

By Denis D. Gray

BUDDHISTS in Burma kill each other while saffron-robed monks shake fists against the government. The actions violate a 2,500-year-old Buddhist rule against taking life and a tradition of clergy shunning politics.

Buddhist societies from Sri Lanka to South Korea, Burma to Tibet have proved as prone to violence as others in recent times despite the precepts of Lord Buddha, the great religious teacher of the 5th century B.C.

Buddhist scholars say much of this violence, and political activism by the clergy, results from rapid modernization, economic inequalities and political repression.

"Buddhism moulds the mentality to be tolerant, to bear all, but even good Buddhists can't live solely on religion," says Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a religion professor at Bangkok's Thammasat University. "Basic needs must be met and stomachs filled."

Kampuchea, once a land of 90,000 monks in scores of quiet temples, was turned into a killing field by the savage Khmer Rouge. The current government says 3 million died in the 1975-78 reign of error.

In wartime South Vietnam, protesting monks set themselves afire. More recently, conflict between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and Hindu Tamils have left more than 8,000 dead in Sri Lanka.

A monk in Burma told a US visitor: "If the government doesn't change, the only way to prevent shedding the people's blood is to fight them to the death."

The image of Buddhist gentleness persists, however. Proponents like to say Buddhists have not waged crusades or burned heretics at the stake, as Christians did, or established anything akin to today's strident Islamic states.

Southeast Asia's Theravada Buddhism, one of the religion's two major branches, places special emphasis on tolerance, equanimity and non-confrontation.

William Klausner, a US expert on Thai culture, says Buddhists try to avoid the confrontational behaviour — a sharp word, a push, a slap — others might employ in a situation of conflict.

"Violence is the last resort," he said, "but when the eruption comes it's going to be more dramatic. The Thais say there is little manoeuvring room between the smile and the knife."

Chatsumarn at Thammasat University believes Buddhism to a large extent explains why the Burmese put up with 26 years of authoritarian misrule before rising up last month.

Demonstrating along with students and workers were monks who, at least in Theravada tradition, are enjoined to restrict activities to the spiritual.

Buddhist societies prone to violence

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BURMESE monks shake fists against the government ... A 2,500-year-old Buddhist rule has been broken.

But monks marched, gave fiery speeches and were said to have largely replaced the government in Mandalay, Burma's second-largest city and a great religious centre.

Klausner said in an interview that monks in Sri Lanka, Burma and to some degree Vietnam had "legitimized a political role for themselves."

When Britain was the colonial power in Burma, it reduced the power of the monkhood, or "sangha", and the Buddhist clergy assumed a political role, helping expel the alien, Christian conquerors. Burma became independent in 1948.

Some analysts say many monks similarly regarded the socialism of military strongman Ne Win as an alien ideology and resented his efforts to co-opt and control clergy after he seized power in 1962.

A strain of aggressiveness is a longstanding characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism, practised in Japan, Korea, China and Tibet.

Buddhist-backed groups in 16th century Japan would band together to overthrow feudal lords, and the monks of the Shaolin Temple in China were noted for truculence and their skill as warriors. The Shaolin Temple remains a centre for the study of martial arts.

About 70 people have been injured in recent feuding between the main Chokey sect in South Korea and its rivals. The antagonists, including monks, have attacked one another with clubs, iron pipes and knives.

Although Tibet's exiled religious leader, the Dalai Lama, urges non-violent resistance to Chinese rule, young Buddhist monks led riots last year and in March. They

were involved in throwing rocks, burning vehicles and the death of a policeman who was beaten and flung from a monastery window.

In a little-publicized conflict, Buddhist rebels called Chakmas raid villages and battle authorities in eastern Bangladesh to halt government efforts to settle Muslims on land traditionally held by Buddhists. At least 4,000 people have been killed, by official count.

Thailand, which calls itself the "Land of Smiles," has one of Asia's highest homicide rates and periodic outbursts of brutality.

Faced with mounting evidence in the early 1980s that Thai pirates were killing and raping Vietnamese "boat people", several officials said the equivalent of: "They can't be Thais. Thais are Buddhists and Buddhists wouldn't act like that." — AP