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BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN THAILAND

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**A Study of Socio-Political Change and
Political Activism of the Thai Sangha**

Somboon Suksamran



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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*To
Lawan and Panithan*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. Religion, Politics, and Social Change: An Introductory Statement	1
2. Political Patronage and Control over the Sangha	12
3. Socio-Political Change and the Rise of Political Monks	52
4. Monks, Peasants, Injustice, and Reforms	100
5. Communist Danger and Holy War on the Communists	132
6. The Political Monks in Thailand: The Prospect	158
<i>Bibliography</i>	169

Preface

This book is a study of the interaction of Buddhism and politics in Thailand. The central assumption is that Buddhism and the Sangha (the community of monks) are a facet of the society's total culture, and as part of the socio-political structure they permeate other parts and institutions as much as they are affected by them. The study places the effects of the forces of socio-political change on Buddhism and the Sangha and their responses to changes at the centre of the dynamic interactions of Buddhism and politics. I try to show why and how politics, especially ideological polarization, has penetrated into the Sangha, and how it responds. As the influence of Buddhism pervades the entire life and every activity of the Buddhists, I then try to demonstrate how Buddhism has been invoked to initiate, explain, legitimize, and defend ideologies and political actions taken by the political monks.

The whole problem of the Sangha stems from the fact that it has been caught in the tide of radical change, and it does not have many alternatives. Whether or not the monks are willing to get involved in politics, they cannot escape being drawn into the political arena. In this connection, I try to analyse how the Sangha can preserve itself and the religion in an unadulterated form while maintaining popular support.

The data for the core chapters are derived from two major sources: (1) field research between 1974 and 1977 which involved observations and personal communication with individuals, some of whom are the main characters in the book; (2) documentary data including confidential government documents, and publications of political groups both freely and clandestinely distributed.

When I was gathering field data, many people — both monks and laymen — gave their cooperation in many ways, and some of them are mentioned in the book. Others, to whom I am greatly indebted, prefer to remain anonymous. I am especially grateful to those who kindly and enthusiastically expressed their views during interviews and conversations and in correspondence. I also thank certain government officials and individuals who provided me with information. They too choose to remain anonymous. Without their cooperation and goodwill, critical analysis could hardly have been made for lack of insight, and this study would have been very peripheral.

My intellectual debt to friends and mentors is so great that I can never fully repay them. I am greatly indebted to Professor T.O. Ling of the Department of Comparative Religion, University of Manchester, and Charles F. Keyes of the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington at Seattle, for their advice in the early stages of formulating the concept and for their valuable comments on the manuscript. I am also grateful to Professor Hans Dieter-Evers, Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, and to Dr Huynh Kim Khanh and Dr Sharon Siddique of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore for reading and making critical and useful comments on the manuscript.

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Somboon Suksamran