

Warriors in Robes? Religious Imagery and Military Counter-Mobilization in Myanmar's Spring Revolution

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic deployment of Buddhist imagery and monastic figures by Myanmar's military during the 2021 Spring Revolution, revealing how religious leaders were mobilized to orchestrate countermobilization against the anti-coup movement. While existing scholarship has extensively examined protest dynamics and resistance, it often overlooks how authoritarian actors deliberately utilize religious authority to incite counter-protests, provoke demonstrators, and legitimize repression. By applying social movement theory, this study conceptualizes these efforts as a sacralized counter-movement strategy. The study draws on open-source images, particularly from social media, employing visual analysis to investigate the role of monks in sacralized counter-movements, complemented by discourse analysis of banners laden with text in the early days of the coup. The findings show that Buddhist monks play a larger role in counter-protests than visual analysis alone suggests. This challenges previous underestimations and highlights the need for new methods to better understand these dynamics.