

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
14

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).

Key findings

The year 2022 brought Myanmar further than ever from a solution to the violent conflict, which started when the army staged a coup on 1 February 2021. Fighting has continued and, in some parts of the country, increased, with the Christian minority among those bearing the brunt of attacks. 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 the northern Shan State. In February 2022, UNHCR estimated there were 440,000 additional internally displaced people (IDPs) since the beginning of the war ([UNHCR Factsheet, February 2022](#)). Christians are part of the generally peaceful resistance movement, but fighting has

increased across the country and although not all ethnic minority armed groups are involved, some Christian ones are. Government forces continued to attack Christian villages and churches (while leaving Buddhist monasteries largely untouched) and Christian aid workers and pastors have been killed.

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

55,227,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,421,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,421,000	8.0
Buddhists	41,549,000	75.2
Ethno-religionists	4,971,000	9.0
Muslims	2,037,000	3.7

Source²

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. 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, 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 groups like Ma Ba Tha. While 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.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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

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 WWL 2023 reporting period, the widening and intensification of the conflict has had an impact. The Tatmadaw indiscriminately attacks Christian villages, church buildings (sometimes hosting refugees or IDP camps) and kills Christian aid workers and pastors. While the atrocities in Chin State continued, other hotspots are Kachin State in the north and Kayah State in the southeast. As fighting there continues, an increasing number of people - many of them Christian - are living in IDP camps. Most have been there for years, and humanitarian access to them is blocked. Fighting continues as well 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 have become IDPs (or refugees in Thailand). A not-so-different story could be told about the Chin, who are predominantly Christian, only that their choice of refuge is 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. 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:

The majority of Myanmar's population (an estimated 60%) are of Burmese ethnicity, also called 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, which seeks to root out and eliminate non-Buddhists in Myanmar through political means. Although the government shows some improvement in including and working with minorities, there is still a long way to go to overcome the old policy of Buddhist-Bamar supremacy and fully include ethnic and religious minorities.

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 on 1 February 2021. Even 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 Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) or the People's Defense Force (PDF), has 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 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.



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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 rounded score out of 100
2023	14	80
2022	12	79
2021	18	74
2020	19	73
2019	18	71

The increase in score in WWL 2023 of 1.2 points after an increase in WWL 2022 by 4.9 points shows that the situation for Christians continues to deteriorate. While the score for violence rose by a further 0.5 points (after having risen by 2.9 points in WWL 2022), the pressure on Christians across all spheres of life continued to slowly increase, the most pronounced is National life with an increase of 0.4 points. This increase is mainly due to the extension of war into more regions, including from the Bamar-majority and the Christian minority's limited space has been restricted even further. Converts (from a Buddhist, Muslim or tribal background) continue to face strong pressure, especially from their family and community; the situation in Wa State continues unchanged. It should be kept in mind that it has been becoming much more difficult to obtain reports from war-torn Christian minority areas, which is acknowledged by other international organizations and is shown in the detention and sentencing of reporters as well as in Internet and communication blackouts across the country.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **January 2022:** In a government air-attack against a refugee camp in Loikaw, Kayah State, three Catholics were killed and seven wounded (Fides, 18 January 2022).
- **December 2021:** In a Tatmadaw attack against a Catholic Church in Mo So town, Kayah State, 35 Catholics were killed (Fides, 29 December 2021).
- **October 2021:** Rocket attacks destroyed more than 100 houses, several churches and non-governmental organization (NGO) offices in Thantlang, Chin State. Before the rocket attacks started, soldiers of the Tatmadaw torched churches and buildings belonging to Baptist, Presbyterian and Pentecostal denominations (CSW, 2 November 2021).

WWL Year	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	100*	1000*	100,000*	10,000*
2022	100*	1000*	200,000	20,000

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 - schools), 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



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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.” 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 controls. 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.

Church life

Dissent, especially any criticism about the situation of the 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 virtually involved all the time and 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 completely in vain anyway. 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. This does not mean that courageous Christians do not speak up, one example being 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 building and church workers and leaders, up to 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 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.



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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
