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Revolution or Order? Buddhist Responses to the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 ended a period of semi-civilian rule (2011–2021), bringing the country once again under direct military rule. Recent research into the religious responses to the coup in its early phases indicate that the mass protests were characterised by global internet culture, inter-religious solidarity, and new visions for a plural and democratic Myanmar. The Buddhist Sangha, it is often claimed, remained silent and mainly supportive of the military. Through a multi-method approach to textual analysis, qualitative interviews, and field work, this article seeks to analyse possible shifts in the ways that Buddhism has contributed to both justification of the military's action and resistance to it. It is argued that Buddhist support for the coup must be understood not only within an instrumentalist framework, but also through what is referred to in this article as a Buddhist Ideology of Order. In opposition to this, a Buddhist revolutionary movement is identified. It envisions radical societal transformations, including of institutional Buddhism itself. Finally, the data show that pro-revolutionary activities go well beyond established monastic revolutionary networks, indicating broader Sangha engagements in the Myanmar Spring Revolution than has often been assumed.

KEY WORDS

Buddhism; military coup; Myanmar; Sangha; Spring Revolution

According to King Zero – a revolutionary Buddhist monk in Myanmar – the reason for the disastrous situation in the country is that “*Dhamma* became weak, and now people suffer a lot from the junta’s oppression and the mischievous monks’ alliance with the dictatorship. We are trying to make the *dhamma* prosper again” (Interview, July 8, 2022). His remark demonstrates that sections of the Buddhist monastic order, the Sangha, actively resist Myanmar’s military junta and – importantly – that their interpretive lens of the post-coup revolutionary situation is deeply Buddhist. To them, the aim is to restore the *dhamma*, which in this context refers to a morally good society, social justice, democracy, and human rights.

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However, this Buddhist interpretive lens was not the hallmark of the 2021 nationwide protests against the military coup. In fact, in contrast to the 2007 Saffron Revolution, which was marked by the presence of Buddhist monks in the streets chanting the *Metta sutta* – a famous Buddhist canonical text on loving-kindness – against military rule as well as economic mismanagement, the popular resistance to the 2021 coup was expressed within a different conceptual framework. During the weeks following the coup, people from all ethnic groups and walks of life joined the protests, all clearly identifying the group(s) to which they belonged: Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians numbered among the participants. In these early days, when the regime still allowed for public protest, there was a real sense of coming together in the streets, joining different groups in ways not previously seen. In its cultural outlook, the protest was similar to the global netizen anti-authoritarianism movement called the Milk Tea Alliance. Participants made references to pop-cultural elements such as Disney princesses, Batman, and *The Hunger Games*. In contrast to the previous decade (2011–2021), marked by a sharp rise in Buddhist nationalism, the presence of religion in public space during the first weeks of the coup was marked by religious diversity and inter-religious mobilisation. Importantly, behind the seemingly spontaneous street protests were religious institutions and networks, indicating long-term pro-democracy education, activism, and networking within different religious fields (see Frydenlund et al. 2021).

Various acts of resistance among the people, such as sheltering of strangers in private homes or the formation of neighbourhood protection associations, helped – at least temporarily – to overcome ethnic, socio-economic, and religious divisions. Furthermore, as noted by Roberts and Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2022), this new inclusiveness was expressed in the remarkable spatial shift from the anti-military protests in sacred public space like the Shwedagon Pagoda to protests in everyday spaces, such as alleyways and private homes.

Thus, the inclusive and culturally diverse outlook of public protest in 2021 differed from the 2007 protests, which were clearly articulated within a distinct Buddhist framework. Jordt, Tharaphi Than, and Sue Ye Lin (2021) have argued that resistance to the coup was grounded in democratic ideas of the sovereignty of the people, and not traditional Buddhist political paradigms, which are overwhelmingly concerned with royal power and virtues of the just king (*dasarajadhamma*). This culturally inclusive framing of the resistance needs to be considered in light of the political liberalisation under semi-civilian rule during the period between 2011 and 2021, when a vibrant civil society bloomed. But where did that leave the Sangha, which had been so visible during the 2007 protests and which many pro-democracy activists saw as an ally against military rule?

This article details how the initial Sangha response to the coup was marked by condemnation and support for the anti-coup protests. Three monks, Myawaddy Mingyi Sayadaw, Ashin Sobhita, and Shwe Nya War Sayadaw – all well-known critics of the military – were detained on the first day of the coup, together with Aung San Suu Kyi and leading politicians from the National League for Democracy (NLD). However, with massive violence against civilians, incarcerations, and torture, the early days of peaceful street protests ended rapidly. Parts of the democracy movement saw armed resistance as the only way to protect themselves. These changes, as will be seen, influenced the ways in which the Sangha responded to the situation.

From Public Protest to Armed Resistance

As the military crackdown turned ever more violent and brutal in March 2021 and after, people made a shift in the ways that they conceptualised their fight against the military:

from resistance to revolution. This shift calls for a nuanced understanding of its implications, and subsequently a need for theorising the notion of revolution (in Burmese *tawla-nye* or *ayedawbon*). Following the aim of this Special Issue, the ways in which Myanmar colleagues, research interlocutors, and others cast their struggle as revolutionary are seriously considered. Revolutionary projects, by definition, aim to create new forms of politics and political relationships. As Chambers and Cheesman (2024) point out, the situation in Myanmar (like that of Egypt in 2011) can best be understood as a revolutionary situation which was not planned for, and which has an uncertain outcome. The lack of pre-planning is crucial as it means that pre-coup political imaginaries are not necessarily operable or relevant to the revolutionary situation. In a revolutionary situation, new visions across class and ethnicity are in the making. In this regard, Prasse-Freeman and Ko Kabya (2021, 2) point out: “The insistence of a true revolution contests demands for a mere ‘return’ to past models of democracy.” What is at stake is a total and radical transformation of the world.

Revolutions have long been the subject of political theory, focusing on acts of political rupture. Recently, anthropologists have made useful interventions, calling for a holistic and ethnographic approach to revolutions, seeing them – in the words of Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020, 3–4) – as “attempts to radically reconstitute the worlds people inhabit.” This perspective, they argue, makes revolutions “more than simply acts of violent political rupture,” calling for understanding revolutions as being “deeply cosmogonic” (Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020, 5). This conceptual framework is particularly useful for the study of the Myanmar Spring Revolution, as it not only allows for the exploration of cosmological co-ordinates that frame the ways in which the Spring Revolution is articulated, but also for the understanding of revolutions as cosmological projects in their own right. This double-analytical strategy of both understanding the worldviews that frame revolutions, but also how revolutionary projects might simultaneously break down such frameworks, is particularly useful for considering the changing roles of Buddhism in the Spring Revolution. It can also help to shed light upon why certain sections of the Sangha explicitly resist the revolution.

Not surprisingly, revolutionary visions pose serious threats to institutionalised religion, such as the Sangha in Myanmar. From a Buddhist-normative point of view, the question inevitably arises as to what extent a revolution constitutes a threat to the *sasana* (Buddhism).¹ How do monks and nuns in Myanmar – close to 600,000 individuals – relate to the ground-breaking work at stake? Are they imagining the political order differently today as compared to the past? How do they envision the role of Buddhism in a future democratic Myanmar? Furthermore, the revolutionary agenda begs the question as to what differences lie between the ways that laypeople think about revolution (in the strict political sense of government and radical social change) and the ways in which Buddhist monks and nuns theorise revolution. If it is true that what distinguishes the post-2021-coup political struggle from previous struggles is a shift from a Buddhist political paradigm to a notion of the sovereignty of the people, then what is the role of Buddhist political paradigms, or of institutional Buddhism, in creating new political orders? This raises further questions about secular–religious differentiations, and how actors themselves conceptualise such differences, if at all.

Buddhism, Utopias, and Revolution

Buddhist monks and nuns can be on the side of revolutionary change, for example as supporters of Marxist movements such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in Sri Lanka.

From a religious studies point of view, however, it is important to point out that history tells us that taking the concept of revolution as the most important analytical category easily overlooks other radical, transformative projects that emerge from within religious traditions themselves. Both apocalyptic and millenarian movements have, across time and space, worked for new beginnings, frequently with the use of force. Also Buddhism contains religious imaginaries and historical reservoirs that can be (re-)activated in the struggle for new orders.

In both pre-modern and colonial Burma, there were clear links between peasant uprisings and cults of the Buddha Maitreya. According to Buddhist cosmology, moral decay will lead to the decline of the *sasana* and eventually the end of this era. In the new era, the next *buddha* will usher in a new beginning where Buddhism will flourish, and humans will live according to the teachings. Pre-modern Buddhist millenarian movements sought social justice (for example against unjust kings) within existing religious frameworks – though radically expanding upon them – but not total societal transformation, for example by eradicating the institution of kingship. In colonial Burma, such millenarian movements mobilised against British colonialism, but with the aim of returning to *old* pre-colonial orders, with reference to figures like Sekya Min, the “wheel-turning king,” corresponding to the *cakkavattin* figure in early Pali literature, as the king who will appear in times of moral decline and later be the future Buddha, or the *minlaung*, the “future king.” Sarkisyanz (1965) records numerous rebellions against British rule made in the name of the Sekya Min in the 1920s and 1930s, the most famous being Maung Thant, the “new king,” who led a rebellion against the British, for which he was hanged in 1911. Importantly, however, in the colonial era, nationalist associations such as the *wunthanu athin* (“Loving One’s Race Associations”) represented a qualitative break from the *minlaung*-inspired uprisings in that the imagery, tactics, and messages they employed were not derived from pre-annexation traditions. Importantly, therefore, not all anti-colonial resistance was framed within traditionalist discourses. In this respect, Aung-Thwin (2003) makes an important contribution in pointing out that the production of rebellion narratives and the role of religion within such narratives reflect the colonial idea that the Burmans could only do “superstitious rebellions.” Rather, in the first half of the twentieth century, rebellion ideology could be framed within nationalist, Buddhist, or Marxist coordinates. Buddhism was particularly visible in millenarian movements aimed at symbolic restoration of the monarchy (with focus on the Sekya Min) as a way of restoring a true Buddhist cosmic order devoid of foreign influences (see Foxeus 2012).

A comparative perspective on Buddhism and revolutionary politics in the post-colonial period reveals that, more often than not, Buddhism has been on the losing side of revolutionary projects. Communist revolutions in Mongolia in the 1920s, Tibet since the 1950s, Khmer Rouge Cambodia in the 1970s, or Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s have unquestionably had devastating effects on Buddhism (see, for example, Harris 2013; Kaplonski 2014). This must be understood both as a result of anti-religious Communist positions, but also as a consequence of Buddhism’s strong connections with state power across Asia. A radical transformation of politics, society, culture, and moral values in Buddhist Asia would by default also imply a challenge to Buddhism, at least its institutional manifestations.

In this article it is argued that the 2021 Spring Revolution calls for an altogether different theorising of the relationship between religion and revolution, calling attention to the ways in which religion (in this case Buddhism) is neither the state-loyal suppressor of revolts (in failed uprisings) nor the victim of anti-religious revolutionary politics (as in Mongolia and Cambodia). Rather, Buddhism finds itself on multiple sides of the

revolutionary situation, including what might be understood as a Buddhist Ideology of Order and revolutionary politics. The notion of Buddhist Ideology of Order has close resemblance to the Christian concept of Theology of Order, but as theology does not work well in the Theravada Buddhist context, ideology is chosen to refer to a systematic thinking and practice in relation to discipline and order. It will also be argued that the vision of the Spring Revolution differs from the pre-modern and colonial millenarian visions in the sense that revolutionary Buddhist politics in this case seek societal as well as religious transformation within a modern democratic framework. As will be shown, the revolutionary co-ordinates can hardly be said to be Buddhist.

It will be further suggested that the role of Buddhism in the Spring Revolution differs from previous uprisings and critical events in post-colonial Burma. While colonialism and modernity implied challenges to monastic authority and Buddhist education, and military-backed socialist rule (1962–1988) implied state neglect, but also increased control of the Sangha, the 1988 uprising showed the importance of monastic support to a worker- and student-led democracy movement. And while the so-called Saffron Revolution indicated the importance of the Sangha in terms of moral authority vis-à-vis unjust rule, the 2021 anti-coup resistance represents a watershed in public discourses regarding ethnic chauvinism and class inequality. Moreover, it questions the hierarchy and privilege of institutional Buddhism itself, and – as we shall see – how such privileges are closely related to the military state, in what we term the monastic–military complex.

Thus, the issue at stake is not simply a “for-or-against” stance on military rule, but rather it highlights the uncertainties around what this radically transformative political project will imply for Buddhism. Taking seriously, then, the radical potency of the revolutionary situation, this article asks two inter-related questions. First, it seeks to understand the ways in which senior leading monks have been supportive of the military coup, following a Buddhist Ideology of Order. That category also includes the Obedient Majority who in multiple ways contribute to upholding the *status quo*. Second, it seeks to analyse the role of Buddhist revolutionary politics, asking what revolution means from a Buddhist point of view, and how lay and monastic revolutionaries envision the Spring Revolution.

Doing Fieldwork under Fire: Methods and Ethical Reflections

Post-coup state terror and violence quickly spread across the country, leading to thousands of casualties, over two million internally displaced persons, thousands of refugees crossing the borders into neighbouring countries, and massive violence not only in areas controlled by armed ethnic organisations (as has been the case for decades), but now also across Bamar-majority areas. Doing “Fieldwork Under Fire” – to honour a classic title in war ethnography – raises multiple methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas (Nordstrom and Robben 1995). First, the massive violence inside Myanmar prevented long-term fieldwork, but did allow for shorter field trips to the Thai-Burmese border, in addition to fieldwork elsewhere in Thailand. The authors also draw upon experiences from Myanmar in the months after the coup. Second, the chaos and the violence of an ongoing revolution means that obtaining reliable research data was difficult. Despite good access to the field, verification of data was problematic. For example, despite checking and cross-checking, the numbers of Buddhist monks and nuns who disrobed to join the militant resistance vary significantly across sources. In many ways, data of the revolutionary situation are ephemeral: short-lived, rapidly changing, and unreliable. Furthermore, while getting access to military-aligned monks inside Myanmar was possible during the time of semi-civilian rule from 2011 to 2021, this is now impossible due to the security

situation. The same is true for the case of the Obedient Majority. Therefore, the data on pro-junta monks and the Obedient Majority rely on fieldwork material gathered before the coup, from open digital sources, press releases, and online sermons. In addition, data are drawn from fact-finding organisations inside the country, who have generously shared their reports on pro-military mobilisation with the authors. These reports are used with permission, but on condition of anonymity, and are referred to as “Domestic Reports.” Third, in the field, the data-collection process was determined by the researchers’ positionality. Access to revolutionary monks was facilitated by the researchers’ religious and political networks. And, above all, the fact that we as researchers take an anti-coup stance made access to revolutionary monks possible.

This study is based on interviews with 15 Buddhist monks (of Bamar, but also Rakhine and Mon ethnicity) who identify themselves as supporters of the revolution, and who use the term revolution to refer to the 2021 coup resistance. Nuns who had disrobed and joined People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) declined invitations to participate in interviews due to the security situation. The data were collected from June 2022 to May 2023. Monks who resided inside Myanmar at the time of data collection were interviewed via encrypted mobile apps such as Signal. Most in-person interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted in different places along the Thai-Burmese border. The Burmese monastic population in Thailand is diverse; some are revolutionary refugees, some are students, others belong to long-established cross-border monastic networks (particularly in the north). For security reasons, revolutionary monks are organised in small cell units, with high precaution measures. For example, interviews were not conducted in temples, but in perceived neutral places such as public hospitals or specific hotels, as the monks themselves thought this would prevent them from being detected by monastic informers. Such fears indicate low levels of trust in Thai monks (who are seen as supportive of both Thai and Burmese militaries), but also in the numerous Burmese monks who reside in Thailand. According to these interlocutors, the majority of Burmese monks in Bangkok support the State Administration Council (SAC) and the military. They knew of numerous instances where revolutionaries had been reported by other monks and lay Buddhists to the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok. According to the revolutionary monks interviewed for this study, the majority of Burmese monks residing in Thailand would be either hesitant of revolutionary politics (thus belonging to the Obedient Majority) or would be in clear support of the military junta. This certainly resonates with what most, if not all, of the Burmese interlocutors in Thailand expressed, although no survey data is available.

This study also relies on social media posts by leading revolutionary monks to gain a better understanding of the revolutionary discourse online. Together with ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews, it adds important insights into what it means to live a revolution, the social workings of a revolution, and the lives behind the Facebook profiles. Online activities are closely connected to real-life actions, but fieldwork provides different kinds of data on how the revolution is understood, practiced, and networked. Above all, the ethnographic method allows for identification of broader engagement among the Sangha than online discourses or formal statements do. In addition, for this study, 15 lay Buddhist revolutionaries and activists in the civil disobedience movement (CDM) inside Myanmar and activists forced to flee to Thailand have been interviewed. All interviews are translated from Burmese to English.

For the group who self-identify as revolutionaries, doing surveys or qualitative interviews among them could potentially make them unsafe. Safety is a complex concept and requires reflection on how unsafety is constituted, for whom, and under what conditions. Is danger linked to the data collection process, or later, to the dissemination of research?

Clearly, it is not only a question of the safety of the field researchers (which in this case is a real issue), but above all, the safety of informants, field assistants, or anyone associated with the data collection process. Due to the security situation, most monks (with a few notable exceptions) have been anonymised. This is necessary in order to avoid future retaliation from pro-coup forces, not only among the military, but also within the Sangha itself. However, this raises another ethical issue, namely the denial of agency as monks who risk their lives in support of the revolution are now “muted.” We are very much aware of the problems of silencing some of our interlocutors, but have chosen to put their safety first, keeping in mind that the revolution is ongoing and open-ended.

Buddhist Ideology of Order

In a statement issued in late November 2022, the Yangon office of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka or MaHaNa, a military-state established body that oversees the Sangha, instructed all monasteries in the region not to accept night guests because “they might cause chaos and unrest.”² The Sangha hierarchy at this moment had not only tried to prevent monastics from engaging in the revolution, but were now concerned with monasteries hiding lay revolutionaries, indicating that the use of monasteries as revolutionary safe spaces was seen as an issue to be dealt with by the military state. At the same time, this statement implies that in 2021 and 2022 some monasteries in Yangon must have hidden revolutionaries.

The chaos and mess of a revolutionary situation makes it difficult to give even rough estimates of where the Sangha stands with regard to the current situation, despite many leading monks’ initial resistance to the coup (Frydenlund et al. 2021). However, they soon became silent. Other high-ranking monks have been openly supportive of the military, both before and after the coup. This section outlines the nature of their support, their ritual and economic entanglements with the military (in a military–monastic complex), and their ideological and religious positions that should be understood as a Buddhist Ideology of Order. This is crucial for understanding the role of leading Buddhist monks as preservers of the *status quo* (that is, military rule), but also in order to understand the massive criticism levelled by Buddhist revolutionaries against famous monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw, who for decades has played a leading role in educational and social activities in Buddhist Myanmar.

Fears of Chaos and Anarchy

As detailed later, a common explanation offered by Buddhist revolutionaries (monastics and lay) for monastic support of the military is economic dependency. While this is a useful explanation, the analysis of statements and social media posts shows that the Buddhist Ideology of Order also needs to be taken seriously in order to understand the role of Buddhism in the revolutionary situation. The roots of the Buddhist Ideology of Order, which is crucial to the military–monastic complex, can be traced to two distinct, but inter-related, strands of thought. The first is rooted in Buddhism itself, for example, in Buddhist fears of chaos and anarchy, as depicted in canonical texts such as the *Agāṇṇa sutta*. Furthermore, it can be argued that focus on order and discipline is inherent to the Sangha itself (as expressed in the Monastic Code, the *vinaya*), and that the military law-and-order narrative (discussed below) can easily be combined with monastic notions of discipline. For example, the concept of discipline-flourishing democracy, announced in 2003 by the military, is connected to Buddhist principles of unity and discipline, but also

to fears of anarchy (Walton 2017, 167–174). Finally, esoteric Buddhist societies in Myanmar have long engaged in a cosmic battle to combat the enemies of Buddhism. In their view, “A condition for the *sāsana* being preserved in Burma and throughout the world is that order prevails in society and the cosmos by the observance of Buddhist morality” (Foxeus 2012, 234). In short, Buddhism needs order to flourish.

The second strand is linked to the post-1988 military ideology of law and order (*ngyein-wut-pi-bya-ye*). Then Chief of Intelligence General Khin Nyunt, for example, claimed in 1994 that the “overriding anarchy in the nation was one of the primary reasons that the State Law and Order Restoration Council took over the responsibilities of state” (quoted in Cheesman 2015, 101). The political concept of law and order corresponds to the absence of anarchy (*mainn mae hpyith-chinn*), the latter understood as a condition of being kingless (*min-mae-zayaik*). Thus, the language of law and order is a question of the restoration of sovereignty (Cheesman 2015, 102). The military has long been an efficient producer of xenophobic nationalism and anarchy discourses with regard to ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) to justify continued military rule. The question, then, is to what extent such narratives are reproduced in the revolutionary situation, or if a shift can be identified in the military anarchy narrative? Looking back to the post-1988 years, the military increasingly justified its rule with reference to Buddhism (see Schober 2011; Frydenlund 2022). During the years of semi-civilian rule the military supported Buddhist protectionist groups such as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (known by its Burmese acronym MaBaTha). While such groups are sometimes referred to as representative of Buddhist nationalism, this terminology is misleading because it is unclear what nation refers to in this case. The notion of *amyo* (“race”) is contextual and can refer to both the 135 state-recognised “races,” but also to specific ethnic groups, or even only Buddhist people. Buddhist protectionism is used here to refer to political and legal activism aimed at protecting Buddhism from perceived external and internal threats.

Following the rise of Buddhist protectionist groups, the pro-democracy opposition has increasingly been identified as anti-Buddhist. After the 2021 coup this discursive shift has become ever more prominent, and in pro-military discourses public enemies and threats to the nation are increasingly portrayed as enemies of Buddhism. The resistance consists of hundreds of armed groups, known as the PDFs, with varying connections and loyalty to the National Unity Government (NUG). In anti-revolution and pro-military ideology these PDFs are increasingly portrayed as anti-Buddhist terrorists, or even as religious extremists. For example, in a military council press conference (September 20, 2022) military spokesperson Zaw Min Tun was quoted as saying: “You will see that the PDFs were beheading the people. IS [Islamic State] is killing for religion. There are only two organisations that are mainly targeted by PDFs: religion and national security forces. I want to say that they are doing extremist acts in order to destroy religion.”³ Here, the PDFs are described both as religious extremists (like IS) *and* anti-religious/Buddhist, indicating hyper-flexibility with regard to how the military interprets the revolutionary agenda on religion.

This implies, as suggested above, a discursive shift compared to 1988 and 2007, in that the junta now presents itself as the protector of Buddhism vis-à-vis the majority Bamar Buddhist population. Sources close to the military reveal that generals often refer to Sitagu Sayadaw’s infamous 2017 military sermon where he used the Sri Lankan chronicle the *Mahavamsa* to justify military operations against the Rohingya population. According to these sources, the army now uses Sitagu’s 2017 interpretation as justification for military action against the PDFs. The *Mahavamsa* justifies violence against non-Buddhists in

order to protect Buddhism in times of peril, but the extension to groups belonging to the Bamar Buddhist majority indicates a noteworthy shift in the anarchy narrative: the enemy is now not only racialised, non-Buddhist Others (such as the Rohingya) but also defined, *internal* enemies of Buddhism. This discursive shift implies externalisation and de-humanisation of the internal enemy, thus laying the ground for acts of violence against the majority Bamar population.

From social media posts and online sermons, it is clear that several leading monks accept the notion of the military as the only possible protector of Buddhism against foreign forces (such as Islam and IS) and against what they see as dangerous anti-Buddhist terrorist activities, which for them can only result in anarchy and destruction. Thus, Buddhist monastics supportive of the military show strong commitments to the Buddhist Ideology of Order. Top monks, many of them connected to the MaBaTha, have long been supportive of the military, so their justifications of the coup should come as no surprise. For example, just prior to the coup, leading MaBaTha monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw and Insein Sayadaw had several meetings and functions with senior military generals. Moreover, in 2021 Sitagu travelled to Russia together with the junta leadership, participating in elaborate monastic-military rituals in Moscow. In the revolutionary situation, MaBaTha monks have fallen from grace in the public eye due to such military connections. Importantly, however, though the MaBaTha is hardly visible to the public, it is still operative.

It is important to point out that only a minority of monks explicitly endorse the military. Many senior monks are less explicit, showing tacit – but nonetheless highly significant – support for the military. Even though they are seen as powerful monks on the military side, they are cautious about their public statements. For example, Ashin Chekinda, the newly appointed rector at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, keeps a low public profile, but excerpts from his writings appeared in military-run newspapers almost daily in 2022. He has also published his texts with military media, testifying not only to the military's embrace of him, but also to his support of the military. This perception of him as pro-military is also supported by the fact that a group of his *dharmaduta* (Buddhist missionary) students rebelled against him in a public letter where they ask him to withdraw his support to the “terrorist” and “power-maniac” junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.⁴

Other monks are seen by the revolutionaries as having changed sides only *after* the coup. Many of those interviewed seemed particularly disappointed with Ashin Sobitha, principal of the International Buddhist Education Centre, who prior to the coup had a large following because he was seen as a pro-democracy and open-minded monk. However, at several conferences abroad in 2022 he repeatedly claimed that PDFs kill monks. For example, at the second United Nations World Peace Association conference in Japan, he accused pro-democracy revolutionaries of killing 725 people including 54 monks. On Facebook, he also claimed that the international community and media are inflaming the situation by supporting the NUG, PDFs, and EAOs. Thus, Ashin Sobitha clearly identifies the pro-democracy forces as illegitimate. Furthermore, he has claimed that the PDFs specifically target the most religiously important centres – namely the Sagaing and Magwe regions – thus constructing the revolutionary pro-democracy movement as anti-Buddhist. Given his broad international connections, including with former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (with Cambodia as 2022 ASEAN Chair), his influence in pro-junta counter-revolutionary politics should not be underestimated.

Many leading monks, such as Ashin Sobitha, call for negotiations in sermons or in online posts. On the surface this might seem to be a constructive path toward reducing

massive violence, but given the current military context such a “discourse of peace” is interpreted by revolutionaries as serving military interests. In particular, military news services seem eager to refer to monastic sermons that endorse the discourse of peace. For example, an editorial in the military’s *Myawaddy Newspaper* on August 22, 2022, in commemoration of the seventh anniversary of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, claims that “most monks” argue for peace negotiations in their sermons. The editorial also uses many quotations from General Min Aung Hlaing’s speeches where he claims that peace can be achieved through negotiation. Clearly then, this discourse of peace is shared by the military and pro-military monks.

Within the category of Buddhist Ideology of Order are the Obedient Majority, which in multiple ways give their support to the *status quo*, for example by carrying out educational and ritual expectations of the SAC and the military. In fact, the most common way of showing support to the military is not through public statements, but rather through continuation of ordinary monastic practices, such as the re-opening of schools (since 2021) or through various forms of ritual engagements. Within the Obedient Majority a variety of positions exist, from explicit support for the Buddhist Ideology of Order, to the traditionalist position of monastic non-political interference, or to outright fears of military repercussions in case of non-compliance. In fact, there are MaBaTha monks in Mandalay who are critical of the massive military violence, but who feel forced into staging pro-military street protests. This makes the Obedient Majority a multifaceted phenomenon, but one that in the public eye is viewed as anti-revolutionary, and thus beneficial to the military state.

Militant Monks

Other monks are more vocal in their support of the military. For example, the Shan monk Wazibeik Sayadaw, who has long-term ritual relations with General Min Aung Hlaing and his wife Kyu Kyu Hla, made headlines for his magic services (*yadaya*) to the army. He became particularly unpopular among the revolutionaries for making a magical utterance calling for violence, saying to army soldiers that “If you want a new age, you better make headshots.”⁵ Some monks, such as Ashin Warthawa and Ashin Nandacara, have delivered sermons where they encourage villagers to join the Pyu-Saw-Htee paramilitary troops in their fight against the revolutionaries. Ashin Warthawa has been particularly active in supporting such groups in Sagaing. In one of his public talks to persuade villagers to join the fighting, he told the villagers that it would be better and safer for them to stay within the boundaries of law and order, and to earn their living legally as protected by the SAC. This position taps into traditional Buddhist imaginaries of fear of chaos and anarchy.

In addition, a multitude of *myo chit* (patriotic) groups have mushroomed since the coup. These groups consist of dedicated pro-military nationalists, mostly lay, but also with a large number of monks attached to them; although the exact number remains uncertain, a rough estimate indicates hundreds of such militant monks in support of the coup. As for famous MaBaTha monks such as Ashin Wirathu and U Wathawa, they have close connections to Pyu-Saw-Htee leaders in Sagaing, making the link between paramilitary anti-revolutionary groups and MaBaTha monks very close. On social media, there are numerous images of monks offering flowers and water on the front lines to the soldiers, thereby providing blessings before armed action on the battlefield. We also have data on monks – remaining in robes – undergoing military training, but the numbers are likely to be small as the cultural stigma against monastic violence is high (see below).

Therefore, it should be noted that while armed monks make sensational headlines, they are not a widespread phenomenon.

Buddhist State-Making after the 2021 Coup

Linked to the Buddhist Ideology of Order are traditional Buddhist political imaginaries of the need for state protection of Buddhism. As previously discussed, the military has since 1988 increasingly presented itself as the protector of Buddhism. This is clearly articulated in the 2008 Constitution (Frydenlund 2022); the 2015 race and religion laws (Frydenlund 2017); accusations against the NLD as pro-Muslim and anti-Buddhist (van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017); and, more recently, in the portrayal of General Min Aung Hlaing as a *bodhisattva* in a letter which the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) later claimed (probably falsely) to be a fraud (Frydenlund et al. 2021, 84).

In the post-coup situation, two SAC initiatives stand out. First, in a televised speech on August 1, 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing explicitly presented SAC rule as pro-Buddhist (in contrast to the previous NLD rule), and importantly, as being in line with the religious clauses of the 2008 Constitution (*Global New Light of Myanmar*, August 2, 2021). This confirmation of Buddhist constitutionalism stands in clear opposition to the Federal Democracy Charter declared by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, in which the constitutional preferential treatment of Buddhism is abandoned (CRPH Myanmar 2021). Second, since the coup, the military has restored the so-called State-Buddhism Day, on August 21–22 (*Full Moon Day of Wakhau/Vassa*), initiated by U Nu in the 1960s. This day had largely been forgotten, but through the YMBA, the day has been revitalised. This has been important to the SAC, particularly in Karen State, where it is a tool to mobilise Buddhist Karen in favour of the SAC and against the Karen National Union (dominated by Christians). For example, on August 22, 2022, the Karen State government (led by the SAC) organised a ceremony in commemoration of the 60th State Religion Day (*naingandaw batha*), with hundreds of Buddhist monks receiving alms (Karen State Government 2022). In this context “religion” is understood as referring to Buddhism.

In many ways, the YMBA – perhaps the most famous anti-colonial lay association in the Theravada world – now functions as invaluable religious infrastructure to promote a Buddhist military state. This is evident not only in YMBA's endorsement of the military as the protector of Buddhism, but also through direct statements on the military situation. For example, the YMBA issued a statement condemning the violent attacks upon public servants and teachers by the PDFs.⁶ Also, the YMBA has donated care packages to soldiers, writing messages of support that “this is donated by the YMBA HQ to the soldiers in the Karen State.” Furthermore, documents that show that individual soldiers' pay checks send a certain amount directly to the YMBA; in other words, these are state-enforced donations to the YMBA. Finally, leaked military lists show that it actively recruits among YMBA members for local pro-military militias; these lists show 122 YMBA members registered for two townships in Yangon.

The Saya-Dakar Programme and Monastic-Military Entanglements

As discussed above, pro-military and anti-revolutionary monks take different positions, ranging from the militant monks who directly encourage lay people to take up arms against the revolutionaries, to famous monks who lend Buddhist legitimacy to the SAC, to monks who are more tacit in their support, or who obediently follow expectations of

discipline. Apart from varying degrees of ideological support for the anti-revolutionary forces, understanding the military–monastic complex requires attention to economic structures. Or put differently, one important way to understand monastic–military entanglements is to follow donor money, that is, military-organised donations, or private donations by military families to particular monks.

When interviewing revolutionary monks, a recurring theme was exactly this notion that senior monks had been co-opted by the military through economic means. While high-ranking political support of senior monks is standard practice in Theravada Buddhist contexts, in order to understand the monastic–military complex in post-coup Myanmar, it is necessary to see such close relations as the result of a well-designed plan by the military to enhance its relations with the Sangha after the 1988 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, through a specific programme for monastic–lay relations: the *Saya–Dakar* programme.

The Pali term *dayaka* (Burmese *dakar*) means lay supporter of a monastic community. In Burmese, a *saya–dakar* relation therefore refers to Sangha–lay donor relations. The *Saya–Dakar* programme was reportedly launched by General Khin Nyunt in 1991 (see Bo Htet Min 2008). It served as a state propaganda tool to tie together the junta and the most senior monks in every township across the country through various forms of support. Within three decades, the junta managed to tame hundreds of progressive and pro-democracy monks and suppress dissent with help from its pro-military network backed by the project. Small green books published by the Yangon Regional Military Headquarters, titled *Yin hnit the cha Naingan yadana* (“The Younger Generation: Jewels of the Kingdom”), were distributed to every monastery in every city, for delivering courses on Buddhist culture, *myanmarsar* (ethics and civic education extracted from Burmese literature), and *abhidhamma* (Buddhist psychology).

Moreover, after the 1988 democracy uprising, many religious organisations were infiltrated by the army (Bo Htet Min 2008, 97–99). Whenever there was a riot or protest, the military made use of their monastic contacts to misinform and to control. They dispatched personnel to *vipassana* meditation centres, they were present during Dhamma talks, in the astrologers’ association, and were pagoda trustees. During student-led protests in December 1996, the army managed to prevent monks from participating by making use of the *thar-thone-thar* slogan, referring to “the three sons,” that is, soldier, student, and the Buddha’s sons (monks). Alongside such initiatives, the military circulated anti-Rohingya documents. They also distributed anti-Islamic Buddhist propaganda books such as famous film director Shwe Dom Bi Aung’s *Kodawh Karunna*, which circulated widely. After the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the army put informants inside the Sangha, revived the *Saya–Dakar* programme, and assigned police for surveillance of monks, nuns, and lay-attendants from 175 monasteries across the country (Moe Zay Nyein 2014, 89–105).

The rise of Buddhist protectionist groups after 2011 can also be seen as an extension of the *Saya–Dakar* programme, although reducing such monastic mobilisation to simply a creation of the military misses the fact that Buddhist protectionist mobilisation in the period from 2011 to 2016 was also a result of ontological insecurities brought about by rapid political and economic liberalisation. What is beyond doubt is that such Buddhist associations thrived under the protection of the semi-civilian government of Thein Sein (2011–2016). The organisation which was arguably most transformed by the *Saya–Dakar* programme is the YMBA, as discussed above. As late as in 2015, when YMBA members in Yangon were interviewed, the YMBA was an almost-forgotten organisation. However, in line with the *Saya–Dakar* programme, the YMBA has returned to the limelight through

the involvement of military personnel and funding. Following the 2021 coup, as explained by Phyo Wai (2023), the programme has expanded.⁷

The strong post-coup military–monastic complex is the result of a long-term military strategy to co-opt the Sangha, not only through control mechanisms, but also through economic incentives. For example, MaBaTha monks such as Ashin Pinna Wara have received large sums for the new MaBaTha free school system, and U Wirathu has received large donations to his educational institution in Sagaing, all from military families.⁸ One of the more curious examples of the military–monastic economic exchange involves a monk starting a mining company. In September 2022, the monk Ashin Pinna Nanda established the Nay Min Gyi Metta mining company, registered with the Department of Investment and Companies Registration.

The phenomenon of monks being closely involved in the military economy led to criticism well before the coup. For example, the progressive monk Moe Thu (2017) coined the term *crony-pongyi*, referring to monks closely linked to military-backed business elites. Moe Thu has long been critical of the monastic–military complex and has long been hiding from military-backed monasteries and monks for his open critique of the Sangha hierarchy. Such critique, as discussed below, exploded when leading monks shut the monastery gates to teenage protesters fleeing military persecution in the weeks after the 2021 coup.

Buddhist Revolutionary Monks

The Sangha is organised into nine sects (*gaing*), and monks from all sects have engaged on both sides of the struggle, so any clear correlation between *gaing* affiliation and position on the revolution is impossible to discern. Ethnicity is another variable that might be expected to influence views on revolutionary politics. A majority of monks are from the Bamar majority, but with important representation of ethnic minority groups such as the Mon, Karen, Shan, and Rakhine. Such ethnic differences are at times salient (in terms of language, cultural practices, as well as ethno-nationalist politics), while in other contexts such differences are downplayed. The revolutionary situation is an example of cross-cutting solidarities. Some devout lay Buddhists have dressed Christians as Buddhist monks to help them flee from one region to another. The authors know of three Rakhine monks who disrobed to become PDF soldiers in Karen State, composed of mostly Christian Karen fighters. Such recruitment is facilitated by long-standing, cross-ethnic Buddhist networks, but interlocutors said this would have been unthinkable before the revolution. In such cases, at least, the radical ethos of the revolution is put into practice.

What does revolution mean in this context? In Myanmar the term revolution (*tawhlan-yay* or *ayedawbon*) is polysemantic, connoting notions of radical change as well as resistance. The concept plays an obvious role in Burmese communist ideologies and traditions but is now widely used as opposition to the military, indicating a vision of broader societal change that transcends mere resistance. In what follows, various positions on what revolution might imply for Buddhist monks and laypeople in their fight against the military are mapped.

Actors and Networks

Perhaps the most significant monk in the revolutionary movement is the Mon Buddhist monk known as King Zero. In the Burmese language this is *min thoun nya*, which means “King of Emptiness.” It also has connotations to eliminate. The name is a direct reference

to the Burmese tradition of kicking back at political power and is therefore in itself deeply revolutionary. King Zero is one of the leaders of the Spring Revolution Sangha Network (*nwayOo taw-hlan-yay thangha konyet*). In conversation during 2022, his choice of words clearly indicated his stance. For example, he (like most revolutionaries) would resist the use of the term *tatmadaw* for the military (as the term is honorific), using the term *sit-tat* (military organisation). He also consistently referred to junta soldiers as *sit-khway* (military dogs).

Being trained at the leading monastic State Pariyatti Sasana University and being a strict follower of the *vinaya*, King Zero combines revolutionary activities with the most traditional appearance as a Buddhist monk in the public space. As an alumnus of a top monastic university and ordained into the Shwegyin order, he clearly belongs to the elite within the Sangha, enjoying enormous respect among other revolutionary monks and lay Buddhists. In many ways he is considered a spiritual guide of the revolution. He is invited to give online sermons several days a week, and his views are of particular importance to a Buddhist Ideology of Revolution.

In conversations, King Zero explained his views on the revolution:

I started to engage myself in politics since I joined the State Pariyatti Sasana University in Yangon in 1998. The reason is that many of the monks, especially senior ones, were not guiding the right way to the lay followers. For example, the main reason why our country Myanmar became one of the poorest nations in the world, even with abundance of resources available, was that the military has been using the wrong political system. However, those senior monks failed to pinpoint the main reason [for the country's troubles]. Rather, they misguided the people and they insisted that poor people should donate more and more, making already poor people more vulnerable. Donations go to unnecessary places like pagodas and monasteries. Look what they were doing, they allied with the military and practiced nepotism. Thus, I raised questions and awareness on these issues. That is why I decided to become political [*naing-ngan-yay lote te*] (Interview, July 8, 2022).

Importantly, by politics here he did not refer to party politics, but to making people aware of the wrongdoings of the military toward the people, as well as the monastic hierarchy's support to the military. Due to his activities, he was dismissed from the monastic university, but became aligned with other senior monks in support of the NLD. He has established many language-learning centres and free courses on computers, in addition to building up libraries. "The actual reason behind these activities," he explained, "is that I wanted to politically educate people about what has been happening in Myanmar and what and how things should be done." During the 2007 Saffron Revolution he had to flee to Thailand, but returned after the NLD came to power in 2016. During the NLD government he felt free to re-engage in his educational activities. After the 2021 coup he has again been forced to flee to Thailand, where he works for the refugee communities in the Thai-Burmese borderlands. He continued to explain:

From here, I have built the Spring Revolution Sangha Network and multi-religious peace groups that are really active on social media, and together we help the revolutionary groups in whatever they need. The MaBaTha monks and most senior monks were misleading the people, and I and my friends have been trying to bring people and the *dhamma* back on the right track. They allied with the SAC and practiced nepotism. Only when the coup took place, their masks were taken off, so many young people came to thank me here saying, "without you, we would not have anyone to trust and no religion [*batha*] to follow." I smiled at them and said: "You better be the person without religion, but please never be the person without *dhamma*." The two are really different. *Dhamma* became weak, and now people suffer a lot from the junta's oppression and the mischievous monks' alliance with the dictatorship. We are trying to make *dhamma* prosper again.

The distinction made between "religion" (*batha*) and *dhamma* is important as *batha* in this context refers to cultural and social boundaries and identities while *dhamma*

transcends all that by referring to morality, righteousness, and justice. The monk thus clearly frames his revolutionary politics within a Buddhist framework. When asked about how revolution could be defended on Buddhist grounds, King Zero replied:

In reply to your question, protection [*karkwe*] level is two-fold and they are interconnected. You need to protect yourself first and then if you are able, you can protect your society and environment too. It is also said in the *Mangala sutta* [canonical text] as well, like in the phrase *patiyupadesavasa*, which means you need a wholesome surrounding or environment. But your environment and you yourself are interdependent and inter-related too, as in the *Patthana pali* especially in *Inmyamannya paccayo* [canonical text]. Regarding the Buddhist way of doing politics, the Buddha never said that we should just surrender to the bullies and to unfairness; we should rather protect our selves and our society. You can see a good example in the *Mahosada jataka* [*Jataka* 546, a canonical text] and also in the eight major triumphs achieved by the Buddha. Buddha taught us to spread loving kindness, not to use violence. But he also taught us to protect ourselves from bullies and oppression. His teachings never dwell on the extreme, always on the middle path, holding the position to neither surrender nor bully, but to protect. When you attempt to become powerful by yourself, then you can go a step further, you can protect your society and even the entire world from unwholesome things.

To him then, being a revolutionary is to restore the *dhamma*, meaning that revolution and the *dhamma* cannot be separated. Decline in *dhamma* is what caused the suffering of people in the first place. Therefore, he explained, “every Friday and Sunday we give *dhamma* talks on how to build a ‘*dhamma* state’ (*dhamma naing-ngan-taw*), which is our mission after the revolution.” In his view, this *dhamma* state must be “a religiously-inclusive state in which followers of different faiths can coexist peacefully.” A *dhamma* state is not about creating a religious (*batha*) state based on religious exclusion of minorities, but one built on respect, peace, and justice, transcending religious and ethnic differences.

Such views were common among the revolutionary monks involved in this study, but King Zero was unquestionably among the most learned and distinguished among these, as his many textual references to classical sources testify. He is also among the few who clearly communicated a Buddhist vision for what the new beginning should bring; that is, what comes *after* the revolution. This vision, as explained above, implies that following Buddhist teachings the right way is a pre-requisite for building a just society.

Liberation is often discussed in Buddhist sermons, but in the revolutionary situation monks fighting against the military use the term liberation (*lut-myauk-yay* or *lut-lat-yay*) in a wider sense, so as to include spiritual as well as physical liberation in the here and now. These sermons often contain encouragement for individual sacrifice and continued resistance. In these settings, the revolutionary co-ordinates are clearly Buddhist, and there is a conflation of individual liberation with the liberation of people from tyranny. However, and in clear contrast to the Marxist-inspired Buddhist revolutionary ideologies of the 1930s, the 2021 post-coup Buddhist revolutionary language does not contain any reference to *lokka nibban* (a this-worldly perfect society), with its emphasis on economic justice in the present. The reason for this is that the Spring Revolution is not driven by socio-economic concerns *per se*.

Another well-known revolutionary is Ashin Varananna (a pseudonym), one of the leading monks of the Mandalay Sangha Union who organised night-time indoor protests in Mandalay. He explains why he engaged:

I have been participating in the protest since a few days after the coup started. Now, I cannot define my role any longer. Maybe, such protest is what people will do after the coup. All I know is that I must do whatever I can to bring back peace, harmony and justice in our country ... I think, for me, it started from the day they brutally killed the unarmed civilians in our country. We did not need to negotiate with one another regarding how to respond to this brutal killing and

unlawful oppression by the army. We automatically responded to it almost in unison. I think that was the starting point (Interview, August 10, 2022).

Like many other monks and lay activists interviewed for this study, Ashin Varananna sees his revolutionary engagements as a response to the mass atrocities committed by the military, and not necessarily as the outcome of an ideological programme, or vision that existed prior to the coup. However, in contrast to most interviewees, he also doubts his own role. The revolutionary situation put him in a position out of the ordinary, making him wonder whether this is “what people will do after the coup.”

Other revolutionaries showed more explicit concern for what the revolutionary situation would imply for the Sangha. In one focus group interview in July 2022, a young monk explained:

I was really shocked when people were violently repressed. So, I participated in the protests ... When people built roadblocks, I came across monks' comments online that condemned people who defended themselves. That is wrong. I am very critical of those who criticise the people [who fight against the military]. I have also been critical of Sitagu and Chekinda and their trips to Moscow [together with military generals]. However, I have decided to stay away from the Spring Revolution Sangha Network; people have different opinions. The Network ... the way they present ... it will affect the image of the Sangha. In my view it is not presentable.

In the Spring Revolution Sangha Network there are multiple opinions and styles, ranging from elite intellectual voices like the late Myawaddy Mingyi Sayadaw (1951–2022) and King Zero, to monks such as NwayOo Taw-hlan-yay Sayadaw, who has used harsh language and even cursed the military. Therefore, although in strong support of the aim of the Spring Revolution Sangha Network, this young monk was not comfortable with its harsh language and revolutionary mode as he thought that it damaged monastic ritual purity and subsequently damaged the authority of the Sangha. Like other monks interviewed for this study, he preferred monks like Myawaddy Mingyi Sayadaw, who since 1988 had been a public critic of military rule, but whose learned and traditional style allowed for political engagements within the conventions of monastic behaviour. For example, Myawaddy Mingyi Sayadaw often referred to Buddhist narratives about the evil monk Devadatta who used Buddhism for his own power and profit, to point out what he saw as the misuse of Buddhism by military monks and the military itself.

Revolutionary Practices

During the 2007 Saffron Revolution, chanting of the *Metta sutta* in a public space was one of the hallmarks of monastic resistance. After 2021 this has hardly been practiced, at least in public spaces. Uruwayla Sayadaw (pseudonym), another of the leading monks of the Spring Revolution Sangha Network, was asked about the role of this *sutta* for the revolution. He explained that revolutionary monks still hold on to it, as they did in 2007, but that now they do more than just recite it in their anti-coup protests “But we follow the Buddha’s advice in the *Metta sutta*,” he explained, “putting them into practice in our anti-coup activities.” He then quoted the second verse of the *sutta* about the need to be an upright person, as those who are not upright can easily fall prey to one or all of the four *agati* (evil courses of action). Explaining the meaning of the *sutta*, he pointed out that only wisdom can give birth to the quality of uprightness, and moreover, that only the upright person can spread genuine loving kindness to all. He continued:

So, to our understanding, these guys from the SAC practice *agati* as they are not wise enough from the Buddhist perspective. They follow *agati* and commit so many grave crimes against us. In this respect, if we want to resist their unwholesome actions, we must stand with the *dhamma*, start

with being upright to others. I mean, not just reciting but action. We should stand with those fighting for freedom, justice, and fairness. This is how we understand the way to spread loving kindness physically [*metta-kayakamma*]. This spring revolution needs from us, not just verbal actions, but physical ones. So, in short, we still follow the Buddha's advice from the *Metta sutta*, but in a practical way (Interview, April 14, 2023).

Thus, there is a clear recognition that monastic revolutionary practice is not only about employing ritual practice (exclusive to the Sangha) against military rule, but to extend actions beyond the traditional monastic sphere. Interviews show that Buddhist monastics assist the revolution in a number of ways, and many do so in a low-key manner by assisting their *dayaka* communities. This entails providing food to the needy (turning around the ritual order of monks receiving food from laypersons); providing shelter to persecuted activists (which became even more dangerous after the MaHaNa order that prohibits monasteries taking in lay guests); posting on social media in support of the revolution, serving as website hosts (run by young and tech-savvy monks); running revolutionary apps (such as NUG Pay, an alternative economic transfer system that bypasses state-run banking systems); and, fund-raising activities. With regard to the latter, these are conducted often in connection with regular sermons. According to one interlocutor residing among Burmese migrant communities in Bangkok, people show less interest in sermons than they show for fund-raising activities (such as lotteries) in support of the revolution.

Another important act of resistance are calls for the boycott of regular monastic activities, such as state-organised alms donations. As previously discussed, an important SAC strategy in creating an impression of normalcy and order has been to insist on state-monastic ritual interaction, such as the massive alms offerings to more than 10,000 monks in Mandalay in May 2022 (Myanmar Information Sheet 2022). As the state media made announcements for similar massive events in May 2023, revolutionary monks from a group called “Sons of the Buddha Against Dictatorship” organised online campaigns to ask monks not to participate, with the intent of breaking down a fundamental part of the monastic–military complex.

This study also found that the activities of the revolutionary monks have shifted, from being active in public protests in the few weeks after the coup to more clandestine activities as the military violence increased. Ashin Dhamma Metta (a pseudonym) explains this shift:

I was saddened to notice that our country fell back into the darkness again when the coup started on February 1, 2021. Not long afterwards, people of all ages took to the streets condemning the coup. Of course, I took part in the street protests, struck the tin bucket at 8:00 pm, reciting *paritta* [protective verses from the canon] together with other monks in my monastery. Later, I participated in night-time silence strikes with my friends. I co-operated with the Mandalay Monks Union in their street protests. In one of our street protests, we were run down by a police truck and arrested. I suffered torture in the [anonymised] interrogation cell for a week. I was charged with 505-a [of the Penal Code] and sent to prison in Mandalay. When they released me, I left for the liberated areas and took rest for a month. After I recovered, I started supporting the revolutionary groups (Interview, September 9, 2022).

At the heart of his clandestine activities was digital fundraising for PDFs. He sent regular reminders to donors – and potential donors – to support the resistance groups. Furthermore, he used his nationwide connections to organise rescue operations for monks who needed to flee the cities into the liberated areas.

Again, the massive military violence led to revolutionary engagements. In the beginning of the resistance, the number of monks and nuns imprisoned or killed was low compared to 1988 and 2007. With an intensified military crackdown on protesters, the number of monks and nuns being unlawfully imprisoned, tortured, and killed increased –

with an estimated 100 monastic casualties in the period between February 1, 2021 and December 31, 2023. Such violence prompted Ashin Dhamma Metta to become a military chaplain for one of the PDFs. He remained in robes and served the religious needs of his platoon, including spiritual counselling, preaching, and – sadly but not surprisingly – conducting funerals. His activities have inspired others and there is an increased number of PDF military chaplains; by December 2023, the authors had counted 15 of them. Such monks cannot be dismissed as false monks as they do their utmost to keep the *vinaya* under extreme circumstances. Furthermore, in addition to the activities already mentioned, they bless fighters before battle, and share their merits (*punya*) with the PDF fighters. Some monks serving in PDF camps occasionally also engage in spirit rituals (*akyut-alut pwe*) to free the spirits of fallen soldiers who in solidarity remain with their comrades in the camps. The rituals are thought to release them to a better realm of existence.

Revolution Within Limits? Vinaya Regulation and Monastic Purity

So, are there any restrictions on monastic revolutionary activities? Not surprisingly, *vinaya* regulations have the strongest influence upon how monks and nuns understand their contributions, and how they *perform* the revolution. First and foremost, being a revolutionary monk or nun does not imply taking up arms. Unfortunately, there is only limited information about the nuns who disrobe to join PDFs – although the authors are aware of at least ten cases – so the following analysis is based on the experiences of male monastics only. When monks decide to join the armed struggle, they leave the Sangha. Taking life is a transgression of the third *parajika* rule, which results in ex-communication. Furthermore, being too closely associated with war and violence runs the risk of losing one’s ritual purity and thus one’s authority as a monk or nun. There is a fine line, however, between not associating oneself with structures of violence (as expected in the monastic code) and serving soldiers or revolutionary troops. As discussed above, some of the revolutionary monks have joined PDFs as military chaplains, not unlike many other Buddhist monks who serve armies in Buddhist majority states across the region. In this capacity, they console soldiers and provide necessary ritual services, and in some cases, they justify the use of violence with reference to Buddhist texts.

The number of monks serving the PDFs within military camps is therefore limited because monks know very well that association with military structures might endanger their ritual purity and thus their religious authority. Many of the interviewees also thought that their role as monks allowed them to serve the revolution in better ways than serving the PDFs inside camps. For example, funds raised through monastic activities are re-donated to PDFs. Several monks reported that as they do not know how the money is spent in the PDFs, they are free of possible negative karmic repercussions since they could not know if the donations were spent on arms. A revolutionary monk explained that in his view, it was impossible to support a non-violent strategy, given the mass atrocities against the people, and that people had the right to defend themselves, but he also added: “We cannot say this in public as it goes against the *vinaya*” (Focus group interview, July 2022).

For other monks, it was completely unthinkable to make donations to the PDFs as they saw it as funding violence, and thus inappropriate for monks. To them, donating to the CDM was a far more wholesome (*kusala*) moral action, as the CDM engaged in non-violent civil disobedience against the morally corrupt military state. Concern over *vinaya* transgressions was a recurrent theme in conversations with monks. As previously mentioned, harsh revolutionary speech was an issue; although identifying as revolutionary

monks and being active in clandestine networks in support of the revolution, some of the monks interviewed felt uncomfortable with the style of other revolutionary monks. Therefore, one of the young monks explained that he refrained from engaging with the Sangha Revolutionary Network. He said, “In my view, the way they present their cause ... will affect the image of the network. It is not presentable. They engage in personal attacks and are very harsh in their criticism” (Focus group interview, July 2022). Monks are supposed to be soft-spoken and not engage in harsh speech, and they are trained to control their speech as well as their body. The concern is that if they lower the standards for the sake of the revolution, the Sangha will be in decay *after* the revolution. A revolution the Buddhist way is thus performed and acted from *within* the traditional boundaries of the monastic community, not by breaking them.

Lay Buddhist Revolutionaries and the Sense of Betrayal

Leading members of the NUG and the CDM have been forced to flee to the borderlands or abroad. Some have settled in Mae Sot, on the Thai side of the border. The town has long been a site for refugees, diaspora politics, and illegal trade of all sorts. Since the 2021 coup, it has been a hub for revolutionary politics. Several youth CDMers and NUG staff and activists were interviewed in Mae Sot to get their views on the role of Buddhism in the revolution. Attention was paid to the changing role of Buddhism, as compared to 2007, and the radical critique of leading monks such as Sitagu Sayadaw or Ashin Chekinda. Given the harsh online revolutionary critique of such monks, one could easily assume that Buddhism had little influence on the lay revolutionaries. However, despite the massive outcry against the Sangha and the NUG’s secularist Federal Democracy Charter – it would be misleading to assume that these activists had left their Buddhism behind. In fact, all of those interviewed were openly disillusioned with monastic Buddhism but nonetheless strongly identify as Buddhists.

A prominent CDM activist and NUG staff member (and cultural celebrity in Myanmar) revealed that the reason for monastic support of the junta was the co-option of leading monks by the military. To him, the *Saya-Dakar* programme had been extremely successful, meaning many monks were unable to support the people against the military. As a former follower of Ashin Sobitha, he felt disappointed a monk he thought was liberal, with a vision of Buddhist pro-democratic politics, had shown himself to be pro-military following the coup. When asked about what the revolution meant for him, he explained:

Revolution for me ... means to get back my life, really, you know, under the Thein Sein and the NLD governments we had much more freedoms. I could openly criticise government policies ... and I could live my life as I wanted. I want to have my freedoms back ... The revolution is also about changing the mindset. We want the ethnic groups to have their rights and freedoms, we do not want any form of discrimination of minority groups (Interview, July 13, 2022).

This is, not surprisingly, in line with NUG visions of a more inclusive Myanmar. In this, the “revolutionary co-ordinates” are less informed by Buddhist grammars than they are by liberal democratic politics.

A female CDMer, working for the NUG in the border regions, was also deeply disappointed with the Sangha. She explained:

To me what changed it all was the violence in Nay Pyi Taw on February 22, 2021, when the military attacked the students protesting against the coup. I was there and experienced the violence. Many students sought refuge in a nearby monastery, but the monastery closed its gates. Because of that the students were killed or jailed. I know I should not feel this way, but later,

when Bhadanta Kavisara, the famous monk of that monastery, was killed in an airplane crash, I was happy (Interview, July 15, 2022).

The shock that monks, who were supposed to represent moral authority and to guide the public, could betray youth protesters was widely shared among other CDMers who were interviewed. As one explained: “All our lives we have learnt how to pay respect to the monks and then they betray us like this.” Another criticism among interviewees focused on the lavish lay donations to the Sangha, which in their view was just exploitation of the poor. In sum, there was a deep-seated critique of corruption, economic dependency, massive military–monastic entanglements, and the exploitation of the poor.

Conclusion: Division, Polarisation, and the Future of Buddhism

COVID-19 restrictions and visits home after religious exams meant there was a low number of monastics in urban temples at the time of the 2021 coup, which might explain a lower turnout than might have been expected in street demonstrations in Yangon. Importantly, however, this does not mean lack of support of the pro-democracy struggle, with the initial response of elite Sangha institutions being moderate resistance. However, with the military crackdown on civilians and subsequent armed popular resistance, leading monasteries favoured the Buddhist Ideology of Order, withdrawing into a self-defined non-political space, and contributing to the restoration of normalcy and playing their ritual part in the monastic–military complex. Furthermore, a large group of monks fall into the category of the Obedient Majority.

This raises the question of to what extent the Obedient Majority overlaps with the long-standing tradition of monastic indifference to politics and the ideal of being above politics. On the surface, this might seem the case. However, the post-2021-coup situation is far more extreme than any other rupture in post-colonial Burma, largely excluding a possibility for a neutral or non-political stance; monks who close monastery gates to fleeing students are, not surprisingly, understood as taking a political stance. The same could be said for monks who engage in state-sponsored *dana* rituals, despite calls for boycott. The revolutionary situation has narrowed the space for so-called non-political monks especially as their constituencies continue to suffer.

This study has found that the revolutionary situation has produced an unprecedented division and polarisation within the Sangha, generating radical – if not militant – responses either for or against the revolution. On the one side, pro-military monks justify continued military rule, while on the other side, revolutionary monks support armed resistance to military rule, although, notably, their support is framed in less militant discourses than the pro-military monks. Recent discussions about the role of the Sangha after the 2021 coup have emphasised the alleged silence of the order compared to 1988 and 2007 (see International Crisis Group 2023). As argued here, to reduce their response to silence is inaccurate and misleading. Rather, division, polarisation, and broader conflict have devastating long-term effects on Sangha–lay relations and, potentially, on Sangha organisation, as monks in the resistance-controlled areas are out of MaHaNa control.

One of the important findings of this study is that it shows the importance of long-term monastic engagements with resistance networks, revealing hidden forms of monastic revolutionary engagements. As clearly demonstrated in interviews and field observations, when popular resistance was met with massive violence in March 2021, monastic resistance to the coup did not disappear, but underwent a radical transformation. Admittedly, monastic revolutionary networks represent a radical minority. However, monastic resistance needs to be understood as a broader social field beyond defined networks. This includes multiple

forms of humanitarian engagement among monks who do not necessarily identify with the clearly defined radical networks, and who might even be concerned about the ways in which the revolution is *performed* through harsh language or magic practices (*yadaya*). As shown in this article, such monks still self-identify as “revolutionary monks” and work tirelessly for the Spring Revolution to succeed, albeit in less linguistically and aesthetically radical ways.

Revolutionary monks interviewed in higher monastic education in Thailand were less familiar with the intense lay revolutionary critique of institutional Buddhism, and rather than radically altering monastic institutions, to them the burning question was to get all monks to follow the *vinaya* correctly. In that sense, these monks can perhaps be categorised as traditionalist revolutionaries who highlight the importance of the Buddhist revolutionary co-ordinates, or in other words, who attempt to understand questions of social justice within the boundaries of monastic tradition. The issue at stake was the monks’ traditional role in guiding public morality as they are expected to demonstrate the relevance of the Buddha’s teachings in daily life. While some monks have had to be extremely careful to avoid talking politics, others have been criticising the military government for not acting according to a Buddhist moral basis of political action. As has been shown, revolutionary monks see their duties as going beyond the recital of the *Metta sutta* – to “actually now put it into practice” – as a tool for revolutionary action.

Revolutionary monks (be they traditionalists or radicals) understand the revolution according to Buddhist co-ordinates, for example in their visions of a *dhamma* state, which tap into traditional Buddhist utopias of the righteous state. Importantly, however, the context of the vision of a *dhamma* state is now different to previous utopian imaginaries. For example, during colonial times, visions of a *dhamma* state were more linked to the concept of *dhammaraja* (the righteous king), and the need for restoration of pre-colonial political orders. This must be understood in the context of liberation from colonial rule and the need for protection against foreign rule. In the current situation, King Zero’s conception of a *dhamma* state after the revolution is not about a *dhammaraja*, but instead provides a democratic vision of a just society. In the post-2021 revolutionary context, a *dhamma* state is not understood in relation to state protection of religion or to desires for a Buddhist king. More than anything it refers to visions of social justice and sovereignty of the people. As such, the revolutionary monks would see their vision as complementary to the secular revolutionary forces. On the one hand, this speaks to Walton’s (2016, 59) point that Buddhist political thinking in Myanmar often regards “democratic values not only as consistent with the Buddha’s teachings but as a worldly manifestation of the core elements of Buddhism.” On the other, the lay revolutionary critique of the Sangha threatens the Buddhist co-ordinates of the cosmogonic project. Thus, while to some it is a Buddhist Revolution, to others it is not only a democratic revolution but also a Revolution of Buddhism, as a necessary step toward the creation of new social orders.

Notes

1. The Pali word *sasana* (Burmese: *thathana*) refers to 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.
2. This statement was issued on November 23, 2022, and is held on file by the authors. See also *Khonumthung News. A Window for Chin People* (November 30, 2022).
3. Domestic Report, October 2022. On file with authors.
4. A copy of the letter is on file with the authors.
5. Screenshots of the now deleted Facebook post are on file with the authors.

6. YMBA statement, issued November 25, 2021. On file with authors.
7. Statement issued by the Union Solidarity and Development Party of Southern Shan State saying that the *Saya-Dakar* programme was to be resumed as directed by the army. On file with authors.
8. Domestic Report, June 2022. On file with authors.

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Ethical Compatibility Statement

The study presented in this article has been conducted following the ethical guidelines of The National Committee for Research Ethics in Norway and is approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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