

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	779
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	US. Department of State
Titel:	2023 Report on International Religious Freedom
Udgivet:	3. juli 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. juli 2024

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burma

Burma

In February 2021, the military overthrew the democratically elected civilian government, declaring a state of emergency and creating a State Administration Council (SAC), a military-run administrative organization that assumed all executive, legislative, and judicial functions, led by armed forces Commander-in-Chief (CINC) Min Aung Hlaing. In opposition to the SAC, several democratically elected parliamentarians from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other prodemocracy political parties formed the Committee Representing the Union Parliament (CRPH). Other SAC opponents formed the self-proclaimed “National Unity Government” (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC). Some NUG, CRPH, and NUCC members are in exile.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2008 constitution was drafted by a previous military regime and, according to the SAC, remains in force following the military coup. The constitution guarantees every citizen “the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality, or health and to the other provisions of this constitution.” The constitution prohibits speech or acts insulting or defaming any religion or religious beliefs.

As was the case in previous years, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents as being based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. During the year, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups. Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that in January, regime forces bombed Lu Thaw Township’s Laywa village in Kayin State, hitting a church and killing five persons, including a child, a Baptist pastor, and a Roman Catholic bishop. According to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), from February 2021 to April 2023, the regime established military camps on at least 110 religious properties in as many as 12 states and regions, using these properties as interrogation and detention centers and the occupants as human shields. ICJ reported authorities arrested some monks when they refused to allow regime forces to set up military bases in their monastic compounds. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a human rights organization based in Thailand and Burma, as of December 31, the military regime had detained a total of 144 religious leaders, including 123 Buddhist monks and 20 Christian leaders and clerics, for participating in protests since the 2021 coup. Regime authorities detained 14 of the 123 Buddhist monks during the year. The regime also detained one Muslim leader. On July 3, media outlets reported regime police and soldiers raided an Eid al-Adha celebration in a Muslim ward of Yangon District, seizing animals intended for religious sacrifice. In April, a court sentenced Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, a prominent Kachin Baptist pastor and religious freedom advocate, to six years in prison in a closed-door trial with no lawyer present. In October, the Catholic Archbishop of Yangon, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, gave a homily in which he stated, “Nowhere in Asia is the Christian faith journey more challenged than in Myanmar.” At least 104 Buddhist and 16 Christian leaders remained in detention across the country at year’s end.

According to local media, some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups in areas under EAO control. Muslim-majority Rohingya advocacy groups in Rakhine State reported continued harassment and at times physical violence at the hands of the ethnic Rakhine and Buddhist-majority EAO, the Arakan Army (AA). For example, the London-based Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) reported that

in December, members of the AA killed a Rohingya Muslim high school student at the AA-controlled Nurular security outpost on the Burma-Bangladesh border. Also in December, BHRN reported the AA had seized more than 100 acres of Rohingya Muslim-owned land in Kyauktaw Township in Rakhine State and subsequently evicted its inhabitants.

There were continued reports of criticism related to assistance to or sympathy for the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as foreigners, primarily because of their religious identification with Islam, irrespective of citizenship or historical and personal ties to the country accorded under previous governments. There were also continued reports of Buddhist nationalist groups voicing antipathy and urging violence towards Muslims. According to a local monitoring group report, self-declared nationalist and anti-Muslim monk Wirathu visited Tharyarwaddy Township, Bago Region, where he instructed residents and monks to form vigilante groups to defend “[the Bamar] race and [the Buddhist] religion.”

Senior U.S. government officials consistently voiced concern publicly and privately regarding religious freedom in the country. They also engaged on social media, calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions. Concerns raised included the plight of predominantly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, who the U.S. Secretary of State determined in 2022 faced crimes against humanity and genocide at the hands of Burma’s military. U.S. officials separately raised hardships facing communities in areas not dominated by the Bamar majority, who are predominately Buddhist, in Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Shan, and Chin States amid escalating violence. The U.S. government pressed for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom. U.S. embassy exchange programs continued to prioritize recruitment efforts to increase ethnic and religious diversity. Embassy representatives advocated religious freedom and tolerance with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Since 1999, Burma has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the Act.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at approximately 57.1 million (midyear 2023). Other sources, including Singapore-based DataReportal, estimate the population at 54.4 million. According to the 2014 census, approximately 88 percent the population are Theravada Buddhists. The 2014 census excluded Rohingya from its count. Approximately 6 percent are Christians, primarily Baptists, Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several other small Protestant denominations. Muslims, mostly Sunni, comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. There are also small communities of Hindus, Jews, practitioners of traditional Chinese faiths, and animists. Prior to the military-led security operation in October 2016 in Rakhine State, NGOs and the deposed civilian government estimated the predominately Sunni Muslim Rohingya population to be 1.1 million. According to the United Nations, there are an estimated 630,000 stateless Rohingya in Rakhine State, with 153,600 displaced. As of June 30, Bangladesh hosted approximately 968,000 Rohingya refugees. In addition, a significant number of Rohingya reside in Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and India, with smaller numbers domiciled in Thailand, Indonesia, and Nepal.

There is a significant linkage between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine/Arakanese, Mon, and numerous other minority ethnic groups. Various forms of Christianity are dominant among the

Kachin, Chin, and Naga minority ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen (also known as Kayin) and Karenni (also known as Kayah) minority ethnic groups, although some Karen and Karenni are Buddhist or Muslim. Citizens of South Asian ancestry, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some belong to Christian denominations, including Catholicism and Anglicanism. Ethnic Rohingya and Kamane in Rakhine State, as well as a small percentage of ethnic majority Bamar and ethnic Indians in Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Magway, and Mandalay Regions, are practicing Muslims, predominantly Sunni. Chinese ethnic minority groups generally practice Buddhism and traditional Chinese religions, and, to a much lesser extent, Islam and Christianity. Some small ethnic groups in the highland regions are animists.

Section II.

Status of Government and Military Regime Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The 2008 constitution states every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice his or her religious beliefs. The constitution limits those rights if they threaten public order, health, morality, or other constitutional provisions. It further provides to all citizens the right to profess and practice their religion, if not contrary to laws on security, law and order, community peace, or public order and morality.

The law prohibits deliberate and malicious speech or acts intended to outrage or wound the religious feelings “of any class” by insulting or defaming its religion or religious beliefs. It also prohibits injuring, defiling, or trespassing on any place of worship or burial grounds with the intent to insult religion.

Whether secular or religious, all organizations, including local and international NGOs, must by law register with authorities to obtain official status, which is required for organizations to gain title to land, obtain construction permits, and conduct religious activities. Registration involves submitting detailed information about the organization’s activities, finances, and members, as well as other requirements. To act as an organization without complying with the legal requirement to register may result in a prison term of up to five years or a fine of more than 5 million kyat (\$1,500) or both.

The law bars members of any religious order, including monks, pastors, priests, and imams, from running for public office, and the constitution bars members of religious orders from voting. The government restricts by law the political activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*). The constitution forbids “the abuse of religion for political purposes.” The Election Law states that a candidate’s parents must be citizens at the time of the candidate’s birth; authorities have denied citizenship to most Rohingya, thus precluding most Muslim-majority Rohingya from running for office and achieving political representation the country.

Although there is no official state religion, the constitution states that the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The constitution also “recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this Constitution.”

The law bans any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC or Ma Ha Na), a government-financed and currently military-controlled body that

oversees Buddhist affairs across the country. The government appoints the Ma Ha Na's 47 members.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture's Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversees the government's relations with Buddhist monks and schools. Religious education is not included in public schools, although Buddhist-majority state schools often start the school day with a Buddhist prayer.

There are 1,484 monastic or Dhamma schools, run by monasteries and nunneries in all states and regions of the country, serving approximately 285,000 students, or 4 percent of the total school-aged population during the year. Those that are officially registered use the official state primary and middle school curricula but also teach Buddhist culture and ways of life as part of their standard curricula.

The country's race and religion protection laws remain in effect. One law bans polygamy, making it a criminal offense to have more than one spouse. A marriage law specifically for Buddhist women stipulates notification and registration requirements for marriages between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women, obligations that non-Buddhist husbands must observe, as well as penalties for non-compliance. A religious conversion law regulates conversion through an extensive application and approval process through a township-level Religious Board for Religious Conversion. The law, however, is rarely applied, and many townships do not have conversion boards. The law states applicants must be older than 18 and must undergo a waiting period of up to 180 days; if the applicant still wishes to convert, the board issues a certificate of religious conversion. A population control law allows authorities to designate special zones where they may apply population control measures, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing.

To register a Buddhist marriage, a couple must appear in court with their respective national identity cards (which identifies their religion as Buddhist) and attest they are married. Buddhist marriages may be registered at any court with relevant jurisdiction. Christian marriages are regulated under a Christian marriage act dating from 1872 and, to be recognized, must be officiated by a Christian religious figure registered with the Supreme Court. There are only a handful of Christian ministers or priests officially registered in the country. The officiating church must submit details of a marriage from its registry to the Supreme Court within three months of the marriage ceremony.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

MILITARY REGIME PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

As was the case in previous years, it was often difficult to categorize incidents as being based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. Throughout the year, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups that, according to media, had increased under the military regime. According to local and international NGOs, there continued to be almost complete impunity for regime security forces that had committed or continued to commit abuses, including what some NGOs described as genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim. One NGO analysis of news sources reported the regime had attacked cultural and religious sites across the country where civilians seek refuge. Religious leaders expressed concern that the regime could misconstrue religious assembly as prodemocracy events.

According to the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), a grassroots Karen-led human rights organization established in 1992 and operating throughout the rural southeast, on the evening of January 1, local armed groups and regime troops fought near Lay Naw village, Waw Ray Township, Dooplaya District, in Karen State. After the fighting, the regime conducted airstrikes in Lay Naw

village, destroying villagers' houses and the village monastery. As of October 24, the regime had carried out 14 attacks during the year, including airstrikes, on religious buildings in Kayin State, killing or injuring four religious leaders and damaging or destroying at least seven buildings. According to Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), during the year, regime air strikes and artillery shelling partially damaged or destroyed at least 15 Christian churches and 10 buildings used for religious purposes in Chin State.

RFA reported that on January 13, regime forces bombed a church in Lu Thaw Township's Laywa village, Kayin State, killing five persons, including a child, a Baptist pastor, and a Catholic bishop.

On January 15, media reported regime forces burned the historic Assumption Church in the predominantly Christian village of Chan Thar in Ye-U Township, Sagaing Region. The soldiers entered the village the previous night, set fire to houses, and then occupied the church before setting it ablaze. The same day, soldiers also set fire to the nearby convent of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary, forcing residents to flee. The Catholic Church urged the country's military to protect places of worship following these attacks.

On March 7, a prominent Buddhist monk, Sayadaw Agga Wuntha, reportedly disappeared after regime forces raided a village in Sagaing Region where he had taken refuge. Media outlets speculated regime troops may have killed Sayadaw. Several other protestors whom regime troops arrested along with Sayadaw were also missing. Sayadaw was known for leading protests in support of pro-resistance movements; in 2021, authorities placed him on the regime's warrant list under the Sedition Act.

According to a report by the NGO International Crisis Group released in March, the country's Buddhist monks and nuns largely remained outside the antiregime, prodemocracy movement since the 2021 coup, in part because of divided allegiances within their community and in part because those resisting the military regime were using violence.

According to multiple news outlets, on March 12, local resistance forces discovered 30 bodies, including those of three Buddhist monks, in Nantnein village, Pinlaung Township, southern Shan State, after a reported March 11 regime airstrike on the village. Regime forces later raided the village monastery that housed internally displaced persons (IDPs) and reportedly fatally shot them at close range. The regime denied any responsibility for civilian casualties, stating Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces used civilians as human shields. The NUG, the Karenni State Consultative Council, and the Pa-O National Federal Council reported regime military forces had tortured these victims before executing them.

On April 15, according to CHRO, a regime military aircraft dropped bombs on a Catholic church in Tiphul village of Hakha Township in Chin State, even though there was no known history of resistance or armed conflict within the village or nearby. CHRO stated the inability of the regime's military to make ground advances had prompted the regime to resort to indiscriminate airstrikes. CHRO also said the airstrikes targeted religious buildings that provide shelter to displaced communities.

According to the Karenni Human Rights Group, a Karenni-led grassroots human rights organization founded in 2016 and operating in all Kayah State townships, regime troops damaged or destroyed a total of 128 structures, including two religious buildings, between April and June. According to members of civil society, the military regime had attacked 46 religious buildings in Kayah State since the 2021 coup, including 19 during 2023. Residents of 29 of 41 parishes in Kayah State were displaced due to the conflict.

According to AAPP, the military regime had killed 32 religious leaders since the coup, including 16 Buddhist monks, three nuns, and two novice monks, as well as 10 pastors and one imam. Eighteen of these killings occurred during the year. AAPP said "other armed groups" had killed at least 11 religious leaders since the coup. Six of them – five monks and one Buddhist nun – were killed during the year. AAPP said it used the term "armed groups" because the identity of the perpetrators was unverified, and the term included both regime and antiregime groups.

The Myanmar Witness project of the United Kingdom-based Centre for Information Resilience assessed that regime military airstrikes were responsible for seven of 10 attacks on churches in Chin State from March through August, including airstrikes that caused major physical damage. The airstrikes occurred in townships the regime placed under martial law on February 2. Among the damaged churches were the Khuafo Baptist Church in Khuafo; Presbyterian Church of Myanmar in Tlango; Malsawm Baptist Church in Hakha; Ramthlo Baptist Church in Falam; and Khufo Baptist Church in Thantlang, according to the Myanmar Witness project.

AAPP reported that on October 29, the regime's military set fire to a church and at least 400 houses in Thantlang, Falam and Mindat Townships in Chin State. The military regime denied responsibility for the arson that occurred in Thantlang Township, but a spokesman for the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party told the public on social media, "to see the Thantlang incident as an example of what is to come." On November 20, the regime's military bombed and destroyed the Mara Evangelical Church in Chin State.

On October 23, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo gave a homily in which he stated, "Nowhere in Asia is the Christian faith journey more challenged than in Myanmar. Our small flock is currently scattered due to manmade crises, causing multidimensional crises and immense suffering.... Homes have vanished, and churches have borne the brunt of cruelty.... We will see all wounds healed, and a new dawn of hope, peace, and justice will shine upon every long-suffering nation."

According to AAPP, by year's end, the military regime had detained a total of 144 religious leaders, of whom 123 were Buddhist monks and 20 were Christian, and one Muslim, for participating in protests since the coup. At least 104 monks and 16 Christian leaders remained in detention across the country. Of these, 60 Buddhist monks were facing trial and 44 had already been convicted. Nine Christian leaders were facing trial, and seven had already been sentenced by military tribunals.

On January 4, the regime released 7,012 prisoners to mark the country's 75th Independence Day. The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) news outlet reported former Union Minister of Religious Affairs Thura U Aung Ko, held at Insein Prison, was among those released.

On April 7, a court sentenced Reverend Samson, a prominent Kachin Baptist leader and religious freedom advocate, to six years in prison in a closed-door trial with no lawyer present. Prison authorities reportedly seized his personal items, including a Bible, as potential "evidence." In December 2022, the regime had detained Samson, charging him later that month under the Unlawful Association Act and the Counter-Terrorism Law for his alleged meetings with leaders of the ethnic resistance organization Kachin Independence Organization. The news agency Irrawaddy reported the Kachin Baptist Convention, of which Reverend Samson was previously president, said the regime believed his sermons were derogatory toward the military. Samson's appeal was rejected on May 3. Union of Catholic Asian News reported that on December 5, a regime court rejected Samson's second appeal for release from Myitkyina Prison in Kachin State. The military regime did not allow Samson to see or communicate with his family following his arrest, even though prison visits for other prisoners resumed on October 24.

On June 16, CHRO and media outlets reported regime soldiers abducted four Chin Christian leaders, including a pastor and three deacons, from the Presbyterian Church in Mindat, Chin State. The regime had previously allowed the church's compound to be used for the temporary shelter of IDPs from Mindat Township. The abducted religious leaders were Reverend Thang Kee Om and deacons Kee Hung, Chai Kee, and Hung Choi, who had been actively supporting IDPs. The regime accused the four religious leaders of having connections with local People's Defense Forces (PDFs). The regime reportedly tortured them during transfer to a military base in Mindat. Reverend Thang Kee Om reportedly lost consciousness and was left for dead in the jungle near the military base; he survived and departed the area. CHRO said the other three were denied family visits, and their condition at year's end was unknown. According to CHRO and various media sources, the military commander in Mindat Town was involved in the arrests but denied detaining the four when family members inquired about their whereabouts.

On June 20, Buddhist monk Thawbita, a prominent rights activist, reportedly disappeared when authorities released him after serving his four-year sentence for charges of defaming the regime leader. News reports suggested the regime's Military Security Affairs unit took him to the Nann Twin Interrogation Center. Thawbita's whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

In its October report, the ICJ estimated that regime military forces raided 64 religious sites and places of worship as of April 30. The raids on Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic sites occurred across the country in Mandalay, Sagaing, Yangon, Irrawaddy, Bago, and Magway Regions as well as in Kachin, Mon, Chin, Kayah, and Shan States.

According to media reports, throughout the year, regime military forces used a paramilitary proxy, Pyu Saw Htee militia, to conduct armed operations against resistance groups and the general public, with the help of proregime monks. For example, in November, media outlets reported that the monk U Wathawa facilitated the deployment of proregime groups to villages in Sagaing Region's Kanbalu District and provided weapons and food to proregime militia members.

According to the ICJ, from February 2021 to April 2023, the regime established military camps in at least 110 religious sites in 12 states and regions, using them as shields against resistance forces and as interrogation and detention centers. Authorities arrested some religious leaders when they refused to allow regime forces to set up on their compounds. According to the ICJ, on November 26, military forces bombed and desecrated Christ the King Cathedral's pastoral center in Kayah State, before occupying the church the next day. The center was housing 80 refugees, most of them elderly, disabled, sick, women, or children. No deaths were reported.

In September, RFA reported that since the coup, the regime had destroyed by arson and gunfire, looted, or designated as construction projects more than 200 religious buildings nationwide. RFA reported the looting and destruction appeared to be part of concerted military efforts to break the spirit of local residents opposing military rule, terrorize areas with strong anti-regime forces, and repress non-Bamar ethnic cultures in the country.

CHRO reported that on November 25, the regime's 274th Light Infantry Battalion, based in southern Chin State's Mindat Town, deliberately shelled a Baptist church, hitting it three times and injuring two civilians. A woman working for the church was among the injured, according to CHRO and media sources. On November 27, CHRO reported individuals from a regime military post in Hakha, Chin State, fired on a Christian religious compound belonging to the United Pentecostal Church, damaging the church and nearby homes.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

According to the UN Development Program, a total of 50 townships, representing 13 percent of the population of the country, were under martial law during the year, which the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) said allowed the military regime to censor religious content in media, restrict religious gatherings, and prohibit the distribution of religious materials. Reportedly, the regime used antidefamation laws to prosecute non-Buddhists, while not prosecuting Buddhist leaders who defamed other religions.

The BBC reported the regime's Ministry of Education formed two inspection teams, one for upper Burma and another for lower Burma, to inspect private high schools, including schools that taught international curricula. The ministry instructed these teams to monitor whether the schools taught Burmese language, history, and geography, as well as content on other cultures, customs, and religions. According to the BBC report, this monitoring was part of the military regime's implementation of its "Three Bs" policy: one race (Bamar), one religion (Buddhism), and one language (Burmese)

The news agency *Myanmar Now* reported that on February 13, the regime announced churches in eight townships under martial law in Chin State must submit requests at least five days in advance to host worship services, weddings, and prayer meetings, along with names of attendees. According

to CHRO, increased bombing and destruction had compelled the communities to suspend all religious services. Activities such as youth gatherings and church choir practice had also been rescheduled from evening hours to daytime because of the regime-imposed curfew in the area. Church leaders reported authorities arrested and fired on those who did not comply with the curfew.

On August 8, local and international media reported the regime arrested 13 Burmese nationals and a Swiss citizen, including a 12-year-old girl, for “harming Buddhism” through their roles in creating the film “Don’t Expect Anything!” The film, released online on July 24, criticized monks for not following Buddhist precepts. Proregime social media posts stated the film used language that “insults the morals of the monks and harms the cultural traditions of Buddhists.” A Mandalay-based monk responded: “It’s not such a bad [film]. If you watch just one scene, you might think it insults the Buddhist religion. But you will understand what the presentation is about only if you watch the entire film.”

On July 3, media outlets reported the regime raided an Eid al-Adha celebration in the Thingangyun Township of Yangon District. More than 10 regime police, soldiers, and administrative staff stopped the ceremony and seized 22 cattle and 100 goats intended for religious sacrifice. The worshippers dispersed to avoid arrest, according to the media reports.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

The regime continued to enforce at least three different laws to limit gatherings, including religious gatherings. A gathering of five or more persons, including for religious reasons, could result in charges and punishment under a natural disaster management law (three months’ to three years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both), a communicable diseases prevention and control law (six months’ imprisonment or a fine), or the penal code, for defiance of a government order (one to six months’ imprisonment or a fine). CHRO said that following the arbitrary arrest of 21 persons in Hakha town, Christian members of the community halted all church-related youth activities out of fear of arrest.

The regime’s Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture restricted non-Buddhist religious teachings to government-approved religious buildings and prohibited prayer services and religious teaching in private homes. Despite this ban, Muslims in areas with few or no mosques continued to conduct prayer services and other religious practices, such as teaching, in private homes.

According to RFA, on March 18, regime police, citing a “failure to submit guest registration,” reportedly detained 15 Muslims, including two clerics, during an award ceremony at a madrasa in Chauk Township, Magway Region. Reportedly, the two clerics were subsequently released, while the whereabouts of the other 13 individuals was unclear at year’s end.

In Yangon’s Shwepyithar Township, residents told DVB that on October 20, regime-appointed ward administrators started banning Christians in some wards from gathering to worship at homes. The administrators said worshippers should attend churches instead of gathering to worship at home, but some elderly, workers, and individuals with mobility issues said that option was not viable for them.

In January, Fortify Rights, an independent NGO based in Southeast Asia, along with 16 individual complainants from Burma filed a criminal complaint with the Federal Public Prosecutor General of Germany under the principle of universal jurisdiction against senior generals in Burma’s military for committing genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017, as well as crimes against humanity related to the military junta’s coup in February 2021. The complaint alleged the military systematically killed, raped, tortured, imprisoned, disappeared, persecuted, and committed other acts that amount to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in violation of the German Code of Crimes against International Law. In November, however, the German Federal Prosecutor, declined to investigate and dismissed the criminal complaint.

Fortify Rights reported that in April, the International Court of Justice issued a ruling rejecting the military regime's request for an extension in a genocide trial brought by the Gambia against Burma in 2019. In addition, on December 4, Fortify Rights urged International Criminal Court (ICC) member states to refer the situation in Burma to the ICC Chief Prosecutor pursuant to Article 14 of the Rome Statute, which governs prosecution referrals. The NGO stated that, not only had there been precedent for the Chief Prosecutor to investigate and potentially prosecute serious international crimes committed in Burma since 2018, but also that the NUG had filed a declaration with the ICC Registrar in July 2021 to accept ICC jurisdiction for international crimes committed in Burma from July 2002 onwards.

As of March, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported regime authorities continued to confine approximately 147,000 Rohingya in 24 displacement camps in the country. Restrictions on in-country movement of Rohingya remained extensive, with authorities requiring them to carry special documents and obtain travel permits even to travel within Rakhine State, where most Rohingya resided. While regime authorities discussed with Bangladesh, under People's Republic of China mediation, the possible return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, no returns occurred by year's end. According to multiple humanitarian organizations, including HRW, there was no possibility for the voluntary, dignified, safe, and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya under the military regime.

Based on media reports, between January and November, the regime arrested at least 2,079 Rohingya adults and children in different parts of the country. Authorities sentenced almost all the adults to two years in prison and sent the children to the Nget Aw San Youth Detention Center in Twantae Township, Yangon Region. The largest number of arrests occurred on March 23-24, when authorities arrested 150 Rohingya in Mon State.

According to UNHCR, during the year, 6,500 Rohingya attempted land and sea journeys to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, and 569 were reported as dead or missing. Local media in Rakhine State reported that human smuggling of Rohingya to Malaysia and Indonesia continued. Given lack of access to affected areas or information on the often-clandestine land movements, UNHCR estimated the actual figures were likely higher.

According to news reports and representatives of ethnic and religious communities, during the year, the regime tightly restricted external access, including by UN, humanitarian, and media organizations, to some Bamar-majority areas such as Sagaing and Magway Regions where ethnic and religious minorities also lived. The United Nations reported that as of December 25, more than 2,310,900 persons had been displaced due to conflict emerging since the coup, including from ethnic and religious minority areas such as Kayah, Karen, Shan, and Chin States. Bamar-majority areas such as Sagaing and Magway Regions also saw a significant rise in IDPs. According to the Karenni Civil Society Network, as of December 3, more than 282,615 persons had been displaced due to fighting and other conflict since May 2021, of whom 95 percent were Karenni Christians. According to CHRO, as of April, a total of 60,956 persons, mostly Christians, had crossed into India, and members of the displaced Christian Chin community were living in 12 different places in Mizoram State and in New Delhi.

The regime continued to restrict the right to freedom of association, including by religious groups. After the coup, the regime required banks to report on all foreign funds received by both local and international NGOs. According to various religious groups and NGOs, the process to register an NGO remained lengthy and was often unsuccessful.

According to CHRO, the military regime had not issued any permits to Christian groups to register or own land and properties. All such registration applications remained pending at year's end, with some pending for more than 17 years.

According to representatives of some civil society groups, NGOs refrained from registering because doing so would require providing extensive information on staff to the regime, which they preferred not to do out of fear the regime would target the individuals for detention. A 2022 law imposed criminal penalties for organizations that failed to register of up to five years in prison. One

NGO leader said the 2022 law left civil society organizations in a dilemma, hesitant to register because they considered the regime illegitimate, but concerned they could not continue operating without registering. In May, the UN Human Rights Office and the ICJ published a joint report on the registration law stating it was “incompatible with international human rights standards” and that it had a “negative impact on the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms.”

According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the registration law, which regulates both domestic and international NGOs, restricted freedom of association by mandating registration, enforcing criminal penalties, and severely restricting legitimate civil society activities.

Religious groups throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and especially Muslims, continued to report difficulties and delays that could last for years in obtaining permits to allow construction of and repairs to religious buildings. Buddhist leaders said obtaining such permission was more difficult for non-Buddhist groups. Representatives of religious groups said the need for multiple permissions, unclear authority, and interminable delays in responses to requests for permits led them to construct places of worship without the required permissions. Others said it was necessary to pay bribes for permits.

In October, media outlets reported the regime had approved plans for construction of a Russian Orthodox church in Dagon Myothit (North) Township in Yangon to mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Burma and Russia. Regime authorities said the regime would support the project, covering 1.25 acres of land, by providing municipal water and electricity. The approval reportedly reciprocated permission for the 2022 construction of a Burmese Buddhist temple in Moscow.

On February 3, CHRO reported that on February 2, regime troops in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, had occupied the Believers’ Church. As of December, the regime also continued to occupy the adjacent United Pentecostal Church, which it seized in October 2022.

Media reported that on April 4, regime-affiliated local authorities in Nattalin Township, Bago Region, forcibly demolished an old Muslim cemetery without consulting the Muslim community or Islamic religious institutions. According to a local resident, a community member had purchased and donated the land decades ago. The government had closed the cemetery for an extended period and planned to build a hospital on the site, despite opposition from the original landowner’s heirs and the local Muslim community.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to local media and NGOs, there were no reports the regime held perpetrators accountable for crimes against members of religious minority communities.

The regime’s General Administration Department continued to take legal action against Rohingya traveling internally without documentation, a reversal of a 2020 order that had relaxed rules for internal Rohingya travel. In Rakhine State, according to the United Nations and media reports, the movement of members of various ethnic and religious groups, particularly Rohingya remained restricted by the regime during the year. Depending on the township, restrictions usually included a requirement that travelers submit an immigration form to local authorities. A traveler could obtain this form only from the township of origin’s immigration and national registration department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and letters from two guarantors. The form typically authorized travel for two to four weeks but was issued almost exclusively for medical emergencies, according to human rights activists. Sources stated that obtaining travel permits often involved extortion and bribes. Muslims throughout the country still faced restrictions on travel into, out of, and within Rakhine State and reportedly feared authorities would not allow them to leave Rakhine State if they were to travel there.

Due to the continuing regime-imposed restrictions of movement on Rohingya, many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools. Authorities continued to bar any university students

who did not possess citizenship cards from graduating, which disproportionately affected students from religious minorities, particularly Muslims. These students could attend classes and take examinations but could not receive diplomas unless they had a citizenship card, the application for which required some religious minorities to identify as a “foreign” ethnic minority.

According to an October 11 BHRN report, doctors and nurses at Rakhine State’s Buthitaung Civil Hospital subjected Rohingya Muslim patients to discrimination and abuse. Hospital staff did not speak the Rohingya language, used the derogatory term “*kalar*” (referring to persons of Indian origin) when referring to Rohingya Muslims, and physically abused some Rohingya Muslim patients.

According to observers, the law banning polygamy and making it a criminal offense to have more than one spouse disproportionality affected the country’s Muslim population.

According to NGOs, legal restrictions continued to impede the ability of Rohingya and some unrecognized, “unofficial” ethnic minorities, including Chinese Burmese, Anglo-Burmese, and Gurkhas, among others, to pursue livelihoods and education, access markets, hospitals, and other services, and engage other communities. Sources stated individuals stereotyped by regime security forces as appearing to be Muslim continued to receive additional scrutiny of their movements regardless of their actual religion; obtaining travel permits often involved extortion and bribes.

Sources said the Supreme Court rarely acted in a timely manner to recognize Christian marriages, making it effectively impossible for a Christian marriage to be legally recognized. In practice, however, Christian couples used the church certificate to establish marital status and were not subjected to legal consequences for noncompliance with the 1872 Christian marriage act.

Buddhists continued to make up nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service. Applications for civil service and military positions continued to require the applicant to list his or her religion.

Authorities continued to require citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. The cards indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens were also required to indicate their religion on certain applications for official documents such as passports, although passports themselves did not indicate the bearer’s religion. Members of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, continued to face problems obtaining identification and citizenship cards. Some Muslims reported they were required to indicate a “foreign” ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on their application for a citizenship card. For those who identified their religion as Muslim, their ethnicity automatically printed as “Bengali” on their national identity card, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

The regime halted the previous call under the civilian government for Rohingya to participate in the citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs). NGOs reported that under the civilian government, authorities coerced or pressured Rohingya to apply for NVCs, which effectively identified Rohingya as “foreigners.” Originally scheduled to run from May 2021 to November 2022, the NVC project was still underway as of the end of the year. NGO reports contained no mention of authorities issuing household registration lists to Rohingya or unofficial minorities through the program.

The Global New Light of Myanmar, a regime-controlled newspaper, reported the regime had begun implementing an “e-ID” electronic identification system for census data collection. As of August 10, authorities had reportedly collected biographic data on more than 51 million persons and more than 13 million households, in addition to biometric data on more than 700,000 individuals. The project aims to assign unique 10-digit identification numbers to citizens, age 10 and above, and it only grants national identifications to those eligible for citizenship.

According to local media and NGOs, including International Crisis Group, the military regime intensified its use of hate speech to instill fear of potential threats to the country’s Buddhism and national sovereignty. Researchers stated the regime tried to position itself as a pious institution with

strong support from the Buddhist monastic community that was serving the role of protector and promoter of Buddhist practice and philosophy. It also depicted coup leader General Min Aung Hlaing as a Buddhist warrior-king and suggested the country was susceptible to a Muslim takeover, linking the ousted NLD government and the anti-coup movement to Islam. These narratives were echoed on various social media platforms, including TikTok, where troops used videos to threaten violence against anti-coup protesters. The military and its supporters also shifted to Telegram after Facebook and YouTube removed their channels for engaging in hate speech and disinformation targeting various groups, including the Rohingya community, the NLD, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy civilian protesters.

Regime-controlled media continued to frequently report on officials and military personnel paying respect to Buddhist monks, offering donations at pagodas, and organizing “people’s donations” of money and food. In February, members of the Myanmar Patriotic Monks Union, nationalists, and supporters of the military regime held sign boards stating, “Congratulations to the two-year anniversary of the State Administration Council,” “Protect Buddhist monks,” “Army and People together,” and other signs praising the military’s leadership during rallies to commemorate the second anniversary of the coup.

On March 27, the regime held a parade in Nay Pyi Taw to mark Armed Forces Day, during which Commander-in-Chief *Min Aung Hlaing* gave a speech promising to take “lawful actions” against “terrorist groups.” Proregime Telegram channels praised the celebration as a success and shared images of the regime’s military showcasing its new weapons and being lauded as the protector of race (Bamar) and religion (Buddhism).

On August 1, 900 monks attended a regime ceremony consecrating a large Buddha statue in Nay Pyi Taw. Participants included prominent proregime monks Thanlyin Min Kyaung Sayadaw and Sitagu Sayadaw as well as 70 foreign monks. Critics described the event as a regime effort to appease the country’s predominantly Buddhist population, suggesting that the simultaneous announcement of an extension of the state of emergency for a fourth time and the consecration of the Buddha statue was not a coincidence. Members of the State Administration Council and regime supporters welcomed the consecration, praised the moral integrity and wisdom of the regime leaders, and described the day as historic.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

On August 23, Narinjara News reported traffic police were extorting money from Muslims traveling within Sittwe Town. For example, traffic police forced seven Muslims to each pay 70,000 kyat (\$21) to 150,000 kyat (\$44) for driving without licenses. Some commentators, including one Buddhist monk, criticized Narinjara News for reporting the incident, saying traffic police were merely doing their jobs.

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

According to local media, some EAOs operating in the country continued to pose a threat to other ethnic and religious minority groups.

On January 26, according to a DVB report, unidentified gunmen attacked a Buddhist monk in Kyuchaung village of Kyaikto Township, Mon State. The monk was treated at a hospital after the attack. The monk’s nephew told DVB, “He was a member of a militia before he became a monk. I haven’t been in touch with him for a long time. We are investigating which group conducted the attack.”

On September 4, media reported the Kachin Independence Army and the PDF had arrested and fatally shot Abbot U Gandham from Nungpa Monastery in Van Mak Township of Sagaing Region, sparking strong condemnation from the Shanni Nationalities Army. The motive for the killing was unknown.

A report by the Center for Arakan Studies released in August stated the Rohingya community had experienced significant changes since the rise of the United League of Arakan and its military wing, the ethnic Rakhine and Buddhist-majority EAO AA (ULA/AA) in 2018. According to the report, the ULA/AA espoused the idea of an inclusive political community and prioritized promoting social cohesion and reducing tensions between different communities. The report said these changes allowed Rohingya to explore new livelihood opportunities and travel more easily through urban and rural areas under ULA/AA control. Some Rohingya, however, reported ongoing discrimination from ULA/AA administrators and ground-level commanders.

Muslim-majority Rohingya advocacy groups also reported experiencing continued harassment and at times physical violence at the hands of the AA in Rakhine State. For example, BHRN reported that on December 8, members of the AA shot to death a Rohingya Muslim high school student Maung Hussein at the AA-controlled Nurular security outpost on the Burma-Bangladesh border. Also in December, BHRN reported the AA had seized more than 100 acres of Rohingya Muslim-owned land in Kyauktaw Township in Rakhine State and subsequently evicted the inhabitants.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of criticism related to assistance to or sympathy for the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of personal ties to the country and citizenship status accorded under previous governments, and as belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice.

On September 15, a Muslim individual shared a post on social media featuring pictures of a mosque in Shwe Taung Ward, Rakhine State. The poster stated that the mosque was an “Ancient Rakhine Mosque” dating back more than 400 years. Many Rakhine commentators disputed the claim, stating the Rakhine people are predominantly Buddhist and that they only build temples. Some Rakhine commentators also accused the poster of inciting racial tensions. A few responded by sharing images of pork curry as a form of insult.

Despite a continuing order by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee that no group or individual operate under the banner of “Ma Ba Tha,” a Buddhist ultranationalist group, some branches of the group continued to use the name Ma Ba Tha, while others used a new name, Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation.

In February, according to a local monitoring group’s report, self-declared nationalist and anti-Muslim monk Wirathu visited Tharyarwaddy Township, Bago Region, under the protection of the regime’s military. He met with local residents and monks, instructing them to form vigilante groups to defend “[the Bamar] race and [Buddhist] religion.” He also met with regime Major Kyi Myo Lwin from the Tharyarwaddy Township administration to discuss forming vigilante groups led by monks in the community. Wirathu was arrested for sedition shortly before the 2020 election but released after the regime seized power. After his release, he actively preached, published books, and led nationalist activities to “promote and protect Buddhism.” In November 2022, the regime honored him with the title of “Thiri Pyanchi” (glorious hero), a prestigious honor conferred on individuals who have made significant contributions to the country.

On March 27, vigilante leader U Wathawa led a ceremony to commemorate the 78th Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) Day with approximately 1,000 persons at the Sarsana Alinyaung Monastery in Mawtaw village, Kanbalu Township, Sagaing Region. On the same day, the National Security Youth Network sent an open letter to commemorate Armed Forces Day, stating, “Every country in the world has an army to protect its sovereignty from internal and external threats and its religion. Myanmar also has an army, navy, and air force to protect its sovereignty and religion from internal and external attacks. As long as Myanmar exists, the Tatmadaw will exist.”

On May 24, self-characterized news and business magazine *Frontier* reported that under the regime there had been a resurgence of Buddhist monastery associated Dhamma schools, both privately and publicly run, teaching a curriculum backing nationalism and military propaganda. Antiregime activists stated, “The courses amount to psychological violence ... teaching children that ... suffering is a consequence of sins we committed in past lives, not because of the regime’s injustices.”

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, senior U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations, the USAID Administrator, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and for human rights, consistently raised continuing U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom, including the plight of predominantly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State. In 2022, the U.S. Secretary of State determined that members of Burma’s military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya in 2017. During the year, the U.S. Secretary of State issued multiple statements strongly condemning the military regime in Burma and expressing support for Rohingya. These statements included one issued on August 25, the sixth anniversary of the 2017 Rohingya genocide, and expressing the United States’ continued commitment to seeking justice and accountability for the atrocities committed by the Burma military. On March 23, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom wrote on X (formerly known as Twitter), “It’s been a year since [the Secretary of State] determined members of Burma’s military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya. Today, I recommit to uplifting Rohingya voices as we work to advance religious freedom and other human rights for all the people of Burma.”

Senior U.S. officials engaged in advocacy on social media platforms, calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions and standing against violence and hate speech targeting religious minorities. For example, senior U.S. government officials raised concerns regarding hardships facing Christian minority religious communities in Kachin, northern Shan, Karen, Kayah, and Chin States amid continuing violence. On April 7, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom wrote on X, “I am deeply concerned about continued reports of members of the Burma military killing innocent civilians and desecrating churches in Chin State. We urge the military regime to reverse course and cease abuses against civilians and houses of worship.”

The U.S. government continued to press for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses, including individuals who violated religious freedom. As of December 31, the United States had sanctioned 48 entities and 87 individuals, including military leaders and their adult family members. The United States also targeted key revenue streams through designation of two of Burma’s state-owned banks and the Office of Foreign Assets Control-issued directive on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise that curtailed the regime’s access to foreign currency that it could otherwise use to procure weapons.

U.S. government officials continued to encourage international efforts to address religiously motivated violence. On August 25, the United States signed a joint statement with 12 other UN Security Council members to condemn the military regime’s continuing human rights abuses and call for the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2669 and ASEAN’s Five Point Consensus.

The United States also continued to support and engage with the UN Special Envoy on Myanmar, the UN special rapporteur on the situation for human rights in Myanmar, and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM). As of December 31, the United States had provided \$3 million in funding to the IIMM. The United States also regularly engaged with ASEAN and the ASEAN special envoy’s office, including during the September ASEAN-United States

Ministerial in Jakarta, to promote accountability for atrocities and other violations committed by the military regime and implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus reached in 2021.

U.S. government support for the Burma-Bangladesh humanitarian crisis response included more than \$410 million in fiscal year 2023, with more than \$105 million for programs in Burma and nearly \$247 million for programs in Bangladesh, including programs that benefited members of both majority and minority religious groups. Since August 2017, the U.S. government has provided nearly \$2.4 billion in humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya crisis response. Embassy officials promoted religious and ethnic inclusion during virtual meetings with the opposition NUG, CRPH, and NUCC as well as with ethnic armed organizations and other ethnic and religious leaders.

Embassy officials emphasized the need for respect for religious freedom and tolerance in their interactions with various sectors of society and through the embassy's social media accounts. Postings showcased the Chargé's visit to the historic Mahamuni Buddha Temple in Mandalay and visit to the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, where the Chargé discussed the rich history of the synagogue and the Jewish community in the country.

Embassy personnel continued to engage with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders; members of faculties of theology; and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs to advocate religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy staff traveled to Myitkyina, Kachin State, in July and met members of community-based organizations and religious communities.

The embassy also posted content on social media to engage local audiences on the importance of religious pluralism, respect and tolerance, and shared identity in democratic societies, including the recognition of minority religious holidays. Embassy posts amplifying the Chargé's trips to religious sites garnered more than 83,000 views.

The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns regarding religiously based tensions and anti-Muslim discrimination and calling for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance.

The embassy continued to prioritize ethnic and religious diversity in its exchange and scholarship programs, including participants from Shan, Wa, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups, many of whom also belonged to religious minority groups. As in prior years, the embassy worked with and supported NGOs on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance and former participants of U.S. government exchange programs in promoting tolerance and equal access to basic health care, education, and mental health resources, regardless of religious affiliation.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the Act.