

# **A comparative study of Buddhist nationalistic movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka: A case study on the 969 movement in Myanmar and the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the tendency of recent extreme Buddhist nationalistic movements which have developed in some Theravadin Buddhist countries especially in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Myanmar is a Southeast Asian country while Sri Lanka is actually located in South Asia but has a lot of cultural and religious connections with the Theravadin Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. As Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion in mainland Southeast Asia, and one of the most important religions in the whole of Asia, Sri Lanka's religious origins and Southeast Asian popular religion needs to be compared both, in the context of Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asian countries. Since in the modern era both Myanmar and Sri Lanka share significant experiences of Buddhist Nationalistic sentiments, and these two countries had over a millennium of religious contact, we can find many similarities in both societies. Looking into the Theravada Buddhist traditions we found in the records that there were also historical Buddhist nationalistic movements in both countries. Nowadays, modern technology and convenient travel has sped up the spreading of this phenomenon. The emergence of Buddhist nationalism and the Buddhist nationalistic movements, with their anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, are related to the politicization of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and South Asia. In more detail, the differences of Buddhist nationalistic phenomenon are related to the different contexts of their societies. For example, the Buddhist monks in Myanmar have high levels of political influences but were not allowed to become parliament members or party leaders. On the other hand in Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks have participated in the political field for decades. The final phase of this case study involves field interviews in different places throughout Sri Lanka. These interviews provided information for more individual consideration of religious nationalism which includes Buddhist nationalism and may direct future research on this issue.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Buddhist nationalism, U Wirathu, Myanmar, Sri Lanka.

### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้สำรวจแนวโน้มของการเคลื่อนไหวแบบชาตินิยมแนวพุทธสุดโต่งที่พัฒนาขึ้นไม่นานนี้ในประเทศซึ่งนับถือศาสนาพุทธเถรวาทโดยเฉพาะในศรีลังกากับพม่า พม่าเป็นประเทศหนึ่งในกลุ่มเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ในขณะที่ศรีลังกาตั้งอยู่ในเอเชียใต้ แต่มีความสัมพันธ์ทางศาสนาและวัฒนธรรมอย่างมากกับประเทศที่นับถือพุทธศาสนาเถรวาทในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ในฐานะที่ศาสนาพุทธเถรวาทเป็นศาสนาโดดเด่นในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ทั้งเป็นหนึ่งในศาสนาอันสำคัญที่สุดของเอเชีย ต้นกำเนิดทางศาสนาในศรีลังกาจำเป็นต้องถูกเปรียบเทียบกับศาสนาหลักของเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ทั้งในบริบทของประเทศศรีลังกาเองกับประเทศในกลุ่มเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ทั้งพม่ากับศรีลังกาในยุคสมัยใหม่ต่างมีประสบการณ์เกี่ยวกับความรู้สึกในชาตินิยมแนวพุทธร่วมกัน อีกทั้งสองประเทศนี้มีความสัมพันธ์ทางศาสนากันมายาวนานนับพันปี เราสามารถพบความคล้ายคลึงหลายประการในสังคมของทั้งสองประเทศ เมื่อมองเข้าไปในประเพณีของพุทธศาสนาแบบเถรวาท เราพบในบันทึกว่าเคยมีการเคลื่อนไหวแบบชาตินิยมแนวพุทธในทั้งสองประเทศ ปัจจุบันนี้เทคโนโลยีสมัยใหม่และการเดินทางที่สะดวกได้แผ่ขยายปรากฏการณ์นี้อย่างรวดเร็ว การเกิดขึ้นของลัทธิชาตินิยมแนวพุทธและการเคลื่อนไหวของลัทธินี้ด้วยความรู้สึกต่อต้านมุสลิมในศรีลังกากับพม่านั้นสัมพันธ์กับขบวนการทำพุทธศาสนาให้เป็นการเมืองในเอเชียใต้และตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ความแตกต่างของปรากฏการณ์ชาตินิยมแนวพุทธโดยรายละเอียดนั้นสัมพันธ์กับบริบทที่แตกต่างของสังคม ยกตัวอย่างเช่น ภิกษุชาวพุทธในพม่ามีอิทธิพลทางการเมืองอยู่ในระดับสูง แต่ไม่ได้รับอนุญาตให้เป็นสมาชิกรัฐสภาหรือผู้นำพรรค ตรงกันข้ามกับศรีลังกาที่ภิกษุชาวพุทธเข้าร่วมทางการเมืองนับได้เป็นทศวรรษมาแล้ว ช่วงสุดท้ายของกรณีศึกษาเกี่ยวข้องกับการสัมภาษณ์ภาคสนามในสถานที่ต่าง ๆ ทั่วศรีลังกา บทสัมภาษณ์เหล่านี้ให้ข้อมูลสำหรับการพิจารณาในเชิงปัจเจกในเรื่องลัทธิชาตินิยมทางศาสนาอันรวมถึงลัทธิชาตินิยมแนวพุทธ ซึ่งอาจกำหนดงานวิจัยในอนาคตเกี่ยวกับประเด็นนี้

### 1. The evolution of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar

Nationalism is a double-edged sword. Dr. Hanz Schildberger from Thai studies section, Chulalongkorn University argued in the year 1996 that nationalism is one of the significant keys to the success of a Nation. Nationalism can be described as the patriotic feeling, principles, or efforts of the people to go forward hand to hand together as a single body. On the other hand, in 2001 Professor Roger Friedland, a scholar who is held a high reputation at the University of California, argues that both nationalism and religion evolve around the imagination of order and power and considerations of how one should relate to those<sup>1</sup>. Religious nationalism which includes Buddhist Nationalism is not a new phenomenon; it derives from historical sequences long before it came to recent prominence. In recent years, the Bodu Bala Sena of Sri Lanka and the 969

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<sup>1</sup> Friedland, R. (n.d.). Religious nationalism and the problem of collective representative. Santa Barbara, CA: Department of Religious Studies and Sociology.

movement of Myanmar have become popular topics of the domestic and international media. Against the bigger backdrop of anti-Islamic extremism in the world, the rise of Buddhist nationalism caught more attention from the public, partly because the authentic teaching of Buddhism is all about the idea of peace. During my interview with the Venerable Professor Uttarawala Dhammaratana Thera from Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, he insisted that the function of Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka is a politically related organization which is involved in many different political campaigns in the country, while the 969 movement of Myanmar is a civilian organized organization to deal with the relationship with the Muslim community in the country.

As one of the main religions around the world, Buddhism plays an influential role in many countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia. Myanmar and Sri Lanka appear as icons if anyone mentions Theravada Buddhism. The Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar and the Temple of Tooth in Sri Lanka are considered the landmarks of this significant religion.

**Figure 1** Maha Stupa Mihintale, where is commemorated the meeting between Maha Mahinda Thera (Thera is a title specially used for these reverend monks) and King Devanampiyatissa in a mango forest, which is always interpreted as the first moment of Theravada Buddhism's propagation on the island of Sri Lanka, 2015



These Dhammaduta reached various areas. Based on the teaching of the Lord Buddha, Buddhism with the forms of Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism and

Theravada Buddhism spread in Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian area. The Mahavihara Lineage of Sri Lanka Theravada Buddhism became influential in the 13 century with the strong and dedicated support from the King Parakramabahu II. Sinhala Buddhism was famous for its strict Vinaya and knowledgeable theras. Upon the request from the noble class in various kingdoms in Southeast Asia, Sinhala Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Mon and Sukhothai and so on. It developed from there. The way in which Buddhist orders are managed and how Buddhism has been practiced are still not very different when compared with early Sinhala Buddhism. Strict Vinaya and close ties among Buddhist practitioners still continues to manage the Buddhist Sangha until today. The main form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the Theravadin Buddhist states in Southeast Asia is still the Maha Vihara lineage which originated in Sri Lanka.

Doctor Heinz Bechert from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences pointed out that during the early period, the Sangha communities in India avoided getting involved in any forms of state and nation related issues<sup>2</sup>. However, according to professor Guenter Lewy from the city college of New York, the ties between Buddhism and Burmese or Myanmar identities could be traced back almost one thousand years ago<sup>3</sup>, and in Sri Lanka, for nationalists, Sri Lanka is destined as home for Sinhalese Buddhists (K.M.de Silva 1986:35). From Sri Lankan we could find out that Sri Lankan people believe the day when the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment was the day when prince Vijaya arrived in the island of Sri Lanka, and moreover the Sri Lankan legends also told us about the Lord Buddha's three visits in different areas on the island thus also blessed the island.

Professor James K. Wellman from Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington mentioned that the modernization process around the world stimulated the growing of Buddhist nationalism, its ideology and violent approach are in the name of religion and use the religion against religion<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the two of the main recent Buddhist nationalistic movements in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Bodu Bala Sena

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<sup>2</sup> Bechart, H. (1973). Sangha, state, society, "Nation": Persistence of traditions in "Post-Traditional" Buddhist societies. *Daedalus*, 102(1), 85-95.

<sup>3</sup> Lewy, G. (1972). *Militant Buddhist nationalism: The case of Burma*. Church & St., 14, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Wellman, J. K., Jr. (2007). *Belief and bloodshed: Religion and violence across time and tradition*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

and the 969 movement have recently merged as good examples of Buddhist against Muslim. The sentiment of distrust and hatred towards Muslim shows itself in the form of Buddhist nationalism as shown in the 969 Movement and the Bodu Bala Sena. Bodu Bala Sena, literally means, “the power of Buddhism”, is a leading Buddhist nationalistic organization in Sri Lanka. And the 969 Movement, the leading Buddhist nationalistic counterpart in Myanmar has chosen, from its inception, the organisation’s three digit number ‘969’ to represent the three Buddhist gems: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In the Myanmar Buddhist tradition, the first 9 stands for the nine special attributes of the Lord Buddha, the 6 for the six special attributes of Dhamma and the last 9 represents the nine special attributes of the Buddhist Sangha<sup>5</sup>. U Kyaw Lwin, a religious official in the Burmese military junta remarked that across South Asia, Muslims represent the phrase, “In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful,” with the number 786, and businesses display the number to indicate that they are Muslim-owned. The 969’s proponents see this as evidence of a Muslim plot to conquer Burma in the 21st century, based on the implausible premise that 7 plus 8 plus 6 is equal to 21. The number 969 is intended to be 786’s cosmological opposite in the traditional numerological beliefs in Myanmar.

## **2. Backgrounds of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar**

Mahinda and Sanghmitta, the son and daughter of King Asoka, were sent to Sri Lanka and warmly received by King Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka and this was a central historical event in Buddhist history. Dr. Madhukar Piplaya from the University of Delhi, the author of ‘Asoka the Great’ pointed out that “Sri Lanka has played a major role in preserving Lord Buddha’s law and Sri Lanka is also credited with first inscribing the whole of Buddha’s sermons and creating and preserving the Pali Atthakathas”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Bookbinder, A. (2013). 969: The strange numerological basis for Burma’s religion violence. The Atlantic.

<sup>6</sup> Piplayan, M. (2011). Asoka the great. New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan.

**Figure 2** The Temple of the Tooth, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2013



However, Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka experienced ups and downs throughout history. The Chola (a South Sub-continent based Tamil kingdom) invasion of Sri Lanka in the 10<sup>th</sup> century brought Theravada Buddhism into darkness and during that period, the Hindu power pushed Buddhism into the margins. The number of Sanghas decreased dramatically. After Sinhala people regained power on the island, it was the Sanghas from Arakanese kingdom and the Rammana kingdom who saved the Sangha order in Sri Lanka. Then during the colonial era, when the Portuguese power first landed on this island, they considered themselves as the protector of the Holy Catholic faith and charged with propagating Catholicism around the world - this deed was approved and supported by the Holy See. When the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka, they gradually took control of the coastal area, and began to stop the popular practice of Buddhism by forcing monks to un-robe, destroying monasteries and preventing Buddhist activities. As a result, Buddhism was brought to a dangerous situation. This time with aid from Siam and Burma, the Sangha order was thus saved again.

In 1817, the British annexed Kandy kingdom, ending the monarchic system in Sri Lanka. During the British colonial period, the British brought a large Tamil population from Southern India to work in Sri Lanka's tea plantation, thus the proportion of non-Buddhist Tamil population increased. Sri Lanka declared independence in 1948 and shortly after independence, Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism dominated the nation's main ideology. The civil war of Sri Lanka which was a byproduct of the Sinhalese

Buddhist Nationalism uprising in 1983 and finished in 2009. Soon after the demolishing of Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam, the Sri Lanka government moved the spearhead to another non-Buddhist group-the Muslims. Since 2012, there have been violent attacks against Muslim and Christian communities by Buddhist extremists. On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014, a massive Buddhist-Muslim conflict took place in Aluthgama, Western Province, Sri Lanka. However, the Sri Lankan president at the time, while visiting Bolivia stressed that he won't "allow anyone to take the law into their own hands". Since 2013, the Bodu Bala Sena raised a campaign to boycott Halal food certification in Sri Lanka, argued that the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama is not authorized to certify Halal label, and got support from the Sri Lankan government, with a result that the government announcement that the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul has no power to issue Halal label any longer. While randomly talking with both Sri Lankan monks and laymen in Sri Lanka or overseas, the author noticed that some Sinhalese people are concerned about Muslims rather than hating them. In the Rotary Peace Fellows Class 18 Public Seminar which was organized by Chulalongkorn University on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Mr. Antony Suthan and Mr. Udayakantha Suraweera from Sri Lanka gave public speeches named *Challenges to Peace-building in Postwar Sri Lanka* and *Peace Education in Sri Lanka* after they completed the course, in the end of the talk, a female member of the audience asked Mr. Udayakantha Suraweera, whether, while living in Sri Lanka for many years, he witness the aggressive behaviour of Buddhist monks. Mr. Udayakantha Suraweera refused to answer her questions directly, while Mr. Antony Suthan admitted that in Sri Lanka some Buddhist monks have aggressive attitudes towards Tamil and Muslim people, but he never saw any of these monks apply their aggression physically. At Dekanduwala Dhamma Training Center near Horana, the leading Buddhist nun training center in Sri Lanka, the head nun Dhammashanti Theri, also expressed her concern that the population of Muslim people is getting higher and higher year by year. she told the author that she is worried that even within 50 years Sri Lanka will become a Muslim country as once Buddhist Bangladesh and Indonesia experienced. On the other hand, some people were disgusted by what the Bodu Bala Sena did in Sri Lanka. They even blamed the close relationship between Bodu Bala Sena and former president Rajapaksa. At the more than 700 years old Lankatilaka Temple, a monk, who didn't want to share his name, said that Rajapaksa

had strongly supported the development of the Bodu Bala Sena. Whether what he said is true or false, it represents the complicated situation in Sri Lanka.

The author interviewed some scholars with high reputations in the University of Colombo. Doctor Farzana Haniffa from the Sociology Department of the University of Colombo argues that Bodu Bala Sena is not a friendly organization and therefore its functioning is not good for Sri Lanka. She is very confident about the new president Srisena. She believes that he is applying the right policy for the country and the trend is going to be positive. Doctor Suren Raghavan from the History Department points out that the problems of nationalist inspired disorder have to be solved at the spiritual level. With a higher general spirituality, the current nationalistic problems in Sri Lanka can be solved easily.

More practically, Professor Siri Hettige from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Colombo said that obviously the Bodu Bala Sena is not a right thing but Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is rooted in the Sri Lankan educational and political systems. The top politicians in the country always consult Buddhist monks when they need advice instead of the intellectuals such as university professors and researchers. Buddhism is a must study subject in the Sri Lankan educational system despite the certain percentage of religious minorities in the class such as Tamil Hindus, Muslims and Christians. He also stated briefly that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is still significant no matter who is the current president. After the defeat of the Tamil Eelam Tigers, the Sri Lankan civil war finished, and the once popular anti-Tamil emotion lost its market, therefore the nationalistic object has been transferred from the Tamil group to the Muslim group. On the other hand, the Sinhalese race is the majority group in Sri Lanka, so the politicians made use and propagated Sinhalese Buddhist nationalistic feelings for the convenience of electioneering. Professor Siri Hettige also indicated that language education is another cause for the unrest. In Sri Lanka Sinhala language is a language for the majority and Tamil is a minority language. In primary and higher education which language should use to deliver the lecture is another important issue that needs to be solved by the talented Sri Lankan people. In a conclusion, he did support the action of the Sri Lankan government granting a visa for the visit of Myanmar's key figure of the 969 Movement - U Wirathu.



**Figure 3** Shwe Dagon Pogoda in Yangon, Myanmar, 2013



In the case of Burma, the story is slightly different. According to Sri Lanka's Chronicle *Mahavamsa*, Sona thera and Uttara thera were sent to Suvarnabhumi to teach Buddhist Dhamma, a hypothesis was raised by many scholars originally associated Suvarnabhumi with modern Myanmar's territory. The Mon people were the first to accept Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka. Burmese, Rakhaine and Shan people converted to Theravada Buddhism after the Mon people. In the early and middle Konbaung period, Mon, Rakhine and Shan territories were annexed by the Burmese, however, Buddhism was still the predominant religion. In 1885, after 3 Anglo-Burmese Wars, Burma was transformed into a British colony and regarded as a province of British India. A big population of Indian people voluntarily came to Burma, which were mainly Hindus and Muslims. The immigrants brought their faiths to their new homes. The growing number of non-Buddhist foreign-ancestral population stimulated Burmese people's religious nationalistic feeling. After the independence of Burma in 1948, more than 0.5 million of Sub-continental originated population went back to where they came from, leaving a small community of them in Burma. Moreover, shortly after the independence of Burma, a Karen armed group began to fight with Burmese military force. Kachin, Chin and other various armed groups also started to fight with the military one after another; many of these groups are actually non-Buddhist such as the Kachin and Chin. This phenomenon was also quickly incorporated into the Ne Win military government's Buddhist Nationalistic campaign.

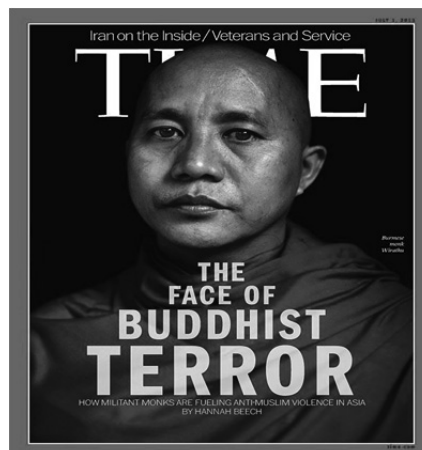
In early July of 2014, an incident of a Buddhist - Muslim conflict in Mandalay broke the peaceful atmosphere of the city. The trigger point was a false report posted by a blogger on the Internet that a Buddhist women had been raped by a Muslim man. Earlier in the January, U Wirathu posted a photo-shopped picture of a child monk with a gun, that said "You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog. If you are weak, our land will become Muslim." In the beginning of the conflicts, U Wirathu again reposted the false report of this sensitive rape case on his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/AshinWirathu/>), Jan 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014., simultaneously calling for a harsh government reaction to the "Jihadist Muslim". Shortly after this, his post spread quickly on the internet, and Buddhist nationalistic feelings were dramatically heightened against the Muslim population in Mandalay. Group fights started on the streets and as a consequence 2 people were killed and 14 injured. The government had to stop the Internet in case hate speech would cause the situation to get out of hand. U Wirathu played a pivotal role in these conflicts. CNN observed that the Mosque where this incident took place is only 5 minutes driving distance from U Wirathu's Masoyein monastery. The CNN journalist raised the idea that it was in his "heartland" that the Buddhist-Muslim conflict began. When interviewed by *the New York Times* in 2013, U Wirathu announced to the public that "he is proud to be a radical monk."

The Rohingya issue has long been recognized as an issue of concern for the international community. That Buddhist Rakhine had conflicts with Muslim Rohingya could be reinterpreted as religious conflicts rather than racial conflicts. Outwardly, Rohingya people constitute one fourth of Rakhine State's total population. The Rohingya's big population basis and the increasing number of Rohingya people, their totally different physical features, their different culture and language, their Indian look that always reminds Rakhine people of Bangladesh and Bengal - their neighbors to the west whom they confronted for hundreds of years. Rakhine people claim that the Rohingya people are Bengali-originated and fled to Arakanese territory since 1950, and when they arrived they grabbed lands from indigenous Rakhine people. Since the Independence of Myanmar in 1948, unlike Kaman Muslim who had been recognized as full citizens of the country, the Rohingya have been denied citizenship by both the authorities and the local Rakhine people.

Rohingya people, with their habitations mainly located at the Bangladeshi-Myanmar border, are facing difficult challenges. With a forefront location near heavily populated Muslim majority Bangladesh and causing insecure feelings among the Rakhine Muslim, the Bangladeshi government denies to accept Rohingya refugees by giving the reason that the Rohingya belongs to Myanmar not Bangladesh. Meanwhile Buddhist nationalistic movements are fermenting fierce opposition in Myanmar especially in Rakhine State against the Rohingya people. In June and October in 2012, two riots took place in Sittwe Rakhine State, Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya continued to attack each other. In early 2014, angry rioters attacked the UN office for the reason that a UN staff member relocated the Buddhist flag on the building. According to the investigation of an organization network “Burma Partnership” that U Wirathu has been whipping up anti-Muslim fever among the local Arakanese Buddhist population, demanding that the UN-census be changed.

One important core of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path is right action - action which won't harm any other living beings and dedicated practice of Noble Eightfold Path will lead to the cessation of Dukka. However, the reality is that alongside modernization and globalization, the latest Buddhist Nationalistic movements against non-Buddhist groups proves that many people in Sri Lanka and Myanmar seem already to have forgotten the primary teachings from the Lord Buddha. It is indeed a dangerous signal!

**Figure 4** U Wirathu therā's picture on the Time Magazine.



Parallel with Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan Vajrayana also play relevant roles in the Buddhist world. Throughout history, despite the recent increasing militant tendency of Theravada Buddhism, historically Mahayana and Tibetan Vajrayana also have had militarization experiences. It was the strong assistance from Shaolin militant monk which helped Taizong Emperor successfully overthrew the power of his brothers and his father through a coup. Militant monks also existed in the great temples around Tibet and Bhutan during the medieval era, Sera monastery and Drepung monastery had big groups of militant monks in the name of protecting Dhamma and the glory of the great monasteries. Dr Matthew J. Walton and Dr Susan Hayward from the East-West Center, University of Hawaii, pointed out that when considering the various of Theravadin Buddhist corpus wholly, there is actually no pacifism mentioned in the doctrines. Instead, [it seems necessary to defend violence for the sake of “defending Sasana. (Buddhist religion)”. All in all, the short-termed violence was considered a righteous goal for self-defense<sup>7</sup>.

Myanmar has 80% of Buddhist population and Sri Lanka has even less of a Buddhist population at 70%. In Sri Lanka, Muslim people are around 9.7% of the whole population according to 2012 data, and in terms of Myanmar, the data for Muslim people which was released by the government is around 4%. However, the International Crisis Group believes that the actual portion of Muslim people in Myanmar is about 10%. Compared with major Buddhist population in both countries, the Muslim populations are still relatively much lower.

Geographically speaking, Sri Lanka and Myanmar are much closer to Muslim concentrated Middle-eastern countries and Bangladesh. The images Islam extremist groups such as the al-Qaeda and the Islamic State badly infected the perceptions of the Islam and the Muslim population in Buddhist majority Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

However, this kind of interpretations was also mixed with images of domestic Muslim population in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Faster birth rate of Muslim babies and the dominant of some business fields are evoking the Buddhist nationalistic sentiments in both countries. In reality, the 969 Movement and the Bodu Bala Sena's perception of

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<sup>7</sup> Walton, M. J., & Hayward, S. (2007). Contesting Buddhist narratives: Democratization, nationalism, and communal violence in Myanmar. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii.

Muslim is violence, radical, dangerous, exclusive society and fast growing population. Globally the fear of Muslim that flies around the world, not only in the Christian Western countries but also in Buddhist Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

**Figure 5** Myanmar Buddhist monks demonstrating in Yangon with anti-Muslim slogans.



### **3. The Buddhist Nationalistic couple across the Bay of Bengal - Sri Lanka and Myanmar**

Sri Lanka and Myanmar are not the only Theravada Buddhist countries in this world. In the area, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos are also countries with the same belief system - the difference is that these countries have less of a Buddhist nationalistic atmosphere. When the Islamic extreme started to spread eastward to the South Asia and Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar thus became the frontiers of this invisible ideological and religious conflict. The expanding of extreme Islam affected the ups and downs of the local Muslim population in Sri Lanka and Myanmar as well.

Firstly, the ending of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009 and the opening up of Myanmar in 2013, brought about dramatic changes in these two countries. Mr. David Madden, the founder of Phandeeyar Innovation Lab argues that the recent hate speech waves on Facebook reflects that, when facing the challenge of change within the country, some conservative monks and laymen prefer to behave more nationalistically to maintain the sole authority of Buddhism in Myanmar. This transitional time for Myanmar which started in 2013 could be considered as a fragile turning point. Careless negligence will trigger numerous problems.

**Figure 6** The logo of the Bodu Bala Sena



**Figure 7** the logo of the 969 Movement



**Figure 8** U Wirathu theras's visit to Sri Lanka in 2014



Secondly, more and more, the focus of Buddhist Nationalist attacks has moved to the Muslim population in both Sri Lanka and in Myanmar. Compared with Thailand and the other Theravadin majority countries, some radical Buddhist in Sri Lanka and Myanmar pointed out that they geographically face the Muslim world. Moreover, Wirathu theras says that Myanmar must learn from Malaysia and Indonesia. These countries once were mainly Hindu/Buddhist but gradually transferred to Muslim-majority nations. Despite the real truth that Muslims constitute a very low ratio of total population in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara theras, the secretary general of Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena organization and Wirathu theras, the head of the 969 movements, together with many young and senior monks, claim that Muslim people breed much faster than Buddhist populations, thus Buddhist culture and practice are in big danger.

**Figure 9** It is said that the former Sri Lankan president Rajapaksa had lots of connections with the Bodu Bala Sena



In a word, the twisted relationship between the government and Sangha worsens the situation. In the case of Myanmar, in 2007, ignoring the despotic power of Myanmar's military government, to the world's amazement, the monks led the Saffron Revolution against the government. Nevertheless, the author found some Sangha members chose to embrace the government after the quick opening up in 2013 and part of the Sangha has been used by the strong military power in Myanmar government for their political interests.

If we pay attention to Sri Lanka, we will find that Sri Lankan monks are even allowed to be involved in the political field with many senior monks even becoming parliament members. Political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have been playing significant roles in Sri Lanka. When Rajapaksa was the president of Sri Lanka, the government tightly embraced Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism. During the civil war it became a national ideology and has maintained its strong influence up until now. The popular slogan in Sri Lanka is often heard - "There is no Buddhism without the Sinhalese and no Sinhalese without Buddhism." The link between the Sinhala race and Buddhism is so close and inseparable that it led to the Maxism (Cyril Mathew, 1983). We must face the fact that Buddhist monks will continue to take important roles in Sri Lankan



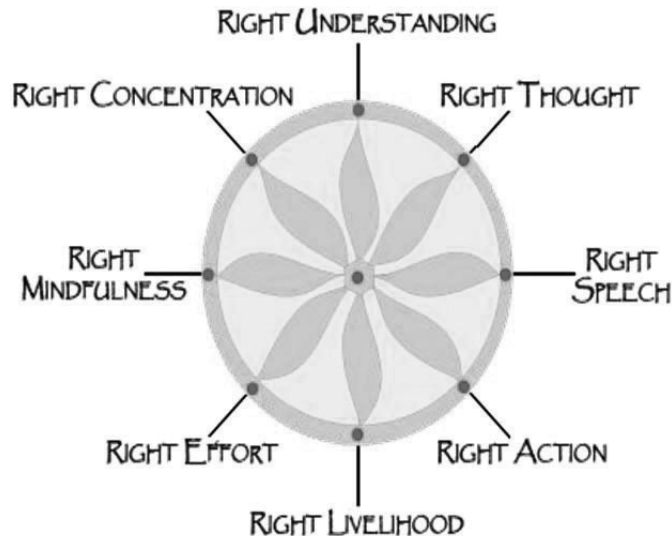
politics unless the change takes place within the Sangha orders<sup>8</sup>. Throughout their long history to the present days, now two great Buddhist nations namely, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, are experiencing the troublesome conditions which they didn't experience until the modern era. When facing decolonization and modernization, many countries faced severe problems, compared with the other Theravadin majority countries in the region, but Sri Lanka and Myanmar have more problems dealing with Buddhist nationalistic issues. It's likely that these issues will not remain only particular to Sri Lanka and Myanmar's special cases, the problems may spread if necessary attention isn't applied.

In the end of May 2015, the General Secretary of the controversial Bodu Bala Sena - Galagoda-atte Gnanasara thera was arrested for defying a court order and subsequently released on bail. Since the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa has been defeated in the vote in January, he claimed that the Bodu Bala Sena's extreme activity was one of the reasons why he has been defeated. Maithripala Srisena, the newly elected president of Sri Lanka hasn't show clear attitudes towards the Bodu Bala Sena yet. In Myanmar, U Wirathu thera still remains active through different channel. In January 2015, U Wirathu thera called Yanghee Lee - a UN's reporter - a "whore" after she highlighted the plight of the Muslim minority during her visit to Myanmar. This remark shocked the UN and the world. At present, according to Myanmar's legal system, hate speech is not yet defined as a crime.

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<sup>8</sup> Devotta, N. (2017). Sinhala Buddhist nationalism ideology: Implication for politics and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka. Washington, D.C.: East-West Center.

Figure 10 The Noble eightfold path of Buddhism.



The author's interview work among Sri Lankan general public indicates a good hope for a cessation of this kind of extreme religious nationalism. The author interviewed more than 200 Buddhist individuals in different places around Sri Lanka. These interviewees belong to different social classes which included university professors, soldiers, civil servants, shopkeepers, farmers and monks. 178 of the total 200 samples did not like the extreme Buddhist nationalistic organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena and also disagreed with the ideology and aggressive approaches of the Bodu Bala Sena. Many Buddhist interviewees claimed that Sri Lanka is a country for all races who have lived here for generations. Trying to divide people again right after a long-standing civil war is not a good idea.

While talking with some Myanmar interviewees both monks and laymen expressed similar attitudes. Many of them pointed out that with such behavior, U Wirathu there shouldn't be a monk. Because of what he did and propagated, the image of Buddhism is viewed with misconceptions.

To sum up, as more information has been exposed all around the world and a big progress of civilian education, the awareness of the people in Sri Lanka and Myanmar has taken a big leap. Thus extreme Buddhism nationalism and its related organizations cannot maintain its popularity amongst people as the time goes by. Many Buddhists

laymen are uncomfortable to see monks engaged in political activities especially in the case of the case of the 969 Movement in Myanmar and the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka. Many laymen raise strong criticism of the political monks in newspaper of the day<sup>9</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

The rise of Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar represents a certain social problem in these two countries. Buddhist Nationalism was first used to fight against British colonialism and afterwards it was used by both of national governments to build a strong sense of national feeling. However, during this process, some minority's rights and feelings were neglected. Politicians who were concerned about their own power desperately use religion for their personal power struggle. General Ne Win and President Rajapaksa are good examples. During the past decades, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and the Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar have echoed each other. For example on September 27<sup>th</sup> 2014, when Myanmar's 969 movement's leader Wirathu thera arrived in Colombo airport, he was received warmly and welcomed and honoured by Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena organization.

After the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009 and the opening up in Myanmar in 2013, when transitional moments came, Buddhist nationalism became more significant. With more chances for free speech and easier access to the technology, a number of extreme Buddhist nationalists thus made use of the opportunities for their secret purposes. The absence of efficient management of this hate speeches and the little effort made to create a peaceful atmosphere worsened the situations Buddhist nationalism is an important phenomenon in these two countries, it originated in complicated social and political backgrounds, professor Stephen C. Berkwitz from Department of Religious Studies, Missouri State University demonstrated that Buddhist nationalism can also interpreted as an essential combination to fight against external power which is harming their existences in certain circumstances. No matter what is the story behind the scene, it needs Sri Lanka and Myanmar people work hard to end this problem at last, returning their precious religion to its original task of peacefully effecting spiritual and moral improvement of the individual and society.

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<sup>9</sup> Dharmadasa, N. O. (1988). Buddhist resurgence and Christian privilege in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

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