

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE:

Myanmar's Christian Minorities Under Tatmadaw Rule

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the Burmese military overthrew Myanmar's civilian government in February, the international community responded with swift condemnation of the Tatmadaw and vocal support for Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. The preservation of democracy in Myanmar became a common theme of discussion, and analysts began speculating what the coup might mean for trade, the world economy, and international relations.

But amid all these concerns, another issue—one predating the coup by decades—bears focused attention as well. The protection of Myanmar's many ethnic and religious minority groups, long persecuted by the Tatmadaw, is a critical matter and one that must rank high on the international community's list of priorities.

This report considers the history and future of Christians in the Kachin, Chin, Rohingya, Karen, Indian, Chinese, and Karenni ethnic groups as well as those in Wa State and suggests several international policy stances with potential to improve their situation going forward.

INTRODUCTION

It has been four months since the Burmese military, or Tatmadaw, arrested the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, in its February 1, 2021 coup. The military's thin attempts to justify the takeover by claiming it was a response to fraud in last November's elections did little to assuage the international community, which had monitored the elections and found little evidence to justify the military's claims.

The current military junta promises to hold free and open elections in a year, but even if it keeps this promise—not a given, considering its disregard for last year's free and open elections—there is no doubt that the coup represents a substantial blow to Myanmar's prospects of a stable, self-sustaining democracy.

Suu Kyi is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and a symbol of Myanmar's nascent democracy. She helped raise Myanmar's profile on the international stage and was, for years, the country's principal representative to the rest of the world. The international community was generally positive towards her, though she went out of her way to defend the Tatmadaw against accusations of serious human rights violations before the UN International Court of Justice in 2019, in a move that raised eyebrows and suggested that the military exercised an outsized influence over her.

Suu Kyi is currently under house arrest and faces spurious criminal charges levied against her by the military. The irony of the military bringing petty criminal charges against her after she defended them before the International Court of Justice should not be lost.

At the national level, the military reserved 25% of seats in the legislature for itself in a power-sharing arrangement enshrined in the constitution, which it wrote in 2008. This baked-in representation essentially gives the military veto power over any attempts at constitutional reform.

As hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets in February to oppose the coup, they were unsure what their country's future would look like if Tatmadaw succeeded in its plot to rule the nation again. Among protesters, there are individuals from the country's religious and ethnic minority groups who fear that the return of Tatmadaw will mean further targeting and crackdown, which could threaten their lives.

The military junta has responded to the protests with swift brutality but have, so far, been unable to quell the growing pro-democracy movement despite killing over 840 civilians and wounding or torturing even more. Reports have even emerged of the Tatmadaw attacking medical first responders and preventing ambulances from staging near protests.

In this report, ICC will focus on several Christian groups that have historically faced oppression and persecution in Myanmar. This includes Kachin (both in Kachin state and Shan state), Chin (both in Chin and Rakhine state), Rohingya, Karen, Christians in Wa state, ethnic Indian and Chinese Christians, and Karenni Christians in Kayah State.

KACHIN CHRISTIANS

History & Background

The Kachin are a people group spread across south-eastern China, northeastern India, and northern Myanmar's Kachin State. A lack of reliable census data in the region makes it difficult to say exactly how many Kachin live in these three countries, but the vast majority of ethnic Kachin live in Myanmar and have since the 15th or 16th century when they moved south from the Tibetan plateau, through southeastern China, and into what is now modern-day Myanmar.

Tucked away in the mountainous north, the Kachin people found themselves geographically removed and largely politically independent from Yangon, the southern city from which centuries of Burman kings ruled. This relative independence continued under the rule of the British, who administered Kachin areas as part of a separate Frontier Administration rather than part of Burma proper.

The migration of Kachin into modern-day Myanmar was soon followed by the introduction of Christianity to the region. Catholic missionaries arrived in the 17th century while protestant missionaries arrived in the early 19th century, led by Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson. By the mid-1900s, there were about 400,000 native Christians in Myanmar, many of them Kachin. The Tatmadaw has kept census data a tightly controlled secret for years, but today it is estimated that between 60% and 90% of Kachin are Christian.

Rise of Tensions

It was in the context of the rapid expansion of Christianity across Myanmar that Kachin State was formed in 1947. While tensions rose between the Burman-run central government and various ethnic groups, Kachin State managed to mostly stay out of the conflict until 1961, when Buddhism was declared the state religion.

Kachin State, already majority Christian at this point, did not accept this decree and began a decades-long independence movement that continues to this day. Led by the Kachin Independence Organization and its military wing, the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), the conflict has risen and fallen over the years, with a significant spike in 2011 after a ceasefire between the KIA and the Tatmadaw fell apart.

Violence against Christians

At least 100,000 Kachin civilians have been displaced since the ceasefire was broken in 2011. In its effort to crack down on the independence movement, the Tatmadaw has engaged in a widespread campaign of violence against the Kachin people and, given their distinctly Christian composition, against Christianity itself. In addition to its indiscriminate attacks on the general population, witnesses regularly send reports of the Tatmadaw destroying churches, raping women, and killing innocent civilians.

The Tatmadaw also targets Christian teachers and pastors. Two Kachin teachers, both Christians, were brutally raped and killed in 2015 while volunteering in Kaung Khar village. The Tatmadaw's 503rd Light Infantry Battalion had set up camp in the village just two days prior, and an army belt was found near the women's bodies along with numerous boot prints. The Tatmadaw has refused to investigate the crime.

Two Kachin pastors were imprisoned in 2016 after reporting on airstrikes executed by the Tatmadaw. The airstrikes had damaged a Catholic church in the area. The pastors were convicted on charges of unlawful association and defamation and served 15 months under harsh conditions in Lashio Central Prison before being released in 2018.

The Tatmadaw has even sought to suppress dissent

outside its borders, suing Reverend Hkalam Samson, the leader of the Kachin Baptist Convention, after he testified regarding Christian persecution in Myanmar at a meeting with then-president Donald Trump in Washington, D.C.

Religious Freedom for the Kachin People After the Coup

For the moment, the Tatmadaw seems to be largely focused on suppressing the protests and solidifying its power in the capital. Still, that has not stopped it from attacking Kachin Christians—on February 28, the Tatmadaw raided a Kachin Baptist Church in Shan State. They returned later that day, arresting eleven members of the congregation. They were released a day later, but only after beatings so severe that some of the congregants were unable to speak or hear properly.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's now-deposed State Counsellor, and her NLD-led government served as the only real counterweight to the Tatmadaw and their brutal violence against religious minorities. Her record on religious freedom, unfortunately, includes her defense of the Tatmadaw before the ICJ when they were brought there for violently persecuting Rohingya Muslims, but she was, nevertheless, a champion for democracy and increased freedom for all before she was deposed in the coup.

With Suu Kyi now under arrest, many believe that the

Tatmadaw will refocus its violence on the country's religious minorities if it is able to quell the pro-democracy protests. It is feared that, with the civilian government out of the way, the country may descend into a state of violence and experience atrocities even worse than before.

The Kachin are particularly vulnerable to the ravages of the Tatmadaw, given the extremely high number of internally displaced Kachin persons. The same military that displaced them in the first place now runs the government, squashing any hope they may have had that the NLD would restore their homes and livelihoods. Observers worry that the Tatmadaw could attack or suspend the 170-some camps currently serving the 100,000 displaced Kachin, with horrific humanitarian implications if they do.

Speaking to ICC on the issue of the KIA's longstanding military conflict with the Tatmadaw, a Kachin Christian studying in the United States said that she was *"most concerned about the civil war that is about to break out in northern part of Myanmar... it is unavoidable at this point."* She also expressed her fear for the many internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region. *"I am worried about the IDPs and more IDPs to come due to the armed conflicts."* She believes that Kachin and Shan states will soon be targeted by the Tatmadaw, given its long war against the KIA.

CHIN CHRISTIANS

The Tatmadaw has been violently oppressing religious and ethnic minorities around Myanmar for years, including the Chin ethnic group concentrated in the western Chin and Rakhine states. Intense fighting has displaced more than 160,000 in Chin State, while an ongoing war between the Arakan Army (AA), an armed resistance group, and the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State has displaced and killed many more.

History & Background

The Chin are a culturally and linguistically diverse people group spread across northeastern India and western Myanmar. Reliable census data is kept a closely guarded secret by the Tatmadaw, but it is known that there is a large concentration of ethnic Chin in Chin State, a Burmese jurisdiction bordering Bangladesh and India, where analysts estimate a population between half and one and a half million. The Chin people are believed to have migrated away from the eastern Salween River Basin border area with China around the 10th century, eventually settling in the Chin Hills area in the 14th or 15th century.

Chin State is extremely mountainous, something that helped it stay relatively autonomous under the rule of successive Burman kings governing the country from the southern capital city of Yangon. This comparative independence was interrupted by the British in the 1870s but resumed in 1886 when the British signed the Chin Hills Regulation Act, allowing the Chin to largely govern themselves.

Missionaries arrived in the Chin Hills in the late 1880s, led by Baptist missionary Arthur E. Carson and his wife, Laura. Their evangelistic efforts gained significant momentum in the early 1900s. Today over 90% of Burmese Chin are Christian, with most identifying as Baptists. The prevalence of Christianity among the Chin people and Chin State's high concentration of ethnic Chin

make it among the only states where the population is not majority Buddhist.

Rise of Tensions

Modern-day Chin State was formed in 1947 when the British began pulling out of Burma. Statehood was formalized in under the Panglong Agreement, an arrangement that was never fully implemented but which laid the groundwork for a federal system in the newly independent Burma. Tensions rose soon after between the Burman-run central government and various ethnic groups around the country, though Chin State managed to stay out of the conflict for the most part until the central authorities began to restrict freedoms and harass pro-democracy activists in 1988.

Several Chin were elected in the 1990 national elections, but they were quickly arrested and their political party, the Chin National League for Democracy, was banned from running candidates in future national elections.

Systematic Discrimination Against Chin Christians

As political tensions between Chin State and the central government escalated in the 1990s, the military-led government began to aggressively persecute Chin Christians, cracking down on proselytization, destroying places of worship, and attempting to forcefully convert believers to Buddhism. This campaign of violent "Burmanization," or forced assimilation, continues unabated to this day and has caused the displacement of over 160,000 Chin from their traditional homeland into India, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Given the prevalence of Christianity among ethnic Chin, it can be difficult to distinguish between religious persecution and attacks motivated by the Tatmadaw's desire to erase Chin identity altogether. However, even the government-appointed Myanmar National Human

Rights Commission has acknowledged the religious nature of the Tatmadaw's actions, pointing to the destruction of religious symbols, arrest of pastors, and coerced conversions as evidence of systematic persecution.

The Tatmadaw is the leading force behind the persecution of Chin Christians, though radical Buddhist mobs are a significant threat as well. Human rights organizations have long documented the abuses perpetrated by the Tatmadaw and radical mobs, warning that coordinated international action is needed to stop what is now a decades-long record of serious human rights abuses against a vulnerable minority group.

Another significant concern for Chin Christians is the ongoing conflict between the Aarakan Army, an armed Buddhist independence movement based in Rakhine state, and the Tatmadaw. Both sides of the conflict have terrorized Rakhine's large Chin population with forced labor, rape, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Displaced Chin Christians have no safe place to dwell in Rakhine, forcing many to flee their homeland—something made more difficult by the recent COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Religious Freedom for the Chin People After the Coup

Though the Tatmadaw is largely focused on suppressing the protests for now, that preoccupation has not stopped it from raiding Chin churches or attacking pastors. Security forces raided Hakha Baptist Church in the

capital city of Chin State on February 27, 2021, arresting the pastor and dispersing a multi-denominational prayer service being conducted there at the time. The soldiers conducting the raid used water cannons to disperse the thousands of worshipers gathered that day, according to the Chin Human Rights Organization.

In another episode, in Kalay township in Sagaing Region, Tatmadaw soldiers shot and killed a 25-year-old pastor and three other civilians. The incident happened late in the evening of March 17 as the pastor was attempting to rescue his sister, who was trapped by soldiers. The pastor, Cung Lian Ceu, died on the spot. The soldiers have not been prosecuted for their actions in this case or in the case of the raid on Hakha Baptist Church.

There are currently 15,000 IDPs in Chin State.

Further complicating matters into the future is Chin involvement in the nation wide pro-democracy movement.

"The movement in Chin State is quite unique because pastors and ministers there have joined the protests on the streets, even organizing interdenominational prayer meetings every Friday at eight locations in Hakha," said Zo Tum Hmun, Director of the Chin Advocacy Committee of the Chin Baptist Churches USA in an interview with ICC. *"I am particularly concerned about pastors being arrested in the future."*

ROHINGYA CHRISTIANS

Immediately condemned by the international community and now considered a genocide, the Tatmadaw began the latest in a series of brutal military crackdowns against Rohingya Muslims in August of 2017. The Tatmadaw has persecuted Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims for decades, but the ongoing genocide launched that August is the most intense action to date and has resulted in the displacement of at least 742,000 and tens of thousands of deaths.

But amid the crisis facing Rohingya Muslims and the international community's efforts to respond to it, another group has often found itself overlooked: Rohingya Christians.

A small minority within another minority, Rohingya Christians have long found themselves on the receiving end of persecution not only from the Tatmadaw but from other Rohingya as well. Now, as the Tatmadaw solidifies its grasp on the country, the Rohingya Christians find themselves in a dangerous position.

History & Background

The Rohingya are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group, part of a pastoralist people that migrated from Central Asia to South Asia in the 2nd century B.C. The vast majority follow a blend of Sunni Islam and Sufism, while a small percentage practices Hinduism and an even smaller part follow Christianity. An estimated one million Rohingya lived in the Buddhist-majority Myanmar, in the western state of Rakhine, before the Tatmadaw's offensive in 2017—that number has dropped as hundreds of thousands of Rohingya seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh.

The early history of the Rohingya in Myanmar is a debated subject and one that is complicated by Rakhine State's location on the border with Bangladesh and its position within the Arakan region, which has ex-

perienced centuries of shifting politics. Regardless of exactly when the Rohingya people settled in Myanmar, though, the Tatmadaw has gone to considerable lengths to propagate the nationalist idea that Rohingya do not belong in Myanmar, even going as far as to not recognize the term "Rohingya."

This idea was enshrined into law in the 1974 Constitution and the Citizen Act of 1982, which lists 135 acceptable "national races" and requires that members of any group not listed provide documentation that their ancestors settled in Myanmar before 1823. The list does not include Rohingya, allowing the government to refuse them citizenship based on their race. This situation renders them stateless and largely unable to access government services like education, healthcare, and even marriage certificates.

Exodus to Bangladesh

Violence broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017, after a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for attacks on police and army posts. In retaliation, Myanmar's government razed at least 55 villages and waged a brutal campaign of murders, rape, torture, and indiscriminate shelling against the Rohingya, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee.

The refugees walked for days through jungles and mountains or took a dangerous marine route to seek shelter in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district. Among the over 700,000 refugees were approximately 1,500 Rohingya Christians—all living representatives of the harsh impact of Tatmadaw rule on Myanmar's religious minorities.

Discrimination Against Rohingya Christians

Rohingya Christians face a double threat—first from the

Tatmadaw and again from radical Muslims among their Rohingya neighbors. They are often seen as traitors to their people and are consequently rejected by their community. As underprivileged as the Rohingya are in general, Rohingya Christians often face more trouble when they profess their faith, including the threat of abduction, harassment, sexual abuse, and the removal of their children from the limited educational opportunities available to other Rohingya.

Much of the violence against Rohingya Christians is very local in nature—neighbors attacking neighbors—but some of it is more organized. Speaking of one such organization, a Rohingya Christian wrote in a letter published through the International Mission Board that his uncle was being pursued by the ARSA. *“He has been running from them for four months,”* the Christian wrote.

The ARSA attacked Rohingya Christian refugees in January 2020. The attack took place in a community of Christian families living in Kutupalong refugee camp, dubbed the world’s largest after the latest influx of the Muslim Rohingya who fled from Myanmar into Bangladesh in 2017. In a follow-up attack on the same camp shortly

after, 400 ARSA militants destroyed a church and the 25 Christian homes. One underage girl was kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to one of her captors.

Religious Freedom for the Rohingya People After the Coup

Due to their location, Rohingya refugees have avoided involvement in the unrest following the February 1 coup by the Tatmadaw. Still, that does not mean that the Rohingya people are not affected by the coup—to the contrary, analysts believe that their situation could worsen as the Tatmadaw solidifies its power over the country and begins operating without a civilian government to hold them back.

But even before this happens, there is a more immediate concern for Rohingya Christians. Speaking on their situation post-coup, the Rohingya Christian Assembly issued a public statement on February 28, 2021, saying that Rohingya believers were finding themselves unable to go out for work due to the unrest and were struggling to survive without income. *“They are struggling to survive,”* the statement said.

KAREN CHRISTIANS

Myanmar's independence from British rule, formalized in 1948, kickstarted decades of change still being felt at every level of society. Progress has come in fits and starts, but before the Burmese Army overthrew the civilian government in February, Myanmar was widely believed to be well on its way to establishing a stable, functioning democracy. These hopes were dashed by the coup, and since then, the Tatmadaw has responded to pro-democracy protests with brutal violence, killing over 800 and jailing thousands.

Dating back to independence, the conflict between the Tatmadaw and Karen militias has worsened since the coup and is concentrated in eastern Kayin State where the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the Karen National Union, has waged a decades-long war for independence.

History & Background

Kayin State, which was known as Karen State for its majority Karen population before the Tatmadaw changed its name, is located on Myanmar's eastern border with Thailand. The Karen are ethnically and linguistically diverse. They speak twelve distinct languages and are believed to have settled the Kayin State area before the arrival of the Burmans to modern-day Myanmar. Subjected to the rule of various kingdoms throughout their history, the Karen were given some degree of autonomy by the British, who allied militarily with the Karen against the Burman majority, whom the British saw as a threat.

Today, it is estimated that there are about 4 million Karen living in Myanmar, mostly living in Kayin State, though reliable population data is difficult to come by since the Tatmadaw keeps census results a closely guarded state secret.

Karen was the first ethnic group in Myanmar to accept Christianity when it was introduced to the country in the 1800s by a group of American Baptist missionar-

ies led by Adoniram Judson. Today, it is estimated that 20-30 percent of Karen are Christian, with most of the remainder consisting of Buddhists and animists.

The KNLA's armed struggle has continued since the end of World War II, making it the world's longest-running civil war. The rebels seek autonomy for the region and have continued their fight in the face of unimaginable brutality by the Tatmadaw, which often targets women and children. Tens of thousands are reported dead, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced by the conflict.

The Lives of Karen Christians

As with the Kachin, Karen Christians face the double threat of both ethnic and religious persecution. The KNLA's long war against the Tatmadaw has created a state of heightened tensions between the central government and residents of the region that only worsens the condition of Karen Christians.

The Tatmadaw often targets churches and leverage Christian's minority status against them in their rhetoric and tactics—Christians are a tiny minority in Burma as a whole and make an easy target for the Tatmadaw's nationalistic rhetoric. But the persecution does not stop at rhetoric—the Tatmadaw uses mass brutality against its enemies and reports of gang rape, public beheadings, and the decimation of entire villages are all too common in the area.

Patrick Klein, president of a US-based Christian group, once spoke about the atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw against Karen people. *"Villages are being surrounded, and rockets are lobbed in. The Myanmar regime then goes in with machine guns and mows down whoever is still alive, and then the evidence is burned. There are reports they are also blockading villages so the people can't go out and get food; it is also reported that women are being raped, and men are being set on fire while they're alive. And, they're actually poisoning*

the water supplies now.”

Benedict Rogers, the East Asia Team Leader of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, witnessed the aftermath of a 2004 Tatmadaw attack near the Moei River. He recounted that the troops had set fire to the homes, looted and destroyed the clinic, burned the crops, and set the church ablaze. According to him, churches are often the first targets, while Buddhist temples are typically left untouched.

Karen Christians, suffering with little protection from the ravages of the Tatmadaw, often flee to neighboring Thailand for refuge. Even there, though, they are not safe—reports have surfaced of the Tatmadaw shelling camps of displaced Karen in Thailand, in a brazen violation of both the refugees’ human rights and Thailand’s sovereignty.

David Eubank, head of Christian aid group Free Burma Rangers, has helped document the Tatmadaw’s crimes against the Karen people and has worked for years to provide life-saving aid to civilians in the region and train young rangers to defend themselves.

The Post-Coup Future

The Tatmadaw has been unyielding in their violence against Karen civilians since taking over the government in February, and the KNLA has been active in its response ever since. Fighting and shelling in civilian areas such as the Doo Tha Htoo District has been relentless, forcing many Karen Christians to flee into the jungle or across the border into Thailand, leaving behind their farms, homes, and churches.

Thailand’s Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said in

March that his country would accept refugees from Myanmar, but Sunai Phasuk, a researcher with Human Rights Watch, reported on the same day that Thai authorities had forced over 2,000 Karen refugees back over the border into where the Tatmadaw had recently engaged in bombings of civilian areas.

On May 24, 2021, the Burmese military attacked a catholic church in the Kayin state, injuring four and killing four. The church compound was sheltering more than 300 people, including the elderly and children who were displaced due to the conflict between the military and an anti-coup resistance group. Additionally, the roof, ceiling, and cross of the church were damaged.

The February coup only worsens the situation for Karen. Though limited in its ability to push back against the Tatmadaw, the democratically elected civilian government was the only real internal check on the Tatmadaw’s campaign against ethnic minorities. Now that it is deposed, little stands in the way of larger-scale ethnic and religious persecution in Kayin State and elsewhere around the country. In fact, there are currently 40,000 IDPs in Northern Karen State according to Eubank.

The problem is already a massive one, according to Clara Tunwin, a Karen Christian activist based in Washington, D.C. *“Over 20,000 Karen villagers are currently displaced. They need a lot of medical supplies, medical attention, food and shelter,”* she told ICC. *“Our plea to our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world is to continue praying for the Karen Christians and other people who are oppressed and attacked by the Burmese military.”*

CHRISTIANS IN WA STATE

For decades, Myanmar's many ethnic militias have warred against the Tatmadaw in a long battle for greater autonomy, access to basic rights, and self-determination. Most militias control only very limited areas and are fighting to wrest territory from the central government, but one—the United Wa State Army (UWSA)—runs Wa State autonomously, though it maintains deep ties with both the Burmese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The UWSA patterns its form of government after the Communist system that China uses, complete with a central committee and central party that together run the government. As in China, Communist influence has led to wariness of Christianity, which is seen as antithetical to the ultimate allegiance demanded by the party.

The connection between persecution in China and persecution in Wa goes deeper than ideological roots, though. When China's Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs took effect in 2018, the CCP began to crack down on house churches and authorities in Wa followed suit soon after, tearing down crosses and demolishing churches. Authorities put Church leaders in jail to deter congregations from gathering, and it was not until late 2019 that churches were allowed to reopen even in part.

Wa's history is complex but must be understood to make sense of the ongoing persecution happening today.

History & Background

Like the rest of Myanmar, Wa's history stretches well beyond the formation of the modern state. Wa is a mountainous area and was populated by a number of separate tribes without any kind of unified government. This unstructured approach was continued under British rule of Myanmar, which stretched from 1824

to 1948. The British practiced several models of governance around the country but did not administer Wa at all.

Some members of the Chinese Nationalist Party, Kuomintang, retreated to the Wa area in the late 1940s after losing the battle to CCP. This incentivized the CCP to begin supporting the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Their partnership allowed the CCP to establish a foothold of its own in Myanmar and pressure the Kuomintang out of the area. China's support for the CPB in the form of arms and manpower quickly made it the most powerful militia in Myanmar.

The CPB supported a loose guerrilla government in Wa for some time, eventually expanding its operations in Wa in the 1960s after losing ground in central Myanmar. The CCP again aided in this expansion, and many Communist youth from China joined the CPB, further deepening ties between Wa and China.

China has continued to exert influence in Wa even as the CPB was restructured in 1989. China's influence today largely centers around its relations with UWSA, economically, culturally, and militarily. China regularly engages in significant economic projects with Wa and has given the UWSA significant weaponry, including machine guns, armored vehicles, and surface-to-air missiles. Culturally, Mandarin is the major spoken language and even Wa's currency is Chinese renminbi.

Many Wa residents practice Buddhism, Islam, animism, and spirit worship, but Christianity is the most practiced religion in Wa despite significant pushback from the UWSA and the CCP.

Crackdown on Christianity

In September 2018, the UWSA launched a campaign against Christian churches, claiming only churches built between 1989 and 1992 were built legally. The

campaign involved the tearing down of crosses and the demolition of churches built since 1992. Videos of these demolitions emerged on social media. The reasoning, according to a UWSA spokesman, was to prevent religious extremism from destabilizing the region. *“The laws in our region do not allow people to build churches without permission,”* said the spokesman.

The UWSA also announced that it would not allow churches to be built going forward and that it would prevent Christian organizations from adding to their membership.

ICC’s partner on the ground reported that scores of Christians, including many pastors, were detained or kept under “village arrest,” in which they are prevented from leaving their home village. Additionally, some Christian children were forcibly conscripted into the UWSA to serve as militia members. All told, many hundreds of Christian families in Wa were impacted whether through the destruction of their church, the killing of family members, or conscription.

Pastor Stephen and his wife Mara* were among those imprisoned during the crackdown. Before the government put them in prison, Mara was pregnant with twins. She delivered the twins while still incarcerated but received no prenatal care or special accommodations. The babies were born alive, but both died before their mother was released.

The CCP’s arrest of Chinese pastor John Sanqiang Cao, a North Carolina resident, is also noteworthy. His arrest predated the 2018 Wa crackdown. Chinese authorities

have held Pastor Cao since March 5, 2017, sentencing him in March 2018 to seven years in prison and fining him \$3,000 for *“organizing illegal border crossings”* and exerting foreign influence.

Before his arrest, Pastor Cao helped build sixteen schools since 2013, serving 2,000 impoverished children in Wa. He also established educational projects to help alleviate poverty among local minority groups, increase medical access, and campaign against drug use. His arrest was likely a result of the UWSA and CCP working together to target Christian leaders who do not submit to the Communist regime. It also may have deterred other mission groups from entering Wa State to *“exert foreign influence.”*

Challenges faced by Christians in Wa State

While the ongoing coup has little direct effect on the autonomous Wa State, the UWSA has expressed its support for the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw has led to the persecution of Burmese religious minorities, including Christians, for decades. There are even rumors that the Tatmadaw plans to escape to Wa should the military junta be deposed and the democratically elected civilian government be reinstated.

Wa’s ties to the Tatmadaw and its increasingly close relationship with the CCP promise a difficult future for Wa Christians who find themselves caught between the Buddhist nationalism peddled by the Tatmadaw and the aggressive state-sponsored atheism of the CCP.

**Names changed to protect their identity.*

ETHNIC INDIAN AND CHINESE CHRISTIANS

Home to at least 135 ethnic groups, Myanmar is known for its diversity. While some of the larger groups are concentrated in geographic regions or in states and enjoy some degree of power, others are more spread out and enjoy less autonomy. A subgroup within one of these latter groups are ethnic Indian and Chinese Christians who face the significant challenge of not only being part of a small ethnic minority but also of an unpopular religion in a country that is nearly 90% Buddhist.

Indians and Chinese in Burma face systemic government discrimination, including difficulty obtaining national identification cards and marriage licenses. It is common for them to wait years before receiving proper documentation—an unfortunate reality that makes it difficult for them to participate fully in society.

History & Background

After Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948, the Burmese government began working on integrating the various ethnic groups into one nation. But rather than take its rich diversity into account, the central government chose to build the new government around the identity, culture, and Buddhist religion of the ethnic Burman majority. This decision led to decades of violence and conflict that continues to the present day in the form of large, well-organized, armed ethnic militias fighting for independence from the central government.

It is estimated that about 3% of Myanmar's population is of Chinese origin and that about 2% is Indian, though exact numbers are difficult to obtain given the Tatmadaw's close control of census data. Out of a total population of about 57 million in Myanmar, that means there are about 2.8 million Indian and Chinese. Of the approximately 2 million Chinese in Myanmar, the Chinese Christian Training Resource Center estimates that only 15,000, or 0.75%, are Christians—a tiny minority

in an already vulnerable population.

Adding to their troubles, much of Myanmar's Indian and Chinese population migrated to the country while it was under British rule and are thus considered alien minorities by the current government which only grants "indigenous minority" status to ethnic groups which were established in the country before British rule.

Institutional Hardships

According to the US Department of State, the Burmese government requires citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards. These cards allow the holders to access various government services and serve as proof of legal status in the country. Problematically, though, these cards typically indicate the bearer's religious affiliation and identity and other government processes, including passport applications require, religious identification as well.

The requirement that citizens reveal their religious identity creates a great deal of room for discrimination against religious minorities. Religious minorities are often made to wait exorbitant amounts of time before being issued their identity cards and the Department of State reported in 2020 that some Muslims were even forced to indicate that they were foreigners after identifying as Muslims. Similar issues confront Christian minorities.

The discrimination faced by Indian and Chinese Christians were evident during a November 2015 election in which they were banned from voting. Hundreds of thousands of voters with temporary identity cards were disenfranchised by a discriminatory election rule. The action mostly targeted Rohingya Muslims in western Burma, but it impacted Indian and Chinese around the country as well.

Asked earlier this year about the challenges facing eth-

nic Indian Christians in Myanmar, pastor Johnson—an ethnic Indian—pointed to the issue of identity cards as one of the major practical challenges. *“It is quite difficult to obtain the National Registration Card. There are a lot of restrictions regarding different ethnicities and religions,”* he told ICC. *“There should be a lot more flexibility.”*

Another issue is the Religious Conversion law, which regulates religious identity and makes it difficult for an individual to change his or her religion. *“As long as no one is pressured to convert to another religion, this right should be granted to every individual. In my opinion, religious conversion is not a concern of the government,”* said Pastor Johnson.

In the area of family law, Johnson pointed to the Interfaith Marriage Law, which targets specific groups with certain religious backgrounds and limits their ability to marry members of other groups. ICC was made aware of one case in which an interracial couple—an ethnic Indian pastor and his Karen wife—faced a months-long ordeal when trying to register their daughter’s birth. The process usually takes weeks.

Before the coup, Myanmar’s Indian and Chinese population looked to the democratically elected government for legal reform and for protection from the ravages of the Tatmadaw. Now that the civilian government has been done away with, little stands between the Tatmadaw and Myanmar’s vulnerable minorities.

CHRISTIANS IN KAYAH STATE

Since the February 1 coup the Tatmadaw has expanded its attacks from a few major cities to the surrounding states—especially ones with Christian-majority ethnic militias. Even in the face of strong international condemnation of the Tatmadaw and a well-organized pro-democracy movement within the country, the violence is growing.

More than 50,000 civilians have been forced to leave their homes in Kayah State and neighboring Shan State due to intensifying clashes between the Tatmadaw and pro-democracy groups. Many of these IDPs seek shelter at monasteries, convents, and churches. Yet, safety there is not guaranteed as the Tatmadaw has demonstrated its willingness to attack even places of worship in its campaign to suppress the people.

At least three churches in Kayah have been targeted since late May, with six people killed and many more injured. Catholics make up about twenty-five percent of the population of Kayah, at 90,000 of 355,000 total inhabitants, though these numbers are largely estimates given the Tatmadaw's close control of demographic data.

History & Background

Kayah State is home to the Karenni people, also known as the Kayah or Kayah Li, a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group that came to modern-day Myanmar from Mongolia as early as 700 BC. Like many other ethnic classifications in the country, "Karenni" is a collective term used during the British colonial era and actually represents multiple ethnic groups.

Also referred to as the Red Karen—red features prominently in traditional Karenni clothing—the group is composed of diverse sub-tribal groups that speak related Tibeto-Burman languages such as Kekhu, Bre, Kayah, Yangtalai, Geba, Zayein, and Paku. While a lack

of accurate census data from Myanmar makes precise numbers impossible to know, it is estimated that there are about 280,00 people in Kayah State, the majority of which are ethnic Karenni.

The British recognized the independence of what was then called the Karenni States in an 1875 agreement. This allowed the Karenni to operate with a large degree of autonomy which under British rule, even after local leaders agreed to become a tributary of Britain in 1892.

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, however, Kayah State was forcefully incorporated into the Union of Burma without the consent of the Karenni people. This led to the formation of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in the late 1950s and the founding of several armed ethnic groups. These groups are in violent conflict with the central government to this day. The Tatmadaw has persecuted the Karenni people for decades, subjecting them to gross human rights violations and displacing nearly a third of the population both internally and across the border into Thailand.

Traditionally, Karenni people are animist and Buddhist, but many have converted to Christianity. The majority of the Christian population is Catholic. The Catholic presence began in the late 1800s with the arrival of the first missionaries from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions. Today, Christian churches have significant influence in the majority of villages in Kayah State and continue to suffer persecution from the Tatmadaw.

A String of Attacks Against Churches and Civilians

Four people were killed and eight injured on May 23, 2021, when the Tatmadaw attacked a Catholic church in eastern Myanmar. The church compound was sheltering more than 300 people who were displaced due to intensified fighting between the military and an anti-coup resistance group called the People's Defense

Force. The military attacked at around 1 am at the Sacred Heart Church near Loikaw, the capital city of Kayah State.

In response, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Myanmar's Roman Catholic leader, published an appeal on May 25. Though he did not name the Tatmadaw specifically, he asked "related organizations" to stop the attacks on places of prayer and called the situation "a great humanitarian tragedy," where the blood of unarmed people, who had taken refuge in churches to protect themselves and their families, was spilled.

On the evening of May 27, 2021, St. Joseph's Church in Kayah State was attacked by the Tatmadaw. Artillery fire hit the church in the town of Demoso, breaking windows and putting holes in the church walls.

While no one was inside the church compound when the attack took place, two young Catholic men, Alfred Ludo and Patrick Bo Reh—both from the parish of St. Joseph—were killed by the soldiers when they went out to retrieve food for IDPs in the Ngu Palot neighborhood.

On the same day, a member of the multiethnic humanitarian group Free Burma Rangers, All Lo Sein, was also killed in the clashes around Demoso. The 24-year-old was shot while trying to protect civilians trapped under fire.

On May 29, a young man who volunteered at a Catholic seminary in Loikaw, Myanmar's Kayah State capital, was murdered when the Tatmadaw raided a building where refugees and IDPs were housed and conducted a room-

by-room search. Despite the priests' attempt to stop the military, they could not prevent the young man's murder. The motive for the killing is not known since the man did not resist.

On June 6, the Tatmadaw unleashed artillery fire on Our Lady, Queen of Peace Church in the Loikaw diocese, located near the town of Demoso in Kayah State. As reported to Fides by a priest of the diocese, Father Paul Tinreh, no injuries were sustained.

Agenzia Fides, a Catholic news portal, also reported on the additional attacks against the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in the parish of Domyalay, a recently built and not yet inaugurated church, and the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the diocese of Phekhon.

Father Francis Soe Naing, a local priest, told Fides "We have appealed to the military not to attack churches because many people, especially the most vulnerable, are taking refuge in them. But the appeal has fallen on deaf ears."

There are currently between 50,000 and 100,000 IDPs in Kayah state, according to Free Burma Rangers and the KNPP.

The increased attacks on churches show the hostilities the Tatmadaw has towards Christianity and its disregard for human lives. The international community should not stand idle and watch as more atrocities unfold. The international community must support the people of Myanmar.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the barrage of sanctions levied against it by the international community, the Tatmadaw shows little sign of backing down. The ineffectiveness of the international community's current sanctions regime means that Myanmar is likely to descend into some sort of civil war, analysts say.

Violent incidents are escalating, with airstrikes and ground fighting spreading to various regions around the country. Tens of thousands have fled, and many more are sure to follow in the months ahead. Instability, food shortages, and great loss of life threaten the Burmese people—especially its vulnerable minorities.

The international community must continue to push back against the Tatmadaw and do everything in its power to protect the Burmese people from the threat posed by their new military government. To that end, ICC recommends that members of the international community take the following policy stances.

Impose Meaningful Sanctions

Immediately effective or not, sanctions are an important first step in the international community's response to the Tatmadaw. Sanctions seem to be a palatable option for western governments if nothing else, and they help to create political momentum on the issue of Tatmadaw aggression.

Importantly, the sanctions must be narrowly targeted at the Tatmadaw's leadership. There is good reason to believe that the coup was, in part, an effort to protect the financial interests of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Sanctions that attack his financial state and those of his co-conspirators will prove far more effective and less harmful to the Burmese people than broad sanctions on Myanmar as a whole.

Recognize & Support the National Unity Government

Composed of the remnants of the deposed civilian government, Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) deserves recognition and support from the international community. Unfortunately, many governments—including those ostensibly opposed to Tatmadaw rule—have given junta representatives recognition they do not deserve. Meanwhile, NUG's parallel government has gained little support on the international stage. The US received Hong Kong activists during the pro-democracy protests there, and it should make similar gestures of support in this case as well.

Within their own sovereign territories, and at international fora such as the UN, the US and its allies should refuse to deal with representatives of the Tatmadaw. They do not represent a legitimate government and should be treated accordingly. Conversely, the US and its allies on this matter should openly recognize NLD and NUG representatives, offering them haven and assisting them as they fulfill their diplomatic duties.

Pressure the Tatmadaw's allies

The US and other concerned nations should focus significant attention on the Tatmadaw's allies in the international community. They are the reason current sanctions are proving largely ineffective, and they will continue to undercut future attempts to combat the Tatmadaw if left unaddressed. Without effective pressure on the Tatmadaw's allies, the rest of the world's efforts will prove fruitless.

For example, the US has maintained an arms embargo on Myanmar since 1988 and has restricted relations with the Tatmadaw since 2011. The embargo is a unilateral one, however, and the US has done little if anything

in response to its allies selling arms to the Tatmadaw, including the reported sale of advanced military equipment by Israel. China, Russia, and Ukraine have also supplied the Tatmadaw with military equipment and supplies. Efforts in the UN Security Council to impose a multilateral arms embargo have been blocked by China and Russia, for obvious reasons.

Myanmar is a relatively small country and does not need access to the entire world economy to satisfy the Tatmadaw's economic ambitions. It is therefore insufficient to close off a few western markets and leave the Tatmadaw with free access to the Russian and Chinese markets, which seem eager to continue trade with the new military junta.

Create a cohesive bloc, and leverage existing ones

Building off the need to pressure the Tatmadaw's allies, the US and others should come together to build a cohesive, coordinated bloc committed to working together on the issue of the coup. Capable of far more effective action than any one country on its own, this bloc must be empowered to act swiftly in response to Tatmadaw aggressions and to block the Tatmadaw's allies in their efforts to support the junta.

The creation of an international contact group committed to addressing the problem in Myanmar is essential because others seem unable or unwilling to address it effectively. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for example, has [proven unwilling](#) to confront the Tatmadaw, and has even taken steps to grant it legitimacy while sidelining the remnants of the legitimate civilian government. ASEAN has also proven reluctant to support an embargo, perhaps because of its increasingly warm relations with China, which granted ASEAN its highest level of diplomatic recognition in July.

The US should pressure other nations to join it in ostracizing the Tatmadaw. It could make continued military or civil assistance contingent on officially severing ties with the Tatmadaw and use its position of influence at the UN and other multilateral organizations to consistently bring up the issue, even if some efforts will be stymied by China and Russia. In any case, the international community must not sit back and watch as the Tatmadaw settles into power. The people of Myanmar have fought for democracy since 1948, and they deserve better than for the world to watch as the Tatmadaw runs roughshod over what progress has been made so far.

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