

Christians in Burma under Military Rule

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Historical context

Known as a land filled with ancient and modern pagodas, Burma is home to the Burman, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan, who consistently practiced Buddhism for their religion and culture for centuries before the arrival of Christianity. Emphasizing the extreme difficulty of converting the Burman, Adoniram Judson, the first American missionary to Burma, likened getting a convert from Buddhism to “pulling the tooth of a tiger.”¹ To underscore how much Buddhism has penetrated and shaped Burman society and culture, U Hla Bu, a Burmese scholar, likewise, stated, “Buddhism is as much a part of the Burman as his language and customs. In fact, Burmese language and customs are largely infused with Buddhist ideas and ways.”² Whereas Judson and other missionaries failed to convert Buddhists, they made inroads among animists—the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa—who were non-literate and illiterate.³ While the Burman, the largest and most powerful ethnic group in modern Burma, identified Christianity with colonialism, these highlanders “discovered it as the fulfillment of the cultural values latent in their primal religion.”⁴ This seemingly explains the missionary record that people in highland Burma received them well and accepted their religious teachings.⁵

To elevate the collective situation of these non-literate and illiterate people receptive to Christianity, American missionaries invented orthographies for them, translated the Bible, hymns, and other Christian literatures into the scripts they invented, educated them at mission schools in Burma or at seminaries and universities in the United States, and exposed them to modern medicine. It must be noted that education, brought by missionaries, forever changed the overall status of these non-Burman and non-Buddhist races, with lasting socio-political implications. San C. Po, a U.S.

While the Burman, the largest and most powerful ethnic group in modern Burma, identified Christianity with colonialism, these highlanders “discovered it as the fulfillment of the cultural values latent in their primal religion.” This seemingly explains the missionary record that people in highland Burma received them well and accepted their religious teachings.

educated Karen Christian was, for instance, the first Karen in history who called for the creation of a Karen country, and Saw Ba U Gyi, a legendary U.K. educated Karen Christian, was the first Karen who led the Karen armed struggle, which means Karen leaders, who deliberated and decided the fate and future of the Karen, were educated Karen Christians. Unable to think of the Karen and the Burman living together peacefully in the same country, San C. Po urged the British to create a separable country in the coastline of Lower Burma for the Karen.⁶ The first Kachin and Chin nationalists resisting Burman supremacy and military tyranny for ethnic equality and federal democracy were also educated Christians.⁷

It is important to recall that these non-literate and illiterate races seemed desperate for literature and education, as they created a folklore, according to which, they once had their own literatures, but somehow lost them. When American missionaries founded schools and educated them, they, therefore, cherished it, which, in turn, produced educated Christian elites among

1. Henry Park Cochrane, *Among the Burmans: A Record of Fifteen Years of Work and Its Fruitage* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1904), 211.

2. U Hla Bu, “The Christian Encounter with Buddhism in Burma,” *International Review of Mission* 47, no. 186 (1958): 172.

3. In this paper, I use the term “Karen” when I refer to all the subgroups of the Karen, including the Karenni.

4. Simon Pau Khan En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” *RAYS MIT Journal of Theology* 2 (2001): 41.

5. Herman G. Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth: The Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), 390.

6. San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 81. The Karen failed to found their own country.

7. Joshua, “Religion and Politics in Kachin Conflict,” *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 1, no. 1 (2021): 212.

them. Such young, educated, and motivated elites subsequently emerged as natural leaders for their respective races. Under the able and smart leadership of generations of educated leaders, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa Christians have valued and upheld their distinct literatures, cultures, and languages. Scholars acquainted with highland Burma know the historical importance of Christianity in revitalizing and buttressing the distinct ethnic identities of these people.⁸ The practice of Christianity by these upland people for their religion and culture gave them a source of power to underpin their distinct ethnicity and identity against the destructive forces of Burman ethnic assimilation. To put it in perspective, the Burman and Mon, who practiced Buddhism for their religion and culture for centuries, “have become fused.”⁹

Christians in Postcolonial Burma

Since Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa Christians are religiously and ethnically different from the Burman, who have controlled state power, particularly the military, since independence, they have faced restriction and persecution perpetrated and perpetuated by successive Burman military rulers, who accuse the Chin, Kachin, and Karen of being disloyal to the nation. These three groups sided with the British and Americans while their Burman counterparts backed the Japanese during WWII.¹⁰ When they colonized Burma, the British also recruited the Chin, Kachin, and Karen—not the Burman—into the army.¹¹ These events, among others, widened ethnic divide between the Burman and non-Burman races, especially the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, in postcolonial Burma. What made things even more intricate is that the core idea underlying nationalism in Burma before and after independence has exclusively centered on Burman race, religion, literature, and language. This nationalism came directly from Burman nationalists resisting the British colonizing the Burman and other races. Their popular motto stated, “Burma is our country. Burmese is our literature. Burmese is our language. Love our country. Cherish our literature. Uphold our language.”¹²

When Burma ultimately became independent in 1948, non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups—the Chin, Kachin, some Karen, Lahu, Shan, Wa, and others—became new citizens of the young nation, which means modern Burma has been home to more than Buddhists and Burman. Despite this new reality requiring a different imagination for the future destiny

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of the country, the Burman who have ruled Burma since independence have aggressively pursued the exclusive notion of Burman nationalism. In the name of eradicating remnants of colonialism, they, thus, destroyed what Burma scholars call “the plural society.”¹³ General Ne Win nationalized private businesses, mission schools, hospitals, and others after he took control of the country in 1962, which, in turn, saw the departure of unnumbered Indians, Chinese, missionaries, and Europeans from Burma. It was during this fateful time that he and his men began what has become known as Burmanization. He and all Burman military rulers who came after him not only expelled missionaries and other aliens but also sought to homogenize Burma by destroying the distinct ethnic, cultural, and religious identities of non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups.¹⁴

Those who practice religions other than Buddhism, retain ethnic identities other than Burman, speak languages other than Burmese, and use literatures other than Burmese against this polarizing backdrop have surely faced systematic and structural discrimination and exclusion. Race and religion are so important, perhaps decisive, when it comes to coveted privileges in mainstream Burmese society, that the non-Burman and non-Buddhists, in practical terms, never expect, let alone get, equal opportunities and privileges. People are, for instance, legally required to display their ethnic and religious identities when they apply for any positions or privileges, and top bureaucrats making decisions are virtually Buddhists and Burman, illustrating the interplay between special privileges and ethnicity/religion. Burma scholars chronicled if, why, and how Ne Win and his Burman successors started and continue this policy of Burman privilege/supremacy.¹⁵

It is notable that the departure of missionaries, Burman supremacy, and military dictatorship didn't weaken the indigenous

8. Xi Lian, “Fulfilling Prophecies on China's Ethnic Frontiers in Southeast Asia: Peripheral Peoples' Encounter with Christianity in the Twentieth Century,” *Church History* 92, no. 1 (2023): 99; Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 244.

9. Max Ferrars and Bertha Ferrars, *Burma* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, and Company Limited, 1901), 142.

10. Andrew Selth, “Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986): 483-507.

11. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The Other Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 33.

12. Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 74.

13. Richard Cockett, *Gold, Dreams and Blood: The Changing Face of Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 15-28.

14. Charmaine Craig, “Burma's Fault Lines: Ethnic Federalism and the Road to Peace,” *Dissent* 61, no. 4 (2014): 93-101.

15. Matthew Walton, “The ‘Wage of Burman-ness’: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1-27.

church, given that more Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa accepted Christianity for their religion and culture in the years and decades that followed. Despite arduous challenges facing them, Christians continued evangelizing their own people, and the vast majority of the Chin and Kachin are now Christians; about one-third of the Karen and Wa, and two-thirds of the Lahu practice Christianity. Christianity has enabled these highlanders to resourcefully imagine and construct their identity and ethnicity on their own terms and in their own contexts in the midst of the turbulent forces of colonialism, nation-building, and military tyranny; it has provided them with social, cultural, political, and intellectual sources.¹⁶ Christian traditions, practices, arts, literatures, music, and monuments have dominated the religious landscape of highland Burma.

The everyday Burmese from all races and religions endured economic stagnation, political restriction, and poor education and healthcare systems under previous military rule, but Christians faced double hardships—religious restriction and ethnic persecution—because of their ethnicity and religion. Native Chin, Kachin, and Karen scholars chronicled why and how their people underwent misery after misery under Burman military rule.¹⁷ Arrogant, chauvinistic, and violent, Burman military rulers deem the Burman are and always have been the real owners of the land. Whereas the Burman have been structurally privileged, non-Burman groups—the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa—have been underprivileged. In Burma, those who are in control of the military automatically control social, economic, and political capital, which means the Burman who control the military control the country. Since Burman military rulers have continued to make life difficult for religious minorities, hundreds of thousands of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen left Burma and sought refuge in India, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Unable to return to Burma and live in peace, more than two hundred thousand Chin, Kachin, and Karen permanently resettled in the West, with most of them in the United States—American missionaries evangelized Burma. Estimated to number more than 160,000, Christians constitute more than half of the Burmese American population. When they came as refugees, they brought with them nothing but their bodies and faith. Many of them came as single males, worked hard in factories with little pay to support their families in Burma, helped fellow immigrants settle in a new country, and brought their wives and children or future wives

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later.¹⁸ To meet their spiritual, social, and emotional needs, they organized churches wherever they worked; they founded hundreds of immigrant churches in Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Columbus, Dallas, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Nashville, New York, St. Paul, Tulsa, and others. Indianapolis is home to the largest Burmese Christian community in the United States, with dozens of churches and about 30,000 Christians.¹⁹ Tens of thousands of Chin, Kachin, and Karen Christians also resettled in other countries—Australia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and New Zealand.

Christians in Burma, meanwhile, continued to face tough trials under military rule, as Burman military rulers got drunk with power, amassed wealth, maltreated non-Buddhists and non-Burman, and made the ordinary Burmese extremely poor.²⁰ The military tyranny not only traumatized the Burmese, especially ethnoreligious minorities, but also made the nation virtually a client state, given Burma, shunned, sanctioned, and isolated by the West and most democratic countries, became dependent on China for anything and everything a country needed. Economic, military, political, and diplomatic support came from China that has endlessly plundered enormous natural resources—gold, jade,

16. Pum Za Mang, "Christianity, Modernity, and the Karen in Burma," *Highland Christianity: Modern Transformations of the China-Southeast Asia Borderlands* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2026), 35-56.

17. Layang Seng Ja, "Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar," *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 173-190; Pa Yaw, *Martin Luther's Theology of Two Kingdoms in Buddhist and Christian Communities: Transforming Contemporary Myanmar Society* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024), 35-37; Saw Eh Htoo and Tony Waters, *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar: The Challenge to Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024), 3-29.

18. Chan Thawng Lian, *Pastoral Care to Single Males in Myanmar Immigrant Churches in the U.S.* (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary 2018), 1.

19. Most Burmese Christians in Indianapolis are the Chin, and Chin church leaders told me that the Chin in Indianapolis alone are estimated to number about 30,000.

20. I use the term "Burman military," because the Burman have led, controlled, and operated the military since 1949, when General Ne Win replaced General Smith Dun, a Karen Christian, as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

rare earth, ruby, teak, and others—in Burma. China's oil and gas pipelines and projects, such as mega dams, have crisscrossed the land. Burman military rulers finally grew uneasy as they realized the dangerous level of Chinese influence and hegemony. The point of my articulation here is that it is not a democracy awakening, but this profound fear led them to start the process of democratization in 2011.

To reduce the alarming Chinese influence on Burma, the Burman generals, then, wanted to initiate a new relationship with the West, particularly the United States, and thus released Aung San Suu Kyi from prison for that specific purpose. They knew well the West only trusted her, not them, so they decided to play her card. They most likely calculated that since the United States wanted to contain the rise of China, the U.S. government would possibly accept their overture. They invited European and U.S. leaders; Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and others, then, visited Burma, which marked a new chapter in the history of relationships between Burma and the West. It was a sure thing that China was disappointed, perhaps livid. The everyday Burmese, who had endured the full brunt of military tyranny, thought their long nightmare would be a thing of the past. For the first time in history, they experienced the contrast between living under democratic rule and suffering under military tyranny; the new era saw better education, better healthcare system, better transportation, and unprecedented freedom of the press. Internet and phone revolution, global financial services, and foreign companies and organizations followed.

Freedom and democracy immensely benefited the everyday Burmese, who became deprived of freedom of expression since 1962. Before 2008, when I left Burma for the United States, nobody trusted anyone, because military agents were anywhere and everywhere. When I returned home in 2017, I was amazed by the incredible scale of press freedom and freedom of expression. That era of freedom and democracy also saw an unparalleled level of Christian participation in national, regional, and local governments. From 2016 to 2021, Christians, for example, served as vice president and speakers of the two houses.²¹ It was true that the military held the reins of real power, yet civilian politicians also wielded significant power to make all the difference to the country and people. Christians, who were denied religious freedom, now enjoyed freedom and democracy. Chin State, the one and only Christian majority state in Burma, was, for instance, restricted to foreigners, but the elected governments allowed tourists to enter it. The Chin who never left their state never saw foreigners before, but tourists from the rest of the world freely visited cities, towns, and villages in Chin State before 2021.²²

21. Henry Van Thio (Chin), Mahn Winn Khaing Thann (Karen), and T. Khun Myat (Kachin) had served as the vice president and speakers of the two houses of Burma.

22. When the Chin held the hundredth anniversary of the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the city of Hakha in 1999, the military blocked Robert G. Johnson, the last missionary to the Chin, from entering Chin State.

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Outrage after the 2021 Coup

The military, however, suspended democracy and freedom in February of 2021, because of the insatiable greed of the generals, shattering our dreams and our future; I shook my head in disbelief as I came to learn of this news. I lived in Yangon at that time and saw the sweltering rage of Yangon residents. Rejecting military tyranny, most people of all ages, races, and religions marched on the streets in cities, towns, and large villages across the country. It was during this time that I, for the first time, saw the Chinese and Russian embassies in Yangon. China and Russia historically backed the Burman military, so protesters went to the two embassies and called upon their countries not to support the coup. Christians, led by priests and pastors, also marched the streets and peacefully protested against the coup. The cost of resisting the military has been high, however, as the generals responded to people, who only called for a return to democracy, by extreme violence. They arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and killed men, women, and children. As of December 30, 2025, they had killed 7,640, according to a local human rights group.²³

Whereas the military sought to remain in power at every cost, the public, especially young men and women, refused to be sent back to the dark era of military dictatorship, which ended in the rise of armed revolution for freedom and democracy. Young people from all backgrounds—doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, students, and others—joined the armed resistance movement. Provoked by atrocity after atrocity perpetrated by the military against civilians, some existing ethnic armed organizations trained and armed tens of thousands of civilian resistance fighters. Fierce

23. The Statement of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (December 30, 2025).

fighting between the military and numerous resistance groups killed 52,720 people by May of 2024, according to a report.²⁴

In what follows, I precisely describe how much the church has excruciatingly endured suffering and destruction since the coup. What must be equivocally stated here is that rejecting military rule, Christians have played an important role in resisting military tyranny and subsequently paid a high price. The war has wrought tragedy in virtually every Christian family, destroying homes, displacing hundreds of thousands of them, separating family members, decimating lives, and shattering health and education for millions, especially children. Seeking to crush the revolution militarily, the military has relentlessly bombed and razed cities, towns, and villages across Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Shan States, where most Christians reside, and elsewhere in the country. The military has struggled in the ground war, so it has used its air-power to maximize the scale of its campaign of terror and destruction. Once again, China and Russia have backed the military.²⁵

There are nine towns in Chin State in western Burma, and the military bombed and virtually decimated Falam, Kanpetlet, Matupi, Mindat, Paletwa, Thangtlang, and Tonzang. More than seventy churches in these towns are left in ruins, as traumatized residents, who survived the hell of unrelenting airstrikes, fled the towns for their lives. Unknown numbers of rural churches in the townships of these towns are bombed and destroyed. Two Baptist seminaries—Union Theological College in Matupi and Chin Christian Institute of Theology in Falam—and nine Baptist associations located in these towns are also left in ruins. Founded in 1953 and located in Falam, the Chin Baptist Convention (CBC), the oldest and single most important religious organization in the history of the Chin is also abandoned. More than 200,000 people, nearly half of the state population, are displaced, and thousands of them died of depression, deprivation, and loneliness.²⁶ According to a local newspaper, 474 Chin resistance members also lost their lives, and the military killed 965 Chin civilians as of February of 2025.²⁷

The military has also attacked cities, towns, and villages across Kachin State, northern Shan State, Sagaing Region, and Mandalay Region in Upper Burma, subsequently shattering hundreds of churches, killing thousands of civilians, razing countless homes, and flattening hundreds of schools and hospitals in Bhamo, Hpakant, Hseni, Hsipaw, Kawlin, Khampat, Kunlong, Kyaukme, Laiza, Laukkai, Kutkai, Lashio, Mogok, Momeik, Namhkam,

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Namhsan, Mantong, Nawngkhio, and others.²⁸ Christians in these parts of Burma are ethnically diverse: the Akha, Chin, Chinese, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, Shan, and Wa. In Kachin State alone, more than 230,000 people have been displaced, according to a Kachin Baptist pastor in Myikyina, who asked for anonymity.

The situation in Karen State and Karenni State in southeastern Burma is not better either; the military bombed Bawlakhe, Demoso, Hpasauung, Hpruso, Loikaw, Mawchi, and villages across Karenni State, killing countless civilians, destroying uncounted homes, churches, hospitals, and schools, separating wives and husbands, and displacing more than 250,000 people, more than half of the state population.²⁹ The war between the military and multiple resistance groups in Karen State, Mon State, Bago Region, and Tanintharyi Region has also wrought tragedy in almost every family and society, with the military bombing military and civilian targets alike since 2021. To highlight the magnitude of violence and suffering facing civilians in these places, leaders from the Karen National Union told a local Karen newspaper in January of 2024 that the internally displaced people in areas under their control alone were estimated to number more than 700,000.³⁰ What I described above is merely a summary of the destruction caused by the military against civilians in places where most Christians live. If I mention all their atrocities, my list would be endless.³¹

24. *The Civilian Cost of Myanmar's Civil War: An Accounting of the First Three Years*.

25. Bertil Lintner, "China Plumps Squarely for Myanmar Junta," *The Irrawaddy* (September 3, 2025); "Russian Suicide Drones Headed to Myanmar as Junta Ramps Up Air War: Report," *The Irrawaddy* (December 16, 2025).

26. This information comes from a Baptist pastor in the hilltop town of Thangtlang. For his safety, I can't reveal his name.

27. "474 Chin Resistance Fighters Killed since Coup," *Khonumtung News* (February 4, 2025).

28. I have taught hundreds of students at Myanmar Institute of Theology since the coup and more than a hundred of them are from these places. They told me what they witnessed in their respective cities and towns. They requested to remain anonymous for security reasons.

29. This source comes from my displaced Karenni students, who requested anonymity.

30. "KNU-Controlled Areas Witness Surge in War-Displaced Population Now over 700,000," *Karen News* (January 23, 2024).

31. There are good reports: "Crashing Down on Us: Myanmar Military Junta Aerial Attacks, War Crimes, and Impunity in Kachin

Conclusion

Sadness upon sadness, the 7.7 magnitude earthquake also struck Burma on March 28, 2025, destroying hundreds of pagodas, mosques, temples, and churches in central Burma and Shan State, killing at least 3,800 people.³² The military stopped rescue teams from helping people buried under the ruins of collapsed buildings, continued bombing the quake-devastated Sagaing area, and blocked medics from assisting victims. The military prohibited Muslims and Christians from renovating their mosques and churches, making them especially vulnerable to this quake. Church leaders in Mandalay told me that that disaster damaged multiple churches and killed dozens of Christians. Instead of rescuing people trapped in the rubble, the military used that quake to consolidate their power; hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people may have died unnecessarily. The embrace of apathy by the military is, however, consistent with what they did to the public when the cyclone Nargis rocked Lower Burma and killed more than 100,000 lives in 2008 and when the pandemic devastated Burma in 2021.³³

All in all, the adoption of Christianity by peripheral races in highland Burma—the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa—for their religion and culture has profoundly transformed their communities and buttressed their distinct ethnic identities against dominant lowland cultures. Because of their religion and ethnicity, they also faced exclusion and persecution under successive Burman military juntas since independence. Since the 2021 coup, they, not unlike most ordinary Burmese, suffer more than ever before, as current Burman military rulers, the enemies of democracy, freedom, peace, and prosperity, relentlessly attack them. What is certain is that Christians will continue to endure exclusion and violence as long as Burma is under military rule.

and Karenni States” *Fortify Rights* (September 2025), “Horrific Sight to Witness: Airstrikes on Civilians by Myanmar’s Military Junta Ahead of Sham Election,” *Fortify Rights* (November 2025).

32. Vibhu Mishra, “Still Reeling: Myanmar Quakes Worsen Humanitarian Crisis in Fractured Country,” *United Nations* (June 24, 2025).

33. Pum Za Mang, “The Church and the Pandemic in Burma,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, no. 3 (2022): 326-338; Andrew Selth, “Even Paranooids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar’s Fears of Invasion,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 3 (2008): 388-389.

The adoption of Christianity by peripheral races in highland Burma—the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa—for their religion and culture has profoundly transformed their communities and buttressed their distinct ethnic identities against dominant lowland cultures. Because of their religion and ethnicity, they also faced exclusion and persecution under successive Burman military juntas since independence.
