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Sāsana Over Secularity

A Discourse Analysis of the Role of Religion for the National League for
Democracy in Transitional Myanmar

Figure 1. Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Source: Author's own.

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Abstract

The study of religion within the field of political science is growing. This thesis aims to contribute by studying religion and Myanmar's leading (and currently governing) pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD is a valuable case, as Buddhism has played an important role in Burmese politics, including in the democratization efforts. Religious minorities have suffered the consequences of this - as seen in the 'Rohingya crisis'. Furthermore, little research has been done on the NLD since Myanmar began to transition to democracy in 2011.

This thesis addresses the research question: *What is the role of religion for the NLD in transitional Myanmar?* The two sub-research questions are:

1. *What is the NLD's official stance on religion?*
2. *How does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?*

This thesis is based on empirical evidence gathered through fieldwork in Myanmar. A discourse analysis of twelve in-depth interviews with Burmese politicians, political activists and monks leads to three hypotheses:

1. The NLD does not have a meaningful formal stance on religion. It envisions itself as a party adhering to 'liberal' democratic values, including being 'secular'.
2. Buddhism has an unofficially privileged position in the NLD. The NLD engages with Buddhist sources of legitimacy and actively defends its relationship to Buddhism – as seen by the removal of its Muslim candidates in the 2015 election.
3. The NLD's relationship with religion is largely contextual. The unofficial privileging of Buddhism appears when political adversaries accuse the NLD of not being able to protect Buddhism.

These findings have theoretical implications and demonstrate that studies of politics in Buddhist contexts must be cognizant of the continued importance of the state being seen as a protector of Buddhism, and that Western political conceptions (such as secularity) cannot neatly be applied to Buddhist contexts.

Abbreviations

CEC	Central Executive Committee
EC	Election Committee
MaBaTha	Association for the Protection of Race and Religion
MaHaNa	State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee
MP	Member of Parliament
NLD	National League for Democracy
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
YSPS	Yangon School of Political Science

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In August 1988, Myanmar was embroiled in a massive uprising against the ruling military regime. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese people gathered at the main location of the protests – Shwedagon Pagoda. Shwedagon Pagoda, located in the previous capital Yangon, is a 112-meter-tall gold stupa which is the most sacred Buddhist site in Myanmar and said to hold relics of the Buddha. It has served as a site of political mobilization for the Burmese people at several points in history, including the student protests of 1920 and 1936 and protests for independence from the British in 1946. Not only does Shwedagon have more space for people to gather than most of crowded Yangon, but one can imagine that its looming gold spires and sanctity lent visual and moral authority to the protestors.

The August 1988 protests marked a critical point in Myanmar's recent history. In front of the sea of protestors, including students, peasants, monks and ex-soldiers, emerged a slight woman with flowers adorning her hair – Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi was in Yangon at the time of the protests by happenstance as she had returned to Yangon from the U.K. to tend to her dying mother. However, in front of the estimated 500,000 people gathered at Shwedagon, many of them holding pictures of her father, Myanmar's independence hero General Aung San, she delivered a speech that marked the start of her life as Myanmar's preeminent democratic leader. As a result, she served 15 years under house arrest –separated from her husband and children. She received accolades and respect from the world, including the Nobel Peace Prize, and adoration in Myanmar.[1]

Fast-forward to 2020, and Aung San Suu Kyi is the State Counsellor and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), is the first democratically elected party to hold office in Myanmar since 1962. However, her international reputation is tarnished. In withdrawing her 'Ambassador of Consciousness' award, the Secretary General of Amnesty International gave the message to Aung San Suu Kyi that "we are profoundly dismayed that you no longer

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[1] In 1989 the government changed the official state name from 'Union of Burma' to 'Union of Myanmar', and later to 'The Republic of the Union of Myanmar'. From this point onwards I will use 'Burma' to refer to the state prior to 1989, and 'Myanmar' from 1989 onwards and in general discussions of the country. Burmese people today use both terms, at times laden with political meanings.

represent a symbol of hope, courage, and the undying defence of human rights" (Amnesty International, 2018). This came as a response to the deadly violence in the Rakhine region of Myanmar by Buddhist civilians and military forces against the Muslim 'Rohingya' minority, which has been described as a genocide. While it is generally accepted that the NLD did not have any direct responsibility in the 'Rohingya crisis', the global outcry resulted from Aung San Suu Kyi's apparent defense of the military's role in the conflict and her lacking defense of the victims. As State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi has promoted the military's stance that this is not a conflict related to religion but to illegal immigration. The Rohingya crisis reflects many of the complex and challenging conflicts that exist in Myanmar, including the continuous power of the military, the precarious democratization process, ethnic conflicts, ongoing civil wars, economic exploitation and armed rebellions.

The political challenges in Myanmar are further complicated by the fact that Buddhism has featured heavily in Myanmar's democratization efforts, including leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi justifying democracy in Buddhist scripture and influential monk-led protests against the military. As Myanmar began to transition to democracy and politically liberalize in 2011, the National League for Democracy (NLD) transformed from an underground organization to a formal political party participating in elections. However, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD's political rhetoric has been largely bereft of explicit references to religion, both in terms of justifications in the Buddha's teachings and in policies on religion. This is remarkable in light of the previous prevalence of Buddhism in the rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the ongoing conflicts surrounding religion in Myanmar and the oppression of religious minorities, of which the 'Rohingya crisis' is but the most recent and atrocious iteration of.

My own interest in Aung San Suu Kyi came from attending her speech when she visited Oslo to accept her Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Along with many others, I was compelled by her bravery and sacrifices. Later, reading her eloquent and influential writings on democracy and its justifications in Buddhist scripture challenged my studies of political science, which so often negates the role of human traits, culture and religion. While her international fall from grace is an example of the limitations of the binary hero-villain narrative so often imposed onto non-Western political activists, my fascination with Aung San Suu Kyi was strengthened by my curiosity of how these changes occurred and were justified. As a student of the intersection of political science and religion, this formed the basis of my interest in the subject of this study.

In this thesis I will explore the position of religion in Myanmar since political liberalization, focused on the NLD and its policies.

1.2 Academic Context

The topic of religion and the NLD is situated in the broader field of studies on religion and politics in Myanmar. Historically, research on Myanmar has been limited by restrictions put in place by the military regimes, resulting in difficulty accessing informants and certain locations. In some cases, conducting research in Myanmar has been outright dangerous. With the political liberalization of 2011, the limitations on conducting research in Myanmar were eased. However, in recent years, with the re-emergence of Buddhist nationalism and the Rohingya crisis, topics related to religion and politics remain sensitive. Despite this, some important research has been done in the past decades studying religion and politics in Myanmar in different ways. The literature on religion and politics in Myanmar – which is central to this study and forms its academic context – is comprised of two strands. The first focuses on how Buddhism has historically informed the nature of engagement with politics in Myanmar. An example is the book by Alicia Turner (York University) *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (2014) where she makes the case that during the colonial period the preeminent organizing feature of politics in Myanmar was promoting the *sāsana* (the Buddhist religion) rather than the 'nation'. Another important piece is Matthew Walton's book *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (2017). Walton (University of Toronto) focuses on how the Theravāda Buddhism practiced by the majority of Myanmar's population has informed political perspectives and that Burmese Buddhists operate within a specific 'Theravāda moral universe'. Juliane Schober (2011) (Arizona State University) has also taken a broader historical perspective in studying how Buddhism has informed various political processes in Myanmar and the ways in which this has resulted in specific 'conjunctures' of political development. Several scholars have focused on how various Burmese governments throughout history have relied on Buddhism as a source of legitimacy, including other research by the aforementioned authors as well as Smith (1965), Spiro (1982) and Kawanami (2016).

The second strand of studies of religion and politics in Myanmar comes from the scholars who have focused on specific modern political developments and processes in Myanmar that pertain directly to Buddhism's role in politics (though often operating interrelatedly or with similar frameworks as the previously mentioned works). Iselin Frydenlund (The Norwegian School of

Theology, Religion and Society) has studied the rise of Buddhist nationalism and Buddhist-Muslim relations in Myanmar (2019) and has demonstrated that with the political liberalization in Myanmar there has been increased space for the legal repression of religion (2017). Susan Hayward (United States Institute for Peace) has done research on the role of Buddhism in the democratization efforts in Myanmar, including how democratic values have been placed within Buddhist 'kingship ideals,' thereby advancing the role of Buddhism in Burmese governance (2015). Melissa Crouch (University of New South Wales) has studied how religion has been legally constructed and regulated in Myanmar since 2011 (2015) and, relatedly, Benjamin Schonthal (University of Otago) has described the specific form of 'Buddhist constitutionalism' that exists in Myanmar (2018).

While by no means complete, this overview outlines the existing research on religion in Burmese politics, which forms the backdrop of this thesis. While this thesis will lean on the work done by these scholars, it aims to fill a void. In the research described above, the NLD is often a subject within a broader study. However, very little research published in English has been done on the NLD specifically. Stokke (2019) has studied the differences in contemporary Burmese political parties and Kempel, Sun & Tun (2015) study party dynamics across Myanmar. As far as I am aware, there only exists one in-depth study of the NLD. This is from Roewer (2020) and is an analysis of the inner-workings and structure of the NLD. To my knowledge no studies have been done focusing on the NLD's relationship to religion, including its ideology, policies and developments since the political liberalization in Myanmar where it emerged as a formal political party.

1.3 Research Aims

This thesis aims to explore and analyze the role of religion for the NLD in transitional Myanmar. 'Transitional Myanmar' refers to the period of political liberalization which began in 2011, when the Burmese people experienced increased political (and economic) liberties and steps were taken to transition to democracy. The aim is to understand how the NLD as a party conceptualizes 'religion' and 'politics' and the ideal relationship between them, its justification for policy choices related to religion, how religion formally and informally influences policy decisions and the NLD's stance on the relationship between Buddhism, the state and religious minorities – all of which are characterized as the 'role of religion' for the NLD.

The role of religion for the NLD is important to study in part because religion is an extremely contentious topic in contemporary Myanmar. In the past decade, thousands of people have lost their lives and liberties as a result of the military's policies which have privileged Buddhists at the expense of Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities. Using the NLD as a case study is particularly interesting as it is a party which is still being formed and continues to struggle for its right to exist. If it continues to be successful, and wins the upcoming 2020 election, it will define Myanmar's future. In the words of the International Crisis Group (2017), "In Myanmar's new, more democratic era, the debate over the proper place of Buddhism, and the role of political leadership in protecting it, is being recast" (p. ii). A goal of this thesis is therefore to shed light on how religion (and particularly Buddhism) influences the democratic forces in Burmese politics and has shaped contemporary politics in Myanmar.

Furthermore, analyzing the role of religion for the NLD can provide an interesting contribution to the subset of political science which studies religion and politics, which is often limited by a focus on Western states and Judeo-Christian contexts. Studies have also focused on established democracies (when studying political parties), unlike the NLD which is constantly navigating the possibility of its own dissolution at the hands of the military.

The aim of this thesis is to study how religion and politics are understood by a non-Western party. This allows for an assessment of the extent to which traditional theories and concepts from political science can be applied to a Buddhist-majority context. To be able to do an in-depth analysis, I have established some parameters to these research aims. I have decided to limit this study to the post-liberalization period ('transitional Myanmar') because this is when the NLD began operating as a formal political party, accountable to both the internal processes associated with a democratic party and the national electorate, and where policy ideals are tested in response to political realities. It should also be noted that this study does not attempt to assess the 'religiosity' of NLD members and leaders themselves, but rather studies how they conceptualize 'religion' and 'politics' and the influence of these understandings.

1.4 Research Questions

The overarching research question this thesis aims to answer is: *what is the role of religion for the NLD in transitional Myanmar?* Since this question is broad in scope, there are two sub-research questions which will be the focus of this study:

1. What is the NLD's official stance on religion?

2. How does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?

The first question pertains to a written stance on religion or determining if the data demonstrates any unanimous (potentially unwritten) policy that is widely recognized as the NLD's stance on religion. Such a stance could include broader ideological perspectives on the ideal relationship between the state and religion and the relationship between the NLD and Buddhism. The second question relates to justifications for policy choices related to religion, how the NLD views the current governmental regulation of religion, the NLD's relationship to different religious groups and internal party discussions on religion.

1.5 Methodology

To answer these questions, I take a qualitative approach based on empirical evidence gathered from a month of fieldwork in Myanmar. The fieldwork resulted in twelve formal interviews with individuals in the NLD or associated with it, ranging from leading party officials to lower-ranking members of parliament, which were supplemented by informal interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and tailored for the individual informants. The data collected from these informants are not statistically significant but are important as they come from in-depth interviews which allows for an analysis of the discursive formations on the topics of religion and politics and the NLD's self-understanding. These interviews are analyzed alongside policy choices and existing information on NLD activities. The findings were analyzed throughout the fieldwork and as a whole following the data collection process and are presented here in several themes to best address the research questions. This allows for the development of a few overarching hypotheses on the role of religion for the NLD.

1.6 Thesis Organization

This thesis is comprised of seven main chapters. The following chapter, Chapter Two, presents the theoretical framework used, including what analytical approach will be taken in studying religion and politics. Chapter Three presents the research methods used to gather and analyze the data. Chapters Four and Five provide the necessary background for understanding the case at hand. Chapter Four outlines research on Buddhism and politics at large and Chapter Five provides a historical overview of Myanmar, with particular attention to the relationship between Buddhism and various Burmese governments. Chapter Six presents the fieldwork and data

collection process, including methodological reflections. The findings from the fieldwork are presented and analyzed in Chapter Seven, ending with the three central hypotheses which can be drawn from this. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of the broader theoretical implications of the findings, beyond the research question at hand and what this means for studies of politics and religion.

2 Theoretical Framework

The study of religion and politics can take a multitude of directions and modes of analysis. It is important to establish the theoretical framework which will be used to analyze the 'role of religion' for the NLD. This chapter will therefore discuss theoretical approaches to studying religion and politics and present the approach which will serve as the basis of this study. This will include outlining what is meant by the 'role of religion', the terms 'politics' and 'religion' and their context-specific meanings. The aim of this thesis is not to 'test' a theory of religion and politics. Rather, the theoretical approach presented here will serve as the framework for studying the subject and analyzing the findings.

2.1 Religion and Political Science

This thesis is rooted in the field of political science, largely due to my academic background. However, this is also fitting with the aim of this study, as political science research can be defined as "an exacting and discriminating investigation undertaken by political scientists to discover and interpret new political knowledge [which] often involves scientific activity to produce knowledge about political life" (Jones & Olson, 1996, p. 4). The aim here is to explore and contribute to understandings of "political life" in Myanmar – specifically the nature of the NLD – that has not received due attention. While this thesis' approach is rooted in political science, I will be heavily relying on and borrowing theories and definitions from religious studies and sociology.

Research on religion within political science is broad, ranging from studies of religion and political theory, such as Rosenblum (2003), to religion and international relations, as conducted by Hurd (2008). The focus on the NLD places this thesis within the subset of political science that researches *political parties* and religion. Within this, there exists a diverse set of theoretical and methodological approaches. A common focus of studies on religion and political parties is exploring the rise and development of religiously-based parties, such as the Christian democratic parties in Europe (including Alberti & Leonardi, 2004; Ozzano & Cavatorta, 2013; Kirdiş, 2019). However, the theoretical basis of such studies is not relevant for this thesis as the NLD is not a party explicitly formed out of a religious identity. Another theoretical approach to studying religion and political parties is by relying on *social-cleavage theories* (developed by Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Here the church-state divide is one of four social cleavages which

is analyzed as a way political parties mobilize, and this "remains the dominant model for political party analysis" (Mohesni & Wilcox, 2009, p. 214). However, the Burmese Buddhist tradition is not equivalent to the Judeo-Christian tradition in West (where these theories are traditionally applied). As will become clear throughout this thesis, the relationship between Buddhism and the state is marked by distinct historical traditions, paradigms and notions of political responsibility, and the Buddhist monastic community is not directly comparable to 'church'. Given the distinct religious and historical context the social-cleavage approach is rooted in, it is my contention that it would offer a weak theoretical basis.

The relationship between religion and political parties can also be studied through the *associational nexus* approach (Rosenblum, 2003; Wilcox & Robinson, 2007). Here political parties are studied by how they relate to the influence of religious institutions, where political parties become more like "membership groups" (Rosenblum, 2003, p. 33). The associational nexus approach also includes analyzing how political parties specifically "appeal to particular types of voters – including religious ones" (Mohesni & Wilcox, 2009, p. 215).

Another alternative for studying religion and political parties is analyzing voting patterns of certain religious groups or how political parties appeal to different religious demographics (as done by Soper & Fetzer, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2013). Given the lack of accessible data on Myanmar, a quantitative study of voter demographics is difficult, if not impossible. While interviews or surveys of different religious groups could shed light on an aspect of religion and the NLD, there would be significant methodological challenges to this, as the most religious minorities live in the border regions of Myanmar, which can be difficult to access given the ongoing armed conflicts. Given that the research aim of this thesis is focused on the dominant narratives within the NLD and its self-understanding, such a theoretical approach is not helpful.

While elements of these methods could be used to shed light on religion and the NLD, there are a few recurring problems with them. Firstly, most studies of religion and political parties have been focused on political parties in completely democratized states, which the NLD does not fit into. This complicates the extrapolation and application of many such theoretical approaches. Arguably the main problem of these theoretical approaches is that they are largely intended for deistic/Judeo-Christian contexts. It would be flawed to project these onto a Burmese-Buddhist context which, as discussed, has its own traditions, features, belief-systems and historical

processes. It is therefore my contention that understanding the role of religion for the NLD requires examining how the NLD relates to its own historical, cultural and religious context. This includes the influence of the larger relationship between Buddhism and politics, colonialism and years of military rule.

I have chosen to assess the 'role of religion' for the NLD from the theoretical premise that this requires understanding how 'religion' and 'politics' are understood in the Buddhist Burmese context and by the NLD and the influence of these understandings. Matthew Walton (2017) has taken a similar approach in studying historical conceptions of politics in Myanmar, arguing that this is rooted in a Buddhist Burmese 'Theravāda moral universe' (to be discussed later). Using these notions as a theoretical framework, this thesis will study the NLD's discourse on 'religion' and 'politics.' The empirical findings in this study will be analyzed to understand how the NLD conceptualizes the boundaries between religion and politics and the ideal relationship between them. It is my contention that this is the best approach to answering the research questions outlined in Chapter One. Therefore, when discussing the *role of religion* I am referring to how these discursive formations impact the self-understanding of the NLD, the narratives it promotes and policy-choices.

2.2   *The Distinction between Religion and Politics*

The central tenant of this theoretical approach is assessing the NLD's views on the relationship between 'religion' and 'politics'. I do not contend that 'religion' and 'politics' are entities which can be deemed inherently separate from each other. Distinguishing between the bounded categories of 'religion' and 'politics' reflects a worldview which "is neither absolute nor natural, but is a particular ideology and way of looking at the world" (Turner, 2016).

The demarcation of 'religion' and 'politics' and the development of the category of the 'secular' emerged in Western thought as a "legacy of the very particular historical experience of modernity that played out in Europe over several centuries," starting in the 15th century (Mandaville, 2014, p. 9). The term 'secular' in English has not been found until the late 17th century and an explicit distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' comes even later (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 6). This has since developed into distinct trajectories, including French *laïcité* and particular Judeo-Christian traditions of secularism which emphasize freedom of religion and religious tolerance (as seen in the U.S. and Britain) (Hurd, 2008; Roy, 2013). There

is also a "more generic, largely sociological, dimension of the secular" which denotes how it is understood in common parlance in the West, including "the privatization or compartmentalization of religion as a sphere of social activity ('once a week on Sundays'), lower levels of active participation in organized religion, and a general decline in the influence of religion in everyday life" (Mandaville, 2014, p. 11).

These conceptualizations have developed from the historical and intellectual developments of the West, rooted in the Judeo-Christian context. This also informs the 'analytical lens' which is often used to study 'religion and politics.' This is arguably debilitating to the study itself due to its intellectual background. As described by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "to define the boundaries of the secular and the religious is itself a political decision" (Hurd, 2008, p. 16). Therefore both 'religion' and 'politics' are analytical categories which are being studied in this thesis, for how they may differ from traditional western conceptions of the terms and how they inform each other. It is therefore my contention that an assessment of religion and the NLD requires critically examining its discourse on 'religion' and 'politics' and understands categories such as 'secular'.

At this point it is important to note that when referring to 'the NLD' I do not contend that the NLD is a uniform body with shared beliefs among its members. The NLD is made up of a diverse set of people, with different ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and identities which impact their views. When I am discussing 'the NLD' in the singular form I am generally referring to the perspectives of the party leadership and the dominant narratives within the party. However, part of this study will include deconstructing the various perspectives that exist within and across the party.

2.3   Religion as an Analytical Category

Peter Mandaville (2014) introduces his seminal study of Islam and politics by emphasizing that "the intersection of religion and politics is notoriously tricky terrain to navigate, and we would do well to examine some of the baggage we inevitably bring to the analytical table" (p. 9). I share Mandaville's contention, and therefore I will discuss the central terms and analytical concepts of this study. In trying to conduct a nuanced analysis of the 'role of religion' for the NLD, it is helpful to begin with a brief discussion of how the term *religion* itself will be used

and defined. The NLD's discourse on religion will be a subject of study in this thesis, but the term 'religion' is also going to serve as an analytical category.

This thesis is grounded in the perspective of Talal Asad and other scholars working from the legacy of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. In particular, I am influenced by Asad's (1993) argument that it is impossible to construct a universal definition of 'religion', as it will be thoroughly rooted in power relations. Furthermore, a definition of religion is "itself the historical product of discursive processes" rooted in secular modernity (Asad, 1993, p. 29). However, as the term 'religion' is a central tenant of this study, establishing a working definition, while acknowledging that any definition will be imperfect, is essential. This is particularly important as the field of political science includes a range of definitions of 'religion' which have at times been tailored to match particular research objectives (Cavanaugh, 2017, p. 25).[2] I take a constructivist approach in defining religion and will rely on Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as:

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1973, p. 90)

While there are limitations to this definition, which Asad has highlighted, I have chosen this definition because I share Geertz's contention that 'culture' is a salient element of understanding religion. Geertz defines 'culture' as an "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89).

Similarly to Peter Mandaville's approach to defining Islam, I use the terms for various religious traditions (including 'Buddhism,' 'Christianity' and 'Islam') to "refer to a particular tradition of discourse and practice that is variously defined across multiple social and historical settings" without normative connotations of what 'authentic' practice is (Mandaville, 2014, p. 5). This is

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[2] For example, the well-known political scientist R.J. Rummel (2004), who has long argued that democratic regimes are the most peaceful, went so far as to characterize Marxism as a religion, and the most violent one. Such a broad, functionalist understanding of religion is not helpful for this study.

particularly important when studying Buddhism as there is a history of scholars applying a 'Weberian' perspective on Buddhism which argues that certain Buddhist practices are 'authentic', and that Buddhist political engagement is not (Schober, 2011, p. 148). However, this thesis does not abide by the perspective that there exists an 'authentic' Buddhist practice, and aims to be, as Schober (2011) describes "cognizant of the fact that the voice of authenticity belongs to religious communities and that the history of Buddhist traditions is far more complex than colonial imaginings had envisioned" (p. 148).

Given the research aims of this thesis and the theoretical approach, 'religion' will be used as an *analytical category*. This means that 'religion' is not intended to serve as an independent variable, but an object of study in itself. 'Religion' as defined here will be used to denote the practices and beliefs associated with a particular tradition but will also be used to examine how the concept itself is understood from the perspective of the NLD. It is my contention that by using the term 'religion' in this way it will most effectively allow for an analysis of its relationship with politics.

2.3.1   Contextual Perspectives on Religion

For 'religion' to serve as a meaningful analytical category, it is important to discuss how the term features in the context being studied. As described by the sociologist José Casanova (2010),

> The actual concrete meaning of whatever people denominate as 'religion' can only be elucidated in the context of their particular discursive practices. (pp. 62-63)

This thesis is primarily centered around Buddhism and how this is understood through these "particular discursive practices". However, this too can pose a challenge as historically 'religion' has been a discursive concept which has been *applied* to Buddhism. In most of Asia before the modern period "there was no indigenous terminology corresponding to ideas of 'religion' held by Christians or Jews" (Keyes, 1994, p. 4). The use of 'religion' as a "bounded category" was introduced to Southeast Asia as part of the colonial discourse and was projected onto it as an act of colonial power (Turner, 2016). Studies of 'religion' in Southeast Asia must therefore be aware that the term was 'exported' to this context. However, it is clear that Buddhism fits into the analytical category of 'religion' as defined by Geertz.

The empirical reality of what constitutes Buddhism varies across time and contexts. Different schools of thought in Buddhism have developed and "significant doctrinal disagreements separate many of the main schools" (Walton, 2017, p. 9). The different traditions in Buddhism have transformed over time and in different contexts, for example with the popularization of lay practice and meditation or reinterpretation of monastic rules and practice (Schober, 2011, p. 9). The practice and worldviews that Buddhism encompasses has also shifted as Buddhists met with colonial powers, such that contemporary Buddhist communities have relinquished a totalizing cosmological worldview and come to "accept the fragmented nature of modern knowledge" (Schober, 2011, p. 8). Underlying the use of 'religion' in this thesis when discussing Buddhism is the understanding that "Buddhism lives in the transformations of Buddhists' interpretations" (Turner, 2016).

The Buddhist Burmese context entails particular articulations and understandings of 'religion' and the associated themes. 'Burmese Buddhism' is a distinct category which refers to the beliefs and practices of the majority Burman ethnic group in Myanmar which practices Theravāda Buddhism (Walton, 2017, p. 10). Buddhism in Myanmar also encompasses difference. For example, spirit worship and Buddhist esotericism are important features of some Burmese's practice of Buddhism (Brac De La Perriere, 2017, p. 67).

 The Burmese word for the category of 'religion' which is commonly used is *batha* (Burmese) or *bhāsā* (Pāli)[3]. The Buddhist religion in Burmese can be denoted by *Buddha Batha*, in contrast to, for example, *Muslim Batha*. Houtman (1990) and Kirichenko (2009) have demonstrated how the word *batha* emerged through interactions with colonialism and missionaries. Brac De La Perriere (2017) argues that the colonial introduction and promotion of this term was "largely predicated by the Western notion of world religions then in formation would have been meant to make up for the inadequacy of the Burmese *thathana*" (p. 67). However, Buddhism is still widely referred to by the traditional term *thathana* (Burmese) or its Pāli equivalent *sāsana*, and will be often referred to in this thesis. Thathana/sāsana can be defined as:

[3] Pāli is the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

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…the teachings, practices and institutions established by a particular *buddha*. It is understood to exist for a particular period of time before it disappears altogether. (Frydenlund, 2019c, p. 99)

This is distinct from the concept of *dhamma* which refers to the teachings of the Buddha, including moral principles and the 'nature of things' (Walton, 2016a, p. 69). While dhamma is eternal, sāsana is temporal. Sāsana belongs to the 'Buddhist era' – a 5,000-year period of the Buddha's dispensation (Kawanami, 2016, p. 36). The literature used in this thesis and the empirical findings often use 'sāsana' to denote Buddhism as a religion.

2.4 Politics as an Analytical Category

The other central analytical term which will be used is 'politics.' Attempts to define politics are also rife with differing perspectives. 'Politics' is often thought of as that which is related to the state. This view of politics is largely dismissed by political theorists, who see it as ignoring the important influence of actors who do not formally belong to the institutions of the state. Many political theorists take a Machiavellian view of politics as the exercise of power. Influential proponents of perspective include Robert A. Dahl (1957) and Steven Lukes (1974). While the power to influence decision-making processes is a central tenant of politics, I find that such definitions are also too broad to serve as a meaningful analytical category. If politics is the ability to exercise power, then a discussion of the NLD's 'politics' also requires studying its influence on cultural paradigms and social relations.

This thesis will therefore take root in the definitions of the political theorist Bernard Crick (1965) and various writings from the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, who focus on politics as a process of conflict resolution. Crick defines politics as the "solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence or coercion" (Crick, 1965, p. 21). Andrew Heywood's theory of 'politics' emerges out of the legacy of Crick and Arendt. Heywood provides a narrower definition which will serve as the basis of this thesis:

> Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. (Heywood, 2013, p. 2)

I share Crick's contention that violence does not constitute 'politics'. Coercion and violence can feature in 'political' processes (such as imprisonment of citizens) but that it does not in and

of itself constitute politics as an analytical category. This definition is particularly useful for the Burmese context, where you have electoral politics alongside a powerful military. The regime's previous threat of violence to coerce the Burmese people to follow their authority is therefore not deemed 'politics' but an act of military power. This definition of 'politics' rather denotes the processes in which the military, political activists and political parties negotiate their power and use it to influence legislative and social outcomes.

2.4.1 Contextual Perspectives on Politics

Understandings of 'politics' and what the term denotes are also contextual. Matthew Walton (2017) has conducted the most extensive study of how 'politics' is conceptualized in the Buddhist Burmese context in his book *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. This serves as a useful point of departure for this thesis and I will use Walton's work as a theoretical premise for engaging with perspectives of 'politics' in Myanmar.

Walton makes the persuasive case that politics in Myanmar operates in and is influenced by a 'Theravāda moral universe'. Walton describes it as follows:

> Therāvada Buddhists in Myanmar hold certain common beliefs about the rules of cause and effect that govern the universe and the specifically *moral* nature of those rules, even as their specific interpretations or applications of these rules may vary. These common views are the framework within which many Buddhists in Myanmar cognitively organize their social and political world, and as such they act as a lens through which we should analyze political ideas expressed by Burmese Buddhists. (Walton, 2016a, p. 59)

Therefore, political authority and 'moral authority' (meaning acting appropriately in the Theravāda Buddhist perspective) are closely tied. The Burmese term commonly used for 'politics' is *nain ngan ye*, which means "affairs of the state" (Walton, 2017, p. 67). Walton has also shown how Burmese political conceptions have also been influenced by nearly half a century of military rule and limited space for public discourse. This has curtailed opportunities for organic discussions of politics. Prior to military rule there were lively discussions around democracy and political ideals, where politicians and monks drew from Buddhist teachings, Marxism and liberalism (Walton, 2016a, p. 57). However, due to the limited space for meaningful debates around politics, modern discussions on democracy "have often drawn from Western models, emphasizing freedom, electoral participation, and the protection of basic

human rights" rather than values emerging from local discourse and ideological development (Walton, 2016a, p. 57).

The hegemony of the 'Theravāda moral universe' and the limited space for political discourse means that certain political concepts have specific meanings in the Burmese context. The challenge of asserting western concepts of 'religion' and 'politics' in Myanmar is perhaps most clearly seen in any attempt to delineate the concept of 'secular'. Historically there has been no 'linguistic category' in Burmese that pertains to Western conceptions of 'secularism', and this was introduced as part of the colonial presence (Schober, 2011, p. 8).[4] Understanding how the NLD and the informants in this study conceptualize what is meant by 'secular' is therefore central to this thesis. The word which is commonly used to denote 'secular' in Burmese (including by the informants) is *lawki* (Pāli: *lokiya*). Lawki refers to the material world, including politics, health and marriage. However, lawki is best understood in comparison to the corresponding term *lawkouttara* (Pāli: *lokuttara*). Whereas lawki pertains to the 'worldly realm', lawkouttara can be defined as that which relates to "other-worldly nirvana [enlightenment]-seeking efforts" (Hertzberg, 2014, p. 105). This includes meditation, the Sangha and pagodas. Both these terms inherently entail a Burmese Buddhist worldview, and they are inextricable. *Lawki* is the 'worldly' elements of the sāsana. Therefore, part of the theoretical framework of this thesis will be that the Buddhist-Burmese context has inherently informed linguistic and historical conceptions of politics, and the impact of this needs to be studied to understand the 'role of religion' for the NLD as a party that emerged out of a Theravāda context.

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[4] It is however simplistic to view the secular/religious divide purely as arising with colonialism, the separation between "this 'path dependency' of differentiation goes further back in time: a key point in Theravada Buddhist political ideology is a formal divide between the state and Sangha" (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 4).

3 Methodology

In light of the theoretical framework serving as the basis of this thesis, this chapter presents the methodological approach used for collecting empirical evidence to analyze the role of religion for the NLD. This thesis is a qualitative study, which takes an interpretative approach, and will conduct an in-depth exploration to generate propositions on the role of religion for the NLD. Central to this methodological approach is a case study with a flexible research design.

3.1 Case Study Research

A central tenant of political science is the pursuit to discover and produce "knowledge about political life" (Jones & Olson, 1996, p. 4). There are various methods that can be used to achieve this aim, and both qualitative and quantitative research methods have a strong position in the political science tradition. Within the qualitative tradition is the approach that is taken in this project – an in-depth case study analysis.

The use of case study analysis in political science gained its foothold in the 20th century, when political scientists began to shift their focus to studying "the history, institutions, and processes of individual countries" (Jones & Olson, 1996, p. 134). Even as the use of case studies has developed and become an important part of political science research, there remains disagreement on what case studies entail and how to best conduct them. Despite these debates within the field, a case study is widely understood as when "the researcher examines one or a few cases of a phenomenon in considerable detail" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2008, p. 149, 150). Political science case studies can also be referred to as *small-N research designs,* since they include many variables, unlike *large-N designs*.

Another area of debate is what constitutes a *case*. A useful definition from Vennesson (2008) is that "a case is a phenomenon, or an event, chosen, conceptualized and analyzed empirically as a manifestation of a broader class of phenomena or events" (p. 226). Cases are therefore often chosen on the basis of the "presence or absence of factors that a political theory has indicated to be important" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2008, p. 152). Various systemizations of case studies exist, such as distinguishing between case selections that are "*representative, prototypical, deviant, exemplary,* and *crucial cases*" (Seha & Müller-Rommel, 2016, p. 425). As the broad phenomenon of interest in this thesis is religion and political parties in non-Western contexts, the case that has been chosen is the NLD, studied in light of its political

history, policy choices and the intersection between religion and politics. In this study, the NLD is a *crucial case,* as it provides a unique case. The role of religion for the NLD is not representative of the role of religion for all political parties, or even all parties in Buddhist majority countries. Rather, the multi-faceted Burmese context, including incomplete democratization and ongoing ethnic conflicts where religion is a factor, have created a distinct opportunity to study religion and politics. This is a case where the formal and legal relationship between religion and the state can be formed, alongside other elements of democracy, with the rise of the NLD.

Case study research in political science has been criticized, especially for the small sample sizes and the limits to forming causal inferences and making generalizations based on one or a few cases (Seha & Müller-Rommel, 2016, p. 421). Another potential limitation is that case study analysis means that the researcher does not control the independent variables of the case, nor is the case a representative 'sample' of a larger phenomenon. However, such critiques have been largely refuted, as case studies have shown to provide a unique opportunity for political scientists as they can "deal with complexity and provide in-depth and holistic, context-sensitive knowledge about cases" (Seha & Müller-Rommel, 2016, p. 421). Furthermore, they are an important form of empirical inquiry because of their ability to develop explanations, investigate causal mechanisms and for testing political theories (Johnson & Reynolds, 2008, p. 151). This is fitting with the research aim at hand, as this study is not trying to create statistical generalizations, but to develop explanations for the impact and influence of religion on the NLD and to expand on theories of religion and politics in non-Western contexts.

3.2   Research Methods

Case studies can also be helpful for researchers as they can use several data collection methods to contribute to a full analysis of the case, including (but not limited to) observation, surveys, discourse analysis and interviews. This gives the researcher a broad range of opportunities for data collection methods which can be tailored to match the research objective and what is available in a given context.

To assess the role of religion for the NLD, there are several forms of data collection techniques that could be used. One option is an analysis of the NLD's voting records on issues relating to religion. However, this would lead to a rather small sample size, as Myanmar has been governed

by the military since 1962 and the NLD was first allowed to participate in national politics following the 2012 by-elections. A potential set of data could have been how different ethnic and religious groups across Myanmar voted in the 2012 and 2015 elections (the limits of which were discussed in Chapter Two). Another could be conducting a discourse analysis of the writings of Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders. A central limitation to all of these possible data sets is that they would not provide insights into the justifications for NLD policy choices, views of the NLD on particular issues relating to religion, nor an in-depth understanding of what they see as the boundaries between 'religion' and 'politics'.

Therefore, the empirical evidence for this thesis was collected through in-depth interviews, gathered during a month of fieldwork in Myanmar. An in-depth interview approach was chosen due to its flexible nature and that it allows for a wide range of findings, based on "face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words" (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016, p. 102). It is my contention that this was the most effective approach for the research aims of this thesis, as in-depth interviews allowed informants to frame their experiences and reflections in their own terms, using their own linguistic choices, which has implications for the meanings of the responses (something which would not be possible through a survey). The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that while I had questions planned for each informant based on their background, the interviews were conversational and allowed for follow-up questions and discussions of topics that became relevant during the interviews, which I often could not have foreseen prior to the interview.[5] I also considered a structured interview approach (relying on strict adherence to the interview guide), as it would have allowed for a more streamlined and consistent set of data which would potentially be easier to analyze. However, the nature of this topic and the lack of existing research on the subject meant that I would not have been able to predict the best questions to ask, and the initial interviews were necessary to scope out further research topics.

Chapter Six will discuss the fieldwork process in detail and reflect on its strengths and weaknesses. However, as hoped for, the semi-structured in-depth interview approach was a

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[5] See Attachment 1 for an example of a preliminary interview guide.

useful method for gathering data on the experiences, reflections and perceptions of the role of religion for the NLD by the participants – all of which are presented and analyzed in Chapter Seven.

4   Background: Buddhism and Politics

The vast majority of Myanmar's population is Buddhist and Buddhism is therefore at the center of any discussion of religion and politics in Myanmar. An overview of the relationship between Buddhism and politics is therefore necessary to contextualize the findings on the role of religion for the NLD. To provide the necessary background for the role of Buddhism in Myanmar's political development, this chapter will rely on existing research to provide an (albeit limited) overview of the relationship between Buddhism and politics at large. Sources will include work done by seminal scholars of the intersection of Buddhism and politics, often rooted in the work of Balkrishna Gokhale (1966, 1969), Stanley Tambiah (1976) and Ian Harris (1999, 2016). This overview will include looking at how politics has featured in Buddhist canonical texts, as well as Buddhism upon engagement with the pre-colonial and modern state.

Such an overview is also critical because for many years little Western scholarly attention was paid to the relationship between Buddhism and politics. This was largely rooted in the Eurocentric (and often orientalist) view that Buddhism is *apolitical*, proposed by scholars such as Max Weber, giving the impression of Buddhism as an "other-worldly religion with a gnostic distaste for the worldly order" (Harris, 1999, p. 1). This is in contrast to the Judeo-Christian traditions and Islam, whose relationship to politics has been taken for granted and discussed by theologians and academics for centuries. However, recent scholarly attention has demonstrated that the perception of Buddhism as entirely separate from politics is fundamentally flawed. This is clearly seen by contemporary political developments that are inherently tied to Buddhism, such as state regulations of Buddhism (for example the disenfranchisement of monks in Thailand, Bhutan and Myanmar), Buddhist monks forming political parties (such as Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka), politicians using Buddhist concepts in political rhetoric and appealing to Buddhist sources of legitimation and the rise of Buddhist nationalism. However, the connections between Buddhism and politics can also be understood by studying scripture, the history of Buddhist thought and development and the historical relationships between states and the Sangha (the monastic communities).

Again, it is crucial to note that Buddhism does not function as one 'coherent' religion (Gravers, 2012, p. 2). 'Buddhist' history has been influenced by a range of contexts, and I will try to avoid conflating "the disparate and historically distinct cultures and political systems of Asia,

particularly when their only common feature may be shared commitment to Buddhism" (Harris, 1999, p. 1). This chapter will demonstrate that Buddhism and political life in Asia have been (and are) closely tied, comparable to the history, developments and influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Western states. As described by Ian Harris, Buddhism is "a historical phenomenon influenced by, and on occasions influencing, patterns of political power in the societies in which it was located" (Harris, 1999, p. vii).

4.1 Politics and Scripture in Early Buddhism

According to tradition, before becoming the Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama was born a prince – a 'political' position. Although Siddhartha Gotama ultimately left his 'political' future and his position as prince to seek enlightenment, his teachings have served to create and inform ideas for governance and political life. However, as Buddhism spread across different geographical and cultural contexts, different interpretations of Buddhist canon also spread. Despite the various interpretations and developments, it is helpful to begin by looking at the role of the state and kings in early Buddhism, as early texts and practice resulted in a distinct *ideology of kingship* which has remained prominent.[6]

4.1.1 Three Political Paradigms

A useful analytical approach for understanding the position of politics in early Buddhism and the development of the ideology of kingship is to view it as three distinct 'phases' (Gokhale, 1969) or three 'political paradigms' (Frydenlund, 2013). The first of these is related to why the state arose and its function. This political phase/paradigm is rooted in the *Aggañña Sutta*. A *sutta* is piece of the scripture of the Buddha's teachings, and the Aggañña Sutta is found in the Dīga Nikāya collection of suttas.[7] Aggañña Sutta is central to the early Buddhist view of the state as it demonstrates a "quasi-contractual arrangement under which the king performs certain functions in return for certain rights" (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 103). The Aggañña Sutta describes a time when the cosmos was expanding and when 'beings' were largely reborn in the world. The beings began to eat rice and due to the work required to grow rice, they divided the land so that each being could be responsible for their own crop. However, along with this came theft

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[6] See Gokhale (1966) and Tambiah (1976) for two of the seminal pieces discussing the Buddhist ideology of kingship.
[7] The Dīga Nikāya is a collection of discourses in Pāli canon.

and further ill conduct between the beings, eventually leading to a condition comparable to anarchy. As a result, the beings appointed the first king – the *Mahāsammata* ('The Great Chosen One') – to protect themselves and administer justice.

This sutta offers an explanation as to why a political system arose – to solve "the problem of social chaos and conflict that results from human tendencies toward greed, motivated by desire and craving" (Hayward, 2015, p. 26). In this political paradigm the state is therefore *necessary*, as without this "basic condition of organized human society" there was anarchy (Gokhale, 1969, p. 733). This sutta also demonstrates a form of 'social contract theory' in early Buddhism. The king is to govern in exchange for a share of the rice crop (a symbolic form of taxation), demonstrating a specific relationship between a ruler and those governed (Harris, 1999, p. 3).

The Aggañña Sutta is also important as it establishes the importance of the Mahāsammata, who is presented as an ideal king – he is considered the most handsome man and "during his reign torture, fines and exile are unknown" (Harris, 1999, p. 3). Various kings throughout history have traced their descent from the Mahāsammata (especially in Myanmar and Sri Lanka) and the legacy of the Mahāsammata has remained strong in Buddhist history. The figure of Mahāsammata has continued to be appealed to by contemporary Buddhist leaders and has become the basis of the 'Buddhist kingship ideal' (Collins & Huxley, 1996; Harris, 1999).

The second political paradigm/phase that can be identified in early Buddhism is the 'two wheels' theory, which forms the foundation of early Buddhist political theory (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 103). The 'two wheels' theory is rooted in the tales of King Ajātasattu (who lived in the 5th c. BCE), who distinguished between the two spheres of human life – the temporal and the spiritual. King Ajātasattu is said to have asserted that the monastic order was the 'wheel of law' (Pāli: *dhammacakka*) while as the king he was the 'wheel of command' (Pāli: *anacakka*) (Gokhale, 1969, p. 732). This recognition and distinction between these two 'wheels' is especially important because they are dependent on each other, and implies that the dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) "cannot operate in this world by itself as it needs the acquiescence, if not support, of āṇā or the state" (Gokhale, 1969, p. 732). When combined with the importance of the Mahāsammata figure, the 'two wheels' theory clearly testifies "to the importance of royal power in early Buddhism" (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 103)

The third political phase/paradigm from early Buddhism further promotes the Buddhist kingship ideal through the figure of the *Cakkavatti*. A Cakkavatti is a 'wheel-turning monarch' – a king who's rule promotes the 'wheel of dhamma'. This paradigm comes from the *locus classicus* of Buddhist doctrine, the *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta* (Harris, 1999, p. 5). This is one of the few, and the most famous, pieces of Buddhist canon that explicitly deals with kingship. The Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta presents the Cakkavatti as a righteous monarch, who rules in accordance with the Ten Royal Virtues: "generosity, morality, liberality, uprightness, gentleness, self-limitation, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction" – values which are to "govern the king and bind him within a Buddhist sphere of influence" (Harris, 2016, p. 3).

The figure of the Cakkavatti demonstrates that the king's political legitimacy is based on his ability to promote the dhamma, since the kingdom declines when his rule does not promote the dhamma (Hayward, 2015, p. 26). While the notion of a contract between the king and the people is conveyed the Aggañña Sutta, in the Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta the dhamma itself becomes the "basis of the state and the ideal ruler is elevated as the secular equivalent of the Buddha" (Harris, 1999, p. 4). The Cakkavatti is even said to bear the same 32 physical marks of a superhuman as the Buddha.

The aforementioned suttas are among the preeminent texts of early Buddhism that have been used as a basis for political thought. These three paradigms inform a Buddhist conception of political legitimacy, where the ideal ruler is supposed to promote the dhamma, and the 'political' and the 'religious' are interlinked and mutually enforce each other. However, a range of other figures and tales have also had important political implications, including the *Samaññaphala Sutta* (which says that a ruler should express deferential respect to a Buddhist monk) and the *Janataka Tales* (which further discuss the 'Ten Royal Virtues').

It is also worth mentioning the tales of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka (r. 270-232 BCE), who, through the 'Asokan paradigm', became the "pre-eminent historical model of the ideal ruler" (Harris, 1999, p. 5). Following his conquest of Kalinga and remorse for its violence, Asoka dedicated the rest of his rule to promoting the dhamma. The ideals of Asoka's rule are a departure from the 'social contract' of the Aggañña Sutta, Asoka's rule was a system where "the king was regarded as a parental benefactor upon whom his subjects depended for welfare

and security" (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 104). He ruled according to the 'Universal Law of the Buddha', had great influence over the Sangha and embraced the doctrine of *ahimsa* (no-harm) (Schober, 2011). From Asoka's rule the Asokan paradigm developed to include "ideals of nonviolence, the idea of the king as *dhammarāja* (king of dhamma), the preservation of canonical texts, the maintenance of the integrity of the monastic order, and doctrinal purity", which became the inspiration for a multitude of Buddhist polities and leaders (Frydenlund, 2016, p. 98).

As history progressed, Buddhism divided into the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrāyana traditions, evolving in distinct historical and cultural contexts, where different texts and tales have gained more importance. However, Buddhist kings have continuously appealed to the ideals of the Mahāsammatha, the Cakkavatti and Asoka, to legitimate their own rule (Hayward, 2015, p. 27). Combined, these texts and tales established a strong kingship ideal of the 'enlightened monarch', where the king and state should promote the dhamma.

4.2 Buddhism and the Modern State

While the texts discussed above provided a basis and grounding for the legitimacy of various Buddhist monarchies throughout history, in the past centuries, Buddhist regions (like the rest of the world) have experienced extensive social and political changes. This has included the rise of the modern nation-state and the influence of colonialism, communism, market-driven economies, democracy and globalization. Along with this has come challenges to the historical relationships between Buddhism and the state, especially with the departure from monarchy, and "Buddhists have been forced to adapt, or risk the possibility of substantial decline" (Harris, 1999, p. 19) While virtually all Buddhist countries have abandoned monarchy, elements of traditional Buddhist kingship ideal remain strong, though taking different forms and meeting with various degrees of success in the modern political sphere.

Since the way that Buddhism relates to politics in the modern period includes a vast set of cases and contexts, it is helpful to use a pre-existing theoretical framework. The engagement between Buddhism and the modern state has been assessed using Ian Harris' 'Sixfold Typology' (2016). With inspiration from Richard Niebuhr's (1951) fivefold typology of the relationship between the Christian tradition and politics, Harris identifies six types of 'interactions' between Buddhism and the state. He divides these into two subsets – the *institutional framework* and the

tactical positions. The categories within the institutional framework "represents states of equilibrium between Buddhism and politics that might be said to abide over time" (Harris, 2016, p. 2). The categories are *Buddhist authority over the political*, *fusion of Buddhism and the political* and *authority of political power over Buddhism*. Though not as relevant for this overview, the tactical positions relate to how the Sangha engages with 'worldly power' and includes *withdrawal*, *antagonistic symbiosis* and *conflict* (Harris, 2016, p. 2).

The relationship between Buddhism and politics in the modern period is marked by "a process of negotiation" between the political and the religious spheres (though this is not a clearly defined dichotomy) (Harris, 2016, p. 2). Harris' category of *the Buddhist authority over the political* is rooted in texts such as the Aggañña Sutta and the *Sammaññaphala Sutta*, which assert the superiority of the monk over a king. In modern times, this has been seen in various attempts to implement Buddhist authority over the political sphere, such as the effort by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in Sri Lanka in 1956 to create a Buddhist 'system of governance' (Harris, 2016, p. 3). Other examples include attempts to create a Buddhist state religion in Thailand and Burma in the early 1960s.

The *fusion of Buddhism and the political authority* is a departure from the historical universalism of Buddhism – where Buddhism's relationship to the state became strongly associated with "the fate and character of particular peoples" (Harris, 2016, p. 4). This development began in China and quickly moved to Korea and Japan and is rooted in the Mahāyāna suttas. Harris contends that this 'fusion' is often denoted by the term "state-protection Buddhism" (Harris, 2016, p. 4). This is also seen in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with the position of the Dalai Lama (Shields, 2016, p. 216). In these cases, cooperation between the political authority and the monastic community is seen as necessary for the best Buddhist practice of the people of the state.

Finally, the modern period has also seen relations that Harris characterizes as *authority of political power over Buddhism*. This is a reversal of his first category (Buddhist authority over the political) and includes the persecution of the Sangha and other ways in which political power has "sought to curtail Buddhist influence when they have considered it to be some kind of a threat" (Harris, 2016, p. 5). This is not a new phenomenon and historically there have been several examples of the state trying to oppress Buddhism, and particularly the Sangha, with

motivations including "straightforward doctrinal antipathy" as well as "social, economic, and political critiques" (Harris, 2016, p. 6). In the modern period this has been enhanced by a "scientific and rationalist spirit of anti-clericalism imported from the European Enlightenment" (Harris, 2016, p. 6). Modern examples of such extreme repression of Buddhism include Cambodia under Khmer Rouge and the Cultural Revolution in China.

While Harris' three 'institutional frameworks' provide a helpful way of categorizing various relationships between Buddhism and the state, there are other elements of Buddhism and modern politics that should be touched on. Firstly, contemporary Buddhist leaders and politicians from various ideological backgrounds continue to appeal to historical kings for legitimation and justification of their political ambitions. For example, the Sri Lankan reformer Anagarika Dharmapala promoted democracy by applying the tales of Asoka, going as far as describing Asoka's state as "the greatest democratic empire in history" (as cited in Harris, 1999, p. 6). Other political activists have emphasized the importance of rulers acting in accordance with the Ten Royal Virtues – often as a critique of other politicians.

There also remains a strong belief in the ideal that the state is responsible for governing in accordance with dhamma and preventing the decline of the sāsana. An early modern example is the well-known Japanese monk Tanaka in the 20th century and his 'Nichirenism'. Nichirenism was based on the teachings of the 13th century monk Nichiren who argued that a peaceful society is only possible if the political authorities practice the "right Buddhist law" in a nationalistic manner (Harris, 1999, p. 109). Another example is the Buddhist revival in post-colonial Sri Lanka where people returned to the kingship ideal and saw political leaders as the protectors of Buddhism (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 107). In other Buddhist majority states, such as in Thailand, Bhutan and Myanmar, it is still largely expected that political leaders are Buddhist and Buddhist institutions are given special attention and support (Frydenlund, 2013, p. 107). The belief that the state is tied to the best practice of Buddhism has at times gone so far that monks have supported violence and a militant response to perceived threats against Buddhism, as has been seen in Sri Lanka and Thailand (Keyes, 1978; Deegalle, 2016).

While these are only some examples, these cases demonstrate how historical traditions and understandings have been applied to contemporary politics in ways which Hayward (2015) argues "undoubtedly reframe classical understandings of Buddhist governance even as they

demonstrate continuity with them" (p. 34). Central to this overview is politicians placing themselves within the legacy of historical Buddhist rulers, appealing to the 'kingship ideal' and the view that the state is responsible for protecting the sāsana. These 'Buddhist sources of legitimacy' have been important for a range of political activists and ideologies, including authoritarian rule, ethno-nationalism and democracy.

5 Historical Overview: Religion and the Burmese State

Just as this study of the role of religion for the NLD is contextualized by the broader history and traditions of Buddhism and politics, it is also necessary to provide an historical overview of Myanmar. The overview presented in this chapter will pay special attention to the relationship between Buddhism and historical Burmese states and the shifting boundaries between them, allowing for an understanding of the context and traditions which the NLD operates in.

Central to Burmese history and development is that the modern state of Myanmar is a construction which has developed through centuries of contentious negotiation of its boundaries. Myanmar is considered one of the most diverse countries in the world. The current government formally recognizes 135 different ethnic groups (though more exist), many of which have distinct cultures and their own languages. Approximately two-thirds of the people living in Myanmar are ethnically 'Burman' (officially named 'Bamar'). The Burman people predominantly live in the central regions of the country. Most of the other ethnic groups live around the periphery of the country. These include the Shan, Mon, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine (Arakanese) and Rohingyas. Buddhism is the majority religion, estimated to be the religion of 90 percent of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). The vast majority of Burmans are Buddhist, as well as the Mon, Shan and Rakhine. It is estimated that Muslims and Christians each constitute 4 percent of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). The Kachin, Chin, Naga and Karen are largely Christian. The largest group of Muslims are the Rohingya, who live alongside the ethnically Rakhine Buddhists in the Rakhine state (bordering Bangladesh). However, there are Muslims among other ethnic groups. Across all of the ethnic and religious groups there is also a strong tradition of spirit-worship, which continues today. This religious and ethnic diversity, alongside contentious borders, means that meaningful unity among one 'Burmese people' has never been achieved.

5.1 The Pre-Colonial Period

Prior to the modern conception of a single state of Myanmar, the region was comprised of various polities and kingdoms "whose nebulous areas of control expanded and contracted through warfare and intermarriage" (Walton, 2017, p. 22). The Pagan dynasty was founded in the 11th century and rose to become the dominant kingdom, amassing large parts of the region

under its rule. The Pagan dynasty is estimated to have been the first majority ethnic-Burman kingdom, and as the dynasty expanded the Pagan rulers spread Theravāda Buddhism and the Burman language throughout their kingdom (Walton, 2017, p. 22). Eventually the Pagan dynasty came to rule over much of the region we today denote as Myanmar.

As Buddhism was becoming hegemonic in the region, a close relationship between kings and Buddhism developed. The Pagan kings were seen as protectors of Buddhism, and they constructed monasteries and promoted the spread of Buddhism. There was a widespread belief that "the throne was intricately connected to the purity and maintenance of Sangha institutions" and that it was the responsibility of the king to "ensure the peoples' ability to make merit" (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 203).

5.2 Colonialism

In 1824 Britain launched its first attempt to subsume the region into the British Empire in the first Anglo-Burmese war. By the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885, the last Burmese kingdom in Mandalay fell and the British had conquered the majority of the region that comprises today's Myanmar – then known as 'British Burma' (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 193). British colonial administration came with extensive societal changes, including new forms of economic life, the extraction of natural resources, new ways of dressing and educational reform (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012). Indians were brought to British Burma to administer the new colony, and Indians also became the predominant moneylenders, which subsequently started a culture of 'Indophobia' in Burma (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 7).

The British also applied classification schemes onto the diverse region they came to define as a single state. They categorized the people based on language, ethnicity and occupation. The strict ethnic identities in Myanmar today did not exist prior to colonization – where ethnicity had been 'fluid' and had been a political or geographic marker, rather than an all-encompassing identity (Walton, 2013, p. 7). However, British colonization and "the colonial obsession with classification" strengthened ideas of permanent ethnic identities, which later formed into the privileged position of the Burman (Bamar) ethnic group (Walton, 2013, p. 8).

One of the most significant changes during the colonial period was that, following centuries of Buddhist monarchical rule and close ties between kings and the Sangha (the monastic

community), British rule included the "colonial insistence of secularizing politics and dislodging it from a Buddhist worldview" (Schober, 2011, p. 5). The colonial government withdrew state support for the Sangha and by disrupting traditional village economies, it restricted another source of support for monasteries (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 4). Monasteries deteriorated and the British refused to appoint a head of the Sangha, disintegrating its traditional hierarchy (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 23).

Around 1890, a forceful, anti-colonial, nationalist, independence movement arose. The movement was centered around fighting for autonomy for Burma and dispelling the British. Turner (2014) has made the influential argument that the anti-colonialism that arose was not comprised of Burmese people rallying around a shared conception of Burma but of the sāsana. The British had stripped Myanmar of traditional sources of support for Buddhist structures and institutions, and Buddhist Burmese collectively worried about that this would lead to the decline of the sāsana. In response to the British removal of the formal state protection for Buddhism, Buddhist associations arose across the country, through which lay people could work to protect Buddhism, including providing support for monasteries. Turner therefore argues that the rising anti-colonialist movement, while seeking an independent state, was not mobilizing around the 'nation' so much as around these collective worries about the 'decline' of the sāsana.

The independence movement was largely led by a group of (often leftist) educated young men (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 223). They emerged from the student union at Rangoon University, and became an influential "cosmopolitan-styled generation of political leaders" (Kawanami, 2016, p. 33). They were consequential agitators against the British, and several of them formed the first Burmese army, led by General Aung San.

5.3 *Independence*

Following the end of the Second World War, the "British sought a quick withdrawal from Burma and they were willing to negotiate a rapid path to independence" (Walton, 2017, p. 28). The British began negotiating with the independence leaders, including General Aung San. However, there was a significant challenge for those working for Burmese statehood: there had never previously existed a unified 'state' in the region that had been occupied. Many of the ethnic groups in the border regions were hesitant, or outright opposed, to being subsumed into a Burmese state. Therefore, General Aung San and other Burman independence leaders met

with representatives of the ethnic minority groups at the Panglong Conference of 1947. They were able to somewhat resolve their differences and joined forces to seek independence from the British (Kawanami, 2016, p. 41). In return for cooperation, the ethnic groups were assured that they would be given a significant level of autonomy in a Burmese state – "a promise that would later become a curse" (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 237). This construction of 'Burma' was granted independence in 1948 and the Union of Burma was established as a parliamentary democracy. During the interim period of forming the new governmental system, General Aung San was assassinated by political adversaries (he was only 32 years old). General Aung San has remained a beloved icon, promoted by all political leaders as a martyr for the Burmese state.

Another independence leader, U Nu, became the first Prime Minister of the newly formed Burma. However, quickly following independence, Burma erupted into civil war. Armed groups from the ethnic minorities have been fighting for greater autonomy (and often complete separation) continuously since its independence.

5.4 *Religion in the Democratic Union of Burma (1948-1962)*

The 1947 Constitution of the new Burmese state marked the start of tension in the relationship between subsequent governments and religion. General Aung San had called for the separation of church and state, and this was reflected in the 1947 Constitution (Kawanami, 2016, p. 35). Article 20 of the constitution stated, "All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice religion", while Article 20(1) explained that "The above right shall not include any economic, financial, political or other secular activities that may be associated with religious practice". Article 21(1) of the constitution asserted that "The State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union" and Article 21(4) prohibited "The abuse of religion for political purposes". Frydenlund (2020) has characterized this as the beginning of the inherent tension and ambiguity "between state protection of Buddhism on the one hand, and strict separation of religion and politics on the other" (p. 189). As history progressed the government-mandated position of Buddhism continued to be contested.

The institutional separation of religion and politics outlined in the 1947 constitution was challenged by the charismatic Prime Minister U Nu, who led the country in the periods 1948-

1956, 1957-1958 and 1960-1962. U Nu was deeply religious and wanted to dispel the idea that democracy was a form of Western imperialism, by promoting a combination of Buddhism, nationalism and democracy. He believed that "a secular state would offer only a weak paradigm for governing the country", and to foster nationalism he worked to create a "programmatic Buddhist revival" (Schober, 2011, p. 79). He encouraged the spread of meditation centers, formed the Ministry of Religious Affairs and organized mass Buddhist rituals. U Nu also presented a new national ideology which became popular – the 'Burmese Buddhist Way to Socialism' – in which Burma's modernization was a path to enlightenment (Schober, 2011, p. 81).

In the election of 1960, influenced by the wishes of the Sangha, U Nu's campaign included the aim of making Buddhism the official state religion (McCarthy, 2008, p. 300). Many Burmese people objected to this, including communist factions of the population and the religious minorities (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 240). It has been speculated that this proposal, and the fear it created among the religious minorities, were the cause of the clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in 1961, which resulted in the demolition of a mosque (Gravers, 2013, p. 250). U Nu won the election and tried to achieve this aim using his parliamentary majority. However, his proposal to make Buddhism the official state religion became the basis of a military coup d'état in 1962 (Walton, 2017, p. 30).

5.5 Military Rule (1962-2011)

The military coup was led by General Ne Win, who effectively ruled Burma until 1988. Ne Win's regime was highly repressive. The political space shrank, surveillance increased, it became illegal to oppose the regime and educational and cultural institutions came under the authority of the military-run government (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2012, p. 250).

During Ne Win's rule the tensions in the boundaries between religion and politics continued. Ne Win's rule began on the basis of (at least nominal) objection to implementing Buddhism as the state religion. In 1974, a new constitution was implemented which did not mention any state preference for Buddhism, and Article 156c (similarly to the 1947 Constitution) stated that "Religion and religious organisations shall not be used for political purposes". The legislation pertaining to religion maintained a clear *institutional* separation between religion and politics. As his rule continued these 'secular' tendencies were complicated. Ne Win and other military

leaders began to legitimize their rule by appealing to the Buddhist kingship tradition. Ne Win made public donations to monks and constructed pagodas. He mandated a new pagoda to be built behind Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, where he personally raised the spire, a "kingly function symbolising royal power, glory, and religious merit" (McCarthy, 2008, p. 301).

Ne Win's rule ended with the 1988 uprisings. The protests of 1988 emerged out of mass dissatisfaction with the brutality and shortcomings of the military regime. In addition, Ne Win had demonetised between 60 and 80 percent of Burma's currency based on numerological advice (numerology is widely practiced in Myanmar) (McCarthy, 2008, p. 301). This immediately destroyed people's savings and further heightened grievances against the military. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across Myanmar – largely urban students, but also villagers and monks. The leaders of the protests came to be known as the '88 Generation', many of whom are still influential figures in Myanmar today. The protests were brutally repressed and the military replaced Ne Win with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988-1997).[8]

Figure 2. The logo of the 88 Uprising can still be seen around Yangon. The '8888' logo marks the most important date of the protest, 8th of August 1988. Source: Author's own.

[8] Burma was renamed Myanmar in 1989.

Military rule continued, though later under the guise of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (1997-2011). However, the 1988 uprisings had important consequences. Firstly, the National League for Democracy was founded out of the protests. It was led by Aung San Suu Kyi, though it was supressed, and its leaders were arrested from its inception. When possible, Aung San Suu Kyi advocated for democracy through speeches and through her writing, such as her renowned book *Freedom from Fear* (1991).

Buddhism featured heavily in her early pro-democracy rhetoric. This was important since there was still a discomfort in the Burmese population who were generally suspicious of democracy as another form of Western imperialism (a view which was perpetuated by the military). Therefore, Aung San Suu Kyi invoked the Buddhist concepts of the righteous ruler (*dhammaraja*) and non-violence (*ahimsa)* to criticize the regime (Gravers, 2013, p. 47). She appealed to the *Aggañña Sutta* and argued that this sutta demonstrated a democratic 'social contract' tradition in Buddhism (Hayward, 2015, p. 30). A particularly interesting example of how she argued for democratic values in a Buddhist framework was human rights. Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy advocates grounded their arguments for human rights in the *Metta Sutta,* which promotes "cultivating feelings of non-discriminating loving-kindness towards all living beings" (Walton, 2017, p. 175). Since there is no 'creator god' in Buddhism, the *Metta Sutta* was applied as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian justification for human rights – 'all men are created equal' (Walton, 2017, p. 175). By placing democratic values in a Burmese Buddhist framework, Aung San Suu Kyi made influential arguments about the compatibility of democracy and Buddhism.

The military regime decided to host elections in 1990 in an attempt to appease the 1988 protesters. However, following a landslide NLD victory, the election results were dismissed by the military. Given the 1988 protests, the violence against monks in its aftermath, and their loss in the 1990 elections, the military saw it necessary to build their legitimacy to repair its relations with the Sangha (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 190). Furthermore, Aung San Suu Kyi was writing about Buddhism and democracy and the NLD was publicly visiting monasteries and making donations to monks. Therefore, the military embarked on an avid Buddhist nationalist approach. The military tried to create "an image of themselves as better Buddhists than Suu Kyi and, more generally, as being responsible for the preservation and promotion of Buddhist traditions in

Burma" (McCarthy, 2008, p. 304). This reflects a central paradigm of Buddhism and politics discussed in the previous chapter – the idea that the state is responsible for protecting the sāsana.

Military generals began increasingly partaking in public merit-making acts (such as donating to monks), using Buddhist symbols, building pagodas and giving speeches that invoked historical Buddhist kings (McCarthy, 2008; Schober, 2011). The military promoted a narrative that they were the 'saviors' of Myanmar, who could "purify, protect, and propagate" a Buddhist Burma (Schober, 2011, p. 86). They appealed to different elements of Buddhist canon and practice than the pro-democracy activists and advocated that "a strong political authority is a necessary component of a thriving sāsana" and emphasized the Buddhist conceptualizations of discipline, order and unity (Walton, 2017, p. 168, 170). Schober (2011) succinctly characterizes the discourse of the regime following the 1988 uprisings as combining "a nationalist ideology in which the military elite was the primary religious agent" (p. 86).

The Buddhist nationalism promoted by the military marginalized the religious minorities. Some groups, such as the Christian Kachin, maintained some level of freedom of religion, while most have not fared so well (Keyes, 2016, p. 45). A Human Rights Watch report described how the government sponsored new Buddhist structures on sacred sites for minority groups and that "some monuments sacred to ethnic minorities were destroyed and replaced with new structures, such as hotels, against local objections" (Human Rights Watch, 2003, p. 204).

In 2003, the regime announced a seven-step 'Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy' which was to transition Myanmar from military rule (Walton, 2017, p. 168). However, there was no timetable for this 'roadmap' and its progress was "glacial" (Lall, 2016, p. 17). Dissatisfaction with the regime came to a head again in 2007 with new mass protests. This uprising was dominated by monks and has therefore been termed the 'Saffron Revolution' (because of the colour of the monks' robes). The uprising was ultimately sparked by the generals' decision to raise the price of diesel by 100% and natural gas by nearly 500%, following years of economic mismanagement and vast spending on constructing Naypyidaw as the new capital (McCarthy, 2008, p. 307). The protests included monks, 88 Generation leaders and civilians. The monks marched chanting the *Metta Sutta,* imbuing the protests with moral authority. The monks also conducted their most dire protest – a religious boycott – demonstrated by monks overturning their alms bowls. Not only was this a threat to the military

as it took away the soldiers' ability to accrue merit (by giving donations) but it also epitomized the monks as a "moral force whose sources of authority transcend the secular power of the military" (Schober, 2011, p. 7). On the last days of the protests, "an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 monks were joined by the same number of civilians, many holding flags including the NLD and the banned All Burma Buddhist Monks Union" (McCarthy, 2008, p. 309).

In late September, the protests were brutally suppressed, including the killing and arrests of monks and the desecration of monasteries. Similarly to the 1990s, following the Saffron Revolution "the military tried vehemently to repair its relationship with the Sangha through gifts and a targeted PR campaign" (Lall, 2016, p. 186). However, some have argued that "many officers were disgusted by the order to shoot at the demonstrators and to beat and violently disrobe monks" and that this provided impetus for the military to speed up the reforms (Gravers, 2013, p. 49). In 2008, a new constitution was drafted and implemented, which remains Myanmar's constitution today. Elections were scheduled for 2010, though the NLD was not allowed to participate and the 2008 Constitution mandated that 25 percent of the seats in parliament are to be held by the military.

The 2008 Constitution makes numerous references to religion, including mandating freedom of religion in Article 34. While it does not proclaim Buddhism as the state religion, it states that Buddhism has a "special position" in Article 361. However, the 2008 Constitution generally outlines a "remarkably strong separation between 'religion' and 'politics'" (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 191). Article 121(h) bans politicians from "inciting, giving speech, conversing or issuing declaration to vote or not to vote based on religion for political purpose" and Section 364 declares that "the abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden".

Another aspect of the aforementioned paradox of how the Burmese government both privileges Buddhism while imposing a strict institutional separation of religion and politics, is the disenfranchisement of the Sangha. Article 392(a) declares that members of 'religious orders' cannot vote, nor can they form political parties (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). However, the government also supports a unique Buddhist court system which has authority on doctrinal matters, as well as a multitude of laws and legislation that exists to regulate the Sangha in various forms. This includes laws that require government registration to join the monastic community, as well as to form new monastic organizations

(Schonthal, 2018, p. xix). Much of the regulation of the monastic community, such as creating "formal national monastic hierarchies", is done through the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee (Schonthal, 2018, p. xix).

5.6 Transitional Myanmar (2011-)

In 2011, the military began a dramatic series of reforms, which was "constituted by partial democratic reform, economic liberalization, and a newly invigorated peace process with more than 20 armed groups" (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 1). The transition towards democracy was a top-down process, implemented, confined and controlled by the military. The regime was motivated to liberalize by the need for increased foreign investment, modernization and a desire to be less dependent on China (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 187). An initial step in democratization was the 2012 by-elections, where the NLD was allowed to participate. The NLD won 43 of the 44 seats it contested.

As Myanmar began to liberalize, religion explicitly re-emerged in the political sphere with the rise of Buddhist nationalism. Out of the Sangha two different Buddhist nationalist groups arose – the 969 group and The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly referred to by its acronym MaBaTha). These groups mobilized around fears of the 'Islamisation' of Myanmar and Burmese identity, epitomized in the slogan "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist" (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 195). The monks from these groups began by encouraging Buddhists not to buy from Muslim shops and warning people about the dangers of Islam (Fuller, 2018, p. 21). They quickly took advantage of the increasing political space that liberalization had created. They advocated for a series of proposed laws that have become known as the 'Race and Religion' laws. The aims of these laws included "to regulate marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversion, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country" (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 56). These laws were intended for the Muslim population in an attempt to 'protect' Buddhist Myanmar. In acting as an 'autonomous' Buddhist protection movement, MaBaTha was an effective co-legislator of the laws, while also "successful in resisting, even ignoring, rulings issued by Myanmar's state-endorsed State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee" – challenging the traditional legislative control of Buddhism (Schonthal, 2018, p. xvii).

Although the "codification of ethnic and religious identities as a basis for legal rights" existed prior to democratization, these particular laws were significant because prior to the 2011 liberalization "there was no political space for such legal initiatives" (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 62, 65). This case demonstrates that political liberalization in Myanmar has not corresponded with religious liberalization. Rather, increased political freedom and the legislative parameters in place have resulted in "a growth of Buddhist protectionism, violence against religious minorities and Buddhist legal activism to secure Buddhism through 'secular' law" (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 187).

The NLD voted against these laws. However, many groups supported them and helped get them passed, most notably the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 67). The USDP is the political party tied to the military – its leaders have "strong military roots" and it is in a "quasi-symbiotic relationship with the military" (Maung, 2016, p. 250). This marked the start of the Buddhist nationalist support for the USDP and criticism of the NLD. Therefore, although "religious belongings and inter-faith relations played a relatively subdued role in the electoral campaigns in 2010 and 2012", by 2015 MaBaTha and nationalist monks increased the importance of explicitly religious political choices (Stokke, 2019, p. 3).

As Myanmar opened up for elections, religion was (and remains) through "a number of laws/legal spheres," which includes the 2008 constitution (as discussed), election laws and the penal code (Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 190). The place of religion in electoral politics is limited. The Political Parties Registration Law No. 2/2012, 6(d) prohibits parties from "writing, speaking, and campaigning causing the conflicts and violence among the individual, groups, religions and ethnics" (as cited in Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 191). This could be the predominant reason why political liberalization did not lead to the formation of political parties explicitly rooted in a religious identity (Stokke, 2019, p. 7). However, the close relationship that formed between the USDP and MaBaTha suggests that the boundaries of religion and politics are blurred, and that the military applies this legislation when it sees fit.

In 2015, national elections were held. The constitutionally mandated power of the military meant that the election was by no means 'fair,' but it was still deemed relatively 'free' (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 56). International observers were invited as 'election watchers,' but the democratic nature of the election was limited by mass disenfranchisement and difficulty

conducting a nation-wide election (Maung, 2016). Regardless, the election took place on November 8ᵗʰ, "without major incident" (McCarthy, 2016, p. 146).

The key players in the election were the NLD and the USDP. There were also a host of small ethnically-based parties vying for seats. The NLD was the party of change and strong democratic desires for Myanmar, while the USDP identified with the regime and emphasized "development, stability and continuity, drawing strength from its immense financial and organizational resources and capitalizing on its chairman President U Thein Sein's popular wholesome image" (Maung, 2016, pp. 247-248). The USDP could also benefit from support from MaBaTha and the other Buddhist nationalist groups. The NLD won by a landslide – securing 77 percent of the seats in the state and regional parliaments (McCarthy, 2016, p. 146). The military accepted the results and Aung San Suu Kyi effectively became the civilian leader of Myanmar as the State Counsellor in 2016.[9]

Despite the NLD's victory in 2015, not much has changed since then for Myanmar's democratization. The military maintains 25 percent of seats in parliament and is constitutionally designated to control four of the most important government bodies, including the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs. Freedom of speech is still limited and persecution of minorities continuous (the 'Rohingya crisis' will be discussed in greater detail later).

In addition to the lagging democratization efforts, a multitude of other challenges continue to face the approximately 55 million people living in Myanmar and inform the context in which the NLD operates. Tensions between ethnic groups in the border regions and the powerful Burman majority remain. Many members of ethnic minority groups continue to push for greater autonomy and civil wars are ongoing. Much of the border region is under the control of local militias. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have failed to bring peace to the country, which has created a conception among the non-Bamar population that the NLD does not take their concerns seriously (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 1). Myanmar also remains an extremely poor country, with one of the lowest GDP per capita in Asia (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Myanmar offers a host of natural resources, including teak and valuable minerals, but

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[9] Aung San Suu Kyi is barred from the presidency because of a clause in the 2008 constitution which prevents people with children or spouses with another nationality from becoming president. It widely accepted that this clause was created by the military with her in mind, since her husband and children are British.

years of exploitation at the hands of military leaders and warlords has left the general population impoverished.

6 Fieldwork

This chapter presents an overview of my data collection process and a reflection on the fieldwork conducted. It is useful to understand both the limitations and value of the data collected before presenting the findings in the next chapter. It is also important to note that the informants are anonymized and given pseudonyms for their safety.

6.1 Conducting the Fieldwork

My first visit to Myanmar was in January 2019, where I completed an intensive course on religion, ethnicity and conflict. This sparked my interest in Burmese politics. I returned to Yangon on the 24th of October 2019, where I stayed until November 19th, 2019, conducting all of my fieldwork in the Yangon region. On my first day in Yangon, I met with my research assistant, Maung Nyan Lwin.[10] Maung is an economics student with an interest in politics, and I was put in touch with him after contacting the well-respected Yangon School of Political Science. During our first meeting, I briefed Maung on the general themes of my research and about the assistance I would be seeking from him. His English proficiency and knowledge of the Burmese political system were immediately apparent, and he proved to be an invaluable resource.

I began reaching out to NLD members and political activists for interviews before arriving Myanmar. Due to the difficulty of finding email addresses and other contact information, I had also reached out to the local NLD township offices in Yangon via their Facebook pages. I received a few responses, largely from individuals welcoming me to Myanmar and asking me to contact them upon arrival. Other potential informants who I had been referred to by acquaintances either did not answer, or ultimately did not follow up. Therefore, upon arrival in Yangon I had no interviews scheduled.

After a few failed telephone calls with potential informants, where the language barrier did not allow for any meaningful exchange, I gave Maung the responsibility for making contact with potential informants (including those who I had previously contacted), as well as other NLD members that could be helpful. The Yangon School of Political Science also has a significant

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[10] Due to the sensitive nature of this research I have decided to also use a pseudonym for my research assistant.

number of alumni who are involved with the NLD. Through a combination of the contacts I had gotten in touch with, Maung's own personal network, the Yangon School of Political Science and reaching out to politicians whose contact information he could find, Maung scheduled several interviews. This planning happened via Facebook Messenger or telephone, and usually the interviews were set up for a date shortly after contact was made (sometimes the same day). I had planned to rely on the 'snowball' sampling technique, whereby informants would be found based on referrals and connections from the initial informants. This form of nonprobability sampling was deemed effective since the intention was not to gather statistically significant data. This technique worked well. I tended to finish the interviews by asking if there was anyone else the informants recommended I speak to, and most informants were very accommodating. During the course of my fieldwork I ended up having 12 formal interviews.

It should be noted that some people we contacted, particularly from the local NLD offices, declined to speak with me as they did not see themselves as qualified enough to be a good interviewee. I was therefore put in contact with their superiors and it was through these interactions that I was able to meet with some high-ranking NLD officials.

I had previously been advised by a Myanmar-researcher to not plan more than one interview per day because of the traffic and general intensity of conducting fieldwork in Yangon. This proved to be valuable advice. Due to the quick turn-around from making initial contact with an informant and when they wanted to meet, this was not always possible – as demonstrated by one day where I had three formal interviews and a longer informal interview at a teashop. However, the quality of my research decreased when the interviews were conducted so close to each other, and I tried to avoid that whenever possible.

My research assistant was not only critical for arranging these interviews, but also in preparing for them. Prior to interviews we would discuss the most appropriate questions for each informant based on their position and background. It was helpful for me to discuss the intentions behind the interviews with Maung, so he could be prepared to provide the most fitting translation and necessary clarifications. I also made clear to Maung that he should let me know during the interview if there were any other questions I should ask. This was useful because he was more aware of what topics they may have referred to in the interviews where we could go

more in depth and themes he may have sensed that they were open to discuss (and those that were too sensitive).

6.1.1 The Informants

While the snowball technique was used to find the informants, the method for identifying suitable participants for the interviews was *theoretical sampling*, whereby the usefulness of an informant is based on their ability "to aid the researcher in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied" (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 106). Therefore, in seeking participants for my research, I chose to not limit myself to any parameters other than their ability to shed light on the NLD. The reason for this low 'requirement' for participation was both that I was unsure of how many people would be willing to speak to me and that I wanted data from a diverse set of informants. Both the former and the latter were achieved, and among the 12 interviewees there was a significant level of diversity in the informants' background, position in the party, gender and religion.

Seven of the informants were NLD members who held formal positions in the party, including members of the national and regional parliaments. Several of the informants also held administrative or research positions for the party, such as membership on the Information Committee. One of the interviewees was on the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the party, which is the highest body of the NLD. These interviews were crucial to the data collection because they could provide 'official' party stances and the experiences of members involved in party decision-making. In addition, the range of informants *within* the NLD allowed for a study of the differences between levels of the party and provided insight on how information and power is distributed in the NLD.

Three interviews were held with individuals who were affiliated with the NLD but who are not currently members. These consisted of a former political prisoner who had lived with Aung San Suu Kyi for a year during her house arrest, an '88 Generation' leader who runs a pro-democracy organization and a well-known literary figure who has publicly supported the NLD. I also conducted interviews with two monks who were affiliated with the NLD. The informants who were not members of the NLD were particularly helpful in that they could contribute a counterweight to the perspectives of the NLD members and sometimes provided views that were more critical of the NLD. Unlike the NLD members – who may have had to be more

careful to follow official party lines – these informants could speak more openly about their perceptions and reflections. In terms of other identities besides party-affiliation, ten of the informants were men. While the two women appear to be the youngest informants, all of the informants were middle-aged or older.

When discussing the informants, I will use the term 'NLD official' to refer to the NLD members who hold leadership positions within the party, and 'MP' to refer to NLD members of parliament. I will cite the informants with their position, gender and estimated age range.

6.1.2   Language

The majority of the interviews were conducted in Burmese and my research assistant would translate my question and provide a translation of the response (or a summary if it was a longer reply). I found that the interviews that were conducted in Burmese were generally more effective, primarily because many of the respondents' English was not strong enough for a detailed conversation. Furthermore, when the interviews were conducted in English and I asked clarifying yes/no questions, I was almost always given affirmative answers, though my impression was that this was not necessarily a reflection of the actual question. In addition, I found the interviews in English to be challenging because the informants often replied using the wording of the question, leaving me unsure if this was the phrase they would use themselves. When the interviews were held in Burmese it allowed for a much greater level of nuance and discussion. In these interviews, I was much more comfortable that the respondents understood the question correctly.

It should also be noted that the informants both used 'Myanmar' and 'Burma'. When citing the interviews, I will keep to the name used by the informants. Generally, when quoting the informants, I will note whether the quote is the original or if it has been translated from Burmese to English. Shorter quotes that are integrated into the text are translated, if not otherwise specified.

6.2 *Methodological Reflections*

The nature of conducting interviews means that the interpersonal relationship and my role as a researcher could impact the data collected. Both during the fieldwork, and when analyzing the

findings, I tried to be conscientious of my *identity* as a researcher and the impact this may have had on the data collection process.

6.2.1   Nationality

Nationality was one element of my identity that I was concerned about in relation to my fieldwork – specifically whether to present myself as American or Norwegian (as I am both). Frydenlund (2005) has written about nationality in fieldwork based on the challenges she experienced being Norwegian when conducting fieldwork in Sri Lanka. She described the shifting implications and challenges nationality can have for data collection, and in particular in areas with high levels of political conflict. She explains:

> The fieldworkers nationality and his/her role as a friend or enemy can be an especially great challenge in communities with high levels of conflict because the consequences of that one is seen as belonging to a specific side can be dramatic. (Frydenlund, 2005a, p. 170) [Translated from Norwegian to English]

While I did not think that being either Norwegian or American in Myanmar was going to be met with as strong reactions as being Norwegian in Sri Lanka, having read Frydenlund's reflections before beginning my fieldwork, I took nationality into consideration when deciding my research approach. For the first interviews I only introduced myself as Norwegian, as I assumed that this would create less confusion since the informants were told I was from a Norwegian university. Furthermore, it also served as a useful way to explain my interest in the sensitive topic of religion in Burmese politics. Following an introductory conversation about the informants' background and the NLD, I used Norway and the Nobel Peace Prize as a transition to introduce my interest in the topic. I explained that growing up in Norway one becomes familiar with Aung San Suu Kyi as a hero and that I was fortunate enough to have heard her speak when she came to Norway to accept her prize. This was always well-received by the informants and allowed me to bring up religion by describing how I had read and enjoyed her writings that advocated for democracy through Buddhism and was curious about this topic. The aim was to avoid coming off as accusatory about religion in Myanmar and to make clear that my interest is not solely rooted in the contemporary conflicts which have received international attention (such as the Rohingya crisis).

I also did not mention that I am American because I had limited knowledge of the general perception of Americans in Myanmar. However, my approach to my own nationality changed after an interview with a monk in my second week of fieldwork. As we were finishing up the interview, he told me that he had recently been interviewed by a PhD candidate on related topics, but that they had a much longer conversation. To see if I had missed some key issues, I asked him if he could tell me why their conversation was so much longer and he told me (not knowing I am American) that it was because she was from the U.S. and he wanted to discuss President Trump with her. Upon realizing that there may be a greater interest in American politics than I was aware of, I began including that I am American when introducing myself. This proved to be useful, not only because many informants were interested in American politics, but it also became a familiar reference point in the interviews. From that point forward, several informants discussed political concepts and ideals by comparing them to American politics, which improved the quality of the interviews.

6.2.2   Gender

Gender was another aspect of my identity that I was concerned could impact the quality of my interviews. Myanmar is a country with great gender inequity, reflected in low levels of political representation for women, high rates of gender-based violence, the widespread tradition of women as responsible for household tasks and limitations to education for girls (Han & Chau, 2018; Maber, 2014). The central institutions of Burmese society – the military, the Sangha and politics – are male-dominated. Another aspect of the gender dynamics in Myanmar is the Burmese Buddhist concept of *phon*, meaning the glory, power and influence which is unique to men and which indicates their higher spiritual standing (Nwe, 2019, slide 38). It is widely believed that certain 'female' activities lead to the shameful loss of phon and I was concerned that these honor/shame dynamics could impact the interviews. There is also a strong cultural emphasis on a woman's *enidaray* (dignity), governing what actions are appropriate for women (Nwe, 2019, slide 22). The informants were predominantly male and during the fieldwork I generally found myself in male-dominated spaces – such as the offices, monasteries and teashops. Fortunately, from what I could perceive, being a woman did not pose a particular challenge. Upon reflection it seems that my otherness as a foreigner made me 'neutral' in these male-dominated spaces. I seemed to fall into the category of *honorary male* – described by Warren & Hackney (2000) as when "both whiteness and foreignness, as well as aging, may

permit women field-workers more cross-gender behavior than that allowed to native women"
(p. 15).

However, with the female informants a shared female identity may have been helpful. I got the impression that they were among the informants most comfortable being interviewed. While I cannot know if the shared identity of being women was the cause, it seemed that both women were relaxed and spoke to me in a familiar way – including one telling me about her current battle against cancer and the other inviting me into her home and introducing me to her husband. While they were both NLP MPs, they were also two of the informants who were most willing to speak candidly and critically about the party.

6.2.3   Sensitivity in the Field

The nature of conducting interviews, regardless of context, means potentially handling sensitive information. Even if privacy and confidentiality are respected to the utmost degree, the possibility that the researcher or informant finds the situation uncomfortable or that incriminating information comes to light is always present. However, the risk is heightened when conducting fieldwork on sensitive topics or in contexts with high levels of political conflict like Myanmar. Given the history of the Burmese government's treatment of journalists and academics, the NLD's long history as an underground organization, many of the informants' opposition to the military (which for some resulted in imprisonment and torture), the continuous limits on freedom of speech and the ongoing armed conflicts in the country, Myanmar is a challenging country in which to conduct fieldwork.

To mitigate the sensitive nature of the fieldwork, and to protect the informants and myself, I avoided bringing up a few topics. These included the Buddhist nationalist groups and the persecution of the Rohingya minority. The overarching approach I took to navigate this tense political context was therefore to put the impetuous on the respondents if they wanted to discuss these topics. While this approach may have limited the scope of the data I actively tried to collect, I found it to be quite effective. When the informants brought up sensitive topics, I could assume that they felt comfortable speaking about them. If the respondents brought up a topic such as MaBaTha (the leading Buddhist nationalist group), I took this as a signal that I could explore this line of discussion further. However, even if an informant brought up a sensitive topic, it was still difficult to know how far to continue the discussion. An example was a monk

I spoke to who brought up the nationalist monks. Before speaking about it in more depth, he explained to me that he was going to be very careful when discussing this. A few weeks prior to our meeting a journalist had interviewed him about the Buddhist nationalist monks, hoping to get controversial comments from him and stimulate a conflict between these groups which could have been dangerous for him. He made it clear that the power of these Buddhist nationalist organizations had made him very wary of discussing this topic.

I found the approach of letting the informants establish the parameters for sensitive topics to be effective as it helped avoid putting them in an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous position. However, several times this approach came with the unintended and rather surprising consequence that informants themselves quickly brought up such topics. A reoccurring example of this was the 'conflicts in Rakhine' (referring to what is internationally known as the 'Rohingya crisis'). Though I was prepared to avoid conversation on this topic, I found that the 'conflicts in Rakhine' was often brought up by informants, including when it was not relevant for the current topic of discussion. It seemed that the informants wanted to highlight this sensitive topic, possibly with the aim of being able to characterize it in their own terms. As an example, by referring to it as the 'conflicts in Rakhine' they were immediately establishing that they viewed this as a conflict with several actors committing violence, not allowing me to bring it up in a way that designates the Rohingya as the victims – demonstrating the different narratives around the conflict within and outside of Myanmar. It became clear that the respondents felt that the 'outside world' – represented by me – did not fully understand the issues and dynamics taking place in Myanmar. Perhaps bringing up the conflict lifted the weight of potentially worrying that I was going ask them about it. However, in these cases the informants generally did not delve into the conflict itself but used it rather as an end-all-be-all explanation, quickly shifting to another topic. It seemed that when the answer was 'the conflicts in Rakhine', they felt no more explanation was needed and knew the sensitive nature of the conflict meant we could not discuss it much more, which in turn had implications for the level of detail of some of the data collected.

6.2.4   Risk of Accusations

The sensitive topics and my identity as a Western researcher produced another dynamic I became acutely aware of – that some informants initially assumed I was critical of the NLD and possibly perceived me as accusatory. The informants were clearly aware of the negative

backlash Aung San Suu Kyi has received in the West for the treatment of the Rohingya. It was my perception that several informants felt defensive on the behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, and therefore made sure to describe 'The Lady' and her political choices in glowing terms and quickly brought up the 'conflicts in Rakhine' and brushed it off. Though some of the informants were critical of her (primarily those who were not members of the NLD), the majority seemed keen to not criticize her in front of me. Though this may not have been the case, I suspect my identity as an 'outsider' made them less inclined to criticize the NLD, since they were very aware of the negative international perception of recent conflicts. To avoid confirming such suspicions of me, and because it was not crucial to my thesis, I ended up nodding along when the plight of the Rohingya was dismissed or when derogatory descriptions of Muslims were sometimes made. I did not delve deeper into the specifics of these views.

6.2.5 Location of the Interviews

All of the interviews were conducted in Yangon, which may have had implications for the data collected. In particular, the data does not reflect the views of the non-urban NLD and does not provide perspectives on the NLD from various demographics, both ethnically and geographically. However, the potential limitations of only conducting research in Yangon are arguably mitigated by the fact that the NLD operates in a rigorous hierarchy and is highly centralized, so even the rural NLD offices are under strict instruction from the central, Yangon-based body of the NLD. Also, meeting representatives based in Yangon allowed for interviews with high-level officials who would not be accessible in the rural parts of the country or other cities.

The interviews took place in different settings in Yangon, which I found to have an impact on the quality of the data collected. Several of the informants invited me to conduct the interviews in their offices. In some cases, this came with a high level of privacy, while in other cases the offices were crowded. An example of the correlation between the meeting place and the quality of the interview was reflected in my interview with the NLD official Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80). Prior to the interview, Dr. Htay told Maung (my research assistant) that religion was a sensitive subject and was hesitant to discuss it. While he agreed to meet, he told Maung that he did not need to join since he spoke English, though it seemed that this could have been due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I therefore came prepared to have this interview in the utmost privacy. However, we were seated in the main room of a bustling NLD office for the interview.

It was my impression that the Dr. Htay was in a sense purposely giving me *less* room to discuss sensitive issues because several others could listen to our conversation. Dr. Htay was the head of this NLD office so I believe that if he had wanted to have this interview with more privacy it could easily have been achieved. Furthermore, during the interview two men came in and sat next to me and proceeded to listen to the remainder of the interview. They were never introduced, and their presence was not acknowledged by Dr. Htay. Although I was already consciously avoiding any particularly sensitive issues, this interaction only strengthened my hesitance.

Two of the interviews were conducted in cafes, though generally out of earshot of other guests. If there was a risk that anyone could hear what was being said I let the informants steer the interview to a greater extent, to ensure that they could speak within parameters they felt comfortable with. Three interviews were conducted in the informants' home and the monks were interviewed in their monasteries.

6.2.6   Research Ethics

The sensitive political climate meant that research ethics and upholding the privacy of the informants was a key part of the fieldwork. To ensure that the informants were aware of the research aims and their privacy, my research assistant or I introduced the topic, and offered a verbal explanation of the consent form – including that they would be anonymized, that they could leave the interview at any point, that the data would be protected and that they could withdraw what they had said. Each of the respondents was offered a written consent form to sign, though as had been expected, they all declined to do so. I did not make any further attempts to get them to sign, as there is an understandable hesitance in Myanmar to leave your name on any document that could imply participation in conversations about sensitive topics.

I also worked to maintain the privacy of the informants through my data collection and storage technique. The interviews were recorded on my iPhone, and the recordings and subsequent transcripts were given a code for each informant. These were stored on my computer and encrypted. During the fieldwork, notes and memorabilia I received in the interviews, as well as my computer, were stored in a safe in my hotel room.

My attempts to maintain privacy was at points challenged by the informants themselves. While I was aware that the use of social media, and in particular Facebook, is widespread in Myanmar,

I was acutely reminded of this during my fieldwork. Pictures were taken at every interview and I saw that several of them later appeared on Facebook (though without descriptions of why I was there). Due to the extent to which things are constantly documented on Facebook in Myanmar, I considered it to be the responsibility of the informants to publish what they were comfortable with. This was an interesting counterbalance to the fact that they did not want to sign a consent form.

Finally, as has been discussed, the informants did not always arrange for us to be alone during the interviews, which posed a significant challenge to ensuring a sufficient level of privacy. I relied on the judgement of the informants that this was appropriate.

6.2.7   Informal Interviews

Alongside the official interviews I conducted, another important part of my fieldwork were the many informal discussions I had with political activists during my time in Yangon. They were arranged by an NLD member who I became acquainted with and who had been present for some of the interviews. These 'informal interviews' took place at teashops and restaurants where pro-democracy activists gathered. These conversations were useful for the larger research aims. They provided context, background and anecdotes of the experiences of these men and the oppression they had endured. This helped move the abstract political developments into the personal. Though it was rarely directly related to the topics I was researching, their personal accounts, pictures and videos provided me with a background that I had not found in scholarly research and the formal interviews. In particular, they demonstrated the ways in which grassroot members of the NLD are politically active and the issues they are passionate about. Since the formal interviews were conducted with people who are well-established in the NLD, generally with a stronger educational background and distinguished career in the party, it was interesting to discuss with NLD members who operated within a different political sphere.

These casual meetings also helped me form friendships with individuals who, although they did not hold important positions in the NLD, had a large network and helped organize other interviews. Though our conversations had to be translated, they were courteous and happy to tell their stories and one man gladly drove me and my assistant to the rural outskirts of Yangon for my next interview. We connected on Facebook and several have kept me updated with pictures and videos of current political activities.

7 Presentation and Analysis of the Findings

This chapter presents and analyzes the central findings from the data collected in the interviews to answer the two sub-research questions:

1. *Does the NLD have an official stance on religion?*
2. *How does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?*

The nature of conducting twelve in-depth interviews meant that a large amount of data was collected, often quite detailed and not always relevant for answering the research questions. It has been challenging to find a way to present the findings effectively, especially since, in the words of Brinkmann (2013) "the human conversational world, studied through qualitative interviewing, is rich and varied and cannot be captured adequately through one single formula" (p. 112). I will begin by briefly discussing the approach I have chosen and the organization of this chapter.

7.1 Chapter Approach: Integrated Data Presentation and Analysis

Rather than presenting a summary of the findings from the fieldwork, followed by an analysis chapter, I have decided to present and analyze the findings together. Presenting the findings and then subsequently delving into analysis may be fitting for a fixed research design or a qualitative method where the data collection is systematized (such as strictly following an interview questionnaire). However, this thesis has a flexible research design, meaning propositions and hypotheses are developed by virtue of the data collected (and not existing a priori) (Nygaard, 2017, p. 181). Identifying what parts of the data are meaningful to form hypotheses is in and of itself an analytical exercise.

The data collection process was also inherently analytical, since when conducting semi-structured interviews "researchers are constantly theorizing and trying to make sense of their data" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 160). The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that while I had developed some ideas of what subjects I was looking to discuss with informants, this changed as the fieldwork progressed and as new topics were brought to light. For example, after conducting the first interviews, I was surprised by the fact that 'secular' was often referred to along with 'paying respect to all religions', which led me to delve deeper into this nuance when other informants brought it up. This has important theoretical implications for

understanding how the NLD conceptualizes a division between religion and politics, which will be presented in this chapter. This abductive approach means that data analysis was an ongoing part of the data collection.

To avoid having to include all of the data in its raw form, analytical steps have also been taken to determine which findings are necessary to present given the research objective. As described by Brinkmann (2013), "one might not attain much by representing *all* data bits," which includes data that was gathered to establish a rapport with the informant or when the interview steered away from a relevant topic" (p. 115). The findings will therefore be presented through themes that can shed light on an element of the research questions. For this thesis, a *theme* is defined as something which "captures a salient aspect of the data in a patterned way, regardless of whether that theme captures the majority experience" (Scharp & Sanders, 2018, p. 117). These themes are derived through *thematic analysis*, by which the data from all of the interviews has been "segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set" (Ayres, 2008, p. 868).

The themes through which the data will be presented are constructed categories and do not exist independently in the data, nor do they indicate statistical significance. The themes have been chosen because they include data that can be used to generate hypotheses on the role of religion for the NLD. The designation of a theme does not mean that there was agreement by the informants on the given topic. For example, one of the themes through which the data will be presented is *Muslim Electoral Representation*. This theme is particularly interesting in part because of the conflicting responses as to why no Muslims were nominated by the NLD as candidates in 2015. Having themes where there are a high amount of convergence as well as themes with divergence between the responses is also helpful as it enables comparison between the different types of informants (based on role and identity). This can help clarify the impact that the positionality of the informant had on their views.

Two different approaches were used to construct themes from the data collected. One set of themes are *theory-based*, which is common for semi-structured interviews as "some themes will be anticipated in the data set because those concepts were explicitly included in data collection" (Ayres, 2008, p. 867). These arose relatively neatly out of questions that were asked for the majority of informants, questions which were rooted in theory and research done prior

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to the fieldwork. This includes *Muslim Electoral Representation*, based on news reports from 2015, and *Buddhist Constitutionalism*, which was rooted in theories developed by Benjamin Schonthal in the Sri Lankan context, as well as a longer scholarly tradition of studying Buddhism and political legislation (including French, 2004; Harding, 2007; Lee, 2014).

The remaining themes emerged from analyzing the full data set following the fieldwork. These themes did not arise from one question, but from a range of responses to different questions, which were analyzed to derive and compile larger sets of meaning. The method of developing these themes is loosely based on the six-step thematic analysis approach discussed in Scharp & Sanders (2018), which includes "becoming familiar with the data," "generating coding categories," and "generating themes" (p. 118). For example, the several cases where informants discussed the importance of Buddhism as the largest religion in Myanmar or the importance of winning the majority Buddhist vote were compiled to form the theme *The Informal Privileging of Buddhism*.

It is important to note that both types of themes are *etic* categories. Here an etic perspective refers to "an external view on a culture, language, meaning associations and real-world events", in contrast to the *emic* perspective which "typically represents the internal language and meanings of a defined culture" (Olive, 2014, p. 4). The expressed views, language and experiences of the informants form the basis of analysis, but the explicit themes applied to the data are etic categories as they are analytic choices developed from my theoretical background.

7.1.1   Potential Limitations

Before delving into the findings, I would like to mention some of the possible limitations of this chapter and its approach. Central to this is the potentially detrimental role of myself as a researcher. As was discussed in the *Fieldwork* chapter, my presence as a researcher necessarily had an impact on the data collection process and similar risks run through the data presentation and analysis. For example, presenting and analyzing the data includes the potential to rely too much on the explicit information conveyed in the interview, as "the interview is always also a form of situated interaction that occasions the production of speech in particular ways" (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 126). Therefore, when analyzing the findings, I tried to be cognizant of other aspects of the interviews than what was verbally conveyed, such as body language or whether the informants seemed comfortable or tense when discussing a topic.

Another potential limitation of the data is that the majority of the informants work *for* the NLD and may have vested interests in defending the reputation of the party. This needs to be seen in light of the increased international criticism towards Aung San Suu Kyi, of which the informants were clearly aware. Luckily, my assistant could often tell me which NLD members I spoke to were known to be more willing to criticize the party (often those from the lower levels of the party) versus those who were known to toe the party line (especially those in the party leadership). I have taken this into consideration when analyzing the data. When the informants' responses are analyzed in light of their position in the party it can be beneficial for finding the 'official' party stance and when this may diverge from the political reality.

Not only will the data collected be restricted by the questions I posed during the interviews, but the data presentation and analysis is also potentially limited by the themes chosen and the theoretical perspective I apply to the data. Flyvbjerg (2006) characterizes this possible weakness as a "a bias toward verification, understood as a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions, so that the study therefore becomes of doubtful scientific value" (p. 234). While this is a risk, I believe that the lack of previous research on the NLD and the perspectives of its members (particularly on religion) has somewhat mitigated this. Furthermore, Flyvbjerg cites a series of scholars to argue that while such a criticism is "useful", this is generally a challenge in all forms of research and analysis and should not be overstated (p. 234).

Finally, while the findings are presented thematically for analytical purposes, I want to stress that these are constructed categories being projected onto a diverse series of responses which in reality cannot be neatly organized into such static concepts. The aim is that the nuance and range of perspectives reflected in the data will not be lost through this categorization.

While these limitations are important to consider, I want to highlight the unique benefits of the data collected. There are several types of sources and ways with which one could gather information on religion and the NLD. This includes studying voting records, conducting a discourse analysis of the writings of NLD leaders, or analyzing campaign materials. While each of these could contribute to an aspect of understanding religion and the NLD, data from in-depth interviews across the party and with informants outside the party can arguably provide a more holistic and detailed understanding of how religion and politics are conceptualized by the party and its individual members. This allows for an analysis of the discursive formations of

'religion' and 'politics' for the NLD which I do not believe could effectively be done with the aforementioned sources. Furthermore, the methods used here allow for data that could not easily be gathered from other sources, such as conversations *within* the party and personal experiences with sensitive topics.

7.2 Understanding the NLD Through the 2015 Election

I will now present the findings from the fieldwork, beginning with the data collected on the 2015 election. While the 2015 election is not the focus of this study, it is a useful reference point with which to analyze the role of religion for the NLD. This is because it marks a pivotal point in the NLD's development from an underground organization to a formal political party, accountable to its constituents and the pragmatic decision-making necessary in electoral politics. An assessment of religion and the NLD cannot be separated from the nature of the NLD itself and analyzing the 2015 election can shed light on the internal workings of the NLD and how it operates as a political party.

In 2015, the Burmese people, for the first time in 25 years, were able to freely (at least nominally) elect members to the national legislative assembly as well as the seven regional assemblies (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 56). There is not much English literature focused on the 2015 election in Myanmar and what does exist largely focuses on how the election itself arose and proceeded (see Thawnghmung, 2016; McCarthy, 2016). Little existing research studies how the NLD functioned as a political party in this period (and beyond). The interviews with NLD members thus sought to establish an overview of NLD's approach to the 2015 elections, and how the election proceeded from the perspective of its members at different levels of the party. This will supplement the only existing in-depth study (that I am aware of) of the NLD in this period from Roewer (2020).

7.2.1   Electoral Approach

When discussing the 2015 election with the informants, it became immediately clear that the NLD approached the election in a top-down, uniform manner, greatly determined by the decisions of Aung San Suu Kyi. I was lucky to interview Htun Myat (male, 60-80), who is the highest-ranking informant, as a member of the NLD's Central Executive Committee (CEC),

and thus close to Aung San Suu Kyi.[11] I met Htun at a large NLD office in Yangon, and he spoke with authority and familiarity of the NLD's inner workings and history, rooted in a life dedicated to the party since its formation. Htun explained that Aung San Suu Kyi began planning an electoral strategy for the NLD as early as during the 1990 elections, while she was under house arrest.[12] Again, while under house arrest during the 2010 elections (in which the NLD was not allowed to participate), Aung San Suu Kyi carefully observed the political progress and used her observations to plan for future elections. Htun admired Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to understand the feelings and sentiments of the Burmese people, which he explained formed the basis of her campaign strategies. In the 2012 by-elections, Htun, Aung San Suu Kyi and fellow party members were elected. From this, they gathered valuable political experience by attending parliamentary sessions and working alongside other political parties.

Htun explained that the NLD formed a 'grand strategy' for the 2015 election, based on the experiences from the 2012 election. According to Htun, by understanding what the Burmese people wanted, and sharing their desires for Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi campaigned with three central election promises: (1) to implement the rule of law, (2) to implement a nationwide peace process and (3) to amend the constitution to remove the power of the military. Another NLD electoral strategy was to encourage the Burmese people to ignore the particular candidates fielded by the NLD and focus on the party. Aung San Suu Kyi urged the people to vote by looking for the party flag, saying:

> Don't look at the name tags of the candidates, just vote for the party brand—we the party
> will take care of them if they behave counter to the will of the people. (As cited in Radio
> Free Asia, 2015)

Htun explained that there were several unpopular NLD candidates, and that many Burmese people did not recognize candidates other than Aung San Suu Kyi. Upon hearing her

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[11] Htun and all other informants have been given pseudonyms.
[12] The NLD won the 1990 election by a large margin but the military dismissed the results.

encouragement to vote for the party, however, Htun believed she convinced people to vote for the NLD without considering the profile of the particular candidates.[13]

7.2.2 Party Structure

The 2015 elections demonstrated the importance of party hierarchy and uniformity for the NLD. In order increase party unity and strength, the CEC and the chairperson positions – including that of Aung San Suu Kyi – were put to vote at a nationwide NLD congress in 2013. Htun explained that the purpose of these internal elections was to reorganize and solidify the party, which in turn created the unique nature of the NLD in Burmese politics. Most political parties in Myanmar are "poorly institutionalized" and although the NLD is one of the oldest Burmese political parties, it was weakened by the repression of the 1990s and early 2000s (Stokke, 2019, p. 4). Htun stressed that, unlike other Burmese political parties, the NLD now has a strong structure, hierarchical mechanisms, and is clearly organized from the CEC down through the township and village levels.

The NLD streamlined its campaign throughout Myanmar, relying on the slogans 'Time for Change' and 'Vote NLD'. According to the informants, the NLD did not tailor its campaign to appeal to local constituencies. I asked another high-ranking member of the NLD, Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80), if the campaign had in any way been conducted differently for minority groups (such as translating the party slogans). His reaction was laughter. "No", he said, the NLD only relied on "'It's time to change' and 'Vote NLD'" [original]. According to informants from lower levels of the party, local NLD offices were ordered not to deviate from the instructions given by the CEC. For example, Aye Myint (female, 40-60, MP), was an NLD candidate for NLD for the Yangon Regional Parliament in the 2015 election. Her opponent was a notoriously aggressive minister from the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) who even publicly threated to slap Aye for opposing him. Part of his campaign approach was promising the development of infrastructure in the electoral district. In an attempt to mitigate her opponent's appeal, she used the slogan "participative budgeting" to convey to her constituency that they would be part of budget decisions if she was elected. However, the CEC intervened,

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[13] Informants told me that this policy is to change in the 2020 election, and the NLD will focus more on the exact candidates they are nominating.

instructing her to seize all use of this customized slogan, and stick to the official NLD slogans. While she clearly found this involvement to be frustrating, she ultimately agreed with the approach, explaining that:

> At the time, [with] so many places and so many dangerous positions, [it is best with] a simple message to give the whole country. Not for the select MPs but for the whole party. It is the message of Aung San Suu Kyi. It is very powerful. [Original]

Aye Myint had also undergone training abroad in electoral strategies, and therefore conducted door-to-door campaigning. She explained that she was the only NLD candidate to do so and the other NLD candidates in her constituency only relied on public speeches and the sway of Aung San Suu Kyi's image. Again, Aye was met with resistance from within the party:

> …some NLD members and candidates informed the party. They give the wrong message to the leaders – they say I am very selfish, that I do it for my own win, that I campaign not for the whole party. Some leaders misunderstand me at the time. [Original]

Aye's experiences seem representative of the wider approach taken by the NLD leadership to the 2015 election. While her methods could have attracted greater local support, the NLD's emphasis was on a uniform message to the entire country – grounded in the methods of the CEC. Another example of the top-heavy power distribution of the NLD was the instrumental role of the party leadership in choosing the NLD candidates. Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) outlined the process of becoming a nominee for the NLD. First, she submitted an application to the township NLD Election Committee. The Election Committee then reviewed her application, and passed it along to the regional NLD office, where it was given a rating. Based on this rating, the application was delivered to the national party office. According to Hla Soe, the final applications were ultimately reviewed by Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

While a formal application process was in place, other informants made it clear that this was secondary to the decisions of the party leadership. Again, Aye Myint's experience demonstrates this. NLD members in her township had asked her to run as their candidate for the Yangon Regional Parliament. Aye had worked as a teacher before the election and explained that she had never had any personal ambitions in politics. She reluctantly agreed to run with the hope of being able to reform the education system. However, Aye was clearly exasperated when she told me the following story of her candidacy:

The township level and regional level selected me as a candidate in 2014, but not central level. One of the CEC members, he is of power and he changed my place for his people. But I got mad, so I wrote a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi. I support NLD, not because of the position, I am happy wherever I can support. But this…is not good for our party…The candidate the EC [Election Committee] brought here, he has never been to the [local] office once. It should not be. For me, it's dangerous for the organization. I point that out and I write that to her [Aung San Suu Kyi]. When she know this message, she decided to put me as a candidate – but not in the township, in another township. [Original]

Both Aye's initial replacement and her designation to a new township demonstrate the power of the party leadership and, ultimately, of Aung San Suu Kyi. As discussed, Aung San Suu Kyi has been at the center of the formation and rise of the NLD, and as the face of the pro-democracy movement she has enjoyed immense popularity and has come to personify the NLD. As such, Aung San Suu Kyi has had a fundamental role in internal NLD affairs. Illustratively, Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) explained that in party discussions "the result is always unanimous…because of the leadership of The Lady". As this quote indicates, even the CEC members attribute the power in the NLD to Aung San Suu Kyi.

I was also able to interview Thet Win (male, 40-60) who is a prominent pro-democracy activist in Myanmar and a leader of the '88 Generation'. Thet has served several prison terms, where he was subjected to torture and was sentenced to the death penalty. Thet is not a member of the NLD (which will be discussed later) and currently runs an organization devoted to promoting democracy and federalism in Myanmar. He characterized the role of Aung San Suu Kyi in the NLD as follows:

When we look at the NLD party we must look at the NLD party and Aung San Suu Kyi. Without The Lady the NLD is nothing more than a paper tiger. Without The Lady we see that the NLD party might be scattered into at least three pieces. [Translated from Burmese to English]

This explanation from Thet suggests that while the NLD is the largest political party in Myanmar, and enjoys widespread support, its power is fundamentally rooted in the image of Aung San Suu Kyi. She serves as the ultimate voice of authority in party-affairs and without her, factionalism may be inevitable. It should be noted that while Aung San Suu Kyi's image has been tarnished outside of Myanmar, she remains an icon in Myanmar. All of the informants,

including those critical of the NLD or not in the party, expressed admiration for her and referred to her with her respectful nickname, 'The Lady'.

These findings on the 2015 election are fitting with Roewer's (2020) assessment that the NLD is a highly centralized body, without strong internal democratic structures. Roewer argues that this is because the NLD developed under a repressive authoritarian rule and that it believes that "authoritarian structures constitute a competitive advantage in Myanmar's hybrid regime" (Roewer, 2020, p. 286). While certain democratic processes exist within the party, such as for nominating candidates, the real power still rests in the hands of 'The Lady', and her closest advisors. Given her immense persona in both Burmese politics in general, and the NLD in particular, the role of Aung San Suu Kyi in the process of streamlining the NLD cannot be understated. Lower-level party officials and candidates are expected to abide by the mandates of the party leadership.

A full assessment of *why* the NLD won the election is outside the scope of this thesis, and not necessarily relevant for my research objective. However, the NLD's power structure is important for the later findings on the role of religion, as the party leadership both engineers and strictly regulates any official party policies and stances. We can assume that the NLD members operate in accordance to what is understood to be the policy of Aung San Suu Kyi. Furthermore, the strict control of the party leadership indicates that the NLD's position on religion cannot be separated from the larger operation and strategies of the party. In looking further at the discursive formations of the role of religion for the NLD, a framework for understanding the finding on religion is therefore that the party line is indeed the line of the CEC, and perhaps even more so, the line of Aung San Suu Kyi – rather than a result of internal debates and discussions within the party.

7.3 An Official Party Stance on Religion

Moving onto the role of religion for the NLD, I will now present the findings responding to the first sub-research question: *What is the NLD's official stance on religion?* This addresses the overarching, *formal* position of religion for the NLD, including how the NLD publicly addresses the relationship between 'religion' and 'politics' and the policy implications of this. When I began my fieldwork, I was not aware of any official information released by the NLD pertaining to its stance on religion in the years since it emerged as a formal political party. As

discussed, Myanmar's Political Parties Registration Law Political Parties Registration Law No. 2/2012, 6(d) prohibits parties from "writing, speaking, and campaigning causing the conflicts and violence among the individual, groups, religions and ethnics" (as cited in Frydenlund, 2019b, p. 191). Thus, I was prepared for the possibility that the NLD had no official written policy on religion. I therefore also tried to gauge the official stance on religion by asking informants what they *believe* the NLD's position is on religion, and then analysed the discursive formations used in the responses.

As demonstrated with the 2015 election, much of the party information and power is held in the highest levels of the NLD, culminating in the CEC and Aung San Suu Kyi. Therefore Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) served as an invaluable informant for gathering an official stance on religion. Upon meeting Htun, my immediate reaction was that he is a skilled politician and he was quick to defend his party and preemptively mentioned potentially sensitive subjects. When initially being asked about religion he responded by saying,

> It is true that the NLD is a Buddhist majority party, but even though NLD is overrun by the Buddhist majority groups, the NLD also has its own constitution that is in line with the Universal Constitution of Human Rights so the party pays respect to the freedom of religion. [Translated from Burmese to English]

I was unfortunately unable to access the NLD's constitution. However, Roewer has written about how the NLD "suffers from the absence of a proper party constitution" and the document which serves as the party constitution has barely been changed since 2011 (Roewer, 2020, p. 293). Roewer cites an NLD informant saying "The party constitution was drafted in haste. It only has a thickness of half of my little finger" (Roewer, 2020, p. 293). Regardless, Htun's immediate response demonstrates that the NLD envisions itself as a party which respects "freedom of religion". Later Htun described the stance of the NLD as "neutral":

> …the NLD has already declared their intention in regard to religion since 1988. The NLD has no favor to any religion, so the NLD constitution stated that the party is neutral. The 2008 Constitution [of Myanmar] stated that a party needs to be neutral on religious issues. Also, the NLD pays respect to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights… the NLD is trying to be as neutral as possible. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Interestingly, Htun was careful to stress that the NLD acts in accordance with various legal frameworks in place. However, Htun also demonstrated ambiguities in the party stance on religion, saying that, in fact, the party does not even talk to the public about religion. Due to the presence of minority religious groups in Myanmar (which could comprise an important electoral group and are the subject of oppression) I was curious if the NLD has implemented any policies to attract these voters:

> *And in terms of the minority religions, for example in the 2015 election, does the NLD do anything to appeal to these groups?*
>
> The NLD believes that in democracy, the right to freedom of religion is already included, it is taken for granted. So, NLD doesn't need to say anything about religion. The only things the NLD will talk about is the political, not the religious. [Translated from Burmese to English]

As these quotes from Htun demonstrate, it seems that the NLD does not have a singular, overarching stance on religion. However, various 'liberal' ideals such as 'freedom of religion' and 'neutral' form the NLD's self-understanding and position on religion.[14] What is ultimately clear from Htun's comments is that the party leadership does not want the NLD to be identified as having a distinct religious affiliation.

The other informants also used a range of terms, often interchangeably, to describe the NLD's stance on religion. When I met Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80, NLD official), he answered my question on the NLD's relationship to religion in a dismissive manner, saying:

> …actually, we always lift up the Buddhism and also other religions because freedom of religion is a human right and its only in our declaration of our present constitution… our policy is always secular. So, religion is not a problem. We never think based on religion. [Original]

This exchange with Dr. Htay, where he describes the NLD as 'lifting up' the different religions and 'secular', is emblematic of a reoccurring finding from the interviews – the interchangeable

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[14] When discussing 'liberal' values I am referring to the values widely associated with liberalism and the tenants of many democratic states, including "freedom of expression and association, toleration of differences, equality of the sexes and the right to democratic participation" (Lægaard, 2007, p. 46).

use of terms that seem contradictory. We can assume that 'lifting up' religions refers to politicians openly engaging with different religious institutions, actors and rituals. NLD politicians are often pictured at Buddhist temples and offering donations to monks. Several of the informants were also clear that participating with religious actors and institutions was an important part of 'paying respect to all religions'. Examples were often given of NLD politicians visiting places of worship of different religions and welcoming Pope Francis to Myanmar in 2017. These examples further complicate any attempt to understand what is meant by being a 'secular' party, in that the party is actively and visibly engaging with the religious communities. These examples were often presented together with assertations that the NLD is 'secular'. The term 'secular', as used by Dr. Htay and other informants, does not exclude publicly partaking in religious practices, so long as the aforementioned 'freedom of religion' is maintained.

It should be noted that while some informants, including Dr. Htay, used the English word 'secular', others used the Burmese term *lawki*. For example, Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) told me that the NLD's goal is to move towards a secular state, using the word *lawki*. As was discussed previously, deriving a specific meaning from this is complicated by the Buddhist Burmese linguistic tradition associated with *lawki*. It refers to the "mundane world" in contrast to *lawkouttara*, which is the truth of the Buddha that "both transcend and embody the everyday world" though these are two realms of the same Theravāda moral universe (Walton, 2016a, p. 61).

Another interesting finding was that several informants replied to questions about the NLD's stance on religion with the claim that there exists no religious discrimination in the NLD, and some went as far as to say in Myanmar at large. This is in contrast with human rights reports, scholarly research and international organizations which have criticized the Burmese government, including the NLD, for the religious discrimination that is prevalent in Myanmar. This was demonstrated in the interview with Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC), who made the following points:

> Since the NLD came to power there have been no restrictions and no oppressions over religious freedoms. For example, the Muslims can enjoy their own religious traditions without any restrictions from the government. In the case of the recently celebrated Hindu Diwali they have also enjoyed celebrations very freely, there has been no oppressions.

...there is currently no religious oppression by the state – by the government or a government body. Everyone enjoys the religious freedom happily in Burma...there might be some extreme groups, both on the Muslim side, on the Christian side, on the Buddhist side – but these are not government bodies. [Translated from Burmese to English]

There is no empirical evidence to support Htun's claim. Reports on the Rohingya crisis show that the NLD has largely been silent on the atrocities and the NLD is known to have withdrawn its Muslim candidates in the leadup to the 2015 election (Hindstrom, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, since Htun represents the upper echelons of the party, this is clearly the narrative that the NLD wants to convey. I had also not asked Htun about religious discrimination at this point in the interview, so perhaps this was a preemptive defense against the international criticism toward Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD for their complicity in the Rohingya crisis.

Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80, NLD official) also reflected this (idealized) self-understanding of the party, telling me that the NLD has "no discrimination" at three different points in our interview. Myat Thant (male, 40-60, NLD official) came with the same claim twice, explaining that "actually the NLD has no discrimination against the minorities" while acknowledging that "religion is a very fragile issue in the current situation". Arguably these claims of 'no discrimination' demonstrate that the NLD is rewriting political realities to promote a narrative that represents the party's democratic ideals.

I also asked the informants who were not members of the NLD what they believed the NLD's stance on religion to be. Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation) was very critical of the development of the NLD in recent years (especially for the Rohingya crisis), but still came with the following description of the NLD:

It is almost impossible to accuse the NLD of being in favor of Buddhism because NLD was born as a political party that does not abuse any religious faiths. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Interestingly, Thet attributes the NLD's stance on religion to its initial formation, suggesting that the democratic ideals it was born out of reflect the 'true' nature of the party, and recent developments (such as religious discrimination under NLD rule) does not reflect the essence of the party.

Ultimately, when initially broaching the subject of religion in the interviews, the respondents consistently answered by giving some variation of values associated with liberal democracy and rejecting that religion has an influence on the NLD. This was complicated by the range of terms that was used to denote this. While these respondents may be indicating a similar stance, the responses show that there exists no broad, official party policy on religion. Even if there is a reference to religion in the party's constitution, the fact that the majority of informants could not point to it means that it would not serve as a meaningful guide of party policy and party identity.

7.4 The Informal Privileging of Buddhism

The information gathered on the NLD's stance on religion was complicated by that several informants also acknowledged that Buddhism holds a special position in the NLD. The informants generally only brought this up further into the interviews, after we had established a rapport. Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) was the most candid on this topic, perhaps since she does not speak for the party leadership and we met in the privacy of her home. Hla bluntly gave this characterization:

> In the NLD there is no official statement which stops the Muslims from joining the party. Unofficially they favor Buddhism over other religions. [Translated from Burmese to English]

When I asked why the NLD favors Buddhism, Hla Soe put it simply, saying "because this is a Buddhist majority country, the NLD has to please the desires of the majority people". Hla's response indicates that the NLD acts in accordance with a form of *Buddhist majoritarianism*, whereby the NLD appeals to Buddhism as a way to attract the Buddhist majority of voters. The Buddhist majoritarian perspective was also given by Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80, NLD official) who gave a similar argument:

> … our leader always ask to respect the religious orders and people for every religion. For example, Christian churches, Buddhist monasteries, Hindi temples and Islam's mosques. We are always going and paying respect to them. Every township. But, some things are better in Buddhist, because it's the majority…We believe in multi-culture, multi-religions, but especially in Myanmar most of the people are Buddhist, so we need to promote the Buddhism. [Original]

Here too we see that engaging with religious practices is commonplace for the NLD (contributing to previous discussions on the NLD as a 'secular' party), and that Buddhism is especially important in this. In an informal interview that was not recorded, another high-level NLD official explained to me that he was frustrated because the NLD leaders will do anything to win votes, including explicitly appealing to the majority Buddhist population. These responses suggest that the NLD believes that promoting Buddhism by giving it the most 'attention' is a political necessity to win votes from the majority Buddhist population.

Informants also explained that publicly engaging with Buddhist rituals and institutions is natural for the NLD as part of Burmese political culture. As discussed previously, there is a long tradition in Myanmar of politicians participating in public displays of Buddhism. In the past decades, this has included military leaders performing "merit-making rituals in public contexts", with the aim of affirming "their place within a social and ritual hierarchy in which power relations are constantly negotiated" (Schober, 2011, p. 89). As part of the pro-democracy movement, the NLD has also historically been closely tied to Buddhist institutions, such as Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at Shwedagon Pagoda in 1988 and protests with monks in 2007. Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation), who was generally critical of the NLD's relationship with religious minorities since liberalization, was understanding of the NLD engagement with Buddhism. He captured the perspective of many informants in the following statement:

> Burma is a majority Buddhist country so it is very natural that particular leaders of these parties might engage a lot with the Buddhist members because the situation is such. We also have traditions in our political cultures that if parties or if a government make a trip to the city they first have to go to the monastery. In order to change this kind of tradition it might take time. So, it is understandable if the NLD party still follows in this tradition because it is going to take time. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Thet's response indicates that publicly engaging with Buddhism is a reality of conducting politics in Myanmar. We can partly attribute this to the Theravāda moral universe that Walton (2016, 2017) argues that Burmese people and politics operate in – where political power and Buddhist authority are tied. While several informants shared Thet's perspective that this is the nature of politics in Myanmar, it is interesting to note that a contrasting view was given by one of the NLD-affiliated monks I interviewed. He was highly critical of the traditions where

politicians are expected to publicly partake in Buddhist practice, such as symbolic visits to pagodas. He expressed disapproval of Aung San Suu Kyi in this matter, explaining that:

> The Lady as a politician, a state leader, should do only political things, not the religious things. As a political leader she should mind only her political things…As a Buddhist religious leader, [I do not] agree with The Lady regarding some religious affiliations as a state leader. [Translated from Burmese to English]
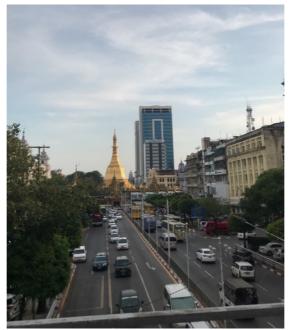

Figure 3. Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon is one of the most important Buddhist landmarks in Myanmar and has also served as a point of political activity. Source: Author's own.

These findings on the informal privileging of Buddhism complicate previous characterizations of the NLD as 'secular' and 'neutral'. The emphasis on the 'necessity' of participating publicly in Buddhist rituals shows that the NLD is comfortable with a political context that is closely tied to Buddhism. Regardless, this suggests a divide between how the NLD envisions itself ('lifting up' all religions) and the political realities (focusing especially on Buddhism), where it has made the pragmatic choice to appeal to the majority of the voters.

7.5   The Politicization of Religion

To further examine the tensions between the findings on the formal position of religion for the NLD and the unofficial privileging of Buddhism, we can turn to sub-research question two: *How does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?* The informants were open about the important role that religion has played in Burmese politics in recent years (particularly during

the 2015 election), resulting in important political decisions (which will be discussed in detail later). However, they overwhelmingly blamed this on the groups that are the NLD's political opposition. This is supported by previous research (Frydenlund, 2017; Crouch, 2015) which has shown that in the lead-up to the 2015 election, the 'opposition groups' accused the NLD of promoting other religions above Buddhism, and in particular Islam. 'Opposition groups' is used here as a catch-all term for the actors that were hoping to prevent an NLD victory in 2015. This includes the military, the USDP (the political party which acts like the civilian branch of the military) and supporting groups, including MaBaTha (the leading Buddhist nationalist group).[15]

That religion was explicitly brought into the 2015 election by the opposition groups was confirmed by several of the informants. During our interview, and following his description of the NLD as 'lifting up' all religions, Dr. Htay (male, 60-80, NLD official) grew concerned, and said:

> On the opposite side the USDP always doing the whispering in the ear [that] the NLD is never lifting up the Buddhism. [Original]

Dr. Htay is referring to the accusations reiterated by many of the informants which became widespread in the lead-up to the election: that an NLD victory in 2015 would be detrimental towards Buddhism and lead to the 'Islamisation' of Myanmar. The spread of such accusations and the narrative that the NLD would not be able to protect Buddhism can be characterized using the analytical concept of the *politicization of religion*. This ties back to the paradigm of Buddhism and politics discussed in Chapter Four – that political leaders have long been seen as responsible for ensuring the sāsana (the Buddha's teaching). If we see the attacks on the NLD for not adequately respecting Buddhism in light of this narrative, it is clear that Burmese political parties operate within deep-rooted traditional conceptions of the responsibility of the state for protecting the sāsana. The 'politicization of religion' in 2015 therefore does not refer to bringing religion into the electoral space (as politicians in Myanmar have for a long time appealed to Buddhist sources of legitimacy), but that being a 'protector' of Buddhism has

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[15] As discussed, the connections between the Buddhist nationalist groups and the USDP emerged with the 'Race and Religion' laws of 2015. MaBaTha has previously declared itself neutral in party politics, but in the lead up to the 2015 election MaBaTha endorsed the USDP because they supported these laws and the NLD did not (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 68).

become an explicit theme in electoral mobilization. Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) addressed these accusations towards the NLD, explaining:

> Aung San Suu Kyi has been attacked by the outside and accused of favoring Muslims over others. Aung San Suu Kyi has been under attack by the Myanmar patriotic groups, such as U Wirathu and 969. [Translated from Burmese to English]

While these responses attribute the blame to the opposition groups, the informants' concern highlights how dangerous they deem these attacks to be. This demonstrates that the NLD operates with an awareness of how important it is for a political party to be correctly identified with Buddhism and to be able to convey their ability to protect the sāsana.

One of the monks interviewed highlighted how the military effectively promoted a combined fear of democracy and the decline of Buddhism, saying that:

> …. a secular state is no threat to Buddhism. But […] the rhetoric, the propaganda, from the military is that 'if NLD fully won the election, if Burma becomes a fully functioning democracy, it would turn into a Muslim state'. That really goes into the minds of the general public. People really worry what would happen if NLD wins. What would happen if the country becomes a fully democratic state? Some of the people who buy the military propaganda worry like that. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Many informants stressed that this is a recurring feature in Burmese politics and conflicts between religious and ethnic groups in Myanmar have been encouraged at several points in Burmese history to prevent democratization efforts. According to Aye Myint (female, 40-60, MP), "the easiest way to set fire on Burma is by using the religious tensions". In our conversation Aye Myint seemed desperate to show that these religious tensions are not an inherent problem, explaining:

> Actually, most of the MPs and NLD are members of traditional Buddhism. In the Muslim cases, it's a created problem by other opposition groups. It's not a serious conflict in our people. In my constituency there is a big Tamil community. Ok, we are all the families a very long time harmoniously... So many foreign communities, they think Burmese is very racist. Actually, Burmese people are in general not very racist – we've lived together for a very long time. I'm Burmese – in Chinatown all the Chinese come to welcome me to participate in their township. [Original]

Aye's perspective suggests that the NLD did not want to be faced with issues relating to religion in the 2015 election and maintains that this is a politically orchestrated conflict. However, the claims that Myanmar is not an inherently racist society seems to reflect a somewhat idealized reality, as religion and ethnicity have a history of leading to privilege and oppression for different groups. For example, in his piece *Wages of Burman-ness*, Walton (2013) argues that being ethnically Burman in Myanmar is comparable to being white in the West and entails a privileged position in Burmese society. Walton argues, with certain caveats, that "in the case of Myanmar, race and ethnicity are functionally similar with regard to access to power and privilege" (Walton, 2013, p. 4). Regardless, while claims that Myanmar is not a racist society may be empirically false, the findings support the existing research that argues that religion was brought to the forefront of the 2015 election by the USDP and the military.

7.5.1 The 'Conflicts in Rakhine'

According to the informants, the 'politicization of religion' in the 2015 election was spurred by one important issue: the 'conflict in Rakhine'. The 'conflict in Rakhine' is a widely used term for what is internationally known as the 'Rohingya crisis.' The Rohingya are a group of Muslims who have lived in the Rakhine state in the western part of Myanmar for centuries. However, among the non-Rohingya population there is a widespread belief that these are illegal Bengali immigrants. This narrative has been heavily promoted by the military. Since independence, the Rohingya have often been the subject of governmental persecution and have had extremely limited liberties – they are not included among the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar and do not have citizenship (Gravers, 2013, p. 50). In the lead up to the 2015 election, many Rohingya were forcibly displaced through extreme violence, including burnt villages, mass killings and rape. This most recent violence towards the Rohingya was sparked by attacks from Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (a local separatist militia) against the police. The military responded with actions that have been characterized as genocide and ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This violence against the Rohingya has continued and since the fall of 2017, over 742 000 Rohingya refugees have been forced to flee to Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2019).

As discussed, the Rohingya crisis is an extremely sensitive issue in Myanmar, as demonstrated by the two Reuters journalists who were imprisoned for over 500 days after reporting on the conflict (Lewis & Naing, 2019). Therefore, I was only able to discuss the topic when the

informants themselves brought it up. While the NLD has been internationally (and to some degree domestically) criticized for its complicity in the atrocities against the Rohingya, the findings show that the military used the conflict to accuse the NLD of not adequately defending Buddhism (in comparison to themselves). Myat Thant (male, 40-60, NLD official) explained that the USDP started to bring light to religion in the conflict in Rakhine as part of a political 'game', capturing a perspective shared by several of the informants:

> …in the NLD party there is no discrimination about religion. Actually, you know in Myanmar this kind of religious crisis is a political maneuvering process – I think that. Some of the former experience we have with the military general, when they want to disgrace the democracy they agitate…especially the Muslim issue. This process spread very quickly, they make [the conflict in Rakhine] a game. Actually, they play a trick for the religious crisis, but the problem became worse than they expected. Yesterday there was a video found on Facebook of a Rakhine killing the Burmese – intentionally broadcast on Facebook. [Original]

The video that Myat refers to here reflects an important dynamic in this conflict – the role of social media and 'fake news'. Burmese people have only gotten access to social media since liberalization, following years of military restrictions. Facebook has become immensely popular and influential in Myanmar. As my research assistant explained to me, "many people in Myanmar do not know the difference between the news and Facebook". Facebook posts and videos began to circulate widely conveying anti-Rohingya propaganda, including videos depicting violence committed by Muslims against Buddhists. These posts were coming from the official accounts of military leaders, as well as fake profiles posing as fans of pop stars, beauty bloggers and regular Burmese citizens (Mozur, 2018). Facebook's head of cybersecurity attributed this propaganda and the 'trolls' behind it to the military, saying the company had found "clear and deliberate attempts to covertly spread propaganda that were directly linked to the Myanmar military" (cited by Mozur, 2018).

Both Myat Thant's and other informants' responses support existing evidence that the blame for the Rohingya crisis falls on the military. The quote above also shows that Myat thinks this was meant primarily as a way to attack the NLD. Instigating conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims means creating unstable conditions to weaken democratization efforts, and thus the military can make the claim that it is necessary in order to provide 'security'. It also allows the

military to demonstrate a strong stance against Muslims – presenting itself as the 'protector' of the sāsana.

A particularly notable aspect of the informants' discussion of the 'conflict in Rakhine' is that the NLD saw this as an effective attack. This can be seen as a case of what Monica Duffy Toft (2013) characterizes as *religious outbidding*, whereby political elites "reframe secular conflicts as religious conflicts" (p. 10). As is the case in Myanmar, Toft argues that this often occurs in transitional regimes, to mobilize those who identify with the religious group purportedly being threatened. The military (and the USDP) presented itself as the only group which could protect Buddhist Burmese people.

While international media has criticized Aung San Suu Kyi for her handling of the Rohingya crisis, Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) defended the NLD, promoting the same rhetoric as both Aung San Suu Kyi and the military that this is not a religious conflict:

> [Another] challenging thing…is the Rakhine state. The people of the international community are trying to portray the problems as a crisis related to race and religion – but it is not. It is a problem of illegal immigration…not something related to race and religions. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Aung San Suu Kyi's (and Htun's) decision to implicitly defend the military's role in this conflict could be rooted in fears about the precarious nature of the democracy movement in Myanmar (and a hesitance to oppose the military). However, it is widely believed in Myanmar that this is actually a conflict related to immigration, which could be Htun's genuine perspective. Regardless, in light of the other findings, we can infer that there is a benefit for the NLD leadership to assert that the crisis in Rakhine is not religious as it allows them to maintain the dominant narrative of 'no discrimination' to the international community. I was nonetheless surprised by Htun's assertation that this is a conflict based on immigration, as this is known to be empirically false (Ibrahim, 2016).

Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation) took a different stance from the aforementioned informants and was very critical of the NLD's response to the conflict. He was disappointed, as he believed it to represent an undemocratic development of the NLD:

The last thing, which is very important, is diverting from democratic values and human right values when it comes to the Rohingya or Muslims in the Rakhine state issue. Whatever you may name it, it is about diverging from the democratic value. So, [I am] very disappointed in NLD action in this area… [Aung San Suu Kyi] could use her image to protect the minorities and to fight against the dictatorship – but she failed to do so. She was too much afraid to use her power to protect the minority and fight against the dictatorship. Consequently, she got a lot of condemnation, a lot of disrespect, not only from the international community, but also from the inside. That is why [I feel] very sad – [I am] a fan of The Lady. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Unlike the NLD informants, Thet echoes the international condemnation of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in this situation, reflecting that it was an active choice on the part of the NLD to not defend the Rohingya. As previously mentioned, Thet saw this as a clear departure from the democratic ideals of the NLD. Unfortunately, more information could not be gathered on this subject due to its sensitive nature, and we cannot know the political constraints facing the NLD leadership given the continuous possibility of a return to complete military power. However, the Rohingya crisis arguably demonstrates a 'realpolitik' stance, where the NLD's attempt to hold onto political power came at the cost of their human rights ideals. It also stands in contrast to the claims of 'lifting' all religions.

7.5.2   National Politics in a Local Constituency

National politics in the 2015 election revolved around a rhetoric of being a party that defends Buddhism, and several informants explained how this also played out at the local level. Aye Myint (female, 40-60, MP) provided an example from her own experience. As a member of the Yangon Regional Parliament, Aye represents a township with a large Hindu Tamil community, as well as Muslims. In the past years, Rohingya refugees have been detained in her township as part of what she believes to be a military-backed human trafficking scheme.[16] This has posed a multitude of problems in her constituency, including challenges with providing adequate food and shelter (the Rohingya were held in the townhall) and security concerns. During this time, a series of fake Facebook profiles of Muslim men appeared, issuing threats against her. Aye

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[16] Human trafficking is widespread in Myanmar and ethnic minority groups are especially vulnerable (Ibrahim, 2016; Han, 2017).

believes that the military stood behind these profiles and attacks to distract from the ongoing human trafficking.

Aye was visibly distressed as she talked about the widespread backlash she received for the detainment of Rohingya in her township. She has been criticized by human rights organizations for the treatment of the Rohingya in her community and for being Islamophobic while at the same time is often attacked by the USDP and its supporters for defending Muslims over Buddhists (by providing shelter for the Rohingya). In addition, when photos are taken of her with Tamil men from her constituency, she is accused of helping the Hindu Tamil community over Buddhists. The range of criticism Aye has received is arguably a microcosm of the NLD's position in the wider political context, where the international community has largely admonished the NLD for its handling of the atrocities in Rakhine, whereas the USDP has used the conflict to present itself as the protecting the sāsana. Aye's story demonstrates that the USDP has deployed its attacks in the name of religion against the NLD at all levels, consistently relying on similar techniques and rhetoric to target the NLD, from Aung San Suu Kyi down to local MPs.

7.5.3 Rising Islamophobia in Myanmar

The politicization of religion and the Rohingya crisis can also be assessed in light of the rising Islamophobia in Myanmar in the past decade. While there is a history of 'Indophobia' in Myanmar, political liberalization and vast social and economic changes resulted "in a strong ethno-religious counter-reaction" (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 63). This has particularly targeted Muslims and Frydenlund (2017) has argued that "these collective fears are tied to larger concerns about 'Islamisation' of Myanmar and the possible eradication of Buddhism" (p. 63).

In the past decade, there has been extreme violence against Muslim communities (most notably the Rohingya), encouraged by the rising Islamophobic Buddhist nationalist groups. The most prominent of these is MaBaTha (the Burmese acronym for 'The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) and its figurehead U Wirathu. As explained previously, these groups, led by monks, have in recent years begun to actively engage in the political sphere, such as promoting the 'Race and Religion laws' of 2015, which included abolishing polygamy and regulating the marriage of Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, intended to target the Muslim population. Muslims in Myanmar experience a host of other forms of discrimination

than direct violence, and a central message of the Buddhist nationalist groups is to stop Buddhists from buying products from Muslim shops.

It is important to note that Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar construct their identity specifically against the Muslim 'other'. While discrimination is largely experienced by all religious minorities in Myanmar, there is a 'hierarchy of oppression'. Christians and Hindus in Myanmar are discriminated against (such as limitations to building new churches and temples), but Muslims are even more so, and of all the Muslims the Rohingya have suffered the most. This was also seen in my interviews with NLD members. For example, visiting Hindu temples was referred to in several interviews as a preeminent example of the fact that the NLD respects all religious traditions. This is despite the fact that Hindus only makes up an estimated 0.5 percent of the Burmese population, unlike the significantly larger Christian and Muslim populations (Stokke, 2019, p. 2). Hindus in the Burmese context fit into the *model minority* trope, which is often promoted by exclusionary or nativist politicians, whereby one minority group is elevated as an example of the ideal behavior of minorities, and used as a point of comparison with 'threatening' minorities (Ghosh, 2015; Buck, 2017). Elevating the idealized minority allows political actors to present themselves as pluralistic (Buck, 2017, p. 2808). However, this trope of the 'exemplary other' is extremely problematic, as the model minority is always presented as a comparison to the 'threatening other' and provides a hierarchy where the dominant group (here the Buddhists) are still on top (Buck, 2017, p. 2807).

While some informants (such as Aye Myint) worked hard to convey that Burmese people are not inherently prejudiced, other NLD informants made comments critical of Muslims. For example, Myant That (male, 40-60, NLD official) stressed that there are ties between Muslims in the Rakhine state and ISIS. While this may be true, Myant brought this up unprompted. Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) complained about Buddhist women marrying Muslim men for financial reasons, arguing that 'protections' should be established to control this. This reflects a common theme in the Buddhist nationalist rhetoric of the victimization of Buddhist women at the hands of Muslim men (Frydenlund, 2019a, p. 295). This is interesting given that the 'Race and Religion' laws of 2015 (which the NLD voted against) were in part intended to prevent Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men. While it was not my impression that any of the informants were active supporters of the Buddhist nationalist groups, comments such as these denote a political culture where elements of the Islamophobic discourse have been normalized

and are broadly accepted. Combined with examples suggesting that Hindus are the 'model minority', this indicates that the NLD abides by the narrative promoted by Burmese Buddhist nationalists that Islam is the religion that most significantly presents a threat to Buddhist Myanmar.

The accounts given of the politicization of religion are fitting with the previous work done by Walton (2017) on how the military has tried to position itself as the protector of Buddhism and Frydenlund (2017) on how the USDP came to be aligned with the Buddhist nationalist groups in the lead-up to the 2015 election. While the informants argue that religion was 'politicized' by the USDP in the lead-up to the 2015 election, research shows that there is a longer tradition in Burmese politics of presenting oneself as the protector of Buddhism (Hayward, 2015; Schober, 2011). The more interesting finding is how the NLD responded to these attacks and the 'religious outbidding'. The next chapters will discuss the specific policy choices that the NLD used to defend itself against the attacks. However, what is clear from the findings is that the NLD saw this as a legitimate attack that could have detrimental consequences. As is often the case with religious outbidding, the USDP has forced the NLD into an 'unwanted counter-identity' (Toft, 2013, p. 18). The findings show that the NLD saw this as something it needed to defend itself against – not by promoting freedom of religion or human rights – but by highlighting that this is a false claim.

The NLD's narrative that the party had to defend itself was criticized by Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation), who was extremely frustrated by the NLD's complaints that religion was politicized by the opposition:

> … there are certain risks in anything you want to do. The time has come for the NLD to decide how to manage this political risk of the extreme groups…There is always a possibility, a way, for the NLD to handle the situation and win the heart of the people. These Muslim minority groups, they have been underrepresented for so many years. So, what they expected from the NLD is not too much – just sympathy for their grievances. That is all. That is what the NLD needs to do…And also there are still remaining questions that the NLD needs to answer – what kind of political party does the NLD want to see itself as? In Germany it was not the German people who imprisoned and tortured the Jews – it was Hitler who led this movement – who initiated and executed all of these cruelties. So, it

is up to political leaders to decide what kind of political party they want to be. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Thet's response supports the argument that while the NLD presents itself as passive in this context and responding by necessity, this was an active political choice, which came at the detriment of religious minorities and previous emphasis on human rights and has come to define the party.

7.6 Muslim Electoral Representation

The NLD made a consequential policy decision to defend itself against the USDP attack that the NLD prioritizes Muslims over Buddhists by withdrawing its Muslim candidates for the 2015 election. This was a significant shift, as the NLD has had several important Muslim members since its inception. The most notable is U Ko Ni, a lawyer who was a close advisor of Aung San Suu Kyi. He was the one responsible for finding the legal loopholes that allowed her to get the position of State Counsellor after being banned from the presidency. U Ko Ni was shot at the Yangon airport in 2017 and the assassination is thought to be tied to ex-military officers (Moe, Ives & Nang 2017; Lasseter, 2018). Reflecting the political tensions relating to religion, Aung San Suu Kyi did not attend U Ko Ni's funeral, though they had been very close (Moe et al., 2017). The NLD's decision to remove its Muslim candidates must therefore been seen as a significant shift given the previous prominence of Muslims in the NLD. It is important to note that the USDP has previously had several Muslim candidates, including a Rohingya candidate in 2012. This shift in representation and the discourse of the USDP provides further support for the previously discussed 'politicization of religion'.

Religious identity is not a private matter in Myanmar and there is a long tradition of codifying religion and ethnicity, such as in national identification cards (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60).[17] One of the informants showed me the government issued booklet of candidates standing for election in 2015, where candidate names were listed next to their party and their religion. Therefore, in the lead-up to the 2015 election, several news sources could report that the NLD had not nominated any Muslim candidates and had withdrawn the Muslim candidates who had

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[17] See Frydenlund (2017) for a discussion on the historical codification of ethnic and religious identity in Myanmar.

previously been listed. One of the Muslim politicians told The Irrawaddy (a leading English-language newspaper) that "around 15-16 Muslim people applied to be candidates, but the central committee did not choose them" and that they did not receive a formal explanation for this (Hindstrom, 2015).

7.6.1 Who Was Responsible?

In response to questions of *who* was responsible for the withdrawal of the Muslim candidates, the informants gave conflicting responses. Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) was clear that this was a tactical decision made by the party leadership. Dr. Khin Htay (male, 60-80, NLD official) gave an ambiguous set of answers as to who was responsible and began by indicating that this was a decision made by the local NLD offices, while later acknowledging that this decision came from the CEC. The following exchange is interesting in its entirety as Dr. Htay had to be pushed to clarify, as he kept returning to the NLD stance of 'no discrimination and no marginalization':

But there were no Muslim MP's running in 2015 were there? Any Muslim candidates?

Yeah, yeah. We have no discrimination and no marginalization. Welcome, welcome. But that would totally depend on the voting of the township selection committee.

So, these choices didn't come from the central committee? The local offices decided who would be running?

In 2015 there was much less amount of Muslim MPs in the NLD – its right. But we have no discrimination and no marginalization, its only our decision of the township committees.

Ok so none of these decisions are made by the central committees? They are based on local decisions of what happens to be best?

In our party constitutions we always are prioritize the will of the grassroot peoples. But the final decision totally depends on the Central Executive Committee.

So, at the end the decisions are made by the CEC?

Yeah, decisions of the selection of the MP candidates. Final decision making is totally dependent on CEC, but most of the decisions are at the grassroot levels. [Original]

This interaction with Dr. Htay indicates that he is aware that this decision is contentious and therefore wants to maintain the narrative that the NLD does not discriminate and shift the blame away from the party leadership.

Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) attributed lack of Muslim candidates to the lower levels of the party, saying that "the village levels the selection committee makes sure that no Muslim candidates have been selected…it is not the policy of the party, it is the sentiment of the general NLD members at the very, very bottom level". Hla's candid discussion of other topics indicates that this was what she genuinely believed had occurred. In contrast, Aye Myint (female, 40-60, MP) said that it was her impression that the reason there were no Muslim candidates was that they themselves chose not to apply for the positions since they understood "the situation the country was in" and that if they had participated the NLD would have received even more attacks from the opposition groups.

It is arguably fair to assume from the responses that the decision to not have Muslim candidates in 2015 was made by the CEC. While the contrasting responses may be a reflection of the lack of transparency within the party, it also demonstrates a sensitivity that continues to surround the topic and awareness that this is conflicting with previous claims of 'no discrimination'.

7.6.2 Justifications for the Withdrawal

A consistent explanation for why there were no Muslim candidates was that it was a 'temporary' decision rooted in the sensitive political situation at the time. The NLD members explained that this was a justifiable defense against the aforementioned accusations that the NLD favors Muslims over Buddhists. None of the NLD members interviewed were critical of this decision (regardless of who they saw as responsible), though they explained that this was a loss for the party since the potential Muslim candidates were skilled politicians. Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) said that those who were responsible for the withdrawal felt "very sad", but maintained that the decision was necessary, as "the NLD party had to make the decision, not because the party wanted to but because of the political constraint. They do not have any alternative".

I was surprised to find that a frequent response from the NLD informants was that there was widespread understanding that this decision was necessary, including from the Muslim candidates. Htun went on to say:

Everybody showed empathy because this is not likely to happen in the long run. This is just temporary as a response to the current political constraints. The Muslim candidates give understanding to the party. They have not become adversaries of the party. They are still friends with the mother party.

So, what conditions would have to change where it would be ok for the NLD [to include Muslim candidates]?

Once we solve the Rakhine issues. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Myat Thant (male, 40-60, NLD official) also highlighted that the defense against these attacks does not mean that the NLD is, or should be seen as, a 'Buddhist party', and that the Muslim members sympathized:

Do you think that people see it [the NLD] as a Buddhist party because there are no Muslim candidates and it is predominantly Buddhist?

No, I don't think so. Because we don't accept the Muslims at the present is because the current issue is very sensitive […] That's why, to avoid unnecessary religious conflict. But even in our parties there's a lot of Muslims….and no problem. They understand why we don't choose them as our candidates, because this is a very fragile situation and fragile problem. [Original]

These responses indicate that the NLD takes limited responsibility for this decision, suggesting that they were forced into the decision. The party line seems to have been to adopt a defensive stance and make policy choices to demonstrate that the NLD adequately respects Buddhism. While this is presented by the NLD as an unavoidable political reality, this is clearly a decision that contradicts its 'neutrality' in issues relating to religion. This suggests that the NLD wants to be seen in the eyes of the Buddhist Burmese people as a party which cannot be accused of prioritizing any other religion over Buddhism.

7.6.3   A Response from a Muslim Candidate

I was fortunate to interview one of the Muslim NLD candidates whose nomination was withdrawn - Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation). Thet never explicitly said that he had been removed as a candidate during the interview but news reports from 2015 cited him as one of the leading NLD politicians who had been withdrawn for being Muslim. He did say that he is

currently not a member of the NLD, and referred to "disagreements" with the NLD in 2015. Thet is an important figure in Burmese politics as an important member of the '88 Generation' (those who led the 1988 protests) and as the head of a notable pro-democracy organization.

I met Thet at his organization's headquarters in Yangon, and he offered a very different perspective from the NLD informants on the lack of Muslim candidates. He explained that he could to a certain extent understand why the NLD made this decision. However, he was clearly very disappointed with the NLD, saying that:

> Myanmar has a lot of different 'colors' – identities – so when you consider your political and election campaign policy, you have to take everybody's opinion into account. So, what NLD failed to do in 2015 was the inclusion of Muslim candidates in their list. They purposely removed all of the Muslim candidates' names from their candidate lists. That's where it diverged from [my] political and democratic values. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Unlike the NLD informants, Thet does not see this so much as a political 'necessity' as an active choice, detrimental to democratic values. When I asked him about the NLD claim that this decision was made as a reflection of the Burmese people and that the NLD did not think it would have won the election if this decision had not been made, he became annoyed:

> In one word: I say that 'ridiculous' is enough to respond to your question. If the NLD people that you interviewed said 'this is just a reflection of public perception' that they do not chose any Muslim members in the election candidate list [it] is complete nonsense. Very ridiculous. The word ridiculous is enough to represent the NLD defense…what is the job of the political party? Is the party leading or following the people? […] The core duty of the party is to lead the people from wrong to the right…it is an outright wrong defense that they use – 'a reflection of the people's opinions.' It is an outright lie. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Thet clearly disagrees with the NLD members who claim that the Muslim candidates were fully understanding of this decision. Thet also arguably represents a different view of political responsibility within the pro-democracy movement – whereas the NLD informants suggested that unfortunate decisions had to be made for the ultimate aim of winning the election and

promoting democratization, Thet's stance was that this should be secondary to abiding by democratic values.

The decision to withdraw the Muslim candidates in the 2015 election seems to have been thoroughly pragmatic. However, this came at the cost of the NLD's proclaimed stance of religious neutrality. This consequential policy decision is arguably the empirical evidence that Buddhism is unofficially privileged by the NLD.

7.7 Buddhist Constitutionalism

Stepping away from the 2015 election, the informants were asked about how the NLD envisions the ideal legal position of religion, in particular in the constitution. Article 361 of Myanmar's 2008 Constitution declares a "special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union", while Article 362 "recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism as the religions existing in the Union". While Buddhism is not the state religion, scholars have argued that these clauses in the constitution and the ways that the military has privileged Buddhism mean that Buddhism is the *de facto* state religion in Myanmar (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60). While amending the 2008 Constitution is one of the NLD's primary political aims (in particular eliminating the constitutionally mandated power of the military), discussions on the constitutional position of religion in the pro-democracy movement have been "remarkably absent" (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60). This was reflected in the interviews, where the informants were generally not particularly concerned with this matter.

The overarching response from the informants was that, if possible, changing Article 361 (which grants the 'special position' of Buddhism) is unlikely, and largely not considered necessary. Various positions were taken to justify this. Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) defended Article 361 by arguing that each countries' constitution should reflect that states' 'specific needs':

> The constitution has peculiar clauses. In every country there might be a constitution that reflects the needs of the specific country. Myanmar has its own specific needs…America is a country that has a completely different history from Burma, so they are completely ok with a complete secular state. But Myanmar is a different scenario. So, we have different people with a different background and still very fragile democracy, so we need to take many factors into consideration. [Translated from Burmese to English]

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Hla's response shows that this is not considered a particularly important issue for the NLD. However, from this we also see that Hla believes the protection of Buddhism should lie in the hands of the government to meet Myanmar's 'specific needs', demonstrating a discourse with blurred boundaries between what is necessary for political reasons and for Buddhism itself. This arguably reflects the traditional view that the state is responsible for protecting the sāsana.

Another recurring justification for why amending this article of the constitution is not necessary was that religious freedom *in practice* is what is important. Interestingly, the Muslim informant, Thet Win (male, 40-60, 88 Generation), was one of the advocates of this position:

> [I do] not see too many problems with that clause…What matters more is the implementation of the freedom of religion on the ground. It is much more important. Political rhetoric or discourse, this is much more important. What they implement by law, these are the areas where we need to pay much more attention. Myanmar has a long way to be politically or religiously mature, so according to the current conditions [I] can give full understanding to the constitution and that is completely fine. Because the constitution also stated that the state recognizes Buddhism as a religion with characteristics. At the same time the constitution recognizes the freedom of religions. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Interestingly, even as a Muslim pro-democracy activist, Thet does not seem too concerned with the constitution's special attention to Buddhism. His response reflects the recurring finding that freedom of religion and a constitutional position for Buddhism are not seen as mutually exclusive. However, it is not clear that these can be disaggregated, as Walton (2016) has argued that it was the very constitutional position of Buddhism that provided the legal basis and protection for the 2015 'Race and Religion' laws as not discriminatory, as "their defenders present them as being necessary for the protection of Buddhism" (Walton, 2016b, p. 539).

I was surprised to find that Htun Myat (male, 60-80, CEC) entirely rejected that the constitution outlined a special "position" of Buddhism, but rather asserted that it noted special "features":

> …the constitution stated that Buddhism holds the special features, not the special position. The special feature means only to the Buddhist people, not for the other believers. They might have their own special features that their religions give to them. So, it's very unlikely to be changed. [Translated from Burmese to English]

This response suggests that while other religions groups can receive the 'special features' from the religions themselves, Buddhism needs it from the state. Htun also claimed that Buddhism is already the state religion in Myanmar and therefore he did not see any reason why the minorities would feel subordinated by the clause. Given the contentious political history of attempts to establish Buddhism as a state religion (as demonstrated by U Nu's removal from power in 1962) perhaps Htun is referring to 'state religion' as the majority religion in Myanmar, as we can assume he knows that it is not formally so. Regardless, his reading of these clauses, and denial that they denote a 'special position', may be indicative of the NLD not wanting to distract from their ultimate constitutional aim of removing the military's power. However, that Htun claims this clause only applies to the Buddhist population arguably demonstrates that Buddhism benefits from constitutional and legal frameworks, and a blurred boundary between what is political and what is religious. Htun's response shows a conception of the 'religious' as tied to the 'political' whereby a legally mandated position is necessary for the sāsana.

Arguably these responses show that the NLD abides by a form of *Buddhist constitutionalism*. The concept of Buddhist constitutionalism has been developed by Benjamin Schonthal (2018) in the case of Sri Lanka, by studying efforts to constitutionally strengthen the status of Buddhism. Iselin Frydenlund (2019) demonstrates how this is also seen in the 2008 Constitution in Myanmar and therefore part of the military's ideology. Buddhist constitutionalism across Southeast Asia involves particular iterations of the relationship between Buddhism and public law. My findings show that the NLD also fits into this framework, as the NLD does not reject a legally privileged position for Buddhism, and at points this is deemed necessary for protecting Buddhism itself.

7.8   Discussions on Religion Within the NLD

The role of religion for the NLD includes understanding if and how religion has been discussed *within* the NLD and what different perspectives can be identified within the larger body of the party. My findings indicate that conversations on religion within the party have been relegated to the informal sphere. In response to being asked if there were any discussions about religion within the NLD, Htun Myat's (male, 60-80, CEC) position was firm, stating that "there has been no conversation about religious issues inside the party". However, this was disputed by other NLD members, who explained that while there were no official discussions about religious issues, this did occur informally. In the realm of the 'informal' discussions, several

respondents pointed to varying perspectives among different groups within the party. They explained that differences among NLD members exist, especially in regard to the view of Muslims. Myant That (male, 40-60, NLD official) demonstrated such an internal division:

> *Is there a lot of conversation in the NLD about [religious issues]?*
>
> Actually, not loudly conversation but we have informal discussion…
>
> *Do you have the sense that there is a lot of disagreement within the NLD or do most people agree?*
>
> Actually, there is no…that kind of issue in the NLD. But even in the NLD there are two classes – one is the conservative and one is the educated reformists, like our generation. So, we don't fear about the Muslims or the religious threat, we don't accept it. But some in the conservative NLD, they have some kind of fear of the Muslims. [Original]

Aye Myint (female, 40-60, MP) made a similar reflection about her constituency and those who are susceptible to Buddhist nationalist rhetoric:

> *So do you think that in the 2020 election these political groups* [the Buddhist nationalist groups] *are going to keep trying to use religion?*
>
> Yes. They point out that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are against Buddhism.
>
> *Do you think that people believe that?*
>
> Yes, so many people can believe that kind of message. In the city level, educated people, they can decide what is wrong and what is right. But so many people on the village level – not education, no experience, very narrow-minded people. This is the true situation in our country. They target that kind of person. They use the monk to deliver hate speech and discrimination. [Original]

Hla Soe (female, 40-60, MP) also discussed how different perspectives on religion can be seen 'hierarchically' across the different levels of the party:

> There is no official guidelines coming from above – from the top levels of the NLD. But there is some unwritten, feelings, negative sentiments towards Muslims at the very bottom levels. [Translated from Burmese to English]

Overall, this data demonstrates that while there has not been any formal debate about religion in the party at large, within the informal space of the NLD there exists several ideological factions and perspectives. These responses can be understood within the strict party hierarchy and the value placed on the views of Aung San Suu Kyi. That there has been no formal inter-party discussions on religion is perhaps a reason why the informants could not point to a singular formal party stance on religion.

7.9 Sangha Support for the NLD

Understanding the role of religion for the NLD also requires looking at how the party engages with the Buddhist monastic community – the Sangha. During the fieldwork I was able to interview two monks who are affiliated with the NLD which allowed me to explore the relationship between the NLD and the Sangha.

As discussed in Chapter Five, monks in Myanmar have had an important role in politics, with various political allegiances, for centuries. While the approximately 400,000 monks (and 43,000 nuns) living in Myanmar today are disenfranchised, certain groups of monks have increased their influence in politics since liberalization (following years of repression and regulation following the monk-led protests).[18] This is demonstrated by the increasingly close relationship between MaBaTha (the leading Buddhist nationalist group) and the military/USDP. While the Buddhist nationalist monks have developed influence with the military, historically the pro-democracy movement has had a close relationship with parts of the Sangha, as seen during the 1988 uprisings and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Walton (2016a) has argued that the Sangha had an important role in forming the narrative of the pro-democracy movement, as they could "shape the public discourse on politics and democracy as an extension of their role as guardians of public morality" (p. 56). The interviews with the monks were therefore important for understanding the relationship between the Sangha and the NLD.

The monks I interviewed, U Kyaung and U Mingun, are from two different monasteries affiliated with the NLD, and they were referred to me by NLD leaders. Both are older men, who are important figures in their monasteries, demonstrated by the visible subservience of the other

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[18] From here onwards, I will be referring to 'monks' as a catch-all term for monks and nuns because Burmese nuns are not formally part of the Sangha and there are many fewer of them.

monks present during the interviews. They both seemed hardened by years of suppression at the hands of the military, including serving many years as political prisoners. They were well-educated on international affairs and American politics and eloquent in their political descriptions and analysis. I met both men at their respective monasteries. U Kyaung's monastery was in the middle of Yangon, in-between shops and outdoor restaurants. I learnt that several of the restaurants surrounding the monastery were regular meeting places for NLD members and political activists, and I was lucky enough to join such meetings on several occasions for tea and conversations about politics. The walls of U Kyaung's monastery are lined with posters of Aung San Suu Kyi and protesting monks (see figure below).

Figure 4. Two of the posters hung up in U Kyaung's monastery. Left: a monk participating in a protest by 'overturning the alms bowl.' Right: Aung San Suu Kyi. Source: Author's own.

In contrast, U Mingun's monastery is a large compound in the city suburbs, so upon entering one feels like one is leaving the city and entering a village. This monastery was bereft of visual indicators of political involvement, and when I arrived I was met by a dozen-or-so young monks kicking a football. U Mingun explained that his monastery is a meeting place for former political prisoners, and the benefits of its seclusion and privacy were apparent.

7.9.1 Perspectives on a Monk's Political Responsibility

I began each interview with the monks by asking them what they see as appropriate monastic involvement in politics. This is important because many monks across the Buddhist world, as well as laypeople, are strongly opposed to monks engaging in 'politics'. In Myanmar many

important monks have at different points "insisted that proper monastic comportment demanded detachment from political activities" (Walton, 2017, p. 140). Walton (2017) and Kawanami (2016) explain that resistance to monastic engagement in politics is rooted in beliefs that it would detract from their moral authority to be involved in such worldly affairs. This has led to the ideal of the "politically 'neutral' monk" (Frydenlund, 2005b, p. 13).

The extent to which it is deemed appropriate for a monk to be involved with politics is contextual. All monks are expected to abide by the *vinaya* – the monastic discipline and rules – but are also influenced by local traditions and policies (Frydenlund, 2016, p. 100). While the *vinaya* mandates that monks detach themselves from 'worldly' matters, they are allowed to engage in such matters if the sāsana is being threatened (Walton, 2017, p. 139). Therefore, strains of 'modernist' and 'socially engaged' Buddhism have emerged which are "more accepting of organized religion entering the political arena" (Larsson, 2016, p. 86). This is the basis of justification that MaBaTha monks use for engaging in politics, where Myanmar as a country is seen as "inextricably linked with the vitality of the *sāsana*" (Walton, 2017, p. 148). Monks in Myanmar, Thailand and Bhutan are disenfranchised, though this is not due to a militant secularism of the state so much as in a desire on the part of the government to 'protect' the Sangha since "the principle of universal suffrage is perceived to pose a threat to the sanctity of the monastic order" (Larsson, 2016, p. 92). On the other hand, monks in Sri Lanka are openly involved in politics and have even formed their own political party (Bodu Bala Sena). The issue regarding monastic participation in politics (both within Myanmar and in the broader context) is determining is what is deemed appropriate within the monks' moral authority and what constitutes 'politics'.

In Myanmar, it has been widely believed that monks should not be 'political'. However, at important conjunctures in recent Burmese history, monks have been at the forefront of opposition to military rule – such as during the 2007 Saffron Revolution. However, the literature shows that this was deemed a moral imperative for the monks. The protesting monks were "worried about the decay and decline of Burmese society" and for these monks "democracy and *dhamma* (the doctrine) are closely related" (Gravers, 2013, p. 49). Burmese monks have also spoken and written in ways that "either have multiple interpretations or contain resonance with previous discussions of Buddhism and politics in Myanmar" (Walton, 2016a, p. 63). A notable example is Sitagu Sayadaw, a famous Burmese monk, with ties to both the NLD and

the military, who spoke to the United Nations in 2011 to discuss the Buddhist concept of '10 perfections' necessary for political leaders (Walton, 2016a, p. 64). Monks who came out in implicit (or sometimes explicit) opposition to the military have been important in light of the narrative promoted by the military and fears among Burmese Buddhists that "democracy is not compatible with either Buddhism or Burmese culture" (Walton, 2016a, p. 66). Monks who have engaged in politics in Myanmar have lent moral authority to the pro-democracy movement.

Regulation of Burmese monks has been strict under the military. The Sangha in Myanmar is formally overseen by the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (commonly referred to as MaHaNa) which was established by the military to ensure that monks are abiding by the vinaya. However, MaHaNa has also regulated monks' participation in politics (influenced by the will of the military), including disrobing monks that oppose the military, and therefore has little legitimacy in the eyes of many Burmese monks. A result, which has also been seen across the Buddhist world, is the accusation of being a 'fake monk' (also known as a 'bogus monk').[19] In Myanmar, and in other places, governments have deemed individuals as 'fake monks' at times when monks oppose them. However, the military also has developed a relationship with the Buddhist nationalist monks, suggesting a greater acceptance of some forms of monks engaging in the political sphere. Because monks in Myanmar are largely expected to avoid politics, I was curious how the NLD-affiliated monks justified their relationship with the NLD now that Myanmar has moved into electoral politics, and the NLD is no longer merely the face of the opposition to the military.

U Mingun and U Kyaung shared similar views of their position and responsibility as monks in Burmese politics: while some political engagement is justified and necessary, they cannot tell their followers *who* to support. They referred to different tales of the Buddha himself as justification for participating in politics. U Kyaung talked about a time when the Buddha resolved a conflict over access to a river to justify his participation in Burmese politics. U Mingun argued that a monk can participate in politics if it means "trying to reduce the violence,

[19] The designation of 'fake monks' does certainly hold merit in some cases, such as the 2002 case of Chinese men dressing up as Theravāda monks to collect money from tourists in exchange for "false and expensive fortune-telling services" (Borchert, 2016, p. 12).

trying to help the country stabilize [and] trying to help build peace within the state". With this notion of what constitutes politics, the monks explained that they were justified.

They also attributed their participation in politics to their close relationship with lay people. U Mingun explained that monks' political perspectives are formed by their everyday conversations with their supporters when they are collecting their donations. Both monks told me that their duty to continue to promote the Buddha's teaching is dependent on donations from the civilians, which has been hindered the by economic hardship and suppression of civilians from the government. U Kyaung describes this as:

> When the civilian donors face economic hardship, [we] can't be silent, [we] need to address their grievances. That is the motivation for [us] to participate – in search for more justice, in search for more liberty, in search for more prosperity for [the] donations. [Translated from Burmese to English]

These explanations show that the monks consider their political engagement as being a necessary part of their overarching duties given the current conditions in Myanmar.

Given their conceptions of what they deem appropriate participation in politics, I asked the men what political action means in practice. They explained that historically this has meant participating in uprisings against the military regimes, including marching and boycotting donations from the military (as seen in the Saffron Revolution). U Mingun also gave the example of the uprisings of the 1990s. According to U Mingun, during this period there were extremely high levels of violence towards civilians (including poisonings and beheadings), and he recounted the monks biking around Myanmar as a security force to protect civilians (there has often been a hesitance from the predominantly Buddhist military forces to hurt monks). These monks believe that their elevated position as part of the Sangha includes responsibilities to protect their civilian followers.

Both U Mingun and U Kyaung made it clear that there were limits to what extent a monk can engage in politics. Both were forceful in telling me that they would never explicitly tell lay people who to vote for. When discussing the monks who explicitly tell their followers who to vote for, U Mingun disapprovingly said:

> …as a principled Buddhist monk, the monks need to be neutral in the political rivalry. If you side with the NLD party, it is very likely for you to be supporting the NLD whatever decision they make. It can also ruin the monk's principles, integrity, etc. So, taking sides with a political party is not a good thing for a monk. [Translated from Burmese to English]

While both monks are *affiliated* with the NLD, each made it clear that they do not think it is right to engage explicitly in *electoral* politics. This reflects a conception of politics that does not necessarily include voting or partisan support. Both U Mingun and U Kyaung scoffed at the "USDP monks" and those who publicly promote a party. This suggests that monks are walking a thin line between supporting political changes they see as morally right and being a 'political monk' (which is used as pejorative term to describe monks who are seen as inappropriately involved in 'worldly affairs'). These blurred boundaries suggest a tension between the ideal of monks avoiding direct political support and the reality of mobilizing for a moral imperative. This reflects studies on the Sangha in Sri Lanka. Frydenlund (2005) found that for many Buddhists in Sri Lanka the ideal was that monks should be politically 'neutral'. However, this did not mean people thought monks should not speak about national political conflicts, but that monks should not be allied with a political party (though this seems to have shifted with the rise of monks in Sri Lankan political parties). The monks interviewed here are clearly navigating similar dynamics.

U Kyaung told me that he often speaks to lay people about political issues, both in his sermons and in informal conversations. However, he said that he tries to limit himself to educating people on the differences between parties– telling them about what the NLD has achieved and the harm that the USDP has done to the people. However, he was adamant that monks acting correctly should "try to be as neutral as possible in an election campaign" and that he has never told anyone what to do or which party to vote for. U Mingun made a point of describing himself as a "friend to the NLD party" *not* a "pro-NLD monk". He explained that while his responsibility as a monk meant that he was unwilling to *explicitly* support the NLD, he has a strong "personal engagement with the NLD party members". He believes he should have the *possibility* to participate in politics (referring to the disenfranchisement of the Sangha) but that it is inappropriate for him as a monk to make explicit political statements. However, both monks were clear that it was appropriate and necessary for them to, in the words of U Kyaung, "stand

together with the people in their fight for democracy" – again reflecting blurred boundaries between religious and political activities.

7.9.2   NLD Support

While research has been done on the rhetoric of monks in Myanmar to promote democracy (Hayward, 2015; Walton, 2016a), my interest was in how these monks became affiliated with the NLD specifically (versus just being 'pro-democracy' monks). Both monks made it clear during the interviews that their support for the NLD is rooted largely in a single issue – amending the 2008 Constitution to achieve real democratic change – and that supporting the NLD is the best way to do this. U Mingun's personal relationship with the NLD arose after being imprisoned together with NLD activists, but he explained that:

> The only thing that matters is to change the constitution. If the NLD is trying to change the constitution [we] will side with the NLD. If the military proposes to change the 2008 constitution [we] will be with the military. So, it is not about the person, it is about the essence of the decision. [Translated from Burmese to English]

U Kyaung explained that his support for the NLD comes from that "democracy and the teachings of the Buddha go hand-in-hand", saying that:

> The NLD is trying to amend the 2008 constitution, which is very undemocratic. That is why it should be removed and the constitution needs to be changed as soon as possible. The NLD is trying to implement the process so the monastery is trying to give a hand to what the NLD is trying to do. [Translated from Burmese to English]

These quotes show that these monks' support for the NLD is largely rooted in their desire for democratization – to which the 2008 Constitution poses the greatest barrier. Given that the NLD has been the hegemonic pro-democracy force in Myanmar, the monks' support for the NLD seems like a pragmatic decision to most effectively support democratization.

The ways in which the monks have supported the NLD has taken different forms. U Kyaung described two forms of relationships that his monastery has with outside organizations – social and political. While the 'social' relationship his monastery has with the NLD is the same as with other organizations (such as partaking in rituals together), he explained that "politically the NLD is the only affiliation that the monastery has". He told me that the monastery does not

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have "any specifically designed mechanism or procedure to support the NLD" but that they support the NLD by helping out at its rallies and attending NLD speeches. U Mingun gave a similar explanation. In addition, his monastery has become an important meeting point for former NLD political prisoners. He said that pre-liberalization his monastery was under strict military surveillance, but now politicians can come to the monastery more freely (though there is still a chance they are under surveillance). This arguably shows that the monasteries' form of political support is two-fold. Firstly, by attending NLD events, the monks add a moral authority to the NLD. This is important since in the Theravāda moral universe in Myanmar, political authority is closely tied to the impression of Buddhist authority (Walton, 2017, p. 12). Secondly, the monks have helped facilitate discussion and activism within the NLD because of certain freedoms granted the Sangha by the military, which is especially important given the limited political freedom in Myanmar.

As with the Rohingya crisis, social media has also become increasingly important for the monks. U Mingun explained that Myanmar has entered a "social media era" and with this "the role and the patterns of monks participating in politics has changed". Walton (2016) has shown how the spread of new forms of communication technology in the past decade have made monastic teachings more accessible to the Burmese population, and "watching DVDs of monks preaching is part of many people's daily religious practice" (Walton, 2016a, p. 57).With the rise of social media, the direct access for monks to a wide array of followers has become even more expansive.[20] This has also been an important part of the rise of Buddhist nationalists, as monks such as the Buddhist nationalist U Wirathu are able to easily deliver their political messages to thousands of followers.[21] U Mingun told me that he often posts his political opinions on social media. He explained that while he would not use his platform to explicitly endorse a political party, he posts his "feelings about politics" on social media and criticizes political agendas he does not agree with. It seemed that these monks are quite comfortable discussing politics on social media, blurring the boundaries of what is deemed appropriate.

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[20] In the Burmese context 'social media' is generally referring to Facebook.
[21] U Wirathu's Facebook page has been removed on the basis of violating community guidelines by promoting hate speech.

Perhaps this emerging form of communication is deemed separate from giving sermons and therefore a more appropriate forum with which to discuss politics.

7.9.3 The NLD's Use of Religion

The monks were also asked about how they viewed the NLD's relationship with religion. U Kyaung described the NLD as 'pure' when it comes to religion, saying:

> It is not strange that the USDP used religion in the political fight, because they are willing to sacrifice anything – including religion – for their power. But it is a different story for the NLD. The NLD has never used religion for their party survival. [Translated from Burmese to English]

He supported this argument by explaining that the evidence is that the NLD has never donated money to any monastery *because* of their affiliation to the NLD. He did not deny that the NLD makes donations to monasteries. He also declared that he would support the NLD regardless of whether or not it was led by Buddhists, explaining:

> It is not about people, it is not about political parties, it is not about religion – it is about their action and their belief in the democracy and good for the people…

> …the majority of the Burmese people took refuge in the Buddha, so the monks – their duty is to deliver the message that the Buddha left to the people. It is to do more of the good things, and not to do more of the bad things. It is very simple. So, if the political parties want to use Buddhist rhetoric, it is fine, as long as they encourage people in the spirit of doing good, not of doing bad. [Translated from Burmese to English]

These quotes show that U Kyaung does not see the NLDs engagement with the Sangha as "using" religion, nor is it a problem for Buddhism to feature in political discourse, so long as it is in line with what he deems to be the message of the Buddha.

For this reason, both U Mingun and U Kyaung condemned the monks who support the USDP. They decried them for misusing the word of the Buddha. U Kyaung described the USDP as a cruel organization responsible for atrocities against the people. However, he seemed somewhat sympathetic towards the monks who support USDP, saying that:

The monks who live here in Burma are unsophisticated. They do not have access to modern life and modern knowledge. The military, the USDP, took advantage of the lack of knowledge of the monks and tried to win that kind of monks' support for their party and the military. [Translated from Burmese to English]

U Kyaung dismissed the threats coming from the USDP that if the NLD wins Myanmar will 'turn into a Muslim state'. He pointed to the suppression of Buddhism under British rule, and its survival, and was "very confident that Buddhism will stand as firm as it was before. Even if Burma changes into a fully democratic, secular state". While this is not representative of all the NLD-affiliated monks, it suggests that the push to defend the NLD's respect for Buddhism does not come from its affiliated monks.

7.9.4 Summary

Given the disagreements that U Mingun and U Kyaung have with the Buddhist nationalist and pro-USDP monks, these findings support the recent academic work that designates a complex relationship between the Sangha and politics. This is unlike much previous scholarly work in which "monastic institutions were primarily seen in a duopolistic relationship with the states" (Borchert, 2016, p. 14). Taking a global perspective, they also provide an interesting counterexample to monks which actively engage in electoral politics as well as those that completely reject a political life.

Of particular note, these findings indicate that the monks have a distinct conception of 'political participation' that is tied to moral obligations – supporting the NLD in their fight for democracy. These responses are fitting with Matthew Walton's description:

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'. (Walton, 2016a, p. 57)

That these monks and the NLD have chosen to align denotes a conception of politics that has moral implications, reaffirming the NLD's position in the Theravāda moral universe. The importance of this relationship and the moral authority it gives the NLD arguably contributes to the unofficial privileging of Buddhism for the NLD.

7.10 Concluding Analysis

Returning to the overarching research aim of understanding the NLD's relationship to religion, the findings can be used to outline three hypotheses. We can begin by looking at sub-research question one: *Does the NLD have an official stance on religion?* The findings show that the informants could not uniformly point to a single official position on religion for the NLD. While a written formal stance on religion may exist from the post-liberalization period (though I could not find evidence of it), the inability of any informants to point to one suggests that even if it does exist, it is of little value for how the party operates in reality. Interestingly, this means that Myanmar has a ruling party without an official written stance on religion, despite operating in a context rife with religious conflict. However, terms including 'secular', 'neutral' and 'freedom of religion' were recurring descriptions of the party's stance on religion. We can assume that these responses are indicative of how a larger, albeit limited, political discourse surrounding religion has informed the way NLD members view the party. Given that the informants described limited conversations on religion within the party, these ideas of party identity are perhaps rooted in the larger democratic ideals the party is striving for. I therefore suggest that the NLD envisions itself as a party that is in line with certain 'liberal' democratic ideals. The interchangeable (and at points conflicting) use of terminology associated with this arguably means that the NLD's self-understanding on religion has not been thoroughly developed. The first hypothesis is therefore that the NLD has a self-understanding which is based in values associated with traditional liberal democratic ideals (such as freedom of religion), but that the understandings of what this entail means that it does not serve as a meaningful policy which informs the practices of the party.

The lack of an official stance on religion makes sub-research question two of even greater importance – *how does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?* The findings from this study show that religion has informed and influenced NLD policy decisions in transitional Myanmar. Most notably, while the NLD voted against the 2015 'Race and Religion' laws, which have been widely decried as Islamophobic, the NLD chose to withdraw its Muslim candidates in the 2015 election. This decision should be considered in light of how the NLD publicly partakes in Buddhist rituals and engages with the Sangha and informants' descriptions of Buddhist majoritarianism. Its decision to defend its respect for Buddhism leads to my second hypothesis – that Buddhism is unofficially privileged by the NLD. The justifications for withdrawing

Muslim candidates and publicly engaging with Buddhist rituals and traditions suggest that the NLD's ideals of 'freedom of religion' and 'no discrimination' do not align with the policies of the party. This clearly comes to light when the NLD is being accused of prioritizing Muslims over Buddhists and the party chooses to actively defend its respect for Buddhism through policy choices (withdrawing its Muslim candidates) and its ability to protect the sāsana. My final hypothesis is therefore that the role of religion for the NLD is largely contextual, as it is most clearly seen when the NLD is being attacked for not being able to protect Buddhism in Myanmar. The findings indicate that the current context in Myanmar and the 'politicization of religion' has forced the NLD to reckon with some (perhaps uncomfortable) parts of its identity. The NLD's ideals and perception of its relationship to religion may not have been challenged in a culture which seems relatively tolerant of politicians publicly engaging with religion, but the conflict in Rakhine, the rise of Buddhist nationalism and attacks in the name of religion have pushed the NLD to make consequential decisions with implications for its aforementioned 'secular' identity. Pragmatic decisions were made in order to maximize the chance of winning the 2015 election and challenge military rule.

8 Discussion: Implications for Political Science

The previous chapter presented findings and hypotheses which can improve understandings of the NLD as a political party and Myanmar's political development at large. However, these findings also have implications for the wider field of political science and the study of Buddhism and politics. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the theoretical implications of this case and conduct an examination of the ways traditional theories of political science apply to Buddhist contexts.

Continued research on the relationship between Buddhism and politics is critical given that until the mid-20th century, it had been largely overlooked and at its worst a subject of orientalism and racism. Historical understandings (from the West) of the relationship between Buddhism and politics were heavily influenced by the acclaimed German sociologist Max Weber, who argued that Buddhism is "otherworldly" and "apolitical" (Weber, 1916). The German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch was effective in perpetuating a similar view, positing that while Christianity is concerned with the political, Buddhism "perhaps presents the opposition to the spirit of politics in its most acute form" (Troeltsch, 1923, p. 157). Various formulations of this view of Buddhism were promoted by scholars in the following years and developed into a hegemonic perception, impacted by colonial perspectives. The influences of this assessment of Buddhism and politics seems to remain in popular consciousness in the West. A recent example was the global shock at 'militant monks' in Southeast Asia, which stood in stark contrast to common conceptions of the peaceful, meditating monk, earning U Wirathu (a Burmese Buddhist nationalist monk) the frontpage of TIME Magazine.[22] Furthermore, the view of Buddhism as 'apolitical' has had important policy implications. A notable example is the hesitance of Western governments to engage with monks in political processes where they are an important actor, as was seen in attempts to create peace in Sri Lanka (Frydenlund, 2005b).

The literature on Buddhism from the past half-century has largely moved away from the Weberian view of an 'apolitical' Buddhism and various scholars have demonstrated that this is a thoroughly flawed understanding (including Tambiah, 1976; Harris, 1999, 2016; Borchert,

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[22] Of course, the plight of the Rohingya and the other atrocities promoted by 'militant monks' (though this a problematic term itself) are worthy of much greater attention. However, the problem lies in the reactions (and shock) to monks engaging in politics.

2016; Walton, 2017). This thesis provides support for literature that opposes a Weberian perspective of Buddhism and politics. The case of the NLD demonstrates that Buddhism continues to inform political engagement in Myanmar. This is seen by how Buddhism heavily features in the Burmese political culture – visiting temples and participating in rituals is expected of any Burmese politician. By appealing to Buddhist sources of legitimacy, including aligning with monks such as U Mingun and U Kyaung, the NLD is arguably a modern formulation of a long tradition where political authority is given legitimacy by its relationship to Buddhism. As the NLD continues to publicly engage in Buddhist rituals, historical Buddhist conceptions of political power continue to influence contemporary realities, even as the country democratizes. The NLD worked hard to convince the Burmese people that Buddhism and democracy are compatible. The findings from this thesis reveal that the legacy of this remains strong.

This demonstrates that political scientists should not ignore the religious and ideological roots of contemporary political realities which are inextricably linked in this context. Full appreciation of the ongoing political dynamics in Burmese politics requires constant awareness of how religion informs notions of political participation. This has implications outside of Myanmar and for studies of politics in Buddhist majority contexts. It is my contention that political scientists need to critically examine the ways Buddhism may influence the political environment being studied and political values, even when Buddhism is not the explicit object of study.

This study also shows that contemporary studies of Buddhism and politics need to be cognizant of how traditional Buddhist conceptions of the state as a protector of Buddhism remain strong. As discussed, the NLD made the decision to respond to the attacks from the USDP and Buddhist nationalists that it cannot defend Buddhist Myanmar by withdrawing its Muslim candidates. A political decision such as this one cannot be understood without accounting for the importance that political parties be perceived as respecting Buddhism. This reflects the traditional perspective that the state has an instrumental role in protecting the sāsana. This is tied to the Asokan paradigm and Buddhist kingship ideals, and arguably demonstrates that Buddhist-Burmese conceptions of the 'political' includes responsibility to protect the sāsana. Studies of political processes in Buddhist contexts need to account for this underlying conception of the responsibility of the state.

The continuous influence of Buddhism on Burmese politics demonstrates that Buddhism has by no means been relegated to the 'private sphere'. In fact, this suggests that it is not possible to place Buddhism in a binary public-private distinction, given that Buddhism continuous to inform underlying ideas of political responsibility in the modern state. The NLD's view on the constitutional position of Buddhism provides an example of this. The ideal political development for the NLD does not necessarily exclude Buddhism as an important social and political structure, with the possibility to be enshrined in the constitution. While the NLD is diametrically opposed to the USDP on most political issues, they operate within the same Buddhist frameworks and both accept the value of a legally mandated position for Buddhism.

The findings from this study demonstrate that it was the USDP which was the driving force behind the recent 'politicization of religion' in Myanmar. However, it is my contention that a view of the NLD as purely the 'receiving force' of these attacks is simplistic. The USDP brought increased attention to matters of religion in 2015, but the NLD is operating with the same awareness of the importance of Buddhist moral authority for a political party. The view that the NLD would suppress Buddhist nationalism once in power negates the importance of maintaining Buddhist legitimacy for these parties. This demonstrates a permanence of a Buddhist worldview that cannot merely be attributed to the autocratic forces. Not only is an 'apolitical' view of Buddhism extremely reductive, such a perspective on the Burmese context would seriously limit any attempt to understand the ongoing political battle lines between the USDP and the NLD. Both parties are vying for legitimacy in a Theravāda moral universe. Buddhism has not been 'privatized' in way that is comparable with Christianity in the West. Therefore, traditional theories for studying religion and political parties, such as the 'social cleavage' theory and other approaches discussed in the theoretical overview chapter, are not applicable in Buddhist majority contexts.

Within the field of those who reject an apolitical reading of Buddhism, there has been a 'modernist' perspective promoted by scholars who consider Buddhism to be "a democratic and liberal religion" (Kawanami, 2016, p. 32). Buddhism *has* been an important part of the democratization efforts of the NLD, as seen by the allegiance with pro-democracy monks and the justification of democracy in Buddhist terms and scripture. However, the findings from this study show that for the NLD in recent years, the importance of Buddhism has been at the center of arguably its most *illiberal* policy choice – the withdrawal of Muslim candidates. These

findings suggest that the values of Buddhism that were used to promote human rights and democracy in the pre-liberalization period were limited to the Buddhist population of Myanmar. Whether this is rooted in the primary motivation of winning votes as discussed by some of the informants, or how Buddhist values have informed party development, the importance of Buddhism has allowed for an illiberal turn in party policies. The tension between Buddhism as a justification of democracy as well as Buddhism as the basis for promoting illiberal policies *within* one political party should help put to rest the idea of Buddhism as a religion with one political direction. Rather, Buddhism serves as a method of legitimation and informs what is considered the purpose of a state and political agency.

The case of the NLD also has implications for studying politics in Buddhist majority contexts as it demonstrates how secularist Western notions of politics do not necessarily fit when they are imposed onto non-Western contexts. A consistent theme throughout the findings and analysis was that a distinct stance on religion for the NLD was hard to gauge. This can in part be attributed to the challenges of implementing terminology that has different connotations and linguistic backgrounds from the associated 'Western' terms. This was most clearly seen with the tension in the informants' descriptions of the NLD as *secular*. As discussed, the word used for 'secular' in Burmese, *lawki*, is inherently rooted in a Burmese Buddhist worldview (Walton, 2017). Furthermore, 'secular' was used interchangeably with 'pays respect to all religions' and 'neutral'. For the NLD informants, being a 'secular' party does not exclude actively participating in religious activities, such as visiting places of worship as a representative for a political party. While this may be rooted in low political literacy of how a Western audience may understand the term 'secular' I believe it is better understood as a challenge to universalist Western ideals of the relationship between 'politics' and 'religion'. The NLD's conceptualization of what is 'secular' reflects how it idealizes this relationship, where the emphasis is on freedom of religion and respecting all religious traditions, and not on excluding 'religion' from the political sphere. For example, the NLD is not known to have advocated for voting rights for the Sangha – which suggests a 'secularity' (understood as excluding religion from the political sphere). While this denotes a very strict separation of religious and political institutions, the NLD also often relies on monks in their political activities and are comfortable engaging in Buddhist rituals – acts providing moral authority for the NLD. This tension (engaging with the Sangha but denying them voting rights) suggests a specific understanding of what the NLD deems 'secular'. The informants' responses therefore indicate that the

unofficial privileging of Buddhism is a natural condition for any majority religion in a secular democracy, so long as respect is paid to all religions. This demonstrates that definitions of what is 'secular' are an act of power. Just as Western states have enforced their own meanings of what constitutes the 'secular' (influenced by their own histories and the Judeo-Christian tradition), the NLD imbues the term with its own meanings and legitimacy. The ideals we read into the 'secular' in the West are different from those in the Buddhist Burmese context.

The complex dynamics between Buddhism and the political formation of the NLD, which continue to play out, can hopefully provide a counter-stance to the secular *ideology* that underlies perspectives on what is 'modern'. 'Secularism' has come to act as a Western marker of developmental achievement and political maturity (Calhoun et al., 2011, p. 20). Whereas Western political notions have been informed by a protestant ethic and centuries of the constructed division between church and state, this division cannot be comfortably used as a political marker in Myanmar, where the majority of the population abide by a distinctly Buddhist-Burmese worldview and its associated values and beliefs. Given that political conceptualizations in Myanmar are informed by its Buddhist history and its engagement with the West, using 'secular' in the Western understanding as a marker of the political development of Myanmar is arguably not only unhelpful, but also projects a normative, and Eurocentric, perspective.

These theoretical implications from the case of the NLD hopefully demonstrate shortcomings in the traditional field of political science. Examples can be seen in several political science studies of Buddhist contexts. Larsson's (2016) study of monastic disenfranchisement is an example of this. Larsson provides an exploration of monastic disenfranchisement in Southeast Asia and argues that this "clearly contravenes important human rights norms and laws" (p. 92). Larsson makes a compelling human rights critique of monastic disenfranchisement, arguing that the failure of Western governments to push for the enfranchisement of monks reflects a Weberian perspective of Buddhism. However, in doing so, he negates the local discourse and understandings of what constitutes the boundaries of meaningful political engagement. As this thesis has hopefully demonstrated, Buddhist contexts have their own understandings of what constitutes appropriate political engagement and responsibility. In a context where monks and lay people widely do not believe that monks should have the right to vote, this should arguably not be considered a human rights issue. The boundaries of political participation are not an

objective metric that can be applied and need to be conscious of local conceptions. I therefore believe that scholars such as Larsson are providing a Western-centric perspective, which limits their own findings and arguments.

This chapter addresses some of the ways in which the case of the NLD can contribute to the larger discourse on the relationship between Buddhism and politics. The NLD serves as an example to demonstrate that Buddhism is by no means removed from politics. Rather, Buddhism needs to be further studied as a point of departure for understanding political developments in Southeast Asia. This discussion aims to show that the relationship between religion and politics in Myanmar is complex and influenced by conceptual understandings which are rooted in pre-colonial Buddhist traditions and the imposition of western concepts through colonialism. The NLD is a clear example of the challenges and limitation of widely applying Western and secularist conceptions of politics. Studies of politics in Buddhist contexts need to be cognizant of the multitude of ways Buddhism has informed politics at different historical conjunctures and continues to do so.

9 Conclusion

This thesis has explored *the role of religion for the NLD in transitional Myanmar* by analyzing how religion has informed the beliefs of the NLD, its discursive formations of 'religion' and 'politics,' and how the NLD conceptualizes the ideal relationship between them. To fully assess the 'role of religion' for the NLD, this thesis has focused on two sub-research questions:

1. Does the NLD have an official stance on religion?
2. How does religion impact the NLD's policy choices?

The findings from the twelve, in-depth interviews show that the NLD does not have an overarching stance on religion that is widely and meaningfully understood by party members. Rather, the NLD has a broad self-understanding of aligning with liberal democratic values such as *freedom of religion*, *religious neutrality* and *secular*. However, this thesis has demonstrated that these conceptions are complicated by an unofficially privileged position for Buddhism. This is arguably due to the NLD operating in a 'Theravāda moral universe' – where the state should be able to protect the sāsana. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, when criticized by political adversaries for not defending Buddhism, the NLD chose to withdraw its Muslim candidates. This demonstrates a tension between the party's ideals and its policy choices. The NLD has neither adopted the Buddhist nationalist narrative of the USDP (demonstrated by its vote against the 2015 'Race and Religion' laws), nor fully embraced expansive religious freedom and the espoused 'neutrality'.

Ultimately, this study shows that the NLD's policies pertaining to religion are largely defined by the political conditions and contexts in which it operates. The illiberal tendencies of the party would probably not have come to light if the USDP had not mobilized around 'protecting Buddhism' in Myanmar, and thus prompted the NLD to respond. The role of religion for the NLD is contextual, as the party is adjusting its policies based on changing political realities. Regardless, the NLD's notion of 'political' action does not exclude continuous engagement with sources of Buddhist legitimacy, such as publicly visiting Buddhist temples and aligning with members of the Sangha.

Given the ongoing conflicts surrounding religion and the upcoming 2020 election, I believe that religion will continue to play a critical role in the NLD's future political developments.

However, more research on the NLD and religion is necessary to understand how these dynamics will play out. This would benefit from quantitative studies of the voting patterns of different religious groups across Myanmar, in-depth examinations of how the NLD engages with religious minorities and how religious minorities perceive the NLD, studies tracing the genealogies of the NLD and the Sangha as well as further research on the discourse of NLD leaders. A better understanding of the relationship between the NLD and religion can make further contributions to the larger field of religion and politics and may have policy implications for engaging with governments and actors in Buddhist contexts.

Ultimately, the political developments in Myanmar did not occur in a vacuum, but in a long tradition of state leaders trying to align themselves closely with Buddhism, both in relation to the Sangha and by presenting themselves as protectors of the sāsana. While the NLD finds itself in this tradition, it also encounters expectations from Western democracies for a secular, liberal democracy. The NLD is navigating the realities of acting within a highly devout population where Theravāda Buddhism informs many peoples' worldview and perspectives on politics. Given the importance of Buddhism in the democratization efforts, it would perhaps have been unwise to assume that with political liberalization Buddhism would disappear as a force in politics.

Many people had extremely high hopes for the NLD's time in office, envisioning expanded political freedoms, economic development and peace. Others waited with bated breath to see how the challenges of electoral politics would influence the party and the seemingly principled woman at the top. We cannot know what the NLD gained from its decisions to withdraw its Muslim candidates in 2015 and to stand behind the military in the Rohingya crisis. However, 'The Lady' will forever be a fallen hero for many. That being said, the people of Myanmar have experienced extreme repression for decades at the hands of a brutal military dictatorship. One can only hope that with a victory in 2020, the NLD will be able to implement greater steps towards a peaceful democracy. To do so, however, it is crucial that the NLD reform its stance on religion to alleviate the suffering of religious minorities in Myanmar – most importantly the Rohingya, whose plight continues.

10 Bibliography

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11 Attachments

11.1 Sample Interview Guide for NLD Officials

1. How are decisions made within the NLD about campaign rhetoric?

2. On the national level, did the NLD have an organized/overarching campaign approach? What policies did they decide to focus on? Who made these decisions?

3. Does the NLD have an official party policy on religion/secularism?

4. Leading up to the 2015 election, was there any discussion on religion?

5. Does the NLD identify as a *Buddhist* party?

6. How does the NLD want the public to see them in terms of religion?

7. How has the NLD appealed to minority religious groups?

8. Has there been disagreement/discussion within the NLD regarding religion?

9. Why were Muslim candidates excluded from the 2015 election?

10. If the NLD were to finally be able to change the constitution, would they change the article on the special position of Buddhism?

11.2 Approval Letter from NSD

NSD Personvern
02.12.2019 10:54

Det innsendte meldeskjemaet med referansekode   er nå vurdert av NSD.

Følgende vurdering er gitt:

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet den 2.12.2019 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET
Prosjektet vil behandle særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om politisk oppfatning og religion, samt alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 30.4.2020.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG
Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a, jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER
NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER
Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER
NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!