

Buddhist Nationalism and Extremism in Myanmar and North America

Written by Brenna Artinger

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Buddhist Nationalism and Extremism in Myanmar and North America

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/31/buddhist-nationalism-and-extremism-in-myanmar-and-north-america/>

BRENNA ARTINGER, AUG 31 2023

This article is part of the Buddhism and International Relations article series, edited by Raghav Dua.

Across the global landscape, one does not expect to see images of Buddhist monks training pro-junta militias in Asia or practitioners spewing hateful Antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric online – but such scenes are not uncommon in recent years. While largely seen as a compassionate and peaceful religion across the world, Buddhism is also a source of nationalism, extremism, and violence. This article will focus on Buddhist nationalism and extremism in Myanmar and North America.

To begin I'd like to provide a brief technical note, as while I see nationalism and extremism as separate in their aims, it is clear that the goals of Buddhists in both of the countries/regions depicted in this article are to maintain an idealized version of the *Dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha). By using the term Buddhist nationalism, I am referring to violence by individuals in predominantly Buddhist countries who are furthering and maintaining the religious identity of their state. Whereas, by using the term Buddhist extremism, I am referring to violence by largely (but not exclusively) Buddhist converts outside of Asia who feel that their personal and religious beliefs are being threatened. I argue that what unites both nationalism and extremism is a preservationist agenda, which seeks to prevent external influence from corrupting a religion that is seen as 'pure.'

The first example or case study of Buddhist violence occurs in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar. Along the lines of religious affiliation, Myanmar is a majority Buddhist country with roughly 88% of the population identifying as Theravada Buddhist, and with minority religions Christianity and Islam making up 6% and 4% of the population, respectively. The history of Myanmar in recent centuries has been tumultuous and often dominated by conflict, beginning with three consecutive Anglo-Burmese Wars (from 1824-1885) and British colonial occupation from 1824 to 1948. More recent years have seen a military *coup d'état* wrestle control from the fledgling democratic government in early 2021, resulting in command by a military junta and the arrest of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Buddhist nationalism has long been prevalent in Myanmar, with the minority Muslim Rohingya population experiencing persecution at the hands of the Buddhist majority. While persecution against the Rohingya has been ongoing for decades, skirmishes between Muslim groups and Burmese police officers along the border with Bangladesh are what are believed to have started the military crackdown against the Rohingya in 2016. Buddhist nationalism occurs both at the hands of the laity and the Buddhist monastics resident in the country, with monastics using hateful and Islamophobic language to spur the lay people into violence. Such language has centered around depicting the Rohingya and Muslim Burmese peoples as 'others' who will corrupt or threaten the Buddhist religion and identity within Myanmar. This purported 'protection' of Buddhist values is often achieved through dehumanizing language, with nationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu famously referring to Muslims as "mad dog[s]," and monk Sitagu Sayadaw delivering a speech to military officers in which he referred to Muslims as 'less than human.' Now more than two-and-a-half years since the military junta seized control of the government, Buddhist monks are directly participating in the violence of the military, with those such as nationalist monk, Wathawa creating pro-junta militias to combat the anti-military resistance fighters. The junta is also notable in its promulgation of Buddhism, allegedly offering money and donations to Buddhist monastics and monasteries to encourage their support. Along with a

Buddhist Nationalism and Extremism in Myanmar and North America

Written by Brenna Artinger

recently created 1,700 ton marble Buddha statue that was unveiled earlier this month, aforementioned monk Ashin Wirathu was presented with an award for “outstanding work for the good of the Union of Myanmar” from the military government.

Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar continues to remain prominent, proliferated further by the military junta and their desire to promote a Buddhism free of ulterior blemish. Such views posit that the presence of Muslims within Myanmar is degrading the institution of Buddhism and the national identity of the ethnic Bamar people, an idea that has very dangerous consequences. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 730,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following the massacres and genocide by the Burmese military, with an estimated 25,000 people killed since 2016. Such actions have led to an ongoing lawsuit against Myanmar within the International Court of Justice.

A second example of Buddhist violence is in North America and European convert communities in which Buddhist extremism has emerged in recent years, taking form largely as a backlash to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In a paper published with Dr. Ann Gleig in 2021, we explore a range of conservative and extremist individuals across online Buddhist communities, ranging from reactionary centrism to alt-right Buddhists.

The most extreme of these individuals are self-identified alt-right Buddhists. Due to the anonymity of the individuals expressing such views, we do not have a full understanding of where they are from, though the majority appears to live or originate from North America and Europe. It is notable that Buddhism represents quite a small religious demographic percentage in North America (about 1% of all religions in the United States and 1.4% in Canada), so unlike the nationalism seen in Myanmar, the extremism witnessed amongst Buddhists is not a nationalistic endeavor, but rather a reaction to progressive changes within convert Buddhist communities.

One prominent instance of Buddhist extremism is the (now defunct) podcast, Right-Wing Dharma Squads, which was formed in 2019 to allow four Buddhist individuals to discuss their views of Buddhism and politics. In this podcast, the participants are critical of so-called ‘Western Buddhism,’ or the Buddhism that has evolved since its arrival in the West from Asia, often arguing that Buddhism has become stripped down from its original form (Gleig and Artinger 2021, 32). The participants are also opposed to many facets of Engaged Buddhism, particularly efforts towards LGBTQ+ inclusion and the Black Lives Matter Movement, which they see as liberal corruptions of the true Buddhist teachings. In a similar vein, the description of the now private subreddit r/AltBuddhism goes so far as to describe Western Buddhism as “castrated, weak, [and] corrupted by progressivism” (Gleig and Artinger 2021, 33). Such comments show a preservationist urge towards maintaining the ‘inherently’ masculine and traditionalist Buddhism as it was originally founded in textual sources (though this interpretation is dependent on specific readings of early Buddhist texts). It is notable that such arguments posit a Buddhism that is hyper-, if not toxically masculine, and could be argued does not exist in the form that is presented. In other words, alt-right Buddhism suggests there is a standard or idealized version of Buddhism that is constantly being threatened, though it is unclear whose version of Buddhism it is or whether it ever existed in its utopic form.

In addition to the comments made by right-wing and alt-right Buddhists against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, there are also those that encourage or espouse violence. The first episode of the Right Dharma Squads podcast is entitled, ‘This Podcast Respects U Wirathu,’ referring to Ashin Wirathu mentioned earlier in this article, with the participants using popular Islamophobic tropes to dehumanize the Rohingya. Other individuals who have taken up alt-right Buddhist views include the American former monk Paññobhāsa, and Canadian Brian Ruhe, both of whom have engaged in Antisemitism, including the conspiracy theory that Jews are taking over Buddhist communities by infiltrating higher levels of leadership.

Right-wing and alt-right Buddhists are thus shown to have similar aims to the Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar, with both seeking to preserve a traditionalist and idealized version of Buddhism and the Buddha’s teachings. However, while Buddhist nationalists are more oriented toward sustaining the religious identity of their state, Buddhist extremists feel that both their religious as well as personal/political identities are being challenged and threatened. The violence is thus committed by Buddhist extremists in order to reassert or re-actualize their own identities. It is clear regardless of whom the actions are being committed by, whether those with nationalist or extremist agendas, that religious and political violence is growing across the world, posing a threat to world peace and stability.

Buddhist Nationalism and Extremism in Myanmar and North America

Written by Brenna Artinger

About the author:

Brenna Artinger (they/them) is an independent Buddhist Studies scholar and journalist who received their MPhil in Buddhist Studies from the University of Oxford in 2020.