



Buddhist monks have by now been accepted by our society in a political role. Soon after the assassination of SWRD Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk and the revelation that high profile Sangha like Buddhakittita were behind the conspiracy, Sri Lankan society began to openly repudiate the very idea of the saffron community being seen on the political stage. The monk's urge for the political platform was severely curbed for many years. On the other hand, today Buddhist monks have re-emerged with the cloud of guilt blown away out of their halo.

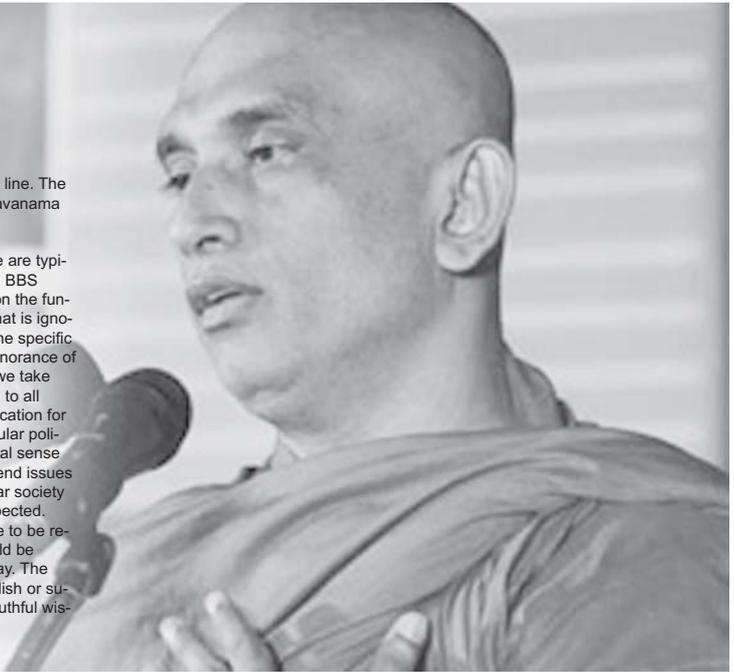
The formation of a formerly declared party for monks, the JHU, took place in the year 2004. The fact that the JHU or The National Heritage Party succeeded in winning as much as nine seats in parliament became the signal of general popular acceptance of a political landscape dotted by the Buddhist clergy. The JHU is still a significant force to be dealt with as its influence spreads beyond their numbers.

There isn't any scriptural reference that can be interpreted as barring Buddhist monks from politics. Human Rights laws will frown on any disallowance of monks to participate in politics. Furthermore, the absence of an organised authority- wielding hierarchy that covers

Nathi mohasamani jalam
(There is no net like ignorance)
Nathi thanhasamana nadi
(There is no river like craving)

The fourth line is an emphatic first line. The Buddha preached this in the Jethavanama Monastery.

Since the states of greed and hate are typically hard to discern, except when BBS hammers Muslims, we will focus on the fundamental poison or papa karma that is ignorance. Now, it is admitted that in the specific Buddhist context Avijja refers to ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. However, we take the liberty to extend its application to all forms of ignorance. There is justification for this in that monks engaged in secular politics are expected to evince a critical sense and to make an effort to comprehend issues of the wider jurisdiction of a secular society if what they articulate is to be respected. Monks taking to politics, if they are to be respected as Buddhist monks, should be mindful of the truth of what they say. The public expect monks not to be foolish or superficial but to be endowed with truthful wisdom.



MONKS IN POLITICS SHOULD AVOID THE THREE POISONS

the whole Sangha has cleared the door further. This is unlike the Christian priesthood, which does have a controlling body to exercise a code of conduct. The Sangha is like the provincial barber saloon where anybody can come in and go away. Thus we had and have the BBS that went on the rampage burning Muslim places of worship and beating Mussalmen. Recently, we saw videos on social media where a monk in Batticaloa was castigating a Muslim Grama Sevaka in racial terms and jumping toward him to have a meritorious go. The general public expectation, specifically the Buddhist expectation, is that monks in politics should behave according to the spirit of

On the contrary, how many times have we observed our political monks in the political playing field displaying their ignorance on matters relating to secular society? Just take two prominent recent examples. We had Revd Athureliya Rathana Thero, while participating in the Committee Stage of the 2017 budget, making an uncompromising stand on banning chemical fertilisers, pesticides and fungicides. He has even formed a movement called, "Wasa Visa Neti Ratak," (A Country without Poisons). His idealism is praiseworthy. On the other hand, as someone expected to be endowed with learning and wide understanding, Athurelye Rathana

Thero should have been cautious about the complexities of the issue he has chosen to deal with. The practical effect of banning chemical fertiliser will be a collapse of our agriculture and economy. Organic farming is very expensive and 25 per cent less productive than conventional chemical farming, which is the predominant form of

agriculture all over the world. Organic farming will, therefore, bear a direct economic cost by way of reduced production. Consequently, the entire economy would be damaged by flow-on effects. Employment loss and the decrease in agricultural exports would surely result. Besides all this, it is important to recognize that there is no black or white status in the debate about organic farming and conventional farming. Organic farming must also use chemical pesticides.

Our second example is from a Buddhist Nayako Thero who occupies the very high pedestal of Mahanayake of Bellanwilla Raja Maha Viharaya-the right Revd doctor. I watched a video where this monk, on the 27th January, spoke counselling President Maitripala Sirisena at no other place than the Abhayasingharama Temple-Mahinda Rajapakse's favoured ground. This Nayako Monk who was unspoken and dumb during the whole maladministration era of Mahinda Rajapakse's tenyears appeals in an urgent tone to the current President Maitripala Sirisena to take urgent action against what he alleges as the corruption of the present administration. The Bellanwilla monk referred specifically to the Bond issue, which

he stated was one the most massive and unprecedented corrupt deals of any government. "Even a school kid," the Mahanayake exclaimed, can see how corrupt this deal has been." Hinting that Ranil Wickremasinghe, Prime Minister, was behind this, the Bellanwilla monk concluded that President Sirisena is a good man but that his hands are tied. The monk encouraged President Sirisena to be bold and act according to his powers. "Why have Presidential commissions? This is all a cover up," the Nayake monk accused.

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Here is a former Vice Chancellor of a University! How could he have assessed the quantum of any claimed loss in a deal like this? I will shorten my criticism of the Nayaka Thero by pointing out that the World Bank (WB) has given a report on this much hyped bond issue. WB has clearly stated that there are no known international practices by which an ex post bond issue like this could be calculated for potential loss to the government and country. The bond issue was a longterm one repayable in thirty years and how could one assess the benefit or otherwise that can accrue to government during such a long period? It all depends on volatile market conditions and on other market opportunities made available. One cannot go to the performance trends of previous bonds because they were issued on private placement on an agreed value and not on market value.

Hence the Yield Curve of the past is no guide as that had been artificial. This par-

ticular issue had been made on an auction price where all bidders were free to participate whereas the previous issue under Governor Cabral had been awarded to preferred selected cronies on agreed bases. Aloysius was one of the past beneficiaries.

Why didn't the monk bother to understand these complexities? Perhaps one can point out if the COPE guys couldn't understand how could this monk be expected to know. The problem was that the Bellanwilla monk followed up with another assault that seemed to have let out his true motives. The monk looked at the President and charged: "two years have passed but nothing has happened." What an uncharitable remark! More than that, what an unstudied accusation! Law and order which under the previous regime had been privatised to Ministers, MPs and Pradeshiya Sabha cronies has now been firmly been returned to the public

realm. People are free to protest unlike the Rathupaswela days and no White Vans are seen. The judiciary is free and court cases are no longer determined at Temple Trees. The 19th Amendment has been passed curbing Presidential powers. The Freedom of Information Act has been passed guaranteeing transparency in government. The runaway national debt situation has been restrained. Solid plans are afoot for the economy.

The public will not expect one-sided assessments like this from a supposedly erudite monk. From Buddhist monks in politics people are entitled to expect wise words and balanced judgments. In the particular instance of Bellanwilla Thero one can, perhaps, smell some guilt about the other two poisons or Papa Karma. It was a true Abhayasingharama style speech that would have delighted the incumbent resident monk.

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the Dhamma. This ethical norm is held high and monks are expected to behave accordingly. This also is consistent with the general spirit of the Vinaya Pitaka that scripturally governs monk conduct. It is in this Dhammic spirit that Buddhist monks of the past were said to have advised Kings and so on. The ethical behaviour created a respected link between King and monk. That had been a healthy relationship ad a productive one, too.

The fundamental Buddhist ethical admonition is that Buddhists (particularly monks) should avoid the three poisons of Lobha (greed), Dosa (hate) and Avijja (ignorance). Fundamental to the three is ignorance or delusion. Buddhist monks must at all times cultivate this three-fold ethic. They have a special responsibility to do so in their political role. Ordinary people do not expect monk-politicians to behave like greedy and lying secular politicians. The distinction in political role play is apparent. Verse 251 of the Dhammapada spells these three pegs of moral underpinnings:

Nathi ragas aggi
(There is no fire like passion or greed)
Nathi dosasamo gaho
(There is no grip like ill will or hate)