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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Burma

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The government imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and limited freedom of religion, although it generally permitted adherents of government-registered religious groups to worship as they chose. Highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. According to the government, a 2008 nationwide referendum approved a new draft Constitution that was presumed to go into effect after the new parliament sits in January 2011. The government held elections on November 7, 2010, the first elections since 1990. Democracy activists and the international community widely criticized both the 2008 constitutional referendum and the 2010 elections process as seriously flawed. The government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claimed an overwhelming majority of seats in the elections for the national parliament and state/regional assemblies; 25 percent of seats in all legislatures are reserved for military appointees.

There was no change in the government's limited degree of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Religious activities and organizations were subject to restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. The government continued to monitor meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations, and required religious groups to seek permission from authorities before holding any large public event. The government continued to restrict systematically the efforts of Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom. Many of the Buddhist monks arrested in the violent crackdown that followed prodemocracy demonstrations in September 2007, including prominent activist monk U Gambira, remained in prison serving long sentences. The government also actively promoted Theravada Buddhism over other religions, particularly among ethnic minorities. Christian groups continued to struggle to obtain permission to repair places of worship or build new ones. The government eased some of its travel restrictions on Muslim groups, particularly in the largely Rohingya areas of Rakhine State and predominantly Muslim areas in Rangoon. However, there were reports the government's actions were a quid pro quo to enlist electoral support for the USDP. The regime continued to monitor Muslim activities closely. Restrictions on worship for other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued. Although there were no new reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists, authorities in some cases influenced the placement of

orphans and homeless youth, preferring Buddhist monasteries to Christian orphanages in an apparent effort to prevent Christian groups' or missionaries' influence. Adherence or conversion to Buddhism was an unwritten prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks. Nearly all senior-level officers of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the armed forces are Buddhists.

During the reporting period, social tensions continued between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. Widespread prejudice existed against citizens of South Asian origin, many of whom are Muslims. The government continued to refuse to recognize the Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority as citizens and imposed restrictions on their movement and marriage.

The U.S. government advocated religious freedom with all sectors of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, scholars, diplomats of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders, including through small grants and training programs, and relayed information to otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999 the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government has a wide array of sanctions in place against the country for its violations of human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 261,970 square miles. The Human Development Report under the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates the country's population to be 50 million. Buddhism coexists with astrology, numerology, fortune telling, and veneration of indigenous pre-Buddhist era deities called "nats." Buddhist monks, including novices, number more than 400,000 and depend on the laity for their material needs, including clothing and daily donations of food; Buddhist nuns are fewer in number. The principal minority religious groups include Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several other small Protestant denominations), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism, 4 percent Christianity, and 4 percent Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimated the non-Buddhist proportion of the population. Independent researchers placed the Muslim population at between 6 and 10 percent. A very small Jewish community in Rangoon has a synagogue but no resident rabbi.

The country is ethnically diverse, with some correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and also among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities. Christianity is dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Protestant Christian groups reported recent rapid growth among animist communities in Chin State. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim. Citizens of Indian origin, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south central region, predominantly practice Hinduism or Islam, although some are Christian. Islam is practiced widely in Rakhine State and in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, and Mandalay Divisions, where some Burmese, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis practice the religion. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions. Practices drawn from those indigenous beliefs persist in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the

status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

Highly authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. The current military government, the SPDC, has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988, although in a 2008 referendum that most observers believe was fundamentally flawed, the SPDC announced a 92 percent approval rating for a new constitution that is slated to take effect after a parliament is seated. The government held elections for national and regional assemblies on November 7. The government-backed USDP, whose candidates included cabinet ministers and other high-ranking government and military officials, won approximately 77 percent of all seats. There have been widespread complaints by pro-democratic and ethnic political parties of election fraud. It is unclear what policy role the newly-elected parliament will play. Since independence in 1948, many ethnic minority areas have served as bases for armed resistance against the government. Despite ceasefire agreements with many armed ethnic groups after 1989, Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies have continued. The government has maintained pressure on Kachin, Wa, and other armed ethnic minority groups, which have ceasefire agreements with the government, to join the Burma Army-dominated Border Guard Force. To date, most have refused to accede. The government has tended to view religious freedom in the context of potential threats to national unity or central authority.

Most adherents of government-recognized religious groups generally were allowed to worship as they chose; however, the government imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently limited religious freedom. Antidiscrimination laws do not apply to ethnic groups not formally recognized under the 1982 Citizenship Law, such as the Muslim Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State.

The 2008 constitution was to go into effect on January 31, 2011, upon convening of the first joint session of the national parliament, but the government has made no announcement on the subject.

The regime commonly employed nonreligious laws to target those involved in religious and political activism, including the Electronic Transactions Act, Immigration Act, and Unlawful Associations Act.

The law bars members of religious orders from running for public office. Laws published in March 2010 in preparation for elections also barred members from Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu religious orders (such as priests, monks, and nuns) from voting and joining political parties, as did laws for past elections. The new laws do not mention Muslims.

Although the country has no official state religion, the government continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism through official propaganda and state support, including donations to monasteries and pagodas, encouragement of education at Buddhist monastic schools, and support for Buddhist missionary activities. In practice nearly all promotions to senior positions within the military and civil service were reserved for Buddhists.

State-controlled media frequently depicted government officials and family members paying homage to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines nationwide. State-owned newspapers routinely featured front-page banner slogans quoting from Buddhist scriptures. The government has published books of Buddhist religious instruction.

The government restricted the activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (Sangha), although some monks have resisted such control. Based on the 1990 Sangha Organization Law, the government has banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban were punishable by

immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee" or SMNC), the members of which are indirectly elected by monks.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversees the government's relations with Buddhist monks and schools. The government continued to fund two state Sangha universities in Rangoon and Mandalay that trained Buddhist monks under the purview of the SMNC. The state-funded International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Rangoon, which opened in 1998, has a stated purpose "to share the country's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world."

Buddhist doctrine remained part of the state-mandated curriculum in all government-run elementary schools. Students at these schools could opt out of instruction in Buddhism and sometimes did, but all were required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some schools or teachers may allow Muslim students to leave the classroom during this recitation, but there did not appear to be a centrally mandated exemption for non-Buddhist students.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Full Moon Day of Tabaung, the four-day Thingyan (Water Festival), Buddhist New Year's Day, the Full Moon Day of Kason, the Full Moon Day of Waso, the Full Moon Day of Thadinkyut, the Full Moon Day of Tazaungmone, and Christmas. Diwali and Bakri Eid are not government holidays; however, the government newspaper generally announces them in the state-run press.

Since the 1960s Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulty importing religious literature. All publications, religious and secular, remained subject to censorship and other controls. In December 2009 six Muslims were arrested for distributing an Islamic newsletter without approval. Five of the six later were released (three were fined), but in November the Supreme Court sentenced the person identified as the leader to one year imprisonment on charges of violating the Printers and Publishers Registration Act. It is illegal to import translations of the Bible in indigenous languages. Officials have occasionally allowed local printing or photocopying of limited quantities of religious materials, including the Qur'an (with the notation that they are for private use only) in indigenous languages without approval by government censors.

Religious organizations were not required to register with the government, but if the religious organization wanted to engage in certain activities (religious education, etc), it needed to get government permission.

The government discouraged proselytizing by non-Buddhist clergy. These restrictions most affected some Christian denominations and Islam. The government generally has not allowed permanent foreign religious groups to operate since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized almost all private schools and hospitals. The government was not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations.

Citizens and permanent residents are required to carry government-issued National Registration Cards (NRCs) (also known as Citizenship Scrutiny Cards), which permit holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards often indicate religious affiliation and ethnicity. There appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person's religion was indicated on the card. Citizens also were required to indicate their religion on certain official application forms for documents such as passports, although passports themselves do not indicate the bearer's religion. Members of many ethnic and religious minorities faced problems obtaining NRCs, Muslims even more than others.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government selectively enforced legal restrictions on religious freedom. During the

reporting period, the SPDC continued to rule by decree and was not bound by any constitutional or statutory provision concerning discrimination based on religion, race, gender, disability, language, or social status. (The new constitution was not yet in force and is presumed to go into effect after parliament sits.) Religious organizations were subject to restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The government's pervasive internal security apparatus imposed implicit restrictions on collective and individual worship through infiltrating and monitoring meetings and activities of virtually all organizations. The government subjected all media, including religious publications, and on occasion sermons, to censorship and other controls and at times interfered with religious gatherings.

Authorities frequently refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Christian and Islamic holidays, and often restricted the number of celebrants who could gather in one place, particularly Muslims. In Chin State for example, because the population is predominantly Christian, authorities more vigorously enforce these restrictions and often require churches to submit requests for religious celebrations two to three months in advance (although the requests are generally approved). In satellite towns surrounding Rangoon, Muslims were only allowed to gather for worship and religious training during major Muslim holidays. During the reporting period, mosques in Mandalay and Rangoon were restricted from using a loudspeaker for the Azan (call to prayer). The government-cited reason for this restriction was that it would upset Buddhist monks.

The government continued to discriminate against minority religious groups, restricting educational activities, proselytizing, and restoration or construction of churches and mosques. Christian and Muslim groups reported authorities still had not granted permission to rebuild churches and mosques destroyed by Cyclone Nargis in 2008; they were only allowed to make minor repairs to structures that were damaged but not destroyed.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. Christian groups reported that authorities sometimes refused residency permits for Christian ministers attempting to move to new townships; they indicated this was not a widespread practice, but depended on the individual community and local authority. Nonetheless, Christian groups reported that church membership increased, even in predominantly Buddhist regions.

Government censors continued to enforce restrictions on local publication of the Bible, Qur'an, and other Christian and Islamic texts. The most onerous restriction was a list of more than 100 prohibited words the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature, forbidden as "indigenous terms" or derived from the Pali language long used in Buddhist literature. Some Christian and Islamic groups in the country have used these words since the colonial period. Some Muslim organizations, which translated and published non-Buddhist religious texts, appealed the restrictions although government authorities have not responded to the appeals. In addition censors sometimes objected to passages of the Bible's Old Testament and the Qur'an that they interpreted as endorsing violence against nonbelievers.

Authorities restricted the quantity of imported Bibles and Qur'ans, although individuals continued to bring them into the country in small quantities for personal use. There were no reports that authorities confiscated Bibles or Qur'ans at border entry points.

Some Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several Islamic madrassahs. Some of these institutions did not register with the Myanmar Council of Churches, an alliance of some major churches in the country, but were able to conduct affairs without government interference. The government allowed some members of foreign religious groups to enter the country to provide humanitarian assistance, as it had done after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

Muslims across the country, as well as ethnic Chinese and Indians, often were required to obtain permission from township authorities to leave their hometowns. Authorities

generally did not grant permission to Rohingya or other Muslims living in Rakhine State to travel for any purpose; however, permission was sometimes obtained through bribery. Muslims in other regions were granted more freedom to travel, but still faced restrictions. Muslims residing in Rangoon could visit beach resort areas in Thandwe, Rakhine State, but could not return to Rangoon without the signature of the Regional Military Commander. Muslims residing outside Rakhine State often were barred from return travel to their homes if they visited parts of Rakhine State.

Media reported on August 5 that Deputy Minister for Home Affairs retired Brigadier General Phone Swe went to Rakhine State in July and promised that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) would issue NRC cards to Muslims who agreed to join the USDP. MHA, however, reportedly reneged on its promise after some Muslims joined the USDP, instead issuing them Temporary Registration Cards (TRC), which do not serve as proof of citizenship. Authorities required Muslims to pay a bribe of up to 250,000 kyat (approximately \$250) in order to get the card.

Muslims in Rakhine State, particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience the severest forms of legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination. There were reports that Buddhist physicians would not provide Muslims the endorsement required by the Ministry of Health that permits Muslims to travel outside Rakhine State to seek advanced medical treatment.

The government denied citizenship status to Rohingyas, claiming that their ancestors did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as the 1982 citizenship law required. The Rohingya asserted that their presence in the area predates the British arrival by several centuries. In November 2008 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged the government to review its citizenship law. In February 2010 the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar visited the country and noted discrimination against Muslims. Many of the approximately 28,500 Rohingya Muslims registered in two refugee camps in Bangladesh and the estimated 200,000 Rohingya Muslims living outside those camps refused to return to the country because they feared human rights abuses, including religious persecution.

Essentially treated as illegal foreigners, Rohingya were not issued Foreigner Registration Cards (FRCs). Since they also were not generally eligible for NRCs, Rohingya have been commonly referred to as "stateless." The government continued a program with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that issued Temporary Registration Cards to stateless persons in northern Rakhine State, the majority of whom are Rohingyas. This was primarily done, it appears, to allow Rohingya participation in the elections. UNHCR worked with approximately 750,000 residents of Rakhine State who do not hold citizenship in the country. At the end of the reporting period, UNHCR (quoting government estimates) indicated that 85 percent of eligible residents (637,500 stateless persons) over the age of 10 possessed TRCs. UNHCR also assisted Rohingya with education, health, infrastructure, water and sanitation, and agriculture.

Without citizenship status Rohingyas did not have access to secondary education in state-run schools. Those Muslim students from Rakhine State who completed high school were not permitted to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar Muslim university students who did not possess NRCs from graduating. These students were permitted to attend classes and sit for examinations, but they could not receive diplomas unless they claimed a "foreign" ethnic minority affiliation. Rohingyas also were unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. Rohingya couples needed also to obtain government permission to marry.

Newcomers who were Muslim were not allowed to buy property or reside in Thandwe, Rakhine State. Authorities did not permit Muslims to live in Gwa or Taungup in the state.

The government allowed members of all religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes. These links were subject to the restrictive passport and visa issuance practices, foreign exchange controls, and government monitoring, which extended to all international

activities by all citizens regardless of religion. The government sometimes expedited its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the Hajj or Buddhists going on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, India. Approximately 4,300 Muslims from Burma participated in the Hajj (November 12-17) in 2010. Several travel agents reportedly required pilgrims to cast advance votes for the USDP before their trip. An estimated 1,500-2,000 Buddhists from Burma made pilgrimages to Bodhgaya in 2010.

The government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired to promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism. Some Muslims who wished to join the military reportedly had to list "Buddhist" as their religion on their applications, although they were not required to convert.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has stipulated in the past that permission to construct or repair religious buildings "depends upon the population of the location"; however, there appeared to be no correlation between the construction of pagodas and the demand for additional places of Buddhist worship. The government openly supported Buddhist seminaries and permitted them to construct large campuses. Buddhist groups generally have not experienced difficulty in obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

In most regions Christian and Islamic groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations were able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities. When local authorities or conditions changed, approvals have been rescinded and, in some cases, authorities have demolished existing religious buildings. Formal requests encountered long delays, generally were denied, and even when approved could subsequently be reversed by a more senior authority.

Christian groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. In some cases authorities refused because they claimed the churches did not possess property deeds, but access to land title was extremely difficult due to the complex land law and because the government holds title to most land. In some areas permission to repair existing places of worship was easier to acquire. In Chin State authorities have not granted permission to build a new church since 2003. The Chin Human Rights Organization reported that authorities ordered the destruction of nine large public crosses in Chin State in 2010.

It remained extremely difficult for Muslims to acquire permission to build new, or repair existing, mosques, although internal maintenance was allowed in some cases.

Historic mosques in Mawlamyine, Mon State and Sittwe, Rakhine State, as well as other areas, continued to deteriorate because authorities would not allow routine maintenance. A number of restrictions were in place on the construction or renovation of mosques and religious schools in northern Rakhine State. In some parts of Rakhine State, authorities cordoned off mosques and forbade Muslims to worship in them. Border security forces continued to conduct arbitrary "inspections" of mosques in northern Rakhine State, demanding that mosque officials show permits to operate the mosques.

The USDP reportedly offered to help Muslims secure a government permit (typically very difficult to obtain for non-Buddhist religious organizations) to renovate several mosques in Rangoon in exchange for recruiting 500 Muslims to join the USDP.

In early October Ward Peace and Development Council officials prohibited the renovation of several mosques in Sittwe, Rakhine State. Later that month, however, in a reported bid to win votes for his party, USDP candidate and Minister of Transport Thein Swe, who is also in charge of development in Rakhine State, agreed to allow two mosques to be renovated as "models." Thein Swe, in turn, reportedly strongly encouraged local Muslim organizations to vote for the USDP.

In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, authorities permitted the caretaker of Rangoon's only synagogue to repair storm damage and restore other parts of the building.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees. The government continued its efforts to control the Buddhist clergy (Sangha). It tried Sangha members for "activities inconsistent with and detrimental to Buddhism" and imposed on the Sangha a code of conduct enforced by criminal penalties. The government arrested and imprisoned politically active Buddhist monks. In prison, some monks were defrocked and treated as laypersons. In general they were not allowed to shave their heads and were not given food compatible with the monastic code. They were often beaten and forced to do hard labor.

The government also subjected the Sangha to special restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Members of the Sangha were not allowed to preach sermons pertaining to politics. Religious lectures could not contain any words, phrases, or stories reflecting political views. The regime told Sangha members to distance themselves from politics, political parties, or members of political parties. The government prohibited any organization of the Sangha other than the nine monastic orders that fall under the authority of the State Clergy Coordination Committee. The government prohibited all clergy from being members of any political party and electoral law bars them from participating in political activity and voting in the elections.

According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association of Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP), at the end of the reporting period approximately 256 monks remained in prison, many of them arrested after the September 2007 peaceful prodemocracy demonstrations. During the reporting period, some of the monks, as well as other political prisoners, remained in remote jails away from their family members, limiting their access to basic necessities and medicines that visiting relatives generally provided.

The government still has not investigated reports that, during the suppression of September 2007 demonstrations, security forces took large numbers of residents and monks from their homes and monasteries during numerous nighttime raids. AAPP estimated that security forces raided at least 52 monasteries in 2007 in retaliation for the monk-led demonstrations. Opposition activists and members of the clergy reported soldiers forcibly entered the monasteries at night and deployed tear gas, fired rubber bullets, and beat monks with batons and bamboo sticks. International NGOs estimated that at least 150 monks were arrested between September and October 2007.

According to the Burmese Muslim Association, local authorities in Bago demolished part of an ancient Muslim cemetery on December 13. The military regime had completely banned all religious services at the cemetery in 2005, and had destroyed other parts of the cemetery between 2002 and 2005.

According to exile press reports, in December 2009 police arrested monk Ashin Uk Kong Sah for writing "no 2010 election" along a highway. On September 7, 2010 authorities sentenced Ashin Uk Kong Sah to 15 years in prison for violating the Electronics Transactions Act, Press Act, and Section 505 B of Penal Code (for inciting public unrest).

According to a September 2009 Human Rights Watch report, monk U Sandar Dika told his family that he was tortured while under interrogation following his August 2009 arrest.

On April 22, 2009, authorities arrested NLD members U Chit Phay and U Aung Soe Wai from Twuntay Township at their homes after the two led a prayer meeting for the release of activist leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At the end of the reporting period, both were still in prison.

Human rights observers believed the leader of Maggin Monastery, Sayada Aindakaat, remained in detention, as did other monks arrested in 2007, including U Sanda Wara.

On January 28, 2009, prison officials reportedly ordered an inmate to beat monk U Kelatha at Henzada Prison, Irrawaddy Division, for wearing his prison uniform in the

style of monk robes. Authorities had arrested U Kelatha after the September 2007 demonstrations and sentenced him to 35 years in prison. U Kelatha is still in prison.

On January 17, 2009, authorities transferred U Gambira from Obo Prison in Mandalay to Hkamti Prison in Sagaing Division, which is approximately 1,200 miles north of Rangoon. U Gambira reportedly staged a hunger strike the week before. In November 2008 authorities convicted U Gambira of several charges, including offenses under the Electronics Transactions Act, Immigration Act, and Unlawful Associations Act. Officials sentenced him to 68 years in prison. Authorities had arrested him in November 2007 and his younger brother Ko Aung Kyaw Kyaw in October 2007. Both remained in prison.

On March 30, 2008, the army arrested 11 Muslim community leaders in Maungdaw, Rakhine State. Among those arrested were the president of the Maungdaw District Myanmar Muslim League, U Than Tun (aka Muhammad Solin); community leader Hla Myint; and local businessman U Niramad. While authorities did not provide any explanation for the arrests, local residents reported to the media they believed the arrests were the result of the regime's concern about alleged organized Muslim political activity in the area. Authorities released Hla Myint three months after taking him into custody, but the remaining 10 are believed to be still imprisoned. No information about their condition has been released.

Beginning in 2004 and continuing through the reporting period, a group of Buddhist laypersons known as the Tuesday Prayer Group attempted to gather every Tuesday at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda to pray for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. Authorities sometimes used the pro-regime Union Solidarity and Development Association (renamed the Union Solidarity and Development Party after transforming itself into a political party) to block the group from entering the pagoda grounds and make them pray outside the entrance or to shout and clap to drown out their prayers. In October 2009 authorities arrested Tuesday Prayer Group leader Naw Ohn Hla and three of her colleagues for offering alms to monks at Magwe monastery in Rangoon, alleging they acted with intent to incite public unrest. The four were sentenced in February 2010 to two years' confinement each for "disturbing public tranquility." They are still in prison.

There continued to be credible reports from various regions that government officials compelled persons, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or materials to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The government denied that it used coercion and called these contributions "voluntary donations" consistent with Buddhist ideas of earning merit.

Forced Religious Conversion

Although authorities appear to have moved away from a campaign of forced conversion, there continued to be evidence that other means were being used to entice non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism. During a previous reporting period, Chin Christians reported that local authorities operated a high school that only Buddhist students could attend and promised government jobs to the graduates. Christians had to convert to Buddhism to attend the school. An exile Chin human rights group claimed local government officials placed the children of Chin Christians in Buddhist monasteries, where they were given religious instruction and converted to Buddhism without their parents' knowledge or consent. Reports suggested that the government also sought to induce members of the Naga ethnic group in Sagaing Division to convert to Buddhism through similar means. During the current reporting period, there were no reports of forced religious conversions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Preferential treatment for Buddhists and widespread prejudice against ethnic South Asians, particularly ethnic Rohingya Muslims, were key sources of social tensions between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

The roof repair of a Rangoon mosque became the center of controversy after the Yangon City Development Committee forced the mosque to suspend work. Rangoon Mayor and USDP candidate Aung Thein Linn allegedly approved the renovation project after the Muslim community agreed to support him in the elections. However, authorities revoked the permit after the Buddhist community allegedly sent a letter of protest to the Union Election Commission in Naypyitaw. The mosque is currently without a roof.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government continued to promote religious freedom in its contacts with all sectors of society as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the reporting period, U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of increasing religious freedom with government officials, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives met with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs.

Government restrictions on speech, press, assembly, and movement, including diplomatic travel, made it difficult to obtain timely and accurate information on violations of human rights, including freedom of religion. Information about abuses often becomes available only months or years after events, and it frequently was difficult or impossible to verify.

Through outreach and travel, when not blocked by regime officials, embassy representatives offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and exchanged information with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Members of many ethnic and religious groups participated in English language and current events studies at the embassy's American Center. The embassy regularly distributed U.S. government and NGO statements and reports on violations of religious freedom in the country. In addition the embassy worked closely with Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian NGOs involved in education and teacher training.

The country has been designated a CPC since 1999 and most recently was redesignated on January 16, 2009. The U.S. government has a wide array of financial and trade sanctions in place against Burma for violations of human rights. The passage and signing into law in 2008 of the Tom Lantos Block Burmese Junta Anti-Democratic Efforts Act further strengthened these sanctions. The United States has opposed all international financial institution assistance to the government and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions. U.S. sanctions included a ban on imports from the country, a ban on the export of financial services to the country, a ban on bilateral aid to the government, a ban on the export of arms to the country, and a suspension of Generalized System of Preferences benefits and Overseas Private Investment Corporation and U.S. Export-Import Bank financial services in support of U.S. investment and exports to the country. The U.S. government does not actively promote trade with the country, and has limited the issuance of visas to high-ranking government and military officials and their immediate family members, and has frozen SPDC assets in the United States. U.S. citizens have been prohibited from engaging in new investment activities in the country since 1997.
