
Spring Revolution in Myanmar (Burma): A Buddhist-Christian Perspective on the Revolutionary War

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The ongoing Spring Revolution in Myanmar is more than a political struggle: it is a profound moral and spiritual battle between *Dhamma* (righteousness) and *Adhamma* (unrighteousness), rooted in both Buddhist and Christian ethical teachings. The suffering *Ludu* (people) have come to see that a group of powerholders perpetuate oppression, marginalization, and injustice. They recognize the revolution as a consequence of the regime's *Adhamma* mindset. Amid gunfire and repression, the people's resistance expresses a deep yearning for freedom, justice, and human dignity, grounded in truth and compassion. From a Buddhist view, the revolution aligns with *Dhamma*—justice, nonviolence, and the fight against tyranny—while the military represents *Adhamma*—falsehood and suffering.

Similarly, Christian theology frames the struggle as one between righteousness and sin, with faith, hope, and love inspiring resistance to moral corruption. Myanmar's long history of struggle, from colonialism to post-independence turmoil, has shaped a resilient people whose fight continues in this revolution turned to civil war. This article explores the movement through a Buddhist-Christian lens, examining how faith and morality intersect with revolutionary warfare. It challenges readers to engage critically with the ongoing conflict and to consider how peace and justice might be achieved sooner rather than later.

The ideology of revolutionary war

The term “revolution” finds its roots in the Latin word *revolutio*. Its earliest documented appearance dates to Christian literature in late Antiquity, where it was used to describe phenomena such as the rolling away of the stone from Christ's grave or the wandering of the soul. In a political context, the term denotes that every revolution requires resistance against established forces to instigate profound and radical change. Artemy Magun provides a compelling interpretation of revolution, stating that “the Latin prefix ‘re-’ primarily signifies opposition or a countermovement and, by extension, implies a return. Its connection to repetition is secondary and derived. Therefore, the term ‘revolution,’ while it may suggest a circular or recurring motion, also embodies the concept of vigorous resistance.”¹

1. Artemy Magun, *Negative Revolution: Modern Political Subject and Its Fate After the Cold War* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

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Revolutionary wars stand apart from other forms of conflict, such as conventional wars (e.g., World Wars I and II), proxy conflicts such as the Cold War, or newer domains such as Cyberwarfare.² Unlike these other types, revolutionary wars are propelled by an intense aspiration for fundamental and sweeping change within a society. The driving philosophy behind these conflicts emerges from dissatisfaction with prevailing political, social, or economic structures deemed oppressive, unjust, or obsolete. The ideology of a revolutionary war distinguishes itself from other forms of conflict or wars due to its fundamental motives, goals, and context.³ The key difference lies in the revolutionary nature of the conflict, where the primary goal is a radical transformation of societal, political, or economic structures, contrasted with conventional wars that may focus on specific objectives without seeking broad societal change.

Myanmar's Spring Revolution as a war: Between *Dhamma* and *Adhamma*

This section examines the Buddhist-Christian perspectives on *Dhamma* and *Adhamma*, particularly in the context of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. Ven. Zawana, a former political prisoner and Buddhist monk, reflects on the role of religion in this movement, emphasizing that the revolution has exposed both good and evil, not only in individuals but also within religious leadership. He expresses hope that, in the aftermath, faith will be restored based on genuine experiences rather than manipulation. His perspective

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2. “Proxy War: Armed Conflict,” *Britannica.com*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/proxy-war>.
 3. See Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Amy Austin Holmes, *Coups and Revolutions: Mass Mobilization, the Egyptian Military, and the United States from Mubarak to Sisi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

underscores the moral and spiritual dimensions of the ongoing struggle for justice and democracy in Myanmar.⁴

In Buddhism, the term “Dhamma” originates from the Sanskrit root “dhr,” meaning “to uphold” or “to sustain.”⁵ Burmese Buddhist *Dhamma* is deeply rooted in Hindu *Dharma*; historically, Buddhism was referred to as *Dhamma-Vinaya*, signifying both doctrine and discipline.⁶ Siddhartha Gautama, born into a Hindu family, discovered the Middle Way and became the Buddha, emphasizing *Dhamma* as a guiding principle for human behavior. *Dhamma* carries multiple meanings, including the universal law governing existence, the totality of Buddhist teachings, and the fundamental elements that constitute reality.⁷ U Ba Khin, a prominent Burmese meditation teacher, describes *Dhamma* as an art of living—one that requires dedication and leads to enlightenment and moral integrity.⁸

The American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to Buddhist terminology when translating the Burmese Bible. He used the term *Dhamma* to express key Christian concepts, such as “Testament” and “the word” in Ecclesiastes, recognizing its resonance with Burmese spiritual vocabulary. This linguistic adaptation highlights the parallels between Buddhist and Christian understandings of sacredness, morality, and the pursuit of ultimate truth. Similarly, Judson incorporated the Buddhist term *Adhamma* to represent various forms of wickedness, injustice, and immorality in the Bible, aligning with Burmese conceptions of moral disorder. By doing so, he sought to bridge theological gaps and present Christian teachings in a way that was culturally accessible to the Burmese people.

In contemporary Myanmar, the conflict between democracy activists and the military regime is often framed as a battle between *Dhamma* (morality) and *Adhamma* (immorality). Many Burmese perceive the revolution as a division of society into two groups:

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those who uphold *Dhamma* by resisting the military, and those who align with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military), whom they view as embodying *Adhamma* through oppression and violence. Meanwhile, the military justifies its actions by claiming to protect the nation. This framing of the revolution reflects a deep-rooted moral struggle within Myanmar, where religious and ethical principles continue to shape perspectives on justice and governance.

The catalyst and impact of Myanmar’s Spring Revolution

Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) won a second major victory in the national elections on November 8, 2020. However, on February 1, 2021, the military declared a state of emergency, claiming there was voter fraud. The coup resulted from a mix of personal and institutional reasons. Despite the political system favoring the military’s interests, changes toward democracy had reduced the military’s influence. This shift endangered the military’s control over lucrative business monopolies, which had long been a source of wealth for generals and their associates. Additionally, although the military’s motives are not entirely clear, it seems they sought to increase their political power in Myanmar by exploiting tensions related to ethnicity and religion.⁹ After the coup, there have been significant developments.

In the coup’s aftermath, civil servants have played a pivotal role in the resistance, actively engaging in civil disobedience by rejecting collaboration with the military-led government. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar emerged as a nonviolent response to the challenging circumstances. The CDM took shape just two days after the coup, as numerous civil servants—including doctors, nurses, railway staff, schoolteachers, and employees from various sectors—steadfastly refused to comply with military governance. The CDM garnered broad support from a diverse range of civilians. The Spring Revolution was marked by a youth-led movement with young activists leveraging social media platforms to mobilize masses for participation in protests and civil disobedience against the military regime.

Symbolizing solidarity in pro-democracy demonstrations, the three-finger salute became a prominent gesture. Across cities, the reverberating clamor of pots, pans, and car horns echoed a collective expression of support for the CDM throughout the nation. However, in response to peaceful protesters and bystanders, the military escalated its use of increasingly lethal tactics and weaponry. Tom Andrews, the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar, condemned the military’s actions, stating that its brutal response to peaceful protests likely meets the legal threshold for crimes against humanity.¹⁰

4. Interview with Ven. Zawana, a former political prisoner. “The Role of Buddhism in the Revolution... and Beyond,” October 16, 2024.

5. William K. Mahony, “Dharma,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 4:329.

6. “vinaya,” *Dictionary of Buddhism*, October 2, 2024, <http://www.nichirenlibrary.org.dic>.

7. “Dharma,” *Global Buddhistdoor Dictionary*, October 16, 2024, https://www2.buddhistdoor.net/dictionary/details/_dharma.

8. See Sayagyi U. Ba Khin, *The Essentials of Buddha-Dhamma in Meditative Practice* (Onalaska, Washington: Vipassana Research Publications, 1997).

9. Lian Bawi Thang, “Understanding the Military Coup in Myanmar, Two Years Later,” *East-West Center* (Mar 15, 2023), February 15, 2025, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news/east-west-wire/understanding-military-coup-myanmar-two-years-later>.

10. Helen Regan and Jessie Yeung, “Myanmar’s military is killing peaceful protesters. Here’s what you need to know,” *CNN* (March 25, 2021), February 10, 2025, <https://edition.cnn>.

In response to the military's brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters, civilians have felt compelled to take defensive measures. Indeed, civilians have formed defense groups, primarily made up of young men and women carrying improvised firearms referred to as 'tu mae' in Burmese. The Chinland Defense Force (CDF) was founded on April 4, 2021, covering all nine townships of Chin State. This occurred before the formation of the People's Defense Force (PDF) by the National Unity Government (NUG).¹¹ Myanmar has witnessed the emergence of various defense entities, including PDF, CDF, LDF (Local Defense Forces), and PDT (People's Defense Teams). There are approximately 65,000 troops within the PDFs and at least 30,000 personnel across 401 LDFs.¹² Numerous ethnic armed organizations exist in Myanmar and have been engaged in revolutionary activities. Though their political ideologies may not align precisely, their common goal has been to establish Federal States through armed conflict over several decades.¹³

In response to the military regime's coup, certain nations such as the USA, United Kingdom, Australia, and others, implemented sanctions as a strategic measure to economically isolate the ruling authorities. The objective behind these sanctions was to exert substantial pressure on the junta, compelling them to relinquish power and reinstate civilian governance. This punitive action was intended not only to condemn the breach of democratic norms but also to signal a collective international disapproval of the coup, using economic measures to foster political change in Myanmar.¹⁴

A Dhammalogical view of Myanmar's Revolutionary War

Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha—the Enlightened One—is a transformative figure for several reasons. His teachings challenged and reshaped the religious and societal

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conventions of his era, offering a revolutionary alternative to traditional religious practices. The Buddha's path emphasized personal experience and inner realization, marking a departure from reliance on external authorities or deities. This revolutionized spiritual ideology focuses on self-discovery, critical contemplation, and introspection. He encouraged individuals to scrutinize traditional beliefs and rituals, promoting an experiential and introspective approach to understanding the truths of life. Buddhism, as taught by the Buddha, is inclusive and accessible to people from all walks of life, regardless of their social status or background.

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Buddhism emerged in a socio-cultural context that was deeply entrenched in the caste system, particularly in ancient India, which rigidly divided society into distinct groups. This system curbed social mobility and assigned roles based on birth, leading to the oppression of certain groups. Dr. Ambedkar, a Dalit who converted to Buddhism and became a principal architect of the Indian Constitution, recognized Buddhism as a revolutionary force. He remarked, "Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a revolution

[com/2021/03/16/asia/myanmar-protesting-coup-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html](https://www.hnk.com/2021/03/16/asia/myanmar-protesting-coup-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html).

11. Min Thang, "Unrest in Myanmar after the Coup of 2021," *Torino World Affairs Institute*, February 11, 2023, <https://www.twai.it/articles/unrest-myanmar-after-coup-2021/>.
12. Ye Myo Hein, "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar>.
13. Approximately 65,000 individuals make up the People's Defense Forces (PDFs), serving as a collective term for three distinct types of armed entities that have arisen post-coup: PDFs, Local Defense Forces (LDFs), and People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs). PDFs are typically larger armed units either formed or acknowledged by the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow civilian government primarily composed of democratically elected lawmakers. However, there are also numerous local armed groups that operate independently of the NUG. See Ye Myo Hein, "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar>.
14. See "Burma Sanctions," *U.S. Department of State*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/burma-sanctions/>.

15. K.M.Y. Khawsiamia, *Towards a Ludu Theology: A Critical Evaluation of Minjung Theology and its Implication for a Theological Response to the Dukkha (Suffering) of People in Myanmar (Burma)*, 133-134.

as the French revolution.”¹⁶ He argued that Buddhism’s revolution was not just religious but also social and political, challenging the oppressive structures of the time. Understanding the depth of this revolution requires recognizing the societal conditions that preceded it, including the rampant corruption and moral decay in the dominant social order.

A Buddhist perspective on revolutionary war emphasizes non-violence, compassion, and peaceful conflict resolution. Buddhism discourages harm and promotes dialogue and understanding as the means to resolve disputes. While the violence and destruction of war contradict Buddhist ethics, events such as the Revolutionary War must be understood in their complex historical context. Some may argue that the war was fought for freedom and justice—values that resonate with Buddhist ideals of self-determination—but from a Buddhist standpoint, the focus should be on finding non-violent alternatives to address grievances. The Buddha discouraged aggression and promoted peaceful negotiation, cultivating virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Although Buddhism encompasses diverse interpretations, its core principles prioritize personal transformation, mindfulness, and ethical living, which can be adapted to social movements while maintaining a commitment to nonviolence.

Gautama Buddha’s revolutionary ideas and teachings have had a lasting impact on the world, fostering peace, spiritual enlightenment, and social justice. His teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path guide individuals toward liberation from suffering, with an emphasis on right understanding, intention, speech, and mindfulness. Buddha’s philosophy centers on non-violence (*ahimsa*), compassion (*karuna*), and mindfulness (*sati*), which are essential practices for cultivating peace and alleviating suffering. He also challenged the caste system, advocating for equality and social justice.¹⁷ Buddha’s teachings emphasize personal responsibility in spiritual growth, the interconnectedness of all life, and a collective responsibility for others and the environment that promotes peace and harmony. His ideas continue to inspire individuals and movements for peace and social justice across the globe.

A theological view on Revolutionary War

Throughout history, Christian leaders and nations have engaged in wars, sometimes using religious justifications, as seen in the Crusades—military campaigns authorized by the church to reclaim holy lands—that reflect a specific interpretation of Christian duty. However, many modern Christian theologians argue that the Crusades were inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. Contemporary Christian ethics often emphasize peacebuilding, reconciliation, and conflict resolution; many Christian organizations and individuals actively engage in peace initiatives, humanitarian work,

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and advocacy for social justice as expressions of their faith. The Christian viewpoint on war is diverse, with perspectives ranging from adherence to Just War Theory to pacifism and a focus on peacebuilding. The interpretation of biblical teachings, alongside theological reflection and individual conscience, greatly influences how Christians navigate the ethical complexities of war and peace.¹⁸

The Bible offers a multifaceted perspective on war, presenting both its endorsement and its challenging aspects. In the Old Testament, there are accounts of wars believed to be sanctioned by God, such as the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, as described in the Book of Exodus. Led by Moses and guided by God, the Israelites journeyed toward the land of Canaan, where they were instructed to conquer the indigenous peoples as part of God’s promise to them. This conquest involved armed conflict, with texts like Exodus 15:3 affirming God’s role in battle: “The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name,” and Psalm 144:1 expressing a warrior’s praise: “Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.” These passages highlight a biblical view that warfare, in certain historical contexts, was seen as guided or even glorified by God. However, it is important to note that the Bible also contains messages of peace and reconciliation, presenting a more complex and nuanced view of war.

In the New Testament, Jesus preached love, forgiveness, and nonviolence, challenging traditional notions of retaliation. The New Testament laid the foundation for the Just War Theory, later developed by Christian theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. This framework assesses the justice of war through criteria such as just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality, and likelihood of success, aiming to limit war’s destructiveness while emphasizing peace as the

16. Khawsiamia, *Towards a Lodu Theology*, 133-134.

17. See Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Life of the Buddha according to The Pali Canon*, 3rd ed (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1992).

18. Michael J McClymond and David Freeman, “Religious Traditions, Violence and Nonviolence,” in *Stress of War, Conflict and Disaster*, ed. George Fink (San Diego: Academic Press, 2010), 379-407.

ultimate goal.¹⁹

Though not a political revolutionary, Jesus transformed societal norms by challenging social hierarchies and prejudices, advocating for love, compassion, and justice. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he questioned his arrest, highlighting that his mission fulfilled Scripture rather than inciting rebellion. His treatment of women was particularly groundbreaking, as he elevated them to equal status, showed deep concern for their welfare, and entrusted them with significant roles, exemplified by Mary Magdalene announcing his resurrection. Through his teachings and actions, Jesus introduced a new way of living centered on spiritual and ethical transformation.²⁰

Viewing revolution, especially through the lens of war, reflects a moral paradox that can justify violent means for achieving systemic change. While such a perspective acknowledges the inherent ethical violations of war, like human suffering and loss of life, it sees war as a necessary tool for societal transformation. From a Christian perspective, however, shaped by Jesus' message of peace, nonviolence, and social justice, the revolution he led was not by political or military power but through spiritual and ethical transformation. His teachings continue to inspire movements for peace, justice, and reconciliation, emphasizing love, forgiveness, and the rejection of force as the path to true societal change.

Evaluative analysis

This interpretation of Myanmar's Spring Revolution through a Buddhist-Christian lens, framed as a conflict between *Dhamma* and *Adhamma*, reflects the country's religious diversity, where Buddhism holds the majority influence while Christianity represents a significant minority. Buddhism emphasizes *Dhamma*, encompassing moral and ethical conduct. Many Buddhists saw the democratic transition as aligned with these principles. Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership was widely regarded as a step toward a just society, and the nonviolent nature of the protests reflected Buddhism's commitment to nonviolence. Buddhist monks played an active role in supporting the pro-democracy movement and advocating for peaceful resolutions.

Christianity, with its strong emphasis on human rights and social justice, also played a key role in the revolution. Many Christians viewed the military coup as a direct violation of these principles and actively supported the pro-democracy movement to defend human dignity, equality, and justice. The Spring Revolution witnessed notable interfaith solidarity, with Buddhists and Christians uniting against what they perceived as *Adhamma*. Religious leaders from both communities publicly condemned the military's actions, advocating for peace, democracy, and human rights. Their shared commitment to justice strengthened the movement and demonstrated the moral and ethical dimensions of their resistance.

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Despite theological differences, Buddhism and Christianity share core values of peace, compassion, righteousness and justice, which have provided a common ground for opposition to the coup. Buddhist monks and Christian clergy actively condemned the military junta, calling for a peaceful resolution and using online platforms to spread their messages. Framing the conflict as a battle between *Dhamma* and *Adhamma* added a spiritual dimension to the struggle, portraying the resistance as an effort to restore righteousness and justice. Many perceived the junta's actions as a departure from moral order, and the revolution became a hopeful struggle to reinstate ethical governance.

However, support for the military regime also existed among Buddhists. Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist population includes the nationalist organization Ma-Ba-Tha (Patriotic Association), which promotes the protection of race and religion. The military has long used religion as a tool for maintaining power, relying on the Buddhist-Bama identity to uphold its ideological influence. Religion and ethnicity have become powerful tools for governance. During Aung San Suu Kyi's administration, ultra-nationalist monks associated with Ma-Ba-Tha faced restrictions and imprisonment to curb extremism. Following the 2021 coup, Ma-Ba-Tha was reinstated, reinforcing the junta's narrative as the protector of Buddhism, highlighting the complex interplay between religion, politics, and power in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy.²¹

Concluding remarks

The Myanmar Spring Revolution, ignited by a military coup,

19. See Alexander Moseley, "Just War Theory," *International Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, January 5, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/justwar/>.

20. Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach* (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2004), 43.

21. Saudid Ahmed Khan, "The Unholy Nexus Between the Monks and Military in Myanmar," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-unholy-nexus-between-the-monks-and-military-in-myanmar/>.

reflects deep-rooted struggles for power and a stark contrast between the ruling junta's interests and the welfare of the people. The uncertainty surrounding the revolution's outcome highlights the immense difficulty of overthrowing an entrenched regime that is unwilling to relinquish control. In this context, the Buddhist concepts of *Dhamma* (righteousness) and *Adhamma* (unrighteousness) provide a moral framework, illustrating the ideological divide between revolutionaries advocating for justice and the group of powerholder's pursuit of self-interest and authority. While the teachings of Buddha and Jesus on nonviolence and compassion offer powerful ethical guidelines, their application in the face of modern political conflict—particularly in Myanmar's revolution—is fraught with complexity.

The brutal realities of the revolution, marked by civilian suffering, trauma, and loss, expose the inherent tension between pursuing justice and adhering to the ethical constraints of religious teachings. While *Dhamma* offers a moral compass, the calls for compassion, reconciliation, and a peaceful society can sometimes seem at odds with the urgent need to resist an oppressive regime. The revolution requires more than moral clarity: it demands a practical approach to navigating political oppression and protecting human rights.

Finding a balance between moral integrity and the urgency for meaningful change is crucial, with the hope that Myanmar's future can be shaped by compassion, equity, and reconciliation.

Ultimately, Myanmar's path toward long-term peace, stability, and social justice needs not only a commitment to *Dhamma* but also a pragmatic approach that addresses the harsh realities of conflict. Finding a balance between moral integrity and the urgency for meaningful change is crucial, with the hope that Myanmar's future can be shaped by compassion, equity, and reconciliation. Needless to say, if the powerholders in Myanmar could change their mind, all problems would be solved.