview of the temple fund embezzlement case, see *Workpoint News* (2018).
[38] The rumor is that he was taken into custody at the order of the place and requested to disrobe in exchange of a job either in the media or within the military. He chose the latter and was recruited into the royal guard, though the details concerning the unit and assignment are not known. A year or so later, a pair of photos of him in white army uniform surfaced, and the speculation of his prosecution was put to rest. It should be noted that Buddhist activists like Korn Meedee have also confirmed this report that Maha Apichat was recruited by the palace.

from the unauthorized use of the royal symbol on his amulets. He was interrogated, denied bail and forced to disrobe before going into the custody at Bangkok Remand Prison where the senior monks were also detained. The reactions to the news were mixed. On the side of the monastic establishment, Buddhist activists and followers of arrested monks were upset, and many looked at the arrest of Phuttha Itsara as a necessary sacrifice needed to quell public dissent in order to catch the monastic leadership, or the situation of a pawn for a queen.

Among laypeople, many welcomed the arrest because they felt that the monastic order was plagued with monastic transgressions; arresting those guilty of committing fraud, seeking material excesses or inciting violence in the case of Phuttha Itsara would set a positive precedent for the future cases. A large part of the public, however, tended to share the view that the move was unusual and most likely political; they recognized that the monastic order had become politicized not only on both sides of the color-coded spectrum, but also in terms of its expanding network and capacity to realize its agenda. In this sense, control over the sangha was a necessity, particularly at the time when the military government wanted to consolidate their control before the upcoming election. In this case, the temple fund embezzlement, just like the charges that Phuttha Itsara faced, was used as the specific example to justify the argument that un-monk-like behavior was dangerous to the purity of Buddhism and should thus be contained.[39] This trend in monastic

[39] For discussions on this issue, see Ellis-Petersen (2018) and Tonsakulrungruang (2018). The rumor, however, is that these developments were abetted by the palace because of the expectation of the new reign that orderliness should be a priority, whether in terms of the administration of the agencies under direct control of the crown or traditional institutions like the sangha. There was also a rumor that there was a plan to purge the upper ecclesia of the sangha even before the royal cremation of the last king. Even though the usual argument of the purity of Buddhism was usually given in the conversation that I had with my informants, the rationale remains unclear. At the same time, I was told that monks from Wat Saket, Wat Sam Phraya and Wat Samphanthawong knew about a week or so in advance of the arrest but did not believe that it was a serious issue like what would later transpire. As a result, they were not prepared for the arrest, and the reason that Phra Phrom Sitti and Phra Phrom Methi could escape on the day of arrest was due to what little preparation that they had made just in case anything would not go according to plan. I was told that Phra Phrom Sitti, however, decided to turn himself in because he could not bear to see his subordinates remain behind bar alone. Phra Phrom Methi, on the other hand, is rumored to have received help from the network of Wat Phra Thammakai in his escape and application for political asylum in Germany.

discipline has not amounted to a complete purge of the monastic order. The arrest of monks from the royal temples and of Phuttha Itsara seems to be a selective tactic intended to contain the political elements of the sangha, rather than trying to conduct a purification en masse.

After a series of incidents that had the monastic order shaken up, NLA deliberated in July 2017 on another amendment to the sangha law to alter 8 provisions. The most important changes was the institution of a 2-year term limit for *Mahathera* membership with possibility of renewal and granting of full authority to the king to directly appoint *Mahathera* members, who no longer needed to come from the Somdet rank.[40] These new changes meant that the monastic order lost the capacity to determine its own hierarchy, which it had once enjoyed. The new provisions also fully subordinated the upper echelon of the sangha to the royal control and not the government, an important distinction that had serious repercussion for the struggle for monastic activism. Prior to the recent amendment, even though the sangha was dependent on the palace for patronage and prestige, it was not subject to the control by the palace. Rather, the old sangha law dictated its compliance to the government, while providing the capacity for the sangha to manage its administrative structure and leadership. In the eyes of the monastic establishment, this new development takes away that capability, derails its political ambition and subjects the sangha to an even more restricted position. With such containment, Buddhist activism will likely diminish in the center and instead relocate to southernmost provinces where anti-Islamic activities have flared up in recent years.

[40] For the details concerning the amendment, see *iLaw* (2018).

Buddhist Political Parties

A series of coercive measures implemented by both the government and *Mahathera* forced many Buddhist activists into silence in fear of severe repercussions. While the legal campaign conducted by new groups such as Power of Lands continued, the option for street protest was not viewed as viable anymore. Individuals and groups associated with the monastic establishment began to look for alternative ways to realize their agenda. When the prospect of a new general election became more and more of a reality, they began to assert themselves into the fray.

Due to the constraints placed on monastic protest and political expression, the expectation of an upcoming election in 2019 guided an important development in Buddhist politics. Believing that the electoral process promised an avenue to turn their agenda into reality, Buddhist activists formed political parties that were identified with Buddhist identity and policy platform that echoed monastic agenda. Beside LDP, which is an extension of TBF, other Buddhist political groups were:

Category	Name of Buddhist political group
Registered political parties	The Land of Dharma Party (LDP) Thai Sadhuchon Party (TSP) People Progressive Party (PRA) Democracy for People Party (DPP) For Heaven and Earth Party (FHEP)
Unregister party	Thai People Sovereignty Party (TPSP)
Party with monastic reform agenda	People Reform Party (PRP)

Several parties were the extensions of Buddhist activist groups that had sought to participate in the electoral process to formalize their engagement with the hope that they could present themselves as a viable option for a potential coalition government. The Democracy for People Party (DPP) is the product of Association of the 9th Level Graduates of Buddhist Theology. It is a recently formed party led by Pramuan Pimsen, formerly of Assembly of Khon Kaen Buddhists, and Raksiam Mananuphap, who acted as the party secretary. Other members from the association

such as Ekapop Laolapa also joined the party, which claimed to have recruited more than fifty of those with backgrounds in the monkhood and advanced Pali education. In doing so, DPP took after the same signaling strategy that the association used, which was to use monastic educational background as a basis to show its affinity with the sangha and legitimate claim to operate on behalf of Buddhists.

Thai Saduchon Party (TSP) was an offshoot of Duangchai Chueakhampheng, who previously parted way with Banjob and Korn from TBF to focus on his own activism in the Northeast. Registered in March 2018, TSP announced that it would select only virtuous persons who were honest and had a good sense of gratitude because the party believed that good individuals with discipline would be able to lead public affairs to a good outcome. The party stated that it primarily wanted to recruit Buddhists and did not mind having an outsider prime minister, a contentious issue found in the 2017 constitution that allowed the Senate and House of Representatives to nominate an unelected figure to be the prime minister position (*Banmuang* 2018). TSP, however, does not seem to be active at present because Duangchai was recently introduced as a candidate for another party, People Progressive Party (PRA), with a strong connection to Wat Phra Thammakai, a logistic business and several local political families in the Central Plains.

Officially registered in August 2018, PRA was led by Somkiat Sornlam, a former senator from Nakorn Sawan Province in 2000 who held the position of party-list MP for Puea Phaendin Party (PPP) in 2007 and Pheu Thai Party in 2011. Somkiat had publicly made clear his status as a disciple of Wat Phra Thammakai over the years and had been involved in the campaign to constitutionalize Buddhism as the national religion. The overtone of Buddhist identity could be observed in the slogan of the party, which was “Walk with Dharma, Lead with Heart” (*khao duai tham, nam duai chai*). While PRA emphasized the promotion of Buddhist morality in national development, it

proposed several policies that catered to the sangha and Buddhist activists such as setting up an office for administrative monks in each sub-district throughout Thailand as well as establishing an office for central monastic property management and allocating budget for lay temple managers.[41] Perhaps recognizing the groundwork done by Buddhist activists in the Northeast, one of the tactics employed by PRA was to recruit individuals with backgrounds in advanced Pali education to act as its candidates for the election in the Northeast (*Naewna* 2018). At any rate, PRA was primarily based in the northern section of the Central Plains, as Somkiat's political base was in Nakorn Sawan, where the first meeting of the party was held. Acting as the secretary of the party was Nanthana Songpracha, former MP from Chainat Province and member of the local dynastic family that controlled political positions from local to national levels. She had been a member of Pheu Thai Party but now became part of PRA. With Nanthana on board, PRA also received a backing from business groups from the logistics sector, particularly from Yoo Chienyuenyongpong, President of Land Transport Federation of Thailand (*KomChadLuek* 2018). The presence of these figures sought to ensure a certain level of resources and a prospect of PRA securing at least a few seats in the Central Plains.

Thai People Sovereignty Party (TPSP) was another political collective, which to date had not been formally registered as a political party but been active in the last few years as an interest group that focuses primarily on Buddhist issues. In late 2016, news of a new political party was

[41] According to information on the pamphlet distributed by the Election Commission for the upcoming election on March 24, the main policy platform of PRA consists of 1) establishing the secretariat office for all levels of administrative monks; 2) building one Buddhist park per province; 3) setting a renumeration cap for lay temple manager at THB 9,000 per month; 4) launching Buddhist bank; 5) allowing for lands allotted for use under the land reform program (Sor.Por.Gor) to be transferable; 6) creating assessment project for bank credit; 7) legalizing medical marijuana with a million rai quota for people from all levels; 8) providing cash handouts for senior citizens for THB 5,000 per person; 9) allocating monthly allowances for single moms to the tune of THB 10,000 per month; and 10) restructuring credit card debt and removing credit bureau history.

announced by Saman Sringam,[42] a former salesman, veteran political activist and student of Prasert Sapsunthorn, former MP and committee member of Communist Party of Thailand. At first, the group was rumored to have the backing of General Prawit Wongsuwan, NCPO leader, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The speculation was soon rejected. Senior Captain Kampee Kampeerayananon emerged as the secretary of the group and acted as the leader, while Naphondet Maneelanka assumed the role of the spokesperson. These two key figures remain in their positions until today. The group has been shown to have close associations with General Chaowalit Yongchaiyut, former prime minister, and factions of the military as their members were retired generals. Their role thus far had been to advance the interest of the sangha. Kampee and Naphondet had collaborated with monks and other Buddhist activists in events ranging from organizing a seminar that was shut down by the police and issuing statements to demand the junta cease harassing the ecclesia and Wat Phra Thammakai, among others. Kampee and Naphondet had been trying to establish connections with Buddhist activists in the southernmost provinces; they seem to have done so with links to Somnuek Rakhang and Ruam Thai, an armed civilian group that used to be active several years ago and has now appeared again. While TPSP efforts had garnered attention, their objectives were not clear.

On the opposite side of the monastic establishment, there were two political parties that also had policy platform related to Buddhist agenda. For Heaven and Earth Party was established by Photirak several years ago but had not been active; most of its membership came from Santi Asoke followers. Despite the news of the upcoming election, the party did not make any announcement and seemed to remain inactive. The People Reform Party (PRP), on the other hand, was a new party formed by Paibun Nititawan and Mano Laohawanit, among other PDRC and yellow shirts

[42] Phra Maha Bunthung Chutinatro and Prachai Leophairatana, former Senator, founder of Thai Petrochemical Industry (TPI) and known financier of the yellow shirt movement.

activists. Since its inception, Paibun and Mano had occasionally mentioned their intention to tackle the issues of Wat Phra Thammakai and religious consumerism, even though these concerns were not priorities. In a conversation with Paibun, he clarified that PRP had a firm stance on the separation between Buddhism and politics. He did not believe that protecting Buddhism had to be done through instituting Buddhism as the national religion in the constitution or creating a Buddhist army to fight insurgents in the southernmost provinces, because unlike Christianity and Islam, Buddhism did not have the teachings that required dependence on state power to survive. Paibun was very concerned that if religious identity was used as a frame for conflict, such rhetoric could cloud the root of the problem, and the division could become too severe to recover from. At the same time, he maintained that the sangha had the duty to follow strict adherence to the regulatory framework of monastic conduct, which erected a clear distinction between the religious and worldly spheres. Paibun thus advocated for the sangha to remain "above politics" and not get involved in any affair that could tarnish its sanctity. His position, in short, was to depoliticize the sangha.[43]

Conclusion: Cultivating Monastic Docility

In this chapter, I have outlined the development of Buddhist activism after the 2014 coup and noted changes in how the monastic establishment conducted its campaign to negotiate for autonomy, and its response to the religious policy of the junta and the crown. Principal to this process was a shift in political order caused by the passing of King Bhumibol, which saw the crown gain more control over the sangha than before. The new reign came with a new perspective on how best to contain the sangha. The direction appeared to look back and borrow from the

[43] Paibun Nititawan (politician), in discussion with the author, August 24, 2018.

customary norm that the purification of the sangha was a necessary component to the enthronement. Nonetheless, the efforts by the establishment tended to deploy measures to only silence not actually restructure the sangha in a radical way. It remains to be seen what direction this development will take, but for the moment all signs point to the objective of disciplining and making the sangha into a carrier of national policy with no clear political will through both formal and informal channels of control.

CONCLUSION

What kind of relationship should the state have with the sangha, and who has the authority to decide? These questions are at the center of this dissertation, which explores the struggle of the state and the sangha over the issue of monastic reform in post-2014 coup Thailand. The dissertation is a cumulation of the research conducted between 2014-2018 and divided into two main parts. The first part consists of chapter one and two. It details the rise of lay intellectuals as well as changing notions of religious protection and expectations of the monkhood. In the first chapter, I examine how these shifts provide the social basis for political activism undertaken by lay social activists, who grew up with an idea that social engagement was a form of religious cultivation. Central to the process is the role of Phutthathat, a modernist monk revered among the urban intelligentsia whose unique doctrinal interpretation with heavy emphasis on intellectual and moral aspects of Buddhist ethics has come to define the contemporary meaning of what true Buddhism is. His teachings have also shaped the notion of religious practice among these socio-religious activists as an engagement with the world, rather than the conventional understanding of Buddhism as an ethics of world-renunciation.

Driving the spirit of reform is lay reformists' disdain for the official sangha and what they view as rampant monastic impropriety. Underlying this judgement is a belief that social ills are a result of capitalism, which has infiltrated the monastic order. During the Cold War, communism was seen by the Thai state and monastic elites as a critical threat. In a similar manner, capitalism has become a new enemy of Thailand and Buddhism in the eyes of these reformists, who have been principal to the formation of non-governmental organizations in Thailand and have been engaged in the issues of rural development and self-sufficient agriculture. They have witnessed how industrialization, rapid urbanization and agricultural commercialization have transformed rural

economy and lifestyle. These experiences inform their activism and guide the view that unchecked capitalist expansion is a grave danger. With increased news coverage of monastic scandals in recent years, the reformists have come to hold a belief that the monastic order has become corrupted with consumerism. Religious commercialization and the monastic order's financial and sex controversies deepen this conviction that the sangha needs to be reformed.

Beginning in the 1990s, many of these activists started to assert their voices more prominently in Thailand's political landscape and rose to the leadership of the anti-Thaksin movements that employed rhetoric of morality to drive their agenda. The second chapter traces the political development prior to and after the military coup that toppled the Yingluck government and placed the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in charge of the country in 2014. After the coup, these activists occupied positions within the military government and hijacked the state to implement their program of monastic reform. Although the military government initially appeared ambivalent toward the issue of monastic reform, its position changed once the junta began to realize that the monastic order was a force to reckon with. As a result, the military became more and more involved in the effort to contain the sangha and chose to gradually adopt an increasingly forceful approach to monastic containment. This effort, however, did not completely discipline the sangha, and the government and the sangha came to a standstill on the issue of the nomination of the next Supreme Patriarch, legal charges against Phra Thammachayo, abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai, and amendment of the sangha law.

The second part of the dissertation examines the development of the sangha as a powerful economic and political institution. Attending to the notion of the sangha as a semi-autonomous social field proposed by Sally Falk Moore, the third chapter looks at how norms and customs within the sangha configure the reciprocal relationships between those in powerful positions and

their dependents. Obligations between the patron and clients in the monastic order represent non-legal rules that are produced out of social life. While monkhood remains an avenue of social mobility to many children with humble background, institutional changes in the 1990s, especially the official recognition of monastic universities and creation of the Office of National Buddhism (ONAB), contributed to the growth of the monastic order. The monastic establishment, a group of monastic elites in control of how the resources within the monastic order are distributed and hold influence in shaping life trajectories of the rank and file of the sangha, substantially benefited from these changes. Even though the sangha was subject to the sangha law, the law allowed for the relative autonomy of the sangha to administer its own promotions and other affairs, which strengthened the control of the monastic establishment and led to its expansion. Central to the development of the monastic order was the creation of social networks between the ecclesia, former members of the sangha and lay patrons, who held political and commercial influence. It was thus an ironic twist to the plot of monastic regulation that an unexpected possibility of the law could be found in the empowerment of the sangha. When the monastic order became more and more politically active as a powerful political group, its political salience turned the public away and legitimized the campaign of monastic reform.

The fourth chapter deals with the proliferation of Buddhist activist groups after the 2014 coup, the tactics and strategies that they employed as well as the impact that royal succession had on monastic disciplining. Even though emerging Buddhist groups seemed to consist of new faces, they were not new recruits. Many, if not most, were those who grew up ordained and had formed a lasting relationship with their masters during that time. Even after they left the monkhood, these laypeople kept contact and communication with the ecclesia. Their activism proceeded under the auspices of the monastic establishment, acting as the arms and legs of the monastic order, while

harboring their own political ambitions. The role of these lay activists on the side of the monastic establishment represented a new phase of monastic activism that sought to directly accommodate the backlash from the public, whose expectation for the sangha was for monks to maintain their monastic propriety and remain above worldly affairs. The struggle between the military government and the sangha, however, was not easily resolved. The decisive action came after the death of King Bhumibol in October 2016, which signaled a change in the location and relations of power. The new reign, as the monastic order came to find out, came with a series of swift coercive measures aiming to quell monastic activism and discipline the sangha. In a direction reminiscent of Laura Nader's argument on the harmony ideology, the top-down monastic reform measures were implemented under the guise of brining order and harmony back to the monastic order. Many observers, in turn, welcomed such actions due to their opinion that the monastic order was "out of line" with its political expression and demand that caused discord in the society. Although the interference succeeded in temporally silencing monastic and lay activists on the side of the monastic establishment, it could not stop the discontent and perception of injustice that had already spread through the rank and file of the monastic order.

Postscript: Control and Defiance

In the aftermath of the legal amendment on the sangha law in 2018, Buddhist activists such as Phra Maha Cho, Phra Methi Thammachan and Sathien Wipornmaha have been keeping relatively quiet. Groups like Buddhist Power of Lands with lawyers among their members tend to be more assertive than others. There is a disquieting sense of unease and anxiety among the monastic order and activist groups, given the recognition that the government could at any time use a heavy-handed approach to contain any element or sign of potential danger as in the case of the arrests of

senior monks. As the monastic leadership is under the jurisdiction of the palace, the junta is also keeping a close watch on the sangha.[1] According to the BPCT leadership, for instance, soldiers regularly come to monitor and warn the center to not do anything that would violate the ban on political assembly instituted by the junta, or any activity that could be considered a threat to national security.[2]

The apprehension is reaffirmed with *Mahathera* issuing a decree in August 2018 prohibiting the use of temple for any assembly, meeting or seminar that would contain activity deemed illegal or a threat to national security. The rationale provided in the news is that as the election is approaching, politicians might canvass vote at temples, an action that must be avoided at all cost (*Khaosod* 2018). Another explanation, however, is that Buddhist activists have adapted to the restrictions placed on the sangha and instead have turned to organizing seminar to keep their momentum going. Since July 2018, **National Thai Buddhism and Culture Mass Media Association (NTBC)** has organized a handful of seminars in Bangkok and provinces such as Khon Kaen and Chiang Mai. Founded in 2010, the association has recently become active in trying to provide an avenue to hold discussion, exchange ideas and network among different groups, who would otherwise be afraid to do so on their own. Led by **Wuthisan Phanari**, a disciple of Wat Phra Thammakai, and other members such as **Narong Nuechua**, the association creates and maintains a website *ThaiRNews*, which provides updates of the monastic affairs and general news.[3]

The association shares the view of radical Buddhist groups in Burma. Besides having ties to Wat Phra Thammakai, Wuthisan Phanari also traveled to Burma in 2015 to attend a meeting on

[1] One of the examples indicating a potential tightening control from the place is an unusual order issued by *Mahathera* in late January 2018 that prohibits temples from using any decorations, procedures or arrangements that may mimic or resemble those used in royal ceremonials (*Thairath* 2018).
[2] Phra Tham Kittiemethi (BPCT President), interview with author, August 22, 2018.
[3] The website of Thai R News is: https://www.thairnews.com/

the theme dangers to Buddhism with Pornchai Pinyapong from WABL, Naphondet Maneelanka from TPSP and Rungroj Phekanan, a disciple of Wat Phra Thammakai. The resolution from that meeting was to establish a Buddhist broadcasting service in Burma with equipment and other technical assistance from Thailand. When NTBC hosted its first seminar on July 22 at Thammasat University, guest speakers included Banjob Banaruji, M.L. Kantaphong Worawut, Korn Meedee, Naphondet Maneelanka, Charun Wannakasinanon, Kampee Kampeerayananon and Suchart Thada-thamrongwet, former minister of education under the Yingluck administration, among many others. The second seminar, also held by Thammasat University, had Bencharat Meetian and Worakorn Phongthanakun, among others, as guest speakers. Looking at the list, these guest speakers were all veteran activists. It is clear that these seminars provided the space for Buddhist activists to evade government scrutiny to express their opinions regarding the recent development in the state-sangha relations. The events included such topics as the dangers of Buddhism, survival of Buddhism through the eyes of sons of the Buddha, monastic reform, the new sangha law, the legal struggle of Wat Phra Thammakai and the arrested monks.[4] Principal to the organization of NTBC seminars is **Ai Petchthong**, an outspoken disciple of Wat Phra Thammakai who was considered the face of lay followers of the temple due to his appearance on several news shows during the siege of the temple to debate and ask for the public understanding of Thammachayo and the temple (*MGR Online* 2018b).

These details of Buddhist activist groups and individuals should provide a general view regarding the ongoing struggle of the monastic order and figures associated with the official sangha. As the future of the upcoming election remains uncertain, the state and sangha are locked in a tense situation where monastic loyalty to the government is in question. While the monastic

[4] For a comprehensive report on these seminars, see *MGR Online* (2018a).

order seems stable and compliant, discussions with several monastic activists have indicated a strong dissatisfaction with how the military government has handled the incidents involving Wat Phra Thammakai, the amendment of the sangha law, the nomination of the Supreme Patriarch and the arrests of the high ecclesiastic monks. This sentiment will not easily go away, but because the junta has control over the national governance and has proven that it is willing to deploy coercive methods to contain the sangha or its political opposition, the monastic establishment is thus lying in wait for any opportunity or opening that could potentially be brought about by the electoral process. Nonetheless, this tension is a good reminder that contemporary dynamics of power and state-sangha relations is informed by the reality of plural legal institutions and normative orders. The *vinaya* remains an avenue in which the sangha can still invoke its legitimacy as the guardians of Buddhism. At the same time, although the amendment of the sangha law has taken away the power of the Buddhist ecclesia to nominate its own candidate for the Supreme Patriarch as well as members of *Mahathera* and upper echelon of monastic administration, the monastic order maintains the authority sanctioned by the sangha law to appoint or remove other ecclesiastic and administrative positions. In other words, the authority of the sangha is lessened but not lost.

The most worrying trend is, however, a shift in the focus of the sangha from the government to Muslim minorities in Thailand, especially with regards to the protracted conflict in the three southernmost provinces. Curiously, the disappointments of the monastic order with the state seem to have been transferred to anti-Islamic activities, and the perception of injustice is attributed to the plot to undermine Buddhism by adherents of other faith who have seized state power to further their own interest at the expense of Buddhists (Kulabkaew 2019). The rhetoric of Buddhist activists exhibits a dangerous trend from which a call for the recognition of the monastic order's loss of control over its own affairs is increasingly conflated with an explanation that such decline is a

direct result of the receding state patronage as well as deliberate attempt by other faiths to diminish the significance of Buddhism as an institution. Recent violence at Wat Rattananuphap in Narathiwat on January 18, 2019, that left 2 monks dead and 2 others injured has ignited a surge in anti-Islamic sentiments that look at the number of monastic casualties, 23 monks dead and more than 20 monks wounded, in the areas as a clear pattern of aggression. This view, however, neglects a long history of peaceful co-existence in southernmost provinces where people of different faiths lived and worked together. Even though the protracted conflict has effectively divided local residents along the ethnic and religious lines and created a growing wedge between neighbors, I have witnessed the continuity of relationships across these segregating lines in my encounter with people in these areas as well as narratives of cooperation and comradery that contest the production of violence.

Hypothetically, the recent incident of violence against monks in Yala may prove to be a key moment in which the monastic establishment can finally justify its claim that Buddhism is under threat, and that the government is incompetent to protect the sangha. It should also be noted that LDP activity tends to be relatively more prevalent in southern provinces.[5] One cannot help but wonder whether the killing of monks and Buddhists in southernmost provinces may not only continue to provide validation for Buddhist activism, but also escalate the course of action into something more unsettling in the future. Still, the argument that Buddhist monks and residents are specifically targeted is countered by the number of casualties among the Muslim population, which

[5] LDP, in a telling move, has electoral candidates for the upcoming election in all slots in the three southernmost provinces. The gesture, however, is largely symbolic. Rather, the party is primarily focused on sending a message to other Buddhists, especially in areas outside of the South, that its action is consistent with the claim to protect the sangha and Buddhist minorities in these provinces, even if such attempt is predictably futile because there have not been serious efforts exhibited by candidates, beside holding sporadic discussions with local Buddhists.

is overwhelming higher than their Buddhist counterparts and tends to paint the loss as part of the indiscriminate violence.

Nevertheless, the monastic establishment faces a challenge from the constraints posed by the new reign and changing attitude of the public. Given the relationship between the monarchy and sangha, the consolidated power that the palace has over the sangha can function as a mechanism of control over the intensification of monastic activism as recent events have demonstrated. It is thus contingent on the royal action as to what kind of directives would the new king make with regards to the growing tensions between the government and the sangha as well as between different religious adherents. Whatever little signs are there tend to suggest that the new reign will not hesitate to contain monastic activism through decisive and forceful measures. The pressure from above is not the only limitation the monastic order is facing. The attitude of the public toward the monastic order has also shifted toward a more critical stance than before. For many Thais, the veneration the sangha previously enjoyed has come under an intense scrutiny in the eyes of the public due to the sangha's diminished social role along with the constant news of monastic mischief making headlines to the dismay of the population, particularly the younger generation. In virtual public sphere, for instance, among facebook groups and accounts that post anti-Muslim and anti-junta messages consistent with the agenda of the monastic establishment, none is as popular as the parody facebook pages set up to report and ridicule misbehavior of monks and novices.[6]

More importantly, the expectation that the sangha must remain above worldly affairs, primarily any political involvement, and that Buddhist teaching must be exclusively interpreted as an ethics

[6] Among the popular pages are **Venerable Brother Justin Wat Do You Mean** (*luang phi justin wat do yu min*), which has 129,793 likes and 131,994 follows; and **Chareon Phuang News** (*samnak khao chareon phuang*) with 67,026 likes and 70,690 follows. The information is as of March 8, 2019, and these pages produce daily content and actively interact with their followers, who regularly send leads and information to expose monastic deviance to the administrators.

of world renunciation continues to critically constrain monastic and lay activists working on behalf of the ecclesia. In this sense, the monastic establishment is confronted with a reality that its capacity to rally public support for its political agenda is largely compromised. Instead of mass mobilization, the sangha will most likely focus its attention in the three southernmost provinces where it can use the killing of monks and Buddhists as the justification for their action. This position may find a willing partner in a faction of the military, whose information operation employs the rhetoric of religious divisiveness as a weapon.[7] In the immediate term, Buddhist activism in the southernmost provinces may well increase, but in the long run, the monastic establishment faces an uphill battle in becoming socially significant and politically independent.

This speculation, however, does not diminish the reality that as long as the official sangha continues to be relative autonomous but structurally located in proximity to the Thai state, which includes the government, the courts, bureaucratic agencies, the military and the crown, the tension between the state and the sangha remains. While state patronage and the status as a pillar of national identity legitimates the sangha as a national institution, the very same conditions reduce the sangha's cultural autonomy and places it in a position subordinate to the state. Still, the sangha's capacity to persist as a semi-autonomous social field, largely thanks to its monastic disciplinary code and internal system of inclusion/exclusion through the control over ordination and religious ceremonials, means that the sangha preserves a level of influence and capability that can be used to negotiate a structure of control instituted by the state. As Sally Falk Moore (1973, 720) proposes that a semi-autonomous field can "generate rules and customs and symbols internally, but that it is also vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which it is surrounded," one of the questions is whether the monastic order will

[7] For discussion on the information operation campaign conducted by the military, see Puengnet (2014) and *TCIJ* (2017).

completely accept a return to the dominant control of the crown and internalize this new change as its custom. It remains to be seen how the sangha will respond to the new arrangement that has recently been implemented by the state.

At the same time, between control and defiance lie other challenges. Monks are not just members of the monastic order but must submit to secular laws and are part of their national community. They identify themselves as both clergy and citizens, albeit without the voting right. As the discourse of citizenship and human rights becomes more and more ubiquitous, this development will complicate how individual monks pledge their allegiance to which social field, the state or the sangha, they feel that they belong. The increasing importance of global values and norms in local worlds will inevitably produce new possibility and demand within the sangha and toward the state. As opposed to other Theravada countries like Burma and Sri Lanka where the monastic order was involved in the decolonization process, Thai sangha has been on a different trajectory from those nations and is subject to both legal and discursive convention that prohibits monastic political expression. Monastic activism is thus contingent on change in values and norms, particularly with respect to which action can be considered legitimate and permissible. If the sangha can break free from its reliance on state support, the prospect for self-determination may appear possible, but there is no guarantee if doing so will lead to the sangha's ability to sustain itself. Dependent on the state for patronage but wanting to have autonomy to deliberate its own affairs, the sangha is placed in an awkward position. These are issues that cannot be easily resolved. The monastic struggle continues.

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