

Privileged Nation: Buddhist Nationalism, Regime Change, and Anti-Minority Mobilization in Myanmar

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Abstract: What explains the emergence of mass nationalist mobilization against unthreatening outgroups during democratization? According to existing literature in political science, bellicose nationalist mobilization during democratization is the by-product of threatened political elites' riling up fears of ethnic or religious others to accrue or maintain political power. Literature on right-wing nationalism in Europe and North America argues that it is status threats from mass immigration and democratic disillusionment that has led to the contemporary resurgence of right-wing nationalism. However, this literature cannot explain why there is a resurgence in exclusionary nationalism when democratic institutions are on the rise and minorities pose no credible threat to the majority. This paper argues that a heightened threat to privileged traditional authorities' moral authority from ingroup opposition-linked leaders during democratization is a sufficient condition for the resurgence of exclusionary nationalist mobilization against unthreatening outgroups. This paper focuses on the puzzling case of mass Buddhist nationalist mobilization against the Muslim minority during Myanmar's political transition and draws on data from seven months of fieldwork in Myanmar, structured interviews with Buddhist clergy, and process tracing.

Introduction

In 2012, at the beginning of Myanmar's historic political liberalization period, communal conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State. This violence sparked waves of Muslim-Buddhist conflict across the country and led to the emergence of The Committee to Protect Race and Religion (*MaBaTha*)—an anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement that called for restrictions on the civil liberties of the Rohingya, campaigned for a boycott on Muslim businesses, and supported laws that aimed to “regulate marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men, to prevent forced conversions, to abolish polygamy and extra-marital affairs, and to promote birth control and family planning in certain regions of the country” (Frydenlund 2017). Despite making up a substantial proportion of the population in Rakhine State, Myanmar Muslims only consist of 4% of the Myanmar population overall. Furthermore, the timing of the emergence of this exclusionary Buddhist nationalist movement is surprising—it emerged just as democratic institutions and leaders in Myanmar were taking hold as opposed to during a period of democratic decline. Why did an exclusionary Buddhist nationalist movement emerge in Myanmar at a time when the Muslim population posed no credible threat to the Buddhist population and democracy was on the rise?

Existing literature on exclusionary nationalist mobilization cannot explain the emergence of mobilization against unthreatening minorities during democratization. Explanations for the resurgence of exclusionary nationalist mobilization at the end of the cold war and during the third wave of democratization assume that the targeted group is threatening to a national group's claims to territory and statehood (van Evera 1994, Posen 1993). Scholars, instead, emphasize power-seeking political elites' instrumentalist propagation of ethnic or nationalist appeals as

driving the upsurge in chauvinist nationalism. Threatened elites from a collapsing authoritarian regime and their political challengers use inflammatory nationalist propaganda to compete for mass allies or to demobilize ethnic or coethnic opponents (Mansfield and Snyder 1995, Snyder and Ballentine 1995, Snyder 2000, Gagnon 1994). The fear produced by belligerent nationalist rhetoric against other nations sparks counter-mobilization and escalatory actions that lead to large-scale violence (Posen 1993, Lake & Rothchild 1998).

More recent literature on the rise of extreme right-wing mobilization in Europe and North America also cannot explain the emergence of exclusionary nationalist mobilization against unthreatening minorities during democratization. Many scholars argue that the recent resurgence of right-wing nationalism is due to perceived threats to the majority group's social and economic status by minorities and mass immigration (Mutz 2018, van der Brug et al. 2000, Mudde 2007). Other scholars locate the explanation in a broader disillusionment with democratic institutions and established political parties (Koopmans 1996, Rydgren 2005). Neither of these explanations fit the case of Myanmar, in which an exclusionary Buddhist nationalist movement that targeted an unthreatening Muslim population emerged at a moment when a popular democratic opposition party was posed to enter government.

I argue that an exclusionary nationalist movement against an unthreatening outgroup is more likely to arise during democratization when an authoritarian regime grants conservative traditional authorities—i.e. religious clergy, tribal leaders, or other culturally conservative leaders—a monopoly on moral authority through exclusionary nation building practices pre-transition. During a later period of democratization, when popular support for democracy is high, these privileged traditional authorities face a heightened threat to their moral authority from ingroup opposition-linked activists that garnered significant democratic legitimacy through their

struggle against authoritarian rule. Mobilizing exclusionary nationalist narratives that manufacture an existential threat to the ingroup's traditions and culture from an outgroup is an effective strategy for privileged traditional authorities to combat this threat to their moral authority. These narratives raise the salience of ingroup ethnoreligious identity over political identity, reducing privileged traditional authorities' comparative disadvantage in competition among ingroup leaders with democratic legitimacy for moral authority. Contrary to the literature on nationalist mobilization that focuses either on threats to political elites' power or perceived threats to ingroup political, economic, or social status from ethnic outgroups, this argument focuses on threats to traditional authorities' moral authority from ingroup civil society leaders and organizations.

My argument applies to post-colonial countries in which the majority group's traditional institutions and culture have historically played an important role in nationalist mobilization against foreign rule. This is an important scope condition because it ensures that exclusionary nationalist repertoires of contention will resonate broadly with the masses when remobilized during democratization, and that traditional authorities have credible claims to protecting the nation. However, the mere existence of a history of exclusionary nationalist mobilization does not make remobilization of this repertoire of contention inevitable during a period of democratization. My theory argues that among countries with a history of exclusionary nationalist mobilization against foreign rule, democratization heightens the risk of its resurgence when traditional authorities were granted a monopoly over moral authority pre-transition. This coercive monopoly on moral authority for traditional authorities increases the gap in democratic legitimacy between opposition-linked leaders and organizations and traditional authorities, which

in turn, heightens the threat to traditional authorities' moral authority from ingroup opposition-linked leaders during democratization.

I demonstrate my argument through an in-depth case study of the emergence of a mass Buddhist nationalist movement against the Muslim minority in Myanmar during the country's most recent liberalization period. Drawing on data from fieldwork, historical analysis, and interviews with difficult-to-access Buddhist clergy during an unstable period of Myanmar's political transition, I demonstrate that the Myanmar military regime's granting of prominent Buddhist monks within the *Sangha*¹ with a monopoly on moral authority through exclusionary nation building incentivized these regime-privileged Buddhist leaders to mobilize an exclusionary nationalist movement during the political liberalization period. During seven months of field work and multiple trips to Myanmar, I collected publications from Buddhist nationalist leaders, held focus group discussions with local civil society organizations, and conducted over 50 interviews with Buddhist religious and secular activists, civil society leaders, and leaders of an anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement in Myanmar.

This paper proceeds as follows. I will first introduce my theory. Then I discuss the emergence of the anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement during Myanmar's recent political liberalization period. Next, I trace how the former Myanmar military granted prominent Buddhist monks in the *Sangha* with a monopoly on moral authority through coercive nation building. I then analyze the rhetoric of the Buddhist nationalist movement that emerged during Myanmar's liberalization period to demonstrate how it is consistent with my argument. Finally, I conduct a plausibility probe of my theory through a comparative analysis of nine structured interviews with prominent Buddhist monks in Yangon in Mandalay.

¹ The monastic community of monks and nuns.

Exclusionary Nation Building, Democratization, and the Resurgence of Exclusionary Nationalist Mobilization

Nation building - or the process whereby elites attempt to make the political and the national units overlap (Gellner 1983) - is an important legitimation tool for authoritarian regimes; by drawing on the traditions, ideologies, and symbols of particular segments of the population and creating a national narrative that positions the regime or dictator as protector or promoter of this core nation, regimes attempt to garner acceptance if not support from the population of their right to rule (Steward 2017). An emerging literature recognizes that autocracies cannot rely entirely on coercion and cooptation to maintain power over the long-term, and that autocrats must also gain legitimacy from some subset of the population (Gerschewski 2013, 2018; Burnell 2006, Zhu 2011).

Studies of autocratic nation building focus primarily on how autocrats use their control over state policy and resources to shape the bounds of the nation. Regimes may use citizenship policies, formal and informal education, and even coercion to determine the character of the nation and the degree to which all groups living within the territorial boundaries of the state are included in the national community (Mylonas 2012, Shevel 2009). Regimes can also engage in highly visible symbolic actions and performances meant to reify a particular tradition or heritage as central to the nation or to strive to unite multiple group traditions into a single national narrative. Elites use monuments, museums, public holidays, and state-sponsored ceremonies to commemorate combinations of historical figures and events and to promote particular interpretations of history that support their right to rule (Cummings 2013, Forest and Johnson 2011, Mitchell 2016, Mpofu 2016, Petrone 2000).

However, authoritarian nation building is not solely a top-down process driven by elites and regime institutions; for authoritarian nation building to work, there must be congruence between regime narratives and policies and ordinary peoples' quotidian experiences. As Hobsbawm observed, 'while nationalism is constructed essentially from above, [it]...cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist' (1990, pg. 10). The literature on "everyday nationalism" or nationalism from below argues that the everyday flagging of symbols, values, ideals and morals in the routine practices of daily life serves to reinforce national identity and make it come to be seen as common sense (Billing 1995, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). It is not simply the spectacular performances of national identity during public holidays and in national museums, but also the quotidian interactions people have within institutions organized around national logics - the daily recitation of the national anthem in schools, getting married in the Catholic church, and reading the national news - that offer them the opportunity to feel as if they belong and deepen their attachment to a particular vision of the nation (Brubaker 1996).

Despite the abundance of scholarship on top-down authoritarian nation building and "everyday nationalism" from below, little research investigates the interaction between the two. While authoritarian leaders can shape the nation through national policies, the construction of monuments and museums, and the celebration of large-scale public holidays, autocrats can also shape the nation through the regulation, repression, and selective support of social institutions that ordinary people interact with on a regular basis. Through censorship of the media; promotion of particular interpretations of history in school; the selective repression and patronage of cultural, religious, educational, and media civil society organizations; and the

public display of national symbols, an authoritarian regime can determine the national values, symbols, and historical interpretations that ordinary citizens are embedded in and interact with on daily basis and that become common sense.

My core claim is that an autocrat's nation building strategy can render traditional authorities dependent on regime policies for their moral authority, which in turn has important consequences for patterns of nationalist mobilization during political crises and inflection points that threaten the status quo. Specifically, I argue that the greater degree to which an authoritarian regime privileges traditional institutions and values in nation building, and thus ties the moral authority of traditional authorities to the regime's coercive policies, the higher the risk of the resurgence of exclusionary nationalist mobilization against an outgroup during a later period of democratization. However, this mobilization does not require that the targeted outgroup pose a credible threat to the political, economic, or cultural dominance of the ingroup group at the time of mobilization. Rather, the threat to traditional authorities' monopoly on moral authority from opposition-linked ingroup civil society leaders that derive their moral authority from democratic legitimacy drives the mobilization.

Authoritarian regime privileges traditional institutions and values in nation building

Authoritarian regimes can grant the majority group's traditional authorities a monopoly on moral authority through the use of regulations, repression, and patronage that privilege these traditional authorities' institutions and values in nation building activities. For example, the regime can institute traditional norms, values, and morals as the sole basis of the nation through school curriculums and state-run media organizations, restricting alternatives. The regime can also reinforce traditional institutions and values at the grassroots level by channeling important social goods and services—education, social welfare, and traditional ceremonies for important life

milestones, such as marriage and death—through traditional institutions. Authoritarian elites can also grant traditional authorities a monopoly on moral authority by shaping the ordinary symbols that people encounter in daily life – flags hanging from buildings, monuments in public spaces, and national heritage sites. These symbols “stealthily legitimate a nation without inviting critical engagement” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, pg. 549). National identity becomes “internalized because the symbols that are embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or ‘flag,’ nationhood...these reminders are so numerous and they are such a familiar part of the social environment, that they operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully” (Billig 1995, pg. 38). By privileging traditional institutions and values in nation building activities, the regime makes the idea that the majority ethnoreligious group’s traditions and values form the basis of the nation common sense.

Democratization leads to heightened threat to privileged traditional authorities’ moral authority from ingroup opposition-linked leaders

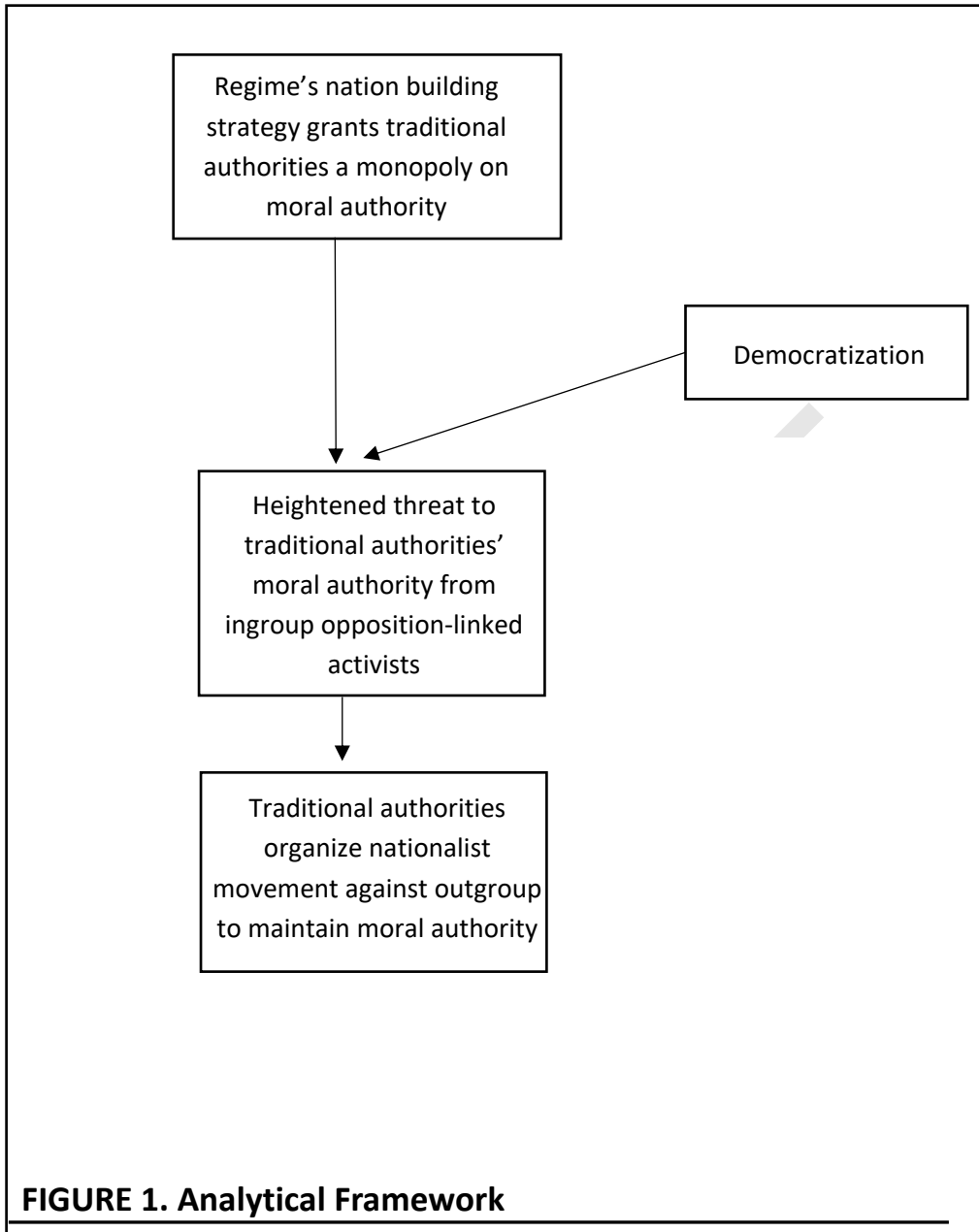
In a regime that has privileged traditional institutions and values in nation building, democratization poses a heightened challenge to privileged traditional authorities’ moral authority. During democratization, these traditional authorities face increasing competition for moral authority from ingroup opposition-linked civil society leaders and organizations that participated in the struggle against authoritarian rule and gained their legitimacy from a different source—democratic legitimacy. Democratization creates a window of opportunity for these opposition-linked ingroup activists to compete for followers on a more even playing field. With high popular demand for more democratic leaders and organizations, privileged traditional authorities without democratic legitimacy are at a competitive disadvantage in competition with ingroup opposition-linked activists for moral authority.

Traditional authorities organize exclusionary nationalist movement against outgroup

When traditional authorities perceive opposition-linked ingroup activists threaten their moral authority during democratization, the relative appeal of fomenting exclusionary nationalist mobilization against an unthreatening outgroup as a strategy to protect their moral authority increases. Opposition-linked ingroup activists have a comparative advantage in maintaining moral authority in a democratic setting given their democratic legitimacy. While regime-privileged traditional conservative authorities lack democratic legitimacy, they instead have a competitive advantage in the protection of the core national group's traditional values in society. Riling up longstanding exclusionary nationalist narratives that increase fears of an outgroup raises the salience of ingroup identity and serves to maintain support for privileged traditional authorities' prominent role in civil society—education, social welfare provision, and public symbolism.

Methodology

In this paper I analyze the case of the emergence of the Buddhist nationalist movement in Myanmar – the Committee to Protect Race and Religion (*MaBaTha*) – a nationwide campaign to protect Buddhist traditions and morals from the alleged threat of Islamization during the country's political liberalization period from 2012 to 2021. The emergence of *MaBaTha* in Myanmar is a case that is well-suited for discovering an explanation for the emergence of a nationalist movement against an unthreatening outgroup because the core target of the movement – the Myanmar Muslim community – did not pose a credible security, demographic, political, or economic threat to Myanmar's majority Buddhist population. Through a total of seven months of



fieldwork spread over two phases, I conducted an in-depth case study of the emergence of *MaBaTha* in Myanmar and used process tracing to develop my theoretical argument. In the first phase, I conducted over 50 interviews with interfaith peace activists, Buddhist clergy and lay leaders, and pro-democracy activists. In the second phase, I used a subset of nine interviews with Buddhist clergy involved in prior anti-regime uprisings to conduct a plausibility probe of my argument. I also drew from the content of state newspapers; journals, books, and social media published by Buddhist nationalist leaders; and local civil society organizations' reports.

In 2019 and 2020, when I conducted my fieldwork, Myanmar was in the middle of a transition from military to semi-civilian rule that had stalled and was beginning to head in an autocratic direction. The military regime had ceded power to a semi-civilian regime in 2011 and the National League for Democracy's (NLD) 2015 landslide victory was the first opposition party victory that was respected by the Myanmar military in over 50 years. Since the NLD party came to power in 2015, however, political reforms had stalled, freedom of the press was being rolled back, the Rohingya crisis escalated into a genocide, tension over constitutional change was simmering, and the 2020 elections were on the horizon. These conditions exacerbated the difficulty of conducting already sensitive research on exclusionary nationalist mobilization in an unstable and repressive hybrid regime. To protect the safety of my interlocutors and research assistants, I did not record any identifying information during interviews, such as names or locations. I only interviewed potential informants with whom I had a trusted connection (i.e. an individual that one of my research assistants knew and trusted or that one of my own contacts knew and trusted). To develop contacts, I built relationships with pro-democracy activists, civil society organizations, and journalists through prior connections that I developed while working with the international community on election security in Myanmar.

Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalist Mobilization during Myanmar's Political Liberalization

Between 2012 and 2017, at the beginning of Myanmar's political liberalization period, anti-Muslim violence spread across the country, leading to the death of thousands and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Muslims. These nationwide waves of violence against Muslims were triggered by communal conflict between local Buddhists and the minority Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine state in 2012. On May 28, 2012, three Rohingya men allegedly raped and murdered a young Rakhine Buddhist woman in Rakhine State, Myanmar. State media claimed that the alleged perpetrators of the rape were "Indian" or of South Asian descent by using the term *kala*.² Subsequent media reports used the term "Bengali Muslims," which is the term that the Myanmar government and the general population uses to describe the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim community in northwest Rakhine state that has been the victim of state discrimination and violence for decades (Cheesman 2018, Physicians for Human Rights 2013).

Despite the initial focus on the Rohingya, prominent Buddhist monks in the *Sangha* disseminated narratives that stoked fears among Buddhists of the broader domestic and global Muslim population and these narratives were the driving forces behind a nationwide Buddhist nationalist movement. At first, the movement was a loose campaign called 969 that promoted boycotts against and isolation of Muslims. Later, the campaign developed into a nationwide movement and organization called The Committee to Protect Race and Religion (*MaBaTha*). 969 and *MaBaTha* systematically spread anti-Muslim narratives through public sermons, called for

² Foreigners entering Burma from the Bay of Bengal before the 18th century were all identified as *Kala* or *Kula*, regardless of nationality or ethnic identity. The term began to apply primarily to a darker skinned person of Indian origin with the advent of mass Indian immigration in 1826 due to the disproportionate cooperation of Indians in the colonial project. The term increasingly took on a derogatory meaning (Egreteau 2011).

boycotts of Muslim businesses, advocated for a set of discriminatory laws - the “race and religion laws” - and called to protect *amyo*, *batha*, and *thathana* - race, religion, and *sasana*.³ *MaBaTha*’s narratives claimed that Muslims are inherently aggressive and will exploit the benevolent nature of Buddhism to overtake it or make inroads into Buddhist society through high reproductive rates, interfaith marriage, forced conversion, or various forms of economic and cultural domination (Frydenlund 2018, Schontal and Walton 2016, Kyaw 2016, Walton 2018). This discourse tied together historical tropes about Indian Muslims dominating Buddhists in Myanmar through marriage to Buddhist women with more recent global Islamophobic discourses about Islamic terrorism (Walton and Schoenthal 2016, Schissler, Walton and Thi Thi 2017, Gravers 2015, Kyaw 2016, Frydenlund 2018). These anti-Muslim campaigns coincided with the spread of anti-Muslim violence beyond Rakhine state to dozens of locations in Central Myanmar with small Muslim populations that were unrelated to the Rohingya between 2013 and 2016.

Violence against the Rohingya escalated again after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a rag-tag group of Rohingya militants in Rakhine State that formed after the 2012 communal riots, attacked military outposts in 2017. The Myanmar military responded with a brutal counter-insurgency operation that led to more than 624,000 Rohingya Muslims fleeing to what has become one of the world’s largest refugee camps in Bangladesh. The UN called the military’s operation “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” and documented unlawful killings committed by the security forces and local vigilantes - massacres, sexual violence against women and children, and the burning of tens of thousands of Rohingya homes - between August and October of 2017 (International Crisis Group 2017). While the ARSA attack was the immediate

³ The teaching - and dissemination of that teaching - of the Buddha.

trigger for the state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya in 2017, the extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric spread by *MaBaTha* monks in sermons contributed to the escalation of this crisis. In one particularly egregious example, Sitagu Sayadaw, one of the most respected monks in the country, delivered a sermon to a military garrison and training college in October of 2017 that justified the killings by claiming non-Buddhists are “not fully human” (International Crisis Group 2017).

Coercive Nation Building and Privileged Buddhist Monks’ Monopoly on Moral Authority

I argue that the former Myanmar military regime’s granting of prominent Buddhist monks in the Buddhist *Sangha* a monopoly on moral authority through coercive nation building is an important factor that contributed to the rise of *MaBaTha* – a popular anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement – during Myanmar’s political transition. The military began implementing this legitimization strategy after the 1988 uprising, when mass nationwide protests threatened to collapse the then socialist military regime. The regime cracked down on dissidents and remained in power by launching a coup that reinstated a new regime, the State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC), which later became the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. With the military regime’s formerly socialist ideology discredited and the civilian opposition movement claiming to be the legitimate voice of the people, the SLORC regime attempted to regain legitimacy by promoting the regime as the protector of Buddhism and Myanmar heritage.

Prior to the 1988 military coup, the “Burmese Way to Socialism” was the regime’s guiding ideology and the junta instituted a socialist command economy in which the government managed the distribution of all goods and services through local People’s Stores (Maung 1970). After 1988, however, the military junta partially opened the economy, dismantled the BSPP, and embarked on a new legitimization strategy, of which a radical reimagination of the nation-state

was a core feature. The Myanmar junta's new legitimation strategy characterized the military as part of a long lineage of Burman dynastic reigns, in which Theravada Buddhism was the primary source of authority for rulers (Houtman 1999, Bagley 1965). Classically, in Theravada Buddhist polities the king is both the protector and promoter of Theravada Buddhism and must materially and organizationally support the *Sangha*, the Buddhist clergy devoted to an ascetic lifestyle of Buddhist learning, practice and teaching (Swearer 1995). The king built temples and stupas, provided material support for monks, administered monastic and lay Buddhist education, held Pali exams, and ensured the purification of the Sangha from heretical practices (Walton 2016). The construction of "grand Buddhist monuments, such as Asoka's construction of 84,000 stupas, the Kandyian Shrine of the Tooth Relic, and the Thai Emerald Buddha statue, among others" are examples of the Buddhist patronage of past kings (Schober 1997, pg 219). The *Sangha* historically acted as intellectuals that translated the Buddhist scriptures into the ethics and codes of conduct of the Pali Canon and had a sizable influence over the population in the Theravada Buddhist polity (Bagley 1965).

The Myanmar military's post-1988 legitimation strategy mirrored that of past Theravada Buddhist Burman dynasties. During the 1990s, the state-run newspaper at the time, the *New Light of Myanmar*, began to compare the Myanmar military to former Burman dynasties by showcasing the regime's efforts at archeological preservation and reconstruction of sacred sites—the reconstruction of Mandalay Palace, pagodas and stupas, and museums dedicated to the history of the Buddhist tradition (Schober 1997, 237). The regime also organized lavish displays of state patronage to the *Sangha* at national monuments and local pagodas, in which military officials and businessmen recited prayers and suttas and procured sizable donations for religious construction and merit-making (Schober 1997, 238). The regime opened two state-financed

Buddhist universities and reintroduced a tradition of conferring religious awards on monks and Buddhist lay persons that passed religious examinations and engaged in good deeds (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

Beyond the symbolic and religious realm, the regime also granted traditional Buddhist organizations dominance in the everyday social functions in Buddhists' daily life, reinforcing a sense of belonging among the masses within Bamar Buddhist traditions—Buddhist rice donation groups, monastery education centers, and other Buddhist lay associations formed during colonial rule to provide for the religious and social welfare of the community (Kramer 2011). In 1988, the regime passed the 'Law Relating to the Formation of Organizations,' which limited the formation of independent organizations in civil society to those engaged in religious and business activities only (Law Relating to Formation of Organizations 1988). Military spending on health and education dropped from 2.6 and 1 percent of GDP in 1990 to .64 and .18 percent in 1988 (McCarthy 2020, Turnell 2011). Instead, the regime channeled state patronage and social welfare through private businessmen linked to the mass-based organization – the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) – who were expected to finance religiously oriented social welfare organizations, such as hospitals and homes for the elderly (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, McCarthy 2020, Schober 1997: 238). Monks that developed military officials as patrons were often able to secure important public goods for their home villages by themselves, such as the construction of new schools and hospitals (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

Ideologically, the regime promoted an interpretation of the nation in which Buddhist morals, values, and traditions were the exclusive glue that bound the national community together. The core set of documents that encapsulated and served as a medium to socialize these values is a book published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1992 titled *A Guide to the*

Mangala Sutta. The Mangala Sutta is a compilation of Buddha's lessons on how to live a moral and good Buddhist life and are preserved within the Buddhist scriptures. The regime's *Guide to the Mangala Sutta* conveyed the Mangala Sutta not just as a guide for living a good Buddhist life, but also as essential for the foundation of the Myanmar nation-state. The guide promotes the concept of "Mangala Country," or an "Ideal State," and argues: "If these Mangalas are obeyed or adhered to, one can become a good son, a good parent, a good citizen, a good administrator or even an ideal head of state. These Mangala rules are therefore very important in the making of a nation of good citizens, and in the building of an Ideal State or a Mangala Country (Houtman 1999, pg. 130, Kyaw Htut 1992)."

The 38 Mangala Suttas, as described in this book, provide the foundations for human society, education, citizenship, and national defense. The guide explicitly calls for education in Myanmar to incorporate religious scriptures in the curriculum, such as the *Jataka*,⁴ and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of maintaining tradition through education.

"In any country or school there are rules and conventions relating to tradition and culture, which must be adhered to, e.g. things like what sort of hair-style to adopt, how to dress, how to walk, how to eat, etc. If the children are not taught to abide by these rules and conventions, the general knowledge they have learned will be useless."⁵

Modern ideas of rule of law and the welfare state are also conceptualized through the lens of the Mangala Sutta. According to the guide, "all the [Mangala] rules must be strictly obeyed or else action would be taken against anyone who fails to do so. If all the above rules are complied with, let us consider whether our country will become a peaceful and prosperous country or not" (Kyaw Htut 1992, pg. 39). Buddhist notions and acts of

⁴ Stories about the former lives of the Buddha preserved in the Buddhist scriptures.

⁵ Kyaw Htut 1992, pg. 24

charity are then used by the guide to advocate for the outsourcing of social welfare to Buddhist civil society.

“In the olden days Myanmar was a Mangala Country. The people built monasteries, dug wells and tanks, built roads and bridges on their own and at their own expense. As the people in the Mangala Country adhered to the Mangala rules and principles, and built the necessary works for public welfare, government had to spend very little on such works. Out of their own free will and generosity, the people subscribed liberally to all works or projects concerning education, economy and social welfare”⁶

The military regime promoted this vision of the Buddhist nation through formal and informal channels—the state-run news, individual monks and Buddhist lay associations that taught religious education to Buddhist youths, the social welfare organizations the regime financed, and its mass-based organization the USDA. In the early 1990s, the state newspaper *Workers’ Daily* began to print one of the 38 blessings of the *Mangala Sutta* at the top of the front page of the newspaper (Houtman 1999). The Ministry of Religious Affairs in cooperation with the Young Men’s Buddhist Association⁷ (YMBA) trained teachers of Buddhist cultural classes across the country using the *Guide to the Mangala Sutta*. In 1994, the Minister of Religious Affairs opened a course on Buddhist culture in Yangon by stating, “each of the trainees is to help preserve national culture through religious education and stressing the need to safeguard the nation against the threat of extinction of race and culture” (Schober 1997, pg. 238).

Combined, these nation building activities—symbolic overtures to the *Sangha*, the expansion of the role of Buddhist institutions in the provision of social welfare, the promotion of

⁶ Kyaw Htut 1992, pg. 35

⁷ The Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) is a Buddhist organization formed during colonial rule that is credited as being one of the first nationalist organizations in the country. The YMBA formed Buddhist lay associations that mushroomed across the country and engaged in campaigns for educational, moral, and religious reform; sponsored Buddhist schools, journals, and religious examinations; and forged a Buddhist moral community (Turner 2014).

the *Mangala Sutta* as the foundation of the Myanmar nation-state, and the restriction of alternatives—granted regime-privileged monks an effective monopoly on moral authority among the masses. Spearheaded by the emergence of the YMBA during colonial rule, Buddhist lay associations have long played a role in education and social welfare provision in Myanmar and Buddhist nationalism has resonated broadly with the Buddhist public. However, the regime’s exclusive material support for Buddhist traditional institutions and its reinforcement of an exclusionary Buddhist nationalism as the sole basis of the nation at the grassroots level made monks that directly benefited from these military privileges dependent on the regime for their moral authority.

Due to the privileged space and resources provided to traditional Buddhist leaders and organizations, the opportunity costs for these monks to engage in opposition activities increased. Privileged members of the *Sangha* and Buddhist social welfare groups, thus, became increasingly contained within and dependent upon regime institutions and patronage networks, and increasingly isolated from anti-regime activist networks and the international community. According to one pro-democracy activist and founder of a prominent civil society organization that I interviewed in Yangon, monks that received positions as head abbots, religious titles, and donations from military-linked businessmen at major donations ceremonies were often too busy and invested in their religious activities to engage with pro-democracy activism and tended to stay out of politics.⁸ The costs of engagement with the opposition for monks was high: arrest, disrobing and loss of privileges (Schober 2005). Another prominent activist that leads an interfaith peacebuilding organization argued that many monks sought out prominent

⁸ Interview with 88 generation activist on 5/18/2023

businessmen and authorities to gain wealth and prestige instead of leading a more precarious existence. Putting the situation in starker terms, he said:

“There are two ways to become prominent as a monk in Myanmar. You can gain the respect of the local community by providing them with genuine spiritual and moral guidance, or you can seek out material and symbolic rewards from authorities and businessmen. Most prefer to have strong relations with famous laypersons than to have hardship that deserves an award.”⁹

In contrast, the military regime eliminated political and civic space for secular Buddhist leaders and organizations, forcing these leaders underground or into exile (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007a). The SLORC implemented the ‘Law Relating to Forming of Organizations’ of 1988, which required all non-religious organizations to apply for permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs, effectively banning independent non-religious civil society (Law Relating to Formation of Organizations 1988). From Thailand, the elected but unseated Burmese-Buddhist civilian legislature formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), lobbied for diplomatic recognition, and engendered widespread international sympathy (Steinberg 2023). Many secular Buddhist civil society leaders fled to liberated territories at the periphery of the country or to the border with Thailand to engage in resistance more safely.¹⁰ Journalists at risk founded Burmese media in exile that provided uncensored news of Burma to those still in Myanmar that could gain access to shortwave radio (Corporal 2007). While censored and surveilled by the military regime, activists that remained inside Myanmar were still able to organize underground study groups to learn about different political philosophies and engage in open discussion (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007a).¹¹ In the early 2000s, the American Center,

⁹ Interview with interfaith activist in Mandalay, December 2019

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

a library run by the U.S. Embassy in Yangon as a public diplomacy program, often served as a space where these activists obtained access to outside information from foreign published books and high speed internet (Perlez 2006).

Political liberalization and Threats to Regime-privileged Monks' Moral Authority from Opposition-linked Buddhist leaders

In 2011, after over 50 years of isolationist military rule, the semi-civilian Myanmar government initiated a set of far-reaching political reforms. The government released long-time opposition leader and pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) from house arrest; freed more than 200 political prisoners; relaxed press censorship; began allowing unions, strikes, and peaceful demonstrations; and held by-elections in 2012, in which the results were respected for the first time in over 50 years. Civil society organizations and activists that fled across the Thai border and into exile after the 1988 uprising returned to the country to participate in the unfolding liberalization process and engage in a more open civil society. Whereas before 2010, religious organizations were the only space outside the family and state for people to organize, the political and social reforms in the first couple years of the transition dramatically increased the opportunities for Buddhist political and social leaders to organize more openly and to attract the attention and support of the Buddhist population.

It is within this context of liberalization that the anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement *MaBaTha* emerged and garnered nationwide support. If my argument were correct, *MaBaTha*'s rhetoric would reflect that this anti-Muslim movement was motivated by regime-privileged Buddhist monks who perceived a threat to their moral authority from opposition-linked Buddhist leaders with greater democratic legitimacy. We would observe rhetoric that does

two major framing exercises. First, the rhetoric would link the contemporary context in Myanmar to a larger existential threat to Buddhists and Buddhism in Myanmar from Muslims. This would serve to raise the salience of religious identity over the political issue of democracy among Buddhists during political liberalization by heightening fears of an imminent existential threat from other religious groups. Second, the rhetoric would also frame opposition-linked Buddhist leaders with significant democratic legitimacy—the NLD, ASSK, and liberal civil society organizations—as co-conspirators in other religious groups’ plans to dominate Myanmar society. This part of the rhetoric would serve to counteract the *actual* threat to regime-privileged Buddhist monks—Buddhist opposition-linked leaders and organizations with democratic legitimacy. By associating these Buddhist opposition-linked leaders and organizations with the Muslim threat, this rhetoric would serve to reduce popular support for opposition-linked Buddhist leaders and to increase popular support for traditional Buddhist leaders and organizations that claim to be the legitimate guardians of the Burmese Buddhist nation.

Indeed, *MaBaTha*’s mobilizing rhetoric follows these above-mentioned scripts. First, *MaBaTha* publications frequently link historical anti-Muslim propaganda in Myanmar that emerged during the anti-colonial struggle to relevant contemporary issues. Buddhist nationalists first spread anti-Muslim conspiracies during colonial rule. The general conspiracy is that there is a global Muslim plot to overtake Buddhism in Myanmar by marrying Buddhist women and only supporting Muslim businesses (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016). Military-linked propagandists and unknown Buddhist nationalists later adapted and spread this propaganda in pamphlets called *Amyou-pyauk-hma-sou-kyauk-saya* (Fearing that the Nation will Disappear), claiming that Muslims wiped out Buddhism from India, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia and seek to ‘swallow’ (*wa-myau*) other nations/races and religions (Foxeus 2022). *MaBaTha* monks

remobilized and repackaged these narratives during the political liberalization period in order to heighten fears of religious others and to focus Buddhists' attention on their religious identity over democracy-related issues.

Variations on these anti-Muslim narratives were ubiquitous in *MaBaTha's* publications. One article in *MaBaTha's* biweekly publication *Tharkithway* compared the colonization of the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan (modern day Xingjian, China) by Turkic Muslims in the 9th century to the “Bengali invasion” in Rakhine state. The author first recounts how a “Muslim army brutally colonized Khotan” and quickly shifts to a description of the 1942 destruction of Buddhist villages in Rakhine State and a refers to the broader Muslim plot to dismantle Buddhism in Myanmar (Tharkithway 2014a). He argues that the 2012 Rakhine State riots were the latest attempt by the “Bengali Muslims” to “swallow our race,” (Tharkithway 2014a). Another article details ISIS's practices of female genital mutilation to reinforce the longstanding concern about the dangers of Muslim men to Myanmar Buddhist women present in Buddhist nationalist discourse. The author writes, “our mothers and future mothers will be violated by different faiths if we do not protect them with race and religion protection laws,” (Tharkithway 2014b). In another example, a Buddhist nationalist writer harkens back to the direct threats to Buddhists from colonial rule in Myanmar when “new races and ideologies were transported along with new bad characters,” and claimed that, “if Myanmar continues to ignore it, it can lose the status of being a Buddhist country,” (Tharkithway 2014c).

MaBaTha's rhetoric not only raised the specter of the “Muslim threat,” but also placed the blame for this threat squarely on the political opposition. This placement of blame was in service of combating a different, more grave threat to regime-privileged monks than Muslims—the threat of Buddhist opposition-linked leaders to regime-privileged monk's moral authority.

While the main opposition – the NLD – had a more secular Burmese nationalist ideology, the predominantly Bamar Buddhist NLD party still largely viewed the Bamar Buddhist ethnic group as the true inheritor of the Burmese nation and Muslims as foreigners (Khin Yi 1988). Thus, the NLD neither directly threatened the political and economic dominance of the Bamar Buddhist population nor the religious authority of the *Sangha*. Instead, *MaBaTha* leaders framed the opposition as pro-Muslim in service of combating the threat to their *moral authority* from Buddhist opposition-linked leaders. The anti-Muslim rhetoric was merely a mobilizing tactic to do so.

Examples of this blame shifting to opposition-linked Buddhist leaders and organizations are abundant in *MaBaTha*'s publications. In 2013, just as *MaBaTha* emerged on the national scene, *MaBaTha*'s soon-to-be president published a book called *A Loyalist of the Country*, in which he declared: "Every [Myanmar] citizen has the duty to protect and maintain sovereignty, race, religion and sassana¹² and has the duty to defend the country from those who were insulting and destroying it" (Insein Ywama Sayadaw 2013). However, instead of focusing on a direct threat from other religions, he focuses on what he calls "traitors from within," or Buddhists whose allegiances are with foreign countries and groups. He defined traitors from within as:

"those who live in Myanmar, drink Myanmar's water, consume Myanmar's rice, and live under Myanmar's shadow but work for the other country, other races and other religions. Those who are supporting the traitors of the country are traitors, regardless of being monks, common people, politicians, business people, national leaders, lawmakers, or celebrities"¹³

¹² The teachings of the Buddha

¹³ Insein Ywama Sayadaw, 2013

He also explicitly referred to current “national leaders” as traitors, ostensibly referring to popular opposition-linked Buddhist leaders at the time—NLD-linked leaders.

“Politicians and those who want to become the nation’s leaders must be loyalists of the country who are required to protect every citizen. But if they protect citizens who are traitors of the country, then they become traitors. These days, some politicians who are “national leaders of the country” are supporting different faiths who support them in return...We need to be aware that those politicians are the traitors of Myanmar.”¹⁴

References in *MaBaTha* publications to the NLD’s threats to Myanmar culture, specifically, are even clearer indications that *MaBaTha* monks were responding to threats to their moral authority from opposition-linked Buddhist leaders as opposed to threats to their religious authority from other religious groups during political liberalization. *MaBaTha* publications frequently referenced threats from the opposition not just to Buddhism as a religion, but rather, to Buddhism as the sole basis of the Myanmar nation, as the defining culture and values of Myanmar society. In another *Tharkithway* article titled “Lambs Disguised as Wolves,” an author argues that democracy is good, but that “we must try to filter out the bad which are not in line with our Myanmar culture” (Tharkithway 2014d).

“Today our country is in transition. In other words, it is the important time that citizens need to support their country. Myanmar does not need to forget the history of our country and needs to elect a leader who is true a Buddhist and Myanmar. But how can we know if someone is a true Myanmar...If they are a true Myanmar, they will maintain the culture, love their people, protect their race, religion, and sassana...If Myanmar elected someone who is disguised as Myanmar but not Myanmar, if we elected a wolf leader disguised as a lamb...”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Tharkithway 2014d

According to *MaBaTha's* narratives, it is not sufficient to be Buddhist to be Burmese, but rather, to be a Burmese national, one must protect the primacy of Buddhist traditions and values as the sole basis of Myanmar society. By framing opposition leaders as an existential threat to the Burmese Buddhist nation itself, as opposed to simply the political or economic dominance of Buddhists over Muslims in Myanmar society, *MaBaTha* leaders justified a broader popular rejection of opposition-linked Buddhist political and civil society leaders. This rhetoric served regime-privileged Buddhist authorities that felt threatened by opposition-linked Buddhist leaders with greater democratic legitimacy during political liberalization.

Variation in *MaBaTha* Participation Among Former Activist Buddhist Monks

How do we know that *MaBaTha* was not just an unavoidable reaction to political liberalization that would have occurred regardless of the regime's prior privileging of traditional Buddhist authorities in nation building? If the Myanmar military's pre-transition privileging of traditional Buddhist authorities heightened Buddhist authorities' perceived threats to their moral authority and incentivized them to engage in exclusionary nationalist mobilization during democratization, the counterfactual should also hold. That is, if the Myanmar military had not privileged traditional Buddhist authorities pre-transition, during democratization, prominent monks within the *Sangha* would not have felt their moral authority to be threatened by opposition-linked Buddhist leaders and would have felt less incentivized to participate in exclusionary Buddhist nationalism. While at the national level, this counterfactual can only be imagined, at the subnational level there is variation in the degree to which the military regime privileged Buddhist traditional institutions pre-transition. To probe the plausibility of my

argument against competing explanations, I analyze in-depth interviews with a sample of nine former activist monks that vary in terms of their degree of military privilege and whether they participated in *MaBaTha* during political liberalization.

Given limited resources, the Myanmar military did not have capacity to make generous donations and create new titles and monasteries for all abbots¹⁶ across the country (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, pg. 237). While the regime tended to target abbots with high levels of respect within the *Sangha* and that shared a strong Buddhist nationalist ideology,¹⁷ other unrelated factors determined patronage distribution to the *Sangha* at the local level. As other scholars have noted, the regime patronized monks and monasteries through military officials as well as military-linked businessmen and informal networks (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, McCarthy 2020). Monks and monasteries physically closer to military networks were more likely to receive state patronage because the regime could easily monitor their activities and ensure regime loyalty and compliance.¹⁸ There was also a significant amount of contingency involved in whether the military patronized an abbot or monastery. Some popular monks involved in the 1988 uprising did not accept military patronage. Most activist monks I spoke with argued that a monk's mental fortitude played an important role in whether he accepted or refused the patronage.

If my argument were correct, the following hypotheses would hold true. Among the sample of nine monks that I interviewed, those monks that received military patronage—i.e. religious titles, military donations, or positions at the State-run Buddhist University—would be

¹⁶ An abbot is the head monk of a monastery. While head monks of monasteries have significant status locally, some abbots receive awards and resources from the regime that can raise their status to the national level.

¹⁷ Interviews with anti-regime activists throughout fieldwork.

¹⁸ Interview with interfaith peace activist, January 2020.

1) more likely to have participated in *MaBaTha* during democratization. Recipients of military patronage would also be more likely to 2) have disengaged in anti-regime activism post-1988 due to their dependence on military privileges for moral authority, and 3) feel their moral authority to be threatened by opposition-linked Buddhist leaders with greater democratic legitimacy during the political liberalization period.

Sampling

I interviewed a sample of nine abbots that participated in either the 1988 uprising or the 2007 Saffron Revolution against the military regime and asked them a set of questions about their historical engagement in activism, views on Buddhist nationalism, perceptions of Muslims in Myanmar, and perceptions of the NLD and political liberalization. Given that no public record of monks involved in the 1988 or 2007 uprisings exists, I used a snowball sampling approach. I worked through contacts I developed over prior fieldwork trips to Myanmar from 2015 to 2018—former pro-democracy activists, journalists, and inter-faith activists—that had connections to monks involved in the 1988 and 2007 uprisings.

Using monks that participated in the 1988 uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution as my study population was a design choice that allowed me to focus on the population of monks that were most likely to engage in political activism (and those most relevant to my research question). This design also mitigated bias due to selection on the dependent variable. Prior studies on *MaBaTha* and Buddhist nationalism during Myanmar's political liberalization process only included analyses of *MaBaTha* leaders and participants and did not include comparable monks that did not participate, introducing significant selection bias into these analyses (International Crisis Group 2017, Bertrand and Pelletier 2017, van Klinken and Aung 2017,

Foxeus 2022, Walton and Hayward 2014). Furthermore, my interviews during the first phase of fieldwork indicated that there was no correlation between the selection criteria—a monk’s participation in prior anti-regime uprisings—and participation in *MaBaTha*. *MaBaTha* and non-*MaBaTha* monks alike had been part of these mass protests regardless of their attitudes towards Muslims and their position on Buddhist nationalism. This research design simultaneously reduced bias due to selection on the independent variable because a monk’s participation in the 1988 uprising and 2007 Saffron Revolution also appeared to be uncorrelated with receipt of military privileges in the 1990s. As one Burmese activist and scholar has noted, former 1988 activist monks developed a variety of relationships with the military regime post-1988—while some could not resist military support and were coaxed into submission, others refused military donations and kept themselves away from the government (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, pg. 235). Monks that joined the 2007 Saffron Revolution did so out of outrage over the regime’s mistreatment of monks protesting the regime regardless of their privileges (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008).

Results

The overall results of the analysis of this sample of nine monks (figure 2) are consistent with my three hypotheses. In this sample of monks that participated in past uprisings, more monks that received military patronage pre-transition participated in *MaBaTha* than monks that did not receive military patronage. More monks that received military patronage pre-transition also disengaged in sustained anti-regime activism than monks that did not receive military patronage. Finally, more monks that received military patronage pre-transition perceived threats from the opposition to Burmese Buddhist culture in Myanmar than monks that did not receive military patronage.

Monk ID	MBT	Prior uprisings	Military patronage	Sustained activism	Threat from opposition	Anti-Muslim
M01	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
M02	✓	✓			✓	✓
M03	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
M04	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
M05		✓		✓		✓
M06		✓		✓		✓
M07		✓		✓		
M08		✓		✓		✓
M09		✓		✓		

Figure 2. Findings from analysis of interviews with nine Buddhist monks involved in anti-regime protests in 1988 or 2007 (✓ = affirmative).

Monks' political networks and sustained anti-regime activism

To assess whether a monk was linked to military patronage before the political transition, I asked monks about their experience in the *Sangha*. I coded a monk as linked to military patronage if the monk trained at a state-run Buddhist University, received significant donations or religious titles from the military government, or expressed a fear of losing state privileges if engaged in politics. For example, one monk claimed that he was unable to engage in sustained political activism after the 2007 Saffron Revolution because he was enrolled at the State Pariyatti Sasana University in Mandalay and was closely monitored by the government. An abbot of a monastery in Mandalay described how he was pressured by clergy in the official state-led monastic institution to stay out of politics and feared losing his position as abbot of his monastery if he did so. All but one of the monks that received military patronage did not engage in sustained activism because of the high costs of opposition. The one monk that did engage in

anti-regime activism after the 1988 uprising disengaged entirely after the military constructed a new monastery for him.

The majority of monks independent from military patronage networks in the sample sustained their activism after the 1988 uprising. One monk that trained at a private Buddhist monastic school claimed his monastery served as an underground headquarters for the All Burma Students Federation Union (ABSFU), a prominent pro-democracy student activist group.

“The ABSFU students held their events here [his monastery]. This is like their monument. It is like a headquarters for ABSFU students. I was like a president by leading them.”¹⁹

Another monk that had participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution and evaded arrest described how he joined opposition activists in Ayerawaddy region to help with relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. He made the point that this experience brought him closer to the communities he served.

“I was asked by the people who were struggling in the streams and ditches where their families died to conduct the Buddhist funeral (chants, readings, prayers). The rain was constant, and they were desperately putting up the small tents, their feet were sinking into the mud up to their knees. These are the things that make me very angry with the military dictators.”²⁰

Perceived threat from political opposition to Burmese Buddhist culture during political liberalization

The interviews also revealed that monks linked to military patronage were more likely to express feeling threatened by the NLD or ASSK due to their association with the international community and insufficient support for Burmese Buddhist culture. Many of these monks

¹⁹ Interview with 88 generation monk in Mandalay, January 2020

²⁰ Interview with 2007 saffron revolution monk in Mandalay, January 2020.

perceived that ASSK, the NLD's leader, had compromised traditional Myanmar Buddhist values by cooperating too closely with the international community. One monk stated this explicitly.

“She might have a good relationship with the international community, but among Myanmar people she cannot build a good relationship.”²¹

These charges also applied to monks that the interviewees believed had been bought off by the NLD and Muslims.

“These monks who attack *MaBaTha* are supported by the NLD and Muslims. They traveled around the world with their expenses paid for by the NLD and Muslims. I was a fan of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, but her attitude is unacceptable and therefore I stopped being a fan.”²²

Monks that appeared to be too close to international NGOs were also viewed with suspicion.

“There are monks who attack other Buddhist monks in INGO conferences. They are no more qualified than a novice in our monastery. But because they have been to the UK, US, and Australia, they think they can criticize Buddhism in Myanmar.”²³

This perceived threat towards the NLD and the international community among monks connected to military patronage, however, did not always exist and appears to have developed over time. This suggests that having been linked to military patronage pre-transition led to an increase in a monk's perceived threat from the NLD over time, not that a monk received state patronage because he already felt threatened by the NLD. One monk that studied at the State Pariyatti Sasana University claimed that support for the NLD in the *Sangha* overall had collectively declined.

²¹ Ibid

²² Interview with monk in Yangon, February 2020

²³ Ibid

“In the past, 80% of monks supported the NLD. Now it is only 20%. I know this because I have many pupils and have interacted with many Buddhist monks.”²⁴

Another monk claimed to have stopped supporting the NLD because the party had become too close to the international community.

“Our differences emerged because we don’t like the NLD's approach to our country's development by relying on international development or the party’s approach to race and religion. They accept too much of the international community’s interference. I left NLD because of this.”²⁵

Another monk that had quickly disengaged in politics after 2007 to return to his position as the abbot of a monastery in Mandalay, expressed feeling abandoned by ASSK.

“Personally, I do not think she [ASSK] supports the *Sangha*. There is no equality. If a monk has a good relationship with her, she might support him. The monks who do not have a good relationship with her, were sent to jail.”

Monks that remained engaged in anti-regime activism after 1988, and that were independent of military networks, expressed different perspectives of the NLD. None of these monks felt threatened by the NLD even though they supported a strong role for Buddhism in the public sphere. One monk stated that he had at first joined *MaBaTha* to support the broader Buddhist nationalist mission, but he quickly left the organization after attending a meeting where leaders criticized the NLD and expressed support for the military.

“In the meeting, they spoke ill of the NLD and the 88 Generation group, the opposition force at that time. And they defended the military. I raised a lot of objections there. Accordingly, I had a lot of disputes with them and my story with *MaBaTa* entirely came to an end. They serve as the pillar of the military when conducting their activities under the name of race, religion and *Sasana*.”²⁶

²⁴ Interview with 2007 saffron revolution monk in Yangon, February 2020

²⁵ Interview with *MaBaTha* leader in Meikthila, January 2020

²⁶ Interview with Saffron Revolution monk in Mandalay, January 2020

Another prominent monk engaged in sustained anti-regime activism expressed support for a strong role for Buddhism in the public sphere, but he claimed that it was neither Muslims nor the NLD that threatened Buddhism in Myanmar, but rather, the military and authoritarian rule.

“What we should really worry about is the dictatorship, under which everything can be ruined. What should we do? If we want to rebuild Buddhism, we should change the political system.”²⁷

When asked why he was not concerned about the NLD’s linkage to foreign groups and institutions, he argued that it was his experiences working with the opposition to help survivors of Cyclone Nargis that made him feel comfortable with alternative groups. While volunteering with activists and international NGOs during cyclone Nargis, he recounted working together respectfully with the NGO workers.

“When an NGO group visited the village, I met some young Christian girls. They were staying at the village. Even they expressed their respect for me. They paid homage to me. Nargis year is the most soul touching year of my life.”²⁸

Competing explanations

According to these results, my argument that the military’s prior privileging of Buddhist authorities better explains a monk’s participation in *MaBaTha* during political liberalization than explanations focused on threatened political elites or “ancient hatreds.” First, my sampling strategy rules out the possibility that pro-military agents drove the anti-Muslim mobilization; I used participation in either the 1988 or 2007 anti-regime protests as inclusion criteria for my sample, indicating that the monks in the sample had a minimum level of opposition to military rule. Furthermore, monks linked to military patronage in my sample expressed clear dislike for

²⁷ Interview with 88 generation monk in Mandalay, January 2020

²⁸ Ibid

military rule in interviews. The former student monk at the State Pariyatti Sasana University clarified that his opposition to the NLD did not equate to support for the military dictatorship.

“It is really important to know that not supporting the NLD does not mean we are supporting military rule...Now the NLD is violating the Sangha, so we regret that we supported them.”²⁹

Another alternative explanation is that a monk’s prior anti-Muslim views, and not his links to military patronage networks, explains participation in *MaBaTha*. This alternative explanation is not supported by the interview data either. A larger proportion of monks connected to military patronage networks supported *MaBaTha* (100%) than the proportion of monks that expressed strong anti-Muslim beliefs during the interviews (57%). One monk that risked his safety to expose the danger of *MaBaTha* to his followers repeated false narratives about a Muslim plan to Islamize Myanmar a few minutes later.

“They [Muslims] are trying to make this country an Islamic country because you can see the conflicts in Rakhine, the Muslim-Bengali issue, they began to kill and torture the Rakhine and Hindus.”³⁰

He then continued to criticize the international community’s portrayal of the Rakhine crisis as one-sided.

“The media reported that the Rakhine killed the Rohingya, but in reality, the Bengali killed the Rakhine. We got blamed by the international community. They want to torture Myanmar in a way. Their activities are not positive and they ignore the truth.”³¹

²⁹ Interview with 2007 saffron Revolution monk in Yangon, February 2020

³⁰ Interview with 2007 saffron monk in Mandalay, January 2020

³¹ Ibid

Another monk that opposed *MaBaTha* and worked with opposition activists to provide humanitarian relief during Cyclone Nargis used dehumanizing language to refer to the Muslim community.

“There is a saying that goes “Do not have a dog if you have no house.” The childbearing Muslim women in Rakhine state reminds me of this saying.”³²

This animosity towards Muslims among *MaBaTha* opponents is counterevidence against the argument that a deep attachment to anti-Muslim attitudes within the Myanmar Buddhist population alone is sufficient to explain prominent Buddhist monks’ escalation of anti-Muslim violence during Myanmar’s political liberalization.

Discussion

I find that the Myanmar military regime’s pre-transition privileging of traditional Buddhist authorities in nation building increased the incentives for these privileged monks to organize an anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist movement during political liberalization from 2012 - 2017. Using historical analysis, fieldwork, analysis of Buddhist nationalist publications, and a small-n analysis of interviews with nine activist monks, I iteratively developed and probed the plausibility of this argument against competing alternatives. The military’s prior privileging of Buddhist authorities heightened the threat of Buddhist opposition-linked leaders to regime-privileged monks’ moral authority and incentivized these monks to engage in anti-Muslim mobilization to protect their moral authority during political liberalization.

Despite using a variety of methods and data, my findings have limitations. First, the results of my analysis of interviews with Buddhist monks were based on a small sample of nine

³² Interview with 2007 saffron monk in Mandalay, January 2020

monks that may not be representative of the larger population of monks in Myanmar.

Nevertheless, the monks that I interviewed were leaders in the *Sangha*, either due to receiving patronage from the military regime or moral authority for their engagement in pro-democracy activism. In other words, these Buddhist monks were pivotal to any form of Buddhist nationalist mobilization. Second, due to the sensitivity of this topic in Myanmar and the political instability of the time, I did not directly ask questions about monks' relations with the former military regime. Nevertheless, I was able to gather information that indicated the monks' proximity to military patronage networks - affiliation with state *Sangha* institutions, religious awards conferred by the former regime, and information about military patronage provided by my own contacts.

Despite these limitations, my findings break new theoretical ground in scholarship on nationalist mobilization. I demonstrate how the pre-transition privileging of traditional authorities in nation building and subsequent democratization can jointly drive mass nationalist mobilization against historically othered minorities even when the minority is not an imminent threat. The role of traditional authority within the public sphere often remains contested among members of the same majority group, and taking for granted unity within a majority group can obscure divisions that explain important political outcomes. I also bring a case from Southeast Asia into the growing literature on the resurgence of right-wing nationalism that is focused primarily on Europe and North America. While right-wing nationalist mobilization is overwhelmingly seen as a phenomenon linked to democratic backsliding and disillusionment in Western democracies, my study finds that right wing mobilization may also emerge during periods of democratic progress as a reactionary movement led by traditional authorities.

Conceptualizing right-wing nationalist mobilization as a multicausal social phenomenon is critical to understanding its historical and geographic patterns.

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