Preface

My research entitled “Buddhism as a Factor in Thai Politics, 1963-1992” is an attempt to understand the role of the religion in politics. The work explored the dynamics of Buddhism, and the other structural institutions of governance in the politics of Thailand, particularly in the post 1932 period, using history and politics as a tool to understand the society. In Southeast Asia, Thailand has a unique feature, where any European or other powers had never colonized, (except during the World War II). Its rulers adopted flexibility and engagement with the hostile European powers, which are based on Buddhist values to retain the country’s “sovereignty” in the foreign policies throughout the history. The absolute monarchical rule from 1782 to 1932 was ended with the seized of the power in a coup, and established a Constitutional Monarchy. Since then, Thailand had been witnessing various civil and military governments.

This research work argues that Thai politics, which have been shaped in the past two centuries by the influence of a number of activist Buddhist movements, can only be understood if it recognizes the major revolutionary transformations which Buddhism has undergone in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, Buddhism has been a factor in Thai Politics since Sukhothai till Bangkok Era. Wherever, the participation in the religious ceremonies that revolved around the temple was a political and a religious act.

The ‘institutions’ of “King, Buddhism, Nation and Democracy” have been engaging and accommodating constantly to provide political legitimacy in Thailand. The mentioned institutions have played vital role in the society, for instance, the Monarchy is consider as symbol of socio-political conservatism, Buddhism as cultural identity and unity. Democracy represents freedom, civil liberty, and peoples’ participation in the nation’s political matters. Besides the social and political changes since 1932, Thai Buddhism has also been accommodating with those changes, and it helps to maintain a harmonious social and political order. One cannot underestimate the legacy of Buddhism and its uniqueness in Thailand, and this legacy manifests in the civil laws and spheres of Thai life. A glimpse on the political history of Thailand is taking account. Historically, kings and nobles were supreme in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok eras. But after the 1932 coup, there were some fundamental
changes in the pattern of rule that bureaucratic elite replaced the monarchical elite. They created the first Constitution in Thailand and forced the King to relinquish his absolute status and became a constitutional monarch. But, the emerged government was dominated by the military with seldom participation of the people. The decision makers in modern Thai politics have been the bureaucrats, military officials, royal members, distinguished journalists, directors of large corporations, and politicians. So, a parallel politics had been witnessing; authoritarian rule on one hand, and the people’s movement for democracy on other.

Conceptualizing various affairs of the Thai society and politics in modern era, Chapter I delineates the social and political history of the nation with trajectory of modernization. This chapter particularly focuses on King Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn reign, because there was manifold progress in the socio-cultural spheres of Southeast Asia. During this reign, the notion of modern Siam came forth. This chapter analyzes administrative, judicial and financial reforms, political developments, and the growth of social services included of modern communication. Buddhism, like other great religious systems, inevitably has political implications. To some extent, these seem to be relatively clear, and in other senses they are arguable and controversial. Religion has its own contribution to make to politics and, ultimately, it is the only contribution to politics that really matters. It has failed both politically and as religion it falls either into the extreme of being debased by politics or of rejecting any kind of political involvement as a kind of fearful taboo.

Chapter II narrates discourses of different Thai Buddhist sects with both theoretical and practical dimensions, it engages critically about the role of Buddhism in modern Thai society. The major sects like Buddhadasa, Dhammakaya, Santi Ashoke, etc are taken into account, and studied its operation and the impact on Thai society. In the course of the research, I have found that Thai Buddhism continues to make adjustments, especially, toward a more dynamic and constructive role in the human development. These adjustments with the time are evident on the level of the educated elite both in and out of the Sangha, and among the upper strata of the urban Thais. It is also evident that the central figure of the dramatic change in Thai Buddhism is the emergence of sects, namely; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Dhammakaya and Santi Ahoke.

Contemporary research argues that not all religious movements necessarily have direct impact on broader institutional organizations or promote fundamental
changes in social and cultural structures. Nevertheless, when such "intellectual" interpretations are generated at the traditional and indigenous rather than the imported level, they must be taken seriously. The expansion of Buddhadasa's movement among the intellectuals should not be simply identified as primarily reflected in the religious sphere.

In Thailand, Buddhism occupies a central place in the Thai social system in which 95 percent of the population is Buddhists. Therefore religious change cannot be isolated, but interacts with other social institutions to create change in Thai society. The formation and the development of Buddhadasa's movement allow us to raise many interesting questions. Through a study of Buddhadasa's movement we can gain insights into religious innovation and reflect the process of social change in contemporary Thailand.

Chapters III explain the relationship between socio-political change and the development of Thai Buddhism. It is briefly analyze the essential features of the reform movement (Thammayuttanikaya) which was established by a monk of royal parentage who spent twenty-seven years (1824-1851) in robes and later left the monkhood to become King Rama IV popularly known as King Mongkut. The movement took "root" at the very top of the Thai Sangha, in a hierarchical society in which the "absolute" monarchy was supported by a secure traditional hierarchical polity. During Sarit regime Buddhist Sangha was made under the government cantoned.

After thorough understanding of the historicity, this chapter succinctly explains the relationship between the Sanghas and the state in Thailand, through the social and political changes of different time frames. The State and the Sangha do not always necessarily have a cordial relationship. As Thailand march towards the path of a modern nation state, the role and position of the institutions underwent changes. The modern state, for example, demanded control over all these institutions in the name of secularism. It is because of two important reasons, one being the threat of dissent from these institutions, and the other is the capacity of the Sanghas to aid and sanctify a lot of state actions and policies. The three Sangha Acts promulgated by the Thai government in 1902, 1941 and 1962 respectively are the efforts of the government towards appropriating the Sangha institutions. Underlying those Acts, especially the 1962 Act was an effort to garner support not only for the
current government, but also to legitimize its development policies, which have profound impacts in Thai polity and society.

The study further aims to understand the structural interrelationship of the Sangha and the state. Because of the Sangha's sacred nature and because of its considerable influence over the masses, it is postulated that the Sangha has been utilized for the achievement of national goals designed by the government. The taking over of the Sangha administration through various acts is a testimony to the government's attempt to appropriate the Sanghas to serve the ends of State.

Chapter IV unfolds facets of Buddhism and government in Thailand during the democratic movement. It explored how the Sanghas, government and the movement interplay, and also the unstable condition of Thai politics and economy since 1960's, till Thaksin era. Thailand's long history of economic success from the late 1950s through 1996, which had not experienced of any negative economic growth, recorded unequaled by any other nation. Its financial crisis of 1997-98 took Thais and outsiders surprised. The collapse was brought on by a failure of coordinate policy responses within an economic establishment weakened by corruption; the downfall was further fueled by the broad consensus to focus first on political rather than economic and financial reform.

Ironically, Thailand's virtues of diversity and multiple power bases, which promoted competition and free flow of information among segments of society and the economy, and its sensible, gradual openness toward foreign investment in its business community had made it impossible to shift direction rapidly toward reform changes, even at the peak of the financial crisis.

The faith of people in the religion is further strengthened by the role played by the Sanghas. The Sangha's role in community development is in fact a psychological response arising from its long-standing relationship with the people at that time of crisis. The fear of creating dissension among fellow Buddhists is understandable. There has also been a fear and a sense of insecurity among the minority religious groups in Thailand arising out of the demand for a recognized national religion of Buddhism.

In this regard, the study explored to examine in a nutshell, the religion, politics and its impact on the people of Thailand. The promotion of Sanghas in carrying out the government policies in certain region of the country like the northeast part of Thailand, it could be understood as an attempt of the state to
effectively integrate certain groups which are ethnically or culturally different from
the majority. The chapter delves into aspects of Sangha and their role in rural
development and the underlying politics etc. It also further explored the causes of
the problems in southern Thailand, such as irresponsible attitude of the government
towards the Muslim minorities and their identity assertions, and suggested some
mechanisms to solve the issue.

Chapter V analyses the two important institutions of monarchy and
democracy, and especially King Bhumibol’s political roles. It also concerns the
institution of constitutional monarchy, and how people and Sanghas interact with the
institution in Thai politics and society. The traditional foundation of stability
provided by the interdependence between enlightened monarchy and Buddhism has
been weakened by the subsequent military and civilian governments in Thailand
either through abuse of the institutions or through appropriation of these institutions.
This research explored on how the traditional institutions play major role to maintain
harmony, and address to find modern alternatives too. Further, the Buddhism is not
completely separable in the politics of Thai society for a better society.

After thorough understanding of the empirical findings and normative
assumptions, my research concludes that Buddhism, Monarchy and Democracy are
the integral part of Thai society. Moreover, the fatherly Monarch remains as a
symbol of unity and stability above any forms of government. Particularly, the
monarchy under King Bhumibol Adulayadej in Thailand could successfully adapt
with the modern society, and able to deliver the people’s need. Importantly, the
ideals of Buddhism need to be encouraged in Thailand to maintain social and
political harmony, with proper protection of other religious minorities.