

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 12 April 2019

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## **The Rise of Thailand’s Buddhism Protection Movement**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Over the past two decades, religious chauvinism has been on the rise among members of the Buddhist monastic order in Thailand. This is rooted in the belief that the expansion of “foreign” presence in the country endangers Thai Buddhism.
- In order to counteract alleged threats from other religions, a loose network of resistance has been formed among members of the Thai Sangha.
- The Thai monks’ Buddhism protection movement holds that malevolent ‘others’, especially those practicing Islam, violate the right of Buddhism to be the predominant faith upheld by the Thai state.
- This movement to protect Buddhism has called for collective action on the part of Thai Buddhists to offset unjust relations among religions, and argued that only by discarding liberal principles and becoming “expressive Buddhists” can Thais restore the dominant influence of Buddhism and its national status.

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## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen a rise in religious chauvinism within the Sangha – Thailand’s Buddhist monastic order. Suwanna Satha-Anand has suggested that the tolerance in Thai Buddhism, especially in its relations with Islam and Christianity, has shrunk,<sup>1</sup> and Duncan McCargo has argued that the politics of Buddhist identity has increased tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand’s Deep South.<sup>2</sup> Michael K. Jerryson has also pointed out in his study of Thailand’s “military monks” that a new space for violence has emerged in Thai Sangha.<sup>3</sup>

This chauvinism is rooted in the belief that Thai Buddhism – the moral pillar of the nation – is threatened by the increasing presence of “foreign” religions. Recently, a network of monks and devout laymen campaigned to “protect Buddhism” (*phithak phut*). They keep constant vigilance over aggressions and conspiracies that might undermine the sanctity and influence of Buddhist institutions, especially the Sangha.

This article discusses the origin of the Buddhism protection movement, including its role in constructing and spreading the Buddhism protection discourse in twenty-first century Thailand. This discourse frames an understanding among Thai Buddhists of relations between religions in the country as problematic and unjust.

## THE EVER-CHANGING “THREAT” FACING THAI BUDDHISM

The act of defending Buddhism has provided legitimacy to various political forces throughout Thai history. “Righteous” traditional Buddhist rulers often argued that extra disciplinary control of the Sangha and intervention in its affairs were necessary to protect Buddhism from deterioration. They saw ill-disciplined monks as an “inner threat” to the religion. However, the modern-day Thai Sangha defines differently both what constitute threats to Buddhism and what counts as measures for Buddhism protection. The Sangha’s new definition of perils to Buddhism and its proposed remedies also serve new political purposes.

Since the 1970s, the leadership of the Thai Sangha has faced the problem of diminishing authority over the fragmented monastic order. Society has also come to scrutinize monks for increasing cases of misconduct and for the commoditization of Buddhist symbols and sacred objects (*phutthaphanit*). Public intellectuals like Phra Phaisan Wisalo,<sup>4</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa,<sup>5</sup> and Nidhi Eoseewong<sup>6</sup> have been among the most influential critics of the modern Thai Sangha and of its credibility as society’s moral guide.

However, members of the Sangha utterly reject their stigmatization as destroyers of their own religion. Instead, they claim that malevolent persons have staged incidents to defame monks, using the mass media to publicize and dramatize those incidents. The experience of the Cold War and of American intervention in Thailand’s Buddhist affairs in order to fight communism has also led Thai monks to be suspicious of subversion on the part of foreign religions.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s, Catholicism became the first target for the Thai Sangha's accusation of efforts to undermine Buddhism. An instruction from the minister of education – a Catholic man – changed some content in school textbooks regarding the status of Buddhism in the country.<sup>8</sup> The incident was cited as obvious evidence of malicious intentions toward Buddhism. A few years later, the Sangha revealed a document obtained from the Second Vatican Council that discussed Catholic missionaries' plans to adopt Buddhist symbols, terms and rituals in order to attract local adherents.<sup>9</sup> Events, like the visit to Thailand of Pope John Paul II in 1984, which demonstrated the unity and devotion of thousands of Catholics in the country also left the Sangha alarmed about the faith's growing influence.

The Thai Sangha's two universities are the main institutions in which this antagonistic view of other religions has proliferated. Both faculty and students at those universities have shared this view. Phra Tham Methaphon, who published a book on *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism*, was an administrator at Mahamakut Buddhist University and the mentor to many activist monks.<sup>10</sup> Somdet Phra Phutthakhosachan, a revered Buddhist intellectual and a lecturer at Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University, has also claimed to have verified the existence of a Catholic threat to Thai Buddhism. He is also known to be unsupportive of ecumenist activity out of fear for malicious intentions on the part of foreign counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Since the 1980s, the Thai Sangha has widely spread a story about the Catholic plot to destroy Buddhism. This narrative somehow helped enforce solidarity within the Sangha. It was also a form of ideological resistance to Thai society's unpleasant view of modern monks.

However, events at the beginning of the twenty-first century turned the Sangha's suspicious eyes away from Catholicism. The changing domestic and international political landscape paved the way for the growing presence of Islam in Thailand's national politics and the increase in Muslim populations in regions beyond just Southern Thailand. Thailand's national constitutional and political reforms of 1997 also brought tangible economic development to Muslim communities and allowed Islamic evangelical activity to flourish.<sup>12</sup>

The trend in Thailand coincided with a global surge in Islamic fundamentalism and the alleged aspiration of Muslim extremists to create the pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia. The resurgence of unrest in Thailand's southernmost provinces has inflamed the Sangha's antagonism even further, with the killing of monks and burning of monasteries by Muslim insurgents. As the dawn of the third millennium arrived, the Thai Sangha began to perceive Islam as an emerging threat that was even more alarming than Catholicism.

## **THE SANGHA NETWORK FOR BUDDHISM PROTECTION**

In order to effectively counter threats from religions seen as foreign, members of the Thai Sangha have formed a loose network to serve as the basis of a resistance movement. The movement's first, most-active and best-structured organization is the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT, *Sun phithak phraphutthasatsana haengprathetthai*). It was

founded in 2001 by activist monks under the mentorship of senior monks who had campaigned against the alleged Catholic threat to Thai Buddhism in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup>

The BPCT actually originated during the resistance against the 1997-2001 Chuan Likphai government's reforms of religious administration. The policy to put Buddhist affairs under the supervision of a mixed-faith committee was unacceptable to the Sangha. Monks again suspected that Muslim and Christian members of the government desired to rule over Buddhists. As a result, the BPCT staged protests calling for the independent administration of Buddhist affairs. These calls eventually led to the establishment of the National Office of Buddhism.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the BPCT is widely considered a "political arm" of the Thai Sangha, enjoying low-profile support from the top of the Sangha administration. Nevertheless, the BPCT claims that its activism is a duty of the modern-day defender of Buddhism – a more respectable and meaningful new role for members of the long-disgraced Sangha.

Recently, other like-minded organizations have also formed within the Thai Sangha. Many of them share connections to activists in the Sangha's universities and the Dhammakaya movement, which has become the Sangha's closest ally. For example, the National Buddhism Protection Organization took a leading role in protesting against the 2018 purge of the Dhammakaya Temple and the prosecution of senior monks implicated in the corrupt use of monastic funds. The organization claimed that the purges were not a sincere attempt to reform Buddhism, but rather a malevolent plan schemed by Muslims under the guise of Buddhist officials.<sup>15</sup>

The Dhammakaya Temple's connections broadened the reach of the Buddhism protection movement in Thailand. It built rapport with similar movements in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, including the hardline Ma Ba Tha. The Dhammakaya movement also encouraged the Sangha to actively engage in the politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand's Muslim-majority South.

## **FRAMING "RELIGIOUS INJUSTICE"**

The Buddhism protection movement of the Thai Sangha communicates to society a particular set of political thoughts, narrating stories that prime audiences to spot injustice done to Buddhism by malevolent non-believers. The message disseminated through the movement's use of both conventional and new media conveys the new meaning of "threats" to Buddhism. It identifies both its culprits and the means of defense.<sup>16</sup>

Thailand's new political order after the political reforms of 1997 deprived the Sangha of the privilege that it had taken for granted – the official superiority of Buddhism over other religions in the country. Under the new principle of equal representation derived from the 1997 constitution, the Sangha deemed the equal distribution of resources and support from the Thai state to each major religion unfair, considering that Buddhists were in the majority and Buddhism was undeniably the traditional faith of the nation.

Monks denounced this new practice in state administration of religious affairs as “the political downsizing of Buddhist influence”.<sup>17</sup> They claimed that while the majority of taxpayers were Buddhists, the government’s budgetary resources were shared and co-managed by religious minorities to a disproportionate degree. In many other cases, government policies even extended extra support and leverage in religious politics to Islam and to Christian denominations, while Buddhism was overlooked for political reasons.

As a result, the Buddhism protection movement’s major foci are on the problematic issue of numbers, proportions and representations in the country’s religious affairs. The movement holds that Thailand’s politics after the 1997 reforms has left Buddhism smaller, poorer, and weaker. In the BPCT’s regular radio and television programmes, monks constantly reiterate their disappointment that the Sangha is “mishandled” (*tok lon*) and Buddhism is made “thinner” (*riao long*) by Buddhist politicians who blindly abide by secular and liberal principles.<sup>18</sup>

For the Sangha, these politicians are “identity-card Buddhists” – people registered as Buddhist in name only but no longer possessing true Buddhist spirit. They avoid endorsing Buddhist interests because that seems to be politically incorrect. While proposals for Buddhists’ benefit are always turned down, religious minorities are significantly privileged and empowered, especially Muslims.

The monks in the movement argue that politicians are more willing to please the violence-inclined Muslims for fear of reprisals, especially when the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand has recommenced. Using Buddhist teachings, the monks claim that most politicians are biased by *bhayagati* – being unjust because of cowardice.<sup>19</sup> The Sangha warns that the Buddhist majority is at risk of becoming a minority in their own country, if violation of Buddhism’s traditional rights is still tolerated.

The Thai Sangha perceives that Islam flourishes at Buddhism’s expense. Muslims have exploited the kindness of Thai Buddhists for the accumulation of resources and strength, while secretly scheming to destroy Buddhism. The analogy for such a situation often used in activist monks’ sermons is the story of a kind horse (*ma-ari*). In Aesop’s fables, a kind horse invited a cow to share its stable. The cow squeezed in little by little, until the horse was kicked out and the whole space was occupied by the newcomer.

The BPCT activists argued that the moral of this story fits the case of General Sonthi Bunyaratkalin, a Muslim who became the head of the junta that ruled Thailand after the September 2006 coup. The monks in the movement have held a grudge against him and what they see as his pro-Islamic policy, accusing him of undermining the campaign to accord to Buddhism the status of national religion during the drafting of the 2007 constitution.<sup>20</sup>

According to the monks of the Buddhism protection movement, the fact that a member of Thailand’s Muslim minority such as Gen. Sonthi could get into a position of power in the country was not a miracle. Thanks to the Thai state’s open-minded practice, religious

minorities are granted a special quota for admission into military and police academies,<sup>21</sup> and, unfortunately, they were ungrateful people who sought to destroy the religion of the Thai people whenever the opportunity arose.

Monks in the movement also hold that Thai Buddhists' ignorance about Islam's malicious moves also compromises the integrity of Buddhist territory in Thailand. Members of the Sangha often relay the story of funding from the Middle East that encourages Muslim migration from the South to cultivate rubber plantations in the Northeast – a region well-known for the revered forest lineage of ascetic monks and important monasteries. The construction of new mosques and the expansion of Muslim communities there are perceived as an Islamic invasion and as a loss of the Buddhist motherland.<sup>22</sup>

This suspicion of Muslims' subversive intentions is substantiated by the escalation of violence in Thailand's Deep South, where Muslim secessionists have killed Buddhist monks, burned down monasteries, and expelled Buddhist communities. Monks' preaching reminds audiences of a lesson that must be learned from a historical event – the sack of the Nalanda Buddhist University in the twelfth century by Turkish Muslims, which eventually led to the demise of Buddhism in India.

As the inert mindset of Thai Buddhists allegedly gives foreign religions the opportunity to do injustice to Buddhism, members of Thai Sangha point out that Muslims gain more religious influence and advantage from being active, vocal, and aggressive. In order to eliminate this vulnerability, the monks argue that modern Buddhists should become more expressive and forthright in asserting claims of Buddhist superiority.

The BPCT activists see a strategy centred on “expressive Buddhists” (*chao phut song siang sadaeng phalang*) as a way of compensating for the loss of Buddhist influence in Thailand. In their opinion, one cannot face injustice squarely with a non-committed stance, and with cowardice. That the Buddhist majority in Thailand, especially those in power, dares not utter a word about the faith's supremacy is considered a weakness.<sup>23</sup>

Modern-day protectors of Buddhism must therefore be bold, passionate, and resolute in confirming Buddhism's dominating presence. The monks' main strategy is to reinstate Buddhism's national status through the explicit inclusion in the Thai constitution of a clause “to reflect the impartial reality that Buddhism is the traditional faith of Thai majority and to prevent future distortion of this undeniable fact.”<sup>24</sup>

Leading monastic activists also explain that such a constitutional clause will be similar to “a marriage certificate” that publicly and securely binds the Thai state to Buddhism. This will prevent Muslims' possible future claim of superiority – a step in the evil plan allegedly to swallow Buddhism.<sup>25</sup>

The monks' campaign has met with criticism that their chauvinistic stance is inconsistent with the Buddhist principle of non-attachment. Moreover, faith in Buddhism is best kept in people's mind (*naphue duai chai*) for the sake of peace in a multi-faith society. However, BPCT activists object to these ideas. They stress the severity and urgency of the alleged

Muslim threat and the need to deal with it by unconventional means. In the monks' analogy, the Catholic threat is like a silent, stealthy python (*ngu lueam*) that slowly constricts and swallows Buddhism. The Muslim threat is more like a fierce, violent cobra (*ngu hao*) whose venom quickly kills victims.<sup>26</sup> It is thus not a surprise that monks in the Buddhism Protection movement openly encourage Thai governments to decisively resolve the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand by force.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Thai Sangha's Buddhism protection movement understands the state of contemporary relations among religions in Thailand to be problematic. In the eyes of its adherents, the right of Buddhism to be upheld by the Thai state as the predominant and native faith has been unjustly violated by malevolent 'others'. Islam is perceived as a subversive foreign faith – a parasite that has benefited from the compassionate Buddhist tradition and the ignorance of Thais.

As a result, monks have come to call for collective actions from Thai Buddhists to address unjust relations among religions. Only by discarding liberal principles and becoming "expressive Buddhists", can Thais restore the dominant influence of Buddhism and its national status.

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<sup>1</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand, "Buddhist Pluralism and Religious Tolerance in Democratizing Thailand", in Philip Cam (ed.), *Philosophy, Democracy, and Education* (Seoul: Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2003). pp.193-213.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 183-87.

<sup>3</sup> Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2011), p.113.

<sup>4</sup> Phra Phaisan Wisalo, *Phutthasatsana thai nai anakhot naeonom lae thang ok chak wikrit* [Thai Buddhism in the Future: Trends and the Way out of Crisis] (Bangkok: Sotsri – Saritwong Foundation, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, and Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, *Anakhot khong ongkon song* [The Sangha's Future], in *Mong Anakhot* [Looking into the Future] (Bangkok: Amarin, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Bunsom Martin was Thailand's minister of education in 1977-1980.

<sup>9</sup> Group of the Defendants of Security of Buddhism, *The Catholic Plot against Buddhism: Classified Excerpts from the Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians (Confidential Publication of the Vatican) and Some Interesting Evidences and Data* (Bangkok: Siwaphon, 1986), p.4.

- <sup>10</sup> The deceased Rabaep Thitayano, whose previous ecclesiastical title was Phra Sophon Khanaphon, was a leading political monk and half-brother to Chatuphon Phromphan, one of the leaders of the Red Shirt movement.
- <sup>11</sup> Phra Dhammapitaka, “Phai haengphraphutthasatsana nai prathet thai” [Threats to Buddhism in Thailand] (Bangkok: Buddha Dhamma Foundation, 2002).
- <sup>12</sup> Katewadee Kulabkaew, “Framing Religious Injustice: Thai Sangha’s Discourse on Buddhism Protection in the 21st Century”, in *Rian Thai: International Journal of Thai Studies*, Vol.5/2012, pp.43-64.
- <sup>13</sup> Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, *Raek roem haengroirao* [The origin of the rift] (Bangkok: Ho Rattanachai, 2002).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> The National Buddhism Protection Organization has served as a substitute for the BPCT in recent years as the National Council for Peace and Order junta threatened and closely monitored BPCT activists.
- <sup>16</sup> Katewadee 2012, p.53.
- <sup>17</sup> “Phra nakthet chae lerai salai phut” [Preacher monks unveil evil plot to destroy Buddhism], *Thai Post*, 8 August 2011.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> *Agati* (Pali) in Buddhist teachings originally referred to the four “wrong paths”: the path of greed (*chanda*), of hate (*dosa*), of delusion (*moha*), and of cowardice (*bhaya*).
- <sup>20</sup> In 2011, the author interviewed a lay member of the BPCT — a retired general who claimed that he had managed to acquire a copy of a letter from Gen Sonthi to the Chularatchmontri, the spiritual leader of Thai Muslims, in which the former promised not to grant Buddhism the status of Thailand’s national religion. Later that year, Gen Sonthi founded a political party whose declared purpose was to serve the needs of Thai Muslims.
- <sup>21</sup> In order to combat Muslim unrest through social measures, Thai governments have during the past fifty years intermittently granted a special admission quota to Muslim students of the Southern-most provinces for study in public universities and military academies. As of 2017, only the Muslim quota for Thai police’s pre-cadet academy remains in place. See “Prakat rongrian nai roi tamruat rueang rap samak lae sopkhatlueak bukkhon phainok khao pen nakrian triamthahan nai suan khong samnakngan tamruat haengchat pracham pi kansueksa 2561 (khongkan phiset chapho nakrian 5 changwat chaidan phak tai)” [Police academy announcement on application forms and entrance examinations for external applicants to the pre-cadet school (special programme for students from the five southern border provinces)], 23 November 2017 ([http://www.rpca.ac.th/images/news/admission/2561/precadet\\_south\\_2561.pdf](http://www.rpca.ac.th/images/news/admission/2561/precadet_south_2561.pdf) accessed 31 March 2019).
- <sup>22</sup> “Mo So chae klum phon prayot yuet wat rang” [Sangha Council reveals illegal occupation of deserted monasteries], *Thai rat*, 26 August 2002.
- <sup>23</sup> Katewadee 2012, p.60.
- <sup>24</sup> Author’s interview with Phra Thamkittimethi, the BPCT’s leader, 16 February 2010.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, “Thalaengkan sun phithak phraphutthasatsana haengprathetthai rueang sathanakan kwammaisa-ngop nai sam changwat phak tai khong thai” [BPCT statement on the unrest in Thailand’s three southernmost provinces], 12 June 2009 (<http://newweb.bpct.org/content/view/472>, accessed 12 September 2011).
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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