



## Burma

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. Constitutional protection of religious freedom has not existed since 1988, after the armed forces brutally suppressed massive prodemocracy demonstrations and abrogated the Constitution. In 1990 prodemocracy parties won a majority of seats in a free and fair election, but the junta of senior military officers refused to recognize the results and has ruled the country by decree and without a legislature ever since. The authorities generally permitted most adherents of registered religious groups to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abused the right to freedom of religion.

There was no change in the limited respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. 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. The Government systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom. In September 2007 the regime violently suppressed peaceful prodemocracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks. Security forces raided monasteries and arrested monks in response to these demonstrations. In some cases government officials destroyed existing places of worship, including monasteries believed to be involved in the September demonstrations, and discouraged and prohibited minority religious groups from constructing new places of worship or repairing existing structures. The Government also actively promoted Theravada Buddhism over other religions, particularly among members of ethnic minorities. Christian and Islamic groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to repair existing places of worship or build new ones. The regime continued to closely monitor Muslim activities. Restrictions on worship for other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued throughout the country. Although there were no new reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists, the Government applied pressure on students and poor youth to convert to Buddhism. Adherence or conversion to Buddhism is generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks.

During the period covered by this report, social tensions continued between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. In contrast with earlier reporting periods, there were no reports of conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists in Magway Division. Widespread prejudice existed against citizens of South Asian origin, many of whom are Muslims. While official religious discrimination was limited, de facto preferences for Buddhists remained.

The U.S. Government advocated religious freedom with all facets 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, and acted as a conduit for information exchanges with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999 the U.S. Secretary of State has designated the country as a "Country of Particular Concern" 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 and a population of more than 54 million. The majority follow Theravada Buddhism, although in practice popular Burmese 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. The country has a much smaller number of Buddhist nuns. The principal minority religious groups include Christians (Baptists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and an array of other Protestant denominations), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practice Buddhism, 6 percent Christianity, and 4 percent Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimate the non-Buddhist proportion of the population, which could be as high as 30 percent. Independent scholarly researchers place the Muslim population at 6 to 10 percent. A tiny Jewish community in Rangoon has a synagogue but no resident rabbi to conduct services for the approximately 25 Jewish believers.

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 among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities in the east, west, and south. Christianity is the dominant religion among the Kachin ethnic group of the north and the Chin and Naga ethnic groups of the west, some of whom also continue to practice traditional indigenous religions. Protestant groups report recent rapid growth among animist communities in Chin State. Christianity is also practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups of the south and east, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist. In addition, some ethnic Indians are Christian. Hinduism is practiced chiefly by Burmese citizens of Indian origin, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region. Islam is practiced widely in Rakhine State, where it is the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority, and in Rangoon, Ayeyarwady, Magway, and Mandalay Divisions where some Burmans, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis practice Islam. 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 widely in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

Highly authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. The current military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. In May 2008 the Government announced that its draft constitution had been approved after a nationwide referendum. Many diplomatic observers and human rights organizations criticized the fairness and transparency of the referendum and questioned the validity of the results. The constitution is not scheduled to take effect until after parliamentary elections scheduled for 2010.

In September 2007 the Government concluded its National Convention, 14 years after it began. The convention was part of the Government's seven-step "road map" to adopt a new constitution. Shortly after the conclusion of the final session, the Government released a list of 104 principles to guide the drafting of the constitution. In October 2007 the regime appointed a 54-person constitutional drafting committee. On February 27, 2008, the regime published the law governing its upcoming constitutional referendum. While the law stated that citizens and most ethnic minorities were eligible to vote, it excluded members of religious orders and individuals serving prison terms, including political prisoners.

The Government released its draft constitution in late March 2008. The draft constitution specifically recognizes the "special position of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the great majority of citizens," but also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as religions "existing" in the country on the date the constitution will come into force. It states that the Government shall "render assistance and protect the religions it recognizes." The text of the draft constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and provides for freedom of religion "subject to public order, morality, health, and other provisions of the constitution." The draft constitution prohibits members of religious orders from running for public office and forbids the "abuse of religion for political purposes."

Most adherents of religious groups that register with the authorities generally are allowed to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposes restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abuses the right to religious freedom.

Since independence in 1948, many of the ethnic minority areas have served as bases for armed resistance

against the Government. Although the Government negotiated cease-fire agreements with most armed ethnic groups after 1989, active Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies continued. Periodic fighting between the army and the leading Karen insurgent group, the Karen National Union (KNU), and multiple army attacks on Karen villages occurred. Successive civilian and military governments have tended to view religious freedom in the context of whether it threatens national unity or central authority.

The country has no official state religion. However, since independence, successive governments, civilian and military, have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Buddhism. In 1961 the Government's push to make Buddhism the state religion failed due to country-wide protests by religious minorities. However, in practice the Government continues to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism through its official propaganda and state-sponsored activities, including government donations to monasteries and support for Buddhist missionary activities. Promotions within the military and the civil service are generally contingent on the candidates being followers of Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs includes the powerful Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching).

State-controlled news media frequently depict or describe government officials paying homage to Buddhist monks, making donations at pagodas throughout the country, 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 throughout the country. State-owned newspapers routinely feature front-page banner slogans quoting from Buddhist scriptures. The Government has published books of Buddhist religious instruction.

Official public holidays include numerous Buddhist holy days, as well as a few Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holy days. The Government normally observes the Full Moon Day of Tabaung, the 4-day Thingyan 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, Christmas, Idul Alhwaha, and Deepa Vali as national holidays.

Buddhist doctrine remains part of the state-mandated curriculum in all government-run elementary schools. Students can opt out of instruction in Buddhism and sometimes did. All students of government-run schools are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some Muslim students are allowed to leave the room during this recitation, while at other schools non-Buddhists are forced to recite the prayer.

The Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana handles the Government's relations with Buddhist monks and Buddhist schools. The Government continues to fund two state Sangha universities in Rangoon and Mandalay to train Buddhist monks under the control of the state-sponsored State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee" or SMNC). The Government-funded International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in 1998, has a stated purpose "to share the country's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world." The main language of instruction is English. The Government also funds one university intended to teach noncitizens about Theravada Buddhism.

Since the 1960s Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulty importing religious literature. All publications, religious and secular, remain subject to control and censorship. It is illegal to import translations of the Bible in indigenous languages. Officials have occasionally allowed local printing or photocopying of limited copies of religious materials, including the Qur'an (with the notation that they were for internal use only) in indigenous languages without prior approval by government censors.

Virtually all organizations, religious or otherwise, must register with the Government. A government directive exempts "genuine" religious organizations from official registration; however, in practice only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts. These requirements lead most religious organizations to seek registration. Religious organizations register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with the endorsement of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. Leaders of registered religious groups have more freedom to travel than leaders of unrecognized organizations and members of their congregations.

Citizens and permanent residents were required to carry government-issued National Registration Cards (NRCs) that often indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. There appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person's religion was indicated on the identification card. Citizens also were required to

indicate their religion on certain official application forms for documents such as passports, although passports themselves did not indicate the bearer's religion.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government generally enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom selectively. The Government continued to show preference for Theravada Buddhism while controlling the organization and restricting 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 banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. These nine orders submit to the authority of the SMNC, the members of which are indirectly elected by monks. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and often by criminal penalties.

According to state-owned media reports, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is compulsory, organized courses on Buddhist culture which millions of people attended. It was not possible to verify this claim independently.

There were reports that the ITBMU, while in principle open to the public, accepted only candidates who were approved by government authorities or recommended by a senior, progovernment Buddhist abbot.

The Government infiltrated or monitored the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. The meetings and activities of religious groups also were subject to broad government restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The Government subjected all media, including religious publications, and on occasion sermons, to control and censorship. The Government at times interfered with the assembly of religious groups.

Churches in Chin State often needed to request permission to hold religious ceremonies 2 to 3 months in advance, although authorities generally approved these requests.

Authorities frequently refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Christian and Islamic holidays and restricted the number of Muslims that could gather in one place. For instance, in satellite towns surrounding Rangoon, Muslims are only allowed to gather for worship and religious training during the major Muslim holidays.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religious groups, restricting their educational, proselytizing, and church-building activities.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. Christian groups reported that several times during the period covered by this report, local authorities denied applications for residency permits of known Christian ministers attempting to move into a new township. The groups indicated this was not a widespread practice, but depended on the individual community and local authority. In some instances local authorities reportedly confiscated NRCs of new converts to Christianity. Despite this, Christian groups reported that church membership grew, even in predominantly Buddhist regions of the country.

In 2007 authorities in the Rangoon area closed several Christian house churches because they did not have authorization to hold religious meetings. Other Rangoon home churches remained operational only after paying bribes to local officials. At the same time, the authorities made it difficult, although not impossible, to obtain approval for the construction of "authorized" churches.

State censorship authorities continued to enforce special restrictions on local publication of the Bible, Qur'an, and Christian and Islamic publications in general. The most onerous restriction was a list of more than 100 prohibited words that the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature because they are "indigenous terms" or derived from the Pali language long used in Buddhist literature. Many of these words have been used and accepted by some of the country's Christian and Islamic groups since the colonial period. Organizations that translate and publish non-Buddhist religious texts were appealing these restrictions. In addition, censors sometimes objected to passages of the Old Testament and the Qur'an that they believe

approve the use of violence against nonbelievers. There have been no reports of arrests or prosecutions for possession of any religious literature in recent years.

Authorities also restricted the quantity of Bibles and Qur'ans brought into the country. During the reporting period, however, individuals continued to carry Bibles and Qur'ans into the country in small quantities for personal use. There were no reports that authorities intercepted or confiscated Qur'ans at border entry points, but religious leaders complained that postal workers steal them to sell on the black market.

The Government discouraged proselytizing by all clergy. These restrictions most affected missionary religions, including some Christian denominations and Islam. The Government generally has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized almost all private schools and hospitals. The Government is not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations. Christian groups, including Catholics and Protestants, have brought in foreign clergy and religious workers for visits as tourists, but they have been careful to ensure that the Government did not perceive their activities as proselytizing. Some Christian theological seminaries also continued to operate, along with several Bible schools and madrassahs. Some of these groups did not register with the Myanmar Council of Churches but were able to conduct religious services without government interference. The Government allowed some members of foreign religious groups to enter the country to provide humanitarian assistance, as was the case after Cyclone Nargis hit the country in May 2008.

Citizens and permanent residents of the country were required to carry government-issued NRCs in order to obtain many basic government services. NRCs often indicated religion and ethnicity. Muslims often must pay large bribes to receive NRCs and passports. Ethnic Burman Muslims pay less than Muslims from ethnic minority groups (primarily those of Indian or Bengali descent). Authorities often refused to issue NRCs to Muslims who claimed to belong to one of the country's indigenous ethnic groups. Beginning in 2007, government authorities began barring Muslim university students who did not possess NRCs from attending graduation ceremonies. While these students were permitted to attend classes and sit for exams, they were not issued diplomas without NRCs, which they could not obtain unless they claimed a "foreign" ethnic minority affiliation. Many Muslim students from one indigenous ethnic group could not obtain diplomas unless they disavowed their true ethnic identity.

Rohingya Muslims were not eligible for NRCs. Although essentially treated as illegal foreigners, they were also not issued Foreigner Registration Cards (FRCs). Instead, the government continued a program with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) that issued Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs) to stateless persons in northern Rakhine State, the vast majority of whom were Rohingyas. The UNHCR estimated that approximately 35,000 TRCs were issued under this program in 2007 and an additional 48,000 were issued between January and May of 2008. Authorities insisted that Muslim men applying for TRCs must submit photos without beards. The authorities did not allow government employees of the Islamic faith, including village headmen, to grow beards, and dismissed some who already had beards. The authorities also did not consider many non-Rohingya Muslims to be citizens. According to the Government's referendum law, Rohingya TRC holders were eligible to vote in the May 2008 constitutional referendum; however, many diplomatic observers and NGOs believed the Government counted their votes without actually permitting them to cast ballots.

In 2006 a prominent Muslim religious organization asked the Rakhine State Peace and Development Council Chairman, the Regional Military Commander, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to lift marriage restrictions for Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. At the end of the reporting period, they had yet to receive a response.

In Rangoon Muslims can usually obtain birth certificates for newborns, but local authorities refused to allow them to place the names of the babies on their household registers.

Authorities generally did not grant permission to Rohingya or Muslim Arakanese to travel from their hometowns for any purpose; however, permission was sometimes obtainable through bribery. Non-Arakanese Muslims were given more freedom to travel; however, they were also required to seek permission, which was usually granted after a bribe was paid. 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. Those with money were able to bribe local officials to return. Muslims residing outside of

Rakhine State often were barred from return travel to their homes if they visited other parts of Rakhine State.

Rohingyas did not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education and were unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. Muslim students from Rakhine State who completed high school were not granted permits to travel outside the state to attend college or university. In lieu of a diploma, Rohingya high school graduates received a document that stated they would receive a diploma upon presentation of a citizenship card; however, Rohingyas can never obtain such a card.

Many of the approximately 25,000 Rohingya Muslims remaining in refugee camps in Bangladesh refused to return because they feared human rights abuses, including religious persecution.

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, subject to the country's 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, although it limited the number of pilgrims. An estimated 2,500 Muslims went on the Hajj in 2007, 500 fewer than in 2006. Approximately 300 went on government-sponsored trips. Only 180 ethnic Rohingya residing in Rakhine State were able to go on the Hajj, due to difficulty in obtaining passports and exit permission from the regime. Similar to 2006, an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 Buddhists made pilgrimages to Bodhgaya in 2007.

Muslims across the country, as well as some other ethnic minority groups such as Chinese and Indians, are often required to obtain advance permission from the township authorities when they wish to leave their hometowns.

Muslims in Rakhine State and particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience the severest forms of legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination. The Government denies citizenship status to Rohingyas because their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, which the country's citizenship law requires. The Rohingya assert that their presence in the area predates the British arrival by several centuries. In April 2007 five U.N. Special Rapporteurs and an Independent Expert called on the Government to repeal or amend its 1982 Citizenship Law to ensure compliance with international human rights obligations. Without citizenship status, Rohingyas do not have access to secondary education in state-run schools, because the Government reserves secondary education for citizens only.

Since 1988 the Government permits only three marriages per year per village in the primarily Rohingya townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in northern Rakhine State, and each marriage requires the approval of the Regional Military Commander.

Muslims also have difficulty obtaining birth certificates. A local official in Sittwe, Rakhine State, reportedly issued a verbal order in 2005 prohibiting the issuance of birth certificates to Muslim babies born in the area.

There are still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, but newcomers who are Muslim are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Muslims are not permitted to live in Gwa or Taungup.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. Few have ever been promoted to the level of director general or higher. There were no non-Buddhists who held flag rank in the armed forces, although a few Christians reportedly achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. The Central Executive Committee of the largest opposition group--the National League for Democracy (NLD)--also included no non-Buddhists, although individual members from most religious groups in the country supported the party. The Government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired for 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 application, although they were not required to convert.

The Government continued to restrict the building of religious structures by minority religious groups. The

Government also permitted the destruction of religious centers and schools.

The Religious Affairs Ministry has stipulated in the past that permission to construct new 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. 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; however, informal approval from local authorities created a tenuous legal situation. When local authorities or conditions have changed, informal approvals for construction have been rescinded abruptly and construction halted. In some cases authorities demolished existing church buildings.

Christian groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. Sometimes the authorities refused because they claimed the churches did not possess proper property deeds, but access to official land titles was extremely difficult due to the country's complex land laws and government 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. Muslims reported that the authorities prohibited them from constructing new mosques anywhere in the country, and they had great difficulty obtaining permission to repair or expand existing structures. Historical mosques in Mawlamyine, Mon State, Sittwe, Rakhine State, and other areas continued to deteriorate because authorities would not allow routine maintenance. In early 2007 Muslims in northern Rakhine State repaired a mosque that had been severely damaged in a storm. When the authorities discovered this, they destroyed the repairs that had been made to the mosque. Buddhist groups have not experienced similar difficulties in obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

The Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) in Insein Township, Rangoon, is the premier seminary for Baptists throughout the country. To accommodate a rapidly increasing enrollment, MIT raised funds to build a new classroom building and purchase building supplies in 2004. At the last minute, government officials refused to grant a building permit. Four years later, piles of construction materials still litter the campus where they gather mildew and rust. In contrast, the Government openly supports Buddhist seminaries and permits them to build large campuses.

The Government's border security force continued to conduct arbitrary "inspections" of mosques in northern Rakhine State, demanding that mosque officials show permits to operate the mosques. When mosque officials could not produce the permits, officials ordered congregation members to destroy the mosques.

It remained extremely difficult for Muslims to acquire permission to repair existing mosques, although internal renovations were allowed in some cases. In some parts of Rakhine State, authorities cordoned off mosques and forbade Muslims to worship in them.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

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 did not hesitate to arrest and imprison lower-level Buddhist monks who opposed the Government. In prison monks were defrocked and treated as laypersons. In general they were not allowed to shave their heads and were not given food in accordance with the monastic code. Like other political prisoners, 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 state-recognized monastic orders under the authority of the State Clergy Coordination Committee. The Government prohibited all clergy from being members of a political party.

On November 5, 2007, authorities arrested U Gambira. His younger brother Ko Aung Kyaw Kyaw was arrested on October 17, 2007. U Gambira was one of the leaders of the All Burma Monks Alliance and was alleged to have helped organize the September 2007 peaceful prodemocracy protests. U Gambira and his

brother were held without charge until January 2008, when officials charged them with violating the Unlawful Associations Act, which carries a maximum 3-year prison sentence. In February 2008, officials again charged U Gambira and his brother with immigration violations for allegedly crossing the Thai-Burma border without permission. If convicted on this charge, they could face up to 5 years' imprisonment.

The All Burma Monks Alliance did issue a statement urging monks to boycott upcoming state-sponsored religious exams but did not call for a boycott of the referendum as some media have reported. The statement also reminded monks of the September 2007 crackdown and called for a continuation of a boycott against alms-giving from the regime.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners—Burma estimated that security forces raided at least 52 monasteries between September 26 and December 31, 2007, in retaliation for the peaceful monk-led prodemocracy 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, although at the end of 2007, many more monks were reportedly missing from their monasteries.

On November 15, 2007, approximately 150 USDA members, local officials, and police raided a monastery in New Dagon township in Rangoon, stealing the monastery's funds and detaining a monk, U Sanda Wara. Media reports stated that the regime attempted to evict monks from 39 monasteries in the area, purportedly over a land dispute.

In November 2007 there were reports that younger monks imprisoned for their participation in the September demonstrations appeared to suffer more severe injuries from interrogators' beatings than older monks.

On October 4, 2007, two monasteries in South Oakkalapa Township were raided.

In October 2007 approximately 90 monks, including the head monk of the Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery, were detained at a monastery in the Kaba Aye monastery complex, where they were undergoing interrogation. Many novices had departed in anticipation of being arrested and others had been fetched by parents.

In September 2007 the regime violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations led by Buddhist monks. Witnesses reported the regime conducted numerous nighttime raids on monasteries and private homes following September's peaceful prodemocracy protests. In Rangoon local witnesses, media, and foreign diplomatic representatives reported that many monks were missing from their monasteries after the crackdown began on September 26. The September crackdown in Mandalay was reportedly milder than in Rangoon. Similar to other Burmese cities, monks in Mawlamyaing disappeared and were reportedly ordered to return to their homes.

On September 24, 2007, Minister of Religion Thura Maung instructed the State Sangha Religious Committee to urge monks to end the protests and warned the regime would take action if demonstrations continued. Government officials reportedly visited other Buddhist leaders with similar warnings, but the demonstrations continued.

In late September and early October 2007, foreign diplomatic representatives and members of the media visited several local monasteries and found many damaged and nearly empty. On September 28, 2007, journalists and foreign diplomatic representatives visited Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery in Rangoon and found bamboo batons, riot control munitions, broken windows, and pools of blood on the floor of the monastery's dormitory.

On September 27, 2007, security forces conducted a pre-dawn raid at the Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery in Rangoon. Witnesses reported that police and soldiers beat monks and destroyed property. Approximately 70 monks were taken away. Cash, jewelry, and other valuables also were reported missing following the raid. An official from the Religious Affairs Department returned later in the day to demand that the remaining monks clean up evidence of the raid and relocate to another monastery. When the monks refused and local residents gathered to support them, soldiers and police returned and fired live ammunition to disperse the crowd.

Witnesses told journalists that at least 2 men were killed by the gunfire, including 18-year-old Zayar Naing Oo. Similar raids were reported at Kyaik Ka San, Moe Kaung, and Mahar Bawdi monasteries.

On September 26, 2007, soldiers and police raided at least 6 large monasteries in Rangoon and arrested an estimated 100 monks, including Sayada Aindakaat, the leader of Maggin Monastery.

On September 5, 2007, authorities fired warning shots to disperse a peaceful procession of approximately 300 Buddhist monks in Pakkoku, Magwe Division. Witnesses reported that the monks were collecting alms and chanting for peace and an end to oppression. Three monks were detained but released later that day. The next day local monks demanded an apology from the police and local officials. When officials traveled to the local monastery but did not publicly apologize, the monks set fire to the officials' cars and held them in the monastery for several hours before releasing them unharmed. Many diplomatic and human rights observers believed this incident in Pakkoku led to the subsequent monk-led prodemocracy protests in September 2007.

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 to pray for the release of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda. Authorities sometimes used the proregime USDA to block the group from entering the pagoda grounds and make them pray outside the entrance or to shout and clap loudly to drown out their prayers.

On the morning of October 12, 2007, authorities briefly detained Tuesday Prayer Group leader Naw Ohn Hla. She was released later that day but was informed that she was confined to her Rangoon neighborhood for 1 year. This restriction on her movement prevents her from leading the Tuesday Prayer Group campaign. She was previously arrested on September 18, 2007, and released shortly thereafter.

In January 2007 USDA members verbally and physically attacked Naw Ohn Hla and the Tuesday Prayer Group as they tried to enter Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda. Witnesses reported that approximately 100 men in plain clothes surrounded Naw Ohn Hla and demanded that she and the other prayer group members depart immediately. When they did not depart, witnesses reported that USDA members beat several of the Prayer Group members. Uniformed police at the scene did not attempt to stop the attack, and authorities did not investigate the incident or pursue a complaint filed by Naw Ohn Hla.

In July 2006 authorities from Thandwe, Rakhine State, arrested Abbot Wila Tha and his assistant Than Kakesa from the Buddhist monastery of U Shwe Maw village, Taungup Township, closed the monastery, and forced 59 monks and novices to leave. Local sources claimed that the reason for the arrest was that the abbot refused to accept donations from or conduct religious ceremonies for the authorities. The authorities also claimed the abbot was endangering local stability by talking to the monks and novices about democracy, that he was a supporter of the NLD, and that he had supported the visit of Aung San Suu Kyi when she visited the area several years earlier. The exile-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) estimated there were 86 Buddhist monks in prison on various charges. It was not possible to verify the AAPP estimate. The number of non-Buddhists in prison for their religious beliefs was unknown. Reportedly, authorities usually defrocked monks upon arrest, treated them like ordinary prisoners, and used torture. The prison authorities disrespectfully addressed the monks by their given names, not their religious titles.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been in prison or under house arrest since 2003 when forces allied with the Government attacked her and her convoy, which included several NLD-allied monks, while they traveled in Sagaing Division in the northwest. The Government reportedly used criminals dressed in monks' robes in the ambush. On May 25, 2008, the Government extended Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest for an additional year.

Local civilian and military authorities continued to take actions against Christian groups: arresting clergy, closing home churches, and prohibiting religious services.

In January 2007 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) released a report that documented the Government's restrictions, discrimination, and persecution of Christians in the country for more than a decade. Subsequently, the Ministry of Religious Affairs pressured religious organizations in the country to publish statements in government-controlled media denying they had any connection with CSW or to condemn the report, and to reject the idea that religious discrimination existed in the country.

In Kachin State, authorities have constructed Buddhist shrines in Christian communities where few or no Buddhists reside and have tried to coerce Christians into forced labor to carry bricks and other supplies for the shrine construction. In September 2006 government officials inaugurated a pagoda near the Kachin Independence Organization's headquarters at Laiza, Kachin State. Kachin sources reported there were no Buddhists living in the community. In northern Rakhine State, authorities frequently forced Rohingyas to help construct Buddhist shrines, even though Buddhists there account for approximately 2 percent of the population.

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 Dr. Tun Aung, and local businessman U Niramad. While authorities did not provide any explanation for the arrests, local residents reported to the media that they believed the arrests were the result of the regime's paranoia about alleged organized Muslim political activity in the area. It was believed that the 11 leaders continued to be held at the end of the reporting period, although no information on their condition has been released.

In January 2006 Muslim Rohingyas from at least ten surrounding villages claimed the military forced them to carry building supplies for three model villages at Padauk Myin, Mala Myin and Thaza Myin in Rathedaung Township. Certain townships in Rakhine State, such as Thandwe, Gwa, and Taungup, were declared "Muslim-free zones" by government decree in 1983.

SPDC authorities continued to "dilute" ethnic minority populations by encouraging, or even forcing, Buddhist Burmans to relocate to ethnic areas. In predominantly Muslim northern Rakhine State, authorities established "model villages" to relocate released ethnic Burman criminals from other parts of the country.

There continued to be credible reports from various regions of the country 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 making merit. In April 2006 authorities in Lashio reportedly tried to coerce merchants to contribute large sums to construct a Buddhist shrine. Christian merchants refused to participate and the funds raised were well below the authorities' target.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor United States citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Although authorities appear to have largely moved away from a campaign of forced conversion, there continued to be evidence that other means were used to entice non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism. Christian Chins were pressured to attend Buddhist seminaries and monasteries and encouraged to convert to Buddhism. Christian Chins 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 this school. An exile Chin human-rights group claimed that 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.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

Preferential treatment for Buddhists and widespread prejudice against ethnic Indians, particularly ethnic Rohingya Muslims, were key sources of social tensions between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities.

In contrast with previous years, there were no reports of conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists in Magway Division during the reporting period. While official religious discrimination was limited, de facto preferences for

Buddhists remained. The Jewish congregation of eight Rangoon families did not report any acts of anti-Semitism.

The Government tightly controlled the limited number of private academic institutions and their curriculums. Similar controls extended to Buddhist monastery-based schools, Christian seminaries, and Muslim madrassas. During the reporting period the Government cracked down on private classes and attempted to ban them. Aung Pe, a private teacher and NLD supporter, remained in prison, reportedly in poor health, and was serving a 3-year sentence for alleged violation in 2005 of the Private Tuition Act.

Since 1994, when Buddhist members split away from the KNU (Karen National Union) to organize the progovernment Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), there have been armed conflicts between the DKBA and the predominately Christian antigovernment KNU. Although the DKBA reportedly includes some Christians and there are some Buddhists in the KNU, the armed conflict between the two Karen groups has had strong religious overtones. There were also unverified reports that DKBA authorities continued to expel villagers who converted to Christianity.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

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

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 period covered by this report, embassy officials discussed the importance of improved religious freedom with government and military officials, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives met regularly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religious-affiliated organizations and NGOs. These meetings included regular invitations to the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires' residence to build understanding and tolerance among the groups.

Through outreach and traveling, when not blocked by regime officials, embassy representatives offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and exchanged information with many otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Representatives of the [Rohingya](#) minority participated in English language and current events studies at the Embassy's American Center. The American Center regularly translated statements and reports by the U.S. Government and various NGOs on violations of religious freedom in the country and distributed them via its frequently visited library. The U.S. Government funded an effort for the UNHCR to initiate work with the Ministry of Immigration and Population to issue TRCs, fairly and without bribes or unreasonable requirements, to undocumented Rohingyas. In addition, the Embassy worked closely with Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian NGOs involved in education and teacher training.

Since 1999 the Secretary of State has designated the country as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Because of the country's poor human rights situation, including its abuses of religious freedom, the United States imposed extensive sanctions on the regime, including sanctions targeted at specific members of the Government and those who benefit from its policies. The United States has also opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions. U.S. sanctions include 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 General System of Preferences (GSP) benefits and Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the U.S. Export-Import Bank (EXIM) financial services in support of U.S. investment and exports to the country. The U.S. Government also ended active promotion of trade with the country, limited the issuance of visas to high-ranking government and military officials and their immediate family members, and froze SPDC assets in the United States. New investment in the country by U.S. citizens has been prohibited since May 1997.

Released on September 19, 2008

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