

# From Monks to Politicians

## *Transformation of Buddhism from the Social to Political Sphere in Sri Lanka*

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Buddhism as the religion practiced by around 70% of the people of Sri Lanka has been central to activities in political and social spheres, particularly since national independence. Traditionally, the majority of Buddhist monks have stayed away from politics. For a long time Buddhism detached itself from active politics and engaged in the social sphere. Thus, traditionally the monk was a person who renounced material goods and lived on the generosity of the householder, devoting all of his time to the quest for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Early in the history of Buddhism, this total dependence of a renouncer on the laity for material sustenance led to a social relationship which, at its core, was one of gift exchange – returning the laity's gift of material goods with the spiritual guidance which is explicitly understood in Buddhism as the gift that surpasses all other gifts. This eventually evolved into an ornately wrought priestly and pedagogic role. Despite periodic 'declines' in Buddhism, the monk's anchor in the code of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) was firm, the foundations of his belief in it un-shattered, and his relations with the laity maintained within clearly demarcated boundaries (Seniviratne 2001). It is within this framework of monk-lay relations that the social role of the monk in Sri Lanka evolved through the centuries.

There was a clear divide between the political and social spheres with which the Buddhist monks associated themselves. The interpretation of the notion 'social service' changed with passage of time, and the new reading covered a broad spectrum of advice and guidance in wholly secular activity, conspicuously including political activity, understood as the right to make and unmake governments, and to exert pressure on the elected representatives of the people. This is where the transformation began within the Sri Lankan Buddhism which later emerged as 'Political Buddhism'. Scholar monk Walpola Rahula best articulated the basis for this transformation in 1946 in his book titled *Bhikṣuvage Urumaya* (later translated as *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*), which argued that given their mandate to perform social service, monks could participate in politics and had done so since the time of Buddha. Significantly, political Buddhism emphasizes politics over Buddhist values

(Schalk 2007) because it disregards Sri Lanka's poly-ethnic heritage and seeks to institutionalize a Buddhist ethos for the entire country.

Active involvement of Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan politics in an individual capacity has been there since the politicization of society under British rule. In fact, a Buddhist priest was a founder member of the Communist Party of Ceylon. However, since the 1950s, monastic involvement in politics has gradually become institutionalized. In 1956, the *Eksath Bhikku Peramuna* (United Buddhist Front) was a driving force in the successful electoral campaign of the *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* led by SWRD Bandaranaike. The role of the clergy suffered a setback after the assassination of Bandaranaike by a priest in 1959, but recovered in the mid 1960s and has risen during the past five decades, notably in a militant form among young Buddhist monks closely associated with the politics of the *Janatha Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) in late 1990s and early 2000s. Even though the young JVP monks paraded in JVP May Day rallies, their involvement in active politics has been rather restrained. Contesting elections was not an option open to all politically active monks, since participation in active politics was not considered the Theravada Buddhist norm. (Theravada Buddhism which is predominant in Sri Lanka, India, and Burma is claimed to be doctrinally closest to Lord Buddha's teachings).

The paradigm shift from complete social work to partial involvement in politics by the Buddhist monks was seen as a departure of Buddhism from social to political sphere, also within the societies the monks have their influence and command on societal organization. Obeyesekere (1970) analysing post-independence cultural and political shifts in Sri Lanka referred to the Theravada Buddhism that Sri Lanka was experiencing as 'Protestant Buddhism', pointing out that many of its norms and organizational forms are historical derivatives of Protestant Christianity and that it is also a protest against Christianity and its associated Western political dominance prior to independence.

On the one hand, many expressed the fear that social service would inevitably lead to monks compromising monastic discipline. The critique of 'social service as the work of the monk' was based on religious-moral grounds. With the gradual acceptance of the idea that the monk's work is social service, a new and secular criterion to assess the worth of the monk has come into being. As opposed to the religious-moral criterion, this is an ethical and liberal-humanist criterion of social responsibility. To many lay critics, the monks do not live up to expectation.

On the other hand, with the Sri Lankan state already more receptive to Sinhala nationalism, the politicization of Buddhism paved the way for the domination of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the affairs of the state and politics. Political Buddhism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism have created the nationalist ideology prevalent in government and in the predominantly Sinhala Buddhist society. The most fundamental belief anchoring Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is that Sri Lanka has been preserved for Sinhala Buddhists, and minorities live there only because of Buddhists' sufferance. This sentiment automatically privileges Buddhists, marginalizes followers of other religions, and justifies Sinhala Buddhist superordination and minority subordination. This superordination was made possible by the transformation of the spheres of activity of Buddhism and the people increasingly seeing Buddhism as the primordial phenomenon linking Sinhala Buddhist society and polity.

A Buddhist monk belonging to the left wing *Lanka Samasamaja Party* was elected to Parliament from the Galle District in the parliamentary elections held in December 2001. He was the first monk to be elected to the parliament. Already, a Sinhala chauvinistic party calling itself the *Sinhala Urumaya* (SU) had entered the fray in October 2000, claiming that it was contesting for the upliftment of the Buddhism. Despite expectation that the SU would do well in the parliamentary elections, especially in the southern regions, it received only 1.47 percent of the national vote but it, however, won a seat in parliament. The SU fared even worse in the elections held a year later in December 2001, winning only 0.57 percent of the vote and no seat in parliament. During its December 2001 election campaign, the SU had declared that if elected it would force all those under eighteen years of age to join the Buddhist clergy, leading some to wonder, rather light heartedly, if Sri Lanka was witnessing the birth pangs of a Sinhala "Buddhist-Taliban" (Sunday Times 2004).

The unexpected death of Gangodawila Soma, a populist Buddhist monk with a wide TV audience, in Russia in December 2003 under unclear circumstances provided the politically active monks with a sudden and unexpected opportunity to arouse anti-Christian feelings and whip up Buddhist sentiments (Uyangoda 2007). In the wake of this build up, the SU reorganised itself as the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) in February 2004, and developed the strategy of fielding Buddhist monks as candidates in parliamentary elections. It pleaded with the Sinhala-Buddhist voters that their interests could be best served by electing Buddhist monks as law-makers. The main

elements of the JHU's electoral platform in April 2004 were "the protection of the interests of the majority Sinhalese, protection of Buddhism from non-Buddhist adversaries and international conspiracies while working towards the moral regeneration in society and politics". Nine monks were elected to the parliament. The JHU's elected monks asked not to be referred to as members of parliament but 'advisors' to the masses, and argued that their goal was to create a block in parliament to protect and propagate Buddhist interests. Meantime, several Sinhala Buddhist nationalist intellectuals latched on to the catch phrase *jathika chinthanaya* (national consciousness) to propel Sinhala Buddhist chauvinistic ideas. The JHU subscribed to the shared belief that, given the island's 2,500-year-old civilization, the people should embrace its roots and seek to reinstitute cultural nationalism. Venerable Athuraliye Rathana, the very much outspoken media spokesman for the JHU remarked: "the *Sangha* has entered the arena of politics to ensure the protection of Buddhist heritage and values which had been undermined for centuries" (Deegalle 2006).

Meanwhile, many Buddhists felt uncomfortable that monks participated so conspicuously in politics, and a Presidential Commission report in 2002 recommended that *bhikkhus* should not be allowed to contest elections or engage in politics. Notably, the JHU monks received the highest share of their votes in urban electorates with a concentration of middle-class Buddhists, many of them literate in English, while JHU polled less than five percent in the rural districts of the Southern and North-Central Provinces, usually seen as the heartland of Sinhala nationalism. Thus, the emergence of Buddhist monks as parliamentarians can be described as a manifestation of the spread of militant Sinhala nationalism among the urban, middle class constituencies. It was evident that the transformation was made possible by the middle class, and it was accreted in the last elections in 2010 where JHU's major vote share was from the capital Colombo, especially the voters were from elite and the educated middle class.

The JHU election campaign in 2004 stood out from its earlier election campaigns since its slate of parliamentary candidates consisted entirely of Buddhist monks and the JHU is still presented a monk-led political party. Although the novelty and radical development that Buddhist monks as a large representative group decided to enter Parliament, certainly paid dividends, the performance of the clergy in Parliament led to political setback and a weakening of the JHU as well as second thought on the prospect of running a slate of Buddhist monks in elections.

Nevertheless, this political event is likely to have had a significant impact on the future of the *Sangha* (the order of Buddhist monks). JHU monks have become a symbol of Sinhala Buddhist strength within Parliament. This brings us to the question how it was possible for the Buddhist monks to transform from mere social discourse into a full-fledged political entity. This will shed light on the social aspects of modern Sri Lanka. Frustration with mainstream politicians and the general feeling that politicians typically manipulate and use *bhikkhus* has played a role in the emergence of the JHU. The monks have run the gamut participating in active politics for over fifty years in Sri Lanka; all that was left was contest elections directly, and the JHU was a natural extension of such political Buddhism. The active presence of evangelical Christian groups and the understandable public concern about 'unethical' conversions, promoted by monks and made into a national issue by Buddhist nationalists, also played a role in the formation and growth of the JHU (DeVotta 2007).

Against this backdrop, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism may be seen as a modern political response to newly emerging local and global social challenges, which also benefits from the institution of majoritarian democracy and the growing tyranny of the majority, in the absence of fair "checks and balances" to protect the minorities in the post-colonial period, in which Buddhism has been mobilised and captured to legitimise a Sinhalese majoritarian state. The mobilisation and politicisation of Buddhism is, however, neither static nor steadily growing, but has waxed and waned almost inversely with the supremacy of the majority and domination of Buddhism in the social and political spheres. Uyangoda (1996) has argued that Sinhala Buddhism has made no significant contribution to the evolution of a non-violent social ideology. On the contrary, the Sinhala Buddhist historiographical tradition and the ideology inherent in it support ethnic political violence.

The Buddhist clergy, now almost exclusively identified with Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, still has progressive clergymen in its midst. But with the upward mobility of the Buddhist clergy owing to support by the state, wealthy individuals and affluent Buddhist organisations, the clergy, although divided along political, caste and regional lines, act as a privileged social group, and play an important role in carrying forward the cause of Sinhala Buddhism in all major Sinhala nationalist parties. The four *mahasanghas* have been given increased prominence by successive governments and have generally served to obstruct solutions to the national question and suppressed the minorities and moreover helped to maintain the

tyranny of the majority. This upward mobility is one of the main reasons for the unending political ambitions of the monks and their urge to move from social to political. The Sinhala Buddhist elite and the more advantaged sections of the clergy have a vested interest in making Buddhism the state religion and have succeeded in securing for it a special place in the constitution. Besides the benefits enjoyed by the Buddhist clergy through the elevated status that they have in the Sinhala Buddhist community, successive governments have granted various special privileges to the clergy as a whole, but in actual practice benefitting the Buddhist priests. The prominence given to Buddhism in the affairs of the state and the rise in religious awareness also has led to the introduction of religious rituals in public and state functions which for long had been secular and to a tendency for individuals and organisations to make a public display of religious identity, especially that of Buddhism.

However, given the degree to which the JHU has hitherto compromised itself, the party is unlikely to fare better in future elections. Irrespective of its future success, the party's monks will continue to play an influential role in the effort to expand the extant Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology. Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which was sandwiched in-between social and political spheres over the past decades, has now been wholly transferred to the political sphere with the political playing field dominated and evaluated by the norms and values of the political Buddhism in the name of protection of the sanctity of Buddhism. In modern days, fascists have come to power using the pretext of democracy. Modern day political Buddhism in Sri Lanka has actually brewed itself from ultra-nationalism at large. Anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments, endorsement of majoritarian parliamentary democracy, celebration of militarism and minority suppression have become the defining features of Political Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which is new to the humane and tolerant philosophy of Buddhism.

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