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Buddhist Monks and Democratic Politics in Contemporary Myanmar

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, monks were key actors in propelling Buddhist activism and setting the stage for Burmese nationalism, drawing from Buddhist sources to criticize colonialism and provide religious justification for the independence struggle. After independence in 1948, monks continued to take part in politics, supporting candidates, and pressuring the government to enact policies that benefited the Buddhist community. From 1962 to 2010, successive military governments imposed restrictions that limited the ways in which monks and laypeople could engage in the political realm, although that did not prevent monks from participating in the 1988 demonstrations and leading the 2007 protests that came to be known as the 'Saffron Revolution.'

The political system in Myanmar has slowly opened up over the past few years, but the electoral campaigns in 2010 and 2012 for a partially civilian government included virtually no references to Buddhism, a surprising contrast to previous elections in the country.[1] The political messages of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, which were strongly rooted in Buddhism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, also appear to be more pragmatically secular. Even with this apparent turn away from Buddhism in politics among political figures, in this chapter I argue that, in this period of increasing political openness, Buddhist monks in Myanmar have re-emerged to shape the public discourse on politics and democracy as an extension of their role as guardians of public morality. Prior to 2012, most did this indirectly through preaching and daily interactions with the laity. Some have engaged with politics more directly, and since 2012, some have emerged as the vanguard of groups that have urged a strong defense of Buddhist and national ideals, often

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with an anti-Muslim bias. Monks reinforce the moral laws of Buddhism and connect them to political and social situations through their writings and video messages, public sermons, and daily interactions with laypeople.

From one perspective, we can view these actions as part of monks' traditional role in guiding public morality; however, the present situation differs from the past involvement of monks in two important ways. First, the spread of new communication technology has meant that monastic teachings move more quickly throughout the population, and watching DVDs of monks preaching is part of many people's daily religious practice. Second, whether they are explicitly critical of the government or not, monks are influencing the ways in which people understand political participation in a transitioning Myanmar by reaffirming the relevance of Buddhist teachings to social interactions and by incorporating Buddhist concepts into public discussions of 'democracy.' Some monks assert the centrality of Buddhist morality in the political realm and even argue for a democratic practice that is rooted in Buddhist morals. In the typology used in this book, they are attempting either to achieve some type of fusion between Buddhist and political authorities or to assert the primacy of Buddhist authority over the political, although in most cases this manifests as gentle prodding rather than direct resistance. Reflecting the category of 'antagonistic symbiosis,' in a few instances, monks have urged political leaders to play their role as protector of the religion more effectively, in ways that range from collaborating with political parties to develop religious legislation to thinly veiled threats against politicians seen as shirking this duty toward Buddhism.

While monks are mostly staking out these positions in the context of a 'democratic' discourse of rights and freedoms, what is less clear is what these monks have in mind when they speak of 'democracy.' Political discourse in the first half of the twentieth century was lively and politicians such as U Nu and monks such as U Thilasara espoused different conceptions of democracy, drawing from Buddhist teachings, Marxism, and liberalism. In contrast, during the almost fifty years of military rule, the authorities severely curtailed public discourse and debate in the country, and until 2011, Burmese people had limited opportunities and outlets to discuss their ideas about democratic politics, and the current political thaw has been both precarious and partial. Those who have talked about democracy have often drawn from Western models, emphasizing freedom, electoral participation, and the protection of basic human rights. However, they have also crafted their arguments using Buddhist concepts and values, attempting to cast