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THE POLITICS OF THAI BUDDHISM  
UNDER THE NCPO JUNTA

KATEWADEE KULABKAEW

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta**

By Katewadee Kulabkaew

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The past two decades have been a time of turmoil in Thailand's religious affairs. Disputes, debates and controversies concerning the administration of Buddhism, Thailand's national religion by tradition, have erupted more and more frequently.
- This chronic and unresolvable conflict originates from Thai Buddhists' inability to achieve a broad consensus on religious reform.
- Under the governance of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta that came to power in 2014, the fierce struggle concerning Buddhist reform seemed to subside.
- Upholding and protecting Buddhism might be a duty of traditional Thai rulers who desire for a source of political legitimacy, but the NCPO's decisive actions concerning Buddhist institutional reform were not merely reflected respect for this tradition, but were closely intertwined with the dynamic of contending forces in Thailand's long-troubled religious politics.
- Conflicts between the influential religious nationalists and the Thai Sangha convinced the military government of the need to act, for the sake of national security and political stability.





# The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta

By Katewadee Kulabkaew<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have been tumultuous in Thailand's religious affairs. Disputes, debates and controversies concerning the administration of Buddhism, the country's national religion by tradition, have erupted more and more frequently. This chronic and unresolvable conflict originates from Thai Buddhists' inability to achieve a broad consensus on religious reform.

Tensions have escalated as the Sangha—the Buddhist monastic order—has found itself at odds with government authorities over the process of negotiating reform. Monks' growing inclination to concern themselves with politics and activities that aim to protect monastic interests have displeased sections of the Thai establishment. As a result, the Thai state has recently sought to assert more control over Buddhist affairs in general and the Sangha in particular.

However, under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta that came to power in 2014, the fierce struggle concerning Buddhist reform had seemed to subside. The military junta put an end to some of the prolonged religious controversies and even enforced the Sangha reform measures that former military and democratic governments had failed to uphold.

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<sup>1</sup> Katewadee Kulabkaew is Visiting Fellow, Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

Upholding and protecting Buddhism might be a duty of traditional Thai rulers, in their desire for political legitimacy, but the NCPO's decisive actions concerning the institutional reform of Buddhism are rooted not merely in respect for this tradition. Thai society today might not find the legitimation of political power through the defence of Buddhism to be as persuasive as in the past.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, what the NCPO did in the area of Buddhist reform during its almost half-decade-long rule reflected a political decision. That decision had been closely intertwined with the dynamic of contending forces in Thailand's long-troubled religious politics. The background of long-term contentions between lay religious nationalists and the Sangha convinced the military government to act, for the sake of national security and the stability of its regime.

## **PERPETUAL CRISIS: THE PROBLEMATIC STATE OF THAI BUDDHISM**

Why do Thai Buddhists and the notionally secular state have to concern themselves with the issue of religious reform? The answer lies in the long-running discourse of “Buddhism in crisis” that has been propagated and continually revived in Thai society since at least the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> There is a strong sentiment among members of the Thai public that Buddhism—a pillar of the national identity and of society's moral consciousness—has been significantly weakened and that it faces threats from sources such

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars argue that the NCPO's purge of the Sangha Council and the Dhammakaya Temple was motivated by the Theravada Buddhist tradition of the righteous upholder. They believe that the military junta was seeking political legitimacy (*barami*) by establishing itself as the patron and defender of Buddhism. For example, see Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, “Purging the Thai Sangha”, *New Mandala*, 28 May 2018, <https://www.newmandala.org/ncpos-purge-thai-sangha> (accessed 2 March 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Katewadee Kulabkaew, “In Defense of Buddhism: Thai Sangha's Social Movement in the Twenty-First Century” (doctoral dissertation, Waseda University, 2013), pp. 158–59.

as modernity, the commercialization of the faith and competition from foreign religions.<sup>4</sup>

The “Buddhism in crisis” discourse holds that the Thai people’s lack of faith, monks’ misconduct and the state’s incompetence to uphold and protect the once-revered religion have left Thai Buddhism in a state of degeneration. Thai Buddhists also tend to believe that calamity in the religious realm leads to moral corruption in society—the root cause of Thailand’s many social problems.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that Buddhism’s allegedly disastrous state has been discussed, endlessly and repetitively, for decades, the first tangible attempt on the part of concerned Thai Buddhists to remedy the situation took shape only in the late 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The Asian Financial Crisis not only accelerated the effort to reform Thailand’s corrupt politics, but also convinced Thai religious nationalists that it was the abandonment of Buddhist moral values that had led the country to such unprecedented economic and social catastrophe in the first place.<sup>7</sup> As a result, they decided to push for a state policy that would bring Buddhist morality to bear on the national crisis. Effective implementation of such a policy required the intensive prior reform of deteriorated and neglected Buddhist institutions.

In 1997, Thailand’s political reform—spearheaded by the agility of the country’s civil movement and the promulgation of the “people’s constitution”—paved the way for a thorough overhaul of administration in the country. Plans had included the issue of spiritual development and the institutional reform of Buddhism, which was to be launched

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<sup>4</sup> Phra Sophon Khanaphon, *A Plot to undermine Buddhism* (Bangkok: Siwaphon, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Katewadee, “In Defense of Buddhism”, pp. 91–92.

<sup>6</sup> “Song phan ongkon satsana long chue ruk so so ro” [2,000 religious organizations signed a petition submitted to CDC], *Matichon*, 5 April 1997, pp. 1, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Witthayakon Chiangkun, “Thamma kae panha settakit khong prachachon dai yangrai” [How Can Dhamma Solve the People’s Economic Problems?] (Bangkok: Bunyapanya, 2000), p. 50.

as soon as possible. This “Buddhist reform”, however, did not concern the reinterpretation of religious teachings or practices, but rather the structural overhaul of state administration of Buddhism. In order to revive the powerful influence of Buddhism as a national institution, the enactment of laws or constitutional clauses that systematically endorse and effectively safeguard the religion was considered necessary.<sup>8</sup>

Socio-political change in Thailand since 1997 has had a great impact on the politics of state Buddhism. The campaign for reformation led by laymen—middle-class religious nationalists—also came to antagonize members of the Buddhist monastic order. An initial attempt to restructure the religious administration committee, the governing body overseeing Thailand’s religious affairs, triggered strong resistance from Thai monks, who feared that the plan would undermine the symbiotic relationship between Thai Sangha and the state.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout two decades of internal conflict among Thai Buddhists, the religious nationalists—mostly senior bureaucrats and parliamentarians—have wrestled against the Sangha in controversies concerning the principle of Buddhist reform and its implementation. Debate has centred on four issues.

1. Amendment of the Sangha Act to reorganize the structure of monastic administration, including changing the protocol for appointing the Supreme Patriarch.
2. Enactment of related legislation to bind the Thai state to the upholding and protecting of Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Botbat song yuk wikrit setthakit” [The role of the Sangha in the era of economic crisis], *Matichon*, 20 December 1997, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Phra Maha Dewit Yasasi, “Nayobai patirup kansueksa phuea satsana rue nayobai thamlai phraphutthasatsana” [Education reform for religion or a policy to destroy Buddhism?] (Bangkok: The Young Monks Organization of Thailand, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Buddhist reformers have in recent decades considered intensive amendment of the Sangha Act too politically ambitious and demanding. As a result, they have proposed the drafting of a separate legislation on Buddhist reform,

3. Enshrining the status of Buddhism as the national religion in the Thai constitution.
4. Combating monastic crimes, corruption and heresy, especially in the case of the Dhammakaya Temple.<sup>11</sup>

One may view both the religious nationalists and the Sangha's leaders—the two parties to these controversies—as ultra-conservative religious chauvinists. Nevertheless, the monks' ultimate goal is a reformation that restores Buddhist supremacy in the country, so that monastic interests will be securely protected. The religious nationalists have different ends in mind. They seek stringent control of the Sangha on the part of secular

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a *Phraratchabanyat upphatham lae khumkhrong phraputthasatsana* (Act to uphold and protect Buddhism). However, the religious nationalists and the Sangha competed to propose their own version of the legislation draft to previous governments. At present, none of the controversial drafts written by Buddhist reformers on either side has been enacted as actual law. The NCPO junta claimed that it had already incorporated the general principles of upholding and protecting Buddhism into its 2018 Sangha Act. See “Phraratchabanyat khana song (chabap thi si) pho so 2561” [The Sangha Act (fourth amended version) 2018], *Royal Gazette*, 17 July 2018, <http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2561/A/050/T1.PDF> (accessed 6 March 2019).

<sup>11</sup> The controversy over the Dhammakaya Temple (*Wat Phra Thammakai*) first emerged in Buddhist reaction to the 1997 economic crisis. The religious nationalists re-examined the relationship between wealth and Buddhist piety, questioning the appropriateness of making monastic profit and the hyper-commercialization of Buddhism in the Dhammakaya movement. The temple was also accused of heresy for preaching the concept of nirvana (*nipphan*) in deviation from the original Theravada doctrine. The religious nationalists saw the Dhammakaya Temple as a centre of evil that must be excised from Thai Buddhism. However, the Sangha Council—the top monastic administrative body in Thailand—refused to punish the temple and its infamous abbot. This convinced the religious nationalists that the Sangha was totally corrupt, beyond correction. For more details on the Dhammakaya Temple see Susan M. Scots, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

authorities and consider such control as the most effective and reliable means of purifying and reviving Thai Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

Numerous rounds of conflict have erupted. The religious nationalists have tried to propose contentious reform measures for eventual enactment by parliament. These proposals have inevitably brought thousands of displeased monks to the streets in protest. The monks have denounced the laymen's proposal as a malicious plot to undermine Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> Such ugly brawls have often ended with the religious nationalists and their alliances in the government backing off. However, the monks have not won; the Sangha's own reform proposals and their campaign for official recognition of Buddhism as Thailand's national religion have never been successful.

Disagreement between the two influential groups has reached stalemate and left the reform process in stagnation. Until recently, this intermittent chaos in the religious realm fed the "Buddhism in crisis" sentiment among Thais. It seemed that the crisis would be endless and hopelessly unsolvable. The struggle dragged on through the years of the Thaksin Chinnawat administration. It grew even more politicized during the confrontation between Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts after 2006. Even now, no consensus among Thai Buddhists concerning reform is in sight.

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<sup>12</sup> The Sangha had decried religious nationalists' proposal to strictly monitor monks' behaviour and to take control of monastic administration. It criticized such plan with the saying, "*Kharawat pokkhrong song*" (laity rules over monks), to indicate that it was highly inappropriate and unjust. See the Sangha's opinion in "Chamlae rang kotmai antarai kharawat pokkhrong phra" [A dangerous legislation draft analyzed: laity rules over monks), *Dokbia thurakit*, 16 August 1999, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Thailand's monastic population in 2014, counting both monks and novices, was around 350,000. The number of monks joining the protest against the NCPO's move against Somdet Chuang in 2016 was reportedly 3,000–10,000. The statistic reveals that at least 1–3 per cent of the Sangha's members are politically active. Source: Rawiwan Rakthinkamnoet, "Chamnuan phra phiksu lae sammanen nai prathet thai" [The number of monks and novices in Thailand], 11 September 2016, <https://www.tcijthai.com/news/2016/09/watch/6407> (accessed 6 March 2019).

## **FORCES INVOLVED IN BUDDHIST ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE NCPO**

The *coup d'état* of 22 May 2014 changed the momentum of the prolonged Buddhist conflict in Thailand. When the NCPO junta first came to power, it seemed to have little interest in Buddhism or religious affairs. The policy statement of junta leader and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha included only a few sentences on religion, copied from the 2007 constitution. The statement vaguely declared that:

The government shall uphold and protect Buddhism and other religions, support religious organizations in having a meaningful role in cultivating morality and ethics, including a role in the sustainable development of quality of life, peace and unity in Thai society.<sup>14</sup>

In the first year of the junta's rule, the issue of Buddhism was obviously not among its priorities. But the NCPO government gradually involved itself in Buddhist politics, with all its subtleties. Using the absolute power granted to the prime minister in Article 44 of the junta's 2014 temporary constitution, the military government could act more decisively and more successfully in restoring peace and order to the country's religious realm than its recent predecessors had done.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Kham thalaeng nayobai khong khana rattthamontri phon-ek Prayut Chan-ocha nayokratthamontri thalaeng to sapha nitibanyat haeng chat” [The policy statement of the cabinet of Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha to the National Legislative Assembly], 12 September 2014, [http://muabudget.buu.ac.th/uploadfiles\\_new/e55857cee78453562c97403fcd6b4a9b.pdf](http://muabudget.buu.ac.th/uploadfiles_new/e55857cee78453562c97403fcd6b4a9b.pdf) (accessed 10 March 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Using the power granted by Article 44, Prayut ordered government officers and all religious organizations to implement measures to prevent religious conflict, religious violence, subversive activities to undermine Buddhism and other religions, and disrespect for all the faiths in Thailand that could bring about disputes and disunity. See “Khamsang huana khana raksa kwamsa-ngop haeng



What did the NCPO achieve in the area of Buddhist reform during its five years in power? First, the National Legislative Assembly—the NCPO’s unelected rubber stamp parliament—passed a new Sangha Act in 2016 and 2018 that restores the old tradition in which the king reserves exclusive right to name the Supreme Patriarch and holders of other high-ranking clerical positions.<sup>16</sup> Second, that bill settled the persistent and highly controversial issue of the appointment of a new Supreme Patriarch. Somdet Phra Ariyawongsakhatayan IX was named the head of the Thai Sangha in early 2017. This was soon after the new Sangha Act returned absolute power over Sangha administration to King Vajiralongkorn, who made the appointment. Third, the new Sangha Act and a prime ministerial order under Article 44 paved the way for a swift purge of Dhammakaya Temple, long accused of heresy. The purge included the removal of many high-ranking Sangha Council members implicated in corruption in the use of monastic funds.

It is not difficult to comprehend why the NCPO dictatorship, with all political tools and mechanisms under its control, has been successful in regulating the long-troubled Buddhist affairs. However, its motivation remains another question.

It is not sufficient to attribute the NCPO’s actions to Buddhist rulers’ traditional duty of upholding and defending the religion. The rise of the modern democratic state, especially after the end of Siam’s absolute monarchy in 1932, means that Buddhism is no longer needed to legitimize modern-day rulers’ political hegemony. With the advent of modernity, political legitimation through Buddhist ideology has been replaced

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chat thi 49/2559 rueang mattrakan uppatham khumkhong satsana tangtang nai prathet thai” [Order of the head of NCPO Number 49/2559, on measures for upholding and protecting of religions in Thailand], *Royal Gazette*, 22 August 2016, [http://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content\\_ncpo/ncpo-head-order49-2559.pdf](http://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content_ncpo/ncpo-head-order49-2559.pdf) (accessed 6 March 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Mongkhol Bangprapha, “NLA passes bill to tweak Sangha Act”, *Bangkok Post*, 30 December 2016, p. 1.

by legitimacy gained by popular will and administrative efficiency.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the fragmented Thai Buddhist society of today is too diverse in religious beliefs and practices for that approach to legitimacy to retain its historical importance.<sup>18</sup> It is unlikely that a particular policy of reform will overwhelmingly earn praise and support from the majority.

In fact, the reasons that the NCPO government paid attention to the seemingly trivial issues of Buddhist affairs might well have been related to the changing Thai political environment. Dynamics among the stakeholders who operated and interacted under the junta's rule were determinants of Thailand's Buddhist politics during its dictatorship.

## RELIGIOUS NATIONALISTS

A network of middle-class laymen, mostly senior bureaucrats and senators, has long played an important role in advancing the cause of religious reform. The network comprises leaders of the lay Buddhist organizations that initiated the campaign against the Dhammakaya Temple in 1997. Outstanding members of this network include the senator and agribusinessman Phaibun Nititawan, the economist and author Choemsak Pinthong, the retired policeman and novelist Wasit Detkunchon, retired Ministry of Commerce official and senator Somphon Thepsittha<sup>19</sup> and other senior officials on the parliament's religious affairs committee.

Greatly influenced by the 1997 economic crisis, the religious nationalists are conservatives who hold a negative view of modernity

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<sup>17</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, "Anakhot khong ongkon song" [The Sangha's Future], in *Mong anakhot* [Looking into the Future] (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Justin McDaniel, "Buddhism in Thailand: Negotiating the Modern Age", in *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Stephen C. Berkwitz (ABC-CLIO, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Thai names in this article are transcribed in accordance with the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS). These names may appear in other places as Paiboon Nititawan, Jermsak Pinthong, Vasit Dejkunchorn and Sompon Thepsitha.

and global capitalism. They attribute the crisis facing Thai Buddhism to these same factors, blaming the greedy clerics and the morally corrupt monastic life for the rise of the Dhammakaya movement.

The religious nationalists believe that the putatively heretical and highly commercialized Dhammakaya Temple is a manifestation of the decline of Thai Buddhism. Their goal is not only to correct the Dhammakaya temple's errors, but also to reform the corrupt Sangha administration that supports it. In order to prevent monks from violating monastic rules, they envision a system of strict measures and criminal penalties for ill-disciplined monks.

The religious nationalists do not trust the Thai Sangha to carry out religious reform by itself. In their opinion, poorly educated and thoroughly debauched monks no longer have the credibility to be society's moral guides. Instead, these nationalists trust the community of pious and able laymen who should have a say in Buddhist affairs that is equal to that of monks.<sup>20</sup> They have even proposed for lay Buddhist councils at both the provincial and national levels to have the authority to regulate, monitor and censure the Sangha.

Naturally, the religious nationalists' attempts to push forward their radical reform measures have often met with strong opposition, especially from the Sangha itself. Their ceaseless lobbying for the trial and punishment of monks from the Dhammakaya Temple has also been unsuccessful. They have blamed the incompetence and negligence of previous Thai governments for their failure to prosecute the enemies of true Buddhism, and they have in particular denounced the Thaksin administration for whitewashing the Dhammakaya Temple's crimes to serve its own political purposes.

The coming of the NCPO government enabled the religious nationalists to achieve their long-desirable goal. As most of these figures were members of the People's Democratic Reform Committee that

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<sup>20</sup> "Tong patirup song khachat alatchi" [We must reform the Sangha, purging immoral monks]; interview with Phaibun Nititawan's in *Thai Post*, 8 October 2017, pp. 1–3.

fought to oust Prime Minister Yingluck Chinnawat and supporters of the associated Yellow Shirt movement, they were trusted by the military and were recruited to serve in the junta's unelected parliament and on its National Reform Council.<sup>21</sup>

That council named Buddhism one of the eleven areas in which Thailand needed urgent reform. Its Buddhist reform panel, headed by Phaibun Nititawan, had a crucial role in promoting the religious nationalists' reform agenda. His proposal for the enactment of bills to control monastic wealth, including his aggressive campaign against Somdet Chuang—the Dhammakaya Temple's patron and the Mahanikai sect's apparent candidate for the post of Supreme Patriarch—ignited unprecedented resistance from the monks.<sup>22</sup> It led to an exchange of threats and insults between leading members of the Sangha and the prime minister himself in January 2016.<sup>23</sup> A month later, a group of monks and soldiers even clashed during a sit-in staged by the former.<sup>24</sup>

The unexpected scuffle, which threatened to compromise peace and order in the religious establishment, alarmed the junta. The religious nationalists seized the opportunity to counsel the military government, pointing to potential security threats and to political opposition to the junta in the corrupt Sangha. Phaibun himself campaigned ceaselessly,

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<sup>21</sup> Pongpiphat Banchanont, "Khrai pen khrai nai khruetakhai amnat yuk kho so cho" [Who is who in the NCPO's network of power], *The Matter*, 16 October 2017, <https://thematter.co/pulse/ncpo-network/36795> (accessed 10 March 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Somdet Chuang (Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangkhalachan) was appointed the acting Supreme Patriarch in 2014. He was later accused of tax evasion in the importation of antique cars in his collection. It is believed that the scandal was orchestrated by his rivals to prevent him from becoming the actual head of the Sangha.

<sup>23</sup> "Bik tu huem ya bangkhap tang sangkharat" [The Prime Minister snaps - don't force me to appoint the Supreme Patriarch], *Khom Chut Luek*, 16 January 2016, pp. 1, 11.

<sup>24</sup> "Mop phra lai at thahan bip tang somdet chuang sangkharat" [Mob of monks attacks military troops, pressuring government to appoint Somdet Chuang as Supreme Patriarch], *Phuchatkan Raiwan*, 16 February 2016, pp. 1, 11.

through parliamentary lobbying and speaking to the media, and urged the NCPO government to act decisively to resolve problematic issues in Buddhist affairs.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, the religious nationalists convinced the junta to partially implement reform measures—the merciless purging of the allegedly corrupt Sangha and the appointment of “pious” authorities to take responsibility for the well-being of Thai Buddhism. The religious nationalists also edited the wording in the NCPO’s new 2017 constitution, specifying that the Thai state shall uphold and protect only one form of Buddhism—Theravada Buddhism. This move was clearly intended to hurt the notionally heretical Dhammakaya Temple, which the religious nationalists consider to be non-Theravada.

## THE SANGHA

Members of the Thai Sangha totally reject the religious nationalists’ accusation that monks in general are immoral, unintellectual and insignificant to the spirituality of modern men and women. In other words, the monks refuse to accept that laymen would consider them the “inner threat” that may bring about Buddhism’s demise in Thailand.<sup>26</sup>

Prominent members of the Sangha have expressed grievances concerning the lack of respect from, and the unfair judgement towards them of, modern society. Laypeople often fail to see that monks have limited authority and access to state support, and that the Sangha cannot for that reason effectively reform itself.

In the view of members of the Sangha, its legitimacy crisis and the degeneration of Buddhism itself are largely due to the contempt being

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<sup>25</sup> “Phaibun - khruengkhai phut chi bik tu reng patirup phutthasatsana” [Phaibun - Buddhist network pressures the Big Tu to reform Buddhism], *Thai Rat Online*, 14 October 2015, <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/532255> (accessed 3 March 2019).

<sup>26</sup> On concepts of “internal threat” and “external threat” in Thai Buddhism, see Phra Dhammapitaka, “Phai haeng phraphutthasatsana nai prathet thai” [Threats to Buddhism in Thailand] (Bangkok: Buddha Dhamma Foundation, 2002).

unfairly held toward monks and the general religious negligence on the part of modern Buddhists. They also suspect that foreign religions aiming to tarnish the Sangha's public image have sabotaged their institution. Some members of the Sangha regularly claim that the monk-hating religious nationalists are actually not Buddhists. Rather, the accusation goes, they are Christians or Muslims in disguise, holding the malevolent intention to destroy Buddhism.<sup>27</sup>

To defend the religion from the subversion that they fear, members of the Thai Sangha have argued for the need to reform Buddhist administration through providing the Sangha with more resources and authority. The campaign for a clause in the Constitution recognizing Buddhism as Thailand's national religion thus became the Sangha's main strategy for securing state support.

This climate has meant that the Sangha has developed a resistance movement of its own, comprising the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT) and other network organizations.<sup>28</sup> This movement relies heavily on street politics to defend the Sangha's authority, monastic interests and the superior position of Buddhism.

The monks' increasing political activity attracted more attention and suspicion from the NCPO junta than it had done from previous

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<sup>27</sup> Social media users who fervently support the Sangha often accuse other Thai Buddhists who disrespectfully criticize monks for being followers of foreign religions in disguise. Even Prayut and his wife were accused of covertly being Muslims. See, for example, "Phon-ek Prayut kho kae khao khropkhrua mai chai mutsalim" [General Prayut rejects the rumour that his family are actually Muslims], *Prachachat*, 8 March 2016, <https://www.winnews.tv/news/15> (accessed 11 March 2019).

<sup>28</sup> The Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand [Sun phithak phraputhsatsana haengprathethai] is one of the most active and well-organized political organizations connected to the Thai Sangha. Although it appears that monks have hundreds of such organizations, activists belong to the same small group of political monks frequenting protests on all religious issues. For more details on the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, see Katewadee, "In Defense of Buddhism", pp. 121–55.

Thai governments. It was widely known that the Sangha's resistance movement had joined forces with pro-Thaksin parties and the affiliated Red Shirt movement since 2011. The Sangha entered into this alliance in the hope that the Phuea Thai Party would honour its promise to make Buddhism Thailand's official national religion.

Not only had the Sangha then sided with the military's political opposition, but it had also revealed its strong inclination to protect the Dhammakaya Temple from attacks and hostile government intervention. Each of these stances reflected the sentiment that Thai Buddhism was undermined by external threats. The Sangha Council and Dhammakaya movement have tended increasingly to cooperate in work to advance the Sangha's cause. The Dhammakaya Temple had, for example, close ties to the Thaksin and the Yinglax administrations.<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, these political connections convinced the NCPO to perceive the Sangha as a threat to the security of its regime. In 2016, a leader of Thai Sangha's political arm issued the threat that monks could defeat the junta's new draft constitution in the upcoming referendum.<sup>30</sup> This was the same political stance and rhetoric adopted by pro-Thaksin groups. Phuea Thai Party members also often expressed their support for the monks' reform proposals, warning the military government that too much coercive intervention in Buddhist affairs risked stirring disunity in the Sangha.

In order to uproot this monastery-political party network, which posed a potential threat to the stability of its regime, the NCPO decided to purge the whole chain of "Red" connections in the Thai Sangha. This

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<sup>29</sup> "Chak santi-asok thueng wat phra thammakai plian mit prae sattru" [From Santi Asoke to the Dhammakaya Temple: changed friends, altered enemies] *Matichon Sutsapda*, 14 July 2006, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> However, the Sangha's representatives said that the rejection of the draft constitution would not happen if the junta agreed to endorse Buddhism as Thailand's national religion in that draft. See "Ongkon khu wot no ro tho no mai banchu phut" [Buddhist organizations threaten to vote no on the constitution draft without the national religion clause], *Matichon*, 14 January 2016, pp. 1, 13, 14.

decision meant that the corrupt cronies running both the Dhammakaya Temple and the Sangha Council were to be deposed. Those arrested and defrocked in the junta's purge belonged to the clique of the deceased Somdet Kiao—an extremely influential but highly corrupt network of monks with senior administrative positions.<sup>31</sup> Members of Somdet Kiao's inner circle were accused of receiving bribes from the Dhammakaya Temple and of supporting groups of political monks who staged protests against government policies.

## **THE NCPO AS UPHOLDER OF BUDDHISM?**

The difficulties that Thai Buddhism has faced in recent decades reveal a lack of consensus among Buddhists concerning religious reform. However, monks and laity in fact have very similar goals. Each side wants to secure the well-being of Buddhism by means of stronger mechanisms for the Thai state in upholding and protecting the religion. This idea is a reaffirmation of the ancient Theravada tradition of seeking an upholder—a powerful monarch or ruler who provides generous support and total protection to the religion.<sup>32</sup>

Even though Thai kings are constitutionally designated as the upholders of religions and defenders of all faiths in the kingdom, the real burden of managing religious affairs belongs to the government. Thai Buddhist reformers have felt disheartened that most governments in the recent past, whether democratic or dictatorial ones, have paid little attention to the problems facing Buddhism.

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<sup>31</sup> Somdet Kiao (Somdet Phra Phutthachan) was appointed acting Supreme Patriarch in 2004. He was one of the most influential members of the Sangha Council for decades before passing away in 2013. However, Somdet Kiao and his clique were long rumoured to be implicated in monastic corruption, bribery, sexual scandals and inappropriate political connections with government officials, politicians and military officers.

<sup>32</sup> Suraphot Thawisak, “Udomkan nai khotmai song chabap mai” [Ideologies in the new Sangha Act] *Prachathai*, 22 July 2018, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2018/07/77937> (accessed 7 March 2019).



The NCPO government proved to be different. By enacting a new Sangha Act in 2016, it returned the absolute power over Sangha administration to King Vajiralongkorn.<sup>33</sup> The king now becomes the true upholder of religion, both in a ceremonial capacity and in the wielding of real power. The military junta still had to execute royal commands, but it was clear that the generals, including Prime Minister Prayut, did not perceive themselves as upholders of Buddhism. They were merely doing their duty, serving the monarchy, without seeking political legitimacy by trying to take credit from any activities of their own to uphold the faith.

Despite the fact that the NCPO mainly administered religion matters with security concerns in mind, the might of the monarchy also counted as a factor in its approach to Buddhism. That factor compelled the junta to act more decisively than would otherwise have been the case. In addition, the palace reinforced the junta's moves, immediately issuing—for example—royal decrees to remove the ecclesiastical titles of the high-ranking monks already arrested in the scandal over monastic funds.<sup>34</sup>

The extent of King Vajiralongkorn's interest in reforming the administration of Thai Buddhism is not clear. However, a series of episodes in which NCPO leaders were pressured to do things against their personal preferences suggested royal intervention. These cases included the unexpected arrest and disrobing of Phra Phuttha Itsara.<sup>35</sup> Prayut and his deputy, General Prawit Wongsuwan publicly apologized

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Protklaio thot samanask 7 thera khadi ngoen thon” [The King strips 7 senior monks of ecclesiastical title in case concerning monastic funds], *Matichon*, 1 June 2018, pp. 1, 3, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Despite the fact that Phra Phuttha Itsara was a political monk with profound connections to many influential royalists and military officers, it is believed that his downfall might actually have been due to a decision taken in the palace. See James L. Taylor, “What’s behind the purging of the Thai Sangha?”, *New Mandala*, 8 June 2018, <https://www.newmandala.org/whats-behind-purging-thai-sangha/> (accessed 2 March 2019).

to the monk, whom both they and many in the Yellow Shirt movement revered highly, for this action.<sup>36</sup>

The NCPO government did facilitate a peaceful and orderly transition during the time of royal succession. The consolidation of monarchical power in the new reign was also considered paramount. In this regard, the military junta's enactment of the 2018 Sangha Act and purge of Sangha Council did pave the way for the king to arbitrarily restructure the administration of the monastic realm should he wish to.<sup>37</sup>

The NCPO's religious reforms seemed to have served its purposes very well. Nevertheless, a reform strategy that solely focuses on eliminating a "network of evil" in the Sangha has limitations.

Using coercive, military-style purge operations without implementing systematic and meaningful reform measures might do more harm than good in the long run.<sup>38</sup> The lack of consultation and negotiation over reform, in a context of fragmentation among Buddhists, worsens the problematic situation in which religious freedom in Thailand was already limited and increasingly restricted. Sympathizers of the oppressed Sangha point out that purges of high-ranking monks have disheartened

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<sup>36</sup> "Prayut - Prawit kho thot het bukchap phra thera - phra phuttha itsara runraeng" [Prayut-Prawit apologize for the violent arrests of senior monks and Phra Phuttha Itsara], *Matichon Sutsapda*, 26 May 2018, [https://www.matichonweekly.com/hot-news/article\\_104216](https://www.matichonweekly.com/hot-news/article_104216) (accessed 22 January 2019).

<sup>37</sup> However, it is unclear whether the purge is related to a long-running rumour about the palace having some control over monastic money and the flow of wealth in some prosperous royal monasteries, like Wat Sothon Wararam in Chachoengsao Province and Wat Saket in Bangkok.

<sup>38</sup> The purge of the Dhammakaya Temple was carried out jointly by a specialized military regiment and hundreds of police officers. It was conducted in the fashion of a military operation against enemy armed forces. Rumours about the temple mobilizing the Red Shirts equipped with heavy weapons to counter state oppression may have alarmed the officers behind the raid. See "Khut khlong khwang thang khao thammakai ngat yutthawithi thahan sakat" [Digging a canal to block entry into Dhammakaya and employing military tactics to prevent attack], *Daily News*, 7 March 2017, pp. 1, 16.

Thai Buddhists, who object to such disrespectful actions on the part of the military.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Religious politics is often directed or influenced by factors that are not religious at all. The Theravada tradition in which rulers seek to establish oneself as righteous upholders of religion was not the factor that motivated the NCPO to involve itself in the politics of Thai Buddhism. Actually, influence and pressure from religious nationalists in the junta's administrative network, the perception of an influential clique in the Thai Sangha as a security threat, and the military government's sense of duty to serve the monarchy—especially in the consolidation of monarchical power—were the three political considerations behind the NCPO's actions.

The junta had been successful in some aspects of its reform of religions administration, but future disputes are foreseeable. The prospect for a sustainable consensus among Thai Buddhists is still not in sight.

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<sup>39</sup> “Lueak tang 62: 11 phak ahiprai pom khwammankhong khong phraphutthasatsana” [Election 62: 11 parties discuss the security of Buddhism], *Prachathai*, 15 March 2019, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2019/03/81524> (accessed 15 March 2019).

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