



Myanmar: Religious Minorities Besieged

The February 1, 2021 coup by the Tatmadaw, Myanmar’s military, halted the country’s nascent efforts toward democratic government and the protection of human rights that often accompanies this trend. Before the coup, in 2017, the Tatmadaw’s relentless violence against Rohingya Muslims caused over 600,000 Rohingya men, women, and children to flee and seek shelter in Bangladesh, a poor country ill equipped to handle this massive, forced migration. The United Nations called the military’s crackdown on the Rohingya to be “textbook ethnic cleansing.”

Since the coup, the military has stepped up its attacks, targeting Christians, ethnic minorities, and even Buddhists who oppose their draconian rule as well as Muslims. Over 25,000 people have been arrested by the military and over 4,000 killed, a number of them religious minorities. More than 220 Christian churches and other religious buildings have been destroyed or damaged since February 2021.

For example, prominent Christian pastor, Rev. Dr. Hkalam Samson, who came to the U.S. to attend an International Religious Freedom Summit, was arrested upon his return to Myanmar and is currently serving a six year sentence on baseless charges of “terrorism, unlawful association, and

inciting opposition to the military regime.”

In November 2023, the military attacked Christ the King Cathedral and its pastoral center in Loikaw diocese. At that time, the compound was housing over 1,000 people displaced from the fighting. After repeated shelling, all the people and religious were forced to flee. The bishop of Loikaw estimated that 80% of the population in his diocese, many of whom are Christian, have been displaced and half of the parishes have had to be abandoned.

Myanmar’s population is about 88% Buddhist, 6% Christian, and 4% Muslim. Christians (Karen, Kachin, Shan, and Chin) are often targeted because of their ethnic minority status as they live in the border states and are not the Burman majority ethnic group who occupy the central plain.

Ethnic groups, with large numbers of Christians, have historically suffered discrimination and violation of religious freedom and human rights as they tend to support a more democratic vision of the country where human rights are protected.

Some of these ethnic groups are armed and have been fighting since 1948 for equality and justice against the dominant military, resisting the loss of their culture, defending the right to their land and its rich resources. In 2015, militant

Buddhists passed laws that regulate conversions, marriages and births, and generally restrict religious freedom of non-Buddhists.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, by the end of 2023, the 2021 coup and ensuing violence has led to 2.6 million people being internally displaced (some multiple times) and thousands of others having fled to Thailand, India, and other countries. The UNOCHA reports 18.6 million (a third of the population) are in dire need of humanitarian assistance due to lack of food, clean water, shelter, a collapsed economy, and failing health and education systems.

While the military ruled from 1962 to 2011, there was a 10 year period when Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party achieved some power through peaceful elections and allowed certain freedoms as they tried to push for political, economic, and social reforms, despite the military retaining considerable control in the government and over resources.

Young people remember that period of relative freedom and many have united in their opposition to the military, joining ethnic armed groups (EAGs), people's defense forces, or the Civil Disobedience Movement. In October 2023, EAGs coordinated nationwide operations and scored victories against the Tatmadaw so that the amount of territory controlled by the military has shrunk significantly.

The persecution of religious minorities and violations of their human rights has

led Burma/Myanmar to be designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by both the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom since 1999. The CPC designation is for those countries that are deemed to have ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The surge of violence, since February 2021, shows this designation is warranted due to reports of rape, murder, arson, mass arrests, and extrajudicial killings, all targeting the country's religious minorities.

Pope Francis, in his Angelus remarks and Urbi et Orbi messages, has repeatedly expressed his closeness to the people of Burma, a country he visited in 2017. In January 2024, he acknowledged the suffering there and called to "transform weapons of destruction into instruments for the growth of humanity and justice" and appealed for more humanitarian aid to be permitted into the country. Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon, an active advocate for interfaith dialogue surrounding the crisis, continues to call for rejection of hatred and ethnic conflict.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops encourages ongoing humanitarian support for those suffering within Burma and in surrounding countries. They call for durable solutions for all those people from Burma who are part of a protracted, national and regional crisis of forced displacement affecting over 2.6 million people. The bishops urge an end to conflicts that violate the rights of these religious minorities and a resolution of the root causes of the forced displacement and the conflicts.