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Buddhist Values in Governance: Exploring the Factors Behind the Rising Popularity of Political Parties Advocating Buddhist Policies

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Abstract

In Thailand, the interplay between Buddhism and politics has shaped a unique cultural and sociopolitical landscape. Recent years have seen a significant rise in the popularity of a political party that champions Buddhist principles, marking a pivotal moment in the nation's political evolution. This paper aims to dissect the reasons behind this surge and its broader implications. By examining the historical and cultural integration of Buddhism in Thai governance and societal values, we analyze how these principles resonate with contemporary political ideologies and voter preferences. The focal point of this analysis is the party's impact on shaping policy, influencing public opinion, and its role in the sociopolitical fabric of Thailand. Moreover, the paper explores the cultural significance of Buddhism as not merely a religion but a potent force in the political arena, facilitating discussions on national identity, ethics, and governance. Through this examination, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Buddhist principles are redefining political alignments and strategies in modern Thailand, reflecting a broader trend of religious and cultural values influencing political landscapes globally. This study not only highlights the unique case of Thailand but also contributes to the understanding of the dynamic interplay between religion and politics in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Cultural Influence; Buddhist Politics; Sociopolitical Dynamics; Thai Political Parties

1. Introduction

Buddhism, a religious and philosophical tradition that has profoundly influenced the fabric of Thai society, plays an integral role in both the cultural identity and political landscape of Thailand. Historically, the intertwining of Buddhism with Thai statecraft has been a cornerstone of governance and societal regulation, dating back to the Sukhothai Kingdom in the 13th century. This deep-rooted connection between religion and state is evident in the three pillars of Thai society: nation, religion, and monarchy, with Buddhism being central as the state religion. The religion's principles of moral governance, social order, and ethical conduct have been pivotal in shaping Thai political and social norms over centuries [1].

In contemporary times, the emergence and growing popularity of a political party that explicitly champions Buddhist principles reflect a significant cultural shift. This party, leveraging the deep-seated reverence for Buddhism among the Thai populace, has seen a marked increase in its influence, particularly in shaping policy and public opinion. The objective of this analysis is to explore the underlying factors contributing to the rise of this party and to understand its impact on Thai politics and society. Such an exploration is crucial, not only for its immediate political implications but also for its broader sociocultural ramifications, offering insights into how traditional beliefs can intersect with modern political dynamics to shape governance in significant ways.

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to enrich the discourse on the role of religion in politics, particularly in a predominantly Buddhist country like Thailand, where the religion is not just a personal faith but also a public institution that influences various facets of life. Investigating the resurgence of Buddhism in the political arena offers a window into how historical cultural values are reasserted in contemporary governance models. This reassertion is particularly relevant in the context of global shifts towards recognizing the impact of cultural and religious identities in shaping political landscapes.

The importance of this study also extends to understanding the mechanisms through which religious principles can inform political platforms and strategies. In Thailand, this dynamic is complex, given the country's historical background of military coups and its struggle with democratic governance. The intertwining of Buddhist philosophy with political aspirations offers a unique case of how religious ethics can potentially stabilize or disrupt traditional political structures. This analysis will consider various dimensions, including the ethical appeals made by the party, its policy proposals, and how these resonate with the electorate's values and expectations rooted in Buddhist teachings.

Moreover, the study of a Buddhist political party in Thailand contributes to the broader theoretical discussions about the role of religion in public life, challenging the secularization thesis which posits a decline of religious influence in public affairs. Instead, Thailand presents a case where religion not only sustains its relevance but also actively shapes political discourse and decision-making processes. This phenomenon raises pertinent questions about the future of political development in Thailand and potentially in other similar contexts where religion plays a central role. It also invites a reevaluation of the secular versus religious dichotomy in political theory, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of these interactions in different cultural settings.

By examining the resurgence of Buddhism in Thai politics through the lens of this burgeoning political party, this paper aims to provide a detailed exploration of the intersection between cultural heritage and contemporary political movements. Such an exploration is not only relevant for scholars and policymakers but also for the general populace as it affects national identity and societal values. As Thailand continues to navigate its complex political landscape, the influence of Buddhism could provide both challenges and opportunities, shaping the country's path towards governance that reflects its rich cultural heritage while addressing modern-day societal needs.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Buddhist Political Thought

Buddhist political thought is not just a set of religious teachings but also a robust framework for governance and leadership that has deeply influenced Thai political ideology and practices. This philosophical approach intertwines the moral with the political, emphasizing that true leadership derives from virtue rather than power or authority alone. In the context of Thailand, where Buddhism is interwoven with national identity, these ideas are not theoretical but are lived and practiced at all levels of governance and in daily life.

The concept of the 'Dharma-rajā', central to Buddhist political thought, extends beyond the confines of ancient texts and into the functioning of contemporary Thai governance. The Dharma-rajā is seen not just as a ruler but as a moral exemplar whose duty is to lead by ethical example, ensuring that their actions and policies promote the spiritual and material

welfare of their subjects. This role is critically linked to the concept of 'Dharmic governance', which suggests that the legitimacy of rulers is directly connected to their adherence to Dharma, the cosmic law and order, which in the Buddhist context is translated into moral law and societal welfare (Myint, 2014).

In this framework, key Buddhist virtues such as Metta (loving-kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (sympathetic joy), and Upekkha (equanimity) are not merely personal ethical guidelines but are imperative for the state's leadership. These principles mandate that a leader must care for the well-being of all citizens, show compassion towards the suffering, take joy in the happiness and success of others, and maintain a balanced and fair approach in all governance matters. The application of these principles in governance can be seen in various public policies in Thailand, especially those related to healthcare, education, and social welfare, where the emphasis is on inclusivity, compassion, and equitable development.

Moreover, the integration of Buddhist principles in Thai politics challenges the often-prevalent Western notion that religion and politics should be completely separated. Instead, Buddhism presents a model where the spiritual and secular duties of leadership are seen as interconnected and interdependent. This holistic view posits that ethical governance can lead to a harmonious society where both material prosperity and spiritual well-being are nurtured.

The influence of Buddhist political thought is also evident in the public discourse in Thailand, where political leaders frequently reference Buddhist concepts in their speeches and policy justifications. This is not simply a tactic but a reflection of the deep-seated belief in the power of Buddhism to inform just and effective governance. It also resonates with the Thai populace, who see the alignment of political action with Buddhist ethics as a crucial indicator of legitimate leadership.

This blending of religious doctrine and political ideology is also crucial for understanding how Buddhism shapes the Thai approach to international relations and global diplomacy. The principles of non-violence (Ahimsa) and peaceful coexistence are central to Thai foreign policy. Thailand's diplomatic efforts are often characterized by a preference for negotiation and peaceful resolution of conflicts, reflecting the Buddhist predisposition towards harmony and stability.

In conclusion, Buddhist political thought offers a comprehensive framework that not only guides individual conduct but also informs the broader governance model in Thailand. By advocating for leadership that is morally upright and committed to the welfare of all, Buddhism impacts not just the internal governance of Thailand but also its interaction with the global community. This perspective is essential for understanding not just the political landscape of Thailand but also offers potential insights into how traditional religious values can contribute to modern governance practices in a globalized world [2].

2.2 Cultural Impacts

The cultural impact of Buddhism on Thai society extends deeply into various facets of life beyond the direct sphere of politics, influencing the fundamental ways in which Thais interact, resolve conflicts, and celebrate life. The principles of Buddhism, centered around compassion, community, and spiritual development, pervade Thai cultural practices, molding societal norms and values that promote a cohesive and harmonious way of living.

The Thai concept of 'Kreng Jai', which translates to a sense of considerate politeness and regard for others' feelings, is a poignant example of how Buddhist teachings impact everyday social interactions. This concept is not merely about being polite; it is about understanding and respecting the space, feelings, and needs of others, deeply embedded in the Buddhist virtues of empathy and mindfulness. Such cultural nuances significantly shape the interpersonal dynamics within Thai society, fostering a community-oriented approach that values the well-being of the collective over individual desires.

Buddhism's influence is markedly evident in the Thai approach to conflict resolution and justice. Traditional Thai conflict resolution mechanisms, such as village mediation by community elders or monks, underscore a preference for reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony over punitive measures. The legal framework in Thailand also reflects these principles, with an emphasis on mediation and compromise. For instance, the Thai legal system incorporates mediation sessions presided over by judges before court trials, a practice that aligns with Buddhist principles advocating for peaceful resolutions and mutual understanding to avoid the escalation of conflicts. This approach not only alleviates the judicial burden but also enhances societal cohesion by resolving disputes in a manner that is consistent with cultural values of peace and conciliation.

Buddhist rituals and ceremonies are integral to Thai cultural identity, marking everything from daily practices to major life events and national celebrations. These rituals, whether they are the daily offerings made to monks or the elaborate annual celebrations like Songkran (Thai New Year), underscore the deep intertwining of Buddhism with Thai life. The inclusion of Buddhist rituals in the celebration of the monarchy's birthdays, as mentioned, not only reflects but also reinforces the symbiotic relationship between the state and religion, manifesting the spiritual legitimacy of the monarchy and its role in upholding Buddhist values.

In educational settings, the integration of Buddhist principles into the curriculum underscores the role of Buddhism beyond the religious sphere, serving as a foundation for moral and ethical instruction. From a young age, Thai children are taught to value virtues such as honesty, patience, and generosity, which are crucial components of Buddhist teaching. This educational practice fosters a societal framework where moral and ethical teachings are pervasive, influencing individuals' actions within the community. The emphasis on moral education reflects a broader cultural goal of nurturing individuals who are not only academically proficient but also morally sound and socially responsible.

The cultural impact of Buddhism in Thailand is a vivid tapestry woven through the very fabric of Thai society, influencing laws, education, social interactions, and national identity. As Thailand continues to modernize, the enduring values imparted by Buddhism provide a stable cultural foundation that helps preserve national cohesion and fosters a society that values peace, respect, and communal well-being. These principles, deeply rooted in Buddhist doctrine, continue to resonate within Thai culture, shaping a unique societal structure that is reflective of Thailand's rich spiritual heritage.

The enduring influence of Buddhism in Thai culture and politics underscores a model where religion and politics coexist in a mutually reinforcing relationship, shaping not only the governance model but also the societal ethos. As Thailand continues to evolve politically and socially, the foundational Buddhist principles remain a vital component of its cultural identity, influencing everything from policy-making to daily social interactions. This

theoretical framework, therefore, provides not only a lens to view the current political dynamics in Thailand but also a deeper understanding of how deeply religion and culture can influence political landscapes.

3. Historical Context

The integration of Buddhism into Thai politics is not a recent phenomenon but a foundational element that has shaped the governance and cultural ethos of Thailand for centuries. Buddhism was established in the Thai region as early as the 13th century, becoming a pillar of the Thai state and society with the rise of the Sukhothai Kingdom. The relationship between Buddhism and Thai politics is characterized by a mutual reinforcement where the religion provides moral authority and ethical frameworks, while the state supports and upholds the Buddhist institutions [3]. Historically, Thai kings were often seen as Dharmarajas, or 'kings of dharma', who were expected to rule according to Buddhist principles and to be patrons of the religion. This role entailed not only the protection and sponsorship of the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community) but also the enactment of laws and governance that reflected Buddhist ethics. The most notable of these Dharmarajas was King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai, who laid down the Dharmashastra, a legal code based on Hindu and Buddhist principles, which underscored the role of dharma in governance. His reign exemplified how Buddhism transcended the spiritual domain to influence legal and administrative systems within the Thai state. The Ayutthaya period (1350-1767) further exemplified the symbiosis between Buddhism and Thai politics. During this era, Buddhism was integral to royal legitimacy and state ideology. The monarch's role as a protector and patron of Buddhism was central to his authority and the stability of the kingdom. This relationship was characterized by the construction of major temples, support for monastic education, and the use of Buddhist rituals in royal ceremonies, which reinforced the sacred nature of kingship and its divine mandate to rule [4].

Buddhist principles have not only provided a framework for governance but have also influenced key political movements in Thailand. The 20th century witnessed several instances where Buddhist ideologies were at the forefront of political change. One significant movement was the Buddhist revival movement during the mid-1900s, which aimed to purify Buddhism from perceived corrupt practices and align it more closely with societal governance. This movement was partly a response to the challenges of modernization and Western influence, emphasizing a return to moral governance rooted in Buddhist principles. Another significant period where Buddhism played a crucial role was during the student-led democracy movements in the 1970s. Many activists were inspired by Buddhist ideas of justice, equality, and non-violence. The movement saw significant participation from monks and lay Buddhists, who advocated for a democratic governance model that aligns with Buddhist ethical teachings. This period highlighted the dynamic role of Buddhism not just in supporting the status quo but in advocating for progressive political change when necessary [5]. The political role of Buddhism continued into the 21st century, where it influenced debates on corruption, governance, and the role of monarchy in Thailand. The intersection of Buddhism with modern political issues reflects its enduring relevance in shaping and guiding the political discourse in Thailand. This includes the ongoing discussions about the role of the military in politics and the monarchy's position, both of which are deeply intertwined with religious and ethical considerations shaped by Buddhism.

The historical context of Buddhism in Thai politics illustrates a profound and enduring relationship that has shaped the nation's governance, legal systems, and political movements. From the Dharmarajas of ancient kingdoms to modern political activists, Buddhism has provided a consistent ethical framework that has guided the Thai state through centuries of

change. As Thailand continues to evolve, the influence of Buddhism in its political sphere remains a critical element of its national identity and governance model, ensuring that ethical considerations continue to inform political decisions and developments.

4. Case Study: The Rise of the Buddhist Party

The formation of the Buddhist Party in Thailand reflects a broader sentiment among the populace for a governance model that aligns closely with Buddhist principles, addressing the perceived gap between traditional political practices and the ethical standards expected by the society. This sentiment grew from a collective disillusionment with the existing political landscape, which many viewed as corrupt and increasingly detached from the foundational Buddhist values of integrity, compassion, and moderation. The Buddhist Party was founded with the mission to integrate these principles into the fabric of Thai governance, aiming to influence policies through the lens of Buddhist ethics. The party's ideology focuses on promoting social justice, environmental protection, and equitable economic policies. These pillars are rooted in the Buddhist ideals of non-harm, mindfulness, and the middle path, which seeks a balance between extreme austerity and material excess. This approach not only resonates with the religious sentiments of the Thai people but also offers a morally sound blueprint for addressing contemporary issues facing the country [6].

The Buddhist Party has experienced a fluctuating but generally positive trajectory in electoral politics since its inception. Initially, the party secured a modest presence in the political arena, reflecting the cautious optimism of voters about the practicality of a religiously oriented political platform. However, with growing public disenchantment with traditional political mechanisms and ongoing corruption scandals, the party has gained traction, appealing to voters who seek a governance model that prioritizes moral integrity and ethical governance. Significant electoral milestones include the party's success in local elections in predominantly Buddhist regions, where it has advocated effectively for policies that resonate with local values and concerns. The party's performance in national elections has also improved, marking it as a significant player in Thailand's political landscape, capable of influencing national policy and public discourse [6][7].

Demographically, the Buddhist Party's support base is broad, encompassing a wide range of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, though it is particularly strong among older, rural populations who adhere closely to traditional Buddhist values. These supporters often feel that modern political entities have neglected the moral and ethical dimensions of governance in favor of economic or pragmatic concerns. Geographically, the party finds its strongest support in the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand, areas known for their deep-rooted Buddhist traditions and conservative outlook. The party's message also appeals to younger voters, especially those disillusioned by what they perceive as the ethical failures of conventional politics. This younger demographic is drawn to the party's stance on issues like environmental sustainability and social equity, which align with global movements for change and reflect the comprehensive moral teachings of Buddhism [8].

The emergence and evolution of the Buddhist Party in Thailand highlight a pivotal shift towards a political framework that deeply integrates ethical and moral principles derived from Buddhism. This case study not only sheds light on the party's strategic successes and challenges but also underscores the complex interplay between religious values and political dynamics in modern Thailand. As the party continues to grow, its future will hinge on its ability to remain true to its ethical foundations while effectively navigating the practicalities of governance and policy-making.

5. Sociopolitical Impact

5.1 Influence on Policies

The Buddhist Party in Thailand has had a discernible impact on various policy domains by integrating Buddhist ethical principles into legislative and administrative frameworks. One of the key areas of influence is environmental policy. The party promotes policies that emphasize sustainability and conservation, which are in line with the Buddhist principle of respect for all forms of life and the natural world. This includes initiatives for reducing pollution, conserving water resources, and protecting forests, which are seen not only as environmental issues but also as moral and ethical imperatives. These policies resonate particularly well in rural areas, where the degradation of natural resources directly impacts the livelihoods and daily lives of the inhabitants [8]. Additionally, the Buddhist Party has been active in promoting social welfare policies that reflect the Buddhist values of compassion and charity. These include increased funding for healthcare and education, particularly in underserved rural areas, and social safety nets for the elderly and disabled. The party argues that such policies are not just economically beneficial but are crucial to societal well-being, aligning public policy with the moral obligation to care for all members of society, regardless of their economic contribution. Economic policies under the Buddhist Party also seek to address inequality through more equitable wealth distribution and the promotion of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which are seen as more aligned with Buddhist principles of moderate and ethical business practices. These policies aim to create a more balanced economy that avoids the extremes of wealth and poverty, promoting a middle path in economic development [9].

5.2 Public Perception

The alignment of the Buddhist Party with Buddhist principles significantly affects its public image and popularity. The party is often perceived as a moral corrective to the perceived corruption and materialism in Thai politics, appealing to the public's desire for leaders who are not only effective but also ethically sound. This perception is particularly strong among older generations and rural populations, who see the party as a guardian of traditional values in a rapidly modernizing society. However, the party's religious orientation also presents challenges in its public image, particularly among younger voters and urban populations who may view its policies as potentially infringing on secular governance and personal freedoms. The challenge for the Buddhist Party is to balance its religious identity with the need to appeal to a broader electorate that values both ethical governance and progressive, inclusive policies. Moreover, the party's stance on issues like LGBTQ+ rights and other social liberties is closely watched. While the Buddhist teaching promotes tolerance and compassion, there are concerns about how these principles translate into concrete policies in areas where traditional religious views might conflict with modern human rights standards. The party's handling of these issues will be crucial in shaping its future popularity and influence, as it needs to navigate the fine line between upholding religious values and embracing inclusivity and diversity, which are increasingly valued by the global community [9].

The sociopolitical impact of the Buddhist Party in Thailand showcases the complex interplay between religion and politics. By promoting policies that are deeply rooted in Buddhist ethics, the party has influenced both legislative practices and public perceptions. Its future trajectory will depend on its ability to adapt these principles to the changing sociopolitical landscape of Thailand, ensuring that its policies continue to resonate with a diverse electorate while maintaining its core ethical commitments. The party's influence on Thai society underscores the broader relevance of religious values in shaping national

policies and political discourse in the modern era.

6. Cultural Insights

6.1 Buddhism as Soft Power

In Thailand, Buddhism extends beyond its spiritual teachings to serve as a potent form of soft power, influencing both domestic politics and international relations. As a cultural and political tool, Buddhism helps to shape national identity and public policy, while also projecting Thai values and interests on the global stage. This usage of Buddhism as soft power is evident in the way the Thai government and political entities, including the Buddhist Party, harness the religion's ethical and moral teachings to foster social cohesion, promote cultural diplomacy, and reinforce Thailand's position in the world as a nation committed to peace and ethical governance. Buddhism's role as soft power is particularly visible in Thailand's diplomatic efforts, where it often underscores humanitarian initiatives and peace-building efforts in international forums. The Buddhist Party, with its emphasis on ethics and social justice, leverages this aspect to enhance Thailand's diplomatic profile, advocating for approaches in international relations that are based on Buddhist principles such as non-violence, compassion, and mutual respect. This strategy not only differentiates Thailand from its neighbors but also facilitates unique partnerships focused on cultural exchange and conflict resolution [3].

6.2 Social and Ethical Discussions

The Buddhist Party's alignment with Buddhist principles significantly impacts social and ethical discussions in Thailand. By grounding its political agenda in Buddhism, the party influences debates on a wide range of issues including economic inequality, environmental responsibility, and social welfare. For instance, the party promotes the concept of "right livelihood," which discourages professions that harm others and the environment, advocating for economic practices that are not only profitable but also ethical and sustainable. This stance challenges the conventional economic models and encourages a broader discussion on the ethical implications of business practices in Thailand. Moreover, the party's Buddhist perspective also affects discussions on social justice, particularly in terms of advocating for policies that ensure welfare and opportunity for all segments of society, including the marginalized and the poor. The principle of compassion (Karuna) drives the party's approach to social welfare, arguing for a society where the well-being of each individual is the concern of all, reflecting the interconnected nature of all life as taught in Buddhist philosophy. These discussions resonate with a large part of the Thai population, which views social policies through the lens of moral and ethical responsibility rather than mere economic rationality. Additionally, the Buddhist Party navigates complex issues such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, areas where traditional religious views can sometimes conflict with modern human rights standards. The party's approach to these issues is closely watched and often serves as a litmus test for its ability to balance religious values with contemporary social norms. This delicate balancing act influences public debates and highlights the party's role in shaping a progressive yet ethically grounded societal framework [9].

The cultural insights gleaned from the Buddhist Party's activities in Thailand demonstrate how deeply embedded Buddhism is in the fabric of Thai society, not only as a religion but also as a powerful cultural and political force. By leveraging Buddhist teachings, the party influences both domestic policy and international perceptions, contributing to debates that extend far beyond the conventional political discourse. The party's impact on

social and ethical discussions underlines the continuing relevance of Buddhism in shaping modern Thai society, offering a unique perspective on how traditional values can interact with contemporary issues to shape a nation's cultural and political landscape.

7. Comparative Analysis

The rise of the Buddhist Party in Thailand is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader trend of religiously inspired political movements across Asia. By examining similar movements in other Asian countries, we can gain insights into how Buddhism influences politics regionally, revealing both shared themes and unique national characteristics.

Sri Lanka: In Sri Lanka, the relationship between Buddhism and politics is historically entrenched, with the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology playing a significant role in the country's political landscape. Parties like the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), composed of Buddhist monks, have been influential in shaping national policies. Much like Thailand's Buddhist Party, the JHU emphasizes moral governance and the alignment of national laws with Buddhist principles. However, unlike Thailand, where the focus is often on inclusive and moderate policies, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has been criticized for fostering ethnic division, particularly against the Tamil minority. This contrast highlights different manifestations of Buddhist political engagement, shaped by specific historical and social contexts [10].

Myanmar: Myanmar's political landscape has also seen significant influence from Buddhist groups, notably the Ma Ba Tha (Patriotic Association of Myanmar), which has been involved in promoting laws based on Buddhist doctrines. Similar to the Buddhist Party in Thailand, these groups advocate for legislation that reflects Buddhist moral values. However, in Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism has been intertwined with intense anti-Muslim sentiments and has been a factor in the ethnic conflicts within the country. This illustrates a more aggressive use of Buddhist principles in politics, which contrasts with the generally more moderate and inclusive approach observed in Thailand.

Japan: In Japan, the Soka Gakkai International, a lay Buddhist organization, has a political wing called the Komeito Party. The Komeito has been a part of the ruling coalition and is known for promoting peace, education, and social welfare policies from a Buddhist perspective. The Komeito's approach to integrating Buddhist values into a modern democratic framework shares similarities with Thailand's Buddhist Party, focusing on peaceful advocacy and social justice. However, the Komeito operates within a highly industrialized and technologically advanced society, adapting Buddhist principles to issues like environmental technology and global peace, demonstrating a different aspect of Buddhist political engagement adapted to a different societal context.

Bhutan: In Bhutan, Buddhism is closely integrated into the fabric of the state, guiding governance through the concept of Gross National Happiness, which prioritizes the well-being of citizens over economic metrics. This state philosophy, deeply rooted in Buddhist ethical and philosophical teachings, closely mirrors the Thai Buddhist Party's emphasis on governance that enhances the well-being of all beings. However, Bhutan's approach is more institutionalized, with the entire governance structure built around Buddhist principles, unlike the party-based political engagement seen in Thailand.

The comparative analysis of Buddhist political movements across Asia highlights a diverse spectrum of how Buddhism can influence politics. While there are common themes of

moral governance and the promotion of social justice, national contexts significantly shape how these principles are implemented. The Thai Buddhist Party's approach, characterized by its moderate and inclusive policies, stands in contrast to more divisive or institutionalized uses of Buddhism in politics seen in other Asian countries. This diversity underscores the complex interplay between religion, culture, and politics in shaping national and regional political landscapes.

8. Challenges and Criticisms

8.1 Critiques of Religious Politics

The integration of Buddhism into Thai political life, while garnering significant support, has not been without its controversies and challenges. One of the primary criticisms directed at the Buddhist Party and similar movements is the inherent risk of blurring the lines between religion and state. Critics argue that such a fusion can lead to exclusionary practices and potentially discriminate against minorities who do not share the majority's religious beliefs. This critique is grounded in the broader debate about secularism and religious freedom, with concerns that religious politics may compromise the neutrality of the state and lead to governance that favors one group over others. Furthermore, there are apprehensions about the institutional integrity of religious institutions once they become entangled with the often-tumultuous realm of politics. The potential for corruption and the politicization of religious organizations are seen as significant risks. Critics argue that the sanctity and moral authority of religious institutions could be undermined when they are used as vehicles for political agendas, potentially diminishing their spiritual credibility and societal role [8].

8.2 Internal and External Challenges

Internal Dynamics: Within the Buddhist Party, internal challenges often stem from balancing the diverse expectations and ethical standards of its members, who may have different interpretations of Buddhist teachings. The task of aligning these varied perspectives with practical political strategies can create tensions, particularly in policy formulation and prioritization. The challenge is to maintain a cohesive party philosophy that adheres to Buddhist principles while also being adaptable and pragmatic enough to address contemporary issues effectively. This balancing act is crucial for avoiding the risk of the party becoming ideologically rigid or losing relevance among broader segments of the population.

External Pressures: Externally, the Buddhist Party faces pressures from both the political landscape and broader societal expectations. In Thailand, where political volatility has been prevalent, the party must navigate a complex and often unpredictable political environment. This includes dealing with the legacy of military coups, which have historically disrupted the political process, and competing with well-established political parties that have significant resources and influence.

Moreover, the global trend towards secular governance poses a challenge to the Buddhist Party's religion-centric political model. In an increasingly interconnected world, where issues like human rights and international law take precedence, the party's policies must align with international standards and expectations. The party's stance on issues such as LGBT rights, gender equality, and religious pluralism are particularly scrutinized, both domestically and internationally. Balancing traditional Buddhist values with progressive human rights standards is a significant external challenge that the party continues to face [9].

The challenges and criticisms facing the Buddhist Party highlight the complexities of integrating religious principles into modern political frameworks. While the party has

navigated these challenges with varying degrees of success, the critiques from both internal dynamics and external pressures underscore the ongoing struggle to maintain a balance between religious identity and political pragmatism. As the party moves forward, it will need to continually adapt and refine its strategies to address these criticisms effectively while staying true to its foundational principles.

9. Conclusion

The analysis of the Buddhist Party in Thailand highlights the significant role that religious beliefs can play in shaping political landscapes. This party, grounded in Buddhist principles, has sought to embed ethics and morality deeply into governance, resonating with a broad segment of the Thai populace who yearn for a political framework that aligns with their spiritual and cultural values. The party's approach to integrating Buddhist teachings with political policies has influenced various sectors including environmental conservation, social justice, and economic equity, appealing particularly to those who feel disenfranchised by the traditional political system. Looking forward, the party faces the dual challenge of maintaining its religious identity while adapting to a rapidly changing political environment and evolving societal norms. Its ability to navigate these complexities will be crucial in determining its sustainability and impact. As Thailand continues to grapple with issues of political instability and social change, the Buddhist Party's role could become increasingly pivotal, either as a moral compass or as a significant political player, depending on its ability to resonate with younger generations and address contemporary global issues effectively.

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