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Military and the Monks: Future of Civil-Military relations in Myanmar



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Abstract

There are widely held perceptions that the National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) has not only failed to act against the military perpetrators of crime against the Rohingya minorities, but has defended them openly. However, amid the din that seeks to disown the Nobel laureate and strip her off the awards bestowed by countless organisations, the NLD's painstaking efforts to rein in the Buddhist nationalists on the one hand and to limit the power of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) on the other, is being lost. In the run up to the parliamentary elections of November 2020, the international community has to choose between ASSK and the Military.

Demonstration and Hate Speeches

On 9 February, about 1000 Buddhist hardliners including monks under the banner of Myanmar National Organization, demonstrated in commercial capital Yangon in support of the country's military and in opposition to the NLD's alleged moves to undermine 'Buddhism'. Several hate speeches were made targeting ASSK and Thura Aung Ko, the country's religious affairs minister. Both were accused for 'oppressing the country's majority religion by favouring non-Buddhists' and for 'proposing constitutional amendments that would reduce the political power of the military'. According to reports¹, some Buddhist monks who were part of the demonstration carried banners with "No Rohingya" written on them. Media houses who reported about the speeches were sent threat letters by the hardliners to take down the reports from their websites. Some persons even visited two media houses making similar demands. Broadcasters had to edit news reports about the protest that were webcast earlier. There is little doubt that the rally, which echoed the world view of the Tatmadaw, had its full support.

NLD versus assertive Buddhist Nationalism

In 2017, Ma Ba Tha (MBT, literally translating to the protection of race and religion), a hardline religious organization formed in 2012 was disbanded. The MBT had spearheaded most of the rhetoric that fueled anti-Muslim hatred in recent years. Speeches made by its leaders had preceded the anti-Rohingya program. In May 2017, the State-backed 47-member Buddhist cleric organization, State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, known as Ma Ha Na (MHN) declared MBT an unlawful organization and banned the group from operating under its current name. In response, the MBT quickly renamed itself Buddha Dhamma Prahita Foundation (BDPF) and continued to operate from its headquarter in Yangon's Insein Township.

In May 2019, the NLD-led government decided to prosecute ultranationalist monk U Wirathu under section 124(a) of the Penal Code accusing him of sedition. Section 124 (a) punishes bringing the government into hatred or contempt with a maximum penalty of 20 years' imprisonment and a fine. The monk had ridiculed

¹ Protestors chanted slogans such as protection of race, religion and sovereignty; protection of Section 59 (f) of the constitution that prevents Myanmar citizens with immediate family members holding foreign citizenship from contesting the presidency; non-emergence of false race Rohingya and non-acceptance of amendments to the constitution and criticizing the organizations trying to harm national sovereignty. "Mass rally held to denounce threat to race, religion and sovereignty", *Eleven Myanmar*, 10 February 2020, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/mass-rally-held-to-denounce-threat-to-race-religion-and-sovereignty>. Accessed on 26 February 2020.

ASSK and the NLD government for their attempt to amend the 2008 constitution. Wirathu indirectly spoke of ASSK as someone, who was “sleeping with a foreigner”², referring to her dead British husband. Wirathu, who had been banned by the MHN from public preaching for a year in March 2017, was issued with an arrest warrant. Wirathu who initially said that “If they want to catch me, let them do. I will face it,” however, went into hiding and is yet to be arrested. The government’s move was condemned by BDPF as “a lawless action by the current democratic government”, which staged rallies in Yangon and other areas to show support for Wirathu. The rights advocates, however, raised concerns that the government has targeted him not for his hate speech against the Muslims but for criticising the authorities.

On June 16-17, the BDPF organized its annual meeting. More than 1000 monks assembled in Insein township. In the meeting, monks came down heavily on the NLD-led government over its handling of the conflict with Rohingya Muslims, suggesting it had “tarnished the reputation” of Myanmar and the Buddhist religion.³ In July, the Ma Ha Na summoned the chair and vice-chair of BDPF for their roles in organizing the celebration. While BDPF’s vice chairman Mawkyun Sayadaw turned up, chairman Ywama Sayadaw sent a letter expressing his inability to come.⁴ However, no specific disciplinary actions were taken against them. The Ma Ha Na merely ordered the foundation’s signboards taken down within 45 days, saying that action will be taken in line with the 1990 Law Relating to the Sangha Organization if it fails to comply. In response, the BDPF said the organization had already removed all signage since 2018. “They can come and have a look”, said the BDPF spokesperson.⁵

Unlike the Tatmadaw, which uses the monks for its attempts to safeguard its dominance in politics, the NLD has taken some steps to delink religion from politics. In June 2019, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture released a public statement denouncing any monk who gets involved in social and political activities in order to instigate community destabilization, saying they are not entitled to the status of “cleric”. “They are just bogus monks who are damaging the dignity of Buddhism through their actions across the country,” it said.

Civil- Religious-Military ties

Many in Myanmar blame the military for having carved out a group of supporters among the Buddhist groups. After the transition from military rule to civilian government in 2011, the military aligned itself with the ultra-nationalistic Buddhist leaders, who in return for financial support and gifts, worked to enhance the army's popularity and influence. A group of monks’ broke ranks with the largely non-political clergy to spread the pro-military propaganda and also hatred against the Muslims.⁶ U Wirathu incidentally had served a prison term of eight years for inciting hatred. But after his release in 2014, the military backed-MBT became a powerful organization.

² Hannah Beech & Saw Nang, “He Incited Massacre, but Insulting Aung San Suu Kyi Was the Last Straw”, *New York Times*, 29 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/asia/myanmar-wirathu-monk-buddhism.html>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

³ “Ultrationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization”, Radio Free Asia, 1 August 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ultrationalist-myanmar-monk-group-07302019164233.html>. Accessed on 24 February 2020.

⁴ Htun Htun, “Religion Ministry Done Leaving Sangha to Govern Ma Ba Tha”, *Irrawaddy*, 31 July 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/religion-ministry-done-leaving-sangha-govern-ma-ba-tha.html>. Accessed on 24 February 2020.

⁵ “Ultrationalist Myanmar Monk Group Declared Illegal by Top Buddhist Organization”, op.cit.

⁶ “An Unholy Alliance: Monks and the Military in Myanmar”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2019/03/unholy-alliance-monks-military-myanmar-190309083316608.html>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

The NLD, on the contrary, did not view groups like MBT favourably. This compelled the NBT to add anti-NLDism and anti-ASSKism to its plan of action. The NLD tolerated it till the MBT started belittling ASSK. The challenge, however, that the government faces in acting against the BDPF is that it enjoys the open support of the Tatmadaw; going after it could exacerbate tensions between the civilian and military wings of the government at a particularly sensitive time.⁷ The *Tatmadaw* has said that MBT/BDPF is a necessity and should be supported in the name of Buddhism. In June 2019, the BDPF received US\$19,600 from the Yangon regional military commander.⁸ The same month, BDPF issued a seven-point statement urging voters to shun the NLD in next year's general election, accusing the party of damaging the "country, race and religion".⁹

The military's active role in the violence carried out against the Rohingya is well documented and in July 2019, the United States (U.S.) imposed sanctions on four military leaders.¹⁰ That has not stopped the Tatmadaw from promoting Buddhist nationalism and Muslim phobia in the country. At least one member of the military's political arm Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has been charged for having incited the Buddhists against the NLD and the Muslims. On 3 August 2019, U 'Bullet'¹¹ Hla Swe, a retired lieutenant colonel and former parliamentarian who had joined the USDP in 2010, criticized ASSK for not having chosen to protest against imposition of sanctions against the *Tatmadaw* leaders. He accused that civilian government had provided evidence to the U.S. that led to the imposition of sanctions.¹² His speech reportedly included the following statement. "If the United States came and bombed government ministries, I would accept that. Hey bombers, try it. If all [state leaders] died, that would be good." He went on to say that while the U.S. can insult Buddhism (referring to an art exhibition organized by the U.S. embassy which displayed a photograph of Buddha in a gas mask), it does not dare to do so against Islam because, "Muhammad will bomb them with an airplane"¹³. In August 2019, Hla Swe was charged with sedition under Article 124(a) for making comments that the court deemed defamatory to government leaders. He, like Wirathu, is yet to be arrested.

The NLD hasn't made secret of why fugitives like Wirathu and Hla Swe have not been arrested till now, in spite of court orders. On 4 February 2020, Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture U Aung Ko pointed at the government's lack authority over the military-controlled Home Affairs Ministry, which oversees the police force; and suggested that the fugitives would have been arrested if the Home Affairs Ministry was

⁷ "Is the Tatmadaw supporting an anti-government organisation?", *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 July 2019, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/is-the-tatmadaw-supporting-an-anti-government-organisation>. Accessed on 22 February 2020.

⁸ Htet Naing Zaw, "Ma Ba Tha is a Necessity: Military", *Irrawaddy*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-necessity-military.html>. Accessed on 18 February 2020.

⁹ Kyaw Phyo Tha, "Buddhist Nationalists Urge Voters to Shun NLD at Ballot Box", *Irrawaddy*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/buddhist-nationalists-urge-voters-shun-nld-ballot-box.html>. Accessed on 18 February 2020.

¹⁰ These include Myanmar military's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing; his deputy, Soe Win, and two other brigadier generals Than Oo and Aung Aung and their families. These are the strongest action the United States has taken in response to massacres of minority Rohingyas in Myanmar. David Brunnstrom, Lesley Wroughton. "U.S. imposes sanctions on Myanmar military leaders over Rohingya abuses", Reuters, 16 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-myanmar/u-s-imposes-sanctions-on-myanmar-military-commander-over-rohingya-abuses-idUSKCN1UB2QM>. Accessed on 26 February 2020.

¹¹ Hla Swe is the publisher of the ultranationalist Bullet News Journal and hence, uses 'Bullet' as his middle name. Facebook page of Bullet journal can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/soeyannn33/>.

¹² Swe Lei Mon, "Court issues warrant to arrest former USDP lawmaker", *Myanmar Times*, 13 August 2019, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/court-issues-warrant-arrest-former-usdp-lawmaker.html>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

¹³ Htun Htun, "Muslim Leader Files Suit Against Ex-Officer for 'Hate Speech' Against Islam", *Irrawaddy*, 6 August 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/muslim-leader-files-suit-ex-officer-hate-speech-islam.html>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

under the control of the civilian government. This angered the *Tatmadaw*, whose spokesperson called on the government to act against the minister¹⁴.

Banality of 2008 Constitution

Months away from the general elections in November 2020, the NLD appears to have stepped up its efforts to be able to bring about some changes to the 2008 constitution that bestows extraordinary political powers on the military including controlling key ministries. In late January, a constitutional amendment committee, working over 11 months, submitted 114 bills to parliament that contain the proposed changes, including ones that would move oversight of the armed forces from the Defense Services Ministry to the elected president and gradually eliminate all military-appointed lawmakers. The committee's other suggestions include clauses that will pave way for gradual reduction of seats reserved for the *Tatmadaw* and the threshold reduction for constitutional amendments. Curiously, however, these, under the present constitution, would need the military's approval. In other words, the latter would have to vote for its own decline in influence, a phenomenon whose conclusion can be foretold. So, 'while the amendments are unlikely to have any tangible effects on Myanmar's laws, they are already having tangible effects on the relationship between the NLD and the military'¹⁵.

The military can stall the moves in many ways. Two members of the military have resigned from the committee. Media house *Irrawaddy* has reported an 'unprecedented levels of participation' by military parliamentarians as of the 166 appointed military lawmakers, 164 are registered to join the upcoming parliamentary debate on bills to amend the Constitution, dates for which are yet to be fixed till the writing of this article. At the other level, the *Tatmadaw* is actively pepping up Buddhist nationalist sentiments by supporting rallies such as the one held on 9 February. A symbiotic relationship has developed between the military and monks, catering to their mutual needs and that explains why the Buddhist nationalists have come out in strong support of the military. Myanmar media has reported that many of the demonstrators in the 9 February rally are known to have participated in MBT's activities.

Options for the International Community

Choosing sides in Myanmar has never been easy. ASSK was a preferred choice of the world before she assumed political power. However, she has lost much of her credibility in the face of her defence of the military vis-à-vis the Rohingya. Although much of the world would like her to win the battle to amend the 2008 constitution, they would also prefer her to be politically right in condemning the atrocities on the Rohingya, uphold press freedom and rights of the ethnic minorities. These expectations, however, may have been based on incomplete understanding of the power equations between the civilian government and the military, which she is desperately trying to alter. Till now, damning her has not done much good for the plight of the Rohingya. On the contrary, it may have weakened her position vis-a-vis the military and the ultra-nationalist Buddhists.

As tensions between the military and the government increase in the run-up to general elections in November, ASSK needs support of the international community. The alternative to an NLD-led government in Myanmar

¹⁴ Htet Naing Zaw, "Myanmar Military Asks Govt to Punish Minister for Police Remark", *Irrawaddy*, 4 February 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-asks-govt-punish-minister-police-remark.html>. Accessed on 19 February 2020.

¹⁵ Andrew Nachemson, "How Constitutional Reform in Myanmar Matters for the Country's Democracy", *Diplomat*, 31 January 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/how-constitutional-reform-in-myanmar-matters-for-the-countrys-democracy/>. Accessed on 25 February 2020.

is a quasi-civilian set up propped up by the military. Will that sort of government deliver on the human rights front? Won't incessant pressurizing ASSK minimize her options and push her into the lap of the military? The international community needs demonstrate a bit of patience and strongly support the NLD's bid to bring about changes in 2008 constitution. That may seem a bit of irony at the moment given her public posturing vis-a-vis the Rohingya, but she still remains the best bet for democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

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