


BUDDHISM AND POLITICAL LEGITIMATION IN BURMA (1988-2003)



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สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

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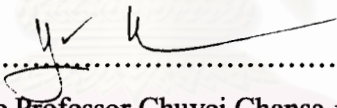
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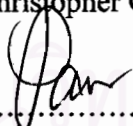
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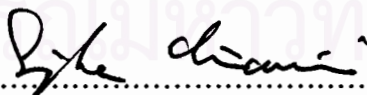
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วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ศึกษาและสำรวจการนำสัญลักษณ์และหลักความเชื่อทางพุทธศาสนามาใช้ในการสร้างความชอบธรรมทางการเมืองของรัฐบาลพม่าในช่วงปี 1988 ถึง 2003 เพื่อหาคำตอบว่ารัฐบาลทหารพม่าที่ได้ทำการปฏิวัติชิงอำนาจคืนจากประชาชน และได้เข่นฆ่าผู้คนล้มตายเป็นจำนวนมาก มีวิธีการสร้างความชอบธรรมอย่างไร

ผลการศึกษาพบว่ารัฐบาลทหารสลอร์กได้มีปัญหาคความชอบธรรมในการปกครองประเทศจากหลายสาเหตุด้วยกัน การเข่นฆ่าผู้คนและการดำรงตนในอำนาจโดยไม่ฟังเสียงและความต้องการของประชาชน ทำให้รัฐบาลไม่เป็นที่ยอมรับ เมื่อพยายามสร้างความชอบธรรมในหลากหลายวิธี อันได้แก่ การจัดการเลือกตั้งขึ้นในปี 1990 สัญญาที่จะทำให้ประเทศมีความร่ำรวย และสงบสุขด้วยการจะนำประเทศไปสู่เศรษฐกิจแบบทุนนิยม และรณรงค์จิตสำนึกความเป็นพม่าในหมู่ประชาชนในพม่า อย่างไรก็ตาม วิธีเหล่านี้ไม่ได้ทำให้รัฐบาลมีความชอบธรรมแต่อย่างใด ทั้งนี้เนื่องจากรัฐบาลประสบความล้มเหลวในการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจและสังคม หากแต่สภาพการณ์กลับเลวร้ายลงทุกที ยิ่งแต่จะทำให้ภาพลักษณ์ของรัฐบาลแย่ลง

จากการศึกษาได้บ่งชี้ว่า รัฐบาลได้ลอกเลียนวิธีการที่ษัตริย์พม่าเคยปฏิบัติเพื่อสร้างความชอบธรรม หลักความเชื่อทางศาสนาและสัญลักษณ์ทางศาสนาถูกนำมาใช้อย่างมากมาย จุดประสงค์คือ เพื่อสื่อถึงอำนาจแสดงให้ผู้คนและคู่แข่งทางการเมืองเห็นถึงความมีสิทธิ์ขาดในการเป็นผู้นำประเทศของทหาร นอกจากนี้เนื่องจากสภาพทางเศรษฐกิจที่แย่ลงอย่างไม่สามารถแก้ไขได้ นายทหารจึงหันมาใช้ศาสนาเพื่อเรียกศรัทธาจากประชาชนว่าเศรษฐกิจจะดีขึ้นจากการลงดีให้ปรากฏ ในความพยายามจะชักจูงความเชื่อของประชาชนต่อไป รัฐบาลจึงดำเนินวิถีทางเช่นนี้เรื่อยมา อย่างไรก็ตาม รัฐไม่อาจเรียกความชอบธรรมมาได้ แม้ประชาชนจะยังคงและศรัทธาในความเชื่อดังกล่าว แต่เมื่อไม่มีอะไรดีขึ้นความไม่เชื่อและไม่ศรัทธาในรัฐบาลผู้เคยทำร้ายประชาชนก็กลับคืนมาดังเดิม

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RATTANAPORN POUNGPATTANA : (BUDDHISM AND POLITICAL
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This thesis examines the Burmese military government's utilization of Buddhist symbols and traditional belief that can be associated royal right and power. The focus is from 1988, which was the year the military government ascended to power by making a coup and killing hundreds of people who protested. It therefore attempted to find out how the detestation could continue to rule the country for almost 15 years.

The study found that the SLORC government has faced with a grave legitimacy crisis on many grounds. The massacring of indignant people and students, and its continuing to rule without people's consent made the military government unadmirable. Trying to establish legitimacy, the government firstly, declared that elections would be held in 1990, as well as claimed that it would improve the economy of the nation and made Burma /Myanmar a peaceful and prosperous nation. In order to achieve those goals, the government made a promotion of the economy, as well as the enhancement of one's national pride among both Burmese and ethnic minorities. But these goals seemed to be never reached. Therefore, the government would never gain legitimacy from those campaigns as well. Instead, its image became undermined from the fact that the economy had never been improved, but even increasingly worsened.

Therefore the government brought back Buddhism to legitimize its absolute right to rule. Evidences showed that the military government imitated the model of Burmese kings. The large-amounted utilization of Buddhist belief and symbols aims to manifest to the people as well as its political rival that the military government has an absolute power and therefore the right to rule. Significantly, as being auspicious signs, those religious works have also been utilized to convince people about the nearly-happened prosperous time of Myanmar. As the economic situation have never been improved but deteriorated, the SLORC in order to keep persuading the people its right to rule, has continued to produce such kinds of religious works. However, it has still been illegitimate. Though the people were convinced at the first place, they had realized that the government tried to trick them when they saw that there was no improvement.

Field of Study Southeast Asian Studies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Question

Significantly, in September 1988, the military ascended to power after massacring people. It was since that times that people have confirmed that many religious activities and projects began operations soon after the coup and the SLORC's ascendancy to power. All activities visibly look like those that practiced by Burmese kings, and therefore seem associated with the signification of kingly manifestation of right and power. In fact, nearly every leader in the postcolonial period utilized Buddhism to legitimate himself in such a way. Surprisingly, however, some of those activities were never used in the colonial period, and were even thought to have disappeared with the Burmese kingship.

Though it is obvious that Buddhism has been used as a political means among Burmese rulers since the time of kings (before 1885), the way the military government after 1988 has utilized Buddhism for political purpose is exceptionally interesting.

1.2 Hypothesis

The SLORC/SPDC greatly brought back and utilized traditional modes of legitimacy of the Burmese king. Significantly however, the characteristics of legitimation are not the same as that of either any previous governments or kings.

1.3 Scope of Study

Though the research studies Buddhism and its role as a tool to legitimize the Burmese government, there are in fact three main modes of which political leaders frequently utilized Buddhism 'to provide cohesiveness to their realms and to legitimate their power'. This includes religious beliefs, practices, and institutions.¹ Obviously, the

¹ Smith, Bardwell, Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma. Bangkok: ANIMA Books, 1978, p.vi.

SLORC/SPDC has instrumentalized all these three means. However, in this thesis, the focus is on the Burmese government's exploitation of religious beliefs, that associate with traditional symbols and beliefs of the Burmese monarchs, and that signify right and power according to Buddhist belief and to its associated values. It focuses on a case study of particular mega-projects held by the SLORC/SPDC.

1.4 Purpose of study

This research attempts to look at the characteristics of the political culture of Burma/ Myanmar. It tries to find out mainly answers of the following questions.

1. What has been the crises the SLORC/SPDC had faced? What did they do and why had they had to utilize Buddhism that much?
2. Examine the characteristic of Buddhist legitimation in the SLORC/SPDC's period. What characteristics had been changed?
2. Identify the key factors that led to the changing characteristics of legitimation.

1.5 Methodology

This study is interdisciplinary in nature. Library research, bascd mainly on English provided basic information. Though there are many studies concerning on Buddhism and political legitimacy, a very few studies are concerned Buddhism and political legitimation of the current Burmese government. Only a few French documents give current information. Field research in Myanmar has more or less provided clearer picture about Myanmar. Observation and interviews with academics, monks and people also bestowed me more understanding on current situation. However, due to a limited time, the data could not be much relied. Therefore, other sources of information are needed. Primary sources including Burmese newspapers and articles available in both government-run and private web-sites, are largely used in this study. Anthropological and political science approaches are employed as a major instrument for data collection and analysis.

1.6 Basic concepts

As it is shown at the title, this study concerns Buddhism and its being utilized by the Burmese Government towards the aim of the political legitimacy. Therefore, basic understanding of each aspect, including Buddhism, political legitimacy and the SLORC/SPDC --the Burmese government since 1988 to 2003, should be explained.

According to Somboon (1993), religion is the central component of the traditional cultures of almost all societies in the world, and in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, Buddhism constituted the core of traditional culture.² It has profoundly influenced on political development of the country, and also reputedly continues to mould the social and political values of the great majority of Buddhists. Since legitimacy, according to David Apter, can be derived from a particular set of moralities or a set of cultural norms. Accordingly, it could be said that, in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, Buddhism is a source of legitimacy.

The same has happened in Burma. Burma or Myanmar (as officially called since 1989) has been ruled by many regimes, including the monarchical regime (1044-1885), the Parliamentary regime (1948-1961), and the Military Socialist regime (1962-1988). 'Where a government has faced erosion of political legitimacy, whether it be Anawratha, U Nu, or Ne Win, it returns to Buddhism.'³

In September 1988, there was another group of soldiers making a coup and establishing itself in power. The State Law and Order Restoration Council, as it was named, was a group of soldier that organized a coup against the infamous Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) on 18 September 1988, and that the name was in 1997 changed into "the State Peace and Development Council" (SPDC). After establishing itself in power, in September 23, 1988, it claimed to maintain law and order... and hold

² Somboon Suksamran. Buddhism and Political Legitimacy (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 1993), p. 1.

³ Martin Maritn "Burmese Politics after 1988." In Burma: Political Economy under Military Rule (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p.21.

multi-party election in May 1990.⁴ As losing the 1990 elections, and denying to transfer power to those who won, the SLORC government has been illegitimate since then.

Since 1988, the SLORC/SPDC made increasing recourse to the public support of Buddhism. Countless pagodas have been erected or renovated across the country, including the historic Shwedagon in Rangoon, with military officers pictured daily in the state media paying their respects to senior monks. Therefore, many people views that the ruling general has been justifying itself with the same means as the precedent rulers when facing erosion of their political legitimacy.

1.7 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters.

Chapter One introduces the purpose and scope of the study. It roughly outlines the modes of which Buddhism could be used to legitimation. It also gave a brief understanding of key words in the study and the connection of issues.

Chapter Two concerns itself with an overview of the historical background of the Burmese economy. It showed that the economic problem had long been taken place in Burma under the policy of 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. Though Ne Win, the head of the state, blamed the policy as a major cause for economic disaster, it was generally known that the economic disaster was mainly derived from the mismanagement of the Socialist government. The government's 1987 demonetization of all bank notes of which was over 15 Kyat in value was the most infamous and significant one. It was because the wide dissatisfaction had been mainly derived from this matter.

In Chapter Three, we discusses the crises the State Law and Order Restoration council (SLORC) had faced since 1988. It started with the 1987 economic crisis that had been occurred since the previous Socialist government, and that eventually had led to political crisis of the military regime. In 1988, the SLORC as authority at that time tried to legitimate its coup d' etat and status, and to pacify the chaotic situation by a

⁴ Josef Silverstein, "Introduction." In Democracy and Politics in Burma (Rangoon: NCGUB, 1993), p.5.

promise to hold elections in 1990. The outcome of electoral votes of which the National League for Democracy (NLD) gained landslide, indicated the people's bestowing right to rule to it, was ignored by the military junta who refused to transfer State power to the NLD. Instead, the latter continued to rule, and had suffered with the economic, social, and political worsening under its administration. Meanwhile, such a big political power as Aung San Suu Kyi who has been admired both by the Burmese and the international communities, was unnegligible.

Chapter Four reveals the use of Buddhist symbolism for political legitimation in Burma. It introduced to reader that, in previous centuries, formulations of Buddhist doctrine that emphasize the determinative influence of Karma and religious merit and demerit on human-being and socio-economic status were used to lend legitimacy to the absolute monarchy. Burmese traditionalist ruling elites in modern period is also evident to use the historical model of the absolute monarchy.

Chapter Five forms the central component of this thesis. Fifteen pages of Burmese government paper and documents, as well as anti-Burmese government organization publications, provided information that benefited to the study. Only four cases of the SLORC/SPDC's utilization of Buddhist symbolism were discussed in deep details. These include the reconstruction of Pagan, the hoisting *hti* at Shwedagon Pagoda's spire, the operation of Mindhamma –the grand marble Buddha image, and the possession of three white elephants.

Chapter Six is made of an analysis of the SLORC/SPDC's utilization of Buddhism. The utilization of Buddhist symbolism in this time was similar to the traditional one by Burmese monarchs. Buddhism was still a base of legitimacy and power to the Burmese government, and the latter achieved it by manifestation, through the use of rituals, practices, and symbolic objects, associated with Buddhist belief.

Chapter Seven Conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

POLITICO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT (1962-1987)

2.1 The Economic Situation under the Socialist Government (1962-1987)

In March 1962, the military led by General Ne Win made coup d' etat against the civilian government and took control of the country since then.

Almost immediately after the coup, the leaders announced that Burma was a socialist state* with a program called "the Burmese Way to Socialism." This mode aimed to improve in the standard of living; to end the unemployment and the expansion of production through nationalization of agriculture, industrial production, communication, distribution and trade.¹ Economic priority was given to industrialization and modernization of agriculture.²

In order to achieve its economic goal, the Revolutionary Council then promulgated the nationalization of all banks, industries, and large shops -mostly belonging to Indians and Chinese from February 23 to October 1st, 1963. Land was also nationalized between 1963 and 1965. Besides, there were the cancellation of debts and abolition of land rents, the actions of which benefited the peasants. On 17 May 1964, bank notes of 50-kyat and 100-kyat were demonetized with the intention to "return the profits to indigenous Burmese" and "remove wealth from foreign hands."³

Planification of the economy started with Aung San in 1947. But all plans failed one after other during the republican regime. The same happened during the Socialist regime with a series of unfinished plans.

* Aung-Thwin (1989), In fact, U Nu government after 1948 and its program of pyidawtha (literally, "Pleasant Honorable Country") had also opted for a socialist state. in a sense, then, "the Burmese Way to Socialism" of 1962 was not an entirely different indeology, though it did differ in certain respects. (For more information, see Aung Thwin, 1989, p. 27)

¹ Josef Silverstein, "Introduction," p. 3.

² Guy Lubeigt, La Birmanie. Que Sais-Je? (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975), pp.59-63.

³ Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), p. 32.

At first, the national economic came better than before for the Burmese population. However, since 1967, economic situation became worse due to the government's mismanagement.⁴ By the large extent, economic deterioration derived directly from the policy of nationalization. As a result of so doing, the economic situation was very discouraging. It became even worse because of stagnation in agricultural production.

This began with the government's policy of controlling the price of commodities and especially the price of rice. During the Socialist regime, farmers were ordered to sell their rice to the government at below market price.* Some frustrated farmers put less effort into their cultivation while others hoarded as much rice as possible and sold or bartered it surreptitiously on the black market.⁵ As a result, there was the scarcity of rice in Rangoon and the big towns. Other consumer goods, especially imported ones, experienced shortage. Partially, this was because the rice exports had been Burma's primary source of foreign exchange. The dramatic fall in rice exports, from 1.8 million tons in 1963 to 0.3 million tons in 1968, made it impossible for the government to pay for necessary imports.⁶ Worse still, the shortage of goods was increased due to the unskilled management of military men who were brought in to run their new businesses, instead of the skilled Chinese and Indian businessmen who had initially been expelled.⁷ As a consequence, there was shortage of both industrial and agricultural products in market. Stocks of even the most basic goods were insufficient.⁸

⁴ Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, p 34.

⁵ Guy Lubeigt, La Birmanie. Que Sais-Je?, pp. 72-73, and Lubeigt, 1979: 139-143. From 1945 to 1964 the price of the farmers for one basket of paddy (20.7Kg) remains the same; 3 Kyats. Peasants had to sale their production of paddy to the buying center of the Socialist government. In October 1973 a center was paying 6 Kyat per basket. On the black market, paddy was sold at 10 Kyats. (Enquiries, October 1973)

⁶ Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, p. 33.

⁷ Ibid., p.33.

⁸ Lubeigt, La Birmanie. Que Sais-Je?, pp. 59-90.

⁹ David Steinberg, Crisis in Burma: Stasis and Change in a Political Economy in Turmoil (Bangkok: ISIS, 1989), p.17.

Table 1 : Trends in Economic Performance : 1962-1987

Average Annual Percentage Change	GDP Growth	Consumer Prices Index	Exports (Million US\$)	Imports (Million US\$)
1962-65	4.9	3.2	248.3	222.8
1966-69	2.2	6.1	138.1	157.8
1970-73	1.3	7.8	128.7	167.4
1974-77	4.7	19.5	185.5	250.8
1978-81	6.5	0.1	399.2	719.6
1982-85	4.7	5.7	368.2	687.2
1986-88	-1.7	17.4	215.0	272.0
1986/87	-1.1	9.2	351.2	549.9
1987/88	-4.0	23.9	257.7	623.9

Sources: Review of the Financial, Economic and Social Conditions for 1993/94 and Tun Wai, 1990, and Mya Than (1997). "Economic Transformation In Mainland Southeast Asia : The Case of Myanmar."

Because of the introduction of political as well as economic reforms since 1974, the economic situation had been improved in the first half of the second phase of Socialist Regime, but it started to get worsened in 1983. Export earnings began to decline as a result of the decrease in rice procurement and the falling world price of rice.⁹ Imports for agriculture and manufacture, together with consumer goods, outpaced exports and Burma's foreign debt rose appreciably. The imports were reduced and the manufacturing sector was especially hard hit as it was without spare parts and raw materials. The periods saw nation's dependence upon the black market grow as the state could not provide what the people wanted and needed.¹⁰

From Table 1, we witness the collapse of the Burmese economy since 1985/6, as there was negative growth rate. Export performance was also depressing: earnings fell

⁹ Mya Than. "The union of Burma Foreign Investment Law: Prospects of Mobilizing Foreign Capital for Development?" In Myanmar Dilemmas and Options (Singapore: ISAS, 1990), p.4.

¹⁰ David Steinberg, Crisis in Burma: Stasis and Change in a Political Economy in Turmoil, p. 17.

from US\$ 0.31 billion in 1985/86 to US\$ 0.15 billion in 1989/90. With a decline in foreign currency reserves –down to less than US\$ 30 million at one point in 1988, the government was forced to borrow more money from external sources and thus, Myanmar’s foreign debt rose from US\$ 1 billion in 1979 to more than US\$ 4 billion in 1988/89.¹¹ It reveals the gradual deterioration of Burmese economy as the fruition of the economic manifesto, the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” In 1987, when internal debt had risen to dangerous levels, many of the state economic enterprises (SEEs), the public sector, symbolized of economic of modernity, had effectively failed, as their production faltered and black market’s goods increased. On the other hand, external debt had exploded. For several years the administration had been negotiating with the United Nations to have the country proclaimed “least developed,” “which would provide some relief from foreign debt by lowering interest rates and encouraging grants.”¹²

2.2 The Political Situation under the Socialist Government (1962-1987)

Under the socialist regime, the economic deterioration caused enormous suffering for almost every one but the military officers and well-connected civilians. Thus, military’s projection of legitimacy was rejected by nearly everyone, but the armed forces and the bureaucracy. However, the socialist regime could claim legitimacy as the socialist constitution was adopted by referendum in December 1973, with an overwhelming majority.¹³

However, the dissent was shown. Hundred of the Burmese best-educated and experienced civilians emigrated from Burma. In the meantime, there were in Burma many rioting in 1974 and 1975. The student’s strike and demonstration of June 1974, and the labour strikes and riots from May to June 1974 could be traced to a limping national economy. According to Maung Maung Gyi, “growing unemployment among the young people, rising food costs, shrinking purchasing power, and shortages in essential commodities, especially rice and cooking oil are some of economic reasons

¹¹ Mya than, “The union of Burma Foreign Investment Law: Prospects of Mobilizing Foreign Capital for Development?”, p. 4.

¹² David Steinberg, Crisis in Burma: Stasis and Change in a Political Economy in Turmoil, pp. 13-4.

¹³ Guy Lubeigt, La Birmanie. Que Sais-Je?, pp. 56-57.

that provoked the strikes and riots.”¹⁴ The political situation was more intense in 1974, when the government was about to bury deceased UN Secretary General U Thant* in an obscure cemetery in Rangoon, thousands of monks and students seized on the occasion to launch huge demonstrations against Ne Win at the Shwedagon Pagoda.¹⁵ Many of the demonstrators were killed and more were arrested, including a large number of monks. Student rioted again in 1975 and 1976. The military summarily executed one of the student leaders, which quieted events on the campuses for a period.¹⁶

The outgrowth of frustration over economic hardships and disillusionment with the Burmese Way to Socialism was increasing. Even some members of the army bureaucracy were dissatisfied on the regime as well. In 1976, young army officers unsuccessfully attempted a coup in protest of the socialist system. It later proved necessary to purge the cabinet on both the right and left. In November 1977, at an extraordinary meeting, Ne Win unexpectedly lost an election for party chairman. New elections were immediately called and he won.¹⁷ It was again that Ne Win could claim legitimacy; however, economy got worsened, and people’s discontent was still there.

It seemed that Ne Win turned to use Buddhism and superstition in the late of his period. In the manner of Burmese monarchs and with political objectives, Ne Win convened the Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders. In this occasion, he found opportunity to build a pagoda and to place *hti*, a symbol of power, at its spire. Besides, on 3 November 1984, All 100-kyat banknote are demonetized. 35 and 75 kyat had been introduced in 1985 and 1986 to replace the old 100-kyat note. Lintner (1999) views that these two newly introduced banknote had been one outcome of Ne Win superstition.

¹⁴ Maung Maung Gyi, “Negative Neutralism for Group Survival.” In F.K. Lehman (ed.) *Military Rule since 1962*. Singapore: Maruzen Asian. 1981, p.24.

Fink (2001), U Thant was a Burmese diplomat who became Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1960s. he was receiving international accolades for his level-headed handling of numerous crises during the escalating Cold War period. After he died in New York, his body was flown back to Rangoon, but General Ne Win ordered that no state official should meet the body, and he would be buried like any other ordinary person. But when his body was unceremoniously laid out at Kyaikkasan grounds, the old race track, thousands of Burmese came to place wreaths and pay their last respect.

¹⁵ Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule*, p. 43.

¹⁶ David Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), p. 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Likewise, as his chief astrologer told him that his lucky number was nine, two new denominations were issued: 45 and 90 kyats. The rationale behind the move was that both numbers added up to nine: $4+5=9$ and $9+0=9$.¹⁸

2.3 The Military and The Path to the 1988 Legitimacy crisis: The Economic Crisis

Though there was long time economic deterioration in Burma since the ascendancy of the military government as already shown, but it was this 1987 demonetization that deeply dissatisfied people. On 5 September 1987, the announcer of Burma's official radio read out that the 25, 35 and 75 Kyat currency notes would be ceased to be legal. No reason was given. 60 to 80 percent of all money in circulation in Burma had become worthless.¹⁹ In the eyes of most Burmese, the Socialist government needed to be responsible for their economic problem, because the government had taken away their money through demonetization.²⁰

Indeed, such resentfulness was nothing new. It had been accumulated more and more owing to the fact that demonetization in 1987 was not the first time, but the second since the military took power in 1962.* However, the 1987 event, according to Steinberg, did destroy the last vestiges of whatever faith had been residually placed in the money and in the state itself.²² What was different in this demonetization was that it was 'the most sweeping demonetization' since all bank notes of over K. 15 (estimated to US\$ 2.50) in value were declared illegal, and no compensation was to be paid for them.²³ As a result, a thought that the government was lack of capability to solve the economic problem and elevate the life standard of the people no matter how long the time passed, had risen. Anger and frustration was widespread. Some rightist and leftist

¹⁸ Bertil Lintner, Burma in revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999), p.339.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.339.

²⁰ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Reconsidering the failure of the Burma Socialist Programme Party government to eradicate internal economic impediments." In South East Asia Research 11: 1, p.54.

* The first was on 17 May 1964.

²² David Steinberg, "The Burmese Political Economy: Opportunities and Tensions." Paper presented at the Conference: Myanmar Towards the 21st Century: Dynamics of Continuity and Change, June 1-3, 1995, p.1.

²³ David Steinberg, Crisis in Burma: Stasis and Change in a Political Economy in Turmoil, p.12.

opposition groups, taking advantage of the unstable political and economic situation, tried to incite university students to rebel against the government. However, most students did not dare to do so “because the price of participating in an anti-government movement was high.”²⁴ However, a small brawl that broke out between students, and undercover reality the death of a student from the Rangoon Institute Technology, exposed the 1988 turmoil.

2.4 Conclusion

Chapter 2 concerned itself with an overview of the economic and historical background of the Burmese politics and economy. It showed that the economic problem had long been taken place in Burma, and that economic deterioration in Burma derived mainly from the ignorance and mismanagement of the Burmese government and its policy of ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’.

In the chapter, we also evidence the hardship of the people under the military socialist regime. Because of the mismanagement of the government, the people had suffered for all over 26 years. There was wide dissatisfaction and well as attempts to eradicate the government of both the ordinary people and members of the government itself. Obviously, every one wanted to put an end to the military government. A number of unrest in Burma at that time clearly illustrated that the government power was at risk, and that it actually had no right to rule.

สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

²⁴ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, “Reconsidering the failure of the Burma Socialist Programme Party government to eradicate internal economic impediments,”p. 54.

CHAPTER 3

FROM JUSTIFICATION OF THE SOCIALIST POLICY TO LEGITIMATION OF THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT

Legitimacy is therefore a very important issue that every government needs to concern. Alagappa defines the meaning of political legitimacy: “the belief in the rightfulness of a state, in its authority to issue commands, so that the commands are obeyed... because they are believed to have moral authority, because subjects believe that they ought to obey.”¹

There are four essential components of political legitimacy. This includes shared norms and values of the leadership and the citizenry; conformity with the established rules of acquiring power; the proper and effective use of power; and the consent of the governed.² Coicaud points out, “[A]mong these components, it is “consent” that plays a key role in establishing legitimacy.”³ Thus, what is the most important issue of which the government has to concern is the consent of the people.

Why the popular consent is so important? It is because if a government lacks popular consent, their legitimacy might be weakened, if not destroyed. And this would develop into a full-scale crisis of government.⁴ In consequence, the government could not survive for long. This is because, “when such conviction of legitimacy is absent, an acceptance of commands issued by authorities is based solely or even largely on naked force.”⁵ Political legitimacy then will be challenged or contested, and political change will be sought through resistance, rebellion, and revolution.⁶

The whole Burmese population’s uprising in 1988 showed the Burmese military’s lacks of legitimacy and, therefore, of the right to rule. This explosive event

¹ Muthiah Alagappa, Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority. (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.2.

² Ibid., p.2.

³ Jean-Marc Coicaud, Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.13.

⁴ David Beetham. The legitimation of Power (Hong Kong: Macmillan education, 1991), p.186.

⁵ Muthiah Alagappa, Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority, p. 4.

⁶ Ibid., p.4.

demonstrated the people's discontent on the military government, according to Alagappa, it is people's discontent that eventually leads to disobedience and uprising; "[W]hen political disobedience appears on a massive scale, it reflects a lack of consent and erosion of the incumbent government's legitimacy and that of the regime as well".⁷

3.1 The 1988 Crisis of The Military Regime

3.1.1 The Political Crisis and the Military's Massacre of People

As generally known, it was a non-political matter that trickled the 1988 popular uprising. Initially, it was the dispute between engineering students of the Rangoon Institute of Technology and a son of local authority in a tea shop. However, it turned into a violent riot, when the local authorities mishandled it. The government could not contain the riot within the compound of the engineering school. Infuriated by the deaths of their fellows students, Rangoon University students began to organize anti-government assemblies in the university. On 17 March 1988, about 5000 Rangoon University students marched to the Rangoon Institute of Technology. The Burmese public lost their patience and decided to join in the protest. On 18 March, thousands of people marched down the streets of central Rangoon. Their progress was halted by well equipped riot police. When students refused to comply with the orders, the riot police and the army responded fiercely. Both male and female students were clubbed to death. Hundred more were arrested and 41 students suffocated to death inside an overloaded police van.⁸ However, the brutality didn't stop the protests.

To control the situation, the government closed down all universities throughout the country. This action did not smother the students' anger. Besides, people's resentment towards the government intensified. When universities reopened in May, students at Rangoon universities and the Rangoon Institute of Technology found many of their friends missing. The students asked the government to take action against those officials who had been responsible for the deaths of students in March incident. As the government did not satisfy the student's demands and placed much of the blame upon

⁷ Muthiah Alagappa, Political legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The quest for moral authority, p. 4.

⁸ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Reconsidering the failure of the Burma Socialist Programme Party government to eradicate internal economic impediments." South East Asia Research: 54.

‘unruly students’⁹, students were enraged and students from all universities and colleges in the country demonstrated. The government then suspended all university classes and imposed a curfew in many cities.

In June 1988, all sections of society including Buddhist monks, students, workers and peasants staged massive demonstrations demanding the end to military rule. Being the largest popular demonstrations in recorded Burmese history, the 1988 uprising indicated that the socialist government was confronting the big legitimacy crisis. Acrimony of the situation was reflected in the resignation of General Ne Win from the party presidency after controlling Burma for over 26 years.

The Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) accepted Ne Win’s resignation and those of other leaders, but refused to consider Ne Win’s proposal of immediate political system change. However, the party congress did make radical policy changes in order to boost production in the public, cooperative and private sectors. Contrary to the original objectives of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’, these policy changes were designed to enlarge the economic scope for the private sector.¹⁰

In late July, sporadic demonstrations occurred in many locations in Rangoon. On 8 August 1988, demonstrations took place in several major cities.

Although the movement was initiated by students and the political opposition, most of the participants in the first few days of the protests were coolies, performers, trishaw-men and various other labourers –the people hardest hit by demonetization and the economic downturn.¹¹

General Sein Lwin as the new party head and president after the resignation of Ne Win, responded to the general strike by commanding the police and army to attack the demonstrators. An unknown number, estimated in the hundreds, were killed. But the army failed to break popular opposition. The whole country was in protest.

⁹ Ibid., p.55.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.55-56.

¹¹ Ibid., p.56.

The incident as such is pointed out by Steinberg that, “The overwhelming popular outburst in Rangoon indicated that the motives behind the demonstrations were far more intense.”¹² With the already dissatisfaction at the economic deterioration and the 1987 demonetization, the demonstration therefore was easily and dramatically agitated. That was undoubtedly why such trifle matter could lead to the explosion of the largest outburst, and almost simultaneously, cause widespread demonstrations throughout the country.¹³

Sein Lwin resigned on 26 August. He was replaced by a civilian lawyer, Dr. Maung Maung, a close friend of Ne Win. The new President promised to hold elections and tried to calm the population. However, protests persisted.

Finally, on September 18, after more than a month of daily protests, the army stepped in again. The 19 military commanders organized a coup and the new regime was called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). It is generally known that this coup was counterfeit as the 19 military commanders who engineered the coup in the name of “restoring law and order” were the same entourage that surrounded Ne Win,¹⁴ as well as that the general in the SLORC were still loyal to and under the control of Ne Win.¹⁵

The Chief of Staff General Saw Maung became the head of SLORC. It forcefully put down the popular movement with thousands of deaths and arrests. Trucks full of troop and armored cars with machine guns rolled into Rangoon. “The forces were impeccably organized and the operation carried out with cold-blooded efficiency.”¹⁶ The carnage continued for two days. Because of the increasing repression, students, who had been the leaders of the demonstrations, were forced to flee to the border areas.

¹² David Steinberg, Crisis in Burma: stasis and change in a political economy in turmoil (Bangkok: ISIS, 1989), p. 16.

¹³ Steinberg (1989) mentions that demonstrations also spread to Prome, Taunggyi, Mandalay, Sagaing, as well as to other urban centers.

¹⁴ Mya Maung, “Burma’s economic performance under military rule: An assessment.” Asian Survey 37, No. (June 1997), p.503.

¹⁵ Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), p. 62.

¹⁶ Bertil Lintner. Burma in revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948 (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999), pp. 351-2.

3.1.2 The Leadership Crisis

Though the army could pacify the situation once again, the fact was that there were four leaders of the state in less than two months. These included General Ne Win, General Sein Lwin, U Maung Maung, and General Saw Maung. It did not simply portray how resentful the people were. Their rejection of any new pro-military regime leader also showed that the people no longer wanted to be under the control of the authoritarian regime. According to Fink, the 1988 event had a profound psychological influence on its participants, whose feeling was transformed from 'wide dislike' into 'hatred'. When seeing the green uniforms, people were always reminded the brutality of the military government and its massacring of students and monks. They lost their faith to the regime, and those who "had once grown up assuming authoritarian rule would indefinitely be there, now believed that the country's politics could be changed."¹⁷ Political unrest had been continuing even after the collapse of the BSPP. Whereas monks and students, particularly in Mandalay, engaged in various forms of civil disobedience to put pressure on the regime,¹⁸ people's uprisings raised the call democracy for being reinstated.¹⁹

3.1.3 Aung San Suu Kyi: Threat to the regime

In the meantime, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a national hero, General Aung San, had returned to Burma on April 1988 to nurse her sick mother; however, she was unintentionally led to political arena. On 15th August 1988, as personally felt that the military had been injustice all the time to the country and people at large, she sent a personal letter to the secretary of the State Council, General Kyaw Htin, who had become the officiating head of state following the resignation of the Butcher Sein Lwin.²⁰ As Kyaw Htin deliberately ignored the letter, Aung San Suu Kyi, realizing the fact that the Ne Win clique was not at all interested in solving the national crisis but was bent on sustaining the power, decided to tread into political arena.

¹⁷ Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, p. 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁰ Kabawza Win, A Burmese perspective on Aung San Suu Kyi: The noble laureate (Bangkok: CPDSK Publications, 1992), p. 68.

On August 26, 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi gave her first political speech at Shwedagon Pagoda. She was admired by the people and perceived as a savior who would free people from the hard time under the military regime and open the new prosperous era of democratic regime where there is equality among the people. In the meantime, she made speeches against the regime. “[B]y the end of 1988, this speech and subsequent speeches which she gave in her relentless political campaigns across Burma captured the endorsement of the entire populace, establishing herself as the only challenger and legitimate successor to the political throne”²¹

The Burmese military greatly feared her popularity with the people and was quite at a loss of how to respond to it. On July 20, 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest. A reason was given by Saw Maung, “[what she did] indicate(s) that there was personal hatred, prejudice, incitement to make people misunderstand the Tatmadaw”.²² Trying to eradicate her, the junta had openly said that it would release her if she agreed to renounce politics and leave the country for good.²³ Also, they prevented her from contesting the elections under her party’s list. As insisting to stay in Burma and as threatening to boycott the military, Aung San Suu Kyi has been perceived a thorn in the junta’s throat. The SLORC as a consequence has tried to ruin her prestige; however, people have still preferred her to the junta.

Since her being put under house arrest, she has become the rallying figure in Burma’s struggle for democracy. In 1991, she was awarded the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought by the European Parliament and in the same year, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.²⁴ She was supported across the country, not just by Burmese, but by most ethnic groups and by foreign countries as she is the symbol of freedom and democracy for the Burmese.²⁵ Not only lay people, the monks in Mandalay had been

²¹ Mya Maung, Totalitarianism in Burma: Prospects for Economic Development. (New York: Paragon House, 1992), p. 146.

²² Gustaaf Houtman, Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (Tokyo: Tokyo Press, 1999), p.19.

²³ Kabawza Win, A Burmese perspective on Aung San Suu Kyi: The noble laureate, p. 107.

²⁴ Kothom Ariya and Somchai Homlaor, Nolasco, Cynthia and Balais-Serrano, Evelyn. *One Step Forward and Two Steps Backward. Burma: One Year after the Release of Aung San Suu Kyi*. Bangkok: Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia), 1996, p. 8.

²⁵ Kabawza Win, A Burmese perspective on Aung San Suu Kyi: The noble laureate, p. 103.

reported as having been active throughout the election campaign, often openly supporting the NLD.

3.2 *The SLORC/SPDC (1988-2003): An Attempt to Establish 'Legitimacy'*

According to Beetham, the withdrawal of popular consents means a disaster to the regime. This is because it would lead to legitimacy crisis and the loss of moral authority.²⁶ If those massive protests and uprisings still continue, it will render the government morally bankrupt and impotent.²⁷ Possibly, it could also lead to the collapse of the regime. The regime accordingly, needed to search for modes to legitimate themselves.

Since its killing a hundred of 'innocent' people, the military government of Myanmar, which seized power on 18 September 1988, had been highly detested from people. Popular uprising against the authoritarian regime continued. The military government, therefore, needed not only to justify its power, but also to pacify the country.

In its attempt to establish substantial legitimacy, the military made many trials. It used elections to justify its right to rule. As that failed, it tried to legitimate itself in other ways. This includes the promotion of national economic development, and nationalism and the claim of the protection and defends of national sovereignty.

3.2.1 **The SLORC's Promise to Hold The Elections in 1990**

In 1988, with the country's mood swinging against the army, and with a track record of unpopular action, the SLORC, which tried to shore up its domestic and international legitimacy, promised to hold a general election in 1990. General Saw Maung broadcasted to the nation on September 23, that "I and my colleagues and all Tatmadaw men most respectfully and honestly give our word to all *rahans*, laity, and

²⁶ David Beetham, The legitimation of Power, p. 220.

²⁷ Muthiah Alagappa Political legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The quest for moral authority, p. 29.

the people that we do not wish to cling to State power for long.”²⁸ In this speech, Saw Maung also promised elections and a new election law was passed.

In consequence of the passing of election law, there was the advent of numerous political parties, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) emerged as the most popular opposition political party. The NLD was led by former general Tin U and Aung San Suu Kyi. In the mean time, the military launched the National Unity Party (NUP), of which was composed of former government and Lanzin party²⁹ officials, to contest the election.

The military’s declaration to hold the elections by itself in the spring of 1990 showed that now it admitted the people, through their votes, to give ‘mandate’ who they wanted and therefore had right to rule. Also, this meant that no matter how the outcome would be, the electorate was the final arbiter: the “sovereign people” had already decided who should be their leader. But the outcome did shock the generals who had always been confident that the NUP, which they supported, would win this competition. The NLD landslide won in almost every constituency in which they competed; it gained 392 seats out of the 485 that were contested, while the NUP won only 10. The outcome, therefore, completely arbitrated the military’s lack of a mandate to rule. But instead of letting the Pyithu Hluttaw* to convene, the SLORC didn’t allow the establishment of new civilian government. According to Declaration 1/90 promulgated On July 27, it declared that ‘it is not an organization that observes any constitution; it is an organization that is governing the nation by Martial Law.’³⁰ Following this announcement, SLORC began to arrest and intimidate NLD members as well as members of other opposition parties.

The 1988 uprising caused from the accumulated resentment against military rule shaped the first stage of crisis and the most indignant feeling ever on the military regime

²⁸ Josef Silverstein, “Introduction.” In Democracy and Politics in Burma (Rangoon: NCGUB, 1993), p.5.

* The former Burmese Socialist Program Party.

* Taylor (1987:292), Pyithu Hluttaw, or people’s Assembly, was formed under the constitution inaugurated on March 2, 1974, in the Socialist government’s period.

³⁰ Silverstein, Josef. “Introduction.” In Democracy and Politics in Burma, p. 6.

at a whole. However, as the SLORC ignored to follow the mandate from people in the 1990 elections, and has been continuing to hold onto power, this meant complete illegitimacy to the military government. From then onwards, the SLORC, seen as a continuation of the previous wicked and impotent military-socialist government, has been encountering the problem of political impasse as well as continuing to suffer a legitimacy crisis.

3.2.2 The Army's Promotion of Nationalism

In seizing the power, the SLORC claimed its duty as the protector of national sovereignty. According to its main claim of the army as the upholder of national sovereignty, the SLORC aimed to create consolidation among Burmese and ethnic minorities. This became obvious when the regime renamed the country, from Burma to Myanmar, and its people; Myanmar citizens, instead of Burmese. Houtman who called this program as 'Myanmafication', views the changes of name as due to political motivation. "It is due to the motivation to build up national unity that underlies the renaming... The SLORC presented the name changes as a testament of its patriotic spirit, its goodwill for the country, and as a milestone in the history of the revolution that would bring the ethnic groups of Burma together."³¹

The SLORC pursued the two moves that it felt might restore people's faith in the army. On the one hand, it developed a policy of negotiating cease-fires with armed ethnic groups who were tired of fighting the regime.³² In the meantime, there was the redefinition of Burmese history. The SLORC formed on 31 May 1989 the 11-membered Committee for the Compilation of Authentic Data of Myanmar History headed by Dr Khin Maung Nyunt. By the mid-90s academic answers to the problem of unity were available with more detail than the journalistic approach from the very institutions, namely the Myanmar Historical Commission (MHC), the Myanmar Institute of Strategic Studies (MISS) and the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS). In this academic sphere, the agenda was one of military propaganda. According to Kyaw Win, Professor and Head of the Department of History at Rangoon University, "the divide-and-rule

³¹ Gustaaf Houtman, Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, p. 45.

³² Martin Smith, "Burmese politics after 1988." In Burma: Political economy under military rule. (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p. 21.

at a whole. However, as the SLORC ignored to follow the mandate from people in the 1990 elections, and has been continuing to hold onto power, this meant complete illegitimacy to the military government. From then onwards, the SLORC, seen as a continuation of the previous wicked and impotent military-socialist government, has been encountering the problem of political impasse as well as continuing to suffer a legitimacy crisis.

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policy of the British was the main cause of the disintegration of national unity. In other words, national unity is still assumed to have been in evidence until the British arrived and destroyed it by encouraging dissent between the Burmans and the ethnic minorities.”³³

On the other hand, it tried to encourage nationalism among the Myanmar citizens. Large sums of money have to be spent in the preservation of ancient cultural heritage for the purpose of enhancing pride in one's nationality.³⁴ Rebuilding palaces had been proceeded to redefine wholesale the political, cultural and social structure of society. The idea to focus on national consolidation was reaffirmed by the SLORC itself. In July 1993, the SLORC established the Central Committee to Preserve National Heritage on the instruction of General Than Shwe, with General Khin Nyunt as Chairman. Parallel committees were formed at state, division and township level, which compiled a list of ancient edifices submitted to the Department of Archaeology. The aim is that ‘preservation of the national heritage ... will contribute to national consolidation and promotion of patriotic spirit.’ In this occasion, Khin Nyunt wrote that ‘preserving our cultural heritage, preserving cultural arts and handing down art heritage will awaken the spirit of patriotism and love of one's own culture and thus contribute towards national consolidation.’ The state classified the culture-related tasks in four sectors. These include ‘tasks to uplift dynamism of patriotic spirit, uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation of cultural heritage’* which will contribute towards national consolidation.

Parallel to those campaigns of nationalism, the SLORC had been employing a tatmadaw-led xenophobic nationalism as the ideological cement binding the state together.³⁵ As Aung San Suu Kyi's entry into the political arena posed serious dangers to its legitimacy, the authorities since 1989 had concentrated on destroying Aung San Suu Kyi's image. They attempted to delegitimize Aung San Suu Kyi as Aung San's

³³ Gustaaf Houtman, Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, p. 70.

³⁴ Nawratha. Destiny of the nation. The News and Periodicals Enterprise by U Hla Kyin Under Exemption No. (286), 1995, pp.143–45.

* Interview with Guy Lubeigt. He states that it had been daily in the Newspaper ‘*New Light of Myanmar*’.

³⁵ David Steinberg, “Democracy, power, and economy in Myanmar: Donor Dilemmas,” Asian Survey 8 (August 1991): 736.

daughter, and to assassinate her character as unpatriotic, 'having more in common with the British than with the Burmese.'³⁶ The army instead identified Aung San Suu Kyi as national enemy Number One and has sought to eliminate her.³⁷ Again, in this account, we no longer see Aung San as the one who accomplished unity, but rather it is the British who prevented the Myanmar ethnic family from joining together according to ancient rights. In short, unity did not have to be re-invented, as it was Myanmar's natural state prior to the advent of colonialism, and it was merely to be 'reconsolidated' so as to restore Myanmar to its harmony of old. This attainment has been attributed to the army under the SLORC and the SPDC.³⁸

3.2.3 Developing of the Economy as a Source of Gaining Legitimacy

The military government claim of national pride does not at all seems to be a matter for the people. Instead, what the people concern most is good economy and their better life standard. They will support any leadership that can stabilize the economy, improve the socio-economic infrastructure, and demonstrate equity in their allocation of resources.

Therefore, economic issue is very important and necessary to be concerned by every ruling elite. To what extent the leader could pursue the collective interest of the political community become one measure to justify his potency. Besides, success or failure in this endeavor, inevitably affects the legitimation of government and the regime. Accordingly, Alagappa views that performance can be an effective resource in the cultivation of legitimacy."³⁹ Steinberg is the other scholar who perceives the significance of 'effective performance'. In his comparison between Myanmar and Korea, Steinberg implies that no matter whether a leader is personally despised or considered an illegitimate ruler; "with his economic accomplishment, he could be regarded as an important and legitimate ruler."^{*}

³⁶ Gustaaf Houtman, Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, p. 28.

³⁷ Ibid., p.32.

³⁸ Ibid., p.70.

³⁹ Muthiah Alagappa Political legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The quest for moral authority, p. 22

^{*} Steinberg (1998) views that, "In Korea, Park Chung Hee initially was personally considered an illegitimate ruler, and his regime broadly despised. His abuses of human rights

In Burma, as a nineteen-member State Law and Order Restoration Council assumed power soon after the 1988 military coup, it abolished the socialist economic system,* and took ostensible economic reform measures. On December 1988, it promulgated the Union of Burma Investment Law. This is a very significant step towards free-market capitalism.⁴⁰

The authorities remarkably produced such a liberal investment within a few weeks after they came into power.* Hereto, it was obvious that the new military rulers were trying to achieve the support from people and to establish substantial legitimacy of their power through economic development.

There are many significant Reform Measures during this time. Mya Than has briefly organized in chronological order as follows;

1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -removal of restrictions on private sector participation in domestic and foreign trade -introduction of liberal Foreign Investment Law -restitution of small- and medium-size establishments
1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -decontrol of prices -official revocation of the 1965 law of establishment of socialist economic system -regularization of border trade

were legion. Today, however, he is regarded as an important and legitimate ruler because of his economic accomplishments –accomplishments that were attained through the sacrifices of the Korean workers...”

Before the Investment Law was announced on December 1988, the new military government had abolished the only ruling party, the Burmese Socialist party (BSPP) along with its guiding principle, the “Burmese Way to Socialism”. And the words “Socialist Republic” in the official title of the nation were removed so that Burma has become “The Union of Burma” once again.

⁴⁰ Mya Than. “The union of Burma Foreign Investment Law: Prospects of Mobilizing Foreign Capital for Development?” In *Myanmar Dilemmas and Options* (Singapore: ISAS, 1990), p.186.

According to Mya Than (1990), it turned out that there were many flaws in this few-week-produced law. (Ibid., p. 200-203)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -introduction of SEE law allowing private sector participation in economic activities -relaxation of restrictions on private investment -introduction of the Central Bank of Myanmar Law
1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -introduction of Myanmar Tourism Law -introduction of 100 percent retention of exports earnings law -introduction of Financial Institutions of Myanmar Law -introduction of Myanmar Agricultural and Rural Development Law -promulgation of the Commercial Tax Law
1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -announcement of the Central Bank of Myanmar Rules and Regulations -reestablishment of Myanmar Chamber of Commerce and Industry
1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -announcement to lease inefficient state-owned factories - announcement of denationalization of nationalized saw mills - announcement for sale of government palm oil firms -announcement of the establishment of four private banks
1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -introduction of foreign exchange certificate (FEC) -announcement of the establishment of four more private banks
1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -introduction of domestic investment law -announcement of the establishment of three more private banks -announcement of licensing of representative offices of 11 foreign banks
1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -announcement of 51 establishments to be privatized -announcement of the formation of Privatization Committee -permission to establish joint-venture banks between local private banks and foreign banks

Source: Mya Than. "Economic Transformation in Mainland Southeast Asia: The Case of Myanmar". In Brandon, John. *Burma: Myanmar in the Twenty-first Century; Dynamics of Continuity and Change*. 1997. P.103-4

Obviously, the SLORC's attempt to develop national economy became reinforced shortly after its defeat in the 1990 general elections. After SLORC suppressed political discontent in 1992, it declared the 1992/93 'the Year of the Economy' and concentrated on the stimulation of the economy, which grew strongly.⁴¹ In April 1993, the government approved the 100% increase of the salaries.⁴² The years 1992-93, 1993-94 and 1994-95 were designated the "Year of the Economy", "Second Year of the Economy", and "All-round Development Year", respectively, with the claim of spectacular economic growth and prosperity attained under the economic reforms of the military government.⁴³ Taylor (2001) views such actions that, "Having failed to achieved through the ballot box legitimacy for a new political order which would allow for the continuation of military dominance, the SLORC sought to achieve a degree of support and institutional security through economic development."⁴⁴

Despite these, the economy has worsened. There were many factors that caused the economic disaster in Myanmar as will be explained as follows.

3.3 Major Causes of Economic Deterioration

3.3.1 Lack of External Support/ Assistance

Over time, Aung San Suu Kyi's support for economic sanctions had hardened. In 1997, Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) began to pursue line that foreign companies who did business with the generals were supporting an illegal regime.⁴⁵ Because of the human right abuse in Myanmar, the United Nations had

⁴¹ Medhi, "Peril and Prospects of Myanmar's Economic Reforms." In *Myanmar towards the 21st century: Dynamics of continuity and change*, ed. John Brandon (Bangkok: TK Printing, 1997), p. 70.

⁴² Verbal communication with Guy Lubeigt, 3 September, 2004

⁴³ Donald Seekins, *The disorder into order: The army state in Burma since 1962* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), p.265.

⁴⁴ Robert Taylor *Burma: Political economy under military rule* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p.11.

⁴⁵ Ang Chin Geok, *Aung San Suu Kyi towards a new freedom* (Sydney: Prentice Hall,

pleaded to press for foreign economic disengagement with Burma. In the meantime, activist groups based in the United States and elsewhere have become increasingly forceful advocates for divestment and other measures to economically isolate the country. There were internationally co-ordinated consumer boycotts of Myanmar-made goods as well as share-holder and public awareness campaigns against companies that invested or did business with Myanmar. Therefore, there was withdrawal of foreign companies from Myanmar.

Despite this, some ASEAN countries still pressed on their investment, and their people still visited Burma. This was helping Burma to carry on its economy. The largest investor in Myanmar by the end of 1996 was Singapore (22% of the total), followed by the United Kingdom (19.2%) and Thailand (18.2%). The foreign investment hit a peak in 1996-97 with 2,814 billion dollars.⁴⁶ However, in 1997, Asian countries had faced financial crisis. The event pulled these investors as well as visitors back homes. According to the economic indicators published by the country's central statistic organization, there were only ten investment projects during 1998-99 that came from 8 countries, including investors from Britain, China, the Hong Kong of the administrative region, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Thailand.⁴⁷ The economic indicators showed that the foreign investment in 1998-99 dropped to the lowest level as compared with the past five fiscal years.⁴⁸

Because of the financial crisis, ASEAN partners could not be able to stimulate economic growth in Burma through investments and trade as earlier. And as ASEAN collectively absorbed nearly 30 per cent of Burma's exports and in the light of Western economic sanctions, "the loss of these markets is not a *quantite negligeeable* for Burma." "The black market rate of the kyat shot up from 170 to nearly 400 kyat to the dollar, inflation soared to 40 per cent in 1997, foreign reserves declines to US\$ 150 million and foreign investments fell by half from US\$ 2.18 billion to US\$ 1.18 billion."⁴⁹ As a

1998), p.141

⁴⁶ Available from <http://www.ibiblio.org>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Ruland, "Burma ten years after the uprising." In *Burma: Political economy under military rule*, ed. Robert Taylor (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p.153.

consequence, Burmese economy now became obviously deteriorated.⁵⁰ Unemployment was widespread, especially among the youth. Many immigrated to neighboring countries. This further hastened the population's decline into misery.

The U.S. sanctions imposed in April 1997 indeed caused big wound to Burmese economy. According to the 1997 U.S. Congress, many sanctions were imposed among which included 'investment sanction', 'import sanctions' and 'Ban on Travel to Burma'.⁵¹ Once more sanctions on Myanmar, with a complete ban on trade, new investments, and all commercial transactions, were put in place by The United States since the end of July 2003.⁵² Similar though slightly less draconian sanctions were brought forward by the member states of the European Union, as well as a long-standing ban on assistance to Myanmar from the World Bank (ADB).

These really had had severely negative consequences for Myanmar's economic growth and development during the previous decade-and-a-half. Because of these three sanctions, there were less inflows of foreign currency to Myanmar, which in its development still needed hard currency from the outside world. Also, the absence of assistance and advice from the major international financial institutions has forced the government to rely on its own limited resources and inhibited its willingness to address major economic reform issues such as exchange rate rectification. Taylor illustrates the consequence, "As a result, there was a huge disparity between the official rate for the kyat to the U.S. dollar (5.5 or 6.0 to the dollar) and the parallel market rate (over 900 kyat to the dollar at the end of 2003)."⁵³

3.3.2 Internal Causes: The Regime's Mismanagement and Its Subsequent Factors

As the economy became worsened, the regime started blaming U.S. sanction and Aun San Suu Kyi as causes of economic worsening. It was true, yet partial. Indeed, what really was the major cause led to economic disaster was the regime's mismanagement of political, social and economic development. It was because the

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.153.

⁵¹ Available from <http://www.Ibiblio.org>

⁵² Taylor, Robert. Myanmar road map to where? In Southeast Asian Affairs (Singapore: ISAS, 2004), p.171.

⁵³ Ibid., p.181.

Burmese government has given priority to maintaining political stability rather than economic and social progress since the early 1960s.

The first flaw of state's management was a monopoly of economy. Though economic liberalization had been allowed, only partial or 'piecemeal' steps had been taken.⁵⁴ This was because "Myanmar was a socialist economy until economic reform in 1988 and most industrial activities had been undertaken by the state enterprises (SEEs).⁵⁵ Medhi states that even in 1994, no privatization has taken place.⁵⁶ Also, there was no distribution of wealth. Nyo Ohn Myint states that the military government refused to allow real privatization and equal opportunity for ordinary citizens and local businessmen. Instead, in order to "have a political upper hand on pro-democracy sympathizers and supporters of the National League of Democracy (NLD),"⁵⁷ they created a new society of pro-regime businessmen to take this privileged opportunity, and ignored the suffering of ordinary citizens. It was reported that military personnel's minimum monthly salary was increased to Kt 10,000 (US\$ 12.5) and the maximum wage was raised to Kt 15,000 per month (US\$ 18.75), while the minimum monthly salary in the public sector has remained at about Kt 1000 since 1994 and has increased to Kt 5000 in April 2000.⁵⁸

The government reserved most critical sectors of the economy to its monopoly control, although allowing joint ventures with foreign firms.⁵⁹ The profits derived from tourism and foreign investment went into pockets of the military elite and their cronies. Only a very little profit trickled down to the ordinary Burmese.

Additionally, the military government lacked of monetary and fiscal discipline. In order to cover spending deficits and to give civil servants pay increases, the regime had printed and circulated new bank notes at an annual average rate of 40.6% since

⁵⁴ David Steinberg, "Democracy, power, and economy in Myanmar: Donor Dilemmas," p. 740.

⁵⁵ Medhi, "Peril and Prospects of Myanmar's Economic Reforms," p.69

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.69.

⁵⁷ Available from <http://www.Mizzima.com>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ David Steinberg, "Democracy, power, and economy in Myanmar: Donor Dilemmas," p.733.

1988.⁶⁰ This led to inflation. As there was more of money but less of goods, prices of goods increased. This consequently led to widespread corruption among the civil servants and the military generals. In consequence, there was the distinction between the rich and the poor in the country.

What the military government concern most was its stability. It preferred spending government budget on military hardware,⁶¹ to developing people's life standard. The consequences of military spending, accounting in the past few years for about 40 per cent of total government budgets, are that health and education needs have been neglected.⁶² Besides, as the regime tried to improve the underdeveloped infrastructure, it forced people in the countryside to labor forces. Accordingly, the life condition of the Burmese ordinary people had worsened.

3.4 The Outcome

3.4.1 The Economic Situation (1988-2003)

In its early years, it seemed that the economic situation became better as the SLORC enacted a Foreign Investment Law (FIL) to facilitate the entry of approved FDI. In consequence, Burma began to receive significant inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from Asia and the West in the latter part of 1988. And it was since 1992, the economic changes were so obvious to be better that the SLORC had won the most praise from outsiders.⁶³ Foreign investors had formed joint ventures with 50 state enterprises. Most had invested in oil and gas exploration, hotels and tourism, fisheries, mining, manufacturing, agriculture, and transport.

However, because of demands by developed nations that the SLORC end its human rights violations and transfer power to the people, the SLORC was unable to borrow from international lending institutions, despite its desperately needed money to

⁶⁰ Mya Maung, "Burma's economic performance under military rule: An assessment", p.513.

⁶¹ Ang Chin Geok, Aung San Suu Kyi towards a new freedom, p.141.

⁶² Donald Seekins, The disorder into order: The army state in Burma since 1962, p. 207.

⁶³ David Silverstein, "The Burmese political economy: Opportunities and tensions." Paper presented at the Conference: Myanmar Towards the 21st Century: Dynamics of Continuity and Change, Chiang Mai, 1995, p.440.

fund development. Moreover, the United States claimed that it would not support lending to Burma by international agencies until Burma would be certified as doing all it could to eradicate the production and export of opium.⁶⁴

Silverstein (1995) states that these bans led the junta which needed quick money to generate foreign exchange to look to tourism. The year 1996 had been designated “Visit Myanmar” year. Foreign investors, such as the United Kingdom, France, Thailand, Singapore, and the United States have built new hotels, restaurants, improved transportation, and created new airline.

Though the regime claimed to encourage economic development, and opens market reforms, wealth has never spread to the whole population. Seekins concludes the situation of Burmese economy in the first six years of economic reform under SLORC government; “Though the initial years under the SLORC government were economic boom, it was also reported that few of the benefits reached people outside of the circle of military officers and their cronies.”⁶⁵ Likewise, Silverstein (1995) revealed that what laid beneath the beautiful facade of development was that there were rural stagnation, inflation, low income, and military abuse of peasants.

Table 3.1
Trends in Economic Performance: 1988-2000

Year	GDP Growth	Consumer Prices Index	Export (Million US\$)	Imports (Million US\$)
1988/89	-11.4	16.1	147	244
1989/90	3.7	27.2	215	201
1990/91	2.8	17.6	325	269
1991/92	-0.6	32.3	419	646
1992/93	9.7	21.9	591	1,010
1993/94	6.0	26.0	696	1,302
1994/95	7.5	22.5	917	1,488
1995/96	6.9	21.8	897	1,831
1996/97	6.4	-	929	2,107
1997/98	5.7	-	1,011	2,451
1998/99	5.8	49.1	1,125	2,116
1999/00	10.5	11.4	1,309	2,355

Source: Myat Thein. *Economic Development of Myanmar*. 2004, p.127

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.443.

⁶⁵ David Seekins, *The disorder into order: The army state in Burma since 1962*, p. 265

Table 3.2
Average Black Market and Official Exchange Rates
of the Burmese Currency (to US\$)

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1995	1996	1997	2002	2003	2004
Black Market (Kt)	45	60	80	122	110	117	120	148	400	900	800	950
Official (Kt)	5.00	5.80	6.62	6.20	6.30	6.10	5.90	5.90	-	6.30	5.5	-

Sources: US. Embassy, Retail Prices of Selected Goods, Rangoon (1988-1994), Mya Maung's private information for 1995-96, Ruland. "Burma Ten Years after the Uprising", Clark's "Burma in 2002" gives information for 2002, and Guy Lubeigt's private information for 2003-2004.

Mya Maung (1997) determined that the clearest indicators of the economic plight of ordinary people in Myanmar was reflected in the escalating cost of rice, "the staple that makes up more than 50% of the consumption expenditures of a typical Burmese family."⁶⁶ The rice shortage was also aggravated by natural disasters such as monsoon floods that destroyed rice lands in the Irrawaddy delta between August 1997 and March 1998.⁶⁷ This led to escalating prices of rice. According to Mya Maung, the increasing price of best quality rice to Kt 15 per pyi (4.67 lbs) by 1988 which climbed above Kt 100 per pyi by 1995, suggested that there was an increase in prices of over 800% between 1988 and 1995.⁶⁸ Additionally, other consumer prices have risen by 20 to 40 per cent annually, but according to Steinberg (2001), it was likely that they have in fact increased more rapidly.⁶⁹ Lubeigt gives further information that the price of rice was 260/280 kyat per pyi in 2003/2004.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Mya Maung. "Burma's economic performance under military rule: An assessment", p.507.

⁶⁷ Ruland. "Burma ten years after the uprising." p.153

⁶⁸ Mya Maung. "Burma's economic performance under military rule: An assessment," p.507

⁶⁹ David Steinberg, "The Burmese conundrum." In Burma: Political economy under military rule, ed. Robert Taylor (Hurst & Company, London, 2001), p.47.

⁷⁰ Lubeigt, enquiries in Rangoon.

After 15 years under the SLORC/SPDC, economic situation in Myanmar seemed to be unchanged or even worse. Seekins (2000) reveals that the economic situation in 1998-99 which was so poor that the regime decided not to publish a year book of economic statistics of that annual year as “[it] apparently reflected embarrassingly poor performance in all sectors.”⁷¹ In 1999 official statements indicated that inflation was running between 50 and 70 per cent. Bank interest rates were negative, and civil servants, the highest of whom earned monthly about US\$ 10 at the unofficial rate of exchange, could not live on their salaries. Under the SLORC/SPDC, far more goods available in shops, but income distribution was likely to be far more inequitable. It was recorded that there was a widening disparity between income and prices. While wages remained the same over the three prior years, prices had increased more than doubled between mid-1997 and mid-1998.⁷²

The people also well noticed this. They said that the economic situation in the time of SLORC/SPDC has been worse than that of its predecessors.⁷³ This was confirmed by Steinberg, “[W]here previously under the BSPP there was a general shared poverty, this has changed, with potentially important social and political implications. Over 40 per cent of the population was said to live below the poverty line.”⁷⁴ For the poor, basic commodity prices continued to rise dramatically, further eroding their living standards.

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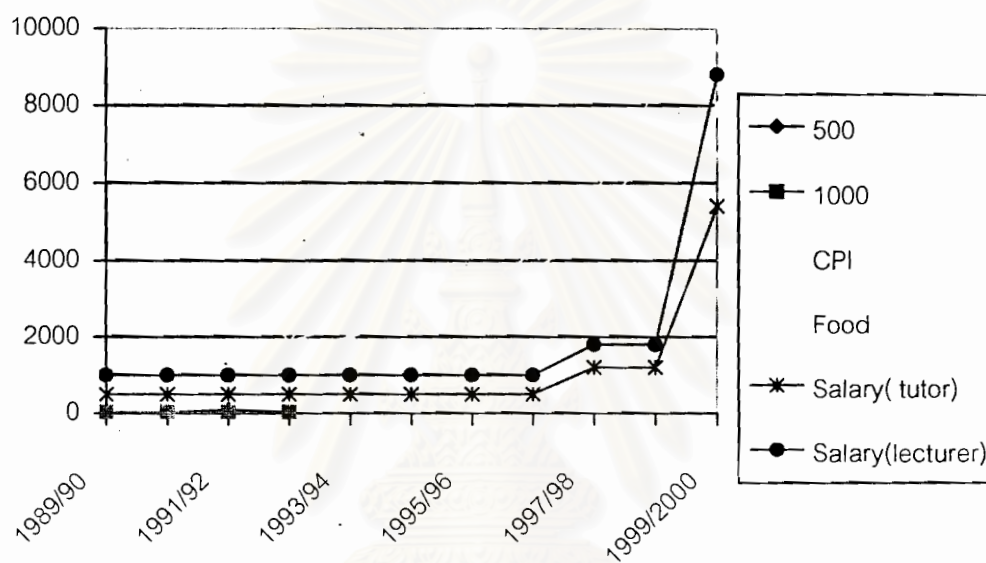
⁷¹ Donald Seekins, “Burma in 1999: A slim hope.” *Asian Survey* 40 (Jan 2000): 23.

⁷² Gustaaf Houtman, Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, p. 81.

⁷³ Verbal communication with a resident of Rangoon.

⁷⁴ David Steinberg, “The Burmese conundrum,” p.47.

Figure 3.1
CPI, Food, and Salary, 1989-2000



Source: Myat Thein. *Economic Development of Myanmar*. 2004, p.153

Economic deterioration was not only a problem the ordinary Burmese people have faced. Apart from the poverty, the low quality of life additionally caused from a pile of problems including the high output in narcotics, the alarming rise in the spread of AIDs to an estimated 500,000 HIV-carriers by 2004, the humanitarian crises of the internally displaced and illegal migrants or refugees still moving abroad.⁷⁵

Fifteen years later, by 2003, it was clear that the state capitalist government was running to nowhere. To underpin economic change by a number of reforms, both faced the same failures. The energy and ideas, which initially seemed to influence both military and civilian officials in government during the early SLORC period, were

⁷⁵ Martin Smith, "Burmese politics after 1988," p. 24.

increasingly tempered by the accumulative weight of deadlock and countrywide problems that urgently needed to be addressed.

3.4.2 The Political situation (1988-2003)

With economic deterioration, people became more and more dissatisfied on the military government, who arbitrarily took control of the country since 1990 without people's will. Its brute image in 1988, and its continuing suppression on people, and had been recalled in the mind of people, and agitated by Aung San Suu Kyi. The latter claimed that the SLORC was not a national hero who protected their independence and sovereignty, but those who seized the independence from all Burmese people instead. Moreover, the international communities' refusal to accept its authority made the military lost its credibility in the eyes of its people. Consequently, the legitimacy of the military as a patriotic institution, a key element of SLORC's legitimation formula, has been seriously compromised. And indignant people had challenged the military power as they had chances.

On 8 August 1990, after the SLORC's official refusal to transfer power to the winner and its ascendancy to power, demonstrations were located in Mandalay and had spread throughout the country. Over 7000 people in Mandalay, led by monks and students, marched to commemorate the killing of 1988 General Strike. This led to clashes between soldiers and demonstrators. As a result, two monks were killed, while several lay people were wounded and arrested. Though the death of the monks was reported as accidental ones, monks there and elsewhere began to withhold religious services to members of the armed forces. The demonstration was preceded by students gathering and causing disturbances at various high schools. In Rangoon and three other cities of Pakokku, Monywa, and Meiktila, the student demonstration also blazed up.⁷⁶ Though the chaos was ended by the army's conquest, on 10 July 1995, as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were lifted and more than 200 political prisoners were released, people made gathering. In the front of her house, there were assembling of one or two thousands of people. In December 1996, students organized demonstrations demanding the restoration of civil and political rights as well as the recovery of student rights. At

⁷⁶ Mya Maung. Totalitarianism in Burma: Prospects for Economic Development, p. 183.

times, an estimate 2,000 people were arrested during 1996 after calling for human rights reforms. Most schools and universities were subsequently closed down. This event was followed in January 1997 by an unusual mass protest by farmers in the Shwebo region against the regime's demand to sell a high proportion of the rice crop to the state at well below market prices. Besides, a short time later, in March 1997, Buddhist monks became dissatisfied on the junta as they believed that the latter stole a renowned ruby, the Padamya Myetshin, from the Maha Myat Muni image in Mandalay. An already aroused restlessness within the monastic order (Sangha) over arrests of monks and other harassment suddenly erupted on 17 March, 1997.⁷⁷ According to Matthews, these three major protests by important elements of society, including students, farmers and monks, suggest a grave political crisis in Myanmar. Matthews suggests that they seem to point to tensions associated with the struggle between the military regime, and the supporters and exponents of democracy.

In 1999 there was other unrest. Seekins has reveals about the 9-9-99 Movement (September 9,1999) of which he says it was designated as an auspicious date for concerted anti-government demonstrations. "Most 9-9-99 protests were 'hit-and-run' actions in the Rangoon area involving small groups of people."⁷⁸ Also there was a thousand of people demonstrating in the town of Meiktila in Mandalay Division. As revealed by Seekins, the regime prepared for the event by bringing extra troops and riot police into Rangoon, reinforcing the border with Thailand to prevent infiltration and arresting over 150 persons, including two British nationals.

3.5 Conclusion: The illegitimate SLORC/SPDC government

The State Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) has been confronted with a grave legitimacy crisis on two basic counts. First, it seized power in a bloody coup d'etat following the "people power" uprising in September 1988 and the collapse of the 26-year-old military-socialist regime. Second, the military-supported, state-funded National Unity Party (NUP) was defeated overwhelmingly in the May 1990 general

⁷⁷ Bruce Matthew, "The Present fortune of tradition-bound authoritarianism in Myanmar." *Pacific Affairs* 71 (Jan 1998): 8.

⁷⁸ Donald Seekins, "Burma in 1999: A slim hope," p.17.

elections. SLORC refused to transfer power to the victorious National League for Democracy (NLD) of the popular opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.⁷⁹

As it stubbornly continued to rule the country, in its period, the SLORC/SPDC seemed to be restless as its power has always been challenged. The government tried to introduced many things for the sage of its people and the Myanmar country, as it has claimed. These included the rebuilding of the peaceful and prosperous nation. Yet, people had never convinced its legitimacy as well as its ability to administrate the country. Because of increasingly economic worsening, the claim legitimacy of the government has been undermined. In conclusion, the SLORC/SPDC had no right to rule. Accordingly, in order to be a legitimate government, the SLORC needed to search for new means to legitimize its status quo, and it learned that from the past.



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⁷⁹ Yawnghwe, "The Depoliticization of the political. In Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford University Press, 1995), p.7

CHAPTER 4

LESSON FROM HISTORY: HOW THE KING GAINED LEGITIMACY THROUGH BUDDHISM

In the old time Burma, Buddhism was the base of legitimacy that had been sanctioned by a long line of Burmese kings as well as accepted by people. This was because the Buddhist values rank possibly highest among the primary values of the masses. As taking root in people's custom, lifestyle, worldview, morale and beliefs, Buddhism was not only important and deeply related to the social organization, but has also been the important source of political power.¹ Buddhism has provided an ideological basis in the administrative of the government and legitimacy for the rulers. The ruling elite of Buddhist countries has invariably sought legitimacy from Buddhist as well as its associated values.

The kings derived legitimacy in large measure from their visible support and protection of the faith. This could be perceived through their donations to the sangha, merit-building construction or renovation of holy sites, and their defense of orthodoxy through purification of the monkhood and the sponsorship of Buddhist scholarship.² Additionally, in case of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist countries, where the belief in Kamma law has been so strong and where the authority was believed to be either a deity or a Buddha, religious sanctions served to justify the rule of monarchs. In other words, it constituted an invaluable means to maximize legitimacy. Hereto, Michael Aung Thwin defined this form of suzerainty as: "In Burma, the political culture demanded that leaders possess that magic found in charismatic personalities as an unequivocal proof of legitimacy..."³

However, there are other values associated with Buddhism. The matter of fact that Theravada Buddhism, of which Burmese kings claimed themselves to be disciples, didn't aim to serve such function. Accordingly, the question of "how could it function

¹ Donald E. Smith, Religion and politics in Burma (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.308.

² Donald Seekins, The disorder into order: The army state in Burma since 1962 (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), p.10.

³ Michael Aung-Thwin, Pagan: The origins of modern Burma (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1985), p.65.

as such” is raised. To understand such issue, the characteristics of Burmese Buddhism should be firstly explained

4.1 Buddhism and its definition

As stated by Prapod, the word “Theravada” applied by many Western scholars is misused, for “Theravada” represents only a school among other schools, which had been grouped under the name of “Hinayana.” Thus, the term “Theravada Buddhism” has been abused conceptually and historically, and there come the general misunderstanding and misapplication of the term.⁴ In his conclusion, he states;

“In our context, Theravada Buddhism has to be understood as Buddhism as practiced in Southeast Asian countries. And when the term “Theravada Buddhist country is used, it only means “Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia.” Thus, we cannot really label religious beliefs and practices in this area as “purely” Buddhism, not to mention “pure Theravada Buddhism” or “orthodox Theravada Buddhism.”⁵

To understand the difference clearly, let me mention the different characteristics of Buddhism.

4.1.1 Theravada Buddhism

Since the beginning, Buddhism had served as the religion to salvation. Though the Gautama let it serve the society, “the only objective of the Buddhism and its relationship to the society is (only) to show the way to final salvation to mankind, i.e. the way to nirvana”.⁶

The Theravadins concerned about the path to enlightenment; they believe in the individual enlightenment. A scholar on Buddhism, Henz Bechert, tries to explain the concept of Theravada Buddhism as follows:

⁴ Prapod Assavavirulhakarn. “The ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Berkeley, 1990), p.286.

⁵ Ibid., p.286.

⁶ Heinz Bechert, Buddhism in the modern states of Southeast Asia (1978), p. 2. (n.p.)

“[They believe that] there exists no permanent substance nor an eternal soul nor an almighty god nor anything else which could escape from the law of impermanence, it follows that everything is subject to the law of suffering. And because there is no eternal ‘self’ which could escape from impermanence and suffering, we must realize that there are three ‘lakkhanas’, i.e. the three basic characteristics of everything that exists, viz. suffering (Dukkha), impermanence (Anicca) and being not the self (Anatta). It is only with the realization of this true nature of the universe that we may escape from the endless cycle of rebirth or samsara and may attain nirvana.⁷

As mentioned above, Theravada Buddhism, thus, is concerned with the self-salvation of the individual. And no one can be saved or delivered by the promotion of someone else’s compassion for him.⁸

Also, the Theravadins strongly believe that, after Gautama Buddha, there is no Buddha reborn in the world, till the enlightenment of the next Buddha, Ariya Mettriya. The others who have attained enlightenment around this time span are recognized with the title of Arahants.

As revealed by Sarkisyanz, “there is no bridge” between this “Arahant” idea and active social endeavor.⁹ This means that Theravada Buddhism doesn’t agree with the involvement of the religion and the society.

4.1.2 Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism is the other school, later founded after the pass away of the Buddha. As stated by Spiro, normative Buddhism is currently expressed in two major forms: Mahayana and Hinayana.¹⁰ There are the differences between the two schools. While the disciples Hinayana Buddhism are taught to follow the doctrine of which the Buddha had discovered, the Mahayanists believe that there is the power to assist others

⁷ Ibid., p.3.

⁸ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution (The Hague: Netherlands printing, 1965), p.39.

⁹ Ibid., p.37.

¹⁰ Melford Spiro, Buddhism and society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes (California: University of California Press, 1982), p.6.

towards enlightenment, and that any fully enlightened being may be considered as a Buddha (However, as the term Bodhisattvas is probably humbler, it is mostly used). Thus, the concept of Bodhisattvas emerged from this school, Mahayana. According to Blofeld, the Mahayanist concept of Bodhisattvas* is described as follows:

“It holds that one should compassionately vow not to enter Nirvana at the time of enlightenment but to remain in the endless round of birth and death as a potent force for guiding other sentient creatures toward Liberation. And it is believed that, in all the vast galaxies of worlds, there are innumerable Bodhisattvas, that is, being who, on achieving Enlightenment, have renounced Nirvana out of compassion for the myriads of sentient being still lost in darkness. This concept is unacceptable to the Theravadins, who hold that, as the attainment of enlightenment involves total negation of the constituent parts of the personality; once death has supervened, nothing remains to undergo voluntary rebirth as a Bodhisattvas.”¹¹

4.1.3 Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhism, as it is named, has been flourished in five countries: Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka Thailand and Burma. There is so much homogeneity that the five Southeast Asian Buddhist countries can be dealt with together, viz. they share the same characteristic; Buddhism is firmly based on the Pali Canon.

Despite of this, as stated by Cady, they have never been completely identical in case of the so-called ‘Little tradition’, i.e. cult tradition or ceremonies which make Southeast Asia Buddhism differs from the original one.¹² Each indigenous made the

* As stated by Sarkisyanz, “it entered the Theravada Buddhism of Ceylon and Burma, since the sixth century as royal cult and to the present on the level of folk religion.” And many Burmese kings were firmly believed to be Bodhisattva.

¹¹ John Blofeld, The world of Buddhism: A pictorial presentation (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1980), p.8.

¹² Donald Swearer, Buddhism and society in Southeast Asia (Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1981), p.1.

new traditions theirs, as Buddhism on entering the new realms, absorbed beliefs and practices already current in each locality.

However, in all Buddhist societies, Buddhism here became the source of culture, values and customs. Besides, the function of Buddhism is to control the society and the people in that society. Accordingly, this made Theravada Buddhism different from the normative Buddhism. In the Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist countries, Buddhism does not only serve as the religion for salvation, but also as the political device of the elite in their political administration, viz. its function was as the source of political ideology of the state and the authority of the ruler.

4.2 Burmese Buddhism

The fact that Burma, like other countries in Southeast Asia, had been plentifully adopting the Indian civilization. Yet, indigenous peoples had arbitrarily adapted those Indian materials in so large extent that it became distorted from their pure forms. Buddhism was among those arrived civilizations that had been “localized”. It was merged altogether with the other religion, including other Indian religions and indigenous ones.

It became as such since the early time, as the Burmese at Pagan indirectly adopted the Indian civilization from their two predecessors, the Pyus and the Mons. Both of them created their own civilization from Indian models. Accordingly, those cultures had already been transformed. In the case of the civilization from the Mons, Michael Aung-Thwin (2001) cites the respected scholars of Burma’s statement;

From the Mon of Lower Burma, the people of Pagan obtained their orthodox (Singhalese Buddhism of the Mahavihara school) and even their unorthodox ‘*nat*’ religion and conceptual system; their writing system and all its accoutrements; many... of their engineering skills related to irrigation and temple architecture; most of the handicrafts and fine art techniques found at Pagan; their

ideologies of leadership, legitimacy, and authority, reflected in the idealized organization at court...¹³

From the above statement, it could be considered that Buddhism in Burma, as well as other Theravada Buddhist country in Southeast Asia, was a mixture between many religious ideologies --a blending between Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous animism.

The Burmese kings since Anawratha, like those kings of the other Theravada Buddhist countries, claimed themselves the Buddhist kings, and their country; Buddhist country. However, they also practiced other religious values in the meantime. Aung-Thwin explains the case of Hinduism and Hinayana Buddhism in Burma, respectively, as follow;

“For the most part, Brahmans and their rituals fulfilled the political needs of royalty, not the daily needs of commoners...”

“[Also,] it appears that Mahayana Buddhism in Pagan did not simply play a counterculture role but was very much a part of elite, in fact royal, belief as well.” (Aung-Thwin, p.35-6)

The mixture aims to create means to legitimacy. As reaffirmed by Bechert (1970), Indian tradition that provided a system of political science, namely, *Kautaliya-Arthasastra*, came to Southeast Asia; “it is evident that *Kautaliya*’s book was read and used for the instruction of princes in Ceylon and Burma... [Rulers] were taught to make use of religious beliefs and institutions for political ends, for example, to exploit the faith of the people in deities...”¹⁴

¹³ Michael Aung-Thwin “The Legend That Was Lower Burma.” In Texts and Contexts in Southeast Asia, (Yangon, 2001), p.2.

¹⁴ Bechert, Heinz. “Theravada Buddhist Sangha: Some General Observations on historical and political factors in its development.” The Journal of Asian Studies 4, (Aug 1970): 766.

4.3 Buddhist Concept of Kingship in Burma

As previously revealed, there were not just Theravada Buddhism, but a variety of religious influences, that built the foundations for the conceptions of Burmese kingship both in Pagan and by later dynasties that provided legitimacy to Burmese king.

In the Buddhist classical mythology, the kingship was justified by the myth, derived from the *Digha Nikata*,¹⁵ of the first king Mahathamada (the Great Unanimously Elected). The kingship was established from the concern of the people who noticed the imperfect human condition and that they needed a ruler to reassure the welfare of the country.¹⁶ From this he had to be a good king who ruled by Dhamma as “through the king’s observation of the Dhamma, by ruling ethically, the earth of his realm was to produce good harvests.”¹⁷ Accordingly, the ideal king was the *Dhamma Raja*.¹⁸ As *Dhamma Raja*, the Burmese king, who was modeled by Ashokan tradition as well, claimed his legitimacy through his responsibility for the welfare of the Sangha as well as that of his people.¹⁹

And as the Ten Auspicious Dhamma for King performed by *Dhammaraja* could be adjusted with Ten Parami of *Bodhisattva*, the Burmese king claimed to be *Bodhisattva* as well.²⁰ As a *Bodhisattva*, the king was elevated as the supreme monarch who sacrificed himself for the benefit of man and of religion by his protection of the religion and by the maintenance of order. He strengthened his claim to legitimacy by his ability to help those who were less endowed with merit than himself, to salvation.

¹⁵ It is a scripture of the Pali Canon. Sarkisyans cites Bode that; “[O]f all the “Nikaya” scriptures of the Pali Canon, [it], is the best known in Burma and the most studied. (Sarkisyanz, p.10. op.cit. M. Bode, Pali Literature of Burma, p.2)

¹⁶ Somboon Suksamran, 1993, p. 27

¹⁷ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution, p.49.

¹⁸ In Buddhism, there are ten rules that the kings must always observe, including *Dhana* (generosity), *Sila* (high moral character), *Pariccaga* (self-sacrifice), *Ajjava* (honesty), *Maddava* (kindness), *Tapa* (austerity), *Akodha* (non-anger), *Avihimsa* (non-violence), *Khanti* (patience), *Avirodhana* (conformity to the law). (Payutto, 2002: 240-241)

¹⁹ Sunait Chutintaranond. “Cakravartin: The ideology of traditional warfare in Siam and Burma 1548-1605,” (Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1996), p. 131.

²⁰ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution, p. 45.

At the same time, the Burmese king did also claim the status of *cakravartin*. Sunait has made this clear. He says, “in actual political situations, the pre-modern kings of Burma and Siam found no contradiction in claiming to be *cakravartin* and *Dhammaraja* at the same time.”²¹

But in order to reinforce the justification of his absolute right to power, all of these claims ultimately were altogether associated with the influence of kammatic Buddhism. Intertwined with the Buddhist law of karma, the king above all is *kammaraja* -the person with the most abundance store of merit accumulated in previous existences, among lay people. He becomes a king because he is destined to be a king and “if the star of the *min* (king) is in the ascendant, nothing will bring him down.”²² It is *phon* (predestined authority) and *kan* (karma) that keeps him in power. He is *phon-shin-kan-shin* (Lord of *phon* and *kan*).²³ From such reason he was bestowed the right to be in power and the right to rule.

However, whatever titles the king claimed, it is just so abstract that the only claim might not be effective. Accordingly, the king needs to manifest his power so that his charisma would be recognized.²⁴ Apart from defending of the faith, it was his performing of rituals as well as his occupation of sacred objects or animals, that were important means to represent his being the ‘Universal Monarch’ as well as ‘the righteous king’.²⁵ Intentionally therefore, the Burmese kings had held many religious activities as to be seen as defenders of the faith, performed rituals and occupied many symbols of power as to be seen as righteous kings. This will be exemplified as follows.

²¹ Sunait Chutintaranond. “Cakravartin: The ideology of traditional warfare in Siam and Burma 1548-1605,” p.130.

²² Maung Kyi. Burmese political values: The socio-political roots of authoritarianism, (New York: Praeger, 1983), p.196.

²³ Ibid., p.196.

²⁴ Tambiah, The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: A study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism and millennial Buddhism, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.326.

²⁵ Prapod Assavavirulhakarn. “The ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” pp.215-6. Prapod (1990) has stated that, “For the people, the king is always perceived as a god... All these ways of actions are actually the same expressions through different beliefs... When they used these Indian religions to legitimize themselves, it was the ritual, and not the concept, that really mattered.”

4.4 Traditional Belief and the Burmese Monarch's Practices

4.4.1 The Possession of White Elephants

It was believed that one of the seven treasures of the *Cakravartin* kings was white elephant.²⁶ The possession of an undoubted white elephant stood as a sign and symbol of universal sovereignty,²⁷ or state sovereignty.²⁸ Thus, only those who possessed an undoubted white elephant only were considered as *Cakravartin*. As stated by Sarkisyanz, the White Elephant was an attribute of royalty and one of the symbols of state sovereignty.²⁹ Significantly, Sunait also states that the white elephant was more than just ornament of the universal king. It was an indispensable repository of his power. Without it, the king had no virtue that was the whole 'raison d'être of king'.³⁰ According to Sunait (1996), the significance of the white elephant was derived from Buddhist nativity tales, according to which the mother of Siddhartha Gotama had a dream of a white elephant entering her womb on the eve of the birth of the Buddha-to-be. This was taken as a sign of the child's purity, wisdom and auspiciousness. Later, ancient texts and traditional scriptures would describe the white elephant as one of the seven jewels of King *Cakravartin*.

Influenced by the vision of *cakravartinship*, Bayinnaung, for an example, had been intensely enthusiastic for taking possession of the white elephants.³¹ As revealed by Sunait (1996), "According to Burmese and Thai chronicles, the Burmese king Bayinnaung took four white elephants back to the court of Hanthawaddy after he subjugated Ayutthaya in the 16th century, following a dispute with the King of Ayutthaya over the latter's refusal to send two white elephants requested by the former. Bayinnaung was seen not as an expansionist, but as one of the greatest kings described in the indigenous literature and the chronicles of the region. Later rulers sought to attain his illustrious reputation as Hsinbyushin ("Lord of the White Elephant")."

²⁶ Sunait, "Cakravartin: The ideology of traditional warfare in Siam and Burma 1548-1605," p.212.

²⁷ Shway Yoe reveals that, "To identify a white elephant is very hard. There was even a science to determine white elephants in particular."

²⁸ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution*, p.52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

³⁰ Sunait Chutintaranond. "Cakravartin: The ideology of traditional warfare in Siam and Burma 1548-1605," p.214.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.211.

Apart from being a symbol of *Cakravartin* King, White Elephant is also claimed to be associated with *Indra*, the God of Thunder and Rain (or *Sakka* of the Burmese), whose symbol or vehicle is White Elephant.³² Accordingly, apart from being seen as symbol of royalty and power, in ancient Burma where agriculture is the life of the citizen, White Elephant is considered precious, as it would bring rainfall. Sarkisyanz states that; “Good harvest through rainfall were thought to be assured for the land whose king possessed a “White Elephant.” Later, the white elephant was considered an auspicious sign throughout mainland Southeast Asia. it is a belief that possession of white elephant would bring luck to country.

4.4.2 The Constructing of Pagodas and the Casting of Buddha Images

In *Religion and Politics on Burma*, Smith states that it was because of the king’s intent to promote the Buddhist faith that “all the kings from the time of Anawrahta, built and adorned pagoda... [and] engaged in a continuous search for relics and especially for the elusive sacred tooth relics.”³³

As a Buddhist king, the precedent statement by Smith is absolutely undeniable. However, as claim by Tambiah, “those edifices [in which the remains of the Buddha were enshrined] were not merely regarded as reminders and ‘field of merit’.” But they were also “repositories of power.”³⁴

Swearer has examined a cult ‘Buddha as Cosmocre[a]tor’. As suggested by Swearer, the king in so doing is thought to have other motivations. “The Buddha as consecrator [sic] of the land plays... [a] center role...that is, the Buddha’s physical presence served to establish a ‘holy land’, Buddhadesa.” The status of the Buddha became associated with the relic cult of which was derived from the belief that there was magical power latent in the physical remains of the Buddha. And the outcome was that, through his physical presence, his actual visitations or symbols of his physical

³² Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution*, p.53.

³³ Smith, Donald. *Religion and politics in Burma*, p.24.

³⁴ Tambiah, *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: A study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism and millennial Buddhism*, p.3.

presence, i.e. his relics, his images and his footprints, the Buddha sacralized the land. Accordingly, the king could justify his expansion of the territories by utilizing the Buddha relics or his image; "Political units are built around extensions of the Buddha, namely his relics and his image."³⁵

According to Swearer (1981), the Buddha relic symbolizes political authority in two ways. First, when enshrined in a *cetiya* or reliquary mound it functions as a magical center for the kingdom. The enshrined relic or *cetiya* becomes the symbol *par excellence* of the monarch as *Cakravartin* or 'wheel turner'. Hereby, pagodas have played an important role in reinforcing claims to political power. As revealed by Noel Singer, it is also "[t]o awe prospective troublemakers and to make them feel inferior with the immensity of the structure, which was designed to be seen from a vast distance."³⁶

Second, the Buddha relic was only one religious factor among many being exploited for the purposes of political legitimation and integration."³⁷ It was used in the royal strategy on the expansion of political power and national unification. Swearer claims the other Buddhist symbols of legitimation include pagodas, the Theravada scriptures and Buddha images. Historian G E Harvey noted that pagodas built by the Burmese King Bayinnaung in Ayuthaya, now in present-day Thailand, were constructed to be permanent reminders of his power. "The Burmese would point to them as proof of their claim to rule those countries," wrote Harvey. Undoubtedly, the king's building the pagoda meant that Ayuthaya where he conquered was a part of his domain.

The other traditional activity concerning with pagoda's building is ceremony of hoisting *hti* on pagoda's spire. After pagoda is completed, the king will place *hti* (royal umbrella) on top of pagoda. It has a significant meaning as it was symbolic of the king's crown which signified glory and power. Also, its tiers indicates celestial power. Traditionally, the ceremony of hoisting *hti* on pagoda's spire indicates the king's authority on that territory, (as pagoda where he places *hti* is the center of territory). For

³⁵ Donald Swearer, Buddhism and society in Southeast Asia, p.36.

³⁶ Noel Singer, The sourcerer-king and that 'great abortion' at Mingun (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2004), p.114.

³⁷ Donald Swearer, Buddhism and society in Southeast Asia, p.36.

instance, when a Mon king invaded Burmese-dominated territory, he put a *hti* on top of each pagoda in the newly conquered land. Similarly, when a Burmese king reconquered the land, he replaced the *hti* of the Mon king with a *hti*, which was a symbolic gesture of his dominance as well.

4.5 History of Utilizing Buddhism as Political Legitimacy: From King Mindon to Ne Win

4.5.1 King Mindon

King Mindon ascended the throne of Burma in the time of her downfall. Before his reign, his predecessors had lost territories to the British. In 1825, with the encounter between King Bagyidaw and the British, Burma in consequent lost the Arakan and the coastal area of Tenasserim in the south to the British. It was followed by further losses. In 1852, because of the second Anglo-Burmese War the whole of lower Burma, including the ports of Rangoon and Pegu, was under the British power.

Theses two wars put an end to Burma's military preponderance in further India and lower Burma. What remained of Burmese Empire was landlocked deprived by British power of an outlet to the sea. As a result, it caused the enormous economic losses,³⁸ as well as the Burmese king's lost of pride. This was reflected in King Mindon's sudden decision to move his capital city from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1857. Maung Htin Aung explains the reasonable answer of which Dhida Saraya mentions in her book, *Mandalay*, as follows;

“King Mindon founded the religious and cultural center of Mandalay as an alternative to the shame, humility and defeat embodied in Ava and Amarapura. The older capitals had lost their dignity... The British had twice defeated the old regimes, first in 2369 B.E./ 1826 C.E. and again in 2395 B.E/ 1852 C.E.”³⁹

³⁸ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution*, p.8.

³⁹ Dhida Saraya. *Mandalay: The capital city, the center of the universe* Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House, 1996), p.99.

Thirteen years later, the king convened of a great council of what he called the fifth Sanghayana in the newly built city of Mandalay, in 1871. At around the same time, King Mindon funded a project to review the Tipitaka canon and to inscribe an authoritative copy in stone at the foot of Mandalay Hill.⁴⁰

It was known that all actions were operated to meet political ends. Thant Myint-U (2001) suggested that Mindon, who noticed ‘the decline of royal prestige resulting from the second defeat at the hands of the British and the loss of Pegu’, perceived ‘the need to meet what was perceived as the traditionally ceremonial and religious obligations of a Burmese monarch’.

“Mindon must have seen the usefulness, at a time of increasing threats to royal authority, of strengthening religious institutions through lavish patronage, and to associate the state, especially the monarchy, as closely as possible with a reinvigorated and centralized Buddhist Sangha.”⁴¹

As having no ability to expand his military power, he instead followed the model of King Asoka.⁴² Mindon illuminated the Wheel of the Conqueror, as did Asoka, viz. he expanded his authority by way of Dhamma.⁴³ He visited the lower Burma, already under the British occupation, in order to hoist a new *hti* at the heart of Lower Burma --on the spire of Shwedagon Pagoda. According to Moore, it represented a claim by the Burmese kings to sovereignty over lower Burma.”⁴⁴

However, his attempt was in vain. The British didn't allow the king to do so. It was obvious that the latter seemed to know the significant symbol of Shwedagon; “[T]heir appreciated the significance of the Shwedagon embellishment...Therefore the

⁴⁰ Thant Myint-U. The making of modern Burma (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.150.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.148.

⁴² According to Sarkisyanz, King Mindon “prided himself in calling Asoka his ancestor.” (Sarkisyanz, p.8.op.cit.Edict of King Mindon of May 21, 1854)

⁴³ Sarkisyanz, Emmanuel. Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution, p.97.

⁴⁴ Moore, Elizabeth, Mayer, Hansjorg, and U Win Pe. Shwedagon: Golden Palace of Myanmar (London: Thomas and Hudson Ltd., 1999), p.186.

British, though allowing the new *hti* to be hoisted, forbade the presence of King Mindon,⁴⁵ but insisted on installing it themselves.”⁴⁶

4.5.2 Prime Minister U Nu and His Crisis of Legitimacy

U Nu was the first premier of the newly independent Burma, since 1948. Situation when U Nu came to power was very discouraging. There was political chaos and, inside the country, created varied political rivalries that had completely different political ideologies from representative government.⁴⁷

U Nu was known as a religious man since he was a university student. In 1950 U Nu introduced into parliament legislation to establish a lay Buddhist Sasana Council, and a Minister of Religious Affairs. Not only did the Council support Buddhism among the existing members of the faith, it also undertook missionary work to encourage the development of Buddhism among animists and others living in the hill areas, under agencies such as the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism.⁴⁸ He clearly declared his intention in promoting Buddhism in early 1951 that, “apathy to religion was responsible for 80 per cent of the disorders in Burma and that to overcome them it was necessary to bring about a religious revival.”⁴⁹

Other legislation passed in the early 1950s established a Pali University and continued the colonial state’s practice of supervising examinations for Buddhist scholars.⁵⁰ In October 1951, U Nu announced the holding of the Sixth Great Buddhist Council to correct and maintain Buddhist texts. He seized upon this circumstance in chronology and belief and began to plan the Sixth Synod in Buddhism’s history; the approaching 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s *maha parinibbana* (death and

⁴⁵ Stewart, The pagoda war: Lord Dufferin and the fall of the kingdom of Ava, 1885-1886 (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2003), p.50.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Moore, Hansjorg Mayer, and U Win Pe. Shwedagon: Golden Palace of Myanmar, p.186.

⁴⁷ John Cady, Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p.141.

⁴⁸ Donald Smith, Religion and politics in Burma, p.148.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁵⁰ Robert Taylor, The state in Burma (London: Hurst & Company, 1987), p.288.

attainment of *nibbana*) was thought to be especially auspicious, and would be suitably marked by the convening of a great council.⁵¹

U Nu and the government of Burma, anxious to demonstrate their concern for Buddhism, seized upon this circumstance in chronology and belief and began to plan the Sixth Synod in Buddhism's history. Starting in 1954, the synod was in the tradition of those held in India, Ceylon, and Burma during previous centuries. The fifth in 1871 had concentrated upon establishing a purified version of the Pali scriptures. But when later engraved upon stone tablets, the stonecutters made many errors. The Sixth Synod thus, concentrated upon editing the scriptures anew. (Dalton, Jame, p.20)

As suggested by Mendelson, the council, like the last one held under the auspices of King Mindon, served to link the state clearly with the support and propagation of the faith.⁵² Like the fifth Buddhist Council of Mindon, a Sixth Buddhist Council had never been regarded in Asia as orthodox: to non-Burmese it was purely a Burmese affair. Though the aim of the convening was of religious, "the recent attainment of independence and the close association of Buddhism with a reascent Burmese nationhood were clearly important factors."⁵³ In its search for new foundations, U Nu found the new emphasis on Buddhism as a symbol of the reassertion of Burma's national identity.⁵⁴

Furthermore, surrounded by political crisis, U Nu legitimated his status by the elements of the traditional ideal of the Buddhist righteous monarch. He convinced the people his status as Maitreya in accordant with the foreteller of the Buddha.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Smith, Donald. *Religion and politics in Burma*, p.158.

⁵² Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp.270-76.

⁵³ Smith, Donald. *Religion and politics in Burma*, p.158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁵⁵ While U Nu considered himself as Bodhisattva, or Meitreyia, it seemed that people considering him so. "His demonstrated popularity in winning successive elections probably owed as much to... his presumed embodiment of the Emergent Buddha, or Bodhisattva ideal." (Cady, 1966: 9)

“A suggestion that the council concentrate on the Maitreya (the coming of the future Buddha) was particularly welcome. He quickly realized that this would confound his enemies and establish the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of all Buddhists.”*

The evident was during the Jayanti celebrations organized by U Nu in Burma's capital in 1956. According to Sarkisyanz (1965), “2500 men at a sign dropped their dress of a uniform color and donned the Yellow garb of Buddhist monks, not unlike the countless soldiers of the ideal *Cakravartin* Ruler who at the advent of the future Buddha are to become monks, replacing battle dress with the yellow robe.”⁵⁶

Government funds were used not only to construct the great artificial cave in which the proceeding of the council were constructed but also to build adjacent to it the Kaba Aye (World Peace) pagoda.⁵⁷ The first Kaba Aye ‘Pagodas Anniversary Festival’ was made the occasion for large celebrations, with a national holiday declared throughout the Union. Only after the pagoda was built was work started on the other buildings for the Sangayana. Its central role as the key symbol of the Sangayana was clear, as apparently the main bones from the Botataung Pagoda didn't go back, but remained permanently at Kaba Aye. Concerning Buddhist relics, one must also see the Kaba Aye Pagoda as symbolic object signifying U Nu's right and power.

U Nu attempted to use Buddhism as the basis of state' legitimacy. But the fact that after the independence, Burma was the country of religious and ideological diversity. The idea was opposed not only by Christian, Islamic, Communist and animist leaders, but also by socialists within his government. Therefore, after the split of the AFPFL in 1958, “Nu was no longer constrained in his use of Buddhism as a source of

* Among the Burmese, the Buddha is reputed to have said that his Dhamma (teaching) would last 5000 years and that part of this time would be a period of obscurity for his teachings. Following the period of obscurity there would be a time of peace during which mankind would seek and find solace in Buddhism and the “great age of Buddhism” would be achieved. The Burmese believed that the half-way point in this remark of the Lord Buddha was 2500 years and that after that time, Burma and the world alike would turn towards a great period of peace. According to Theravada Buddhist reckoning this date fell in 1956.” (Dalton, 1970: 20)

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution*, p.208.

⁵⁷ Robert Taylor, *The state in Burma*, p.288.

political legitimacy.”⁵⁸ He revived *nat* worship almost an official state ceremony, once ordering the construction of 6,000 sand pagodas as a means of establishing peace in the country.⁵⁹ Besides, he instituted the use of Buddhist lunar calendar, abolished cattle slaughter and reinstated many Buddhist support programs.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly, he was attempting to create state legitimacy on the basis of the symbols and beliefs of the Burmese monarch.

Eventually, this attempt failed. Taylor gives three reasons for this including, the much more religiously and educationally diversity in the state, its lack of power to impose its control upon the Buddhist monkhood, and some mobilized factions within the monkhood’ s taking advantage of the state for its own political purposes.

The controversies that surrounded the state’s legitimacy were not lessened but rather exacerbated by the policies the U Nu implemented. Nu’s final desperate acts, seen to be politically expedient rather than serious efforts at national consensus by his critics, revealed how the state’s legitimacy was largely dissipated by the early 1960s. In keeping with his campaign promises, Nu introduced legislation amending the constitution and making Buddhism the official state religion. During this period, new insurgencies developed as factions within the minorities, who previously supported the government, went into revolt.

In order to find a permanent solution to the lingering insurgencies, in 1960 election U Nu promised to create more ethnically designated state for the Mon and Arakanese. Nu also sought to end the threat to the union posed by a faction within the Shan State who wanted to implement the right of secession. Nu called a meeting of all minority leaders for February 1962 to find a solution through peaceful and frank discussions. But in March 1962, before he could announce his own recommendations for a solution, a military Revolutionary Council headed by General Ne Win seized power on the 2nd of March.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.289.

⁶⁰ Donald Smith, Religion and politics in Burma, p.171.

4.5.3 Ne Win (1962-1988)

This period should be divided into two intervals. The first period was direct military rule by the Revolutionary Council (1962-1973), and the latter; indirect Military Rule by Burmese Socialist Programme Party (1974-1988). However, both periods are under the power of Ne Win.

In his first claim to legitimate his coup d'état, Ne Win said that it was because U Nu's desire to make Buddhism national religious which led to the demand of autonomy of the Shan and Kayah, that led him to make a coup in 1962 in an attempt to retain national unity.

Initially, Ne Win strongly eschewed the use of religion as a basis for legitimacy. Rather, it argued that U Nu's use of religion had not only created greater dissatisfaction with the state by raising fears in the minds of non-Buddhists, but had also encouraged the politicization of the monkhood and thus diverted it from its religious duties. Furthermore, the state under U Nu had increasingly ignored its obligations to create a socialist society because of its concentration upon religion and upon the abandonment of the secular goals of the pre-independence nationalist movement.

The Revolutionary Council initially ordered the cease of state's support for Buddhism.⁶¹ Also, Ne Win ran new measurement towards the Sangha; in May the Buddha Sasana Council (Maha Sangha Nayaka) was dissolved. Ne Win didn't allow the Sangha (monkhood) to develop the same political position as it had during U Nu's regime.⁶²

⁶¹ Robert Taylor, *The state in Burma*, p.357

This is also stated by Dalton; "the government initiated the opening stages in the new relationship by abrogating all previous legislation establishing Buddhism as a state religion. It then completely reorganized the Buddha Sasana Council's leadership, reduced government contributions to it, and launched a thorough investigation of its past use of funds contributed by the state. Monastic travel abroad was curtailed.(Dalton, p.20)

⁶² Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma*, p.209

Two years later, all Buddhist and other religious organizations were ordered to register with their local Security and Administration Committee (SAC) and to refrain henceforth from political activities, but in May the order had to be rescinded after a monk immolated himself in protest.⁶³

Ne Win has tried cautiously to bring the Sangha under control. He launched another programme in 1965 to bring the Sangha under its control. However, it was unsuccessful at that time.⁶⁴ In 1965, and again in 1969 and 1974, Ne Win confronted the Sangha over demonstrations, and cracked down on its political proselytizing activities.⁶⁵

Though the large-scale involvement of Buddhist monks in overt political activity did not occur after 1965 until the demonstration over the burial of U Thant, the state managers were always concerned about the possibility of the development of opposition to the state through the monkhood,⁶⁶ within which there was the presence of many factions making it a loose organization, “highly penetrable by individuals with a variety of intentions.”⁶⁷

Then in May 1980, however, the relationship between the state and the Sangha was fundamentally altered. There was again the cooperation of the state-sangha relationship. In 1979, there was negotiation between the socialist government and the reformist monks led by Sayadaw Wiseitta who wanted to “put back the honor of apprenticeship of the canonical texts, and unify the Burmese Sangha under the direction of Maha Sangha Nayaka (the Grand Council).”⁶⁸ Ne Win convened the congregation of the Sangha of All orders. This gathering brought together all sects of Buddhist monks and to solve doctrinal disputes.

⁶³ Robert Taylor, *The state in Burma*, p.357.

⁶⁴ The Monks’ opposition led to the arrest in April of ninety-two monks for political and economic activities, and forced the RC to defend itself repeatedly against charges that it was anti-religious and therefore no different from the Communist Party. The RC viewed the protests by the monks as the consequence of their acting in collusion with illegal political parties. (Taylor, 1987: 357)

⁶⁵ Michael, Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma*, p.210.

⁶⁶ Robert Taylor, *The state in Burma*, p.358.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.358.

⁶⁸ Jean Murdani, “L’Argent du Bouddhisme: Ideologie et pouvoir en Birmanie,” *Geographie et cultures*, 12 (2002): 103.

The congregation was followed by the construction of Maha Wizaya Zedi (Maha Wijaya Pagoda), situating on a hill lock across Shwedagon Pagoda. Though being one of a few religious constructions built in the Socialist government's period, the symbolic meaning of this pagoda is so great and should not be neglected.

It aimed at commemorating the formation of a unified body of the Sangha in the country. Accordingly, it was a symbol of the unification of the Sangha of all orders "which had assembled at the congregation for the purpose of "purification, perpetuation and propagation" of the Sasana. Here, political prisoners were released, and insurgents had ninety days in which to surrender. According to Tin Maung Maung Than, this was reminiscent of the traditional practice of Dhammaraja pardoning convicted criminals on auspicious occasion.⁶⁹

Interestingly moreover, on 28 February 1986, when the pagoda was completed, the *hti* was hoisted to its pinnacle.⁷⁰ As revealed earlier that the hoisting *hti* on the spire of pagoda was traditional ceremony performed by Burmese kings as to manifest their power. The construction of this pagoda as well as Ne Win's hoisting the *hti* signified right and power of Ne Win as the state's leader. This was a means Ne Win used to legitimize himself.

4.6 Conclusion

Buddhist symbols and operations have traditionally provided mode of religious legitimation for every authority in Myanmar. Significantly, I have explored in that conceptions of legitimation have been given both mythic and cultic expression.

Even in the post colonial Burma, Buddhist symbols and operations had also been exploited by both leaders, U Nu and Ne Win. However, there was the difference between them. The fact was that U Nu had greatly used them since his initial year, while

⁶⁹ Tin Maung Maung Than. "Sangha reforms and renewal of Sasana in Myanmar: Historical trends and contemporary practice." In Trevor Ling (ed.), Buddhist trends in Southeast Asia. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p.52.

⁷⁰ Tin Maung Maung Than. "Sangha reforms and renewal of Sasana in Myanmar: Historical trends and contemporary practice," p.37.

Ne Win had just utilized Buddhist symbol and beliefs just in the late of his period. And the only obvious Buddhist symbols operated by him were his congregation of the Sangha of All Order and construction of Maha Wizaya.

However, the operations of U Nu and Ne Win indeed could not be competed with those of the SLORC/SPDC. We saw any amount of interesting rituals since 1988. Accordingly, I will examine the characteristic of those religious works in the next chapter.



สถาบันวิทยบริการ
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

CHAPTER 5

A CASE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SLORC/SPDC'S PERIOD FROM 1988 TO 2003

The chapter focuses on the four religious works operated by the SLORC/SPDC. These include the reconstructing of Pagan (1988-2003), The hoisting of *hti* at Shwedagon Pagoda (1999), the operation of the grand marble Buddha image, “Min Dhamma” (2000), and the possession of White Elephants (2001-2003). Though there were in fact many other works, these four operations are exceptionally interesting. Firstly, they were as grand as national projects. Secondly, we have no evidence that these four projects had been operated by any government in the post colonial Burma. Therefore, the four works are the most worthwhile to study.

5.1 Reconstructing of Pagan (1988-2003)

5.1.1 Historical Overview: The Significance of Pagan

Located in central Burma in a plain near the confluence of the Irrawaddy and the Chinwin, Pagan city covered an area of approximately sixteen square miles where there were a large number of pagodas, of which approximately nearly 5,000 pagodas remain nowadays.

To the outside world, those remains of temples have been recognized in an aspect of its archaeological splendor “it is one of Southeast Asia’s most remarkable historical sites, including *Angkor Wat* in Cambodia and *Borobudur* in Indonesia. Accordingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) announced that Burma’s famous temples of Pagan are slated to become the country’s first world heritage site.¹

But for the Burmese, their feelings towards Pagan might not be just ‘splendor’. Religiously, Pagan is also considered significant. As there are relics of the Buddhas, enshrined among those pagodas and temples since the monarchical period, Pagan therefore is considered as the sacred land to the Burmese Buddhists --estimated 89% of

¹ Htein Linn. “Reconstructing History: Pagan Gets a Facelift.” In *Irrawaddy* Vol 10. No. 6, July-August 2002.

the whole population in Burma/ Myanmar, and many temples continued to be places of worship of the Burmese people, just as they were in the past. Significantly moreover, according to traditional beliefs, Pagan has always been closely associated with the world of the *nats*, since so many of them are connected with its history.

5.1.2 Restoration Project of Pagan Since 1988

Since the ancient times, the religious buildings were damaged over the centuries both by nature, such as fires, floods, earthquakes, trees, and by robbers and treasure-seekers. Either considering them as religious edifices going to be destructive or desiring to beautify the old pagodas, the Burmese kings had many times restored the buildings in Pagan and their contents since the mediaeval times. Reports said that there were many repairs as early as 1212 AD, and more than 20 instances of “making new” by the Burmese kings in later period which were documented in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.² Making merit by their financial support, the kings who gave command to their citizens for labor, claimed that they could also gain merit in that way.

In the modern Burma, there were the other attempts, following a severe earthquake in 1975, to renovate the old-ruined pagodas. At that time, much work was done in conjunction with UNESCO. But since 1988, the SLORC/ SPDC kept control of supervising the rebuilding program. All the assistance from the UNESCO specialists, except the aid fund, was refused.* The restoration program has been continued since then. On May, 1996, the government-sponsored newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, advertising the project, called it as “adopt a Bagan pagoda” scheme.³ Along side with the information, photographs of different damage pagodas have been published daily. Apart from that, the donations by civilians, government servants, and soldiers were also declared. the *New Light of Myanmar* also reported the Secretary-1 Lt-Gen. Khint Nyunt’s inspecting on pagoda preservation and renovation.

² Bob Hudson, “The merit of rebuilding Bagan,” *Orientalism Magazine*. 31 (May 2000): 1.

* Bob Hudson, (2000) Rebuilding program is the first time the entire city has been offered for Buddhist donors to make religious merit in return for sponsorship.

³ Huge Macdougall, *Burma Press Summary. From the Rangoon: The new light of Myanmar*. The Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois, 1996. (Mimeographed): 28.

Apart from the reconstructing of Pagan, there were many projects of reconstructing and renovating of religious edifices all over the country. These, for instance, include: "Resurrection of Hanthawady Palace Hill; renovation of Pyathadagyi Pagoda in Bagan; Repair of Layhmyethna Brick Monastery in Bagan; excavation of Bagan City Wall and Moat; Reconstruction of Inwa [Ava] City Wall; Reconstruction of inner wall and stockade near the Myanan Sankyaw palace; excavation of the Myaygon Palace site at Bagan.etc."⁴

According to many sources, there were evidences that this project dissatisfied many people, especially archaeologists and scholars. For a voice in Myanmar, Dr Than Tun, a former professor of history at Mandalay University and currently a member of the Burma Historical Commission, agrees. "It [excavating and restoring] is no business for soldiers. They have no knowledge about antiques. They want just publicity," complained Burmese historian Dr Than Tun in an interview with the BBC. He was very angry with the generals because they excavated and restored many palaces and pagodas when the junta announced 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996'.⁵

It is likely that the reconstruction of Pagan aimed to legitimize the regime. Apart from being a meritorious duty of those who claim to be king, Reconstruction of Pagan could signify power of the Burmese monarch as well. The fact is that Pagan was the first capital city of the Burmese where the country was successfully integrated under one leadership for the first time. King Anawrahta who founded Pagan, had successfully united most of those territories belong to many ethnic minorities under one power. After united the country, Anawrahta obviously maintained a formal hegemony over the minorities by including those minorities' local spirit cults and their leaders in the thirty-seven *nats*,* of which the Burmese king, as *Sakkra*, the king of all *nats*, stood as the head. The Shwezigon Pagoda in Pagan was created to be the ceremonial headquarters of the thirty-seven *nats* and thus was the important symbol of Burmese king as the king of

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁵ Available from <http://www.Irrawaddy.com>

* Nats are guardian spirits still beings popularly worshipped by the Burmese. There are many kind of Nat. See also Melford E. Spiro (1967)

kings.⁶ As Pagan signifies the seat of power and authority in Burmese history, the SLORC/SPDC's supervising the restoration of Pagan and holding the ceremony at the Shwezigon Pagoda in March 1997 has claimed *cakravartinship* of Myanmar. Also, the military junta's reconstructing of Pagan as did by a long line of Burmese kings, showed its claim as 'spiritual heir' of the Burmese monarch,⁷ and therefore bestowed itself right to rule.

5.2 The Hoisting of Hti at Shwedagon Pagoda

5.2.1 Historical Overview

Shwedagon pagoda attracts all Myanmar citizens and the world, because of its beauty. But since the early time, it has been considered significant by the Burmese Buddhist in particular by the fact that it is where the hair relics of Buddha were enshrined. Historically, after the two brothers presented the Eight Sacred Hairs, bestowed by our Lord Buddha to King Okkalapa, the Hair Relics since then were enshrined and worshipped in a *zedi* on Singuttara Hill. Traversed 2587 years, this Holy shrine had been many times renovated and adorned by a long line of kings "till the original feet height of the Pagoda reached the present height of 326 feet.

In Burmese history, apart from renovating project, the ceremony of hoisting of an umbrella (*hti*) on pagoda's spire had also been performed at Shwedagon Pagoda. In pre colonial Burma, the ceremony of hoisting *hti* at Shwedagon was held twice by two Burmese king; including Hsinbyushin and Mindon, respectively.

Hsinbyushin in 1774 A.D, in eagerness to place a new *hti* at Shwedagon Pagoda, he progressed from Ava to Rangoon. He removed its old *hti*, said that it was thrown down by an earthquake in 1769, and replaced it with the new one. A new *hti* was constructed from iron and brass planting. "The *hti*, the cone, the jewelled vane and diamond orb were planted with four kg of gold melted down from golden treasures belong to the king... They were then set with 15038 diamonds and gems. The 356 gold

⁶ Mikael Gravers, Nationalism as political paranoia in Burma: An essay on the historical practice of power (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), p.16.

⁷ Sisley, "La robe et Le fusil: Le bouddhisme et la dictature militaire en Birmanie." Revue d' Etudes Comparatives Est-Quest 32 (Jan 2001): 178.

and silver bells recovered when the former top broke off were augmented by a further 32.9 kg of gold and silver bells and these were hung from the *hti*.⁸

In 1869, in the reign of King Mindon, the another hoisting was organized. The reason for hoisting of new *hti* was that the old *hti* hoisted since 100 years ago was too old and it was time to be replaced.⁹

According to historian Dr Than Tun, the practice of hoisting *hti* on the top of pagoda “began in the 15th century, when a Mon king invaded Burman-dominated territory and put a big crown made like his own on top of each pagoda in the land he conquered.” As retaliation, The Burmese king put a likeness of his own crown on top each pagoda when he re-seized his land.”¹⁰ According to Gravers, ‘*Hti*’ “was a sign of glory (*hpon*) and power. It could be compared with the king’s crown.”¹¹

Taw Sein Ko has reviewed the symbolic meaning of Hsinbyusin’s motivation in placing new *hti* on the pagoda. According to Taw Sein Ko, it was his desire to express his hegemony over the land. *Hti* was the symbol of the king of kings, Caṅkravartin, and those who hoisted a *hti* on the spire of pagoda, he claimed to consolidate territories only in his own hand.

The placing of a new *hti* on the Shwe Dagon pagodas by Hsinbyushin was symbolical of the consolidation of the power of the dynasty...The ceremony of placing the *hti* was witnessed by the king in person, in order to convince the Talaings whose abortive rebellion in Martaban had just been suppressed, that his rule was a personal one, and to impress on them the splendour of his power and the resources at his command¹²

⁸ Elizabeth Moore, Hansjorg Mayers, and U Win Pe. Shwedagon: Golden Palace of Myanmar (London: Thomas and Hudson Ltd., 1999), p.186.

⁹ Ibid., p.186

¹⁰ Min Zin, www.Irrawaddy.org. Vol 9. No. 6, July 2001

¹¹ (Gravers, Mikael. Nationalism as political paranoia in Burma: An essay on the historical practice of power, p.14.

¹² Taw Sein Ko, “A preliminary study of the Po:u:daung Inscription of Sinbyuyin, 1774 A.D.” The Indian Antiquary, A journal of Oriental research, Vol xxii. 1893:1.

5.2.2 SPDC Government and Its Ceremony of Hoisting *Hti* at Shwedagon Pagoda

In 1999, the SLORC/SPDC government had a project of renovating Shwedagon and placing new *hti*, the golden umbrella, on the top of the sacred pagoda. In *Historic record of the History of the Golden Umbrella on the Shwedagon Pagodas* it is recorded that there are “Renovation and enhancement of the pagoda by a long line of kings [that have raised] the height of the original 66 feet to its present 326 feet...”

Like both kings who hoisted the previous their *hti* on the spire of Shwedagon Pagoda, the SPDC gave a reason in doing such deed that, according to the document, “this Umbrella, subject to the vicissitudes of the elements for 128 years, has degenerated.”¹³

As the Htidaw was donated by King Mindon in 1871, it has been 128 years old, and major and minor repairs were also undertaken whenever damages were caused to it-in 1919, in 1930 and in 1970 and due to weather and old age, many parts of the Htidaw were found to be infirm, he said.¹⁴

The government also informs the main purpose in doing so, by stating that, “the Government of the State Peace and Development Council, while endeavoring vigorously to modernize and develop the nation, has also comprehensively renovated pagodas and monasteries, and has erected new religious edifices in order that the Buddha Sasana may grow, spread and endure.” (*Historic record of the History of the Golden Umbrella on the Shwedagon Pagodas, p.1*)

In this document, *Historic Record of the History of the Golden Umbrella on the Shwedagon Pagodas*, glossy pages show more junta officials in uniform and devotional sash than Buddhist clergy. In the meantime, new initiatives to gain merit and possible public adulation through the junta’s religious activities marked virtually every edition of

¹³ *Historic record of the History of the Golden Umbrella on the Shwedagon Pagodas*, p.1.

¹⁴ Available from <http://www.Myanmar.com>

the daily newspapers, *Kyemon* (The Mirror) and *The New Light of Myanmar*.¹⁵ In *Myanmar Times*, 15 January 2001, Khin Nyunt claimed that “the happiness I feel for this occasion is incompatible to anything, any thing at all in my life. It is the height of my joy. I feel I can die contented.” *The New Light of Myanmar*, 7 April 1999, noted, “the brilliance of that bud is... as if it was anointing and blessing the close camaraderie that exists between the rulers and their subjects.”¹⁶

There was a rumor. Matthew (2001) stated that “the names of Secretary Khin Nyunt and other junta dignitaries, are said to be inscribed somewhere on the *hti*, “a virtual time capsule to honor their rule. In addition, in the south entrance to the Shwedagon, a new panel painted in the traditional style depicting the four senior generals in their usual battle fatigues –but smiling graciously on a model of the great zedi – can be found along side pictures from the Jataka tales and from Myanmar Buddhist history and folklore.”¹⁷ Besides, according to Aung Zaw, a journalist, many Burmese were offended when Khin Nyunt and other generals ascended to the top of the pagoda and shouted “Aung Pyi! Aung pyi!” (“We won! We won!”).¹⁸

5.3 The Construction of the Grand Buddha Image, “Min Dhamma”

5.3.1 Historical Overview

As stated by Swearer, things that could be the symbol of legitimacy included Buddha images.¹⁹ Since the time Nagasena, statues of Buddha began to be carved out of gem as he reflected that, “The Buddha, the Doctrine and the Church each represents a gem, so I have to get a precious stone with a very great power in it to make the statue of the Lord.”* Accordingly, Buddha images have been carved out of precious stone.

¹⁵ Bruce Matthews, “Myanmar : Beyond the Reach of International Relief?” In *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (Singapore: ISAS, 2001), p.236.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.246.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.236.

¹⁸ Aung Zaw, “Shwedagon and the generals,” 12.

¹⁹ Donald Swearer, *Buddhism and society in Southeast Asia*, (Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1981), p.36.

* According to Tambiah (1984), the Nagasena, upon the death of his guru, Dhammarakkhita, decided that an image of the Buddha would make his religion “extremely flourishing” and very prosperous” in this world. (Tambiah. p.215)

The size of the stone to be carved is also concerned significant; the bigger the precious stone, the more powerful and magnificent those kings who possessed it become, as referred in the myth of Nagasena.

“This [precious] stone is not available because it has...been reserved for the enjoyment of a future *Cakravartin* (Universal Monarch).”²⁰

Likewise, in pre modern Burma, precious stone was popularly used in carving Buddha image included white marble. The white marble boulder, that would be used to carve into the Buddha image, should be of great size and be one single unbroken piece. When Burmese kings discovered the gem in such quality, no king was reluctant in carving it into Buddha image. In Burma, there were four huge marble images built during the monarchical period.

The first marble Buddha image, Lay Kyun Man Aung Buddha image, was carved in AD 1734 during the reign of King Taininganwe of Ava. One single unbroken piece of a large marble boulder was carved into a sitting Buddha image with the height of 20 feet and 13 feet 6 inches in breadth.²¹ The second one, Maha Loka Tharahpu image, was built six years after, by the same king.²² This marble Buddha Image with the height of 29 feet and 19 feet in breadth was recorded as the world largest white marble Buddha image of a single piece. The other marble image, Maha Thet Kya Yanthi, was carved in AD 1830 during King Bagyidaw' s (of Amarapura) reign, and the last one, the Maha Thet Kya Marazein; later in AD 1864 during King Mindon' s reign.²³

²⁰ Tambiah, The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: A study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism and millennial Buddhism. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.215.

²¹ In WWW.Ibiblio.

²² But while it was under process the King passed away and it was completed only during the reign of his son.

²³ Available from <http://www..Ibiblio.com>

5.3.2 The SPDC and the Operation of Mindhamma

In the beginning of 2000, there was again the project to create the huge Buddha image made of white marble. A new colossal image of Gautama Buddha, the Mindhamma Lawka Chantha Abhaya Labha Muni, was carved of a large marble block found in the Sagyin Range in Mandalay and donated to the SPDC.²⁴

U Taw Taw, a famous traditional sculptor, discovered the huge block of marble, and at once informed General Khint Nyunt, the Secretary No.1 of the State Peace and Development Council. The former was asked to be assured that he could carve the largest and highest Marble Buddha Image out of that block of marble (11.45 meters).²⁵ On 4 August 2000, the Buddha image was sent down as a partially carved slab of marble from near Mandalay to the Yangon suburb of Insein, where it was finished and erected at an *aung myay* ('winning ground' or 'victory spot') identified by astrologers.²⁶

The operation of Mindhamma had a deep meaning. According to Burmese traditional belief, those kings who possess great marble was perceived as *Cakravartin* king. Accordingly, when a Burmese king found a big marble boulder, he was willing to carved Buddha image out of it. But what was very interesting was that, unlike the four precedent images which were carved in the seated Vijaya mudra (victory over Mara), the *Lawka Chantha Abahaya Labha Muni* Buddha Image was carved in the seated *abhaya*, or 'no fear' mudra.* Besides, the name of the image, "*Lawka Chantha Abahaya Labha Muni*", also means 'the sage who releases the fear and gives the prosperity to the world'.²⁷

²⁴ Sisley, "La robe et Le fusil: Le bouddhisme et la dictature militaire en Birmanie," p. 178.

²⁵ Ibid., p.178.

²⁶ Bruce Matthews, "Myanmar : Beyond the Reach of International Relief?" In *Southeast Asian Affairs*, p.236.

* In the *abhaya* muddra, one or both hands are extended forward with palms out and fingers point upward, to symbolize the Buddha's offer of protection or freedom from fear to his follower.

²⁷ Sisley, "La robe et Le fusil: Le bouddhisme et la dictature militaire en Birmanie," P.181.

According to Sisley (2001), the name perfectly supported the idea of domination, submission, supremacy and royalty that became associated with the junta and their power.²⁸ Like a *Dhammaraja*, the junta tried to persuade the people its royal kindness. And in such way, the junta could claim legitimacy. This was assured by an article “the land of the Sacred Buddha Images,” in *the New Light of Myanmar*, on 13 September 2002.

The tatmadaw government in accordance with the Ovada of the Sayadaws is working over time in conducting pious deeds. The people realizing the government’s good will are also taking part in its meritorious deeds in physical as well as in monetary terms. With the leadership of the government, the people’s will to carry out pious deeds; emergence of the Image, construction of the Gandakuti Kyaungdawgyi and all-round development of the Mindhamma Hill will be marked as a milestone in history.²⁹

5.4 *The Possession of White Elephants*

There were the discoveries of three white elephants as claimed by the junta. The first white elephant was found in Arakan State on late October 2001.³⁰ Six months later, the country’s state-run press again reported that another rare white elephant was captured in Western Burma’s Arakan State in January.³¹ According to wire reports, the most recent white elephant was twenty-five years old and had all the characteristics associated with white elephants—including pearl-colored eyes and light pink skin.³²

Interestingly, after the first white elephant was found, there was the proclamation of how its characteristic was matched to the legendary auspicious white elephant.

²⁸ Ibid., p.181.

²⁹ *New Light of Myanmar*, (13 September 2002)

³⁰ “White elephant emerges from Rathedaung Township, Rakhine State,” Available from <http://www.Myanmar.com>

³¹ Available from <http://www.Myanmar.com>

³² Available from <http://www.irrawaddy.org>

The eight-year-old male elephant possesses all the characteristics of a white elephant. Of the eight elephants captured by the staff of the Ministry of Forestry at Chutpyin village at Ahtetnanya village-tract, an eight-year old bull with a height of nearly six feet and with pearl eyes is found to be a white elephant.... The animal is significant and different from others as under the rain its skin is whitish-light pink colour; and its colour changes to moderate russet on a cool sunny day. Besides, it is found that the animal has all the characteristics of a white elephant....

According to the learned persons of the past successive eras, the characteristics of a white elephant are the pearl eyes, the white hoofs, the back which hangs down like the bough of a banana tree, the white hairs on the body and tail and the *tah gah paik* (closed door) shape tail. Its ears are larger than ordinary elephants. The white elephant found at Ahtetnanya in the Union of Myanmar has pearl eyes, yellowish eyebrow, reddish eyelids, back which hangs down like the bough of a banana tree, white hairs on the body, and long and straight tails shapes like the *tah gah paik* (closed door).

The tail at its base is black and tip is white. When washed with water, its colour turns reddish. During the rainy season, its colour is whitish-light pink, and under the cold sunny weather, it is moderate russet. The large herbivore is a bull with a pair of tusks. Each tusk is six inches long and five inches in girth. Its ears are larger than other elephants, and besides it looks more stable than them. Throughout the history, white elephants emerged during time of the kings and governments who ruled the nation in accord with the ten royal precepts.

In accord with the records compiled by the learned persons, it is said that the white elephant brings about peace, stability and prosperity to the nation; that it prevents all hazards and dangers, and that the nation enjoys annual bumper food harvests and is rich during the times the white elephant emerges. Emergence of the white elephant is a good omen for the nation at the time the State is endeavoring to build a peaceful, modern

and developed nation. It is assumed that the nation will be peaceful, prosper and be totally free from all the dangers because of the white elephant.³³

As this white elephant was to be transported to the capital city, a luxurious greeting was held. A greeting party consisting of members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a pro-junta "grassroots" support group, was formed to welcome the pale, pinkish elephant as it made its way from Rangoon's Ahlon Jetty to Mindhamma Hill. The elephant was conveyed on a specially constructed float covered by "four white umbrellas."

Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt viewed the white elephant named *Yaza Gaha Thiri Pissaya Gaza Yaza*, which was conveyed from Sittway, Rakhine State, to Yangon by water in November 14, 2001.

The white elephant was conveyed and arrived at Aungzeya Timber Jetty of Myanma Timber Enterprise in Ahlon Township at 1.45 pm. Secretary-1 Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt, ministers, the Mayor of Yangon, deputy ministers, heads of department and officials, viewed the white elephant on board *Aungyadana Thit* ship.

At a time when a peaceful, modern and developed nation is being built, a white elephant named *Yaza Gaha Thiri Pissaya Gaza Yaza* has been discovered, which is a good omen for the nation. It is assumed that the nation will be peaceful, prosperous and totally free from all the dangers because of the white elephant.³⁴

The current regime has invoked this tradition by naming its recent find white elephant, "*Yaza Gaha Thiri Pissaya Gaza Yaza*", which means "Royal Elephant That Bestows Grace Upon the Nation" in the ancient Pali. The sacred white elephant named "*Yaza Gaha Thiri Pissaya Gaza Yaza*" was welcomed in accord with the tradition in

³³ Available from <http://www.myanmar.com>

³⁴ Available from <http://www.myanmar.com>

Insein Township, Yangon, November 14, 2001. The welcoming-ceremony took place at the temporary shed near Min-dhamma Hillock Garden. Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt had reportedly inspected the construction of the temporary "White Elephant Hall" at the hill, where the ruling military regime had previously erected a huge marble Buddha image to boost its religious credentials, and stored one of the Buddha's teeth.

Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt, Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council, did the honors of presiding over the ceremony, which was performed by a number of prominent monks from the government-controlled Sangha, or monastic community. Khin Nyunt poured auspicious water sanctified with immersed gold, silver and precious stones, and sacred water over the male elephant. At the auspicious time, Adviser of the State Calendar Committee U Kyaw read out the Seinta Mani Mantra three times. Members of the Teingya Sacred Umbrella Hoisting Group blew the conch shells and beat the gongs to mark the successful completion of the ceremony.

As the last white elephant was found, at a ceremony honoring the elephant, Gen. Khin Nyunt made a claim mentioned by Aung Zaw as follows

The ruling State Peace and Development Council is in possession of three white elephants, which are treated as state treasures. State-run media use news about the elephants to boost public confidence, assuring the people that the lucky pachyderms prove what the generals have been saying all along: that nation's peace and prosperity are assured.³⁵

There were many different opinions about this matter. In his article, Maung Maung Oo stated that the Junta's project is turned out to be successful.³⁶ He views that many Burmese are convinced that the white elephant will save the day, though there is crumbling economic in which any significant improvement in the country's prospects is in the unforeseeable future. He gives a sample of an astrologer who suggests that the country may soon be in store for some good news, as "it is extremely rare for a king to possess a white elephant." Others are even more enthusiastic: "I strongly believe that

³⁵ Aung Zaw, *Burma's Yadaya Battle*. Available from <http://www.Irrawaddy.org>

³⁶ Maung Maung Oo. "Junta's New White Elephant Project is paying off" in www.Irrawaddy.org

discovering this white elephant will lead our country to achieve prosperity,” insisted another man standing in line to see the elephant, echoing the sentiments of many others in the crowd. “The ancient scriptures say that only powerful and glorious kings can possess a real white elephant,” one Rangoon resident who joined the crowd gathered to see the precious pachyderm at its temporary home near Mindhama Hill, in Rangoon’s Insein Township remarked. “I believe that our country will become more peaceful and developed soon,” he added.

However, there were many other people who were not convinced. They thought that those white elephants were just albino. The most outstanding of those who thought so and proclaimed out loud was Dr. Than Tun. He thought that the occupation of any white elephant would bring no luck to the country, “it is just an animal,” he said.

5.5 Conclusion

From the case study, it is now obvious that the SLORC/SPDC, like a king, has exploited Buddhist symbols and beliefs to justify its rule. What we notice is that these four operations are strongly associated with kingly right and power. And as no previous government of the post colonial Burma had performed, it can be assumed that the SLORC/SPDC has been imitating model of Burmese king.

However, what are main reasons why they have to do so, and are there any change in legitimation? The possible answers will be given in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 6

CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHIST LEGITIMATION OF THE SLORC/SPDC (1988-2003)

On the surface, it may appear that there is no difference between the religious operations of the military government and those of previous governments in both pre- and post-colonial of Burma.

However, it seems that Buddhist legitimation during this period had its own distinct identity. The chapter, therefore, aims to examine the characteristics of Buddhist legitimation of SLORC/SPDC and whether or not it differs from previous governments. Additionally, Buddhist identity, as it related to political legitimation during the SLORC/SPDC will also be explored.

6.1 Characteristics of Buddhist Legitimation in Comparison: U Nu, Ne Win and the SLORC/SPDC

It is true that all governments in Burma have used Buddhism to legitimize their power. In fact, most government leaders claimed themselves to be either Cakravartin or Maitreya. Even Ne Win, who initially refused to involve Buddhism in politics, had placed *hti*, which signifies kingly power, on the spire of his pagoda in 1986. Ne Win had no other opportunity to conduct such auspicious deeds, after the people's uprising in 1988.

Yet, there is another post-colonial leader whose religious operations seem to be in large part similar to that of the SLORC/SPDC. U Nu and his religious operation were perceived by every one to be significant. Superficially, U Nu's Buddhist legitimation resembled that of the SLORC/SPDC. But indeed, the aims of the two governments were different.

In his period, U Nu utilized traditional Buddhist symbols, the most significant being the Sixth Great Buddhist Council, the construction of World Peace pagoda at Kaba Aye and the worshipping ceremonies of *nat* at Mount Popa. Like Burmese kings whose unique role was "defender and promoter of the Buddhist religion," U Nu, who wanted to

confirm his legitimacy, was deeply involved in religious affairs and sought to promote the interests of the Buddhist religion in Burma.¹

This is evidenced in U Nu's arranging of the Sixth Buddhist Synod 83 years after Mindon organized the Fifth Synod. Because of this activity, people associated U Nu with *Cakravartin*. Though U Nu's willing acceptance of this title is generally known, this was not the desire to be *Cakravartin* that motivated him. In fact, his real intention was to create peace in the newly independent country where civil wars had still been taking place. "The Sixth Great Buddhist Council's greatest significance was symbolic. It dramatized the government's commitment to the promotion of Buddhism which was regarded as an essential component of the Burmese national identity."² The construction of the pagoda at Kaba Aye also served to meet this aim. Observing its name, we also notice a motivation in its construction. However, though the stated aim was world peace but there was clearly an element of "Peace for Burma" in the wished-for-result.³ Likewise, the ceremonies of worshipping *nats* at Mount Popa meet this aim as well. According to Smith, the intention was to ask good spirits to help aid and protect the country. "U Nu attributed the country's recovery from insurrections to the help given by the spirits."⁴

In contrast, it is obvious that the SLORC/SPDC had different intentions. According to the four case studies previously discussed in this paper, its intentions are clear. Most significantly, operations performed by every Burmese king could be associated with the royal right and power. The reconstruction of Pagan had long been undertaken by a series of Burmese kings, and this could be used to signify the power of the Burmese monarch over ethnic minorities. The hoisting of *hti* at Shwedagon Pagoda had been done by just a few notorious kings in their attempt to manifest their power and hegemony over the land. Similarly, the possession of large marble boulders and white elephants had been claimed by the *Cakravartin* king or those who claimed to be one.

6.2 Causal Factors Leading to Changing Characteristics of Buddhist Legitimation

¹ Donald Smith, Religion and politics in Burma, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.140.

² *Ibid.*, p.165.

³ Michael Mendelson, Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.273.

⁴ Donald Smith, Religion and politics in Burma, p.167.

The fact is that Buddhism in political legitimation of the SLORC/SPDC was different from that of previous post-colonial governments. Unlike U Nu or Ne Win's utilization of Buddhism, the SLORC/SPDC's exploitation has been better organized. Moreover, Buddhist symbols that strongly signify right and power have been greatly used. In order to understand the characteristics of Buddhism in political legitimation of this time, it is also important to understand the crises that the SLORC/SPDC faced.

Firstly, the SLORC/SPDC has been an illegitimate government since 1988 when it massacred hundreds of people and seized power. The other significant problem is the emergence of political rival, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been greatly admired by people both within and outside of Burma. Last, but not least, is the ever worsening economic situation in Myanmar. The military has suffered as its legitimacy was undermined because of this.

In the following section, three factors affecting the Buddhist legitimation of the SLORC/SPDC will be examined.

6.3 Identities of the SLORC/SPDC's Buddhist Legitimation

6.3.1 Reinvented Characteristics: A synthesis of Buddhist Legitimation and economy

Normally, Buddhist legitimation of every government has involved only the political domain. But the first attempt at synthesizing the economy with Buddhist legitimation was made by the SLORC/SPDC.

Because of wide discontent among the people, the chances of a violent upheaval were deemed to be greater. The military junta therefore developed a strategy for consolidating power and political legitimacy "by relying on making people as rich as possible."⁵

⁵ Michael Vatikiotis, *Political change in Southeast Asia: Trimming of the banyan tree*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p.114.

1988 was the first time that the government of Burma/Myanmar came to promote the national economy. Because people thought the economic deterioration was derived from Socialist government's mismanagement and its "Burmese Way to Socialism" policy, the military government tried to bring back the good prestige of its regime and adopted the new "Burmese Way to Capitalism" policy.

Accordingly, since 1988, 'development' and 'modernization' became new more positively-phrased instruments used by the government. Subsequently, this has opened the door of Myanmar to the outside world and allowed foreigners to come in and spend money in Myanmar. Consequently, the economy began to develop as could be noticed from the many hotels built during this time. The economic development was also accelerated by the SLORC's promotion of tourism. The SLORC now presented the country with a glimpse of hope that the economy and the quality of life for all people would be better.

Thus, because of all of the aforementioned issues, any project launched by the SLORC was based on an expectation that it could lead them to simultaneously achieve both economic growth and national consolidation objectives. In the program of promoting national pride, the military took this opportunity to promote the country's tourist trade. According to Houtman, the regime invited tourists to the country to admire the greatness of 'Myanmar civilization.' Much effort has been expended to develop tourism, which helps to increase precious foreign exchange earnings with which the cultural resources are elaborated. It has been admitted that tourism and cultural development go hand in hand, because 'foreign exchange earning is the main target of the Myanmar hotel and tourism industry'.⁶

Moreover, it seems that the promotion of tourism for the SLORC could not only serve the aim of economic development and enhance national pride, but tourism could also establish a new good prestige for the regime.

⁶ Houtman, Gustaaf. Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (Tokyo: Tokyo Press, 1999), p.109.

“It is ‘cultural tourism that Myanmar intends to promote because the Myanmar Government and people believe that cultural tourism contributes to international friendship and understanding.’ Through tourism Burma can also fulfil the ‘urgent need to present her true image to the world which knows very little but which has many misconceived and misinformed ideas about her.’ It is ‘with the help of her well-wishers and ASEAN friends the world will come to understand her real situation and realize that Myanmar is a uniquely hospitable and fascinating land to visit.’”⁷

In addition, these projects could also bring money to the country, as they enhance tourism. Consequently, money from outside would then flow into Myanmar.

What is important in the identity that emerged from this is that Buddhism was not confined only to the political domain. This made Buddhism and political legitimation of the SLORC/SPDC in this time completely different from all previous regimes. Here, the Buddhist legitimation had been involved in the economic domain as well. In the other words, the SLORC/SPDC was using Buddhism to gain legitimacy for its economic achievements.

However, the fact is that the economy of the country has not improved, but has worsened. In failing to legitimize itself through economic performance, the government therefore has mainly based its legitimacy through beliefs of right and power.

6.3.2 Bringing back traditions of Konbaung Kingship

The reason why the SLORC/SPDC may have brought back traditions of the Konbaung Kingship model is its need to trace back to the past. In the pre-colonial period of Burma, there were three dynasties that reigned. These included Pagan, Taung-nyu and the Konbaung Dynasty. In the last dynasty, Konbaung, there were 11 kings who ascended the throne. These included Alaunghpaya (1752-1760), Naungdawgyi (1760-1763), Hsinbyushin (1763-1776), Sin-gu (1776-1782), Maung Maung (1782), Bodawhpaya

⁷ Ibid., p.110.

(1782-1819), Ba-gyi-daw (1819-1837), Tharawadi (1837-1846), Pagan (1846-1853), Mindon (1853-1978) and the last king, Thibaw (1878-1885).⁸

Evidently, the four ceremonies operated by the SLORC/SPDC mentioned in the previous chapter had been performed by these kings of Konbaung dynasty. For example, it was Hsinbyushin (1763-1873) and Mindon (1853-1878) who placed new *hti* on the Shwedagon Pagoda's spire; Bagyidaw (1819-1837) ordered the large Buddha image be carved out of white marble block; and Alaunghpaya (1752-1760) and Hsinbyushin possessed white elephants.

It appeared that those religious works would disappear forever with the deposition of Thibaw, the last king of Burma. However, in the SLORC/SPDC's time, we see the reintroduction of these same ceremonies again. Without doubt, SLORC/SPDC has been imitating the model of Burmese kings. The reason why the SLORC/SPDC brought back and focus on utilizing those kingly symbols is based on the three factors earlier mentioned—the 1988 massacre, the Aung San Suu Kyi situation, and the economic deterioration. These appear to be the three mains driving factors in SLORC/SPDC operations.

Firstly, because of the massacre of hundreds of people in 1988, the SLORC/SPDC tried to tone down its criminal image. They therefore adopted the model used by Burmese kings in that a ruler could execute his rivals and then neutralize this de-meritorious act in building a pagoda.⁹ The generals therefore tried to act like good Buddhists in performing many meritorious deeds and doing good in accordance with the Buddha religion. In so doing, the SLORC/SPDC was convincing people of its right to rule.

Secondly, because of the popular rival, Aung San Suu Kyi, the military government tried to show that the military, not Aung San Suu Kyi, has right to rule the Myanmar territory. Because of its great fear of her, the generals put her under house arrest, and attempted to portray her as a stooge of foreign 'neo-colonialism' and

⁸ The Source from Koenig's, The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Political Administration and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period. (USA: University of Michigan, 1990).

⁹ Koenig, The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Political Administration and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period, p.42.

'hegemonism'. While the military government tried to destroy Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity, it simultaneously convinced people through kingly ceremonies that it was the *Cakravartin* of Myanmar. The most obvious evidence was the ceremony of hoisting *hti* on the spire of Shwedagon Pagoda in 1999. As discussed in the previous chapter, the activity of hoisting of *hti* had been performed only by a few heroic Burmese kings, and was closely associated with the claim to right and power. Also, we saw that the generals considered themselves fighting in battle. When the *hti* was crowned on the spire, Khint Nyunt and other generals ascended to the top of the pagoda and shouted "*Aung pyi! Aung pyi!*" ('We won! We won!').¹⁰

Like Burmese monarchs who can be both cruel¹¹ and compassionate, the military government intentionally manifested itself as *Dhammaraja* king. The creation of the Buddha image in the 'no fear' gesture has helped to reassure this attempt. Also, in repairing decaying pagodas and constructing religious edifices have been ones of meritorious acts and are the duties of *Dhammaraja* king. The project of reconstructing Pagan, likewise, makes the military government a supporter of the Buddha religion.

Thirdly, because of the increasing economic deterioration, the SLORC/SPDC has utilized Buddhism and its associated traditional beliefs to convince people about the upcoming prosperity. As there is no sign of improvement, the military government has continued to produce those religious works in an attempt to mask its failure. In creating many grand projects, the people have been fascinated and distracted from the despair of reality.¹²

The evidence came in the form of an eight-year-old white male elephant discovered in the forests of Arakan State in western Burma. In what to the outside world must have looked like a quaint reenactment of an outdated custom, several magnificent ceremonies were held to give the country's two top-ranking generals, General Than Shwe and General Maung Aye, a chance to sprinkle consecrated water on this auspicious beast. The discovery of a white elephant, in the ancient lore of Theravada Buddhism, is regarded as nothing less than a cosmic endorsement of the reigning king—or in this instance, the

¹⁰ Aung Zaw, "Shwedagon and the generals," p. 13.

¹¹ It is undoubted why the Burmese king is included in the five evils that men should avoid.

generals. As the national economy worsened in 2000 as indicated in the ever-decreasing value of the Kyat down to 950 k. per US\$1, the current regime has invoked this tradition by naming its recently-found “*Yaza Gaha Thiri Pissaya Gaza Yaza*,” meaning “Royal Elephant That Bestows Grace Upon the Nation” in the ancient Pali language.

In addition, the state-run media has used the elephant to allay concerns about a crumbling economy. It had repeatedly been telling audiences that this lucky omen proves what the generals have been saying all along that the nation’s peace and prosperity are assured. Also, a ceremony was held to reinforce the mystical—and political—significance of the elephant’s appearance.¹³

Interestingly, the figure of the white elephant offers the most compelling evidence of a counter-discourse to the principle of *phon* as it is propagated in perpetuating the supremacy of ascendant groups. Occupation of such auspicious things implied that possessors are men with merit. As stated in Chapter Four, when man with *phon* come, men without *phon* have to give him way. As possessing such an auspicious thing, the military junta is considered to be *phon-shin-kan-shin* (Lord of *phon* and *kan*). The Tatmadaw therefore has been using symbols of merit to pursue its selfish goal.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the regime is merely exploiting tradition to manipulate the superstitious public; in all probability, the generals sincerely believe that the elephant is a divine blessing and a sign that their rule is one ordained by the cosmic law of *kamma*. On this level, at least, their perception of reality is not wholly different from that of ordinary Burmese. They accordingly tried to accumulate more merit in the hope of elevating their karma, and help prolong them in power.

¹² Verbal communication with Rangoon people.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 Buddhism and Political Legitimation of the SLORC/SPDC (1988-2003)

In conclusion, it can be summarized that the SLORC/SPDC's reproduction of Buddhist king's legitimation depended to large extent on three main causes. The first cause is the illegitimacy of the military government because of its massacre of people in 1988. The second cause is the military's impotence in administrative management and in developing the country and improving the quality of life people. Last, but not the least, is the appearance of political rival, Aung San Suu Kyi. Accordingly, we see a large amount of big religious projects produced during this time. The fact is that during this time the military in its utilization of Buddhism aimed both to legitimize its rule and manifest its power, according to Buddhist traditional belief. Therefore, Buddhism and its symbolism has been exploited to give the Burmese military government its absolute right to power and therefore undisputed power to rule, or legitimacy in accordant to divine law.

There is a continuation the utilization of Buddhism by the state in Burma. U Nu utilized Buddhist symbols such as the Sanghayana to manifest his kingly and unquestioned right to rule, while Ne Win put *hti*, symbols of power, at his unfinished padoda, *Maha Wizaya*.

However, whether the leaders utilized such religious belief or not, depends on the people. In other words, the leaders will do such operations so long as they are still effective in convincing the people. Undoubtedly, U Nu could convince the people from his religious activities because they thought him to be the Maitreya (the future Buddha).

In the following section, an analysis will be presented examining whether the SLORC/SPDC has been perceived as a legitimate government or not, after conducting these types of religious rituals.

¹³ Aung Zaw, *Burma's Yadaya Battle*, p.1.

7.2 *Either Buddhist Legitimation Worked or Wasted: Response from People*

To answer the question, again the situation in Myanmar has to be carefully considered. During this time, there is the emergence of an important political rival in Aung San Suu Kyi. Normally, the Burmese authority would either eliminate their political rivals or propagate that, as a Buddha, their rivals were not meritorious.

But what is important is that this was the first time in the Burmese history that a political rival, Aung San Suu Kyi, was allowed to continuously exist and challenge the regime. Like a king, the government tried to show that it was of the good side and Aung San Suu Kyi was of the Western side. However, the people have never been convinced. In their eyes, Aung San Suu Kyi is good and the regime is malevolent.

Buddhism can be effectively used to bestow on any leader more substantial legitimacy if he is perceived as legitimate before hand. The massacring of hundreds of people in 1988 was not good for the regime at all. In their eyes, the people saw that the government committing criminal acts in killing many people and as an authoritarian dictatorship in taking absolute control of the country beginning in 1988.

Thus, the people want any government that can help improve their lives and livelihood. However, this was a goal which the military government had never been able to reach. The economy has steadily worsened and the price of rice and other goods is continues to rise. As the economy continues to worsen, the military government's credibility continues to be seriously eroded. Any claim to justify itself had been weakened. Sanctions from Western countries and communities clinched the government's illegitimacy in the eye of its people. On the contrary, Aung San Suu Kyi, as an important political rival of the military government, increasingly gains more and more popularity from both all Myanmar citizens and the international community. As the hope for a better economic situation continue to fade, many Myanmar citizens have indicated that, "Aung San Suu Kyi was their leader, not the military junta. The latter is only the government."¹⁴ Accordingly, the military junta needed to strengthen their claim of legitimacy by increasing such activities which signify, according to traditional belief, right and power.

¹⁴ Verbal communication with people, both the Burmese and the ethnic people, in Myanmar.

Thus, it can be seen that, the economic disaster has been paralleled with the emergence of many mega-projects in the last quarter of the 1990s including the following events: in the beginning of 1999, the hoisting of *hti* at the sacred Shwedagon Pagoda; in 2000, the operation of the Mindhamma Buddha image; and, between 2001 and 2003, the discovery of auspicious white elephants.

The deterioration of the economy may also be a cause that undermines the claim to legitimacy through those operations. The government had tried to stimulate the faith among the people and to convince them of both prosperity of the country, and the legitimacy of the military government. When the government brought back and utilized many Buddhist symbols that are signs of the nearly coming prosperity, the people were convinced initially, but not for long. When they realized that the economy was not going to be better at all, they noticed that the military rulers were essentially deceiving them.¹⁵



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¹⁵ Verbal communication with Rangoon people

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