



A Silent Sangha? Buddhist Monks in Post-coup Myanmar

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Principal Findings

What's new? The Sangha, Myanmar's Buddhist monks and nuns, have mostly stayed on the sidelines since the February 2021 coup, as monastic communities are divided, and the resistance is pursuing a secular agenda that includes violent action. This stance contrasts with that during previous political turmoil, when they were often prominent.

Why does it matter? The Sangha's low profile has allowed space for youth – particularly young women – to take on leadership roles in the struggle. This bold departure from generations of male Burman Buddhist gerontocratic leadership in Myanmar is encouraging for the future but could bring a backlash.

What should be done? Policymakers and international donors should carefully monitor shifting views on the appropriate role of Buddhism and the Sangha in Myanmar, looking out for any conservative reaction that could compromise intercommunal relations, social stability, human rights or future democratic development.

Executive Summary

The Myanmar Sangha – the country’s community of Buddhist monks and nuns – has played a mostly marginal role in the anti-regime resistance following the military’s February 2021 coup d’état. The National Unity Government (NUG) and its revolutionary allies are pursuing an agenda that is secular and that embraces armed resistance, both features that the monastic community find hard to reconcile with Buddhist teachings. The Sangha’s step to the side is a break from the past, when monks played a significant and vocal role at moments of political crisis. It has also made room for youth – particularly young women – to take on prominent roles in the struggle, an important shift from a tradition of elderly, male leadership drawn predominantly from the Burman Buddhist majority. While Myanmar’s future path is unclear, these trends are likely to be important as they could herald social upheaval, intercommunal tensions or a conservative counterreaction.

In previous periods of political struggle in Myanmar – the independence movement of the early 20th century, political protests in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and the 2007 Saffron Revolution – monks were highly visible, despite widespread religious and cultural unease with monastic involvement in political affairs. But since the coup, the Sangha has been divided. Some prominent monks have curried favour with the regime by explicitly supporting it and some others have been vociferous opponents. Most of the monastic community, however, has avoided taking any public position, wary of supporting a secular-minded resistance movement engaged in armed struggle, fearful of the consequences of openly challenging the regime and also reluctant to incur the wrath of public opinion by supporting it.

As a result, it seems unlikely that the Sangha will emerge as a strong voice either for or against the junta. Critically, the monks, scholars, resistance fighters and activists interviewed by Crisis Group agreed that even should the monastic community unite behind a particular position, it would be unlikely to influence the conflict’s outcome. Despite his performative religiosity, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing is very unlikely to be convinced by any monk, however venerable, to eschew violence or set a radically different political direction. Nor is the general likely to frame the crisis in religious or Buddhist nationalist terms, as some fear he might do in an attempt to win over the Sangha. It is furthermore improbable that any monastic figure could speak to or influence the myriad anti-coup forces.

Nevertheless, the sidelining of monastic figures, long a key part of Myanmar’s social and political fabric, could have important implications. It represents a bold departure from generations of male Burman Buddhist gerontocratic leadership in the country. Myanmar’s political trajectory is uncertain, and there is no end to the crisis in sight. But this moment is likely to be formative in the country’s political life, irrespective of whether the resistance succeeds in its aim of ousting the regime. Whatever dispensation follows the current tragic phase of Myanmar’s history, the shifting moral and religious value systems in the country, and any backlash, will likely have a major impact on intercommunal relations, politics and conflict.

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A Silent Sangha? Buddhist Monks in Post-coup Myanmar

I. Introduction

The Sangha, as Buddhist monks and nuns are collectively known in Myanmar, has often been at the forefront of the country's political struggles, from the independence movement of the early 20th century to the Saffron Revolution of 2007 and more recent Buddhist nationalist movements.¹ It has played this role despite popular sentiment that Buddhist monks should avoid engaging in worldly affairs or commenting on politics. The Sangha consists of around 600,000 individuals.²

This history engendered, on one hand, an expectation among many Myanmar people and outside observers that the monastic community would respond resolutely to the February 2021 coup and the subsequent violence. Many thought monks' participation would be a vital – possibly determinative – contribution to the anti-military resistance movement. On the other hand, it created a fear that many monks, particularly the more hardline elements, might strongly back the regime. In the event, however, the Sangha is split on the crisis. With a few exceptions, monks have been less prominent at the front lines of protests or in leadership roles in the resistance movement than many expected.

This report analyses Buddhist monks' low profile in post-coup politics, as compared with other segments of society, and assesses the reasons for it, including the impact of COVID-19 on monasteries and the differing views of the regime and resistance movements on the proper boundaries between religion and state, as well as relevant gender dynamics. The report also considers the extent to which the limited involvement of monks in anti-coup activities has opened space for others – including women and youth – and allowed for a more secular and pluralistic politics to emerge among those opposing the regime than might have otherwise been possible.

¹ For detailed analysis, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°290, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, 5 September 2017. For Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar since the military takeover, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°s 166, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, 16 February 2021; 167, *The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, 1 April 2021; 168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, 28 June 2021; 170, *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar*, 20 October 2021; 171, *Resisting the Resistance: Myanmar's Pro-military Pyusawhti Militias*, 6 April 2022; 173, *Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace*, 4 August 2022; and 174, *Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution*, 16 February 2023; as well as Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 314, *Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, 18 May 2021; 319, *Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts*, 12 January 2022; 325, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 1 June 2022; and 328, *Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's Resistance*, 20 December 2022. See also Richard Horsey, "A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 February 2021; "One Year On from the Myanmar Coup", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 January 2022; and "Myanmar: Post-Coup Crisis and a Flawed Election", Crisis Group Commentary, 31 January 2023.

² This total includes more than 282,000 ordained monks, 253,000 novices and 60,000 nuns, according to data published by the Sangha Council in 2016.

The report draws on detailed interviews with monks active in the resistance and those sitting on the sidelines; nuns (most of whom have kept a low profile); pro-regime and nationalist figures; former monks; leaders of anti-coup armed militias; and religious activists, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. The research also draws on Crisis Group analysis of social media posts by key influencers, including some of the strongest monastic voices – both those expressing sympathy for the military regime and those opposing the coup – as well as comments made in online discussion of those posts. In addition, Crisis Group reviewed relevant academic and policy research, as well as articles about the Sangha in the Myanmar media.

II. The Sangha's Role in Past Political Movements

A. Pre-colonial Symbiosis

Historically, Myanmar's kings viewed the Sangha as a troublesome but necessary counterpart to their reign. Kings were responsible for protecting the health and well-being of the Sangha, which for its part tried to ensure – through private words of guidance and, sometimes, careful intervention in secular affairs – that the Myanmar populace had a skilful and meritorious ruler.³

The arrival of the British in 1824 prompted King Mindon, the penultimate Myanmar king, to adopt a protectionist approach to Buddhism. He convened the Fifth Buddhist Synod in 1871 with the aim of ensuring that Buddha's teachings were recorded correctly and in a standardised way. His action led to expanded access to Burmese translations of the Buddhist canon (the Tipitaka).⁴

In 1885, when the British defeated Myanmar's last king, Thibaw, and took full control of the country, the increased accessibility of Buddhist texts empowered the laity to take up religious responsibilities that would previously have been the monarch's prerogative. These responsibilities included protection of the Sangha, which came to be associated with safeguarding access to Buddhist teachings for all – not just the monastic community or royal class.⁵ The independence movement was built on this foundation.

B. The Independence Movement

The British authorities' decision to leave religious affairs in the hands of those it had colonised was a double-edged sword. The colonial withdrawal of traditional state subsidies for monasteries alongside significant disruption to village economies, another key source of donations, compounded the monasteries' struggles to finance their daily activities. Colonial rule threatened to undermine the religious and social service functions of monasteries, prompting Myanmar society to rally in the Sangha's support and triggering a Buddhist revival. The laity created a plethora of associations aimed at providing for the Sangha's needs, along with a mass religious propagation and reform movement.⁶

The revival laid the groundwork for organisations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) to play a key part in agitating for independence. The role of the Sangha itself in the independence movement was more circumspect. Some monks were very active, in collaboration with groups such as the YMBA. A prominent example is Ashin Ottama, who argued that British rule prevented the country's Buddhists from reaching enlightenment and thus that securing independence was a

³ See, for example, Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies and Civil Society* (Honolulu, 2010), p. 24.

⁴ The synod did not involve monks from other countries and is not generally recognised outside Myanmar as an official Theravada council. For in-depth discussion of these developments, see Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu, 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

religious obligation.⁷ He was imprisoned many times, becoming a hero for the movement. But such monastic activism did not sit well with the population at large, and many Sangha leaders and other senior Buddhist clergy spoke out against monks' participation in politics on doctrinal grounds. Some members of the YMBA likewise advocated, albeit unsuccessfully, for the organisation to focus solely on religious matters.⁸

C. *Post-independence Activism and the Saffron Revolution*

Monastic political activism continued after independence, during Ne Win's socialist one-party rule as well as the period of military dictatorship from 1988 to 2010. Monks resisted the government's attempts to control and register them in 1965; joined students demonstrating against the government's failure to hold a public funeral for former UN Secretary-General Thant in 1974; participated in nationwide pro-democracy rallies in 1988; and led a series of protests from 1990 to 1991 that spread from Mandalay across the country – including a symbolic withdrawal of spiritual services from the military – that the regime violently suppressed.⁹

The most high-profile monastic political action after independence was the 2007 demonstrations, commonly known as the Saffron Revolution.¹⁰ What had started as protests led by veteran political activists in response to the military government's removal of fuel price subsidies morphed into a broad-based monastic movement decrying the socio-economic hardships that monasteries and the general public were facing.¹¹ When the military responded with unprecedented violence, beating protesting monks and raiding monasteries, senior members of the Sangha invoked a religious boycott, as they had in 1990.¹² Monks deployed sacred symbols with powerful effect throughout the unrest, with the aim of undermining the military authorities' legitimacy. For example, when an estimated 10,000 monks marched through Mandalay in October 2007, they chanted the Metta Sutta – a discourse that emphasises sustaining Buddhist “loving kindness” (*metta*) and compassion, consciously drawing a contrast to the military's actions.¹³

⁷ Matthew J. Walton, “Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought”, PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2012, p. 119.

⁸ Maung Maung, *Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920-1940* (New Delhi, 1980), p. 13.

⁹ Walton, “Politics in the Moral Universe”, op. cit.; Bertil Lintner, “The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma”, Human Rights Watch, 22 September 2009; and Bruce Matthews, “Buddhism under a Military Regime”, *Asian Survey*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1993). The withdrawal of spiritual services (*pattam nikkujjana kamma* in Pali) is the ultimate moral rebuke by the Sangha. Rarely invoked, it is signified by monks turning their alms bowls upside down. See Richard Horsey, “The Recent Events in Burma/Myanmar: Domestic and International Implications”, in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds.), *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar* (Canberra, 2008).

¹⁰ Named analogously with the “colour revolutions” in post-Soviet Eurasia in the early 2000s, and to reference the saffron hue of monks' robes in most Theravada Buddhist countries. Monks in Myanmar, however, wear maroon rather than saffron robes.

¹¹ For a contemporaneous analysis, see Horsey, “The Recent Events in Burma/Myanmar”, op. cit.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See, for example, “Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma”, Human Rights Watch, 6 December 2007; and “Monk leaders call for third Sangha boycott”, *The Irrawaddy*, 25 August 2009.

III. Shifting State-Sangha Relations

A. Relations Following the Saffron Revolution

The junta responded to the Sangha's role in the Saffron Revolution by expanding the powers of the state-backed Sangha Council.¹⁴ The committee, which oversees and regulates the Buddhist clergy, was formed in 1980 as part of an effort to consolidate the military's control of the monastic community. In 2007, the Sangha Council went beyond its existing role of enforcing monastic discipline by issuing a prohibition on monks' participation in non-religious activities.¹⁵ The ban served to constrain the Sangha, giving the military a way to have dissident monks disrobed, in order to interrogate and imprison them.¹⁶ Because of such actions, members of the Sangha and the wider public question the council's independence, as well as the legitimacy of its authority, given that it strays into politics.

Among the broader Buddhist population, the 70-monk council is generally respected for its scholarship but much less commonly seen as active at the community level. After 2007, many younger activist monks established themselves as pro-democracy voices, often from exile, providing a stark contrast to the Sangha Council's conservative pronouncements. Though many Myanmar Buddhists question the appropriateness of monks' engagement in worldly matters, for doctrinal reasons, the expectation that the monastic community should ensure the propagation of the Buddha's teachings can be used to justify civic action.¹⁷

The junta's credibility suffered a further blow in 2008, when Cyclone Nargis struck the coast of Myanmar, killing at least 138,000 people. Many people in Myanmar, including some members of the military, believed the storm was some sort of karmic retribution for the violence committed against monks the year before.¹⁸ More concretely, it clearly demonstrated the military government's weak institutional capabilities, which made its relief efforts slow, ineffective and non-transparent.¹⁹ Local lay groups, including Buddhist associations, rallied under the leadership of monastic figures such as Sitagu Sayadaw, bringing aid and relief to affected populations.²⁰ In a public sermon in Yangon in 2008, Sitagu Sayadaw discussed the merit of "volunteer social work" (in Burmese, *parahita*), saying:

¹⁴ Formally known as the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, and often by its Burmese acronym, MaHaNa.

¹⁵ Sangha Council Directive No. 93, 24 September 2007. Reproduced in *New Light of Myanmar*, 25 September 2007.

¹⁶ Monks are normally disrobed either of their own volition, or by order of monastic authorities, if they have committed a serious violation of the monastic code. They may then be subjected to normal criminal justice procedures. While monks may be arrested, detained and interrogated without being disrobed, officials would normally treat them with great respect; disrobing allows them to be treated in the same way as any other detainee.

¹⁷ See, for example, Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York, 1970), p. 393.

¹⁸ See, for example, "Winds of change", *Newsweek*, 10 May 2008.

¹⁹ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°161, *Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations*, 20 October 2008.

²⁰ See, for example, "Monks succeed in cyclone relief as junta falters", *The New York Times*, 31 May 2008.

Meditating in a room with the doors shut won't help the [cyclone] victims suffering over there. But most Burmese who traditionally believe in Theravada don't appreciate the need for compassionate action. That is why I am talking about it to people every day. It is essential to make social merit stronger.²¹

This emphasis on the meritoriousness of *parahita* was a natural continuation of the forces set in motion after the Saffron Revolution. Regime efforts to quiet the monks' political voice pushed them to develop alternative spaces in which they could exert influence and then to allow lay men and women to these activities, in order to cultivate public acceptance thereof. The growth of *parahita* work gave monks a more prominent role in what would normally be a key function of the secular state – social service provision and disaster relief. It also undermined the Sangha Council, because people in Myanmar came to understand that monastic influence stemmed at least in part from monks' willingness and ability to advocate on their behalf, something that the council is structurally unable to do.

B. *The Buddhist Nationalist Movement*

In 2011, a small group of monks and laypeople appropriated a set of numerological symbols popularised by a booklet published in 1997 under the title 969.²² Led by energetic monks including Ashin Wirathu and Ashin Wimala, the movement was particularly vocal in its insistence that Buddhism was under threat from pernicious internal and external forces. The movement's dire warnings combined with a simple message to the faithful to "buy Buddhist" (that is, make purchases from Buddhist-owned businesses) resonated strongly and spread across the country.²³

In 2013, the 969 movement was in effect banned by the Sangha Council, not because of the anti-Muslim violence that its inflammatory rhetoric had helped trigger, but on the more prosaic doctrinal grounds of its unauthorised use of Buddhist symbolism.²⁴ As a result, it morphed into a new and more powerful incarnation, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, widely known by its Burmese acronym, MaBaTha, which continued the 969 movement's ideology and promoted it far more widely across the country.²⁵

MaBaTha's rank-and-file members tended to believe that the organisation existed in part to help clarify proper moral practice in a changing society at a time when Myanmar was opening up to the world after decades of isolation under military rule.²⁶

²¹ Kyaw Zwa Moe, "Putting compassion into action", *The Irrawaddy*, July 2008.

²² The number 969 is numerological shorthand for the special attributes of Buddha and his teachings and is a riposte to the number 786, a folk Islam representation of the *basmala* ("In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful") long used by Muslims in Myanmar and elsewhere to identify halal restaurants and Muslim-owned shops. See Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, op. cit., Section III.A.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. For analysis, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013.

²⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, op. cit.

²⁶ Melyn McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas': Risk and Freedom in Myanmar's Contemporary Buddhist Revival Movement", PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2020, p. 46.

They focused less on the religious actions of individuals and more on shaping the culture as a whole – both its underlying values and its role in promoting suitable behaviour.²⁷ As Melyn McKay writes:

Given that this collective morality is believed to be a precondition for stable democratic governance, members often see MaBaTha's efforts as enabling the expansion of democratic rights. Moreover, they believe MaBaTha's work in this regard is essential to managing the fractious and conflictual nature of party politics. Unity, in their view, was a prerequisite to democracy, not a product of it.²⁸

The semi-civilian government of President Thein Sein (2011-2016) did little to rein in MaBaTha, but the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) administration, which took power in April 2016, was more suspicious of it. The NLD's concerns related mainly to MaBaTha's perceived support for the military-established Union Solidarity and Development Party, the NLD's main electoral opponent, and some MaBaTha members' criticisms of Aung San Suu Kyi in the run-up to the 2015 elections.²⁹ In July 2016, the Sangha Council, under pressure from the administration's Ministry of Religious Affairs, issued a statement declaring that MaBaTha was not a recognised Buddhist organisation – a rebuke but not an outlawing of the organisation.³⁰

In May 2017, the Sangha Council went further, banning MaBaTha's name and logo. The edict used language that hinted at similarities between MaBaTha and other illegal Buddhist factions whose proponents have been prosecuted and imprisoned.³¹ Many of the group's most popular figures challenged the ban, arguing that the Council had overstepped its authority, which is limited to overseeing members of the Sangha, not laypersons who are also part of the group.³² Others claimed that the group was not engaged in inappropriate party politics, but rather the promotion of Buddhism and Buddhist values.³³ Yet the Council was unmoved, as were its counterparts at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, making the political climate increasingly inhospitable for MaBaTha.³⁴

C. *Political Efforts to Constrain MaBaTha*

By the end of 2019, many MaBaTha members were demoralised, both by the political pressure they now faced from the NLD administration and by international perceptions that the organisation was extremist.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 46. See also Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 187.

²⁹ See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°157, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, 6 August 2019, Section IV.D.

³⁰ See Matthew Walton and Aung Tun, "What the State Sangha Committee actually said about MaBaTha", Tea Circle (blog), 29 July 2016.

³¹ "The monk in blue robes", *Frontier Myanmar*, 25 April 2016.

³² McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas", op. cit., p. 18.

³³ Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, op. cit., Section III.D.

³⁴ MaBaTha's leader, Ashin Thiloka, attempted to sidestep the ban on a technicality. Rebranded as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, the group continued some of its activities.

In 2018, Facebook deplatformed MaBaTha, removing the pages of its most popular members and its national, state and township-level committees.³⁵ It was very difficult thereafter for the organisation to mobilise people in support of its various activities, which significantly dampened its members' enthusiasm. Seeing the crowds at events dwindle took away the sense many members had that MaBaTha was an unstoppable movement. The feeling of being part of a righteous and preordained struggle slipped away, as did many of the less committed supporters.³⁶

At the same time, sensing the changing political winds, local government bureaucrats had stopped granting applications for MaBaTha events (whether in the group's name or not) or dragged their feet in reviewing them.³⁷ As Crisis Group has previously pointed out, MaBaTha members – especially women – felt their participation in the group magnified their impact. Raising money to build a school on their own might take months, whereas doing it as a MaBaTha activity could mobilise significant funds in a matter of hours.³⁸ With this amplifying power diminished, and as the sense of invincibility it created evaporated as well, many members found other means of personal and spiritual improvement, filling their free time instead with coursework, meditation retreats or hobbies.³⁹

All the while, civil society activists were working assiduously to counter MaBaTha ideology both online and offline. Increasingly, support for MaBaTha and its ideology came to be associated with something old and out of touch that signified lack of education. Young activists, in particular, argued that monks should limit their focus to religion, while urging the NLD administration to adopt an explicitly secular approach to government.⁴⁰

These various pressures meant that by the time the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, MaBaTha was largely inactive and many of its local organising networks had dispersed.⁴¹ Those within pro-NLD circles had by then also fully embraced the rhetoric – and likely even the notion – that monastic engagement in civic spaces was inappropriate, as had been the NLD's rallying cry against MaBaTha for years.⁴² Given that monks were free to demonstrate their commitment to social engagement by meeting community needs via non-political *parahita* activities, it was difficult for anyone to argue that greater monastic political engagement was necessary to advocate for the needs of the Buddhist polity.

Successive Myanmar governments since 1962, both military and nominally civilian, have made efforts to constrain and control the powerful Sangha, in an extension of pre-colonial patterns of state-Sangha relations. As a result of the more recent dynamics discussed above, however, by the time of the 2021 coup both the legal and moral basis for monastic leadership on civic issues had been called into question.

³⁵ See Lee Short, "Facebook tries to silence Myanmar's hateful monks", *Asia Times*, 5 July 2018.

³⁶ McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas", *op. cit.*, p. 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, *op. cit.*

³⁹ McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas", *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁴⁰ M. Sophia Newman, "Punks vs. monks: Rockers speak out against genocide in Myanmar", *Religion Dispatches*, 8 August 2013.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, former monk living in the U.S., August 2022.

IV. Monastic Reactions to the Military Coup

A. *Involvement in Initial Protests and Subsequent Organised Violence*

In the first days and weeks following the coup, various monasteries released statements, many of which were rather insipid, taking no clear stance against the coup.⁴³ Curiously, however, some of these statements were released despite the most senior members of these institutions making seemingly contradictory remarks.⁴⁴ The discrepancy highlights the deep divisions within the Sangha that persist today. Nevertheless, three main groups can be identified.

1. Those backing the regime

The first group are mostly older, more seasoned monks who have either made their support for the military clear through participation in the regime's public events and trips, or who have implied their support by focusing their anti-violence messaging on resistance groups, while ignoring the military's own atrocities. One prominent example is Sitagu Sayadaw, whose high-profile travel to Russia alongside Min Aung Hlaing for a pagoda dedication ceremony in July 2022 was particularly controversial.⁴⁵ Another is Ashin Chekinda, who also participated in the Russia trip and whom the regime's Ministry of Religious Affairs promoted to acting rector of the International Theravada Buddhist University in Yangon in 2022.⁴⁶ Myanmar commentators have made two key arguments about these senior monks:

- Both have risen to the seniority they now enjoy in part due to their warm relations with key military figures. Chekinda is noted for having been promoted to the rector's position ahead of other, more learned monks. Sitagu's appointment as head of the Shwegyin sect is less surprising given his standing, but still noteworthy in its timing.
- Though supporters of the post-coup resistance tend to despise Sitagu, they nevertheless recognise that he faces a dilemma. His numerous social development projects, including education and health-care facilities, would likely suffer were he to oppose the junta, as would the communities that depend on them. But the scale of these problems may be overstated. Such is the national (and international) reputation of these facilities, including their ability to attract other high-quality leaders, that the military authorities might well replace Sitagu as figurehead while leaving the services intact. It is therefore difficult to say for sure whether Sitagu's support for the regime is driven by the risk to his projects, self-preservation or his ideological leanings.

⁴³ See "Faith and the coup: An interview with Susan Hayward and Iselin Frydenlund on the religious dimensions of the situation in Myanmar", *Religion & Diplomacy*, 3 March 2021.

⁴⁴ See Fanzura Banu and Kevin Zhang, "Split within the Sangha: Divergent responses towards the Myanmar coup", *New Mandala*, 28 May 2021.

⁴⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace*, op. cit. For a detailed opinion piece on Sitagu's embrace of the military, see Swe Win, "In Myanmar, a once revered monk falls from the people's grace", *Myanmar Now*, 20 January 2023.

⁴⁶ "As Myanmar burns, junta pours money into 'world's tallest' Buddha image", *The Irrawaddy*, 27 June 2022.

There is a surprising degree of overlap between the monks who are implicitly or explicitly backing the regime and those who participated in the Saffron Revolution. In interviews, monks emphasised that those who took part in the 2007 demonstrations faced enormous challenges, including targeted attacks on their monasteries and in some cases imprisonment. Some of these monks are disgruntled by what they perceive as the NLD administration's failure to recognise and reward their sacrifices. A common refrain of MaBaTha monks, for example, is that they supported the democratic transition only to be later "betrayed" by Aung San Suu Kyi and her government, when they clamped down on MaBaTha and made moves toward greater secularism, and again when they elevated a small number of Muslim advisers, notably Ko Ni.⁴⁷ This sense of grievance was deliberately nurtured by the military over many years, translating into vocal support for the coup among a few of these monks, and weakening the enthusiasm of others for actively opposing it.

The impact of the small group of pro-regime monks should not be overstated. The rise and fall of nationalist groups such as MaBaTha over recent years served to identify – and dent the reputations of – the most charismatic military-aligned monks. Pro-NLD and anti-military forces have had several years to chip away at the public's respect for these monks, and the results are particularly visible among the younger generations most engaged in anti-coup organising.

Though pro-regime monks may attempt to prevent younger monks in their monasteries from participating in anti-regime activities, the pandemic led a significant number of young monks to move from urban locations to rural monasteries closer to their homes just prior to the coup. The influx disrupted traditional student-teacher relations and meant that abbots had less influence over newly arrived young monks.⁴⁸

In rural areas in particular, monasteries and monks remain highly dependent on the local population for support. Monks must tread especially carefully when they have settled in areas away from their birthplaces. In such situations, they lack strong kinship ties in the area and must be cautious not to provoke a local backlash. Anti-coup organisers have also been highly successful at using social shaming as a means of punishing those with pro-military or even insufficiently pro-revolution tendencies. Monks have accordingly felt pressure to align with community sentiments, which are predominantly anti-regime. They also need to fear being targeted by anti-coup armed actors – who have allegedly killed several monks accused of supporting the regime.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Pro-coup and anti-coup monks both inside Myanmar and overseas confirmed that these views are widespread among the Sangha. Crisis Group interviews, August 2022. See also McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas", *op. cit.*, p. 100. Ko Ni was assassinated in 2017, amid rising anti-Muslim hate speech and violence. Three former military officers and a fourth person were subsequently convicted for their roles in the killing. See Crisis Group Statement, "Myanmar Assassination Shows Urgent Need for Unity against Hate Crimes", 29 January 2017; Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, *op. cit.*, Section III.D; and "Ko Ni: Gunman gets death penalty in murder of Myanmar lawyer", BBC News, 15 February 2019.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Mandalay-based Sangha Council member, September 2022.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, pro-coup and anti-coup monks in Myanmar, August-September 2022. For accounts of alleged attacks on pro-regime monks, see "Monk killed in junta custody after rival monk shot to death", *Myanmar Now*, 7 April 2022; and "Shanni organisations protest murder of prominent monk", *Myanmar Now*, 12 September 2022. The regime claimed in November 2021 that resistance forces had killed twelve monks by that time, providing a list of names but no de-

2. Those avoiding taking sides

Many monks have remained neutral since the coup, for several reasons. Most importantly, monks who speak out against the junta are likely to face reprisals. These are often violent, as in cases where troops have burned down or demolished monasteries, leaving the nearby faithful without a vital social asset.⁵⁰ As many monks living around the country hail from Myanmar's central Dry Zone, where the fighting is intense, loss of their monastery would also likely mean return to an active conflict area, at a time when many are desperately trying to escape.

Many monks have also refrained from supporting the resistance out of disenchantment with the NLD administration for the reasons discussed above. Though the administration did participate in numerous pagoda-building campaigns and other religious events, and Aung San Suu Kyi was involved in donations and other ceremonial activities, the government also spoke about human rights, ethno-religious diversity and secularism in ways that alienated these monks (notwithstanding the fact that many minorities felt the government downplayed their concerns, and in the case of the Rohingya, was complicit in their plight).⁵¹

The prominence of armed resistance activities also puts monks in a difficult position when it comes to expressing open support for the revolution. Unlike monks who have made doctrinal arguments in support of violence in certain circumstances, many feel they cannot support such acts, even in response to greater brutality.⁵² As one monk told Crisis Group:

For me, there are two personalities in one. I am a citizen of the country and a monk. As a citizen, I have to stand up for my rights, for democracy, for freedom, but there are also principles that monks have to follow. Revolution at this point means taking sides, which means killing. This is a power struggle. Everyone supporting either side is complicit in killing.⁵³

As this same monk noted, members of the monastic community sometimes refer to the objective of Buddhism – seeking to achieve nirvana by breaking from the cycle of rebirths – as “revolutionary”, which may lead them to describe the Sangha as supportive of revolutionary action. But this conception of revolution usually translates into a focus on material suffering such as acute poverty, hunger and physical danger, rather than any strong belief in liberation from a particular ruler or preference for one form of government over another.⁵⁴

tailed evidence. See “Terrorist groups kill 12 monks without any reasons”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 17 November 2021. The regime and its allied militias have also allegedly killed monks. See, for example, “Monk killed in junta custody after rival monk shot to death”, *op. cit.*; and “Two children and a monk among six people killed in teashop shooting”, *Myanmar Now*, 9 November 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, monk supporting the anti-coup movement from abroad, August 2022.

⁵¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, *op. cit.*; and Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°151, *Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, 28 August 2018.

⁵² For detailed discussion of doctrinal arguments of “virtuous defence” in support of violence, see Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka”, *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 16, no.1 (2015), pp. 1-27; and McKay, “For Women There are Two Nirvanas”, *op. cit.*, p. 110-112.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, monk supporting the anti-coup movement from abroad, August 2022.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

In past revolutionary moments, particularly the Saffron Revolution, frustration at widespread economic hardship made it easy to mobilise around the notion that the military – the sole political authority at the time – was the cause of suffering and thus vigorous action to depose them was consistent with Buddhist doctrine.⁵⁵ Some monastic figures involved in the Saffron Revolution mobilised explicitly in support of democracy, but their stance then was more a rejection of a specific harmful political authority than an embrace of a particular form of government.

The situation is much less clear-cut today. The ousted NLD government, though hamstrung by the 2008 constitution's limitations on civilian governance, did wield meaningful power. Prior to the pandemic, people across the country were beginning to enjoy a better quality of life and feel much greater hope for the future, even if the improvements were not evenly distributed. As a result, prior to the coup, suffering was seen as having multiple causes, including a global outbreak of disease, rather than stemming from a single incompetent, abusive authority.

The way the crisis has developed has also informed some monks' reluctance to pick a side. Despite broad social rejection of the coup, the junta did not change course, instead deploying extreme violence to consolidate its control. The initial, largely peaceful protest movement thus morphed into armed rebellion. The regime has unleashed brutal repression against both the civil and the armed resistance but failed to quash either; neither is the resistance able to meaningfully challenge the regime's control of the state apparatus. In this dynamic, many monks feel that the chaos now facing communities is the result of a battle for political control in which both sides are willing to kill to achieve their goals. They conclude that they have less space to engage politically than on previous occasions such as the Saffron Revolution.⁵⁶ This view is based not on any perception of moral equivalence of the two sides, but rather on the fact that neither offers a clear pathway out of the crisis.

Even those monks who might otherwise lean toward supporting the revolution may worry that doing so contributes to a decline in monastic authority in the country. They are keenly aware that the parallel authority, the National Unity Government (NUG), relies for its armed resistance on the support and sanctuary provided by predominantly Christian ethnic armed groups, which many monks expect will push any future democratic government to adopt a more explicitly secular approach.⁵⁷

3. Those openly supporting the revolution

Some monks are openly supporting the revolution, but they acknowledge that their numbers are far smaller than those who took part in the Saffron Revolution. Their engagement takes many forms, and they face several constraints.

Pre-existing groups such as the Peace Sangha Union – a progressive monastic network – are mostly made up of younger monks, although they may have a few members who participated in protests in 1988 or 2007. These groups have taken part in

⁵⁵ That is, that such political action was akin to the eschatological efforts of freeing oneself from suffering and creating conditions conducive for others to do so, which are central to Buddhism. See also Paul Fuller, "Sitagu Sayadaw and justifiable evils in Buddhism", *New Mandala*, 13 November 2017.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, former monk, August 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

demonstrations, though usually not organising or leading them; they have also supported local defence forces and other anti-regime groups, for example by using their religious status to help transport medicines and other supplies.

There have also been more organic monastic reactions to the coup. For example, 200 to 300 monks joined the daily marches in Mandalay that started on 8 February 2021 and lasted for several months, likely the most active monastic participation in protests anywhere in the country.⁵⁸ Such activity can create tensions between junior monks and their abbots, who may forbid them from taking to the streets, for various reasons. Some senior monks support the military takeover because they feel the NLD failed to protect Buddhism – and that the military regime will.⁵⁹ Other abbots act out of concern for the likely consequences, such as the military shuttering monasteries if any of their monks visibly resist the coup. Concerned abbots warned junior monks and novices that if they joined protests, they would have to leave the monastery.⁶⁰ The senior monks' fears are not unfounded, with some 60 monks thought to have been detained since the coup, some of whom remain incarcerated. Many others have been forcibly disrobed, and still others have had to go on the run.⁶¹

Such monastic support for the revolution, while welcomed by the vast majority of the country who oppose the coup, has done little to sway those who support the military or who are still sitting on the fence. These people typically downplay the importance of monastic opposition to the coup, arguing that monks should not participate in politics, or cast pro-resistance monks as young and not truly committed to their practice – their participation in resistance activities being proof of their unfitness for the religious life.⁶²

On the morning of the coup, the military detained several monks who were prominent supporters of the democratic transition and of Aung San Suu Kyi personally, including Myawaddy Sayadaw; others had to flee to avoid apprehension.⁶³ The coup itself so outraged the public that these arrests had limited additional impact. Subsequently, after citizens took up arms against the coup, the junta promoted the idea that armed resistance groups were a threat to Buddhism due to their attacks on monks.⁶⁴

While the regime has attempted to portray itself as defending Buddhism, it has not fully embraced a Buddhist nationalist narrative nor sought to elevate MaBaTha. It took more than six months following the coup for the regime to release firebrand monk Ashin Wirathu, who had been imprisoned under the NLD administration (see Section IV.D below). For their part, resistance forces, including the NUG and local defence groups, have declined to frame the political crisis in religious terms, focusing instead on the junta's illegal overthrow of the elected government and subsequent

⁵⁸ See, for example, “‘A flower among thorns’: Mandalay’s daily Mya Taung marches frustrate security forces”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 24 March 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Craig C. Lewis, “Report: Nearly 60 Buddhist monks detained in Myanmar since military seized power”, *Buddhist Door*, 29 August 2022.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

⁶³ See “Three Saffron Revolution monks among those detained in February 1 raids”, *Myanmar Now*, 3 February 2021. Myawaddy Sayadaw was released in an amnesty in August 2021. See “We have to speak up for the sake of the country”, says freed monk”, Radio Free Asia, 3 August 2021.

⁶⁴ For details, see fn 49 above.

violence. Nor have resistance forces encouraged their monastic supporters to publicly attack the junta's religious authority.⁶⁵

B. *Gender Dynamics and Monastic Participation*

The limited role of monks in the post-coup resistance has allowed greater space for new types of leaders to emerge. According to monks that Crisis Group spoke to, the most notable change for them compared with the leadership of the 1988 and 2007 movements is the presence of women, particularly young women.⁶⁶

Relatedly, anti-regime protests have often been two-pronged, challenging both the military's rule as well as traditional gender norms. The prominent *htamein* (sarong) protest involved communities hanging women's sarongs above the street to act as a de facto barricade, relying on the superstition among many soldiers and policemen that women's undergarments and skirts weaken men's charismatic power (*hpoun*).⁶⁷ In some places, women and their allies scrawled military leader Min Aung Hlaing's initials in red marker on menstrual pads before sticking them to walls and telegraph poles. Colourful bras and panties have been affixed to images of military men and their favourite monks.⁶⁸

Not all women have benefited from increased space. According to Crisis Group interviews, the position of nuns has, on the contrary, been further constrained since the coup. Groups like MaBaTha tested the traditional boundaries between religion and state and the limits of monastic activism on social and political issues. By doing so, they created an opening for nuns to take a more visible and active role in both religious and secular public life, but the coup seems to have closed it. The lower status of nuns in Myanmar society means their participation in protests is considered less notable than a monk's might be and leaves them less likely to be protected from serious harm.

Nuns also face more serious material constraints, as their subordinate position to monks means that, even in normal times, they receive fewer donations and may struggle to survive.⁶⁹ In the current poor economic conditions, donors with less money to spread around are even more likely to give to monks before nuns. Any time spent away from collecting alms, or on activities that much needed donors might disapprove of, would thus constitute a risk to nuns' financial survival.

The erosion of nuns' status has been exacerbated by the loss of opportunities for them to study abroad, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. For many Myanmar nuns, study-

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, NUG member, October 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, pro-coup and anti-coup monks in Myanmar, August-September 2022. For detailed discussion of this issue, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Breaking Gender and Age Hierarchies amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution*, op. cit.

⁶⁷ See "With *htamein* barricades and flags, protesters launch a revolution within a revolution", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 March 2021. *Hpoun* is the accumulation of merit from past lives, which manifests as charismatic power in men. Many men in Myanmar insist that women's clothes be washed separately from their own and dried on the ground.

⁶⁸ See "Photo exhibition: 'Women out on the streets for a new Burma'", SEA Junction. The exhibition was held from 24 January to 11 February 2022.

⁶⁹ Hiroko Kawanami, *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 159–191.

ing in Sri Lanka provided a unique opportunity to develop a more politically aware and engaged stance, largely from being exposed to the different monastic culture there and especially the political enfranchisement of monks and nuns there (members of the Myanmar Sangha are constitutionally barred from voting or standing for office).⁷⁰ With such exchange programs likely to be limited for the time being due to Myanmar's economic crisis, and lack of functional coordination between religious educational institutions and government ministries, Myanmar nuns are likely to become further isolated.

Such isolation may in turn lead to greater conservatism. Nuns have often argued that advanced education was the best way to improve their status as a community.⁷¹ Facing more difficult living conditions and denied opportunities to study abroad, many will take refuge in Buddhist educational facilities. Their connection will deepen to the abbots and monasteries best able to sustain their facilities in the post-coup period – which means, predominantly, those who have better relations with the regime.

C. The Role of the Sangha Council

Even before the coup, the Sangha Council's legitimacy was weak. Most monks consider ultimate monastic authority to lie in the hands of their monastery's chief abbot, not the council. Council decisions are mostly about abstract doctrinal matters or involve disciplining monks who drink, gamble or otherwise misbehave. Indeed, many anti-coup monks believe the council has rarely, if ever, embodied an explicit political or social agenda.⁷² As one activist from Mandalay told Crisis Group:

It is even rumoured that many if not most Sangha Council statements addressing things like religious conflicts are actually drafted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, using the council's name to disguise the political origins of these statements.⁷³

As a result, the Sangha Council as an institution is highly disconnected from the public. People may revere particular monks who sit on the council, but they do so in spite of, not because of, their council role. Even in the monastic community, the council is not regarded as wielding supreme leadership, but rather as an administrative body.⁷⁴

The fact that, as mentioned above, the Sangha Council is in practice largely subordinate to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, means that it has limited capability to work outside the ministry's confines. Following the coup, the Council shuttered its subnational offices, which remained closed for one year – longer than many other official agencies' workplaces. Interviewees told Crisis Group that as monastic pressure mounted to reopen the offices to hold religious exams, it became clear that some subnational members of the Council were being replaced with junta loyalists.

⁷⁰ See McKay, "For Women There are Two Nirvanas", op. cit., p. 125.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, nun in Sagaing Region, August 2022.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Myanmar interfaith activist, September 2022.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, pro-coup and anti-coup monks in Myanmar, August-September 2022.

Indeed, the regime has attempted to use the Sangha Council to keep the monastic community under its control. One monk who sits on the Council told Crisis Group that:

The Sangha Council's members are under the control of the military, and in return the military provides a lot of financial support. Most members do not want to go against the military for these and other reasons, even though they do not like the coup. Some monks, especially anti-coup monks, criticised the Sangha Council a lot, and some of their followers were angry at the way Council members acted with military leaders, but everyone should understand the Council's position. The members are very old and the military controls everything they do.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the regime's attempts to use the Sangha Council to boost its legitimacy have mostly failed. First, the Council initially put up more resistance to the coup than expected by suspending many activities for months, for example declining to schedule monastic exams.⁷⁶ Secondly, the national mood has shifted dramatically since the coup, with resistance leaders and others openly condemning the Council as an instrument of the regime. Far more so than under previous periods of military rule, Council members are aware that public perception that a monk is biased toward the military can seriously undermine his following.⁷⁷

The upshot is that whatever legitimacy the Sangha Council once had – even as a purely administrative body – appears to have mostly evaporated. There is little appetite anywhere in Myanmar for an institution overseen by the military to issue moral edicts about lay or even monastic life. In a sign of the institution's waning significance, the military's rumoured detention of Bhamo Sayadaw, the Sangha Council chair, after the coup elicited little outrage amid many other pressing issues.⁷⁸

D. *The Standpoint of MaBaTha*

Many observers had taken it for granted that Buddhist nationalist monks such as Wirathu would rally to support the junta. But members of MaBaTha and similar groups have not come together as a unified force supporting either side. In the early days following the coup, many observers had assumed that Wirathu – detained by the NLD government in November 2020 on sedition and defamation charges – would be released from prison imminently.⁷⁹ He was discharged only in September 2021, eight months after the coup.⁸⁰ Shortly before his release, he had posted a scathing video message to VK – the Russian social media platform to which many military and nationalist figures in Myanmar migrated after being kicked off Facebook – complaining that he was in poor health and had been passed over for release despite “prosti-

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mandalay-based Sangha Council member, September 2022.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, monk supporting the anti-coup movement from abroad, August 2022.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

⁷⁸ Though it is unclear if Bhamo Sayadaw was ever actually detained, rumours swirled on social media following a tense but non-violent standoff between the monk and Min Aung Hlaing. The monk had made himself available to the senior general only on a limited basis following the coup.

⁷⁹ See “Anti-Muslim Myanmar monk released from prison, charges dropped”, Associated Press, 7 September 2021.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

tutes” having been included in earlier pardons.⁸¹ His release was reportedly tied to several conditions, including the confiscation of his property and a ban on giving public sermons or speaking to the media.⁸²

Some observers – who had long assumed that MaBaTha was the military’s creation, or at least that Wirathu and other MaBaTha monks were its puppets – were confused by these developments.⁸³ Yet high-ranking members of the group (such as Insein Ywama Sayadaw) have had to thread the same needle as more moderate monks (such as Oxford Sayadaw), declining to comment directly on the coup to avoid provoking the regime, and instead issuing vague statements urging restraint in a nod to public opinion.⁸⁴

Overall, the NLD administration’s weakening of MaBaTha made it difficult for the body to regroup after the coup, and it now faces virtual institutional collapse. Some lower-level MaBaTha monks have broken with the organisation’s stance to speak out against the coup and participate in local protests. Given the highly decentralised nature of MaBaTha, their action was probably unavoidable. But the organisation’s enervation also stems from the fact that, for many members, its purpose was to protect the place of Buddhism in an increasingly liberal and pluralistic society. The coup has overturned that set of assumptions, especially as regards liberalisation, and thus the fears sustaining the group’s Buddhist chauvinist and anti-NLD rhetoric have largely dissipated, replaced with anger at the military’s brutality and incompetence.⁸⁵

While MaBaTha is largely spent as a political force, its demise has weakened the Sangha’s political influence more broadly. The strongly negative NLD and civil society reaction to its political activism created fertile ground for more secular thinking following the coup, particularly among the new generation of youth activists and armed resistance leaders. As one member of an armed resistance group told Crisis Group:

Our leaders are pressuring the NUG not to work with the Sangha because of the bad image MaBaTha has given it. If you want to move to a federal union, you cannot leverage religion.⁸⁶

E. *Small-scale Armed Movements*

Wirathu’s release from prison, which has been surprisingly uneventful, illustrates how complicated regime-Sangha relations are, and why the regime is hesitant to leverage Buddhist nationalism for its own ends. Though the controversial monk has been raising a mild ruckus in his immediate surroundings – calling a mosque, for exam-

⁸¹ See “Junta drops charges against hate-preaching monk Wirathu”, *Myanmar Now*, 6 September 2021.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ For an account of one such person’s views (an anti-MaBaTha abbot), see Carlos Sardina Galache, *Burmese Labyrinth* (London, 2020), p. 61. See also “Hard-line Buddhist monks threaten Burma’s hopes for democracy”, *The Washington Post*, 5 November 2015; and tweet by Myanmar Now, @Myanmar_Now_Eng, 11:30 pm, 13 August 2021.

⁸⁴ Many of the original statements were posted by social media accounts that have now been deleted. Crisis Group has copies on file.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, former monk, August 2022. See also the remarks by Melyn McKay at the GNET-CENS conference in Singapore, in 2021.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, people’s defence force leader from upper Myanmar, August 2022.

ple, to complain about the call to prayer – his impact has been muted.⁸⁷ Calamitous prognostications that his release might exacerbate the conflict by introducing sectarian dimensions have proven exaggerated, with only a few vague rumblings thus far. In his first public sermon, in Bago Region in October 2022, where he was joined by ultra-nationalist Michael Kyaw Myint, who heads the Yeomanry Development Party, he touched on his typical Buddhist nationalist and anti-Muslim themes, but the event attracted only 25 attendees.⁸⁸

There are reports of underground Buddhist nationalist mobilisation in Mandalay and in parts of Sagaing Region – including Kanbalu township, where two Islamic trainee scholars were killed by alleged pro-regime forces – fuelling fears that regime-aligned nationalist forces may be attempting to reorient the conflict more along religious lines.⁸⁹

There have also been rumours that Wirathu is the organising force behind a group of former MaBaTha monks, none of whom are especially well loved, who captured headlines for carrying arms and appearing publicly at military ceremonies.⁹⁰ They reportedly call themselves the *pandita* (scholar) group. This group should not be seen as evidence of Buddhist nationalist engagement in the conflict on the junta's behalf. There is no proof that Wirathu is meaningfully involved, and his authority among Buddhist nationalists has often been overstated, as has his closeness to the military (see Section IV.D above).

It is in any case hard to see how monks such as these would be beneficial to pro-regime forces, beyond dispensing occasional religious teachings and services. Rather than a carefully engineered plot to bolster pro-regime forces, the involvement of monks in pro-regime militias is in most cases more likely to be an example of the broader phenomenon that monks in these areas tend to provide pastoral services to whichever local armed group – pro- or anti-regime – happens to be most prominent in their community.

Yet monks' ideological perspectives undoubtedly influence their spiritual guidance, and thus their politics may have some impact on the conflict. For example, a member of an anti-regime defence force told Crisis Group that one of the reasons some of these groups had stopped short of fully backing the NUG was that the monks they sought advice from were not very pro-NUG.⁹¹

Wirathu's release and his subsequent comportsment suggest that all the main protagonists see his personal influence, and the charismatic power of monks more generally, as an unstable force that they are wary of unleashing. The military does not

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Myanmar interfaith activist, September 2022.

⁸⁸ See "Ultranationalist Buddhist monk Wirathu re-emerges in post-coup Burma", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 28 October 2022. At the time of the coup, Michael Kyaw Myint was imprisoned awaiting trial for sedition and has a record of anti-Muslim hate speech and provocative actions; his charges were withdrawn by the junta in May 2021. See "Myanmar junta scraps charges against pro-military, ultranationalist party bosses", *The Irrawaddy*, 20 May 2021.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* See also "Monk militia: The Buddhist clergy backing Myanmar's junta", *Reuters*, 8 December 2022.

⁹⁰ See, for example, "Hardline monks tied to pro-junta militias in Myanmar's Sagaing region", *Radio Free Asia*, 14 March 2022; and "Nationalist monks recruit pro-Myanmar Regime militias in Sagaing", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 June 2022.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, people's defence force leader from upper Myanmar, August 2022.

trust Wirathu, seeing him as a populist organiser more than a pro-regime ideologue.⁹² The regime gave him an award in January 2023 to mark the 75th anniversary of independence, but he was one among thousands of recipients from across the political spectrum, including ministers from the deposed NLD administration.⁹³ The award should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the monk or an attempt at rapprochement with him. Although Wirathu is known for taking a strong pro-military stance in recent years, he was also imprisoned by the former military regime in 2003 for his inflammatory sermons.⁹⁴ To a certain extent, the military's doubts about Wirathu extend to MaBaTha, some of whose members were prominent participants in the Saffron Revolution (see Section III.A above).

⁹² See Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar junta releases infamous ultranationalist monk from prison", *The Diplomat*, 7 September 2021.

⁹³ See "Myanmar junta marks Independence Day with show of force", Agence France-Presse, 4 January 2023; and "Citizens blamed for blackouts; regime forces opponents to accept awards; and more", *The Irrawaddy*, 14 January 2023.

⁹⁴ See "Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma", *The Guardian*, 18 April 2013.

V. The Silence of the Monks

In the first days and weeks after the coup, the limited monastic participation in protests was in part explained by the COVID-19 situation. Given the typically crowded living quarters and multi-generational nature of large urban monasteries, many monks left these institutions and returned to rural areas where they were less likely to contract the illness.

At the time of the military takeover, many monks were thus far away from the main demonstrations in the cities, spread out in towns and villages in the countryside. In these circumstances, communication and mobilisation were also difficult. Some monks did try to return to the cities to join the protests, but COVID-19 prevention measures and post-coup travel restrictions made it difficult to do so.⁹⁵ Others, particularly a new generation of young political and social activists, were left to take the vanguard in the demonstrations.

Yet the continued low-profile monastic participation in anti-regime movements, and the political dynamics that have emerged since the coup, suggest that other factors were more significant than COVID-19, particularly the actions and orientation of the resistance and the regime.

A. *The Secular Orientation of the NLD and NUG*

An important dynamic at play is the NUG's reliance on ethnic armed groups for sanctuary and military support. Most NUG members – and members of the resistance's legislative branch, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw – are Buddhist, though the movement also includes some Christians.⁹⁶ But the four ethnic armed groups working most closely with the NUG – the Chin National Front, Kachin Independence Organisation, Karen National Union and Karenni National Progressive Party – have predominantly Christian leaderships and constituencies.⁹⁷ Given a history of discrimination against non-Buddhists by successive post-independence governments, these groups have traditionally pushed strongly for secularism and the separation of religion and state.⁹⁸ While extending support to the NUG, they have demanded that any future federal union under restored civilian rule (their declared goal) adhere to a secular agenda.⁹⁹

In addition to the ethnic armed groups, many of the activists sustaining the NUG's political struggle are against any close cooperation with the Sangha, because they are opposed to religious influence on the federal framework they are developing.¹⁰⁰ Most resistance fighters, who tend to be young, also reject the idea of such cooperation. They feel strongly that monks should keep out of politics both in the current struggle

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, pro-coup and anti-coup monks in Myanmar, August–September 2022.

⁹⁶ Acting President Duwa Lashi La and Prime Minister Mahn Win Khaing Than are also both Christian.

⁹⁷ Although the Karen (Kayin) population is majority Buddhist, the Karen National Union armed group has a Christian leadership and much of the population in its areas of control is Christian or animist.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Myanmar interfaith activist, September 2022.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group and NUG representatives, September–October 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, people's defence force leader from upper Myanmar, August 2022.

and in the development of a future federal union. One armed resistance group leader told Crisis Group:

The Buddhist majority always influences political matters, and it often decreases trust among different religious groups. We also do not like their influence in our revolution, and we do not trust non-violence as an effective way to tackle the regime.¹⁰¹

To the latter point, armed resistance group members worry that the Sangha's discomfort with violence may undermine their fighters' morale. A senior monk in Mandalay told Crisis Group that the revolution "is now about killing one another, but monks have to follow the four *parajika* [inviolable rules]".¹⁰² Monks are loath to break these rules – one of which prohibits intentionally causing the death of a person – because doing so entails expulsion from the monastic order for life. Thus, monks may provide aid to internally displaced people or others who are suffering as a result of supporting the revolution, and monks may even support the idea of revolution. But because the current revolution is based on armed resistance, many monks feel that they cannot participate, or must become laypersons to do so.¹⁰³ Another monk from Sagaing Region put it more succinctly: "If a monk holds a weapon, they automatically become a layman."¹⁰⁴

A further reason for the lack of monastic participation is that the NLD and Myanmar civil society – two key protagonists in the anti-coup movement – were central to undermining MaBaTha, on the basis that monks should not be involved in political issues. Encouraging monks to become involved in the current crisis would thus represent a U-turn that these groups are reluctant to make, as it would undo their years-long efforts to limit monastic influence and authority to religious issues. Indeed, resistance leaders feel that involving monastic figures in conversations about the future of the democratic, federal state is far beyond monks' and nuns' utility and remit.¹⁰⁵

The role of monks is somewhat more prominent in the Myanmar Buddhist diaspora, in which more traditional views of religion tend to prevail. People in the diaspora are also more removed from the revolution, engaged predominantly in lobbying, solidarity efforts and fundraising (for the NUG, as well as for armed resistance groups).¹⁰⁶ The NUG has regular contact with these diaspora communities, including monks, in what is the most direct form of NUG-Sangha collaboration.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Mandalay-based Sangha Council member, September 2022.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, monk from Sagaing Region, August 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, people's defence force leader from upper Myanmar, August 2022.

¹⁰⁶ For more detail on resistance funding mechanisms, see Crisis Group Report, *Crowdfunding a War*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, NUG member, October 2022.

B. *The Regime's Religious Outreach*

Since before the February 2021 coup, Min Aung Hlaing has made energetic efforts to “harvest” merit, in an attempt to boost his power (and, subsequently, improve the odds of the coup’s success).¹⁰⁸ For example, for the last five years, he has been building a marble Buddha image 25m high, reputedly the largest of its kind in the world, and state media regularly reports on his inspection visits to the site.¹⁰⁹ After the coup, he and other high-ranking military figures also met with countless monks, made numerous donations and visited many pagodas in attempts to give the regime and its coup an air of moral legitimacy.¹¹⁰

Members of the Sangha who spoke to Crisis Group noted that such religious ceremonies should not necessarily be interpreted as signals of monastic support for the coup. They pointed out that monks have been put in a very difficult situation since the military takeover, trying to navigate harsh political realities in a system where the material and legal support of those who wield power (on matters such as land use and other permits) is essential for monastic survival.¹¹¹

While these displays may have strengthened Min Aung Hlaing’s resolve or belief in his moral fitness to rule, most Myanmar people did not interpret them in that way. His actions have been widely criticised as blatant attempts to use religion to bolster his grip on power. NLD and activist efforts in recent years to combat MaBaTha and its foray into party politics laid the groundwork for this response, heightening the public’s sensitivity to overt politicisation of Buddhism and making people less likely to be swayed.

Many observers expected that Min Aung Hlaing would move quickly to embrace Buddhist nationalism following the coup, because he was known to be close to several prominent nationalist monks and agitators, and because the movement had long been opposed to Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD.¹¹² So far, he has not done so, for reasons discussed in Section IV.D above.

¹⁰⁸ Merit “harvesting” refers to a deliberate and conscious effort to accumulate merit through the performance of good deeds and religious activities, analogous to harvesting crops.

¹⁰⁹ See “State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee Sayadaws hear report about construction of world’s biggest Bhumi Phassa Mudra sitting marble Buddha Image, give advice”, website of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, 25 March 2021; “Carving of Maravijaya Buddha Image which would be the highest stone sculptured Buddha image in the world and plans to build it explained”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 13 November 2021; “SAC Chairman Prime Minister inspects progress in building Maravijaya Buddha Image”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 27 June 2022; and “Maravijaya Buddha image combined with parts 1, 2 and 3 conveyed onto jewelled throne successfully”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 1 February 2023.

¹¹⁰ These meetings and visits featured prominently in state media, including the daily newspapers *Myanma Alin* (in Burmese) and the *Global New Light of Myanmar* (in English).

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, pro-coup and anti-coup monks in Myanmar, August–September 2022.

¹¹² In addition to his close relations with Sitagu Sayadaw (see Section IV.A.1 above), Min Aung Hlaing released “Bullet” Hla Shwe and Michael Kyaw Myint, both ultra-nationalist agitators, in the weeks after the coup. See Strangio, “Myanmar junta releases infamous ultranationalist monk from prison”, *op. cit.*

C. *The Current State of Play*

Unlike the NLD in the past, the NUG has not attempted to contest the junta on religious grounds. Rather, the NUG and other resistance forces across the country have embraced a more pluralistic, inclusive approach – which is necessarily also more secular. This stance has prevented them from promoting their popular legitimacy by performing a protector of Buddhism (*dhamma raja*) role. In this way, they have broken with a central tenet of Myanmar political leadership since before independence, a historic shift. But even as the NUG has promoted a multi-ethnic, inclusive agenda, it has faced little popular criticism for neglecting the majority religion – in contrast to the NLD, which mostly stuck to a Burman Buddhist-centric approach.¹¹³

Part of the reason is that young people in the anti-regime resistance movement have developed an aversion to organised Buddhism and Theravada cultural norms more generally. Several popular meme accounts have emerged with names such as Anti-Theravada Movement and Anti-Theravada Memes that take aim at Buddhist institutions and traditions, depicting them as old-fashioned and ill-suited for shepherding society through the modern era and the post-coup crisis.¹¹⁴ Such tropes began to gain traction following the coup.

With monks less prominent in the resistance, other leaders, including youth and especially young women, have been able to step into leadership roles (see Section IV.B above). There is a widely held impression – expressed by every monastic figure that Crisis Group spoke to for this report – that Buddhism is being left behind.¹¹⁵ Moreover, there is a pervasive fear that the future of Buddhism and the Sangha in Myanmar looks bleak, whatever the outcome of the current crisis.¹¹⁶ As this very fear underpinned the rise of Buddhist nationalist sentiment across the country in the 2010s, it needs to be closely monitored.¹¹⁷

But these fears of Buddhism in decline may well be unfounded or at least premature. The widespread social and economic destruction wrought by the coup means that many vulnerable people, especially youth, will have to rely on monasteries – the only social institution in Myanmar still able to support them. So long as monasteries continue to accept children for study, the population of monks is likely to remain robust. Similarly, communities in rural areas, who have suffered significant economic hardships from the pandemic and the coup, will remain reliant on monastic aid.

Monastic figures have long been a central part of Myanmar's social and political life. Any change in this pattern – for example, if the current secular shift becomes an enduring feature of the younger generation's views or is incorporated into a future politics – would likely foment rural-urban division and social strife, given that most rural Burmans adhere to a more traditional view of Buddhism's role in society. It would also risk a conservative backlash. The defining challenge of Myanmar's post-independence history has been to develop a more ethnically and religiously inclusive politics and promote the rights of ethno-religious minorities.

¹¹³ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, op. cit.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, the Anti-Theravada Memes and Anti-Theravada Movement Facebook pages.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Buddhist monks and nuns, August-October 2022.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ See Crisis Group Reports, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar* and *The Dark Side of Transition*, both op. cit.

A failure to craft a more inclusive agenda of this kind will keep Myanmar politics stuck in the narrow confines of Burman Buddhist nationalism, from which it has struggled to escape for decades, to the detriment of human rights, intercommunal relations and the nation's long-term peace and prosperity. Yet if backlash is to be avoided, powerful conservative Buddhist social forces and the Sangha itself cannot be alienated, either. Myanmar's political trajectory remains uncertain, but in almost any scenario, these issues will be of great importance.

VI. Future Developments and Recommendations

The coup and its aftermath have redefined the political and social role of Buddhism and monastic institutions. It is therefore important to monitor how moral and religious value systems continue to shift in Myanmar, particularly those that have historically affected social cohesion, human rights and democracy. It may be that the Myanmar equivalent of the Overton window – that is, the range of policies politically acceptable to the public at a given time – is shifting.¹¹⁸ Tracking that shift is important for understanding the trajectory of social and communal relations, conflict and politics in the country.

At the national level, the current low profile of the Sangha has led to a decentralisation of moral leadership, which can bring both benefits and risks. Though centralised institutional power, vested with religious significance, often acts as a constraint on political progress and can further sideline minority populations, loss of faith in these institutions creates a void that may be filled by something else – including charismatic figures who turn out to be demagogic movement leaders. Potential for such movements can be seen in the attention initially attracted by figures such as Wirathu or the lay agitator Michael Kyaw Myint after the 2011 opening of civic space, although their momentum waned under the NLD administration (see Section IV.E above).

When in power, the NLD stuck close to the priorities of its Burman Buddhist political base, rather than attempting to use its political capital to promote a more pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multifaith framework for the country. Any future leaders able to formulate a compelling framework of this latter kind will likely benefit by expanding their political and voter base beyond traditional ethno-political boundaries. They may, however, face strong challenges from Burman Buddhist populist forces. When and if democratic politics will be restored in Myanmar is uncertain at this time. But should that happen, a future competition for power of this kind will have important implications for political stability, minority rights and armed conflict.

Foreign actors also need to calibrate their interactions with the monastic community at the local level. There, monks still play a hugely important religious and social role. Donors and partner organisations should continue to consult them and incorporate their views into project design and implementation. They must also keep in mind, however, that consultations at the moment may put the monastic community at risk of regime retaliation – and so should proceed with due care. International actors should also recognise that they themselves may have lost moral legitimacy in the eyes of those monastic figures and their lay supporters who sympathise with the resistance and see the UN, international NGOs and other agencies as having offered only muted criticism of the coup and subsequent violence, while continuing to work with the regime.

The Sangha's low profile in the current crisis looks set to continue, with any significant monastic leadership role appearing unlikely. Even more unlikely are Saffron Revolution-style protests. Although it is hard to see any developments that would

¹¹⁸ For discussion of the Overton window, see Maggie Astor, "How the politically unthinkable can become mainstream", *The New York Times*, 26 February 2019.

significantly raise the Sangha's profile, two possible triggers should be kept in mind. One would be a move by a political aspirant to follow the Sri Lanka model by offering voting rights to members of the Sangha or allowing them to run for political office. While Myanmar political and religious consensus has long been against such a move, it would be highly significant should the possibility be raised. The other trigger would be any move to offer full ordination for women. This eventuality also seems unlikely. But should the idea gain traction and become a progressive cause celebre, it could act as a wedge with uncertain implications for the next generation of aspiring political leaders, who would be caught between alienating the politically engaged young generation that has emerged since the coup and the religiously conservative Buddhist population.

VII. Conclusion

Myanmar's Buddhist monks have played a limited role in the post-coup protest and resistance movement, unlike during previous periods of political struggle, such as the 2007 Saffron Revolution. There are many reasons why monks have largely stayed away from involvement, the most important being that the NUG-led resistance does not support their participation. Its largely secular agenda is driven by the legacy of Buddhist nationalist support for the military and by the fact that the NUG – with the encouragement of civil society and its non-Buddhist ethnic allies – is pursuing a multi-ethnic, multi-religious vision for the country. Monastic communities themselves are divided, with some resisting the coup, but many others reluctant to support a secular political movement that has embraced violent resistance and unwilling to risk the consequences of openly challenging the regime.

The Sangha's low political profile has allowed space for youth, and particularly young women, to take on leadership roles. The longer-term challenge for Myanmar is to develop a more ethnically and religiously inclusive politics and promote the rights of ethno-religious minorities. The trajectory of the Myanmar crisis is unclear, but the secular turn among young people in the resistance movement, if it endures, could help national politics to escape the decades-old confines of Burman Buddhist nationalism. At the same time, it could also alienate conservative social forces and the Sangha itself and risk a backlash. Whatever lies on the other side of the current crisis, balancing these tensions will be essential for Myanmar to achieve long-term peace and prosperity.

Bangkok/Brussels, 10 March 2023

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



Appendix B: Glossary of Buddhist Terminology

<i>Parahita</i>	Volunteer social welfare activities, seen as meritorious
Sangha	The community of Buddhist monks
Sangha Council	The state-backed body responsible for enforcing monastic discipline, also known by its Burmese acronym MaHaNa
Sayadaw	The presiding abbot of a monastery
MaBaTha	Burmese acronym for the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, a Buddhist nationalist organisation
MaHaNa	See Sangha Council
<i>Metta</i>	Loving kindness
Theravada	One of the two main branches of Buddhism, widely practiced in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere (the other branch being Mahayana, practiced in Nepal, China, Japan and elsewhere)
Tipitaka	The three Pali-language books forming the Buddhist canon

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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