

Burma

Myanmar Junta Finds Allies Among Well-Known Buddhist Monks

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Seven months after the military coup in Myanmar, some young Buddhist monks have taken off their yellow robes to join the armed struggle against the junta, while other older and senior ones are throwing in their lot with the junta leaders.

One of the monks in the latter group is Sitagu Sayadaw, who accompanied Vice Senior General Soe Win, the No. 2 man in the military regime, on his Russia trip earlier this month. Another big name that is closely connected with the coup is U Kovida, a monk from Shan State's Kengtung who has been accused of providing coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing with astrological advice ahead of the takeover.

Other influential monks include 92-year-old Bhaddanta Dhamma Siri from Tachileik in eastern Shan State; Bhaddanta Kavidaja from Hpa-an in Karen State, a leading monk in the now-defunct Association for Protection of Race and Religion, known by its Burmese acronym Ma Ba Tha; and Dhammaduta Ashin Chekinda.

After the coup, some Buddhist monks joined civilians in street protests against the regime, some staged silent demonstrations inside their monasteries, some were beaten and arrested by security personnel for their anti-junta activities, and some took off their robes to take up arms against the regime.



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla and military officials are pictured with Sitagu Sayadaw.

But it has been a different story for other high-profile monks including Sitagu Sayadaw. The 84-year-old is the second-most-influential leader of Shwe Kyin, one of Myanmar's nine Buddhist clergy sects. Its members are known for strictly obeying the Vinaya, the code of conduct for Buddhist monks.

The monk was widely recognized for his outreach and charity work, and was an outspoken critic of military dictatorships in the past. He apparently got close with Myanmar's military under U Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government in 2015 when he, as the vice chairman of the nationalist organization Ma Ba Tha, pushed for enactment of a legislative package known as the race and

religion protection laws, which are designed to prevent the spread of Islam in Myanmar.

Later, Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—now the coup leader—became a familiar face among his high-level followers.



U Kovida and Sitagu Sayadaw

Since the coup, he has never failed to portray himself as a promoter of Buddhism, making the most of popular opinion among the country's nationalists that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's ousted National League for Democracy government favored human rights over the religion that the majority of citizens practice. He started his mission by hastily paying a visit to the well-known Zaygone Sayadaw and other monks in Naypyitaw one day after the coup. (Sadly, the monk died in a military plane crash in June.) The general has also ordered his subordinates to follow suit, visiting and making offerings to other monks. As Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority country, senior monks have a significant influence on their many followers. Min Aung Hlaing might think that if he has blessings from the monks, support from their disciples will follow.

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.



Bhaddanta Dhamma Siri, or Two Dragon Sayadaw, receives the Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru title from Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Tachileik, eastern Shan State on March 28, 2021.

The monk was present when since-ousted State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League for Democracy government offered meals to Buddhist monks. He often receives offerings from Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing and the general's wife, Daw Kyu Kyu Hla. Some three months before the coup, the couple offered meals to the monk.

The monk is currently at the Myanma Theravada Buddha Vihara Monastery in Moscow. The monastery has received donations from Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing and his wife, among others.

Ashin Arsara, a striking monk from Mandalay, said he felt sad to see Myanmar's leading monks like Sitagu Sayadaw stand with the regime when the whole nation is fighting against it.



Military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla have a conversation with Sitagu Sayadaw on Oct. 29, 2020.

“One of the figureheads of the Buddhist clergy is standing with the unjust. As a Buddhist monk, I feel embarrassed and sorry for the people,” he said.

Another famous monk is U Kovida, commonly known as Vasipake Sayadaw and famous for his vows of silence. Min Aung Hlaing has been his follower since 2006, when the general was serving as the commander of the Myanmar military’s Triangle Region, which oversees eastern Shan State.



Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing (left, front) with U Kovida (right, front) during the Hti Umbrella placing ceremony at the ancient Htilominlo Temple in Bagan in 2020. / The Irrawaddy

He has been accused of advising the senior general to tell security forces to shoot protesters in the head. Most of the anti-regime protesters killed in the early days of the junta crackdown had bullet wounds to the head.

The monk was singled out for criticism at anti-regime protests, with some protesters attaching photos of him to htamein—women’s sarongs—and hanging them in public places to express their wrath. Seeing the pictures of the monk he venerates attached to htamein is an infuriating sight for Min Aung Hlaing. He ordered his troops to take the women’s garments down and publicly announced in his state-run papers that anyone committing the act would be charged with insulting Buddhism. The 64-year-old monk has close ties with Sitagu Sayadaw.

Another monk, Bhaddanta Dhamma Siri, known as “Two Dragon Sayadaw” after his monastery, was the first to receive the Abhidhaja Maha Rahta Guru, one of the highest religious titles in Myanmar, after the coup. The monk with red and white amulets on both wrists came under fire as the coup leader presented the title to him in person at his monastery, and he accepted the title after hundreds of young activists had been killed by the regime. It’s noteworthy that Min Aung Hlaing personally presented titles or paid visits only to monks who either have influence or knowledge of some “special power.” The coup leader was seen, even at the regime’s governing body meetings, wearing a red amulet believed to be given by one of the monks on his return from Kengtung and Tachileik.

In May, during their tour to Karen State, Min Aung Hlaing and his wife visited the radical monk Bhaddanta Kavidaja, who, prior to the NLD government’s ousting, publicly showed his support for the military by organizing pro-military rallies. The monk, known as Zwegabin Sayadaw after the name of his monastery, publicly defied the NLD government’s designation of the Ma Ba Tha as an

unlawful association and its order that the group's signboards should be taken down across the country.

He is widely believed to have taken the helm of the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, the successor to Ma Ba Tha.



Min Aung Hlaing makes an offering to Zwegabin Sayadaw in May 2021.

Dhammasuta Chekinda is known for his summer school programs, in which he teaches teenagers Buddhism and other subjects, attracting hundreds of youngsters annually. The monk has barely appeared in public since the coup and has been tight-lipped about the regime's brutal crackdowns on peaceful protesters, some of which were the same age as his summer school students. He is therefore thought to share the views of Sitagu Sayadaw. Ashin Chekinda currently serves as a department head at the International Theravada Missionary University in Yangon. Rumors have it that the monk chooses not to offend the regime and senior monks who have close ties to it, like Sitagu Sayadaw, because in order to become the rector of the university he may need the approval of senior monks and authorities.



An undated picture of Ashin Chekinda (left) and Sitagu Sayadaw.

Military dictators have never been reluctant to manipulate religion to maintain their grip on power. The regime earlier this week dropped the legal case against firebrand nationalist monk U Wirathu, who was charged with sedition by the since-ousted NLD government. U Wirathu, who has earned a notorious name among Myanmar people, is a faithful follower of Sitagu Sayadaw, who once blessed the younger monk by calling him "my comrade."

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