The past

Buddhist views on politics are as varied as Buddhist traditions themselves, and over the last three decades there has been a re-evaluation of the relationship between Buddhism and politics. These studies started with works by Paul Harris (1999, 2007, 2013) and were continued in works such as Schonthal (2016) and Long (2021) which all highlighted the existence of long traditions of political thought in Buddhism. Moreover, within the vast diversity of Buddhist traditions over the last two and a half millennia, there has been a consistent thread of discussions about tensions between Buddhism and politics. The tension arises over the question of whether the welfare of the state relies on a ruler following Buddhist principles or that state patronage of Buddhism can protect the state from worldly enemies. The first view is found in early Pali canonical suttas (Moore, 2015), and the second view, often called “State-protection Buddhism”, rose to prominence with the fifth-century translation into Chinese of the Mahayana Golden Light Sutra by Dharmaksema (Lee, 2017).

The first source for these debates is found in canonical Buddhism, Buddhism as described in early Pali sacred literature. In this literature the relationship between Buddhism and politics is encapsulated in the tradition that when the Buddha was born, it was prophesied that he could either become a ruler of the world, a ‘Wheel-Turning Monarch’ (cakravartin), or become a Buddha (Khosla, 1989, p. 32; Walshe, 1987, p. 205). This idea that the roles of secular ruler and spiritual leader are distinct paths stands at the heart of Buddhist tradition. Both are leaders, the secular ruler establishes security and prosperity in this world and the Buddha leads the people towards liberation. The notion of the separation of the roles of spiritual and secular rulers of the world has contributed greatly towards the compatibility of Buddhist ideas on governance and modern Western conceptions of the separation between the church and state.

It would be unwise though to ignore that modern notions of religion and politics have no direct equivalents in ancient Indian thought. Both are seen as manifestations of one underlying principal: dharma. The word dharma (Pali dhamma) has meanings that relate to the notions of the true nature of things in themselves, or duty, virtue or morality (Rahula, 1974, p. 181). It often occurs in compounds such as Buddha-dharma, which is often translated as the ‘Buddhist religion’ but could be translated as ‘Buddhist morality’ or ‘the nature of things as taught by the Buddha’. However, when dharma is found in another important term Raja-dharma, dharma does...
not refer to religion but rather to the ‘duties’ of a king or ruler of a state. In both cases, both the Buddha and a ruler of a state uphold an aspect of dharma. Another Sanskrit term which nowadays is translated as ‘politics’ is Raj-niti. It is formed from raja, king, and niti which has a range of meanings that centre on the notion of appropriate conduct and according to context could be translated as ‘morality’ or ‘policy’. So Raj-niti can be understood as meaning ‘the policies/morality/code of conduct of a king’. What is important to notice here is that neither Rajadharm nor Rajaniti relates to a system of representation of the people but rather to the notion of how a king should conduct himself.

In 1999 Ian Harris edited a work on Buddhism and politics in Asia in which he argued that the Western notion that religion and politics are exclusive categories should be set aside when discussing Buddhism as it has always had a political dimension (Harris, 1999, p. vii). A traditional Buddhist description of this relationship as complementary, rather than exclusive, was to speak of there being two wheels of the dhamma, one wheel being the wheel of dhamma turned by the Buddhist monastic community and the other being the wheel of secular rule turned by the king or Cakkavatti (‘Wheel-Turning Monarch’) (Reynolds, 1972).

There is also a large body of ancient Indian literature on the duties of the king, which include the protection of the people, the maintenance of social order and the administration of justice (Flood, 1998, p. 71). Buddhist notions of kingship share in this heritage and include as prime duties of the king that he should conquer without violence through maintaining justice and that he maintains law and order within the boundary of the kingdom so that people can be prosperous and free from danger (Walshe, 1987, p. 443).

Indications of the relationship between Buddhism and the state are found in the texts of the Pali canon which constitute the earliest Buddhist texts to survive to the present day. Two points need to be considered here. First, they contain descriptions of what constitutes a desirable relationship between a king and the Buddhist community. Second, they contain two distinct models for governance.

In one model, found in the Aggaṇṇa sūtra (Walshe, 1987, pp. 407–415), there is a description of how men came to be ruled by elected leaders, called the Mahā-samata, the ‘People’s Choice’. In the other model, such as found in the Cakkavati-Sihanada Sutta (Walshe, 1987, pp. 395–405), the rulership of the state is decided on the basis of a person being born with the marks of being a universal monarch. In the second model there is no suggestion that the universal monarch needs the general consensus of the people to rule. Rather his rule is dependent on his upholding the dharma and ensuring the wealth and prosperity of the state. As long as the king rules according to dharma, the heavens revolve according to their proper pattern, but when he deviates from the dharma and rules for his personal benefit, then the heavens no longer follow their proper pattern, and he falls from power.

Theravada Buddhist tradition also identifies ten duties of a king, the dasarajadhama which include liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, honesty and non-violence (Rahula, 1985, pp. 84–85). The role of the sangha is to advise the king and to influence him so that his policies uphold values that further the dhamma.

The next critical evolution in these early ideas on the relationship between the Buddhist sangha and the state happened during the rule of the emperor Asoka (269–243 BCE). Buddhist legend has it that he converted to Buddhism and then ruled according to Buddhist teachings. Contemporary scholarship has questioned the degree to which Asoka was actually a Buddhist in the modern sense as he seems to have also continued to patronise all religions (Norman, 1997, pp. 113–130), and it might be safer to say that the historical Asoka took it upon himself as part of his rule to propagate a version of the dharma of a king, which seems heavily influenced by Buddhism. For a general overview of the historical development of the relationship between
Buddhism and politics and the colonial interaction between Buddhism and the West, see Friedlander (2006).

The end result of the two-millennia-long interaction between Buddhism and politics in Asia was that by the colonial period, Buddhism in Asia was the heir to not only ancient traditions but also modern ideologies developed within interactions with anti-colonialist nationalist political movements.

The present

Estimates of the total number of Buddhists in the world today vary widely due in part to differing assumptions about how to determine who is a Buddhist. However, a rough estimate of around five hundred million Buddhists is quite common. An influential source for this figure was a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center which forecast that Buddhist numbers would continue to grow to around 511 million by 2030. However, at the same time, it also pointed out that as a proportion of followers of all religions in the world, the percentage of Buddhists will have fallen from 7.1% in 2010 to 6.2% by 2030.

There are major problems with figures like these. For instance, there are problems due to issues such as what constitutes a country. The Tibetan community in exile regards Tibet as being a region that is larger than the Chinese government’s view on what constitutes the Tibetan Autonomous Region, so that whilst some figures would suggest that there are around six million Tibetans, who would virtually all describe themselves as Buddhists, other figures might be lower or higher. I now look at the top ten countries in terms of number of Buddhists and then briefly at Buddhism in the West.

China and Tibet

The two main issues that dominate discussions of Buddhism in China are the degree to which there is religious freedom and the treatment of the Tibetans. During the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976), there was a wholesale attack on Buddhist cultures, peoples and monasteries. However, there has been a resurgence of Buddhism since liberalisation began in the late 1970s. By 2003 there were around 13,000 monasteries and around 180,000 monks and nuns;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Buddhists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>244,110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>64,420,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>45,820,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma (Myanmar)</td>
<td>38,410,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>14,450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>14,380,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>13,690,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>11,050,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>9,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>5,010,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of world</td>
<td>27,150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>487,760,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Center Report 2015
however, in the absence of adequate traditional support from Buddhist laity, Buddhist temples and monasteries have often become focuses for the tourist industry and transformed into money-making enterprises. Chairman Jiang Zemin (held office 1989–2002) advocated the use of Buddhist morality (de) in the political sphere (Yin, 2006). However, the term he used for virtue was ‘de’—not a Buddhist term but a Daoist traditional Chinese term for virtue. The idea of promoting traditional virtues, rather than democratic rights, as ‘Asian values’ is one that shows how Buddhist ideas are used by many politicians in Asia.

The current situation for Buddhism in China needs to be seen in the context of a speech to UNESCO made in March 2014 by China’s President Xi Jinping. He outlined how Buddhism had originated in India but once it had reached China it had integrated with Taoism and Confucianism and developed into ‘Buddhism with Chinese characteristics’ (Xi Jinping, 2014). This is a significant development in Chinese state attitudes towards Buddhism as it appears to recognise the importance of Buddhism in China and the contribution of Buddhism to Chinese culture and Chinese culture to Buddhism. However, Buddhism continued to be linked to ongoing commercialization of temples and monasteries and institutions such as the famous Shaolin temple which has run from 1999 as a commercial enterprise, run by its abbot, or CEO monk, Shi Yongxin (Chen, 2015). The Famen temple near Xi’an has also been the focus of commercial activity as the relics of the Buddha’s finger form a focus for Buddhist pilgrimage. Moreover, by 2020 reforms aimed at the Sinicization of Buddhism now stress that the study of the thoughts of Xi Jinping are central to the reform of Buddhism in China. So now at Buddhist temples like the Da Ci’en (Great Wild Goose) Pagoda in Xi’an, established by Xuanzang in 646 CE, Buddhist monks study the doctrines of Xi Jinping as a central aspect of Buddhism (Bandurski, 2020). Xi Jinping has also called for Buddhism in Tibet to be Sinicized (Lewis, 2020), and 2021 reports indicate that a key point in this process is the study of Xi Jinping’s thought as a central feature of current Communist Party of China understanding of what constitutes Buddhism (Pollard, 2021).

Chinese government policy in Tibet in the last decade or more has been focused on suppression of Tibetans’ protest campaigns against Chinese control of Tibet and Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. An important element in Tibetan protests since 2009 has been individuals who committed suicide by self-immolation; this led to crackdowns by the Chinese authorities to make such protests difficult to perform and to prevent them being publicized. In parallel with this, there were ongoing moves by the Chinese state to claim authority in religious matters for itself to the degree that it now claims to be able to identify by itself who the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama will be. The paradox of an atheist state being able to identify a reincarnation is profound but is based in the end on the simple possession of a particular bowl that belonged to the Panchen Lama which was used to draw lots out of indicating who is the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama. Indeed, they used this method when identifying the 14-year-old they chose as the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995, whom they put forward as an alternative leader for Tibetan Buddhism. In March 2015 the Chinese government went as far as to say that the Dalai Lama is ‘profaning Buddhism’ by saying he may not be reincarnated, as they are now the sole body with the authority to authorise Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations (McDonell, 2015).

**Thailand**

As around 95% of Thais are Buddhists, all sides of the political spectrum claim Buddhist affiliations at times for their ideologies. For instance, in the period when Thaksin Shinawatra was Prime Minister of Thailand (2001–2006), both he and his opponents used Buddhist rhetoric
Buddhism and politics

Thaksin linked his own free-market reform of the economy to a concept of a ‘social contract’ to Buddhist ideas. In a speech he gave in 1999 on the influence of the Buddhist reformer Buddhadasa (1906–1993), he argued that Buddhadasa had said, ‘Politics is dhamma and dhamma is politics’, and claimed that what Buddhadasa, and by implication all Buddhist reformers, wanted was a government of men of moral integrity, and he was himself such a person (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004, p. 137). However, opponents of Thaksin, such as the engaged Buddhist campaigner Sulak Sivaraksa, criticized Thaksin for being the embodiment of Mara, a devil-like tempter figure in Buddhism, while also arguing that Thai democracy should be based on ‘good governance, a righteous ruler, and Buddhist Dhammic kingship’ (Kitiarsa, 2006).

Thaksin blamed bandits for Islamic separatism in the south of Thailand and denied it had a link to a conflict between Thailand as a Buddhist state and militant Islam. His advocacy of a strong military solution to the separatism in the South and opposition to his economic reforms exacerbated the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims during his period in office (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004, pp. 234–239). However, by 2022 government suppression of separatism in Southern Thailand (Schonthal, 2016) has all but led to its disappearance from news reports from Thailand. But, there still appears to have been no progress in resolving the basic issues between the Thai Buddhist state and Southern Thai Islamic separatists (Bakhshi, 2021).

Buddhist monks took part in the extended period of civil unrest in Thailand that led up to the military coup on 22 May 2014 led by General Prayuth. Buddhist monks, such as Buddha Issara, took a prominent part in the anti-government protests and gave speeches on the stages set up in Bangkok as part of the movement to stop the city and topple the government of Yingluk Shinawatra. Since the coup Prayuth, now Prime Minister Prayuth, has affirmed his support for Buddhism but also affirmed that people’s faith in Buddhism must be strengthened by cracking down on inappropriate behaviour by monks (‘Declining faith in monks must be fixed: Prayuth’, 2014). In the main part he has continued to use a similar strong approach to governing the monastic sangha as he has used in many other aspects of governance. The junta has continued to rule since 2019 when it called a general election under a revised electoral system which once again led to his confirmation as the Prime Minister of Thailand. Recent studies of the situation up to 2017 (Dubus, 2018) suggest that the situation remained fairly consistent up to then. In the run-up to the 2019 election, there were also concerns raised in the press at the rise of a new Buddhist Party, the Pandin Dharma Party, which campaigned on the platform that Thailand was becoming too secular and the regime was giving undue favour to the Muslim minority (Wongcha-um, 2019). In a sign of the changing times in Thailand, the government has now also proposed legislation to prohibit monastics taking part in any form of social activism (Kurzydlowski, 2022).

Japan

Buddhism in Japan presents a number of apparent contradictions. Over 80% of Japanese people describe themselves as not following any particular religion, yet at the same time around two-thirds of Japanese people say that they follow both Shinto and Buddhism (Iwai, 2017). This reflects how for many Japanese people everyday life is led in ways which are largely secular, but at the same time they observe Shinto traditions and follow Buddhism in matters related to funeral traditions and the celebration of the Bon festivals in honour of the ancestors. Alongside this around 13% of Japanese voters support a party that has Buddhist affiliations, the New Komeito Party, or ‘New Clean Government Party’. This was formed as the Komeito party in 1964 by the lay Buddhist Soka Gakkai organisation, whose teachings are an offshoot of

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the Nichiren Buddhist tradition (Hardacre). The party publicly distanced itself from the Soka Gakkai movement in 1999 and was renamed as the ‘New Komeito Party’ (NKP). The NKP’s website asserts that it has had no formal links with the Soka Gakkai since its foundation in 1964 (‘New Komeito’s Views on Politics and Religion in Japan’, 2013).

The role of Buddhism in Japanese politics is often underestimated, but it continues to influence politics in Japan as New Komeito is a junior party in the ruling coalition. It was part of the ruling coalition with the LDP from 1999 to 2009 and has been in the ruling coalition again since 2012. The influence of the NKP was highlighted in 2014 when Shinzo Abe’s government sought to revoke Article 9 of the Japanese constitution on the non-use of military forces and tensions over this arose between the pacifist-orientated NKP and the LDP. These were only resolved by a compromise in March 2015 (‘Coalition reaches deal on security laws’, 2015) which led to a watered-down resolution that the NKP was able to support. Following Shinzo Abe’s resignation in September 2021, in the subsequent elections the ruling coalition was re-elected under the leadership of Fumio Kishida, and the number of lower-house NKP representatives increased from 29 to 32 (Hayat and Ashley, 2021). Klein and McLaughlin argue in a recent study that although NKP now functions as a largely secular party, its aims are still shaped by its Buddhist origins, and by its ongoing role in the ruling coalition it exerts a strong influence on contemporary Japanese politics (Klein and McLaughlin, 2022).

Vietnam

The Vietnamese government publicly supports religious traditions, including Buddhism, whilst at the same time seeking to stamp out what it regards as superstitions. This means that whenever it dislikes any particular grouping, it labels it a superstition and can ban it (King, 1996; Do, 1999). There is only one official Vietnamese Buddhist organisation that represents some 55,000 Vietnamese monks and nuns. This is the state-sponsored Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha which celebrated its 40th anniversary on 7 November 2021. Reflecting a somewhat similar integration of nationalism into Buddhism as is found in China, the Vietnamese head monk the Venerable Thich Thien Nhon emphasized at the 40th anniversary celebrations that it was led by its motto ‘Dharma, Nation, Socialism’ (Barua, 2021).

The issues associated with the degrees of freedom of religion in Vietnam are reflected in the life of its most prominent twentieth-century Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), who is regarded by many as being the founder of engaged Buddhism (Hanh, 1993). He was forced into exile in 1966 and was only able to return after 39 years of exile. He stayed over a three-year period during 2005–2008 before his final return after he was incapacitated by a stroke to spend the last years of his life in Vietnam in 2018–2022 (‘Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography’, n.d.). His visits during 2005–2008 were also a source of considerable controversy as monks in Vietnam argued that the government was using them to show they were liberal in their attitude to Buddhism, whilst at the same increasing repression of Buddhists and the ‘Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam’ which had been banned in 1981.

However, that there are possibilities to negotiate these challenges is shown by the way that one of Thich Nhat Hanh’s disciples, the monk Minh Niêm, has become a well-known monk in Vietnam associated with promoting mental well-being through drawing on both Mahayana and Vipassana teachings and reconnecting with the environment (Niem, 2012). He also sought to establish a community in Vietnam in 2016 in some ways akin to Thich Nhat Hanh’s ‘Plum village’ under the name of ‘Cherry Blossom Village’ (Bản Hoa Anh Đào).
Myanmar

In Myanmar (formerly Burma) the relationship between Buddhism and politics has been shaped by governance of the country by military regimes over many years. The only exception to this being the period from 2011 to 2021 during which there was a form of democratic governance. Prior to 1990 large parts of the sangha supported pro-democracy elements and the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi. However, the military ignored a 1990 election victory by the NLD and set out to suppress opposition to it in the state and in the Sangha. This culminated in the police attacking a meeting of 7,000 monks in Mandalay to which 20,000 monks responded by boycotting the regime (Mathews, 1999). The government then set out to drive elements hostile to it from the sangha and sought to appropriate Buddhist rhetoric to legitimate its rule. The mangala sutta was promoted as a basis for government policy, and the generals appeared from time to time on television in white robes, like lay Buddhists observing the eight precepts on special days (Houtman, 1999). The notion of virtue was also contested in Burmese politics with both Aung San Suu Kyi and the regime asserting that what they were doing was acting on Buddhist principles and promoting Buddhist virtues. This situation dramatically changed after the election in 2011 when under the leadership of former general, and now President Thein Sein a liberalizing approach was adopted for the governance of Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, and she and the NLD were allowed to take an active part in politics. As part of the liberalization, many monks who had been imprisoned for their anti-government activities were also released. By 2012 a new problem emerged with the emergence of violent anti-Muslim movements within the Buddhist community with some possible support from elements in the military factions. As a symbol of identity, one group adopted the term ‘969’ which relates to a set of key Buddhist beliefs, the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six attributes of the dharma and the nine attributes of the sangha. This was intended to be a symbol to use in distinction to the common Muslim use of the number 768 as a way to represent a phrase used at the beginning of an activity (Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm). One of the most prominent leaders of the 969 movement is a monk, Ashin Wirathu, who was periodically detained at various times along with other monks. He describes himself as ‘the Burmese bin Laden’ and has led an active collaboration with the Bodu Bala Sena from Sri Lanka (see the Sri Lanka section next) in opposition to what he sees as the Muslim threat to Buddhist cultures (Sirilal and Aneez, 2014). This led to anti-Muslim riots, often directed at Rohingya Muslim communities, which began in May 2012 and which have continued sporadically since that time (Thompson, 2013).

The 1 February 2021 military coup followed a general election in which Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party had again won a landslide victory. Widespread public protests under the banner of the Campaign for Civil Disobedience (CDM) have been violently suppressed by the ruling military junta under the leadership of Military Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. The junta has also adopted a policy of fostering support for its actions amongst the Buddhist Sangha and suppressing participation by the Sangha in protests against the military junta. This has included massive donations, at four times pre-coup levels, to the Buddhist sangha; getting leading monks such as the hard-line Sitagu Sayadaw to accompany coup leaders on an arms-purchasing mission to Russia in 2021; and releasing Ashin Wirathu, the Buddhist monk who leads the anti-Muslim 969 movement, in September 2021 (Mendelson, 2022). Despite these efforts to get the Buddhist Sangha to support the coup, Buddhist monks have also been prominent in public protests against the coup, which has led to monasteries being occupied by the military and many younger monks being imprisoned or having to flee into exile, whilst at the
same time Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the junta, or Tatmadaw, has claimed that it is ‘the country’s ultimate spiritual guardian’ (Beech, 2021).

This has led to tension amongst many lay Buddhists about whether by supporting the Buddhist sangha they are supporting Buddhist monastics teaching that Buddhism is about the well-being of all people, or Buddhist monastics who support the military junta as the protector of the Buddhist state (Banu and Zhang, 2021).

**Sri Lanka**

Conflict between the Tamils and the Singhalese dominated the relationship of Buddhism to politics in Sri Lanka from 1980 to 2009, and since then tensions between Buddhism and Islam have also become prominent in Sri Lanka. The background to this goes back to Angarika Dhammadala’s nineteenth-century reforms and independence movements figures such as Walpole Rahula. In Rahula’s seminal pre-independence work of 1946 *Bhikshuvage Urumaya* (‘The Heritage of the Monk’), he rejected the notion that monks could not play an active role in society and in politics, and favoured the development of the role of the ‘political monk’ (Malalgoda, 1977; Bartholomeusz, 1999, 2016). This led by 2001 to conservative nationalist Buddhist monks forming a political party called *Baddegama Samitha* which then became ‘The National Heritage Party’, or *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU). JHU monks then sat in parliament as elected politicians, and from 2007 to 2014 the JHU formed part of the coalition government led by Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, in January 2015 the JHU shifted their support to the government of Maithripala Sirisena when he won the January 2015 election. This may have led to them losing political influence as the JHU has largely ceased to exist since constitutional changes and elections in 2019 led to a new government under the leadership of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as president and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister.

After the defeat of the Tamil Tiger movement in 2009 under the government of Mahinda Rajapaksha, some militant Buddhist groups turned their attention towards Muslim communities and sites. Prominent amongst this is the *Bodu Bala Sena*, or ‘Buddhist Brigade’ which has been influential in fomenting anti-Muslim violence. The BBS was founded in 2004 as a breakaway from the JHU and actively campaigned from 2012 onwards over issues such as whether Buddhist migrant workers in Arab countries were able to practice their religion freely. By June 2014 the BBS and the anti-Muslim rhetoric it employs appear to have been part of the motivation for anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama (‘Sri Lanka Muslims killed in Aluthgama clashes with Buddhists’, 2014). Anti-Muslim viewpoints have continued to play a prominent role in Sri Lankan politics since this time and were particularly inflamed by Muslim bombings of Christian churches and high-profile buildings in Columbo on 19 April 2019 which may have contributed to the victory of the hard-line leader Gotabaya Rajapaksa as president in November 2019. Some commentators now argue that anti-Muslim and pro-Buddhist rhetoric, formally advocated by the JHU and then its offshoot the BBS, has become a mainstay of government rhetoric along with the implementation of measures in order to oppress Muslim minorities, such as an order on 19 March 2021 closing one thousand Islamic schools and banning the wearing of the burqa in public (Haniffa, 2021).

**South Korea**

Buddhism in Korea has been through a number of phases of waxing and waning in influence varying from its dominance during the Koryo dynasty (918–1392) through to anti-Buddhist statutes enacted during the Choson dynasty (1392–1910). Twentieth-century Japanese imperialism
also led to heavy interference by the state in the monastic rules of the sangha. Government control of Buddhist monasteries and temples was further entrenched by the 1961 law on control of Buddhist property in the republic of South Korea. Under the government of Park Chung Hee from 1962 to his assassination in 1979, Buddhism was seen as supporting the regime and was supported by the regime. The next dictator, and then president, Chun Doohwan (1979–1988), was a staunch Christian who withdrew support from Buddhism and tried to attack it wherever possible. Chun turned monasteries and temples into national parks and took control of their lands and began to develop them as tourist resorts. By 1980 this led to open conflict between the sangha and the state. Arrests and repression of Buddhist monks continued and culminated in the popular uprisings of 1986 which led to the first democratic elections in South Korea. The dominant Jogye Order tries to maintain order within the diverse groups of monks in temples, monasteries and renunciate orders that make up its membership. At times this has boiled over into actual fighting, as happened in 1994 at the main Jogyesa Temple in Seoul, for control of the order (Sorensen, 1999). In another incident at Jogyesa Temple in 1998, over a hundred monks barricaded themselves in the temple in protest over the control of funds by another faction of monks and in the end the occupation had to be broken up by riot police ('Monks charged over temple violence', 1998). As well as Buddhists fighting with Buddhists in South Korea, there is also a history of Christian attacks on Buddhist monasteries, sites, monuments and individuals which has been going on since 1982. In view of the ways in which the South Korean government has taken an active part in the management of the sangha and its property since 1945, it is also evident that these conflicts cannot be seen in isolation from political struggles in South Korea over wealth, property and the rights of different communities.

During the office of President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013), there was considerable tension in South Korea due to his strong Protestant beliefs causing him to appear to favor Protestant Christianity. This led to major demonstrations by over sixty thousand Buddhists and others in Seoul in 2008. However, from 2013 to 2017 while President Park Geun-hye was in office, religion seems to have played a less divisive role in politics. President Park Geun-hye has been described as an atheist who has been influenced by Buddhism and Catholicism, and her tenure in office marked a period in which the government adopted an even-handed approach to religion (Song and Ko, 2012).

However, in 2022 politics in Korea continues to reflect the ongoing political friction between supporters of Christianity and Buddhism in Korea. One indication of this is that in the run-up to the 2022 election, there was a controversy over comments made by a well-known politician, Jung Chung-rae, who is a Christian, from the ruling liberal Democratic Party of Korea. He compared the behavior of Buddhists to a story about a swindler in a traditional Korean folk story, a character called Bongi Kim Seon-dal, and said that Buddhists were also exploiting people by charging them for entry into cultural heritage sacred sites (Da-min, 2022). There were also protests led by the prominent Jogye Buddhist Order at its temple in Seoul against the ruling party and perceived bias against Buddhists by then President Moon Jae-in whose term in office came to an end in the presidential election of 2022 (Park, 2022).

Taiwan

Taiwan is home to an extraordinary range of Buddhist movements such as the Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain. There are also numerous questions that have been raised about the relationship between traditional Buddhism, business and politics. The Fo Guang Shan movement, also known outside of Taiwan as the ‘Buddha’s Light International Association’, is an exemplar of this. It was founded in 1967 by the Venerable Hsing Yun and has founded many
temples around the world. These include the Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong, Australia, and the Hsi Lai Temple in California, USA. It is extremely wealthy and is actively engaged in educational and charity work and is the largest Buddhist organization in Taiwan. It is not surprising therefore that it should be courted by political leaders, as essentially such a large organization cannot but be seen as a potential vote-bank in any democratic system. Venerable Hsing Yun has also at times been labelled a ‘political monk’ as he has made comments on Chinese reunification and supported the Tibetan cause. There is also considerable overlap in Taiwan between the government and the *sangha*. In particular a number of religious leaders have played active roles in politics which has led to a blurring of the line between religion and politics (Laliberte, 2004, pp. 42–43).

There has been a continued growth in the last decade in socially engaged Buddhism in Taiwan, and groups such as the Tzu Chi Foundation have a membership of around five million in Taiwan and two million overseas. In addition, overseas membership of Taiwanese Buddhist groups is growing rapidly, with Tzu Chi membership in Malaysia growing from 100,000 to one million in 2013 (Sui, 2014). However, it should be noted that groups like Tzu Chi, which was founded by a nun, the Venerable Cheng Yen, could be characterised as charitable groups inspired by Buddhist ideals rather than Buddhist organisations (Schak and Hsiao, 2005). In terms of the impact of Buddhism on politics in Taiwan, Schak (2009) argues that the large scale of involvement in community-building by Buddhist organisations has fostered the growth of engagement with political representation in Taiwan.

The general trends evident in Taiwanese Buddhist relations with politics have been maintained over the last decade. Commentators have also argued that influential Taiwanese Buddhist movements were, along with Christian groups and traditional Chinese religion traditions, part of the political landscape in Taiwan that led up to the election of Ms Tsai Ing-wen in the presidential election of 2016 (Xin et al., 2016).

**Cambodia**

After the devastation during the Pol Pot regime era (1975–1979), Cambodia has seen an extraordinary rebirth of Buddhist culture which highlights the way that diaspora community members are able to interact with their own countries of origin. Since 1989 when the People’s Republic of Kampuchea started lifting restrictions on religions, large numbers of monasteries have been rebuilt, and the number of monks and nuns has increased enormously. The sangha is today largely seen as a supporter of the government and its leader Hun Sen. That there were other possibilities for perceptions of Buddhism is shown by the work of Maha Ghosananda (1913–2007) who became an exiled Cambodian monk. He was well known for starting in 1992 a practice of *dhammayatra* (‘peace walks’) and organising from 1993 meditations by monks and nuns with the aim of influencing the creation of a ‘just constitution’ for Cambodia (Poethig, 2004, p. 204).

Buddhism has continued to recover in Cambodia from its nadir during the regime of Pol Pot. However, as Ian Harris (2013) pointed out, there are still profound problems, and the situation of Buddhism has changed from ‘virtual extinction to a simulacrum of normality’ (Harris, 2013, p. 167). In general, during the period from 1998 to the present day, while Cambodia has been governed by Prime Minister Hun Sen Buddhist, monastic organisations have been able to function, but there has been from time to time discontent with government. After an election in September 2013, large crowds including Buddhist monks protested against the results of the election, and a three-day protest demonstration included an attempt by a monk, Venerable Sok Dyna, to self-immolate in protest against the governing regime (Titthara, 2013).
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The Cambodian state continues to closely monitor and control Buddhism in Cambodia. An example of this from 2021 was a provincial administration seeking to have the imagery in newly carved public statues of the Buddha altered to ensure that they conformed to government guidelines on Buddhist statues in Cambodia released in 2014 (Bunthoeurn, 2021). There has also been recent debate over challenges to Buddhist engagements in public protests in Cambodia. In particular, civil society and opposition groups are opposing a proposal by the Ministry of Cults and Religion to ban all intentional involvement by monks in political protests and to make any sort of participation in social activism subject to 7 to 15 years of imprisonment (Dara, 2021).

India

There are around ten million Buddhists in India out of its total population of over 1.25 billion people. The majority of Indian Buddhists come from around nine million dalit Buddhist supporters of B. R. Ambedkar. Due to this, Buddhism is a factor in the politics of some states, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP). Their support helped the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) gain government over four periods in UP between 2007 and 2012. However, support for the BSP all but collapsed by the 2022 UP assembly elections in the face of increased dominance by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government (Tandon, 2022). BJP central and state governments’ policies have marginalised dissenting voices from minority non-Hindu communities and undermined support for opposition parties. This has included opposition to a dalit Buddhist mass movement founded in 2015 called the Bhim Army led by Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan, who was repeatedly arrested and detained from 2017 onwards for protesting against anti-dalit atrocities. In 2022 he formed a new political party, called the Azad Samaj Party, and unsuccessfully contested the seat held by the chief minister of UP, Yogi Adityanath, in the 2022 UP assembly elections (Mathur, 2022). Yogi Adityanath’s government in UP has consistently attacked any opposition to its rule and in 2020 passed legislation outlawing mass religious conversions, a characteristic feature of Ambedkarite Buddhist activism (Venugopal, 2022).

The other significant Buddhist populations in India are residents of the Himalayan regions of India and Tibetan refugees in India. After the Indo-Chinese war of 1962, the border areas between India and China become militarised zones, and tension and border skirmishes with China continue to this day. Indian governments have normally maintained a balance between hard-line and soft-line approaches to India-China. Since the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected in May 2014, it followed a policy of reaching out to Indian Buddhists and of supporting Tibetan exiles within India and the Dalai Lama as a guest of India. In a signal of the continuing influence of this approach, in 2021 the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi prominently publicized that he had sent birthday greetings to the Dalai Lama at a time when India-China relations were at a low point due to military clashes on the border (Mohan, 2021).

Overall, the relationship between Buddhism and politics in India at this time is dominated by BJP policies. The BJP courts dalit votes, while suppressing dalit movements, and incorporates Tibetan Buddhists in exile in India into its Hindu majoritarian politics while marginalizing non-Hindu Indian communities (Bakshi, 2019).

Western Buddhism

Despite the prominence of Buddhism in Western countries, the majority of Buddhists in Western countries come from Asian backgrounds and make up only a few percent of the population. For instance, there were 247,743 Buddhists in the 2011 UK census (0.5% of the population),
560,000 Buddhists in the 2016 Australian census (2.4% of the population) and in 2015 around three million Buddhists in the US (1% of the population) according to a Pew Foundation report (‘The Changing Religious Composition of the U.S.’, 2015). Despite the relatively small numbers of Buddhists in Western countries, their influence is substantial as they often represent the visible face of Buddhism for Western cultures. However, Buddhists in western countries often come to be aligned with regional politics in western countries rather than Buddhism per se. For instance, in 2020 the Tibetan government in exile welcomed Donald Trump’s support for the Tibetan cause by his signing of an order reaffirming the right of Tibetans to choose the next Dalai Lama (Gupta, 2020). However, by 2021 the Tibetan Government in Exile had to express its disquiet at the sight of the raising of the Tibetan flag by protestors, possibly of Tibetan origin, during the storming the US Capitol Building in 2020 (Dharpo, 2021).

The future

There is a growing disjuncture between perceptions of Buddhism as a force for global well-being and Buddhism as a vehicle for nationalist state protection, which is increasingly prominent in Asia at this time.

Emblematic of visions of Buddhism as a force for global well-being was the twentieth-century Engaged Buddhist movement which is often associated with the late Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. One of the striking features of Engaged Buddhism is that it became a form of global Buddhist movement in which Asians living in Asia and in the West, and Westerners in the West and in Asia interacted and campaigned for universal civil rights, environmental protection and democratic governance (King, 1996). However, despite the success of this movement internationally, its influence now seems to be increasingly under challenge in many Asian countries. In China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and other Asian countries, Buddhist values are often cited as an element in ‘Asian values’ which form part of how non-democratic state governments are protecting Buddhism.

Emblematic of this development are programs to construct gigantic public Buddhist monuments to soldiers who were martyred in wars to defend Buddhist states. In Sri Lanka in 2019 the president and prime minister attended the inauguration of a giant state-sponsored stupa in honour of the soldiers who died fighting the Tamil Tiger liberation movement (‘Buddhism, politics and the military’, 2021). Constructing monuments to soldiers who died in protection of Buddhist states does not seem to go back to ancient Buddhist traditions, in which monuments such as stupas were built to house the relics of the Buddha and other highly spiritually realised Buddhists. The construction of a temple honouring Buddhist soldiers who died fighting for the state first came to prominence in Japan during the 1930s and is still part of state-sponsored religion in Japan (Victoria, 2015). More recent Buddhist monuments to war dead include the Tawang Stupa in India which was built in 2000 to honour the memory of the soldiers who died defending Eastern India against the Chinese military in the 1962 Indo-Chinese war (‘Welcome to Tawang’, 2009). Thailand also saw the construction during 1990–2018 of a gigantic 92-metre Buddha statue at Wat Muang Monastery which includes memorial gardens in memory of the eighteenth-century Burmese-Siamese war (‘Thailand’s Biggest Buddha’, n.d.).

Alongside these Buddhist war memorial monuments, there is also an emerging trend of constructing gigantic Buddhist monuments. General Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the junta in Myanmar, is sponsoring the building of the largest carved marble Buddha in the world, which is being described as ‘a place of prayer for national peace and stability’ (‘Myanmar junta goes big on giant Buddha statue in midst of crisis’, 2021).
Another way in which Buddhism can be seen as being refashioned into contemporary ‘State-protection Buddhism’ is the extent to which some states argue that Nationalism is an integral part of Buddhism, such as in China and Sri Lanka. Another striking example of this is found in Vietnamese Buddhism where the honouring of those who died as freedom fighters in wars waged against Vietnam has over time been fully integrated into everyday Buddhist practice (Malarney, 2001).

My conclusion is that the future of the relationship between Buddhism and politics will be shaped by contemporary developments in East Asian countries. This will reflect a tension between Buddhism as a support to movements for universal well-being and Buddhism as a form of practice aimed at ‘state protection’ in Buddhist states. On the one hand engaged Buddhists in Asia and globally will, as in the twentieth century, identify with Buddhism as a world religion that supports universal well-being amongst all living beings. On the other hand, Buddhism is likely to remain enmeshed in national struggles for identity. In this dimension of Buddhism, it is likely that Buddhists may be involved with conflicts with non-Buddhists, particularly followers of Islam, and the leaders of Buddhist states may assert that protection of Buddhist states justifies Buddhist violence against other states, and against non-Buddhists.

References


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