

## THE ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN SHAPING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### *Abstract*

*The social and political framework of Southeast Asia owes its cultural and ethical foundation together with its government principles to Buddhism. This research investigates the spread of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia in historical times and the functions of Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions within various nations and their incorporation into indigenous political and social systems. The study analyses how the "Dharmaraja" concept together with monastic institutions in government enabled Buddhism to authorize rulers while affecting state governance and social ethics and legal systems. The study explores the present-day challenges which Buddhism faces in the current political climate alongside secularization and nationalist trends and religious-motivated political ideology alignments. An exhaustive investigation of these main topics demonstrates how Southeast Asian political and social institutions still experience Buddhist influence during both historical and current times.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Southeast Asia, Political Influence, Social Structures, Dharmaraja, Theravāda Buddhism*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

For over two thousand years Buddhism functioned as a fundamental power that formed the social and political institutions across Southeast Asia. The transmission of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia using Indian cultural contacts led to religious changes that strongly influenced both political structures and social systems and governance. Politicized Buddhist

doctrines merged together with religious functions to create a new political-religious system that shaped Southeast Asian historical events.

### **1.1.Buddhism and the Political Structures in Southeast Asia**

The political systems of Southeast Asia underwent substantial influence because of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. The sovereigns across Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos followed Buddhist teachings to set their direction in government. Political ideologies throughout most Southeast Asian nations established the "Dharmaraja" or just king concept as their central focus. Kings incorporated Buddhist teaching principles into their governance decisions while extending defense of Buddhist faith through protectorship.



**Figure 1:** Buddhist temples

The establishment of Buddhist monasteries as centers of education and culture facilitated the development of governance structures, influencing lawmaking, social welfare systems, and the administration of justice in these societies.

### **1.2.Buddhism and Social Structures in Southeast Asia**

The social framework in Southeast Asia receives its influence from Buddhism through changes in caste organization along with modifications of family functions and communal relationships. Buddhist principles of equality and philosophical perspective on social divisions led to a diminishing trend of strict social hierarchies in particular areas. Social organization implemented monastic life as its main component that allowed people to escape customary family duties while pursuing spiritual enlightenment. Through Buddhist merit-making practices people engaged in generous and kind acts that strengthened community bonds and



created social welfare systems that fostered responsibility between members. Thailand along with Myanmar formed a dual political relationship between Buddhism and the state that served as a primary pillar for both societal harmony and societal dispute mitigation and conflict resolution strategies and methods to promote social unity.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Lê Phan, T. (2023)** investigated the historical, cultural, and political reasons for the emergence of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, with emphasis on the influence of trade, kingship, and the localization of Buddhist teachings. Buddhism, one of the oldest and most powerful religions in the world, started to expand outside India in the early centuries of the Common Era. Its coming into Southeast Asia was characterized by initial contact with Indian merchants, missionaries, and cultural exchanges along sea routes. Buddhism had already taken root in areas like the current Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Vietnam by the 1st century CE. Buddhism's spread affected the region's art, architecture, and societal structures and went on to fashion Southeast Asia as a dynamic, multi-dimensional center of Buddhist teaching and practice.

**Āchārshubho and Saengpare (2022)** explored the connection between Indianization and Buddhists' sociology in Southeast Asia and Lanka. Their research found five major dimensions of Indian impact on Buddhist sociological features: 1) Indianized religion and beliefs, such as Brahmanism and Buddhism; 2) Indianized languages and literature, especially Sanskrit and the Ramayana; 3) Indianized kingship and administrative systems; 4) Indianized art and architecture, as seen in construction patterns; and 5) Indianized modes of social production, such as the caste system, that influenced folk rites and norms. The article provides useful contributions for future research in Buddhist studies, history, Indianization, and human society civilization, with special emphasis on Southeast Asia.

**Laliberté (2024)** emphasized the most significant differences between two models of Buddhism practiced globally, i.e., 'Buddhism(s) for this World' and 'Engaged Buddhism.' Although these two terms seemed to be used interchangeably, the article explained how certain historical conditions led to different differences. 'Buddhism(s) for this World' was a reform movement in Chinese Buddhism in the early twentieth century and, in the course of time, became linked with nationalism in certain situations. Conversely, 'Engaged Buddhism,' which

was indirectly provoked by the above and was even more heterogeneous in its composition, appeared later on the scene with a range of social justice activities. Although the scope was broader, 'Engaged Buddhism' had difficulty institutionally realizing its ideals. International rivalry geopolitics, in which the two developments tried to corroborate their distinct points of view, was further investigated in the article.

**Das (2023)** explored the processes that facilitated the dissemination of Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the 1st millennium AD, focusing on Vietnam. The research suggested that Buddhism disseminated through various channels, such as trade, evangelization, and royal patronage, while being integrated into local cultures and shaping social and political conditions in the region. Evidence for early religious activity at Dong Duang, the principal monastic center of the region, was introduced, emphasizing the Cham kings, like Indravarman II, who made Mahayana Buddhism the state religion. The impact of Chinese Buddhism in Vietnam was also addressed, together with the syncretic and pluralistic nature of Vietnamese Buddhism, which blended aspects of Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion. The article also discussed the existence of diverse Buddhist traditions in Vietnam, such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, and utilized both images and text to corroborate its arguments and assertions.

**The study by Ibrahim (2025)** investigated how Buddhism contributed to Myanmar state policy development through its use in creating political relations while denying access to religious and ethnic minorities such as the Rohingya. Research studied Rohingya history for understanding the roots of the crisis by applying a civilization clash model to examine cultural and religious conflicts. Statements from leaders like Ashin Wirathu and state laws as well as news reports demonstrate how Buddhism became an instrument for political control by the state. The study also compared Myanmar with other nations such as China, India, and Sri Lanka to analyze how religion is utilized to entrench power. State-building theory was used to comprehend religion's role in consolidation and its overall influence.

### **3. HISTORICAL SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Buddhism entered Southeast Asia through trade, cultural contacts, and missionary efforts that enabled the passage of Buddhist ideas from the Indian subcontinent to the kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Buddhism spread even further with the support of royal patronage, art forms,

and the organization of monastic orders. Through centuries, Buddhism became enmeshed with the local traditions and political institutions and became an integral part of Southeast Asian society.

The two main branches of Buddhism, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, took root in different parts of the region, each influencing the cultural and religious landscape in unique ways.

### 3.1. Theravāda Buddhism

Theravāda Buddhism, or the "Teaching of the Elders," gained prominence as the mainstream Buddhism of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The tradition entered mainly through Indian and Sri Lankan influences, especially in the 3rd century BCE when Emperor Ashoka of India sent Buddhist missionaries to propagate the faith throughout Asia. Theravāda Buddhism came to be closely identified with the ruling classes of Southeast Asian kingdoms, who adopted Buddhist teachings to sanctify their rule.



**Figure 2:** Theravada Buddhism

This school of Buddhism focuses on monastic life, meditation, and strict adherence to the Pali Canon teachings. Monastic schools, or Sangha, had a crucial function in spreading Buddhist values, training the people, and offering moral guidance to kings. The interfusion of Buddhism with statecraft resulted in the evolution of the idea of the "Dharmaraja" (just ruler), under which kings had to follow Buddhist teachings and provide for the happiness of their people.

### 3.2.Mahāyāna Buddhism

Unlike in Theravāda, Mahāyāna Buddhism took root in Vietnam and Indonesia due to trade and cultural interactions with India and China. It is the Buddhist branch that believes in the power of Bodhisattvas, which are enlightened creatures who decide to continue living in the cycle of birth and death so that they can assist others in seeking enlightenment. Local animistic and Taoist practices were absorbed into Mahāyāna Buddhism, giving rise to a distinctive syncretic tradition called Mahāyāna Buddhism.



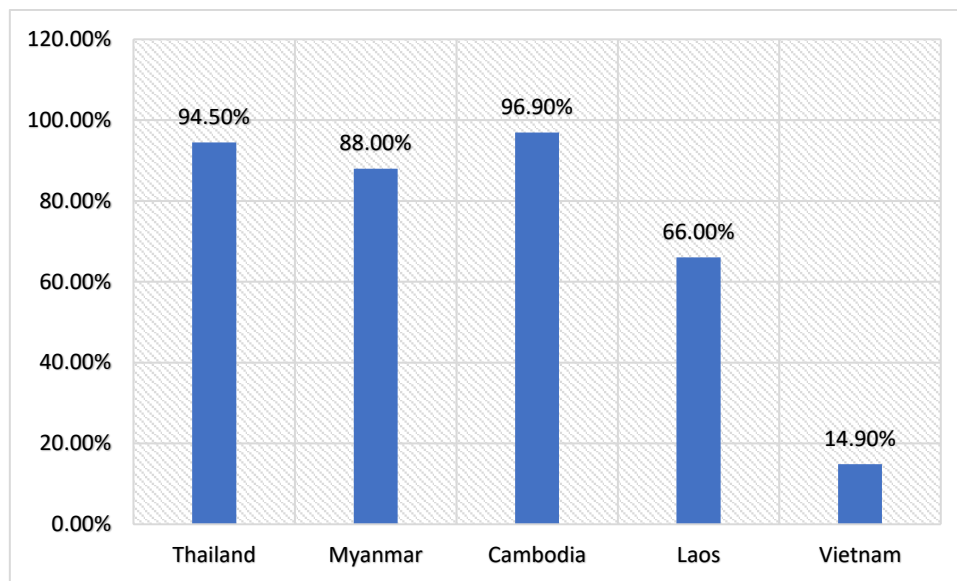
**Figure 3:** Mahayana Buddhism

The transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Vietnam was largely made possible by Chinese political and cultural power. During Chinese domination, Mahāyāna Buddhist rituals and scriptures were introduced, blending with local spiritual practices. In Indonesia, Mahāyāna developed during the Srivijaya Empire (7th to 13th centuries CE), where Buddhist monasteries served as institutions of learning and scholarship. The Borobudur temple in Java, the greatest Mahāyāna Buddhist monument, remains a proof of the history of Buddhism existing in the area.

**Table 1:** Buddhist Population in Southeast Asian Countries

| Country  | Buddhist Population (%) | Dominant Branch |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Thailand | 94.50%                  | Theravāda       |

|          |        |           |
|----------|--------|-----------|
| Myanmar  | 88.00% | Theravāda |
| Cambodia | 96.90% | Theravāda |
| Laos     | 66.00% | Theravāda |
| Vietnam  | 14.90% | Mahāyāna  |



**Figure 4:** Buddhist Population in Southeast Asian Countries

Table 1 shows how Buddhist populations have been distributed geographically across the Southeast Asian nation-states, showcasing the dominance of the Theravāda school in the majority of countries. Thailand boasts the largest percentage at 94.50%, in line with how deeply rooted the Theravāda school has become in their political and societal institutions. The second is Cambodia at 96.90%, where Buddhism itself is the national religion and core to the defining of national identity. Myanmar, where 88.00% of its population practices Theravāda Buddhism, traditionally has experienced robust connections between state and monastic community (Sangha) that have influenced governance and society. Laos, where 66.00% of the populace practices Theravāda Buddhism, also shares the incorporation of Buddhist values within societal ethics and governance, yet is more religiously diverse than its neighbors. Conversely, Vietnam only boasts a 14.90% Buddhist population with the prevailing Mahāyāna Buddhism existing as a legacy of Chinese rule. The reduced percentage accounts for Vietnam's religious diversity

in that Confucianism, Taoism, and native folk customs have also heavily influenced spiritual thoughts and practices.

#### **4. THE ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN POLITICAL STRUCTURES**

Buddhism has been a key component in shaping Southeast Asian political systems. The concept of Dharmaraja (the righteous king) became the foundation of Buddhist-influenced governance, as rulers sought legitimacy through Buddhist teachings.

##### **4.1. Kingship and Legitimacy**

Most Southeast Asian monarchs throughout history have tapped their legitimacy in Buddhist doctrine and embraced the concept of the Bodhisattva king, ruling with wisdom and compassion. The Buddhist rulers of that time were expected to implement both moral governance and prosperity creation for their populace by upholding the Ten Royal Virtues (Dasavidha-rājadhamma) which consisted of generosity righteousness self-renunciation and fairness.

Under the Chakri dynasty in Thailand the current royal family places great importance on Buddhist traditions while bestowing upon the King the responsibility to safeguard Buddhism. Throughout history the royal institution used Buddhist religious institutions to maintain control over power while royal activities tend to merge into Buddhist liturgical practices. As protector of the Sangha institutions the King ensures both their protection and flourishing growth throughout state oversight.

During the 11th century of the Pagan Dynasty in Myanmar King Anawrahta adopted Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion to strengthen his monarchy through Buddhist principles. Through support of monastics and monastery land endowments kings gained political authority that became validated through religious means.

During the 12th and 13th centuries the Khmer Empirical ruler Jayavarman VII actively spread Mahāyāna Buddhism throughout his kingdom by integrating it into his political domain and architectural masterpieces. During his rule numerous spectacular Buddhist temples such as Bayon appeared which symbolized Buddhist monarchical power. The state incorporated Buddhist teachings to guide their administrative and legal choices.

## **4.2. Buddhist Monastic Institutions and Political Influence**

Traditionally the Buddhist monastic orders known as the Sangha exerted governance power through moral guidance and counseling activities for monarchs. The Sangha fulfilled responsibilities in legal proceedings together with social protection efforts and knowledge conservation operations.

Myanmar shared a crucial aspect with its precolonial administrations which was theocratic rule because monarchs worked hand in hand with Buddhist monks to ensure all policies followed Buddhist teachings. Monarchy obtained legitimate backing from religious personnel who functioned as connectors between public and state authority. The monarchs received spiritual backing from the ranks of monks while the monks received worldly support from the monarchs through material exchanges.

Through Southeast Asia the legal systems developed under the influence of Buddhist religious beliefs. Thai and Burmese law systems before colonial rule applied Dharmasastra-based codes that combined moral components of Buddhism with their criminal justice system. Thai legal precedent displayed significant focus on merit-based justice because its punitive measures matched individual moral failures to the teachings of Buddhism.

Scholar-monks gained their scholarly knowledge from monastic organizations that actively participated in state administration. Buddhist adherence to Vinaya religious rules made monastic orders function according to ethical principles thus creating a trust-based system between monastic communities and political leaders in governance. The monastics decreased their involvement in governing institutions following the emergence of secularization together with modern advancements.

## **5. BUDDHISM'S INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL STRUCTURES**

Buddhism has significantly influenced societal norms and hierarchies across Southeast Asia, shaping social ethics, educational structures, and social mobility.

### **5.1. Social Ethics and Morality**

Buddhist philosophy on karma, merit-making, and non-violence has profoundly shaped social conduct. Karma teaches people that they are morally responsible for their actions in the present

life because they will influence their future births. The giving of *dāna* (alms) is highly promoted, and this generates a culture of giving and social responsibility.



**Figure 5:** Karma and Reincarnation

Buddhist temples frequently organize welfare programs, including food distribution and healthcare services for underprivileged communities. Additionally, Buddhist ethical teachings promote non-violence, leading to reduced social conflicts in many Buddhist-majority regions.

### **5.2. Education and Monastic Scholarship**

Traditionally, Buddhist monasteries have been institutions of learning, imparting literacy and moral education to society. Monastic schools in Thailand and Myanmar have been at the forefront of educating royals and commoners alike. Monks have been known to function as teachers, teaching religious scriptures, history, and even applied subjects like agriculture and medicine. The monastic system of education was one of the earliest systems of formal learning in Southeast Asia and remains in operation along with modern educational institutions. Numerous Buddhist schools today incorporate modern curricula with the retention of Buddhist ethical instructions so that religious principles continue to impact societal evolution.

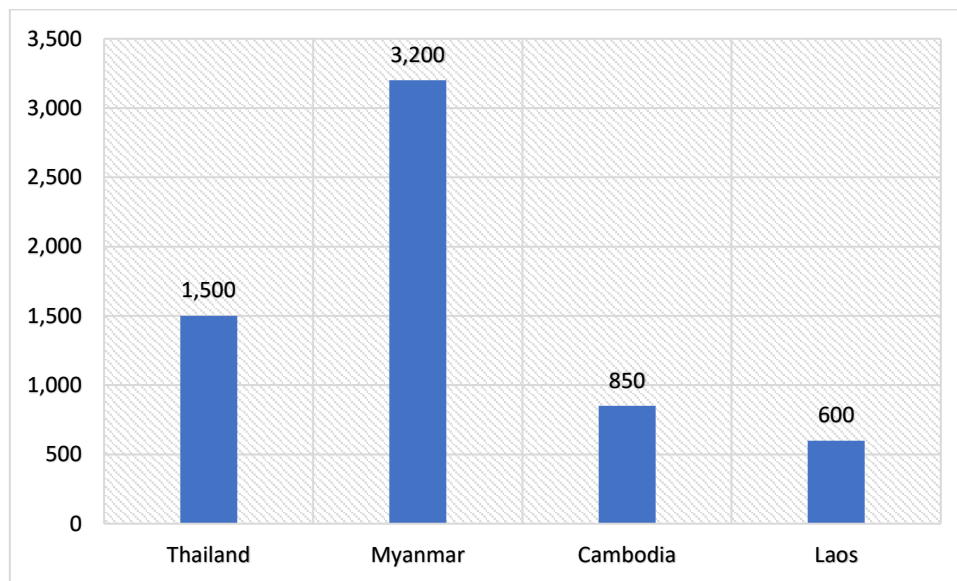
### **5.3. Caste and Social Mobility**

In contrast to Hinduism's stringent caste system, Buddhist communities within Southeast Asia tend to encourage merit-based social mobility. Social ranking, while prevalent in the case of the monastic order, is determined through spiritual achievement instead of birth right. The monastic order gives access to those from all backgrounds to acquire an education, consideration, and leverage on the strength of their religion and learning. Yet, the formal ranks

in the Sangha (monastic order) establish a clear hierarchy, with older monks having great power in religious and political affairs.

**Table 2:** Buddhist Monastic Education Enrollment in Southeast Asia (2022)

| Country  | Number of Monastic Schools | Estimated Student Enrollment |
|----------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Thailand | 1,500                      | 2,50,000                     |
| Myanmar  | 3,200                      | 5,00,000                     |
| Cambodia | 850                        | 1,20,000                     |
| Laos     | 600                        | 90,000                       |



**Figure 6:** Number of Monastic Schools

Table 2 shows the important position of Buddhist monastic education in Southeast Asia, specifically in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Myanmar boasts the largest number of monastic schools, standing at 3,200, with an estimated enrollment of 500,000 students, an indication of the country's deeply entrenched Theravāda Buddhist heritage and the dominant position of monastic institutions in education, especially in rural communities where formal schooling may not be readily accessible. Thailand follows at 1,500 monastic schools with a student enrollment of 250,000, further demonstrating the sustained integration of Buddhist

education within Thailand's wider education system, wherein secular and religious learning sit together. Cambodia, with 850 monastic schools and 120,000 students, also has a strong Buddhist educational tradition, although on a lesser scale than Myanmar and Thailand, in keeping with the nation's historical dependence on monastic institutions for religious and secular education. At the same time, Laos, despite having the fewest monastic schools at 600, still supports a considerable student population of 90,000, highlighting the continued relevance of Buddhist education in Laotian society, especially in maintaining religious and cultural values.

## **6. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND BUDDHISM IN MODERN POLITICS**

Buddhism has long been pivotal in the formation of Southeast Asian governance, social order, and cultural identity. It has impacted royal courts and shaped societal morality. The dynamic between Buddhism and politics has always been profound and complex. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, Buddhism has encountered serious challenges to its conventional status in the face of modernizing trends, secularization, and political mobilization. These issues are seen in the nexus of Buddhism with nationalism, controversy surrounding its place in secular states, and political leaders' use of it.

### **6.1. Intersection with Nationalism**

Contemporary Southeast Asian politics face significant challenges for Buddhist leadership because of its intersection with nationalism throughout Myanmar and other regional states. Some Buddhist monks and politicians have successfully promoted Buddhist nationalism through religious nationalism and ethnic nationalism which has produced serious sociopolitical impacts. The persecution of Rohingya minority serves as an excellent example of how discriminatory practices unfold. Myanmar Buddhist monk leaders Ashin Wirathu stands among a substantial number of religious figures who actively support anti-Rohingya feelings while arguing that Rohingya Muslim presence threatens the integrity of Buddhist Myanmar. Nationalist ideologies linked with Buddhism transformed an ordinary religious tradition into discriminatory government policies thus worsening interreligious and interethnic rifts across the nation. The Buddhist monks heightened political activism remains a controversial approach

since most Buddhist groups do not accept it but it exposed the challenges between religious doctrine and modern political ideology.

### **6.2.Modernization and Secularism**

The emergence of secular rule throughout Southeast Asia during the 20th and 21st centuries created a re-examination of the role of Buddhism in the public sphere. The state's special relationship with the Sangha in Thailand, once a self-professed Buddhist kingdom, is subject to erosion in the face of growing secular influence. The evolution of governmental institutions and the emergence of secular political movements have prompted discussions on whether Buddhism should continue to enjoy its superior position in state affairs. Although the Thai constitution provides protection for Buddhism, most young individuals and progressive forces call for a separation of religion from state matters to create more inclusive, democratic-oriented societies. In the same way, increased secularism and the international momentum for human rights occasionally clash with orthodox Buddhist views, particularly over gender and minorities' rights.

In nations such as Vietnam, where Buddhism has long been a fundamental aspect of national identity, the secularism of the Communist government has resulted in the exclusion of religious institutions, such as Buddhism. The state's domination of religious expression and practice has resulted in a conflict between religious liberties and nationalistic secularism. In the face of modernization, Buddhism's historical function as the society's moral and ethical pillar is under threat from secular philosophies and the rise of materialism, which raises new concerns about how Buddhism can evolve to fit the contemporary world while maintaining its fundamental teachings.

### **6.3.Political Instrumentalization**

Some Southeast Asian nations utilize Buddhist influence to justify government initiatives in support of political policies. The Cambodian government uses the power of state-backed Buddhist nationalism to control all political authority. Prime Minister Hun Sen leads the government of Cambodia which has chosen to use Buddhism strategically as it advances nationwide support through its status as the unifying power in the country. The government

supports Buddhist monkhood while granting temple donations to demonstrate its loyalty and elevating Buddhist spirituality to core Cambodian national identity.

When Buddhism is incorporated with political power this raises crucial ethical questions about how religious independence remains possible when institutions blend with government. Nevertheless, different viewers interpret this as a demonstration of national unity but others argue it crosses Buddhist independence boundaries and takes away monks' ability to present free spiritual advice. History shows how Buddhist establishments in Cambodia along with Southeast Asian nations face challenges when political necessities clash with authentic religious practices.

In addition to these political dynamics, modernization has led to significant shifts in the role of Buddhism in Southeast Asian societies, particularly in terms of education and monastic enrollment.

#### **6.4.The Role of Buddhism in Shaping Social and Political Structures**

Despite contemporary challenges Buddhism continues to have a strong impact on the social and political institutions throughout Southeast Asia. Ethics together with morality and communalism values from the religion shaped how Southeast Asia governs itself and develops social customs and cultural principles throughout the entire region. The Buddhist doctrine remains the guiding force in public life for Sri Lanka together with Thailand, Laos and Myanmar which provides political leadership with moral direction while guiding educational and health and social welfare policy decisions.

The ongoing political relevance of Buddhism becomes apparent through its participation in Thai pro-democracy activism and its peace-building initiatives in Myanmar. Buddhist monks together with laypersons have continuously served as essential forces in advancing social justice and human rights alongside fostering peaceful solutions for societal issues. The movements serve as a moral force that enforces Buddhist principles of nonviolence and compassion while promoting harmony to stop political power abuses.

#### **7. CONCLUSION**

Southeast Asian political and social organizations together with governance systems and legal frameworks and societal norms have been deeply influenced by Buddhism throughout

centuries. The ruler and his policies receive moral stability for legitimacy through Buddhist teachings that emphasize "Dharmaraja." The effect of Theravāda and Mahāyāna beliefs has shown unique patterns across different areas because Buddhism integrates differently in each local political and cultural context. Buddhism faces significant hurdles nowadays because secularism gains strength while nationalism rises in power and Buddhism aligns with modern political activities. Buddhism continues to hold its position within Southeast Asian politics and society through its adaptation to current circumstances without abandoning its fundamental principles. This investigation demonstrates that the Buddhist heritage shapes the modern political environment of Southeast Asia as it continues to evolve throughout the twenty-first century.

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