Political parties and religion in Myanmar

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Myanmar is characterized by a puzzling paradox when it comes to the relationship between religions and political parties: While religions, especially Theravada Buddhism, are omnipresent in society and frame politics in multiple and contentious ways, the reintroduction of electoral politics has not been followed by the formation of religious parties or major party-driven politicisation of religious identities and interests. Although religious beliefs and belongings are parts of politics in a broad sense, the links between religions and political parties seem relatively weak and are difficult to discern.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country that officially recognises eight 'national races': Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Kayin (Karen), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. Bamar comprise approximately two thirds of the population. The Union of Myanmar is territorially organised in seven Bamar-dominated regions in the central parts of the country and seven ethnic states along Myanmar's borders (Figure 1). Myanmar is also a multi-religious country where the large majority are identified as Buddhist, but there are also important Christian, Muslim and Hindu minorities, and some of these are prominent in particular areas (Carstens, 2018; Fink, 2018). Whereas Buddhism is the dominant religion and has fundamentally shaped Myanmar's cultural and political history, Islam has also had a long history in the country and Christianity is a major religion among ethnic nationalities (especially Chin, Kayah, Kachin and Kayin) (Gravers & Ytzen, 2014). Animist traditions and worship of *nat* spirits and Hindu gods are also common, including as part of Buddhism. Myanmar has no state religion and the 2008 Constitution states that "every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practise religion" (Union of Myanmar, 2008, section 34). However, the constitution also authorises the state to restrict these rights if necessary and recognises the "special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union" (section 361).

The 2014 census enumerated a total of 50.3 million people, while an estimated 1.2 million remained non-enumerated due to armed conflicts or contentions over the census classification system (Ferguson, 2015; Transnational Institute, 2014). Most significantly, an estimated 1.09 million people residing in Rakhine State were not enumerated because they were not allowed to self-identify as Rohingya. Based on the assumption that these are mainly affiliated with Islam, the Census concludes that Buddhists constitute 87.9 percent of the total population, followed by Christians (6.2 percent), Islam (4.3 percent), Animists (0.8 percent) and Hindus (0.5 percent). This classification of the population by religion also has a distinct geography: Buddhists are in the majority in almost all states and regions; Muslims make up a large part of the population in Rakhine State and many Muslims reside in Mandalay and Yangon; Christians have a prominent position in Kayah, Kachin and especially Chin states and there

are also many Christians in Kayin, Shan, Ayeyawady and Yangon states and regions (Figure 1).

Moving beyond general census figures, it can be noted that religious identities and practices are integral parts of everyday life. Myanmar is a country where the dividing line between the sacred and the mundane domain is blurred, and religion is intimately intertwined with communal relations and contentions, political values and leadership, state law and education (Gravers, 2014). Religious institutions also have a long history of providing important services in society, especially education, health services and welfare support (Gravers & Ditlevsen, 2014). Gravers and Ytzen observes that the position and potential power of Buddhism in Myanmar means that "successive governments have sought to harness Buddhism to their own purposes or otherwise tame the Sangha" (Gravers & Ytzen, 2014, p. 67). While the democratic government of U Nu promoted Buddhism and declared it as the state religion in 1961, the subsequent, non-democratic, military socialist regime led by Ne Win imposed strong restrictions and established a governmental body of senior monks to oversee and regulate the Sangha (Charney, 2009; Smith, 1991).

It is notable that the iconic leader of the pro-democracy movement and the current government, Aung San Suu Kyi, has used Buddhist ideals of moral perfection and freedom to explain democracy and criticise the military rulers (Aung San Suu Kyi, 2010). Outside of the formal political sphere, Buddhism has also played a role in contentious movement politics in society. The 1988 democracy uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution are well-known examples of the use of Buddhist ideals and the role of Buddhist monks in popular mobilisation against the military rulers (Rogers, 2008; Walton, 2015a). After the democratic opening, monks played a leading role in Buddhist nationalist movements, with reference to their duty to protect race and religion from the threat of 'Islamisation' (Cheesman, 2017b; Frydenlund, 2017; van Klinken & Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017).

Religion is also intertwined with Myanmar's protracted and multiple intrastate conflicts, but it is misleading to portray these as religious conflicts (Cheesman & Farrelly, 2016; Smith, 2018). Sadan (2014) argues that there is a tendency to see religion as the core of Myanmar's armed conflicts, based on the centrality of Christianity in Kachin, Chin, Kayah (Karenni) and Kayin (Karen) nationalism. The assumption is that the core of the Kachin conflict, for example, is about religious antagonisms between the Buddhist-Burmese majoritarian government and the Christian Kachins. Sadan asserts that this is an oversimplification, contradicted by the fact that the Mon, Rakhine, Shan and many of the Kayin are Buddhists. Instead, Myanmar's intrastate conflicts revolve around the antagonism between majoritarian, centralised and militarised statebuilding and demands for ethnic self-determination, representation and equality (Smith, 2018). Discrimination of religious minorities is among the contentions that have triggered ethno-nationalism, but it is misleading to conflate ethnicity with religion and to reduce ethno-nationalism to religious grievances. Buddhist nationalism has, however, played a decisive role in the growth of communal anti-Muslim violence since 2012 and the large-scale ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in Arakan State (Crouch, 2016; Ibrahim, 2016; van Klinken & Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017; Wade, 2017; Ware & Laoutides,

2018). The latter has attracted international attention and condemnation and has been described as a textbook case of genocide by the UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.[1]

It can thus be observed that religions are intertwined with the state and politics and have been politicised in complex and contentious ways (Crouch, 2016; Walton, 2017). Yet, it can also be argued that political parties and electoral politics have not played a primary role in this politicisation. Myanmar's political parties and party system do not revolve around religious identities, and religious belongings and inter-faith relations played a relatively subdued role in the electoral campaigns in 2010 and 2012. The 2015 election, however, saw the emergence of Buddhist nationalist monks endorsing the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) while questioning the Buddhist credentials of the National League of Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This also raises concerns about potential party-politicisation of religious issues in the forthcoming 2020 election. In general terms, it can be observed that although the reintroduction of competitive elections and parliamentary politics since 2010 have widened the political space for religious politics, political parties have been at the receiving end rather than the driving force behind politicisation of religion in recent years.

This chapter will provide tentative analytical reflections on this conundrum. The next section will review the reintroduction of electoral democracy and party-politics, with special attention to the character of parties and the party system, and their links to religion. Thereafter, the attention turns to how the majority religion (Theravada Buddhism) frames democratic politics and is a basis for contentions over the relationship between Buddhism and politics. The chapter concludes with brief reflections on the increased role of religion in electoral competition and how this may be furthered or ameliorated in future elections.

Political parties in contemporary Myanmar

Following five decades of direct military rule, the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) crafted a new constitution in 2008, held fraudulent elections in 2010 and transferred power to a nominally civilian government in 2011 (Bünte, 2017; Egreteau, 2016; Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, forthcoming). This military-imposed transition produced a formal institutional framework for electoral democracy, parliamentary politics and civilian government, but the democratic substance is constrained by constitutional regulations that grant the military (*Tatmadaw*) authority over national security and strong military influence in parliament, government and public administration (Williams, 2014). The state and politics in contemporary Myanmar are thus to a large degree shaped by the changing continuity of military domination, and this is also the key for understanding the weak institutionalisation and capacity of most political parties (Selth, 2018; Stokke, forthcoming-a).

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[1] https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar

The military-designed 2008 Constitution introduced elected parliaments both at the union and state/region levels, and held general elections in 2010 and 2015 and by-elections in 2012, 2017 and 2018 (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016; Huang, 2016; Tin Maung Maung Than, 2013). A legal framework for registering parties was created, and a large number of new electoralist[2] parties were formed and contested the 2010 election. Older movement parties rooted in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and the annulled 1990 election refused to re-register under the 2008 Constitution and boycotted the 2010 election. Following amendments to the electoral laws, however, they subsequently changed this position and have engaged in elections and parliamentary politics since 2012 (Marston, 2013).

Myanmar has a large number of political parties (Table 1). More than 90 parties registered with the Union Election Commission and contested the 2015 election, but most of the parties remain small and few of them have been successful in winning parliamentary seats within the first-past-the-post electoral system (Lemargie, Reynolds, Erben, & Ennis, 2014). The list of parties includes both old movement parties from the 1990-era and new electoralist parties that were formed for the 2010 election (Stokke, forthcoming-b). Most of the electoralist parties were defeated in the 2015 election, when the old movement parties participated in the first free general election since 1990 (Huang, 2016). Both old and new parties are poorly institutionalised, as the old parties were repressed and largely defunct during the 1990s and 2000s and the new parties are electoralist organisations with weak party structures and links to society. This means that most parties have limited political capacity to represent their constituencies in parliamentary politics and government (Stokke, Khine Win, & Soe Myint Aung, 2015). There are, however, two dominant parties that have substantive organisational resources and union-wide reach: The military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that governed Myanmar from 2011 to 2016 and the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD) that stems from the 1988 democracy uprising and which has been in power since 2016. The polarised opposition between USDP and NLD represents the pivot of party politics in Myanmar today.

In terms of the identities and interests that parties claim to represent it is notable that none of them are based primarily on religious belonging and can be labelled as religious parties. This seems paradoxical, in light of the aforementioned omnipresence of religion in Myanmar. One possible explanation may be found in how the Constitution defines an overall political framework for 'disciplined multi-party democratic system' and impose restrictions on political parties (Egreteau, 2016). Section 364 of the Constitution states that "the abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden" (as it also was in the 1947 Constitution) and Section 407 adds that parties "abusing religion for political purpose" shall have "no right of continued existence" (Union of Myanmar, 2008, pp. 152, 163). These regulations make divisive party politicisation of religious issues unconstitutional. Nevertheless, constitutional restrictions are not the most plausible reason for the absence of political parties. A more

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[2] 'Electoralist' parties are those engaged in politics during a 'mid-way' transition from an authoritarian towards a democratic system. The term 'electoralist' was first used by Schmitter and Karl (1991).

convincing explanation may be that other grievances and cleavages have taken precedence over religion in shaping the party system and strategies for mobilisation of support.

Myanmar's current party-system is not organised around social or religious cleavages in society, but rather reflects political polarisation between opposed state- and nation-building agendas (Table 2).

On the one hand, there is a divide between parties advocating Burmese unity and nationalism and those representing ethnic nationalities and nationalism, where ethnic nationalism is criticised for undermining the unity of the nation and Burmese nationalism is portrayed as a disguised Bamar majority nationalism (Stokke et al., 2015). What Burmese and ethnic nationalisms have in common is that both rest on a cultural rather than civic conception of national communities, where the notion of 'national races' (*taingyintha)* has become the primordial cultural core of the nation. Cheesman (2017a) traces the genealogy of *taingyintha* to nationalist movements in the late colonial period that sought to unify colonial subject populations by creating a distinction from European, Chinese or Indian foreigners. After independence, *taingyintha* gradually came to refer to eight national races – Arakan (Rakhine), Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Mon and Shan – that became a legitimising frame for ethno-nationalist mobilisation as well as military rule to protect the unity of the Burmese nation (Charney, 2009; Smith, 1991).

Later, the military rulers constructed a detailed taxonomy of 135 national race groups that became the basis for the 1982 Citizenship Law and a tool for governing the population (South & Lall, 2018). While the list of 135 ethnic groups is contested, Cheesman (2017a) describes *taingyintha* as a truth regime that has subsumed civic conceptions of political communities and created a basis for Burmese and ethnic nationalisms. It is also the basis for exclusion of non-*taingyintha* groups such as the Rohingyas from citizenship, which means that achieving *taingyintha* status has become a strategic priority among many Rohingya organisations. Since independence, this polarised opposition between Burmese unity and unitary state-building and claims for ethnic self-determination, equality and representation within a federal state, has been the core of Myanmar's multiple and protracted armed conflicts (Smith, 2018). Through the 1990 election and the democratic opening in 2010, this polarisation has also come to be expressed in electoral politics as an opposition between national parties and ethnic parties.

On the other hand, there is also a divide over the state-building and the form of rule, between military-affiliated parties that prioritise securing state authority and political order and pro-democracy parties that emphasise state legitimacy based on democracy, rule of law and federalism (Stokke et al., 2015). This divide can be traced back to the early post-independence period, when there was growing political instability and armed intrastate conflicts in the context of multi-party democracy and state fragility, creating a pretext for a short-term military caretaker government (1958-60) followed by protracted military rule (1962-2011) (Smith, 1991; Taylor, 2009). With reference to the dangers of disunity and instability, the Tatmadaw came to see itself as the guardians of stability and political order, in contrast to divisive and ineffective multi-party politics and government (Callahan, 2003). The

military rulers have thus had a persistent focus on building and defending the sovereignty and authority of the unitary state, including by strong military force against multiple armed ethnic organisations (Selth, 2018). Such military rule has been challenged by popular struggles for democratisation, especially in the form of democracy 'uprisings' in 1988 and in 2007, and movement parties demanding democracy, human right and federalism. Following the democratic opening, this divide is expressed in electoral politics as a polarised opposition between the two dominant parties, the USDP and the NLD.

Myanmar's party system has thus revolved around opposing agendas for nation-building/nationalism and state-building/form of rule (Table 2). These divides have created a party-system that revolves around three clusters of parties: national parties that originate from and maintain close links to the military; national parties that stem from the pro-democracy movement; and, ethnic parties representing non-Bamar nationalities (Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, & Aung Tun, 2015; Stokke et al., 2015). Most of these parties were either repressed under military rule during the 1990s and 2000s or are new electoralist parties, which means that they tend to be poorly institutionalised with limited political capacity. The foremost exceptions are the two dominant national parties, the military-affiliated USDP and the pro-democracy NLD. It is striking that the party system continues to be shaped by these state-centered divides rather than socio-economic interests or religious identities. It is the ebb and flows of military rule and state-building that are the foremost determinants behind Myanmar's tripartite party system of military parties, democracy parties and ethnic parties, as well as the divide between old movement parties and new electoralist parties (Stokke, forthcoming-a). It can be argued that this is a key to understanding the general absence of religious parties, in combination with the constitutional restrictions on religious politics that was mentioned earlier.

Religious framing of party politics

While there is a general absence of religious parties in Myanmar, religious beliefs and ideals are prevalent in society and especially Buddhism frames politics in a broad sense (Crouch, 2016; Rogers, 2015; Walton, 2017). Also, religious actors exert political influence in multiple ways. This is most strikingly demonstrated by politically engaged Buddhist monks, but also by the political influence of Baptist and Catholic organisations in Kachin and other ethnic states (Frydenlund, 2017; Gravers, 2013; Sadan, 2014; van Klinken & Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017). Christian leaders in Kachin State, for example, have advocated a merger of ethnic parties as a strategy for improved political representation based on ethnonationalism, while local Buddhist monks have pursued the same agenda in Mon State (Stokke, forthcoming-b). Although the Constitution forbids abusing religion for political purposes and it is widely held that Buddhist monks should refrain from political engagement, there are strong, yet complex links between Buddhism and politics in Myanmar (Gravers, 2014). This section provides a brief overview of Burmese Buddhist political thought and the role of politically engaged Buddhist monks.

Walton (2015b, 2017) portrays Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices as a moral framework that defines the boundaries of political authority, legitimacy and participation. This framework is, however, not a unitary and totalising perspective on politics, but rather religious raw material for contestation and reformulation. Theravada Buddhism contains multiple modes of reasoning that have been used in different ways, by diverse actors and for divergent political purposes, often in combination with political ideologies from other sources. Walton thus observes that "while Theravāda Buddhism is not a totalizing influence on Burmese politics, the religion has provided both a set of ideational raw materials and a general conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in Myanmar think about and practice politics" (Walton, 2015b, p. 1).

A foundational premise in Burmese Buddhist thought, according to Walton (2017), is a duality in the conception of human nature: Humans are seen as enslaved by desires that produce conflicts and are hence in need of protection against their basic instincts, but humans also have the capacity of controlling their cravings through moral living. These views on human nature support a dual conception of the purpose of politics. While one perspective holds that the aim of politics is to create political authority that can control human actors and make them live in agreement with moral and mundane laws, an alternative position sees the end goal of politics as freedom or liberation. In the latter perspective, personal liberation and political freedom are closely related, as expressed for example in the writings of Aung San Suu Kyi (Aung San Suu Kyi, 2010; Walton, 2015a).

This twofold understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and politics is paralleled by paired notions of political authority. Houtman (1999) identifies two different concepts of authority in Burmese Buddhism: a model of centralised authority (*ana*) and an alternative notion of distributed influence (*awza*). These models are distinct, yet also blend into one another:

> One who is greatly influential is often given authority, and one who is in a position of authority is also able to influence. Nevertheless, there is a world of difference between these concepts. To be influential may make one authoritative, but there is a world of difference between being influential and authoritarian. In Burmese history all Burmese kings invariably had ana, but exceptionally few were described as having awza. (Houtman, 1999, p. 169)

Resembling this primacy of authority in pre-colonial and colonial times, the model of *ana* has held a dominant position in most of the post-colonial period. Walton (2017) points out that there was a shift within the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League after independence, from an emphasis on liberation to political authority. After the military coup d'état in 1962, state authority and order became the *raison d'être* for the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (Callahan, 2003). By the late 1990s, Houtman finds that a deep divide had been created between the model of *ana* (authority) associated with various military regimes since 1962, and the model of *awza* (influence) that was associated with the democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi. By extension, it can be argued that this opposition between *ana*-based centralised power and *awza*-based moral opposition is also manifest in contemporary party

politics, as a divide between the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party and the pro-democracy National League for Democracy. The current divide is, however, less clear-cut and conflictual than in the past, due to the military's acceptance of formal democratic institutions and the emphasis on unity and political order also within the NLD.

In contemporary Myanmar, Walton (2017) argues that these notions of human nature, politics and authority are linked to competing models of democracy rather than an opposition between democracy and military rule. On the one hand, the Tatmadaw and USDP have pursued a model of disciplined democracy that prescribes a sequenced democratisation process and sees state sovereignty and authority as prerequisites for political liberalisation (Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, forthcoming). The core argument is that a transition to democratic politics has to be gradual and carefully managed to avoid political disunity and instability (Egreteau, 2016; Selth, 2018). The democracy movement and NLD, on the other hand, have championed a model of rights-based democracy. This position holds that democracy is compatible with Buddhism and Burmese culture, and "valuable as a political system because it enables and supports human efforts to create their world freely" (Walton, 2017, p. 175).

These models of disciplined or rights-based democracy indicate that Buddhism continues to frame political dynamics. Buddhist political thought is used as raw material for criticising or legitimating political authority, with Buddhist monks as key political actors in society (Walton, 2015a). Such political engagement by the Sangha seems to challenge the "generally assumed prohibition against monastic political activity among Burmese Buddhists" (Walton, 2015a, p. 123), but monks can abstain from direct participation in party politics and still be politically influential (Walton, 2015b). They enjoy deep respect in society and are expected to protect Buddhism, engage in the problems of the followers of Buddha and offer advice to both laypeople and rulers (Gravers, 2013). On this basis, monks have engaged politically as advisors to pre-colonial kings, participants in anticolonial mobilisations, critics of military rule, advocates for democracy, and leaders of Buddhist nationalist movements.

Gravers identifies two principal positions within politically engaged Buddhism:
> One is the political spirituality of the NLD and young monks aimed at establishing a new moral and democratic order. It is critical of corruption, violence and repression. The other is the conservative, nationalist 'line' of 'Burmanization' or 'Myanmarification', which emphasizes Burman cultural hegemony, Buddhism as the national religion, and the order established by the state as above the Sangha. (Gravers, 2014, pp. 319-320)

While 'liberal' pro-democracy engagement was especially visible in the 1988 and 2007 mass uprising, 'conservative' Buddhist nationalism has gained a prominent position in recent years.

In 2007, Buddhist monks played a lead role in the so-called Saffron Revolution, which was the most significant mass mobilisation against the military regime since 1988 (Rogers, 2008). Emphasising loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion, this mobilisation was framed as a defence against the decay and decline of Burmese society. For some monks this meant expressing support for NLD, while other monks saw themselves as politically neutral. The

military rulers, however, responded forcefully against the protesters and legitimated this by arguing that Buddhist morality means loyalty and obedience to the regime and the nation (Rogers, 2008; Selth, 2008). This Buddhist nationalist conception was explicitly expressed in the slogan 'one race, one language and one religion'. It is this nationalist line that has gained prominence among politically engaged monks in recent years, enabled by the introduction of basic civil and political freedoms and conducive relations with military personnel and the USDP-government (Frydenlund, 2017; van Klinken & Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017).

Under protracted military rule, the links between personal and political freedom/liberation created a common ground between pro-democrats and Buddhist monks. In contrast, the contemporary merging of nation and religion in Burmese Buddhist nationalism has become a convergence point between the Tatmadaw and nationalist monks in recent years. This is most clearly demonstrated by the Buddhist nationalist movements, 969, and the Association for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha), which were formed to protect the Burmese Buddhist 'race and religion' (Gravers 2015). Whereas the 969 movement was a loosely organised campaign for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, MaBaTha has been a more formal organisation with both monastic and lay leaders (Gravers, 2015). Both organisations have been banned by the Maha Nayaka Sangha Council (MNSC), but MaBaTha continues to exist under new name and as informal networks of meaning and activism. MaBaTha has been active in framing religious pluralism and especially 'Islamisation' as a threat to Burmese Buddhism in general, and to vulnerable Buddhist women in particular (McCarthy & Menager, 2017).

Contemporary Buddhist nationalism has primarily targeted Muslims, including in the form of anti-Muslim communal violence and ethnic cleansing of Muslim Rohingyas by the Tatmadaw (Cheesman, 2017b; Crouch, 2016; van Klinken & Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017). MaBaTha has been at the forefront of pushing for legislative measures to protect Buddhism and successfully advocated the USDP-government to propose and approve four controversial 'race and religion laws' before the 2015 election. The laws were designed to regulate interfaith marriage, prevent forced conversion, abolish polygamy and promote birth control, and are commonly understood as being targeted at Muslims (Frydenlund, 2017).

USDP together with the Rakhine National Development Party (RNDP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) supported the laws in Parliament. NLD and several ethnic parties voted against without providing a strong counter narrative to MaBaTha's anti-Muslim rhetoric. This created a basis for politicisation of religion during the electoral campaign in 2015. USDP was framed as being more tolerant towards Buddhist nationalism and supporting the laws in Parliament, in contrast to NLD (Frydenlund, 2017). USDP office holders and government officials had "tacitly or explicitly sided with the Buddhist community against alleged Islamic 'intruders'" (Cheesman, 2017b, p. 337) while some military personnel and business owners had donated funds (Fink, 2018). Van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung (2017) describe this as a process of skilful brokerage, whereby disparate groups were pulled together through deals between monks and influential political actors.

Before the 2015 election, MaBaTha monks endorsed USDP for its commitment to protecting the future of Buddhism, while the Buddhist credentials of NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi were called into question. Both USDP and NLD refrained from nominating any Muslim candidates, although USDP had Muslim legislators in the prior parliament period and NLD had earlier portrayed itself as an inclusive party with many non-Buddhist members. In this manner, it can be observed that questions of 'race and religion' were politicised prior to the 2015 election. However, it can be argued that this was not primarily driven by the electoral rivalry between two national parties dependent on support from the Buddhist majority. The main driving force was rather a Buddhist nationalist movement in society seeking to utilize the USDP-NLD rivalry to gain political influence. Reporting on the 2011-2016 period, Chit Win and Kean (2017) find that USDP suppressed rather than fueled communalist views in parliamentary politic. While the legislature could have done more to suppress communal violence, it did not descend into conflictual religious identity politics during the USDP government period, and has also shown some restraint in the heated political context of military ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas (Win & Kean, 2017). Looking towards the forthcoming 2020 election, the implication is that the electoral rivalry between USDP and NLD may lead to party politicisation of religious identities, while the prevalence of other political cleavages than religion and the constitutional restriction on religious politics may continue to hamper religious identity politics in parliament.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to untangle the paradox of relative absence of religious parties and religious issues in electoral politics and the omnipresence of religion in society, especially Theravada Buddhism. The chapter has paid special attention to the character of parties and the party system, and their links to religion. A key finding is that the party system continues to revolve around political questions of state- and nation-building rather than socio-economic interests or religious identities. This may hold a key to understanding the general absence of religious parties, in combination with constitutional restrictions on religious identity politics.

The chapter also highlights that religious beliefs and ideals, especially Buddhism, frames politics and specific religious actors in society exert considerable political influence. This is most strikingly demonstrated by politically engaged Buddhist monks. Although the Constitution forbids abusing religion for political purposes and it is widely held that Buddhist monks should refrain from political engagement, there are strong and complex links from Burmese Buddhist political thought and politically engaged Buddhist monks to democratic politics. It was especially found that Buddhist nationalism have politicised religious identities and Buddhist-Muslim relations, despite regulations that constrain large-scale party politicisation of religion.

Yet, it is not inevitable that Myanmar will see further intensification of religious identity politics. The diverse links between religion and politics highlight how the political use of

Buddhism is situational and strategic. Buddhist doctrine provides resources that can be used by different actors for different purposes in a changing political field. Buddhist identity has strong mobilising capacity, not least in a period marked by major political, economic and social changes, and Buddhist organisations provide a social infrastructure for mobilisation and leadership. Thus, Buddhism in Myanmar should be seen not as a fixed framework of politics, but as a rich source of raw materials that can be used by diverse political actors and agendas.

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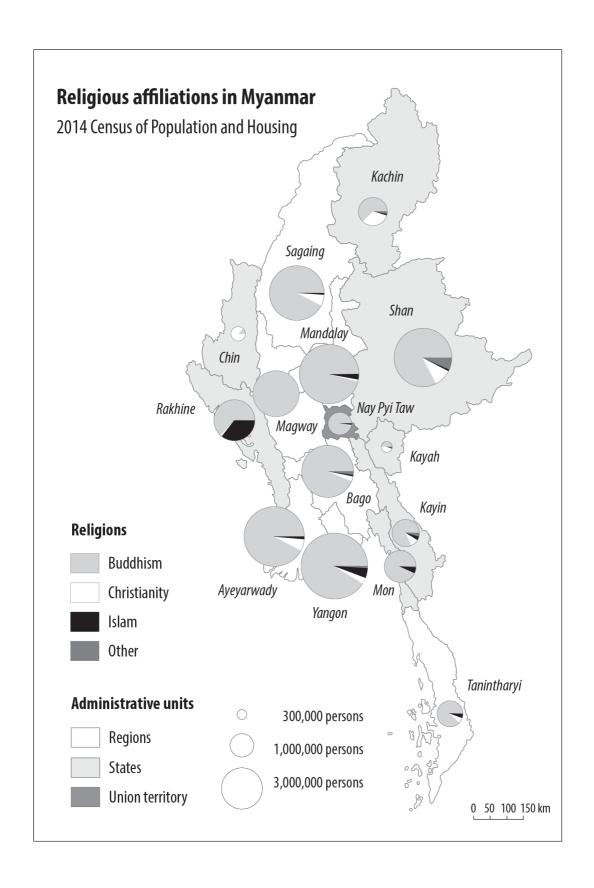
Figure 1. Religious affiliations in Myanmar (adapted from: The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2017).

Party type	Party name	Founded	1990 National Assembly	2010 Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	2015 Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
			Number of parliamentary seats		
Military parties	National Unity Party (NUP)	1988	10	17	1
	Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	2010		388	41
Democracy parties	National League for Democracy (NLD)	1988	392		390
	Other democracy parties	1988-90	7		
	National Democratic Front (NDF)	2010		12	
Ethnic parties: Chin State	Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)	1989	3		
	Zomi Congress for Democracy (ZCD)	1988	2		4
	Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organisation (MKNSO)	1989	1		
	Mara People's Party (MPP)	1990	1		
	Chin Progressive Party (CPP)	2010		6	
	Chin National Party (CNP)	2010		4	
Ethnic parties: Kachin State	Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KNCD)	1990	3		
	Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS)	2010		2	
	Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP)	2013			1
	Lisu National Development Party (LNDP)	2013			2
Ethnic parties: Kayah State	Democratic Organisation for Kayan National Unity (DOKNU)	1989	2		
	Kayah State Nationalities League for Democracy (KSNLD)	1990	2		
Ethnic parties: Kayin State	Karen State National Organisation (KSNA)	1990	1		
	Kayin People's Party (KPP)	2010		2	
	Kayin State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP)	2010		1	
	Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP)	2010		5	
Ethnic parties: Mon State	Mon National Party (MNP)	1988	5		1
	All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP)	2010		7	
Ethnic parties: Rakhine State	Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)	1989	11		
	National Democratic Party for Human Rights	1989	4		
	Kamans National League for Democracy (KNLD)	1990	1		
	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP)	2010		16	
	Arakan National Party (ANP)	2014			22
Ethnic parties: Shan State	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)	1988	23		15
	Pa-O National Organization (PNO)	1949	3	4	4
	Ta'ang National League for Democracy (TNLD)	1989	2		
	Union Danu League for Democracy Party (UDLD)	1989	1		
	Lahu National Development Party (LHNDP)	1990	1		
	Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP)	1990	1		
	Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP)	1990			1
	Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)	2010		21	
	Inn National Development Party (INDP)	2010		1	
	Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party (TNP)	2010		2	5
	Wa Democratic Party (WDP)	2010		3	1
Other	Other ethnic parties	1988-90	3		
	Independent		6	2	3
	Vacant		7	5	7
Total	Elected Members of Parliament		492	498	498
	Military-appointed Members of Parliament			166	166

Table 1. Distribution of parliamentary seats at the union level, 1990, 2010 and 2015 elections (data source: Burma Fund UN Office, 2011; Khin Kyaw Han, 2000; Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2016).

	Nation-building	
	Burmese nation and nationalism	Ethnic nationalities and nationalism
State-building Unitary state and military rule	*Military parties*	
Federal state and democratic rule	*Democracy parties*	*Ethnic parties*

Table 2. Major political divides within Myanmar's party system.