

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

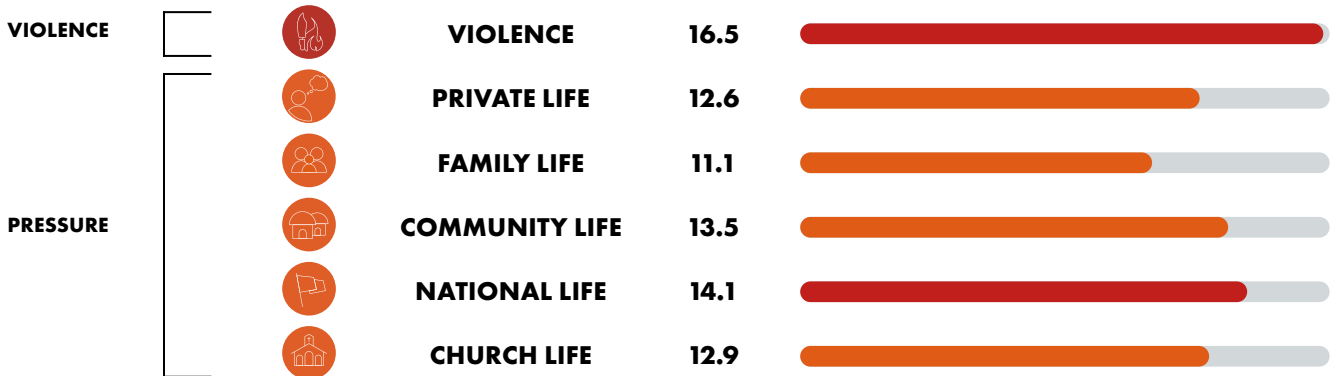
MYANMAR

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
13



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LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

2025 sees Myanmar entering the fifth year of an increasingly violent conflict. After the army staged a coup in February 2021, fighting has continued and increased in many parts of the country. The Christian minority is among those bearing the brunt of these attacks. Even well-established churches belonging to historical Christian communities are being attacked by government forces in predominantly Christian states like Chin and Kayah, but also in states with a strong Christian minority like Kachin, Karen and Shan. 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 some are involved in the fighting.

An offensive named “Operation 1027” mounted in Northern Shan state in October 2023 by three powerful ethnic armed groups is still ongoing, but has overall put the military junta on the back foot and forced it to focus more on the Burmese heartlands. It was joined by more or less successful offensives by other ethnic armed groups and resulted in such groups holding about half of Myanmar’s territory, while the operations are still continuing.

Converts to Christianity find themselves additionally persecuted by their Buddhist, Muslim or tribal families and communities as their conversion is seen as betrayal. Communities who aim to stay “Buddhist only” make life for Christian families impossible - for example, 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.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister, Sr. Gen.
Min Aung Hlaing

POPULATION

54,965,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,760,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Military Regime



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,760,000	8.7
Buddhists	40,603,000	73.9
Ethno-religionists	5,159,000	9.4
Muslims	2,123,000	3.9

Source²

In the years following Myanmar’s independence in 1948, various ethnic groups attempted to break off to

form independent countries. The military, aiming to maintain the state’s integrity as well as ethnic Burman control, seized power and five decades of military rule followed. A series of protests led by Aung San Suu Kyi increased public pressure against the government, culminating in a 2015 election where Ms Suu Kyi won in a landslide victory. She was forcibly deposed by the military following the 2020 elections and the country has since returned to military rule, resulting in significant unrest, violence and displacement across the country. Christian minority states are especially affected. Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities (such as Chin, Karen, Lisu, Kachin, Naga, Kayah and Lahu) and not to the Burmese (Bamar) majority.

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Life for Christians was tough even before the coup. For example, the 'Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion' were adopted in August 2015. These aimed to protect Buddhist identity and the majority Bamar ethnic group by regulating religious conversion, interfaith marriage, population control, and monogamy. They were celebrated countrywide by nationalist Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha. While these laws were aimed chiefly at the Muslim minority in Rakhine State, Christians are also impacted because conversions have to follow an administrative process including notification to different authorities. Ma Ba Tha has been banned several times but re-emerges under different names.

Radical Buddhist groups have targeted Muslims more than Christians, leading to the exodus of the largely Muslim ethnic Rohingya into Bangladesh. In March 2022, the US government declared the atrocities against the Rohingya as [genocide](#) 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. Converts to Christianity such as those from a Buddhist background, continue to be persecuted by their families and the community. The Ma Ba Tha and the Pyu Saw Htee are instrumental and active in monitoring the activities of Christians including those from a Buddhist background.

Christians experience pressure and even violence from the army, and killings of Christians are reported. The United Nations has found that [opium production](#) in Myanmar has almost doubled since the military coup of February 2021; this lucrative organized crime as well as lawless zones are hotspots for human trafficking (USIP, 9 November 2022). Lawless zones are mainly found in the remote and border regions of Myanmar, where many Christian minorities live. China has forced action such as raids against lawless zones since Chinese citizens are among their prime targets.



Protestants comprise almost two-thirds of all Christians. The Myanmar Baptist Convention estimates its membership at about 1.6 million Christians, many of whom are among the Karen, Kachin and Chin people. The number of Catholics is smaller, but there are estimates of up to a million. However, there is no strong inter-denominational association among Christians; in controversial issues and concerning the (persecution) situation in the country, their reactions are not unified.

How the situation varies by region

When it comes to difficulties for Christians in the WWL 2025 reporting period, the conflict became entrenched in areas with Christian majorities (such as Chin state) and significant Christian minorities alike. The Tatmadaw (armed forces) indiscriminately attack Christian villages, church buildings (sometimes hosting refugees or IDP camps) and kill Christians. While the atrocities in Chin state continue, other hotspots are Kachin state in the north, Kayah state in the southeast, Kayah state in the southeast and Sagaing division in the west. Fighting there continues, and 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. The lawless zones bordering Laos and Thailand, in which organized crime is blooming, are placed in minority regions, inhabited by many Christians as well.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These Christian communities have for decades faced pressure and violence from the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military. In many cases, they are caught up in conflicts between the military and radical insurgent groups, such as the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), which supports the opposition's fight. Because these conflicts are generally separatist in nature, often a strong sense of nationalism pervades and Christians, who are seen as "foreign", are likely to be among the first victims of attacks.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts to Christianity from Buddhist or Muslim backgrounds face extreme violations of their rights from authorities, families and communities. 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 a Buddhist background. While primarily a Muslim ethnic group, there are Christian converts among the Rohingya, who were forced to

flee to Bangladesh due to the military's violent actions against them. Christian Rohingya face persecution both because of their ethnic and religious affiliations.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations face violations from the community they live in, especially in rural areas. Historically, proselytizing and importing Christian materials was illegal. More recently, government policy seeks to prioritize Buddhist interests at the expense of those of other religious minorities.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – BUDDHISM BLENDED WITH ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

60% of Myanmar's population is Burmese (Bamar). Being Bamar is equated with being Buddhist. To be otherwise is to be seen as foreign and a threat to the state and national unity. Government policy has even supported radical Buddhists like the Ma Ba Tha group. One country expert reported that the military regime appointed Ma Ba Tha members as ward administrators.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and while neither the 2015 nor 2020 elected government could be called paranoid, Myanmar is one of the very few countries where it is the army who holds almost all power, as illustrated by the military coup in February 2021. A quarter of parliament's seats are reserved for military staff and the army holds the most important government offices. Also, 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."



ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Many of Myanmar's most precious natural resources, such as jade, ores, and timber, are found in states with high Christian populations. Additionally, Myanmar is part of the "Golden Triangle", one of Asia's largest opium-producing regions. Often, the military and insurgency groups compete over the revenues produced by these lucrative ventures. Those, such as Christians, who oppose corruption risk violence from both insurgency groups and the military itself. The lawless zones, emerging in ethnic minority states like Shan State and others bordering Laos and Thailand, are another example of how the civil war benefits organized crime.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

The military coup of February 2021 sparked fresh concerns for women. In particular, the army - which has expanded its already considerable power base - is a known perpetrator of gender-based violence. Many displaced women and youths are vulnerable to slavery, trafficking and abuse. Rohingya Christian women also continue to be targeted by extremist groups, who reportedly abduct women and force them to marry Muslim men. Women in the predominately Christian Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China as “brides,” to produce male heirs. Converts are also vulnerable to house arrest, forced marriage, expulsion from the family home and divorce.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men might lose their jobs, be driven from their village or town or be trapped in cycles of forced labor because of their faith. It is especially difficult for Christian men to practice their faith within the context of the armed forces, or when pressured to join militias, such as the Kachin Independence Army. Na Ta La schools intend to convert Christian children, aiming to stop Christianity from spreading to the next generation. Here, the boys are raised to become Buddhist monks. Converts also face threats, ridicule and physical beatings. In the present civil war situation, Christian men - especially youth - run the risk of being automatically identified as members of the opposition and/or as part of the many militias opposing the junta. Military conscription also poses a threat to the safety of the men and their existence.

Male typical pressure points:

- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	13	81
2024	17	79
2023	14	80
2022	12	79
2021	18	74

The rise in 2 points in overall score was caused by an increase in violence against Christians (rising from 16.1 points to 16.5 points) and by small increases in pressure in all Spheres of Life except in Church Life. 2025 sees Myanmar entering a fourth year of increasingly violent conflict, marked by a severe deterioration in human rights, economic stability, and humanitarian conditions, as violence between the military junta and resistance forces continues to escalate. Christians, as a minority, face some of the worst human rights abuses, with the destruction, bombing, and burning of churches persisting across the country. Restrictions on gatherings, curfews, and targeted attacks on places of worship have left many Christians unable to attend services, while widespread conflict has forced numerous believers to become internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees. One notable development during this period was the introduction of mandatory military conscription, leading to heightened fear and prompting many young people to flee the country, further weakening the fabric of Christian communities.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **26 November 2023:** State military attacked Loikaw Cathedral in Kayah state with [aerial strikes](#), causing the IDPs seeking protection in the compound to flee elsewhere.
- **7 January 2024:** A church in Kanan village, Sagaing Division, was targeted by airstrikes, killing 17 people and wounding nine. According to a [report](#), 11 of those killed were Christians.
- **12 April 2024:** Catholic priest Paul Khwi Shane Aung was [shot](#) and seriously injured while holding a morning church service in Mohnyin town, Kachin state.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2025	60	80	100*	10*
2024	34	32	18	1

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

Myanmar's current laws make it hard for an individual to convert. The Religious Conversion Law, part of the "Law for Protection of Race and Religion", requires that citizens who wish to change their religion must obtain approval from a newly established Registration Board for religious conversion, undergo an interview and engage in religious studies for a period. During this period, the application is posted on a community board meant to put the convert under severe community pressure to retract their application. Because of this, conversion is usually done in secret. Converts also face pressure from their family and community and are sometimes disowned and expelled from the family home.

FAMILY LIFE

The state continues to run so-called "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (or *Na Ta La*), which are attractive to minorities as they are boarding schools run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and introduce them to Buddhism. They have been affected by the war, but it is not clear to what extent. The army has continued its practice of weakening ethnic insurgencies by encouraging ethnic youth to become drug addicted, a practice that is affecting Christian Kachin.

COMMUNITY LIFE

There is intense pressure on Christians in Myanmar from the community. Christians tend to be economically, socially and politically excluded which leads to poverty, harassment and exposure to crime. Christians, especially those gathering in house churches, are monitored and pressured into renouncing their faith by both communal and government authorities. They are excluded from communal decisions and resources. Denial of building materials and access to drinking water can put Christians in dangerous and exposed conditions.

With the developing civil war and a quickly growing number of IDPs and IDP camps, health care and humanitarian aid to Christians is either not possible, not allowed or is only given in minimal portions, and international monitoring (and sometimes even access) is blocked. As one country expert added: "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. Some Christians are being shadowed, harassed or threatened by the military or armed groups, especially in conflict zones with majority Christians."

NATIONAL LIFE

Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution reads: “The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” It also recognizes the presence of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism in section 362. This “special position of Buddhism” has been abused by Buddhist radicals. The previous government aimed to garner Buddhist support by controlling conversion to other faiths, banning interfaith marriages and introducing birth control. Official permission must be sought to convert.

Christians are usually only hired by firms when there are no Buddhists available and are frequently bypassed for promotion.

With the developing civil war, Christian aid workers and pastors are increasingly accused of being resistance leaders and can be attacked by the army. One country expert explained: “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.

CHURCH LIFE

Dissent, especially any criticism about the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, is dealt with harshly by the military. Christian leaders are frequently accused of joining or even leading the resistance. Courageous Christians still speak out, for example, Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng, who has been detained several times, after she [peacefully stood up](#) against the military junta.

As churches are suspected of being centers of opposition, local communities, authorities and especially the military monitor their activities. In a growing number of cases, this monitoring led to attacks against church buildings and church workers and leaders, up to killings.

Buddhist monks connected with Ma Ba Tha, a Buddhist nationalist movement, also monitor Christian activities. For converts, this kind of pressure is even higher, as detection may have more serious consequences, not just from the community, but from their own family too.



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International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

The persecution of the largely Muslim Rohingya minority is under discussion at The Hague; however, the whole court process is slow and persecution continues meanwhile. In August 2024, over 50 Rohingya civilians were killed near Maungdaw during clashes between the military and armed groups. At the same time, the Tatmadaw has been forcibly recruiting Rohingya men and boys (as young as 15) into military service, often through intimidation and deception.

Non-Rohingya Muslims in other parts of the country also face persecution and discrimination – for example, in government or military jobs. People sometimes refuse to sell property to Muslims, and the building of mosques is forbidden. Hindus sometimes also feel restrictions and pressure from Buddhist supremacy but on a much lower level than other religious minorities.



Open Doors in Myanmar

Working through local partners, Open Doors strengthens persecuted believers in Myanmar through:

- Discipleship programs
- Pastoral and leadership training
- Livelihood support
- Family and marriage enrichment
- Children and youth training
- Persecution preparedness
- Presence ministry



ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.

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