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Burmese Buddhist Idealism from U Thant to Aung San Suu Kyi. Two Case Studies of Myanmar's Political Thought

Abstract

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi remains a puzzle. Not a long time ago a global democracy icon, she now faces harsh criticism for her actions in governance. Much has been written about her policies yet there is little attempt to trace the intellectual sources of her policymaking. This article will try to fill this gap by showing that important sources of Suu Kyi's governing philosophy can be found in 1950s intellectual climate of Burma. Suu Kyi in her political thought follows the (completely forgotten now) tradition of Burmese Buddhist modernists of 1950s whose most famous representative was U Thant. Suu Kyi is quite like them in many regards including the inability to successfully govern a country.

Keywords: *Burma, Myanmar, U Thant, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Political Thought, Burmese Buddhist Modernists*

1. The background: U Thant and Buddhist Modernists

The roots of Suu Kyi's political thought should be located in postcolonial Burma. Among various intellectual traits represented by the Burmese postcolonial elites the one that comes closest to Suu Kyi is the heritage of so-called modernized Burmese Buddhists, best personified by U Thant, UN secretary general from 1961 to 1971.

U Thant, born in Irrawaddy Delta in the family of landowners and businessmen, was in his youth a journalist, a Rangoon University student. During studies he met and befriended U Nu, the future prime minister of Burma (in the years 1948–1956, 1957–1958 and 1960–1962), a teacher and a headmaster in the countryside, before becoming a civil servant in newly independent Burmese government (Nassif, 1988; Bingham, 1966; Charney, 2009). He became well-known internationally for being the secretary of Bandung Conference in 1955. During that time, he became a close adviser to U Nu, if not his closest confidant (Dorn, 2007). Once he was offered to became Burma's permanent representative to the UN in 1957, he was happy to leave the "ugly political atmosphere" in Rangoon in late 1950s and moved to New York (Thant Myint-U, 2007). Four years later he was elected the UN Secretary General, escaping the fate of his former colleagues from U Nu government imprisoned by the military junta under general Ne Win.

On ideational ground U Thant was the best personification of the group called Burmese Buddhist modernists. They "championed Buddhism as the only suitable religion for the modern world" and dreamed of offering Buddhism as "an alternative not only to the world-systems prevailing at the time (…) but to those that it was designed to replace – traditional Buddhism and the British empire" (Winfield, 2017). As Jordan Winfield elaborated, Buddhist modernism "represented a non-reactionary critique of Western modernity": it "emphasized and affirmed the cultural and spiritual superiority of Asia over the West, yet it did not urge a retreat from Western institutions or technology," rather "it insisted that the high sciences of the West, from particle physics to dialectical materialism, were in fact Buddhist ideas seen through a glass, darkly," hence "Buddhists (particularly Burmese Buddhists) were the true inheritors of science and their way of life was the one best suited to a scientifically advanced civilization" (Winfield, 2017). According to him, inside Burma, the Burmese modernism was an intellectual solution of the problem of lack of a "blueprint" of development: Burmese Buddhist modernism "subverted the universalist/particularist dichotomy by making what was local – Buddhism – universal"; in their view "only Buddhist modernism represented a coherent philosophy that was modern and scientific, and yet was also moral and – importantly – local"; it "reaffirmed Burmese moral and cultural superiority at the local as well as the global level, challenging the existing world-systems and overturning the universalist/particularist dichotomy that supposedly confronted them" (Winfield, 2017).

Burmese Buddhist modernists biggest problem was their administrative incompetence: they "found themselves in a situation where they could build neither pagodas nor factories. They lacked the desire to build the former, and the expertise to build the latter. The only thing they could build (…) were ivory towers; intellectual edifices that failed to provide concrete outcomes" (Winfield, 2017).

Well-known and universally respected, U Thant in the 1960s "was a figure of enormous fame and stature, his curious name and smooth, sensitive, rather worried-looking features" were universally familiar (Popham, 2011). With his "doubts veiled beneath more than even the normal measure of Burmese charm" (Lewis, 1952) and "mild, gentle and in several ways typical 'Burmese' manner appealed to most parties in the otherwise very fragmented United Nations" (Bengtsson, 2012) U Thant was well-equipped for the role of "moderator" designed for the UN secretary general and he personally agreed to play it (U Thant, 1978). He was a skilful negotiator who gained respect for handling the Cuban crisis, ending the war in Congo, mediations in Yemen and Bahrain and establishing the UN development, humanitarian and ecological programmes. He supported the Third World, and decolonization, and was hostile to neo-colonialism which deteriorated his relations with the USA over war in Vietnam; he was unable to countermine the Six Days War. He ended his career as a tired and ill man, albeit still respected, and he died of cancer three years after leaving the post in 1971 (Nassif, 1988; Thant Myint-U, 2007).

In his memoirs, U Thant concentrated on describing above mentioned events. Yet here and there, there are more personal moments. At the beginning, he started with personal words (that are now his frequently – if not most frequently – cited words) that in order to make others understand him and his role, he needed to present his religion and its ethical aspects: "As a Buddhist, I was trained to be tolerant of everything except intolerance. I was brought up not only to develop the spirit of tolerance, but also to cherish moral and spiritual qualities, especially modesty, humility, compassion, and, most important, to attain a certain degree of emotional equilibrium. I was taught to control my emotions through a process of concentration and meditation. Of course, being human, and not yet having reached the stage of *arahant* or *arhat* (one who attains enlightenment) I cannot completely 'control' my emotions, but I must say that I am not easily excited or excitable (…) I believe I have attained a greater degree of emotional equilibrium than most people"

(U Thant, 1978). U Thant followed with describing and emphasizing the importance of *brahmavihāras* (*Mettā,* "impersonal love or good will," *Karunā*, "compassion," *Muditā,* "sympathetic joy," *Upekkhā*, "equanimity," "a balance of mind") as well as meditation: he rejected popular association of meditation with "a particular posture, or musing on some kind of mystic or mysterious thought, or going into trance" and instead wrote that "through meditation I seek inner peace" (and quoted Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dominique Georges Pire's words to be "a man of peace, one must first be at peace with oneself," "one must first achieve inner peace"), which helped him to accept both tragic news (the sudden death of his only son) and good ones (intention to award him Nobel Peace Prize) with "minimal emotional reaction"; U Thant's ideal remained the Buddha's words "to contemplate life, but not be enmeshed in it" (U Thant, 1978). In this words one may find characteristic aspects of Burmese modernist Buddhists: "the usual Buddhist virtues of tolerance and humility are lauded, but so too is the 'process of concentration and meditation' leading to the very rational outcome of emotional equilibrium," moreover, U Thant "did not speak constantly about his religion, yet (…) he made it plain that Buddhism was his main inspiration" and "underpinned his conception of his own role as an international figure and – significantly – of the role of the responsible 'planetary citizen'" (Winfield, 2017). This can be seen in his memoirs, where he rejected concept of different civilization as a "meaningless fallacy" (for him "civilization connotes a mental and spiritual excellence"), stressed the "oneness of the human community" and opted for "a great human synthesis" and "universal or planetary man" (U Thant, 1978).

U Thant's modernized Buddhism was also visible indirectly. U Thant stressed that modern science should be used by mankind to eradicate the poverty, not to build another mortal weapon: "I wish that the immense progress achieved in science and technology be equaled in the spheres of morality, justice and politics" (U Thant, 1978). He wrote about "magnitude and poignancy of the problem of poverty in two thirds of the world" and "inadequacy" of sums spent of armaments with the budget of the UNDP ("senseless spending on potential forces of destruction and death, instead of construction and life") – he complained that his urges about "substantial savings from disarmament" that could "rapidly accelerate the raising of economic and social standards of the less developed countries" fell on deaf ears"; and he warned that "humanity has reached the point of no return. Acceptance of the community of interest has become

a requirement of human survival on this planet" (U Thant, 1978). In this vision, "the perpetration of poverty in a world of plenty" is "morally wrong and politically intolerable" (quoted in: Nassif, 1988). The problem is not the lack of resources but the wrong use of it: this was an indirect criticism of the developed countries (their "moral failure"), a criticism "consistent with what the Burmese postcolonial elites were saying about Buddhism and science in Burma; that there was a connection between developing the country and making it more Buddhist, that there was a Buddhist moral imperative to use science to improve people's lives"; in this regard, U Thant articulated the "internationalist applications of this new moral philosophy" – "since poverty exists in a 'world of plenty,' the prevailing moral orthodoxy of the developed economies – Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union – is perhaps inherently flawed and Buddhism is an obvious alternative." (Winfield, 2017). This is how U Thant followed Burmese Buddhist modernists hope "to make an existing philosophy – Buddhism – into the intellectual and moral context for that imagined global fraternity, with Burma as its source and example"; the challenge they faced was "to balance the emphasis on Buddhism's universalist and universalising tendencies with the championing of the superior Burmese variety" (Winfield, 2017). U Nu failed that, for he was too local, but U Thant was able to promote this vision to the international audience. In the late 1950s he advocated Burma as a place which harmoniously combined both democracy and socialism; he claimed that it happened since roots of both these ideologies ley within Burma. U Thant's vision of both democracy and socialism is modern, yet "defined by the values of the past" such as "pacifism," "tolerance," and "equality" – he managed "to equate the modern concepts of socialism and democracy, the Buddhist virtues of tolerance and pacifism with a sense of Burmese nativism"; this all echo Buddhist modernist argument about Buddhism – "with its emphasis on individualism and laicization" – being "a more egalitarian and inclusive framework for global modernity" than rival ideologies (Winfield, 2017). It does not matter that these comparisons were historically far-fetched at best (what pacifism in precolonial Burma?) and constructed on wrong assumptions (U Thant hailed Burma's democracy as a strong one just before it was killed by the army). What mattered here was that by doing so U Thant "could promote a different view of Burma's cultural landscape to an essentially non-Buddhist audience internationally": a Buddhist and modern landscape and the same time (Winfield, 2017). Although U Thant must have been well aware that his imagined Burma

in both democracy and social aspects was long dead when he wrote his memoirs, he did not stop his attempts to combine his patriotism with a sense of being a "world citizen" (Ma Than, 2010; Thant Myint-U, 2007). This attitude is clearly seen in the final pages of his memoirs, where he wrote explicitly: "a new quality of planetary imagination is demanding from all of us the price of human survival. I am not decrying that form of nationalism that prompts the individual citizen to appreciate and praise the achievements and values that his native land has contributed to the well-being and happiness of the whole human race. Nor am I calling for international homogenization, for I rejoice in cultural and national uniqueness. But I'm making a plea (…) for dual allegiance. This implies an open acceptance of belonging (…) to the human race as well as to our local community or nation. I even believe that the mark of the truly educated and imaginative person facing the twenty-first century is that he feels himself to be a planetary citizen" (U Thant, 1978). Finally, he dots the "i" by writing "perhaps my own Buddhist upbringing has helped me more than anything else to realize and express in my speeches and writings this concept of world citizenship" (U Thant, 1978). As Jordan Winfield observed, Burma in U Thant memoirs appeared only in the context of Buddhism ("Buddhism is Burma's most significant feature, for him and for the world"), as it was Buddhism that the Burmese modernists presented as the remedy for both domestic and global challenges: "In the rhetoric that U Thant deployed we see efforts on the part of the modernist Burmese to campaign for a Burmese-centred Buddhist internationalism, to wrest their history and their future away from external hegemony, as well as refuting the old British claims of backwardness by presenting international modernity as an essentially Burmese (as opposed to Soviet or American) concept" (Winfield, 2017).

Unfortunately for modernist Buddhists like U Thant, this vision was not accepted internationally during their lifetime. And – perhaps even worse for them – a certain global popularity of Buddhism did indeed emerge in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but it was Tibetan Buddhism with its pivotal person of the 14th Dalai Lama – not Burma with its Theravada Buddhism – that won the hearts and minds of so many in the West and beyond. In the meantime, in Burma the army has completely killed the ideas of modernized Burmese Buddhists, by totally rejecting their dual heritage (Burmese and, by their Anglicized education, international) and by concentrating fully on nation-building, based on narrow-minded, local, xenophobic nationalism. Only with the 1988 political entry of Aung San

Suu Kyi – who knew U Thant, worked in the UN during his time and lived among the Burmese emigre diaspore where Buddhist modernists were strongly present – did this combined Burmese and universalistic ideas re-emerged in the mainstream Burmese political thought.

2. Aung San Suu Kyi: the Epigone of Buddhist Modernists

Aung San Suu Kyi, with her unique blend of internationalized Burmeseness and with her universalistic emphasis on Buddhism as compatible with democracy and human rights may be considered Buddhist modernists' intellectual epigone. One may trace Buddhist modernists' inspiration in Suu Kyi political thought particularly in some of her texts written for international audience, especially those that do not deal with her political struggle directly.

In first four of her "Letters from Burma," Suu Kyi described an idealised vision of Thamanya monastery which served her to present her political philosophy – "some have questioned the appropriateness of talking about such matters as *metta* (loving kindness) and *thissa* (truth) in the political context. But politics is about people and what we had seen in Thamanya proved that love and truth can move people more strongly than any form of coercion" (Suu Kyi, 1997). Suu Kyi's Thamanya was "Gandhian in its Shangri-La serenity" (Sengupta, 2015). In one of her descriptions of Thamanya, Suu Kyi wrote about the abbot of the monastery that he "combines traditional Buddhist values with a forward-looking attitude, and is prepared to make use of modern technology in the best interests of those who have come under his care" (Suu Kyi, 1997) which followed Buddhist modernists sentiments about the need to subjugate modern science to moral guidance of Buddhism.

Not only science should be subjugated: democracy, too. In her lengthy interviews from the mid-1990s Suu Kyi almost openly followed Buddhist modernists' line of thinking about the West lacking spiritual values by declaring: "I don't agree with everything that's happening in the West, which is why I say that I would like our democracy to be a better, more compassionate, and more caring one. That is not to say we have fewer freedoms. But we will use these freedoms more responsibly and with the wellbeing of others in mind" (Suu Kyi & Clements, 2008). She repeated this sentiment when asked about her vision of Burma's future democracy

– "it would be a democracy with a more compassionate face" (Suu Kyi & Clements, 2008). Thus, Suu Kyi's vision of "compassionate democracy" can be classified as the 1990s equivalent of Buddhist modernists' hope of Burma being the model for the West, with the Burmese version of democracy being appealing thanks to the spiritual, universal values of Buddhism.

Further Buddhist modernists' inspiration is clearly noticeable in her several lectures/essays. In one of them, Suu Kyi started from elaborating on the issue of culture of peace. She emphasized the universal appeal of peace and combined it with democracy and human rights. Having declared this, she proceeded to criticise critical voices: "there is ample evidence that culture and development can actually be made to serve as pretexts for resisting calls for democracy and human rights" as "some governments argue that democracy is a Western concept alien to indigenous values; it has also been asserted that economic development often conflicts with political (i.e. democratic) rights, and that the second should necessarily give way to the first"; in this regard culture and development should be presented in such way to prevent misusing these concepts "to block the aspirations of peoples for democratic institutions and human rights" (Suu Kyi, 2010a). Suu Kyi clearly referred to her political struggle with Myanmar generals who used culture as an argument against democracy and human rights in Burma, saying that these values ran against traditional Burmese values. The indirect criticism of the military government served Suu Kyi as a pretext for more philosophical deliberations. She used it to criticise the concept of economic development in favour of human development, for "development projects (…) should be done with people in mind," therefore "those who organize development projects should take into consideration that people need the balm of loving-kindness to withstand the rigours of human existence" (Suu Kyi, 1997). For Suu Kyi development projects and planning should arise "out of love," whereas "true development" should also "comprise spiritual cultivation," for "no amount of money or technical expertise or scientific knowledge or industry or vision can make up for lack of love" (Suu Kyi, 1997). And "no amount of material goods and technological know-how will compensate for human irresponsibility and viciousness" (Suu Kyi, 1993). Suu Kyi then rejected the notion of Western or Eastern type of development in favour of a division between "people centred" and "government centred" development, and called the latter "democratic" (Suu Kyi, 1997). In short, "for Aung San Suu Kyi, true development involves much more than mere economic growth"

(Silverstein, 1996). This idea of people-centred development is a clear indicator of Suu Kyi being the intellectual epigone of the 1950s Burmese Buddhist modernists. She did not reject the West and international (Western) ideas (here: development) as such; she just wanted to improve it, upgrade it "spiritually" by adding human dimension in accordance with Buddhist ethics. This was what Burma, an underdeveloped country with few international assets, could offer to the world in both the 1950s and the 1990s: a more humane, Buddhist-inspired vision of development that is both local and international at the same time.

This sentiment can be seen, too, in Suu Kyi's criticism of capitalism, especially her objections to capitalist belief that development would solve all the problems. Suu Kyi complained about "an increasingly materialistic world" and about the "ardent advocates in favour of giving priority to political and economic expediency," who based their reasoning on "cold argument: achieve economic success and all else will follow"; and about "policies heavily, if not wholly, influenced by economic considerations" that would unlikely "make of the much bruited 'New World Order' an era of progress and harmony such as is longed for by peoples and nations weary of conflict and suffering" (Suu Kyi, 2010b). She repeated these thoughts more elaborately elsewhere: "the Market Economy, not merely adorned with capital letters but seen in an almost mystic haze (…) economics is described as the '*deus ex machina*, the most important key to every lock of every door to the new Asia we wish to see" (Suu Kyi, 2010a). She rejected this economic vision as reductionist, outdated and outmoded. Reading this criticism of the materialism one may conclude that this is another 1990s equivalent of Buddhist modernists' criticism of the West, with its material progress but lack of spiritual values.

Suu Kyi combined her criticism of capitalism/materialism with appraisal of Buddhism. She stated that what the world has just recognized (the need for more spiritual values), the Burmese have known for long, thanks to their Buddhism: "such a 'modern' concept of poverty is nothing new to the Burmese who have always used the word *hsinye* to indicate not only an insufficiency of material goods but also physical discomfort and distress of mind" (Suu Kyi, 2010b). Hence, according to her, "individual happiness needs a base broader than the mere satisfaction of selfish passions," but "the desirability of redressing imbalances which spoil the harmony of human relationships (…) is not always appreciated," however "Buddhism (…) have long recognised and sought to correct this prejudice in favour of the self"; therefore, if taken Buddhism message

into consideration, "many seemingly insoluble problems would prove less intractable," for "the drive for economic progress needs to be tempered by an awareness of the dangers of greed and selfishness which so easily lead to narrowness and inhumanity," thus "only policies which place equal importance on both will make a truly richer world" (Suu Kyi, 2010b). Again this Suu Kyi's declaration echoes Burmese Buddhist Modernists' claim that all the problems have already been recognized and adequately dealt with by Buddhism and it would be beneficial for the world to look at the global problems from a Buddhist perspective. This would be Burma's piece in resolving international challenges and making this world a better place.

She followed up along these moral lines with a wider generalization: "if material betterment, which is but a means to human happiness, is sought in ways that wound the human spirit, it can in the long run only lead to greater human suffering"; it must be "serving the people, instead of people serving the market" (Suu Kyi, 2010a). She repeated these thoughts, too, during her rallies, saying that the government should encourage foreign investors "to do the kind of business that would benefit our people" (Suu Kyi, 1996). Suu Kyi's vision of economy, in which she "obviously finds more appealing an economic growth based on 'simplicity, comfort and respect for the community', thereby reflecting a Gandhian vision of small is beautiful" – has been criticised for being confusing, as well as "simplistic, with no clear predilection evident for capitalist or socialist structures" (Sengpupta, 2015). This is naturally correct, for Suu Kyi's economic vision is not a concrete economic, developmental programme, but a moral vision, based on *metta* and Engaged Buddhism's inter-dependent co--arising "wherein no individual or society is free of the shared matrix of values and systems to which it belongs" – "what Suu Kyi has envisioned is an economic landscape which is inclusive, organically integrated to the society so as to be responsible during crisis and more importantly people-centric (…) according to her, the economic framework was merely meant to shore up socio-political and even spiritual development and left one with no option of choosing between god and mammon" (Sengpupta, 2015). This moral vision of economy, too, was subjugated to politics: to achieving democracy – Suu Kyi constantly "downplayed the role of the economy in favour of implementing democracy first" (Zöllner, 2011). She declared it openly: "Only if there is a good political system will it be possible to reach economic goals. Even if business is doing well, if the political system is unjust, the nation will not prosper" (Suu Kyi, 2010c).

And she repeated this message at the very end of her speech: "don't give too much thought on economics. Now is not time to be concentrating on economics, but rather on politics (…) After establishing democracy, we may have new responsibilities in the economic sphere but at this time work towards democracy!" (Suu Kyi, 2010c). This accent on politics at the expanse of economics can be seen elsewhere: "the challenge we now face is for the different nations and peoples of the world to agree on a basis set of human values, which will serve as a unifying force in the development of a genuine global community" (Suu Kyi, 2010b). In other words, capitalism is insufficient to solve the problems of the world as it has a reductionist vision of human beings. Free market economy, thus, needs to be deepened by empowering the people, in other words, by more cultural and spiritual needs. And the world needs to find an ideological consensus. This argument, combined with Suu Kyi's accent of Buddhism as guarantor of social justice, is another feature in making Suu Kyi a distant intellectual cousin of the Buddhist modernists of the 1950s.

3. Conclusions

To conclude: in Suu Kyi's political thought economy played an adjunct position to both politics and morality. This was due to objective reasons – the logic of her political struggle – but probably subjective as well. Suu Kyi is a moralist, not economist, and her knowledge on economy is limited at best. Thus, she theorised on economy from moral perspective because morality is the field where she feels secure. The lack of the NLD's concrete economic vision for the country both before 2015 and after, suggests that Suu Kyi is similar to the 1950s Burmese Buddhist modernists in many aspects. The most fundamental one is that just like them, Suu Kyi is unwilling to build pagodas and unable to build (contemporary equivalent of) factories: she lacks the expertise to make Myanmar economy competitive.

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