



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2023

TWO YEARS AFTER THE COUP: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN A CONTESTED BURMA

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USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

On February 8, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing, [*Two Years After the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma*](#). The hearing explored the effects of the ongoing conflict within Burma in two ways: the extent to which this conflict has worsened conditions of freedom of religion and belief for majority and minority religious communities, and on efforts to repatriate religious refugees who have fled into neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand. The hearing also provided ways the United States can further religious freedom as it partners with local and regional acts to resolve the ongoing conflict.

Chair [*Nury Turkel*](#) led the hearing, convening four witnesses who offered insight into religious freedom conditions within Burma and for those who have fled ethnic and religious persecution throughout the region. Chair Turkel opened by discussing the political instability within Burma sparked by the February 2021 military coup that overthrew the quasi-democratic experiment of the prior decade. He highlighted USCIRF's consistent reporting of the Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, as the primary perpetrator of religious freedom violations in Burma.

Vice Chair [*Abraham Cooper*](#) highlighted U.S. government policies to address religious freedom violations in Burma, including the State Department's March 2022 designation as genocide of the atrocities that Tatmadaw committed against the Rohingya community. Vice Chair Cooper also highlighted USCIRF's recommendations, including calling for U.S. intervention in support of international efforts toward accountability such as the ongoing cases at both the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, as well as pressing regional actors and partners to prioritize religious freedom in resolving the ongoing conflict.

Commissioner [*Stephen Schneck*](#) noted the missed opportunities of the quasi-democratic period that ended in February 2021, which included the failure of the civilian-led government under the National League for Democracy to restore citizenship rights to the Rohingya peoples and to prevent the escalation of violence which led to the 2017 attempt at genocide. He also recounted his November 2022 visit to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar in which the majority of Rohingya refugees communicated their desire to return to their homeland in Rakhine State. He then

highlighted the deteriorating condition of Burma's diverse Christian communities, which have been targeted by the Burmese military following the coup. Commissioner Schneck concluded his remarks by praising the recent passage of the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act, also known as the Burma Act of 2022.

[Priscilla A. Clapp](#), Senior Advisor at the United States Institute of Peace and former U.S. Charge, U.S. Embassy Yangon, provided an update on the ongoing conflict, noting that due to the concentration of violence in areas of ethnic and religious diversity, it is difficult to separate the regime's official hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities from its assault on opposition to its authoritarian rule. She stated that the military controls less than 50 percent of the country and large sections of the civil service no longer work for the regime authorities. She further explained that leaders from various political groups have joined the National Unity Consultative Council and the National Unity Government (NUG), representing the most diverse political groups in Burma's history. She also stressed that the military junta has affected majority and minority religious communities, resulting in opportunities for these groups to come together. Clapp then elaborated that, since the coup, the Tatmadaw has escalated its longstanding tactic to weaponize Buddhism in targeting minority faiths as "Western infiltrators."

[Kyaw Zeyar Win](#), Burma Technical Specialist at the International Republican Institute, contributed firsthand experience of discrimination as a Rohingya Muslim. He commented on the longstanding discrimination and religious repression Rohingyas face in Burma, which have worsened since the coup in several ways. First, he expanded on the military's weaponization of Buddhism and attempt to frame the pro-democracy movement as a threat to the religion and culture of the Bamar majority. Second, he discussed the strengthened alliance between military leaders and hardline Buddhist leaders and organizations such as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, popularly known as the Ma Ba Tha. Third, he explained the military's deliberate targeting of religious minority communities, their leaders, and their houses of worship.

Win recommended that the United States and partners:

- Recognize the unique role of religion in Burma and develop de-securitization policies to reshape the discourse;

- Invest in youth from minority and majority groups to foster inclusive citizenship that promotes civic nationalism rather than ethnocentrism; and
- Increase support to restore democracy and religious freedom in Burma.

[Zo Tum Hmung](#), Executive Director of the Chin Association of Maryland, emphasized the NUG commitment for a post-coup Burma to address and bring accountability for atrocities against the Rohingya people. He also highlighted the condition of Chin Christian communities, noting that in areas with large populations of Christians—such as Chin State, Kachin, Karen, Karenni State, and the Sagaing Region—the Tatmadaw burn churches and target Christian religious leaders for arrest, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and killing. For example, he mentioned that from September 2021 to February 2023, the Tatmadaw burned down 13 churches in Thatlang Township, Chin State and arrested many Christian leaders, including Kachin Baptist [Rev. Dr. Hkalam Samson](#). Hmung also noted that the Tatmadaw have repeatedly attacked three historically Catholic towns: Chan Thar, Mon Hla, and Chaung Yoe, in Sagaing Region.

Hmung urged the U.S. government to:

- Impose targeted sanctions against those military officials who have targeted religious minorities;
- Designate atrocities against Christian minorities as war crimes and crimes against humanity;
- Include language condemning the violations of religious freedom by the Tatmadaw in future U.S. legislation and United Nations (UN) resolutions on Burma, especially at the UN Security Council; and
- Increase U.S. leadership and engagement with the United Nations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and other concerned nations of goodwill to end the violence and restore a viable path to build peace and democracy in Burma.

He also urged the U.S. Congress to:

- Increase funding to investigate and document Tatmadaw violations of human rights, including religious freedom;
- Conduct a Congressional fact-finding mission to the Indo-Burma and Thai-Burma border areas to assess the protection and humanitarian needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Burma;
- Conduct a Congressional hearing on the persecution of Christians in Burma; and



- Increase funding to strengthen protection and humanitarian assistance for IDPs in Burma, and to pursue durable solutions for refugees from Burma in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand.

[Wai Wai Nu](#), a Burmese activist on Rohingya and women's issues, provided her own experiences as a Rohingya Muslim woman facing state-sponsored oppression at the hands of the Burmese military and the quasi-democratic government. She noted that current state policies restrict Rohingya movement within Burma and prevent them from fully realizing access to healthcare, education, mosques, livelihood, and other basic needs. She also highlighted the plight of hundreds of Rohingya who have risked their lives fleeing by sea.

Nu recommended the U.S. government:

- Provide greater financial and material assistance to local civil society groups, to empower ethnic and religious minorities in Burma and those displaced in neighboring countries;
- Support these communities' resettlement in third countries;
- Support actions to hold the Burmese military accountable for its crimes and curb the military's weapon and financial flows by imposing economic sanctions on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, as well as banning the military's aviation fuel supply; and
- Support the Burmese political opposition in its efforts to protect religious freedom in a federally democratic Burma, to include Rohingya Muslims as well as to empower youth and women generally.

USCIRF Chair Turkel closed the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

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