The Politics Of Spirituality

The attempt to keep religion out of politics has resulted in the spiritual deprivation of modern secular societies. Now a global counter movement has emerged in the post modern period

Jeffery Sng
in Bangkok/ANN

How does politics drive spirituality? What happens when religion is kept out of politics? Is the separation of the church and the state always for the common good?

Thailand's Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation (SNF) has published a series of books in honour of its former founding president Sulak Sivaraksa. Rediscovering Spiritual Values: Alternative to Consumerism from a Siamese Buddhist Perspective, is the latest volume published in honour of Sulak on the occasion of his 76th birthday this year.

The series include "Socially Engaged Spirituality (2003) and When Loyalty Demands Dissent: Sulak Sivaraksa and the charge of Lese Majeste in Siam (1993).

As revealed by its title Rediscovering Spiritual Values: Alternative to Consumerism from a Siamese Buddhist Perspective, the book deals mostly with Buddhist activism.

The author reflects on Siamese Buddhism, famous Thai personalities and Siamese political institutions, including the dangerous subject of the Thai monarchy.

Rediscovering Spiritual Values belongs to the political genre of the late 20th century. It reflects the revival of religious based political movements which began to pack momentum during the '90s.

Former Indonesian president Abdurrachman Wahid observed that "the new millennium saw a surprising trend of religious based political parties defeating secular political parties at the polls all over the world."

The failure and retreat of secular parties reflects a growing disenchantment with an important foundation of modernity, namely secularism.

Secular governments have failed to deliver substantive economic and social justice to its constituents. The rule of law, resulting from the principle of the separation of church and state which came into vogue after the Middle Ages in Europe, could only deliver formal legalistic justice. Disadvantaged communities who are often victims of systemic violence found the legal justice system, of modern secular governments, unresponsive to their plight.

Under secular liberal democratic polities, capitalism, consumerism and globalisation have been allowed to develop without restraint leading to the dehumanisation of society. The attempt to keep religion out of politics, embodied in the principle of the separation of Church and State has resulted in the spiritual deprivation of modern secular societies.

"In their haste to keep religion out of politics the advocates of secularism have thrown out the baby with the bathwater," said Abdurrachman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur.

"A global counter movement prescribing religious participation in politics emerged in the post modern period."

Religious based mass movements targeted authoritarian governments, as well as, democratically elected ones. The Mujaheedin resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), the electoral victories of Islamist political parties over secular parties throughout most of the Middle East at the beginning of the new millennium, the monks' revolt in Burma (2007) and the participation of engaged Buddhists in the occupation of the seat of government and Bangkok's international airport (2008) embody the global trend towards the politicisation of religion.

The spiritual revival movement encompasses a diversity of regions as well as religions. It is a diverse global movement. Its fundamental concepts and practices are rooted in different religious traditions. Nevertheless, the movement, despite its diversity, tends to share a common opponent, namely secular governments. In mainland Southeast Asia, the movement is inevitably bound up with the dominant religion Buddhism.

Rediscovering Spiritual Values is about the core values, beliefs and practices which inform the spiritual revival movement in Southeast Asia's Buddhist region. Readers seeking to understand Thailand's crisis of democracy and recent developments in Burma would gain much from reading the book.

Secular governments often fail to comprehend the spiritual revival movement. Hence, they tend to treat the movement rather dismissively. Such governmental arrogance is a mistake. Often secular governments ignore the spiritual revival movement to their peril as the recent collapse of electoral democracy in Thailand has shown.

Religious based political organisations brandishing the ideology of spiritual revival have become an important countervailing power to secular governments.

The spiritual revival movement's critique of secular governments, have a lot of merit but it falls short of workable prescriptive policies which could be implemented by governments.

The movement's dilemma is that it can either, remain on the political sidelines and continue criticising the government or it can try to enter the formal political arena to replace the government. If it stays on the sidelines it remains impotent but it can preserve its credibility. If it crosses the line to replace the government, as in the case of the Peoples' Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in Thailand, it risks becoming co-opted.

During Thailand's political crisis the PAD mounted a sustained street campaign against the corruption within the democratically elected government. In order to oust the "corrupt, populist" democratically elected government the PAD had to abandon its professed creed of non-violence and align itself with the military and forces to the right of the Thai political spectrum. The PAD ended up calling for a "New Politics" consisting in the suspension of electoral democracy and the replacement of an elected government with a largely appointed "reconciliation" government.

The PAD's "New Politics" is a direct contradiction of the Engaged Buddhist Movement's position on Burma. In the latter case, Engaged Buddhists have consistently supported Aung San Suu Kyi as the embodiment of embattled democratic values following the suspension of electoral democracy in Burma by the military junta.

Meanwhile, the political crisis in Thailand remains unresolved. Public institutions are compromised by double standards. The government has adopted similar "populist" policies as the last elected government, which was decried as "disguised vote buying".

Widespread corruption among politicians of all parties and state enterprises remain untouched. Mobs donning red shirts, instead of yellow, continue to hold street rallies questioning the political legitimacy of the current government.

BUDDHISM AND POLITICS: The Saffron Revolution in Burma in 2007 saw religion as a catalyst for political changes

Hamid Karzai must deliver

Hamid Karzai

The Afghanistan president's 'unity manifesto' is a positive step.

On a day when yet another British serviceman died on duty in Afghanistan, it would be comforting to think that yesterday's confirmation that Hamid Karzai is to serve a second term as the country's president meant the soldier's death was not in vain. Staff Sergeant Olaf "Oz" Schmid, 30, who died defusing his 64th Improvised Explosive Device on the last day of a gruelling, five-month tour of duty, brings to 224 the number of British troops killed in Afghanistan, with 87 lost this year alone.

If the sacrifices of our brave soldiers are to count for something, then it is incumbent on Mr Karzai to put the controversy that has surrounded his re-election behind him and demonstrate that he is the right man to help rebuild the country after nearly three decades of incessant conflict. In the past, allegations of widespread corruption have undermined Mr Karzai's efforts to provide effective leadership. But Gordon Brown's suggestion that Mr Karzai is now planning a "unity manifesto" to stabilise the country is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. While the Nato-led military campaign is essential to providing the security needed for reconstruction to take place, peace will only come to Afghanistan once the country's political leaders have engaged in proper political reconciliation.

Ultimately, that means the government in Kabul negotiating with the more moderate Taliban leaders, some of whom have already changed sides and are now supporting the Nato effort. But before Mr Karzai's government can take that bold step, it must first ensure that it strengthens its own position. A good way for Mr Karzai to start would be to invite Dr Abdullah Abdullah, his vanquished rival, to join him in a national unity government.

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A time to think

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Hillary Clinton's love affair with Pakistan was short-lived. Back in the US she flatly denied the charge that India was sparking unrest in Balochistan. She also observed that since Pakistan could criticise the Kerry-Lugar Bill, the US also had the right to protest Al-Qaeda's presence on its land and demand action against it.

Furthermore, she went to the extent of saying that Islamabad had gone into the fight against militancy of its own accord out of the threat it faced from the terrorists.

The tone and tenor of her words convey the usual tendency of viewing Pakistan with a jaundiced eye.

Keeping in view her trip, her interaction with people from all walks of life, many fell prey to wishful thinking. Some might have even assumed her assurance of turning a new page on Pak-US relations was genuine. Her posturing has now brought all those living in a fool's paradise back to reality.

But the sight of the US Secretary of State or any other official for that matter spewing venom against Pakistan should not worry us anymore. This is part and parcel of the old practice of ditching and stabbing us in the back. On the Kerry-Lugar Act, far from accepting the fact that the act runs counter to our sovereignty, she further upped the ante by badmouthing Pakistan as a terrorist safe-haven.

So far as her statement that it is Pakistan's own war, the truth is that soon after the 9/11 we had gone along with the US literally at gunpoint. The country was warned either it was with the US or with the terrorists. And slowly but surely, we were sucked into a deadly maelstrom. Suicide attacks became more frequent afterwards.

The US then forced us into signing our death warrants by compelling us to resort to the use of force rather than dialogue with the tribals. To add insult to injury, it started bombing our tribal areas in violation of our sovereignty and international law. The real purpose was to brush its failure in Afghanistan under the carpet.

Focusing on Pakistan and labelling it as the centre of all terrorist activity was a much more convenient way of doing away with the 'Afghanistan syndrome'. Equally distressing was to see her laugh away the Balochistan crisis and India's role in it.

Couldn't she recall US Gen Stanley McChrystal, who had observed that increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan would exacerbate regional tensions and would encourage Pakistan into countermeasures?

At this point in time, if our leaders look around, there is no dearth of countries, which have carried themselves with integrity and grace in their relationship with the US. A rethink of our 'friendship' with the US is definitely in order.

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