Myanmar – Minority Rights Neglected in Civilian-Military Struggle for Power

In November 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won peaceful elections. The authoritarian/military regime that had been power for 50 years ceded some control, but the NLD must still contend with a recalcitrant military, so the rights of religious minorities have been neglected. As a result, the already dire conditions these minorities face have worsened.

The most serious conflict is between Buddhists (almost 90 percent of the population) and Muslims from the Rakhine region. These Muslims, who identify as Rohingya, insist their roots in Myanmar go back centuries. However, the Myanmar government views them as recent Bengali migrants who compete for scarce resources and should be expelled. The government denies citizenship to the 1.2 million Rohingya making them “stateless,” and placing restrictions on movement, marriage, number of children, residence, property ownership, and employment. The Rohingya are vulnerable to human trafficking, abuse, and sexual violence.

Anti-Muslim violence is fueled by some hardline Buddhists who seek to curtail the rights of Muslims. Many incidents of anti-Muslim violence were sparked by accusations against one individual that spread to vigilante justice against entire communities. Since 2012, more than 1,000 people have died. In 2015, militant Buddhists succeeded in pushing through four race and religion laws that would regulate conversions, marriages and births, and generally restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists.

In October 2016, a severe government crackdown followed an attack by a few Rohingya on a border patrol. Some 60,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh over the ensuing months. They were confined to squalid refugee camps with limited access to food and essential services, like health care. Previously, thousands had fled to Thailand or on overcrowded boats to Malaysia and Indonesia. This exodus sparked a crisis in the region as neighboring countries struggled to deal with the influx of Rohingya. Malaysia called Myanmar’s actions against Rohingya a “genocide;” one UN commissioner called them “most likely” crimes against humanity. Yet the NLD has been unable to take effective measures to stem the violence against Rohingya and other minorities. Indeed a prominent Muslim lawyer, who was advising Aung San Suu Kyi on possible changes to the constitution, was assassinated in broad daylight in January 2017.

Longstanding tensions between ethnic/tribal minorities (who generally live along the borders) and the Burman majority have erupted into armed conflicts, some taking on religious overtones. The Kachin, who are 95 percent Christian, have fought with the government for years over the right to their land and its resources. In 2011, a tenuous ceasefire broke, causing scores of deaths and some 200,000 were displaced. Bombings and attacks by military against the Kachin Independence Army continue. Often civilians, including thousands in refugee camps, are caught in the crossfire. Churches and villages have been destroyed. Women have been raped and young Kachin men forcibly recruited by the warring factions.

Other ethnic groups, e.g. Kayah, Shan, and Chin (many of whom are also Christian), live in buffer zones where they have been persecuted or forced to labor for the military. They have been fighting for equality and freedom since 1948, resisting the loss of their language and culture by “Burmanization.” Many have likewise become refugees.

Many religious leaders voiced concern over the religious framing of the violence. A U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops delegation visited the region in 2015 to assess the situation facing refugees, many of whom are religious minorities from Myanmar. Pope Francis spoke out against the conflict, and asked for prayers for our Rohingya brothers and sisters. The Catholic Church in Myanmar, particularly Cardinal Charles Bo, has been very active in advocating for dialogue between Buddhists and Muslims and is also providing humanitarian assistance to ethnic/tribal populations, including Rohingya.