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RELIGION AS A TOOL FOR STATE CONTROL: ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which religion has influenced state policies in Myanmar and the role Buddhism has played or been utilized by different actors in order to influence the socio-political and economic dynamics of Myanmar.

The study examines contemporary policies of Myanmar and how Buddhism was appropriated as a hegemonizing ideology and whether it was used to further marginalize religious and ethnic minorities. By assessing historical causes of the Rohingya crisis, this study aims to shed light on the complex link between state institutions and Buddhist organizations and how they contribute to the Rohingya problem.

This paper also views the Rohingya problem through a clash of civilization lens and examines if these two civilizations have had friction due to their religious and cultural differences or whether there are underlying causes of the Rohingya problem.

The paper uses discourse analysis to examine how language and rhetoric were used to shape perceptions and justify state laws and actions against the Rohingya. Statements by religious leaders like Ashin Wirathu, state laws and state media reports were analyzed to provide a nuanced understanding of how Buddhism was utilized as a tool for state control.

This study also carried out a comparative analysis of how different states like China, India and Sri Lanka have leveraged religion to consolidate power. The study has also drawn on state-building theory to examine how states employ religion as a unifying factor and its ramifications.

KEYWORDS: *State control, Buddhism, Rohingya, hegemonizing ideology, Myanmar*

INTRODUCTION

The historical background of the Rohingya crisis goes way back to the colonial and post-colonial legislations that have influenced the socio-political environment of Myanmar. The national identity that was constructed prioritized Buddhism and sidelined the Rohingya and led to their statelessness and exposed to gross violations of their human rights (Messner et al., 2019; Mohajan, 2019)

The research question that will guide this paper is, to what extent has religion been weaponized/utilized to control state policies in Myanmar and how did it contribute to the Rohingya crisis?

The literature review draws on several reputable sources to provide insight into the topic. This references, will especially focus on Budddhist nationalism, the identity and history of the Rohingya, Myanmar's state policies, state-sanctioned Buddhism, the clash of civilization theory,religious rhetorics in state propaganda across South Asia and state-building theory.

Many studies on Rohingya focus on citizenship laws and nationalism while not exploring the role of religion as a tool of state control, this study will examine how Buddhist institutions and narratives are weaponized to legitimize exclusionary state policies against the Rohingya. The study analyzes how Buddhist institutions influence state policies and control the state thus giving insights beyond just ethnic or political explanations.

To show patterns of religious-nationalist governance beyond Myanmar,this study draws parallels with cases across South Asia;Sri Lanka (Buddhism vs. Tamil Hindus), India (Hindutva politics), or China (state control over Tibetan Buddhism).
1982 Citizenship law,stripped the Rohingya off Burmese citizenship and excluded them from the national narrative and thus illustrating how Buddhist nationalism directs state policies,

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this law upholds the notion of Rohingyas being outsiders/illegal immigrants(Debnath et al., 2022). This constructs the Rohingya identity as the "other" while showcasing the state as the protector of Buddhist identity and values.

This exclusionary and alienatory framework has been compounded further by the emergence of Buddhist nationalist movements, which have employed religious sentiments to prop up support for anti-Rohingya rhetorics and legitimize violent acts against the Rohingya(Hossain et al., 2021; Yusuf, 2018).

Additionally, the role of Buddhism in the Rohingya crisis goes beyond politics of identity ,it is also a tool for state control. The Myanmar government has tactfully allied itself with the Buddhist monks and nationalist organizations to justify its actions against the Rohingya, presenting these actions as a requisite for conserving Myanmar's Buddhist tradition(Fahim, 2022; Ruhullah & Mutiarin, 2021).The collaboration has fostered a narrative that paints the Rohingya as a danger not only to Buddhist heritage and identity but also to national security, therefore legitimizing military interventions and violent crackdowns(Ali & Rashid Ibrahim, 2020)

The consistent violence against the Rohingya,including the August 2017 attacks,has been termed as crimes against humanity,demonstrating the extent to which state-sanctioned Buddhism has been weaponized to subdue dissent and exert control(Fahim, 2022; Messner et al., 2019).

BUDDHISM IN MYANMAR

Myanmar's political thought and governance has been molded by Buddhist ideas with various Buddhist nationalist groups emphasizing the cultural embracement of religio-political discourse(Walton & Jerryson, 2016)Additionally, Myanmar's religious landscape is mainly defined by Theravada Buddhist sect(Sparling, 2019).

The government has employed buddhism as a hegemonizing ideology by using monastic members as missionaries to serve the interests of the state(Mukherjee, 2019). This illustrates the endurance and persistance of religious tradition in politics and demonstrates the impact of political shifts on religious spaces (Perrière, 2022). Buddhism shapes not only politics but also societal cultural norms. To date, gender roles which have a basis in Buddhism continue to influence how the society views women's participation in politics (Loring, 2018).

Moreover,Buddhism's impact is visible in people's everyday affairs, with individuals turning to religion for comfort,especially in times of instability(F. Huang et al., 2022). Buddhism is the knot that binds Myanmar's social and cultural tapestry because it has had an immense effect on the social customs,rites of passage and cultural practices(Soe, 2020).

Buddhism's role in Myanmar's political liberalization process has been an area of interest for researchers.The legacy of the military in Myanmar's political infrastructure and institutional design is in such a way that the its influence will be prominent in future governments in Myanmar(R. L. Huang, 2013).

Moreover, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a great role in Myanmar's institutional capacity building and its democratization(Renshaw, 2013).The current political environment in Myanmar has seen an emergence of a hybrid public sphere which is indicated by the contestation of political influence between different groups like the military,political parties,civil society,and the media (Middleton & Win, 2021).

ROHINGYA IDENTITY

Religious identity influences interactions in Myanmar. The Rohingya's Muslim identity has been the defining factor in their relationship with predominant Buddhist groups,as belonging in Myanmar is linked to religion and nationalism.

The historical and political exclusion,resistance and counter-resilience of stateless Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar has been a subject of academic inquiry(Kaveri & Rajan, 2023).

Myanmar's government constructed the Rohingya identity as an alien and illegal immigrants(Anwary, 2020). The historical background of the Rohingyas is deeply connected with the dyanmics of interethnic conflict, statelessness, and refugee experiences.

The Rohingya's historical identity has been further complicated by the rise of radical Buddhist extremism which has been associated with the Rohingya crisis and waves of violent attacks against the Rohingya (*Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar*, 2019).

Inter-religious relationships have been shaped by the convergence of religious prescriptive ideals and hierarchichal moral strivings with perception of ideological clashes and threats influencing inter-religious relations(Gjo, 2022).

STATE-SANCTIONED BUDDHISM

Myanmar has employed Buddhism as a tool for legitimacy and control in that it designs policies to control the excesses of Buddhism while aligning it with state objectives (Shmushko, 2022). This institutionalization and instrumentalization of Buddhism has been linked to the advancement of Buddhist nationalism,where Buddhism becomes the state religion to maintain authority and dominance over the populace(Chiu, 2020).

The state of Myanmar has always leveraged Buddhist nationalism to promote its political aims,especiallyin the context of the Rohingya crisis.Various organizations, including the 969 Movement, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly referred to as Ma Ba Tha), and the political activist monk Ashin Wirathu have taken advantage of Myanmar's

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political and media freedoms in order to fight for the protection of Buddhism from an ostensible Muslim threat(Siddiquee, 2020).

These groups have been advocating for the state to curtail Muslims' civil and political freedoms,terming it as in being in favour of Myanmar's national interest to preserve Buddhism.This narrative has played a critical role in furthering political agendas and consolidating authority through the manipulation and exploitation of religious sentiments and instigating xenophobia and enmity towards the Rohingya and Muslim minority communities(Siddiquee, 2020).

The state's strategic use of Buddhism as a tool for control is evident in how it regulations alternative Buddhist spaces for lay practices. Lay Buddhists have weakened state control by creating substitute Buddhist spaces,thus highlighting the nexus between state-sanctioned Buddhism and the endurance of alternative Buddhist practices(Shmushko, 2022).

Additionally,the state's utilization has been connected to further promote anti-muslim sentiments and the legislation of discriminatory laws. The 969 movement has condemned both the military junta and the democratically elected government for not being anti-Muslim enough, depicting it as a danger to Burman Buddhist purity in the nation(Bakali, 2021).This usage of religious nationalism has led to the spread of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim media and content,further exacerbating violence against the Rohingya(Frydenlund, 2021).

The government has also invoked Buddhist nationalism for geopolitical interests.The military junta government used Sino-US competition to curtail Chinese influence,using the geopolitical dynamics to further its political objectives(Mannan, 2020).An aspect of the government's political objective is to take advantage of foreign power dynamics.

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

The interaction between Buddhism and Islam in Myanmar can be examined from Samuel Huntington's ''clash of civilizations'' theory,which opines that cultural and religious identities will eventually lead to friction between these civilizations and eventually conflict in today's world.

In Myanmar,the Buddhst majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority epitomize this clash,as the former seeks to maintain its national identity through Buddhism,while the latter is growingly undergoing marginalization, structural violence and discrimination. This further supports Hungtinton's theory that conflicts are in many cases rooted in long-standing cultural and religious differences,which in Myanmar have been intensified by historical grievances and nationalist ideologies.

The idea of religious nationalism has been key in justifying discrimination and violence against the Rohingya, constructing them as a "fearsome Other" and revoking their citizenship (Schissler et al., 2017).The marginalization of the Rohingya has been deeply ingrained in the exploitation of religious differences. The state-sanctioned discrimnation against the Rohingya has been due to historical,legal and political factors that have maintained their marginalization and statelessness(Parashar & Alam, 2019).

The Rohingya crisis has its roots in Rakhine State,where the Rohingya community has historical roots. The crisis has been further complicated by colonial legacy and the implentation of historical identity creation by the majority Buddhists,which has led to the recent refugee crisis(Siddiquee, 2020).

The Rohingyas were legally recognized as citizens and ethnic group by three successive governments after independence(Ali & Rashid Ibrahim, 2020).However,the situation changed, the Rohingyas' citizenship was revoked and this is considered to be the root cause of the crisis(M. S. Rahman & Sakib, 2021).

The 1982 Citizenship Law,which didn't recognize the Rohingya as a 'national race,' has been a focal legal instrument that caused their statelessness,vetoing their citizenship and basic rights(Tobing, 2018). This legal bias has been worsened by institutionalized discrimination and violent ethnic cleansing campaigns,including sexual crimes committed against Rohingya women in Rakhine state (K. F. Rahman, 2021). This citizenship law puts a limit on the participation of the Rohingya in Myanmar's socio-economic and political life.

Religious Rhetoric In State Propaganda Across South Asia

It's not only in Myanmar where religion was used to consolidate power. India,Sri Lanka and China have also done the same. In this section, a comparative framework will be employed to see how these states used religion to legitimize state policies and strengthen their grip on power.

In China,the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has endeavoured to control religious narratives to consolidate power. The CCP employed dual strategy to approach religion : promoting state-sanctioned religious practices while suppressing those that challenge its authority(Brasnett, 2021; Wang, 2021).The manipulation of religious discourse has served CCP's interest to maintain power and portrays it as a guarantor of stability and harmony.

This narrative is cemented through state-run media to paint the state as benevolent in order to prop up support from the countries that practice these religions(Brasnett, 2021; Wang, 2021). This has helped China avoid international criticism despite violating religious freedoms.

In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has significantly shaped the Indian political and religious landscape and discourse as the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) has capitalized on the Indian religious landscape to maintain authority. BJP leaders have often aligned state policies and Hinduism to portray the state as the guardian of Hindu interests(Das Acevedo, 2013).

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The state has played a role in amplifying religious narratives by portraying Hinduism as being synonymous with Indian identity,therefore promoting a monolithic view of national identity that excludes other religious communities(Rao, 2018). The state leveraging religious discourse provides it with a justification for its actions and policies despite criticism in regards to religious intolerance.

In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese majority has leveraged Buddhism as a tool for mobilization with political leaders using Buddhist narratives to legitimize state actions and policies(Ghosh & Singh, 2021). The state has often portrayed itself as a protector of Buddhism, this has been done through the narratives the state runs via the media and has equated adherence to Buddhism being synonymous to loyalty to the state (Ghosh & Singh, 2021). This has portrayed religious minorities like Tamils and Muslims as being threats to national security and integration.

State-Building Theory and Religion as a Unifying Ideology in Myanmar

State-building theory posits that ,historically, religion has been used as a unifying factor in order to promote social cohesion and legitimize state authority. In Myanmar, Buddhism acts as a key unifying factor that remarkably contributes to state-building processes.

The prevalence of Theravada Buddhism,the most predominant group,embraced by most of the Burmese population is essential in providing a foundational framework for social cohesion and national identity. This religious categorization is deliberately exploited by the state to cultivate a sense of belonging among the population,therefore strengthening the legitimacy of the government and its policies.

State-building theory asserts that the construction of a national identity is key for the state's legitimacy and stability. The Myanmar government has integrated Buddhism as a hegemonic ideology to bring together different ethnic groups under a single national umbrella. Political leaders have frequently referenced Buddhist principles in their speeches,depicting state policies as being in line with Buddhist moral teachings(Roszko, 2012; Zaitun et al., 2022). This alliance not only validates the state's authority it also fosters a collective identity that goes beyond ethnic divisions,thus encouraging the idea that following Buddhism is same as loyalty to the state.

The state's utilization of Buddhism is further solidified through numerous forms of media representation and propaganda. The government always depicts itself as the protector of Buddhism, affirming its duty in preserving and upholding the cultural heritage of the nation. This representation serves to legitimize state policies as the government portrays itself as the guardian of the faith as well as the nation(Finke et al., 2017; Sadvokassov & Zhumashev, 2023).Such rhetorics and narratives are distributed via state-controlled media,which often illustrates the contributions of Buddhist monks and institutions to national development,hence affirming the notion that the state and Buddhism are inherently interlinked.

Additionally, the appearance and use of Buddhist symbols and rituals during state functions further shows the linkage between religion and state identity. These practices not only strengthens the state's legitimacy but it also develops a common and shared cultural space where citizens can collectively interact with their religious identity in a way that is in harmony with nationalistic sentiments(Wilde, 2018). This use of Buddhism as a unifying ideology is clearly evident in the context of political mobilization,where religious narratives are used to mobilize support for government policies and initiatives.

However, the strategic use of religion,Buddhism in this case, has considerable ramifications for minority groups within Myanmar. The government's promotion of Buddhism marginalizes non-Buddhist communities like the Rohingya Muslims, who face discrimination and violence. This exclusionary element of state-building via religion illustrates the intricacies and paradoxes inherent in using a unifying ideology to promote national identity while at the same time subverting the rights and identities of minority groups(Burova et al., 2023; Gajasinghe & Jayakodi, 2022).

Buddhism in Myanmar is woven into the fabric of state-building process.The state uses Buddhism to reinforce its legitimacy and control. This analysis highlights the significance of understanding the role religion plays in shaping political landscapes and the manners in which state control is exerted through religious discourse.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown how Myanmar employs Buddhism as a tool for state capture and legitimizing exclusionary policies against the Rohingya.Buddhism in Myanmar is not just an ideological or social movement but rather a state-sanctioned mechanism for justifying political authority. In Myanmar,religion is deeply intertwined with governance. The government portrays the Rohingya as a threat to national unity as well as Buddhist identity.

Buddhist institutions like the Ma Ba Tha and religious leaders have a symbiotic relationship with the state. The state provides religious institutions and figures political leverage and the in turn the state gets religious endorsement and portrayed as a protector of Buddhism.

Similar patterns of religious instumentalization for state control are evident in Sri Lanka,India and China. This demonstrates patterns of religious-nationalist governance is not practised by only Myanmar.

The exploitation of religion for state control has also been used to influence geopolitical dynamics.

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Tackling this crisis requires the deconstruction of the symbiotic relationship between the state and religious institutions while simultenously confronting the narratives that endorse it. Legal frameworks like the Genocide Convention must be applied to prosecute the perpetrators and hold them accountable.

Religion is a formidable factor able to either unite or divide a state. States need to find balance between curving a national identity and maintainence of ethno-religious coexistence as the incorporation of religion into politics can lead to domination by others and alienation of certain groups, consequently undermining state-building.

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