

# Buddhism, Democracy and Identity in Thailand

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Buddhism in Thailand has been characterized as a 'revolutionary' force, since rationalist Buddhist teachings offer considerable support for progressive and democratic political ideas. The reality, however, is that Thai Buddhism has been captured by the state, and its latent radicalism neutralized. The symbiotic relationship between the state and *sangha* has effectively limited Buddhism to the role of legitimating state power, and the universalistic teachings of Buddhism have been subordinated to nationalist ideology. While there is some interest in progressive ideas, overall numbers of monks are falling, and commercialized folk Buddhism has gained the upper hand. Monastic sexual and financial misdeeds are widespread. Thai Buddhism is also highly intolerant of those who deviate from mainstream teachings, making a mockery of ideas of freedom of religion. The Thai state strongly supports a conservative, orthodox and authoritarian mode of Buddhism. Insofar as Thailand has experienced processes of democratic transition and consolidation in recent decades, it has been in spite of the role of Buddhism.

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Thai Buddhism offers an interesting example of a religion that enjoys an ambiguous relationship with processes of political liberalization and change. On the one hand, Theravada Buddhism would appear to contain many elements highly compatible with liberal democracy. At the heart of its teachings resides an ethical message based on tolerance and the quest for individual pursuit of moral behaviour and enlightenment. In theory, Buddhism – founded by a prince who gave away his worldly goods – rejects hierarchy and promotes ideas of equality. Harris argues that the Buddha's teachings seem to offer support for republican or even socialist ideas, and cites examples of Buddhist involvement in anti-colonial, nationalist and reformist movements.<sup>1</sup> Though Larry Diamond has argued that religion forms an important component of political culture, and thus should have a powerful impact on democracy,<sup>2</sup> he has nothing specific to say about the relationship between Buddhism and democracy, a topic on which there is a paucity of literature.

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Charles Keyes has argued that Thai Buddhism has been based upon 'revolutionary' ideas,<sup>3</sup> such as a nineteenth-century reformation carried out by King Mongkut.<sup>4</sup> He makes the extraordinary argument that a revolution has been taking place in Thailand, based on 'visions of a future which can be realized through ethically impelled practical action'.<sup>5</sup>

This account argues that Keyes' vision of a revolutionary and progressive Thai Buddhism is overly positive, and that most recent practice in Thailand has been essentially reactionary. The core teachings of Buddhism have been overlaid with superstitious accretions, and a widespread preoccupation with accumulating merit. Given that Buddhist ideas are highly abstract, popular forms of the religion tend to focus on images and rituals. As guardians of images and rituals, monks (numbering in the hundreds of thousands) have assumed considerable importance in Thai society – an importance legitimated by their political functions in relation to the Thai state. Rather than advocating the universalism which some have seen as the essence of Buddhist teaching, most Thai monks and Buddhist thinkers have preferred to espouse a particularistic worldview, placing Thailand at its centre.<sup>6</sup> The result is a captured Buddhism, preoccupied with the preservation of orthodoxy and the maintenance of the established order. While Thailand's politics have been undergoing considerable reform over the past 30 years, Thai Buddhism has ossified and is in urgent need of a thoroughgoing reformation.

Around 95 per cent of Thais are Buddhist. Although no Thai constitution has ever specified that Buddhism is actually the state religion, all have stated that the king professes the Buddhist faith. The official Buddhist hierarchy parallels the bureaucratic order, and is intimately tied to the Thai state, for which it performs important functions of legitimation.<sup>7</sup> Numerous political measures over the past two centuries illustrate attempts by the secular authorities to bring Buddhism under state control. Yet Buddhism's close ties with political authority in Thailand are not those of a 'critical collaborator' (to borrow Cardinal Sin's onetime description of the Philippine Catholic Church). The Thai *sangha* (Buddhist order) has long been an uncritical collaborator with the state, legitimating the state without comment and without reproach. As Somboon Suksamran notes, 'Despite its esteem and prestige, the *sangha* has not been able to exercise its influence over the political authority. Rather, the Thai *sangha* has been loyal and subservient to political authority in return for patronage and protection.'<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the Thai monkhood differs greatly from the politically activist monkhoods of neighbouring Burma and Vietnam, for example, where monks have played an active role both in anti-colonialist nationalist movements and in postcolonial anti-government protests. In Thailand, as in Laos and Cambodia, the *sangha* has regularly been enlisted by the state to mobilize Buddhism as a legitimating force for the task of nation building.

Understanding the special relationship between the Buddhist and political orders in Thailand requires some familiarity with Thai historiography. Thailand is generally considered 'unique' in Southeast Asia, in that it was never formally colonized by western powers. Most scholars, both Thai and non-Thai, have seen Thailand's non-colonization as a blessing made possible by the diplomatic skills of Siam's nineteenth-century kings. More critical scholars, led by Benedict Anderson, have suggested that Siam was in fact informally colonized, that the lack of a colonial experience inhibited the emergence of a genuine nationalist movement in the country, and this led in turn to an immature and unstable political order.<sup>9</sup> Anderson suggests that the kind of modernization carried out by the Chakri kings was analogous to that pursued by colonial governors under formal imperialism. In this sense, the incorporation of the Buddhist *sangha* into a political order organized along principles of internal colonialism is an important element of the legacy of the absolute monarchy. A new political order was ushered in by the 1932 events which ended the absolute monarchy, but the country was left with a 'modernized' (in other words, a subordinated and captured) Buddhist *sangha*. From 1932 to 1973, Thailand alternated between long spells of military rule and brief outbursts of electoral politics, in a political order dominated by uniformed and civilian bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup> 1973 saw a popular uprising against the military dictatorship of the time and, although the nascent radical student movement was violently repressed three years later, the Thai political order had been permanently changed. Thai politics saw major challenges to authoritarianism in the 1970s, symbolized most explicitly by the student-led mass movement of October 1973, which culminated in the ouster of a military government and the beginning of a more open period of politics. Following the repressive bloodshed of October 1976, the 1980s and 1990s saw the gradual institutionalization of electoral politics – despite such setbacks as the 1991 military coup and the 1992 shooting dead of pro-democracy demonstrators. Thai Buddhism remains to a significant extent enmeshed in an earlier set of political structures, immune from the emergence of much more plural and liberal politics since the 1970s. This reflects the role of the Buddhist order as the handmaiden of the Thai state.

Despite the elaborate formal structures of the Thai *sangha*, the institution is not nearly so monolithic as it might first appear. In practice, individual monks and abbots have considerable freedom of operation. By no means all monks are state-oriented: a significant proportion are society-oriented activists, working in fields such as community development, traditional medicine, conservation and moral education. There is also a strong tradition of forest monks, dedicated to meditation and eschewing the trappings of modernity.<sup>11</sup> Yet as a whole, the Thai Buddhist *sangha* has proved incapable of responding effectively to the changing nature of Thailand's society and economy.

The general direction of Thai politics from 1973 onwards was towards greater pluralism and liberalism, but Buddhist thinking played a surprisingly small role in these developments, most of which occurred with little input from the orthodox *sangha*. Certainly, monks were not permitted to participate in radical protests or overt criticism of the political order – when a few tried, they were excoriated by the authorities. By contrast, monastic support for conservative causes went unchallenged, most notoriously when the outspoken right-wing monk Kittiwutto declared that ‘killing communists is not a sin’. This position reflected the extent to which Buddhist monks were themselves part of the military-bureaucratic establishment. Anything that undermined the dominance of the existing order would eventually lead to a questioning of the position of the *sangha*, and especially the privileged position of senior monks within the *sangha*, who formed an unaccountable gerontocracy.

The *sangha* faced numerous financial and other scandals in the 1980s and 1990s, ranging from a scam concerning royal decorations (temple benefactors who gave substantial donations were able to receive royal decorations, but in practice some monks were amenable to nominating people for less than the going rate) to sexual scandals involving the ‘superstar’ monk Phra Yantra, a charismatic preacher who fell from grace in 1995 and eventually fled to the United States. The overall picture was one of an ill-disciplined *sangha*, singularly failing to renew itself and reinvigorate Thai Buddhism. It was also a *sangha* ill-equipped to flourish in a more open political order, with a broader civil society. Much of the community role previously assumed by monks was now assumed by a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations, while a vociferous mass media scrutinized the affairs of temples much more closely than before.

In earlier centuries and decades, temples had offered an attractive opportunity to young men, especially those from poor backgrounds. Through the monastic system, men could gain a free education and a good standard of living. It is no secret that Thai monks, though theoretically forbidden to handle cash, actually receive significant incomes from the services they offer (ranging from blessing people, houses, cars and shops to suggesting numbers likely to win the lottery, and selling holy amulets). This income is crucial as an incentive for monastic recruitment, but can also serve to distort the priorities and activities of monks, contributing to widespread disciplinary lapses. In 2000, a television station screened footage of a monk ‘dressed in a military uniform with girls on his arm, driving a luxury Mercedes-Benz and residing in a house’.<sup>12</sup> In 2001, Manop Polparin of the government’s Religious Affairs Department declared that as many as one in ten Thai monks and novices were drug addicts – a problem most abbots sought to deny existed.<sup>13</sup> By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the numbers of monks in Thai temples had slumped alarmingly; many rural

temples had only one or two permanent resident monks, increased by a small number of temporary ordines during the rainy season. Young men in rural areas had a range of other options apart from entering the monkhood, especially the opportunity to work in Bangkok in the industrial or service sectors. Education could be gained through other routes, too, and monastic qualifications – based largely on memorizing Pali texts – were declining in attractiveness to employers. At the same time, the decline in permanent populations of lay villagers undermined the viability of rural temples. Because Thai temples rely on local villagers to feed their monks, villagers whose populations are depleted by large numbers of people working away from home find it difficult to support sizeable monastic communities. The central *sangha* does not fund or subsidize rural temples, and there are huge disparities in income between rural temples and the major urban temples, especially those in Bangkok. The main difference between Theravada Buddhism and other major world religions is the very high ratio of ordained to lay participants; maintaining this ratio is possible in relatively affluent and pious communities, but becomes increasingly difficult when levels of affluence or religiosity decline. Scandals involving the *sangha* have undermined public confidence and reduced levels of religious participation. Thus orthodox Theravada Buddhism is coming under sustained pressure, a pressure which ill equips it to form the basis of a religious, national or collective identity for Thai people.

The loud criticisms of the Thai Buddhist order currently being voiced contribute to a defensive, siege mentality among the *sangha* leadership. Well-known historian Nithi Aeusriwongse has argued that the *sangha* is in dire need of extensive structural reform.<sup>14</sup> He has called for a return to the traditional status of temples as educational centres for the community, run with the active participation of local people. In other words, he argues that Buddhism in Thailand can only be revitalized by severing the intimate bonds between *sangha* and state created during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), when Buddhism was bureaucratized and thoroughly subordinated to the nation-building project of the state. However, no recent Thai government has shown any enthusiasm for legislative reform of the *sangha* through repeal of the 1962 *Sangha* Act. Any such reform would trigger a backlash from conservative forces, which would denounce changes as politically motivated attempts to undermine one of the nation's highest institutions.

### **Particularism and Universalism in Recent Thai Buddhist Thought**

For the moment, Buddhism in Thailand remains an essentially domestic affair. At an official level, there are very few contacts between the Buddhist *sanghas* of mainland Southeast Asia. For the most part, Thai, Lao, Cambodian and Burmese monks do not visit each other's countries. Exceptions include a

few Thai monks who have personal ties with Burmese counterparts going back decades, and some Lao monks staying at temples in northeast Thailand, often for purposes of study. When a delegation of nine Thai monks went to Laos in 1989 (the first such delegation since 1975), their trip invoked the ire of the Thai military, who regarded their visit as a threat to national security. Regional gatherings of Buddhist clergy tend to be sponsored by international organizations for the discussion of social issues, rather than purely religious questions. Such gatherings, however, involve only those relatively small sections of the Thai *sangha* that are socially activist and internationalist in outlook. The *sangha* hierarchy often views meeting of this kind with suspicion, especially when they involve Japanese, Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese monks from the Mahayana tradition.

Buddhism has long been a source of identity for Thai people, rather than a universalistic religion. In this respect, Mahayana Buddhism – which supports the idea of an East Asian commonality – differs from the particularistic Theravada tradition. Suwanna sees the late scholar-monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu as the only genuinely universalistic thinker in recent Thai Buddhism, standing out against the dominant tendencies of particularism.<sup>15</sup> Buddhadasa (1906–1993) was the leading Thai Buddhist thinker of the twentieth century, a prolific writer and preacher who spent much of his life at Suan Mokh, a forest monastery he founded in the southern province of Surat Thani. Buddhadasa's writings have been immensely influential, both inside and outside Thailand. One of his main themes is the need to separate the core of Buddhist teachings (*dharma*) from superstitious accretions, such as the widespread popular preoccupation with fate (*kharma*). Suwanna defines Buddhadasa core intellectual project thus: how can Thai Buddhism be liberated from Thai popular culture? Buddhism needs to be liberated from its cultural constraints before universalism becomes possible. Universalism opens up Buddhism to all, including those in the West. But it ascribes no special significance to Asia; nowhere in this writings does Buddhadasa discuss the concept of Asia, or an Asian Buddhist identity. Suwanna regards Buddhism as a universalist religion which has been improperly commandeered by particular states and cultures to legitimate themselves.

Since the death of Buddhadasa, Pra Dhammadipok (Prayudh Payutto) has assumed the mantle of the pre-eminent scholar-monk of Thailand. Dhammadipok (who won the UNESCO prize for peace education in 1994) is much more of an establishment figure than Phuttathat, and one with a less universalistic outlook. Many of Dhammadipok's books contain the word 'Thai' in their titles, and explicitly contrast the positive aspects of Thai Buddhism with negative features of other cultures, especially western culture. Examples include his well-known *Looking to America to Solve Thailand's Problems*,<sup>16</sup> and more recent volumes including *Thailand Will*

*Be in Crisis if Thais Have Unnatural Faith, Looking for Thai Culture Based on True Education, and Love: from Valentine to Thai-ness.*<sup>17</sup> All these books stress the degree to which Thais are in danger of losing sight of their indigenous cultural and religious values.

In recent years, Thai claims of a culturally distinctive national identity have been challenged by the discourse of business and management studies. The popularity of books by business gurus and futurologists such as Tom Peters, Alvin Toffler and John Naisbitt (many of which have been best-sellers in Thai translation) has given rise to an alternative 'universalism' predicated upon the philosophy of the market. Phra Dhammapidok has criticized the fashion for the concepts of 'globalization' and 'reengineering' in Thailand.<sup>18</sup> These terms have become extremely pervasive in popular discourse, as well as constant reference points in academic and business circles. Dhammapidok has argued that negative aspects of globalization, such as environmental degradation, intense business competition, and the quest for personal advantage, has overshadowed the positive aspects stressed by most commentators. He has been similarly critical of the concept of re-engineering, which he argued was aimed simply at intensifying the level of competition in business. He argued that western civilization was fundamentally flawed in its view (derived from Greek civilization) that man is superior to nature, a misunderstanding which had led to environmental destruction and human suffering.<sup>19</sup> He was concerned to defend the particularist religious discourse of Thai Buddhism against the quasi-universal, secular threat posed by western business culture. Thus he argued on two fronts, rejecting both secularism and cultural homogenization. Dhammapidok's thinking illustrates precisely the limited engagement of mainstream Thai Buddhist thinking with ideas of liberalism. The principles he advocated were consistently tied to a conservative, nationalist agenda, representing the respectable and articulate voice of the orthodox *sangha*.

### **Sulak Sivaraksa: Conservative Radicalism**

One outstanding figure who has attempted to promote an internationalist, universalist Buddhism is the prominent social critic and intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa. Ironically, however, Sulak's internationalism is based upon ideas of cultural nationalism. When Sulak and like-minded intellectuals challenge the orthodox linkage between official Buddhism and the Thai state, they employ what Thongchai called a 'conservative radical' or a 'Buddhist radical' argument.<sup>20</sup> That is, they argue for a different definition of 'Thainess' from that advocated by conservative nationalists. 'Thainess' for them consists of indigenous principles of Thai Buddhist culture, which have been distorted and misrepresented by the orthodoxies of the state. Nevertheless, this reading

of Thai Buddhism is of a cultural nationalist character, rather than either a universalist interpretation, or one based on a sense of shared Asian identity. As Thongchai notes, this 'radical Buddhist' view of Thainess is predicated upon a sense of threat, a feeling that Thai identity is endangered by the pervasive dominance of western culture. Sulak, however, has sought to establish links with other Buddhists through non-governmental organizations such as the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development. His writings are pervaded with criticisms of western influences and western consumerism,<sup>21</sup> a problematic argument given that many consumer products sold in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries are of Japanese (and increasingly South Korean) design and origin. Sulak's ideas have singularly failed to gain popular currency, influencing only relatively narrow intellectual circles.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that he is first and foremost a cultural nationalist, Sulak has the English skills and the international connections to reach beyond Thailand. Interestingly, Sulak began his career in just the opposite way, helping to introduce the principles of western social science to Thailand during the 1960s, and promoting the translation of classic western texts into Thai. Now he has diversified away from intellectual import, and into intellectual and spiritual export. By doing so, he is attempting to expand the realm of Thai cultural values. In one 1995 interview, Sulak lamented that Thailand had the potential to assume leadership of the international Buddhist movement, but no one was interested in taking on the challenge.<sup>23</sup> Sulak's stance illustrates a further dimension of Buddhist political discourse in Thailand: his criticisms of the orthodox *sangha* were always predicated on his deeply royalist conservatism. Ultimately, he is a product and admirer of the Thai establishment, rather than someone who has sought to subvert it.

### **Thai-ness and 'Radical Buddhist' Political Discourse**

At the same time, elements of a 'conservative radical Buddhist' discourse have proved politically popular at a more general level. One prominent politician who has exploited the appeal of a 'radical Buddhist' nationalist discourse in Thailand is the former Bangkok governor and Palang Dharma Party founder Chamlong Srimuang.<sup>24</sup> Chamlong is a devoted member of the ascetic Santi Asoke Buddhist movement. Santi Asoke, led by the charismatic former television star Photirak, has several thousand members across Thailand, many living in model village communities, and adhering to a strict code of behaviour. Photirak has been in conflict with the Thai government and the *sangha* authorities, which viewed Santi Asoke as a dissident movement; Photirak and his fellow Santi Asoke monks were expelled from the *sangha* in 1988, and were subsequently prosecuted for violations of religious law. Chamlong himself is

famous for eating only one vegetarian meal a day, and having taken a vow of celibacy. While advocating Thai values and behaviour, such as wearing Thai clothes and eating Thai fruits, he stresses that his approach is practical and unromantic: he wants to improve contemporary Thai society, rather than simply reverting to the past. Nevertheless, Chamlong's references to Thainess appeared largely rhetorical, the conjuring up of an edifying mythical Thai village as an electoral commodity to improve his political prospects. Chamlong won remarkable political success in the Bangkok gubernatorial elections of 1985 and 1990, and his party briefly held almost every parliamentary seat in Bangkok following the March 1992 general election. Chamlong's ability to consolidate his political career even after Santi Asoke was expelled from the *sangha* demonstrated that he was not reliant on state approval; his electoral successes seemed to suggest the emergence of a new mode of political populism, and certainly testified to the way in which the Bangkok electorate was willing to back non-standard politicians. It was clear that the wider urban public was much more tolerant of the 'dissident' Santi Asoke than were bureaucrats and senior monks. At the same time, Chamlong's affiliations with the movement marked him down as a threat in the eyes of many conservatives. In May 1992, Chamlong became the leading figure in an extra-parliamentary movement to oust former coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon from the premiership. The movement succeeded – though at least 44 people and probably twice that many were shot dead on the streets of Bangkok. Chamlong paid a heavy personal price for his actions; implicitly rebuked by the king as a trouble maker, his political career was effectively finished. While it is impossible to say exactly what part Chamlong's religious views played in his political downfall, it seems likely that his Santi Asoke connections meant he was never trusted in the palace.<sup>25</sup>

Chamlong never explicitly linked his Buddhist radicalism to a detailed political programme, but his use of Buddhist radical discourse helped attract support from Bangkok voters disillusioned with the prevailing political order. Interviewed about questions such as 'Buddhist economics', Chamlong himself waffled and his economist secretary-general dismissed the idea.<sup>26</sup> Radical Buddhism was for them an image, rather than a set of policies. During the 1995 election, Chamlong's Palang Dharma Party ran an extremely popular television advertisement, featuring scenes from an idealized version of Thai village life. The advertisement illustrated Palang Dharma's attempts to project an image as an authentically Thai political party. The party collapsed politically soon after the 1996 general election, but ironically some of the ideas associated with Buddhist radicalism were popularized following the 1997 economic crisis.<sup>27</sup> In his birthday speech that year, the Thai king called for the creation of a 'sufficiency economy',<sup>28</sup> arguing that the crisis had shown Thais the importance of self-reliance, sustainability and thinking small.<sup>29</sup> Hewison has criticized such ideas for their romanticization of

village life, and implicit 'Buddhist chauvinism', privileging Buddhist conceptions of Thai culture and identity. In the aftermath of the crisis, Santi Asoke – which had long advocated certain localist ideas – saw a surge in interest.<sup>30</sup>

In 2001, the new Thai government led by billionaire telecommunications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra adopted some of the rhetoric of Buddhist radical nationalism, clearly seen in the name of his party: the Thais Love Thai Party (Thai Rak Thai).<sup>31</sup> Thaksin supported the idea of 'one district, one product', a localist economic policy which had been imported from Japan, but resembled many of Chamlong's earlier pet projects. Chamlong was a close associate of Thaksin, who had taken over the leadership of Palang Dharma in an earlier political incarnation. Santi Asoke ideas popularized by Chamlong had been echoed by the king and were then picked up to promote a political party led by the chief representative of Thailand's nouveau riche. These apparently bizarre borrowings and adaptations reflect the complexity of Thai politics in the early twenty-first century.

### **Political Reform and Religious Freedom**

A landmark in modern Thai politics was the new constitution of 1997, widely hailed as a 'peoples' constitution', and said by some to have 'laid the basis for long term emergence of Thai liberalism'.<sup>32</sup> An important feature of the 1997 constitution was its emphasis on rights – including the creation of a human rights commission, an entirely new innovation. Prawase Wasi, one of the architects of the constitution, came under considerable pressure from Buddhist groups to make Buddhism the national religion, pressures which were ultimately resisted.<sup>33</sup> Like previous Thai constitutions (the 1997 constitution was Thailand's 16th since 1932), the 1997 constitution stated that all Thais have the right to religious freedom. Indeed, it goes further than its two predecessors in stating that a person 'shall enjoy full liberty to . . . observe religious precepts'.<sup>34</sup> This covered activities related to religious belief, but not amounting to acts of worship. But as Streckfuss and Templeton note, the provisions of the 1997 constitution offer less protection than those suggested by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; in particular, they do not explicitly protect the freedom to adopt a different religion.

Thailand is not a country characterized by serious religious persecution or overt bigotry, and most Thais would undoubtedly assert that they and their compatriots enjoy full religious freedom. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence to contradict this view, in the specific case of Buddhist groups or movements whose teachings deviate from the lines adopted by the state-sanctioned *sangha* hierarchy. The best example concerns Wat Thammakai, a middle-class Buddhist movement centred on a large temple complex just

north of Bangkok. The movement has long been associated with ambitious building projects funded by sizeable donations solicited from followers – including members of many elite business, bureaucratic and political families – and for the unorthodox meditation techniques it advocates, promising a quick way to nirvana.<sup>35</sup> While another heterodox movement, Santi Asoke, was ousted from the orthodox *sangha* in the 1980s, Wat Thammakai flourished unchecked for much longer, largely owing to ‘protection’ from well-connected supporters. By 1999, however, Wat Thammakai was in disgrace, the abbot charged with various offences concerning illegal land purchases and embezzlement. These alleged crimes, however, were overshadowed by an outspoken public denunciation of the movement’s version of Buddhism, culminating in the Supreme Sangha Council ordering the abbot to renounce his teachings, and the Religious Affairs Department (part of the Ministry of Education) charging Wat Thammakai with ‘propagating false teachings on Nirvana, causing divisiveness among monks, and spreading heretic doctrines’.<sup>36</sup> However, as Streckfuss and Templeton observe, ‘heresy is not a crime, even in Thailand’.<sup>37</sup> In other words, there is a schizophrenic confusion at the heart of Thai thinking about Buddhism. On the one hand, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion; on the other hand, the Thai *sangha* and state believe that, like the medieval Catholic church, they possess the right to determine what does and does not amount to orthodox Buddhism. Under 1969 legislation, the Religious Affairs Department has the right to recognize new religious movements under certain clearly defined criteria, including their being non-political. For this reason, commentators such as Stewart have suggested that freedom of religion simply does not exist in Thailand.<sup>38</sup> What is rather surprising is that despite the popular sense of rights and democratic ideas supposedly manifest in the 1997 constitution-drafting process, there has been remarkably little public debate about freedom of religion as seen in the Wat Thammakai case. Practically no prominent Thai scholar or public figure spoke out openly in defence of the movement’s freedom to advocate divergent religious ideas; indeed, many individuals widely seen as liberal commentators expressed profoundly illiberal views on the question of Wat Thammakai, frequently conflating criminal charges against the abbot with criticisms of the movement’s Buddhist teachings. Even Santi Asoke, an organization that might be expected to support the principle of religious freedom, was quick to condemn Wat Thammakai. Santi Asoke’s chief administrator explained that Thammakai’s methods of soliciting donations violated Buddhist doctrines.<sup>39</sup>

This episode raises difficult questions about the degree to which democratic ideas have been firmly institutionalized in the Thai political order. Criticising the *sangha* is a problematic act – *Matichon*, a leading Thai political daily, had briefly to close itself down in 1991, in order to atone for having

published a letter alleged to have defamed the Supreme Patriarch.<sup>40</sup> The very few Thai scholars who hold progressive views on this subject explain privately that they are very reluctant to risk the backlash associated with publicly adopting critical or liberal positions on issues relating to the Buddhist order. Far from being a religion particularly compatible with democratic ideas, Buddhism in the Thai context has become an authoritarian religion, intolerant of dissent and unwilling to accept critical voices. Indeed, the *sangha* hierarchy are complicit in creating a climate of fear that curtails serious intellectual debate about religious issues; they work closely with the state security apparatus. A critical report by the National Security Council was one of the developments that culminated in the crackdown on Wat Thammakai.<sup>41</sup> Even the head of the Law Society called for new procedures to expel heretical monks expeditiously.<sup>42</sup> Some liberals proposed a 'compromise' solution, in which Wat Thammakai would be allowed to continue its existence, but would not be permitted to call itself a Theravada Buddhist organization. Such suggestions illustrated a continuing confusion about the meaning of religious freedom: the state was seeking to assign to itself, not only the right to 'authorize' religious movements, but also to regulate the way those movements sought to designate themselves. A suggestion that Wat Thammakai supporters were creating their own political party (the Thai Maharat Party) in order to contest the 2001 general elections generated considerable criticism, and came to nothing.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the Constitutional Court seemed likely to be influenced by the definitions of 'religious sect' and 'creed' enshrined in 1969 legislation and policed by the Religious Affairs Department. Keyes has cited Thammakai as an example of Thailand's Buddhist diversity, illustrating the emergence of a 'civic religion' not determined by the state;<sup>44</sup> Swearer similarly argues that there is a 'creative tension between the new movements of the periphery and the civil religion of the centre'.<sup>45</sup> But Streckfuss and Templeton point out that such developments should not be taken to suggest a benignly pluralist religious outlook. Rather, they follow Stewart in suggesting that Thailand has adopted a very conservative and highly orthodox Buddhism as a de facto state religion.<sup>46</sup>

Thai Buddhism, in other words, offers misleading messages and images to the wider world. Religious tolerance is a virtue little practised (or even understood) in Thailand; while prominent Buddhists may generally adopt a tolerant view of other religions, they typically adopt a narrow, even bigoted, view of Buddhism itself. Thai Buddhism is in fact intensely hierarchical, and senior monks jostle endlessly for titles, positions and ranks. The internal structures of Thai Buddhism are completely lacking in democratic modes of participation; abbots exercise almost complete authority within their own temples, and the *sangha* as a whole is controlled by a tiny, ageing clique of high-ranking monks with no retirement age, a genuine gerontocracy.

Even Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the leading Thai Buddhist philosopher of the twentieth century, espoused some very conservative political ideas, and at times expressed open sympathy with notions of dictatorship. In the 1970s he even formulated a rather half-baked political philosophy which he termed 'dictatorial dhammic socialism', which would allow 'small countries like our own' to avoid the excesses of either capitalism or socialism.<sup>47</sup> Buddhadasa's religious ideas – with their emphasis on rational Buddhism rather than the popular accretions of amulet collecting and commercialized merit making – were profoundly radical in their social import. His stance of detaching himself from Bangkok and preaching to small groups of followers who visited his southern forest monastery was also an overtly radical one. But Buddhadasa left it to others to think through the potential political implications of his personal stance.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Culturalist interpretations of Southeast Asian Buddhism dominant in the 1960s assumed that peasants in the region were characterized by a political passivity borne out of a kind of religious fatalism. Such readings led to a very conservative understanding of politics in the region, and completely failed to anticipate such developments as the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (1975–1979), or the popular uprising that led to violent confrontations on the streets of Bangkok on 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976. Clearly, the idea of Buddhism as a 'non-violent' religion inimical to extremism or revolutions was a far-fetched one; as Vickery suggests:

Probably more arrant nonsense has been written in the West about Buddhism than about any other aspect of Southeast Asian life . . . That Buddhists may torture and massacre is no more astonishing than that the Inquisition burned people or that practising Catholics and Protestants joined the Nazi SS.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than Buddhism itself producing political passivity, it seems more appropriate – certainly in the case of Thailand – to suggest that the state manipulated Buddhism in order to subordinate citizens, employing an officially sanctioned form of religion to provide a source of legitimacy. While rationalist Buddhism of the kind advocated by Buddhadasa focused on the way in which Buddhist teachings empowered individuals to seek out their own moral directions, few sought to explore the implications of rationalist positions in political terms. It was certainly possible to see rationalist Buddhism as the basis for a more critical view of the political order, a challenge to the principles of hierarchy and military-bureaucratic dominance that characterized Thai politics at least until the 1970s.

Scholars such as Keyes and Swearer have argued optimistically that Thai Buddhism now constitutes a 'broad church', reflecting the pluralism of wider Thai society. In support of this argument, they cite the emergence of movements such as Santi Asoke and Wat Thammakai, the political successes enjoyed by Chamlong Srimuang, and dissident voices such as Sulak Sivaraksa. Unfortunately, these arguments are simply not credible, since they adopt far too benign a view of the role of the Thai state. There is ample evidence that the Thai state is willing to use all means at its disposal to defend a highly conservative, orthodox and authoritarian mode of Buddhism that is totally at variance with the diversity and vitality of the wider society, and entirely at odds with the open political order convincingly ushered in during the 1990s. Chastened by the blood on its hands over the May 1992 demonstrations, the world's most coup-happy military now remains largely confined to the barracks. Undermined by the 1997 economic crisis that reduced public confidence in their management, and intimidated by the powerful political forces of Thaksin and his party, the once-powerful bureaucracy is on the defensive. Yet the *sangha*, protected by the umbilical cord which links it to the untouchable monarchy, remains substantially unchallenged. Thailand's Buddhist order has not yet been made to face the consequences of its incompetence, intolerance and venality. Thailand has been experiencing gradual political liberalization since the 1970s, not because of the prevailing religious climate, but in spite of the deep conservatism of its Buddhist order.

## NOTES

1. Ian Harris, 'Buddhism and Politics in Asia: The Textual and Historical Roots', in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999), p.19.
2. Larry Diamond, 'Political Culture and Democracy', in Larry Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p.24.
3. Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand', *International Political Science Review*, Vol.10, No.2 (1989), pp.121–42.
4. Best known as the ruler depicted in 'The King and I', Rama IV, or King Mongkut, spent a lengthy period in the monkhood before ascending to the throne, and established a new, stricter Buddhist sect.
5. Keyes (note 3) p.137.
6. Interview with Suwanna Satha-anand, Chulalongkorn University, 22 November 1995.
7. Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1989), p.224.
8. Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and Political Legitimacy*, Chulalongkorn University Research Report Series No.2 (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1993), p.63.
9. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies', in Eliezer B. Ayal (ed.), *The Study of Thailand* (Athens, OH: Ohio Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1978), p.199.
10. For the best overview of Thai politics from the 1930s to the 1970s, see John L.S. Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
11. For the most detailed examination, see J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State* (Singapore: ISEAS 1993).

12. 'Buddhist Leaders Face Major Crisis of Faith', *The Nation*, 27 October 2000.
13. Sanitsuda Ekachai, 'The Booze is Part of General Decline', *Bangkok Post*, 29 March 2001.
14. Nithi Aesurivongse, 'Anakhot khong onkonsong' [The Future of the Sangha Organisation], in Nithi Aesurivongse *et al.*, *Mong anakhot: botwikhro phua praplian thittang sangkhom thai* [Looking to the Future: Analytical Essays to Change the Direction of Thai Society] (Bangkok: Munithi Phumipnaya, 1993), pp.114–51.
15. Suwanna interview (note 6).
16. Phra Rajavaramuni, *Looking to America to Solve Thailand's Problems*, trans. Grant Olson (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation and Santa Monica, CA: The Thai American Project, 1987). This book was published under one of the monk's earlier titles; in the Thai *sangha*, monks receive new names as they progress in the official hierarchy, a system which can make for confusion among those unfamiliar with the latest rankings of senior monks.
17. These three volumes were published in Thai in Bangkok by the Phuthatham Foundation in 1995, 1994 and 1995 respectively.
18. Nattaya Chetchotiros, 'Respected Abbot Finds Fault With Modern Western Concepts', *Bangkok Post*, 23 October 1995.
19. Phra Dhammadipok, 'Reengineering the Thai Society with Buddhist Wisdom', Venerable Buddhadhasa Lecture, Suan Mok, 29 May 1995, summarized in *Power The Thought*, Vol.4, No.1 (1995), pp.5–19.
20. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp.9–12. Thailand was known as Siam prior to 1939, and again from 1945 to 1949. Some critical scholars (notably Benedict Anderson and Sulak Sivaraksa) insist that Siam remains the most appropriate name for the country.
21. See, for example, Sulak Sivaraksa, *Siam in Crisis*, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1990), pp.114–17.
22. Sulak insists on wearing Thai-style clothing and has no air conditioning in his Bangkok house.
23. *Athit*, 928, 24–30 March 1995.
24. The most detailed study is Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (London: Hurst, 1997).
25. See *Ibid.*, pp.260–74.
26. Interviews with Chamlong Srimuang, 29 October 1991, and with Chinnawut Sunthornsima, 14 October 1991.
27. Thailand's de facto currency devaluation of July 1997 triggered a regional economic crisis that affected several neighbouring countries, especially Indonesia and South Korea. The melt-down followed a sustained period of economic growth in the region, and came as a shock to most commentators. For an overview, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2000).
28. The 'sufficiency economy' debate is often translated as 'self-sufficiency', but the king himself has insisted that he prefers the former translation. The Thai king frequently uses an annual speech given on the eve of his 5 December birthday to pass comment on current events; the 1997 speech was a crucial event in forging Thailand's renewed sense of national purpose in the aftermath of the economic crisis.
29. For a discussion of this issue, see Kevin Hewison, 'Responding to Economic Crisis: Thailand's Localism', in Duncan McCargo (ed.), *Reforming Thai Politics* (Copenhagen: NIAS 2002), pp.143–61.
30. 'Santi Asoke Resurgence', Associated Press, 13 January 1998.
31. For the best available account of the 2001 election, see Michael Nelson, 'Thailand's House Elections of 6 January 2001: Thaksin's Landslide Victory and Subsequent Narrow Escape', in Michael Nelson (ed.), *Thailand's New Politics: KPI Yearbook 2001* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002), pp.283–441.
32. Michael Connors, 'Framing the "People's Constitution"', in McCargo, *Reforming Thai Politics*, (note 29) p.38.
33. Prawase Wasi, 'An Overview of Political Reform', in McCargo, *Reforming Thai Politics* (note 29) p.25.

34. David Streckfuss and Mark Templeton, 'Human Rights and Political Reform in Thailand', in McCargo, *Reforming Thai Politics* (note 29), p.74.
35. For a useful comparative overview of Wat Thammakai and Santi Asoke, see Apinya Fueng-fusakul, 'Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravada Reform in Thailand', *Sojourn: Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol.8, No.1 (February 1993), pp.153–83.
36. Streckfuss and Templeton (note 34) p.76.
37. *Ibid.*, p.77.
38. Robb Stewart, 'Defending the Faith(s): Buddhism and Religious Freedom in Thailand', paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999.
39. Prakobpang Panapool, 'Santi Asoke, Dhammakaya Show Extremes', *The Nation*, 15 March 1999.
40. Duncan McCargo, *Politics and the Press in Thailand: Media Machinations* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.93–4.
41. Streckfuss and Templeton (note 34) p.76.
42. *Ibid.*, p.77.
43. 'Religious Donations and Politics Don't Mix', *The Nation*, 22 October 2000.
44. Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhism Fragmented: Thai Buddhism and Political Order Since the 1970s', Keynote address, Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999.
45. Donald K. Swearer, 'Centre and Periphery: Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand', in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999), p.225.
46. Streckfuss and Templeton (note 34) p.78.
47. McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang* (note 24) p.73.
48. Michael Vickery, *Cambodia 1975–1982* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1984), p.9.

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