

Buddhist Nationalism and National Security in Thailand



Phramaha Kritthanin Detchakbodin

Buddhasothorn Buddhist College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand

Email: kritthanin.det@mcu.ac.th

Received March 1, 2022; Revised March 25, 2022; Accepted June 26, 2022

Abstract

Throughout the long history of Thailand, the kings have been trying to strengthen country by using the concept of Buddhism. Nation becomes stronger and united until now because of Buddhism. Buddhism has been very useful in harmony and stabilize people into the state of good citizenship. The relationship between the state and Buddhism is inseparable. This situation is regarded as the security of nation.

At the present, there are many challenges and tensions happening against the national security and Buddhism. If the country wants to be remaining strong and united, it is necessary to develop the concept of Buddhist nationalism. Under the mixing of liberal and conservative nationalism, this concept is believed to be a tool to solve the problems and remove tensions from the country. Buddhism makes country more peaceful and strong. There is no other options to be better than this concept.

From now on, there are many problems waiting for Buddhist monks and people to find solution for benefit and happiness of country. In positive aspect, Buddhist nationalism will be used to solve the problems inside community and country and at the same time, it will be used to protect national security and remove tensions effectively. Finally, this concept will not harm anyone who think differently; in contrast, it will call back the stronger nation. When nation turn to strong security, Buddhism will be remaining peaceful and useful for sake of the state forever.

Keywords: Nationalism; Liberal Nationalism; Conservative Nationalism; Buddhist Nationalism; National Security



Introduction

In the Sukhothai period, stability and continuity of the Siamese society have been based on three intangible foundations such as 1) nation, 2) Buddhism and 3) monarchy. It means that Buddhism is the symbol and deep connection of people in the kingdom. Prosperity of nation and monarchy have been depending to the prosperity of Buddhism. And also the national security, Buddhism and monarchy couldn't be separated from one another. It can be said that the function of monarchy is to patronize, support and protect Buddhism. For political aspect, this relationship had happened for a long time, Sangha institute have been protected and strong under the patronage of monarchy. Buddhism therefore becomes the symbol of nation in order to unite people live together peacefully.

For security of nation and people in stronger way, the term of nationalism should be used to solve it. It is believed that for this instance, Buddhism is very important to develop this idea into the practical aspect. Buddhism is the concept to apply for the policy of country and it's also seeming to be comfortable for the character of Thai citizens. In the other hand, Buddhism is needed to develop along with the concept of nationalism into the terms of Buddhist nationalism. Buddhist nationalism is shown in order to protect and strengthen the condition of country. It is described to unite people and society in harmony. In the coming future, this concept must be developed to remind generations for more understanding. In this case, it is not strange to implement it because many countries develop and implement it in the same way as well.

However, the prosperity of Buddhism have been challenging by several issues such as secularism, modernism, terrorism and so on. These are many factors undermining and decreasing the stability of Buddhism slowly. Even Buddhism has been recognized as the state religion for Thai people, there are so many problems happening within and breaking the faith of people in the country. This phenomenon has been leading to the argument between Buddhism and some other religions. It seems that instability of Buddhist institution and lack of support from Thai government is the cause to demand for the development of the stream of nationalism. The development of Buddhist nationalism in this country is not rising coincidentally. It can be risen by various factors of history that leads to the critical situation.



Nevertheless, it can be questioned that 1) Is it necessary to support Buddhism into the level of nationalism? 2) What is the benefit of nationalism in term of Buddhism? and 3) What should be happened for the near future?

Definition of Buddhist Nationalism

Before going to the details, it should be defined to make very clearly for more understanding. The lists of words must be defined comprising 1) nation 2) nationalism and 3) Buddhist nationalism

1) Nation is defined in the meaning of having blood relation, descendant language culture and history altogether. All lead to create the feeling as the same. It have been shown through various identity i.e. figure, image, language and behavior (Hobsbawm, Eric J. ,1992).

2) Nationalism is the ideology that has given significance to nation or nationality and also the national interest is more important than individual interest. This requires people to sacrifice themselves for nation. Incidentally, the scholar in the field of Political Science has divided into three aspects as follows;

2.1 Cultural nation: nation in the view of culture is given in the meaning of focusing on characteristics or identity of each group by bloodline, clan or ethnic including their own culture such as language, tradition, convention and so on. These are shown the disparity of people by culture and lead to dividing people into one group as the nation.

2.2 Political nation: nation in the view of politics could be found in the past from the writing of Jean Jacques Rousseau which was described that the nation means the group of people who have deep connection and living together by the status of citizenship as the same unit or society.

In this regard, nation is not concerning how language, tradition, convention, bloodline and clan are. As long as people is remaining as the citizen under the government from same Politics and society, they will take part of popular sovereignty like other peoples. The power of sovereignty reflect to be understood as the general will.

In the political meaning, nation plays the ultimate role in Western Europe the late 19s and perform through various channels such as national anthems, national flags in



order to be the symbol of own national people and send through or motivate to create love and deep connection in their own nation. Nation in the view of politics is understood as the thing human create or invent by them, it is not created by time.

For this instance, it has been mentioned that political nation is created by invented traditions. In the other hand, nationalism creates nations in the political meaning, not the other way round (E. J. Hobsbawm, 2012).

It is the imagined community which happened by the important factors such as the modern educational system, mass communication and political socialization (Hechter, Michael, 2000).

2.3 Psychological nation: nation in the view of psychology is the patriotism or love in motherland. It is the deep connection of mentality which person have towards the birthplace and growing place. It is understood as the psychological attachment. It is not happening by creation but it is about familiarity and habitude towards the place ones born or live from childhood. It means the deep connection happening by nature.

3) Forms of Nationalism have been divided by the scholar of Political science into 4 forms namely;

3.1. Liberal Nationalism: in the 19s, when the concept of liberalism have been popular increasingly and spreading within European countries, authority of people and liberal nationalism is happening simultaneously. When people who live under the feudal system understand that they themselves can design their life, it is not necessary to be under the other anymore. So people is the owner of nation, no longer for king and baron.

The principle of liberal nationalism is the regarding that human kind have been divided as various clan or ethnic in according to nature. As we see the diversity of people such as African, Thai, Chinese people or difference of each race i.e. hill tribe in various groups that they can differentiate the disparity. Therefore, nation becomes the true community, not created by nation builder or nation accumulating governor.

3.2 Conservative Nationalism: It is opposite to the liberal nationalism. Conservative nationalism have been arising because of the group of people who oppose against the great change radically from the government system, tradition and convention that



have been used for a long time such as changing monarchy system into oligarchy system by people or for people who have more right and liberty than before. Thus, conservative nationalism is the ideology in need to keep the conventional matter and also mix together between nationalism and conservatism.

3.3 Expansionist Nationalism: It is the concept of focusing on expanding power by occupying land, population in order to create dignity and increasing superiority of country. There are many countries in Europe which used the better technology such as seafaring, using modern weapon to possess the territory of continents worldwide into their own colony. Also, they lead to create empire known as imperialism for example France, Spain, Holland and England is once named as “the Empire on which the sun never set” by the cause of having colony across continents. In the region of Southeast Asia, except Thailand, there are many countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines used to be colonized.

3.4 Anticolonial Nationalism: It is used against colonization that happened after the end of World War II due to the colonial countries such as England and France have been declined greatly and also the concept of Western nationalism have been spread into colonized countries. It made various colonies demand to be independent. For example, India have been independent from England and Vietnam have expelled France (Smith, Anthony, 1996).

Nationalism is created and used to be the tool in different circumstances. Even the form of nationalism is claimed to be international aspect such as liberal nationalism have been described to unite people into becoming the nation, it is undeniable that this concept have been raised against or liberate itself from traditional government system. Incidentally, expansionist nationalism is the cause to make leader in many countries crate legitimacy to invade other countries. Nevertheless, nationalism is to be the tool for people in the country become united for some goals.

4) Buddhist nationalism

Buddhist nationalism is the relationship of nationalism to a particular Buddhist belief, dogma, or affiliation. This relationship can be broken down into two aspects: the politicization



of Buddhism and the influence of Buddhism on politics. In this aspect, a shared Buddhism can be seen to contribute to a sense of national unity, a common bond among the citizens of the nation. Another political aspect of Buddhism is the support of a national identity, similar to a shared ethnicity, language, or culture. The influence of Buddhism on politics is more ideological, where current interpretations of Buddhist ideas inspire political activism and action (Joseph Liow, 2016).

Building and Cultivating Buddhist Nationalism

Thailand is the democratic country under the reign of monarchy. There are a long period of history in terms of nationhood by cultivating consciousness of nationalism and using the Buddhist concept to unite people into harmony and stability. Cultivation of good citizenship for nation, religion and monarchy have been created to strengthen the state of country. It can be said that Buddhism is the tool for nationalism in Thailand, meanwhile nationalism would be stronger because of Buddhism.

By using the Buddhist concept, the cultivation of love towards nation and monarchy leads to the Thai nationalism until now. There seems to be the foundation of Thai society from the past to the present. Thus cultivation of nationalism can be happened into the consciousness of Thai people as appeared namely;

1. By family: it is the first institute to train and cultivate good behavior for people throughout training by parents and relatives. To cultivate nationalism for children is not easy task. For parents, they should cultivate children to be close with Buddhism by following the principle and also not train children to insult and disdain follower of other religions in order to make society live peacefully.

2. By educational institution: School is regarded as the important institute to cultivate nationalism for Thai people by training of teacher throughout curriculums in numerous subjects such as social studies regarding the duty of citizen which is focusing on making people to be the good citizen in accordance with the democracy and in the way of good ethics following the right and liberty for good citizenship of nation (Kawanami, Hiroko, 2016).



Nationalism is the ideology that should be cultivated for Thai people because it is the reminder and preach people to have love, pride and cherishment to nationhood and to make people to have consciousness to develop country into prosperity and national democracy. In addition, the concept of Buddhism must be used along with it.

Buddhism and the Southern Part of Thailand: Strengthening nationalism

The conflict between religion and ethnicity in the Thailand's southern border provinces is a powerful illustration of the consequences of the close association between Buddhism and state in Thailand. Buddhism in Thailand has been officially as consisting of three pillars: Nation, Religion and King. By this, "Religion" and "King" being fundamental elements of the traditional Thai Buddhist theory of kingship. According to this theory, the king as the elected by the assembly of the people must practice justice as the protector and as the supporter to be relied on the people under the moral law of Buddhism. Even if unfortunately, the term that used in the elements of the national ideology is "religion" and not Buddhism, and the term of the superiority of Buddhism could be understood in the heart of Thai people when compared to other religions meant that Theravada Buddhism has been "an integral element of Thai identity. In Thailand, every religion is suitable to particular nations and races. Buddhism is mostly suitable to the Siamese race and inseparable from our nation. In other words, Buddhism is for Thai people. Besides, no other country in the world knows Buddhism better than Siam, and Buddhism is only secure in Siam"

The relationship between nation and Buddhism has been perpetuated from the past until now. Although this does not mean that non-Buddhists are excluded from the national community, it can create discomfort and even resentment among non-Buddhist groups. The problem is especially acute for the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand as they constitute 80 percent of the population of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat as well as in five districts of Songkhla. In spite of being a demographic minority in the region Buddhists, especially representatives of the central state, sense their hegemony, given the conflation between Buddhism and national identity. This contradiction between a "superiority complex" and local reality opens the door



to tensions and even to conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in this region. An illustration of this was the project made public in January 2016 by the Pattani provincial authorities, in agreement with local sangha leaders, to create a 16-hectare Buddhist Park in a Muslim-majority district. Faced with the prospect of massive protests by the local Muslims, the military government forced the provincial authorities to shelve the project.

The Thai state is using Buddhist monks as “living symbols of the Nation”—and they are so perceived by the Thai Muslims of Malay culture and ethnicity in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, with their decades-long ethno-religious insurgency, and which have seen an upsurge in violence since 2004 partly due to the Thaksin government’s confrontational approach. This stance has led Buddhist monks into targets for the Muslim insurgents: at least twenty-three have been killed in the region since 2004. The monks are vehicles of a powerful combination of religion and nationalism. Each murder of a monk in the south, even if it has nothing to do with the insurgency, is transformed from a localized incident and added to the state’s narrative of an ongoing conflict between Muslim separatists and the Buddhist nation-state, or in other words, into a religious war (Ian Harris, 2001).

In this case, understandably, Thailand is a peaceful country along with the Buddhist concept. Meanwhile, Buddhism still plays a significant role to strengthen people in the country in terms of harmony, and happiness. The government of the state has seen clearly what should be done for the sake of the nation. Therefore, it is necessary to use Buddhist concepts for raising the idea of Buddhist Nationalism. It must be practical and positively to make the country and people strong and stable. Incidentally, Buddhist Nationalism is not used to create insurgency and violence. In contrast, it will be for peace, freedom and national security.

Buddhist Nationalism for National Security in Thailand

For instance, National security means that to be survival and growth of a nation including solidarity with stability to get ready to face several circumstances in the coming future. It is also described that if having a stable and safe state of the nation from any danger is meant to be free from threats.



For more details, to keep the unity of nation, territory, welfares of citizens, democratic form of government with the king as the head of nation and recognition from other countries. It is understood that 1) a nation based on the people to be strengthened as inseparable, stable, and conscious-minded, 2) religion as the center of faith from people in the country that must be created for solidarity, and 3) monarchy as the head of nation to unite all people in terms of respect. It can be said that national security is for strengthening physical security as the eternal aspect. At the same time Buddhist concept is for mental security as the internal aspect. Buddhist concept becomes significant inseparably for national security (Hechter, Michael, 2000).

Conclusion

In terms of national security, Buddhist nationalism must be used in this way. In the past to the future for Thailand context, it is not successful to use another concepts and also leading to conflict and turmoil at the same time. Buddhist concept therefore is believed as the most significant element to make the country peaceful and secure. People inside the country live in the proper condition. Government is able to control improper situation under the concept of Buddhist nationalism. Incidentally, national security can be strong and powerfully successful. Buddhist nationalism can be the key to develop national security for Thailand in the near future.

Even Thailand has changed the absolute monarchy into democracy since 1932, Buddhism is still influential to be the tool of Thai government strongly for running the country. It is inevitable that without Buddhism, this country surely will be under the chaos. There are some questions about the state of Buddhism with government and leads to try to undermine Buddhism by using the politics. Meanwhile material interest and economy are most important for government, in contrast the value of Buddhism will be mistaken and misinterpreted by people shortly.

Now on, it is the time to use this concept inevitably because right now country is going to face many bad situations such as political, economic and social aspects as shown in



public news. When the country becomes strong in foundation, the other factors inside of nation will be stable and prosperous. Government must formulate and implement it in the form of policy. It's not the circumstance to be considerate and hesitating to do it. This could be very useful for the sake of people, society and nation. Incidentally, this concept in practical way will lead country to be secure, prosperous and sustainable effectively.

Finally, when Buddhism is not safe because of internal problems, external challenges and tensions from other religions and so on, to use the concept of Buddhist nationalism to protect itself from the mentioned problems, government and people must do. Buddhist nationalism is the solution to keep country remaining as the good one. It is understandable that Buddhist nationalism will not harm another and meanwhile it will not allow other religions to harm people within the country as well. The duty of Buddhist nationalism is to keep national security. When Buddhist nationalism is used strongly and understandably in the country, Thailand and people will be peaceful, prosperous, and stable eventually.

References

E. J. Hobsbawm. (2012). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Hechter, Michael. (2000). *Containing Nationalism*. Oxford University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. (1992). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ian Harris. (2001). *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-century Asia*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Kawanami, Hiroko. (2016). *Buddhism and the Political Process*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smith, Anthony. (1996). *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Polity.