

# 'Rebel' female Buddhist monks challenge Thailand status quo

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faith — these misdeeds and what is termed “checkbook Buddhism” have spurred calls in parliament for curbing the almost total authority the council wields over the clergy and the corruption-stoking \$4 billion in annual donations to monasteries. A proposed Patronage and Protection of the Clergy Bill would impose stiff penalties for those who break the religion’s cardinal rules and set up a panel to monitor donations. Corruption within Buddhism may also be dealt with in Thailand’s next constitution, now being drafted.

The role of women in Buddhism has also aroused national-level debate.

The Sangha council has urged the government to ban Sri Lankan clergy from coming into the country following what Dhammananda calls a “rebel ordination” in Thailand of eight bhikkhunis last November by Sri Lankans. That drew broad criticism of the council itself.

“The clergy can no longer insist on operating in a closed, feudal system that violates universal norms and values,” said an editorial in the English-language *Bangkok Post*. Instead of trying to crush women’s aspirations, it said the “clergy should concentrate on cleaning up its own house to restore declining public faith.”

No scandal has emerged among Thailand’s female clergy. Dhammananda said she has seen no misbehavior in her monastery beyond a few nuns who had used their mobile telephones to excess.

“I think that many nuns see themselves as exemplary. They are, and they’re carving a new role for themselves that didn’t exist,” said Juliane Schober, an expert on Southeast Asian Buddhism at Arizona State University. “That that puts pressure on the Sangha doesn’t surprise me.”

Women clergy interviewed at three monasteries said it was essential to maintain a high moral ground so as not to give opponents an excuse to stop their movement. Some cast them as western-educated feminists out to undermine traditional Buddhism.

“They can be a force for change in Buddhism,” said Phramaha



**UNEXPECTED ACTIVISTS.** Women Buddhist monks pray at the Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. The top Buddhist authority in Thailand bars women from becoming monks. Thailand has some 100 bhikkhunis who were ordained in Sri Lanka, where women are allowed to become monks. They and their monasteries are not legally recognized in Thailand, and don’t enjoy state funding and other support the country’s 200,000 male monks are granted. (AP Photo/Penny Yi Wang)

Boonchuay Doojai, a leading activist monk at Chiang Mai Buddhist College.

“If everything is in the hands of men, it is as if Buddhism was just the way of a father, not mother. But you need both,” he said. “Mothers have some unique feelings that men do not share. They may have more loving kindness.”

Proponents of ordination like Boonchuay say bhikkhunis originated with Buddha himself; the first was an aunt who raised him. Opponents argue that the lineage of the Theravada bhikkhuni order, under which women could be ordained, died out long ago and cannot be restored. The Mahayana branch of Buddhism practiced in East Asia has historically ordained women.

“We simply follow the rules. The ordination of female monks was allowed in the Lord Buddha’s time. But as time passed, the lineage of bhikkhuni disappeared,” Phra Tepvisutthikawee of the Buddhism Protection Center has said.

Despite conservative opposition, bhikkhunis are gaining ground with the general public in Thailand.

“It is a movement now. When I was struggling by myself it was just this crazy woman who wanted to be a monk,” says Dhammananda, who was ordained in 2003. “Now people don’t feel strange when they see a female monk in the streets. We don’t

have problems with people, with society.”

Aside from spiritual pursuits, the 15 monastics at her Songdhammakalyani Monastery visit prisoners, aid the poor and infirm, and maintain other links with the surrounding community near Nakhon Pathom in central Thailand. Regularly they make alms rounds, a timeless tradition of food offerings by the faithful who are then blessed by the monks.

To the north, in the shadows of the country’s highest mountain, hundreds of civil servants, businessmen, villagers, and others regularly flock to an idyllic monastery to hear talks by Venerable Nandanyani, a bhikkhuni and onetime mathematician. Families attend a weekend religion “camp” on the monastery grounds. A bhikkhuni leads a group of men and women in the slow motions of walking meditation.

Seated below a statue of the Buddha, the abbess energetically explains why ordination of women is vital, punctuating her words with thumbs-up gestures. It enables individuals to probe Buddhism’s depths and live the full monastic life, she says, and also allows intimate communication between female clergy and laywomen unhindered by the barriers of sex and traditional propriety between women and monks.

## South Korean man gets 12 years for slashing U.S. ambassador

By Hyung-jin Kim  
The Associated Press

**S**EOUL, South Korea — A Seoul court has handed a 12-year prison sentence to a South Korean man who slashed and seriously injured the U.S. ambassador during a March forum.

Kim Ki-jong was convicted of attempted murder, assaulting a foreign envoy, and obstruction, according to court spokesman Joon Young Maeng.

Both Kim and the prosecution may appeal, Maeng said. Prosecutors had previously asked for a 15-year prison term.

Kim slashed Mark Lippert during a breakfast forum in Seoul, leaving deep gashes on the envoy’s face and arm.

Lippert was treated for five days at a Seoul hospital.

Kim has described himself as an anti-U.S. activist. He told police that his assault was meant to protest annual U.S.-South Korean military drills but that he did not intend to kill the ambassador.

The drills, which are meant as a deterrent against North Korean attack, are a major source of friction on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang says they are practice for a northward invasion to topple the dictatorship that has ruled the country since its founding in 1948. U.S. and South Korean officials say the drills are defensive in nature.

Police said Kim attempted to kill Lippert because he knifed him more than twice with a force that was enough to penetrate the ambassador’s arm as he tried to block the attack.

During earlier police questioning, Kim also said South Korea is a semi-colony of the U.S. and that North Korea has an independent, self-reliant government, according to Seoul police. Shortly after his arrest, Kim shouted that the U.S.-South Korea war games were an obstacle against a Korean unification.

The Korean Peninsula remains in a technical state of war since the 1950-1953 Korean War ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty. About 28,500 American soldiers are deployed in South Korea to deter potential aggression from North Korea.



**CAUSTIC CORRUPTION.** Smoke billows from the site of an explosion that reduced a parking lot filled with new cars to charred remains near a warehouse in northeastern China’s Tianjin municipality. Chinese authorities say they’ve ended the search for the remaining missing in the massive August 12 explosions at chemical warehouses, setting the final death toll at 173 in China’s worst industrial disaster in years. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan, File)

## Final death toll set at 173 in China warehouse explosion

By Christopher Bodeen  
The Associated Press

**B**EIJING — Chinese authorities ended the search for the remaining eight missing in a massive chemical warehouse explosion, setting the final death toll at 173 in China’s worst industrial disaster in years.

The announcement on the Tianjin city government’s microblog said there was no hope of finding the eight people, and the court will now start issuing death certificates.

“After thorough investigations by all parties, it is certain that there is no possibility of survivors,” said the statement.

The eight include five firefighters — underscoring the explosion’s status as the worst ever disaster for Chinese first responders — more than 100 of whom were killed, including police officers. Among firefighters, a total of 104 were killed.

Investigations into the August 12 blasts at the Ruihai International Logistics warehouses showed they were located closer to homes than permitted and stored much more hazardous material than authorized, including 700 tons of highly toxic sodium cyanide.

A series of massive explosions late at night shattered windows and tore facades off buildings for miles around, while launching debris including heavy steel storage canisters into nearby communities with the force of an artillery shell. Disgruntled homeowners have held numerous angry protests demanding the government buy back their apartments, saying they are unlivable.

The disaster has raised questions about corruption and government efficiency, potentially tarnishing the communist government led by President Xi Jinping, who has made those two issues a hallmark of his administration.

Authorities are investigating malfeasance in the issuing of permits and regulation of the company, and have detained 12 of its employees and executives. They include the primary owner, who was on the board of a state-owned company and kept his ownership of Ruihai hidden as a silent partner.

Also detained as part of the investigation are 11 government officials, while the head of the government body in charge of industrial safety, Yang Dongliang, has been placed under investigation for corruption.

Yang had previously worked for 18 years in Tianjin in state industry and local government, rising to executive vice mayor.

Authorities say they have sealed all waterways leading out of the blast zone to curb cyanide contamination as teams in hazmat suits clean up hazardous debris.

According to the Tianjin Environmental Protection Bureau, water samples inside the disaster zone have shown levels of cyanide as high as 20 times above that considered safe. No cyanide has been detected in nearby seawater or areas outside the 1.8-mile radius quarantine zone.



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