

Burma

Myanmar Junta Chief and His Two Favorite Monks Consecrate Pagoda Replica in Moscow

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Two high-profile Buddhist monks who reportedly urged military chief Min Aung Hlaing to seize power well before he did so last year consecrated a replica of Shwezigon Pagoda together with the junta boss in the Russian capital Moscow on Tuesday, which marked the Full Moon Day of Kason.

The two monks in question were Sitagu Sayadaw Ashin Nyanissara and Dhammaduta Ashin Chekinda, whose ties with Min Aung Hlaing have deepened since the coup. Both monks reportedly called ahead of the general election of November 2020 for the military to seize power from the National League for Democracy (NLD) government. One of them even wrote a letter to Min Aung Hlaing urging him to stage a coup, according to a highly respected monk who has followers in the military and the ousted NLD government.

Their incitement appears to have been worthwhile; both are now the religious masters of a despotic ruler.



Sitagu Sayadaw (center) and Min Aung Hlaing (far right) cut a ribbon at the consecration ceremony on July 12 in Moscow. / Venerable Ashin Nyanissara Facebook

Min Aung Hlaing, his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla, their son Aung Pyae Sone, Sitagu Sayadaw and Ashin Chekinda secretly left Naypyitaw on a Myanmar Airways International flight on Sunday. Their visit was only officially reported two days later. It is Min Aung Hlaing's second visit to Russia since the coup. During his first visit in June last year, he consecrated a replica of Shwedagon Pagoda in Moscow.

Construction and consecration of the Shwezigon Pagoda replica were arranged by Sitagu Sayadaw, who has hailed Min Aung Hlaing as a "king" of great generosity and wisdom. Sitagu Sayadaw visited Russia 10 times to oversee construction of the pagoda. The last time he flew there was in September last year with the junta's No. 2 man, Soe Win.



Ashin Chekinda sprinkles scented water on a pennant-shaped vane for the Shwezigon Pagoda replica on July 12 in Moscow. / Venerable Ashin Nyanissara Facebook

According to the Facebook page of Sitagu Sayadaw, the pagoda was funded by business tycoon U Aung Ko Win and his wife, who own Kanbawza Group of Companies, which has interests in many sectors including banking, insurance and aviation. The family owns Kanbawza Bank (KBZ)—one of Myanmar’s biggest—and is known to have close ties to Min Aung Hlaing.

The pagoda consecration was attended by Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council of Russia Konstantin Kosachev and Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Alexander Fomin. Min Aung Hlaing called the Shwezigon replica in Moscow a milestone in cultural cooperation between the two countries.

Russia is the only country that has opened its doors to Min Aung Hlaing, and the only one he has visited over the 16 months since the takeover, as the junta chief has been shunned internationally for his violence against Myanmar’s people.



Min Aung Hlaing, SAC member Mahn Nyein Maung and Russian officials perform a religious ritual to mark the success of the consecration.

Moscow engages with Min Aung Hlaing not because it views Myanmar as a friend, but because Min Aung Hlaing’s regime is a cash cow for it. Russia is a major arms supplier to Myanmar, and the regime could be seen as partially funding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The junta chief has not been received by Russian President Vladimir Putin during either of his visits.

Offering words of thanks after the consecration, the regime chief said Shwezigon Pagoda, located in Myanmar’s UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bagan, was built by King Anawrahta on Shin Araham’s advice—implicitly comparing himself to the founder of the first Burmese Empire and comparing Sitagu Sayadaw to the Buddhist monk who was credited with promoting Buddhism in Bagan Kingdom, today’s central Myanmar.

In just 16 months since the coup, Min Aung Hlaing has consecrated five pagodas. He is also having a Buddha statue—touted as the world’s biggest sitting Buddha image—built in Naypyitaw. Just a few days before his visit to Russia, Min Aung Hlaing showed off a big ruby, a gem traditionally associated with royalty and wealth in Myanmar. He called the ruby “priceless” and named it after his regime’s governing body, the State Administration Council, or the “Na Sa Ka Ruby”. Given that previous military dictators including Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt used white elephants, which are

historically associated with kings and viewed as a source of royal power, to bolster support for their regime, Min Aung Hlaing may already have his men searching for an albino elephant.



The consecration ceremony is under way at the site of the Shwezigon Pagoda replica in Moscow on July 12. / Venerable Ashin Nyanissara Facebook

By smearing the NLD as an enemy of Buddhism in Myanmar, Sitagu Sayadaw and Ashin Chekinda aided and abetted Min Aung Hlaing even before he seized power from a democratically elected government and tormented millions of people. And the duo have actively helped Min Aung Hlaing exploit religion for political gain. Both have been rewarded for their allegiance to the junta leader. Sitagu Sayadaw has become the head of the Shwe Kyin sect, and Ashin Chekinda has been promoted to become the rector of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in a short time.

Construction of a pagoda in Russia does nothing to help the Myanmar people, many of whom have lost their families and friends, as well as their homes and belongings, and are suffering in one way or another in the post-coup turmoil. What Min Aung Hlaing will bring back—military deals with Russia—will only worsen the woes of Myanmar's people

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