

Framing Religious Injustice: Thai Sangha's Discourse on Buddhism Protection in the 21st Century¹

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Abstract

As a response to the discourse that identifies monks as a root cause of the degeneration of Buddhism, the Thai Sangha has generated a counter-discourse of Buddhism Protection that tells the story of a weakened Buddhist society under threat from the subversive activities of foreign faiths. The discourse has been mainly publicized through the activism of the Sangha's new movement – The Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BCT). An analysis of Buddhism protection discourse reveals an underlying cognitive frame that attempts to shape the mind of the Sangha and public audiences to spot injustice done to Buddhism by malevolent non-believers and an ignorant liberal state. The framing of religious injustice has ignited an ethno-nationalist sentiment, calling for collective action from Thai Buddhists in the re-nationalization of Buddhism.

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Introduction

Throughout the past decade, observers of Thai Buddhism have seen a rise of religious chauvinism within the Thai Sangha (the monastic order of Buddhist monks). Suwanna Satha-Anand has suggested that there has been a shrinking space for tolerance in Thai Buddhism, especially in its relations with Islam and Christianity.³ Jerryson has also argued in his study of “military monks” in the unrest of Thailand’s Southernmost Muslim-populated provinces that new space for violence has emerged in the Thai Sangha.⁴ McCargo observed that the politics of Buddhist identity has escalated the tension between Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand’s Deep South.⁵ As a result, he mentioned the necessity for academics of Thai Buddhism to rethink the paradigm that considered Buddhism “a civil religion” of peace and toleration.⁶

The Thai Sangha’s antagonistic sentiment is based on the belief that Thai Buddhism is endangered by at least two threats. The first is the expansion of foreign religious presence in Thailand. The second is a domestic decline in reverence for Buddhist institutions, including the Sangha.

In the past ten years, a group of monks and devoted laymen, called the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BCT), has been working on a campaign to “defend Buddhism”. BCT’s mission is to keep constant vigilance over aggressions or conspiracies that are perceived to undermine the sanctity and influence of Buddhist institutions, especially the Thai Sangha. The organization is also active in dispersing information to Thai people about apparent threats to Buddhism and in promoting strategies to intercept alleged secretive attacks from foreign faiths. BCT’s tactic is to utilize aggressive expression in many protests against “enemies of Buddhism” in order to attract the Thai public’s attention and criticism.

³ Suwanna, “Buddhist Pluralism and Religious Tolerance in Democratizing Thailand”, 193-213.

⁴ Jerryson, “Militarizing Buddhism”, 179.

⁵ McCargo, “The Politics of Buddhist Identity in Thailand’s deep south”, 11-32.

⁶ Keyes, *Buddhism Fragmented*, 24-25.

The move of the BCT, whose members mainly consist of medium and high rank monks, is very interesting. Along with the demise of “political monks” in the 1970s, political activism of the Thai Sangha declined and eventually came to an apparent end. For decades, social critics have considered the establishment of the Thai Sangha administration – the Sangha Council (มหาเถรสมาคม) – a very static, ultra conservative organization that plays no significant role in the modern world. Therefore, the emergence of the BCT at the dawn of the twenty-first century and the Buddhism protection campaign driven by top members of Sangha administration are movements that deserve academic attention. As some BCT members state, the organization is the new political arm of the Sangha establishment.⁷

This article discusses the role of the BCT as the Thai Sangha’s new social movement in constructing and dispersing Buddhism protection discourse within the context of Thailand’s socio-political changes since 1997. The following sections discuss the background of the ever-changing concept of threats to Buddhism and the analysis of the BCT’s Buddhism protection discourse that frame the understanding of the Sangha and Thai Buddhists in the country’s contemporary inter-religious situation.

Sangha and the ever-changing concept of “threats to Buddhism”

Throughout the history of the Sangha and Thai politics, the discourse of Buddhism protection keeps reappearing as a legitimating reason for political acts of all players. The dominating discourse of different historical periods define differently what constitutes threats and the means of protection. Ancient kings argued that extra disciplinary control and intervention in Sangha affairs was needed to protect Buddhism from deterioration by ill-disciplined monks. Modern kings of the nineteenth century proclaimed that fundamentalist reform and the re-organization of the Sangha was to defend Buddhism from irrationality and disorder. The socialist monks

⁷ Interview with Phra Tirawit Shanthawitcho, BCT member, 15 Feb 2010.

of the 1970s reasoned that democratization of the Sangha would prevent Buddhism from distortion by the power-mad, authoritarian ecclesia, while at the same time right-wing monks declared that killing of communists was the right thing to defend Buddhism from their plan of religion destruction.⁸ Different players have interpreted their political ideology to be in line with Buddhist teachings, asserting that the defense of such beliefs was indeed the protection of Buddhism – often considered the moral pillar of Thai society. It is clear that the Buddhism protection discourse has provided political legitimacy to various political forces throughout Thai history. In this tradition, the BCT's activism in generating and dispersing the Buddhism protection discourse of the new millennium can be considered a political act also. However, the changing socio-political conditions and the impact upon the Thai Sangha render an alternative version of threats and remedies. The discourse itself also serves different political purposes.

Since the mid 1970s, the Sangha authority has been facing a problem of its diminishing power over the fragmented monastic order. New religious movements with conflicting view on interpretation of doctrine have broken away from the Sangha administration. The monks themselves are heavily scrutinized by intellectuals and the new generation with respect to corruption cases and scandals, especially in sexual misconduct and commoditization of Buddhist symbols and sacred objects (พุทธพาณิชย์). Together with the decreasing significance of religious institutions in modern society, these negative conditions bring about the public perception of 'Buddhism in crisis' (วิกฤติพุทธศาสนา). This perceived calamity is characterized by the degeneration of Buddhist faith which is mainly caused by the immorality of monks and the impotence of the Sangha administration. Public intellectuals, such as Phra Paisal Visalo, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Nidhi Eosewong, are very influential in providing criticism of the modern Sangha, that it lacks credibility to be society's moral guide.⁹ Mass media also repeatedly projects the tarnished image of monks as corrupted men.

⁸ Somboon, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*, 90, 150-153.

⁹ Phra Paisal Visalo, *Thai Buddhism in the Future*; Sulak, *Conflict, Culture, and Change*; Nidhi, "The Sangha's Future" (in Thai).

Monks of the Sangha establishment are extremely dissatisfied with the blame that stigmatizes them as the destroyer of their own religion. Reactions from resentful monks include the comment that the mass media unjustly distorts the truth about the Sangha for the sake of selling news. The word ‘*sue muan chon*’ (สื่อมวลชน), mass media, is changed to ‘*sue man chon*’ (สื่อมารชน), evil media, in the Sangha’s conferences and gatherings.¹⁰ The monks also reprimand lay critics by reminding them of their lower status as ‘*kharuhat*’ [คฤหัสถ์] – the householder who still clings to worldly attachments – thus criticizing clerics who abide by higher moral standard is by no means proper conduct for them.¹¹

The Thai Sangha totally rejects the popular discourse that monks in general are immoral and insignificant to modern men’s spirituality. Interestingly, this trend has developed in concurrence with the rise of a movement initiated by a group of monks in Sangha universities who believe that the suspect acts of other religions are undermining Buddhism in Thailand. In the 1980s, Catholicism became the first target for the Thai Sangha’s accusation of Buddhism undermining. The instruction from a catholic minister of education to remove a clause from textbooks stating Buddhism as the national religion was cited as evidence of malicious intention. Sangha members also revealed a document obtained from the Second Vatican Council that indicated the plan of catholic missionaries to adopt Buddhist symbols, terms, and rituals in order to attract locals.¹² The Catholic mega-events, especially, the visit of Pope John-Paul II in 1984, which demonstrated the unity and devotion of thousands of Catholics in Thailand, also alarmed the Sangha of the faith’s growing influence. As a result, the Thai Sangha established the Buddhism Promotion Center at Wat Bawon Niwet which has annually organized the Buddhism Promotion Week to strengthen Buddhist faith among Thai people.¹³

¹⁰ Phra Sri Pariyat Moli, “Sangha and Mass Media”, 21 (in Thai).

¹¹ Sathianphong, “Are Ill-Disciplined Monks better than Pious Laymen?”, 15 (in Thai).

¹² Phra Sophon Khanaphon, *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism*.

¹³ Interview with Gen. (ret.) Thongchai Kuasakun, BCT member, 22 Feb 2010.

Although the Sangha's suspicion of Catholic subversive acts did not bring about any serious religious dispute, the idea that perils from foreign religion are real and alarming was permanently embedded within the Sangha's circle from then on. Sangha universities are the main institutions where this antagonistic view has proliferated among the faculty and students. Phra Tham Methaphon (former ecclesiastical rank – Phra Sophon Khanaphon), who published the book, *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism*, was one of the executives in Maha MongkutBuddhist University and an influential mentor to many activist student monks. P.A. Payutto, a leading Buddhist intellectual and a revered lecturer at Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University, although not explicitly denouncing malicious acts of foreign faiths, verifies the existence of such a threat.¹⁴ He is also known to be unsupportive of ecumenist activity for fear of malicious intention by foreign counterparts.¹⁵

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the Thai Sangha extensively spread the story of a plot by foreign religions to destroy Buddhism by defaming the Sangha institution. This included the alleged scheme that malevolent persons staged scenes to defame popular monks, using mass media to dramatize and widely publicize the incidents. Owing to a lack of substantial evidence, the discourse failed to convince the public, but the belief that such peril existed became even more widespread in the monastic community. The narrative of undermining acts from other religions somehow helped to enforce solidarity within the Sangha. The narratives of foreign threat to Buddhism can also be considered a resistance to Thai society's unpleasant discourse of modern monks as the inner perils of the Buddhist faith.

However, the turn of events since Thailand's political reform in 1997 and the aftermath of the 9/11 incident gave rise to another trend that turned the Sangha's suspicious eyes away from Catholicism. Since the dawn of the new millennium, the growing influence of Islam in Thailand has become a topic of discussion within the

¹⁴ Phra Dhammapitaka, *Threats to Buddhism in Thailand* (in Thai).

¹⁵ Interview with Phra Tham Methaphon, BCT head advisor, 2 Mar 2010.

Sangha community for two reasons. First, the changing political landscape after the national reforms in 1997 brought about more tangible developments in Muslim communities and their flourishing evangelical activity. The content of the “People’s Constitution” enacted in 1997 recognized the civil rights of ethnic and religious minorities in more concrete terms, rendering a situation in which these groups gained more political leverage. The constitutional principles of equal participation and decentralization of power also gave Muslim communities access to financial resources and the administrative mechanism of the state. Together with the rise of Muslim politicians in national politics, two pieces of legislation were enacted for the benefits of Thai Muslims within five years following political reform: the Administration of Islamic Organization Act BE 2540 (1997) and the Islamic Bank of Thailand Act BE 2545 (2002).

Second, the world and regional conditions in Southeast Asia after the 9/11 terrorist attack encouraged a surge of Islamic fundamentalism, transnational Islamic movements, and ethno-religious conflicts in the country. To the Thai Sangha’s horror, the American war on terror and the continual suppression of the transnational terrorist network in Southeast Asia exposed an alleged aspiration of Muslim extremists to create pan-Islamic states in the region. Consequential events resulting from this regional tension include the escalation of ethno-religious conflict in Thailand’s three southernmost provinces since 2004. This ‘southern fire’ (ไฟใต้) incident has inflamed the Sangha’s antagonism even further with the killings of monks and burnings of monasteries in the area.

In combination with the socio-political changes of the country that significantly render both political opportunity and institutional constraints on the Thai Sangha, the change in perception toward Islam in this particular moment has brought about the rise of a new Sangha movement actively working on the defense of Buddhist faith. The BCT has played an important role in constructing and dispersing the discourse of Islamic perils which they claim must be counteracted with the Sangha’s plan to re-nationalize Buddhism.

BCT's origin in the context of Thailand's socio-political changes since 1997

The Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2011.¹⁶ The BCT's permanent office is a small, two-storey building located within the enclave of the monk's residence at Wat Racha Thiwat, Bangkok. The office also serves as the broadcasting hub of its mouthpiece, The Radio Station for National Buddhism and Society. BCT regularly organizes seminars and talks on Buddhist teachings and recent issues on Thai Buddhism. The organization also produces printed media and internet websites to update the Thai public about the perceived dangers that Buddhism is facing. The BCT monitors what it considers suspicious moves on the internet and collects news from confidential informants about apparent transgressions of Buddhist sanctity and superiority inside and outside the country. Some of the BCT's executive laymen are retired military generals whose influence is reflected in the organization's prime concern on security.

The BCT's advisory board consists of mostly 'Phra Racha Khana' [พระราชาคณะ], a dignity belonging to the royal chapter of monks, two of whom are members of the Sangha Council. The executive board members are mostly of the junior 'Phra Khru' [พระครู] rank, making it easier for them to engage in political activism, while enjoying low-profile support from the top of the Sangha administration.¹⁷ The BCT always adopts a hard-liner's stance in defending the Sangha's policy. It is also against harsh criticisms from laymen toward any incompetency and immorality of the Sangha Council.

The origin of the BCT is related to the set of events in the aftermath of Thailand's political reform. In 1997, the principles of the new constitution, comprising decentralization, people participation, and the check and balance of political power, were applied to every facet of Thailand's all-round reform attempt. The emerging civil

¹⁶ *A Decade of BCT* (in Thai).

¹⁷ "Appointment of Executive Committee, Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand" (in Thai).

society at the time was eager to undo the corrupt conditions in every facet of Thai life, including the matters of morality and religion. There was an attempt by lay Buddhist societies and charity organizations to raise the issue of moral development and religious reform as part of the national agenda.¹⁸ They argued that Buddhist reform could be achieved by eliminating distorted teachings, equipping the Sangha with able executive persons and good governance, so that they could conduct effective propagation and the functional educational activities.¹⁹ The bid to reform the Sangha and Buddhist affairs by the laity immensely pressured the monks, especially given the prospect of laity participation and decentralization of Sangha authority in reform proposals that could compromise the integrity of the existing Sangha administration.

Meanwhile, changes in state administration resulting from the 1997 reforms also shook the secure foundation of the Thai Sangha, especially, the enactment of the National Education Act in 1999. For the sake of education reform, the principles of equal participation and decentralization implemented in the legislation required the set-up of a new administrative body, the National Committee of Religion and Cultural Affairs. This committee was designed to replace the late Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education by having representatives from every state-recognized religion jointly manage the finances and policy of the country's cultural and religious matters.

The new framework was clearly unacceptable to the Thai Sangha. The fact that Buddhist affairs and Sangha administration were to be put under the supervision of a group of non-believers was unthinkable to them. Rumors spread within the Sangha community that a Muslim and a Christian member of the education reform committee were behind the controversial scheme.²⁰ After many rounds of unsuccessful negotiations with government authorities to revise this plan, the frustrated Sangha eventually decided to enter street politics, calling for an independent organization for Buddhist affairs and Sangha

¹⁸ "Reforming Buddhism; Buddhist's Big Agenda in 2001", 15 (in Thai).

¹⁹ Witthayakon, *How Dhamma Solves People's Economic Problem*, 50 (in Thai).

²⁰ Phra Maha Dewit Yasasi, *Education Reform Policy for Buddhism or the Scheme to Destroy Buddhism*, 2 (in Thai).

administration. On 5 April 2001, following the consecutive meetings of Sangha members at Wat Bawon Niwet, the BCT was founded as a platform organization for the envisaged long-term demonstration by a group of faculty members from the two Sangha universities and the close-aides of high ranking monks. In its founding declaration, the BCT expressed anger and disapproval at the reform process that the Sangha was forced to undertake as follows:

Recently, the term “reform” has been inappropriately applied to Thai society without the deep Yoniso-Manasikan (right contemplation), especially, among Thais educated from Western countries. They apply pure foreign thoughts as a basis of their own thinking, without adaptation to fit the Thai situation. They reform everything that expresses the uniqueness of being Thai. Those people called “academics” have no understanding of the principles of Buddhism. More importantly, they have no spirit of Buddhists. Thai society is re-ordered by this flow of reform current. There is no exception for religious society and Buddhist affairs. If this is for the prosperity of Buddhism, it is acceptable. However, there seems to be a hidden intention to destroy or swallow Buddhism by the enactment of laws...²¹

The declaration reflected the BCT’s interpretation of the reform as harmful and suspicious. Its mission was, therefore, the protection of Buddhism and the Sangha from intervention by foreign religions in the reform process. The new-founded organization mobilized thousands of monks, novices, nuns, and their parishioners to march through central Bangkok and camp for several days in front of the Parliament building, calling for the independent administration of Buddhist affairs. They were eventually successful when the Parliament approved the founding of The Office of National Buddhism. However, the BCT considered this “half a victory” when compared to its ultimate aspiration to secure Buddhism with the permanent status of national religion in the constitution.²²

²¹ Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand, *Origin of the Rift* (in Thai).

²² Interview with Phra Thep Wisutthi Kawi, BCT leader, 16 Feb 2010.

Framing injustice: The political downsizing of Buddhist influence

By its origin, the BCT is the political manifestation of the Thai Sangha in the twenty-first century. The BCT's activism can be regarded as a social movement – a non-state channel for the Sangha to voice their grievances and to strive for meaningful existence in modern society. Apart from its first mission that established the independent Office of National Buddhism, the BCT has been persevering in its national religion campaign and its protest of religious injustice against Buddhism. Indeed, the BCT's activism communicates with Thai society their particular set of cultural and political thoughts, narrating a story of imbalanced interrelations between Buddhism, other religions, and the state in Thailand today. This is a narrative of Buddhism protection that attempts to frame the mind of the Sangha and public audiences to spot injustice done to Buddhism by the perceived malevolent non-believers and the ignorant liberal state.

In order to achieve the understanding of Buddhism protection discourse, the “frame” of thoughts and reasoning used by the Sangha and the BCT in simplifying and interpreting the complexity of related events and experiences must be extracted from their messages.²³ According to Kuypers, “frames” are generally the central organizing idea often found within a narrative account of an issue or event. They operate in four key ways by defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.²⁴ In this regard, the Buddhism protection discourse is also constructed by a set of frames that operate in all of these four dimensions, producing a new meaning of threat to Buddhism, its culprits, its saviors, and the antidote.

When looking at the grievances of the Thai Sangha which has long been expressed through the BCT's political activism, the emphasis has been on the issue of injustice in religious affairs management. In fact, the origin of the BCT represents the effect of a new political order that deprives the Sangha of the safe shelter they used to take for granted – the unstated superiority of Buddhist

²³ Chesters, *Social Movements: The Key Concepts*, 55.

²⁴ Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*.

institutions in Thailand. The BCT deems that the equal distribution of autonomy and resources to religious institutions in the reform process is unfair, considering, they argue, that Buddhists are in the majority and Buddhism is undeniably the traditional faith of the nation. In the case of the National Committee of Religion and Cultural Affairs discussed earlier, the BCT leaders questioned the fairness of the proportion of representatives from each religion. They argue, that ninety-five percent of the population is Buddhist, while the faiths with the second-largest number of followers constituted only five percent and other religions are even less. Thus, it was totally unfair that quotas for the committee chairs were distributed evenly for everyone.²⁵ For the Sangha, the practice was indeed “the political downsizing of Buddhist influence”, since the incomparable wealth of Buddhist monasteries and budgets contributed by the majority of Buddhist taxpayers were to be managed by religious minorities who held equal votes on the committee.²⁶

The representation of Buddhists in other reformed organizations was also an issue of concern for the BCT, especially, the case of representation in the Committee of Education Reform. The BCT expressed disapproval of the legitimacy of the committee for the fact that its nine members included a dean of a Christian university and a Muslim educationist. Although the rest were supposed to be Buddhists, one of the BCT leaders argued that they could not be considered true representation of Buddhist educators since they “forget their Buddhist roots and only dedicate themselves to secular education, while Christian and Muslim educationists step in with strong determination to facilitate religious education for their people.”²⁷

Thai education reform adopted the American principle of secular education and allowed minorities to decide their own cultural and social studies curriculum. In the BCT leader’s opinion, this was clearly devastating. The new curriculum replaced the teaching of Buddhism,

²⁵ Phra Maha Cho Thatsaniyo, “Breaking the Hidden Agenda in the Drafting of Religion and Culture Act”, 24 (in Thai).

²⁶ “Sangha Forum Criticizes Education Reform ‘The Order of Hungry Ghosts’”, 1, 21 (in Thai).

²⁷ Interview with Phra Maha Cho Thatsaniyo, BCT member, 18 Feb 2010.

which was compulsory for ethical study in schools nationwide, with the secular subject of civil ethics. The BCT publications criticized the new curriculum as a total uprooting of Buddhist faith in young generations. In contrast to Buddhism which was cast away by the new education system, they argued that Christians and Muslims were exploiting the reform principle of equal representation and administrative decentralization to build up their influence in local education and religious schools.

As a result, the focus of the BCT's attention has been fixed on the injustice done to Buddhist institutions by the reform process which they consider has made them smaller, poorer, and weaker. In the BCT's regular talks and radio programs, it always reiterates the disappointment that the Sangha is 'mishandled' (ตกหล่น) and Buddhism is made 'thinner' (เรียวลง) by the whole reform process. The BCT complains that most Buddhist politicians blindly abide by secularism and liberal principles, avoiding endorsement of Buddhist superiority in all aspects, while religious minorities are to be significantly empowered. In the Sangha's opinion, this is the over-promotion of human rights in a contemporary Thai context rather than a straight practice of secularism. For the BCT, most parliamentarians are "identity card Buddhist" – a person registered as Buddhist in name only, but no longer possessing a true Buddhist spirit.²⁸ They deem that explicit glorification of Buddhism is politically incorrect, thus, proposals for projects for Buddhist's benefits and Buddhism promotion are always turned down, while the case of Islam is the total opposite. It seems that Thai politicians are more willing to please the violence-inclined Muslims for fear of political backfire. The Sangha members apply the Buddhist term derived from the teaching regarding the four sources of bias (อคติ) to the issue, arguing that Buddhist politicians are biased by '*bhayagati*' [ภยาคติ], being unjust because of cowardice.²⁹ The monks warn that the Buddhist majority are at risk of becoming a minority in their own country soon if the violation of Buddhism's rights by politics is still tolerated.

²⁸ "Preacher Monk Unveils Evil Plot to Destroy Buddhism", 1, 2 (in Thai).

²⁹ *Agati* (Pali) in Buddhist teachings originally means the four 'wrong paths'. These four are: the path of greed (*chanda*), hate (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*), cowardice (*bhaya*).

Most BCT leaders also denounce the double-standard treatment applied to Buddhism by non-Buddhist politicians. The most cited case among BCT people is Wan Muhammad Nor Matha, a leading Malay Muslim politician who became a cabinet minister several times until 2004. During his term in office, new laws and amendments beneficial to the development and expansion of Muslim communities were enacted. Furthermore, his policy of cutting off Buddhist monks' welfare, such as free bus rides and half-priced plane tickets, was harshly criticized. Many BCT monks claimed that when he was the Minister of the Interior, he ordered a Buddha statue to be removed from the set of customary nation-religion-king symbols which was always erected in government ceremonies. A leader of the BCT criticized such disdainful acts in an interview with a newspaper, "Don't forget that here is a Buddhist country. Even that you don't honor us, acceptance and support (to Buddhism) must be extended."³⁰

The dissatisfaction of monks with the growing Muslim influence is based on the view that the religion flourishes at Buddhism's expense. They argue that Thailand, as a compassionate and broad-minded Buddhist country, has given Muslims ideal equality and religious freedom, and even high posts in bureaucracy and national politics are allowed to be given away to Muslims. However, Muslims exploit Thai Buddhist's kindness in accumulating resources and strengths, while scheming for destruction of Buddhism at the same time. The BCT analogously refers to Thai Buddhists in such situation as a kind horse. 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 BCT argues that the moral of this story fits the case of Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a Muslim general who became head of the military junta that ruled Thailand after the 2006 coup. Although many Thai Buddhists supported his regime, out of the total nine members for the National Committee of Religious Affairs, Gen. Sonthi appointed seven Muslims to fill the posts. BCT members held a grudge against Gen. Sonthi as he undermined the BCT's campaign for constitutional statement of Buddhism as the

³⁰ "MCU Monks Protest Price Rise for Plane Tickets", 31 (in Thai).

national religion in 2009. One of the BCT lay members, a retired military general, claimed that he managed to acquire a copy of a letter from Gen. Sonthi to the Chula Ratcha Montri (spiritual leader of Thai Muslims) that promised not to grant Buddhism national religion status.³¹ Recently, Gen. Sonthi founded a political party which clearly declared its intention to serve Thai Muslim's needs.

The BCT also narrates the story of Muslim's growing influence in Thailand as an exploitation of Buddhist resources. They point out, for example, the large sum of tax money paid by the Buddhist majority is disproportionately allocated to government budgets which annually sponsor Muslims in their Hajj pilgrimage, while the Sangha's petition for state sponsorship of Buddhist pilgrimage is refused. In their view, the integrity of "Buddhist territory" in Thailand is also in jeopardy. The BCT's survey of deserted Buddhist monasteries in rural area found that growing Muslim settlements have made use of the land by turning it into mosques and religious schools.³² BCT members always relay the story of funding and investments from the Middle East that encourage Muslim migration from the south to grow rubber plantations in the northeast provinces. The building of new mosques and expanding Muslim communities in the neighborhood are perceived as an invasion and the loss of the Buddhist motherland. In a cable television program of their own production, one of the BCT members lamented: "As a northeasterner, I can say this is unprecedented. Since our ancestor's time, no one has been heard of a mosque being built on the longtime Buddhist land of *Isan* (northeast)."³³ The suspicion of Muslim subversive intention is substantiated in their opinion by the escalation of violence in Thailand's deep south where Muslim secessionists kill Buddhist monks, burn down monasteries, and expel Buddhist communities. The BCT talks remind their audience often of a lesson that must be learned from a historical event – the sacking of Nalanda Buddhist University in the twelfth century by Turkish Muslim that eventually led to the decline of Buddhism in India.

³¹ Interview with Gen. (ret.) Thongchai Kuasakun, BCT member, 22 Feb 2010.

³² "Sangha Council Unveils Illegal Occupation of Deserted Monasteries", 15 (in Thai).

³³ "Surveillance of people, Surveillance of Dhamma" (in Thai).

“Expressive Buddhists” and the re-nationalization of Buddhism

The BTC’s emphasis on the injustice of Islam prospering at the expense of Buddhism is the “frame” that defines the state of contemporary inter-religious relations in Thailand as problematic. The religious injustice frame is the diagnostic element of the BCT’s Buddhism protection discourse, attributing blame to Muslims and irresponsible behavior of Buddhists as major causes of the waning Buddhist influence and the disadvantaged situation of Buddhists nowadays. However, the functions of the religious injustice frame is not only limited to the diagnostic part of the discourse, but is also significant in the prognostic process by making moral judgments and suggesting remedies to the discourse’s central problematic issue.

Since the BCT’s argument points to Muslim influence and the inert mindset of modern Buddhists as root causes of injustice to Buddhism, therefore, their remedy to such problem is the adjustment of the unbalanced inter-religious relations. Under the religious injustice frame, BCT leaders perceived that Thai Muslims have gained religious influence and political leverage by being active, vocal, and aggressive. Meanwhile, they argue that most Buddhists are passive and indifferent to the country’s religious affairs, giving the impression that they are ‘sleeping’ and unaware of the coming threats,³⁴ which is the weakness of the Buddhist majority that the malevolent Muslims take advantage of. In order to eliminate this vulnerability, they assert that the opinion and stance regarding religio-political issues of modern Buddhists must be changed. Having been influenced by the religious injustice frame, the BCT has argued that modern Buddhists should become more ‘expressive’ and forthright in asserting claim of Buddhist superiority.

The BCT views the ‘expressive Buddhists’ strategy as a direct way to compensate for the loss of Buddhist influence. In their opinion, one cannot face injustice squarely with a non-committed stance and cowardice; the way the Buddhist majority, especially those in power, dares not to utter a word about the faith’s supremacy is its great

³⁴ *Buddhists, Wake up!* (in Thai).

vulnerability.³⁵ They go on to state that in a situation in which the hostile group determines foul play, a straightforward policy respecting liberal principles of religious freedom and minority rights is destined to be outsmarted; indeed, the avoidance of Buddhism glorification, although politically correct, has turned into discrimination against Buddhism. The Sangha complains that budgets in support of Buddhism promotion are cut and proposals of the same purpose are turned down without good reason. For the monks, the case not only reflects the politician's misunderstanding that Buddhism is already better-off, but also their speculation that the obvious endorsement of Buddhism may invoke the wrath of Muslims.

To resist such inclination of policy makers, the BCT argues that Thai Buddhists in general must be bold, passionate, and resolute in showing off Buddhism's dominating presence. Their main strategy is to re-nationalize Buddhism by explicitly stating its national religion status in the constitution. The objectives of this campaign are "to reflect the impartial reality that Buddhism is the traditional faith of Thai majority and to prevent future distortion of this undeniable fact."³⁶ The BCT also hopes that the visible and tangible declaration of Buddhism's national status will lead to the commitment of the Thai state in upholding the religion. Most BCT leaders also explain that the constitutional statement is similar to "a marriage certificate" that securely binds the Thai state and Buddhism.

Although the campaign faces opposition that criticizes its projection of ethno-nationalist stance as inconsistent with the Buddhist principle of non-attachment (วิภวาทะ), the BCT objects to the comment and its accompanying suggestion that faith in Buddhism is best to be kept in the mind of the Thai people (นับถือด้วยใจ). For the BCT, the unexpressive devotion is insufficient since the absence of Buddhists voices and presence has already proved disadvantageous for them. The idea that Buddhism protection should take precedence over the religion's restraining tradition and liberal principles of the state, they argue, is made credible by emphasizing the extremity of

³⁵ "Phra Sri Pariyat Moli 'We Need Negotiating Power'", 2, 5 (in Thai).

³⁶ Interview with Phra Thep Wisutthi Kawi, BCT leader, 16 Feb 2010.

threats which must be dealt with by special measures. Since 2004, the higher degree of severity and urgency of the Muslim threat has been put in comparison with the lesser Catholic threat of the recent past. In preaching by BCT monks, the analogy of dangerous snakes is often employed. Catholics are like a silent, stealthy python (งูเห่า) that slowly constricts and swallows Buddhism. However, Muslims are like a fierce, attacking cobra (งูเห่า) whose venom quickly kills its victims.³⁷ The perceived Muslim threat is uncommonly immense and very alarming such that the standard norms and counter-measures no longer apply. This is evidently in the BCT's statement regarding the killing of monks in southern provinces that encourages the government and the military to resolve the conflict decisively by force.³⁸

Table 1:

Interpretive meanings in the BCT's Buddhism protection discourse as generated by the religious injustice frame

Frame operations	Interpretive Meanings
Defining problem	Marginalization of Buddhist influence
Diagnosing cause	Inert/biased Buddhist majority, vocal Muslims
Making moral judgment	Protection of religion above liberal principles
Suggesting Remedy	Strong expression of Buddhist dominance

Conclusion

In sum, the emphasis on the injustice in that Islam prospers at the expense of Buddhism is the “frame” that has defined the state of contemporary inter-religious relations in Thailand as problematic. The BCT and the Sangha's narrative accentuates this religious injustice frame, stressing that Buddhism's rights to be upheld by the Thai state as a predominant and native faith is unjustly violated by the malevolent others. Islam is pictured as a subversive foreign faith, a parasite that has benefited from compassionate Buddhist tradition and the ignorance

³⁷ Interview with Phra Maha Bunthung Chutintharo, former vice-chancellor, Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University, 12 Feb 2010.

³⁸ *BCT Statement on the Unrest in Three Southernmost Provinces* (in Thai).

of Thais. The religious injustice frame used by the BTC has tried to ignite an ethno-nationalist sentiment calling for collective action by Thai Buddhists to offset these perceived unjust inter-religious relations, arguing that only by discarding liberal principles and becoming ‘expressive Buddhists’, Buddhism’s dominating influence as well as its national status can be restored.

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