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**BUDDHISM WITHOUT A LIVING BUDDHA: STATE MANAGEMENT OF
RELIGION IN POST-BHUMIBOL THAILAND**

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Abstract: This article examines Thailand's religious attitudes under the government of Prayut Chan-o-cha in the post-Bhumibol era (2018-2019). The article argues that this government has provided justifications for state intervention in people's religious lives. Field research was conducted in the Department of Religious Affairs of Thailand from June to September in 2018 and 2019 to analyze state policies and gain a better understanding of Thailand's management of religion. The article also analyzes the 2017 constitutional change and the 2018 Sangha Act to reveal how Thailand deals with different religions in the country. The research found that, in the post-Bhumibol era, Prayut's government has attempted to give Buddhism an even greater position of superiority over other religions by supporting it with government policies and constitutional clauses. In contrast, King Rama X, the successor of Bhumipol, has pursued the king's traditional role as a religious sponsor. However, unlike his predecessor, he does not devote himself to the traditional kingly virtues derived from Buddhism.

Key words: Thailand; Buddhism; State management of religion; Department of Religious Affairs; Constitution, Sangha Act.

1. Introduction

The recent resurgence of religion in the modern world calls for a re-evaluation of the concept of secularization (Turner 2011, 127). The growing role of religion in society is evidenced by various faith-based conflicts (Bromley and Melton 2002; Martin 2016; Juergensmeyer 2017) and state involvement in religious affairs (Fox 2008; Seo 2013; Larsson 2019). These actions have the potential to reintegrate religion into public life. The new task is to critically examine the compatibility of religion with constitutional democracies, replacing the previous goal of separating religion and state (Na'im 2008; Cohen and Laborde 2016). Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks and subsequent suicide bombings have repositioned Islam at the center of religious research. However, the focus on the frictions between the Islamic world and the Christian West has left other religious cultures, particularly Buddhism, relatively understudied.

In July 2016, the German tabloid *Bild* attracted world-wide news coverage by publishing a set of photos of Thailand's Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn at the Munich International Airport. Together with his pet poodle, which had been awarded the rank of Air Chief Marshal in the Royal Thai Air Force, the heir to the throne was pictured wearing a tight rolled-up tank top, ill-fitting skinny jeans, and a full-back fake tattoo. A few days later, Andrew MacGregor Marshall, a former Bangkok-based Reuters correspondent, posted another photo of the prince in a similar tank top, which was again widely shared on social media. After the release of the photos, the Thai police detained 'Noppawan Bunluesilp', the British journalist's Thai wife and seized her electronic devices. She was visiting her parents in Bangkok with her three-year-old son when the police raided her parents' home. She was freed after questioning, as she was not involved in the work of her husband, who had been banned from Thailand since 2011 for his criticisms of the Thai monarchy.

The incident caused a national scandal in Thailand, a country known for having the world's strictest *lèse-majesté* law (Streckfuss 2010, 8). Section 112 of Thailand's criminal code dictates that anyone, including foreign nationals, who 'defames, insults, or threatens the king, the queen, the heir-apparent, or the regent' will be punished with up to 15 years in prison. Since King Rama IX, Bhumibol Adul-yadej (reign: 1946–2016), died on October 13, 2016 at the age of 88, the *lèse-majesté* law has become a political hot potato, because of public protests by the 'New People's Party' against the new king Rama X, Maha Vajiralongkorn, named after the People's Party, who introduced constitutional monarchy to Thailand. They demanded a full democracy in Thailand, asserting that sovereign power belongs to the people, not the king. Further, they compared Prayut with a Japanese cartoon character, 'Hamtaro', to allude to his corruption, saying that Prayut takes bribes all the time just as Hamtaro eats all the nuts. These circumstances are quite a contrast to when the Thai people

mourned the death of their much-beloved King Rama IX, as both Thai and international media reported (Thairath 2017; BBC Thailand 2016; Reuters 2016; Jamieson 2016; Holmes 2017). In the post-Bhumibol era, this change signals a wider societal shift in Thailand, compelling both King Rama X and Prime Minister Prayut to devise strategies to maintain the Thai people's trust in them.

The late King Bhumibol took the throne in 1946, when the status of the Thai monarchy was not secure. Given the escalating tensions between the monarchy and modernization, the absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 and King Rama VII, Prajadhipok (reign: 1925–35) abdicated a few years later. Bhumibol's elder brother, King Rama VIII, Ananda (reign: 1935–46), was shot and killed after a decade on the throne, and the perpetrator has never been identified. At 18 years old, Bhumibol faced the daunting task of reestablishing the monarchy, a task in which he achieved remarkable success (Kobkua 2003). Ruling the country for seven decades, King Bhumibol not only restored the weakened monarchy but also reinstated its place at the center of Thai society. The Thai people regarded the royal projects as saving backward regions from poverty, lawlessness, and more significantly, regarded King Bhumibol as a mediator for stability and deterrent to national emergencies. Moreover, unlike a constitutional monarch, King Bhumibol wielded actual political power and was seen as embodying it (Bunbongkarn 1993, 220).

This article aims to explore Thailand's management of religion post-Bhumibol. The departure of the king, the country's epitome of Buddhism, marked a new era of uncertainty in the relationship between religion and the state, as it encouraged and justified state intervention into the religious lives of the nation's people. A long-standing Thai political ideology stipulates that the king, religion, and nation are indissolubly bound, but the government's position has been somewhat unclear. Thailand is widely recognized for its rich Buddhist tradition and culture (Keyes 1971; Cassaniti 2015). Approximately 94.6% of its 69 million population adheres to Buddhism, making it a highly influential force in Thai society. However, it is currently a matter of debate as to which entity - the new king, the government, or both - will exert religious hegemony in the country.

Based on field research conducted in the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) within the Ministry of Culture of Thailand, this article focuses on the Thai government's post-Bhumibol perceptions of religions, and analyzes the institutionalization of religion in Thailand. The article investigates several policies and incidents to better comprehend Thailand's management of religion in this transitional period. Last, an overview of Thai law concerning religion, specifically the Constitution and the Sangha Act, is presented, in order to better clarify the examples acquired from field work.

2. The DRA and Buddhism

One of the authors of the article conducted fieldwork in the DRA to witness how the Thai government handles religions, from the end of June to the beginning of September in 2018 and 2019, under DRA approval as a visiting scholar. Also, one of the authors attended everyday events and had access to internal documents. The discussion of the institutionalization of religion in Thailand is divided into three topics: (1) the role of the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) as a government agency overseeing five major religions in Thailand, (2) the implementation of the “Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017 [B.E. 2560],” and (3) the lack of recognition for the Churches of Christ of Thailand (CCT) as a large-sized religious association, which in Thai administrative terms refers to an independent religious organization.

2.1. DRA as a government agency for five religions in Thailand

In Thailand, there are two different government agencies related to the religion. The DRA deals with the five recognized religions in Thailand, that is, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hindu-Brahmanism, and Sikhism. Meanwhile, the the National Office of Buddhism (NOB), under the office of the Prime Minister (OPM) takes responsibility for the cultivation and support of Buddhism, as well as the management of Buddhist assets, Buddhist areas, and monks, as specified in the Sangha Act. The DRA is intended to control the religious activities not only of Buddhism but also of the other four religions. However, a considerable part of the DRA is still allocated to activities supporting Theravada Buddhism, in particular, such as the protection of Buddhism, the support and protection of Buddhist education, and tasks related to the Sangha Act. Buddhism has never lost its advantage under the DRA, and the government’s patronage of Buddhism has been duplicated through both the NOB and the DRA since then.

2.2. Government Support for Buddhist Monks’ Health

The Sangha and eight different government agencies produced the Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017 [B.E. 2560], in accordance with the 191/2560 Buddhist Order Resolution held on March 20, 2017. (Public Assistance Committee of The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand et al., 2017). It was finally completed on December 20, 2017, and the DRA held a conference to discuss the promulgation of the Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017 [B.E. 2560] to extend results to other religions. The conference was held on the first floor of the Ministry of Culture (DRA, 2018a). One of the authors of the article also attended this conference, with the approval of the DRA, and found that this conference aimed to announce the char-

ter's implementation rather than discuss or extend the results to other religious leaders.

In this conference, the director-general of the DRA, Manas Taratjai, explained the necessity for this charter as follows: "Buddhist monks could not choose their diets because of the monastic discipline, 'Vinaya'; therefore, it is necessary to inform laypeople what are appropriate offerings to the monks. Some religions, such as Sikhs, adhere to vegetarian diets, which are good for health. Furthermore, some religions, such as Christianity, have their hospitals. Those hospitals enable their clerics to be more accessible to medical treatments. However, Buddhist monks have difficulty accessing medical services." (Taratjai on July 6, 2018).

The "Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017" contained provisions that sparked controversy. One such provision allowed the government to provide support for budget, manpower resources, medical equipment, and healthcare institutions only for Buddhist monks (Clause 19-21). Representatives from other religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism, but not Hindu-Brahmanism, requested that their religious leaders also be included to receive these benefits, and likewise for Buddhist monks. The DRA's secretary responded negatively, justifying the response by noting that this charter was not legislation, thus not legally binding. He recommended that they produce their own charters, rather than modify this charter. However, they stated that even if the DRA share knowledge acquired through the drafting of this charter, it would be virtually impossible to prepare a new one for themselves. Compared to Theravada Buddhism, other religions in Thailand are small, and therefore, developing such charters is challenging. The religious representatives in the conference were discouraged by their human and material resource limitations. Even this charter required the Sangha and eight government agencies until it is completed to work together for nine months, so it seems unclear how those relatively small religions could write their own charters.



Figure 1. Medical check-up service for Buddhist monks under the Health Charter for Buddhist Monks, 2017. DRA, Ministry of Culture, Thailand.

The Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017 was established as planned, and health check-ups were conducted for Buddhist monks in accordance with the charter. The medical data collected began to accumulate. The campaigns for monks' health were also implemented with the support of the government. In July 2019, one of the authors met with religious representatives from other religions who had attended the conference. They mentioned that they had not even drafted a charter for their religious leaders. This instance suggests that the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) and other government agencies prioritized providing exceptional support to Theravada Buddhism, while neglecting other religions' leaders or clerics in the process. This situation raises concerns that non-Buddhist religions may be peripheralized in Thailand.

2.3. A Contentious refusal of the DRA against a Christian association

On July 13, 2018, the DRA organized a conference with five other government agencies, including the Department of Provincial Administration, the Thai Police Clearance Centre, the Immigration Bureau, the Office of the National Security Council, and the National Intelligence, to discuss the approval of a new large-sized religious association. According to the Regulation of the Department of Religious Affairs on Religious Organizations, 1969, religious organizations are classified into three types: 1. large-sized religious associations, 2. special religious organizations, and 3. small-sized religious organizations. According to the DRA (2018b), large-sized religious associations are completely independent and do not belong to any other umbrella religious organization. One of the authors participated in this conference as an observer with the approval of the DRA's director. The conference was triggered by a petition (Document No. NR. 1015.05/48123) submitted to the prime minister by the Churches of Christ of Thailand (CCT), a Protestant association that is considered the largest Christian denomination in Thailand. In the petition, the CCT emphasized that they were established about 50 years ago and have more than 80 churches and 3,000 members in over 30 provinces in Thailand. The CCT demanded that the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) mediate between them and the DRA due to the DRA's refusal to approve the CCT as a new independent religious association. However, the DRA declined the CCT's request, citing section 31 of the 2017 Constitution, Order 49/2559 of the National Security Council, and the Plan for Patronage and Protection of Religions in Thailand.

The CCT demanded that the prime minister issue three commands to the DRA. First, to approve them as a new large-sized religious association. Second, to investigate and prepare an organized list of registered religious associations in Thailand to easily obtain data from them. Third, to amend

the 1969 regulations on religious group registration in accordance with contemporary society. The CCT asserted that the DRA ignored their request, causing them to lose opportunities for support that other religious groups or denominations could have received. They also claimed to have lost opportunities to cooperate with government agencies. The OPM passed the petition to the DRA for reconsideration. However, the DRA attempted to approve the CCT as a small-sized religious organization subordinate to existing Christian associations, disregarding the regulations for deliberating new religious organizations and deciding solely based on internal principles.

The DRA responded to the CCT that, even though they did not approve the CCT as an independent association, as long as the CCT did not violate Thai laws and complied with the obligations of the Thai people, the CCT could continue their religious activities. This was ensured in section 31 of the Constitution of 2017 which stipulates that “a person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion and shall enjoy the liberty to exercise or practice a form of worship in accordance with their religious principles, provided that it shall not be adverse to the duties of all Thai people, neither shall it endanger the safety of the state, nor shall it be contrary to public order or good morals” (Document No. WT 0202/5563). The DRA’s decision meant that the CCT would not be able to enjoy certain benefits that only officially approved independent religious associations could receive. This is due to the DRA’s 1969 regulations on religious organizations, which state that if the DRA approves an independent religious association, it must support the association in various ways. For instance, it must support evangelists to obtain ID cards or visas, help with their religious worship, assist with resolving any issues that may arise with their association, invite them to religious affairs meetings, and share information on other religious organizations, among other things.

Prasit Jirotkul, the CCT’s representative was persistent in pursuing the request for approval of CCT as an independent religious association. Despite the explanations and conferences arranged by the DRA’s Division of Religious Patronage, the CCT’s representative remained dissatisfied with the decision and sent another petition to the prime minister on Jun. 19, 2018.

Eventually, the relevant government agencies involved in the conference did not agree to approve the CCT as an independent religious association. They stated that religious liberty under the Constitution only allows individuals to personally believe in a religion or engage in religious activities. They compared the CCT’s case with Buddhism, where there are only two official sects: Maha Nikaya and Dhammayuttika Nikaya. The government agencies stated that it was inappropriate for Christianity to have a larger number of recognized sects than Buddhism and that they should manage the number of foreign missionaries more strictly. The DRA then refused the CCT’s request by stating that it is not an organization

that determines a religious doctrine, and thus its refusal does not intend to restrict or support specific religious activities. However, the CCT's request was not related to the DRA considering their doctrine, but rather to approve them as a large-sized religious organization with the right to receive benefits.

This case shows that religious minorities have found it difficult to obtain government support as independent religious groups. The DRA Secretary Poolsak Sukhsaptaweephol described the Thai government's stance on religion in an interview as follows: "We have been a Buddhist country since ancient times, and all our kings have been Buddhists. Kings have built this country and have defended the country through a variety of efforts, such as wars. Christians and Muslims later came to live here on our approval [...]. I hope that people understand that the government has this perspective toward religion. Although we discuss religious freedom under the Constitution and the law, there is no complete freedom in reality. It is not possible, and complete religious freedom brings chaos". (Interview with Sukhsaptaweephol on July 5, 2018)

3. Legislating religion: The Constitution and the Sangha act

The Constitution of Thailand, as the supreme law of the land, has undergone several amendments due to political turmoil. This article focuses on the 1997, 2007, and 2017 Constitutions, which have established Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion in the country, even though it has never been designated as the state religion. Unfortunately, the 2017 Constitution has negatively impacted religious freedom by increasing the vulnerability of religion to state intervention, as noted by Tonsakulrungruang in 2019. Our research has found that the 1962, 1992, 2017, and 2018 amendments to the Sangha Act have allowed the prime minister to have progressively greater involvement in the hierarchy of monks. However, the recent revision also enables the king to appoint monks to high ranks in the Sangha at his own discretion.

Since the constitutional revolution of 1932, all Thai Constitutions have required that the king be a Buddhist and a sponsor of all other religions. King Bhumibol, the former king, was highly respected and regarded as being well-versed in Buddhist principles, leading many Thais to compare him to a Bodhisattva (Handley 2006, 5-7). However, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the current prime minister of Thailand came to power through a military coup that ousted an elected prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra (incumbency: 2011–14), Thaksin's younger sister. While military coups have been common in Thailand since the 1932 revolution, Prayut faced the additional challenge of proving that he was not aligned with Thaksin's populist political reputation (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008). One way he sought to do this was by promoting Buddhism, follo-

wing the example of previous leaders. In 2016, Prayut's government issued the first Master Plan for National Moral Promotion, followed less than a year later by the Plan for Patronage and Protection of Religions under the Command of the Head of National Council for Peace and Order 49/2559.

Traditionally, Thai kings have been generous patrons of Buddhism since its introduction to the Sukhothai kingdom in the 13th century. However, the current prime minister, Prayut, has also taken on the role of a religious patron with his plans. Prayut has provided a national agenda on religious matters and urged government agencies to enhance all religions, especially Buddhism. The Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) submits quarterly reports to him on the execution of these plans. In contrast, the current king, Rama X, has not been seen playing a significant role as a traditional benefactor of religion in the plans. Additionally, in his private life, he seems to not concern himself with or adhere to the ten kingly virtues required for the ideal Buddhist monarch, despite being a Buddhist and participating in religious rituals in public.

The master plan released by Prayut's government encourages the preservation of the traditional Thai cultural lifestyle, which has been heavily influenced by Theravada Buddhism. The plan highlights that the greatest threats to traditional lifestyles are the advancement of information and communication technology and the influx of foreign cultures. The plan also suggests that resolving these issues will lead Thailand to become a stable country with prosperous citizens and sustainable Thai culture and lifestyle (National Committee of Moral Promotion 2016, 3–4).

In Thailand, there is a close relationship between morality and religion, with Theravada Buddhism gradually becoming more prominent in the Constitution. However, there have also been constitutional amendments that have limited religious freedom. The 1997 Constitution emphasized the importance of adhering to religion in order to combat corruption, as religious sincerity has traditionally been seen as valuable. This Constitution also promoted moral and ethical standards and provided support, protection, and understanding for interreligious reconciliation among all religions in Thailand, not just Buddhism. The Constitution allowed people to enjoy religious freedom without fear of sanctions from the government, with the obligation of the state being to patronize and protect both Buddhism and other religions. Religions were not considered a source of antagonism in this Constitution. (Constitution of Thailand, 38/1997 and 73/1997)

The amendment of the 2007 Constitution was led by the traditional ruling powers, including the military and the Privy Council of Thailand. They were prompted by the actions of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was seen as a threat by these groups (Hewison 2017). Unlike the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) of the 1997 Constitution, which was composed of elected citizens from each province, the CDA of the 2007 Constitution was appointed by the military junta (Dressel

and Tonsakulrungruang 2019). The 2007 Constitution emphasized the importance of Buddhism over other religions, while still acknowledging all recognized religions in Thailand. Section 79 explicitly stated that “Buddhism is the religion that the majority of Thai people have practiced for a long time” (Constitution of Thailand, 79/2007).

Meanwhile, the 2017 Constitution was promulgated by the junta following the 2014 interim Constitution. People’s rights to enjoy full religious liberties were assured; however, the paragraph mentioning the protection of religious liberties was eliminated. It allowed the government to restrict people’s religious liberties/rights with additional conditions, such as “when it endangers the safety of the State” (Constitution of Thailand, 31/2017). The kingship and constitutional monarchy were not mentioned in the preamble. On the other hand, the status of Buddhism was raised higher than before. Section 67 added the following: „In supporting and protecting Buddhism, which is the religion observed by the majority of Thai people for a long period, the State should promote and support the education and dissemination of Dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom, and shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form”. (Constitution of Thailand, 67/2017)

The Sangha Act has been related to state management of religion ever since the first version in 1902 (Ishii 1986, 100–19). Thirathamphimon and Sompong (2019) point out that there is a problem with the Sangha Act in the period 1962–1992. They argued that even though this act was meant to administer monks under an absolute monarchy, it was still valid after the country has been reformed to a constitutional monarchy. Key positions, such as the Supreme Patriarch, were installed by the king, and there were no means of intervention by political figures until the 2000s. However, the prime minister became involved in the process of committee member selection and the expulsion of the monks with the 2002 revision of the Sangha Act 1992 (Sangha Act, 10/1992; Sangha Act, 15/1992). The revision of 2004 entitled the prime minister to submit one or more candidates for the Supreme Patriarch position to the king with the consent of the Sangha (The Sangha Act, 7/1992). Furthermore, the amendment in 2017 enabled the prime minister to expand his authority over the Sangha. The prime minister now has to endorse the appointment of the king’s nominee (The Sangha Act, 7/2017).

It is worth noting that the promotion of monks by the king is a traditional practice in Thailand, and it is seen as a way for the monarch to show his support for Buddhism and his role as the protector of the faith. For instance, Rama X held an specific event that could imply the king’s authority over Buddhist organisation in the country on his birthday. The king’s promotions included an unusually large number of high-level appointments. One noteworthy example is when he elevated four monks to the second-highest title in the Sangha, marking the first time in Thai

history that a king had simultaneously promoted four monks to such a prestigious rank. The king also promoted 74 monks on July 28, and another 85 monks to the tenth or lower title on August 14, 2019. Two years later, the king promoted five monks to the fourth-highest title on July 8 and eight monks to the third-highest title on July 14. The king was thus able to remind people of his role as a patron of religion, which had been overshadowed by his lack of dedication to the ten kingly virtues and by the prime minister's role in religious affairs. In addition, the king could also demonstrate his domination over the Sangha, a role apportioned to kings in Thailand.

4. Conclusions

During the 2010s, Thailand underwent major socio-political events, such as the 2014 military coup, King Bhumibol's death, Rama's enthronement in 2016, and the 2019 general election. Through these events, Buddhism gained a more prominent position as a key component of the nation. This article considered two factors influencing this process: administration and legislation.

The Prayut government has elevated Buddhism in the post-Bhumibol, and deals differently with Theravada Buddhism and the other four religions in Thailand. The Health Charter for Buddhist Monks 2017 also demonstrates the government's extensive support for Buddhism. Although the charter is not legislation, it includes clauses that establish that the government can execute municipal budgets for monk's health, prepare health check-up systems and equipment, and establish medical institutions and assistance only for Buddhist monks' health. Muslim, Christian, and Sikh representatives requested of government agencies coverage for their religious leaders as well, but they were dismissed.

Meanwhile, the largest Protestant denomination in Thailand, the CCT, requested to be recognized as a large-sized religious association by the DRA, which would grant them the opportunity to receive support from government agencies and participate in meetings with the DRA. But the DRA declined their demand, despite numerous petitions by the CCT to the office of the prime minister. Thus, the CCT was unable to benefit as a large-sized religious association, and did not have an opportunity to receive support from the DRA or participate in meetings with the DRA.

As for legislation, the article analyzed both the Constitution and the Sangha Act in order to gain a better understanding of potential directions for amending those laws. To elaborate further, the Constitution of Thailand has increasingly included specific details about Buddhism between 1997 and 2017. In particular, the 2017 revision allowed the government to restrict religious freedom in the interest of national security, even if individuals have the right to practice their respective religions. This sug-

gests that the government's control over religion has become stronger over time, and that there may be limitations on religious freedom in certain circumstances. The Sangha Act amendments from 1992 to 2018 showed a gradual increase in the prime minister's authority over the Sangha, but in 2018, there was a sudden shift that allowed Rama X to appoint or remove high-ranking monks in the Sangha at his discretion. To assert his authority over the Sangha, Rama X promoted a significant number of monks to key positions on his birthday, perhaps indicating his desire to reclaim the king's role from the prime minister's shadow.

Buddhism has played a significant role in consolidating the monarchy and justifying military government in Thailand for a long time. The government and the king have utilized Buddhism as a means to establish their dominance, and have emphasized its importance more than ever before. As long as political instability persists in Thailand, and the current king does not enjoy the same reputation as his predecessor, King Bhumibol, those in power will continue to reinforce the privileged position of Buddhism. Other religions in Thailand, without governmental or monarchical support, do not have aspirations to reach the same level of recognition as Buddhism.

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