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Face to Face:

Professor Y. Karunadasa and Venerable Chandawimala on – “The political monk in contemporary Sri Lanka: a Blessing or a Hindrance”

With the recent election of nine Bhikkhus to seats in Sri Lanka's federal parliament, the issue of 'Political Bhikkhus' has become a highly controversial topic in the Sri Lankan Buddhist order, Sri Lankan society and, indeed, the Buddhist world as a whole. While we may only guess as to the motivations of the 'political Bhikkhus' in question, a plethora of factors - entrenched national poverty, political turmoil, civil war/terrorism, foreign aid, NGO's, Christian fundamentalism, the phenomena of so-called 'unethical conversions' and the Buddhist notion of 'going forth,' are all likely to have in some way contributed to the rise of this unprecedented and controversial phenomena. In this issue we talk to the eminent Professor Y. Karunadasa, a renowned scholar from Sri Lanka's Kelaniya University and currently a Visiting Professor in Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong, and Venerable Thero Chandawimala, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk currently undertaking PhD studies at the University of Hong Kong, to try to further understand the causes, local appraisals and religious and other consequences of this significant and revolutionary trend. We began by asking Professor Karunadasa what he thought about the recent rise of the 'political Bhikkhu.'

K = Professor Y.Karunadasa

C = Venerable Chandawimala

TL = Bodhi Journal

TL: What is your opinion of the phenomena of 'political Bhikkhus' in contemporary Sri Lanka?

K: I will begin with an observation of politics and religion. The interaction between politics and religion is not something peculiar to Sri Lanka. It is there all over the world. In India you find that under the government of the former Prime Minister, the Hindu movement was very powerful. And in the Philippines, the Catholic Church played an important role in politics. Particularly when they wanted to oust that dictator [Ferdinand Marcos]. In Germany you hear of the Christian Democratic Party. Then in Cyprus at some time back there was a Catholic Bishop as the President of the country – Makarios [III]. So here you find that the interaction between politics and religion is not something [that is] confined to Sri Lanka. Then although they don't call themselves a religious [read 'political'] movement in America, you find the fundamentalist Christian movement is all powerful, it has a powerful influence on the Bush administration.

K: Then coming back to Sri Lanka... the Buddhist monks as citizens of Sri Lanka have the right to vote, they have the right to get elected to power. In principle [and] in theory, a Buddhist monk can become the President of Sri Lanka and [hold] any other seat. But for the first time in Sri Lankan history some Buddhist monks - nine Buddhist monks [recently] contested parliamentary seats.

C: Nine monks were elected.

K: The nine were voted to power in Sri Lanka; many contested, and nine won... This was the first ever occasion that Buddhist monks were elected to parliament.

TL: Venerable, as a member of the Sangha, what do you think about this – the election of monks?

C: Actually it's a new movement. I think it happened due to - actually a kind of social need in Sri Lanka.

K: In the context of Sri Lanka.

C: Yes. Some people say there is a long-felt need...

K: No, it is a recent development due to recent needs. One need is unethical conversion, because certain NGO's have given permission to convert - and in India, you can't convert a person if he is below 18, 19. In Sri Lanka anyone can be converted, so actually, a serious problem is (sic) unethical conversion. I don't want to speak [of] it as a Buddhist [perspective] - but as a fact, anybody can go and find it out. One of the richest and most powerful NGO's is openly taken to unethical conversion.

TL: What do you mean by unethical?

K: 'Unethical' means without resorting to rational persuasion. If I convert by giving you money, or by giving you material wealth, or by giving you employment, that is [unethical]. The Buddha said, the correct conversion must be through rational persuasion... and I must also say this, every religion has a right to convert someone else to its own religion through rational persuasion, but certainly not by resorting to unethical tactics like giving a job, giving wealth, giving money, and then allowing getting [sic] a job in the Church, like that. It is called unethical conversion, that is what I want to say.

K: You know I have said that the Buddha says he endorses one miracle – the miracle of instruction. That is rational persuasion.

K: Theoretically, you cannot criticize the entry of Buddhist monks to politics – theoretically, because that is a democratic right exercised by them. They can say, if you criticize a Buddhist monk, you can say, ‘Why? In the first place I am a citizen of Sri Lanka,’ he has the [legal] right to vote [and contest a seat in parliament].

K: So, another thing I want to tell you, the Sri Lankan Buddhist order is not so organized like (sic) the Catholic Church. We don’t have a papal head, it is not a pyramid-like structure, you see, where power comes from the top to the down (sic). No! Its highly decentralized. There is no one authority who can impose its will [up]on the others. So, then, the Buddhist monks have a lot of freedom, a lot of freedom! I think the most free – if we take any religion – Buddhist monks are the most free. They can interpret Buddhist teachings from their own perspective - there’s no [exclusive] official interpretation.

C: Certainly in Sri Lanka.

TL: You mentioned the issue of the state protecting Buddhism, and you said the Christians have a very unique way of interacting with society. But they have their beliefs about the way they should interact with and benefit society. How do you think Buddhism should interact with society?

K: In many ways. If you go to the villages you find there is a strong bond of relationship between the monks, the temple and the village.

C: Actually that is the reason these people cannot convert [many Sri Lankans]. Even during the colonial time very few were converted to Christianity.

K: Thousands and thousands of people flock to the temples during the poya day (monthly day for the observance of the precepts), thousands! The monks play a very vital role. There is a weekly dhamma preaching over the radio or the television. Then there are Sunday schools for schoolchildren.

C: We have very many.

K: Oh, a lot of them.

TL: In terms of welfare activities – are there a lot of those in Sri Lanka?

K: No, the Sangha is poor. The Sangha cannot give wealth to the laity.

C: But there are some such organizations!

K: In my opinion the primary purpose of a religion is not to engage in welfare activities – that is for the state. I ask you whether the Christian church or the Muslim church or the Buddhist church, they cannot solve the [state's] economic problems. That problem is [to be] solved by the government. So it is ridiculous to say that the church and the temple and the mosque must solve the problems of poverty. They can never do that. They say [that is] the last role the religion has on the masses. In most of the countries religion is getting marginalized, so the latest thing they are now doing is, they are resorting to what is called social services. Providing social services, in my opinion, is [the role of] a state. The state! Why should monks have to do it? The monks are there for the spiritual guidance.

C: When they talk about humanistic Buddhism they [are] think[ing] about the source [of suffering].

K: When the Buddha said go forth for the welfare of the many he did not mean social welfare. He meant spiritual welfare. Of course, they can tell the government. They can be vigilant and awake, they can advocate means to ameliorate poverty.

TL: Is that done a lot in Sri Lanka?

K: Why not?

C: Yes, done a lot. A lot of monks had advice for the president.

K: Yes.

TL: The separation between Church and state is a very important principle in the West. Do you think this principle should be applied in contemporary Sri Lanka?

K: Now the Western countries are very rich, and so they can position themselves as a kind of moral authority with regards to these issues. But the poor countries like Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, they are still fighting [poverty]. Take a destitute man, you speak about culture or political ideology to such a person, it has no effect. Only the middle class is concerned with it, so that is why. In most of these poor countries there are two classes, the richest and the poorest, hardly any middle class. So in order to have a very vibrant democracy, a vibrant culture you must have a strong middle class. This is [not] what it is like in India and Sri Lanka. This is a problem. That is why we have to consider the poverty of these countries – that is one factor. Many people don't see about (sic) that. If, for instance, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan are as rich as England and Australia (ie, all countries whose parliaments are based on or influenced by the Westminster system) [they would have] none of these problems. There wouldn't be Buddhist

monks in the parliament if Sri Lanka was a rich country. Do you see what I mean? You see, at the very root of this is the economic problem in my view.

C: Actually in Sri Lanka the monks are regarded as the guardians of the country. So many people wanted monks to go to the parliament. That is why we have this kind of [situation]. Actually this is a brave step, because some people they criticize [the monks that entered parliament], even some monks, they criticize them.

K: But the majority of monks didn't like this – monks entering the parliament, then the majority opposed.

C: Yeah, there are a lot of people (ie, monks) who, they have been divided into many groups, and political [groups] also. Some are helping the ruling party, and some are in the opposition side, and some are independent groups – so many. Because we have freedom there [to enter politics]. Not like in Thailand or other countries. Thai monks – they cannot participate in politics.

K: Let me just say one thing, monks entering politics is not ideal, it is not an ideal state of affairs. But I think in Sri Lanka it has happened as a reaction in a time of serious developing national and political crises. Whatever is the case, whether you are a Christian monk, a Buddhist monk, [when faced with such crises] you have to open up your mouth and 'go forth'. That is a great service. You must not keep mum. In times of national crises, they must engage not in party politics but in national politics, not party politics. National politics means transcending party politics. You advocate [to] the government what to do, and what not to do. That is important.

C: Yes! In Sri Lanka, any crises, [when] anything happens, I think always [in these situations] people want monks to go forward. If there are no monks [that do so] the people criticize them... that is [the] Sri Lankan way.