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**WORLD
WATCH
LIST**
2024

Myanmar

LANDSINFORMATION

FÖR MER INFORMATION KONTAKTA:
Open Doors Sverige | Drottninggatan 60 | 702 22 Örebro
Telefon: 019 - 31 05 00 | E-post: sweden@od.org | www.open-doors.se



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I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

World
Watch
Research

Myanmar: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Myanmar

Brief country details

Myanmar: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
55,664,000	4,479,000	8.0

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Since 2006, Yangon (formerly Rangoon) is no longer the country's capital city.

Myanmar: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	79	17
WWL 2023	80	14
WWL 2022	79	12
WWL 2021	74	18
WWL 2020	73	19

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Myanmar: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders
Religious nationalism	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Ideological pressure groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders
Ethno-religious hostility	Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Ideological pressure groups, Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

As 2024 sees Myanmar entering a fourth year of an increasingly violent conflict, solutions - or even just a ceasefire - are nowhere in sight. After the army staged a coup on 1 February 2021, fighting has continued and increased in many parts of the country; with the levels of violence rising, the Christian minority is 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, Kachin and Kayah states, but also in states with a strong Christian minority, like Karen state and northern Shan state. More Christians than ever have been driven out to live in IDP camps, take refuge in churches or even flee to the jungle where they are often deprived of access to food and healthcare. Since the beginning of the civil war, an estimated 1.5 million citizens of Myanmar have become IDPs. 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, even those that have been out of

the spotlight for a considerable time, like the Karen. Government forces continued to attack Christian villages and churches (while leaving Buddhist monasteries largely untouched) and also killed Christian aid workers and pastors. An [aerial attack](#) against a concert held in celebration of the foundation of the Kachin Independent Organization in October 2022 killed more than 60 people, highlighting the increase in the level of violence in the conflict (Al-Jazeera, 24 October 2022).

Converts to Christianity find themselves additionally persecuted by their Buddhist, Muslim or tribal families and communities because they have left their former faith and have thereby removed themselves from community life. Communities who aim to stay "Buddhist only" make life for Christian families impossible by not allowing them to use community water resources. Non-traditional church groups experience opposition too, especially when they are located in the rural areas of Myanmar and/or are known for proselytizing. While Buddhist monks are somewhat divided concerning the February 2021 coup, many of the more radical ones support it.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Myanmar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
2. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
3. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Myanmar is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are denied access to communal resources because of their faith (ICESCR Art. 2)
- Christian homes and shops are attacked and destroyed, in violation of the right to an adequate standard of living and to a continuous improvement of living conditions (ICESCR Art. 11)
- Christian female converts are forcibly married to Buddhist men and pressured to renounce their new faith (CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Kachin Christian women and girls are trafficked into sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and CEDAW Art. 6)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

19 and 21 August 2023: Two Baptist churches and the homes of at least four Christians were deliberately [destroyed](#) in aerial attacks against Ramthlo village in Falam township and Khuafu village in Thantlang township, Chin State (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 25 August 2023).

16 July 2023: Soldiers from the Khalaya 274 Battalion based in Mindat, a town in western Myanmar's Chin state, abducted Pastor Htang Kay On and three other church leaders — Chai Kay, Hon Chway and Hon Kay — from the nearby Presbyterian Christian church compound in the town's western quarter. While the pastor was able to flee later on, the three others went missing and are believed to be [dead](#) (RFA, 2 August 2023).

27 May 2023: In a military campaign running until 12 June 2023, heavy fighting between regime forces and rebel groups in Moybe, Shan state, killed at least 30 people and forced thousands to [flee](#), among them many Christians (UCA News, 16 June 2023).

7 April 2023: A military court in Myitkina, Kachin state, [sentenced](#) Baptist pastor Dr. Hkalam Samson to six years' imprisonment on charges of terrorism, unlawful association and incitement (UCA News, 9 April 2023).

2 April 2023: Artillery shelling [destroyed](#) a church in Pekhön township, Shan state, killing one person and wounding several others (UCA News, 4 April 2023).

23 March 2023: An airstrike against the Christian Wan Pala village, Bawlake township, Kayah state, [killed](#) three people and sent thousands seeking refuge to be internally displaced (UCA News, 24 March 2023).

17 February 2023: The military regime announced that it will order 25 IDP camps in and around Myitkina, Kachin state, to be [closed](#). These camps were run by Catholic and Baptist churches, served IDPs since 2011 and hosted around 11,000 people (UCA News, 17 February 2023).

4 February 2023: A church building was [destroyed](#) in Hwarikhu village, Pekhön diocese, Kayah state, when it was hit by artillery shells, 10 houses were destroyed as well (UCA News, 6 February 2023).

15 January 2023: In a continuation from its arson campaign in December 2022, the Tatmadaw [attacked](#) even more houses and completely destroyed Catholic Assumption church in Chan Thar village (UCA News, 17 January 2023).

12 January 2023: An airstrike on Laywa village, Lu Thaw township, Kayin state, [killed](#) five civilians, among them a Baptist pastor and a Catholic catechist; their churches were destroyed (RFA, 13 January 2023).

14 December 2022: In an arson campaign, the Tatmadaw [destroyed](#) more than 300 houses of a Catholic settlement, Chan Thar village, Sagaing region, which itself is predominantly Buddhist (UCA News, 16 December 2022).

9 November 2022: An airstrike [destroyed](#) a church and a school in Ta Baw Ko Der village, Hpapun township, Karen state, in what witnesses called a deliberate attack, since in the area there was no fighting (UCA News, 11 November 2022).

3 November 2022: Shelling [destroyed](#) a Bible school in Kutkai town, Shan state, wounding four people. This came just days after previous shelling which had destroyed a Baptist church in Momauk township, Kachin state (UCA News, 4 November 2022).

Specific examples of positive developments

12 March 2023: Catholics were able to [build](#) St. Stephen Catholic Church at Lana village, Ding Sing parish, Kachin state, serving the local IDP camp hosted there (UCA News, 15 March 2023).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: aerial attack - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/24/sixty-killed-in-northern-myanmar-in-aerial-attack>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/chin-churches-bombed-08152023160053.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: dead - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/christian-clergymen-08022023161429.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: flee - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/heavy-fighting-in-myanmar-kills-many-civilians/101681>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: sentenced - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/prison-term-for-myanmar-pastor-sparks-outrage/100930>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/one-dead-church-damaged-in-myanmar-junta-attack/100887>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: killed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/3-dead-6-hurt-as-myanmar-military-bombs-village/100781>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: closed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-junta-to-close-kachin-idp-camps/100406>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/yes-another-myanmar-church-hit-by-army-shelling/100281>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: attacked - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-junta-torches-century-old-catholic-church/100060>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: killed - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/kayin-airstrike-01132023034242.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-junta-reduces-historic-catholic-village-to-ashes/99756>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-destroyed-in-air-strike-by-myanmar-military/99385>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-military-shells-bible-school/99306>
- Specific examples of positive developments: build - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/catholics-build-new-church-in-strife-torn-myanmar/100673>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Myanmar

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Myanmar report	AI Myanmar 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/	27 June 2023
BBC News Myanmar profile - updated 26 May 2023	BBC Myanmar profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563	27 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Myanmar Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MMR	27 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Myanmar - updated June 2023	World Factbook Myanmar	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/	27 June 2023
Crisis24 Myanmar report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Myanmar report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/myanmar	27 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Myanmar profile 2023	EIU Myanmar profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/myanmar	27 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Myanmar	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	27 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index - covering 29 countries, Myanmar not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Myanmar	https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-world/2023	27 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Myanmar	https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-net/2023	27 December 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Myanmar profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/myanmar/	27 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Myanmar report	Girls Not Brides Myanmar	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/myanmar/	27 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Myanmar country chapter	HRW 2023 Myanmar country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/myanmar	27 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Myanmar	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#mm	27 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Myanmar	https://rsf.org/en/myanmar	27 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Myanmar	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/mmr	27 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Myanmar	UNDP HDR Myanmar	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/MMR	27 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Burma/Myanmar	IRFR 2022 Burma/Myanmar	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma/	27 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 Burma/Myanmar – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Burma/Myanmar CPC	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Burma.pdf	27 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Myanmar - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Myanmar	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-mmr.pdf	27 June 2023
World Bank Myanmar data 2021	World Bank Myanmar data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MMR	27 June 2023
World Bank Myanmar overview - updated 10 April 2023	World Bank Myanmar overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/overview#1	27 June 2023

Recent history

In 1948 Burma became independent from Britain. From 1962 to 2011 the country was ruled by an oppressive military junta. A gradual process of democratization then began, most notably visible in the elections won by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2015. She had been re-elected for a second term on 8 November 2020 in elections which she won with a landslide majority of 80%. Apart from the fact that more than one million members from ethnic minorities were not able to vote due to security considerations, the elections were deemed free and fair. However, the Myanmar army (also referred to as the Tatmadaw) opposed the election results, although they had been confirmed by the country's electoral commission. On 1 February 2021, a [military coup](#) took place and the country has been in turmoil ever since (BBC News, 1 March 2021).

All talks and discussions with ethnic minority groups about their place in the country and a meaningful peace have been derailed by this coup; justice for atrocities committed and human rights violations (including crimes against humanity and even genocide) will remain elusive for the time-being. One of the largest refugee crises in modern times, concerning the Rohingya, continues to be unresolved and even sidelined by the deepening civil war in Myanmar. The refugee crisis has been decried worldwide and heavily affects neighboring Bangladesh. Repatriation from Bangladesh cannot take place as the Rohingya refugees have not received any guarantees of safety on return, and fighting in Rakhine state continues. For the time being, the refugees are stranded in Bangladesh. [Endorsed](#) by UN officials, the Bangladeshi government re-

relocated some of the Rohingya refugees to a remote and flood-prone island called Bhashan Char (Benar News, 2 June 2021), where now around 30,000 refugees live. The [re-emergence](#) of violent Muslim groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), capitalizing on the growing despair and hopelessness in the camps, will further complicate any solution (Benar News, 18 January 2022). Prospects for repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar in the near future [remain low](#) (International Crisis Group - ICG, 22 August 2022).

An immediate reaction to the coup in February 2021 was the formation of a Civil Disobedience Movement ([CDM](#)) with thousands of people, an estimated 40% of all civil servants, announcing they would not work for the military regime (New Mandala, 19 October 2021). This involved normal civil servants as well as teachers and medical staff, who were badly needed when the COVID-19 situation seemed to be deteriorating. The author of the New Mandala report cited above also stated (page 14): "There is little or no room for dialogue, or neutrality, in post-coup Myanmar. The military, which sees the CDM as a major obstacle to maintaining its political power and coercive and centralized rule, will continue to take the strongest possible measures against the movement and its supporters. The targeting of healthcare workers and medical facilities associated with the CDM, even during the pandemic, is evident." The CDM's influence diminished over time as more robust forms of resistance were seen as necessary to counter an increasingly violent regime.

Following the February 2021 coup, Aung San Suu Kyi was once more put under house arrest and charged with a variety of political and non-political crimes, she has been sentenced [multiple times](#) and faces a possible total of 190 years in prison (Reuters, 27 April 2022). The more violent form of resistance, as can be seen in the creation of the [People's Defence Force](#) (The Guardian, 1 June 2021), still did not lead to a centralized opposition force. The various [groups](#) within the PDF are not as organized or coordinated as one might expect, but they have nevertheless caused the Tatmadaw significant casualties (ICG, 30 June 2021). According to reports, these forces have [matured](#) over time (Jamestown, 30 July 2021). In a dangerous twist of events, the beleaguered Tatmadaw has resorted to equipping and training [pro-government militias](#), especially in the Burman Buddhist heartland (ICG, 6 April 2022). While this strategy has largely failed, it illustrates how much the Tatmadaw is stretched, clarifies that the resistance is by no means limited to ethnic minorities and adds another violent actor to an already crowded field.

In one of the [largest attacks](#) in the civil war so far, on 11 April 2023 government forces killed more than 100 people, half of them children and youth (RFA, 12 April 2023). The attack took place in majority-Buddhist Sagaing region and was not aimed at any particular ethnic or religious group. It is very clear that the regime is increasingly fighting a war against its own people. In March 2023, it decided to dissolve Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, underlining that any moves towards elections either later this year or in 2024 can only be described as a "[road to nowhere](#)" (ICG, 28 March 2023). Any hopes for a quick end to the war [remain elusive](#), even though the regime has indicated its wish to revive the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (RFA, 17 May 2023).

The elected parliament, which had been suspended, created an interim government in exile - the "National Unity Government" (NUG) - and called for a "[people's defensive war](#)" (CNN, 7 September 2021). Malaysia was the first country to [make contact](#) with the NUG in exile and

called upon other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to follow suit (Benar News, 25 April 2022); however, ASEAN did not make any progress in this respect.

Some of the [ethnic armed groups](#) decided not to join the general resistance against the army, banking on the latter being more willing to make compromises due to the current pressure (as described in: "New friends, old enemies - politics of ethnic armed organizations after the Myanmar coup", Australian National University, 10 June 2021). Another reason is that both army personnel and some ethnic insurgents are involved in producing and transporting [synthetic drugs](#) and there is too much money involved to let a civil war disturb such good business. The United Nations has found that [opium production](#) in Myanmar almost doubled since the military coup on 1 February 2021 (RFA, 26 January 2023). At the same time, lawless zones are also [hotspots for human trafficking](#) and organized crime (USIP, 9 November 2022). This has wider consequences, not only for other Asian countries, but also worldwide. As these zones are mainly found in the remote and border regions of Myanmar, Christian minorities living in these regions are affected by them as well. Due to the lawless situation, Christians are not only hard-pressed by a government relentlessly attacking everyone it assumes to be connected to the opposition, but also by groups benefitting from organized crime. The exploitation of resources like jade and timber are lucrative, too; hence the fighting to gain control of towns like Hpakant in Kachin state.

The four biggest ethnic armies [rejected](#) an offer by the Tatmadaw to join peace talks, reasoning that such talks would not include all relevant actors, since the army had excluded the PDF and NUG as "terrorists" (RFA, 9 May 2022). The offensive named "[Operation 1027](#)" in Northern Shan state is still ongoing at the time of writing (December 2023). Mounted by the "Brotherhood Alliance" of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, it overran and occupied more than 100 army posts, posing a formidable challenge to an already overstretched army (Reuters, 10 November 2023). How decisive this offensive will prove to be in the course of the civil war remains to be seen.

Political and legal landscape

Before the February 2021 coup, the ruling National league for Democracy (NLD) had been focused on the Bamar people and did not reach out to ethnic political parties effectively. The peace process had also made no tangible progress. Despite this, the General Election on 8 November 2020 did [not go too well](#) for the ethnic parties, except in Rakhine and Shan states (ICG, 12 November 2020) and the NLD won some 82% of all votes. However, in the wake of the military coup, issues like these have now taken a backseat, although the regime initially promised that the suspension of the government would only last for one year, after which new elections would be called. The regime backpedaled on this promise and now says elections may take place in 2024. One prerequisite for a nationwide election is a [census](#) and consequently, the regime declared in June 2023 that it had almost completed a new census, a task that neutral observers say is impossible to achieve in a civil war situation where the regime is probably in control of less than 50% of the country's territory (RFA, 28 June 2023).

The ethnic minorities consist of several dozen groups making up more than 30% of the country's population, many of them being Christian or containing large Christian groups. No matter which government or regime is in power, building up trust with the ethnic minorities is a necessity, but has become a major challenge after decades of war. Aung San Suu Kyi, despite all her personal

achievements, is basically regarded as being a member of the Burmese (“Bamar”) nobility who is not seriously interested in the plight of ethnic and religious minorities, even more so since January 2020, when she [defended](#) Myanmar in person against the war crime accusations before the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Irrawaddy, 23 January 2020). Meanwhile, in March 2022, the US government declared the atrocities against the Rohingya as [genocide](#) (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2022) and the World Court (the new name for the ICJ) has confirmed that it does have [jurisdiction](#) in the case bringing genocide claims against Myanmar (Reuters, 23 July 2022).

As mentioned above, opponents of the coup regime have formed a [National Unity Government](#) - NUG (Reuters, 16 April 2021), which includes several ministers who are Christian, and aims to form a federal democracy by [uniting](#) ethnic Burmese with many ethnic minorities (The Irrawaddy, 16 April 2021). Regional efforts by neighboring ASEAN states to negotiate with the regime led to a “[Five points consensus](#)” in April 2021 (Al-Jazeera, 24 April 2021), but this consensus has been widely ignored by the coup leaders in Myanmar. Indonesia, which had the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023, [tried to push](#) for a solution, but has also met with no success (Reuters, 10 May 2023). A solution is desperately needed since the ongoing conflict has serious consequences for the [regional stability](#), not least of which are the lawless zones which are developing (USIP 1 February 2023) - see also above: *Recent history*.

The Myanmar Buddhist Association indicated that it was choosing to [distance](#) itself from the military coup, seeing similarities between the Buddhist understanding of compassion (metta) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (The Diplomat, 18 March 2021). Although it called for an immediate end to all acts of violence, Myanmar’s [Buddhist clergy](#) has largely remained silent in the face of the unfolding civil war (ICG, 10 March 2023). The ICG report states (on page 12): “Even those monks who might otherwise lean toward supporting the revolution may worry that doing so contributes to a decline in monastic authority in the country. They are keenly aware that the parallel authority, the National Unity Government (NUG), relies for its armed resistance on the support and sanctuary provided by predominantly Christian ethnic armed groups, which many monks expect will push any future democratic government to adopt a more explicitly secular approach.” Meanwhile, it is clear that [religion](#) is already playing a significant role in the conflict (Jamestown Foundation, 17 March 2023). While the Buddhist clergy’s neutral stance has deeply religious and doctrinal reasons, the ICG report shows that there are also pragmatic considerations playing out. At the same time, war parties and clergy likewise are already preparing for an after-conflict future, however elusive it may currently appear. The ICG report quotes a member of an armed resistance group as saying (page 17): ‘Our leaders are pressuring the NUG not to work with the Sangha because of the bad image MaBaTha has given it. If you want to move to a federal union, you cannot leverage religion.’” On the other hand, some monks are fiercely resisting the coup, even taking up arms.

Another development to watch is the question of international relations and which countries will be prepared to recognize the new leadership, even if only de facto. So far, no nation has publicly recognized them and fellow states in ASEAN even excluded the regime from participating in their meetings. Myanmar’s [isolation strategy](#), already known from the Cold War era, is termed ‘learning to walk with only a few friends’ (New Mandala, 7 March 2022). In the current geopolitical situation it means that the regime’s main friends are China and Russia,

whose invasion of Ukraine has consequently not been condemned by Myanmar. Arguably, the most important question is how the country's big neighbor China will position itself. While it will definitely not be happy with a prolonged time of unrest (and even less happy about protestors succeeding in their goals), it is likely that China will follow 'realpolitik' in extending a de facto recognition. In a sign of growing unhappiness, while [Beijing's support](#) for the military regime in Nya U Daw is still continuing, there have been changes. For the first time since China was seated at the UN Security Council in 1971, it opted to water down rather than veto the resolution on Myanmar (USIP, 24 February 2023). In another strong, yet underreported, signal, the new Chinese Asian affairs special envoy, first met with northern ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar before meeting with the country's military leaders. China is possibly reacting to the increasing reputational cost of its former Myanmar policy, especially among ASEAN members. At the same time, the [visit of China's Foreign Minister](#), Qin Gang, to Nya U Daw in May 2023 has been a clear sign that the Communist Party is betting on the military regime (Al-Jazeera, 3 May 2023). Russia continues to be the country's biggest arms supplier; [diplomatic ties](#) with the Kremlin became closer after Russia invaded Ukraine (ICG, 4 August 2022).

Neighboring countries like [India](#) and [Thailand](#) have tried to stay neutral in the conflict, but are increasingly affected by refugees crossing their borders, although they are trying to shield themselves from them, even sending them back in the case of Thailand (The Diplomat, 25 January 2022 and ABC News, 8 April 2022). Although the neighboring countries have positioned themselves quite clearly against the coup, this does nothing to change facts on the ground (see below: *Trends analysis*).

Christians are in the midst of the ongoing fighting throughout the country and increasingly in the cities as well. The Tatmadaw airstrikes and bombardments have caused scores more to flee, adding to the more than 100,000 Christians already languishing in IDP camps in Kachin state alone. There are more in Chin and Shan states and displacement camps have also been set up in Karen and Kayah states as well as abroad. Any quick solutions to their plight seem unlikely. Also, with the difficult COVID-19 situation throughout the country, conditions threatened to become almost unbearable in IDP camp set-ups.

As the USCIRF stated in a November 2021 [country update](#), Christian religious leaders and church buildings have been targeted by the Tatmadaw, an assessment which has been confirmed by other observers to be the case almost a year later. The 2019 investigation focusing on the Rohingya, which was carried out by the [International Fact-Finding Mission](#) of the UN, had already found hints of systematic attacks being carried out against Christians. However, the current conflict is far broader and is [disproportionately affecting Christian communities](#) in Chin, Kachin, Karen and Kayah states as well as in the Sagaing region (UCA News, 24 March 2022). In an [update](#) to its previous report, the International Commission of Jurists also found that religious sites are used for military purposes and that since 2022, there has been an increasing trend of targeted attacks and arrest of Christian church leaders based on their ethnicity (ICJ, 29 June 2023).

Kachin state and Northern Shan state (NSS) are in a state of protracted crisis, characterized by ongoing and sporadic conflict, unresolved political grievances and an array of competing interests over resources ranging from logging and minerals to illicit drugs. With the escalation in

fighting between regime forces and the Kachin rebels, Christians are being killed, detained and forced to flee in Kachin. New refugee camps have been created in the majority-Christian Kachin state in order to handle the influx. The government forbids any international aid delivery and denies virtually all access for the United Nations and international humanitarian groups. These restrictions heighten the risk of abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.

A country expert summed up the situation in Myanmar as follows: "Myanmar is no longer a safe place for the people especially for the ethnic minorities as we have witnessed the collapse of civilian rule, arbitrary arrests and indiscriminate attacks against civilians by the military. ... The military carries out violence against civilians and the communities are being uprooted as thousands flee violence and become refugees in neighboring countries." At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the coup triggered resistance coming not just from ethnic minorities, but also from the Burman Buddhist heartland, as explained above.

Gender perspective

Myanmar has a pluri-legal system, comprised of customary, religious and civil laws. Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) 2019/20 identified 35 laws that were discriminatory towards women. Current legislation fails to protect victims from domestic violence and marital rape. Positive developments include the passing of the Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Bill in 2019, although this has been criticized for falling short of international standards ([IDEA, 7 July 2022, p. 6](#)).

The military's forceful takeover of the civilian government in February 2021 has significantly negatively impacted the rights of women and girls ([ICG, 16 February 2023](#)). Despite the country's former leader being female, the exclusion of women from government positions has been cited as a factor that contributed to the coup, as the democratic party struggled to implement deep institutional change. Whilst female participation rate in parliament grew from 5% to 11.3% between 2015 and 2020, there has long been exclusion of women from many significant military and civil roles ([The Conversation, 21 February, 2021](#)). Furthermore, [female representation in parliament](#) dropped from 16.8% in 2020 to 15.3% in 2021 (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). In a [CEDAW periodic review](#), it was also observed that military and security officials have long been granted impunity from human rights abuses (CEDAW, 18 March 2019).

Religious landscape

Myanmar: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	4,479,000	8.0
Muslim	2,032,000	3.7
Hindu	936,000	1.7
Buddhist	42,103,000	75.6
Ethno-religionist	4,792,000	8.6
Jewish	31	0.0
Bahai	90,100	0.2
Atheist	21,800	0.0
Agnostic	253,000	0.5
Other	956,910	1.7
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to WCD 2023 estimates, Christians make up 8% of the population, Buddhists 75.6% and Muslims 3.7%. The 2014 government census (published in August 2016) puts Christians at 6.2%. Christians in Myanmar consider this figure far too low, as counting was not carried out in war-torn, Christian-majority Kachin state. Most Christians belong to the ethnic minorities and not to the Burmese (“Bamar”) majority. According to the contested government census, Buddhists make up 87.9% and Muslims 4.3% (around one million Rohingya had not been counted and it is estimated that up to 400,000 are still living in Rakhine state).

The adoption of the so called "Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion" in August 2015 was celebrated by nationalist Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha countrywide. Those laws were first and foremost targeted against the Muslim minority, especially the Rohingya of Rakhine state, living in the borderlands with Bangladesh. However, Christians are affected as well: Conversion from one religion to another involves having to follow an administrative process including notification to different authorities. Any mixed marriages require in practice a conversion to Buddhism, thus protecting Buddhist women from Muslim men. However, there are few such cases.

Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist and Buddhists played a role in opposing the military regime in 2007. Before that, radical Buddhist groups had not been politically active. However, in 2012 when the movement “969” emerged (later called “Ma Ba Tha”), this quickly changed. This group has a nationalist agenda and calls fellow religionists to defend the country against any perceived threats. Ma Ba Tha was banned, but re-emerged under a different name, and was banned in 2018 again. However, it is very much alive and some local branches do not just simply ignore the ban, they also still use its old name.

Most people belonging to the Muslim minority do not have citizenship and the majority of them have left the country due to ongoing persecution. A deadly attack against a border post in October 2016, leaving nine guards dead and claimed by a radical Islamic group, led the authorities to become even more active against Muslims, pushing an estimated 700,000 across the border into refugee camps in Bangladesh in August 2017.

Radical Buddhism has been targeting Muslims more than Christians, but reports say that Buddhist monks continue to convert children of Christian minorities to Buddhism by luring them into temples. Stronger pressure and violence come from the army, however, where even the killing of Christians has been reported. The regime is stirring up [religious sentiment](#) and encourages people to rally along religious lines, this may even go as far as killing Buddhist monks in false flag attacks, as some observers state (UCA News, 16 March 2023). Until now, persecution by monks and radical Buddhist groups has not increased - however, now that the majority of Muslims are out of the country or are sufficiently intimidated, radical Buddhists may start targeting other minorities more intensively.

The continued fighting with the Arakan army in Rakhine and Chin states is a reminder that the country's nationalism is not purely motivated by religious reasons, but has strong ethnic overtones as well. The fighters of the Arakan army are Buddhists but oppose what they see as the Bamar ("Burmese") dominance. Christians in Chin state were strongly affected by this conflict as well, but all this has been eclipsed by the Tatmadaw's battles with units of the Peoples Defence Force (PDF) in ethnic and religious minority regions.

Economic landscape

According to the UNDP HDR Myanmar:

- **Gross National Income:** 4,961 (constant 2017 USD PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 38.3%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 21.9%. 24.8% of the people are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** 3.73% of the GDP

According to World Bank Myanmar data:

- Myanmar is classified as a lower-middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 4,124
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 2.3% (2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** Poverty almost halved, falling from 48% in 2005 to 25% in 2017. The poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP) is 24%.

Myanmar is potentially a rich country as it holds vast natural resources, for example in oil and gas, but even more in timber, gold and jade, which is all worth billions of dollars. It also has a huge potential in exporting renewable energy in providing water power to neighboring countries. However, the February 2021 military coup and the slowly unfolding civil war have jeopardized any economic development and sent it into turmoil and decline.

The World Bank summarized in its Myanmar overview:

- "The World Bank's [January 2023 Myanmar Economic Monitor](#) forecasts 3 percent growth in the year ending September 2023. This means that per capita GDP will be around 13 percent lower than in 2019, indicative of the persistent impacts of recent shocks on both supply and demand. In the absence of further shocks, the economy is likely to continue to expand slowly beyond 2023, though at rates well below those observed before the pandemic. The failure to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity contrasts with the situation in most of the East Asia and Pacific region. Myanmar's economy remains subject to significant volatility and uncertainty, with business operations disrupted by conflict, electricity outages, trade and foreign exchange restrictions, shortages of inputs, plus frequently changing rules and regulations. The depreciating kyat, combined with increases in global prices and ongoing logistics constraints has fueled inflation, which reached almost 20 percent in mid-2022. Household incomes continue to be stretched by the cumulative impact of recent shocks. In July and August 2022, almost half of all households reported income losses compared to the previous year, reducing food and non-food consumption in response."

While the economy in 2023 seems to be [slowly growing](#) again (World Bank, Myanmar Economic Monitor, 27 June 2023), this growth and any recovery are hindered by low household incomes and by the uncertainty of a prolonged and entrenched civil war. At the beginning of the conflict, activists called for and implemented a [boycott](#) against Chinese products (RFA, 10 March 2021) and some Chinese-owned factories were attacked and destroyed. In the long-term, the [withdrawal](#) of foreign investors like Telenor, which sold its operations in telecommunications in July 2021, might prove to be more damaging (Channel News Asia, 8 July 2021). Even some of the most faithful investors (e.g. from Japan and South Korea) are rethinking their commitment. However, the meeting of foreign ministers at the 7th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation conference held in Bagan/Myanmar in July 2022 showed that while China is pushing for the security of its investments, it is willing to [continue developing](#) the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 11 July 2022). Consequently, China continues to develop the [CMEC](#) (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor), where this is possible from a security point of view (The Diplomat, 1 February 2023).

Most Christians in Myanmar live in rural areas which have not seen high levels of economic development and often struggle to make ends meet, especially when they are living as IDPs. The livelihood of most Christians has been affected by the economic downturn since they most often work in the agricultural sector. A country expert explained: "Since commodity prices are going up, it affects the income of Christians and churches. Some churches cannot support their pastors. Churches are accommodating many displaced believers, but due to economic hardship, they cannot support Christian IDPs. Money transactions are restricted, controlled and monitored by the military. In some areas, groceries and medicines are limited for buying."

Additionally, Myanmar faces many environmental problems and the government angered China by stopping the building of the large Myitsone dam in Kachin state, which China really wants to see built. It remains to be seen if the new military rulers will push the project through, maybe even using force. However, in the WWL 2024 reporting period there were no signs of progress

in this respect. Meanwhile, the military regime has made sure that the dire economic situation of Myanmar will [stay manageable](#) by approving heavy Chinese investment in the construction of a 2.5 billion USD gas-powered power plant (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 31 May 2021). Economic reasons seem to trump fears and reservations on both sides.

The military authorities still dominate some industrial sectors such as energy production. The timber industry is also managed by the army through private partnerships and illicit channels. Timber is mostly located in ethnic territories and as the logging is not being carried out in a sustainable way, supplies are decreasing. But it is still an important source of income for both the army and ethnic insurgents and the former already allegedly sold illegally logged timber to China after the coup. Jade is another commodity the army exploits; it is a multi-billion dollar business and is in high demand, especially in China. If Christian settlements are in the way, since they belong to the ethnic minorities, the inhabitants will simply be chased away without anyone caring. The dangers of jade mining came back to public memory when [more than 200 jade "scavengers"](#) were killed by a landslide in July 2020 (RFA, 13 July 2020). Fighting [increased](#) in the jade mining areas after the military coup, showing how lucrative the mineral is for both the army and other armed groups (Global Witness, 29 June 2021).

Another illicit and allegedly growing source of income is drug production and trading. Myanmar is the second-largest producer of opium after Afghanistan and the Myanmar army (as well as ethnic insurgency armies) are involved in this business. The country's northern region is part of the famous so-called "Golden Triangle". Opium is not the only drug produced in Myanmar, although its cultivation is strongly increasing; methamphetamine is even more lucrative and its production is increasing even in the midst of the developing civil war (see above: Recent history). Army generals and their family members are also directly benefitting from the war, e.g. by running companies procuring weapon systems, often channeled through Singapore (Reuters, 7 September 2021).

Gender perspective

Women and girls are more economically vulnerable than men. Whilst both genders have equal rights of inheritance under law, in practice it is difficult for women to access inheritance following a divorce or the death of her husband. This is due to religious customary laws that attribute greater economic power to men (particularly in the Chin and Shan states), as well as the ongoing practice of widow inheritance, a custom whereby the brother-in-law of a widow is expected to care for a widow following his brother's death. This latter custom has [been heavily criticized](#) for objectifying women as property to be inherited, rather than individuals capable of inheriting and managing their husband's estate (Asian Development Bank, Situation Analysis 2016). Although Myanmar has succeeded in achieving gender parity in regard to enrolment rates in primary and secondary education, female participation in the labor market lags behind men, in part due to the widespread conflict, with just 44.7% of women in the labor force, compared to 74% of men (UNDP HDR Myanmar). Such economic pressure restricts the freedom of Christians, especially female converts. Christian men, too, face challenges within the workplace such as forced labor or the denial of job opportunities.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Myanmar and UNDP HDR Myanmar:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Burman (Bamar) 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%
- **Main languages:** Burmese (official). [This language](#) is spoken by two thirds of the population, minority languages - most of which are using the Burmese script are Shan, Karen, Kachin, Thamizh, Chin and Mon languages and dialects.
- **Urbanization rate:** 32.1% (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 89.1% of population of 15 years and above (2019).
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.0 years
- **Health and education indicators:** The number of physicians per 10,000 people is 7.4, the number of hospital beds is 10. The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 24:1.

According to World Bank Myanmar data:

- **Population/Age distribution:** Under age 14 - 24.9%; above age 65 - 6.7%
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 95.4%, the enrollment rate was 112.3 (2018)
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.5%, the rate of vulnerable employment 64% (modeled ILO estimate)

IDPs/Refugees

The UNHCR published the following [Regional Update](#) estimates concerning IDPs and refugees (Myanmar Emergency Update, October 2023):

- 1,976,400 people internally displaced as of 02 October 2023 (this excludes the more than 50,000 newly displaced after "Operation 1027" in Northern Shan state started in October 2023, bringing the total number to cross the two million mark).
- 1,670,200 people newly displaced IDPs since February 2021.
- 1,124,800 refugees and asylum-seekers in neighboring countries as of 30 June 2023.

However, it should be kept in mind that these numbers are fluid and can be added to by the fighting throughout the country as well as by political decisions such as the policy of closing IDP camps down, as happened in Kachin state (see above: Specific examples of violations of rights).

According to UNDP HDR Myanmar:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.583, Myanmar ranks 147th out of 189 countries and is in the range of "medium human development". The country saw a constant improvement of indicators, although in the war-affected areas the situation is different.
- **Life expectancy:** 67.1 years
- **Median age:** 29.0 years
- **GINI coefficient:** 30.7
- **Gender Inequality Index:** Myanmar ranks 118th, with a score of 0.478.

- **Unemployment:** While the unemployment rate is very low at 1.6%, 59.1% of all people in the workforce are in vulnerable employment and 48.9% of the workforce is in agriculture. The percentage of youth between 15 and 24 neither in school nor in employment is 19.6%.

Myanmar's patchwork of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups has already been described above, as well as the challenges caused by the continued fighting and the politics of "Burmanization", which is strongly backed by the Myanmar army. Before being ousted from government by the February 2021 coup, the NLD had been calling for a government of national unity with ethnic parties, which seemed back then a tall order and may have contributed to the army's decision to stage a coup. It should be repeated, however, that the armed conflict against the various minority population groups is not exclusively religious. An example is the violent conflict with the Arakan army in Rakhine State. The Arakan are Buddhist but this is an ethnic conflict, not a religious one.

As the data shown above makes clear, neither the economy nor the question of minorities are the only challenges, although many problems are inter-linked. For example, whereas the school enrolment rate is high, many students in the ethnic minority areas are facing difficulties in attending school or it is even made impossible if they are living in one of the IDP camps and higher education remains a far-off dream. This is all the more true as the number of IDPs keeps on rising due to increased fighting. Many of these facilitators also participated in the CDM.

Many people are forced to work in subsistence farming and are therefore very dependent on weather conditions and also on such factors as where battles are taking place. The comparably low unemployment rate has to be read against this background. There is little chance of improving the life of the general population as long as the peace process makes no tangible progress. The World Bank stated in its [Economic Monitor](#) published in June 2023: "Risks around these projections include worsening conflict, a further slump in electricity generation, persistence of inflationary pressure, and further deterioration in the business environment. The destruction caused by Cyclone Mocha in May was an unwelcome reminder of Myanmar's ongoing vulnerability to natural disasters."

When, as is likely, Myanmar becomes increasingly isolated internationally, it will rely more on China, even though this may be a relationship filled with mistrust. Finally, drug addiction is increasingly becoming a problem, also among Christians, and neither the authorities nor the churches seem to know how to handle this.

The country report of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI report 2022) states on page 23: "Two land laws were passed in 2012 (the Farmland Law, and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law) which established something like a private property system. This has been a step forward in a country where land confiscations, resource exploitation and forced evictions were prominent characteristics during decades of military rule. The total number of acres illegally confiscated in recent decades is unknown, but estimates are in the millions. The core problem is, however, that these new laws do not recognize the customary land rights of ethnic groups. About one-third of the country's land, 50 million acres, is classified under the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law. A 2018 amendment to the law recognized the customary land ownership of rural ethnic minorities. However, a deadline of six months to apply for the use of land was set. Many rural farmers were unaware of the amendment and have never

been informed that they need to apply for ownership. Furthermore, the permits have only a 30 year validity. In addition, land grabbing by the military and powerful businessmen (often with links to the military) continues in many rural areas. Owing to the persistent lack of civilian oversight regarding the military, such acts are usually met with impunity."

The cyclone Mocha, hitting Myanmar in May 2023, impacted more than [3.4 million people](#) living in its high impact zone (World Food Program, Situation Report Myanmar, 12 June 2023). Organizations like the World Food Program estimate that the [number of food insecure people](#) is about 13.2 million people (WFP, Country Emergency Page Myanmar, accessed 3 July 2023). Meanwhile, large numbers of people (especially from ethnic minorities) have been fleeing both internally and abroad.

Gender perspective

Whilst Myanmar once had a matrilineal system, it is now a deeply matrilineal society, in part due to the influence of the Myanmar army as a [male-dominant political actor](#) (Foreign Policy, 23 March 2021). Social norms expect men to assume the position of heads of the household and financial providers, whilst women are expected to bear greater domestic responsibility, often in addition to paid work. Gender-based violence – which [worsened](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNDP, Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar, March 2022) - is broadly accepted in Myanmar culture; according to a state-funded [2015/16 Demographic and Health Survey \(p.245\)](#), 51% of women and 49% of men believed that a husband was justified in beating his wife in set circumstances. This broad acceptance of gender-based violence and related impunity for perpetrators provides an avenue that can be exploited for the means of religiously motivated persecution.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Myanmar):

- **Internet usage:** 51.9% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 36% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank Myanmar data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 126 per 100 people

According to a now outdated 2015 GSMA report, women were [20% less likely](#) to own a mobile phone than men. This gender gap partly reflects the combination of low household income and traditional gender roles; the financial provider – usually the man – is granted priority for mobile phone access. This gender gap has however narrowed in the past years and as of 2020, [stood at 14%](#) (GSMA, 2020, p. 11). This latter report noted, however, that a lack of knowledge about how to access the Internet remained a key barrier.

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 Myanmar, the country dropped a further two points in the index and is "Not free". The report states:

- "The military, which seized control of the state in a February 2021 coup, continued to repress internet freedom in the face of ongoing civil disobedience, political opposition, and armed resistance during the coverage period. Localized internet shutdowns, data price hikes, online trolling, and arbitrary prosecutions that result in long prison terms have created a high-risk and hostile online space for the public at large. The military's direct and indirect control over all major service providers has enabled the enforcement of strict rules on user identity registration as well as mass censorship and surveillance. Despite these and other obstacles—including detentions, egregious physical violence, and the country's first executions in decades—people in Myanmar continue to use digital tools to share information and organize opposition to the military."

Freedom House sums up the major developments as follows:

- The military's broad attempts to make the internet a hostile space, combined with a faltering economy and attacks on infrastructure, resulted in a globally rare decline in internet penetration.
- Authorities frequently enforced short-term, localized internet shutdowns to prevent the opposition from organizing or sharing information about atrocities, effectively restricting internet access for millions of users.
- After the country's last two foreign-owned telecommunications service providers, Telenor and Ooredoo, sold their Myanmar operations, all providers were left under either direct or indirect military control, enabling mass interception without safeguards.
- Most internet users remained confined to a list of approximately 1,500 military-approved websites; only those with circumvention tools were able to bypass extensive blocking and reach other internet resources.
- Scores of internet users were imprisoned for their online activities during the coverage period; military courts issued multiyear prison sentences and carried out executions in some cases.

Social media is widely used for communication and opinion-making, but it is also used by radical monks and the government for slandering Christians and warning against the Christian faith. Social media users and those quoted in the media have faced prosecution for expressing their views on certain topics, particularly when they entail criticism of the authorities. They faced accusations of defamation and incitement filed by the army and politicians and were charged under Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law, which includes bans on online activity deemed threatening or defamatory.

Concerning surveillance, it has been reported that the regime plans to install surveillance cameras with [facial recognition](#) capabilities in all 14 states and regions of Myanmar, bought from Chinese companies (Reuters, 11 July 2022). While cameras have been installed in big cities like Yangon before under the democratically elected government, these plans are a significant extension to that.

Security situation

The security situation in Myanmar changed in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup and has become much more volatile. Except for the coup itself, the situation is complex and multi-layered as a multitude of actors are engaged in the war. Apart from the People's Defense Force (PDF), there are also Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs), all in different ways [aligned with or independent from](#) the NUG (USIP, 3 November 2022). For a general overview of an already complex situation before the current war, the explanation below, which was originally included in the last three Full Country Dossiers, is still valid, with the addition that fighting has returned in some parts of the country which had not seen military conflict for many years. This is especially true for regions in Kayah and Chin states. Fighting is also becoming more entrenched and it seems unlikely that any one side will gain the upper hand in the short-term, even though there are reports that [Myanmar's military strength](#) may be much weaker than previously thought (USIP, 4 May 2023). The initial success of "Operation 1027" launched against the regime forces in October 2023 may also be a confirmation of that weaker strength, but would seem premature to call it a [defeat](#) through "death by a thousand cuts" (War on the Rocks, 17 November 2023). Rather than accept defeat and a role in a new political arrangement with considerably less power, the regime leaders may decide to follow an aggressive scorched earth policy.

Security situation as presented in the previous WWL reporting periods with some minor updates:

- The "Patriotic Association of Myanmar", better known under its acronym "Ma Ba Tha", was founded in January 2014 with the goal of defending Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar against alleged threats. First and foremost this meant against the Muslim minority, especially the Rohingya, but Christians have been put under pressure by Ma Ba Tha monks too. Ma Ba Tha was banned in May 2017, re-emerged under a different name, and was banned again in 2018. Although it remains largely quiet, it is still active and enjoys the support of at least part of the army.
- Myanmar is going through the longest civil war in the world with several ethnic insurgent armies fighting for independence (or more autonomy). Besides the "Arakan Rohingya Salvation army" (Muslim) and the "Arakan army" (Buddhist), the "Kachin Independence army" (KIA/Christian) should also be mentioned, the latter together with the "United Wa State army" (USWA) being the largest and best-equipped groups in Myanmar. The UWSA enjoys a de facto autonomy and is notorious for its involvement in the drug trade. From September 2018 onwards, it has acted against the Christian minority in its territory in Shan State, bordering China, whose Communist government allegedly supports it. The most active insurgent group at the moment is, however, the Arakan army, which on 15 August 2019 - operating in combination with two other groups in the so-called "Brotherhood Alliance" - attacked a [military training academy](#), other Myanmar army targets and economically important roads and bridges connecting Shan state to China (Reuters, 15 August 2019). The Myanmar army removed the Arakan army from its [terrorist list](#) in March 2021 (Al-Jazeera, 15 March 2021), however, the Arakan army reportedly still participates in [attacks](#) against the Tatmadaw - for instance, an attack claiming 11 soldiers' lives in Northern

Shan state in May 2021 (The Irrawaddy, 31 May 2021). However, officially, they keep their distance from the NUG, hoping to capitalize on the situation.

- China's political pressure and influence cannot be underestimated. China is allegedly providing groups like the UWSA and KIA with weapons and equipment. This explains why neither the Tatmadaw nor China will be particularly happy to have to get along with each other now. The security situation in certain regions of Myanmar remains dire and has even deteriorated and it cannot be excluded that more crimes against humanity will be committed in the future. Apart from the situation in Kachin State and the UWSA, referred to above, Christians are also affected by the increased fighting with the Arakan army in Chin state.
- There has been one other noteworthy development: In a 21 minute video message, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issued [threats](#) to Myanmar's leaders for their treatment of the country's Muslim minority (Long War Journal, 12 March 2021). In the conclusion of the documentary-style message, al-Zawahiri stated that the "criminal Buddhist government that has been pampered by the West shall not be deterred except by force and by making it pay the price of its aggression within and beyond Myanmar. This is a binding duty on the entire Ummah." Such calls for Islamic militant action against Myanmar have been issued before, although not from the top leadership, and have had only very limited consequences: i) Recruitment for Islamic militants in the country has been patchy at best; and ii) efforts to connect the plight of the Rohingya with international jihad have not been very successful. It is likely that al-Qaeda's intention with this new video is to highlight their own visibility and importance rather than to change the situation on the ground in Myanmar. However, any action taken by Islamic militants could very well add to the chaos in Myanmar and give the generals (and even leaders in other countries) a welcome pretext to intensify their crackdown on them.

Gender perspective

Forced recruitment into militias or the government armed forces remains an ongoing threat, and the fact that the Tatmadaw is creating and training militias to support their fight does not bode well for the country's security situation. Young men are the primary target, but children are also vulnerable to enlistment, with the increasing losses, defections and desertions since the coup putting growing pressure on military recruitment, although the extent to which this affects one side more than the other is unclear ([Frontier Myanmar, August 2022](#)). Trafficking also remains an issue of concern in Northern Shan and Kachin states where, driven by conflict and economic fragility, women and girls are lured to China under false pretenses, then sold as 'brides' into sexual slavery ([HRW 2022 country chapter Myanmar](#)). Law enforcement bodies in Myanmar and China have reportedly made little effort to recover trafficked girls ([HRW, 21 March 2019](#)).

The Myanmar army has an infamous record for systematically [targeting](#) and sexually abusing women and girls from ethnic minority groups, including women in IDP camps and female political prisoners (VOA, 2 April 2023). Since the military coup in 2021, reports of sexual and gender-based violence at the hands of the military have flowed in, and the defections within the military make the use of sexual violence to build group loyalty among soldiers increasingly likely, according to scholarship on sexual and gender-based violence ([Foreign Policy, March 23, 2021](#);

[US Institute of Peace, November 2021](#)). The National Unity Government (NUG) Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs and the National Unity Consultative Council Joint Coordination Committee on Gender Policy estimate that at least 122 women have been sexually assaulted by the junta troops since the 2021 military takeover (VOA, 2 April 2023).

Trends analysis

1) Myanmar seems poised on the verge of another prolonged military rule and civil war situation

The military regime proved the country observers right in thinking that the state of emergency would not be lifted after one year; they foresaw a [prolonged military rule](#), similar to that which took control in neighboring Thailand in 2014 and which has also happened before in Myanmar in previous years (Benar News, 4 February 2021). The Tatmadaw announced that elections would take place in 2024, but it can use any pretext to postpone elections further. Although the number of civilians killed since 1 February 2021 (as per AAPP on 30 June 2023: [3436](#)) is not particularly high in this 'slow-boiling conflict', a prolonged civil war seems to be an increasingly realistic possibility. It is more than likely that the true scale of the humanitarian challenge has been under-estimated; according to the 'Institute for Strategy and Policy (ISP Myanmar), more than [5,600 civilians](#) have been killed since the military coup in February 2021 (RFA, 17 May 2022). But there is one major difference to the wars being waged in the background against the ethnic insurgency armies. While those battles are being fought in the far-flung peripheral regions (like Kachin or Shan states), there are an increasing number of reports about fighting taking place in the Burmese heartlands involving such major cities as [Yangon](#) and [Mandalay](#) (The Guardian, 6 February 2022 and Reuters, 22 June 2021). With the economy and services such as health care becoming affected, a humanitarian crisis of monumental proportions is developing and it will be ordinary families who will bear the brunt.

As the coup regime is digging in, so are the demonstrators. One protestor has been quoted as [saying](#): "You messed with the wrong generation" (ICG, 6 March 2023). The civil resistance as well as the PDF have the potential to bridge ethnic and religious divisions, although it may not be enough to reconcile the decades-old civil war between the Bamar majority and the many ethnic minorities. As the conflict is slow-burning, it is [unlikely](#) that it will end with a decisive victory for either side in the short-term (ICG, 31 January 2023). Instead, the civil war has the potential to become a prolonged and violent one, also involving the Christian minority. "Operation 1027" shows that the army can be taken by surprise when opposition groups join forces, but the resulting volatility and the risk of a "scorched-earth-policy" by regime forces shows that civilians - and especially minorities - are bearing the brunt of the conflict's violence. In a matter of days, the "Operation 1027" offensive alone caused 50,000 newly [displaced](#) people in Northern Shan state, bringing the total number of IDPs countrywide to cross the two million mark (Crisis Group, 17 November 2023).

A ray of light may be seen in reports about a growing understanding between the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities. An April 2021 [report](#) states: "Earlier, many Bamars have not believed in their army's abuses and considered it international propaganda. But now they are thinking: if the soldiers are able to kill unarmed demonstrators, women and children, under the eye of the cameras in the cities, what could they have done in these remote areas?" UCA News,

5 April 2021). If this sentiment deepens, it may become increasingly hard for the regime to win this fight and end resistance. The NUG claimed to control around 15% of Myanmar's territory, together with the 30-35% that Ethnic Armed Organizations are controlling, this means that [half of the country](#) is not controlled by government forces (The Diplomat, 1 August 2022). While the war grinds on with no end in sight, the NUG has a lot of [‘homework’](#) to do (USIP, 8 September 2022). Apart from winning legitimacy, for example among its ASEAN neighbors, if hopes for a new and recovering Myanmar are ever to come to fruition, the NUG needs to strive to become less Bamar- and Buddhist-dominated and more inclusive in ethnic and religious terms. 2023 brought no solution to the conflict, which caused one observer to aptly describe Myanmar as being on a [“road to nowhere”](#) (International Crisis Group, 28 March 2023).

2) Using and abusing religious sentiments and tensions

While the civil war seems to become only deeper entrenched, religious minorities including the Christian minority, continue to be [affected disproportionately](#) (USCIRF, Burma Policy Update, 14 December 2022). According to a [report](#) published by the International Commission of Jurists in June 2023, the Tatmadaw has been deliberately targeting religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians. The regime has [extended martial law](#) to 37 townships in Sagaing, Magway, Bago and Tanintharyi and in Chin, Kayah, Karen and Mon states, and also extended the state of emergency by six months, raising fears in Chin and Karen states that these declarations will pave the way for new and increased attacks against the Christian population (UCA News, 9 February 2023). The military regime’s deep mistrust of the Christian population became apparent in the recent restrictions being brought into play in Chin state, where Christians are the majority. Not only is a strict curfew in place, there are now new regulations [requiring all churches to provide lists](#) with the names of members intending to attend church services each week (UCA News, 3 March 2023).

While Myanmar’s [Buddhist clergy](#) has largely remained silent in the face of the unfolding civil war (ICG, 10 March 2021), it is obvious that Christians are playing a prominent role in the resistance. The ICG report emphasizes this on page 20: ‘Most NUG members – and members of the resistance’s legislative branch, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw – are Buddhist, though the movement also includes some Christians. But the four ethnic armed groups working most closely with the NUG – the Chin National Front, Kachin Independence Organization, Karen National Union and Karenni National Progressive Party – have predominantly Christian leaderships and constituencies.’ If this is already a challenge now, what role will religion play in a post-conflict Myanmar? While it is very possible that, with more young people turning their backs on religion, [ultra-nationalist](#) sentiment will gain in influence and the protection of Buddhism may become a potent driving force in the country (East Asia Forum, 10 March 2023), this is far from sure. What is safe to state, however, is that the military regime will [do anything](#) to stay in power and consolidate its rule (USIP, 9 March 2023).

Events in southern Shan state illustrate that the regime is using ethnic and religious tensions to sow discord in society. After a massacre in a Buddhist monastery on 11 March 2023, in which evidence clearly pointed to the regime (and affiliated fighting groups) as the perpetrators, the government has portrayed the incident as proof of [the danger Christian Karenni pose](#) to the mainly Buddhist Pa-O ethnic group (USIP, 27 April 2023). At the same time, the Tatmadaw has

been trying to brush up its religious credentials, e.g. by [consecrating](#) a huge statue of Buddha in Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw (AP News, 21 July 2023). Myanmar's generals are claiming that this is the largest 'sitting Buddha' statue in the world. While such a claim is hard to verify, given the large number of Buddha statues around the world, it is definitely a 5,000 ton statement promoting Buddhist dominance. Christians remain firmly on the regime's radar, as the [sentencing](#) of the well-known Baptist pastor, Dr Hkalam Samson, shows. He was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for alleged terrorism and related charges (UCA News, 10 April 2023).

3) International reactions will hardly influence or solve the conflict

In a rare and at first sight encouraging reaction, ASEAN decided to hold an unprecedented emergency meeting in April 2021 at its headquarters in Jakarta. While the meeting was already a statement in itself, given the strong emphasis on non-interference in members' internal affairs, the outcome has been (predictably) small. Except for insisting on the immediate cessation of violence and the proposal for mediation by a special ASEAN envoy, there were no tangible results. Myanmar's military junta chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, did not immediately comment on the consensus reached but stated later that the ASEAN leader's recommendations would be considered after the country had [stabilized](#) sufficiently (The Irrawaddy, 27 April 2021). Three consecutive ASEAN chairs did not make any tangible progress and the Myanmar question has become not only a [challenge](#) for (informal) ASEAN leading nation Indonesia (HRW, 31 March 2023), but also for ASEAN as a whole, as seen when ASEAN diplomats, accompanying a relief convoy to an IDP camp in Shan state were [attacked](#) in May 2023 (AP News, 8 May 2023).

Other international powers seem happy to relegate responsibility to ASEAN as they are busy with other crises (e.g. the Ukraine war) and do not want to be drawn into the quagmire. Western countries (such as Australia, Germany and the UK) downgraded the status of their diplomatic relations with Myanmar to the level of 'chargés d'affaires'. In most cases this is happening when the ambassador of the country is due for replacement anyway (RFA, 19 May 2022). While this is a clear sign of displeasure, the regime will not be too bothered as it is learning "to walk with few friends". It remains to be seen how close the regime's relations with China will be. The WWL 2024 reporting period saw some signs of a growing Chinese unease with the conflict, but a visit by its Foreign Minister to Naypyidaw took place nonetheless (see above: Political and legal landscape). This may point to China preparing for Myanmar to break apart into some form of future 'balkanization' of the country, which would be likely to create new levels of insecurity for the Christian population. But that is probably a long way off. In any case, it seems safe to say that China is increasingly unhappy with the [lawless zones](#) developing at its border regions with Myanmar (USIP, 11 July 2023). It likewise seems safe to say that "Operation 1027" in Northern Shan state close to the border with China could not have succeeded if the latter had opposed it.

3) Urgent issues have been relegated to 'any other business'

In 2020, it was hard to imagine that anything would push the Rohingya issue from international interest concerning Myanmar, especially now that a case is pending before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, this is what happened and the plight of around one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has faded from view. As a consequence of the military coup in February 2021, Western governments have issued sanctions against certain military individuals and businesses. While this may be a logical consequence, it will also drive Myanmar more and

more into the arms of China, no matter how challenging this relationship may be.

The questions about what direction the country should head in and about how lasting peace could be achieved have also been relegated to a very distant future. In May 2019, a commentator named four possible future scenarios – secession, confederation, federalism and decentralization (Irrawaddy, 16 May 2019). For nationalists and the army, all of these scenarios are anathema. They will do their utmost to make sure that none of these scenarios will become reality and they continue to look impossible for the foreseeable future. It should be kept in mind that Buddhist institutions are not excluded from similar attacks, despite the fact that the Tatmadaw leadership is trying to keep close ties with Buddhist religious leaders. As neither side seems able to win the upper hand, civilians of all ethnic and religious backgrounds will continue to suffer, the latter – which includes Christians – disproportionately more so.

A [detailed report](#) highlighting the shaky basis on which ethnicities have been distinguished throughout history and showing that the whole peace process has been setting false incentives (i.e. making ethnic groups think they need to have powerful armed groups before they can get a place at the conference table) now seems uncannily accurate (ICG, 28 August 2020). This has become the basis for more intense fighting. It seems that Myanmar's Christians cannot put any hope in the political process.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: military coup - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-55902070>
- Recent history: Endorsed - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/island-endorsed-06022021175233.html>
- Recent history: re-emergence - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/arsa-back-01182022195732.html>
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- Recent history: CDM - <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>
- Recent history: multiple times - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/legal-cases-against-myanmars-aung-san-su-kyi-2022-04-27/>
- Recent history: People's Defence Force - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/01/rise-of-armed-civilian-groups-in-myanmar-fuels-fears-of-civil-war>
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- Recent history: matured - <https://jamestown.org/program/briefs-355/>
- Recent history: pro-government militias - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b171-resisting-resistance-myanmars-pro-military-pyusawhti-militias>
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- Recent history: make contact - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-contacts-burmese-nug-as-analysts-slam-asean-for-inaction-on-consensus-04252022161617.html>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Myanmar

Christian origins

Catholic missionaries first entered Burma in 1554. Not until 1613, however, was there a permanent presence with churches in Ava, Sirian, and about three hundred Roman Catholic believers in Rangoon. But growth was so disrupted by the wars between Burma and Siam in the next two centuries that a total membership of five thousand in 1800 had fallen to about three thousand in 1832. As British control widened in the first half of the nineteenth century, Protestant growth, chiefly Baptist, made great advances. In 1813, the famous American missionary, Adoniram Judson, arrived in the country to serve there for nearly 40 years. He translated the Bible into Burmese in 1834. (Source: Moffett S.H., *Burma / 1813-1850 in: A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 2, 2005, pp. 330-331.)

In 1966, the Burmese government expelled all foreign missionaries, but by then the churches had become self-supporting. As many Christians belong to the ethnic minorities such as Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen, Christianity is viewed by many with some suspicion. This suspicion could increase now that the latest figures on religious affiliation (the 2014 census) have been published, which showed a strong growth in the number of Christians.

Church spectrum today

Myanmar: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	666,000	14.9
Protestant	2,820,000	63.0
Independent	692,000	15.4
Unaffiliated	301,000	6.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	4,479,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,717,000	38.3
Renewalist movement	1,242,000	27.7

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC, established 1865), a member of the larger protestant Myanmar Council of Churches, estimates its membership at about 1.6 million Christians, many of whom are among the Kachin and Chin people. Protestants comprise almost two-thirds of all Christians. Of these two-thirds, an estimated 50% are Baptist members in almost 5,000 churches. The MBC works with 16 regional language conventions around the country with its vision “to organize and engage all Baptists in Myanmar in proclaiming and witnessing.” The number of Catholics is smaller, but there are estimates of up to a million. Most Christians are from the minority ethnic groups such as the Chin, Karen, Lisu, Kachin and Lahu. However, there is no strong inter-denominational association among them; in controversial issues and concerning the (persecution) situation in the country, their reactions are not unified.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Myanmar is arguably the nation 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. The conflict has become entrenched in areas with Christian majorities (such as Chin state) and in areas where there are significant Christian minorities. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, the Tatmadaw has indiscriminately attacked Christian villages, church buildings (which have sometimes been hosting refugee or IDP camps) and killed Christians. While the atrocities in Chin state continued, other hotspots are Kachin state in the north and Kayah state in the southeast. Fighting there continues, an increasing number of people - many of them Christian - are living in IDP camps, most of them have been there for years, and humanitarian access to them is blocked.

Fighting intensified 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). The government narrative about the alleged danger the Karenni minority is posing (see above: *Trends Analysis #2*) shows that the government will not ignore Christian minorities - even those outside the international focus. In terms of refugees, a not-so-different story could be told about the Chin, who are predominantly Christian, only that their choice of refuge is India. Other hotspots are Kachin state in the north as well as Kayin and Kayah states in the southeast. The lawless zones bordering Laos and Thailand, in which organized crime is booming, are located in minority regions, where many Christians are living as well.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. Due to the ongoing war situation (also partly due to the COVID crisis), this community has become very small and is not scored in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: This category consists of groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, but also traditional churches among the Christian minorities like the Kachin Baptist Church. These Christians are facing everyday pressure and violent attacks from the Myanmar army or sometimes also from insurgent groups, as they are under general suspicion of supporting or aiding the opposition.

Converts to Christianity: Converts from a Buddhist, Muslim or Ethnic-animist background are facing the strongest violation of rights both from the authorities and from families, friends and neighbors as well. Leaving Buddhism is not accepted for someone of *Bamar* ethnicity and known converts are likely to be expelled from their villages. Radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha and the Pyu Saw Htee are instrumental and active in monitoring the activities of Christians including those from Buddhist background. In all the publicity about Rohingya refugees being forced to flee to Bangladesh, it is less well-known that there is a small number of Christian converts from a Muslim background among the Rohingya who stayed behind. These converts not only face persecution because of their ethnic affiliation, but also because their Muslim families and communities put them under enormous pressure to return to Islam. (The converts who fled to Bangladesh are scored for Bangladesh.)

Non-traditional Christian communities: Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are facing persecution from the community they live in, especially in rural areas. They are not just monitored, but are sometimes also hindered from gathering or holding Sunday school classes. Because of the prevailing perception that being a Burmese means being a Buddhist, outreach is especially challenging. Apart from this, as civil war unfolds, they are facing similar difficulties as the historical Christian communities.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Myanmar

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Myanmar: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	79	17
WWL 2023	80	14
WWL 2022	79	12
WWL 2021	74	18
WWL 2020	73	19

The drop in overall score of 1.3 points in WWL 2024 has a twofold reason. One is that in the expanding civil war situation, it has become increasingly difficult to verify reports, especially from war-torn Christian minority areas. The second is that a considerable part of the country is not under the control of the military regime which results in slightly less pressure for Christians in certain spheres of life. However, the score for violence continued to rise (by 0.7 points - after having risen by 0.5 points in WWL 2023 and 2.9 points in WWL 2022), illustrating the devastating effect the growing conflict has on civilians in general and on the Christian minority in particular. The challenge of obtaining information is acknowledged by other international organizations as well and is shown in the detention and sentencing of reporters as well as in various Internet and

communications blackouts across the country. Converts (from a Buddhist, Muslim or tribal background) continue to face strong pressure especially from their family and community; the situation in Wa State continued unchanged.

Persecution engines

Myanmar: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Strong
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Weak
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Very strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)

Buddhism is embedded in the nation's culture; this is commonly emphasized by radical Buddhists and tolerated - and to some extent supported - by the national government and the army. The majority of Myanmar's population (an estimated 60%) are of Burmese ethnicity, also called Bamar. Being Bamar is equated with being Buddhist. As early as 1962, the campaign "One country, one religion" started. Everyone deviating from this heritage is labelled as being outside the community and therefore potentially dangerous. Consequently, there are Buddhist communities which would like to remain purely Buddhist.

Pressure on Christians comes from two sides:

- i) One side is society, which includes the radical Buddhist movement Ma Ba Tha. The fact that this movement was officially banned in 2017 and again in 2018 did not have real consequences. In July 2019, the Ministry for Religious Affairs announced that it would [take over regulating radical Buddhist groups](#) from the Buddhist leadership (the "Sangha") (The Irrawaddy, 31 July 2019). The implementation of the "Laws for the Protection of Race and Religion" is a sign of the continued influence of radical Buddhist groups. They have kept a lower profile after the war has started, but they continue to be a force to be reckoned with, especially for religious minorities such as Christians, and for converts. With the military coup, efforts for Burmanization and Buddhization [increased](#) and as a result religious rights deteriorated, especially for minorities in the country (Asia Centre, "Burmanization and Bud-

dhization" Report, 22 June 2023). There have also been reports that Ma Ba Tha members were appointed ward administrators by the military regime.

- ii) The other side is family. When a conversion takes place in a strongly Buddhist family, the convert will face high pressure from relatives to return to the Buddhist fold.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and while the 2015 elected government could not be called paranoid (neither could the short-lived 2020 one), behind the scenes Myanmar is one of the very few countries where it has always been the army holding almost dictatorial powers, as became apparent when the military coup took place on 1 February 2021. Hopes for democracy have been seriously dampened by the coup and the resistance movements, be it the CDM, PDF or any other of the acronyms explained above, have contributed to the paranoia of the army leadership.

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, the Myanmar army continued to do everything possible to stay in control, including using extremely violent and indiscriminate means. It even fought more violently, as a reaction to it losing territory, even alienating (at least) parts of the ethnic majority group. It has also called upon Buddhist nationalism or ethnic heritage, when needed. Therefore, one could also see this persecution engine as being blended with *Religious nationalism*. However, as the alienation includes a growing number and even the majority of Buddhists, it is better to keep these engines separate. The armed forces continue to run so-called "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (or Na Ta La - schools), which are attractive for minority people as they are boarding schools run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and to introduce them to Buddhism. *Dictatorial paranoia* is here to stay and, as the war grinds on, it continues to grow.

One country expert explained: "There is a strong link between a Burmese government's 'right to rule' (comparable to the Chinese 'Mandate from Heaven') and their ability to create, sustain, and expand a Buddhist ecumene. So, it is vital to the current junta to win against the ethnic minorities in order to expand/assert Buddhism to those areas that the Burmese have NEVER traditionally owned or governed. Their ability to win against them is a referendum on their Karma. Min Aung Hlaing just commissioned a Buddhist statue in Nay Pyi Daw that resembles his own facial features."

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

In some of the states where most Christians live, like Kachin or Shan states, some of Myanmar's most precious resources are to be found - such as jade and timber. According to a UN report published in August 2019, this and other businesses the army is involved in, yield enormous sums - an income which is sometimes shared with ethnic insurgency groups in exchange for ceasefires or other agreements (see Paragraph 99 of the UN report). One of Asia's two largest opium-producing hubs covers large parts of that region, especially Kachin state (together with parts of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand), the famous "Golden Triangle". Allegedly, government officials, the Myanmar army and insurgent armies benefit from the drug production and trafficking at different levels and stages. Anyone who opposes this or is simply in the way of

traders, exploiters and traffickers is in serious danger. Despite the war-time situation, business continues 'as usual'. Sources inside the country reported that in some villages the Tatmadaw is providing youths with drugs for free, so that they would not fight against the army. Groups involved in illegal trade are also co-opted for monitoring minority groups, including Christians and Christian churches in these regions. As stated above, since many commodities like jade, timber and various ores can be found in Chin, Kachin and Shan states, the many Christians living there face heavy pressure from the army (and not only out of economic interest). This takes the form of being harassed, attacked and of being used as porters or guides. The emergence of "lawless zones", where casinos, but also all kinds of crimes from online fraud to human trafficking are committed and which is referred to throughout this dossier, is strong in ethnic minority and border regions and thus also affects the Christian minorities.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Weak)

Beginning at the end of 2018, the largest insurgency group, the Communist United Wa State army became violently active against Christians. Hundreds of churches were shut down, and hundreds of Christians were abducted or expelled from the territory. Allegedly backed by China, the targeted Christian groups were perceived as "missionaries" - mostly Baptist groups like the Lahu Baptist Convention or the Kachin Baptist Convention. Although reportedly only about half of the church buildings closed were allowed to be re-opened, the persecution engine is still mentioned here, as it helps understand the complex situation Christians find themselves in on the ground. This Communist crackdown resembles the one Chinese authorities have been instigating against Christianity in China for some years now. Since the Myanmar authorities do not have control in the de facto semi-autonomous Wa region with its 450,000 inhabitants, the persecution engine here is not *Religious nationalism*. And as the engine is limited to a comparably small territory within Myanmar, the strength of this engine is weak.

Drivers of persecution

Myanmar: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
		VERY STRONG	STRONG			WEAK		VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials		Very strong	Strong			Weak		Strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders		Medium	Medium			Weak		Medium	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders		Very strong	Strong					Strong	
Violent religious groups		Strong	Strong					Strong	
Ideological pressure groups		Strong	Strong						
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs		Medium	Medium						Very weak
One's own (extended) family		Strong	Strong						Very weak
Political parties		Medium	Medium			Weak		Medium	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups						Strong			Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks		Weak	Weak			Medium			Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist, blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Strong):

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Some Buddhist monk leaders stir up the local population to act against Christians in predominantly Buddhist communities, for example when Christians do not want to send alms to the Buddhist temples. The radical Buddhist movement behind the Ma Ba Tha groups continues to 'protect' Buddhism as the country's national religion at all costs. This is intertwined with the protection of the ethnic 'Burmese race' as well. The two bans on Ma Ba Tha activities have not changed anything as they have always found other ways to continue their influence, often exercised by false accusations against the Christian minority in a local community.
- **Government officials (Very strong):** Local government officials, especially from rural areas, are often influenced by and biased towards Buddhist leaders, so minorities like Christians, who in many cases happen to be a religious and an ethnic minority, are disadvantaged and have no way of seeking justice. Particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, the military-run Ministries of Border Affairs and Home Affairs, and the Burmese military itself are directly responsible for religious freedom. A country expert stated: "The government officials are stricter than last year, we are required to inform them about any activities, no

matter if it is a Christian program or not. Without explicit permission, we cannot do anything." One country expert reported that the military regime appoints Ma Ba Tha members as ward administrators.

- **Ethnic leaders (Medium):** Ethnic community leaders can stir up communities to stop Christians from using resources and aid meant for everyone living in the community. Especially among ethnic minorities, each conversion to another faith is seen as weakening the group and threatening the struggle many ethnic groups find themselves in. Leaders will therefore act to prevent conversions and put strong pressure on converts, up to the point of expelling them from the community.
- **Violent religious groups and ideological pressure groups (Very strong):** Groups such as the already mentioned Ma Ba Tha not only call to protect and preserve Buddhist dominance, they also instigate violence and seek to indoctrinate people - especially soldiers - by upholding Buddhism as the only acceptable religion in Myanmar and regarding all other religions as dangerous cults. Whereas the main target has been the Muslim minority, Christians were affected by their call to take action as well. Insurgents sometimes also become drivers of persecution if they feel Christian churches are not supporting them strongly enough or when pastors are found advising young people not to join in the fighting. Lastly, fighting groups like the already mentioned ARSA act violently against all converts among the Muslim minority.
- **Extended family (Strong):** Buddhist, Muslim and Ethnic-animist families actively persecute family members who convert to Christianity, as conversion is seen as betrayal. Children of Buddhist converts in mixed marriages are often forced - on a regular basis - to spend a week at a Buddhist monastery and follow the monks' way of life.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** If someone in a village converts to Christian faith, this is seen as a disturbance of the harmony and is strongly opposed. Communities will put pressure on converts to give up their Christian faith. Mobs are easily stirred up and villagers often exclude Christians from support or any help they may get.
- **Political parties (Medium):** All non-minority political parties stand for Buddhist supremacy in one way or another and the (pre-coup) ruling NLD turned out to be a disappointment for the Christian minority. The erstwhile opposition USDP was closely connected to the Myanmar army and enacted the 2015 Law on the Protection of Race and Religion. In the current situation, political parties only play a subsidiary role in Myanmar.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** The army is the main force behind this persecution engine. What has been said for *Religious nationalism* applies here as well.
- **Government officials (Strong):** The Myanmar army took over power directly and will do everything it sees necessary to protect and defend its position. Its decades-long experience in dealing (violently) with insurgency movements helps in these efforts, however, the opposition is fierce and has been more successful than initially thought. Therefore, officials - and especially the army - are fighting even harder than before.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Groups such as Ma Ba Tha are at the forefront of supporting the constitutional status of the army and the predominance of the Burmese. They want this equilibrium retained at all costs.

- **Political parties (Medium):** What was said above for *Religious nationalism*, applies here as well.
- **Ethnic leaders (Medium):** Where they are in power, leaders of ethnic minority groups and insurgencies tend to do everything to stay in power. Whoever is seen as a threat to this power will be fought against, even if it is a fellow Christian.

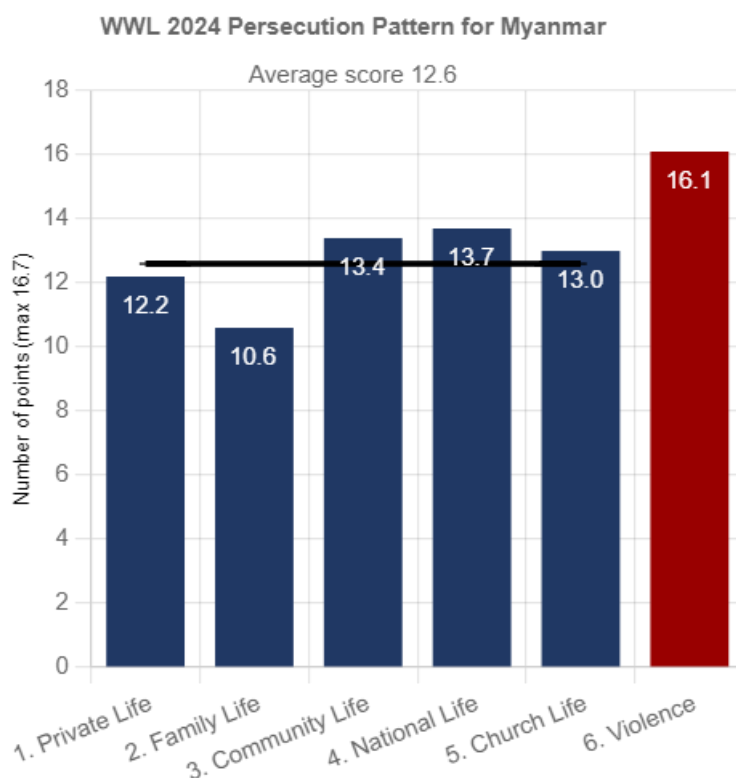
Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Most of Myanmar's landbound resources can be found in states which have a mainly Christian population or where Christians are a significant minority. The Myanmar army colludes with local strongmen, politicians and insurgents to take control of this wealth at the expense of the local population, it has also set up Border Guard Forces (BGF) it cooperates with. BGF are also instrumental in running the "lawless zones", referred to above. Fighting continues and if Christians and minorities are in the way, they are simply driven away. If they dare to speak out against the prevailing injustice (or try to give young people a hope for the future), they may be actively targeted, particularly by those benefitting from the illicit drug trade.
- **Government officials (Strong):** As indicated above, certain branches of the army are involved in various forms of illicit trade; this is sometimes carried out by proxies such as the BGF. If Christian settlements are in the way or they speak up against drugs and illegal trade, they are driven away to become IDPs. As the army dominates, the level of force is higher.
- **Organized crime and cartels (Medium):** Illegal trade is often organized by well-connected local strongmen, who can become drivers of persecution, too, if they see their profit threatened.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Some political leaders are likewise involved in illegal trade, especially those at the local level.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression:

- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Revolutionary and paramilitary groups started to become very visible drivers of persecution in September 2018, when the United Wa State army (UWSA), the largest insurgency group (estimated to have around 40,000 fighters) closed dozens of churches and detained almost a hundred Christians in a crackdown against "new churches".
- **Organized crime and cartels (Medium):** Reportedly, the UWSA is heavily involved in drug trafficking as well, so the 2018 crackdown may have had mixed motives.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Myanmar shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Myanmar decreased to an average of 12.6 points, reflecting slightly less pressure for Christians in areas ruled by the opposition, but certainly not freedom. At the same time, Christians (and other civilians in these areas) are threatened to be attacked by the army relentlessly.
- Converts are particularly affected by the levels of pressure in the *Community sphere* (extreme pressure) and the *Family and Private spheres of life*. All Christians face pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled i) by an increasing emphasis on Buddhism by the regime, excluding all other minorities and ii) by the widening civil war, affecting among others Christian Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen states. News blackouts hinder and delay reporting in these areas, causing verified details about the fighting to be difficult to obtain for international observers.
- The score for violence against Christians increased from 15.4 points in WWL 2023 to 16.1 points in WWL 2024 and is categorized as 'extreme'. There have been several killings of Christians, but those who have been killed by indiscriminate shelling of villages or by being caught between battle-lines have not been included in the scoring. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, more Christian churches were damaged and looted (whereas Buddhist monasteries have been largely left alone, but were not spared where seen as supporting the opposition). Also, more incidents were reported involving arrests, attacks against houses where Christians live or shops they owned and rape/sexual abuse. Due to the growing civil war, especially in Chin, Kachin, Kayah and Shan states, it is very difficult to obtain accurate reports on faith-based attacks against Christians and on churches attacked. In reality, the numbers are almost certainly higher than as listed below in the Violence table.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Myanmar's current laws make it hard for an individual to convert. The Religious Conversion Law, part of the 2015 "Law for Protection of Race and Religion", requires that Myanmar citizens who wish to change their religion must obtain approval from a Registration Board for religious conversion, set up in all townships. The potential convert must also undergo an interview and engage in religious studies for a period not exceeding 90 days from the date of application, but extendable to 180 days at the applicant's request. If after that period the applicant still wishes to convert, the Registration Board will issue a certificate of religious conversion. During this period the application would be posted on a community board and converts are likely to be put under severe pressure by everyone around them to retract their application. Because of this, there are very few cases of this law being applied as conversion is usually done in secret without the complicated process (including public exposure) described above. Converts face even more pressure from their family and community and are sometimes disowned and expelled from the family home or brought before the religious authorities.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

Although Christians are active in social media, even before the war started, they already had to be cautious about how they talked about their faith. Even a simple doctrinal statement like "There is only one God" can draw fierce criticism for promoting "monotheism". In the very difficult economic and social circumstances explained above, Christians are trying to witness to their faith and help and support their fellow citizens. But once they share about this on social media, this can result in strong opposition and accusations of proselytization.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

As soon as it is suspected that a discussion could be an attempt at proselytizing, it becomes risky. This is true for members of the Christian minorities discussing faith questions with members of the Buddhist majority and they also risk being reported to Buddhist extremist groups and/or (local) authorities, including the armed forces. A risk also exists for converts from a Muslim background in their communities when they mention their new-found faith. They need to be particularly cautious. A Christian from within the country adds: "In the tradition of Myanmar, no one listens to the younger people; the respect for the elderly is very high. So if the convert is either a youth or a child it is more difficult for them to talk about faith issues."

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.00 points)

Depending on where a Christian is living and - for converts - depending on the family he or she is living with, it can be risky to display Christian images or symbols. Converts would rarely have Christian images at home or wear jewelry displaying a cross, for instance. The latter could also be perceived as inviting others to the Christian faith or even as mocking Buddhist symbols, so Christians usually refrain from doing so. In the existing war situation Christians are extremely cautious about when and where to display such symbols.

Block 1: Additional information

Meeting with other Christians is usually not dangerous, but can pose a special challenge for converts, especially in strictly Buddhist villages. It can also draw attacks from the army. If converts are not expelled from their family, known converts are closely monitored, ostracized and may face house-arrest in order to hinder them from meeting with other Christians. In villages with a strong Buddhist presence, pastors who come visiting Christians are often met with hostility. Such visits have become even rarer due to the expanding war and even in opposition-ruled areas, such meetings come at a high risk.

In some Buddhist villages, especially in Rakhine state and the central part of Myanmar, Christians are not allowed to participate in community life. In such places, Christian converts, who are usually first generation Christians, have to be very careful not to be discovered, especially when they are the only ones in the family. On being discovered, they are usually forced to leave the village. But even in other places, converts prefer to be cautious as conversion to Christianity is seen as bringing shame and any visible act of Christian worship would be met with harsh opposition from families and local communities. In most urban areas, the pressure is not as high as in rural parts.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Due to the widening war, schooling has been more disrupted than ever. In most schools, cultural and religious practice dictates that pupils recite Buddha's teachings prior to the beginning of the class, if they refuse, they face discrimination by teachers and students alike and can be even sent out of the classroom in disgrace. The national curriculum is dominated by Bamar and Buddhist beliefs and worldviews. Dhamma schools are operated by Buddhist monks in order to teach children about Buddhist doctrines and are spreading across the country. Children are required to participate and contribute financially to the Buddhist festivals of water and light. In Na Ta La schools, children are taught Buddhist prayers, their heads are shaven, and they have to beg for food every morning from homes in the local community. In those schools, all employees (from the teaching and administration staff down to the cleaners) are Buddhist.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

It is almost impossible for children of Christians to go unnoticed, as each school day starts with Buddhist prayers and if the children refuse to participate, they are known as outsiders and will be regularly bullied by their Buddhist peers. In village schools it is normal to blame Christian children for anything bad that happens. Christian schoolchildren also receive fewer opportunities and are unlikely to be chosen for further education, scholarships or special honors. They are also seldom given the opportunity to correct mere administrative errors like the misspelling of a name or a wrong birthdate. As a consequence, they have been blocked from taking exams.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

Parents face difficulties in raising their children according to Christian values as they face pressure from neighbors in Buddhist majority areas. Parents are constantly told that if they remain Christian their child will have a harder future; by belonging to a religious minority they will be offered fewer opportunities. In convert families (from a Buddhist or Muslim background), it is often the grandparents who wield a great influence and make sure that the grandchildren are brought up in their original religion.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (2.75 points)

A typical voice from within the country sums it up best: "Due to the religious conversion law, pastors cannot perform Baptism openly. If they are caught, they will be imprisoned." Churches therefore carry out baptisms discreetly. For converts from a Buddhist or Muslim background, there is no other choice, it has to be done secretly. Baptismal certificates cannot be issued and only a few fellow Christians would be able and allowed to witness the baptism. In regions where Christians are the majority, baptisms of non-Buddhist background believers are less problematic.

Block 2: Additional information

Converts do not necessarily face the threat of losing their inheritance or custody rights, but women converts may well face the threat of divorce (if married). The Kittima Adoption Act of 1941 allows only Buddhists to adopt a child. All other forms of adoption are not official and not legally-binding. Muslim converts are also subjected to the wider Muslim minority's problem of being denied citizenship. Muslim Rohingya - and with them the minority of Christians from a Muslim background - are perceived as being Bengalese and effectively lack any legal status. Most of them are currently residing in refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh. One Christian from Myanmar explained: "Because Buddhists believe that the spirit of a deceased is still present at home, only after seven days, the spirit will be freed by a Buddhist prayer. If this does not happen, the village or community will be harmed. That's why they frequently force burials of Christians to be performed with non-Christian rites."

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

Especially converts are facing strong monitoring by their families and the communities they are living in. Monitoring is also helped by radical Buddhist groups. It is somewhat less pronounced in areas under the control of the opposition. Since the military coup in February 2021, the government has used surveillance technology such as facial recognition, phone tapping, internet censorship and social media monitoring to track and identify Christians, especially those involved in protest. Nationalist Buddhists have accused Christians of proselytizing and reported them to the authorities or local government. Some Christians are being shadowed, harassed or threatened by regime forces or armed groups, especially in conflict zones where Christians are a majority.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 points)

It is very common for Christians to be put under this sort of pressure, as the *raison d'être* of many government and community events is to display Buddhist supremacy. Some observers call this "Burmanization". This pressure involves daily prayers, donations (either in money or in kind) and participating in Buddhist ceremonies, cleaning Buddhist altars and joining Buddhist festivals. It is hard to escape the pressure as it is deeply ingrained in the culture and is ubiquitous at school, workplaces and in the government. If Christians stop giving alms to Buddhist monks, refuse to contribute to the renovation or building of Buddhist temples, or desist from participating in Buddhist festivals, they are likely to experience harassment, be forced to make donations and be threatened with expulsion from the village, as they are acting against the community. Another area where this kind of pressure is strongly felt, is school education, but this is scored in Block 2 (see: 2.8).

Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

If citizens are identified as Christians, they will be discriminated against or - which in most cases is more likely - outright hindered in participating in such forums. A good example occurred in the previous reporting period (WWL 2023) in Myitkina, Kachin state. The Department of Social Welfare conducted a special needs program to provide opportunities for the people. However, they invited only a few people from the Christian community, and they allowed just a few people from the church. While Christians had to pay money to attend to the program, it was free for Buddhists. The organizers also did not provide certificates for the Christians who attended, but did so for the others. Christians were not invited to participate in an advanced class that was offered.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christians have less chance of being hired by firms if there are Buddhist applicants. Christians are also regularly by-passed for promotion, even more so in civil service. This discourages Christians from applying for such positions in the first place. On Sundays, Christians are not given leave to attend church services. Christians in the government, civil service and army are rarely found and will not usually be promoted beyond a certain level. With the regime's view that many Christians are active in the opposition and PDFs, their position has become even more precarious. The exiled opposition NUG has a few Christian members.

Block 3: Additional information

Areas with a high percentage of Christian residents are deliberately disadvantaged through poor infrastructure and health-care and the government prefers to build Buddhist Na Ta La schools instead of regular state-run schools. With the developing civil war and a 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 even access) is blocked. When converts are poor and thus visit a Buddhist clinic, they will routinely be asked their religion and, in order to be treated, will have to claim that they are Buddhist. Only if medicine is left over, will it be provided to them, while additional limitations apply, e.g. that the clinic only opens for them in the evening for one hour.

Children of converts are facing discrimination by teachers and pupils at school, for example not being allowed to prepare for a test like the rest of the class and in extreme cases even being expelled. Another problem Christians are facing are the local oral laws ("Gamma laws"), declared in several communities and villages by Buddhist monks and officials in order to restrict Christians. Preferential treatment given to businesses and companies owned by Buddhists for obtaining loans and government subsidies is common, and for Christian and Muslim business-owners registering their businesses is made complicated. At times, Buddhist monks call for a boycott of shops and establishments owned by Christians and Muslims. Even in the small things of daily life, Christians are facing discrimination, for instance: In many villages, it is normal to rent kitchenware for larger festivities from the community. Christians find they are charged more for it than other villagers.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Section 361 of the now suspended 2008 Constitution reads: "The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union" while also recognizing the presence of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism in section 362. Although the 2008 Constitution is now invalid, the mindset behind the quoted section will prevail and re-appear in any new rules the Tatmadaw may implement. This "special position of Buddhism" has been abused by Buddhist radicals. In order to gain additional support from such groups and the Bamar majority in August 2015, the previous government adopted four religious

conversion bills which aim to protect Buddhism by controlling conversion to other faiths, banning interfaith marriages and polygamy, and introducing birth controls.

Buddhist women wishing to marry non-Buddhist men must first receive permission from their parents and local government officials and the non-Buddhist men would first need to convert to the Buddhist faith. Concerning conversion, the law states that anyone seeking to change their faith needs to get permission from the Religious Conversion Registration body, which is comprised of local religion and immigration officials, a local administrator, the women's affairs chairman and a local education officer. Thus, the community knows if a person wants to convert and they are given 3-6 months to try to convince him or her to withdraw their papers. The law's first target is the Muslim minority, but all other minorities are affected likewise and it discourages both citizens considering conversion and converts from testifying about their new faith. In Myanmar, some tribes have their own additional laws which are used by some communities to drive Christians out of their villages.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (4.00 points)

The army and the Buddhist nationalist movement have been entirely unpunished and operate in a culture of impunity. If there is army involvement, neither Christians nor any other minority can expect fair treatment before courts or any international monitoring of their dire situation. The case of the two female Baptist teachers murdered in 2015, still awaits justice and there were more rape cases in the WWL 2024 reporting period where no punishment can be expected. All the more so, as it is assumed by the authorities that the Christian minority supports the NUG and PDF.

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Christians are usually only employed by firms when there are no Buddhists available. If they are employed, they are frequently by-passed for promotion. There are a few Christians in public service, but they rarely get promoted to senior positions and are even told that this policy applies because they are Christian and/or hail from an ethnic minority background. One source from within the country says: "If a student is a graduate from a Na Ta La school, they will have more opportunities to get a government job. Even if they only pass class X in the Na Ta La school, they can become a teacher." The source explains further: "The government authorities have several headships in communities such as "10 household head" or "100 household head", even for the lowest 10 household head leadership Christians are not given opportunity."

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

The Myanmar army and pro-military government officials are strongly influenced by Buddhist nationalist sentiment and often regard a Christian as a second-class citizen or automatically as being in cahoots with the opposition, therefore Christians face harder requirements when applying for government services. They would, for example, be required to file additional documents, asked to pay additional fees or their application would be delayed, sometimes indef-

initely. Complaints referred to the police by Christians are ignored in most cases. Christians also have less access to loans and state benefits than non-Christian business partners or customers. Even in Christian majority regions, authority officials are frequently Buddhist. However, it has to be said that in general, due to recent developments in the civil war, the authorities in many areas are in a state of chaos. Local authorities in areas run by the opposition seem to put more effort into treating citizens equally, although they still have very limited capacity.

Block 4: Additional information

Young men conscripted into the Myanmar army (or pressured into joining an ethnic insurgent group) face a lot of harassment, which can extend to their families. Media reporting about Christians is often distorted. One country expert says: "There is heavy government regulation when it comes to the media. As such, pro-government narratives are transmitted through the media, especially when reporting on conflicts in predominantly Christian states." Buddhist nationalists and hardliners broadcast a negative picture of Christians, claiming that deception is used to force people to convert, and that converts are used for purposes of enrichment. Converts are often labeled traitors for leaving Buddhism. This is done via all media channels available - from sophisticated approaches on social media to public announcements via loudspeakers in villages. With the developing civil war, Christian aid workers and pastors are facing increasing accusations of being PDF supporters or leaders and may be attacked by the army.

One country expert explained: "I would argue that the Buddhist modalities of belonging make it impossible for a business person to not engage in some aspect of Business legitimization cum Buddhist rituals - whether it is giving the expected 'alms' (tax) to the local Buddhist monastery, bribes to the local officials, or 'favors' to Buddhist religious figures, all of which would run contra Christian beliefs and practices." He added: "Christians are not allowed to preach against 'culture and religion' of the country. This leaves an incredibly wide lens of interpretation that a Christian could be persecuted for very spurious reasons by other Buddhist businessmen or politicians."

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

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. With the military coup, the army is virtually involved all of the time and in a climate where Christian leaders are accused of joining or even leading the resistance, especially the armed PDF, speaking out is not only risky, but completely in vain. The same is true when actions by radical Buddhist groups are addressed, but due to the war 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 knelt in the dust to beg Myanmar police not to shoot anti-coup demonstrators in Myitkyina in Myanmar's Kachin state (UCA News, 28 January 2022). Even prominent and high-profile Christians like Dr Samson are arrested and sentenced for spurious claims (see above: *Specific examples of violent incidents*).

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)

As churches are suspected of being centers of opposition, local communities, authorities and especially the armed forces monitor their activities. In a growing number of cases, this monitoring has led to attacks against church buildings, staff and leaders, and has ended in killings. Buddhist monks connected with Ma Ba Tha also monitor Christian activities. For converts, this kind of pressure is even higher, and detection may mean they have to face very serious consequences, not just from the community, but from their own family too. A country expert adds: "The Buddha Gongyi group is very active in monitoring Christian preaching and activities via social media. If they find out about new converts and their testimonies, they will strongly oppose them and in some cases report them to the authorities."

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

Although most churches have other challenges to deal with than getting legal status (due to the war situation), one country expert sums up the difficulties well: "Christians churches face discrimination from the authorities when seeking registration. For instance, there are up to eight different levels of permission required to build a church including from the township-level General Administrative Department (GAD) under the military-run Ministry of Home Affairs."

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.50 points)

Churches need approval from the village head, whenever they want to carry out an activity outside their standard place of worship, even in predominantly or strongly Christian states. Since Christians are known to carry out outreach activities even when told not to, whatever they do is watched with suspicion. More often than not, approval is denied on the grounds that such activities could lead to violations of the anti-conversion law. Cynically, one could say that many Christians are forced to gather outside anyway since so many church buildings have been destroyed. And even if a church has been badly damaged, that does not mean there will not be any further attacks.

Block 5: Additional information

In the ongoing situation of war, it is very difficult to conduct training sessions. In one example from the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), a pastor was called for questioning by local leaders, who wanted to know what was going on and what the topic of the training was. When the pastor mentioned the title "Standing Strong Through the Storm", the term "Storm" was misunderstood as a military term for "an act of warfare". This created fear and tension among the village leaders and military groups, who, as a result, repeatedly called the pastor for further questioning to find out more.

Even before the coup, church leaders and pastors were frequently targeted for harassment and attacks by radical Buddhists, since this was seen as being an effective way of paralyzing church life. More recently, pastors are often suspected of being leaders of opposition movements. All religious publications are censored and reviewed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Some

churches have started to print their own materials, but owning a printing press has been made very difficult, publishing in minority languages remains out of the question and strict censorship rules apply. Importing Christian materials is very difficult and even impossible in minority languages. Churches in ethnic minority areas face even more difficulties, as they are often regarded as being places for hosting anti-government meetings and communication points for ethnic minority groups.

Even before the civil war, applications for building new churches were often filed away and not acted upon by officials entrusted with the task. In the current circumstances, building a church is almost unthinkable in the first place. In Christian majority areas like Kachin state, Chin state and the Naga area in Sagaing region, the documents necessary were even harder to obtain and not giving them was seen as a good means to weaken the Christian minorities, as it would discourage them from trying to build new churches. Consequently, all over the country, many Christians are either meeting in private houses or in rented offices or shops (mainly in the cities). In Chin state, some Christians even say that there has been no official permission to construct a new church since 1997.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers:

In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Myanmar: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	34	42
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	32	100 *
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	18	100 *
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	1	4
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	45	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	2	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	1000 *	1000 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1000 *	1000 *
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100,000 *	100,000 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10,000 *	10,000 *

For the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** The number of Christians killed in the reporting period is very difficult to count, even if one limits oneself to the number of civilians killed in attacks against churches and Christian villages. First, it is not clear that all civilians were Christian; and secondly, numbers of casualties are seldom stated. For the WWL 2024 reporting period it was decided to limit the number to the killings resulting from the targeting of Christian villages and pastors. Counted in that way, at least 34 Christians were killed because of their faith in the reporting period. Examples are mentioned above in: Specific examples of violations of rights.
- **Christians attacked:** There have been hundreds of Christians attacked for their faith, including converts from a Buddhist or a Muslim background. The attacks were sometimes carried out by family members, but also by ethnic insurgent armies. The Myanmar army is also launching indiscriminate attacks in some predominantly or strongly Christian states.
- **Christians arrested:** Many pastors, Catholic priests and ordinary church members have been detained by the army, often suspected of supporting or even leading the opposition forces. In most cases, they were released after a few days, often after their churches had publicly reported such arrests.
- **Churches attacked:** Churches came increasingly under attack where they were considered to be centers of opposition. There are claims that churches provide spaces for dissidents to gather and plan armed attacks against the military. However, these claims could not be independently verified and the army was not known for distinguishing between church structures and "center of opposition resistance". As communication is often restricted by the armed forces, it is difficult to give a concrete number. Reports on file indicate at least 32 churches were attacked, but the real number may be closer to or even above 100.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There have been dozens of attacks, in which houses and shops were destroyed.
- **Christian fleeing:** The number of Christians fleeing the constant army attacks is impossible to know, but reported estimates are around 250,000 and in reality the numbers are likely to be much higher. As WWR only looks at Christians who have been newly internally displaced or made refugees in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the estimations given in the table above are a symbolic 100,000 and 10,000, respectively. All reports have to be seen as being only anecdotal, but many Christians have become [IDPs](#) in an effort to avoid airstrikes and regime army raids (UCA News, 1 August 2022). In some IDP camps in Shan state, there is fear among the Christians that they will be forced by the Tatmadaw [to return](#) to their villages, despite a lack of security (UCA News, 6 October 2022). Others had to flee abroad; for example, hundreds of Christians from Chin state have been fleeing to neighboring Indian [Mizoram state](#) (UCA News, 22 August 2022). The military regime announced that it will order 25 IDP camps in and around Myitkina, Kachin state, to be [closed](#). These camps were run by Catholic and Baptist churches, served IDPs since 2011 and hosted around 11,000 people (UCA News, 17 February 2023).

5 Year trends

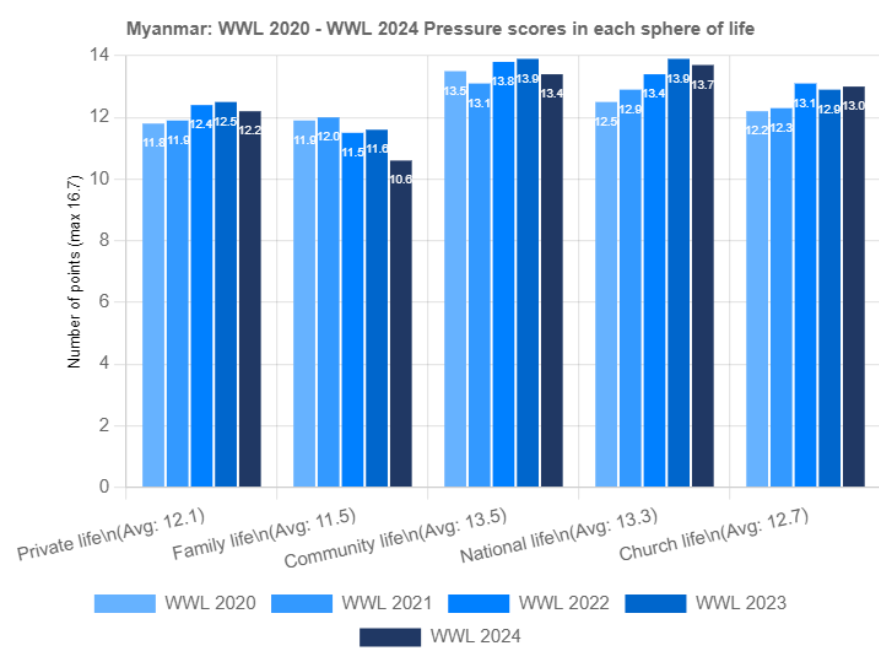
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Myanmar: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.6
2023	13.0
2022	12.8
2021	12.4
2020	12.4

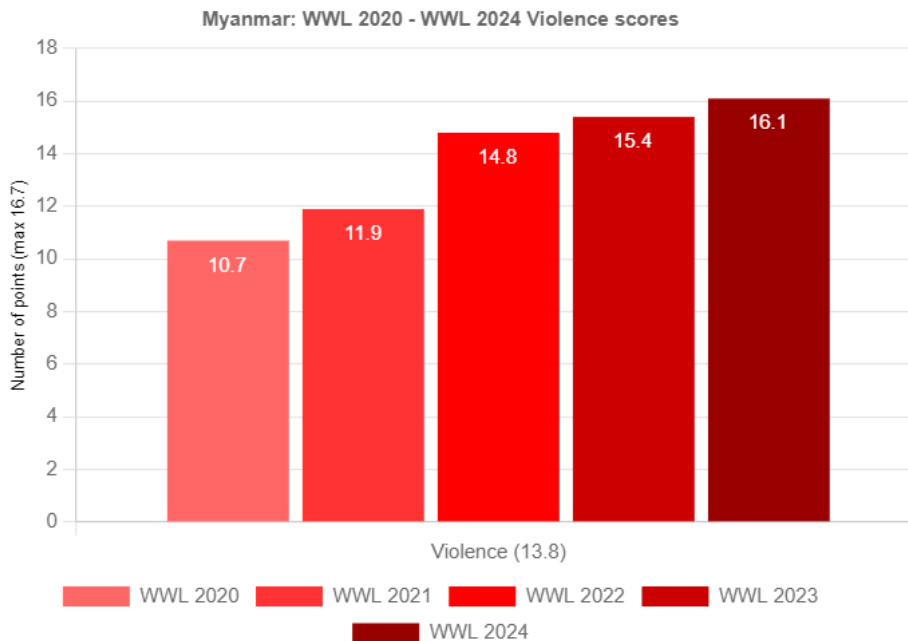
The table above shows how the average level of pressure on Christians dropped to a score of 12.6 points in WWL 2024, after rising from 12.4 to 13.0 points in the previous four reporting periods. This drop occurred because some areas ruled by the opposition reported slightly less pressure in nearly all spheres of life. While the ousted civilian government did nothing to improve the situation for religious minorities in Myanmar (including Christians), the military regime is making things unbearably worse. As the military regime is slowly losing control of territory (at the time of writing - December 2023 - some estimates say it effectively controls just 50% of the country), the situation is becoming increasingly challenging and complex, affecting both pressure and violence scores.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that the pressure in *Community life* has been highest throughout the last five reporting periods, overtaken by the pressure in *National life* in WWL 2024. The strong emphasis on Buddhism (and the nationalism connected with it) made the scores for *National* and *Church life* steadily increase, the increase of the latter also indicating that due to the emerging civil war, the increasing number of IDPs and the attacks against Christian villages and churches, church life is barely possible in many areas.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Since WWL 2020, the violence scores have constantly increased. With the unfolding civil war and the deliberate tactic of attacking churches and killing Christian aid workers and pastors, the level of violence climbed to a new peak in WWL 2024. It should, however, be kept in mind that it is very difficult to get detailed information from regions like Kachin, Shan, Chin and Kayah states, so the real level of violence and pressure may be even higher. The Myanmar army has been quite successful in keeping these regions isolated.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced divorce
Security	Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

The military coup of February 2021 and subsequent conflict implicates fresh concerns for women in Myanmar. Over the last decade some progress has been made on women's rights in the country, yet this has been rapidly disappearing after the military takeover ([UNDP: Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar](#), 8 March 2022). Furthermore, the army is a known perpetrator of sexual and gender-based violence, with evidence such violence escalating since the coup, especially during interrogation ([USIP](#), 30 November 2021). Despite such challenges, women continue to be involved in activism ([BBC News](#), 9 December 2021). Rape and physical assault by the armed forces is a significant threat to Christian women, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities.

Christians feel they are viewed as second-class citizens across Myanmar, without the same legal protection and rights as the Buddhist majority. Thousands have become IDPs and refugees due to the coup and resulting fighting. Women in Myanmar are also subordinate; a country expert commented: "In Myanmar, women are already considered as second-class citizens... their value is measured by their service to their men and their family." This context creates multiple challenges, including creating obstacles to reporting sexual violence; a country expert believes "that there are more women who are raped and harassed, and the women are afraid to speak out because of cultural sensitivity and it is considered a social taboo."

Women lack robust legal protection. Generally, victims of domestic violence lack legal cover. Specifically, Christian women married to non-Christian men can be legally pressured into following the husband's religion, unlike Buddhist women. This law, which was mainly aimed at the Muslim minority, also acts as a hindrance to female converts to Christianity from a Buddhist background (especially secret converts). Within mixed-religion marriages, if the daughter decides to be a Christian, the non-Christian father often arranges for her to be married to a Buddhist. The mother and daughter have no power to prevent this.

Radical Islamic groups among the Rohingya have been known to abduct Rohingya Christian women, forcibly married them to Muslim men and attempt to convert them to Islam. Additionally, there are instances when men have pretended to be a Christian – going so far as to be baptized – in order to find a Christian girl. After getting married, they then applied pressure on their wife to convert to Islam, but in the past few years there have been no reported cases.

Female youth – in combination with a female converts' lower status – are also vulnerable to house arrest and can face discrimination at school. This restricts their access to community life, including Christian fellowship. If married, they may also be divorced by their husband. External sources report that Christian women in the predominately Christian Kachin State have been trafficked to China to become "brides," where they are raped with the aim of impregnating them to produce male heirs, although this is becoming even more hidden ([Human Rights Watch](#), 21 March 2019; [Family Research Council](#), 15 December 2020). Kachin Christians have been exposed to these atrocities for many years – they are even targeted within IDP camps where the Myanmar army inflicts further acts of abuse.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Due to the insecurity and resulting displacement prompted by the ongoing conflict, the threat of death affects both men and women without gender differentiation, illustrating the precarious position that families are faced with. In Myanmar, men are culturally encouraged to find work as the [primary breadwinners](#) within the family unit; if they lose their job or are driven from their village or town because they are Christians, the whole family suffers and it causes emotional distress (Care International, “Rapid Gender Analysis, Myanmar – Rakhine State”, 2020). Such persecution is real and tangible for male converts, who have fewer job opportunities available to them. Others find themselves in cycles of forced labor. Converts also risk threats, ridicule and physical beatings.

It can be especially difficult for Christian men to practice their faith within the context of the armed forces. The Myanmar army has been known to impose forced labor on Christians as a means of preventing them from attending Sunday services and accessing Christian community. Several men have in the past lost their faith as a result. Christian men have also been targeted for recruitment into militias, although the frequency with which this occurs is contested. In particular, Christians are used as guides for troops unfamiliar with the terrain. Imprisonment is a real risk for Christian men, who can also face torture if arrested.

Na Ta La schools aim to convert Christian children, which is an effective way of stopping Christianity from spreading to the next generation. The boys at these schools are raised to become Buddhist monks; when they start at the Na Ta La schools, their heads are shaved, they are given monks clothes and they also go around the local community begging for food.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department’s IRFR 2022 Myanmar:

- "As was the case in previous years, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. During the year, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups. On January 17, media outlets reported a Buddhist monk was among a group of civilians that military forces abducted and forced to serve as a human shield against opposition forces." (Page 1)

- “According to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), established by the UN Human Rights Council, it collected and analyzed more than three million pieces of evidence of possible human rights violations or abuses in Burma from 2019 to 2022, including reports of approximately 1,300 victims and eyewitnesses in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Karen States, which all have minority religious populations. Religious leaders also expressed concern the regime might misconstrue religious assembly as part of prodemocracy activities.” (Page 2)
- “According to local media, some ethnic armed organizations operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups. In October, local media outlets reported the killing of prominent Rohingya teacher and leader Shafikul Islam in Buthidaung Township, Rakhine State, reportedly by the Arakan Army, whose ranks are composed largely of Rakhine Buddhists, which issued a statement denying responsibility for his death. Another Rohingya leader, Sali Hamuk, was killed a few days later, reportedly by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, whose ranks are composed largely of Rakhine Muslims, which also denied responsibility. There were continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for Rohingya. According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of citizenship status, and as belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice.” (Page 2/3)

The persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority has been referred to in this country dossier several times. Their plight is now being discussed in front of an international audience in a court room in The Hague, but this will neither bring immediate relief to the refugees stuck in camps in Bangladesh nor to the Muslim minority left behind in Myanmar, mainly in Rakhine state. The whole court process is slow and saw "only" case management [decisions](#) in the WWL 2024 reporting period (ICJ, Latest developments, accessed 27 July 2023). Since the Tatmadaw took over power in the February 2021 coup, the whole court process has become much more of an uphill battle. It is also unthinkable that Rohingya refugees will return willingly to Myanmar from Bangladesh, where they fled to save their lives, even when some of them have been relocated to a remote island. This relocation policy is driven by the Myanmar army and Buddhist religious leaders and is widely backed by many citizens: It fits the country's increasing *Religious nationalism*.

Non-Rohingya Muslims in other parts of the country are also facing restrictions, discrimination and attacks. Hindus sometimes also face restrictions and pressure from Buddhist supremacy, but such hostility is at a much lower level than experienced by other religious minorities.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia and Organized corruption and crime

With the military coup, *Dictatorial paranoia* is increasing in strength and importance once again. While the motives of the army may not be fully apparent at the current time, one reason for this Persecution engine gaining in strength is that the Tatmadaw is [deeply involved](#) in both legal and illicit trade (East Asia Forum, 2 February 2021), which mainly affects predominantly Christian areas like Kachin state. Trust-building will be impossible as the Tatmadaw is now also fighting against at least parts of the Bamar majority. Also, as long as the army continues to launch offensives against the largely Christian Kachin minority, fighting in Karen and Kayah states will persist. Casualties among Christians are seen as mere 'collateral damage' in the fight against insurgents and frequently, Christians are misrepresented as being leaders of the armed groups. The goal of the National Unity Government as well as the loosely united PDF is to dissolve the Tatmadaw and install a federal system instead, a goal which is anathema to the Tatmadaw and will send *Dictatorial paranoia* into overdrive.

Religious nationalism - Buddhist

Even the civilian government had employed a divide-and-rule strategy, which could be seen, for instance, when Thein Swe, Union Minister of the Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population, said the government was unable to release the [findings of the 2014 census](#) due to confusion over who belonged to which ethnic group: "Taking the case of the Kachin, he said there could be between six and 12 sub-ethnicities depending on who you listen to. Others dispute claims the Chin have 53 sub-ethnic groups" (UCA News, 1 March 2018). The military rulers are expected to use Buddhist nationalism and supremacy as a motivation for keeping them in power. It remains to be seen whether the opposition, assuming it manages to consolidate and possibly even extend its territorial control, will grant the Christian minority more freedom and even respect conversions to Christianity. It should be kept in mind that attitudes rooted in society and family change slower than political or legal circumstances.

Radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha are being watched carefully by fellow Buddhist groups and politicians, but their influence and rhetoric against non-Buddhist minorities is unbroken, even though they may be less visible for the time-being. Their radical stance is still best reflected by a report which [quoted Ashin Wirathu](#), one of the most outspoken and radical Buddhist monks, as saying: "I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog that would bark at strangers coming to your house – it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark" (The Conversation, 7 November 2017). Given the proximity radical monks have with army circles, *Religious nationalism* will continue to have a strong influence, especially as Buddhism is seen as being able to give motivation and justification for the Tatmadaw's fight for control of the country. Wirathu was [freed from prison](#) in September 2021, after charges of incendiary behavior were dropped. It is not clear if and in what ways he will support the military regime (AP News, 7 September 2021).

Communist and post-Communist oppression

Although the situation for Christians in self-governed Wa State has partly relaxed, the damage is done, dozens of churches and Bible schools have been closed down and Christian leaders and students have been detained or expelled. It seems safe to say that Wa state - at least in religious terms - has been changed forever.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: take over regulating radical Buddhist groups - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/religion-ministry-done-leaving-sangha-govern-ma-ba-tha.html>
- Persecution engines description: increased - <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/Burmanisation-and-Buddhisisation-Accelerating-the-Degradation-of-Religious-Rights-in-Myanmar.pdf>
- Persecution engines description: UN report - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/EconomicInterestsMyanmarMilitary.aspx>
- Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points): example - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/the-myanmar-nun-who-faced-down-a-junta/95899>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: IDPs - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmars-catholic-villagers-live-in-mortal-fear/98186>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: to return - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/idps-fear-forced-return-under-myanmars-junta/99004>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: Mizoram state - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/more-myanmar-christians-flee-to-india/98475>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: closed: - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-junta-to-close-kachin-idp-camps/100406>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: UNDP: Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar - <https://www.undp.org/publications/regressing-gender-equality-myanmar-women-living-under-pandemic-and-military-rule>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USIP - <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/myanmars-ongoing-war-against-women>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-59462503>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Human Rights Watch, - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/21/give-us-baby-and-well-let-you-go/trafficking-kachin-brides-myanmar-china>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Family Research Council - <https://www.frc.org/blog/2020/12/chinas-bride-trafficking-problem>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: primary breadwinners - https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE_Learning_RGA_Myanmar-Rakhine-State_COVID-19_August2020.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: decisions - <https://icj-cij.org/case/178>
- Future outlook: deeply involved - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/02/making-sense-of-myanmars-coup/>
- Future outlook: findings of the 2014 census - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/ethnic-groups-blast-myanmar-for-gaps-in-2014-census/81663>
- Future outlook: quoted Ashin Wirathu - <https://theconversation.com/militant-buddhism-is-on-the-march-in-south-east-asia-where-did-it-come-from-86632>
- Future outlook: freed from prison - <https://apnews.com/article/religion-myanmar-d8d7f1f0619fb9b59d76380b47ce2214>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Myanmar>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.