



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma

**Wednesday, February 8, 2023
10:30 AM-12:00 PM ET
Virtual**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Commissioner

Burma has faced an ongoing struggle of civil war and brutal military repression for much of its history. The brief decade of quasi-democracy that ended in February 2021 offered a tenuous respite. It was a period of opening civil and political freedoms as well as significant economic growth, but it was also a moment of missed opportunities.

Chief among these missed opportunities was the re-enfranchisement of the Rohingya people, whom Burma has deprived of citizenship since 1982. The

continued failures of the National League of Democracy (or NLD), led by the once-lauded Aung San Suu Kyi, to address the denial of Rohingyas' citizenship rights perpetuated and even enabled the Tatmadaw's crimes against humanity and eventual genocidal actions against the Rohingya people. This glaring mistake haunts the National Unity Government, which is comprised primarily of NLD officials who escaped the Tatmadaw crackdown following the coup.

In November of last year, I had the opportunity to meet with refugees from Chin and Zomi communities in Malaysia, and various religious communities of Rohingya in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The overwhelming majority of whom I spoke are committed to returning to their homes in a post-conflict Burma, one that is democratic, federal, and fully recognizes the rights of all its ethnic and religious communities.

That quasi-democratic period before 2021 also saw a Burma unable to make amends with the patchwork of ethnic armies that had formed across the country, many of which have enjoyed the support of ethnic and religious minorities.

Amongst this conflict, the situation of the Rohingya people only deteriorated. In 2017, the Burmese authorities and the military led a clearing campaign that committed atrocities against Rohingya that in March of last year, the Biden administration finally recognized as genocide. Throughout this conflict with the

Burmese government and military, Rohingya have also been victims of attacks and persecution from the Buddhist Arakan Army. The hope for return has been on pause since the 2021 coup.

Furthermore, while violations against the religious freedom of Burma's Christians diminished during the decade of quasi-democracy, they have again returned to a terrifying level following the coup. The SAC and Tatmadaw have attacked, bombed, burned, and otherwise targeted Churches, Christian leaders, and their communities. The SAC has pinned its legitimacy, in part, on the state sponsorship of hardline Buddhist nationalists, some of whom have openly advocated for violence against religious minorities. The SAC has also pledged to "protect" Buddhism through the law, by prosecuting blasphemy and allegations of insults to that religious tradition. It is clear to USCIRF that religious freedom is not a priority of the SAC. It is therefore logical to conclude that a Burma run exclusively by the SAC will not prioritize religious freedom.

The real question before us, then, is what the United States can do to protect religious freedom in Burma and those most vulnerable communities who are in desperate need of it. With the passage of the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act, also known as the Burma Act of 2022, the United States is empowered to engage with the myriad of pro-democracy groups,

opposition forces, and ethnic armed organizations. Through this hearing, we at USCIRF ask how the United States government can place religious freedom at the center of its discussions with these diverse organizations, particularly when discussing the construction and development of a post-SAC Burma. To answer this, and to update our understanding of the current situation on the ground, we have assembled an accomplished team of Burma experts to update the Commission on current religious freedom conditions in the country, and to provide recommendations on how we can better monitor and advocate for freedom of religion or belief in Burma as we advise our counterparts throughout the U.S. government.

I want to sincerely thank each of our witnesses for their time, their contribution, and all the effort they take in their daily lives to pursue the protection of this fundamental human right for the long-suffering people of Burma.

I will now turn the proceedings back over to Chair Turkel.