THE IMPACT OF 'BURMESE' BUDDHISM ON THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA: SUPPORTING OR HINDERING?

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Myint Myint San

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analysed the impact of Burmese Buddhism on political and social thinking in Burma. It studied how the popular form of Burmese Buddhism impacts on peoples' understanding of human rights. In particular, it critically makes reference to the impact of the Burmese form of Buddhism on gender equality and individual freedoms regarding sexual orientation.

In the process of Burmanising Buddhism, the concept of Karma has been downgraded and re-interpreted into an apology, explanation or rationalisation for the poor economic and political situation in the country. The explanation and rationalisation of Karma is that no one can change the cause of Karma, and that one just has to take life as it comes. As long as Burmese Buddhists adhere to a Burmanised form of Karma, the equality of human beings will not be understood and valued, and realisation of human rights in Burma will still be elusive.

The thesis argues that the general public's understanding of human rights has been reduced because of the interpretation of Buddhism. The right to life, right to security of a person and right to freedom and equality have been extensively undermined by Burmanised Buddhism. The pacification of the Burmese people hinders human rights ideas and principles as instilled in the minds of the people.

KEY WORDS: BURMESE BUDDHISM/ *BURMANISED* CONCEPT OF KARMA/ IMPACT OF BURMESE BUDDHISM/ HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BURMA

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In Burma, Buddhism has long played a significant role in its political and social ideas. Any discussion about contemporary Buddhism in Burma and its transformations (or regressions) requires a brief history of the religion in Burma and how Burmese people perceive themselves in relation to Buddhism and its preservation. It is important to understand the relationship between the country's old monarchs, the religion and its leaders since the current military regime identifies itself with some of Burma's long dead kings. Buddhism (and Buddhist virtues) shaped the philosophy governing the virtues and practices of a good ruler, with many of Burma's kings having promoted themselves as Buddhist monarchs in order to gain legitimacy.

During the period of British and Japanese colonialism, Buddhism also played a significant role with monks and some of the leaders of the national liberation movement. Nonetheless, the *sangha*'s involvement in the national liberation movement as well as in Burma's modern political movements has not gone unopposed. After the country's independence, U Nu the country's only elected Prime Minister was forced to make Buddhism the state religion (Ling, 1993: 17), attracting protests from the people of other religions (Khin Maung Win, 1999). The Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) led by General Ne Win in 1979, assigned the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) to undertake the first 'cleansing' of the *sangha* after independence. The cleansing of the *sangha* are attempts to impose and maintain conservative and orthodox ideology and practices. For the regime, suppression of political and outspoken monks occurs, quite conveniently with the support of the more conservative interpretations of Theravada Buddhism favoured by many within the *sangha* community and the laity. This has contributed to an interpretation of *Karma* for the laity, which is unable to alternatively comprehend their suffering under the military regime. This means that political explanations and the need for political change are bypassed.

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Classical Buddhism[1] or the Buddha's teaching is arguably attuned to the ideas and philosophy of human rights in the sense that it promotes loving-kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance and humility (Keown, Prebish and Husted 1998: 8). Ethicists, like Inada (1998), argue that Buddhism promotes a "soft relationship" between human beings promoting traits such as patience, humility, tolerance, humaneness, love and compassion (Keown, Prebish & Husted 1998: 8). Inada (1998) stated that these human traits are basic to the Buddhist quest and by extension they are "rights of human beings." These are similar virtues to those which are encapsulated in the UDHR. The debate over whether Buddhist teachings can contribute to the contemporary human rights movement and whether Buddhism is compatible with human rights is still contested (Inada 1998; Keown, Prebish and Husted 1998). Nonetheless, the scope of this paper is not to argue for some ultimate compatibility between Buddhism and human rights principles, rather it starts with the assumption that classical Buddhism or the Buddha's teaching are compatible with the principles that are ascribed to idea of human rights.

The thesis outlines the development of Burmese Buddhism, arguing that its contemporary interpretation is incompatible with the development of human rights ideas and practices. It does not attempt to chronologically outline the introduction of human rights ideas and their violations in Burma. Rather, it discusses some of the philosophical impediments to the realization of human rights associated with the Burmese interpretation of Buddhism. The distortion of Buddhism in Burma is referred here *Burmanised* Buddhism, which has occurred within the country's particular ethnic and ethno-political conflict. The focus is on the contemporary interpretation and its relationship, particularly in the period after the 1988 uprising, which is the period when the religious and psychological warfare between the military regime and the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was in ascendance. This includes an examination of the root causes of Burma's protracted struggle for democracy and freedom and the country's inability to embrace human rights, nearly twenty years after the birth of the human rights movement. The military regime bears some of the culpability for the 'corruption' of Buddhism using the religion to

[1] Classical Buddhism here refers to the more philosophical and accepted intellectual interpretations of the original form of the religion.

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legitimize its rule. Nonetheless, culpability also lay with the wider public whose distorted views of Buddhism contribute to the country's poor political development and poor human rights practices.

There are scholarly works that address Burmese Buddhism and its influence on the country's political system and resistance movements, though most of those works have focused on the period prior to 1988. Among pre-88 literature on Burma and particularly of Spiro (1967) since late 1960s had worked on religion as coping tool for the devotees by offering explanation and by providing techniques. However, his work on Burmese supernaturalism was more of syncretism between supernaturalism and Buddhism of which Burmese seemed to be merging two together in coping their suffering. There are exceptions including Houtman (1999) and Min Zin (2003) who have written on the impact of Burmese Buddhism on limiting social change in Burma, arguing that Buddhism needs to be more socially engaged. These were the first pieces of research on Burma in this area of human rights. Fink (2001) also addresses the links between Buddhism and politics, after 1988, though its focus is on the military regimes manipulation of religion.

However, research by Burmese on this subject, is very small and inadequate. Hence, the thesis is an attempt to partially fill this gap, providing a new perspective on the relationship between Burmese Buddhism and political movements with human rights focus. The thesis will contribute to this area of research and to a more general scholarly debate on issues affecting the people of Burma. The thesis is firstly an academic work, which critically examines Burmese Buddhism from a human rights perspective, though the hope is that it will positively contribute to the ideas of those organisations working on the promotion of human rights in Burma as well.

1.1. Research Methods and Problem Statement

Research was done with 1) literature reviews and 2) fieldworks with initial free style discussion and actually conducting interviews. The literature used to develop the arguments in chapter 1 and 2 is mainly based on the work of both Western and Burmese scholars, published mainly prior to 1988. The literature used for Chapter 3 comes solely from Burmese language sources published inside the country under oppressive controls over press freedom and from the interviews conducted for this

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thesis. The authors of this literature are notably Buddhist scholars and revered monks published in official newspapers, magazines and journals. One of the important authors in chapter 3 was Bone Myint Thway, a Buddhist scholar and populist writer of books on Karmic effects. Another, important author used in chapter 3 was Ashin Sandardhika, a Buddhist monk and popular writer recently famous for his easy to read Dhamma books written for ordinary and young people.

Chapters 2 and 3 also include interviews with Burmese people. In the early stages of the research, all potential interviewees had lived outside of Burma for some time and were therefore exposed to new ideas. This was a major impediment to obtaining a proper understanding as well as true representation of the research subject. Also, preliminary (free style) discussion on the research topic indicated an extreme sensitivity and conservatism of some potential key informants and interviewees, due to social and political conservatism of culture in Burma where people think questioning is disrespectful and betrayal of one's own society. The free style discussions gave the impression to some of the interviewees that the research had an anti-Buddhist focus. This is worrisome for religious freedom as well as freedom of expression and freedom of thought.

Specifically Chapter 1, from pre and post 1988 literatures of both languages, examines the Buddhist zealotry overly keen to preserve and propagate, of Burmese Buddhism and the relationship this has with the philosophical interpretation and transformation of Buddhism across time. Burmese Buddhists pride themselves as being the protectors, preservers and promoters of the 'true' Buddhism, which is a fixed view of Theravada Buddhism as the only true version of the religion. This zealotry has assisted in the maintenance of the status quo due to the ideological conservatism associated with the focus on 'preserving' Theravada Buddhism. The first chapter also discusses the use of Buddhism by the military government as its philosophical and political backbone for its self-styled socialist state and now it is proclaimed forthcoming 'disciplined democratic' state. The chapter also discusses the significance of Buddhism for the NLD and the supporters of democratic change, using Buddhism and its practices as a mental strengthening tool in the face of brutal and extreme repression.

Chapter 2 examines Burma's key political movements from a human rights

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perspective arguing that monks under Burma's different monarchies were the sole protector of human rights, which subsequently transformed into a racial intolerance during the beginnings of the nation's anti-colonial movement, which still continues to some extent. Moreover, the various incarnations of the military government have not allowed any public discussion of 'human rights'. Chapter 2 also discusses the failure of the people of Burma to recognise and accept the importance of human rights principles. Again this chapter was researched from literature reviews as well as from the interviews conducted time span of during 2006 – 2008. Chapter 2 also deals with the important and increasingly elaborate promotion of Buddhism by the various military regimes after the 1988 uprising. The governments before the 1988 uprising did encourage Buddhism including during the short period of parliamentary democracy under Prime Minister U Nu. Nonetheless, it was only after 1988 that all Buddhist rituals become stately affairs, prominent between 1997 and 2003. Both the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the its reincarnation the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), organized donations, including "forced donation", to mark and oversee the Buddhist Lent and other Buddhist festivals. However, the involvement of SLORC and SPDC in religious affairs is not unprecedented occurring since Burma's monarchies.

Chapter 3 does address the contemporary interpretation of Buddhism in Burma, in particular that of Karma, and its relationship to the development and promotion of human rights in post 1988. Also addressed is the so-called cleansing of the *Sangha* by the military to prevent its challenging military rule. The focus on stringent forms of purity of monks (*theras)* to be the 'learned ones' and to strictly follow the *vinaya* has led to the entrenchment of the *status quo*. There are also other examples where Burmese Buddhism has been interpreted, such that it limits the individual rights of some in the community. On these points, the concept of Karma and the practice of the monks (*theras)* will be critically examined from the norms and principles of human rights. Chapter 3 further examines the impact these distortions of Buddhism have on gender equality, and individual freedoms such as sexual orientation and their promotion of political passivity in the country's population.

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1.2 Research Interviews and Interview Questions

All interviews were conducted in Burmese language and were translated into English. Questions were formulated in open-ended style for them to express freely of their thoughts and beliefs. Although it was intended to conduct total of ten interviews with gender balance, eventually, only eight interviews were able to conduct due to time and travel constraint, six of whom are currently living in Burma and two who had lived in Thailand for between four and five years. Due to sensitivity, safety and security issues, all interviewees' names and their detail descriptions were requested by them to withhold. Some of them gave not their real names but all consented that they would just be identified in interview numbers.

The interviewees' age ranged from 24 to 50s. There are five women and three men – one lay person and two Buddhist monks. One of the monks, Interviewee #1, was interviewed in a small border town right after the height of Saffron Revolution in Rangoon and other major cities where monks and demonstrators were mercilessly shot dead followed by brutal crack down resulting in many deaths including one Japanese national photo journalist. The Interviewee #1 was in the second tier leadership in the Saffron Revolution and studying his master degree in Buddhist Studies when the Saffron Revolution took place. Interviewee #2, also a monk, in his late 30s, has been residing in border town for about four years when the interview was conducted. He escaped Burma right after Depayin Massacre in May 2003 during and he was apparently still traumatised by the whole experience of Depayin. He was the lead witness giving first-hand account of what happened to the supporters of NLD, NLD party members and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during the hearing conducted on the border by the Ad Hoc Commission on Depayin Massacre (Burma).

Age of four out of five women ranged from 24 to 30 (Interview #3, #4, #5 and #6) who were in Thailand at the near end of year 2007 and early 2008. Two of these young women were direct witnesses to the Saffron Revolution and one escaped narrowly from brutal crack down although she was not a participant in the protest. They have higher education passed matriculation and exposed to Burmese Theravada Buddhism their whole life. The last woman, Interviewee # 7, was in her early 50s who was exposed to both Buddhism and Catholicism. She is the wife of second tier leadership of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and

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endured political repression with grace and courage for her husband's involvement. The last interviewee, Interviewee #8, has long history of literary background since in Burma and works on the border as a journalist for nearly five years. He is a self-taught Buddhist and differs himself from born Buddhist. Although withholding their identity for their safety some more information and explanations about interviewees were given in footnotes in the thesis where relevant.

Interview Guide Questions:

1. Do you believe in the cycle of *Sansara*[2] in which past, present and future revolve around? How these three periods or existences relate to one another?

2. Why are there rich people and poor people? Why there are some people who have status and no status?

3. Why are some countries richer than some other countries, such as Burma?

4. Why do you think some people win lottery?

5. Why some people are detained or imprisoned?

6. Why some girls and women are raped?

7. Why some people have to die horribly? For example – those who died in Tsunami

8. What impact does the past action have on the present? How present life is connecting to the past life?

9. Please describe the time that you have experienced good Karma or bad Karma.

[2] *Sansara* means 'cycle of life'.

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10. If that is your experience, how do you understand the concept of Karma?

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CHAPTER II
THE *'BURMANISATION'* OF BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhism is well known for its focus on individual salvation, but not for its influence on the political thought of the laity, nor for the involvement of the *sangha* in political affairs. In contrast to the existing popular perception this chapter argues that Buddhism has played a significant role in the development of Burma's political ideology and events. There is a well-known expression that "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist." This expresses the idea that Burmese identity is different from that of Westerners and even from Buddhists in other Theravada countries, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka (Smith 1964: 85-86). This chapter argues that there is a *'Burmanised'* interpretation of Buddhism, which is intertwined with an interpretation of Burma's history. This provides an insight into a prevailing ideology and belief that Burma has an important role in preserving Buddhism, and ultimately the influence this has on the country's contemporary politics, notably the battle over the role of human rights and democracy.

The first Section, 1.1, outlines the contemporary Burmese understanding of the Pyu kingdom, which existed between the 5th and 6th century in the upper region of present day Burma.[3] Many Burmese claim the Pyu (and therefore the Burmese) were the first people to meet the Buddha and witnessed his death, ignoring the origins of Buddhism, which came from India via Ceylon (Phyoe Thara 2003: 101).[4] It was with the conversion of the Indian King Asoka in the third century B.C. involved supporting missionary expeditions to Persia (Iran), Kashmir, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Egypt, Greece and Suvannabhumi, a Mon Kingdom that influenced the present countries of Thailand

[3] The Pyu inhabited what is now central Burma north of Prome from around 100 BCE to 840 CE.
[4] Than Tun (2005: 35) stated that it is impossible to place Buddha in Burma during the life time of the Buddha, but he was astonished that the men and monks of Burma have taken these legends as history.

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and Burma.[5] Section 1.2 then discusses the role of Buddhism during the various kingdoms beginning in the 11th century. It was during this period that Buddhism really took hold in the areas that now constitute Burma, long after the destruction of the Pyu. Since Buddhism came via Ceylon it was heavily infused with Sinhalese nationalism and ideas, which subsequently influenced the basic relationships between the *Sangha* (community of monks), government and society. In the various kingdoms Buddhist ethics shaped the concept of a good ruler, but Buddhism was also used by the various monarchs to enhance the legitimacy of their rule. These ideas of just rule also created an important relationship between the *Sangha* and the monarchs in the various Burman, Mon, Shan and Arakanese kingdoms.

During the British colonial period, Buddhism played a significant role with monks becoming important leaders in the national liberation movement. The national liberation movement that arose under British rule led to some important transformations in Buddhism, leading Buddhism to be identified with the nation and ethnicity. These issues are discussed in Section 1.3. After independence the politics of Burma continued to be extensively intertwined with Buddhism.[6] Section 1.4 discusses this relationship and the approach of U Nu to Buddhism, not only to gain popular support, but as a mechanism to protect and encourage the acceptance of non-Buddhists as genuine citizens of Burma. U Nu's Prime Ministership was heavily criticized for its perceived leniency towards those that challenged the state militarily. His government was also pressured by the *Sangha* to make Buddhism the central ideology for governing the country.

In 1962, the military overthrew U Nu's democratically elected government. Section 1.5 discusses the controls instituted by consequent military state over the institutions of the *Sangha*, designed to limit opposition from the *Sangha* and to equate Buddhism with national identity. It also argues that during the 1988 uprising, Buddhism again became a focal point for some of those opposed to military rule, centred around the figure of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The final section, 1.6 addresses

[5] King Asoka ruled the Maurya Empire, which reached modern day Afghanistan, Pakistan and Persia. Under King Asoka, Hinduism was already entrenched in Indian society, along with Jainism, and other forms of religions.

[6] Silverstein (1996: 212) believes that there are two sources of the idea of freedom in Burma – one derived from Buddhism and culture and another as a by-product from being a British colony.

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the shift in the state's control, after the 1988 uprising, over the *Sangha* and their increased use of propaganda to convince the population that the military are necessary to protect Buddhism from foreign ideologies, particularly 'Western' democracy. However, since 1988, many opposed to military rule have attempted to counter this xenophobic manipulation of Buddhism, highlighting the link between Buddhist ethics, democracy and human rights. This approach has been adopted in particular by the National League for Democracy (NLD), of whom Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the most well-known leader and by many courageous monks within the *Sangha*.

2.1 The Pyu: The Beginning of Being 'Burmese'

Any assessment of the impact of Buddhism on Burma's politics and human rights records requires at least a brief discussion of the mythological status accorded by Burmese Buddhists to the Pyu kingdom (existing around the 5th or 6th Century A. D.), which was located on the upper Irrawaddy River around Prome (or Sri Kitera) (Than Tun 2008: 115, Harvey 2000: 11 & Ray 2002: 55-57). The Pyu in contemporary Burmese history are represented as a simple and peaceful people that avoided war and abstained from killing (Than Tun 2008: 120-121). One popular belief is that the Pyu would not wear silk for fear of killing silkworms and are considered by most Burmese as the epitome of a 'real' Buddhist.[7] The English historian Harvey has a similar interpretation to the Burmese historians, arguing that the Pyu were so passive and mollified by Buddhism they were almost happy as the slaves of the Shan Chinese (Nan'chao), who ruled the neighbouring kingdom.[8]

> …the Nan'chao Chief styled himself P'iaoshin (Pyushin), "Lord of the Pyu.",…, whenever he wanted slaves he could make of foray and carry off people, as in 832 when he deported 3,000 Pyu people to populate Yunnan Fu; and they took care to placate him, as in 858 when they presented him with a gold Buddha in gratitude for having helped them against raiders (Harvey 2000: 15).

[7] Some historians like Prof Than Tun argue that the Pyu were Mahayanist Buddhist. However, any historical association between Burma and the Mahayana sect of Buddhism has no validity for most Burmese as it is considered heretical and therefore antithetical to any interpretation of Burmese history.
[8] Harvey mentioned that Nan Ch'ao (Yunnan) state was inhabited by the Shan. Than Tun (2008: 114) stated that they are the Shan Tayut or one of the Shan race – Chinese Shans echoing U Kyi (1959).

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U Kyi (1959: 12) states that the Pyu Kingdom was almost destroyed by the Shan Chinese[9] in 832, which they finally destroyed in 1044. For many Burmese, this event extinguished a "peace-loving" culture, with Buddhism viewed as having nearly disappeared from the 'country'. The link between the near-disappearance of Buddhism and the "peace-loving" nature of the Pyu is integral to the Burmese psyche. The myth of the Pyu is used to glorify the longevity of Burmese civilization. The cultural heritage of the peace-loving Pyu is still glorified in plays, literature and the popular media, though in particular during the 1970s and 80s.[10] In contrast to the "peaceful" civilization of the Pyu, King Anawratha conquest of the Mon King, Manuha of Thaton in 1057 and the theft of Buddhist relics and sacred texts, '*Tripitaka*'[11] (Ray 1946: 78 & U Kyi 1959: 25), is seen as laying the foundations of Buddhism in Burma, differing from the Pyu, whose conquest caused the temporary loss of Buddhism. His conquests are viewed as necessary for the protection of Buddhism, which was previously lost because of the passivism of the Pyu (Harvey 2000:28). These historical imaginings have led Burmese to proclaim that King Anwratha exemplifies being a Buddhist. Burman Buddhists see the Pyu experience as justifying this protectionist role promoting Buddhist zealotry.[12]

1. 2. Buddhism and the Burman Monarchy

The 11th Century A. D. is viewed by the contemporary Burman, as the apex of Buddhism and its culture.[13] This golden age is associated with the first Burman

[9] Although Prof Than Tun did not refute the claim of U Kyi whose book was designed to be a teaching text in the post colonial era he also asserted that the demise of Pyu was partly due to the migration of Karen into modern day Lower Burma (2008: 30).
[10] See more details in U Kyi's (1959:32-33).
[11] Than Tun disagrees that *Anawratha*'s attack on Thaton was purely religious (2008: 120), arguing instead that the Burmese took advantage of the chaos in the Mon Kingdom, after the attack by *Kyum* or *Kanbawza* (1988: 45). Kyum or Kanbawza were of Shan race (Than Tun 2005: 120). However it is also to be noted that modern day Burmese also called Thais as Shan.
[12] Burmese of ancient and particularly of modern times talk disparagingly about Mahayana Buddhism and to this day there are some revered monks and Buddhist scholars who try to prove Mahayana as impure form of Buddhism. However, Than Tun (2005: 36) later discussed at length that Pyu were of Mahayanists until 7th Century when they became Hinayanists or Theravadins in *Myanmar's Various Histories*.
[13] Some Burmese Buddhist scholars contended that Buddhism reached to Thuvannabhumi in BC 310 and flourished for more than one thousand years before taking deeper root in AD 11 Century. Nonetheless, site of Thuwanabhumi is, until today, still very much discussed and disagreed. See more in Marmaka (Thutaythi) (2002).

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kingdom, established by Anawratha with Pagan at the center where Theravada Buddhism assumed the central civilizing influence (U Kyi 1959: 66-67).[14] U Kyi claimed that during the Pagan era, the economy, religion and culture flourished, under righteous kings who protected and promoted Buddhism by building pagodas and temples. King Anawratha promotion of Buddhism occurred amongst people who practiced animism, Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism, (viewed now as a corruption of Mahayana Buddhism). Violence was required to eliminate Mahayana priests known as Ari[15] and belief in *nat*, contributing to the perception that Anawratha established and promoted pure Theravada Buddhism. Devotion to Theravada Buddhism did not deter belief in *nats* (spirits)[16] and human sacrifice, Anawratha incorporated 37 '*nats*' into a Buddhism pantheon.[17] Moreover, King Kyansitha is recorded as having slain a child to guard the Ananda Pagoda (Harvey 2000: 41). During Kyansitha's reign Pagan was also the centre of Buddhism and became a haven for Buddhists from India and Ceylon who fled persecution by Hindus (Harvey 2000: 40). Kyansitha sent missions to restore the shrine of the 'Holy Tree in whose shade the Buddha was made manifest' at Buddhagaya in India (Harvey 2000: 42). Still Aris and their practice flourished into the late Pagan period, between 1200 and 1500 A. D (Than Tun 2005: 288).

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[14] Culture and literature was brought from the Mon Kingdom of Thaton with the Burmese script evolving from the Mon and the Pali. The administrative skills of the Buddhist Shan were emulated. U Kyi (1959: 66-67) claimed that although people were rounded up by the king to build pagodas and temples, they were happy as they obtained religious merit.

[15] Aris, Tantric Buddhists, were also known as the Siddhacaryas (the enlightened teachers) of Buddhism in Bengal and Eastern India. However, Burmese King saw the Aris as abominable and immoral and tried to wipe out its practice in Burma. (For more details see Dr. Bhattacharya (2004)'s *A Close View of Encounter Between British Burma and British Bengal*. Harvey sides somewhat with the traditional Burmese position writing that villagers had to yield their children to the Ari priest and Aris drank strong liquor. However he noted that "Burmese chroniclers will not face the fact that practices of Ari were another version of Buddhism, and pass on with a few shocked references of Aris as "infidels" in *History of Burma*, p. 17 (1925). U Kyi (1959: 24) had also recorded Aris' practice as impure Mahayana Buddhism coming from northern India. Prof Than Tun, however, proved that Aris were not that as bad as Burmese history claimed (2008: 284).

[16] Burmese worship spirits that either died for good of other sake or died violently. Burmese believe these spirits guard them and in return they must offer what these spirits ask for. This takes place through a medium.

[17] These were placed in the Shwezigon Pagoda in Pagan are still integral to the contemporary conception of Burmese Buddhism (Skidmore 2004). The *nats* are celebrated annually across Burma, especially at *Taung Pyone*, villages 14km North of Mandalay. The Taung Pyone Festivals celebrate two brothers who are believed to have executed by King *Anawratha* in 11th Century. For more details see "Festival Time at a Nat Shrine" *Irrawaddy Magazine*, August 2004.

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The Burman view of the golden age of Buddhism includes the adoption of Asokan principles of rule, which obliged the king to rule his subjects justly and benevolently in accordance with the ten kingly virtues – (i) charity, (ii) religious practice, (iii) benefaction, (iv) fairness, (v) gentleness, (vi) keeping the Sabbath, (vii) benevolence, (viii) avoidance of cruelty, (ix) patience, and (x) avoidance of conflict. According to Burmese scholars during the Pagan period the monarchs did not have absolute rule, as contended by Harvey (2000). Than Tun (2006: 164-7 and 2005: 75-6) argues that the kings were rulers with considerable power, but decisions were bounded by the ethics of Buddhism, curtailed by a legal system. The kings were also influenced by sages and monks also opposing the king when he acted against the precepts of Buddhism.[18] The kings promoted the view that they were contenders for Buddha-hood (*Phaya-alaung)* (Than Tun 2006: 166). Not surprisingly the king's claim to being a Buddhist monarch was often contradicted in practice. Although killing - human or animal, was considered *un*-Buddhist ancient monarchs lacked regard for 'right to life' territorial conquests resulted in merciless killings, with all prisoners of wars killed and demanded captives from defeated rivals.[19] Moreover, not only were rivals killed, but so were their relatives and close associates. The more territories the kings conquered, the more glorious the testament left to the king. However, a 'glorious' Burmese king still publicly paraded his adherence to the ten virtues required of a Buddhist king. Many Burmese kings, notably *Bodawpaya* were influenced by the occult and heeded the forewarnings given by revered practitioners of *Lokipañña*[20] (Than Tun 2005: 75

[18] Some kings allowed important civil and criminal cases to be resolved by a panel of three to six judges, or specially assigned ministers or other ad hoc investigative teams. Parties to the dispute held Buddha statues or the *Abhidhamma* book to swear an oath (Than Tun 2006: 11).

[19] There are many examples where the behavior the monarchs contradicted Buddhist ethnics. King *Bayintnaung* conquered Ava, ruled by a Shan King, known for his persecution of monks and plundering of pagodas. King *Bayintnaung* took the task of punishing the Shan King by taking over the rule of the kingdom. During the reign of King *Bayintnaung*, Buddhist monks rescued soldiers from the king's order of execution by burning them alive after a military setback along with a Mon uprising in Pegu in 1564 (Sarkisyanz 1965: 76).

[20] *Lokipanna* includes all knowledge systems outside of Buddhism. However, the focus of *Lokipañña* with regard to the monarchs was on foretelling the future and astrology. There are six different types of *Lokipañña*. *Lokipañña* also means skills related to all worldly affairs. See more detail in J H Badgley (year unknown). Also see more detail in Than Tun (2005).

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and Houtmann 1999: 251). These soothsayers advised the king via prophecy and omen to encourage him to make decisions in accordance with Buddhist ethics.[21]

The Pagan period survived for around 250 years until the Chinese invaded during King Narathiha Patae rule (Harvey 2000: 67-69).[22] The demise of Pagan is viewed as arising from the rule of barbaric kings like Narathiha Patae, whose breaches of Buddhist ethics, included drinking and elephant-hunting (U Kyi 1959: 58-59). After the demise of Pagan it was another 200 years before King Tabin Shwehtee and Bayintnaung[23] built the 'second kingdom of Burma', also known as the Taung Oo Era. King Tabin Shwehtee died young, but Bayintnaung is well-known for his military conquests and the promotion of Buddhism amongst the colonized. As with Anawratha, he is recorded as prohibiting animal sacrifice, sending Buddhist missionaries to other countries, and building pagodas and temples. But here as in so much else the harshness of the rulers was mitigated by the humanity of the monks; if the distressed mariner wandered into a monastery he was safe, for the monks would bind up his wounds, feed him, clothe him, and send him off with letters of commendation from monastery to monastery till he could reach Syriam, there to await the chance of some passing ship (Harvey 2000: 205-206 and Houtman 1999: 216).[24] Men during this period often entered into the monk-hood to avoid being drafted into the king's armies, particularly under King Nanda (U Kyi 1959: 113). The second Burmese kingdom was completely destroyed in 1752, when the Mon King destroyed Ava (U Kyi 1959: 126 & Harvey 2000: 216).

The third Burmese kingdom (1732-1885) was established by a commoner called, U Aung Zeya, who later inaugurated himself as King Alaungpaya in Shwebo, in the North of contemporary Burma. He ordered the *Dhammathat*[25] the penal code or

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[21] Sages advised the king as do contemporary ministerial and presidential advisors, except there totally depending upon the civility and kindness of the king.

[22] King *Narathiha Patae* is also known as *Tayoat Pyay Min, which* means the king fleeing from the Chinese.

[23] King *Tabin Shwe Htee* built the second Burma kingdom and King *Bayintnaung* extended the kingdom ruling all the areas of modern day Burma, except Arakan. His empire included Assam, Manipur and Ayudhaya. See more details in U Kyi (1959).

[24] Harvey (2000) claimed that the Burmese king wanted sea going ships. The king even had a policy to retain every foreigner he could and seized ships and mariners to enslavement. Therefore, the mariners would take refuge in monastery. He also claimed that the mariners were also encouraged to marry local women so that they would be made Burmese subjects.

[25] These were a collection of existing laws and customs. See Harvey (2000) for more details.

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Burmese Buddhist Laws to be codified.[26] He again prohibited people from drinking alcohol and making animal sacrifices. In spite of the codification of Buddhist law, the third kingdom was ruled by tyrannical kings, especially King Badawpaya, who yielded absolute power and had no mercy to rivals and prisoners of war.

> Bodawpaya punished with death the drinking of intoxicants, the smoking of opium, and the killing of any large animal, as an ox, or buffalo; and when he was in a really devout mood he would make drinkers drink boiling lead (Harvey 2000: 278).

There are many tales of a king's cruelty towards his rivals and it was not unusual for subjects to be killed, when seen to have any supernatural power (Harvey 2000: 273). The kings' cruelty was typically balanced and controlled by their own fears and belief in occultism and curses. Again, as did most of their predecessors, the monarchs of the third kingdom built numerous pagodas and temples. The highest religious achievement accorded to King Bodawpaya was the bringing of 'Buddha's tooth' from China in 1790, something even the 'great' King Anawratha had failed to do (Harvey 2000: 279).

With the spread of Theravada Buddhism, Buddhist monks played the role of educators teaching the young in the monasteries. They also played a political role, for example teaching those in line to the kingship (Smith 1965: 31). When disputes arose between the king and his subjects or rivals, it was the monks who acted as mediators and peace-makers, often to prevent the killing of prisoners of war. Also, the monks often negotiated with the king to exempt villagers and townspeople from taxation, during droughts and other natural disasters (Smith 1965: 39). Some monks were influential in their advisory roles to the king in both national and international affairs. In all the three Burmese kingdoms, royal rituals were also Buddhist rituals mixed with

[26] The time of existence of *Dhammathat* is still disputed and Than Tun (2006: 10) contended with the new founding and reading of some available stone inscriptions that *Dhammathat* existed in 13th Century not in 18th century during *Alaungpaya* era.

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Hinduism.[27] Buddhist monks relied on the king's support for their legitimacy, prestige and status (Barry 1991: 10). In return, the kings obtained their moral authority by being *Buddhist* monarchs. The king was the defender and promoter of Buddhism, the protector of the *Sangha* and the builder of pagodas and temples. However, the building of pagodas and temples involved the use of slaves. Children and slaves were sacrificed to provide a guardian spirit for the pagoda or temple (Harvey 2000: 41-44).[28] The kings, such as Bayintnaung are also believed to have promoted Buddhism (including the conversion of the Shans) and to have 'prohibited their practice of killings slaves, horses, and elephants of a chieftain upon their death' (Harvey 2000: 25). In all three periods, there were kings who sent out Buddhist missionaries to propagate Buddhism.

Above all, the doctrine of Karma was the justification and irrefutable rationalization of the near-absolute power of the king and that he 'had achieved a vast accumulation of merit in previous existences' (Smith 1965: 22). This accumulation of merit in a previous life was also a reason that the king possessed glory or greatness, in Burmese *'Hpoun'* or *'Hpoun Ta-go'*.

> In the political realm, this reliance upon the notion of *hpoun* is even more pronounced. No matter how morally unfit a ruler may appear to be, as long as he is able to cling to power, he can claim that his *hpoun* is still flourishing (Min Zin, 2001, Irrawaddy Magazine Online Version).[29]

For the kings, except for Alaungpaya, an aristocrat and the commoner U Aung Zeya, simply being part of the royal lineage meant they were incarnations of celestial beings with the Karma and *'hpoun'* to rule.[30] King Bodawpaya even founded a new Buddhist *nikaya*,[31] called the *Pramatta*, as the *Sangha* refused to recognize him as a

[27] Various religions including Hinduism existed long before 11 century A.D. along with indigenous animism. See more details in D. E. Smith (1965). Kyansitha of Pagan era also believed himself as incarnation of Vishnu (Strachan, 1988: 10).
[28] Kings, especially Kyansittha, after building pagodas or temples to the Buddha and their father, dedicated a village or more to be slaves of the pagodas or temples (Myazedi Stone Inscription).
[29] Online version obtained on - http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=2471
[30] This kind of belief can be seen till today - in Thailand where the lineage of the present king includes Rama and Burma's generals, who link themselves with Kings like *Kyansittha* and *Bayintnaung*.
[31] Nikaya is the five parts of the *Sutta Pitaka*.

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Buddha-to-be or future Buddha – *'Bodhisataava'* or *'Maitreya Buddha'* - which was more typically a tenet of Mahayana Buddhism (Houtart 1976: 98 & Smith 1978: 68).[32] Burmese kings likened themselves to the "King of the Universe" (*Cakravartin*), which gave their status a cosmological dimension.[33] This was also utilized to justify the subordinate status of the population and their obedience to the king (Barry 1991: 8). Hence, Burmese Buddhism had completely departed from the Asokan style, where Buddhism was only an 'ideological unification' rather than a supernatural 'ideological justification' of political power (Houtart 1976:6).[34] However, Buddhism remained a 'rationale of kingship and mitigated Burmese autocracy' (Sarkisyanz 1965: 76).

1. 3 Buddhism and the British Colonial Period

Buddhism in Burma during the British colonial period became heavily politicised, when the *Sangha*, became politically active, sometimes at the forefront of the national liberation movement. The *Sangha*'s involvement was not surprising as the traditional social fabric and authority was previously focused in and around the monasteries, along with monastery based education system which were threatened, all in competition with the British secular education and administrative systems.[35] The involvement of the *Sangha* in politics and political associations began with *U Ottama* (1878-1939), an Arakanese monk. His writings and his establishment of the Patriotic Association (*Wunthanu Athin*) fostered Burmese nationalism, being jailed twice for his promotion of national liberation (Houtman 1999: 210 & U Maung Maung 1989: 14-15).[36]

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[32] Therava speaks human nature of the Buddha whereas Mahayana believes in supramandane nature of the Buddha. See more detail in Maung Kyauk Seinn (2000) and John Bullit (1999).
[33] D K Swearer (1999) also discusses about the tension between the mythical Buddha and historical Buddha in his article "Buddha Loves Me! This I know for the Dharma Tells Me So" and contends that Theravada Buddhists create this mythical version of the Buddha contradicting their other claim that Buddha was a real historical person of ancient India. See more details in Houtart (1976) as well.
[34] A fusion of Buddhism and Hinduism probably assisted this departure, although, as Houtart (1976) stated, nothing in Buddhism supports the divine concept or deification of the kings.
[35] The Burmese were also greatly angered as the British refused to obey local customs, such as refusing to take off their shoes when they entered pagodas. This perhaps, unlike non-Buddhist ethnic nationalities, further angered Burmans, who are mainly Buddhists creating an intense dislike and hatred of the colonizer and their collaborators.
[36] U Ottama became a national hero when he wrote open letter to the governor "Craddock Go Home" in the Sun newspaper.

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> It can truly be said that Burmese politics was fathered by U Ba Pe, but then inspired and led by U Ottama. His ardour carried much of the rural population, men and women, youth and Sangha, into the nationalist struggle all through the 1920s (U Maung Maung 1989: 16).[37]

As nationalism and patriotism grew, young men and women donned or were urged to wear the national dress. Women were condemned and ostracized if dressed in western clothes and married foreigners. Royalist turned socialist, Thakin Kodaw Hmine, singled out Burmese women who married foreigners – British, Chinese and Indians for he worried their offspring would not be patriotic (Than Tun 2005: 130 & Houtman 1999: 92). This sentiment continued into the early 1990s, with the regime and some in the opposition groups continuing to perpetrate the mentality which is against the basic tenet of Buddhism of tolerance and non-discrimination. Moreover, as Buddhism became used as a force of national unification, this excluded non-Buddhists.

One of the two main political parties during national liberation period was the Organisation of Patriotic Poor (*Sinyetha Wunthanu Aphwegyi*), which represented the peasants, but dominated by revered monks (*Sayadaws*). Some in this organization disliked the control of the *Sangha* as they considered politics to be in the mundane world (U Maung Maung 1989: 3).[38] Among many political monks, two stood out - *U Ottama*,[39] who was the rallying force for thousands of Burmese to revolt against the British, and U *Wisara*, who endured several jail terms and died after 166 days of a hunger strike, protesting for the right to wear his robes while in prison. More generally, politicians and national liberation leaders with their parties struggled to either obtain or condemn the involvement of the *Sangha* in the nationalist movement.

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[37] U Ba Pe was one of the leaders of the General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) who led the Dyarchy reforms movement within legislative council of that time in Burma under the British colony.
[38] The Organisation of the Patriotic Poor (*Sinyetha Wunthanu Aphwegyi*) was led by Dr. Ba Maw who opposed separation from the British. However, the organization included many monks, some of whom were at very senior levels.
[39] Although, much respected for his patriotism and recognized as a national political hero, *U Ottama*, died in poverty and obscurity in Rangoon in 1939 (Brohm 1957: 320). Brohm did not offer any explanation why U Ottama died in such condition. However, the influential role of U Ottama in the relationship between politics and Sangha is also described more details in Ko Maung Maung Soe's (2007) *Politics of Sangha and the Saffron Revolution* on the link between U Ottama's patriotism and the monks of 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma.

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> The most important development was the adoption of resolution No. 11 [of GCBA] which authorized the GCSS sayadaws to advise, direct, and sit in all GCBA Committee meetings as one body, and supervise the headquarters administration… and with no intention of actually carrying out the purports of the resolutions, had constitutionally subjected the nationalist movement to the authority of the Sangha merely to become stronger than the Ba Pe - YMBA group (U Maung Maung 1989: 37).

The most prominent nationalist group, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA)[40] was founded in 1906, whose initial focus was on a radical program to promote Buddhism.[41] The Buddhist monks, during this period, took center stage of Burma's national liberation movement, with the direction of national liberation heavily influenced by the *Sangha* (Brohm 1957: 316). Organizations like the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) founded in 1926 superseded the YMBA and the Patriotic Association where the *Sangha* dominated. The GCBA alliance between secular and *Sangha* associations were unstable due to the differences and jealousies between the monastic and lay leaders fragmenting in 1943 (Brohm 1957: 319). U Maung Maung (1989:5) claimed that by the late 1930s, religious activities were purely for religious reasons, with the *Sangha's* political organizations having lost respect and public support.

Some of the nationalist leadership was educated within a secular education system and socialist and communist ideology having reached Burma in 1931 (Smith 1978: 92). Socialism and communism formed the ideological platform of the young nationalist leaders. Later the atheist and anti-religious ideology of communism was used effectively by Ne Win's military regime against communism.[42] Other nationalist leaders admired the fascist ideology of Hitler and Mussolini (U Maung Maung 1980: 144 & Houtman 1999: 19). It is also the period when young Burmese men and women educated abroad, brought back ideas of representative government and democratic

[40] The organization that was named after the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) by incensed students who considered the British belittled Buddhist religion.
[41] This includes demanding the governor to appoint a Minister for the Buddhist *Sasana* (religion), to appoint *Dhamma Kathika* (Dhamma lecturers), to teach Buddhism at schools, amongst other educational and social demands (U Maung Maung 1989: 5).
[42] This will be discussed a bit more under Gen Ne Win's government in Section 1.5.

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practices.[43] Also, in the late 1930s, the Saya San rebellion expanded from a local protest about taxation into a national insurrection against the British administration, which led many Burma's nationalist leaders to demand not the restoration of the monarchy, but the imposition of a state within an independent Burma (Fink 2001:19).

There was conflict between the urban Burmese educated in the secular education system and participating in the British administration system and the older Burmese, who had refused to even learn English considering it an 'irreligious' and coloniser language (Mi Mi Khaing 1996: 17). The sentiment towards foreigners and identification of many Burmese with the country and religion was reflected in anti-colonial and anti-foreigner slogans, "Race, Language, Religion" (*Ahmyo, Bathar, Thathana)* and "We the Burman the Masters" *(Thakin-myo-hay Dobama)*.[44] Nonetheless, girls only gained access to education with the introduction of the secular education system brought by the British, since traditional education was for boys in the monasteries.[45] In early 1940s, the 'homespun clothes for women campaign' was well underway (Mi Mi Khaing 1996: 135) and this was promoted by nationalist leaders. By mid 1940s, young students and nationalists were at the forefront of the movement and gaining organisational strength. They founded the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) which played a paramount role in the independence struggle as well as in politics in post independence period between 1945 and 1962.[46] By the late 1930s it was the socialist and communist-influenced young *Thakins* that had gained the political upper-hand and national independence father Aung San[47] was among them.[48] Aung San initially held the view that the *Sangha*'s involvement in politics is 'anti-modern', but Houtman (1999: 245) argued that many scholars have over simplified

[43] Introducing democratic idea, however, was not the first time Burmese thought to bring to the country. It was since King *Mindon* time that U Hpo Hlaing, the Interior Minister of the king, had advocated and introduced the idea as well as the idea of constitutional monarchy.
[44] Houtman (1999: 244) however argues that Aung San was not fond of this slogan and harshly warned that politics is not just about shouting slogans.
[45] Girls only ever received education if they were members of the royal families, learning Pali, grammar, and other subjects. King *Kyawswas* daughter was accredited for her scholarly works in Pali (Bischoff 1995).
[46] AFPFL was founded by the Burma Communist Party (BCP) led by Thakin Soe, Burma National Army led by General Aung San and the People's Revolutionary Party later renamed as Socialist Party led by U Nu.
[47] Father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who fought against the British colonial ruler to grant independence for Burma.
[48] National liberation movement will not be detailed as it is outside the focus of the thesis.

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and overlooked his later ideas. Aung San had a complex view of the *Sangha*'s involvement in politics, seeing that it also depended on the political situation.[49]

Nonetheless, the violent and uncompromising acts of some monks meant that many of the lay political leaders, particularly the *Thakins*, opposed the involvement of the *Sangha* in politics (U Maung Maung 1980: 184).[50] In 1938, there were anti-Moslem and anti-Indian riots, arising from mostly from economic and demographical factors, though these were exacerbated by religious intolerance, led by members of the *Sangha* (Brohm 1957: 322-326). The role of Buddhism and the *Sangha* under the Japanese occupation has been little documented and studied. Although the British colonial era did not bring an end to the monks' political activities, they were less prominent during this period. This also enhanced the feelings amongst many of the *Sangha* and some in the lay community that protecting and promoting Buddhism was a national task for the Burmese. The dislike of, and the perceived competition with the *Sangha*, by the later leaders of the country's liberation movement would re-emerge under General Ne Win's government. This would manifest itself in government sanctioned actions aimed at pressuring the monks to strictly follow *Vinaya*.[51] Nonetheless, Brohm (1957: 367) accurately concluded that Buddhism remained the most effective rallying point for social and political thought and actions of the Burmese people.

1.4 Buddhism and the U Nu Government (1948-1962)

The post-independence government, in particular, the Prime Minister, U Nu developed a political ideology based on a mixture of Socialism and Buddhism. U Nu promoted his policy of a "Prosperous Country" (*Pyidaw-tha*) where the "Tree of

[49] Houtman argued that most people who wrote about Aung San had overlooked the differences between his speeches in two different languages – Burmese and English. In Burmese version of some of his speeches Aung San praised monk's politics as 'highest form of politics' and his view on the role of Buddhism in politics cannot be analyzed in singular judgement.

[50] There were several attempts to restore monarchy of which some activities involved monks attacking the Mandalay Palace with the belief in mystic power even a decade after the total annexation of British administration. Another monk also murdered a town official, fled to Siam and later extradited and hanged by the British. This kind of extreme anti-British sentiment was rekindled by the more militant monks when the British brought some political reforms in Burma in early 1920s. See more detail in Brohm (1957: 318-320).

[51] *Vinaya* means discipline or code of conduct for Buddhist monks and nuns or the monastic rules.

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Plenty" *(Padetha* or *Padesa*)[52] was expected to grow, attempting to build a socialist state based on Buddhist ethics (Sarkisyanz 1965: 212).[53] U Nu was deemed to be a future Buddha[54] and a devout Buddhist who turned to Buddhism after years of alcoholism, which he confessed in his autobiography "U Nu: Saturday's Son" (*Tartay Sanay Thar*). As with the earlier monarchs, U Nu promoted and propagated Buddhism. Like the monarchs, he built pagodas, convened and hosted the Sixth Buddhist Synod in 1954-56 in which he and many Buddhist Burmese took enormous pride. He even banned cow slaughtering, which disregarded followers of other religions that did not include injunctions against the killing of animals. There were significant changes made to promote a religious revival to support the *Sangha*. Also, for the first time procedures for resolving monastic disputes were codified and unified by the *Vinaya* Act of 1949 to be overseen by the newly established *Vinaya* Monastic Courts (Brohm 1957: 377). The state sponsored and supported the *Sangha* providing scholarships to eligible monks to pursue scholarly activities to become Dhamma teachers or lecturers (*Dhammacariya*). Dhamma lecturers accredited by the government were offered stipends and a Buddhist Pali University was established, though in the new secular state, monks were constitutionally not allowed to vote.

However, U Nu was blamed for being soft and weak and his mixture of socialism and Buddhist, strongly criticised for not being able to counteract crime and lawlessness. U Nu imposed only very lenient punishment on surrendering communist insurgents and based on his Buddhist faith commuted many death sentences (Sarkisyanz 1965: 221). Also, during the U Nu's period and well into the 1980s, under the military rule of General Ne Win there were many mystic *gaings*[55] led by *Bodaw*s

[52] The *Padesa* tree is a tree (rukkha) that lasts for a fixed period of time (kappa). In Pali it is *Kapparukkha* or known as *Cornucopia* of Buddhism, the tree which grows on the northern continent in the Buddhist cosmology. The inhabitants of this continent having always observed the five precepts have accumulated merit, such that all their needs are supplied from the tree at the center of the continent (Houtman 1999: 26).

[53] During post independence and well into 60s U Nu became known as a *Dhamma* preacher (*Dhammakahtika*) delivering lectures on the Buddhist Dhamma in Burma and overseas.

[54] He also appointed Mahasi Sayadaw to teach *vipassana* which 'questions inherited tradition and only pays attention to the moment' and helped build meditation centers countrywide (Houtman 1999: 205-208). Mahasi Sayadaw's meditation centers sprung up with total of 293 in 1981 all over the country. Other centers were opened up in Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Britain, the United States, Japan and France. See more details in Houtman (1999), Chapter 9.

[55] The Burmese word *gaing* can be translated as a group, gang or sect, though it is more of a grouping. There is no connotation of sectarianism as the group does not arise from any doctrinal dispute.

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(male mediums between humans and higher beings) and charismatic monks (cult-like leaders of lay followers) that caused considerable disturbances and challenges to the state's power and the regime's stability (Ling 1993: 18-50).

In 1958, U Nu gave up power to persuade the communists to compete in the elections and asked General Ne Win, by then Army Commander, to act as the "Caretaker Government" (*Ainsaunt Ahsoeya*) until the elections were held in 1960 (Sarkisyanz 1965: 222). Although considered ineffective, inefficient, and near-utopian, U Nu was able to win the 1960 elections with an overwhelming majority with his mix of socialist ideology and Buddhist ethics and is the only democratically elected prime minister of Burma. This suggests that the people of Burma were responsive to traditional methods of governance based on the Buddhist ideology and a charismatic leader (Sarkisyanz 1965: 228).[56]

> What the Burmese people did appreciate were Ashokan Buddhist ideals of social control – regardless of whether they proved pragmatically effective or not. In Ashokan style U Nu tried by exhortations to induce the people to practice righteousness and social virtues, endeavoring to promote national union within a Buddhist state by concessions to insurgents and minority nationalities (Sarkisyanz 1965: 233).

However, the post independence government not only failed to resolve ethnic conflict, but also created religious conflict as when the Prime Minister, U Nu, announced in 1961, that Buddhism was to be the state religion (Ling 1993: 17 & Smith 1965: 233-238). This, not surprisingly, attracted protests from the other religious groups and was one of the reasons that the ethnic nationalities opted for armed struggle (Khin Maung Win 1999).[57] The 1947 constitution contained a provision on "Rights Relating to Religion" prescribed in Chapter II, Article 20 "All persons are equally

[56] Sarkisyanz (1965) asserted that even the communist leaders used Buddhist terminology to get wider public support as this was the only way people could comprehend the alien ideology in their familial terms since Burmese language is totally originated and intertwined with Buddhism and its sacred language.

[57] According to Khin Maung Win (1999) the then Prime Minister U Nu was pressured from the Buddhist monks to make Buddhism as state religion. Buddhism was made to state religion with the separate law passed by the parliament in 1961.

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entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Chapter" and in Article 21 (4) stating that "The abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden; and any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution and may be made punishable by law".

However, the enshrining of Buddhism as the state religion did not come from U Nu, who in fact after winning the 1960 elections wanted to safeguard ethnic minority rights to prevent disunity and civil war within the union (Smith 1965: 272). It was the *Sangha* who picketed and pressured members of parliament to enshrine Buddhism as the state religion. This included anti-Moslem riots led by monks protesting against the building of a mosque in Rangoon, where ninety-two monks were arrested (Barry 1999: 20). Sarkisyanz (1965: 218) asserts that U Nu was trying to promote the ideal Asokan state in which he was 'a patronage not only of Buddhism but also of non-Buddhist "minority" religions whose position deteriorated when U Nu was out of power'. Though, Buddhism became the state religion in 1961, religious freedoms for non-Buddhists were not threatened until after the military coup in 1962.

Nonetheless, U Nu's Buddhist charisma, his Buddhist socialism and enormous popularity did not save his government, considered ineffective by many politicians and the military. Many argued that criminal activity such as profiteering, the black market and corruption were rampant under U Nu's Asokan style government (Sarkisyanz 1965: 233). This became important in the public debate, centering on the capacity of a government led by a 'good' and 'charismatic' leader with Buddhist ethics, relative to the effectiveness and competence of a military government, with the later argument promoted in particular by General Ne Win.[58] General Ne Win's after the 1962 coup was eager to prove to the public that strong government was necessary and that democracy was chaotic and not meant for Burma.[59] The post parliamentary

[58] Those born after parliamentary democracy grew up hearing how democratic U Nu's government was and how free they were to express their opinions during the independence period. At the same time they heard how incompetent the Nu government had been in controlling communist and ethnic insurgency, crimes and administrating the country.

[59] When in 1962 the army led by General Ne Win, took control, the then prime minister U Nu was detained (or put under 'protective custody' in an army camp outside Rangoon) until 1966. He lived in

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generation, notably school students were taught repeatedly that the military had saved the country from chaos and prevented the disintegration of the union.

The Burmese general perception of the early post independence period is that Buddhism experienced a revival and played a greater role than during the British colonial period having an important impact on social and political thought. After, British rule a large proportion of Burmese turned to leaders, who placed their social and political programs within a Buddhist ethical framework. Many ordinary people and the leadership had relationship with Buddhism that influenced most aspects of their life. Despite this, the introduction of a secular administration and education system by the British, in which some politicians were raised, made it hard for them to share the political space with monks and accept political ideology mixed with Buddhism. Also, during this period some monks again became engaged in radical activities such as contacting with the (outlawed) communist party, and the carrying of arms (Brohm 1957: 327).[60] Oddly enough, the allegedly anti-religious communists gained the support of some monks. During this period the monks again became involved in racial riots, including anti-Moslem protests in 1953 supposedly protesting the slaughtering of cattle (Brohm 1957: 332). Also, the monks displayed public anger in response to some of U Nu's inclusive approach and attempts to influence religious affairs. The silence of the wider public (and their involvement) in these types of violent episodes suggests a general attitude of intolerance towards religions other than Buddhism. The existence and practices of other religions had become viewed incompatible to the propagation of Theravada Buddhism, the main task of Burma and the Burmese (Brohm 1957: 454).

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exile between 1969 and 1980 when he returned to Burma under an amnesty granted by Gen Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government. In the late 1980s, he spent time teaching Buddhism in the United States with the view of converting Americans to Buddhism. He re-entered politics during the 1988 uprising, to be again put under house arrest in 1989, where he stayed until 1992. U Nu passed away in February 1995 in Rangoon.

[60] There were several police raids of monasteries in Rangoon and Mandalay where ammunition, political pamphlets and communication equipment were seized.

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1. 5 Buddhism and General Ne Win's Government (1962-1988)

The 1962 military coup was justified as a response to economic, religious, ethnic and political crisis.[61] Under General Ne Win the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was implemented by the newly created Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), though the locus of power remained with the military. The military government viewed the monks as having 'no useful function to perform in the socialist reconstruction of society' and that spending money on the *Sangha* and religion was simply wasting money on 'an unproductive class' (Ling 1993: 23). All Buddhist organizations were prohibited from engaging in any political activity and the *Sangha* was registered in order for the government to increase control (Smith 1965: 303).[62] More than 700 monks protesting against the imposition of government control were arrested, detained and tortured (Houtman 1999: 220). One of the most notable violations of the *Sangha* by the BSPP government was the arrest of around 2,900 monks, during the U Thant Uprising in 1974 (Barry 1999: 25).[63] Around 700 monks were mistreated and disrobed, greatly angering the public and leading to the deaths of thousands of people. Many monks since held a deep animosity towards the Ne Win government (Houtman 1999: 220).[64] All of these were done in the name of purification and perpetuation of Theravada Buddhism to most pure form. Nonetheless, General Ne Win publicly displayed religious devotion in order to 'gain some legitimacy with the majority of the Burman Buddhist population', turned to 'astrology and magic in support of his ambition' and built, like rulers before him, pagodas (Fink 2001: 40).

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[61] One of the armed oppositions groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) even reached Insein, a few kilometers from the capital city, with gun battles occurring in Rangoon, under U Nu. The economy was in disarray, coupled with race riots and tensions between Buddhists and Moslem on the rise. This provided the military with the justification to a stage coup.

[62] *Bodaw* and mystic groups remained as active as under the U Nu government. The emergence of an admixture of charismatic monks, ascetics, magical *bodaw*, and mendicants as potential power brokers and cult figures of considerable influence was also noticed with apprehension by the authorities as well as the orthodox *sayadaw* who strictly followed the *vinaya* (Ling 1993: 49#ft 30).

[63] U Thant was a third Secretary-General of the UN in 1961 and supported U Nu. When U Thant died abroad students and monks wanted him buried in a state ceremony. However, there was no official reception upon the return of his body. Angered students and the monks kidnapped the body, in order to bury his body within the ground of Rangoon University.

[64] Previously apolitical monks and lay people become politicized by this event, entrenching the deep and strong dislike of Gen Ne Win.

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U Nu's inclusion of Buddhism as the state religion was removed from the constitution, angering many monks. The 1974 Constitution in Article 156 retained and recognized the right of everyone "to freely profess and practice his religion."[65] The Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) under the BSPP instituted a policy program with the aim of making Burma the world's centre for Theravada Buddhism. This included the policy of the "Three Ps" – the Purification, Perpetuation, and Propagation of the *Sasana* (Ling 1993: 20).[66]

> As the BSPP could interpret the constitution as it saw fit, there were no constitutional checks on the governments interference in the *Sangha*. Any monk could be deemed political, defrocked and/or imprisoned. This may explain the relative silence of the *Sangha* between 1976 and 1988 (Barry 1999: 29).

In 1979, the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) undertook the first post-independence 'cleansing' of the *Sangha*.[67] The 'cleansing' of the *Sangha* was viewed and promoted by the BSPP as reforms, rather than attempts to impose a conservative and orthodox practice of Buddhism. The majority in the *Sangha* and the authorities viewed these 'cleansings' as necessary to ensure the monks adhere to the *Vinaya*, necessary for the perpetuation of the Buddha *Sasana.* The State again in 1980 intervened in the *Sangha* by establishing the Congregation of all Buddhist Monks and *Gaings*, which created a system of control over the *Sangha.* This meant that individual monks or novices could not remain independent of the *Sangha* hierarchy (Ling 1993: 19).[68] This move was General Ne Win's attempt to control the *Sangha* the only structure that could have caused a serious challenge to the military government. This also meant that politically active monks faced opposition not only from the military

[65] Although Tin Maung Maung Than in (Ling 1993) stated that the adoption of 1974 constitution by an overwhelming majority in a national referendum on 3/1/1974 ended nearly a dozen years of military rule, for many Burmese there was no different from Gen Ne Win's RC government and Gen Ne Win's BSPP government. A popular local joke was that the only different was the clothes. That was the case until well after 1988.
[66] The impact of 'Three Ps' will be discussed in the following chapter. 2.
[67] 'Purification' of the Sangha was common under the different monarchs.
[68] After nearly a year of preparation, the Congregation was held between the 24 and 27 May 1980 passing total of 3 documents, 4 resolutions, and elected 3 central bodies of the *Sangha* community with the fundamental aim of purifying and restricting *Sangha* movement. See more detail in Ling (1993).

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regime but also from within (Khin Maung Win 1999). During this period there is no documentation of any dissent from within the wider *Sangha* or lay community, regarding the actions taken under General Ne Win's rules against politically active monks, as the majority of the *Sangha* and the public held the conservative position that the *Sangha* had no legitimate role to play in politics.

1.6 Buddhism and the 1988 Uprising

Twenty-six years of one party rule under an isolationist dictatorship led to economic and political disaster, coupled with an ongoing civil war between the military and the different ethnic nationalities. There were anti-government episodes, notably the 1974 U Thant Uprising, the 1975 Workers Uprising and the demonstrations following the demonetization of 35 and 75 Kyat notes in 1987. None of these really threatened Ne Win's military regime, until the 1988 protests. The 1988 protest was started by students growing into a nationwide protest, taking place around religious buildings and monuments, such as monasteries and pagodas. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,[69] who was in Burma to care for her mother, quickly became the national opposition leader. Wearing traditional clothes and linking democratic practices to Buddhist ideology in her speeches (as did U Nu), she became almost a spiritual/national leader.[70] She talked about the problem of dictatorship and authoritarianism, providing a vision of a righteous ruler based on the ancient kings who ruled in accordance with the ten kingly virtues. She highlighted the military's misrule, borrowing from Buddhism the five enemies of mankind – water, fire, kings, thieves and people who bears ill-will towards others - *Yan-thu-myo Ngar-par*. Just like politicians and leaders before, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist,

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[69] Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a daughter of Burma's national independence hero Aung San who was assassinated in July 1947 just before Burma was granted independence from the British in January 1948. Although she had returned to Burma a number of times before 1988 the people of Burma did not know her well, until she made a historic speech at the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon on 26th August 1988. For her selfless work for democracy and human rights she is awarded several international awards, honorary doctorates and honorary citizenship among which one of them is Noble Peace Prize in 1991.

[70] Photos of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi giving speeches and answering questions during the short periods when she has not been under house arrest were seemed with Buddhist nuns '*let-ok-chi*' – paying respect to her by putting their hands in lotus shape. This act usually is done only for the higher and older persons or monks and not to ordinary people like her. Her photo is also placed on the Buddhist alters of her supporters, signifying their respect for her and their desire to protect her from harm.

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utilized Buddhist ethics and ideas to attract public attention and support for her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD)[71] and the democracy movement which she dubbed as "second independence movement" for Burma in her very first public speech on 26th August 1988 (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995: 193).Some of the leaders of the 1988 nationwide demonstrations calling for democracy and human rights came from recently formed Buddhist monks and students unions.[72] As with the national liberation movement, many Buddhist monks took to the streets to show their dissent. The monk's unions acted as the moral benchmark for the protesters, assisting in the maintenance of peace during the demonstrations being responsible for security (Fink 2001: 70-71). In response, the government employed the usual tactics of planting spies, informers and thugs to derail the nationwide protests. When spies and informers were discovered and caught by the demonstrators, many demanded that they be publicly killed. The Buddhist monks saved many of those taken captive.[73] During the demonstrations, thousands of people, young and old, were killed by the military and more than 3,000 people were injured (Lintner 2007). When the military retook power in September, renaming itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) on the 18 September 1988 the monks' unions were savagely suppressed.

> These organizations deviating from the orthodox *Sangha* hierarchy were quickly brought in line with the militant leaders either went underground or were 'neutralized' by security agencies when the SLORC took control of the state (Ling 1993: 38).

After the coup over ten thousand, including many students and monks, fled to border areas of Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand to avoid arrest and persecution. During this important period the monks were again at the political forefront playing their dual roles as protesters and protectors of human life. Except, this time the

[71] The NLD was formed on 27 September 1988.
[72] Amidst series of on and off demonstrations and Marshall Law issued out number of times from March to August in that fateful year 1988, Gen Ne Win resigned as BSPP chairman, Sein Lwin was installed but lasted only less than 3 weeks and then Dr. Maung Maung was installed and he too lasted less than a month.
[73] Usually, students and demonstrators would interrogate the spies when they were captured and the monks would ask the students to donate the spies.

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Buddhist monks were calling for democracy and human rights, for all the people of Burma. The 1988 uprising brought Burma into the international arena. The international community now knew Burma more than at any point since 1962. The uprising also spotlighted the military government's human rights abuses and violations, previously unknown to the international community. Most importantly the uprising introduced knowledge of the principles of human rights to many people in Burma for the first time.

1.7 Burmese Buddhism after the 1988 Uprising

Buddhism for the ruler is a means of obtaining legitimacy and a method of creating a sense of togetherness through common roots. For the ruled and oppressed Buddhism plays an important role in providing an ideological resistance and a basis for reform as well as supplying strength to cope with oppression and cruelty. This has increased, since 1988 due to the further deterioration in the political, social, health, education and economic situation in Burma. This deterioration has led to a 'mental culture',[74] based on Buddhist practices so individuals can gain inner strength and peace to cope with the extreme political and economic hardship (Houtman 1999: 183). These practices[75] which include meditation known as *Vipassana* and sending out *metta* (loving-kindness) to friend and foe are common amongst the opposition and the supporters of the NLD designed to ward off the increasing misery of everyday life. As so many people in Burma are deeply religious, the use of religion for political ends can be effective in both positive and negative ways (Fink 2001: 213). This is exemplified by the Buddhist psychological warfare conducted between the current military regime and the opposition movement, notably, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

> Theravada Buddhism is seen by the military regime as a powerful political tool, to legitimate its rule and authority. But the state's ideological appropriation of Theravada Buddhism has met with forms of political opposition which similarly

[74] The term 'mental culture' is borrowed from Houtman (1999: 182-184). The term originated from Nyanatiloka Mahathera, a German born but was ordained as a Buddhist monk in Burma in 1903.
[75] Houtman (1999) detailed out 'mental culture' people in the opposition practiced during their incarceration notably of the NLD senior and second tier leaders. Clement (2003) and (1997) also detailed this practice as 'inner strength' where practitioners of meditation and active *metta* do not discriminate foes from friends and vice versa.

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> appropriated and incorporated Buddhist concepts into acts of political resistance (Philp & Mercer 2002: 1606).

This includes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's use of Buddhist principles and concepts as the basis of her political arguments linking to democratic and human rights principles. She has provided an answer for Burma's woeful political and socio-economic conditions by drawing on Buddhist teaching of the "four causes of decline and decay". These four causes are – the failure to recover that which has been lost; the omission to repair which has been damaged; disregard for the need of a reasonable economy; and the elevation to leadership of men without morality or learning (Silverstein 1996: 224). She links these teachings to the current rulers and that the country is in disarray due to these failures or lack of regards. She has also drawn on Buddhist concepts, arguing that the concept of law was based on Dhamma, righteousness of virtue, not on the power to impose harsh and inflexible rules on a defenceless people (Silverstein 1996: 225). Also, her 'revolution of the spirit' is rooted in Buddhist principles (Houtman 1999: 301 and Clement 2003: 76). She and her supporters – members of the NLD, endure the military regime's harsh treatment by practicing and living with 'mental culture' to gain 'spiritual strength' or 'inner strength' so that they are 'free' even when they are under house arrest or in jail.

This is all in contrast to the military regime's representation of the democracy movement, as based on western and alien ideas, whilst inventing a connection between the regime and the Burma's long-dead monarchy (Philp & Mercer 2002: 1592). The military regime has attempted to gain moral authority while at the same time monitoring the *Sangha* to ensure they do not openly challenge their power. The regime has engaged in extensive construction, extension and renovation of pagodas, monasteries and other religious infrastructures (Houtman 1999: 123).

> The ruling generals are constantly demonstrating their own piety through lavish donations to monks and monasteries in a bid to shore up their moral authority. At the same time, the regime has kept monks under surveillance, as they are the main alternative voices of authority having frequently intervened in the country's political crises (Fink 2001: 213).

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Nevertheless, the *Sangha* continued to challenge the legitimacy of the regime, with the most serious confrontation between the *Sangha* and the military regime occurring in 1990 when monks in Mandalay refused to provide any religious services to those in authority and their relatives.[76] The military regime took quick action to diffuse the opposition.[77] Meanwhile, to counter the protests the military regime stepped up its enticement by increasing the numbers of title-holders amongst the *Sangha* and the size of their annual stipends.[78] The numbers of distinguished *sayadaws* who were conferred the *Abhidaja Maha Rattha Guru* and *Agga Maha Pandita* titles were considerably increased from (totals of) three and eighteen, respectively, during the previous three years to nine and 109 over the fiscal years 1988/1989 to 1990/91. The annual stipends for these title-holders as well as donations to monks who distinguished themselves in religious examinations were increased to four to six times the previous amounts (Ling 1993: 39).[79] Religion has been more incorporated into the state structures and institutions after 1988, with ever more elaborate offering and donating ceremonies organized by the state. The program of temple building, bribe-like payments to monks and religious propaganda have been financed by public donations organized by the military regime, rather than by individual members of the military figures. The military regime tries to create Buddhist religious sites not only a sense of 'being' but also a place of 'community' where the military officers and lay people come to congregate for religious devotion

[76] Recent protests by monks known as "Saffron Revolution" also is in the same principle where monks refuse to provide religious services to military and its families but goes further by sending out loving-kindness which derived from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD members' practice of active *metta* and engaged Buddhism. However, this thesis covers not beyond 2003. However, Saffron Revolution of 2007 has more to do with economic situation of the country although political dissatisfaction of *Sangha* has long been there against the regime. The *Sangha* having mainly to rely on the peoples' donation of food and materials for their existence the country's worsening economic situation has prompted them to rise up in this massive number.

[77] The military called on all leading monks of the *Sangha* community and influential leaders of the *gaings* and teaching monasteries in order to disperse and quell the massive *Sangha*'s dissent. For more details see Ling (1993: 38-40) and also Fink (2001: 70-71 & 214-215).

[78] *Abhidaja Maha Rattha Guru* is 'the Noble Banner and Great Preceptor of the State', *Tipitakadhara Dhamma Bandagarika* is 'the Bearer of the Three *Pitaka* and Keeper of the *Dhamma* Treasures', and *Agga Maha Pandita* is 'the Supremely Learned One.'

[79] Agga Maha Pandita means the Supremely Learned One and was created by the British in 1915. It was reintroduced by the parliamentary democracy government after the independence. Abhidaja Maha Rattha Guru means Noble Banner and Great Preceptor of the State and was created under the parliamentary democracy government in 1953. It is offered for the most revered patrons of the Sangha (Ling 1993: ft#31).

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and high ranking members of the regime are continually depicted participating in religious activities and rites (Philp & Mercer 2002: 1589-1590).

With no formal announcement the post 1988 military regime has resumed and revived the "Three Ps" continuing the debate within the *Sangha*, with many conservative monks still arguing that monks should follow the *Vinaya* and should not participate in politics. The 'cleansings' were again used to ensure that the *Sangha* conform to a strict orthodoxy, which increased the power of the more conservative monks. The more liberal and outspoken monks face, not only opposition from their more orthodox colleagues, but also from vitriolic pro-regime monks, like *Yadanaze Sayadaw* or *Loilin Sayadaw*.[80] The moral liberal monks face harassment, disrobing and imprisonment. The suppression of political and outspoken monks by the regime has taken place with the support from many of those who adhere to the more conservative interpretations of Theravada Buddhism favored by many within the *Sangha* community and the laity.

2.8 Conclusion

Since the monarchy, Burmese social and political ideologies have been deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhism. Rulers have appropriated Buddhism, promoting themselves as the protectors and preservers of a 'pure' form of Theravada Buddhism. These rulers have made themselves, inseparable from Theravada Buddhism and have assigned themselves as the propagators of the faith for the betterment of others – that is only Theravada Buddhism can save humankind from chaos. However, Buddhism has also acted as counterpoint to the absolute power of the kings, providing a framework for more benevolent rule. Buddhist monks have also been politically active since the monarchy as educators, the protectors of people's interests, and advisors to the king.

Buddhism played a key rallying point and unifying factor in the resistance against British rule, with 'radical' monks for the first time becoming politically active. Unfortunately, a component of the legacy of the resistance to British rule is racial and

[80] These kind of pro-regime monks regularly write in the government newspaper and some of them are not necessarily pro-regime. Being inclined to more orthodoxy of Theravada Buddhism some monks indirectly prop up and sustain military regime.

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religious tension and intensified discrimination toward Muslims, Indians, and Chinese. Anti-colonialism transformed into xenophobia, and seemingly peaceful Burmese Buddhists were actually intolerant of other religions, particularly Christianity and Islam.[81] The perception that independence came to Burma through military means young nationalists harking back to the ancient kings and knights, *Kyansittha*, *Bayintnaung* and *Bandoola*.[82] Now patriotism is viewed as being almost synonymous with an anti-foreigner stance, racial discrimination, along with wearing traditional homespun clothes. Buddhism allowed post World War II leaders to formulate socio-political policy based on newly installed political ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism. Buddhism generally became for governments and politicians a useful tool to rally public support and obtain legitimacy.

However, after post independence period particularly after 1962, the Buddhist monks have been brought increasingly under control of the state, including a *Sangha* registration scheme initiated in 1965 and in late 1970s under Ne Win, when Theravada Buddhism was reinterpreted as a more orthodox doctrine, evidenced by the use of the "Three Ps" program. Clinging to more pure orthodox version means that Buddhism and some famous monks have been quite easily co-opted as a tool to support military rule indirectly or directly. Although "Three Ps" program claims to be a program of preserving the purest interpretation of Theravada Buddhism and propagation to the world it transformed into a doctrine that supports the ideology of military rule.

There is also competition between the military government and the opposition, particularly Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, which centres on the profundity of their belief and devotion to Buddhism. The increasing hardship and confusion caused by military rule after 1988 has led Buddhism to become increasingly intertwined with interpretations and practices that allow people to cope with their dire circumstances. Having failed to liberate themselves from the tyranny of military dictatorship, many Burmese have withdrawn into finding solace and refuge in Buddhism. There has been

[81] In his paper given at PENN Human Rights Forum in Pennsylvania in 2006 Dr. Siddiqui said that "Racist teachers (representing state-sponsored religion) have been known to teach that Muslims were brought in by the colonial regime and have only caused problem".

[82] *Bandoola* served as general under King *Bagyidaw* in 1819 and became governor of Assam after conquering with his military might. However, he died defending Danybyu, on the Irrawaddy River, in 1824 from the advancing British.

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a popularization of certain Buddhist concepts by writers, Buddhist scholars and *Sayadaw*s with Karma being reinterpreted to explain their difficult lives. The impact of this current interpretation of Karma and its role in Burmese social and political thought will be discussed in Chapter 3. However, before this is addressed the history of the human rights movement in Burma is discussed in the following chapter as knowledge of human rights principles can render into social and political movements for greater realization of human rights and greater freedom for all.

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CHAPTER III
HUMAN RIGHTS AND BUDDHISM IN BURMA

Before turning to the reinterpretation of Karma, the practice and understanding of 'human rights' principles or principles that resembled that of human rights in the country will be drawn out in relation to Buddhism. People in Burma are not only deprived of all basic rights, but also of even the knowledge of their existence. Lack of human rights knowledge paired with the *Burmanisation* of Buddhism with its zealotry both discussed in Chapter 1 and its interpretation of some core teachings have had a crippling impact on the ability of people in Burma to embrace human rights principles.

When the country obtained independence in 1948, a significant moment in the history of human rights was taking place at the global level. This was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on 10th December 1948, arguably one of the most important documents in the history of human civilization. The UDHR was incorporated into the constitutions of many countries, establishing the principles that governed some international conventions and treaties[83] and became the main document of customary international law.[84] Despite Burma being a member of the UN bound by the United Nations Charter (UNC) none of the governments of Burma signed or ratified any of UN treaties until the early 1990s.[85] Moreover, all the governments of Burma, particularly the 'post 1988 governments' have vigorously defended themselves against the numerous accusations of their numerous breaches of the UDHR, illustrating the moral significance of the document even for governments that so flagrantly violate its principles. However, the success and future effectiveness of the UN and its human

[83] Conventions and treaties such as the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief (1981).
[84] International customary laws are such as the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR).
[85] The major UN treaties Burma ratified in the 1990s were Convention on Elimination and Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 and the Convention on Child's Rights (CRC) in 1991.

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rights body in accomplishing its mandate is questionable in countries like Burma where knowledge of human rights has not only been withheld but anyone invoking publicly the issue faces extremely long imprisonment and even death.

The first section in this chapter outlines the role of the *Sangha* and Buddhism in protecting and promoting a prototype of human rights during the monarchy period. As discussed in the previous chapter the Buddhist monks played a vital role as educators, defenders of life and negotiated with the king in times of emergency and need. Section 2.2 draws out the national liberation movement which not only led to intensified anti-foreigners sentiments towards British, Chinese and Indian but also racial and gender discrimination among ethnic groups. It also argues that the nature of the national liberation movement caused problems in practicing freedom of association and led to declines in the rights of women. Section 2.3 then discusses Burma's first Constitution of 1947, based on fundamental principles of human rights and liberal values and the beginning of this lost opportunity. Section 2.4 explains the further erosion of liberal ideas and fundamental rights inspired in the 1947 constitution under military rule, exemplified by the 1974 Constitution. After twenty-six years of economic mismanagement and the abuse of power, there were nationwide uprisings in 1988 demanding democracy and human rights. This was the birth of human rights movement in Burma. Section 2.5 discusses this movement and the reasons for is slow emergence in Burma. In this context, the relationship between the human rights situation and the *Burmanisation* of Buddhism is examined.

3. 1 Prototype Human Rights in Relationship to Buddhism

In the previous chapter it was argued that Buddhism, under the various monarchs, underwent a transformation from the Asokan interpretation, into a fusion of beliefs that incorporated supernatural forces, Hinduism, and animism. The Asokan interpretation meant that entitlements were not articulated and rendered in the form of rights, but as responsibilities and duties of the ruler/s towards their subjects in accordance with the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. This interpretation was fused, in the Burmese context, with the concept of the king's right to absolute rule over his subjects, which was justified by his meritorious deeds performed in his previous lives

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or his accumulated Karma. Tracing any activities that resembled any collective demands for human rights is nearly impossible since much of the history and documentation of the various monarchs reflect the views of the rulers and not the subjects of the kingdom.[86] Nonetheless, as the previous chapter indicates, the *Sangha*, belief in occultism and to some extent devotion to Buddhism, mitigated the absolute rule of the monarchs, and in some cases their grave human rights abuses.

The interventions by monks to save life based on one of the five precepts of Buddhism, which is to abstain from killing.[87] In this respect, monks particularly defended the 'right to life' as proclaimed in the UDHR, Article 3.[88] Buddhist monks also intervened to protect the 'rights to food', 'rights to shelter' and 'rights to livelihood' which are described in the UDHR, 25 (1).[89] Barry (1991: 7) has asserted that 'due to the special relationship between the king and his *Sayadaws* and *Sangha*, the monks in most cases became the only defenders of human rights'. Nonetheless, Buddhist monks were not always the defenders of human life and rights. Sometimes, monks were involved in executions and led violent rebellions against the monarch or ruler (Barry 1991: 6-9). Buddhism not only supplied the rationale for the actions of Buddhist monks it also influenced ministers, royal servants and the laity, to practice their 'rights to freedom of expression' as prescribed in UDHR, Article 19.[90] This occurred when they risked their own reputation, status and life by speaking out against the kings. One such event occurred, when U Hpo Hlaing, courageously advised King Mindon (the third and second last Burmese King) to transform the country into a

[86] Historians learned about the period under monarchy in Burma from stone inscriptions, archaeological sites, pagoda histories, etc which were mainly written and curved by the rulers or those with status and influence. See more details in Than Tun (2006).
[87] However, Barry (1991: 6) noted that "In a contradictory manner, in regards to (U. D. H. R. Article No. 3), a criminal pardoned became a monk's slaves. However many lives were saved by the monks.
[88] UDHR Article 3 ~ Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. In accordance with this Art 3 there are many incidences where Buddhist monks saved the lives of soldiers in defeated armies, criminals and ordinary people, under the different monarchs.
[89] Article 25 (1) ~ Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
[90] Article 19 ~ Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

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constitutional monarchy, by authoring the *Rajadhammasangaha"*[91] (Than Tun 2008: xv & Bagshawe 2004: 11).[92] Buddhism is no doubt of paramount importance to Burmese ideas of leadership throughout ancient time. According to historian Professor Than Tun (2008: 260) people could profess any religion and religious tolerance was present in Burma prior to British rule under some monarchs, similar to that prescribed in the UDHR, Article 18 as 'rights to freedom of thoughts' and 'rights to freedom of religion'.[93]

The above behaviour and belief articulate certain relationships between the practice of Buddhism in Burma, with some of the tenets of human rights, where Buddhist monks acted as 'a channel' for people to voice social grievances or violations of their basic 'rights' (Barry 1991: 8). Buddhist monks, palace servants and occasionally a monarch might even be viewed as pro-type 'human rights defenders'. However, 'human rights' were not yet conceived of in their current philosophical framework, rather as righteous and virtuous acts in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, in which there was absolute faith. Some of the practices of rulers diverged from the central teachings of the Buddha. For example, the kings often used slaves, and donated these slaves, as well as services from the laity, to build pagodas and temples, in order to obtain *'kutho'*[94] or merit. These practices, although in some cases were intended as a displays of devotion to Buddhism, often violate several clauses of the UDHR, notably Article 4.[95]

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[91] L. E. Bagshawe translates *Rajadhammasangaha* as "A Collection of Norms for Kingship" or "Civil Society under Monarchy". The book was meant as an "admonishment" to King Thibaw and was drawn from texts on Buddhist conducts for kings, ministers and officers as well as from ideas of government and leadership. This particular historical period in Burmese kingdom was filled with reformism and had more contact with outside world as some royal servants were sent on diplomatic missions to Europe. See more details in Bagshawe (2004).

[92] There are several other lesser known events where ministers and royal court attendants spoke out against the kings in different periods of monarchy.

[93] Article 18 ~ Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

[94] *Kutho* means virtuous action or merit. If one donated and offered a lot in the previous life one is considered to have *Kutho-kan* in present life which means Karma of *kutho* done in the past. Nonetheless, Burmese dictionary does not differentiate this term from *Kan* or *Karma*. *Kutho-kan* is also translated and referred same as *Kan* in *Myanma-English Dictionary* (1998) which means one's deed or word or thought which predetermines one's future, or luck, fortune, or lot.

[95] Article 4 ~ No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

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During the first Burmese kingdom, women had some 'equal rights' in choosing their religion and could become female Buddhist monks - *Bhikkhunis*. The *Bhikkhunis* could perform the same religious tasks as the Buddhist male monks - *Bhikkhus* (Than Tun 2008: 148).[96] According to Professor Than Tun, a stone inscription indicated that *Bhikkhuni* culture existed well into 1281, many years after Pagan era (2008: 291). However, since these beginnings women are not equal in Burmese Buddhism as well as in core teaching of the Buddha.[97] For example, the ordination of *Bhikkhunis* required the presence of a numerous senior *Bhikkhunis*, whilst the numbers required for the ordination of males was much lower (Bischoff 1995: 6). Furthermore, it was a popular belief that women had to pray and make merit, in order to be reborn as males in their next life before being able to attain Buddhahood. Burmese Buddhists believe that there has never been a female Buddha and therefore there never will be and always refer to the "Nine Attributes of the Buddhahood"[98] of which one of the attributes is to be '*purisa*' – male.

> First, women needed to do meritorious deed to be reborn as male since there had never been a female Buddha. A woman prayed to attain Buddhahood in next life in 1260 A. D. only to realise later that she made a mistake. Therefore, she made an amendment in her prayer to be reborn as a male first who would have faith in Buddhism in 1265 A. D (Than Tun 2008: 269).

Nonetheless, in comparison to practices today in the country, there was a general equality between the sexes in the performance of religious rites during the monarchy period that has been subsequently eroded. There are a few in high positions in terms of religious status earned or no women in high positions in the state structure of the clergy now as well as in other administrative positions. Also, women are

[96] Some of the names of well-known *Bhikkhunis* have been recorded in stone inscriptions in Pali.
[97] Women movements in Theravada Buddhist countries question this matter and it is still most argued topic.
[98] The "Nine Attributes of the Buddha" is known as "Gon-daw Koe-par" in Burmese. Gon-daw means attribute, quality or requisite and Koe is number nine. Other attributes of Buddhahood include *Satta deva manusanam* being human with celestial quality and *Wizasarana samantao* having supernatural powers.

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considered the inferior sex, with lesser *hpoun*,[99] as discussed in the previous chapter. In Buddhism equality was considered 'basic, fundamental and natural' and that 'Such a conception of equality requires that rights and freedoms should remain untrammelled by considerations such as race, colour, sex, etc' (Perera 1991: 25-26). Nonetheless, in contrast, it is believed that women do not possess *hpoun* due to being born as 'lower sex' and therefore do not even have the right to pray for Buddhahood in their present life.

During the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878) which was dubbed as an era of reformism as Burma increasingly had contacts with the outside world, there were some indications of the beginnings of press freedom (Aung Zaw 2000).[100] King *Mindon* impressed by the newspapers he obtained from Lower Burma and India, called on journalists to visit his palace, and invited them to report any of his wrongs or those of his queens (Aung Zaw 2000). He expressed his desire to sponsor a newspaper, and was responsible for the birth of Burmese language "*The Yadanabon*" newspaper in 1874 (Bagshawe 2004: 11). This suggests that during the monarchy period there was some 'freedom of expression' similar to that described in Article 19 of the UDHR. Principally it can be said that there existed some practices and principles of *Burmanised* Buddhism analogous to principles of human rights during monarchy period.

[99] The word *Hpoun* or *Hpoun-kan* is translated and rendered as 'power, glory, influence' as well as 'cumulative result of past meritorious deeds' in Myanmar-English Dictionary published by Myanmar Language Department, fifth edition, 1998. Whereas the king or the ruler obtain the former as a result of the latter, concept of *Hpoun* has directly linked to the concept of Karma in context.

[100] King Mindon era in Konbaung Dynasty was filled with reformism as Burma started to have contacts with external world. This is the period when Burma had increased contact with the outside world including the Portuguese, Italians, English, and French. His royal court teemed with rivalry, but the climate was one of reform. The court was influenced by people like the Kanaung Prince, the young brother of King Mindon, who managed the kingdom's economy such that it prospered. There was U Hpo Hlaing, who excelled in external affairs and had numerous contacts with Europeans. There was U Gaung who had learned a great deal of western ideas while he was sent as an ambassador of the King to Europe in 1872-3. There was a certain expectation and hope that Burma would have been modernised if the Kanaung Prince had not been murdered by his two nephews. The seemingly progressing reform died down with the ascension of King Thibaw the last king of Burma. See more details in Bagshawe's (2004).

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3. 2 On Dogs – Race, Language and the *Sasana*

When Burma was totally annexed by the British in 1886, during the reign of King Thibaw, it was monks, who initiated and led some of the strongest protests and rebellions against the country's invaders. It is in this period where radicalisation and racialisation of Burmese Buddhism occurred with its anti-foreigner and nationalistic sentiment. This sentiment has transformed Burmese Buddhism into its present racially intolerance and gender insensitive form contrary to the core of Buddha's teaching. As discussed in Chapter 1, the monks' important role in community affairs diminished under British rule, most importantly in their refusal to recognise a head of the *Sangha*, known as *Thathanabaing*[101] in Burmese which led to a dearth of clear leadership, and disunity between *Gaings* or different sects.

Elements and developments within the liberation movement utilised Buddhism as a rallying cry, and their interpretations led to practices and actions that violated the very philosophy of Buddhism. In order to preserve race or nation, women were encouraged and even forced not to marry so-called foreigners. For nationalists, women had a particular role in preserving the 'racial' lineage, so in order to be patriotic they should be prevented from marrying foreigners and from giving birth to children of 'mixed-blood'. These nationalist outpourings contradicted UDHR, Article 16,[102] which states that the 'right to marry and to found a family' be without any limitation due to race, nationality and religion. The current military government also uses the same ideology against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her two 'mixed blood' sons to insult publicly in the media.

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[101] *Thathanabaing* means the head of Buddhist religious order or the primate of the order. This role is approved by the monarch in ancient time and the monarch gets moral support and approval from the *thathanabaing* in return for legitimacy to rule. Together, they controlled the religious order through a clerical hierarchy and the *thathanabaing* as the head of the religious order.

[102] Also contradicted to UDHR's Article 1 ~ All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Article 2 ~ Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Article 16 ~ (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

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Racial tension and violence become part of the national liberation movement, which identified with Buddhism and used religion to heighten the campaign against British colonialism. Discrimination based on race intensified with anti-Indian, anti-Chinese, anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner disturbances that often ended in riots. Indians were of easy target as they dominated 'commercial life' in Rangoon (Kumar 1995) and this contravenes UDHR Article 2.[103] Furthermore, some Indian descendents worked as 'money lenders', who were loathed by farmers, and were blamed for foreclosures on their land. This discrimination against foreigners has become imbedded in the Burmese Buddhist psyche although contrary to the Buddha's teaching on tolerance, equality and non-discrimination. Nationalist fervour strongly associated with Buddhism also alienated other 'indigenous' ethnic groups, who have distinct cultures, customs and religions, particularly those that converted to Christianity during the British colonial period (Barry 1991: 15). These ethnic groups converted into Christianity are predominantly of Karen, Kachin, and Chin and other smaller ethnic groups who, unlike in monarchy time when the kings attacked and sacked for territorial claims, have enjoyed peace and order under the British administration practicing non-interference regarding customs, traditions and social institutions (Maung Maung Gyi: 1983: 11).[104] These ethnic groups were discriminated against because they had been employees of the British administration and army and therefore in breach of the UDHR's Article 17 and 18.[105]

However, it is under British rule that girls and women have their first chance to obtain a secular and modern education, in line with the principles outlined in Article 26

[103] Indian population in Burma grows during the British administration and especially from 1901 and until 1941 as the exodus took place in 30s and 40s. UDHR's Article 2 ~ Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

[104] Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 12) also argued that the British could have done better to stay on in Burma by winning younger Burmese generation over with their ideals as the old generation was dying out but their arrogance and distrust of Burman had caused more nationalist fervour within Burman majority.

[105] Article 17 ~ Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property. Article 18 ~ Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

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of the UDHR, which states that 'Everyone has the right to education'.[106] The traditional education system was essentially given in the monasteries, where few women and girls could study. One of the practices prescribed in the *Vinayas* is celibacy, which has led to an interpretation where contact with women (and obviously girls) is viewed as a 'stumbling block' for men and monks in attaining Nirvana. Therefore, studying in the monasteries is usually out of question for women and girls in the traditional education system and this again contradicts the Article 2 and 26.

Discrimination and conflict also arose between those who had received a western education and those educated in the traditional education obtained from monastery schools. One royalist turned socialist Thakin Kodaw Hmine wrote in his article "On Dogs" wrote of those with a western education:

> People considered them [western educated] as lovable, admirable and reliable persons and accordingly they are elected leaders. Some of them became very arrogant. For having knowledge of the English language they take themselves as extraordinary and that feeling of self-esteem borders on madness and it also brings about utter disregard for nationalism (Than Tun 2005: 124).

This is evidence of the fervent collective sense of patriotism that the nationalists wanted to instil in Burmese people. This eventually threatened the right to freedom of association, prescribed in UDHR Article 20, during this important time in the national liberation movement,[107] as anyone associating with foreigners and Burmese of mixed-race were considered *un*-Burmese and unpatriotic. There was considerable freedom of the press during the colonial period, but this was threatened by the British administration when it espoused independence movement and anti-British sentiments. Editors and journalists from newspapers like "*The Sun*" and "*The*

[106] Article 26 ~ (i) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (ii) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (iii) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

[107] Article 20 ~ Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

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New Light of Burma" continued to write critically of British rule, even amidst threats and intimidation by the British authorities. However, in practice, Aung Zaw (2000) claimed that there was little interference from the British authorities and journalists and editors were free to engage in contacts with the international press and their associations.

Burma was occupied by the Japanese from 1941 to 1944, until the Allies defeated the Japanese and re-entered Burma. Burmese believed that the Japanese, being fellow Asians and Buddhists, would grant independent once the British were driven out, but it proved not to be so (U Maung Maung 1989: 27 & 39). High regard for Japanese which ran along Asian nationalism[108] turned to nightmare when the Japanese turned from being 'liberators' to 'enemies' and 'oppressors', in the eyes of most Burmese (U Maung Maung 1989: 63). The Burmese realised that the 'independence' granted by the Japanese was a sham and demanded nothing less than a completely free Burma. The Burmese again felt that right to self-determination, autonomy, sovereignty and independence from foreign occupation, were synonymous with their national liberation movement, this time against a new invader. Hence, it was a collective struggle for independence, which as assumed by many, would bring human rights to the country although it was not a movement for human rights *per se*.

The movement was initially perceived as one nation's rights to sovereignty. However, it had a limited tolerance for those groups that are considered different from Burmans and that desired their own freedoms and levels of autonomy within the new nation state. The later period in the national liberation movement was led and dominated by young men who were educated in both western and traditional systems. The Buddhist monks, who had been the strongest and most influential in the beginning, were now advised to 'remain above the mundane nature of everyday politics'. Politics was no longer considered a suitable domain for the Nirvana-seeking men in saffron robes. Yet Buddhism had played an important role in liberating Burma, as independence was perceived as necessary step to prevent the Buddha *Sasana* from deteriorating and even disappearing under foreign occupation.

[108] Burmese intellectuals were impressed by the Japanese who defeated the Russian Empire in 1905 and Asian nationalism was on the rise. See more detail in Maung Maung Gyi (1983).

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3. 3 Human Rights Flash-In and Flash-Out

A new constitution for Burma was adopted in 1947, which included religious freedom and practice modelled from the experience of Ireland where multiple religions were recognised and respected, although Catholicism was practiced by the majority (Khin Maung Win 1999). Essentially, the 1947 constitution guaranteed most of the basic and fundamental rights contained in the articles of the UDHR. It clearly stated that citizenship rights were fundamental rights for all residing in the union legislated in Article 10 and 11 (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv) and also guaranteed rights of equality in Article 13, 14 and 15 which granted women equal wages for same work.

> …equality of all before the law, equal pay for women, the right to hold property, the right to vote and hold office, to move freely, to enter any profession; freedom of speech and assembly; to maintain the security of the home (Barry 1991: 15).

Article 16 of the 1947 constitution granted 'personal liberty' and Article 17 (i) right to express freely, (ii) right to assemble peacefully and (iii) right to form associations. It also generally incorporated other liberal ideas and therefore under the first post-independent government the press and media were unrestricted, Burma being one of the few countries in Southeast Asia with press freedom (Aung Zaw 2000: 2). Also, Article 17 allowed for the formation of student and trade unions.

However, there was only a tenuous union amongst the ethnic groups brought together by the Panglong Agreement (Silverstein 2008: 2 and Barry 1991: 16).[109] The democratically elected governments faced ethnic separatist movements, communist rebellion and economic chaos. Kachin and Karen groups had threatened, prior to independence, to enter into an armed struggle, if they were misrepresented by the

[109] The Panglong Agreement was between Aung San and some representatives of the different ethnic nationalities to forge a Union as the British were delaying independence process with the reason of ethnic disunity among Burmans and other non-Burman ethnic groups. Present day ethnic problems prove the British had been right all along. Some however even speculated that the ethnic groups would have been granted if Aung San was not assassinated or they would have chosen to stay in the Union under the strong leadership of Gen Aung San. Although the Agreement is used as ethnically and politically rallying document many different ethnic groups do not really have much faith in since many of them were not represented during the signing of the Agreement. Some ethnic group's presence during the signing were merely of observers and did not make much input in the outcome. Nonetheless, ethnic groups these days uphold and make reference to this only document when they advocate for self-determination or autonomy.

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constitution or by the Prime Minister. Civil war began within three months after independence (Silverstein 2008: 2). One of the exceptions in the 1947 constitution was the 'Right of Secession' for some ethnic groups, the Shan and Karenni in particular, with the conditions of a resolution passed by state council for succession, which a two-third votes from its council required. This in human rights perspective guaranteed ethnic groups certain rights for autonomy. Self-determination was granted constitutionally with 'the right to secession' under Article 201 and 202 but Article 203 (1) and (2) set out conditions for secession, which could only occur after ten years of being in the Union.[110]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the *Sangha* was adamant that Buddhism be made state religion which U Nu had promised since 1936. However, U Nu believed that guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion was one factor that could save Burma as a union of different nationalities, and essential for avoiding civil war (Barry 1991: 20). The *Sangha* was angered when U Nu intended to 'safeguard ethnic minority rights' by adding amendment 'the right freely to practice and teach religion', believing this amendment would 'amount to recognising all other religions as state religions of the union' (Smith 1965: 272). Responding to pressure form the *Sangha* U Nu's attempted to make Buddhism the state religion, which created further rifts with some of the ethnic groups demanding greater autonomy or independence and majority of who converted into Christianity during colonial time. Although 1947 constitution guaranteed 'the right to religious freedom and that no minority could be denied an education at state schools, or forced to accept religious instruction', it was essential in providing equal rights to minorities and thus supplying some much needed unity to the country' (Barry 1991: 15-16).

Despite the fact that the principles and ideology of human rights entered international relations and global political arena; and the fact that Burma's 1947 constitution incorporated ideals of human rights, the political situation in Burma did not transform into a situation favourable to the promotion and protection of human

[110] Buddhist monks of different nationalities were active promoters of self-determination and separate statehood. Large group of ethnic Mon monks and officers of the Dagon Mon *Sangha* Association demanded separate state in 1952 and the Arakanese separatist movement was led by powerful sayadaw U Seinda. See more details in Barry (1991).

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rights for all. Of considerable importance in the lack of respect and protection of human rights in post British colonial period was the religious intolerance exhibited by Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists, which increased the divisions and violence amongst different ethnic groups in Burma.[111] Even though the Buddhist monks were denied the right to vote or stand in elections, they still had an important (and detrimental) influence on political decisions and the direction of the country. Also, of another importance were the ethnic based secessionist movements, which in the name of self-determination, did not demonstrate a respect for human rights. The rights to secession was perceived and rendered in a historical and ethnical/racial framework, rather than in a way that recognised the human rights of all ethnic groups.

And most importantly the military began to perceive themselves as the ultimate arbiter of political differences within Burma, with little recognition for the principles and human rights incorporated in the 1947 Constitution. The military opposed the clause in the constitution that allowed for succession seeing this as a threat to the integration of the Union. It also perceived (and argued) that the country was on the verge of total collapse, justifying the military led by General Ne Win to stage a coup in 1962, which brought the demise of parliamentary democracy in Burma. Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 7) also contends that 'alien political institutions and values have failed to strike root in Burma' and the military elite rules the country with 'age-old political habits and pattern' – that is 'semi-feudal' and 'autocratic'. Since then, the military has developed and promoted the mentality that democracy is not compatible with Burma's political, cultural and ethnic situation. Hence, it believes and promotes itself as remaining essential to the unity and integration of the nation.

3. 4 Military Dictatorship and the Return of "On Dogs"

From 1962 to 1988 Burma was ruled by General Ne Win, known to Burmese as the *'Arnashin'* or 'dictator', who resigned from the army to become the chairperson of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) established in July 1964 to implement the 'Burmese way to socialism'. Once he came into power the right to freedom of association was dramatically diminished as 'trade unions were outlawed' and 'political

[111] This has also led to more animosity between Burmans and non-Burman ethnic groups particularly of Karens and even causes division among Buddhist Karens and Christian Karens.

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parties were ordered to disband' (Fink 2001: 34). Press freedom and many other human rights were severely curtailed. General Ne Win was known for his heavy handling of dissenters and those who opposed him with torture and extra-judicial execution in ethnic states. The Burmese way to socialism led to the 'blanket nationalisation' of both large and small businesses, viewed by many in the *Sangha* as a form of 'theft' (Barry 1991: 22). Private schools and the press were forced to close down (Aung Zaw 2000 & Fink 2001: 32-34). These basic rights were the first casualties of Ne Win's military system. The press was subsequently controlled by the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB), which was established to ensure that media adhered to the ideology of the Burmese way to socialism.

> During this 26-year period, especially between 1970 and 1988, newspapers served only as means of disseminating state propaganda. Criticising state leaders' wrong doings and discussing serious political issues was simply unheard of (Aung Zaw 2000).

The BSPP policy on religion fostered constitutionally as "bona fide belief and practice of personal morals and taught by ethics and traditions of every religion and culture" angered the *Sangha* most, as Buddhism would not be honoured as state religion. According to BSPP theory, anyone non-Buddhist, had the right to seek and obtain employment and to attend educational institutions.[112] This does not mean Ne Win was favourable to other religions either. It was also under the BSPP that the Buddhist monks encountered rigid restriction over their conduct.[113] However, Ne Win used Buddhism to prop up his image and power by taking up "Three Ps" scheme. In 1964, the BSPP passed laws that restricted all Buddhist and other social and political organisations from participating in political activities (Smith 1965: 303).

[112] During Gen Ne Win's rule, building and renovation of Muslim mosques were not banned all completely. Some suburbs in Rangoon including the downtown areas were populated by Muslims and dotted with beautiful dome-like mosques.

[113] Ne Win's implementation of Burmese way to socialism sees the effectively abolishing of Buddhism as the state religion and dissolved the powerful Buddha *Sasana* Council (BSC). See more details in Barry (1991).

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> As time went on, people's only avenues for participation in civil life were through regime-sponsored organisations which were primarily dedicated to maintaining military rule. In these associations, there was little room for personal initiative or creative thought. The regime was looking for passive supporters, not free-thinkers (Fink 2001: 34).

In 1967, the Chinese who 'controlled the black market rice trade' bore the brunt of the rice-shortage that arose from the government's mismanagement of the economy. Burmese were worried by Chinese, wearing 'Mao badges', who were encouraged by the Chinese Embassy in Burma to show support for the Cultural Revolution. The Burmese reacted by attacking the embassy and many Chinese-owned shops. Although in most cases it is well-documented that the riots against the Chinese and Indians were instigated by the government to divert attention from its own economic mismanagement it is not the culprit of all riots as Burmese discriminatory mentality towards Chinese and Indians as aliens had changed little since the colonial period.

People's right to freely move around and within the country as well as abroad, prescribed in UDHR Article 13[114] was also severely restricted under BSPP's program, justified by the military as a war against ethnic separatist movements and to control any form of dissent.[115] In order to stamp out political or undesirable elements from monastic community, the BSPP in 1965 made a move to register Buddhist monks. As discussed in the previous chapter, the registration scheme was conducted in the name of 'purification' of the Buddha *Sasana* or also known as "Three Ps" Scheme (Barry 1991: 24 and Ling 1993: 18-50). Although "Three Ps" was deemed by some monks and laity including some senior monks as 'reform' it actually calls on to abide more orthodox and *Burmanised* version of Theravada Buddhism. It is important to note that the person responsible for a purification of the *Sangha*, in the Burmese Buddhist

[114] Article 13 ~ (i) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. (ii) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

[115] If anyone wished to travel even within the country, a reference letter from the local council office was essential. Both host and visitor/s were required to report the local council on where they came from and how many day would be staying, etc… and this had become a routine of live factor for Burmese under BSPP and that is not different under the current military regime as well.

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context, gains much more merit or *Kutho* for such an act and therefore oppression of monks in the name of purification is deemed 'good deed'. Nonetheless, realising opposition could stem out from monk activities the BSPP did not push hard on the registration again until 1979 (Ling 1993: 20). However, when it was resumed the BSPP's cleansing programs of *Sasana* and *Sangha* took place with such vigour that thousands and thousands of monks were defrocked and imprisoned. Even if monks were not defrocked or imprisoned their reputation had often been irrevocably damaged by the propaganda the government published about them.

In 1974, the BSPP adopted a new constitution by referendum. The essence of liberal ideologies which inspired in the 1947 constitution and the rights explained, were almost completely erased and replaced with the 'Burmese way to socialism'. With this, the rights of ethnic minorities to cessation also disappeared. In the same year, U Thant, who had been the former Secretary-General of the UN from 1961 to 1971[116] and much respected by many Burmese, died abroad and his remains were brought back for burial.[117] Bitterness over the 1962 destruction of the student union building was still fresh in the minds of the older generation students, and with discontent over the treatment of U Thant, demonstrations and gatherings soon spread to other areas in Rangoon. The site of the old student union building, which was dynamited in 1962, as U Thant's burial side but within days they were surrounded by thousands of soldiers and police (Barry 1991: 25), who beat the students up and dragged them into jails. Monks were also mistreated and detained and this greatly angered the civilians who witnessed the event.

Dislike and bitterness towards the BSPP had then become more of collective sentiment, rather than only among the students and monks, who were singled out, arrested and interrogated, since day one of its coming to power (Selth 1989: 3). This evidences the reverence Burmese have for the monks and *Sasana*. It also shows the

[116] U Thant was chosen to the position when his predecessor Dag Hammarskjöld was killed in an aviation accident in September 1961.

[117] For students and many others including Buddhist monks, U Thant deserved a state funeral but General Ne Win did not deem this as necessary and refused to send official dignitaries to receive the coffin. University and high schools students and monks snatched the body of U Thant in order to arrange an official burial. The students persuaded the officiating monks to give them U Thant's body and took to Rangoon University then placed in the Convocation Hall. Ordinary people also came and donated money and even jewelry. See more details in Fink (2001).

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role at this time that Buddhist monks took on – to speak on injustice and wrongs committed by the ruler or the government – was still accepted with much respect from the laity. During this period, there were lesser and well-known attempts to overthrow Ne Win's government. Fink (2001: 43-44) recorded at least seven incidents of unrests and demonstrations from 1969 to 1978. These activities and demonstrations had political undertone against the Ne Win government. However, every time unrest or protests occurred, the military government responded quickly with deadly force, shooting into crowds and sentencing dissidents to long prison terms between five to fifteen years. One student leader, Tin Maung Oo,[118] was sentenced to death and hung for his involvement in the 1976 demonstrations against the ruling government, which started as a birthday commemoration for Thakin Kodaw Hmine.[119]

During Ne Win's BSPP era, not only was press freedom rigidly restricted but much access to information was prevented. Many books were prohibited and banned. Besides people's thinking about democratic systems were successfully clouded by the government's propaganda machine which depicted parliamentary democracy period as unruly and chaotic.[120] Despite the sacrifices of those who risked their lives, and dozens of protests and demonstration over these twenty-six years of opposition against the government – the movement had not fully transformed into human rights movement until well into the end of millennium. Family members of detained political activists were shunned by friends for fear that they could also become victims or simply believed in the government's propaganda which named all political activists as 'communists' and undesirables. Despite the government's extremely strict censorship policy several books were published to discredit communist party, its members and sympathisers as anti-religious who would even kill their own parents for their belief in communism.

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[118] Tin Maung Oo is of Chin ethnic. He was hanged as a warning to other potential student leaders. During the famous 8.8.88 Uprising, demonstrating students remembered him as the spirit of revolutionary student and resistance against injustice.

[119] Thakin Kodaw Hmine was a young boy who witnessed the dethroning and exiling of the last Burmese king Thibaw and his family to India from Mandalay Palace. He was active in national liberation movement during British colony time and was a poet and writer of several articles against the colonisers.

[120] This sentiment easily rooted deeply in Burmese's mind since they believe U Nu was too weak to be politician. Another reason that made Burmese not so fond of parliamentary democracy period was rampant corruption among politicians.

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In 1987, Burma was designated a 'Least Development Country (LDC)' by the UN. The military government then announced the demonetisation of the Burmese currency notes of 25, 35, and 75 Kyat in September 1987 (Fink 2001: 50). There was unrest and protests at different locations around Rangoon. The military regime closed down universities as protests and demonstration against the government usually originated from the students. Ne Win was well-versed in the historical role of student involvement in politics, because of his own involvement in the national liberation movement. The government quickly announced on the state media that it would reimburse lost currency but only partially when it did, and re-issued 45 and 90 kyat notes (Clymer 2003: 34 and *TWT* 2002). Several protests and demonstrations over the years from 1962 to 1988 against one-party rule and the economic situation could not remove General Ne Win from power. As usual, all dissents and dissenters meet and face the harshest punishments from the dictatorial regime.

3. 5 The Birth of the Human Rights Movement in Burma

In the context of human rights, it was not until 1988 after university and school students began the nation-wide protests in March to September, that the oppression and extensive human rights violations perpetrated by the military dictator in Burma began to be noticed by the international community.[121] The protestors of famous 1988 uprising eventually transformed their demands calling for an end to one-party system, to bring a multi-party democratic system and then for human rights. It is also this uprising that catapults Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as national opposition leader. She is seen giving speeches to thousands and thousands of people at the sacred pagoda –

[121] 1988 student led uprising was started out from a brawl between the youth and the students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) in around mid March 1988. In the brawl, a student and later another one, died. Students from the RIT demanded justice be served or give up the young man who was responsible for their friend death at the local council office. Rumour was that the young man responsible happened to be relative of local council and the authorities did not take up the matter fairly and justly. From March to August, protesting students were joined in by civilians of all walks of life. The student leaders called everyone in the country to rise up on 8 August 1988 as a national strike day. The demonstrations continued until 18 September when the military led by Gen Saw Maung took the power and gunned down protesters. From 13 March to 18 August, more than 3,000 people were shot dead by the military in that faithful year 1988.

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Shwedagon.[122] As usual, the military responded by gunning down thousands and giving lengthy prison sentences to others. For millions of Burmese, 1988 was the first time that they had heard of the word 'human rights'. For many the words were almost considered sacred, and few understood their meaning. Although nationwide demonstrations were brutally cracked down by thousands shot death, being jailed and many more thousands took to the jungle to fight back the military government after it took power by coup on September 18, 1988 this was the birth of a human rights movement for the Burmese.

Myriad of human rights abuses and violations by the military government have been documented and recorded by many different organizations since 1988. Thousands fled to the border areas to join with ethnic armed groups whose identity until then were no better than separatists, rebels and colony appeasers. The main purpose here, however, is not to reiterate these violations and abuses but to look at the impact of Buddhism on human rights movement. In post 1988, the country's economic situation is in critical, despair, so bad that many people in the urban and outskirt areas have replaced the traditional diet of rice and curry with rice soup.[123] Almost all able-bodied persons in cities, towns and villages seek employment in neighbouring countries and send the money back home. At the same time, ethnic groups on the border areas suffer direct human rights violations, crimes of wars, including rape used by the military as a 'weapon of war' against ethnic women and girls.[124] Forced marriage of ethnic girls and women to soldiers from the military regime has become common. Some armed ethnic groups make ceasefire agreement with the military government under pressure from the military and economic crises. Some have not yielded and for that they suffer more, notably of the Karen National

[122] The choice of venue for speech may not have been deliberate but for Burmese it is naturally right place to deliver her first speech just as her father did most of his speeches in national liberation effort against British.

[123] Rice soup is produced from cooked rice. Rice soup is obtained by the following process: rice cooked in the water which was brought to boiling point, when the rice was soften enough the sticky gravy like liquid would be stain out and scoop the rice soup. This is different from rice porridge.

[124] Report called "License to Rape" published in 2002 by the Shan women and media groups detailed out 173 cases of sexual violence and rape against women in Shan State committed by the military government's troops. There are other reports of similar allegation published by the Karen and Mon women groups.

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Union (KNU) and Karen villagers, as the military steps up yearly military campaign against them.

In the urban political landscapes too human rights violations continued especially against political dissidents who were intimidated, imprisoned for long periods, tortured, and for some faced death. Thousands political prisoners[125] are languishing in the jails around the country to the present day. Just like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who has been placed under house arrest several times without trial and with no proper trial, student activists, notably of student leaders like Min Ko Naing[126] and Ko Ko Gyi, have been in and out of jail over the last twenty years. Since the early nineties, Burmese have not been allowed to gather more than five persons at a time. Intimidation and heavy handled methods of the military government are so effective that parents deliberately prevent their children from being politically active (Fink 2001: 103). Relatives and family members of political activists are shunned by their friends and even sometimes by their own family members for fear of meeting the same fate. The regime sometimes arrests the family members like father, mother, wife or even the young child in order to persuade activists to surrender.[127] Closure of schools and universities for long periods, coupled with high unemployment has made young people vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse.[128]

Then the military government promised to hold elections in 1990 and to return to their barrack after transferring power to the winning party. The election was called by the military government apparently after persuasion by the *Sangha* (Houtman 1999: 221). This indicates that the influence of *Sangha* was still considered valuable to the country's polity, as well as for the military government which seized this opportunity to utilise it. The opposition party NLD won a landslide victory in the elections. Nonetheless, the return of parliamentary democracy and guarantee of human rights for

[125] Update in 2008 sees more than 2,000 political prisoners and some of whom are arrested for involving in relief effort for the cyclone Nargis victims of May 2008.
[126] See more detail about Min Ko Naing written by Megan Clymer in *Journal of Burma Studies* (2003).
[127] In 1999 the military regime arrested a mother and a child of a political activist causing him to surrender himself. His little daughter was 3 years old when she was arrested with her mother who refused to give up her political activist husband. This little girl becomes Burma's youngest political prisoner. See more details in *Kyodo News* (29/07/1999).
[128] A friend whose father is NLD member said that the best thing he did for his own and his parent was to involve in politics and then to come out to Thailand. Otherwise, he would have died in Burma with drug overdose. Some young men in their 30s die from alcoholism.

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all were to be out of reach to the people, with the military refusing to hand over power. It proceeded to write another constitution calling a National Convention (NC) in 1993, totally ignoring the election results. Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in 1989 before elections were held, her political activities quickly revitalised the NLD party which had been made almost redundant by the military government, and her detention had placed the Burma pro-democracy cause in the international spotlight (Fink 2001: 87).

After the elections, attacks on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters intensified via the state-owned media and the military government's civilian wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) physically attacked her and her supporters (Fink 2001: 96). Houtman (1999) discusses at length on how the opposition leaders and their supporters cope with the dire situation they are in by practicing meditative Buddhism – 'mental culture' to guard off physical and mental suffering they face in the hand of the military government. The military government's action repeated the ideology and behaviours that developed during the anti-colonial period, such as discriminating foreigners, attacking Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's marriage to the British academic Michael Aris.[129] This clearly demonstrates that as much as Burmese would like to identify themselves as devout Buddhists - and claim that their form of Theravada Buddhism is the purest - that anti-foreign sentiment was still very much the part of Burmese social consciousness.[130] And as much as the military government promotes *Byamaso Tayah*[131] it does not seem to extend their "loving-kindness" and "compassion" to those who threaten their position and power (Houtman

[129] Michael Aris was born in 1946 and scholar of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Himalayan Culture. He had written numbers of book on the subjects and also on Buddhism in that region. He met Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during his college years and married to her in 1972. When she was put under house arrest he campaign full time for her release. The last time he visited Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was in Christmas 1995. In 1999 he died of prostrate cancer. The military regime's refusal to allow Michael Aris to die in Burma was headline of many international news agencies.

[130] Sentiment against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi having married to the British not only came from the military regime. In fact, it also came from some quarters of opposition movement as well. A leader (name withheld for privacy reason) of Alliance Democratic Solidarity, Union of Burma (ADSB) which was founded in Thailand in post 88 told the writer that it was an enormous shame that someone like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi married a foreigner worse a Brit whose race was colonisers of our country. Since she is the daughter of independence hero she should not have married a British. This sentiment is shared among some young students born around 60s.

[131] *Byamaso Tayah* generally means good conduct and the vows of abstinence but it signifies more. See more details in Houtman (1999) Chapter 19.

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1999: 307-330). The military government SLORC/SPDC created *Mangala Suttas*[132] – Thirty-Eight Mangala Suttas of which *Byamaso Tayah* is incorporated as a part and regularly published in the state-owned media to propagate. Houtman (1999: 122) argues that these are cited along deliberately by the regime to legitimise their political propaganda on the front page of state-run newspaper.

In terms of Buddhism and its significance to socio-political and religio-political spheres, post 1988 period not only sees the intensifying and increase use of it as political and social-coping tool both by the regime, the opposition notably of the NLD leaders and its supporters and the Burmese Buddhists but also sees the worsening human rights violations by the regime. Realisation of human rights for all was evasive in the country with the regime not even educating let alone promoting and protecting them. In the early 2000s, debate on whether to impose sanctions and to engage with the military government was based around the government's human rights records. Some organisations and country, like Australia, even tried to engage by providing human rights training to the military government's officials and its supporters despite strong criticism and question of effectiveness of such helping hand from Burma experts, analysts and pro-democracy activists.[133] All these efforts however went unnoticed by general public in Burma. Interviewees from Burma have no idea even the meaning of what human rights is. Interviewee #5 gets confused when asked about ever heard of the word and its meaning and said:

> I guess there are many different kinds of rights under human rights. Actually, I have no idea what human rights really mean. … I thought that oh how stupid I am and I don't even know about the International Human Rights Day.

Interviewee #3 also honestly admits not knowing what the term really means:

[132] *Mangala Sutta* is the sermon given by the Buddha containing the thirty-eight rules for a beatific life.
[133] From 2000 to 2003 Australian Government decided to train up government's officials and its civil servants despite strong opposition from pro-democracy activists within Australia and around the world only to cease the program after the Noble Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was attacked by the government organised mob in what become known as Depayin Massacre. See more details in "Engaging a Pariah: Human Rights Training in Burma/Myanmar" by D. Kinley and T. Wilson.

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> I don't know what it is but I guess that a human being should have rights as a human. For example – it shouldn't be that when one can do such and such a thing I should be able to do the same (meaning there shouldn't be one law for poor and another one for the rich).

While the other interviewees #4 and #6 honestly nodded their heads, Interviewee #4 talked about her surprise when she learned about the International Human Rights Day and said:

> I found out about human rights day falls on 10th of December on 9th December 2007. In my whole life I had no idea before.

Also, human rights training and education efforts on the border were first not taken seriously if not disparaged. Nonetheless, demanding women's human rights were still seen as disrespect towards men and Burmese culture and custom.[134] One of the strongest oppositions women receive from men occurs they talk about their rights to get into certain level of pagodas.[135]

All the why the military generals are publicly displaying their devotion to Buddhism by building and renovating pagodas, overseeing public donations and attending religious ceremonies (Houtman 1999: 123-124 and Fink 2001: 213). Unlike pre-1988 period, all religious ceremonies and festivals become stately affairs.[136] Despite all these publicly displayed pious activities this period also sees relocation and eviction of monks from their monasteries as the military government considers them breeding ground for dissent.[137] On the other hand, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi turns to

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[134] Women's desire to have equality and rights were met with scorning and belittling that some women find this insulting. Women wishing to have their say and rights were equated with them wishing to hang their clothes on their father's head. This is culturally very insulting accusation cross-ethnic groups in Burma. See more detail in "Overcoming Shadows" published by the Women's League of Burma and "Burma ~ More Women's Voices" published by the ALTSEAN.

[135] Detail will be discussed in the next chapter, Chapter 3.

[136] Previously state involvement in religious affairs in pre-1988 was once a year when *Wah-zo Thingann* Competition was held at Shwedagon Pagoda annually. In this festival people from different suburbs and states weaved huge yellow coloured robe for the Buddha and the competition was who made the best and correctly sewn robe.

[137] Eviction of monks from their monasteries takes place since around 2005 even before 2007 Saffron Revolution. After the coup in September 1988 many young people and students planned to leave for the border areas to join with ethnic groups and their meeting and gathering points were at monasteries.

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Buddhism to show and prove that she had not forgotten her root of *Burmeseness* since after all being Buddhist is being Burmese.[138] Or it could be that she saw the military governments since Ne Win's time *un*-Buddhist as Buddhism encourages and promotes compassion, loving-kindness as well as freedom of thoughts, equality and non-discrimination but not killing, cheating from the people and ruling with absolutism. It can be said that this is the period when the religious and psychological warfare between the military regime and the opposition party NLD was at its most noticeable.

Meanwhile, post 1988 period also sees publications of all sorts – journals, magazines and books. Publication of other religions is banned or restricted that it prompts the US Secretary of State to designate Burma as a 'country of particular concern under the international religious freedom act' (USSD 2002). Among those published, there are numerous books on Karma and its interpretation as well as reinterpretation of other Buddhist teachings. Many publications dealing with the concept of Karma have passed the censorship process or the military government does not consider threat to its power. Many of these books state and promote Theravada Buddhism is the only true religion, which can give answers on the human conditions and as a result are allowed to be published – for example Sann Lwin's book on Three Gems.[139] The impacts of these publications on the public, and the socio-political situation of the country over time, have caused *Burmanisation* of the notion of Karma. With or without the support of the military government, the explanation of Karma has been downgraded into an explanation of excuse for the appalling economic and political situation in the country. The process of Karma has been downgraded into an apology or explanation for the appalling economic and political situation in the country. Karma has been *re*-interpreted in response to the political and economic situation of the country by some revered monks and lay persons. The notion has been twisted so much that the meaning is rendered into something closer to 'destiny' or

[138] Since monarchy until today no politicians break out of utilising Buddhism as political tool and even General Aung San who was famous to separate religion and politics did not shy away from linking Buddhist principles in the political affairs of the country. See more details in Chapter 12, Houtman (1999).

[139] The book is about how a born Muslim turns to Christianity first, he then finds the answer in Theravada Buddhism. Many of well-meaning friends also recommended me this book as well as other books which present Theravada Buddhism as true religion by discussing against Muslim and Christianity in conversation of questions and answers style.

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'fate' in both the Burmese language and in the context[140] rather than having any theological or philosophical interpretation and understanding. Numerous books have been written and published in this vein especially after 1988. For the general public as well as some in the opposition groups, the recent and popular version of Karma is a way to cope with the woes of political, economic and social predicament that fall upon their lives.

The military government in Burma has moved from the ideology – the 'Burmese way to socialism' to a 'unique *Burmeseness*' – emphasising 'in line with historical traditions, customs and culture of nationality' (Houtman 1999: 91). In response to the perceived threats to Burmese national identity from neo-colonialists and cultural imperialists the 'perpetuation and national sovereignty' had emerged in the political discourses of the military regime's mindset. Deliberately it does not publicise all information about human rights. The military government has repeatedly pointed out to other countries it considered interfering in the internal affairs of Burma to adhere to the principle of sovereignty. They also denied human rights violations as they were just following their "concept on human rights is based on our own values, traditions and cultures" (Philp & Mercer 2002: 1591-1592).

3.6 Conclusion

During time of the kings, although ruled by absolute monarchy, monks and royal court servants could challenge against the king by referring to Buddhist ethics and traditions. And it is obvious that different religions flourished in the kingdoms and the fusion of other religions and Buddhism was even practiced by some kings. Buddhist monks played a vital role in saving lives, preventing wars, and protecting people in the times of need. They were often able to negotiate with rulers on behalf of their parishes. Under the colonial government, monks were some of the most active nationalists and played a vital role in bringing independence to Burma. At the same time liberal and socialist thought entered Burmese political thinking. Nationalist sentiment against foreign invasions, turned into religious and racial intolerance and discrimination, which intensified under the colonial administration.

[140] According to the Guide, English-English/Myanmar Dictionary (1997), *Karma* means 'person's acts in one of his successive existences, looked upon as deciding his fate in next existences' (p. 521).

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During the post-independence parliamentary democracy period, the military which has born out of national liberation movement adopted a ‘saviour’ or ‘rescuer’ role, saving the country from disintegration. Since 1962 Burma has been ruled by this military. For twenty-six years of BSPP domination, Buddhist monks have come under increasing scrutiny and state controls. The orthodox version of Theravada Buddhism is propagated, and strict adherence to the *Vinaya* is deemed as the only way to *Nirvana* for Buddhist monks. This approach of Burmese Buddhism itself is to be responsible for most of the discriminatory views and attitudes.

The registration scheme of monks had the effect of lessening the participation of monks in politics. However, it was post 1988 that Burmese Buddhism was used by the military government not only to justify the legitimacy of their rule and to get political authority, as in the time of the monarchs but also it manipulates the public, by allowing only certain books on Theravada Buddhism to be published in the country. Although the military government has a strict policy on press freedoms and is named as ‘an enemy of the press’ by international press freedom organisations like the Reporters San Frontiers (RSF) certain books and magazines authored by lay and monastic persons that have altered or *re*-interpreted key Buddhist concepts are able to publish without scrutiny of the government’s censorship board. And without the regime imparting about human rights, the people’s reliance on Buddhism seemed to peak in the post 1988 period as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has once commented that ‘if the countries embraced Buddhism did so because they *needed* it’ (Houtman 1999: 213). However, this reinterpretation of Karma has caused passive pacification and mollifying of Burmese and become inactive politically. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER IV
'*BURMANISED*' INTERPRETATION OF KARMA

The previous two chapters discussed how Buddhism is perceived and related to by the Burmese people and how it has been *Burmanised* in the religio-political aspects.

The second chapter discussed the failure of the political movements after independence to bring greater freedom and human rights for all. Also, discussed was how some of the teachings of Buddhism have been downgraded and re-interpreted to suit the political and social woes of people, by lay and monastic scholars and authors and by the military government. Even the 1988 uprising which brought down the 26 year rule of the BSPP government led by General Ne Win,[141] not only failed to eradicate militarism and military dictatorship but also failed to gain momentum and develop a human rights movement.

The dire circumstances faced by the people of Burma, the majority of whom are Theravada Buddhists, have led them to acclimatise to their circumstances and shield themselves with the very thing they know best – "Burmese Buddhism". Several conditions, such as lack of information about human rights, severe restriction on freedom of the press, bans on foreign books, some films and songs, journals and magazines coupled with numerous other restrictions, have limited the population's knowledge and understanding of the principals of human rights. To some extent it is the state's responsibility to educate and inform people but there are some factors play out in the country of which state does not entirely responsible for because the citizens will believe what they believe. One of 'philosophical' impediments to the understanding of human rights is the Burmese *re*-interpretation of Karma. Karma is a

[141] Two new successive installments of the BSPP new chairmanship lasted in power for only a few weeks. Right after General Ne Win's resignation as a chairperson of the BSPP party on 23 July 1988, the party installed U Sein Lwin as its chair from 26 July to 12 August (for 18 days) and later U Maung Maung (Dr) from 19 August to 18 September (for 31 days) in 1988. Then on 18 September the army led by General Saw Maung staged the coup.

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core concept of Buddhism, which plays a significant role in the daily life of Burmese Buddhists.

Though, Buddhism teaches equality and non-discrimination the *Burmanised* form of Buddhism has been transformed into bigotry towards certain groups of people in the society as discussed in Chapter 2. In this chapter specific attention is given to this *'Burmanised'* interpretation of Karma and the circumstances behind this interpretation. A brief description of Karma, drawing from classical Buddhism, will be presented to discuss the deviations in *Burmanised* form of Karma. It is argued that *Burmanised* interpretation of Karma has had two major impacts on the people of Burma. Firstly, it is argued that this re-interpretation of Karma acts as a major impediment to the people of Burma becoming politically active. Secondly the chapter also argues that is impedes the capacity of Burmese people to grasp the principles and practices of human rights.

There are two main hindrances in accommodating human rights principles. First, there is a stringent focus on *Vinaya,* which bolsters an orthodox and conformist version in some attempt to sustain a 'pure' form of Theravada Buddhism. This chapter will illustrate how this orthodox version of Burmese Buddhism has significantly impacted on gender equality and acceptance of people outside the designated mainstreams, notably gays and lesbians. The second hindrance is not only *Burmanised* but also incomplete or partial interpretation of Karma, which has been ingrained in the Burmese psyche. Drawing from literature on Buddhism particularly on Karma and from interviews with both people from inside and outside of Burma this chapter will demonstrate how people re-interpret the concept of Karma and find out what is the impact of this re-interpretation on people's social and political thinking and on human rights. Before attesting to this argument a brief description of Karma, drawing from classical Buddhism, will be given first to see is there any deviancy in *Burmanised* form of Karma from the core teaching of the Buddha.

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4.1 Buddhist Doctrine of Karma[142]

Karma in Buddhism focuses on the deeds of human beings whether be mental, physical or verbal. Concept of Karma in Buddhism is neither fatalistic nor deterministic. Moreover, its meaning is neither fate nor destiny that imposed on human beings by someone above. In Buddhist doctrine, said Mahasi Sayadaw (2004),[143] it is one's own deed that has effect on oneself and therefore one has the course of changing his or her own Karma to some extents. In addition, Mahasi Sayadaw stated that, the Buddha does not teach nor disapprove of any action that one can take but allows one to decide. Buddhism, as a whole, places and values human beings as the most potential beings to realise the truth - Dhamma. It teaches in its Karma concept that human should cherish their human life as it is the 'priceless opportunity to create good karma' (King 1994: 2) and human have 'potential to realise the truth through his or her own will and endeavour and to help others to realise it' (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: 174). Karma in Buddhism means:

> The Pali term Karma literally means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical, is regarded as Karma. It covers all that is included in the phrase "thought, word and deed". Generally speaking, all good and bad action constitutes Karma. In its ultimate sense Karma means all moral and immoral volition. Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute Karma, because volition, the most important factor in determining Karma, is absent (Mahasi Sayadaw 2004: 5).

Karma focuses not only on actions from the past but also actions in one's present life. Besides, it talks about forces that result from these acts. Essentially, Karma also

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[142] The concept of Karma is just one of the twenty-four fundamental doctrines in Buddhism. For more details see Nandar Theinzan (1989) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1982).

[143] Mahasi Sayadaw's *Vipassana* meditation became very popular in the early 1940s and in 1949 mediation centres were opened up in Rangoon at the invitation and request of the then Prime Minister U Nu. Mahasi Sayadaw was honoured by the PM in 1952 with a title *"Aggamahapandita"* (the Exalted Wise One). Numbers of Mahasi Meditation centres sprung up in the country and it has always been considered the best practice by the majority of Buddhist Burmese. In 1972 a census indicated the number of mediators, who had joined his centres, had reached around 700,000. There are other meditation practices popular in Burma but Mahasi's method is the most preferred. His method has also reached a number of western countries and is still practiced by some westerners. The Mahasi Meditation Centres are still operated in Burma and according to a young woman who this researcher interviewed they attract young people. For more details see Sai Kham Maung (2004).

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stresses on present life Karma that one does which will have good or bad effect on current as well as in the future life. However, Mahasi Sayadaw stresses that 'The present is no doubt the offspring of the past and is the present of the future, but the present is not always a true index of either the past or the future' (Mahasi Sayadaw 2004). Concept of Karma is not for human being to use as justification for suffering, misfortune and injustice that one suffers in life. Instead it allows human being to have a free will to choose what action or deed they will take in order to make bad or good Karma for their current, present and their future life. Wapola Rahula (2006: 32)[144] too states that the theory of Karma should not be confused with 'moral justice' or 'reward and punishment' since it is about the theory of cause and effect only.[145] That is one's physical quality and mental abilities are the results of the deeds of previous existence yet one is the prime being to decide whether to act wholesomely or unwholesomely in their present life. This wholesome or unwholesome acts or deeds will have effect on one's present and future life as well.

4.2 *Vinaya* Abiding: Worthy Ones *vs.* Unworthy Ones

Buddhist monks or *bhikkhus* – literally means a person, who depends on alms (Ajahn Brahmavanso 1990) and have to be more *Vinaya* abiding in their practice and their chosen life as Nirvana (*Nibbana*) attaining beings. A Buddhist monk has to display a high moral, disciplinary practice of meditation and wisdom.[146] The *Vinaya* abiding practices demands that every monk be above mundane affairs and to disassociate with certain groups of people. The "Three Ps" scheme is important in Burma in the practice of the *Vinaya* and has resulted in a conservative mixture of tradition with Buddhism, which is to the military regime's advantage. Theravada

[144] Wapola Rahula (1907-1997) is a Buddhist monk, scholar and writer as well as one of the top Sri Lanka intellectuals in the 20th century. In 1964 he became the first Asian monk to hold a professorial chair in the western intellectual world of History and Religion. He has written extensively on Buddhism in English, French and Singhalese. His book titled "What the Buddha Taught" is considered one of the best books written about Theravada Buddhism and is a must-read if anyone wants to know and learn about Theravada Buddhism.

[145] It is because, for Wapola, the idea of moral justice, or reward and punishment arises out of the conception of a supreme being who sits in judgment.

[146] Basically there are three different groups of monk – (i) those who enter monkhood since childhood (*ngephyu*), practicing and forest-dwelling monk, (ii) practicing but with certain laxity and urban monk, and (iii) those who enter monkhood occasionally (*dulaba*) as boys or men enter monkhood at least once in their life.

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Buddhism teaches that Nirvana can be attained through studying, moral practice (*sila*), meditation or concentration (*samādhi*) and obtaining wisdom (*pañña*). It also teaches that it is attainable only by *arahanta* in Pali or *arhat* in Sanskrit (literally means a worthy one).[147] To be a worthy one, a monk must be able to detach from material possessions and material affairs as much as possible which will then lead to detachment and then to total liberation (or cessation). This is a part of being purifying the act of practice as well as the one who practices. This means that practicing monks must strictly follow certain rules and conduct and stay away from the lay community as much as possible.[148] Than Tun details the importance of abiding by the *Vinaya*:

> Burmese monks always have this fear because *Vinaya* – the discipline that they observe – has 227 sections and in detail it is as much as 91,805,036,000. Everything in their life is so planned that they could never take anything lightly. The *Vinaya* is observed very scrupulously and any laxity in its observation is considered sinful or being not amenable to monkhood. A monk who disregards the *Vinaya* would be an *allajji* which means that a certain person is still a monk though he has no respect of the *Vianaya*… (Strachan 1988: 157).

Buddhist monks are to be meticulous at not kill any living beings. Even trees and leaves are considered living things in Buddhism and it discourages their destruction, being sinful to do so. A worthy one, who practices and abides by the strict interpretation of *Vinaya* is considered to be a *aranhanta*. The Buddha himself is described as an *arahanta* and according to Ashin Rewata Dhamma[149] (2002) *arahanta*

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[147] See more detail in Ashin Rewata Dhamma (2002) who provides what is the definition of *Arhat* and what it means to be an *arhat* worthy one.

[148] This perhaps one of the reasons Theravada Buddhism in Burma works against mass political movement. This is however not to imply that Buddhist monks and monasteries have not played a significant role in politics.

[149] Ashin Rewata Dhamma, born in 1929, obtained Ph. D. in Mahayana Buddhism and had published and written number of books and articles. Upon invitation in 1975 he visited England and tirelessly worked on teaching Buddhism in Europe. He set up the West Midlands Buddhist Centre in England which later becomes Birmingham Buddhist Vihara. In 2000, he was awarded the prestigious title of *Aggamahapandita* by the military regime of Burma. He was highly regarded in Asia too and served on a number of commissions and international Buddhist bodies. He also mediated between the military regime and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 1995 in an attempt to break the political impasse in the country. He was one of Burma's best Buddhist missionaries and this could be the reason the military regime consented to his mediation. He passed away on 26 May 2004.

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is one who has eradicated the four *asava* (intoxicants or taints), sense-desire, attachment of existence, ignorance, and wrong view or speculative opinion. Rewata Dhamma continues to explain that an *arhanta* must practice the seven factors of enlightenment, uprooting three basic roots of evil, the craving for pleasure, life and annihilation, and has to fulfill the triple training of *Sila*, *Samadhi* and *Paññā*.

> …. in the first volume of *Digha Nikaya* which deals with an *arahanta*. In these texts arahantship is extolled as the highest of social ranks, the only person worthy of gifts and veneration, the best asceticism, and true form of *brahmacariya*. Clearly, the arahantship is most worthwhile aspect of life. There are many attributes of an *arahanta* in Theravada literature … (Ashin Rewata Dhamma 2002).

The 'cleansings of *Sasana*'[150] and purity of the *Sangha* overseen by the military regimes since the late 1970s and supported by the lay community have become the platform for returning to stricter (if not ultra) orthodox interpretation of Buddhism. This has seen the power of the more conservative monks within the *Sangha* community increase.[151] Interviewee #2, a Buddhist monk who escaped and now resides in a border town after 2003 Depayin Massacre, expressed his frustration that some senior monks are not only afraid, but also want to stay out of the country's economic and political affairs.

> Well, some people may be just sitting there and saying their own Karma will take care of itself. Actually, some senior monks are just avoiding problems and staying in their own monastery and doing nothing.

The fear and belief of being sinful and becoming a *allajji* or an unworthy one pushes many practicing monks into rigid behaviours and practices even go so far as

[150] Cleansing of *Sasana* is known as *Sasana Thant-Shinn-Yay* in Burmese and many Burmese Buddhists were not against it.

[151] Unlike Catholic pope and priests Buddhist monks do not sanction social and sexual behaviors of lay community such as banning abortion, prohibiting of contraception, etc… However, as part of observing five precepts for lay people, Buddhist monks strongly discourage and admonish to those who use abortion as taking life with the strong warning of Karmic effect of such killing.

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avoiding certain types of people, such as gays, widows, spinsters and sex workers, in order to attain the level of an *arhanta* and Nirvana (Ashin Sandardhika 2006: 126). The practice of celibacy and not having close contact with women being deemed a 'stumbling block' to the attainment of enlightenment has almost morphed into a doctrine of discrimination against women. This type of exclusion is not the policy of the military government, rather being the belief of many monks and lay people. To be a worthy one, this conservative adherence to the *Vinaya* is considered necessary. This coupled with the Burmese notion of Karma has led to enormous discrimination against gays and to a lesser extent against women, including the ostracism of sex-workers.[152]

Being a woman is not so much better either since Theravada Tradition and Burmese Buddhists believe that it is only men who can attain Buddhahood. This stringent focus on monk (*thera*) and their purity and the non-reformist approach or "Three Ps" approach of Burmese Buddhism has made it almost totally incompatible to the principles of human rights, in particular the rights of women. Focus on purity of *thera* leads to the perception that only men can attain enlightenment, thus the role of women within monastic and lay community is reduced to nothing better than an auxiliary existence. Buddha's first refusal and hesitatingly to permit Prajapati (*Gawtami*[153] in Burmese) to become *bhikkhuni* is frequently cited and narrated in Buddhist sermons when questions arise about the status of women.[154] This has also led to total eradication of *bhikkhuni* culture. Moreover, ordination of *bhikkhunis* in Theravada tradition requires an experienced preceptor, five senior *bhikkhunis* to recognize her 'one side' ordination first and then with five *bhikkhus* as 'second side' to be fully recognized as *bhikkhuni* (Ajahn Brahmavamso 1990).[155] There are 311 for *bhikkhunis* and 277 rules for *bhikkhus* but 348 for *bhikkhunis* and 250 for *bhikkhus* previously before revision of all *Vinaya* for *bhikkhunis* took place (Patti Nakai, 2002).

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[152] Young and old men hire sex-workers. However, it was not uncommon in the 1980s for people to stone the houses of sex-workers, telling them to get out of the suburb.

[153] Prajapati is known and well-loved in Burmese Buddhist legend as *Mi-dway-taw Gawtami* – meaning 'step mother Gawtami. She is the sister of Maya – Buddha's mother who died shortly after the Buddha was born. Buddha first refused her request to be ordained as *Bhikkhuni*.

[154] Interviewee #2 related this story by giving the reason that women have more sexual desire than men. This will be discussed later more.

[155] Ordination of *bhikkhunis* and its culture and practice died out due to civil turmoil and wars in 11th Century C. E. in Sri Lanka and did not re-flourish when the country was peaceful again. Requiring to have more than one *bhikkhunis* for a women to become one made impossible afterwards.

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In 2005, Burmese *Bhikkhuni* Thitsa Wadi, after being ordained in Sri Lanka and receiving a Ph.D. returned to Burma to attend an International Buddhist Conference where she registered herself as a *bhikkhuni*. At the time of her re-entry to the country she was wearing the same colour robe that male monks usually wear. Then the authorities were informed by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC), a group that does not believe women should have the same status with men. She was consequently arrested and detained for two months with the charge 'attempting to insult or an act of insult to Buddhist religions' under Penal Act 295 and 295 (a). She was later released from jail (Dove Bulletin 2005: 10-11).[156] Her crime was for registering herself as *Bhikkhuni* or *Rahan-ma*[157] – female monk constituting a threat to the integrity of the *Sangha* and the Buddhist religion. The doctrine of enlightenment based on merit of one's own endeavours and practices is definitely not in the mind of thousands and thousands of Buddhist monks in Burma not to mention the ruling military. Some *bhikkhunis* return to Burma but they never dare to enter the country wearing the same colour as monks. They enter only after changing their orange maroon colour robes back to pink, the usual colour specified for nun in Burma.

4.3 Coping Failures, Suiting Interpretation and Rationalisation

As mentioned in chapter 2, several attempts to achieve greater freedom and fundamental human rights in Burma have brought no change in real sense for wider population till into early 2000s.[158] Real sense in which people's life is bettered by economic, social and political developments. Real sense in which people can freely express, mobilize, organize and associate without being considered crime against the state or authority or as an act of treason in the eyes of the ruling military government. With this social and political impasse in overall situation there is an undercurrent within the Burmese society which takes place along with people turning to Buddhism

[156] *Bhikkhuni* Thitsa Wadi left Burma soon after her release from jail. Women from Thailand, Burma, Indonesia and other countries travel to Sri Lanka to be ordained. Unlike Burma, those *Bhikkhunis* from other countries were not detained or arrested upon their return although the religious establishments in some of those countries do not acknowledge their status as female monks. See more detail in Dove Bulletin, Volume 25., September 2005.
[157] *Rahan* in Burmese is monk who attains higher level of *Sila, Samadhi* and *Panna*. *Ma* in *Rahan-ma* is an indicator of female counterpart.
[158] The first human rights defender group was established inside Burma in 2002.

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as a 'refuge' and coping system to face their daily hardship and the danger under the military rule while practicing mental culture to gain strength spiritually. Existing political impasse, Burmese Buddhist zealotry, Buddhism as the coping tool combined with the military government's strict press control of any publications in the country, there takes place a process of re-interpretation of notion of Karma. This re-interpretation may have caused for two reasons: one is due to interchangeable use in Burmese language over the word or term – Karma; and the second reason is due to honest misunderstanding on the concept of Karma caused by partial translation and understanding of Karma. When these two aspects are used to rationalise there emerges *Burmanised* form of reinterpretation of Karma.

4.4 Fatalistic and Deterministic Karma: Luck '*Kan*' and Deed '*Kan*'

Karma is "*kan*"' in Burmese language.[159] Virtually every day Burmese Buddhists pay homage and submit themselves in front of the Buddha image or pagoda by promising they would not commit any *kaya-ka*', *wazi-kan* and *manaw-kan* – wrong physical, verbal and mental deeds. Although Pali-Myanmar Dictionary (U Hoat Sein 1999: 294) gives meaning for *"Kan"* as 'doing', 'action', 'good or bad deed', in the Myanmar-English Dictionary (1998: 12) it is also translated and given the meanings as (i) one's deed, word or thought which predetermines one's future; and (ii) luck, fortune, and lot. According to another English to Burmese dictionary, The Guide: English-English/Myanmar Dictionary (1997: 521), *"Kan"* means 'person's acts in one of his successive existences, looked upon as deciding his fate in next existences'. The interchangeable usage and translation of *Kan* like these as 'deed' and 'luck' or 'fate' or 'destiny' confused Burmese Buddhists not to mention others with different faiths and beliefs in the country. Language interchangeability means that Burmese Buddhists' understanding of "*Kan"* shifts from their own deeds and misdeeds to total control of their fate and destiny. Or in most cases their understanding of "*Kan*" is as fate only and sometimes it is their luck. An interviewee #7, who even is a strong supporter of

[159] Kamma or Karma is 'kan' in Burmese. However, it is to be aware that the direct pronunciation of *'kar-ma'* in Burmese means sex or *kar-ma set-san tae* is to have sexual intercourse. From here on the word *kan* will be used throughout unless otherwise necessary to use English transliteration of the word Karma or Kamma.

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the NLD, gives a sketchy meaning when asked how she understands the concept of *"Kan*".

> …the way I understand it – even brother and sister have different *Kan*. Isn't it? For example – my brother's twin children have different *Kan*. From their birth to until now they have different *Kan*. See, the younger girl is luckier than the older boy because she is loved by many. So *Kan* is different from one individual to another. … She reaps the seed she sown in her previous life. This is how I understand from what I read from the books but I really don't know exactly how to explain more.[160]

In this way, Karma known as *"Kan"* in Burmese become synonymous with 'luck', 'fate', 'destiny' and 'fortune' and lost its meaning in translation or interpretation as well as in rationalisation.[161] Besides, these are the almost only meanings that popularised by many writers, lay or monastic, in Burma. In numerous books that have been allowed to be published since 1962 and especially post 1988 under various incarnations of a military dictatorship, *"Kan"* is still translated as 'doing', 'action', and 'deed' in some books. Yet interpretation, rationalisation and popularisation of it in most published books have veered into something of a different denotation. In his "Bad Luck and Good Luck of Life" a Buddhist scholar Bone Myint Thway[162] writes and rationalises *"Kan"* and its effect as:

> The effect of *Kan* cannot be planned. If *Kan* is to be in effect it comes even one is in bed while still asleep. It is amazing that one is to win K 180,000 lottery while doing nothing. Even the lottery ticket [he/she] bought has yet to be paid for (2002: 1-5).

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[160] Interview #7 – This is a woman in her late 50s and currently lives in Rangoon. Therefore, she requested her anonymous identity. She is a close friend and strong supporter of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Her husband is in the inner circle of NLD leadership and was sentenced to long imprisonment. She is exposed to both Christianity and Buddhism but later sways more to Buddhism.

[161] This kind of interpretation takes place in other Theravada countries like Thailand as well. Certain reinterpretation of religious concepts happens to almost all religions.

[162] Bone Myint Thway writes numerous books on *kan* by defining, rationalising and interpreting the term. His books are the first ones to be offered by the book-sellers if anyone is to read about *kan*. He also writes about sort of guide to happiness or how to live life of which he bases morality as best principle of life.

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The implying message here is that due to the person's past deed he or she is blessed with winning lottery even before paying for the ticket he or she bought. This rationalisation is fatalistic and deterministic and causes people to overly rely on their fate consequence of their past deeds rather than trying or working hard to change the cause of one's *"Kan"* as some revered monks and scholars, including Mahasi Sayadaw, have previously explained. In contrary to what Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw teaches and explains many Burmese Buddhist scholars and some monks' writings and sermons about Karma, using Buddhist Pali scriptures and texts, focus mainly on destiny or fate especially after post 1988. In some cases, interpretation is not just on the destiny and fate but also in defining as punishment for moral misdeed in the past life 'Looking at the way one's life is now one can even draw a conclusion that what kind of bad action one had done' (Yadanamon Magazine 2004: 7).[163] Rather than interpreting Karma as deed or action Ashin Sandardhika, one of the famous monks who publishes several books on Buddhism, interpreted it as deterministic and fatalistic factor that no one is able to alter.

> If one reaps bad things in romance and marriage in present life one has definitely done bad deed in their past marriage life. If one says and screams having bad luck with romance and love, it is the same as one is admitting and confessing 'I had cheated in my relationship or committed adultery in my marriage in my past life' (Ashin Sandardhika 2002: 77-78).

Confusion over the intertwined usage of the word *"Kan"* also exacerbates when another rationalisation is given. In this rationalisation Bone Myint Thway offers *"Kan"* or bad deed or luck to the readers in his "If When Facing Suffering" as an atonement of past sins and misdeeds. In this book, he talks about a story in which group of monks got into fight and killed each other at the Wailuwon Monastery[164] (2005: 61-64). Explanation he offers for the fighting and killing of these monks is for having to survive as hunters in their past lives where they had killed lots of animals.

[163] From here on Yadanamon Magazine will be mentioned as 'YM'. The quote comes from the magazine and the author is Ashin Sandhardhika.
[164] Wailuwon is a sacred monastery during the Buddha's time and often cited in Buddhist Jataka stories in Burmese.

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This rationalisation and explanation also give the tone of atonement (*Wiq*' in Burmese) rather than as a consequence of past misdeed or past bad *"Kan"* although it still links to it. The meaning of *Wiq* in Burmese is given in 1998 Myanmar-English Dictionary as a 'cyclic process impelled by the interaction of lust, deeds and consequences' and 'atonement or expiation for past sins and misdeeds' or debt to which one owes to repay due to past sins and that everyone needs to repay if they want better future. However, *"Kan"* in this story is interpreted and rationalised as a punishment of past deeds and sins. This kind of interchangeability in language as well as intertwining rationalisation between luck or fate and deed has caused confusion in meaning such that many Burmese Buddhists no longer see the difference in the two meanings.

4.5 Partial or Incomplete Interpretation and Rationalisation of Karma

Several books on Buddhism published after 1988 not only promote Theravada Buddhism as one and the only true religion but focus only on partial or incomplete concepts of Karma that contrasts with the core teachings of Buddha. The interpretation of Karma has become a way of life as well as a catch all explanation for an individual's life. Since the interpretation only focuses on the past deeds, which has an all determining impact on the person's present life, the less fortunate and the disadvantaged become the sinners or slaves to their past misdeeds. Any misfortune, social, material, and even physical attractiveness and disabilities are accounted for by misdeeds in their previous life.

> In our life, *Kan* is the mother, *Kan* is the father. It is possible for human to compete but one's *Kan* is impossible to compete because of their different *Kan* that they had done in the past. Since people had done differently in their past *Kan* people reap its consequences differently too (Bone Myint Thway 1996: 2).[165]

Interviewee #8 admits to his early misunderstanding of Kan and talks about confusing the concept with fate or destiny. It has taken a few years for him to realise

[165] Bone Myint Thway wrote several books on *'kan'* but using the word interchangeably from Karma to luck or destiny. His books are popularly read by ordinary Burmese Buddhists.

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Karma is just deed or action that one should not commit intentionally towards others to harm and cause physical and mental pain.

> Before it was also a mixed up and unclear understanding that I had and only later I found out that *Kan* is our 'action'. Sometimes, we thought that *Kan* is something that we cannot see…. So I only know this later after much learning from other sources.[166]

A famous monk Ashin Sandar Dhika,[167] also asserts that every one would have to bear the seed that they have sown in their past life. A sweet seed will result in having to enjoy sweet fruit and a bitter seed will give a bitter fruit.[168] This conveys a deterministic view of life where people have to repay in their present life, no matter what or just to swallow any suffering in this life. He wrote that any one who cries out about being broken hearted must have committed adultery in a previous life (Ashin Sandar Dhika 2002: 78). This view of sadness and suffering leads to discrimination against those who are less fortunate in life such as the poor, and even those without physical beauty. This has resulted in people adopting a manner of helplessness in their present life. A sense of helplessness and the attitude of 'nothing can be done', or as Burmese say "It's my Karma so let it be!" *(Koh kan bae lay)*, causes people to view their life as fate and destiny, accepting any outcome and becoming inactive or idle both politically and socially.

When ask whether young people inside Burma these days believe in Karma Interviewee #3 explained her frustration at over-reliance on Karma by some young people and of which Interviewee #5 also agreed.

> These days, young people do believe in the effect of Karma and wait until good Karma comes around. But do we have to wait till that benefit of our past karma

[166] Interviewee #8 claims that he has self taught himself about true essence of Buddhism first and later sought guidance from Buddhist scholars and monks as well as practicing meditation.
[167] Interviewee #3, who visited Bangkok, from Rangoon, for a short course, identified Ashin Sandar Dhika and the revered Ashin Nyanisara (Sitagu Sayadaw), who established a Buddhist University, as two of the most famous and educated monk who have many followers or admirers.
[168] Though, he does also explain Karma as 'action' and goes on to say the creator of one's life is one's own Karma (Ashin Sandar Dhika 2002: 76).

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> come into effect? We cannot sit and do nothing just because we believe we are enjoying the good effects of a past good life's. Do we wait for that Karma? What, we just wait to see good thing will eventually happen to us?

Interviewee #7 also fumes on about people's attitude and perception of *"Kan"* and even thinks that Burmese are too forgiving not doing enough for political and social change.

> They believe in it [*Kan*] that's why they say things like "We probably did something really bad to this government and that's why they have been really horrible to us in this life". People try to answer every question like that. People think let it be and it's our own *Kan*. They leave it up to [it] like that. So this government knows well about this so it can hold on to power for this long. Most people are like that.

Interviewee #1 who held a position of leadership in the Saffron Revolution in 2007, also is troubled with people not trying hard enough to oust the military government.

> …in this present life with the help of our wisdom - *Viriya* [endeavour] and *Nyañña* [wisdom], no matter how terrible our past karma sometimes it did not show up. But what happening in Burma is that people just don't do anything or don't try anything right now so it is like deliberately allowing past bad karmas to show up in this life.

For him, although it is true that past misdeeds trail and track down every human being in the present life, one can always try to atone for those misdeeds and let the present good deeds make one's life better instead of just blaming misfortune on past misdeeds.

4.6 Discriminating Karma: Inferior Beings and Superior Beings

Much to the contrary to core teaching of Buddhism – equality, Burmese Buddhists also believe it is their past bad Kan or misdeeds that caused some people to

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be reborn as girls and women or as inferior sex. Many Buddhists believe and would even have an explicit perception that girls, women and gays in particular born into present life as such due to their past sin as adulterous persons. Bone Myint Thway (2004: 5) in his "Human and Adultery" (*Lu-thar hnint Karmay-thu*) has given interpretation and rationalisation on one of the five precepts that human being should abstain from committing adultery. Citing the story of Buddha's cousin, Ashin Ananda, he explains and rationalises how Ashin Ananda suffered years in hell, being bitten off his manly organ during the life he was a monkey, and again during the life of an ox his manly organ being taken out due to his past sin as adulterous son of a goldsmith. Ashin Ananda's suffering did not cease here as the author continues to explain that Ashin Ananda became a neuter – sex of neither woman nor man, then became a celestial being but in female form (*Nat-thamee* in Burmese) for five times, then being born into human form but suffered again as being born as princess not prince. The message he attempts to give is girls and women born into female sex due to their past adulterous sins even great Ananda, Buddha's cousin, could not escape. With this rationalisation and implication of being born women is rendered as social pest and promiscuous in previous life and women carry this label around as they live their present lives. Having to accept tradition and custom as handed down from generations to generations Interviewee #5 lamentably tells the story of herself when she went to Kyaikhtiyoe Pagoda[169] in Mon State.

> I was the one who bought this [flower, incense sticks, etc…] but could not donate with my own hand. I stood there where the picket line was and prayed and chanted looking ahead but unable to go further than that. When I looked at the boys' faces… looked like they were telling us that 'See! We men can go and allowed to go!' We got into argument and fight. I feel so bad on that pagoda but as I said… I just accepted because I took this as the custom or tradition of Buddhism.[170]

[169] Kyaikhtiyoe Pagoda is one of the famous pagoda in Mon State and also known as the Hanging Rock Pagoda as the mass of rock just precariously hanging on the tip of a small hill. There are number of myths surrounding the pagoda in relation to woman and girls not allowed to enter the pagoda.

[170] Interviewee #5 has also came to Bangkok for a short training and agreed to give interview for the thesis. Her frustration is that although she knows it is unfair and untrue she has been brought up in this way and can never argue back rationally because she herself kind of believes in this.

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Not only being born female is considered and believed inferior and impure but also is assumed that women always have sexual desire more than men and therefore a dirty sexual being or bad gender. It was believed and popularised that this was the very reason even the Buddha took time from allowing women to become *Bhikkhuni* – female monk.[171] This attitude leads to discrimination against women and girls who need to be tamed sexually at all time. Although denying the Buddha has any discriminatory view over women Interviewee #2 explains and reasons when asked if Burmese Buddhism discriminating women as:

> However when it comes to sexual desire, women's sexual desire is much higher than that of men. In Vinaya, monks [*Bhikkhu*] have to have four restrictions over this issue but for *Bhikkhunis* they need to abide eight restrictions. The Buddha asked whether Step-Mother *Gawtami* be able to practice and abide eight compassion and sympathy *(Garuna)* and he permitted her to become *Bhikkhuni* only after she promised that she could do so. However, the Buddha did not discriminate between men and women. The Buddha had never discriminated between rich and poor, rich and beggar.

Belak (2002: 34)[172] of the Images Asia discovers that discrimination against women and girls is apparent and women from Burma 'expressed the opinion that it is not the fundamental principles of Buddhism that are discriminatory, but the way in which they are interpreted by men'. Belak also discovers that the concept of *Hpoun* which 'has become a part of Burmese culture, and customary beliefs incorporating the notion of *pon*[173] are often practiced equally by non-Buddhist, non-Burman ethnic communities. However, through her research, she comes across with women who 'do

[171] One of the popular stories of Buddha gives explanation and reason that Gawtami, step mother of the Buddha, was allowed to become Bhikkhuni only after several requests by herself and Ashin Ananda, closet disciple and cousin of the Buddha. The reason was given that women are prone to several flaws in terms of disciplines, religious practices and sexual desire. This story was also related by one of the interviewees, a Buddhist monk, to this thesis researcher and the tale of this has always been popularised to place women as second rate human beings, beings need to be controlled and considered wild sexually.

[172] The author, Brenda Belak, researched details on women rights in correlation to Buddhism, tradition, culture and CEDAW.

[173] See Chapter II, Ft # 27 for detailed explanation. This is the variation of spelling as *Hpoun* and *Pon*.

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not agree with these beliefs, even though they may follow them so as not to incur the condemnation of their communities or families' (Belak 2002: 36).

This is one of the many reasons Burmese Buddhists are scared to go and embark on things considered 'outside the box'. It is in fact fear that causes people to stay in line with societal pressure and norms and in turn makes them socially and politically inactive. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed her wish for people to practice engaged Buddhism and urged them that they should not be accepting a status quo by questioning back (Clement 1997).[174] In her conversation with Alan Clement, she points out that the interpretation of *"Kan"* in Burma is inadequate and creates inactiveness.

> …And to act. I remind the people that Karma is actually doing. It's not just sitting back. Some people think of karma as destiny or fate and that there's nothing they can do about it. It's simply what is going to happen because of their past deeds. This is the way in which karma is interpreted in Burma.

4.7 Is Ruling Government the only Culprit?

Ideas not approved by the military government's since 1962 are either "inked out, ripped off" or simply do not become public because of the severe censorship by the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) and its previous incarnations (Allot 1993: 3).[175] With this strict control over publications writers must come to terms with writing to pass the PSB, although some dare to include hidden political messages in book, article or poem. As published work is directly under the control of the military government they are responsible for the manipulation of public knowledge and the deterioration in the intellectual stock of the people of Burma. Publications about Buddhism not only avoid the political context but have also increasingly stressed the 'fatalistic' view and

[174] Alan Clement, who had been ordained as a monk in Burma and had lived there several years, interviewed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 1997 during her first release from house arrest in Rangoon. The article cited here is online version.

[175] Allot (1993) traced back press freedom from parliamentary democracy era to immediate post 1988 period in her *Inked Over, Ripped Out: Burmese Storytellers and the Censors* published by the PEN American Center. She pointed out that all printers and publishers are required to register under new Printers' and Publishers' Registration Act of the BSPP government era regulation. Furthermore, all publications are allowed with freedom of speech as long as they are written within the frame which in no contrast with interests of the working people and socialism that is the government's framework.

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'reward and punishment' aspect of Buddhist Karmic concept. Thus most writings on the concept of Karma attempt only to give partial answers to the economic impoverishment and ongoing political stalemate inflicted by the military government. Nonetheless, the military government does neither direct nor instruct the ideas incorporated in approved publications, with many in the lay and monastic genuinely holding such beliefs.

Certain opinions on Theravada Buddhism held by the Burmese Buddhists cannot be held all responsibilities towards the military government. As discussed in Chapter 1, Burma has a history of religious zealotry, holding the belief that they are the ultimate protectors of Theravada Buddhism. Interviewee #6 points out that even some monks disparagingly talk about other forms of Buddhism.

> Monks give dhamma the way they want. In Buddhism, there is Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada flourishes in Burma. But then this one monk said openly that Tibetan Mahayana is no good. … He said this in his sermons all the time so some people really began to think that there should be only one form of Buddhism and that should be Theravada. The monk gave so many different examples every day to convince people of this.

Interviewee #7 complained of peoples' attitude to their current circumstances and of people using the concept of Karma as reward and punishment and not being proactive about their life and their immediate concerns.

> In this life we have wrong done to us and in the next life we will be the one doing wrong to others and this goes on and on. So we will not be able to escape from this *Samsara*. So if we want to escape from this *Samsara* we have to tolerate and forgive. If we tolerate whatever they do to us, which is happening because we did wrong to them in our past, we will escape from this cyclic process of suffering. They believe this. That's why Burmese have to endure a long *Sansara* of politics.

After a long explanation of how some people overly rely on Karma Interviewee #5 frustratingly said:

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> Some people would not do anything and put and blame totally and squarely on Karma. Then they think that's it and it's justified. There are many people like that.

Another Interviewee #3 admitted to her annoyance about her own acceptance of such belief.

> …it's because it's like a *mi-yoh pha-la*[176] to me. We have that *ah-swae* – deep-seated belief or feeling and we just accept things so easily. When something happens we think, Oh! That person does something so that's why that happened… do we say it as an 'escape exit'? I guess it could be.

The current common concept of Karma in Burma is about people seeking easy answers for their current circumstances, although they know deep down these are not true. This makes it easier for the military regime to maintain control as there is no or little willingness on the part of the population to change and contentment accepting the status quo. According to Interviewee #2, it not just the people, as many senior monks have also adopted this same passive acceptance of existence.

> Well, some people may be just sitting there and saying their own Karma will take care of itself. Actually, some senior monks are just avoiding the problems and staying in their own monasteries and doing nothing.

There is a more disturbing interpretation of Karma and its relationship to people's interpretation of the country's political problems with the political crisis viewed as some family feud inherited from their previous existences. This perception began during the BSPP period, with the political crisis viewed as a feud between the families of U Nu and General Ne Win.[177] Now the political problems are interpreted as a fight between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military government. This kind of interpretation is reflected in Interviewee #2's analysis of current political situation.

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[176] *Mi-yoh Pha-lah* means something that is accepted, observed and practiced as custom and tradition.
[177] The grandson of U Nu once remarked that he would like to quit politics and not be involved at all. However since this is also a fight between his family and the family of General Ne Win he is obliged to continue the battle. He now lives in Sydney and is little involved in political activities.

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> Many people think the problem we have in our country is between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military government. *Dagama-gyi*[178] [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi] is doing this for the sake of the whole public, whilst the military government kills monks or whoever they like. … We are like *Myay-za-pin* [some innocent victim of a fight]. I don't know what happened between the SPDC and her in their past lives that she has to repay her past *wiq-kway*.

The political struggle for freedom in Burma has been reduced to a feud between families based on their Karma. This is a great tragedy as the inept rule of the country's military has created enormous misery and suffering.

4.8 Conclusion

It is easy to blame the military regime for the limited change and because improvements in peoples lives have not occurred. The present interpretation of Karma is an uncomplicated and easy answer to complex political, social and economic issues facing the country. It is easier for people to explain the situation as the result of past deeds, with a limited possibility for improvement until these deeds are atoned for. They only have to wait until this occurs, though no-one knows when this will end. This is easier for Burmese people than for them to face their own passivity, insularity and zealotry. It is easier than accepting their own bigotry towards each other, other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese and Indians, and correcting their view of women as second rate citizens. All this is more easily explained by their simplified, dumb-downed *Burmanised* concept of Karma.

[178] *Daga-ma-gyi* is a term used by monks when they address a laywoman. '*Daga*' is the term used for the layman. '*Daga*' means someone who takes charitable cause, '*ma*' represents feminine and '*gyi*' is a signifier term for people with status.

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CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

5.1 The Saffron Revolution – A Necessity Move by the Monks

Towards the end of the thesis writing process, tens of thousands monks in Burma took to the streets in Rangoon (the former capital) and other major cities to chant and send out loving-kindness (*metta*) in response to the country's growing economic woes. This was the response to fuel price hike that had been going on in the country for sometime. Around August 2007, the small protests were led by student leaders like Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Htay Kwe, students and youth who were swiftly taken away by the military government. The protests by the monks followed guerrilla protests led by the 88' Generation of Students, supporters of the NLD and others over the fuel price hike. The move was 'an act of love' from the monks for the people of Burma in an attempt to ease the suffering that people endure. For the outsiders the magnitude of the involvement of the *Sangha* signals the people's enormous discontent with the military government. For Burmese and particularly monks it was a show of *metta* to the people and their oppressors. Many international friends and supporters, who are not Buddhists and who have no knowledge of the relationship between religion and politics in Burma question whether this action by the monks is in line with Buddhism.

One of the interviewees, a monk who participated in a leadership position in what is known as the Saffron Revolution, argues that the monks' involvement in this kind of action is in line with the Buddha's teaching and practices. He related the story of drought and famine in Vesali city during Buddha's time to present his point. The story he related was that the Buddha in response to seeing the peoples' suffering, their disease and deaths, brought other 500 monks who circled the city of Vesali while chanting *Pa-yate* (*Sutta* that wards off evil and harm). This kind of chanting by the monks is done every year after the New Year Festival (take place around April in modern day) where all the suburbs invite the monks in their respective areas and

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request them to chant *Pa-yate*. According to the interviewee, the Pali word '*akondarataw*' in Buddhism means to speak up about dissatisfaction. He asserts that this is similar to the 'rights to expression' prescribed in the UDHR Art 19. He even contends that Buddhism allows and permits more freedom and choice than the principals of human rights. Although the Saffron Revolution gained momentum by garnering more monks and nuns to be become politically involved, participation by the public was very slow at the beginning. There was also mixed feelings on the part of people and the organising monks about the possible involvement of the wider public. There were some who think that monks should not get into politics and showed this by staying silent.

He contends that the act of love Buddhist monks showed is definitely in accordance with Buddhism but said some senior monks disagreed. For him, these monks who contended that the Saffron Revolution was not in line with Buddhism were pro-government and said:

> …the State Sangha Maha Nayaka and those monks who get along with the state government said that monks who went out on the streets and roads to peacefully protest were not in line with Buddha dhamma. … For the monks like us, we see people extremely poor because of the ruler, showing them no mercy, no justice, no sympathy and no kindness at all. So the monks went out on the street and sent loving-kindness to everyone whether they were the ruler or the ruled. There was nothing violent about it. But even then there are some people who said what we did was not in line with Buddha dhamma. That is very sad.

Those who watched and monitored the state-run Burmese television on Myanmar Television (MRTV) tried to contemplate and decipher when the senior monks appeared in the news. Nonetheless, the senior monks from the Sangha Maha Nayaka kept their silent over killing and detaining of monks and civilians. Mass arrests and monastery searches were overshadowed by the news of Japanese citizen who was gunned down in the downtown Rangoon. Just like earlier opposition and dissent, this act of love or the Saffron Revolution was brutally crushed by the military

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government and a good number of monks and people were jailed, with some fleeing to the border areas.

For Burmese outside of the country, foreign media and international community, protests and marching were well organised and seemed to be under one good leadership. Nonetheless, opinions were divided with some who wanted other civilians to join in the protests. Those who opposed to the idea and argued that only Buddhist monks should march and chant *metta sutta* and the military would find it hard to crack down on the monks – "sons of Buddha". Meanwhile many Burmese were well aware that military would use thugs to instigate violence and false information among the marching monks and civilians. Then the military government did the unthinkable – brutally beating and shooting the monks and the other protesters then jailing them. Buddhist monks in Burma have not always been unopposed or uncontrolled. They have suffered enormously under various forms of government in the country. The brutal silencing this time however sent a more chilling message than to the Burmese public than 1988 experience and this would make it difficult for them to rise up again.

5.2 Abandoning Concept of Karma All Together?

Indeed, Buddhism provides mental strength and a coping mechanism in the face of extreme oppression. It has provided the rulers with an ideology to be virtuous and benevolent if they so choose. It has also provided the ruled an ideology to resist and strive for the better if they so wish. Nonetheless, the use of force and determination to quell any dissent by the military government to suppress and show no mercy to its political opposition has effectively scared away people from getting involved. On top of this the transformation of Buddhism into a *Burmanised* form has made seemingly mollified Burmese Buddhists into racially, ethnically and religiously intolerant zealots. These combined with the interpretation of Karma have caused Burmese Buddhists to become not only politically inactive, but also added to their inability to embrace human rights particularly from the perspective of individual freedom and gender equality. The *Burmanised* form of Buddhism and its

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interpretation of Karma have to be redressed otherwise they will continue to impede the realisation and recognition of human rights for all.

It is simpler to hold the military government responsible for all the wrongs and the political stalemate in Burma. It is not easy for the people to accept that they too are responsible and have role in political and social change. If the Burmese are to come out of this political deadlock they have to show more courage and need to actively participate in creating their own fate rather than leaving everything up to their Karma and paying off their past debts in their present life. For the wider public to do this there is a need to redress the *Burmanised* version of Karma. This is not to suggest Burmese Buddhists abandon the concept of Karma all together. This is to imply that they should start taking meaning of Karma as deed more and creating their better future with their own deed in this present life. Burmese Buddhists also need to divest themselves of their Buddhist zealotry which only allow them to see Buddhism as one and the only religion answer truth to the suffering and all matters of human life. This should not be so especially since Buddhism urges no deep-seated belief and besides this kind of belief and perception cripple one's mind to explore other possibilities. As long as Burmese Buddhists adhere to a *Burmanised* form Karmic, the equality of all human beings will not be understood and valued and realisation of human rights in Burma will still be elusive.

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