

burma

PERSECUTION 101



burma


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Ruled by a brutal military junta, Burma's ethnic and religious minorities face the constant threat of attack.

When the Burmese army, or Tatmadaw, ousted Burma's civilian government in 2021, the international community responded with outrage. Along with the outrage, many groups expressed concern for the country's ethnic and religious minority groups, against whom the Tatmadaw has waged a decades-long war of extermination. As in many countries, Burma is divided along both ethnic and religious lines, with most of the ethnic majority Burman population being Buddhist and many of the ethnic minorities comprised of Christians or Muslims. Without the limits provided by a civilian government, the Tatmadaw has spent the years since the coup in unchecked violence, killing thousands and jailing many thousands more.

Note on names: "Burma" and "Myanmar" are two names for the same country. The terms can be used interchangeably, though some ethnic minorities, who may not speak Burmese, prefer the more western "Burma" as a mark of protest against the military regime, which prefers "Myanmar," a name with more exclusive linguistic ties to the Burman ethnic majority.

However, both names are derived from Burmese names for the Burman people. While the link between "Burman" and "Burma" is more obvious to English speakers, "Myanmar" is derived from "Myanmar Pyi," the written form of the spoken word "Burman" in the Burmese language.



QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Military
Dictatorship



Chief Executive

General Min Aung
Hlaing of the
Tatmadaw
(since 2021)



Total Population

Approx. 57.9 million
(2023 est)



Religious Demography

87.9% Buddhist - 50.9 million
6.2% Christian - 3.5 million
4.3% Muslim - 2.5 million*
1.6% Other

*This number is likely significantly higher than the reality, given the large number of Muslim-majority Rohingya people from Rakhine State. They have been intensely persecuted since 2017.



Ethnic Demography

68% Burman	3% Chinese
9% Shan	2% Indian
7% Karen	2% Mon
4% Rakhine	5% Other



TYPES OF PERSECUTION



Military Force

The Tatmadaw is waging a brutal war against Christian and Muslim ethnic minority communities across the country



Imprisonment

The democracy, ethnic rights, and religious freedom movements in Burma are deeply linked. The Tatmadaw has imprisoned thousands in its attempt to suppress the political and social rights sought by all these groups



ICC IN BURMA

As in other countries around the world, ICC's Burma work involves a strategic combination of headquarters staff, field staff, and partner organizations to deliver meaningful, cost-effective aid to the persecuted people in Burma. During the COVID pandemic, ICC worked with long-established contacts on the ground to provide aid to communities overlooked by official government programs.

Though working in Burma has become more difficult since the coup, ICC has made efforts to remain involved in serving the country's disadvantaged Christian community. The months immediately after the coup were particularly fraught. During that time, ICC lost contact with its staff many times due to internet shutdowns and door-to-door military raids designed to root out all opposition.

Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Burma

Though the coup changed Myanmar's balance of power away from the civilian government, the military has long enjoyed the lion's share of authority in Myanmar. Even under the previous civilian government, the military controlled the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Border Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the General Administrative Department. The latter regulates the local and regional levels of government.

At the national level, the military reserved a full 25 percent of seats in parliament for itself in a power-sharing arrangement enshrined in the constitution, which it wrote in 2008. This baked-in representation gave the military veto power over any attempts at constitutional reform, such as an attempt to revoke the military head's authority to declare a state of national emergency, which Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing did on February 1, 2021, when he seized power.

Capitalizing on these power structures, the Tatmadaw has waged an internal war against ethnic and religious minorities for years. The military's violent campaign most notably targets Rohingya Muslims and entails significant violence against Christians and other minorities.

According to the United Nations, the military's actions against the Rohingya constitute a genocide.

Myanmar is a patchwork mosaic of ethnic and religious groups. Though a strong majority of the population is ethnic Burman, and an even greater percentage is Buddhist, the communities that make up the rest are well-established, well-organized, and for the most part predate the formation of the modern state by centuries.

In many cases, Myanmar's ethnic minorities have taken on a distinct religious identity as well. About 20-30% of ethnic Karen are Christians, while other groups—such as the Chin—are over 90% Christian. This overlap of ethnic and religious identity has created a volatile situation for believers. In Chin State, for example, most of the population is Christian, creating a target-rich area for the military.

Western countries and their allies, led in large part by the U.S., have refused to acknowledge the junta's legitimacy and have piled on dozens of sanctions designed to limit the junta's financial resources.

In June 2023, officials from the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced a new round of sanctions on the military junta ruling Myanmar. These latest sanctions target Burmese Ministry of Defense, the Myanma Foreign Trade Bank, and the Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank. The latter two institutions house much of the junta's foreign currency reserves, which are critical to the junta's ability to import various goods and services needed to sustain its war effort.

The Burmese military has worked around western sanctions for many years and primarily trades with partners like India, China, and Russia which have support the regime in circumventing U.S. sanctions on the regime.

Despite the significant resources available to the military, or Tatmadaw, recent reports suggest that anti-junta militias have gained significant ground in recent months, reducing the area under solid Tatmadaw control to as little as 17%, according to the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.

US GOVERNMENT DESIGNATIONS

YEAR	USCIRF Recommendation	State Dept. Action
1999	No Designation	CPC
2000	No Designation	CPC
2001	CPC	CPC
2002	CPC	None
2003	CPC	CPC
2004	CPC	CPC
2005	CPC	CPC
2006	CPC	CPC
2007	CPC	None
2008	CPC	None
2009	CPC	CPC
2010	CPC	None

YEAR	USCIRF Recommendation	State Dept. Action
2011	CPC	CPC
2012	CPC	None
2013	CPC	None
2014	CPC	CPC
2015	CPC	None
2016	CPC	CPC
2017	CPC	CPC
2018	CPC	CPC
2018	CPC	CPC
2019	CPC	CPC
2020	CPC	CPC
2021	CPC	CPC
2022	CPC	CPC
2023	CPC	CPC

Resources and Reports

[Caught in the Crossfire: Myanmar's Christian Minorities Under Tatmadaw Rule](#)

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Burma Chapter](#)

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Burma Chapter](#)

