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Irasec

179 Thanon Witthayu, Lumphini, Pathum Wan,
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Tel (+66) 026 70 42 91 - Fax (+66) 026 70 42 90

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by Arnaud Dubus

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E-mail: administration@irasec.com

Web site: <http://www.irasec.com>

Tel.: +66 (0) 2 670 42 91-2

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Introduction

In the first decade of the twenty-first century Thailand entered a deep and prolonged transition crisis that questions not only most state institutions, but the kingdom's whole sociopolitical framework. The passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927–2016) after a seventy-year-long reign, and its expected emotional shock, is only one of the most tangible elements of this painful and ongoing process. A world mostly built on late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century foundations is struggling to cope with new expectations from a more informed, more politically aware, and less submissive population. Fossilized institutions, which have repeatedly postponed dealing with the challenges of adaptation to change, have their backs to the wall.

One of these major institutions is Thailand's *sangha* or monastic community, with around 290,000 monks, and until recently, mainly divided into the Mahanikai and the royally-founded and sponsored Thammayut orders.¹ Since the Sangha Act of 1902 centralized and reorganized the monastic community along bureaucratic lines, the *sangha* hierarchy has mirrored that of the civil service; in a way, it has become an extension of the Thai state, and has largely lost touch with local communities. Monks ascend the ladder of the national religious hierarchy through a system of honorific titles (*samanasak*)

¹ *Sangha* in this book refers only to the main Thai *sangha*. There are two other Buddhist monastic communities, namely the Chinese and Vietnamese *sangha*, but they represent a tiny fraction of Thailand's total monastic population, which at the end of 2014 comprised 290,015 monks, excluding novices.

granted by political authorities rather than the former practice of ecclesiastic titles being awarded by local monastic communities, based on directly witnessed personal attributes and behavior.

Successive Sangha Acts in 1941 and 1962 (the latter amended in 1992 and 2016) did not fundamentally alter this centralized system, even if the Sangha Act of 1941 could appear on the surface as more “modern.”² Regionally diverse forms of Buddhism, with their use of local titles—such as *khrua* in northern Thailand—and local scripts for sacred texts, were marginalized by the reforms. These forceful centralization policies imposed on the *sangha* and, in parallel, on the civilian administration, met locally with stern resistance, particularly in the northeast, with what is known as the “Holy Men rebellions,” and in the north (see Box 3 on Khrua Srivichai). Once detached from their local communities, senior monks have sought to climb the state-sponsored hierarchy and receive honors and financial support—a competition hardly different from that of any bureaucratic or political organization.

Apart from the *sangha*’s leaders, who are often little known to the people, villagers have continued to revere and support local monks for their powers of meditation, divination abilities, mastery of magic rituals,³ or moral authority.

The weakness of the *sangha* could explain in part the recent flurry of scandals—with monks embroiled in sexual misconduct, leading luxurious lifestyles, conducting business ventures or even committing embezzlement—although this apparent increase in wrongdoing is largely due to the media’s active tracking and exposure of errant monks. Such transgressions are as old as Buddhism itself, of course, and allegedly the very reason the Buddha established monastic discipline or *vinaya*.⁴ The fragile state of the Thai *sangha* may explain why errant monks are not punished swiftly according to the monastic rules,

² Louis Gabaude, “Politique et religion en Thaïlande: dépendance et responsabilité,” *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest* 32, no. 1 (2001): 159.

³ Barend Jan Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Studies in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).

⁴ Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 130.

however. Many senior monks, trapped in a race for power and prestige, seem to have lost the moral authority and even the wisdom to manage the *sangha* and resolve disputes. The case of Phra Yantra (b. 1951) in 1995—a monk who had multiple sexual relationships, including with minors, was accused of rape, and of being a regular customer of brothels and night clubs—is perhaps the most telling example. The Supreme Sangha Council—the twenty-member council of highest-ranking elderly monks—did not take any measures against him. Instead it was the media’s coverage that resulted in government pressure on Yantra that made him quit the monkhood.⁵

The *sangha* has also been deeply affected by the sharpened divisions in Thai society since the rise to power in 2001 of businessman-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra (b. 1949). Extreme hierarchization within the *sangha* and its elders’ lack of accountability towards the mass of monks at the bottom of the ladder only served to aggravate this polarization.

The *sangha*’s politicization has also been exacerbated by the rising influence of Buddhist groups outside the official hierarchy, in particular, Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakaya. Although limited in influence, the ascetic group Santi Asoke, whose leader Bodhirak (b. 1934) was expelled from the *sangha* in 1989, has been active in the anti-Thaksin (Yellow Shirt) movement since the coup of 2006. (This was a complete reversal in attitude, as Santi Asoke had supported Thaksin up to the beginning of that year.) Far more influential has been the rise of the wealthy and politically connected Dhammakaya Temple, targeted by Yellow Shirt activists and conservative politicians and bureaucrats as well as activist monks such as Phra Buddha Isara (b. 1956) for its association with Thaksin, as well as its unconventional Buddhism.⁶ Criticism against the temple was at first doctrinal and disciplinary, but it has taken on clear political overtones. The rise of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is probably the most important

⁵ Interview, Louis Gabaude, July 2016.

⁶ Not to be confused with the Vija Dhammakaya Meditation Institute opened in 1982 in Ratchaburi province. Although it shares its origin with the Pathumthani Dhammakaya Temple, i.e. the Pak Nam Phasi Charoen temple in Thonburi, unlike the Pathumthani temple, the Institute has never been involved in controversy.

development in Thai Buddhism in the last three decades, and the temple's power is now such that, as we will see, accusations against it directly impinged on the nomination of the new supreme patriarch, the leader of the *sangha*, after 2013.

This book will also examine the ongoing campaign by a large number of monks and some Buddhist groups to make Buddhism the national religion of Thailand. This campaign is not new, but seems to have intensified and to have met with more success since the beginning of the transition crisis in 2005. The violence plaguing the Muslim-majority provinces closest to the border with Malaysia has provided new arguments to these conservative groups, who claim that Buddhism is under threat and needs special protection. Parallel to these claims, the growing irrelevance of a weakened *sangha* for Thai society is feeding anxiety among these religious conservatives who wish to see Buddhism redefined in narrower and more exclusivist terms, and its cumbersome links to the state strengthened even more.

Polarization and crisis in the twenty-first century

At the start of 2016, controversy erupted over the appointment of a new supreme patriarch, after the high-profile cremation of the last holder of the post, Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, the previous month. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who passed away in 2013 at the age of one hundred, had been appointed as supreme patriarch by King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 1989. The monk had been the king's mentor in October 1956 when the young monarch spent two weeks as a novice. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, then the abbot of the main royal temple in Bangkok Wat Bovornniwet, had taught King Bhumibol meditation techniques and improved his understanding of a religion the young king was not completely familiar with, having grown up in Switzerland. The royal linkage meant that the rituals of the nineteenth supreme patriarch's cremation in December 2015 were a grand affair: a procession went through most of old Bangkok, paralyzing the city's notoriously bad traffic.

A controversial succession

In the days following the cremation, the question of succession quickly became contentious. According to the Sangha Act of 1962, amended in 1992, the procedure was clear. The prime minister, "on the recommendation of the Supreme Sangha Council," had to present a name for royal approval. The law

adds that the name recommended to the prime minister by the Council must be the monk who has held the rank of *somdet phra racha khana*, the highest title of the *samanasak* system, for the longest period. But the text is ambiguous about the prime minister having the option to veto or even change the Council's recommended candidate. It was left as a matter of interpretation.⁷

In 2016, the choice was obvious: Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangalacharn (b. 1926), the ninety-one-year-old Mahanikai abbot of Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen in the Chao Phraya estuary, had been made *somdet phra racha khana* in 1995, which made him the longest holder of the title by far. Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangalacharn, popularly known as Somdet Chuang, had also been made chair of the Council in 2013, in effect, the acting supreme patriarch, because the supreme patriarch himself was too ill to perform his duties.

The supreme patriarch had not attended Council meetings since 1999, when he was hospitalized.⁸ In 2005 then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra decided to fill the void and appointed Somdet Phutthacharn, or Somdet Kiaw (1928–2013), the Mahanikai abbot of Wat Saket, as Council chair and acting supreme patriarch. The move had ruffled feathers among arch-royalists and bureaucrats, some of whom insinuated that the prime minister's unilateral action was potentially an infringement on the king's power. When Somdet Kiaw died in 2013, Somdet Chuang was appointed as his successor.

Following the 2013 amendment to the Sangha Act, the seventeen members of the Supreme Sangha Council (three were absent) unanimously nominated Somdet Chuang as supreme patriarch during a meeting on January 5, 2016. The meeting was held in secret because the *sangha* elders knew their decision would attract criticism. And indeed, when their choice was made public a week later, there was an immediate outcry among some Buddhist organizations, for reasons we will see below.

⁷ Interview, Phra Paisal Visalo, April 2016.

⁸ Duncan McCargo, "The Changing Politics of Thailand's Buddhist Order," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2012): 636.

Period	Ceremonial Name	Secular Name	Religious Name	Order
1945–1958	Somdet Phra Kromma Luang Vajirananavong	Mom Rajavongse Chuen Nobbavong	Sucitta	Thammayut
1960–1962	Somdet Phra Ariyongsagatanana	Plod Ketuthat	Kittisobhana	Mahanikai
1963–1965	Somdet Phra Ariyongsagatanana	Yoo Changsopha	Nanodayo	Mahanikai
1965–1971	Somdet Phra Ariyongsagatanana	Chuan Sirisom	Uttthayi	Thammayut
1972–1973	Somdet Phra Kromma Luang Vajirananavong	Pun Sukcharoen	Punnasiri	Mahanikai
1973–1988	Somdet Phra Ariyongsagatanana	Vasana Nilprapha	Vasana	Thammayut
1989–2013	Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara	Charoen Khotchawat	Suvaddhana	Thammayut
2017–	Somdet Phra Ariyongsak-hatayan	Amporn Prasatpong	Munivong	Thammayut

Between 1945–2017, Mahanikai monks held the *sangha*'s top position for a total of 9 years and Thammayut monks for a total of 48 years.

Box 1: Supreme Patriarchs since 1945

The process continued, however, and Somdet Chuang's name was forwarded to General Prayuth Chan-ocha (b. 1954), who had seized power in a coup in May 2014 and led the junta's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Exploiting the ambiguity of the Sangha Act, Prayuth as head of government did not forward the suggested name to the king. A few months later, in December 2016, the junta amended the Sangha Act, apparently to block Somdet Chuang's accession, as we will describe in chapter 2. After the amendment was passed, Prayuth submitted a list of five candidates for the supreme patriarch position to the new king Maha Vajiralongkorn (b. 1952). On February 7, 2017, the monarch appointed Phra Maha Munivong (b. 1927), the eighty-nine-year-old abbot of the Ratchabophit royal temple in Bangkok as the new leader of the *sangha*, ending a year-long controversy.

Prayuth was embarrassed by the Council's nomination of Somdet Chuang for a number of reasons that seem to testify to the polarization and weakening of the *sangha* in the last two decades. The fissures and fragility of the *sangha*

augur badly for a country undergoing a painful transition—all the more acute now that the long reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej has ended.

Fig. 1: Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangalacharn or Somdet Chuang, acting Supreme Patriarch until February 2017, featured on a banner, in front of a temple in Thonburi
Photo by Arnaud Dubus

The main reason why some Buddhist laypeople and monks opposed Somdet Chuang's appointment as supreme patriarch was his association with the controversial Wat Phra Dhammakaya, a sprawling monastery in Pathumthani, on the northern outskirts of Bangkok. In 1969, Somdet Chuang—then a simple abbot—had presided over the ordination of Phra Dhammachayo, who was to become the long-time abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya until 2016. Opponents of Somdet Chuang's appointment were anxious about the possibility that he would use his position as leader of the Buddhist clergy to protect Wat Phra Dhammakaya and give it the opportunity to realize its aim of taking control of Thai Buddhism.

But there were other factors in play. Wat Phra Dhammakaya was sympathetic to Thaksin—who had intervened in 2006 to stop a judicial process against Phra Dhammachayo—and to his Red Shirt supporters. Thaksin was overthrown in a coup in September 2006. In April and May 2010, his supporters, regrouped under an organization called the Union for Democracy and Against Dictatorship (UDD), popularly known as the Red Shirts, demonstrated in central Bangkok until they were crushed by military deployed under the orders of prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his deputy Suthep Thaugsuban, both of the Democrat Party. During the 2010 demonstrations, many monks were at the forefront of the Red Shirt protests, sometimes actively fighting against the security forces.

Since 2010, and through the May 2014 coup that overthrew the government led by Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thai politics has been defined by the struggle between the Red Shirts and their Yellow Shirt opponents, the latter being ardent supporters of the monarchy and belonging mostly to the traditional elite and middle-class conservatives, backed by the military and bureaucracy.

Thus, through his links to Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Somdet Chuang was considered by his critics to be also involved, even if indirectly, in the ongoing political tug-of-war between pro-and anti-Thaksin groups. No wonder then that one of the fiercest opponents to Somdet Chuang's appointment as supreme patriarch was a monk who had played a leading role in the Yellow Shirts' demonstrations against the Yingluck Shinawatra government: Phra Buddha Isara, the abbot of Wat Or Noi in Nakhon Pathom province.

As we will see in the section on Wat Phra Dhammakaya (see chapter 2), Phra Buddha Isara was not by any means the first critic of the Pathumthani temple. As early as 1987, Prawase Wasi, a doctor who often speaks on Buddhism and ethics, questioned Phra Dhammachayo's teachings about *nibbāna* (nirvana).⁹ The most authoritative voice against Phra Dhammachayo's

⁹ Rachele M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Money, Wealth and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 148.

doctrinal distortions came from respected monk Phra Prayudh Payutto, who wrote *The Dhammakaya Case* in 1988.¹⁰ These criticisms were mostly doctrinal. It was only after 2006 that the attacks against Wat Phra Dhammakaya began to be framed in political terms, partly because the earlier warnings by individual monks had not led to any action by the *sangha* hierarchy.

The overall leader of the November 2013 to May 2014 demonstrations, which led to the May 2014 coup, was Suthep Thaugsuban. From November 2013 to May 2014 Suthep led, with Phra Buddha Isara and a few others, a movement called the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). But Suthep himself preferred to call the tens of thousands gathered every day for months in central Bangkok as the "Great Mass of the People," perhaps trying to suggest that most of the population was behind him.

After the coup ended the protests, Suthep was ordained at Wat Thai Sai in the southern province of Surat Thani, and then spent the Buddhist Lent at Wat Suan Mokh in the same province—a temple founded in 1932 by respected monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Suthep, the politician-turned-monk, quickly used the temple as a stage to continue to mobilize his supporters through mass ordinations and calls for participation in meditation training (Box 2).¹¹

¹⁰ Phra Prayudh Payutto, กรณียธรรมภาษ [The Dhammakaya Case], online version, 1998: http://www.watnyanaves.net/uploads/File/books/pdf/the_dhammakaya_case_lesson_learned_for_buddhist_education_and_society_development_expanded_and_revised.pdf.

¹¹ Vichak Panich, พระสุเทพกับสวนโมกข์ ["Phra Suthep and Suan Mokh"], *Prachatai*, November 2, 2014.

Box 2 - Suthep Thaugsuban: Monkhood as a political stage

Suthep Thaugsuban spent almost a year as a monk at Suan Mokh temple, in Surat Thani province, accompanied by several other leaders of the 2013–14 demonstrations who were also ordained at the temple—including Issara Somchai, a former Democrat MP, and Uthai Yodmanee, former core leader of the Network of Students and People for Reform of Thailand. During his time at the temple, Suthep repeatedly called upon his “comrades of struggle” to come to listen to the *dhamma* or to study meditation at Suan Mokh. He also quickly took on a leadership role at Suan Mokh and organized several mass ordinations in cooperation with the provincial authorities.

This was a very rare instance of a monk inviting only a certain section of the population—PDRC supporters—to study Buddhism. His speeches as a monk were clearly political, for instance, calling on the Thai people to support Prayuth Chan-ocha’s military regime.¹² During my visit to Suan Mokh in March 2015, I found that while some fellow monks were clearly uncomfortable with Phra Suthep’s behavior, they felt unable to oppose his activities.

Phra Suthep’s politicking was all the more shocking because the founder of Suan Mokh, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, had established the temple in a forest as a place where people could retreat to study Buddhism in quiet contemplation, unlike the official world of Thai Buddhism at the time.

It is customary for Thai military personnel, politicians or technocrats who have been intensively involved in politics to spend a period in the monkhood, as was the case for former prime minister Thanom Kittikachorn (1963–73) in 1976, former cabinet secretary-general Bowornsak Uwanno in 2006, or former prime minister Surayud Chulanont (2006–08) in 2008. It is generally seen as a way to cleanse their image, particularly after having been involved in controversy.

But, none of them, before Suthep, had used their period in the monkhood for direct political gains: their goal was rather to erase and atone for their political past. Suthep’s monkhood has created a new kind of connection between monasticism and politics: it is not, this time, a monk who drifted into politics, like Phra Kittiwuttho or Phra Buddha Isara, but a politician who drifted into religion and used it as a new political platform.

¹² Jitsiree Thongnoi, “From Marches to Monkhood: Suthep’s Act of Faith,” *Bangkok Post*, January 25, 2015.

Fig. 2: The Suan Mokh temple founded by Buddhadasa Bhikku in 1932, and where the politician Suthep Thaugsuban stayed as a monk after the coup d' état of May 22, 2014

Photo by François May

The events described above illustrate how deeply Thai Buddhism is mired in day-to-day politics, to a degree probably not seen since the 1970s, when conservative forces of Thai society were arrayed against “the Left.”

Some monks consider that the emerging tensions may threaten the very structure of the *sangha*. Somdet Chuang belongs to the Mahanikai, the larger of the two orders of Thai Buddhism, the second one being the Thammayut—created by Prince Mongkut in 1833 when he was a monk, before becoming King Rama IV—which has continued to be closely linked with the royal family and the Thai state. Since the 1960s, except for a couple of years, the supreme patriarch has been from the minority Thammayut (see Box 1). Because the senior Thammayut monks tend to receive the most prestigious titles at an earlier

age than the Mahanikai monks, they stand a much greater chance than the latter to be eligible for the *sangha*'s highest post. When Somdet Chuang was nominated in January 2016, the Mahanikai congregation thought that their time had come, but the controversy over the appointment derailed the process and yet another Thammayut monk, Phra Maha Muniwong, became supreme patriarch in February 2017. Thus, despite affirmations of harmonious relationships between the two congregations by monks and analysts, there is brooding discontent among some Mahanikai monks who feel the order has been treated unfairly.¹³ Some Mahanikai monks are even invoking the possibility of nominating two supreme patriarchs—one for each sect—as is the practice in Cambodia.¹⁴

The ambivalence of Buddhist political activism

During the troubled 1970s, when Thailand was a strong ally of the United States in its war against communism in Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks became involved at both ends of the political spectrum. Phra Kittiwuttho, a well-known Mahanikai monk from the Mahathat royal temple in Bangkok, became a torch bearer of the ultra-rightist and ultra-royalist movement when he said in an interview in June 1976 that killing a communist was a “minor sin”: “It is like when you kill a fish to offer to a monk. There is certainly demerit in killing the fish, but then it is erased when the fish is placed in the monk alms’ bowl,” were Kittiwuttho’s exact words.¹⁵ He had also participated in at least one demonstration organized by the far-right group Nawaphon earlier in 1976, in direct violation of the laws prohibiting monks from engaging in political

¹³ Interview, Phra Paisal Visalo, April 2016.

¹⁴ Interview, Phra Metthee Dhammachan, May 2016.

¹⁵ Charles F. Keyes, “Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand,” in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Burma and Laos*, edited by Bardwell Smith (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1978), 159–60.

activities. But the Council took no action against him despite abundant criticism in the liberal press.¹⁶

State authorities had in fact been actively enrolling Buddhist monks since 1964 as instruments in their anti-communist struggle, mostly through the *thammathut* or “missionaries of the *dhamma*” program, under which volunteer monks were sent during the dry season, between February to June, to areas of northeastern Thailand, southern Thailand as well as Laos deemed to be threatened by communist infiltration. Their mission was to teach a “correct” version of Buddhism in order to counter communist propaganda, as well as to improve the material lives and moral standing of the populace.¹⁷ A similar program called *thammacharik* launched in 1965 aimed to protect northern hill-tribe groups from communism by propagating Buddhism and the national ideology built around the shibboleth Nation-Religion-King.

Some monks, however, were reluctant to collaborate with the central authorities in their anti-communist campaign. In the early 1950s, a prominent Mahanikai monk, Phra Phimontham, also known as At Asabho (1901–92), who had been close to former prime minister Pridi Banomyong (1900–83), was put in charge of writing an ecclesiastical decree to ban suspected communists from being ordained as Buddhist monks.¹⁸ As he appeared reluctant to do so and because of his liberal views, he was sidelined and blocked in his ascension in the hierarchy under pressure from military dictator Sarit Thanarat (1908–63).¹⁹ Phra Phimontham was eventually disrobed and jailed under false accusations of breaching the monastic code and for being a communist sympathizer. When the monks who had been forced by the police to make the accusations confessed that they had lied, a lengthy campaign was orchestrated by ultra-conservative Council elders and supporters of Thanom Kittikachorn’s military dictatorship to

¹⁶ Ibid., 151–52.

¹⁷ Gabaude, “Politique et religion en Thaïlande,” 161.

¹⁸ Louis Gabaude, *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* (Paris: Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1988), 428.

¹⁹ Interview, Chanchai Huadsri, Professor at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Khon Kaen, March 2016.

try to prevent his rehabilitation. It was only in 1975 that Phra Phimontham was allowed to be a monk again, and in 1981 that he was reinstated as the abbot of Wat Mahathat; in December 1985 he was awarded the title of *somdet* and became a member of the Supreme Sangha Council.²⁰ If there had been no slanderous campaign against him, Phra Phimontham should have become supreme patriarch in the 1980s.

Between 1973 and 1976, some progressive monks also joined peasant demonstrations to show their identification with the poor.²¹ In November 1974, young monks occupied the front rank of a Farmers Federation of Thailand rally. One of them said: “We take pity on the farmers who are the backbone of the country ... Being the children of farmers, we cannot turn our backs on them when they need help.”²² Some of these monks were punished by the Council, in strong contrast with the attitude adopted vis-à-vis Kittiwuttho.

There is a fundamental ambiguity in the relationship between the *sangha* and politics. In principle, monks are not supposed to be involved in politics at all. Indeed, Thai monks have never had the right to vote.²³ They have a status somehow similar to that of the royalty, a “superior” position where they are supposed to deal only with purely religious issues. As for the monarchy, however, this separation between the petty world of politics and the untainted world of spirituality is more appearance than reality. There are several reasons for this. First, since the end of the nineteenth century, and especially since the Sangha Act of 1902, the monastic community has become a tool of state power—first of the absolute monarchy, and then of whatever regime, elected civilian or military junta, is holding power.

²⁰ Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1990), 94–111.

²¹ Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: An Interpretation of Everyday Life* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1990), 121.

²² Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *A History of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189.

²³ Tomas Larsson, “Monkish Politics in Southeast Asia: Religious Disenfranchisement in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 40–82.

Fig. 3: Statue of Khruba Srivichai at Camadevi temple, in Lamphun
Photo by Arnaud Dubus

Box 3 - Khruba Srivichai, the “Lanna Saint” (1878–1935)

Some provincial monks resisted the centralization of the *sangha* and the uniformization of Buddhist scriptures and rituals initiated under the guidance of Prince Wachirayanwarorot (1859–1921), a half-brother of King Chulalongkorn who became a monk and later supreme patriarch. The most well-known of those who resisted the reforms is probably Khruba Srivichai, a revered monk born in 1878 in the northern province of Lamphun, who showed a dogged independence of mind and refused to bow to Bangkok’s diktats. *Khruba* is a title given to him by local villagers who were impressed by his strict adherence to Buddhist discipline and his generosity.

Despite Wachirayanwarorot’s order to only use central Thai writing for Buddhist scriptures, Khruba Srivichai continued to use the northern Thai *Lanna* script. He was also the only senior monk who did not bother to attend a meeting about the implementation of the 1902 Sangha Act. He continued to ordain monks, without the compulsory authorization from the Supreme Sangha Council in Bangkok as stipulated by the Act.²⁴ In December 1911, he even refused (or failed) to decorate his temple in honor of the coronation of Rama VI (King Vajiravudh).

But Khruba Srivichai’s indifference to the Bangkok-appointed civil and monastic hierarchy was most vividly demonstrated by his multiple initiatives to restore temples and build stupas and prayer halls (*sala*) across the northern region. His charisma was such that Khruba Srivichai was able to mobilize hundreds and sometimes even thousands of his followers for these public works, without bothering to contact civil or monastic authorities. His popularity and his independence of mind upset the *sangha* leaders as well as Chiang Mai’s head monk. The ecclesiastical authorities confined him on several

²⁴ Taylor M. Easum, “A Thorn in Bangkok’s Side: Khruba Sriwichai, Sacred Space and the Last Stand of the Pre-modern Chiang Mai State,” *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 2 (2013): 211–36; Katherine Bowie, “Of Buddhism and Militarism in Northern Thailand: Solving the Puzzle of the Saint Khrubaa Srivichai,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 711–32; Katherine Bowie, “The Saint with Indra’s Sword: Khrubaa Srivichai and Buddhist Millenarism in Northern Thailand,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014): 681–713.

occasions to the grounds of specific temples. He was also summoned twice to Bangkok, in 1919 and 1935, to face accusations of rebellion by senior royal monks.²⁵

After each summons, he was allowed to return to his native region, but under severe restrictions; finally, he was stripped of his ecclesiastical position and made a simple monk. His major achievement was to mobilize thousands of villagers and highland people in 1934 to build, mostly by hand, a 12-kilometer-long road between the city of Chiang Mai and the Phra That Doi Suthep temple at the top of Doi Suthep mountain, after the government said they had no budget for the project. This further irritated the Bangkok government, who forced Khruba Srivichai to stay at the Camadevi temple, in Lamphun. He died in 1938 at the age of 60. He is still hugely revered by the northern Thais, who call him the “Lanna Saint.”

Mongkut’s creation of the Thammayut congregation laid the foundations for such an evolution. Mongkut was dismayed by the state of Buddhism in Thailand, where many monks had poor knowledge of the scriptures and where religion and “superstitious” beliefs were inextricably mixed. Relying on a Mon tradition considered closer to the original Buddhism than the then-prevalent version of Buddhism imported from Ceylon, he wanted to establish a purer and more intellectual tradition under the royal family’s tutelage. One of his sons who became a monk and later supreme patriarch, Wachirayanwarorot, played a key role at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century to develop the Thammayut congregation and give it a central place in the Thai religious world. But the vast majority of Thai monks were not part of it: they belonged to the older congregation, which was named Mahanikai (or the “big congregation”) after the creation of the Thammayut *nikai*. Today, some 80 to 90 percent of monks still belong to the Mahanikai order.

As noted, the Sangha Act of 1902 created an ecclesiastical structure modeled on the civil service put into place by King Chulalongkorn at the end of the nineteenth century. The Supreme Sangha Council was set up to serve as an

²⁵ See Sid Perou, “Khruba Ba Sriwichai, the Engineer Monk,” video, 28:42, July 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqw2Gc9x2Ak> (accessed October 27, 2017).

advisory body to the king, but the monks who were members of this council had very limited powers: as Phra Paisal Visalo (b. 1957) says, the real head of the *sangha* was the king (see Box 4). Today the king remains, according to the constitution, the protector of religions while those controlling political power exert, *de facto*, the real control over the monastic community.

Despite subsequent legislation, this framework has not been fundamentally altered since then, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship between the state and the *sangha*. The holders of political power can use the *sangha* to legitimate their power, giving it a kind of moral aura based on religion. In exchange, the monks—or at least the senior monks—enjoy the material and financial support and protection of those in power, hence the *sangha*’s subservience vis-à-vis the state.

This symbiotic relationship was especially strong during the absolute monarchy as the king himself was, and still is, conceived as being a bodhisattaking or future Buddha, an idea that has been inscribed in the Thai mind by regular public presentations of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, the penultimate life of the Buddha.²⁶ The Siamese king had the duty to maintain the *sangha* and, thus, to punish deviant monks if the monastic hierarchy could not manage to do so itself. This role of surveillance perpetuated itself after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, but somehow civilian and military governments had a deficit of *barami*—moral authority or virtue—which weakened the association and their legitimacy to intervene in monks’ affairs. This deficit was linked in large part to the fact that they were not from a “pure bloodline,” unlike members of the reigning royal family. This is the reason why the “new men” who had taken over power were busy making merit at royal temples to “catch up with the monarchy in the area of virtue.”²⁷

²⁶ Patrick Jory, *Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).

²⁷ Christine Gray, “Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1986), 16.

**Box 4 - Interview with Phra Paisal Visalo,
abbot of Sukato Forest Monastery, in Chaiyaphum province, April 2016**

Is the absence of reforms one of the key issues in the crisis affecting the *sangha*?

Phra Paisal Visalo: The administrative regime of the monastic community of today is rooted in the rules edicted at the time of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). The current Sangha Act is not very different to the Sangha Act of 1902. The system of managing Buddhist monks is not very different from that under the absolute monarchy.

The civil administrative system was copied from the British colonial administration in India and Burma. Nowadays, nobody is using this system, but Thailand still uses it. There have been some changes, but this structure is archaic. Concerning the administration of the *sangha*, there have never been any changes. It is completely modeled on the civil service administration of one century ago, with ecclesiastical region chief, ecclesiastical provincial chief, and all these chiefs are regrouped in the Council of Elders, also called the Supreme Sangha Council. This structure is completely fossilized.

In the past, some monks, for instance Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, had a strong intellectual influence. There are still some today, like Phra Prayudh Payutto or yourself. So, how can we explain that there were no reforms of the monastic administration?

In the Thai monastic tradition, there is no space for self-reform. Be it in Sri Lanka, in Burma or in Thailand, *sangha* reform has always come from the king. The model is King Ashoka in around 300 AD. After the beginning of the Rattanakosin era in 1782 and the foundation of the current dynasty, the *Law of the Three Seals*, written by order of King Rama I, organized the monastic community.²⁸

The Thai monks who were reformers have always been at the periphery of the monastic administrative organizations. They reformed themselves and their monasteries, like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu or Santi Asoke. Under King Chulalongkorn, the *sangha* reform was organized by his younger brother, Prince Wachirayanwarorot. He was a monk, as well as a son of a king and a brother of a king. That is why he could lead such a reform.

²⁸ The *Law of the Three Seals* (in Thai: กฎหมายตราสามดวง) is an ensemble of legal texts from the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767).

Fig. 4: Phra Paisal Visalo, at Sukato Forest Temple in Chaiyapum province

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

Has the administrative centralization of the *sangha* created a gap between monks and common people?

The *sangha* has become too close to the state, to the central power. The Sangha Act of 1902 has somehow nationalized the monastic community. Before, monks, but also everything else was rooted locally. When Chulalongkorn became king, he nationalized and centralized everything: religion, language, food, police, and the tax system.

Monks became very close to the monarchy. At the time of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), the Supreme Sangha Council was created as a committee to advise the king in matters of religion, but the council had no power to make decisions; this power was held by the king. The real supreme patriarch is actually the king. Even after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the central state overtook the king's powers and the *sangha* was maintained under the strict control of the state.

For example, if the supreme patriarch wants to appoint some monks to important positions, the names must actually be proposed first by a minister. If the supreme patriarch wants to give the honor of *somdet* [the highest in the Thai monastic hierarchy], the name must be proposed by the minister of education. And as we can see now with the controversy on the aborted appointment of Somdet Chuang as supreme patriarch, the problem is the same for the highest position in the *sangha*.

In this close relationship between the *sangha* and the state, it is clear that the state is benefiting because it can legitimate its power in religious terms, but does the *sangha* also benefit from this relationship?

The *sangha* is benefiting from the financial support of the state. In Thailand, all monastery abbots receive a monthly salary from the state, as do ecclesiastical chiefs at all levels. Temples also receive funds for building and renovation expenses, as well as for the organization of schools within their compounds.

The monks at the top of the hierarchy are benefiting from the state in terms of prestige. They are delighted with their close links to power. For them it is a question of personal interest. In Thailand, prestige relies on connections, on networks. And connections mean power and money. The most senior monks, the *somdet phra racha khana*, are close to the prime minister. They can ask for favors, ask for such or such member of their family to be appointed as governor or a high position in the police.

Since King Vajiravudh or Rama VI, Thai national identity has had three pillars: nation, religion and king. Religion here means Buddhism. Do you think this religious pillar today has become fragile?

This ideology that you describe is a nationalist and monarchist one, which is rooted in Thailand. In the difficult transition that Thailand is experiencing, Buddhism could play the role of moral guide. But the country has become very polarized. All the institutions are fragilized. None of them can be seen as neutral. They are either “Red,” or “Yellow.” People who are accepted by both sides are very rare, because whoever we are, we will be classified as one side or the other. The general attitude is: either you are with us, or you are against us. If you are with us, we listen to you, but if you are against us, we don’t listen to you. One of the consequences is that, in society, leaders with full awareness of their actions are very rare.

Why is there such a degree of polarization?

It has been growing for about ten years. It started with the political infighting between the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts. Everything has become politicized in Thailand. There are no moral questions any more, there are only political questions.

Is the close proximity in Thailand between Buddhism and state power one of the main issues?

Yes, because it has resulted in the exploitation of Buddhism to reinforce the nationalist ideology. Religion has been used to fight against communism, it has been used to fight the enemies of the state, to oppose all those who are not royalist. They are considered as sinners. We say that they lack gratitude, that they should live overseas.

Buddhist morality is exploited by the central power for politics and for nationalism. For instance, under King Rama VI, Buddhism was used to justify the participation of Siam in World War I. A high-ranking monk said that Buddhism supported involvement in the war. It was on this basis that King Rama VI gave the green light to send Thai troops to Europe. The basic idea was and is always the same: Buddhism must support the nation.²⁹

The *sangha* has continued to be a tool of the central state. This has resulted in an ever-increasing distance between laypeople and the *sangha* leadership, and thus a weakening of the monastic community. The *sangha*'s relationship with the state is revealed whenever monks are involved in politics. Conservative monks who become politically active in order to support the incumbent government or the state—for instance, Phra Kittiwuttho in the 1970s or, as we will see below, the Mahanikai monk Phra Buddha Isara after 2013—are encouraged by the authorities and considered “not to be involved in politics”—and thus not violating the principle of separation between religion and politics. But socially-oriented monks opposing the state or the powers that be are considered as “political monks” and thus morally corrupt and religiously deviant.³⁰

²⁹ Interview conducted in Thai.

³⁰ Interview, Phra Paisal Visalo, April 2016.

One monk who challenged the political status quo was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of the most influential Thai monks of the twentieth century. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was perceived by some supporters of successive military regimes from the 1950s to the 1980s as a pro-communist monk, mostly because he did not wholeheartedly support those pro-US authoritarian governments. He spoke instead of communist movements being the “normal outcome” of the selfish and materialistic behavior of capitalists.³¹ He also condemned the official United States’ view that bombing Vietnam was a “moral action” because “this would force [the North Vietnamese] to follow the correct path.”³²

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu also gave the impression of challenging the common understanding of the three pillars of Thai identity (Nation-Religion-King) by interpreting them in moral rather than in physical or geographical terms.³³ But, as demonstrated by Louis Gabaude, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was actually willing to challenge whatever doctrine aimed only at catering to materialistic and physical needs, be it liberalism or communism or even the way Buddhism was practiced in Thailand. His position was that only “moral behavior” and a true understanding of the *dhamma* were valid underpinnings for a political doctrine. So for this monk, a dictatorship was acceptable if “it functions according to the *dhamma*.”³⁴

During his lifetime, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was viewed with suspicion by some ecclesiastical and political authorities, and was frequently lambasted by ultra-right and nationalist groups. Since his death in 1993, however, his image has been rehabilitated in official spheres and used as a “state formal figure”—a transformation similar to that of a number of other politically controversial monks in Thai history.³⁵ As we will see, the same logic of state authorities condoning politically conservative monks and neutralizing less supportive ones has continued to prevail since the start of the transition crisis in 2005.

³¹ Gabaude, *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande*, 421–22.

³² *Ibid.*, 76.

³³ *Ibid.*, 434.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Interview, Vichak Panich, February 2016.

The increasing polarization of Buddhism after 2005

As noted, the *sangha* and wider Buddhist community has become increasingly polarized since 2005, in parallel with the growing divide between supporters and opponents of Thaksin. At the end of that year, Sondhi Limthongkul (b. 1947), a media tycoon and former Thaksin ally, began to organize gatherings in Bangkok where he would strongly criticize the Thaksin government for alleged corruption. People attending the gatherings mostly wore yellow-colored clothes to advertise their support of the monarchy, and, because of this, were quickly dubbed the “Yellow Shirts.”

Thaksin, a former police officer who had become by the end of the 1990s a billionaire by obtaining quasi-monopolies in telecommunications, had been prime minister since January 2001. The anti-Thaksin demonstrations gathered momentum in February 2006, just after the prime minister had sold his telecommunications conglomerate, Shin Corp, to the Singaporean company Temasek, without paying taxes. The tax avoidance was not illegal, but it was considered “immoral” and was compounded by numerous other accusations against Thaksin of twisting national policies to benefit his companies and his clan of relatives and business allies. Even before the sale of Shin Corp, members of Bodhirak’s Buddhist group Santi Asoke began to appear among the Yellow Shirt demonstrators (see Box 5).

These demonstrations eventually led to the coup on September 19, 2006, which overthrew Thaksin’s government. A junta seized power but, less than two weeks after the coup, appointed a former Army chief, General Surayud Chulanont, to lead a government mostly composed of veteran technocrats. After a new constitution was written, elections returned to power in December 2007 a pro-Thaksin party, the People’s Power Party, with veteran conservative politician Samak Sundaravej as prime minister.

Box 5 - Santi Asoke: From asceticism to activism

Santi Asoke was founded by Rak Rakphong, a former TV programmer who was ordained as a monk in 1970 at a Thammayut monastery under the name Phra Bodhirak. Disappointed by what he considered to be the lax discipline and poor spiritual practice of the monks with whom he was in contact, Bodhirak began in 1973 to develop his own religious center, then called Daen Asoke, at Kampaeng Saen, some 40 kilometers from Nakhon Pathom city.³⁶ There, he and his followers practiced what they viewed as the original teachings of the Buddha without submitting to state control. Threatened with punishment by the ecclesiastical provincial chief, Bodhirak reluctantly agreed to register his center as a monastery. In 1975, however, he declared himself independent of both the Thammayut and the Mahanikai orders, and from state-regulated Buddhism, while still a self-proclaimed Theravāda monk.

Santi Asoke's first foray into politics happened when Bodhirak and his largely urban followers openly supported Chamlong Srimuang (b. 1935), a former general who had worked as Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda's secretary-general at the beginning of the 1980s, and presented himself as a candidate for the Bangkok governorship in 1985.

Chamlong, a graduate of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy and a major-general, has been a high-profile member of Santi Asoke since the end of the 1970s. He gained a reputation for his asceticism, including eating only one vegetarian meal a day and abstaining from sexual relations with his wife.³⁷ With Santi Asoke's strong support, Chamlong won the gubernatorial elections in 1985 by a wide margin. During his mandate, he tried to implement some of Santi Asoke's principles particularly on fighting corruption, clamping down on entertainment places, and focusing on the cleanliness of the city. Santi Asoke practitioners had comprised the core of Chamlong's campaign team and he repaid his debt after victory by appointing some of them to Bangkok's City Hall.³⁸

In 1988, Chamlong created a political party, the Palang Dhamma Party (PDP, Party of Moral Force), to compete during the legislative elections. Bodhirak and Santi Asoke became more overtly engaged in politically supporting Chamlong: most of the party

³⁶ Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand* (London: Routledge, 2007), 116.

³⁷ Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

executive committee and around half of the candidates who contested the seats outside of Bangkok were Santi Asoke followers.³⁹ But the results were disappointing: only 14 out of the PDP's 295 candidates won a seat and, among them, only one Santi Asoke member was elected.⁴⁰

Santi Asoke's foray into politics gave rise to worries that Bodhirak's movement could endanger the institutional structure of official Thai Buddhism by becoming a third grouping besides the Thammayut and Mahanikai. After Bodhirak rejected a call by the Supreme Sangha Council to submit to its control and to stop criticizing it, a gathering of 150 high-ranking monks led by the newly appointed supreme patriarch, Phra Nyanasamvara, agreed on May 23, 1989 to ask the Council to defrock Bodhirak for "breach of the discipline" and "rebellious against the mainstream monastic order," and to excommunicate Santi Asoke from the official structure of Thai Buddhism.⁴¹ One of the accusations leveled at Bodhirak was the fact that he was ordaining monks despite not having himself been a monk for the required minimum of ten years. Another was his apparent claim to be a Buddhist saint, a capital sin according to the *vinaya pitaka*. On June 9, 1989, Bodhirak stopped referring to himself as a "monk" (to take the appellation of *samana*) and went to his local district to apply for an identity card—implicitly acknowledging that he was no longer a monk (Thai monks hold a monastic ID card, the *bai sutthi*).⁴² In December 1995, after six years of hearings, a court gave Bodhirak a three-year suspended sentence and lesser suspended jail-terms to some followers of Santi Asoke for continuing to behave as monks.⁴³ Meanwhile, some Santi Asoke followers themselves began to perceive the links between the group and politicians in a negative light.

Chamlong Srimuang was reelected by a landslide as the governor of Bangkok in January 1990, but he did not wish Santi Asoke members to be fielded as PDP candidates, as the connection with the religious movement was proving too problematic.⁴⁴ When PDP participated successfully in the March 1992 elections, the party was no longer perceived as being closely connected to Santi Asoke. In 1995, Chamlong was replaced as PDP's leader by Thaksin Shinawatra, the man who ironically would become ten years later the main enemy of Bodhirak and Santi Asoke.

³⁹ Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements*, 121.

⁴⁰ McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang*, 93.

⁴¹ Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements*, 123.

⁴² McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang*, 97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

Relations between Thaksin Shinawatra and Santi Asoke were good up to February 2006. Because of his political cooperation with Major-General Chamlong Srimuang in the PDP, Thaksin had included some Santi Asoke members among his advisors when he founded the Thai Rak Thai Party in 1998. The Thaksin administration (January 2001 – September 2006) entrusted to Santi Asoke the task of “training” indebted farmers through courses on organic farming and the virtues of economic self-sufficiency.⁴⁵ The thousands of farmers who attended these courses had their debts suspended for three years.

Santi Asoke members began to distance themselves from Thaksin, however, when he switched his policies of support for small business and opposition to the International Monetary Fund—which sought to force Thailand to further liberalize its economy after the 1997 financial crisis—to promoting international free trade agreements. Brown-clad male and female followers of Santi Asoke began to join the demonstrations of the People’s Alliance for Democracy, the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts’ movement led by Sondhi, in February 2006. There were, at most, one thousand Asoke participants at the demonstrations, and their numbers dwindled in the following weeks.

Asoke members returned to the streets in late May 2008, when the government was led by Samak Sundaravej, who had declared himself to be a “nominee” of Thaksin. Samak was an old foe of Santi Asoke as he had strongly criticized the connections between the movement and the PDP during the 1988 general elections.⁴⁶ Thaksin left Thailand to live in exile in August 2008 and was sentenced for abuse of power to a two-year jail term in October 2008. The political situation was then more tense than two years before, as the Red Shirts, composed of Thaksin supporters mainly from the rural north and northeast, had reemerged and were demanding an amnesty that would allow Thaksin to return. On October 7, 2008, violent confrontations between the Yellow Shirts and the police left one person dead and many injured.

⁴⁵ Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Südostasienwissenschaften* 3, no. 1 (2010): 31–47.

⁴⁶ McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang*, 91.

Fig. 5: An anti-Thaksin painting drawn by Santi Asoke artists
Photo by Arnaud Dubus

Santi Asoke followers were also actively involved in demonstrations to reclaim the areas around Preah Vihear temple for Thailand, when tensions between Bangkok and Phnom Penh heightened in 2009.⁴⁷ Most Asoke participants had joined these demonstrations out of respect for Chamlong Srimuang who, by 2005, had become a bitter enemy of Thaksin mostly because he considered that the latter had led the PDP to its demise.⁴⁸ Thaksin's policy of pushing the rural population to become active participants in the capitalist economy, through various spending-inducement schemes, was also at odds with the austerity and self-sufficiency advocated by Santi Asoke.

Indeed, the growing divide between the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts after the 2006 coup progressively affected the monastic community, which became increasingly fragmented, although several analysts claim the majority of monks are sympathetic to the Red Shirts, because they share the same social, and often geographical, origins.

Red monks and Yellow monks

According to Jim Taylor, around four or five hundred monks from the provinces and from within Bangkok participated in the March to May 2010 Red Shirt demonstrations. These monks were both Thammayut and Mahanikai.⁴⁹ The number of monks directly involved in the 2010 Red Shirt demonstrations was obviously a tiny proportion of the *sangha*. But according to a study by Surapot

⁴⁷ Located on the border between Thailand and Cambodia, the tenth century Khmer Hindu temple of Preah Vihear was attributed to Cambodia by a 1962 decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Thailand reluctantly accepted the court's decision, but still claims the areas surrounding the temple.

⁴⁸ Heikkilä-Horn, "Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport," 42.

⁴⁹ Jim Taylor, "No Way Forward but Back? Re-emergent Thai Falangism, Democracy, and the New "Red Shirt" Social Movement," in *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, ed. Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalponpun and Aekapol Chongvilaivan (Chiang Mai: Silkworm; Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), 290.

Thaweesak, a professor at the Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, Hua Hin campus, sympathy for the Red Shirts' cause is widespread within the *sangha*.

In his 2011 study "Why Do Monks have to be Red?" Surapot surveyed the opinions of 512 monks, living in the four main regions of Thailand: center, north, northeast (Isan) and south. The survey indicated that in the central and southern regions a large majority of monks affirmed that they did not favour either of the political camps, but in the northern and Isan regions, respectively, only 49.3 percent and 40 percent of the monks were neutral. Most strikingly, however, 47 percent of the monastic population in the north said it was pro-Red Shirts; this was 57.3 percent in Isan.⁵⁰ The figure of 27.3 percent of the southern monks being openly supportive of the Yellow Shirts completed this picture of a politically divided monastic community. Analyzing these figures, Duncan McCargo considered that "since Isan (the Northeast) accounts for a third of the Thai population, and Isan-born monks are heavily overrepresented among the monastic population generally, these results suggest that a majority of Thai monks outside the South may have redshirt leanings."⁵¹ The historian Niddhi Eoseewong made the same assessment.⁵²

Coming from roughly the same social and geographical background as the Red Shirt demonstrators, it is perhaps not surprising that indeed, these north-eastern and northern monks, for whom the monkhood was often an opportunity to get a better education and improve their status, felt a bond with the socially marginalized. This is confirmed by Surapot Thaweesak's interviews with prominent monks sympathetic to the Red Shirts detailed in the survey. These monks often emphasized that "government by the people," "the fight against double-standards," and "social justice," were important values for them.⁵³

⁵⁰ Surapot Thaweesak, พระทำไมต้องแดง [Why Do Monks have to be Red?] (Bangkok: Thongtham, 2011).

⁵¹ McCargo, "The Changing Politics of Thailand's Buddhist Order," 633.

⁵² Interview, Niddhi Eoseewong, July 2016.

⁵³ Surapot Thaweesak, "Why Do Monks have to be Red?"

Fig. 6: A monk on the frontline of the Red Shirts demonstrations
on Rajdamri road on May 19, 2010

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

The political inclinations of some prominent monks were not lost on the Abhisit Vejjajiva government which, just before the start of the 2010 demonstrations, put under surveillance eleven senior monks, including the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Phra Dhammachayo, the deputy-abbot of Wat Saket, and the rectors of the two Buddhist universities of Bangkok, Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakut, all suspected of supporting the Red Shirts.⁵⁴

The emergence of a significant portion of Thai monks willing to challenge or at least to criticize the status quo is reminiscent of the progressive monks who joined the farmers' demonstrations in 1974. But the contemporary phenomenon

⁵⁴ *Thai Rath*, March 2, 2010.

appears to be much more broadly-based than thirty-six years before, which is remarkable, given the long tradition of the Thai *sangha*'s subservience to the state. Monks who are critical of the establishment face the opposition of a wide array of entrenched conservative monastic or religious groups.

Monastic activism and the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya

The major phenomenon in Thai Buddhism since the late 1970s has been the emergence and spread of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which has all the appearances of a new religious movement similar to Japan's Soka Gakkai and particularly South Korea's Foguang Shan.⁵⁵ The temple and its teachings have been mired in controversy since the mid-1990s and are regularly the object of criticism by both lay and monastic intellectuals and the Thai media.

At its core, Dhammakaya is an attempt to adapt Buddhism to contemporary Thailand, by blending religious teachings and the consumerist ideology that has engulfed the kingdom in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But there is no simple reading of this phenomenon. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has also been referring to ancient Buddhist traditions to propagate its message of "world peace through inner peace," as repeated endlessly in its slick publications. As such, the temple rejects its characterization as a "new religious movement," and defends itself by pointing out Theravāda Buddhism's long history of intertwining wealth and piety.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Scott, *Nivarna for Sale?*, 50–52.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

The advent of Buddhist evangelism

From humble beginnings, this temple, founded in 1970, has used an ancient meditation technique, called *dhammakāya* meditation—rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th century by Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, popularly known as Luang Po Soth (1884–1959), the abbot of Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen, a Mahanikai temple on the rim of a canal in the Bangkok estuary—to attract followers (see Box 6). After four decades, Wat Phra Dhammakaya has become one of the most powerful temples in Thailand, claiming to have 2,000 monks under its direct control, hundreds of thousands of lay followers, and eighty-five branches overseas in thirty-three countries. Wat Phra Dhammakaya also controls numerous meditation centers across the kingdom and exerts a strong influence on hundreds of temples. The temple’s goal, say several analysts, is to become the world center of Buddhism. And to reach this target, a crucial stage is to take control of Thai Buddhism. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has made some progress towards this national goal, but it has also met with serious obstacles, in the shape of numerous doctrinal, disciplinary, financial and political controversies since the mid-1990s.

The official history of the temple, spelled out in the publications handed out by its efficient public relations department, states that Wat Phra Dhammakaya was founded in 1970, first as a meditation center, by a few young monks, including the former abbot Phra Dhammachayo (who relinquished his position in 2016), and a nun, Khun Yay Ubasika Chan, a long-time disciple of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni who had mastered the *dhammakāya* meditation technique. Founded with “3,200 bahts on 196 *rai* [about 31 hectares] given by a female follower,” the temple, buoyed by increasing donations, progressively acquired more land and is today a sprawling compound with a futuristic golden stupa in the middle of what looks like a giant sports stadium. The temple includes a huge prayer hall for lay followers and a school for novices.

Almost from the beginning, the temple has had solid establishment support, including from royal and senior military circles. Princess Sirindhorn (b. 1955) laid the foundation stone for the chapel (*bot*) on December 24, 1977. The temple’s student summer training program or *dhammadayada* was supported by

the Kaeng Krachang Special Military Camp, the Department of Universities (within the Ministry of Education) and the Department of Public Works. Major Thai companies, such as the Central Group, Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmers Bank, and the Crown Property Bureau-owned Siam Commercial Bank have supported the temple's ceremonies or training programs in one way or another.⁵⁷

Fig. 7: A statue of Luang Po Soth at Wat Phra Dhammakaya

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

The first controversies surrounding Wat Phra Dhammakaya emerged at the end of the 1980s. Focused on doctrinal issues, they were limited to academic circles. In 1987, Prawase Wasi (b. 1931), a medical doctor with a keen interest in Buddhism, criticized the temple's teachings on *nibbāna*, saying that the nirvana attained through *dhammakāya* meditation was not the same as the one

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict*, 211.

described by the Buddha, which is accessed through wisdom (Pali: *paññā*).⁵⁸ The same year, ex-monk and scholar Sathienphong Wannapok compared the use of *dhammakāya* meditation with “hypnosis” and criticised the temple for not advocating adherence to the noble Eight-Fold Path.⁵⁹

In the early 1990s, the temple’s unusual fund-raising methods began to attract attention. Wat Phra Dhammakaya used direct-selling marketing methods—giving “bonuses” (in terms of Buddhist merit accumulated, not money) to followers based on the number of followers and donations they could attract—and adopted a very aggressive campaign to raise donations, emphasizing that giving money to the temple equated buying a place in heavens—a theme that resonates with most Thai temples, but this was on a much bigger scale.⁶⁰

At the same time, Wat Phra Dhammakaya distinguished itself by being more adapted to modern times. Stray dogs—a common sight in rural temples—were off-limits in the compound. Young monks, all holding at least a bachelor’s degree and many with a master’s degree, worked daily on computers to enter the fifty-six volumes of the *tipiṭaka* (the Buddhist Pali Canon) on CD-ROMs, in collaboration with the London-based Pali Text Society. Many of them had been recruited initially through the *dhammadayada* training program.

After a few days of physical training at the Kaeng Krachan Special Military Camp in Phetchaburi province, students were recruited for this one-month summer program, where they would intensively practice concentration meditation (Pali: *samādhi*) and sleep outside under a *klot* or umbrella equipped with a mosquito net, usually used by monks. Those who passed this training would be ordained as monks. Many participants would describe their training as a “life-changing experience” in terms close to those used by evangelical converts. This training program and the control that Wat Phra Dhammakaya

⁵⁸ Phra Prayudh Payutto, กรณียธรรมกาย.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict*, 202.

⁶⁰ Apinya Feungfusakul, สาสนทัศนของชุมชนเมืองสมัยใหม่: ศึกษากรณีวัดพระธรรมกาย [“Religious Propensity of Urban Communities: A Case Study of Phra Dhammakaya”], Centre for Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1998.

progressively extended to all Buddhist clubs in universities in Bangkok (except Mahidol University) and many others upcountry helped the temple's development. It has been a way for the temple to build up an extensive network of followers who may offer support and assistance in the business world and bureaucracy.⁶¹ From the DTAC telecommunications corporation's CEO Boonchai Benjarongkul to stock market investor Manothip Jakawantham and Lactasoy Company's CEO Mongkol Jirapatanakul, the list of high-profile businessmen who were supporting Wat Phra Dhammakaya in 2016 is impressive.⁶²

Fig. 8: A banner inviting children to enroll in Wat Phra Dhammakaya's "novice school"

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

⁶¹ Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict*, 214.

⁶² ฝ่ายกลุ่มทุนเสาหลักหินธรรมกาย [Analysis of the core group of investors supporting Wat Phra Dhammakaya], *Kom Chad Luek*, June 21, 2016, <http://www.komchadluek.net/news/scoop/230660>.

Later, a boarding school for novices was established within Wat Phra Dhammakaya, where children, mostly from upcountry, would be sent by their families to be taught order and discipline as novices for one to three years. The ex-pupils of the school are likely to become Dhammakaya's ambassadors when they return to their provinces.⁶³

Urban middle-class Thais were impressed by the efficiency, cleanliness, orderliness and grandeur of the main temple itself—qualities that they tend to equate with goodness.⁶⁴ The materialistic way Buddhism is approached by the Dhammakaya Temple echoes the consumerism dominating Thai society: Dhammakaya's version of Buddhism and its meditation technique are presented as products that are marketed for mass consumption and must deliver results. Followers are told that by practicing *dharmakāya* meditation they “will be more successful in their business.”⁶⁵

Box 6 - Esoteric teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Phra Dhammachayo

The core esoteric doctrine of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is deeply rooted in Phra Monkhol-thep-muni's experiences as a monk at Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen in the first half of the twentieth century. During a meditation session one morning in 1916, he said that he rediscovered the “original teaching of the Buddha,” which he called *vijja dhammakāya*. This understanding was reached during a meditation session when he visualized a bright crystal ball, which led his consciousness further inside “to discover the Body of Enlightenment of the Buddha, after passing through layers of inner refined bodies one inside the other.”⁶⁶

⁶³ The author visited the school in February 2016.

⁶⁴ Sanitsuda Ekachai, “The Dhammakaya Controversy,” in *Keeping the Faith*, edited by Nick Wilgus (Bangkok: Post Publishing, 2001), 95.

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict*, 213.

⁶⁶ Mano Mettanando Laohavanich, “Esoteric Teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 19 (2012): 489. Available at <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/>

This experience provided the basis for the reinvention of a supposedly long-lost meditation technique, which is currently used and promoted by Wat Phra Dhammakaya to attract followers. According to Dr Mano Mettanando Laovanich, a former senior Dhammakaya monk who left the temple and has since become an academic, this meditation technique consists of “visualizing a crystal ball or a crystal Buddha image at the level of 2 finger-breadths above the navel around the middle part of the body and the use of the universal mantra: samma-araham.”⁶⁷

At a deeper level, the innermost *dhammakāya*, called *dhammakāya arahant* is, said Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, the true self of individuals. It is the “living Buddha within, tangible and permanent like a huge living crystal Buddha sitting in deep meditation.”⁶⁸ Those who reach the deepest and more refined levels of inner understanding become *Dhammakayas* of the Light. These assumptions are in total contradiction with the core teachings of Theravāda Buddhism on *anattā* or non-self.

The aim of this quest for ultimate knowledge is to fight and destroy the “dark forces,” the *Māra*. Phra Monkhol-thep-muni believed he had been designated by the creator of *nibbāna* to lead the *Dhammakayas* of the Light against their arch rival, the *Dhammakayas* of Darkness. “Our human existence and the world are the battlefields between the two cosmic enemies. When the battle is won, the entire cosmic existence will reveal its true nature; i.e. the whole of humankind and all other living creatures will turn into *Dhammakayas* of the Light.”⁶⁹

Once he became the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Phra Dhammachayo rebranded this Buddhology and made it more sophisticated, but the inner core stayed the same. Phra Dhammachayo stated that he was himself the Creator of *nibbāna* who had commanded Phra Monkhol-thep-muni “to lead the Cosmic Army in the Final War.”⁷⁰ All this may sound a bit like the scenario of a Hollywood movie aimed at a teenage audience or even the material for a flashy computer game, but the widespread success of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is testimony that it has to be taken seriously. It must also be noted that these “higher level teachings” are not dispensed to newcomers, who are taught traditional Buddhist precepts revolving around compassion, morality and meditation. The deeper

2012/07/Laohanovich-Esoteric-Teaching-Wat-Phra-Dhammakaya-final.pdf (accessed October 27, 2017).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 488.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 489.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 491.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

esoteric Dhammakaya teachings are only accessible to long-time monks and devotees close to the temple's highest ranks.

Overall, Wat Phra Dhammakaya's Buddhology is nothing less than a "revolution in Theravāda Buddhism," according to Mano Mettanando Laohavanich (see also Box 7):

It transforms (Theravāda Buddhism) into a theological religion. It shifts the paradigm of reality towards a collective enlightenment in which the whole of cosmic existence is the battlefield between the Sons of Light, the Bright *Dhammakayas*, against the Sons of Darkness or *Māra*. To be a Buddha, according to the *dhammakāya* meditation, is no longer a difficult task, as it is commonly understood in mainstream Theravāda Buddhism; it is seen as a small issue compared to the aim of the founder of *dhammakāya* meditation, which is to liberate the entire samsara in his life through the Victory of the *Dhammakayas* in the Last Cosmic Battle of the Universe.⁷¹

In September 1998, the expanding temple faced another wave of criticism, after it proclaimed that a "miracle" had happened at the main chedi—the Mahathammai Chedi, then under construction—and had been witnessed by thousands of followers. According to the temple's account, which was widely reproduced in newspapers, an image of Luang Po Soth had appeared in the sky, superimposed on the sun. The claim triggered a wave of criticism in the media, which also began to scrutinize Wat Phra Dhammakaya's fund-raising methods.

Thailand was then in the middle of a deep economic crisis, triggered in July 1997 when the government of Chaovalit Yongchaiyud (1996–97) suddenly floated the baht after having spent billions of dollars in a vain attempt to defend the national currency against speculative attacks by overseas investors. In the following months, thousands of Thai firms went bankrupt and millions of Thais lost their jobs. In this context, Wat Phra Dhammakaya's aggressive drive to gather donations to build the Mahathammai Chedi, a giant golden stupa, was viewed as extravagant and improper. Temple devotees were urged to buy small golden Buddha statues under which their names would be inscribed, to be placed around the stupa—the most expensive statues being placed at the highest

⁷¹ Ibid.

level.⁷² Amulets, advertised for their ability to “suck assets,” were also sold in order to finance the giant project. The media discovered the temple’s “millionaires’ club”—a group of followers who were promised rebirth as “millionaires,” in exchange for monthly donations.⁷³ Even with the Theravāda tradition of large donations for the construction of grand religious buildings and stupas, the consensus, at least among the media, was that Wat Phra Dhammakaya had overstepped its boundaries.

Box 7 - Interview with Mano Mettanando Laohavanich, May 2016

Wat Phra Dhammakaya has tried to modernize Thai Buddhism, which has a positive side. At the same time, they are using the old *sangha* administrative structure for their benefit. It seems like a mixture of both old and new.

It is true. When I came back from Oxford in 1988, I found that the temple had expanded by three hundred times, in terms of numbers of people, but also land.⁷⁴ The abbot was very engaged in a lot of businesses. He started to be involved in businesses since 1983. While before he had been a little well-off, he was quite affluent at that time. Khun Yay Chan was the pillar of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. She was a very strict, very strong, very devoted Buddhist. I have no doubt of her ability and also her sincerity in practicing Buddhism.

But Dhammachayo was another kind of character. He was ambitious. He has two personalities. One is very quiet, very peaceful, he loves to meditate and is a little withdrawn from society. But the other side is totally the opposite. He is ambitious. He wanted to be the greatest guy. He is an admirer of Adolf Hitler. He said himself he loved Hitler. Even in his Buddho-theology, he included Hitler as a member of the Troops of the Light that reincarnate from Nirvana down on Earth.

⁷² Scott, *Nirvana for Sale*, 102.

⁷³ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁴ Interview conducted in English. Mano Mettanando Laohavanich (b. 1956) is a former senior monk of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who left the temple and has become an ardent critic of Dhammakaya. He teaches Thai Studies at the Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University.

Is one of the temple's major attractions its "re-discovered" meditation technique?

Wat Dhammakaya exaggerated the meditation technique. At Wat Pak Nam, they did not see it that way, but Wat Dhammakaya made it more gravitating, more tempting, more mystical. At Wat Pak Nam, they did not want to say that this was the lost knowledge of Buddhism rediscovered by Luang Po Soth (Phra Monkhol-thep-muni) as Dhammakaya said later. Meditation is the first entrance. After, they enter this esoteric knowledge which they introduce step by step to newcomers until they are sure this one really belongs to their community, then they will reveal more. It is a sect-like method.

Given the fact that so much is built around the personality of Phra Dhammachayo, when he is gone, will the temple survive?

They have a very good bureaucratic structure. They will have a shock when their leader is gone. I think they will suffer enormously, like the Nazis without Hitler.

At the beginning, Wat Phra Dhammakaya expanded through the Buddhist organizations within the universities?

Yes that is right. Dhammachayo studied the life of Hitler very clearly. He looked at how Hitler introduced Nazism in Germany through its promotion among students. When the students were organized and they believed in him, the second step were business people. Then, the third level were politicians. There are three steps. Dhammachayo followed these, Hitler-style. Finally, Wat Phra Dhammakaya took over almost all universities in Thailand.

How is Wat Phra Dhammakaya expanding its control over the temples across the country?

They impress people by inviting them to their ceremonies and giving a lot of money to the abbots, so the abbots tend to believe: "this is the best." Because the donations were lump sums, they were impressed. They bought the model. Whatever the temple says, they agree.

Are there any rules which could have prevented Dhammakaya to be so involved in business ventures?

The weakness of the *sangha* is money. Several rules prohibit monks from undertaking any business transactions, but there is no control in practice. Buddhists believe that monks are very honest people. So there is a lack of control. That is the great weakness.

Buddhism is difficult to reform, because monks control the power and don't want to release the power. Whenever we touch upon the issue of monks' money, they stand up and fight against [such accusations].

So, what Wat Phra Dhammakaya is doing on a big scale, any temple in the countryside is doing the same, but on a smaller scale?

It is right. Wat Dhammakaya did not offer anything new in terms of morality. It offers the image of tidiness, efficiency. They are an elite temple. But behind this, there is a massive amount of investment and embezzlement which is going on. The involvement with the two Credit Unions shows how they manipulated these financial operations until one of these companies collapsed. It had been transformed into a pyramid fund, and finally collapsed. Dhammachayo was behind it.

At the same moment, the doctrinal controversy bounced back with the publication of *The Dhammakaya Case (Korani Thammakai)* by respected monk Phra Prayudh Payutto, who attempted to clarify the temple's controversial claim “*nipphan pen atta*” (*nibbāna* is the essential self). After a lengthy analysis, the monk demonstrated that there is no trace of such a teaching in the canonical scriptures of the *tipiṭaka*, and that such an affirmation is external to Buddha's teachings.⁷⁵

The situation came to a head in 1999, when Supreme Patriarch Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara wrote a letter “instructing” the Sangha Supreme Council to disrobe Phra Dhammachayo, on two grounds.⁷⁶ First, he accused the abbot of the Dhammakaya temple of “distorting Buddhist teachings, which created conflicts within the monastic community.” Second, he accused the monk of holding under his name 1,500 *rai* (240 hectares) of land donated to the temple and of refusing to transfer it to the temple—a clear breach of not only the *vinaya*, but also Thai law.

⁷⁵ Scott, *Nirvana for Sale*, 149.

⁷⁶ *Bangkok Post*, February 20, 2015.

Already beholden to Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which was dispensing lavish donations to some of the senior monks, the Council's members did not act upon the Supreme Patriarch's letter. This inaction may also have been due to the way the Council functions, with infrequent meetings and no clear framework for decision-making or practical follow up.⁷⁷ In late 1999, Phra Dhammachayo was charged with embezzlement following a complaint by two laypersons.⁷⁸ Since then, some establishment supporters have distanced themselves from the temple, foremost among them the entire royal family. But in August 2006, the two plaintiffs and the prosecution abruptly withdrew the case, saying that they did not want to create "a bigger rift in Buddhism"⁷⁹—opponents of Dhammakaya attribute the withdrawal to pressure from then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.⁸⁰

Political controversy

After the May 22, 2014 coup d'état that overthrew Yingluck Shinawatra's government, Dhammakaya's opponents revived the earlier accusations. Most of the temple's critics were firmly with the Yellow Shirts, the bureaucracy, and the palace. Their lay leader was Paiboon Nititawan, a former senator and member of the National Reform Council (NRC), which was set up by the junta to define the political reform guidelines.

Paiboon was the chair of the NRC's subcommittee on religious affairs. He proposed several draft laws, including one to audit and regulate the assets of all temples and monks across the country. Earlier, during the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC, an incarnation of the Yellow Shirts) demonstrations

⁷⁷ "Forest Abbot Warns Sangha Reform 'Urgent,'" *Bangkok Post*, March 12, 2015.

⁷⁸ Somphon Thepsitha, former president of the Young Buddhists Association of Thailand, and Manop Pol-Pailin, former expert at the Department of Religious Affairs, within the Ministry of Education.

⁷⁹ "Thai Court Spares Founder of Dhammakaya," *Bangkok Post*, August 23, 2006.

⁸⁰ Laohavanich, "Esoteric Teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya," 509.

against Yingluck from November 2013 until the 2014 coup, Paiboon had appeared on PDRC's stage along with Suthep Thaugsuban, the former Democrat Party MP who had become in 2013 the overall leader of the "Great Mass of the People"—as the protest movement called itself. The main theme of Paiboon's public speeches was the reform of Thai Buddhism.⁸¹ He is a staunch critic of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Phra Dhammachayo, whom he has accused of breaching monastic discipline through personally receiving and even "accumulating" money as well as distorting Theravāda doctrine.⁸²

The second main character behind the revived case against Dhammakaya is a politically active monk, Phra Buddha Isara, whom we have mentioned already and who is the abbot of Wat Or Noi in Khampaeng Saen district, Nakhon Pathom province. Both men were acting in close cooperation. Buddha Isara was fully invested in the most visible part of the campaign, visiting the acting supreme patriarch Somdet Chuang at his Pak Nam Phasi Charoen temple to put pressure on him to act, and handing out written calls for action to the Attorney General, the Department of Special Investigations (DSI), and junta leader and prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. Buddha Isara's tone was threatening—and he always traveled with around two hundred thug-like "supporters," often under military protection. Notably, the junta allowed Buddha Isara to stage demonstrations and marches when all other "political activities" were banned.

Yet Wat Phra Dhammakaya was too big to swallow. The junta was clearly uncomfortable. First, the legal case had been closed once and for all, and there was no way to revive it except by launching a new case. Second, and perhaps more importantly, directly confronting Wat Phra Dhammakaya risked provoking an open conflict between supporters and detractors of the temple, a state of affairs the junta could barely politically afford when it was already much criticized for its other policies. Prayuth backed down and, on March 6, 2015, asked Paiboon to dissolve his subcommittee on religious affairs.⁸³

⁸¹ Interview, Phra Methee Dhammachan, May 2016.

⁸² Interview, Paiboon Nititawan, March 2017.

⁸³ "NRC Axes Guardians of Buddhism," *Bangkok Post*, March 7, 2015.

But Prayuth had not taken into account Phra Buddha Isara's and Paiboon Nititawan's tenaciousness. Among other things, the monk asked the DSI to check on the assets of all members of the Supreme Sangha Council. On Paiboon's request, the DSI began to investigate the case of a vintage Mercedes Benz donated by a follower to Somdet Chuang. The investigation appeared to reveal that the expensive car had been fully imported and not, as specified on the ownership documents held by Somdet Chuang's office, locally assembled, and thus avoiding heavy taxes. The saga occupied the front pages of newspapers for months, and finally Somdet Chuang agreed to give the car to the DSI, thereby ending all possible legal avenues to sue him. But, the reputation of the senior monk had been sullied, and the controversy was used as a reason to block his appointment as supreme patriarch (see Box 9). Prayuth did not forward the name recommended unanimously by the Supreme Sangha Council to King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and after the king's death in October 2016, the position was left vacant.⁸⁴

Then, on December 29, 2016, the junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly unanimously passed an amendment to the Sangha Act to remove the Council's role in the appointment of a new supreme patriarch. The amended section 7 of the Act stipulated that "the King appoints the Supreme Patriarch, whose appointment will be countersigned by the Prime Minister." The rule setting up seniority conditions for the appointment of the supreme patriarch was also discarded. The former version said that the Council had to nominate a candidate for the position and to forward the name to the prime minister, who himself would submit it to the king for approval. The amendment meant that the king could appoint any senior monk as supreme patriarch.

The Assembly deftly presented the new version as a return to the king's traditional power over the *sangha*, which had been reduced in the Sangha Act's 1992 amendment. This was a good way to prevent massive opposition to the amendment by monks and it apparently worked: even Phra Methee Dhammachan, the deputy-rector of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University

⁸⁴ King Bhumibol's only son ascended to the throne on December 1, 2016 as King Maha Vajiralongkorn or Rama X.

and one of Somdet Chuang's main supporters, backed down.⁸⁵ Based on five names submitted by Prayuth, the new king's choice of Phra Maha Munivong, the abbot of Rajabophit temple, as the new supreme patriarch also contributed to appeasing tensions, as he is unanimously recognized as a monk who strictly follows monastic discipline and leads a simple life. One of his first actions after being appointed was to go to the Pak Nam Phasi Charoen temple to pay homage to Somdet Chuang—an important gesture in Thai culture and society with its emphasis on respect for seniority.

Fig. 9: A mass ceremony at Wat Phra Dhammakaya in 2015

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

⁸⁵ "Senior Monk Backs Off as Sangha Act Amended," *The Nation*, December 30, 2016.

The real target of the campaign was not, however, Somdet Chuang himself, but Wat Phra Dhammakaya. The concerted opposition to Somdet Chuang's appointment was hardly about accusations that he had cheated on tax—although that would be a serious breach of monastic discipline, but because of fears that his ascension, according to Paiboon and Buddha Isara's troops, would have allowed Wat Phra Dhammakaya to “take over Thai Buddhism.”⁸⁶

From my own observation of ceremonies at Wat Phra Dhammakaya where members of the Supreme Sangha Council were present, the temple's influence on the Council is obvious. The elderly senior monks are treated like royalty at the temple, being brought by luxury vans, sitting atop stages overlooking thousands of monks and tens of thousands of lay followers, and showered with gifts. In a society where networking, influence and visual spectacle is everything, even in monastic circles, the net cast by Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Phra Dhammachayo over the country is wide and tight.

But why would many Thais worry that a well-managed, modern-looking and dynamic temple grows in influence and takes a leadership role in a sluggish, fossilized and inward-looking monastic community? The first point is the link with Thaksin Shinawatra. Analysts and media allege that Wat Phra Dhammakaya is “a Red Shirts temple” with close connections to Thaksin. Sulak Sivaraksa affirmed that during the political demonstrations of 2009–10, “Red Shirts used to retreat into Wat Phra Dhammakaya.”⁸⁷

Phra Buddha Isara is adamant that the withdrawal in 2006 of the legal case against Phra Dhammachayo was ordered or requested by Thaksin. “Thaksin asked the general prosecutor to stop the case in the name of reconciliation,” said the monk.⁸⁸ Indeed, barely one month before the coup that would overthrow the Thaksin administration, all charges against Phra Dhammachayo were dropped on August 22, 2006, under the rather vague justification of avoiding the creation of a divide between clergy and laypeople. Journalist Sanitsuda Ekachai, a

⁸⁶ Interview, Sulak Sivaraksa, April 2015.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Interview, Phra Buddha Isara, March 2016.

frequent commentator on Buddhist affairs, argued that the decision reflected the strong connections between the temple and powerful politicians.⁸⁹

Some other elements could underline the Shinawatra–Dhammakaya connection. Phra Dhammachayo received an important position in the *sangha* administration and was made a *Phra Phromayantera* in December 2011 when the country was led by Yingluck Shinawatra. A second possible connection is that, according to Mano Laohavanich, Phra Dhammachayo was able to establish a bank, the Land and Houses Bank, with the support of Thaksin, who pushed the public Krungthai Bank to give a huge loan to facilitate its launch.⁹⁰ The CEO of Land and Houses Bank, Anant Asavabhokhin, a staunch supporter of the Dhammakaya temple, had indeed a strong connection to Thaksin via his friendship with Boonkleee Plangsiri, a close aide and advisor to Thaksin.⁹¹ Moreover, Anant's company was one of the major supporters of Voice TV, owned by the Shinawatra family.⁹²

⁸⁹ Sanitsuda Ekachai, "Prosecutors let monk off the hook," *Bangkok Post*, August 24, 2006.

⁹⁰ Interview, Mano Mettanando Laovanich, May 2016.

⁹¹ Anant Asavabhokhin resigned from his position as chairman of the company in May 2017 after being accused of collaboration in money laundering in relation to the Klongchan Credit Union Cooperative scandal, in which Dhammachayo was also involved.

⁹² Ukrist Pathmanand, "Network Thaksin: Structure, Roles and Reaction," in *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power*, ed. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).

**Box 8 - Interview with Phra Pasura Dantamano,
Wat Phra Dhammakaya monk, February 2016**

“We don’t want to be involved in politics, but it is the politics which gets to us”

Is Wat Phra Dhammakaya supported by the Red Shirts and linked to Thaksin Shinawatra?

These are false accusations and allegations. The temple is not involved in any political affairs. Because monks are not supposed to be involved in politics. The temple has a lot of followers, and many people coming to the temple may share this political ideology. But when they enter this place, they have to put this political ideology aside and finally the temple becomes a neutral ground for all these people, who may be different outside, to come here to find peace of mind. So far we have not tried to be engaged in any politics at all, because it would disturb the meditation practice of monks.

Nowadays in Thailand, the political conflict is very strong, so some try to make connections between the temple and this political conflict. These connections are made not only for the temple, but also for certain companies, certain organizations, certain individuals. The temple is only one of the victims of all these false accusations. We don’t want to be involved in politics, but it is the politics which gets to us.

Why were there so many campaigns against Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the last 20 years?

That would be a good question to ask these accusers who are in the news every day. To be honest, we don’t know why they keep coming up with accusations every day. Dhammakaya temple is new. We try to apply many modern management, modern technologies in order to be easily approached by all the people from various age groups. Since we have a high number of projects, it sometimes provokes misunderstandings, which finally lead to these accusations. The accusers don’t understand the objective of this temple, which is to promote meditation and moral values.

Why is Wat Phra Dhammakaya supporting the campaign to make Buddhism the national religion?

Buddhism has very deep roots in Thai culture for the last 1,000 years and it has been a guide for moral conduct for the people, that is why Thai people have been so famous in terms of kindness, calmness, generosity and sense of compromise.

This becomes the foundation on which this nation is built. When Thai people speak about Buddhism as a national religion, it means that they are proud of their own identity,

they are proud that their ancestors have chosen this philosophy to conduct this country. For me it is very appropriate to have Buddhism as national religion: 95 percent of Thais are Buddhist and Buddhist philosophy is present in every part of our life. Buddhism has always been the glue bringing diverse people together, to form the Thai nation and live together in harmony, with a sense of compromise and acceptance.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya is said to exert a strong influence over the Supreme Sangha Council

The Dhammakaya temple has no power at all over the Supreme Sangha Council. Our abbot does not even have a title or a position in the *sangha* administration. We are under the sub-district ecclesiastical monastic chief, which is the lowest level of the *sangha* administration. The Dhammakaya temple has been recognized because of his work and his contributions to *sangha* affairs. For example, we have the highest number of Pali grade 9 graduates, which is the highest monk certification in this country.

Every month we are sending relief funds to the monks in 323 temples in the south of Thailand, which is affected by terrorism. For the last eleven years, each month. Those contributions were recognized by the senior monks. We also send monks to the South for short periods. The *sangha* hierarchy sometimes compliment us because of our contributions.

It is like you are in a school and some students have good scores, it does not mean the teacher favors these students, but he recognizes their good performance. That is the case for us.

Is Wat Phra Dhammakaya strongly supporting Somdet Chuang as new supreme patriarch?

We support the Sangha Council's decision. And the Sangha Council's decision follows exactly the law, the Sangha Act. Article 7 of the Sangha Act says: after the supreme patriarch's passing, the Supreme Sangha Council must nominate the most senior *somdet* and the prime minister must forward the name to H.M. the King for approval and appointment. The vote within the Supreme Council was unanimous, seventeen to zero, representing both Mahanikaya and Thammayut Nikaya, the two orders in Thailand. Wat Phra Dhammakaya supports the decision of the Supreme Sangha Council, which represents 300,000 monks in Thailand.⁹³

⁹³ Interview conducted in English.

Another indication, although weaker, is the fact that, in February 2016, Weng Tojirakarn (b. 1951), a medical doctor and Red Shirt leader, sprung to the defense of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, saying that the Supreme Sangha Council's nomination of Somdet Chuang for the post of supreme patriarch should be respected. But, again, these links may be due to the fact that the Shinawatra political clan and Wat Phra Dhammakaya are somehow attacked by the same groups of people and find themselves in the same defensive position. "Our situation is somehow similar to that of Thaksin. We could say we are friends with the Red Shirts, just because of the position we are in," argued Phra Pawithai, a senior monk of Wat Phra Dhammakaya.⁹⁴

In a way, Wat Phra Dhammakaya has done for religion what Thaksin has for politics: adopted a dynamic approach to modernize an out-of-date institution and adapted it to twenty-first century expectations. And both Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Thaksin encountered strong resistance by groups with vested interests—the bureaucracy and military, above all—because they were upsetting the cosy status quo. This statement must be qualified, however, as Wat Phra Dhammakaya seems to be using any tools available, archaic or modern, in order to reach its goal of Buddhist domination. As such, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is deftly using the fossilized structure of the *sangha* for its own benefit and at the same time, using modern marketing techniques and communications—like the DMC Cable TV Channel, which broadcasts a series of programs dedicated to specific audiences—to attract donations and followers. Some of Dhammakaya's teachings about the efficacy of donations for buildings to guarantee access to *nibbāna* are reminiscent of the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences to build basilicas in the sixteenth century. "Whatever is workable, Wat Dhammakaya people are going to use it to promote their ego, be it the old *sangha* structure or modern capitalist methods," said Buddhist scholar Vichak Panich.⁹⁵

Notably, the Dhammakaya temple is the first nation-wide, well-organized entity since the beginning of the twentieth century that is not closely related to the central state. As we have seen, this too was not always the case, as until the

⁹⁴ Interview, Phra Pawithai, May 2015.

⁹⁵ Interview, Vichak Panich, February 2016.

mid-1990s, Wat Phra Dhammakaya was a strongly pro-establishment temple, but the accumulation of accusations and scandals have turned away part of the establishment (but not the Supreme Sangha Council). Wat Phra Dhammakaya can be seen as a potential challenge for any political regime. This was vividly illustrated between June 2016 and March 2017, when the junta tried to have Phra Dhammachayo arrested over the collapse of the Klongchan Credit Union Cooperative in 2013, leading to financial losses for thousands of the fund's members.

The former chair of the fund, Supachai Srisupa-Aksorn, had issued hundreds of checks for Dhammachayo totaling US\$34 million, shortly before the cooperative went bankrupt. Accused of money laundering and receiving stolen property, Dhammachayo was summoned repeatedly by the police, but refused to obey, saying that he was very ill and could not move out of his temple. On June 16, 2016, the police launched a special operation to “seize” Phra Dhammachayo, but the full power of the Thai state had to concede defeat when thousands of Wat Phra Dhammakaya followers, sitting in meditation posture, prevented police officers from entering the compound.

The astonishing withdrawal of the police forces was a symbolic admission that the Dhammakaya temple seemed to have grown too powerful to be tamed. A new police operation involving 1,000 officers was launched on December 26, 2016, but only resulted in the removal of a fence. Then, on February 14, 2017, Prayuth decided to use Section 44 of the Interim Constitution, which grants him absolute power without executive, legislative or judicial overview to declare the compound of Wat Phra Dhammakaya a “controlled zone,” in order to launch a massive operation to arrest Phra Dhammachayo. The junta had clearly been humiliated by the failure of the two previous raids and wanted to achieve its objective this time. On February 16, 4,000 police officers, backed up by hundreds of soldiers, surrounded the temple and made several searches of the compound, but after a three-week stand-off that saw some minor clashes between security officers and monks, they came back empty-handed and ended the operation.

This fiasco illustrates how Wat Phra Dhammakaya is the only institution that has escaped the control of the authorities. The challenge was clear, but there

was little that the junta could do except to push the king to remove Phra Dhammachayo's honorific monastic title—which he did in March 2017—and the ecclesiastical authorities to defrock the monk—a difficult process as Wat Phra Dhammakaya exerts a strong influence on them. All this attests to the difficulties the junta faces in controlling Wat Phra Dhammakaya—difficulties due in part to the power of the temple, but also to the links it has built with various levels of state authorities.

Phra Buddha Isara, a new kind of political monk

As we have seen, Phra Buddha Isara has played an important role in the campaign against Wat Phra Dhammakaya since the 2014 coup. Prior to that, the monk was also very prominent in the massive demonstrations against Yingluck Shinawatra from November 2013 to May 2014. We will attempt to describe and analyze the role of this activist monk during these troubled political times.

In a way, Phra Buddha Isara, who belongs to the Mahanikai congregation, is the contemporary equivalent of Phra Kittiwuttho: an unabashedly pro-status quo monk willing to aggressively attack his perceived political enemies in his sermons. There are some important differences though. First Phra Kittiwuttho was a well-known Mahanikai preacher and meditation teacher at the Mahathat royal temple in Bangkok, next to Thammasat University, while Phra Buddha Isara is a monk without any particular spiritual aura or ecclesiastical position.⁹⁶

Also, despite Phra Buddha Isara's aggressive stance, he has never gone as far as the encouragement to murder articulated by Phra Kittiwuttho—a call that was followed four months after by the massacre of students at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976. Phra Kittiwuttho's words are considered unacceptable and outrageous by most Thai intellectuals.⁹⁷ It should be noted,

⁹⁶ Interview, Chanchai Huadsri, March 2016.

⁹⁷ Interview, Suwanna Satha-Anand, Professor at Philosophy Department, Chulalongkorn University, May 2016.

however, that Kittiwuttho's position was not in complete contradiction with Buddhist tradition in that *karma* is dictated first by intention and only secondarily by action. But where Phra Kittiwuttho was mostly limiting his political ventures to speeches and sermons, Phra Buddha Isara is going much further, entering the political arena and getting his hands dirty.

From November 2013 to the May 2014 coup, Phra Buddha Isara occupied part of the Chaeng Wattana road in northern Bangkok, next to a large civil servants' complex, with several hundred PDRC militants. Surrounded by a large party of tough-looking bodyguards and with a bunch of feathers in his hand, like a Roman senator carrying his fasces, Buddha Isara delivered lectures tirelessly for months to his supporters. His tenure as "Chaeng Wattana's stage leader" was eventful. From the start, Buddha Isara ordered his men to blockade the offices of most of the civil servants working nearby. He also organized marches to the Shin Corp building, on nearby Viphavadi Rangsit road, and other locations linked to the Shinawatra political clan.

During one of his expeditions on February 20, 2014 the monk went with his troops to the SC Park hotel, which belongs to the Shinawatra family. When the manager, fearing trouble, refused to let the demonstrators check in despite the fact that they had booked ten rooms, Buddha Isara requested to be immediately reimbursed in cash, not only for the rooms, but also for his supporters' forty cars and the cost of their gasoline. The hotel manager obliged and Buddha Isara quietly counted bundles of 1,000-baht notes in front of the cameras.⁹⁸

Some incidents were more serious. On the night of April 25, 2014, an army colonel from the intelligence service was shot in the leg and assaulted by Buddha Isara's bodyguards because he was moving some plastic cones blocking traffic on his drive home. In another incident, two undercover police officers found among the crowd in Chaeng Wattana were blindfolded, and had their hands tied; and then they were forced to kneel and apologize to Buddha Isara, who proceeded to interrogate them.

⁹⁸ เดชหลวงปู่ [The power of Luang Pu], *Nation Weekly*, February 28, 2014.

Fig. 10: Phra Buddha Isara receiving a monk
at his Or Noi temple in Nakhon Pathom province

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

By far the most serious violence involving Buddha Isara's supporters happened on February 1, 2014, a day before the elections called by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra after she had dissolved the parliament in December the previous year. A tense confrontation occurred around the Laksi district office where Buddha Isara had led his supporters to prevent the dispatch of ballot boxes to various electoral offices in Bangkok, so as to jeopardize the elections. As a group of Red Shirts progressed towards the district office, gunshots rang out.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ หลวงปู่พุทธะอิสระและคาถาอิติปิโสวัน [Phra Buddha Isara and the spell], *Manager Weekly*, February 8, 2014.

A reporter who was near Buddha Isara's supporters was grazed by a bullet, but, according to numerous testimonies, most of the gunfire originated from a hooded man on Buddha Isara's side who had hidden his automatic rifle in a large popcorn bag, and who became subsequently known as the "Popcorn gunman." He injured several people, most of them innocent passers-by who were caught in the gunfire near IT Square; a seventy-two-year-old man died of his wounds seven months later.¹⁰⁰ After the coup, which was saluted by the monk as a "victory," Buddha Isara continued to organize demonstrations with several dozens of his supporters. For instance, he protested in front of the US embassy in November 2015 to denounce the American ambassador, who had publicly criticized the *lèse-majesté* law during a talk at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Bangkok. Another demonstration was organized to denounce the New York-based Human Rights Watch. From January 2016, Buddha Isara started an active campaign to oppose the appointment of Somdet Chuang as the new supreme patriarch, while systematically lambasting Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

**Box 9 - Interview with Phra Buddha Isara, abbot of Wat Or Noi,
Nakhon Pathom province, March 2016**

Why are you so opposed to the appointment of Somdet Chuang as new supreme patriarch?

If the prime minister or the president in your country is involved in a tax fraud scandal, could he be elected or appointed to lead the country? No, isn't it?

For us, the supreme patriarch is even more important than a president or a prime minister because he is the leader of the faith. And if he is involved in a fraud scandal, we cannot accept it. If a person we are supposed to revere shows dishonorable behavior, it is quite normal that people do not want to accept him. Somdet Chuang is guilty of fiscal

¹⁰⁰ The Popcorn gunman was sentenced for murder to a jail term of 37 years and 4 months in March 2016.

fraud, in relation to his vintage car. And do you want somebody like him to become supreme patriarch?

The second thing is the behavior of Phra Dhammachayo, the disciple of Somdet Chuang. Somdet Chuang presided over his ordination. And it is known that Phra Dhammachayo has distorted the teachings of Buddhism. Moreover he has breached monastic discipline. Somdet Chuang is his mentor and the highest ranked monk, but he never said anything to his disciple who has breached discipline. If this kind of monk is appointed leader of the Buddhist church of Thailand, what will be the situation in our country?

Do you consider Dhammakaya temple dangerous for Thailand?

Wat Dhammakaya is extremely dangerous. From a Buddhist viewpoint, they are the worst kind of people. Some bandits come in a hidden way, but Dhammakaya comes in an open way. Some people are donating so much money to Dhammakaya that they find themselves in an impossible situation and commit suicide. Their family is destroyed, they are ruined, because they were deceived into believing that they would become rich. Everybody wants to get rich. But the only one enriching itself is actually Wat Dhammakaya. Those who make donations become poor.

What do you think would be the way out of the supreme patriarch nomination controversy?

The best way is for Somdet Chuang to explain the facts to the population, what he did well and what he did wrong. This is the Buddhist way according to the monastic discipline. Somdet Chuang's case is very severe, but he just stays quiet. It is a breach of Buddhist discipline. His attitude is contrary to the Buddhist teachings, he should cleanse himself by explaining his wrong deeds. He just thinks that he is untouchable.

Have you been a soldier under the command of General Prayuth Chan-ocha and General Prawit Wongsuwan in the past?

I have already said that it is not true. I have no close relationships with the military. I don't like to be close to people who hold power. To be embroiled with those with power is suffocating, I feel good when being with people without power. I said to General Prawit, if you have a powerful position, don't come to visit my temple, but once you give up your powerful position, you are welcome to visit me. Since he has a political position, I have not met him. But if he leaves his position, I would agree to meet him.

What is your position on Buddhism as the national religion?

I don't agree with it. In Thailand, Buddhism is not the only religion. The unification of the country has not been done only because of the power of Buddhism. If we want to make Buddhism the national religion, we have to ask the people if they agree. If the behavior of the monks is still the same—full of greed and accumulating assets—and we make Buddhism the national religion, what kind of progress will it be?

It depends on the faith of the people, not on the law. The law cannot impose something on the people in the religious field. No country is establishing a religion as a national religion, except for Islamic countries. And do you want us to be like Islamic countries? It is not needed. And the Buddha never asked that Buddhism be made a national religion. And despite this, Buddhism has survived for more than 2,000 years.

The people who are negatively affecting religion are the monks themselves, it has nothing to do with the constitution or the laws. It is the monks who are not respecting the Buddhist discipline. They are the ones who are spoiling religion.¹⁰¹

As earlier noted, Buddha Isara's freedom to organize demonstrations was in contrast with all other gatherings or marches that were banned, blocked or repressed by the junta. A February 15, 2016 pro-Dhammakaya monks gathering at Buddhamonthon to support the appointment of Somdet Chuang as supreme patriarch, for instance, was immediately blocked by 200 soldiers, and the main organizer, Phra Methee Dhammachan, vice-rector of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, was summoned by the police a few weeks later when he attempted to speak at a press briefing (see also Box 10).

Buddha Isara explains his apparent freedom to demonstrate by the fact that he “always asked the authorization by writing to the civil agency in charge of the location a few days beforehand.” “If the authorization is granted, I go. If it is not granted, I don't go,” he said, adding that “if the other groups never got the authorization, it is because they never ask for it.”¹⁰² Leading demonstrations, extorting money, threatening and indirectly exercising violence and abetting

¹⁰¹ Interview conducted in Thai.

¹⁰² Interview, Phra Buddha Isara, March 2016.

violence, Buddha Isara represents a new kind of political monk. Never before has a Thai monk been so overtly engaged in the lowly world of intrigues and bitter rivalries, in the *lokiya* world of petty politics. Even his demeanor is not what one expects from a Theravāda monk, who are supposed to remain aloof, quiet and disengaged. Buddha Isara is emotional and uses demeaning language—some observers say that such behavior is frequent among influential rural monks. His world vision can be interpreted from several documents he published and distributed during the anti-Yingluck demonstrations at the beginning of 2014.

Fig. 11: A drawing posted by a Facebook user lambasting Phra Buddha Isara's behavior

In these rather confused texts, Buddha Isara is advocating a kind of alliance between Buddhism and the monarchy to establish an autocratic regime “aiming at national security and peace”—a framework that gives no space to

democracy or people's participation but that he calls "a democratic system." "Any other regime is wrong," he asserts.¹⁰³ For him, there is no question about whether Buddhism and politics must be separated. "Any person who wants to separate Buddhism from politics, through letting the monks govern themselves without being subject to the Sangha Act, is deluded," he continued.

The question remains why Buddha Isara appears to be so influential and visible, as he is only an abbot without any status. Our research could not find any past links with the military, but ample photographic evidence shows that he enjoys good relationships with Prayuth Chan-ocha, and General Prawit Wongsuwan, deputy-prime minister and Minister of Defense, and clearly acts as if he has high-level protection. Is he acting on behalf of someone? Is he being used as a convenient proxy by some people who, themselves, prefer not to act openly? Indeed, some analysts consider that the leeway enjoyed by Phra Buddha Isara, after the May 2014 coup, can only be explained by the fact that he is acting on behalf of those in power.¹⁰⁴

Box 10 - Interview with Phra Methee Dhammachan, vice-rector of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, May 2016

Why are many groups critical of Wat Phra Dhammakaya?

This is something usual in a society. An organization that has many followers, many supporters, will be examined and criticized. But what we are seeing is that the level of violence is rising with the political division in Thai society between Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts. This division in political groups has also divided the monastic community. We say: monks from such and such a temple are Red monks and monks of such and such a temple are Yellow monks.

¹⁰³ Phra Buddha Isara, "What is Politics?"; document given by Phra Buddha Isara to the author in January 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Chanchai Huadsri, March 2016; interview, Phra Methee Dhammachan, May 2016.

Fig. 12: Phra Methee Dhammachan

Photo by Arnaud Dubus

What is your view on the controversy surrounding the appointment of the supreme patriarch?

I am worried for the future of the monastic community in the country. We have never seen such violent criticisms towards members of the Supreme Sangha Council. And these criticisms are coming from people linked to the clan that is holding state power. These people—like Phra Buddha Isara and former senator Paiboon Nititawan—are puppets of the state power. They received a green light from those in power and are trying to create problems. It is very worrying.

How do you see the relations between the *sangha* and politics?

Concerning the day to day politics, the elections, the competition for power, we have never tried to get involved in it. But concerning the future of the country, the future

of the people, the security of Buddhism, of the Kingdom, we have no right to refuse to intervene. We have to act in fairness in relation to it. What I am doing every day, I do for the monastic community and for Buddhism.

Is the political activism of Phra Buddha Isara contrary to the *vinaya*, the monastic discipline?

For monks, abstaining from violence, as well as [maintaining personal] ethics and sincerity are central. Climbing onto a stage to criticize others is not something a monk should do. The monastic community has never behaved like this. Monks have to follow both the country's laws and the monastic discipline. To incite troubles and conflicts is not what monks should do. On the contrary, they should be the water that extinguishes the fire.

Why was there a monks' gathering at Buddhamonthon on February 15, 2016?

When I speak to journalists, they often ask me: Do the other monks agree with you? Some journalists say: only Phra Methee Dhammachan speaks like this, the other monks say nothing. How to have the voice of the majority of monks in the country heard? The aim of the gathering was to show that a majority of Thai monks did not agree with the criticisms against the monastic community. For them, it was simply a way to express their views.

Concerning the appointment of the supreme patriarch, does Prime Minister Prayuth have the right to change the name recommended by the Supreme Sangha Council?

He does not have the right. Article 7 of the Sangha Act insists on the "intention." The intention is that monks administer themselves. When the supreme patriarch passes away, the Supreme Sangha Council must meet and nominate the *somdet phra racha khana* who has held the title for the longest time. The intention is that the monks choose the successor themselves. The prime minister is only a messenger. He must receive the name forwarded by the Supreme Sangha Council and forward it to the king. It is written nowhere that [the PM] has the right of veto.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Interview conducted in Thai.

Buddha Isara's overtly political behavior does have some parallels with one monk in the 1990s and 2000s. Luang Ta Maha Bua (1913–2011), a well-known forest monk, became very engaged during the 1997 financial and economic crisis in a quest to collect money to “save the nation.” After a period of collaboration with Thaksin, culminating in the monk offering 12 tons of gold and US\$10.2 million collected from donors to the Bank of Thailand to contribute to the repayment of Thailand's debt to the International Monetary Fund, Maha Bua turned against Thaksin and began to attack him vehemently in his speeches.

And as we have seen, Santi Asoke “monks” participated actively in most of the anti-Thaksin demonstrations from 2006 to 2014, bringing a Buddhist flavor to the Yellow Shirt gatherings. But the Luang Ta Maha Bua episode was short-lived and seemed based more on personal revenge — the monk was hurt by Thaksin's apparent disdain towards him — rather than on clear political commitment. As for the Santi Asoke “monks” and “nuns,” their strict discipline and quiet demeanor during demonstrations fitted with the image that Thai people generally have about monks.

On the other hand, Phra Buddha Isara's complete immersion into the murky waters of politics illustrates the confusion reigning in the Thai monastic community, and the blurring of the lines between religion and politics. It is also a reflection of the wider confusion in society, where traditional values are dissolving and landmarks disappearing in a lengthy transition where, as Watcharabon Buddharaksa, drawing on Antonio Gramsci, wrote, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Watcharabon Buddharaksa, “The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: Organic Crisis, Social Forces and the Thai State 1997–2010” (PhD diss., University of York, 2014).

Buddhism and nationalism

In parallel with the increased political polarization, the long-running campaign to make Buddhism the national religion of Thailand has intensified since 2005. Nourished by the conflict in southern Thailand between Muslim insurgents and the central state—and the subsequent growing unease between Thai Muslims and Buddhists—but also by the political divisions within the monkhood, this campaign advocates a reinforcement of the links between the monastic community and the political authorities as well as of the role of the *sangha* as a state auxiliary, leading to a growing alienation between the Buddhist hierarchy and local communities.

Buddhism and the South: Strengthening nationalism

The ongoing ethno-religious conflict in the Thai south is a powerful illustration of the consequences of the close association between Buddhism and state in Thailand. The national ideology, which has been officially defined since the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910–25) as consisting of three pillars—Nation, Religion and King—with “Religion” and “King” being fundamental elements of the traditional Thai Buddhist theory of kingship.¹⁰⁷ According to this theory, the

¹⁰⁷ Eiji Murashima, “Building of the Official State Ideology in Thailand,” *International Relations* 84 (1987): 118–35.

king, supposedly elected by the assembly of the people, “should practice justice as the protector and as the person to be relied on by the people under the restraint of the moral law of Buddhism.”¹⁰⁸ Even if the term used in the elements of the national ideology is “religion” (Thai: *satsana*; Pali: *sāsana*), and not Buddhism, and even if King Vajiravudh insisted on religious tolerance, his frequent mention of the “superiority of Buddhism” compared to other religions meant that Theravāda Buddhism has been “an integral element of Thai identity.”¹⁰⁹ At a lecture c.1914 for his personal paramilitary, the Wild Tiger Corps, King Vajiravuth makes his stance clear:

Every religion is suitable to particular nations and races. Buddhism is suitable to the Siamese race and ‘inseparable from our nation’. In other words, Buddhism is for Thai people. Besides, no other countries in the world knows Buddhism better than Siam, and Buddhism is only secure in Siam.¹¹⁰

This association between nation and Buddhism has perpetuated itself until today. Although this does not mean that non-Buddhists are excluded from the national community, it can create discomfort and even resentment among non-Buddhist groups. The problem is especially acute for the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand as they constitute 80 percent of the population of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces as well as in five districts of Songkhla.¹¹¹ In spite of being a demographic minority in the region Buddhists, especially representatives of the central state, sense their hegemony, given the conflation between Buddhism and national identity. This contradiction between a “superiority complex” and local reality opens the door to tensions and even to conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in this region.¹¹² An illustration of this was the project made public in January 2016 by the Pattani provincial authorities, in agreement with local *sangha* leaders, to create a 16-hectare Buddhist Park in a

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, “Buddhist Apologetics and a Genealogy of Comparative Religion in Siam,” *Numen* 62, no. 1 (2015): 76–99.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹² Interview, Suwanna Satha-Anand, May 2016.

Muslim-majority district. Faced with the prospect of massive protests by the local Muslims, the military government forced the provincial authorities to shelve the project.¹¹³

As Michael K. Jerryson shows in *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand*, the Thai state is using Buddhist monks as “living symbols of the Nation”—and they are so perceived by the Thai Muslims of Malay culture and ethnicity in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, with their decades-long ethno-religious insurgency, and which have seen an upsurge in violence since 2004 partly due to the Thaksin government’s confrontational approach.¹¹⁴ This stance transformed Buddhist monks into targets for the Muslim insurgents: at least twenty-three have been killed in the region since 2004. The monks are vehicles of a powerful combination of religion and nationalism. Each murder of a monk in the south, even if it has nothing do with the insurgency, is transformed from a localized incident and added to the state’s narrative of an ongoing conflict between Muslim separatists and the Buddhist nation-state, or in other words, into a religious war.¹¹⁵

The militarization of southern temples, now occupied and guarded by soldiers and police, along with the presence of “military monks”—soldiers who are ordained and keep their weapons while officiating as monks—reinforces this conflation between the Buddhist religion and nationalist politics in the eyes of Thai Malay Muslims. As Jerryson shows, Buddhist monks in the south, however they behave individually, are unable to counter the pervasive use of their personae as symbols of the state.

Some monks, however, are enthusiastic participants of this process, actively reinforcing the perception that they act in the name of the central state. On October 20, 2005 for instance, the Pattani Sangha Council published a twenty-point declaration four days after a violent attack on a Buddhist temple in the Panare district of Pattani, during which an elderly abbot and two temple boys were killed. The chief monk of Pattani province, Phra Maha Thawing

¹¹³ “Pattani Buddhist Park Project Put on Hold,” *The Nation*, January 21, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Khemkaro, who initiated the declaration, argued that the southern monks should get involved in politics because they had kept quiet for a long time in the face of violence by Muslim insurgents and had not seen any results.¹¹⁶ The declaration was also strongly critical of the National Reconciliation Commission, an independent commission led by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun aimed at developing ways to lower tensions in the three provinces and help resolve the conflict. Khemkaro and some other monks felt that the commission was pro-Muslim and had sold out their interests.

Box 11 - A bridge between Buddhist nationalisms in Thailand and in Myanmar

In June 2015, the first signs emerged of links being built between Buddhist nationalists in Thailand and the anti-Muslim Buddhist movement Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) in Myanmar. The Bangkok-based World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth, led by Pornchai Pinyapong, donated THB1.5 million (US\$42,000) to Ma Ba Tha in order for the ultra-nationalist movement, which had led a violent anti-Muslim campaign since 2012 aimed at the Rohingya of western Myanmar and other Muslim communities in the country, to set up two radio stations to broadcast its confrontational message.

At the official donation ceremony in Yangon, Pornchai said to local journalists that the issue of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state “was the same problem as the southern part of Thailand.”¹¹⁷

A new step was taken in February 2016 when Ashin Wirathu (b. 1968), Ma Ba Tha’s extremist monk-leader, received an award in Bangkok on behalf of his movement for “being an outstanding Buddhist peace organization.” The award was organized by the World Buddhist Leaders Organization, also chaired by Pornchai Pinyapong. But the award ceremony was presided over by an elder from the Supreme Sangha Council. During his stay in Bangkok, Wirathu was also received with great pomp at the

¹¹⁶ Duncan McCargo, “The Politics of Buddhist Identity in Thailand’s Deep South: The Demise of Civil Religion?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 30.

¹¹⁷ “Shun Hateful Buddhists,” *Bangkok Post*, July 6, 2015.

Dhammakaya temple as well as at the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University.¹¹⁸ In February 2017, Ma Ba Tha and Ashin Wirathu organized two demonstrations in Myanmar to show their support for the Dhammakaya temple while it was surrounded by thousands of police officers who were trying to arrest Phra Dhammachayo. All these institutions and temples have been actively campaigning to make Buddhism the national religion, as well as helping to strengthen the presence of Buddhist clergy in southern provinces with Muslim majority populations.

Some monks outside of the south have been pouring oil on the fire. One of these is Maha Aphichat, the 30-year-old monk of the Mahanikai temple Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok, who in October 2015 launched a call on his Facebook page “to burn a mosque for every Buddhist monk killed in the south.” His call elicited many reactions both in support and in opposition until the military government forced him to take his page down. His call, reminiscent of Kittiwuttho’s words, is testimony to the views on political violence of some within the *sangha*: if Buddhism is attacked, then violence is justified on grounds of self-defense.¹¹⁹ Maha Aphichat and some other radical Thai monks have established bridges with ultra-nationalist Myanmar monks, led by Ashin Wirathu, who has been advocating violence against the Muslim Rohingyas living in western Myanmar close to the border with Bangladesh (see Box 11).

The setting up of Buddhist volunteer militias in the south like Or Ror Bor (Village Protection Volunteers), under the patronage of Queen Sirikit, has also fed Buddhist chauvinism and anti-Muslim hatred. According to field interviews by Duncan McCargo, the volunteers are armed and trained, not only to defend their Buddhist villages but also in preparation for a future civil war when

¹¹⁸ Sanitsuda Ekachai, “Dangerous Path Toward Religious Extremism,” *Bangkok Post*, March 23, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Panu Wongcha-um, “Prominent Buddhist Monk Fans Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Thailand,” *Channel News Asia online*, February 8, 2016; <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/prominent-buddhist-monk-fans-anti-muslim-sentiment-in-thailand-8170856> (accessed October 31, 2017).

Muslims will launch “large scale attacks” to drive Buddhists out of their homes en masse.¹²⁰

The long-standing campaign to make Buddhism the national religion in the constitution has been fed by the violence against Buddhists and especially against monks in the south, which has given this campaign new momentum. For the southern Buddhist monks, who consider that the official *sangha* hierarchy is too slow to act and have formed their own associations—for instance, the Center of Buddhist Affairs in Support of the Southern Three Border Provinces (CBA)—the violence committed against Buddhists and monks in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, as well as in several districts of Songkhla, is proof that Buddhism is under threat from Islam in Thailand and needs special protection. In 2015 and 2016, petitions circulated in temples across the country, and some monks asked their temple’s followers to sign it in fiery anti-Muslim sermons.¹²¹

The Dhammakaya Temple has been especially active in this campaign to gather signatures to make Buddhism the national religion as well as to help southern Buddhist monks, sending them monthly relief funds, and sending monks to the region for temporary stays.¹²² Jesada Buaban’s recent and thorough study of several Facebook pages set up by Wat Phra Dhammakaya has demonstrated that the temple has deftly managed to use the southern conflict to garner the support of Buddhists and to undermine the campaign to reform Buddhism launched by the military government since 2014.¹²³

Dhammakaya has consistently emphasized that the reform campaign led by Paiboon Nititawan to audit the assets of and levy taxation on all temples, and ensure doctrinal conformity with orthodox Theravāda Buddhism would undermine the *sangha* and facilitate the rise of Islam in Thailand. Dhammakaya

¹²⁰ McCargo, “The Politics of Buddhist Identity in Thailand’s Deep South,” 26.

¹²¹ I attended one such sermon at Sam Chuk temple, Suphanburi province, in November 2015.

¹²² Interview, Phra Pasura Dantamano, February 2016.

¹²³ Jesada Buaban, ความทรงจำในดวงแก้ว: ความทรงจำที่แปรเปลี่ยนไปเกี่ยวกับวัดพระธรรมกายภายใต้ปริมณฑลรัฐบาล, ทหารปี พ. ศ. 2557–2559 [Memory in Crystal: Changing memory on Dhammakaya Movement under the umbrella of military junta 2014–2016] Southeast Asian Studies Program, Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 2016 (unpublished).

goes so far as to speak about a concerted campaign by the military government and Muslims to weaken Buddhism. It has also used this as an argument to ask for Buddhism to be made the national religion of Thailand so that it can get more government support. According to the number of “likes” and comments on these Facebook pages, the temple’s tactic has been quite successful.¹²⁴ There is indeed a deeply-rooted belief among a number of Dhammakaya lay followers that there is a long-term “Muslim plot” to “take over Buddhist Thailand.”¹²⁵

The push to make Buddhism the national religion

Buddhism and the Constitution

Every time a new constitution of Thailand is drafted, some Buddhist associations—for instance, the Buddhist Academics Association and the Voluntary Buddhist Council of Civil Society—launch a campaign to have the future constitution stipulate that Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand.¹²⁶ So far, these efforts have failed, but each time, particularly in the two last constitutions, these conservative groups have gained some ground.

For instance, the 2007 Constitution stipulated in its section 79: “The state shall patronize and protect Buddhism which the majority of Thais have followed for a long time and other religions.” The words “which the majority of Thais have followed for a long time” were an addition compared to section 73 of the 1997 Constitution. This was a concession made to the radical Buddhist lobby who had unsuccessfully pushed for Buddhism to be made national religion.¹²⁷ But the traditional mention of the importance of “promoting religious harmony”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Interviews with Dhammakaya followers, March 2017.

¹²⁶ Since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has had 20 constitutions, which is an average of about one every four years. The most recent constitution, drafted in 2016, was enacted in April 2017.

¹²⁷ Interview, Gothom Arya, September 2016.

was written in section 79 of the 2007 Constitution as it had been in most of the previous constitutions.

Radical Buddhists made more progress with the junta's 2016 draft charter, which was approved by referendum on August 7, 2016. This time, section 67 went further and stipulated:

With a view to patronizing and protecting the Buddhism, which has long been professed by the majority of the Thai people, the state shall promote and support education in and propagation of the principles of Theravāda Buddhism for the purpose of mental and intellectual development, and shall establish measures and mechanisms to prevent the desecration of Buddhism in any form. The state shall also encourage the participation of all Buddhists in the application of such measures and mechanisms.

This constitutional call to Buddhists to participate in the protection of Buddhism and the prevention of the desecration of Buddhism understandably made Thais of other faiths, in particular the Muslims of southern Thailand, uncomfortable. Buddhism was this time clearly put at a level superior to other religions. One indication of the Muslim discomfort was the very high number of “no” votes to the draft charter in the southern provinces during the August 7, 2016 referendum as well as the high number of defaced and spoiled ballots.

The draft Section 67 went even further and completely dropped the traditional call for “religious harmony.” The military junta apparently realized, when analysing the referendum results, that something was amiss, and that there was a high risk of increasing discontent among the Muslims. Thus on August 22, barely two weeks after the referendum, Prayuth Chan-ocha issued an order under section 44 of the interim charter—which gives him absolute power for the good of national security—trying to correct the effects of section 67 of the draft charter.

The order set up a panel to “prevent acts which threaten Buddhism and other religions” and mentioned this time the duty of the state to “promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions.” This affirmation that “the state must protect all religions equally,” according to the words of

Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan,¹²⁸ went some way to reassure believers of other faiths, but the confidence of Muslims in the attitude of the government towards them had been eroded.¹²⁹

The debate on Buddhism as national religion

The promoters of Buddhism as the national religion are mostly found among monks linked to the Red Shirts, which may be surprising as they may appear to be more “progressive.” Wat Phra Dhammakaya is a strong supporter of the campaign, as is Phra Methee Dhammachan, the vice-rector of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University. Their argument is based on several grounds. The first is cultural. Buddhist nationalists justify their call by the fact that Buddhism has for many centuries played a dominant role in shaping Thai culture and the Thai ethos or Thainess. “The kindness, calmness, generosity and sense of compromise of the Thais,” say these proponents, comes from Buddhism.¹³⁰ They also emphasize that the high proportion of Thais who are Buddhist—around 95 percent—would also amply justify Buddhism being declared the national religion.

They often make comparisons with other countries to make their point, emphasizing, for instance, that Islam is the official religion of neighboring Malaysia, even if only 55 percent of Malaysians are Muslims.¹³¹ The fact that there are countries where the religion of the majority is not enshrined as the state religion, for instance, in the cases of Hinduism in India or Islam in Indonesia, does not seem relevant to them.

Second, promoters of Buddhism as the state religion argue that it needs protection. For them, Buddhism is being weakened by the aggressiveness of Thai Muslims—illustrated by the killing of monks and lay Buddhists in the

¹²⁸ “Religion S44 order ‘clears confusion,’” *Bangkok Post*, August 24, 2016.

¹²⁹ Interview, Angkhana Neelapajit, member of the Thai National Human Rights Commission, September 2016.

¹³⁰ Interview, Phra Pasura Dantamano, February 2016.

¹³¹ Interview, Phra Methee Dhammachan, May 2016.

south—as well as by the rise of criticisms against Buddhism as shown in the Somdet Chuang case, and finally by the lack of discipline and misbehavior of some monks.

They feel that constitutionally enshrining Buddhism as the state religion would be a first step to protecting and strengthening Buddhism, but some want to go further. For instance, the secretary of the Committee to Protect Buddhism as the State Religion, Korn Meedee, is asking for “heavy penalties, such as jail terms for monks who cause harm and disgrace.” He also wants the authorities to help “eradicate images that do not properly represent Buddhism, as well as non-pure forms of Buddhism.”¹³² The idea is to create legal protection for Buddhism similar to Article 112, which protects the king, queen, heir apparent and regent from threats, insults and defamation—that is, to establish a crime of lèse-Buddhism.

Box 12 - Interview with Louis Gabaude, Professor Emeritus of Buddhist Studies, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, July 2016

What is your view on the evolution of Thai Buddhism at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century?

Louis Gabaude: I think we have not analyzed enough the role of King Chulalongkorn in the destruction of local cultures. I am not sure if it was intended, but when he standardized the Thai writing system across the country—what we call today the modern Thai writing—the effect was to put out of fashion all the regional scripts. The Thai script was not used in the Buddhist texts of central Thailand, where *khorm*, a form of Khmer script, was used for these texts. Not only the local religious culture of central Thailand, but also the cultures of the northeast and the north were progressively erased.

Little by little, people became unable to read in the regional alphabets, and, thus, unable to benefit from what was transmitted by these local texts. The cultural and

¹³² Nanchanok Wongsamuth, “Push to Make Buddhism State Religion,” *Bangkok Post*, October 25, 2015.

religious past of large parts of Thailand became inaccessible, except for a few individuals. Chulalongkorn's policies unified the country politically, but destroyed it culturally, or at least destroyed the sub-cultures.

And since that time, has there been really no change to the administrative organization of the monastic community?

When the monks were organized at a national level, the honorific titles took precedence over everything else. Monks study Pali language, not with the intention of having a deeper understanding of the texts, but to obtain their Pali graduations: Pali 4, Pali 5, until Pali 9. Because they know that with these titles, they can climb up the Bangkok hierarchy, as all the local titles—like *khru* and so on—have been destroyed.

This transferred the prestige of religious authority to a realm that was not spiritual. That is why, in parallel to the Bangkok hierarchy, there is a spiritual hierarchy that has emerged, based on miraculous powers or on the concentration or meditation powers attributed to some monks. This second hierarchy is built on the reputation of these monks, a little bit like the reputation of the Saints was built up in Christianity. But today, the Bangkok press is also echoing this “local reputation,” which therefore is not only local anymore.

Would the campaign to make Buddhism the national religion somehow be a logical consequence of the fact that Buddhism has been used by the central state as a tool of legitimization?

When the new leaders of Siam wrote the constitution in 1932, they played on the ambiguity of the word *satsana*. For the monks and most of the people, it means “teachings (of the Buddha)” or “Buddhism,” but for intellectuals and secular people the word actually means “religion.” Pridi Banomyong had been trained in France and was probably for secularism, but he and the others used the ambiguity of the word to say that the king was the protector of religions or of the religion, without saying that he was especially the protector of Buddhism.

From the viewpoint of the monks, they think that if Buddhism were the national religion, they would have a stronger institutional guarantee for their security, what I would call their “alimentary security.” But clearly, politicians do not want this, particularly today with the Muslim problem in the south. It would be a time bomb.¹³³

¹³³ Interview conducted in French.

The opponents to making Buddhism the national religion are a more diverse group. They include virulent anti-Dhammakaya monks, like Phra Buddha Isara, but also more moderate figures like the forest monk Phra Paisal Visalo and many lay Buddhist intellectuals, such as Suwanna Satha-Anand, Vichak Panich or Sulak Sivaraksa.¹³⁴ Most of them emphasize that making Buddhism the national religion would embolden Buddhist radicals and increase the tensions between Buddhists and Muslims. For them, the linkage made since the nineteenth century between Buddhism and the nation is at the root of many of the problems in the religion: Buddhism was made a tool of the Thai state, which created a gap between the *sangha* and the people. Monks have become disconnected “from the suffering of the people” and enshrining Buddhism’s status as state religion would only accentuate the problem.

In their view, the fact that Buddhism is de facto the dominant factor in shaping Thai culture is enough, and there would be no advantage to have a constitutional section “imposing” Buddhism as state religion. This would even be an admission of failure as it would be an acknowledgement that Buddhism has weakened so much that it is not able to positively influence Thai society. Thus, they think that the priority should be to better explain and promote the essence of Buddhist values, and more widely, of religious values in Thai society, rather than to adopt legal protection of Buddhism.

¹³⁴ Interviews with Phra Paisal Visalo, April 2016; Suwanna Satha-Anand, May 2016; Vichak Panich, February 2016; Sulak Sivaraksa, April 2015.

Conclusion

This book has argued that the long-standing subservience of Buddhism to the central state in Thailand, and its use for nation-building purposes, has been the main factor behind the weakening of the religion. The disconnect between the leadership of the Thai *sangha* and the lives of common people, as well as the increasing political polarization within the *sangha* in the last two decades, has aggravated this state of deliquescence. The monastic community is no longer meaningful for an increasing number of people and each financial, political or sexual scandal serves to further erode the *sangha*'s relevance. The archaic monastic hierarchy is unable to control the monkhood; it is out of touch with contemporary Thai society and yet doggedly resists any attempts at reform.

The stagnation of the *sangha* is of utmost consequence for the country. With Thailand in the stormwaters of a transition to a new kind of society, the *sangha* does not seem able to play the role of moral guide or unifier to lead the country through these turbulent times. As historian Niddhi Eoseewong states, “The Thai *sangha* is weak intellectually, socially, morally, weak at every level. Thai Buddhism is irrelevant in terms of organization and in terms of ideology. [...] Thai monks cannot adapt themselves to give some answers to the present situation in the world.”¹³⁵ The nationalistic trilogy of Thai identity—Nation-Religion-King—is fragile and nothing has yet emerged, or even begun to take shape, to replace it and give a new cohesiveness to Thai society.

¹³⁵ Interview, Niddhi Eoseewong, July 2016.

Some lay critics point to the fossilization of the Thai *sangha* as the reason for its inability to face the challenges of the day, but it must not be forgotten that Theravāda Buddhism is intrinsically conservative, as it is the repetition of a doctrine formulated 2,500 years ago. “In Theravāda Buddhism [...], the Buddha has formulated everything perfectly and once for all. [...] How can you really be a Theravāda Buddhist monk if you are not conservative? By essence, so called Theravāda Buddhism is and has to be conservative,” says Gabaude.¹³⁶

Overall, it is difficult to see a positive scenario for Thai Buddhism. At one extreme, Thai Buddhism could continue to go down the slope of nationalism and politicization, being for instance, made the national religion, which would be a springboard for the most conservative version of Buddhism to become dominant. The religion would run the risk of being hollowed out, or of falling under the control of an opportunistic and dynamic movement like Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s, adept at exploiting Thai Buddhism and its institutions for its own benefit.

Another, less likely, scenario would entail a greater alienation between Buddhism and the state. The Thai *sangha* would lose state support, cut most of its attachments, and become closer to the local communities who would both materially support and control them, as was the case in the past. Phra Paisal Visalo has made detailed proposals to this end. While such an evolution is not completely unrealistic, it would require a complete reform of the *sangha*’s organizational structure, along the lines of decentralization and greater participation of monks at the local level.¹³⁷ Another obstacle would be the cultural order, as there is a common understanding within a large part of the Thai population that Buddhism is de facto the national religion, meaning that it has a

¹³⁶ Manuel Olivares, “Glimpses of Theravada Buddhism: Interview with Louis Gabaude,” <http://www.viverealtrimenti.com/glimpses-of-theravada-buddhism-interview-to-louis-gabaude/>; February 2017.

¹³⁷ Phra Paisal Visalo, “Buddhism for the Next Century: Towards Renewing a Moral Thai Society,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium: Essays in Honour of Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka (Bhikku P.A. Payutto) on his 60th Birthday Anniversary*, edited by Sulak Sivaraksa, Pipob Udomittipong and Chris Walker (Bangkok: Santhirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation and Foundation for Children, 1999), 235–52.

special status in the country and that the state must nurture and protect the faith.¹³⁸

In any case, Thai Buddhism is clearly in need of renewal—rather like the Catholic Church in South America, which was dying from its close association with the state authorities in the 1970s, before Liberation Theology came to inject new blood into the system, by reminding clerics that it is the people, not the elite or the state, which keep the religion alive. The path for the rejuvenation of Thai Buddhism is then rather well-delineated, but the question is whether a significant proportion of the *sangha* is willing to commit itself to this, and whether the political authorities and other sections of the Thai elite would allow such internal reforms to proceed.

¹³⁸ Niddhi Eoseewong, “The Thai Cultural Constitution,” translated and introduced by Chris Baker, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 3 (March 2003); <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/the-thai-cultural-constitution/> (accessed October 28, 2017).

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