

The Quandary of the Saffron's Involvement in Politics in Burma

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Abstrak

Artikel ini tidak bermaksud untuk tidak mengindahkan instruksi dari pemerintah agar tidak melibatkan diri dalam aksi protes, pada bulan Agustus 2008, para biksu di Arakan ikut dalam sebuah aksi protes terhadap pemerintah atas dasar kondisi perekonomian yang terus terpuruk di Burma. Aksi tersebut, pada akhirnya berujung pada sebuah bentrokan di Pakokku yang melibatkan antara pihak kepolisian dengan para demonstran. Dari insiden tersebut, dikabarkan bahwa Satu bikku terbunuh dan tiga lainnya terluka. Insiden tersebut bukannya membuat para bikku untuk mundur dalam aksinya, sebaliknya, peristiwa tersebut malah menyulut lebih besar keberanian dari para bikku untuk melakukan aksi demonstrasi. Dalam hal ini, sejarah mencatat bahwa pada dasarnya bikku memainkan peran yang sangat penting dalam kehidupan sosial masyarakat Burma, termasuk juga dalam ruang lingkup politik. Realitas seperti ini tak pelak memunculkan beragam kontroversi di kalangan umat Buddha. Masyarakat mulai bertanya-tanya, apakah aktivitas politik memiliki justifikasi dalam ajaran Buddha?, dan Bukankah dalam tradisi lama Buddha komunitas Biksu justru “diasingkan” dari arena politik?. Dari pertanyaan kontroversial tersebut, tulisan ini ingin melihat bagaimana para Biksu mulai menjadi sensitif dengan isu-isu sosial, termasuk soal-soal politik. Selain itu, tulisan ini juga berusaha untuk menelisik lebih jauh lagi pengaruh agama Buddha dalam gerakan mereka.

Kata kunci: Politik, Biksu, Agama Buddha, HAM.

Introduction

On August 28, 2008 monks in Arakan states were reportedly marching through Sittwe in protest against the poor economic state that people in Burma have to face. Ignoring the government warning that monks should not engage in protest, the monks' participation in the protests against the government policy on the economy was in steady flow. The peak of the demo was taking place in Pakokku, where security forces confronted demonstrating monks, and fired warning shots in the air. In this heated situation, one monk was reportedly killed and at least three of them were arrested. Instead of putting the situation to rest, the accident has caused even more resistance from the people. Monk groups have obviously organized themselves towards the cause of supporting people's right and continued protesting against the government despite a strong warning from the authorities that monks shouldn't engage in social matters.

Throughout the history of most of Southeast Asian Buddhist countries, particularly in Burma, monks have been playing pivotal roles in society. The political arena is no exception for their involvement. Despite the strong prohibition from the government for any of their civil society to take part in political issues, the monks have sometimes appeared to be in the forefront of the movement acting as a leading group of the civil people. Such a role has definitely invited many controversial opinions in the world of Buddhism. People mostly question whether such a role in political activity done by the monks is justified within Buddhism itself, especially considering the traditional monastic rule that monks should estrange themselves from social affairs.

This article is to see how monks have become sensitive about the social issues in their community taking Burmese monks involvement in politics as the focus. It is also to see how such controversial involvement has actually been inspired by their own religious practice in the service of their society.

Politics, Economy and Religion in Burma

Burma has been part of ASEAN since 1997 and has also become the most economically underdeveloped country. The name Burma was officially replaced by Myanmar following the mount of the military regime in 1962. Since then, Junta military who have also been said to be notorious and brutal to their own people has ruled Burma. Demographically, 62% of citizens are ethnic Burmese while the remainders are of different smaller ethnic groups most of them whom live in hill areas. The vast majority of Burmese people follow Theravada Buddhism while the rest are Christians, Hindus, and Muslims.

As a status bearer of one of the poorest country in Southeast Asia, Burma's economy condition has been absolutely in the hand of the military regime, the Junta. Through their economy's policy, "The Burmese Road to Socialism", Burma has imposed self-sufficiency, import substitution, extreme rigid foreign currency control and low exchange rate. As a matter of fact, these are their key elements to handle their economy. Now, while still bewildered with a positive result that such a policy could enhance the life of the people, what lies ahead is a vast region living under severe poverty. This fact is so contradictory to the fact that Burma is actually a country with rich and abundant fertile fields, mineral and forest resources.

The most uncomfortable truth in this country is malnutrition. This is one of the biggest health problems springing from dire poverty in Burma. According to WFP, one out of five Burmese children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition. It is also said that more than 10% of children do not live to reach adulthood. Besides malnutrition, a lack in medical infrastructure and medical supply also has been the constant contributors to the epidemic. I remembered that during my stay in Burma (2002-2006) I had always been warned to check the expiration date whenever buying medicine from local pharmacies as it is widely known that many of imported medications were too old, or simply counterfeits. As to most of Burmese, their government encourages them to use Burmese traditional medicine. While people are fighting their diseases with local medicines, their generals, ironically are treated in world class hospitals in Singapore.

One of the most misleading conceptions is that such demonstration is an expression of freedom of voice in Burma. In reality, discussion over politics and the economy by common people are among taboo things that people should not indulge in public sphere. In my experience, this is just one thing that Burmese people know not to be part of their casual conversations. I remembered one of my Burmese friends said that ‘we shouldn’t talk about politics and the economic situation in Burma with foreigners because there are spies everywhere and we never know who they are!’ or “we don’t mind talking about politics and economics with you but we might be in trouble if they would over hear our conversation.” That is another sign for us, the foreigners, to avoid discussion regarding socio-economic conditions with Burmese people in public space as it might cause trouble to the locals.

Another common deceptive understanding about Burma is that this is a Buddhist State. Although majority population is Buddhists (89%) Burma is still not a Buddhist state. In the history of religious life in Burma shows that Buddhists have to suffer in the same level as other religious groups are. After monk’s demonstration in 1990, many demonstrating monasteries were kept under surveillance for a period of time, or at least until they consented to join the government’s Sangha committee. Numerous monks and nuns were detained and jailed under politics accusation, in the meantime, there were monks forced to disrobe and not allowed to use their ordained name. “I was also slapped and punched in the face. My interrogators stepped on my toes with their army boots. They demanded to know what organizations I was in touch with and who I had contacted”, recalled Ashin Pannasiri who was taken to police station in Monywa, where he was also disrobed, beaten and interrogated. Furthermore, he reported that since 1988, 19 monks have died in the prison and also a few of them have been sentenced to life in prison. There are also a couple of reports that SPDC troops had come to a couple of monasteries in Shan State and caused destruction to those monasteries.

As to the other religions, Islam and Christianity are similarly enduring the same conditions. As a matter of fact, the military regime in Burma has often tried to stir up religious and racial tensions in order to

divide the population and to divert attention away from political and economic concerns. To give one of examples, Buddhist monks accused SPDC of trying to steal sacred rubies believed to give the owner power to defeat any enemy. These rubies were rumored to be hidden in one of six monasteries in Mandalay, possibly inside the Maha Myatmuni Buddha Statue itself. As a result, all of six suspected monasteries were broken into by the SPDC. Enraged by such disrespectful behavior, monks took to the streets in Mandalay on March, 1997, burning mosques and harassing Bengali Muslims. Because of this incident, SPDC has been accused monks of instigating attack against Muslims and aggravating existing tensions between the Muslims and Buddhists.

The condition is not different for Christiania's, in term of religious harassment projected by the authorities. In the States which majority of population are Christians such as in Chin, Karen, Kachin, and some of Sagaing division, religious persecution is said to be the most common problem. In Chin State, for an example, people have been forced by the military to build Buddhist pagodas in their villages. In early 2007, three Buddhist monks together with a section of soldiers came to Chin state to preach Buddhism. During this visit, soldiers were forcefully ordered the Christians to attend the Buddhist preaching. The "monks" on the other hands asked the adults and the young to become monks and novices, and to follow Buddhist rules. This coercive conversion was accompanied by a threat that they would be taken as porters if they objected.

Thus in so far, it is appeared that the military government has continued to use Buddhism as a legitimizing instrument. The New York Times called it the Junta's "showcase religious project", such as when they embarked on building a glorifying pagoda—tooth relic pagoda—which cost US\$1.6 million. However similar cover has also been taken by SPDC when they decided to construct a massive new pagoda in their new capitol at Nawpyidaw in central Burma. This pagoda is named Uppatasanti pagoda (peace pagoda), which is the replica of Rangoon's most famous Shwedagon pagoda. It reportedly receives donation of tooth relics from Than Shwe, the president of Burma. Lavish gifts and pagoda renovations have been carried on and distributed for monks

throughout Burma. Such actions usually covered by the state swamped the media, for an example: The New light of Myanmar.

From the aforementioned paragraphs, it is pretty obvious that Buddhism itself actually has been suffering from dual treatments: both enjoy counterfeited privileges of being Buddhists as well severe harassment from being Buddhists just in as much as other believers do. Thus, monks have always been in a forefront religious movement.

Theravada Buddhism's Involvement in Politics

When it comes to social activism, especially pertaining to politics, Buddhist monks from Theravada school commonly becomes an estranged group. The majority opinion is that a monk should not engage in worldly issues, as such involvement would violate their monastic rules (Vinaya). However, it is not the whole case happening in Burma. As each of large demonstration always involve monks as their great supporter, it is very easy to know that not all Theravadin monks in Burma oppose political activism. There are two opposing groups of monks: one which strictly denounces any political engagement and on the other hand who justify their role in the political activism. The first group of monks usually condemned the latter, stating that they are not following the Buddha's rule. Spiro in his books interviewed a monk about his attitude toward politically active groups in which the monks answered:

"I thought you were interested in Nirvana; those organizations have nothing to do with attaining Nirvana." And then the monk continued: "A horse who does a dog's work is fated to die." Still according to him, such activism are not only bad because their interests are worldly, but also because they could create disunity in the monkhood and quarrels among laymen.¹ This monk was certainly referring to monk's monastic rule which run: People should not become monks in order to engage in quarrels." Another monk from Mandalay which happened to be a very learned abbot was equally blaming monks who

¹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 393.

involve in politics. According to this monk, regardless the motivations behind the involvement simply dismiss the idea claiming the idea as, “a completely false reading of the Teaching of the Buddha.” This learned abbot persisted, that monks’ duty is to assist people to attain *Nibbana* and not some lower (worldly) goal. In addition to this, he said that the Buddha taught only three things, and so the monks, too should only be concerned with these three: “to help the ignorant to know the Law, so that they can move from a worldly to an otherworldly plane; to help world lings to escape from the Wheel of Rebirth; to attain Buddhahood oneself. How does it relate to politics? NO! Monks who engage in politics do so for fame, for power, and for privileges. They are not Sons of the Buddha.”²

The above mentioned monk believed that monks’ involvement on politics is wrong and futile. This is including comments given to those monks who were a part of struggle for Burmese Independence. The most typical comment they uttered to these struggling monks are, “They were not true monks, protesting, picketing, fighting and killing, this is not monks’ work, regardless of its purpose.” This was also referred to those who supported the movement, although they did not participate in it.³ Almost similar remarks were also made by recent Burmese monks whose positions are against the protesting monks. Following the deteriorating situation in 1988, State Sangha Maha Nayaka Sayadaws,⁴ issued directives for monks to abide by the Vinaya discipline and therein should restrain themselves from getting involved in political affairs.⁵ In addition to the former directives, the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee issued the Directive no. 93 on September 24th, 2007 for monks to carry out religious duties only and not to get involve in violence and political affairs.⁶ Both government and Sangha Nayaka Committee assumes that those protesting monks, “Were in total

² Ibid., 345.

³ Ibid., 392.

⁴ Sangha Maha Nayaka is The highest level of Sangha organization formed by the Government

⁵ *Burma’s Activists march against Fuel Price Hike*. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/>, August 20, 2007, accessed: 20 February 2010.

⁶ Ibid., 346.

disregard of the Sasana and the Buddha's teachings, and they attempt to tarnish the image of Buddha's Sasana and sow discord between the government and the people. As a result, the Sasana as well as the country was affected. So it proved that the destructionists were sticking to the means of confrontation and utter devastation."⁷ Following that statement there was an order issued to take action against whom they called bogus monks, namely U Gambira, U Vicitta, U Obhasa, and U Padaka. These monks were accused to have led the instigation and disturbances and therefore should be expelled in order to ensure peace and tranquility, the rule of law and perpetuity of the Sasana.

Having learnt about the first groups, of what monks have said about the protesting monks, now the latter group would sound completely different. This group is of those who directly involve themselves in the protest or are at least supporters. U Pyinya Jota, as quoted in Irrawaddy news articles said, "People's suffering can easily move monks. As Sons of the Buddha, how can we ignore the disasters that afflict people live? So we took a leading role against evil rulers who have shown no concern for the need of the people." U Pyinya Jota statement was referring to the dramatic increase in fuel price that led to widespread hardship. He added, "We monks should show our disagreement with evil acts in a peaceful way. We monks must actively engage in social issues. People in Burma often talk about *Metta* (loving kindness) but this is not just a word to chant. It must also be practiced. Everyone in the world needs active *Metta*. Active *Metta* can bring peace to the whole world."⁸

Similar reactions were also given by other protesting monks, U Pannacara, a 27-year-old monk said, "Traditionally, we monks are not supposed to be politically active. The military has ruled out country for more than 40 years, and they don't care about the welfare of the people, they care only for themselves and their relatives, and how to remain in power forever. That was why the people rose up against them. There are three powerful groups in Burma: The *Sit-tha* (sons of was, that's the

⁷ Ibid., 342.

⁸ Moe, Kyaw Zwa. *Monks march as Boycott Begins—Authorities use Tear Gas*. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/>, September 18, 2007, accessed 20 February 2010.

military, the *Kyaung-tha* (sons of the school), the students, and the *Payatha* (sons of the Buddha). That's us, the monks." Another monk by named U Viccita claimed that their act was not a politics in the following interview by HRW, "For us, it was not politics, but a question of religion. We just went out into street to recite *Metta Sutta*, loving kindness." What the monks were concerned about during their demonstration was the life of the people. To show their support to their people, monks decided boycotting the junta by turning their bowls upside-down. That action is called *Patta Nikkujjana Kamma* in Theravada Buddhism. During this moment, monks do not accept food, medicines or anything from the authorities. This is one way within the society of Theravada Buddhism on how actually monks have their right to rebuke and admonish the authority when they are imposing unwise policy to the people. The same thing happened during the time of the Buddha when there was a bad king, an evil king, who hurt the monks and the people. At that time, the monks also protested. But then the king had to apologize, and it was all over. But this junta refused to apologize. That was why we continued our protests. They are continuing "We are still opposed to the junta, but we can't fight against men with guns. We are biding our time, but we are not afraid to protest again".⁹

From what has been mentioned earlier, we can perceive that there are two major opposing groups in Burma. The first group, Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, which has become the only legal and highest monk organization formed by government, has more inclination toward the authorities. According to this group, monks should deliberately abstain themselves from any social issues, including politics. Any monasteries which are considered to be the member of this committee can be assumed as the adherence of Junta and certainly oppose the protesting monks. On the other hand, quite a few protesting monasteries, during post demonstration, were under strict surveillance until they joined the committee. Therefore, we also can assume that the members of that committee are not always voluntarily agreeing with the government. As for the position of protesting monks, it is clear that they

⁹ Human Right Watch. *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism*. <http://www.hrw.org>, accessed 20 January 2010, 84.

are in opposition to the authorities. However, for them, their involvement is not for the sake of politics but rather for the sake of humanity and religiosity. That is to find solution for the hardship that their devotees were facing due to the government policy.

A Brief Background of Engaged Buddhism

The term of socially engaged Buddhism is dated back as far as 1954. The term was coined by Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in response to what he claimed to be the period of full of confusion in people of Vietnam, especially – monks, nuns, and lay people. Confusion here is referred to political confusion during which time people of Vietnam were sandwiched between the North and South and were inspired by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In the South, President Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, was trying to run the country with another kind of ideology called “Personalism.” It seemed that the ideological war had begun. The term was initially called “Engaged Buddhism”, seeking for Buddhist value a concrete implementation of Buddhism in the different aspects of life, ranging from politics, education, economics, etc. Later, in its course of development, ‘engaged Buddhism’ evolved to be ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’.

Today, socially engaged Buddhism is one of the hottest issues in Buddhism which at the same time is one of terms that Buddhist from many schools are proud of. The social aspect such as economics, education, ecology and politics are major subjects that this new Buddhist movement mostly seeks to work on. However, the last subject, such as politics is not as encouraged as the others to be involved in, particularly among the monastic members. However, looking at the laid out facts from history about the origin of socially engaged Buddhism, politics was the grave reason for Socially Engaged Buddhist to come into existence. As for the unpopularity of politics that is especially famous within the monastic society, for the reason that they have renounced their ‘worldly’ lives and issues, thereby engaging in such a worldly life as politics is considered low practice. Such denouncement depicts the narrowness of understanding of the field of politics and such engagement between the

two could contribute to a better society, promote justice and peace. Considering those aims, it is rather odd to think that Buddhism or Buddhist religious leaders should restrain from politics.

Although generally speaking Engaged Buddhists are repeatedly compelled to refer to certain Buddhist schools, but according to Kennet Kraft the primary aims are indeed non-sectarian. Maruyama Teruo, Japanese priest also concords that “The movement to revive Buddhism is not for the sake of Buddhism at all. We must reassess Buddhism once more in the context of problems such as the potential destruction of the human race.” One of the most prominent monks from Sri Lanka, Walpola Rahula, supported his role in political arena on the idea that Buddhism is nothing but to give service to others and therefore political and social engagement was the heritage of the bikkhu and the essence of Buddhism.

Therefore, despite harsh criticism that protesting monks should endure, there are also plenty of support for them or at least there are abundant source that they may use to support their activity. That was exactly what happened in Burma. Protesting monks were seeking consolation from the Buddhist texts, some of them from their Vinaya and the discourse of the Buddha. In the earlier stage, monks were simply observed Patta Nikkujjana Kamma, admonishment addressed to lay people for their inappropriate action. At last they chose to emphasize the active loving kindness (Metta). The chant of Metta was a part of their way to express their desire to appeal the government during their protest. Such as what U Panya Jota stated earlier that monks today need to actualize their loving kindness into concrete action and not just mere words that according to him has no stronger effect than action.

The Sangha as the Defenders of Common Human Values

Buddhism is commonly understood as a quiet and meditative religion. Emphasizing its teaching on the improvement of life and getting rid of suffering in the world, Buddhism seems to have little to do with politics. Especially those who belong to monastic orders, both monks and nuns, are commonly pictured as just practicing the religious

function and meditation. Having withdrawn themselves from the ordinary life style, monks and nuns are expected by many to be fully engaged in their new monastic life. However, such a conception does not apply to all monastic members; rather, it depends on why they have chosen to pursue their monastic goals.

In Theravada Buddhism there are two kinds of duties for monastic members that appeared in later development. These two duties (Dhura) are basically serving as options as to why monks and nuns might pursue monastic life. The first one is called Vipassana Dhura. This is a set of duty that calls monastic to engage in mental training and meditation. In contrast to Vipassana Dhura, the second one, Gantha Dhura is duty of studying the text. As for the text here, it is referring to Buddhist texts, which are described only as the blueprints for monks to base their actions on. Pursuing only one of them is not considered wrong. In reality today, especially in Buddhist countries, monastics would emphasize either one depending on their circumstances and preferences. A scholastic monk by named Thanissaro Bikkhu mentions that Gantha Dhura is equally important to Vipassana Dhura as its nature is to study the text which can be used as guidance for one to carry out the actual practice and action. In such wisdom, one's chosen duty should not undermine the other and must incorporate both. Thus, Thannisaro Bhikkhu asserted that Buddhist, regardless of their position in Buddhist hierarchical systems must not close their faculty to the real problem existing within which one's live. This is considered wrong for him to ignore the existing problem and act as if it none of his business while one is pursuing the spiritual journey. From his point of view, Thanissaro seems to encourage the integration of religion and public life altogether.

To support the idea that even monastic members should not completely withdraw themselves from associating with social life, an exemplary action from the Buddha would be an important thing to note. In some Suttas, it is mentioned that the Buddha himself was who actually, for the first time, established the link between Buddhism and social issues, such as politics. One of the most distinguished associations was with King Ajatasattu, King of Magadha, who supported the Buddha or whom the Buddha supported? King Ajatassatu in return sought

advice from the Buddha concerning his governance. In another Sutta such as Cakkavatti Sutta, the Buddha gives more details on how a great king or political leaders should govern their country and serves their people and also how civil society should behavior in order to conduct and fulfill their respective duties.

In today's society, especially in known Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, such as in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Burma, the relationship between the secular people and religious institution (monastics) are very distinct. The nature of monastic life in Buddhism, which requires close interdependency with regular Buddhists, has become the major factor to enjoin these two groups of society in Buddhism together. In Theravada Buddhism, monastic members are traditionally dependent upon on the laity for their sustenance. Being bound by 227 rules and totally detach in their life from regular life style, the monastic members (Sangha) are forbidden to access jobs for salaries. By the virtue of morality that is based on the principle of compassion and loving kindness, the monks are expected to demonstrate their affection to the laypeople by helping them to restrain themselves from doing evil and encouraging them to pursue a good life.

Regarding the laity, Buddhist scholar Tambiah described that there is somehow an expectation that monks should not only concern themselves on the pursuit of Supra-mundane interests and thus only receive donations without expecting anything in return. As the laity is depending upon them for their spiritual improvement, the monks are expected to provide them to give spiritual service. This service is often in the form of delivering religious function. The monks are also expected to not to turn their back away on society but rather to render services when skills are needed. In this way the monk and the laity bear the reciprocal relationship. The monks thus also understand they have a duty to the society, not only to perform religious functions but also to conduct social functions for the benefit of the society.

Such a situation is also reflected within the Burmese society. During the hardship, when the people who have originally been poor were being further inflicted economically, the monks rose up in their defense. The biggest demonstration happened in September which had

resulted from smaller Rally in town of Pakokku. Before the bigger demonstration took place in Yangon, the rally in Pokkoku by the monks was originally concerned for the oil price hike. The monks' demand to the government to reduce the price of commodities and to ease the life of the people can be translated as their form of service to their people.

In order to make a clear cut that their concern was not purposely by mere political interest, the monks had always been used more religious symbols in their movement. The chanting of loving kindness sutra, as they mention, was to induce the gentle nature of the government to take pity on their people. This also can be meant as their symbol of peaceful marching. Armed with only the sutra, they expected to have dialogue with the government to solve the problem that people were suffering from. The loving kindness sutra is very important for the Burmese people. In my observation, this Sutta is always being chanted in every religious ceremony. The meaning behind the Sutta is to encourage everyone to diffuse their gentlest nature and to wish for the good of all living beings which is central to Theravada Buddhism in general. As it is the opposite of hatred nature, the chanting of Metta Sutta also shows the government that they were asking using peace means and do not show anger as retaliation.

The Betrayer of the Monastic Code

During the course of writing this article, I often find myself in a deep thought pondering what monks should actually do in facing this kind of dilemmatic situation. The first thing I did was ask some of my acquaintances who are monks for their opinions. I would like to hear directly from them to compare to the majority of Burmese monks who were directly in the protest scene whose cries I have read. From such conversation, I found that there are basically two strands of answers whether monks should engage in politics or not. The first strand is that monks should not engage in politics at all at any cost. This first opinion is definitely not new, as so their argument. According to them, monks should not bother themselves with worldly issue much less on such a matter as politics. One young monk responded me, "It is a big mistake

for monks to be engaged in politics and such an act would certainly upset the monk's monastic rule." However, the second strand portrays more relax opinion. They agree that monks should not get involved in politics or other social related issue, but they also should not be blamed aimlessly. The context and social situation are also factors that may prompt them to act accordingly as an immediate response to the condition. From a brief overview above we can have general idea on how varied it is regarding the matter among monks themselves.

In the case of Burma, monks' involvement in politics should not be regarded as a new issue. In fact, it has been there since the anti-colonial period and the subsequent period under parliamentary government, through until the military-socialist regime in 1962 that prohibit religious activism. Before the accident in 2007, the young Buddhist monks' activist confronted the regime directly in 1988. And in 1990, they resurfaced to oppose the manipulation of election by the regime over Democratic Party. During that escalation, monks declared a boycott against the military and their families, refusing to accept alms from them and limiting their ability to earn donor merit. Although the response from the government was quite predictable as they were taking immediate measure by crushing the protest with force, detained and disrobed monks who associated with the demonstration. But the movement has evidently resurfaced whenever the government went too far exercising their power on their people.

Monasteries in Burma have been the backbone for most of the community. Having been to Burma myself, I could see how much the monasteries are getting involved in helping people. Their engagement is not limited to religious service but has been stretched to things such as providing food to the hungry, traditional medicine for the sick, and dying and education. There is also a monastery in which the HIV/AIDS contracted people take shelter. This is just a few examples to describe how monk's institutions have been playing pivotal roles in Burma society. It is clear to say that the monasteries have become part of the hearts of most people in Burma.

Moreover, being on the ground with most people, monks build a very strong relationship with people from different walks of life. In other

words, it is their life style as monks who economically and materially depend on the laypersons that make it easy for monks to realize and understand the hardship and struggles of the people. Theravada Buddhist monks in Burma traditionally receive material donation from laity to support their life and religious pursuance. People would come to their monastery to offer their donations in respect to monks' noble practice. In a regular routine, monks would go for alms-rounding from house to house to accept food from the people. In such kind of situations, it is very likely for them to have firsthand knowledge regarding the situation that is going on within the society. It was, as a matter of fact, reflected during the protest in which they cried the slogan, asking the government to ease the people's burden by reducing the commodity prices.

Thus one should at least take this into account before jumping into a judgmental conclusion about whether or not monks' involvement in the political arena is valid. It is important to note that one should not reduce this matter either to become exclusively religious or political. Rather it is as a process or a way of defending and protecting the people from further exposure to unfavorable situation. Finally, it is left up to individual us whether one would use what would be a "modest and humble" way and take no action at all or we would use the wisdom inherited to use to face the problem of life: to remove the suffering in the world.

Conclusion

The engagement of monks in the political arena is not definitely new in the world of Buddhism. It has been stretched throughout the history, from the Buddha's time until today especially in most Buddhist countries. Burma is one of the examples in which Theravada Buddhism's monastic followers have been partly committed in the political arena as a result of their relationship with their lay supporters. The Burmese monks' involvement has always been pivotal and it has become a force that the governments of Burma have always paid attention on. However, their engagement in society such as in political arena has never been for

the sake of their solo power but rather to show support to people who are their religious supporters. Therefore, the classic argument that monks should not be engaged in worldly issues should not be automatically reasoned to conclude that they have broken their monastic rule. It should be considered more contextually, as the absence of those brave hearts may cause different results. Yet the monks' engagement in politics reminds us there is controversy within Buddhism itself.

Within the scope of contemporary issues, Socially Engaged Buddhism serves as a body in which Buddhism and politics gain space in the discussion table among the Buddhists themselves. Socially Engaged Buddhism itself was the fetus born from political unrest and it was pioneered by a Buddhist monk.

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