

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

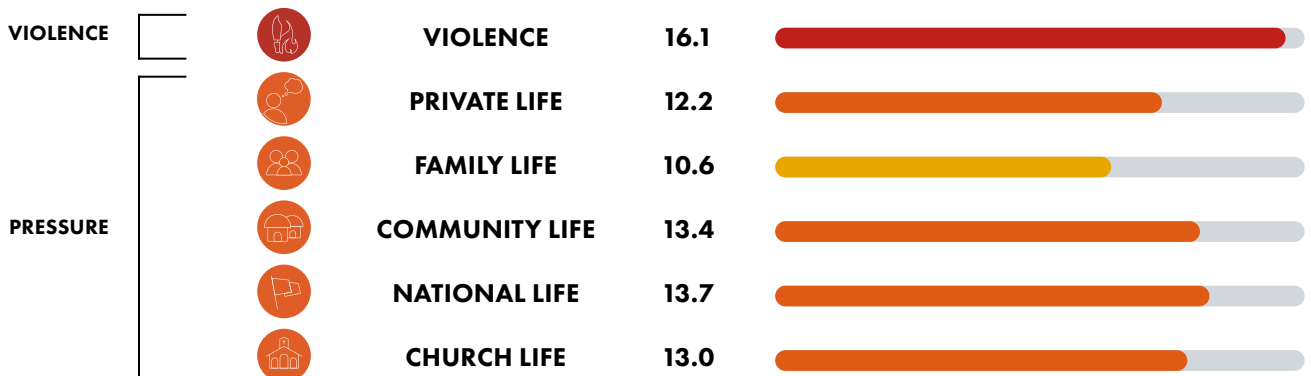
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

MYANMAR

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
17



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

2024 sees Myanmar entering a fourth year of an increasingly violent conflict. After the army staged a coup in February 2021, fighting has continued and increased in many parts of the country. The Christian minority is among those bearing the brunt of attacks. Even well-established churches belonging to historical Christian communities are being attacked by government forces in predominantly Christian states like Chin and Kayah, but also in states with a strong Christian minority like Kachin, Karen and Shan. More Christians than ever have been driven out to live in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, take refuge in churches or even flee to the jungle where they are often deprived of access to food and healthcare. Since the beginning of the civil war, an estimated 1.5 million citizens of Myanmar have become IDPs. Christians are part of the generally peaceful resistance movement, but some are involved in the fighting. Converts to Christianity find themselves additionally persecuted by their Buddhist, Muslim or tribal families and communities as their conversion is seen as betrayal. Communities who aim to stay “Buddhist only” make life for Christian families impossible by not allowing them to use community water resources. Non-traditional church groups experience opposition too, especially when they are located in the rural areas of Myanmar and/or are known for proselytizing.

Quick facts

LEADER

General Min Aung Hlaing

POPULATION

5,664,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,479,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,479,000	8.0
Buddhists	42,103,000	75.6
Ethno-religionists	4,792,000	8.6
Muslims	2,032,000	3.7

Source²

In the years following Myanmar's independence, various ethnic groups attempted to break off to form independent countries. The military, aiming to maintain the state's integrity as well as ethnic Burman control, seized power and five decades of military rule followed. A series of protests led by Aung San Suu Kyi increased public pressure against the government, culminating in a 2015 election where Ms Suu Kyi won in a landslide victory. She was forcibly deposed by the military following the 2020 elections and the country has since returned to military rule, resulting in significant unrest across the country.

Christian minority states are especially affected. Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities (such as Chin, Karen, Lisu, Kachin, Naga, Kayah and Lahu) and not to the Burmese (Bamar) majority. The adoption of 'Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion' in August

2015 was celebrated countrywide by nationalist Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha. While these laws were aimed chiefly at the Muslim minority in Rakhine State, Christians are also impacted because conversions have to follow an administrative process including notification to different authorities. Ma Ba Tha has been banned several times but re-emerges under different names.

Radical Buddhist groups have targeted Muslims more than Christians, leading to the exodus of the largely Muslim ethnic Rohingya into Bangladesh. In March 2022, the US government declared the atrocities against the Rohingya as [genocide](#) (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2022) and the World Court (the new name for the ICJ) has confirmed that it does have [jurisdiction](#) in the case bringing genocide claims against Myanmar (Reuters, 23 July 2022). Converts to Christianity such as those from a Buddhist background, continue to be persecuted by their families and the community. The Ma Ba Tha and the Pyu Saw Htee are instrumental and active in monitoring the activities of Christians including those from a Buddhist background.

Christians experience pressure and even violence from the army, and killings of Christians are reported. The United Nations has found that [opium production](#) in Myanmar almost doubled since the military coup of February 2021 (RFA, 26 January 2023). At the same time, lawless zones are also [hotspots for human trafficking](#) and organized

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

crime (USIP, 9 November 2022). These zones are mainly found in the remote and border regions of Myanmar, where many Christian minorities live.

Protestants comprise almost two-thirds of all Christians. The Myanmar Baptist Convention estimates its membership at about 1.6 million Christians, many of whom are among the Karen, Kachin and Chin people. The number of Catholics is smaller, but there are estimates of up to a million. However, there is no strong inter-denominational association among Christians; in controversial issues and concerning the (persecution) situation in the country, their reactions are not unified.

How the situation varies by region

When it comes to difficulties for Christians in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the conflict became entrenched in areas with Christian majorities (such as Chin state) and significant Christian minorities alike. The Tatmadaw indiscriminately attacks Christian villages, church buildings (sometimes hosting refugees or IDP camps) and kills Christians. While the atrocities in Chin state continued, other hotspots are Kachin state in the north, Kayah state in the southeast and Kayah state in the southeast. Fighting there continues, and an increasing number of people - many of them Christian - are living in IDP camps, most of them have been there for years, and humanitarian access to them is blocked. Fighting intensified in neighboring Shan state, which has a large minority of Christians, especially in the north. The lawless zones bordering Laos and Thailand, in which organized crime is blooming, are placed in minority regions, inhabited by many Christians as well.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

These Christian communities have for decades faced pressure and violence from the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military. In many cases, they are caught up in conflicts between the military and radical insurgent groups, such as the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), which supports the opposition's fight. Because these conflicts are generally separatist in nature, often a

strong sense of nationalism pervades and Christians, who are seen as "foreign", are likely to be among the first victims of attacks.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Buddhist or Muslim backgrounds face extreme violations of rights from authorities, families and communities. While primarily a Muslim ethnic group, there are Christian converts among the Rohingya, who were forced to flee to Bangladesh due to the military's violent actions against them. Christian Rohingya face persecution both because of their ethnic and religious affiliations.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations face violations from the community they live in, especially in rural areas. Historically, proselytizing and importing Christian materials was illegal. More recently, government policy seeks to prioritize Buddhist interests at the expense of those of other religious minorities.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Religious nationalism – Buddhism blended with ethno-religious hostility

Buddhism blended with Ethno-religious hostility: 60% of Myanmar's population is Burmese (*Bamar*). Being *Bamar* is equated with being Buddhist. To be otherwise is to be seen as foreign and a threat to the state and national unity. Government policy has even supported radical Buddhists like the Ma Ba Tha group. One country expert reported that the military regime appointed Ma Ba Tha members as ward administrators.

Dictatorial paranoia

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and while neither the 2015 nor 2020 elected government could be called paranoid, Myanmar is one of the very few countries where it is the army who holds almost all power, as illustrated by the military coup in February 2021. A quarter of parliament's seats are reserved for military staff and the army holds the most important government offices.

Organized corruption and crime

Many of Myanmar's most precious natural resources, such as jade, ores, and timber, are found in states with high Christian populations. Additionally, Myanmar is part of the "Golden Triangle", one of Asia's largest opium-producing regions. Often, the military and insurgency groups compete over the revenues produced by these lucrative ventures. Those, such as Christians, who oppose corruption risk violence from both insurgency groups and the military itself. The lawless zones, emerging in ethnic minority states like Shan State and others bordering Laos and Thailand, are another example of how the civil war benefits organized crime.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

The military coup of February 2021 sparked fresh concerns for women. In particular, the army - which has expanded its already considerable power base - is a known perpetrator of gender-based violence. Rohingya Christian women also continue to be targeted by extremist groups, who reportedly abduct women and force them to marry Muslim men. Women in the predominately Christian Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China as "brides," to produce male heirs. Converts are also vulnerable to house arrest, forced marriage, expulsion from the family home and divorce.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

Men

Christian men might lose their jobs, be driven from their village or town or be trapped in cycles of forced labor because of their faith. It is especially difficult for Christian men to practice their faith within the context of the armed forces, or when pressured to join militias, such as the Kachin Independence Army. Na Ta La schools intend to convert Christian children, aiming to stop Christianity from spreading to the next generation. Here, the boys are raised to become Buddhist monks. Converts also face threats, ridicule and physical beatings. In the present civil war situation, Christian men - especially youth - run the risk of being automatically identified as members of the opposition and/or as part of the many militias opposing the junta.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	17	79
2023	14	80
2022	12	79
2021	18	74
2020	19	73

The decrease of the overall score by 1.3 points in WWL 2024 has a twofold reason. The first reason is that in the expanding civil war situation, it gets more and more difficult to obtain reliable information, especially from war-torn Christian minority areas. Secondly, a considerable part of the country is not under the control of the military regime which results in slightly less pressure for Christians in certain questions. The score for violence continued to rise by 0.7 points (after having risen by 0.5 points in WWL 2023 and 2.9 points in WWL 2022), illustrating the devastating effects the growing conflict has on civilians in general and the Christian minority in particular. The challenge of obtaining information is acknowledged by other international organizations as well and is shown in the detention and sentencing of reporters as well as in Internet and communication blackouts across the country. Converts (from a Buddhist, Muslim or tribal background) continue to face strong pressure, especially from their family and community; the situation in Wa State continued unchanged.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **17 February 2023:** The military regime announced that it will order 25 IDP camps in and around Myitkina, Kachin state, to be closed. These camps were run by Catholic and Baptist churches, served IDPs since 2011 and hosted around 11,000 people (UCA News, 17 February 2023).
- **16 July 2023:** Soldiers from the Khalaya 274 Battalion based in Mindat, a town in western Myanmar’s Chin state, abducted pastor Htang Kay On, and three clergymen — Chai Kay, Hon Chway and Hon Kay — from the nearby Presbyterian Christian church compound in the town’s western quarter. While the pastor was able to flee later on, the three clergymen went missing and are believed to be dead (Radio Free Asia, 2 August 2023).
- **19 and 21 August 2023:** Two Baptist churches and at least four Christians’ homes were deliberately destroyed in aerial attacks against Ramthlo village in Falam township and Khuafu village in Thantlang township, Chin State (Radio Free Asia, 25 August 2023).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2024	34	32	18	1
2023	42	100*	100*	4

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

Myanmar's current laws make it hard for an individual to convert. The Religious Conversion Law, part of the "Law for Protection of Race and Religion", requires that citizens who wish to change their religion must obtain approval from a newly established Registration Board for religious conversion, undergo an interview and engage in religious studies for a period. During this period, the application is posted on a community board meant to put the convert under severe community pressure to retract their application. Because of this, conversion is usually done in secret. Converts also face pressure from their family and community and are sometimes disowned and expelled from the family home.

Family life

The state continues to run so-called "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (or Na Ta La), which are attractive for minorities as they are boarding schools run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and introduce them to Buddhism. The army has continued its practice of weakening ethnic insurgencies by encouraging ethnic youth to become drug-addicted, a practice that is affecting Christian Kachin as well.

Community life

There is intense pressure on Christians in Myanmar from the community. Christians tend to be economically, socially and politically excluded which leads to poverty, harassment and exposure to crime. Christians, especially those gathering in house churches, are monitored and pressured into renouncing their faith by both communal and government authorities. They are excluded from communal decisions and resources. Denial of building materials and access to drinking water can put Christians in dangerous and exposed conditions.

With the developing civil war and a quickly growing number of IDPs and IDP camps, health care and humanitarian aid to Christians is either not possible, not allowed or is only given in minimal portions, and international monitoring (and sometimes even access) is blocked. As one country expert added: "Since the military coup in February 2021, the government has used surveillance technology such as facial recognition, phone tapping, internet censorship and social media monitoring to track and identify Christians, especially those involved in protest. Nationalist Buddhists have accused Christians of proselytizing, converting to the authorities or local government. Some Christians are being shadowed, harassed or threatened by the military or armed groups, especially in conflict zones with majority Christians."

National life

Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution reads: "The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union." It also recognizes the presence of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism in section 362. This "special position of Buddhism" has been abused by Buddhist radicals. The previous government aimed to garner Buddhist support by controlling conversion to other faiths, banning interfaith marriages and introducing birth control. Official permission must be sought to convert.

Christians are usually only hired by firms when there are no Buddhists available and are frequently bypassed for promotion.

With the developing civil war, Christian aid workers and pastors are increasingly accused of being CDM or even PDF (resistance movements) leaders and can be attacked by the army. One country expert explained: "Christians are not allowed to preach against "culture and religion" of the country. This leaves an incredibly wide lens of interpretation that a Christian could be persecuted for very spurious reasons by other Buddhist businessmen or politicians. Christian priests and pastors who protested during the CDM movement of 2021 had their ordinations invalidated by the state religious council, though they all continue to serve.

Church life

Dissent, especially any criticism about the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, is dealt with harshly by the military. Christian leaders are frequently accused of joining or even leading the resistance. Courageous Christians still speak out, for example, Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng, who has been detained several times, after she [peacefully stood up](#) against the military junta (UCA News, 28 January 2022).

As churches are suspected of being centers of opposition, local communities, authorities and especially the military monitor their activities. In a growing number of cases, this monitoring led to attacks against church buildings and church workers and leaders, up to killings. A Catholic expert said: "Five out of 16 dioceses in the country — Loikaw, Pekhon, Hakha, Kalay and Mandalay — are affected by the ongoing conflicts between the army and ethnic rebel groups, some of whose members belong to various Christian denominations."

Buddhist monks connected with Ma Ba Tha, a Buddhist nationalist movement, also monitor Christian activities. For converts, this kind of pressure is even higher, as detection may have more serious consequences, not just from the community, but from their own family too.

International obligations & rights violated

Myanmar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
3. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Myanmar is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are denied access to communal resources because of their faith (ICESCR Art. 2)
- Christian homes and shops are attacked and destroyed, in violation of the right to an adequate standard of living and to a continuous improvement of living conditions (ICESCR Art. 11)
- Christian female converts are forcibly married to Buddhist men and pressured to renounce their new faith (CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Kachin Christian women and girls are trafficked into the sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and CEDAW Art. 6)

Situation of other religious minorities

The persecution of the largely Muslim Rohingya minority is under discussion at The Hague. Non-Rohingya Muslims in other parts of the country also face persecution and discrimination - for example, in government or military jobs. People sometimes refuse to sell property to Muslims, and the building of mosques is forbidden. Hindus sometimes also feel restrictions and pressure from Buddhist supremacy but on a much lower level than other religious minorities.



Open Doors in Myanmar

Working through local partners, Open Doors strengthens persecuted believers in Myanmar through:

- Literature distribution
- Discipleship programs
- Pastoral and leadership training
- Livelihood support
- Family and marriage enrichment
- Children and youth training
- Persecution preparedness
- Presence ministry



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
