

## Moral Authority in Burmese Politics<sup>1</sup>

Stephan Engelkamp

### Summary

This article analyses moral authority as a power resource in Burmese politics. Which strategies did Burmese power holders pursue to stabilize political rule? Did the Burmese sangha employ moral authority merely to legitimize the political rule of the regime, or did it influence Burmese politics? Tracing back the religious and ritual practices that constitute legitimate authority in post-independence Burma, I argue that in order to study Burmese politics, one needs to distinguish legitimate authority from the Western notion of democratic accountability. In contemporary Burma, it seems as if a change has taken place since Ne Win seized power in 1962. Even though the military government tried to use Buddhist norms and rituals as 'traditional' values to legitimize their power, the power holders stopped being the traditional 'patron' of the sangha. Instead, the State Law and Order Restoration Council officials employed a strategy of 'ritual displacement' to transfer moral authority from religious communities directly to the state. What is more, the way Burmese rulers use religion as a moral power resource opens a field of essentially contested meanings of legitimate authority, in which political actors struggle for discursive hegemony. Different social actors tried to discursively influence the interpretation of what counts as morally acceptable political behaviour. Specifically, I examine the different ways in which the state under the successive leadership of U Nu, Ne Win and Than Shwe tried to employ moral authority to stabilize their power. The political relevance of these contested meanings could be witnessed during the events in Burma in 2007.

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### 1 Introduction

„In Southeast Asia, the powerholder – whether divine king, army general, chairman of a revolutionary party, or tribal chieftain – does not seek to gain compliance with obligations. If you have power it is irrelevant whether other people comply with your decisions or condone your actions, i.e. whether your use of power may be considered

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