

# Rituals, Lore and Legitimacy in Post-Coup Myanmar

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**Abstract** This paper examines the strategic use of rituals in Myanmar after the 2021 coup, focusing on their role in political legitimacy. It explores how the military regime and protesters employed rituals in protests and observes divergent practices. The regime relied on symbolic rituals supported by monastic institutions, while protesters used rituals less aligned with normative Buddhist practices. The study highlights differing methods of ritual knowledge dissemination: hierarchical for the regime and network-based for protesters. Despite similar worldviews, their motivations and applications of ritualistic knowledge differ.

**Keywords** Rituals. Legitimacy. Military Regime. Anti-Coup resistance. Myanmar.

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## 1 Introduction

Two days before the February 1st, 2021, coup, rumours of a putsch circulated in the capital Naypyidaw as generals converged in a long VIP convoy, escalating political tension between the National League for Democracy (NLD) government and the Tatmadaw over voter list concerns. However, the purpose of the convoy was later revealed to be the performance of welcoming rituals for a marble Buddha image with senior abbots (DSINF 2021a). Meanwhile, NLD supporters signalled their opposition to the military by raising NLD flags. The State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (MaHaNa) attempted to use its position as a venerated Buddhist institution to sway the military, requesting restraint and a peaceful solution (The State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee 2021), but to no avail, with the military overthrowing the civilian government on 1 February 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Ritual responses to the ensuing chaos sprang up almost immediately. The clamour of pots and pans banging against each other rang out at 20:00 on 2 February 2021 in the country's most populous city, Yangon, reflecting a traditional practice of driving out evil and coinciding with state news broadcasts. Three weeks later, some female activists leveraged widespread beliefs about luck and power by hanging their undergarments and skirts (*htamein*) above protest sites. Soldiers and police painstakingly removed these barriers, fearing the loss of *hpoun* incurred by walking under women's clothing. *Hpoun*, reflecting the power and glory from good deeds, is crucial in Buddhist concepts of authority and legitimacy (Dhamma Dhara Sayadaw 2023; Leider 2011). It serves as a shield against spiritual harm and is sustained through moral obligations and karma.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, in homes and private religious sites, people cast hexes on the State Administration Council (SAC). In response, regime leaders sought protection through religious rites performed by prominent monks to safeguard their *hpoun* and ensure protection against spiritual threats.<sup>3</sup>

Rituals hold a profound significance beyond mere symbolism, mobilisation tools, or individuals seeking supernatural support to maintain political power. During the 2020 protests in Thailand, demonstrators engaged in rituals and turned to divination to guide their political actions. Independent of their political leanings or age, some in Thailand incorporate religious practices and cosmologies

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1 This research is part of the POPAGANDA project of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

2 Harriden 2012; Spiro 1982; Walton 2017; Zin 2001.

3 Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Irrawaddy 2023; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Lusan, Hlaing, Fishbein 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024; Oak Aww 2022.

(ritualistic knowledge) into their political activities (Siani 2020; 2023). This comparison highlights the broader regional significance of ritualistic practices in political resistance, making Myanmar's case a compelling focus for further analysis. Similarly, in Myanmar, rituals were purposefully employed during the 2021 protests to invoke supernatural forces, inflict harm on military personnel, and stimulate political transformation with different ritualistic knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Although the regime's and protestors' frequent use of rituals in the aftermath of the coup is striking, Myanmar's politics has always been deeply intertwined with monks, spiritual beliefs, and rituals.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have studied these phenomena through the lens of Buddhist practice and the institutional relationship between the military and monks, focusing on regime legitimacy and administrative support.<sup>6</sup>

Valuable as they are, these analyses often confine their examination of ritual actions and the agency relationship between monks and the regime to express its motive. They typically present the role of monks in ritual performance, portraying them primarily as coordinators fulfilling the regime's leaders' perceived needs for supernatural support (Matthews 1998; Selth 2020; Steinberg 2006) or attributing it to the influence of the so-called "dark wizard monk" (Jordt, Than, Lin 2021, 30). Similarly, anti-regime protestors' rituals are primarily viewed as mobilisation tools. They can be explained as creating collective effervescence and promoting social cohesion and shared beliefs (Olaveson 2001; Pickering 1984; Whitehouse, Lanman 2014).

However, while existing ritual theories and the academic literature on authoritarian politics and resistance have increasingly acknowledged the potential role of rituals in political processes,<sup>7</sup> much of the focus has remained on how ruling elites employ rituals to maintain and legitimise their authority,<sup>8</sup> with an emphasis on rituals' performative and symbolic elements, may offer limited explanatory power for addressing the complexities above involved.

In contrast, this study seeks a deeper understanding of the individual motivations behind ritual participation and performance, focusing on how rituals construct or contest political legitimacy. It explores the actions, underlying meanings, and the role of monks in rituals, offering insights into how rituals reinforce or challenge authoritarian legitimacy through social movements in autocratic

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<sup>4</sup> Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Lusan et al. 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Foxeus 2022; 2023; Frydenlund 2022; Walton 2015; Walton, Hayward 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Steinberg 2007; Thawngmung, Myoe 2008; Walton 2016; 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Bell 2009; Farneth 2023; Kertzer 1988; Kustermans et al. 2022; Singh 2014; Wedene 2002

<sup>8</sup> Farneth 2023; Gökarıksel, Secor 2016; Kapferer 2011; Singh 2014.

contexts. Specifically, the study examines the dynamic relationship between rulers and the ruled and the source of authority that underlies the acknowledgement or contestation of the ruler (Beetham 1991; Easton 1965; Weber 1968). In this dynamic, rituals are tools to either consolidate or erode political legitimacy.

The regime often employs religious donations and merit-making ceremonies to bolster its authority, drawing on the Burmese concepts of *ana* (power) and *awza* (influence) (Steinberg 2007). These actions also accumulate *hpoun*, further strengthening the regime's claims to charismatic legitimacy (Walton 2017). Derived from *Puñña* (merits) and associated with *Karma* (actions), *hpoun* is a key concept in Buddhist cosmology. The term *hpoun kan* is commonly used to describe the accumulation of good actions and merits, which enhance one's spiritual power (Dhamma Dhara Sayadaw 2023). On the other hand, protestors perform rituals to challenge the regime's legitimacy, seeking to diminish the rulers' *ana* and *awza* through acts of non-recognition (Theresa 2022).

This paper examines the utilisation of rituals in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. The study investigates the diverse motivations, associated knowledge of rituals, and roles of monks in these practices, analysing how different actors interpret and perform rituals and the potential implications for political legitimacy. The context of Myanmar, characterised by the extensive use of rituals by both the regime and protestors to strengthen or contest legitimacy, presents a compelling case study for exploring ritual practices in times of political upheaval. The publicly available data on social media platforms documenting the explicit performance of rituals by both sides provides a rich empirical foundation for analysis.

To explore these dynamics, this research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating firsthand observations, digital ethnography, and qualitative interviews. I observed several ritual events in Yangon, Mandalay, and Pyin Oo Lwin during the initial months of 2021. Additionally, this paper drew on 42 distinct ritual-related events analysed through Digital ethnography by examining politically driven ritual activities documented on social media<sup>9</sup> from January to December 2021.

Additionally, this study prioritises capturing the diversity of ritualistic practices and knowledge across rural and urban contexts. This approach aims to validate local contextual knowledge. The data encompasses news articles detailing rituals the regime and anti-regime protestors performed, acknowledging the potential for bias inherent in politically motivated sources. Data collection focused on keywords related to rituals in the Myanmar context, such as *asiayin* (rituals

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<sup>9</sup> Facebook, YouTube, Telegram.

with precise instructions for worldly rewards), *yadaya* (protective rituals), *yoyar* (traditions), *baydin* (astrology), and *tabaung* (prophecy).

Data analysis followed a two-layered approach initial web crawling to identify relevant events with keywords, followed by a Myanmar-language search on social media. The collected data was then categorised based on the degree of inclusivity and the hierarchy of knowledge dissemination, examining how specific instructions for ritual performance were communicated.

This analysis identifies six ritual categories: omens and astrological predictions, banging pots and pans, mass cursing activities, reciting Buddhist scriptures (*sutta*), pagoda and stupa building, and rituals to harm and protect.

The first category, omens and astrological predictions, highlights the role of prognostication in shaping public sentiment and action. The second, banging pots and pans, represents a sustained and collective act of defiance against the regime. The third category, mass cursing activities, encompasses a range of rituals aimed at invoking harm upon the regime members, drawing upon diverse forms of spiritual knowledge and practice. The fourth, reciting *sutta*, reveals the regime's appropriation of religious practices to protect and overcome the crisis. The fifth category, pagoda and stupa building, showcases the regime's use of rituals and symbolic representations to bolster its legitimacy. Finally, the sixth category, rituals to harm and protect, encompasses private practices often conducted with online guidance aimed at personal protection or inflicting harm on adversaries.

In addition to the digital ethnography, the author interviewed 23 astrologers, monks, and spiritual guides facilitated by longstanding ties. These interviews, conducted in person in Yangon and via video call from September 2022 to October 2023, illuminated underlying meanings and activities not readily available in public sources. Acknowledging the politically charged nature of rituals and the potential biases inherent in media reports, this study employed Norman Fairclough's tri-dimensional framework for discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; 2013). This framework, encompassing linguistic text analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, allowed for an investigation into constructing meaning through language, its interaction with social processes, and the reflection of power dynamics within the collected data. By examining the interplay between semiotic elements (signs and symbols) and broader social behaviours, this analysis explained the intricate relationship between language on media and social structures, particularly in constructing and contesting legitimacy in post-coup Myanmar.

Comparative hermeneutics, a methodological approach that combines the interpretive insights of hermeneutics with the broad analytical scope of comparative studies (Hedges 2016; Pye 1980), was

used to analyse rituals encompassing diverse interpretations, narratives, and knowledge systems. This approach was particularly relevant for understanding the multi-layered symbolism inherent in rituals like the stupa renovation (BBC Burmese 2022), which integrated Buddhist and occult traditions.

### 1.1 Working Definition of Ritual

This study focuses on how rituals foster social cohesion, transmit cultural values, and fulfil various social and political processes. This focus emphasises the purpose and significance of rituals and their accompanying knowledge (ritualistic knowledge). For this study, 'ritual' refers to distinctive actions underpinned by beliefs, fostering collective effervescence and potentially serving as a moral compass. Crucially, the actions and beliefs associated with rituals are informed by ritualistic knowledge, offering interpretations and narratives that can either strengthen or contest the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. This knowledge encompasses diverse astrological methods and other forms of lore.

This working definition includes three criteria drawn from existing ritual theories. First, the rituals examined are those used in political processes, aligning with the "expressive, symbolical, or communicative aspect" of rituals (Bell 2009, 70). Second, while rituals involve beliefs, they are analysed as performed actions, separate from conceptual thoughts like beliefs, symbols, religion, and myths (Lewis 1980, 10-11). This distinction allows examining the thoughts and beliefs that drive specific ritual actions. Third, explicit instructions for performing these actions are necessary, although motivation and meaning may not be required (Bell 2009, 18-19). Ritualistic knowledge, potentially including astrological or cosmological knowledge, is involved in collective performance. This knowledge also provides interpretations and narratives of the symbolic meanings of performing rituals, some of which may extend beyond the religious (Buddhist) dimension, including astrology (Siani 2020; 2023).

Although existing ritual theory considers ritualistic knowledge part of the thought process, this paper emphasises it for two reasons. First, it is contextually relevant, as rituals in Myanmar are characterised by their focus on precise instructions and specialised knowledge (*asiayin*). Second, even within the same worldview and motive, different ritualistic knowledge can be utilised diversely, as seen in the varying applications of astrology during rituals.

This emphasis on ritualistic knowledge is crucial for understanding Myanmar's sociopolitical landscape, where rituals are deeply embedded. They serve various purposes, from navigating the cycle

of birth, death, and rebirth (Samsara) to addressing worldly needs (Lawki). Notably, rituals performed primarily for worldly benefits are termed *lawki asi ayin*, reflecting the diverse applications of ritual within Myanmar, including the construction and contestation of legitimacy.

## 2 Overview of the Rituals Activities during 2021

The initial phase of the protests saw anti-coup demonstrators engage in four distinct ritual practices: the widespread banging of pots and pans, public mass cursing rituals, individual rituals aimed at harming military families, and the dissemination of omens and astrological predictions. The first two months of the protests witnessed innovation and adaptation in ritual practices, fostering collective effervescence and seeking spiritual support against the regime. This trend began with omens and astrological predictions, followed by rituals aimed at harming regime leaders, culminating in mass cursing rituals after the crackdown. By late February 2021, mass cursing rituals evolved from symbolic actions to rituals infused with contextual knowledge that sought to harm regime members and their families directly.

While this study is qualitative, examining the frequency of different ritual types offers insights into trends and correlations between political events and ritualistic practices. Notably, after the March 2021 crackdown, mass cursing rituals gained prominence, with eight unique rituals of mass cursing rituals documented across both urban and rural areas, reflecting a rise in public anger and spiritual retaliation against the regime. These rituals often included oaths specifically designed to delegitimise the regime's authority and undermine the *hpoun* of its leaders. The escalation of spiritual activities in response to heightened repression suggests that these rituals served as a means for the populace to express their discontent and resist the regime's authority through spiritual means.

From April to September 2021, a significant decrease in anti-regime ritual activity was observed, potentially owing to increased state repression, the shift towards armed resistance, and the third wave of COVID-19. However, a resurgence of rituals, primarily prophecies and mass cursing, occurred in October 2021, coinciding with the anti-regime National Unity Government's call for armed resistance. This resurgence suggests these rituals may have provided moral support for armed resistance forces.

Conversely, the military regime escalated its ritual activities from July 2021 onwards. Early rituals focused on reciting Buddhist scriptures to overcome challenges, followed by renovations and constructions of stupas and religious sites with embedded rituals. The peak

in rituals intended for personal protection and legitimacy consolidation coincided with the anti-regime resurgence and the resumption of military campaigns in October 2021.

## 2.1 Instruction, Participation, and Knowledge

A clear pattern emerges in the types of ritual activities and actors involved. The regime engages in various ritual practices, mainly pagoda and stupa construction, renovations, and remedial rituals. These are supported by three key spiritual actors: guiding masters who provide precise instructions, influential monks and abbots who participate in merit-making, and MaHaNa abbots who offer political legitimacy to these religious rites as a performance of kingship. In contrast, anti-regime rituals do not involve direct participation from monks or Buddhist institutions. Prophecies may reference late influential abbots (Theresa 2022), but astrologers disseminate astrological predictions and omens. Astrologers also often presided over rituals intended to harm the regime. At the same time, collective actions at spiritual sites are overseen by ritual or spiritual leaders who provide general instructions and sometimes lead the rituals.

The regime's rituals exhibit high structure and precision, incorporating astrological knowledge alongside Buddhist narratives. The roles of monks, ritual leaders, and abbots are clearly defined, and the knowledge utilised is detailed and accompanied by precise instructions, as in other pagoda-building rituals (Tosa 2012). This hierarchical approach extends to both the application of existing knowledge and the dissemination of instructions for ritual actions.

In contrast, anti-regime rituals often lack precise instructions and may not reference verified sources or established frameworks.<sup>10</sup> This does not imply a complete absence of underlying reasonings but rather that these reasonings are not transformed into precise actions. Additionally, protestors might interpret or assign meaning to their ritual actions retrospectively. The dissemination of these principles occurs horizontally through networks, allowing for greater flexibility in ritual instructions and potentially appealing to a broader audience.

Based on the number of participants and the hierarchy of knowledge dissemination, ritual activities can be categorised into four quadrants of a knowledge-action matrix.

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<sup>10</sup> Notable exceptions include mass cursing rituals led by spiritual guides at religious sites.



**Table 1** Four quadrants of the knowledge-action matrix

	Hierarchical Knowledge	Non- hierarchical Knowledge
High Participation (Wider Audience)	Mass cursing with guiding masters	Banging pots and Pans
Low Participation (Selected Audience)	Pagoda and Stupa building and renovation. Sutta reciting and chanting in selected places. Protective rituals ( <i>yadaya</i> ) to protections against harm	Omens and astrological predictions Performing rituals to harm including Women Longyi (Skirt) campaign

This more precise ritual activity by the regime can be attributed to several factors. First, the Tatmadaw has long-established relationships with astrologers, ritual masters, and monastic orders, regularly seeking their counsel and expertise. Second, the public performance of Buddhist religious rites is crucial for the regime to maintain its political position as the protector of the nation and Buddhism (Sasana), a core source of traditional legitimacy (Foxeus 2023). Finally, regime members believe that the hierarchical knowledge embedded within normative Buddhist practices can counteract the perceived threat of mass cursing and rituals associated with black magic (MAF-11, personal communication, March 1, 2023; Win 2022).

Conversely, anti-coup protestors harness all available knowledge to harm regime members, mobilise the populace, and foster collective effervescence. However, several factors often make their actions less precise than the regime's. First, to maximise participation and social unity, instructions are kept simple and accessible, avoiding complex procedures that might limit involvement (S. Kyaw (AM-1), personal communication, June 10, 2023). Second, protestors maintain a distance from monks and institutional Buddhism,<sup>11</sup> assuming a lack of complete alignment with their cause, contributing to distrust and limiting engagement (Frydenlund et al. 2021; Frydenlund, Wai 2024). Third, the narrative of supernatural-seeking regime members vs. justice-seeking citizens (Ferguson 2023, 1-27; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021) frames the regime's astrological reasonings and rituals as misaligned with Dhamma (interpreted as moral justice in this context), positioning them as forces seeking spiritual support for power (S. Nyunt, personal communication, June 12, 2023). This framing allows protestors to justify their ritual actions as a form of righteous

**11** Institutional Buddhism refers to the organised structures and systems through which Buddhism is practised, preserved, and propagated within a society. It includes formal institutions such as monasteries, educational centres, and governing bodies responsible for the Buddhist community's administration, doctrine, and rituals.

resistance, strategically exploiting the regime's perceived reliance on esoteric practices to undermine its authority. In this way, protestors turn the regime's belief system against itself, leveraging it as a vulnerability.

In contrast to other anti-regime rituals, mass cursing rituals conducted at spiritual sites outside of urban areas often involve precise instructions and guiding figures. However, these instructions and figures are more associated with local spiritual guardians (such as Nats and Bobogyi). Rituals in urban areas reference more religious, astrological, and mainstream Buddhist practices.

This divergence in approach may stem from differing leadership styles and beliefs in urban versus rural contexts, the potentially deeper religious devotion found in rural communities, and a wider variety of spiritual practices. The rural populace may strongly believe in the efficacy of spiritual support for their cause, leading to a greater emphasis on invoking local deities and spirits.

Drawing on this understanding of the varied motivations and practices within the anti-coup movement, this paper focuses on the rituals initiated by protestors and the subsequent reactions from the regime. While some regime rituals have been longstanding practices, they were notably adapted in 2021 to counter the emergence and impact of protestors' rituals. Furthermore, not all rituals performed by protestors garnered universal acceptance within the wider community. The following sections will examine protestors' rituals, the public reaction, and regime responses.

### **3 Protest Rituals**

Each of the rituals performed in February and March 2021 carried astrological significance yet lacked precise instructions for participants. The guidance primarily focused on the use of specific terms during the protests. This astrological reasoning spread horizontally throughout the public, fostering a sense of shared understanding and purpose within the movement. The combination of astrological justification and local knowledge contributed to the initial success of these rituals and the broader movement. However, disagreements regarding their performance emerged after a few months, ultimately leading to their decline and discontinuation.

#### **3.1 Banging Pots and Pans**

A nightly campaign of banging pots and pans at 20:00 for 15 minutes emerged as the first example of ritual resistance. Banging pots and pans resemble *cacerolazo*, a protest involving loud noises to signify

discontent, but it has ritual significance in the Burmese context. The Burmese word that describes the practice *taw htote* focuses not on physical actions involved but conveys the ritual's intended effect: to drive away evil spirits. By engaging in this custom, protestors symbolically cast the military regime as malevolent spirits needing expulsion (Egreteau 2023). While similar practices were observed in the 1988 and 2007 protests, the frequency of this ritual in the 2021 protests surpassed prior instances and the specific term *than pone tee* for this practice. The practice persisted for over five months before dissipating in July 2021 during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The shared syllables between everyday terms and astrologically significant phrases create a powerful link between the mundane and the cosmic. For example, the act of banging on *than pone* (tin boxes) transcends its literal meaning, becoming an act of defiance against *thane pite* (forced occupation). Similarly, the chant *taw htote* resonates with *tite htote* (fighting against), signifying a struggle against forced occupation through the act of striking the *than pone*. (AST-12, personal communication, August 11, 2023). While there have been discussions about adopting alternative terms like *dae o yite*, hitting pots and pans in Burmese, some astrologers have resisted such changes (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022). Zaw further noted that the term *than pone* was carefully chosen and popularised through protest songs, which replaced older songs from the 1988 Uprising. Older songs, like *The Dust in the Wind* cover, *Kabar Ma Kyay Bu*, (There Will Be No Pardon Until The Earth Ends) were considered to connote negatively for the cause and bad omen. Incorporating astrological knowledge in protest rituals imbues their actions and transforms them into potent symbols of resistance.

In the cultural context, banging pots and pans have emerged as a symbol of the anti-coup movement, but monks do not fully accept this practice. The monk Ashin Pyinya explained that

some monks believed the worsening plague (COVID third wave in July 2022) resulted from the detrimental effects of banging pots and pans for months. This noise created disturbances for non-human beings, making them uncomfortable and unable to live peacefully, leading to their refusal to protect the community and even causing harm. (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023)

Therefore, he and other monks initiated a campaign to advise their *Dakar* (supporters) to stop banging pots and pans during the peak of the third COVID wave.

Burmese funeral customs could also have contributed to a decline in willingness to bang pots and pans nightly. After the death of a relative, family members typically offer meals and vigils and invite

monks to perform rituals to help the relative's lingering spirit transition to the next life. Banging pots and pans could prevent the recently departed from receiving merits offered by their relatives and the monks, condemning them to a ghostly state. This cultural belief, amplified by the widespread grief and loss during the pandemic, likely discouraged many from participating in pot-banging rituals, especially in neighbourhoods experiencing funerals. One respondent who mentioned ceasing participation after funerals occurred nearby supports this (H.H. Aye, personal communication, January 2023). Therefore, while government suppression contributed to the overall decline, the cultural context and the pandemic's impact could also be critical in explaining the specific decline observed after July 2021.

### 3.2 The Longyi Campaign

Another act of resistance was the utilisation of women's longyis, *htamein* in Burmese (a term phonetically similar to 'rising up' or *htabi*). Strung above streets where protests took place, women's garments paused soldiers, who preferred to carefully remove them rather than cross under them and deplete their *hpoun* (in this context, masculine power). This hesitation has been interpreted as evidence of the movement's success, highlighting the potent symbolism of this cultural artefact in the context of resistance (Egreteau 2023; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024). While many have embraced the *htamein* protests as a triumph over Burmese patriarchy, it's worth reflecting on how the original cosmological intent of the protests reified traditional notions of femininity and occult practices. Those cosmological roots help explain why the movement did not endure or expand beyond its limited urban context.

A ritual of placing a picture of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's face on a *htamein* stained with menstrual blood (or with an affixed menstrual pad) inspired much of the *htamein* Protests. The act was meant to inflict harm on the junta leader and other junta officials whose pictures were placed on bloodied *htameins*. Self-proclaimed pro-democracy astrologer U Saw Win told me that *htamein* is traditionally implicated in black magic,<sup>12</sup> especially when linked with menstrual blood. Saw Win said that it was this connection that gave regime security

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<sup>12</sup> According to U Saw Win, the use of menstrual blood in black magic, though considered unethical, is believed to stem from its symbolic associations with both death (temporary infertility) and life (originating from a living person). This 'living death' is thought to attract spirits, which practitioners attempt to control for harmful purposes. A woman's longyi, potentially stained with menstrual blood, maybe a ritual tool. This belief echoes the concept of the *Penanggal*, a Southeast Asian spirit associated with detached female heads and entrails seeking menstrual blood.

forces pause when confronted with *htameins* in sanitary pads fortifying protest barricades (S. Win, personal communication, October 31, 2022). The Shwe Yin Kyaw, a traditional Burmese healing association (*gaing*), has strict prohibitions against members passing under women's longyis (S. Win, personal communication, October 31, 2022). This act is believed to diminish the *hpoun* of practitioners, weakening their ability to counteract and ward off evil spirits. Passing under *htameins* could also nullify the spiritual defences endowed by the Yantra tattoos that many in the security services bear.

While the media has focused on how the protestors using *htameins* and menstrual pads against the regime were disavowing the associated traditional stigmas, U Saw Win argued that many did not. He asserted that protestors and security forces shared the beliefs in the connection between *htameins* and *hpoun* but sought to leverage those occult powers for different purposes. While protestors sought to inflict harm, junta leaders rallied with rituals overseen by friendly monastic orders to bolster their spiritual power. For some bystanders and security forces, the *htamein* Protests reflected occult beliefs surrounding the impurity and spiritual harm emanating from women's bodies rather than a challenge to stigmas toward menstruation and femininity. The dissipation of the *htamein* Protests after early 2021 reflected how some concentrated more on the spiritual risks of resistance methods rather than liberatory potential.

Activist Hnin Hin Aye explained that the failure of the protests to unseat Min Aung Hlaing actually reflected the power of his *hpoun* and warned that continued use of *htameins* in such a manner could be a spiritual risk for protestors.

Whether we like it or not, Min Aung Hlaing reached his position of authority due to his *hpoun*. It may affect him when we bang pots and pans or put his face on menstrual stain blood as black magic, but he has a certain level of *hpoun* (in this context, accumulated merits); the detrimental effects can also impact us. (H.H. Aye, personal communication, January 2023)

Besides participants' own concerns for their spiritual well-being, Hnin Aye said that many local community members tolerated these transgressive practices for the sake of solidarity with the broader anti-regime movement. She added that liberal youths with strong ties to the international community spearheaded the campaign.

Her assessments also reflect the sentiments of residents in neighbourhoods where protests unfolded. Ma Cho, a 52-year-old resident of San Chaung Township, where much of the longyi campaign took place, said,

although we usually dry longyi in the apartment, we rarely hang them outside the home or in front, as it's considered inappropriate.

It could negatively impact the household members' *hpoun* (in this context, accumulated merit and karma). Since I have a spirit house, I believe it shouldn't be placed together in the same area or level. It might harm the person and reduce their luck. This principle also applies to the street, as there are guardians of the street and neighbourhood. (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023)

She also conveyed the sentiment of locals like herself, who found the protests unsuitable and did not engage with them.

*Htamein* protests are led by the younger generations and held at various locations with barricades (defence lines). First, it was on Main Street, followed by smaller streets the following day. These protests, however, are not initiated by locals and are often seen as inappropriate by many in the community. However, they can't express opposition due to political pressures and fear of being perceived as unsupportive of the protesters or aligned with the regime. (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023)

### 3.3 Nine Knives Ritual

One of the earliest rituals organised in February 2021 to harm the regime leaders was the Nine Knives Ritual. This ritual involved placing nine knives in a circle, each pointing inward toward a candle in the centre. A candle was positioned on the flat of each knife blade, symbolising the intention to harm military regime members (Fowle 2022; Oak Aww 2022). The Burmese term for candle, *pha yaung dine*, aligns with the Burmese astrological naming convention, as both *pha* and *Min* belong to the same alphabet group associated with Thursday, thus sharing the same initial sound. Placing the knives in a circle pointing inward targets the regime leader. The gradual melting of the candles serves as a metaphor for the protesters' desire for the leadership to similarly "meltdown" (Local Protestor-2, personal communication, December 22, 2022). These ritual institutions reference the fusion of the Burmese astrological method and some well-known international rituals similar to the hexing method using knives (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022). The guidelines regarding knife placement were disseminated through different social media pages focused on astrology.

Astrologer U Zeya, commenting on rituals intended to harm individuals, stated,

I'm aware of Facebook pages and services offering such rituals. Based on my experience, not all are genuine black magic; some

are deceptions. Others utilise techniques translated from Western books or websites, which are popular due to their accessibility and lack of requirement for inherited knowledge. (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022)

However, U Zeya emphasises the karmic consequences of such actions: “It’s important to remember that there is karma. If you intend to hurt someone, regardless of the technique, there will be repercussions and pain in your life, particularly in black magic” (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022). Although this ritual was popular, the young astrologer who initiated it, Linn Nhyno Taryar, was arrested the day after. Soon after, the rituals also died down.

### 3.4 Mass Cursing at the Symbolic Locations

Although less covered in the international press, different types of mass cursing were performed in rural areas. Notably, each incident featured unique actions. People gathered at local sacred sites, such as stupas, pagodas, shrines, spirit houses, and cemeteries, to hex military personnel and generals (Eleven Broadcasting 2021; Kamayut Online TV, 2021).

The first recorded cursing ritual was performed on 19 February 2021 (Kamayut Online TV 2021), at a temple connected to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s legitimacy-building efforts. Located in the ancient city of Bagan, the Htilominlo temple had frequently received patronage from the top general who, in 2020, hoisted an umbrella at the site in an effort to connect himself with the King of the Bagan dynasty (Mizzima 2020). A participant in the hexing ceremony told the author that protestors gathered at the temple because of its significance to the regime strongman (Local Protestor-1, personal communication, December 14, 2022). They began with prayers and placed coconut and banana in an offering basket (*pwe*) presented to a Buddha image and local spirits. They emphasised their communal participation and asserted the effectiveness of mass cursing against an illegitimate regime. Protestors took oaths while cursing to protect themselves from the spiritual repercussions of the hexing target, junta leaders, who may have greater *hpoun*. These oaths are rooted in the protesters’ morality and pursuit of truth and justice, solidifying their commitment through a vow.

A retired senior military officer confirmed that the protestors picked their target well, saying that the historical significance of the temple mirrored Min Aung Hlaing’s ascent to power (MAF-8, personal communication, December 28, 2022). The temple was constructed on a site where a prince was crowned king. To prevent a succession struggle the dying king convened the royal court and

religious leaders at the site. There, they allowed the spirit of the white umbrella, a symbol of royal power and legitimacy, to select a new monarch. The umbrella leaned towards the youngest prince who accordingly became known as King Htilominlo (1175-1235): “the king chosen or mandated by the umbrella” (Ministry of Information 1994, 120). The senior military officer said that Min Aung Hlaing was also an unlikely contender for the throne when he was tapped to become the Commander in Chief in 2010. Likely recognising these parallels, the military strongman patronised the temple to consecrate his elevation as a mandate from the spiritual realm, *hpoun*, or Karma (MAF-8, personal communication, December 28, 2022) and cast himself as inheriting the king’s legacy. Therefore, choosing this specific site for protest takes aim at Min Aung Hlaing’s legitimacy by challenging the charismatic legitimacy of being the “chosen one”.

The cursing in Bagan inspired similar activities elsewhere. Protestors often chose religious sites that received some form of military patronage to replicate the attack on regime legitimacy. Some also sought to harm the relatives of regime members, so they performed cursing rituals at spirit houses and shrines (*nat sin*) (Kamayut Online TV 2021; Kyaw Kyaw 2021). Oftentimes, protestors combined Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. Protestors took their oaths pagodas and then chanted curses at the spirit house, saying, “We give oath at the Buddha and seek support from the guardians to curse and harm the regime” (Ayeyarwaddy Times 2021). Participants relied on Nats (spirits) to inflict harm because asking similarly of the Buddha would have violated the religion’s nonviolent tenets, but they used Buddhist religious rites to create witnesses for their vows and symbolically challenge regime authority. Supernatural intercession to cause harm draws on the authority and contextual knowledge of the spirit house. Here, the concepts of Karma and *hpoun* remain consistent within the Buddhist karmic framework. Knowledge and reasonings regarding their roles and connections to this world-view drive the rituals.

Some doubted turning to Nats because of their predetermined roles within Burmese spirituality. A protestor voiced such concerns because many met tragic demises and were later institutionalised by kings (K. Myo, personal communication, May 12, 2023). “How can they challenge the regime’s might?” he pondered, adding, “Yet, I like to believe they transcend any illegitimate authority. The regime’s mandate is surely not sacred to the *nats*”. Echoing this sentiment, Sein, a *nat kadaw* (spirit medium), (N. Sein, personal communication, December 11, 2002) argued that although *nats* protect believers and donors, they are powerless against the king’s decrees, especially the official 37 *nats*. This sentiment might explain the subdued regime response to the 2021 protests directed at these spirits.

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Legitimacy isn't merely about accepting those governed. It reflects the regime's demonstrated power and commitment to guarding our cherished Sasana (Buddhism and teachings of buddha). And our nats, in their diverse magnificence, are also protectors of the Sasana. (N. Sein, personal communication, December 11, 2002)

Sein and the protestor appeared to agree that the efficacy of spiritual support is intricately tied to the hierarchical power of the nats and the legitimacy of the governing body. However, some protestors sought to bypass this hierarchy by centring their rituals on figures perceived to be more attuned to community needs, such as local and regional spirits and guardians like U Shin Gyi and Bago Medaw (spirits from lower Myanmar not officially recognised by the king's decrees), and various Bo Bo Gyis (local guardians).

### 3.5 Justifications and Responses

Despite the disagreements regarding the rituals, various responses and justifications emerged to address these concerns and reintegrate the practices within existing knowledge frameworks. Three primary forms of justification and redress were observed: Buddhist justifications, appeals to political causes, and reinterpretations and narratives of hpoun.

Although the banging of pots and pans stoked various spiritual concerns for monks, they performed religious rites to mitigate the negative implications of banging pots and pans rather than ask ritual participants to stop. Abbot Ashin Pyinya Yangon explained that monks recited the metta sutta to alleviate the effects of the protest rituals on beings of other realms (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023). This concern stemmed not from esoteric religious beliefs but concerns for the wellbeing of communities hosting spirits. "These non-human entities also protect our community and us. It is not beneficial for the community if we force them out of their homes, as it can have detrimental effects," he said. Others were similarly inclined to make trade-offs for the negative spiritual externalities of ritual protest.

Regarding the *htamein* campaign, Ma Cho noted, "Because the youngsters are risking their lives, we (the neighbourhood) don't mind sacrificing some luck. But we did not continue the activity when the longyis were taken down" (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023). This response illustrates another sacrifice for political causes.

Fundamentally, there are serious doubts about the viability of ritual protest given that rather than challenge the existence of hpoun and accumulated merit - which form the core of the military's traditional

legitimacy – they reinforce their importance by targeting the military members' *hpoun* and merit. Given the successful overthrow of the civilian government and the endurance of the regime, many regard the efficacy of ritual protest as questionable. U Shwe, a political stakeholder, asserted that: "The Junta Chief's actions were wrong and inefficient, but his *hpoun*, power, and glory were at large. That's why he still survived until now" (U. Shwe, personal communication, January 22, 2023). Similarly, astrologers have noted the ineffectiveness of black magic rituals against military leaders, suggesting their *hpoun* acts as a shield (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022).

#### 4 Response from the Military regime

The generals responded by performing essential activities for Buddhist kings and conducting religious rites and rituals to accumulate karma and *hpoun*. The former serves to buttress their legitimacy, while the latter is meant to accumulate spiritual protective measures. These responses suggest the regime's perception of protest rituals as tangible threats, posing potential harm to them as individuals and possibly their legitimacy.

During this study, the junta has undertaken three significant initiatives to uphold traditional legitimacy. First, regime members have performed rituals as patrons of the Sangha. The second initiative was the construction of a new pagoda in Naypyidaw, incorporating symbolic rituals (DSINFO 2022). The third initiative has consisted of organising sermons and group chanting of Buddhist texts. These actions are closely tied to Buddhist religious rites and selectively involve specific participants to ensure the reproduction of traditional legitimacy. Many of these activities fall into long-established interactions between political-military elites and the monkhood. At a broad level, they seek recognition from monastic institutions as part of performing the kingly duty of upholding institutional Buddhism (Foxyus 2023; Walton 2017). On a personal level, these interactions follow the Sayar-Dakar (monk-devotee) relationship often observed in the Burmese cultural and political context (Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Steinberg 2007). Although many of these activities were common pre-coup, a retired military officer said that the regime had suggested that performing religious rites during this crisis time was more than just legitimising their rule but also accumulating Karma as part of the merit-making process (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022).

## 4.1 Rituals at the Each Layer of Engagement

In response to the post-coup crisis, three distinct forms of regime engagement with monks and the Sangha community have been observed, each with varying implications for legitimacy. At the institutional level, the regime and monastic institutions foster a relationship of mutual dependency, reinforcing each other's relevance. The involvement of senior abbots in state religious projects, such as the construction of the Maravijaya Buddha Image in Naypyidaw, exemplifies this (DSINFO 2021b). Another type of monk focuses on ritual practices at the individual level, aiming to maximise merit-making for followers (DVB 2023; Mashikhana Sayardaw 2024; ShweMM 2024). This group provides specific instructions for ritual performance and may engage in activities perceived as contributing to worldly rewards (A. Vihitarlingaya, personal communication, January 28, 2023). Lastly, a third type of monk performs rituals to deliver idealised, give sermons, and mobilise support for political objectives (550 Sayardaw, personal communication, December 2021; MHT News 2022; Nilsen, Thiha 2023). The regime utilises all three layers of engagement to perform rituals and consolidate its legitimacy. However, due to its visible nature, the second type, focused on ritual practices, often garners the most attention.

While the prominent use of the number 9 in state-level projects like the Maravijaya Buddha Image pagoda project is not unprecedented (Ministry of Information 1997; 2010). Its excessive use in this context is noteworthy (DSINFO 2021a; 2021b; Myanmar Radio and Television 2021). Astrologer Zaw explains that this emphasis on the number 9 is a tactical move by the regime to co-opt religious legitimacy. The number 9 symbolises indivisibility and stability, qualities appealing to a regime seeking to project unwavering power. Furthermore, associating 9 with a path beyond Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path adds an esoteric dimension, suggesting an aspiration for supernatural power and influence (W. Zaw, personal communication, March 12, 2022). By linking the number 9 with the 'nine qualities' of the Buddha,<sup>13</sup> the regime associates their symbolism of power (*ana*) with the Buddhist narrative. In these state-level projects and associated rituals, which are primarily intended to benefit the state or institution (A. Khay Min Ta, personal communication, January 28, 2023), senior abbots play a crucial role in legitimising such practices in state-level construction projects (Ministry of Information 1997; 2010; Thura, Lay Kyaw 2020) with the Buddhist narratives. They often achieve

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**13** The nine virtues of the Buddha are Worthy One, Perfectly Self-Enlightened, Perfect in Knowledge and Conduct, Well-Gone, Knower of Worlds, Incomparable Leader, Teacher of Gods and Humans, The Enlightened One, and The Blessed One.

this by invoking traditional Buddhist symbolism and numerology, grounding the regime's actions in religious and cultural traditions.

While some monks focus on institutional engagement, other monks and astrologers perform individual rituals to attain worldly rewards for their followers. This is evident in practices such as incorporating Ahbaya Zata magic squares<sup>14</sup> in renovated stupas in Pwint Phyu, Magway (BBC Burmese 2022; Office of the Commander in Chief 2020). Originally devoid of Buddhist connotations, the regime cleverly reinterpreted this symbol by associating each number within the square with a previous life of the Buddha from the Jataka tales, emphasising lives in which the Buddha was protected from harm (San Zarni Bo 2007). This reinterpretation signals that just as the Buddha was divinely protected in those lives, the regime is also shielded from external threats and malevolent forces (S. Min, personal communication, November 18, 2022).

Also, at the individual level, a military officer explained that junta officials seek out monks because their *hpoun* can neutralise the effects of black magic rituals conducted by protesters (MAF-12, personal communication, May 1, 2023). Monks also distribute amulets as protective talismans, like those worn by the junta leader and his wife. This highlights the regime's reliance on the Sangha community's spiritual and ritual support to protect *hpoun* – a source of charismatic legitimacy and personal protection. However, Abbot Ashin Pyinya argued that true protection stems not from physical amulets but faith in the Three Jewels of Buddhism (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and adherence to Buddhist teachings (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023). He emphasises that those genuinely protected by the Metta (loving-kindness) of the Sangha and actively supporting the Sasana (Buddhist teachings) cannot be harmed, even by powerful spirits. This belief is rooted in Buddhist cosmology, where such spirits are considered to inhabit a lower realm and thus cannot affect those protected by higher forces.

In addition to construction and renovations, the regime has initiated ritual activities involving public participation, particularly among military families within military bases. These activities include chanting Buddhist Dharma texts, such as the eleven sutta, to ward off evil and harm and the Uppātasanti Gatta, to prevent war, evil omens, or public calamities.<sup>15</sup> Monks usually follow these events with speeches, offering spiritual security and strengthening the relationship between the Sangha and military communities. By doing so, they promote their influence (*awza*) within the institution.

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**14** Mercury magic squares in Western occult contexts.

**15** Khit Thit Media 2022; 2023; Kyaw, Din 2024; MITV 2023; Office of the Commander in Chief 2021.

Each of the three types of monk engagement serves a distinct purpose for the regime. The first, focusing on institutional engagement, seeks traditional legitimacy by upholding Buddhist norms and projecting an image of pious governance. The second type, centred on ritual practices, aims to accumulate merit and secure worldly rewards, thus enhancing charismatic legitimacy through perceived spiritual power. The third type, involving sermons and mobilisation, fosters social cohesion within the military and reinforces internal legitimacy by idealising the regime's relevance.

These regime-led activities, invariably involving structured rituals embedded with normative Buddhist narratives and guided by specific knowledge, are strategically deployed to consolidate power and legitimacy across various domains. The regime's engagement with monks and abbots, spanning institutional, ritualistic, and ideological dimensions, goes beyond coordinating efforts to seek supernatural support. Instead, an analysis that considers the regime's epistemology and goes beyond an institutional understanding of Buddhism may offer a more comprehensive interpretation of this relationship based on rituals and legitimacy.

## 5 Conclusion

The empirical data reveals a stark contrast between the regime and protesters regarding using lore and instructions for ritual practices. The junta relies on precise instructions, established knowledge, and narratives often justified through orthodox Buddhist doctrine. This is unsurprising given the military's decades-long construction of traditional legitimacy through monastic institutions, where the roles of monks and abbots in legitimising rituals are clearly defined.

Conversely, protesters have adopted a more flexible approach to ritual instructions. Their knowledge sources often lack direct references to normative Buddhism, possibly for several reasons. Firstly, protesters may wish to avoid associating their rituals with Buddhism because of the regime's perceived exploitation of religious practices for personal gain. This reflects a broader discourse on what constitutes genuine Dhamma (Buddhist teachings). Second, the lack of explicit Buddhist references could be a strategic move to widen participation by not requiring strict adherence to specific Buddhist practices. Thirdly, some protesters may believe that certain actions, especially those intended to harm, are incompatible with normative Buddhist principles. This departure from religious orthodoxy in Myanmar mirrors similar trends in Thailand, where the monarchy's use of Buddhist discourse has led protesters to distance themselves from institutional religious practices (Siani 2023).

Consequently, protesters often seek knowledge from diverse sources, including astrology, local spirits, Western occult knowledge, and Buddhist-agnostic methodologies. This shift suggests the pursuit of alternative forms of legitimacy not controlled by the regime. In contrast, in Thailand, pro-democracy protesters have reappropriated the same cosmological symbols and astrological traditions that the monarchy and courts have long mobilised, using these as forms of political resistance (Siani 2023). Moreover, the dissemination of knowledge among protesters occurs through informal networks, contrasting with the regime's hierarchical approach. This decentralised dissemination allows for greater adaptability and responsiveness among protesters, potentially contributing to the resilience of their movement. Astrologers and monks leveraged social media to disseminate instructions distinct from scriptural Buddhism, drawing on the occult literature surge of the 1990s and its increased accessibility through the internet (S.W. Tun, personal communication, January 9, 2023). This democratisation of esoteric knowledge, once the domain of a select few, has empowered protesters to engage in ritualistic practices that challenge the traditional monopoly of the elite.

The Buddhist concept of *hpoun* remains crucial for understanding the various ritual practices observed, regardless of the specific knowledge employed. It serves to justify the use of rituals for asserting power, authority, and influence and enhancing spiritual capabilities. Rituals are used either to deplete the *hpoun* of adversaries or to accumulate merit and strengthen one's own *hpoun*. Similarly, merit-making (*Puñña*), derived from *Parami*, aligns with the Thai concept of *Barami*, as both refer to the accumulation of merit that enhances spiritual power and authority (Siani 2023). Rooted in Buddhist cosmology, these merit-making practices are central in shaping political legitimacy in their respective contexts. While respondents offer diverse interpretations of *hpoun*, a nuanced understanding requires moving beyond gendered and normative definitions to explore how it is perceived, constructed, and perpetuated within local contexts. From a legitimacy perspective, *hpoun* is a vital asset in establishing both traditional and charismatic authority, signifying the ability to govern effectively and garner support.

The escalation of armed conflict in Myanmar saw a decline in ritual activities deployed against the regime. In contrast, the regime intensified its religious efforts as a cornerstone of its legitimacy-building strategy in 2022 and 2023. This involved seeking the support of monastic orders for administrative actions, such as mobilising militias and galvanising ultranationalists through religious narratives (Aung, Mcpherson 2022; Foxeus 2022; Nilsen, Thiha 2023).

As anti-regime protesters transitioned to armed resistance alongside Ethnic Armed Organizations, distinct rituals emerged within these factions, including tattoos, war chants, blessings, and

talismans. Some of these practices draw from Buddhist tenets, while others are rooted in ethnic traditions. This opens a compelling avenue for future research, exploring the divergent nature of military and revolutionary rituals in ongoing conflicts and their integration with existing ethnic and anti-regime practices.

The gender dynamics in ritual execution also warrant further investigation. While the *htamein* protests gained global recognition as a symbol of defiance, local and non-activist perceptions may differ, particularly concerning *hpoun* and gender roles. Recognising women's instrumental roles in maintaining *Sayar-Daka* relations with monks, organising activities, and executing diverse ritual tasks is crucial for understanding how the bond between the Sangha and the wider populace is reinforced. This relationship, in turn, is fundamental to the regime's traditional legitimacy-building strategy.

The rituals performed during the 2021 anti-coup protests in Myanmar were not merely symbolic. They embodied local beliefs and knowledge systems, profoundly impacting the country's consolidation and contestation of legitimacy. In both Myanmar and Thailand, religious and cultural practices have played a central role in political resistance, underscoring the regional significance of ritual and cosmology in shaping political legitimacy. This phenomenon exceeds conventional understandings of legal legitimacy, highlighting the need for further interdisciplinary research to fully grasp the complex interplay of religion, politics, and power in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy. Moreover, this dynamic is not unique to Myanmar. As seen in Thailand, similar cultural and spiritual traditions influence the perception of authority and legitimacy. Future studies could expand the scope to examine how these factors operate across Theravāda Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, offering deeper insights into the role of religious and cultural contexts in shaping political legitimacy across the region.

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