Buddhism and State Power: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Religious Institutions and Thai Politics[*]

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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring and evolving relationship between Buddhism and state power in Thailand, highlighting the ways in which religious authority and political institutions have shaped one another from early kingship to the digital age. It argues that Buddhism has long served as a source of political legitimacy, national identity, and social cohesion, while the state has continually regulated and instrumentalized the Sangha to reinforce its authority. The discussion traces historical models of Buddhist kingship, the modernization and bureaucratization of the Sangha, the rise of Buddhist nationalism, and the diverse forms of monastic political engagement. It also explores the transformative impact of digital technologies, which have decentralized religious influence and opened new arenas for Buddhist activism and ideological contestation. Overall, the essay demonstrates that Buddhism in Thailand is not merely a religious tradition but a dynamic sociopolitical force deeply embedded in the construction and negotiation of state power.

Keywords: Buddhism; Thai politics; Sangha; Nationalism; Monastic activism; State power; Digital religion

Introduction

The relationship between Buddhism and state power in Thailand has been fundamental to the development of Thai political culture, national identity, and institutional governance for more than seven centuries. Historically, Thai kingship was grounded in the Buddhist ideal of the *Dhammarāja*—the righteous king whose authority derived from moral virtue and adherence to the Ten Royal Virtues (*Dasa-rajadhamma*) (Reynolds, 1979). This ethical foundation not only shaped the symbolic legitimacy of rulers but also influenced the administrative structures that governed monastic life and state–religion relations. In early Thai polities such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, the Sangha served both as a moral authority and an institutional partner of the monarchy, providing education,

ritual expertise, and ideological cohesion for the expanding state (Tambiah, 1976).

The modern Thai state inherited these historical patterns, adapting religious institutions to suit new forms of political authority. The Sangha Act of 1902, for example, reorganized the monastic order into a centralized bureaucracy aligned with the state's administrative hierarchy (Ishii, 1986). Even after the 1932 Revolution and the transition to constitutional governance, Buddhism remained central to national ideology. Military-led governments throughout the Cold War relied on Buddhist rhetoric and monastic networks to legitimize anti-communist campaigns and promote national unity (Keyes, 1971). As a result, Buddhism became intertwined with state-building, national morality, and political legitimacy.

In contemporary Thailand, this relationship continues to evolve in complex ways. Constitutional provisions repeatedly affirm the state's responsibility to protect and promote Buddhism, reinforcing its privileged status among religions (Jackson, 2009). At the same time, state intervention in monastic affairs—such as appointments of the Supreme Patriarch and investigations of monastic factions—has generated debates about political interference and monastic autonomy (Taylor, 2016). The rise of Buddhist nationalism, conflicts involving high-profile temples, and the use of digital platforms for religious–political mobilization further illustrate the dynamic and contested nature of Buddhist–state relations.

This article analyzes the historical development, institutional mechanisms, and contemporary tensions that characterize the relationship between Buddhism and state power in Thailand. By examining both the ideological foundations and the political realities of the Sangha–state relationship, the article seeks to understand how religious authority continues to shape—and be shaped by—Thai politics in the 21st century.

Historical Foundations: Kingship and Buddhist Legitimacy

The historical formation of the Thai state is inseparable from Buddhist conceptions of kingship and moral authority. In early Thai polities such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, political power was justified not merely through military strength or lineage but through the ethical framework of Theravāda Buddhism. Central to this framework was the ideal of the *Dhammarāja*, the "righteous king" who ruled in accordance with the *Dasa-rājadharma*, or Ten Royal Virtues, including generosity, self-discipline, morality, and non-violence (Reynolds, 1979). This model linked sovereign authority to moral conduct: a king who embodied these virtues was believed to protect the kingdom not only physically but cosmologically, ensuring prosperity and harmony throughout society.

The Sukhothai period is often portrayed in Thai historiography as a "moral polity," emphasizing the king's accessibility to the people and his role as

a protector of Buddhism (Wyatt, 1984). Whether idealized or not, the Sukhothai inscriptions suggest that kings used Buddhist moral idioms to construct an image of benevolent authority. Monks were essential partners in this process. They maintained religious learning, provided counsel, and performed rituals that reinforced the king's role as both a secular ruler and a spiritual patron (Tambiah, 1976). The Sangha, in turn, depended on royal protection, establishing a mutually reinforcing pattern of religious and political authority.

During the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), the relationship between Buddhism and kingship became more institutionalized. The monarchy adopted elaborate court rituals, Brahmanical as well as Buddhist, that sacralized the king's status, while the Sangha expanded as a literate institution responsible for education, manuscript production, and moral regulation (Ishii, 1986). Buddhist doctrine provided ideological justification for hierarchical order: social stability was maintained through supporting the righteous king, who acted as the chief patron of the religion and the guarantor of moral order. In return, the king's promotion of Buddhism—through temple construction, scripture revision, and monastic reform—reinforced his cosmological legitimacy.

The early Rattanakosin period (1782 onward) continued these traditions while responding to political crises after the fall of Ayutthaya. Kings Rama I to Rama IV sought to re-establish Buddhist authority as a foundation for national restoration. Major reforms included the compilation of the *Tipiṭaka*, standardization of monastic discipline, and increased royal oversight of the Sangha (Swearer, 1995). These measures reflect the political importance of Buddhism for state consolidation: regulating the Sangha was equivalent to regulating the moral order of the kingdom.

Thus, in pre-modern Thailand, Buddhist legitimacy and political authority were intertwined in a mutually beneficial partnership. The king derived divine-moral authority through his role as the patron and protector of Buddhism, while the Sangha benefited from royal patronage and institutional stability. This historical legacy continues to shape Thai political culture, informing contemporary debates on legitimacy, nationalism, and state–religion relations.

State Regulation and Modernization of the Sangha

The modernization of the Thai state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fundamentally reshaped the position and structure of the Sangha. As Siam confronted pressures of Western imperialism and embarked on administrative reforms, the monarchy sought to centralize political authority and construct a modern bureaucratic state. These reforms extended beyond secular governance and deeply affected the Buddhist monastic order. The reorganization of the Sangha became a key component of nation-building, serving both political and ideological purposes (Ishii, 1986).

A decisive turning point occurred under King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Concerned with regional autonomy within the monastic community, inconsistencies in monastic discipline, and the need to consolidate national unity, Chulalongkorn initiated sweeping reforms that culminated in the Sangha Act of 1902. This legislation transformed the Sangha into a highly centralized hierarchy modeled on the bureaucratic structures of the modern state. Through the Act, the state standardized monastic titles, created an administrative system based on regional ecclesiastical jurisdictions, and placed the Supreme Patriarch at the apex of a clearly defined chain of command (Swearer, 1995). Although framed as a measure to restore monastic discipline, the Act functioned politically to bring religious authority under direct state control.

The Sangha Act of 1902 also formalized the relationship between the state and monastic education. Traditionally, temples had served as centers of literacy and moral instruction; however, modern reforms integrated monastic education into the national system. Monks became participants in state efforts to build a disciplined and literate citizenry (Reynolds, 1979). This educational role strengthened the ideological alignment between Buddhism and nationalism, reinforcing the state's reliance on Buddhist institutions to disseminate moral norms and civic values.

After the 1932 Revolution, which ended absolute monarchy, the state continued to regulate the Sangha through successive legal reforms. The Sangha Act of 1941 reflected the new constitutional order but preserved the centralized administrative model established in 1902. Later revisions in 1962 under military rule reinstated a more conservative and authoritarian structure, strengthening state oversight of monastic affairs and restricting monastic involvement in politics (Keyes, 1971). These measures reveal how different regimes—whether monarchical, constitutional, or military—recognized the Sangha as an institution crucial to ideological legitimacy and social stability.

The Cold War era intensified state intervention as the government used Buddhist rhetoric and monastic networks in anti-communist campaigns. Development monks (*phra nak anurak*) were mobilized to promote rural development and national unity, aligning religious teachings with political objectives (Taylor, 1988). This period demonstrated the dual function of the Sangha as both a moral force and an instrument of political integration.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, continued amendments to Sangha legislation reflected ongoing debates over monastic autonomy, state authority, and religious legitimacy. While modernization strengthened bureaucratic efficiency, it also generated tensions between traditional monastic ideals and the state's political interests. Thus, the modernization of the Sangha must be understood not merely as administrative reform but as a strategic effort to integrate religious authority into the apparatus of the modern Thai nation-state.

Buddhism, Nationalism, and the Contemporary State

In contemporary Thailand, Buddhism continues to play a central role in shaping national identity and legitimizing political authority. Although Thailand is formally a constitutional monarchy with guarantees of religious freedom, Buddhism occupies a privileged symbolic and institutional position. This prominence is rooted in a long historical trajectory but has taken on new significance in the context of modern nationalism, political conflict, and debates over state identity. Buddhism is not simply a religious tradition; it functions as a cultural marker that defines the imagined moral community of the Thai nation (Keyes, 1987).

Buddhism as the Core of Thai National Identity

Thai nationalism has historically been constructed through a triadic ideology often summarized as "Nation, Religion, King." In this formulation, Buddhism is positioned as both the spiritual foundation of the Thai people and a stabilizing force within the political system. State rituals, educational curricula, and national ceremonies consistently reinforce Buddhism as an essential element of the collective identity (Jackson, 2009). Such ideological framing positions non-Buddhist citizens—particularly Malay Muslims in the South—in a complicated relationship with the state, raising questions about inclusivity and state neutrality.

This symbolic elevation of Buddhism also reflects political strategies. Successive governments, whether military or civilian, have invoked Buddhist values to justify policies, promote moral governance, and cultivate an image of guardianship over national stability (Hunsaker, 2018). Buddhism, as morally authoritative and culturally resonant, is frequently mobilized to bolster state legitimacy during periods of political uncertainty.

The Rise of Buddhist Nationalism

Recent decades have witnessed the rise of Buddhist nationalism, characterized by movements that frame Buddhism as under threat and call for stronger state protection. These groups, often influenced by global patterns of religious nationalism, argue that Buddhism is central to Thai identity and therefore requires special legal and institutional safeguards (Darling, 2014). For example, campaigns to declare Buddhism the state religion gained momentum in the 2007 and 2017 constitutional debates. Though the proposals were ultimately rejected, the debates revealed deep concerns about preserving Buddhist dominance in an era of perceived cultural and geopolitical change.

Buddhist nationalist activism has also intersected with security politics, especially concerning the Southern Border Provinces. Some nationalist groups argue that Buddhist identity must be defended against separatist violence, framing the conflict in religious terms that risk exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions (Liow, 2016). This illustrates how Buddhist identity can be wielded not only as a unifying ideology but also as a divisive political tool.

Monastic Politics and State Intervention

Contemporary Buddhist–state relations are also shaped by conflicts within the Sangha itself. High-profile cases such as the Dhammakaya controversy demonstrate how monastic factions can become entangled with political networks, influencing and being influenced by state intervention (Taylor, 2016). The state has increasingly exercised its authority over the Sangha through amendments to the Sangha Act—particularly the 2016 and 2018 revisions, which strengthened executive control over appointment processes for the Supreme Patriarch.

These interventions reveal a paradox: while the state relies on Buddhism for legitimacy, it simultaneously exerts regulatory power to ensure political alignment and prevent institutional autonomy. The politicization of monastic authority has led to internal divisions within the Sangha, with some monks advocating for reform, others supporting nationalist movements, and still others resisting political involvement entirely (McCargo, 2019).

Buddhism in the Digital Public Sphere

The digital age has created new arenas for Buddhist political discourse. Monks and lay teachers now use social media platforms to disseminate teachings, comment on socio-political issues, and mobilize followers. Online Buddhist influencers can challenge traditional monastic hierarchies, diversify interpretations of Buddhist ethics, and even critique state policies (Suwanbubbha & Taylor, 2010). At the same time, social media has amplified nationalist rhetoric, allowing extremist groups to circulate messages quickly and mobilize supporters.

Digital communication has therefore transformed the landscape of Buddhist authority, decentralizing religious expression and expanding the political roles of both monastics and lay Buddhists.

In contemporary Thailand, Buddhism remains a core element of national identity and political legitimacy. However, its relationship with the state is increasingly contested and complex. Buddhist nationalism, monastic factionalism, and the rise of digital activism illustrate that Buddhism is no longer a monolithic force but a dynamic field of ideological and political struggle. Understanding these developments is essential for analyzing the future of Thai politics and the evolving role of religious authority in the modern nation-state.

Monastic Agency and Political Engagement

Contrary to the common assumption that Buddhist monks in Thailand are politically passive or constrained by monastic discipline, the historical and contemporary record demonstrates that monastics have exercised significant political agency. Their influence emerges not only through formal institutional roles but also through moral authority, grassroots activism, education, and symbolic power. The notion that monks must remain apolitical derives from a selective reading of the

Vinaya; in practice, monks have long participated in political debates—sometimes in support of state authority, sometimes in opposition to it (Harrington, 2004).

Historical Patterns of Monastic Influence

Throughout Thai history, monks have acted as advisors to kings, mediators in conflicts, and custodians of moral legitimacy. In the early Rattanakosin period, royal reformers relied on senior monks to standardize monastic discipline, compile canonical texts, and guide religious policy (Swearer, 1995). This illustrates that monastic authority was political not because monks held office but because they shaped the moral foundation of governance.

Even during the era of state centralization in the early twentieth century, monastic figures played active roles in intellectual debates. Reformist monks such as Prince Wachirayan, the Supreme Patriarch under Rama V, influenced educational policy and the ideological direction of national Buddhism (Ishii, 1986). Their teachings shaped public morality and provided the state with cultural legitimacy.

Monks in Modern Political Movements

In the post-1932 and Cold War periods, monastic engagement took on new forms. The state mobilized monks to promote anti-communist nationalism, rural development, and loyalty to the monarchy. "Development monks" (*phra nak phatthana*) were deployed to lead rural modernization programs, reinforcing state narratives of moral and national progress (Keyes, 1971). Such roles blurred the line between religious duty and political service.

By the late twentieth century, a different form of monastic engagement emerged through the global movement of Engaged Buddhism. Thai thinkers such as Sulak Sivaraksa challenged authoritarian politics and transnational capitalism, advocating for democracy, human rights, and local empowerment grounded in Buddhist ethics (Queen & King, 1996). Although Sulak is a lay intellectual, many monks in his networks adopted similar forms of activism, demonstrating the permeability of religious and political spheres.

Contentious Monastic Politics in the Contemporary Era

The contemporary landscape shows a diverse spectrum of monastic political engagement. Some monks participate in pro-democracy movements, advocating reforms in the Sangha's governance, transparency in temple finances, and enhanced social justice. Others align with conservative or royalist agendas, reinforcing state authority and promoting Buddhist nationalism (McCargo, 2019).

Highly visible controversies—such as the disputes surrounding Wat Phra Dhammakaya—highlight the political stakes of monastic autonomy. The state's use of security forces in monastic conflicts demonstrates that monasteries can become arenas of political confrontation. These events also reveal how monastic networks can mobilize large numbers of lay followers, transforming religious disputes into national political issues (Taylor, 2016).

Social Media and the New Public Sphere

The rise of digital communication has further expanded monastic agency. Monks now use YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter to teach Dhamma, critique public policies, and influence political debates. Digital platforms enable monks to bypass traditional hierarchies and reach mass audiences, thereby reshaping religious authority and public discourse (Suwanbubbha & Taylor, 2010). Some online monks frame political engagement as a moral duty to advocate for justice, environmental

sustainability, or ethical governance—a reinterpretation of the monastic role in modern public life.

Balancing Vinaya and Citizenship

These diverse forms of engagement raise normative questions: How should monks balance their religious discipline with civic responsibility? While classical Buddhism encourages disengagement from worldly affairs, Theravāda traditions in Southeast Asia often regard monks as moral guardians who must intervene when society faces ethical decline (Harris, 2007). This tension reflects broader debates about democracy, legitimacy, and the proper relationship between religion and state.

In sum, monastic political agency in Thailand is neither a deviation from tradition nor a recent invention. It is an enduring feature of Thai political life—shaped by historical precedent, evolving social contexts, and the moral authority of the monastic role. As Thailand continues to face political polarization and rapid social change, monastic engagement will remain a significant force in shaping public discourse and contesting political legitimacy.

Digitalization and New Arenas of Buddhist Influence

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of Buddhist communication, authority, and political engagement in Thailand. Historically, the diffusion of Buddhist teachings was mediated through temples, monastic networks, and printed texts. In the contemporary digital age, however, monks and lay practitioners increasingly rely on online platforms to disseminate teachings, mobilize communities, and engage in socio-political issues. As a result, Buddhist authority has become more pluralized, decentralized, and accessible—creating both opportunities and challenges for the traditional structures of the Sangha (Suwanbubbha & Taylor, 2010).

Digital Platforms and the Transformation of Buddhist Communication

Digital media have opened unprecedented avenues for Dhamma propagation (*thammathat*). Monks now deliver sermons through YouTube, Facebook Live, TikTok, and podcasts, reaching audiences far beyond temple walls. These digital teachings often blend traditional Dhamma with contemporary issues such as mental health, ethical governance, and environmental concerns. This shift reflects a broader trend toward "networked religion," where religious identity and practice are shaped by digital interconnectivity rather than institutional hierarchy (Campbell, 2013).

The emergence of online monastic influencers—popular monks with millions of followers—illustrates how digital charisma can rival or exceed institutional authority. Their messages often appeal to younger audiences, addressing everyday concerns through relatable language and digital aesthetics. This phenomenon challenges traditional monastic hierarchies, which historically relied on seniority, scholarship, and lineage to confer religious legitimacy.

Digital Activism and Political Discourse

The digital sphere has also enabled new forms of political engagement among monks and lay Buddhists. While the Sangha Supreme Council discourages monastic involvement in politics, online platforms blur conventional boundaries between religious teaching and civic debate. Some monks use social media to critique government corruption, advocate for social justice, or respond to crises such as environmental degradation (Harris, 2021). These activities reflect a reinterpretation of Buddhist ethics as requiring public intervention when societal suffering becomes acute.

Conversely, digital platforms have amplified conservative and nationalist Buddhist voices. Online groups use Buddhist symbolism to promote exclusionary ideologies, fueling debates about ethnic identity, religious purity, and threats to national Buddhism (Darling, 2014). Social media thus becomes both a democratizing force—empowering diverse voices—and a polarizing arena that can intensify ideological conflict.

Erosion and Reconfiguration of Religious Authority

The proliferation of digital content has disrupted traditional gatekeeping mechanisms within the Sangha. Monks with limited formal education or institutional recognition can gain mass followings, while highly respected scholars may struggle to adapt to the demands of digital engagement. This shift reflects a broader transformation from centralized religious authority to networked and performative forms of legitimacy (Tiravanija, 2018).

Additionally, the spread of online teaching raises concerns about authenticity, Vinaya discipline, and the commercialization of Dhamma. Some online monks monetize their content through advertising, merchandise sales, or live-stream donations, prompting debates about ethical boundaries in digital religious practice (McCargo, 2019).

Digital Buddhism and the Global Public Sphere

Digitalization has also globalized Thai Buddhism. International followers engage with Thai monks through online platforms, contributing to transnational Buddhist communities. These interactions reshape Thai Buddhism as both a national and global phenomenon, enabling monks to participate in international dialogues on peace-building, mental well-being, and interfaith cooperation (Seeger, 2022).

Moreover, during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms became essential for maintaining religious practice. Virtual merit-making, online funerals, and digital meditation retreats demonstrated the adaptability of Thai Buddhist tradition in response to societal disruptions.

Digitalization represents a profound transformation of Thai Buddhism, altering patterns of communication, authority, and political engagement. While it expands access to religious teachings and empowers new voices, it also challenges traditional monastic hierarchies and introduces new risks related to misinformation, sensationalism, and ideological polarization. Ultimately, digitalization has become a new arena in which the ongoing negotiation between Buddhism and state power unfolds—shaping the future of religious authority, national identity, and public ethics in Thailand.

Conclusion

Buddhism and state power in Thailand have long evolved together, forming a relationship that is both foundational to national identity and continually reshaped by political change. From the earliest Thai kingdoms, political authority drew legitimacy from Buddhist ideals, particularly the model of the Dhammaraja, the righteous king whose moral virtues ensured social harmony and cosmological stability. The Sangha served as an indispensable partner in this system, providing education, ritual authority, and moral guidance while receiving royal patronage and protection. As Thailand modernized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the state sought to centralize its authority, and these reforms extended to the monastic order. The Sangha Act of 1902 transformed the monastic community into a bureaucratic institution aligned with state structures, reinforcing Buddhism's ideological role in national integration. Even after the transition to constitutional governance, successive governments relied on Buddhist symbolism and monastic networks to promote unity, morality, and resistance to perceived ideological threats. In the contemporary period, Buddhism continues to underpin Thai nationalism through the enduring triad of Nation, Religion, King, positioning Buddhism as a core marker of collective identity. Yet modern politics have made this relationship increasingly contested. Debates over the status of Buddhism, monastic autonomy, and religious nationalism illustrate how Buddhism is mobilized both to support state agendas and to challenge them. The Sangha itself has become a site of political tension, with internal divisions and high-profile controversies exposing struggles over authority and legitimacy. Monks continue to exercise political agency in diverse ways: some align with conservative or nationalist causes, others advocate social justice, environmental activism, or democratic reform, drawing on Buddhist ethics to address contemporary social issues. The rise of digital media has further transformed the role of Buddhism in public life. Monks and lay Buddhists now reach vast audiences through online platforms, bypassing traditional hierarchies and reshaping religious influence. Digital spaces amplify both progressive and nationalist voices, creating new arenas of debate, mobilization, and conflict. Buddhism, once mediated primarily through temples and state institutions, now circulates through decentralized, highly visible, and rapidly shifting digital networks. Across these transformations, the fundamental pattern remains consistent: Buddhism in Thailand is not merely a spiritual tradition but a central force in shaping political legitimacy, national identity, and public discourse. The Sangha and the state rely on one another, negotiate boundaries, and periodically contest authority, producing a dynamic relationship that continues to evolve in response to social change, political pressures, and technological innovation.

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