

Burma

High-Profile Monk Accompanies Myanmar Junta Deputy Chief on Russia Trip

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One of Myanmar regime leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's favorite Buddhist monks, Sitagu Sayadaw, is accompanying the junta's No. 2 man on his current trip to Russia, seemingly providing further confirmation of the popular opinion that he is close to the junta leaders.

Regime spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun confirmed that the monk is traveling with Vice Senior General Soe Win, who is now in Moscow to attend the closing ceremony of the International Army Games-2021. They both left for Russia on Wednesday.

The reason behind the monk's Moscow mission is not known yet. His sudden trip to Moscow at this time is quite unusual for a Buddhist monk, because the clerics are not supposed to travel until next month, after Lent is over.

The spokesperson told The Irrawaddy that the 84-year-old monk is now staying at the Myanma Theravada Buddha Vihara Monastery in Moscow, to which Min Aung Hlaing and his wife, among others, are donors.



Sitagu Sayadaw (sitting in armchair) at the Myanma Theravada Buddha Vihara Monastery in Moscow

Once highly venerated by many Buddhists in Myanmar for his outspokenness against dictatorship, the monk, who is also known as Ashin Nyanissara, has fallen into disgrace in the eyes of his former followers since the February coup due to his near total silence on Min Aung Hlaing's deadly crackdowns on regime opponents.

While many young Buddhist monks were taking to the streets nearly every day against the regime, Sitagu Sayadaw never failed to receive Min Aung Hlaing and his wife at his monastery at Sagaing Hill. When Min Aung Hlaing took blessings from Myanmar's senior monks for his construction of the world's largest Buddha statue in Naypyitaw in March, Sitagu Sayadaw was there. At the time, nearly five dozen protesters were gunned down by the regime's troops across the country.

Long before Min Aung Hlaing came to power, the monk publicly said he wished then President U Thein Sein would be re-elected when the quasi-civilian government led by former generals was in power from 2011 to early 2016.

Since that time, he has been seen by some as sitting on the fence.

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P.S.

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