

## SECTION: RELIGION AND SOCIETY

# THE DECONSTRUCTION AND RISE OF RADICAL BUDDHISM

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**ABSTRACT:** The article focuses on the deconstruction of Radical Buddhism, and counters the predominant vision of Buddhism being about peace and understanding. Moreover, the article dives into the socio-political situation of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and tries to explain the rise of the radical form of this religion. Therefore, based on the research, it can be understood why Radical Buddhism rose to power in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

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## Introduction

Buddhism, a religion which voices peace, understanding, and tolerance, is considered, as one the most peaceful ideologies in the World today. However, in Sri Lanka, a country known for its mixture of cultures, ethnicities, and beliefs, a more violent and darker version of the religion arose; radical Buddhism. The general opinion in Sri Lanka, is that religion is widely connected to nationalism; since majority of the population are Sinhalese-Buddhist (72%), the radical Buddhists claim to protect the Sinhalese identity against foreigners and minorities: Tamils, who are Hindu (12%), Muslims (9%) and Christians (7%) (WWME, 2016). Sri Lankan Buddhism is connected to the Theravada branch of the religion, also referred to as “the doctrine of the elders.” Theravada Buddhism is closest to the original teachings of Buddha; it emphasizes on the teachings to be used as a tool to understand the truth (BBC Editors, 2002). This form of Buddhism is common in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Tibet.

The country is home to a militant group of monks, known as Bodu Bala Sena (BBC Editors, 2002), also referred to as the Buddhist Power Force which organizes campaigns against those who pose a threat to the Sri Lankan identity (Bodu Bala Sena). The group was formed in 2012 by Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero and has become the predominant power in the country, where even the government turns a “blind eye” to their hateful actions. Which leads to the question, how could Bodu Bala Sena gain a dominant position in the country, even though it is considered as a terrorist organization, in a short period? The question stated will be answered

through the analyses of radical Buddhism, the way it rose to prominence, and its ideological expansion to other Theravada Buddhist countries.

### **The deconstruction of radical Buddhism**

The fundamentals of radical Buddhism are nationalism, culture, and religion. This culture and religion paradigm created the linkage between ideology and politics, which in turn acclaimed it as a unique heritage and destiny of the people – the Sinhalese, who were persuaded to think of themselves as superior to the minorities of the Island (Tambiah, 1986).

This notion is a prime example of Reform Nationalism, which criteria were put down by Peter Alter: “Reform Nationalism grew out of a position of defense, asserting itself from foreign cultural and political influence” (Alter, 1994). Furthermore, reform nationalism pursues the notion of a dominant ethnic, cultural and political force, which for its survival is obliged to take any action necessary. Members of this radical movement provided interviews for the IRLA [International Religious Liberty Association] where they clearly stated: “It's the responsibility of the monks as Buddha's sons to teach wrong and uncivilized people to become good and civilized” (Graz, 2014). In a different interview for BBC the leader of the group, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero stated: “This country belongs to the Sinhalese, and it is the Sinhalese who built up its civilization, culture, and settlements. We are trying to go back to the land of the Sinhalese until we correct this, we are going to fight!” (Haviland, 2015). This attitude puts down the notion that the Sri Lankan national identity is connected to Buddhism. Thus, whoever is not a Buddhist, in turn, can not claim to be Srilankan. This framework was constructed and set in place, by Buddhists who attained their political consolidation, and claimed their religious and moral legitimacy over the Tamil, Muslim and Christian inhabitants (Tambiah, 1986). These converged attitudes, which are common in Theravada Buddhist countries, should pose as a warning about the militant and chauvinistic responses, which have constituted “the dark underside and terrifying face” of Buddhism as a religiopolitical complex (Tambiah, 1986). This other face presents Buddhism as a twisted “political Buddhism” emptied of its moral content and inflated with an ideology of communal identity (Shields, 2014). Under its banner, populists leaders mobilize masses who are losing their traditional roots and their traditional Buddhists moral restraints and transform them into a collective identity (Shields, 2014), whose anger is aimed against those, who pose a threat to their political ideology.

### **The rise to power**

After the Civil War had ended in 2009, radical Buddhism gained a “post-war high” because it began deploying a selection of Buddhas readings - denying the influence of minority or foreign thinkers, as stated by Mohan (2015): “to fanfears of an existential threat to Buddhism and justify its acts of violence.” During a rally, the BBS leader Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero compared the victory over the Tamils to an old legend, where a Buddhist King vanquished his Tamil enemies, spectators listened and cheered to the ideal comparison. Furthermore, Thero ended the speech with the words: “Tamils have been taught a lesson twice, and so would other minorities if they would try to challenge Sri Lankan culture!” The leader, frequently speaks of the “Muslim problem”; his speeches carried a deep hate for the minority, and arguments, that the Sinhala people are under serious threat. This rhetoric echoed within the Sinhala inhabitants which in turn, lead to mosques, shops, and villages being burned down by exasperated mobs (Weiss, 2014). Furthermore, the government decides to “turn a blind eye” to these terroristic events. On one occasion, an anti-Muslim riot

was triggered by BBS, which led to four dead, 80 injured and immense property damage; the President, instead of arresting the members of the group, stated: "all parties concerned to act with restraint" (Mohan, 2015). For the past four years, BBS has been using state links to fund its activities. Even though the government denies any links to the group, it was well known that the Sri Lankan secretary of defense who is also the president's brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has attended countless meetings and has openly supported the organization (Mohan, 2015). With the government's support, the organization has no "justice" overseeing their actions, which in turn leads to more violence towards the minorities. They believe that these measures are just and will bring salvation to the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka. Churches were being under constant attack; Dinesh had led his Church in Kandy for over 30 years, however, when he began expanding the building, the locals with the police approached him and stated that he is no longer wanted in his village. The community took legal action against Dineh, and the Judge ruled in their favor; the ruling was that he had an "unauthorized place of worship." Even though Christianity has been present in Sri Lanka for centuries, this can serve as a prime example that the group gained support, even from the legal section of the country. This is because as stated by the World Watch Monitor organization: "Locals think Christianity is a new kind of colonization, noting tension when Christians visit local villages, where it is assumed they are paid to evangelise: "They believe that you have a CIA agenda" ('Peaceful' Buddhism's violent face in Sri Lanka). The military and police force also hesitate to take action against the group, even though there are video evidence and eyewitnesses of these crimes being committed. Jarni Blakkarry further states: "the scale of the violence in each case was largely determined by the way local law enforcement agencies and government reacted and whether they chose to stand by, provoke or diffuse tensions."

Furthermore, this lack of hesitation from the group to commit violent acts had led secular liberals and peaceful monks into silence. Thus, these circumstances (support of the government and lack of interference from the police and opposition) allowed Bodu Bala Sena to consolidate its position on the Island. In a span of four years, they developed from a monastic community to a force not to be reckoned with.

### **Expansion of radical Buddhism**

However, the continuing ethnic hostility and violence in Sri Lanka, are paralleled in Burma by the persisting opposition and rebellions of ethnic minorities, such as the Shans and Karens. These groups of minorities fight against the domination by the majority Buddhist Burmese. Thailand is known for its vocal opposition on the part of the minority Muslim in the Southern provinces (and in Bangkok) to the restrictive, administrative, and educational policies of the central Thai Buddhist - dominated government. Furthermore, Myanmar is considered to have the most vocal of radical Buddhist organizations (Tambiah, 1986). The 969 movement, whose leader refers to himself as the "South Asian Bin Laden," is responsible for multiple ethnic cleansings and genocide. However, as stated by Blakkarry: "Explaining the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine is more about racial politics than it is about religion. None of Myanmar's ethnic minorities have escaped persecution from the country's Burman majority government over the years - be they Christian, Animist, Muslim or Buddhist" (Blakkarry, 2015). Furthermore, as stated by Coclanis (2013):

"It seems pretty clear that what is going on in most of Burma right now is more akin to terrorism than to sectarian conflict, as some have preferred to style it. Even in the Rakhine state, where there is a large Muslim minority, and the violence is much less one - sided, the power of the Buddhist - the majority is supported, when necessary, by the Buddhist Bamar controlled government. To be sure, Muslims have often been

accused of instigating specific incidents across Burma - there have been an uncanny amount of rumors of Muslim men attempting to rape Buddhist women, for example - but the weight of the evidence suggests that such rumors are more often than not fictions useful primarily for provocation or to rationalize Buddhist promoting, or at least suggesting, violence" (Coclanis, 2013).

These actions can serve as a prime example of a majority people who have dominating urges and of majority politics in pluralistic societies and countries. Today, one can see the dominating position of radical Buddhism in South Asia, which is validated by an alliance between the 969 Movement and Bodu Bala Sena. In 2015, Dilantha Withanag, the leader of Myanmar's radical movement met up with Bodu Bala Sena's leader. Together they agreed on cooperating against the Muslims and Christians in Southeast Asia, and to restore the sacred teachings of Buddha (Blakkarly, 2015). Furthermore, as stated by Aneez: "Both Bodu Bala Sena and 969 Movement have felt that they must now come forward to derive practical and meaningful ways to address these burning issues which cannot be left for politicians to deal with" (Aneez, 2014). The news that reaches the West about South Asian terrorism seems confusing because it breaks the stereotypical idea of Buddhism. However, historically speaking, there have been countless incidences where Buddhism was misused for political aims; besides Burma and Sri Lanka, being the countries with the largest and most vocal groups, one could locate similar groups in Thailand, Nepal, Japan, Bhutan, and Tibet (Coclanis, 2013). Thus, the West considers Bodu Bala Sena and the 969 Movement as terrorist organizations; for their misuse of religion to pursue their program, and the spread of hateful rhetoric against minorities which have been present in their countries for centuries; however, refuses to take any legal, political or military actions against them. The reason being that these organizations, as stated before, have the full, or partial support of the Government; either through funds, political contacts or forbidding the police and army to take any action against the movements.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, to answer the question how could Bodu Bala Sena gain a dominant position in the country, even though it is considered as a terrorist organization, in such a short period, one must analyze the provided evidence. Bodu Bala Sena arose in 2012 and quickly became the predominant power in Sri Lanka because it claimed to uphold and protect Buddhist values. The nationalistic aspect is a perfect tool for the group to manipulate because nationalism is tied to religion. The Sinhalese people, whose religion is Buddhism, create the majority of the Island's population. Furthermore, after the civil war in 2009, the idea of a militant version of the peaceful religion gained notoriety because it turned the attention to another minority; the Muslims and the Christians. Furthermore, the lack of military or governmental interference provided a platform where the group can manipulate the mob against mosques and churches. Thus, the fact that Bodu Bala Sena obtained political support created a situation where it consolidated its position as a driving force in Sri Lanka's political and cultural life. BBS also formed a strong alliance with the Burmese 969 Movement, which is renowned for its authoritarian tendencies and the genocidal actions against Muslims. This cooperation aims to spread the Buddhist ideology and fight against Islam and Christianity in Southeast Asia.

From the information stated above, the BBS had a "swift rise to the top". Through manipulation, political ties and alliances, it managed to obtain the full support of the Sinhalese people who believe Bodu Bala Sena to be the noble warriors who will take any action necessary to protect the nation and freedom. Even though the group

commits horrific actions, these beliefs are firmly consolidated; thus, one can argue that "one's terrorist, is another's freedom fighter."

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