

Korea's Buddhists in Revolt

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Korean Buddhists, fired by allegations of religious bias from the Lee administration, take to the streets but the real reason lies much deeper.

Buddhists are up in arms, accusing President Lee Myung Bak and his administration of showing religious bias against Buddhists and favoring Christians.

South Korea by law is a secular state, as clearly enshrined in its constitution defending the freedom of religion. It bars designation of any faith as state religion. Yet, a phenomenal rise in the size and power of the Christian community in recent decades has the Buddhist community here gripped by apprehension. In the course of the last five decades of Korea's industrialization and modernization, the role and size of Korea's once-powerful Buddhist population has significantly declined.

Internally, not only is the Buddhist hierarchy torn by schisms and squabbles over control of the large financial assets involving temple properties like land and buildings, its failure to attract new converts through renewal has resulted in their growing marginalization.

Their preoccupation with material assets, which are sometimes protected through hiring of mafia-like thugs camouflaged in monks' robes engaging in bloody gang wars, has alienated a growing number of socially and politically powerful younger generations who run Korea Inc.

Unfolding against that background of turmoil, some analysts regard the current uproar over the government's perceived slights and affronts against the Buddhists as a sign that it could be seeking a rallying cry to unite the flock. That could be the beginning of new political activism to revitalize the sagging momentum of Korean Buddhism, some analysts say.

At a massive, traffic-disrupting rally of August 27 in Seoul at which over 200,000 lay Buddhists protested what they said was the government's "religious discrimination", they demanded the firing of the National Police Director by holding him responsible for a number of developments they claimed indicated his religious bias. One was his call to evangelize the entire police force, he being an ardent Presbyterian churchgoer. Another episode involved the riot policemen stopping and searching a temple abbot's car, which they said was necessary to look for anti-US demonstrators hiding inside a Seoul temple compound.

In a fit of rage, one Buddhist monk has slashed his stomach with a razor blade. It was not a life-threatening wound, but the incident was enough to poison the atmosphere of the confrontation. The Buddhist clergy now vows to hold a new series of demonstrations across the country unless President Lee, himself a Presbyterian elder, issued a statement of apology.

But tension has been building up since December, when newly elected president Lee began filling his first cabinet with Christians. At least a half of his new ministers were people professing to be Christians, with the prime minister, Han Seung Soo, said to be a Roman Catholic. Not a single cabinet minister professed to be Buddhist.

And when Lee was Seoul mayor, he himself stirred a storm of debate by saying he would

“consecrate” his public service “to God,” omitting the fact that he was there to serve the citizens. Other than making these statements which were considered religiously over-zealous, neither the President nor the police director has been specifically cited for taking discriminatory steps in their administration or leadership. Government officials say they may have been guilty of giving “wrong impressions” but harbored no actual religious bias.

There’s no denying that Christians have become a powerful force in the Korean society. First is the numbers: people professing to be Protestants or Roman Catholics total more than 14 million or over 30% of the population. The once-dominant Buddhists have shrunk to a little more 10 million, according to the last government survey taken in 2005.

It’s not so much this number as the Christians’ rise in Korean society that is unsettling the Buddhists. Korean Christians boast higher education levels than their Buddhist peers. A recent survey by a Buddhist scholar showed that 23.1 percent of Presbyterians had a college or higher level education level (9.8 percent for Catholics) while for Buddhists, this was 10.8 percent. The perception has risen that Christianity represents a superior religion, a western faith with progressive thinking while Buddhism is old and tradition-bound, at the level of folk belief, mainly sustaining itself vague promises of good luck and fortune, said Kim Yong Pyo, a professor at Dongkook Buddhist University in Seoul.

The younger generation is even more negative. “You don’t want to go to a temple where all you do is recite sutra and bow before a Buddha image, and all the time mingling with oldsters,” says a university student contemptuously, not wanting to be identified by name. To him, Buddhism is little more than a superstition, something far from modern theology answering today’s problems.

Kwon Ki Jong, another professor on the same campus, said all this is a familiar refrain. The Buddhist establishment must find a better way of proselytizing the young, by appealing to rational, intellectual thinking, not mysticism. He suggests holding seminars and conferences using modern religious language and idiom to address issues of the modern life and society. Otherwise, Buddhism will stop being relevant to the young, educated audiences of today’s Korea.

Upgrading the quality of discourse is essential to revitalize Buddhism and make it relevant to Korea’s young, Kwon said. He underlines this case with a number showing that educated Buddhists are deserting in increasing numbers.

While Buddhists fight the government and debate how to keep their faith fresh, the Christian denominations, even though vigorously expanding, face similar criticisms for a host of ills including the Korean churches’ venality and aggrandizement. Richly endowed and overzealous, they move aggressively into Muslim nations, developing trouble with the local authorities with evangelical works and ignoring local customs and religion. In 2007, the government reportedly paid tens of millions of dollars in ransom to get 23 of them released from hostage-taking Taliban in Afghanistan. One was beheaded in Bagdad. Still others have been deported from China for trying to infiltrate Christian converts into the communist North Korea from border areas.

Korea’s economic prosperity in recent decades has meant that huge amounts of church donations have flowed into overseas missionary works. The Korean Buddhists have not been an exception: they too send out priests and laymen to Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka where Buddhism remains strong. Thus venality and vainglory run deeply in both Christian and Buddhist activities.

Like Korea’s economic development, quantity has overwhelmed quality in the nation’s spiritual life. The current stirrings in the Buddhist community may be a part of bigger picture that reform campaign is afoot in the nation’s temples, just as Christian churches are now debating their own

direction of growth.

P.S.

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