Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought in Myanmar

This is the first book to provide a broad overview of the ways in which Buddhist ideas have influenced political thinking and politics in Myanmar. Matthew Walton draws extensively on Burmese language sources from the last 150 years to describe the "moral universe" of contemporary Theravada Buddhism that has anchored most political thought in Myanmar. In explaining multiple Burmese understandings of notions such as "democracy" and "political participation," the book provides readers with a conceptual framework for understanding some of the key dynamics of Myanmar's ongoing political transition. Some of these ideas help to shed light on restrictive or exclusionary political impulses, such as anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalism or skepticism toward the ability of the masses to participate in politics. Walton provides an analytical framework for understanding Buddhist influences on politics that will be accessible to a wide range of readers and will generate future research and debate.

Matthew J. Walton is the Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. He has published widely in academic journals and in the media on a number of topics, focused primarily on religion, politics, and ethnicity in Myanmar.

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For Abby, without whom this book never would have been written, and for Soren who provided the last bit of motivation needed to finish it.

Contents

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Chapter 5 also includes excerpts from an article entitled "The Disciplining Discourse of Unity in Burmese Politics," that was first published in *Journal of Burma Studies* 19:1 (2015), 1–26. It is reprinted here with permission by the Center for Burma Studies.

Chapter 6 includes excerpts from a chapter entitled "Buddhist monks and politics in contemporary Myanmar," that was first published in the book *Buddhism and the Political Process* (2016). It is reprinted here with permission by Palgrave Macmillan.

A Note on Language and Usage

Language decisions are always a challenge in works of comparative political theory. Because Burmese terms and concepts do not always neatly map onto English translations and sometimes have different connotations or usages than the more widespread Pāli terms, there are times when it is important to use the Burmese. However, some Pāli terms will be so familiar to readers that to use unfamiliar Burmese terms could interrupt the flow of the text. In this book, I have chosen to use a mixture of Burmese and Pāli terms (and, for the first instance of each in a chapter, the equivalent in the other language). Pāli terms are used where the words are relatively common in scholarly discourse and where the Burmese usage does not significantly diverge from the generally accepted Pāli meaning. For example, I use the Pāli word *sangha* (monkhood) instead of the Burmese *thanga*. However, where I wish to highlight particular Burmese understandings or uses of a term that do differ from an accepted Pāli definition, I prioritize the Burmese term, also giving a detailed explanation of the usage in Burmese contexts. For example, I use the Burmese word *kutho* (wholesome action; merit from good deeds) instead of the Pāli word *kusala*. While this may seem complicated, I believe it is an appropriate compromise between scholarly norms of usage and my methodological commitment to value Burmese thinking on its own terms. The appendix also contains a glossary of all of the Burmese and Pāli terms used in the book.

I have tried to transliterate Burmese terms in the simplest way for non-Burmese readers, meaning that I do not always follow conventional transliteration practices. While this may be jarring for readers familiar with the Burmese language and common transliterations, I hope it makes the text more accessible since a few Burmese terms are central to the analysis.

The Burmese language uses a number of honorifics that indicate relative age as well as status. “Daw” and “U” are the female and male honorifics that are used in practice as a respectful “Auntie” or “Uncle” (even when the speaker is not related by blood) and generally correspond

to "Mrs./Ms." and "Mr." Monks can be accorded various honorifics but the most common are "U" and "Ashin." A more senior monk who oversees other monks in a monastery is called "Sayadaw." For bibliographic purposes, authors are catalogued by their names, although titles such as U, Daw, Ashin, Thakin, and Sayadaw are provided in brackets.

Scholars writing about Myanmar face the challenge of deciding which name to use for the country. The military government changed the name from "Burma" to "Myanmar" in 1989, but a number of individuals, organizations, and countries have refused to acknowledge what they consider an illegitimate name change. I use "Myanmar" when speaking about the country after the change and "Burma" when speaking about the country before the change; I also use "Myanmar" when discussing the country or state in general terms not linked to a specific point in time. I use "Burmese" to refer to the citizens of the state or the majority language. While this term is problematic because of its linguistic associations with the dominant majority ethnic group, there is no other term that is sufficiently clear or in common usage in denoting citizens of the Myanmar state.