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BURMA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

On February 1, 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 led by armed forces Commander-in-Chief (CINC) Min Aung Hlaing that assumed executive, legislative, and judicial functions. On February 5, democratically elected parliamentarians from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other prodemocracy political parties formed the Committee Representing the Union Parliament (CRPH) before announcing the self-proclaimed “National Unity Government” (NUG) on April 16. Governance in the country remained contested through the end of year.

Executive Summary

The 2008 constitution, drafted by the military, 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 law prohibits speech or acts insulting or defaming any religion or religious beliefs. In December, the OHCHR stated that, since the coup, regime security forces had committed “an alarming escalation of grave human rights abuses.” As was the case in previous years and following the military coup in February, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents 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. On May 24, media reported military forces bombed the Sacred Heart Church in Kayan Tharyar, Kayah State, killing four persons who had taken refuge there. According to media, on May 28, military forces fired upon the church of Saint Joseph in Demoso, Kayah State, and killed two men who were collecting food for internally displaced persons (IDPs). In April, local media reported that residents found the body of a Muslim muezzin, who was wearing a dress and lipstick, hanging in a mosque in Yangon Region. Residents said regime security forces likely had killed him. In September, regime soldiers shot and killed a Christian pastor in Chin State while he attempted to extinguish a fire started by artillery fire. In June, the prodemocracy NUG issued a statement promising to “seek justice and accountability” for crimes committed by military forces against more than 740,000 Rohingya and said if it returned to government, it would repeal a 1982 law denying citizenship to most Rohingya. In August, the NUG issued a statement in which it held the military regime responsible for having “perpetuated crimes against humanity,” including war crimes committed on the basis of religion. The UN High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that regime authorities had confined 144,000 predominantly Muslim Rohingya in camps within Rakhine State at year's end. The government enforced extensive restrictions on in-country movement of Rohingya. According to humanitarian aid organizations, regime authorities made no genuine efforts to initiate the return of Rohingya refugees. In September, regime security forces arrested 30 Rohingya traveling without documentation and sentenced them to two years in prison. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a nonprofit human rights organization, as of December 6, the regime had detained 35 Buddhist monks and nine Christian leaders since the military coup. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), established by the UN Human Rights Council to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyze evidence of the most serious international crimes and violations of international law committed in Myanmar since 2011 and to prepare files to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, continued to engage with local actors, including the NUG, to collect evidence of potential crimes but was not able to travel inside the country during the year. According to leaders of minority religious communities and human rights activists, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the inconsistent enforcement and interpretation of government regulations, in place before the coup and continuing afterward, exacerbated communal disparities during the year, with harsher outcomes reported for minority religious communities. Religious leaders also expressed concern that the regime might misconstrue religious assembly as part of prodemocracy activities.

According to local media, some armed ethnic organizations operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups, including the Arakan Army (AA), which continued to force local villagers, including Christian religious leaders, to work without pay and recruited villagers to attend military training camp. In September, gunmen shot and killed Rohingya Muslim activist and community leader Mohib Ullah in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. According to press reports, Ullah's killers were likely associated with the insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Ullah had spoken out against ARSA militancy and abuses in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

In July, the NUG announced its appointment of a Rohingya activist as an advisor to its "Ministry of Human Rights." Members of ethnic minorities said they continued to face discrimination based on their ethnicity and religion. Rohingya continued to be perceived as foreigners, irrespective of their citizenship status, and as members of a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were

continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for Rohingya. Some civil society leaders said that even among otherwise tolerant individuals, anti-Rohingya sentiment remained prevalent. Some local media reports, however, said the Bamar ethnic majority's empathy for the decades of persecution suffered by Rohingya and other minorities had grown due to their own post-coup experiences. A June public opinion poll found that when asked about relations among persons of different faiths in the country, 47 percent of respondents said that strict protection of one's own religion would provide a stronger foundation for democracy in the future, while 48 percent said that granting more rights to religious minorities would provide a stronger foundation for democracy in the future.

Senior U.S. government officials – including the Secretary of State, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ambassador, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and for human rights – consistently raised ongoing U.S. government concerns about religious freedom with the regime and other internal political actors, as well as with international organizations and also engaged in advocacy on social media calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions. Concerns raised included the plight of Rohingya in Rakhine State, hardships facing minority religious communities in Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Shan, and Chin States amid escalating post-coup violence. The U.S. government pressed for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, including those concerning religious freedom. The embassy amplified the Department of State spokesperson's message on the fourth anniversary of the military's August 25, 2017, ethnic cleansing in Rakhine State¹. U.S. government officials continued to call for sustainable solutions to address the root causes of discrimination and religiously motivated violence. While embassy facilities in Yangon and Mandalay suspended most of their public programs following the coup, the embassy continued to prioritize ethnic and religious diversity in its exchange programs, selecting participants from Shan, Wa, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups, many of whom belong to religious minority groups. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to engage with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other

¹ On March 21, 2022, the Secretary of State publicly announced his determination that members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya in Burma.

religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs, to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance.

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 November 15, 2021, 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(a) pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 57.1 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recently available estimates, approximately 88 percent are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 6 percent are Christians, primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations. Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of Judaism, traditional Chinese religions, and animist religions. The 2014 census excluded Rohingya from its count, but nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the deposed civilian government estimated the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population at 1.1 million prior to October 2016. There are an estimated 600,000 stateless Rohingya in Rakhine State, and according to the United Nations, as of August 31, Bangladesh continues to host approximately 860,000 Rohingya refugees.

There is a significant correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and numerous other ethnic groups. Various forms of Christianity are dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist, and some Karen are Muslim. Individuals of South Asian ancestry, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some are Christian. Ethnic Rohingya and Kaman in Rakhine State, as well as some Bamar and ethnic Indians in Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Magway, and Mandalay Regions, practice Islam. Chinese ethnic minority groups generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Some smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions are animists, observing traditional indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government and Military Regime Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2008 constitution, drafted by the military junta in control at that time, states that 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 provisions of the constitution. 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. The law also prohibits injuring, defiling, or trespassing on any place of worship or burial grounds with the intent to insult religion.

All organizations, whether secular or religious, must register with the government to obtain official status. This official status is required for organizations to gain title to land, obtain construction permits, and conduct religious activities. The law on registering organizations specifies voluntary registration for local NGOs, whether religious in nature or not, and removes punishments for noncompliance for both local and international NGOs.

The law bars members of religious orders, such as priests, monks, and nuns of any religious group, 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 Rohingya from running for office.

Although there is no official state religion, the constitution notes 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), whose members are elected by monks.

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; however, some schools with Buddhist-majority student bodies may start the school day with a Buddhist prayer.

Monastic schools, run by monasteries and nunneries in all states and regions of the country, serve approximately 320,000 students. Those that are officially registered use the official state primary and middle school curricula but also teach about Buddhist culture and ways of life.

Four laws passed in 2015 for the "protection of race and religion" remain in effect. One of the laws bans polygamy, making it a criminal offense to have more than one spouse, which observers say targets the country's Muslim population. 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, and penalties for noncompliance. A religious conversion law regulates conversion through an extensive application and approval process through a township-level Religious Board for Religious Conversion; however, the law is rarely applied, and many townships do not have conversion boards. The applicant 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 for the designation of special zones where population control measures may be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing.

To register a Buddhist marriage, a couple must appear in court with their national identity card (which identifies their religion as Buddhist) and attest that 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 ministers or priests 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 solemnization, and only the Supreme Court is permitted to recognize Christian marriages, making it nearly impossible for a Christian marriage to be legally recognized. Muslim marriages officiated by a mullah are recognized under the law with no court filing requirements.

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

Government and Military Regime Practices

As was the case in previous years and following the military coup in February, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. Both before and following the military coup and the deposition of the civilian government in February, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups, which, according to media reports, 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 the NGOs said was genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim. Local media outlet *The Irrawaddy* reported in February that one of the military units responsible for the 2017 atrocities and other human rights abuses in Rakhine State against Rohingya was also involved in crackdowns on prodemocracy demonstrators following the military coup.

According to Agence France Presse (AFP) and other news sources, in February, following reports that military forces beat, arrested, and used rubber bullets against protestors in and around Myitkyina, the capital of predominantly Christian Kachin State, a Catholic sister knelt before security forces, begging them not to shoot children. In March, Pope Francis said, “I, too, kneel on the streets of Myanmar and say, ‘Stop the violence,’” referencing the actions of the Catholic nun from the Sisters of St. Francis Xavier.

In April, local media reported that residents found the body of a Muslim muezzin, who was wearing a dress and lipstick, hanging in a mosque in Yangon Region. Residents said regime security forces likely killed him. Also in April, according to local media outlet *Myanmar Now*, soldiers opened fire inside the Sule Mosque in Mandalay’s Maha Aungmyay Township, killing Ko Htet, who was sleeping inside the mosque when the attack started approximately 10 am. He had spent the night

there after fasting, as Muslims around the world began observing Ramadan. According to the news report, witnesses said soldiers started firing immediately after storming the mosque. Two others were injured in the shooting.

On May 24, local media reported that military forces bombed Sacred Heart Church in Kayan Tharyar, Kayah State, killing four persons who had taken refuge there, and that on May 28, government forces fired upon the Church of Saint Joseph in Demoso, Kayah State, and killed two men who were collecting food for displaced persons. Local media also reported military forces killed a volunteer from a Catholic seminary on May 29, in Kayah State. After the Sacred Heart bombing, Cardinal Charles Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, issued a statement on May 25, asking the junta not to target places of worship. Violence involving houses of worship and other holy sites continued however, including on June 6, when the military reportedly shelled another church in Kayah State that it stated was being used by “terrorists” to launch offensives against the regime.

In June, the opposition NUG issued a statement promising to “seek justice and accountability” for crimes the military committed against more than 740,000 Rohingya. In addition, the NUG said that if it returned to government, it would repeal a 1982 law denying citizenship to most Rohingya. In August, the NUG issued a statement in which it held the military regime responsible for having “perpetuated crimes against humanity,” including war crimes committed based on religion.

In June, Pope Francis lamented the suffering of IDPs in Burma, stating, “Churches, pagodas, monasteries, mosques, temples, just as schools and hospitals, [must] be respected as neutral places of refuge.”

In September, regime soldiers shot and killed Baptist pastor Cung Biak Hum in Chin State while he attempted to extinguish a fire started by artillery fire. A soldier reportedly cut off his finger post-mortem to remove his wedding ring. The general secretary of Chin Baptist Convention told local media, “The military should carefully distinguish between their enemies and civilians... If they continue this way, fighting could grow into a larger ethnoreligious conflict.”

In October, *The Irrawaddy* reported Buddhist Gurkha student Lin Paing Soe, from Kyaukse Technological University, was tortured to death while detained by regime security forces. According to the report, regime security forces used racial and religious slurs and beat him “inhumanely.” An October Associated Press report on the military’s use of torture included a story of an unnamed monk who described

unsanitary conditions in detention and how the military forced him to defrock and “kicked him in the head, chest, and back.”

In February, regime security forces arrested *Myanmar Now* reporter Kay Zon Nway for her coverage of peaceful protests in Yangon and placed her in solitary confinement for staging a “hunger strike.” Her lawyer told local media that she was fasting for Ramadan. Kay Zon Nway was released from Insein Prison in June after 124 days in detention.

On February 1, *Myanmar Now* reported that regime security forces arrested and detained three senior influential monks, including vocal critic of the military Ashin Ariya Vansa Bivansa, better known as Myawaddy Sayadaw. Authorities sentenced him to six months in prison and subsequently released him on August 2, after serving his full sentence for defamation.

In May, the online *Buddhistdoor Global* journal and multimedia platform reported that the military raided a monastery in Mandalay purported to be associated with prodemocracy activities. A teacher from the monastery reported that he was beaten repeatedly by three members of the military before being sent to an interrogation center at Mandalay Palace.

In June, *The Irrawaddy* reported that regime security forces arrested three Christian pastors from Kachin State who organized a prayer for “peace in Myanmar.” If convicted, the pastors could serve up to three years in prison for incitement. Regime security forces released all three in October.

In August, *Myanmar Now* reported the military issued, then rescinded, plans that would have installed Buddhist monks at military checkpoints in Mandalay. Local monastics objected to the plan, with one Mandalay monk saying that the military was “...trying to exploit the religion for their political gains.”

On September 16, in Mandalay, armed men in plain clothes, accompanied by uniformed military, arrested Reverend Thian Lian Sang, an ethnic Chin pastor. According to the Baptist World Alliance, following his arrest, regime security forces entered Sang’s home, where they confiscated money and cellphones belonging to the Church and the pastor’s family.

In November, a regime court extended by two years the prison sentence of prominent Buddhist monk Ashin Thawbita, who was charged earlier in the year with violating a section on defamation in the telecommunications law for his

comments on social media the military perceived to be defamatory. His new sentence stemmed from an additional charge of incitement under the penal code.

Religious leaders also expressed concern that religious assembly could be misconstrued by the regime as prodemocracy organizing. In June, according to multiple local media reports, soldiers in Mandalay beat Buddhist monks for reciting *suttas* (religious discourses) interpreted as antiregime.

According to media reports, in April, Christian leaders said regime security forces raided and searched several Christian churches across the country, including in Kachin State and Mandalay Region. Regime security forces reportedly said they were looking for individuals involved in illegal activities and for antiregime activists.

According to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region experienced destruction of homes and places of worship and suffered physical violence by the military. *Myanmar Now* reported in December that in Thantlang, Chin State, the military had destroyed at least seven churches, in addition to 842 homes, in a series of arson attacks starting in October. In November, the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) condemned the military's attacks on civilians, citing as an example the military's continued shelling of the town of Thantlang and its setting fire to homes and churches. According to BHRN, the attacks were part of the "Kill all, burn all, and destroy all strategy the military is documented using against other ethnic and religious minorities."

In October, media sources reported regime security forces arrested seven workers from the Catholic Church social agency Caritas (Karuna) who were on a mission to provide aid for IDPs in Kayah State. At year's end, Church officials were working to secure the release of the aid workers. Local residents with knowledge of the situation said that it was common for the military to inflict violence against local residents in the area and make arbitrary arrests based on religious affiliation.

According to AAPP, the military regime had detained 35 Buddhist monks for participating in protests, as well as nine Christian leaders, and a Muslim religious leader for unexplained reasons since the military coup as of year's end

According to the IIMM, it collected and analyzed more than two million pieces of evidence of possible human rights violations or abuses in Burma from 2019-2121,

including reports of approximately 1,300 victims and eyewitnesses in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Karen States.

According to *The Union of Catholic Asian News*, more than 100,000 persons, many Christians, remained in camps for displaced persons in Kachin and Shan States, while another 100,000, mostly Karen Christians, were in camps across the Thai border.

In August, the regime amended the penal code to include a provision on genocide. According to legal experts, the decision reflected an attempt to ease international pressure on the regime as it faced a genocide charge at a United Nations court for genocide and crimes against humanity committed by members of the military against Rohingya. According to *The Irrawaddy*, the provisions of the law include up to the death sentence for killings committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnic, racial, or religious group.

The regime enforced 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 or a fine, or both), a communicable diseases prevention and control law (six months' imprisonment or a fine), or Article 188 of the Penal Code – defiance of a government order (one to six months' imprisonment or a fine).

On October 7, the UNHCR reported that regime authorities continued to confine approximately 148,000 Rohingya in 21 displacement camps. 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 reside. According to humanitarian aid organizations, regime authorities made no new efforts to initiate the return of Rohingya refugees during the year, most of whom remained in camps in neighboring Bangladesh. According to these organizations, under the military regime, there was no possibility for the voluntary, dignified, safe, and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya.

The regime's General Administration Department reinstated legal action against Rohingya traveling without documentation, a reversal of an April 2020 order. For example, in September, regime security forces arrested 30 Rohingya traveling without documentation and sentenced them to two years in prison. In November, *Myanmar Now* reported that regime authorities in Buthidaung, northern Rakhine

State, had tightened travel restrictions on local Rohingya, requiring them to obtain a permission slip from an immigration office to leave the township. According to one Rohingya interviewee, previously Rohingya residents had to obtain a recommendation from their village administrator to travel outside the township but now immigration officials had to grant permission as well.

Rakhine local media reported human smuggling of Rohingya from Rakhine State to Malaysia continued, including eight identified cases in October. Radio Free Asia reported in December that a court in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State sentenced 109 Rohingya to five years in prison with hard labor after convicting them on illegal immigration charges. The refugees had fled Burma during the military's 2017 crackdown against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State and made their way to camps in Bangladesh; Burma's navy intercepted them in late November as they attempted to reach Malaysia.

During the year, the regime tightly restricted external access to ethnic majority areas where religious minorities also live, including access by UN, humanitarian, and media organizations. Fighting between the military and some ethnic armed organizations, such as the Chin National Front, escalated after the coup, though it was difficult to categorize the increase in fighting as primarily religiously motivated. The United Nations reported that as of December 17, more than 296,000 persons were newly displaced since the coup, particularly in ethnic majority areas, including Kayah, Karen, Chin, and Shan States. According to UN reports, thousands more were displaced by year's end, particularly in Kayah and Karen States in the southeastern part of the country. According to the Karenni Human Rights Group (KnHRG), as of the end of the year, more than 156,900 persons had been displaced since May, of which 95 percent were Karenni Christian, due to the escalation in violence between the military and ethnic armed organizations. According to *The Union of Catholic Asian News*, in April, more than 100,000 persons, many Christians, remained in camps for displaced persons in Kachin and Shan States, while another 100,000, mostly Karen Christians, were in camps across the Thai border.

The regime continued to restrict the right to freedom of association, including of religious groups. In the run-up to the November 2020 general elections, the now deposed NLD-led civilian government reinterpreted the law on registering organizations to require NGOs that received foreign funding to register with the government. 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.

Religious groups throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and especially Muslims, continued to report difficulties and delays that could last for years in getting 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 bribe authorities to obtain permits.

According to local media reports, at least 30 churches and a mosque were damaged or destroyed during fighting between the military and joint ethnic armed organizations and opposition People's Defense Force. CHRO reported that as of November, the military had destroyed 36 churches and Christian-affiliated buildings in Chin State. Similarly, KnHRG reported that as of December, the military had destroyed at least seven Christian churches in Kayah State.

In August, CHRO reported soldiers were camping in church compounds. They reportedly tore up Bibles, destroyed property, drank alcohol, and slaughtered livestock on church grounds. KnHRG reported similar incidents in the first week of December in Karenni State's Demoso Township.

According to a BHRN report entitled *Before Our Eyes*, which it released in July, on February 28, eyewitnesses saw many military officers gathering around the gate of a mosque compound in Mandalay. They proceeded to shoot the gate open and advance into the compound. Eyewitnesses heard gunfire and saw military forces destroying the mosque's interior. According to the BHRN report, on 18 March in Thingangyun township, police and military forces destroyed the doors of a Hindu temple.

According to local media and NGOs, there were no reports that the regime held perpetrators accountable for crimes against members of religious minority communities. NGOs also said that regime authorities prevented them from legally owning land and constructing religious buildings. In Rakhine State, according to the United Nations and media reports, the situation remained unchanged from 2019, with the movement of members of various ethnic and religious groups, particularly Rohingya, restricted by the regime. Restrictions varied governing the travel between townships of persons whom the government (before its removal in

February) and the regime considered foreigners, including both Muslim and Hindu Rohingya, some other Hindus living in Rakhine State, and others in northern Rakhine State. Depending on the township, restrictions usually required the submission of an immigration form. The 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 obtaining travel permits often involved extortion and bribes. Muslims throughout the country still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State and reportedly feared authorities would not allow them to leave Rakhine State if they were to visit.

According to NGOs, such restrictions, which continued under the regime, continued to impede the ability of Rohingya to pursue livelihoods and education, access markets, hospitals, and other services, and engage other communities. Sources stated that individuals stereotyped by security forces as appearing to be Muslim continued to receive additional scrutiny on their movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion; obtaining these travel permits often involved extortion and bribes.

According to various religious organizations and NGOs, services to process the registration of NGOs, whether religious or not, were unavailable during the year because of regime-imposed COVID-19 protocols. According to representatives of some civil society groups, NGOs refrained from registering because doing so would require providing extensive information on the staff to the regime, which they preferred not to provide.

According to CHRO, neither the government overthrown in February nor the subsequent military regime issued any permits to Christian groups to register and own land and properties. All such registration applications remained pending at year's end, with some pending for more than 16 years.

In areas with few or no mosques, Muslims often conducted prayer services and other religious practices, such as teaching, in private homes. As the democratically elected government had done before it, the regime Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture continued to restrict non-Buddhist religious teachings to government-approved religious buildings and prohibited prayer services and religious teaching in private homes.

Both prior to and following the military coup in February, COVID-19 restrictions limited access of members of minority religious groups to religious sites. This led to the suspension of applications by Christian groups to buy land in Chin State and Sagaing Region.

Sources continued to state that authorities of both the deposed democratically elected government and the regime generally did not enforce laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion.”

In June, the military regime ordered all primary schools to reopen following months of closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but approximately 90 percent of primary and secondary school students refused to enroll, many reportedly to protest against the military regime. Similarly, hundreds of university students refused to enroll, although it was unclear to what degree COVID-19 also played a role in their decision. In early July, following a third wave of COVID-19, the regime ordered all primary schools to close again; many schools did not reopen until the end of the year. Several Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several Islamic madrassahs, in Yangon, Sagaing, and elsewhere. At year’s end, the regime ordered all institutions of higher learning to reopen on January 6, 2022.

Due to continuing regime-imposed restrictions of movement on Rohingya, many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools. Rohingya and Kaman children in central Rakhine State had physical access to only one high school, located in Thet Kae Pyin, Sittwe township, according to international observers. Authorities generally did not permit Rohingya high school graduates from Rakhine State and others living in IDP camps to travel outside the state to attend college or university, but Rohingya students could take a limited number of online courses. Authorities continued to bar any university students who did not possess citizenship cards from graduating, which disproportionately affected students from religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. 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.

On September 24, military regime-appointed Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture U Ko Ko issued an order to monasteries and convent schools not to accept long-term guests and requiring that temporary guests register at the ward administration office. According to local media outlets, the order explicitly named the CRPH, NUG, and other prodemocracy organizations, making clear it was

designed to prevent these institutions from becoming safe havens for prodemocracy supporters.

In February, the regime granted amnesty to several high-profile ethnic Rakhine politicians, including Dr. Aye Maung and writer Wai Hin Aung, sentenced to long jail sentences for high treason under the deposed NLD government. In September, local media outlets reported that the regime had dropped charges against and released promilitary, ultranationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, and several other monks. Media reports indicated that some Buddhist nationalists had joined a promilitary militant group called Phyu Saw Hti to assist the military regime in its counterinsurgency operations. The prior civilian government had charged Wirathu with sedition based on comments he made during a 2019 promilitary rally, where he criticized Aung San Suu Kyi's relationships with foreigners and her wearing of high heels. According to press reports, Wirathu was widely known for his anti-Muslim rhetoric and prejudice against Rohingya.

According to leaders of minority religious communities and human rights activists, during the COVID-19 pandemic, inconsistent enforcement and interpretation of COVID-19 pandemic regulations exacerbated communal disparities, with harsher outcomes for minority religious communities. In February, the regime-controlled *Global New Light of Myanmar* and *Myawaddy News* announced the regime had allowed the reopening of houses of worship. Some chose to remain closed due to COVID-19. According to media reports, Yangon authorities requested that Muslims observe Ramadan at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic led to additional government restrictions on all forms of worship, including Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim, but sources reported punishments for violations were disproportionately applied to religious minorities, restrictions that continued under the regime. Although Muslims said authorities had granted limited permission to slaughter cows during Eid al-Adha in prior years, COVID-19 restrictions prevented this activity during the year. Regime-controlled media continued to report frequently on officials and military personnel paying respect to Buddhist monks, offering donations at pagodas, and organizing "people's donations" of money and food. Regime-controlled media also highlighted regime COVID-19 vaccination efforts. In August, *The Irrawaddy* reported that only citizens were eligible for the military's nationwide COVID-19 vaccination program, which excluded noncitizens such as Rohingya.

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. These identification cards indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens were also required to indicate their religion on certain official applications for 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.

The regime halted the deposed government's previous call for Rohingya to participate in the citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs). Under the civilian government, NGOs reported that authorities coerced or pressured Rohingya to apply for NVCs. Rohingya generally expressed distrust of any documentation process that did not affirm their citizenship or that would grant naturalized versus full citizenship, which carries fewer rights under law. NGOs documented past cases where Rohingya were forced to identify as "Bengali" when applying for an NVC, with the implication that Rohingya are viewed as "foreigners" not entitled to full citizenship rights. The few Rohingya who did receive citizenship through the NVC process said they did not receive significant rights or benefits and that they had to pay bribes at different levels of government to receive the document. The regime announced a citizenship documentation project in May, which, it stated, was a concerted, nationwide effort to issue household registration lists and national identification cards and a means to prevent the kind of voter fraud the military regime said occurred in the 2020 general election. According to the director general of the Department of National Registration and Citizenship, as of November 5, the regime had issued 171,149 household lists and 567,371 national registration cards. Authorities issued no citizenship cards to Rohingya through this program by year's end.

Statements by some authorities before and after the coup exhibited Buddhist nationalist sentiment. In August, CINC Min Aung Hlaing said in a speech, "Most of us are primarily Buddhists in our country. The Buddha devotees were disheartened in their faith in Buddhism during the previous five years. Since the time we took power, we have emphasized religious affairs under the provisions of the constitution."

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In May, *The Irrawaddy* reported that the regime released Michael Kyaw Myint, the leader of the Yeomanry Development Party detained by the deposed civilian government. Kyaw had previously served a year in prison after leading an anti-Muslim mob in Yangon.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to local media, some ethnic armed organizations operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups. The AA continued to force local villagers, including Christian religious leaders, to construct roads without any pay for their labor and recruited villagers to attend military training camp. According to a local source, the AA also forced Christian religious leaders to attend its administration training, often holding them against their will.

In September, gunmen shot and killed Rohingya Muslim activist and community leader Mohib Ullah in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. Ullah was known for his detailed compilation of abuses and atrocities committed in 2017 against Rohingya in Burma. According to press reports, his killers were likely associated with the insurgent group ARSA. Ullah spoke out against ARSA militancy and abuses in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In July, the NUG announced its appointment of a Rohingya activist as an advisor to its “Ministry of Human Rights.” The NUG’s August 24 statement on the anniversary of atrocities committed against the Rohingya received public support via social media. Some social media users commented that the coup had united the country against the military regime and had produced more sympathy for the Rohingya, which, they said, may have been responsible for a decline in online hate speech aimed at the Rohingya noted by some observers.

According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of citizenship status, and as belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for Rohingya. Some civil society leaders said that even among otherwise tolerant individuals, anti-Rohingya

sentiment remained prevalent. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice, including social pressure not to rent housing to Muslims in some areas. Some local media reports, however, said the Bamar ethnic majority's empathy for the decades of persecution suffered by Rohingya and other minorities had grown due to their own post-coup experience of the brutal crackdown by regime security forces on innocent persons irrespective of ethnic and religious background. For example, a schoolteacher told the *New York Times*, "I saw soldiers and police killing and torturing people [...] I started to feel empathy for Rohingya and ethnic people who have been suffering worse than us for many years."

In June, a public opinion poll found that, when asked about relations among persons of different faiths in the country, 47 percent said that strict protection of one's own religion would provide a stronger foundation for democracy in the future, while 48 percent said that granting more rights to religious minorities would provide a stronger foundation for democracy in the future.

Despite a continuing order by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC), an independent but government-supported body that oversees Buddhist affairs, that no group or individual operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha, some branches of the group continued to use the name Ma Ba Tha, while others used the new name, Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. According to *Myanmar Now*, in March SSMNC announced in a statement that it would suspend its activities and called on the military to end the violence and arrests. One of SSMNC's 47 abbots said of the suspension, "It is similar to the [Civil Disobedience Movement]." According to local media, some Ma Ba Tha-affiliated monks held a rally in November in support of the military.

In March, protestors waved flags made of women's sarongs in celebration of International Women's Day. Regime-controlled *Myawaddy News* called the act "inappropriate" and "severely insulting to religion and contempt of [Buddhist] religion...and monks."

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, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and for human rights – consistently raised ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom, including the plight of the majority Muslim Rohingya in

Rakhine State, hardships facing Christian minority religious communities in Kachin, northern Shan, and Chin States amid ongoing violence, and also engaged in advocacy on social media calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions and against violence and hate speech against religious minorities. In July, the Secretary met with civil society representatives from diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country to discuss their calls to restore the country's democratic transition.

The U.S. government continued to press for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, including those concerning religious freedom. On February 10, the President issued Executive Order 14014, Blocking Property with Respect to the Situation in Burma, which stated, in part, the military “unjustly arrested and detained government leaders, politicians, human rights defenders, journalists, and religious leaders.” Pursuant to the Executive Order 14014 of February 10, 2021, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six officers of Burma's military who played a direct role in the coup. OFAC also designated four military officials who were appointed to positions in the SAC following the coup and designated three entities operating in Burma's gem industry that are owned or controlled by the military. In addition, OFAC designated 46 individuals, including the union ministers, immediate family members of military-related designated individuals, and 14 entities including the SAC between March and July 2021, pursuant to E.O. 14014.

U.S. government officials continued to call for sustainable solutions to the root causes of discrimination and religiously motivated violence. In July, the United States was among 15 countries from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to sign a joint statement that condemned “any attack on places of worship” and commended faith actors for their work in the prodemocracy movement and in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. In an October statement about reported attacks in Chin State, the Department of State spokesperson condemned the “brutal actions by the Burmese military regime against people, their homes, and places of worship.” U.S. government support for the Burma-Bangladesh humanitarian crisis response included more than \$124.6 million in 2021, with nearly \$49.6 million for programs in Burma and approximately \$75 million for programs in Bangladesh. Since August 2017, the U.S. government has provided more than \$820 million in humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh and Burma, including \$469 million in 2020, with \$78 million for programs in Burma, \$314 million for programs in Bangladesh, and \$29 million in regional crisis response.

Embassy officials at all levels emphasized the importance of addressing the effects of ethnoreligious violence and hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. Embassy officials promoted religious freedom and meaningful inclusion during meetings with the opposition NUG, CRPH, and the National Unity Consultative Council, as well as with ethnic armed organizations and other ethnic and religious leaders.

Although embassy travel to ethnic and religious minority-predominant areas was curtailed in 2020 and 2021 by the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 1 coup, discussions of religious freedom and tolerance with NGOs and members of community-based organizations and religious communities continued.

The embassy emphasized the need for respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and unity in its interactions with all sectors of society, in public engagements, and through its social media accounts. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to engage with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs, to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy also posted content on Facebook, Facebook Stories, and Twitter to engage local audiences on the importance of religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in democratic societies, including the recognition of minority religious holidays. The embassy amplified the Department of State spokesperson's message on the fourth anniversary of the military's August 25, 2017, ethnic cleansing in Rakhine State, which some NGOs said was part of a larger campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity. The statement demanded accountability for those responsible and noted the \$155 million in assistance announced earlier in May as part of the 2021 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis. In September, an embassy tweet highlighted the Department of State's announcement of \$180 million in additional assistance for the humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya inside and outside the country. In addition, in October, the embassy amplified the Secretary of State's statement on the killing of Rohingya Muslim leader Mohib Ullah, in which he praised Ullah's advocacy for the human rights of Rohingya Muslims around the world. That same month, the Ambassador's Thadingyut video message marking the end of Buddhist *Vassa*, an annual period of fasting and reflection, called for peace and prosperity for all during a time of hardship. The video received more than 200,000 views and 20,000 "likes," with comments acknowledging U.S. efforts in raising awareness about shared values among all faiths.

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

While embassy facilities in Yangon and Mandalay suspended most of their public programs following the coup, the embassy continued to prioritize ethnic and religious diversity in its exchange programs, selecting participants from Shan, Wa, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups, many of whom belong to religious minority groups. As in prior years, the embassy worked with and supported NGOs working on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance, as well as with former participants of U.S. government exchange programs 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 November 15, 2021, 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(a) pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the Act.