

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**12**

## Myanmar



### 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).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

2021 has been a momentous year for Myanmar, and also for the situation for Christians. After the army coup on 1 February 2021, fighting has continued. Even well-established churches belonging to historical Christian communities are being attacked, in predominantly Christian states like Chin State and Kayah State, but also in states with a strong Christian minority like Kachin State, Karen State or in

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

northern Shan State. It is estimated that at least 250,000 people have been internally displaced this year. More Christians than ever have been forced to live in internally displaced people (IDP) camps where they are often deprived access to food and healthcare.

Christians have become involved in the quickly evolving Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in protest against the coup. Parallel to this widely peaceful resistance, fighting has increased across the country. Although not all ethnic armed groups (who have been fighting for autonomy for decades) are involved, some Christian ones are. Among them are those which have been out of the spotlight for a considerable time, like the Karen. The Myanmar army has attacked Christian villages and churches, while leaving Buddhist monasteries untouched, and has killed Christian aid workers and pastors.

Converts who live in areas with a majority Muslim or Buddhist population experience violations from family and community, including being denied access to community resources like water.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

General Min Aung Hlaing

### POPULATION

55,269,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,409,000 (8.0%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

### GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,409,000	8.0
Muslims	1,989,000	3.6
Buddhists	42,182,000	76.3
Agnostics	4,492,000	8.1

Source<sup>3</sup>

In the years following its 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. In elections in November 2020, widely recognized as free and fair, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won 82% of all available seats. However, the military claimed voter fraud and staged a coup, forcibly deposing Ms Suu Kyi in February 2021. Since then, the country has returned to military rule, resulting in significant unrest across the country. Christian minority states are especially affected as the Tatmadaw fights the insurgency with all its power.

Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities 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

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

groups like Ma Ba Tha. Whereas these laws were aimed chiefly at the Muslim minority in Rakhine State, Christians are also affected 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 Rohingya into Bangladesh. Christians experience pressure and even violence from the army, and killings of Christians are reported.

## How the situation varies by region

Myanmar is arguably suffering from the world's longest civil conflict, which began immediately after the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. The core of the conflict is that the central government has tried to impose its control over regions, which had been promised a certain measure of autonomy.

When it comes to difficulties for Christians in the reporting period, Chin State has to be named. The Tatmadaw indiscriminately attacked Christian villages, church buildings (sometimes hosting refugees or IDP camps) and killed Christian aid workers and pastors. Other hotspots are Kachin State in the north and Kayah State in the south-east. 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 also continues in neighboring Shan State, which has a large minority of Christians, especially in the north. Although the conflict with the Karen and Karenni is not in the focus of international attention, it is still smoldering, and many people have become IDPs (or refugees in Thailand). A similar story can be told about the Chin, who are predominantly Christian and have sought refuge in India.

## 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. As these communities are targeted by the Tatmadaw, they are strongly affected by persecution. In many cases they are caught up in conflicts between the military and radical insurgent groups. Because these conflicts are generally separatist in nature, often a strong sense of nationalism pervades. 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 community. 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 because of their ethnic, and religious affiliations.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations face violations from the communities 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:

The majority of Myanmar's population (an estimated 60%) are of Burmese ethnicity, also called Bamar. 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 which seeks to root out and eliminate non-Buddhists in Myanmar through political means.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and is one of very few countries where the army holds almost all power, as illustrated by the military coup on 1 February 2021. According to the country's (old) constitution that was written by the Myanmar army itself in 2008, one quarter of parliament's seats were reserved for military staff. Moreover, the army held the most important government offices, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministries of Interior and Border Affairs. The emerging of resistance movements, be it the CDM or the PDF, have contributed to the paranoia of the army.

### 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 will 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.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### **WOMEN**

Rohingya extremist groups reportedly abduct Rohingya Christian women, forcibly marry them to Muslim men and attempt to convert them to Islam. Armed forces also pose a further threat to Christian women, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities. They are often at the forces' mercy, vulnerable to rape and physical assault. Women in the predominately Christian Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China as 'brides', so they can produce male heirs. Converts are also vulnerable to house arrest, expulsion from the family home, divorce and loss of child custody.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Targeted Seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

### **MEN**

Christian men might lose their job, be driven from their village or town, or 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.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced to flee town/country
- 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 score out of 100
2022	12	79.01
2021	18	74.07
2020	19	72.65
2019	18	71.42
2018	24	65.03

The increase in score by 4.9 points in the WWL 2022 is mainly related to a strong increase in reported violence. The pressure on Christians across all spheres of life continued to slowly increase but is more pronounced in 'community' and 'church' life. While the increase in 'community' life pressure was due to reports of discrimination in accessing healthcare services related to COVID-19, the increase in 'church' life reflected the fact that the army perceives churches more and more as centers of opposition. Christian converts continue to face strong pressure especially from their family and community.

It should be noted that it is increasingly difficult to obtain reports from war-torn Christian minority areas. This is also acknowledged by other international organizations, evidenced by the detention and sentencing of reporters as well as in internet and communication blackouts, e.g. in Chin State.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **On 14 September 2021**, a Baptist church in Thantlang town in Chin State was [attacked](#) by Myanmar Army artillery. When the pastor helped extinguish a blaze that had engulfed 19 houses set on fire by artillery, he was [killed](#) by soldiers, who also cut off his finger in order to steal his wedding ring.
- Many Catholic priests and pastors have been detained by the army, often suspected of helping, supporting or even leading the opposition forces.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2022	13	23	100	1000	200,000
2021	3	9	25	78	120,000

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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 citizens who wish to change their religion to 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 schools), which are attractive for minorities as they are boarding schools run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and to 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 governmental authorities. They are excluded from communal decisions and resources. Denial of building materials and access to drinking water can put Christians into 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. International monitoring (and sometimes even access) is blocked. The same applied to the distribution of COVID-19 relief aid.

### **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," while also recognizing 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 inter-faith marriages and introducing birth controls. Official permission must be sought to convert.

Christians are usually only hired by firms when there are no Buddhists available, and Christians 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.

### **Church life**

Dissent, especially any criticism about the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, is dealt with harshly. Complaining is futile and whenever the army is involved, speaking out bears an even greater risk. Following the military coup, the army is involved virtually all the time. In a climate where Christian leaders are accused of joining or even leading the resistance (be it CDM or PDF), speaking out is not only risky, but useless. The same is true when actions by radical Buddhist groups are addressed, but due to the changed situation in Myanmar, this has been eclipsed by other challenges.

As churches are suspected of being centers of opposition, the local communities, authorities and especially the military, monitor their activities. In a growing number of cases, this monitoring led to attacks against church buildings, church workers and leaders, including killings.

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 in 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 sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and CEDAW Art. 6)

# Situation of other religious minorities

The persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority is under discussion at The Hague. An imminent return from Bangladesh seems impossible, especially following the coup in February 2021. Non-Rohingya Muslims in other parts of the country are also facing persecution and discrimination.



# 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



#### 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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