

BURMA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees every citizen “the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution.” The law prohibits speech or acts insulting or defaming any religion or religious beliefs; authorities used these laws to limit freedom of expression and press. Local and international experts said deeply woven prejudices led to abuses and discrimination against religious minorities by government and societal actors. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Violence, discrimination, and harassment against ethnic Rohingya, who are nearly all Muslim, and other minority populations continued. In particular, security forces’ actions in northern Rakhine State beginning in late August resulted in widespread reports of extrajudicial killings, rapes, torture, beatings, arbitrary arrest, mass displacement, and destruction of property, which the U.S. government deemed ethnic cleansing. Approximately 688,000 individuals reportedly fled to Bangladesh due to the violence, and an unknown number were displaced internally. In late April, following protests by Buddhist nationalists, local authorities forced the closure of two madrassahs in Rangoon. In other areas, non-Buddhist minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, reported incidents in which authorities unduly restricted religious practice, denied freedom of movement to members of religious minorities, destroyed religious property and texts, denied or failed to approve permits for religious buildings and renovations, and discriminated in employment. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups said local authorities in some cases moved quickly to investigate and debunk rumors that could inflame religious tensions and spark violence. In November the government facilitated the first visit of a Roman Catholic pope to Burma, culminating in a public Mass attended by approximately 150,000 individuals from various religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Some leaders and members of the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (Ma Ba Tha), including Ashin Wirathu, continued to issue pejorative statements against Muslims, in spite of government denunciations. In May the State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee (SSMNC) ordered that no group or individual would be allowed to operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha and sanctioned Wirathu, the chairperson of the Ma Ba Tha Mandalay branch, for his propagation of hate speech. The group continued to operate, but its influence reportedly waned after the SSMNC order. Some Ma Ba Tha leaders continued

propagating anti-Muslim sentiment in sermons and through social media, and the organization's leaders rebranded the organization under the new name, the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. In May nationalist monks prompted violence as they sought to investigate whether Rohingya were living illegally in a neighborhood in Rangoon; police intervened and arrested those responsible for the violence. In September Buddhist nationalists conducted a violent protest against a Muslim business owner and a mosque in Magway, which resulted in the destruction of property; police responded by firing rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. On October 30, a prominent Buddhist leader delivered a widely viewed sermon to soldiers suggesting that the killing of non-Buddhists would constitute a minor sin. Religious and civil society leaders increasingly organized intrafaith and interfaith events and developed mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech.

Senior U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State and the Ambassador, advocated for religious freedom and tolerance and consistently raised concerns about violence against religious minorities countrywide, the treatment of Rohingya and conditions in Rakhine State – including those facing Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, and the rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and tensions. The Secretary of State announced on November 22 that the situation in northern Rakhine State constituted ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya, and the U.S. government later imposed sanctions on an army general involved in atrocities there. The embassy regularly highlighted concerns about religiously based discrimination and abuses and called for respect for religious freedom and the values of diversity and tolerance.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including extrajudicial killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; prolonged abduction and/or detention without charges; and other flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons. On December 22, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 55.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the most recently available estimates, approximately 88

percent are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 6 percent are Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations). Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. NGOs and the government estimate the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population at 1.1 million. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, this includes more than 800,000 stateless individuals in northern Rakhine State, prior to the outbreak of violence in October 2016. As of December, international organizations estimated 300,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. There is a very small Jewish community in Rangoon.

There is significant demographic correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and numerous other ethnic groups. Christianity is dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim. People of South Asian ancestry, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some are Christian. Islam is practiced in Rakhine State and in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, and Mandalay Divisions by some Bamar and ethnic Indians as well as ethnic Kaman and Rohingya. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice his or her religious beliefs. The constitution limits those rights if they threaten public order, health, morality, or other provisions of the constitution. It further provides that every citizen has the right to profess and practice his or her religion if not contrary to laws on security, law and order, community peace, or public order and morality.

The law prohibits deliberate and malicious speech or acts intended to outrage or wound the religious feelings of any class by insulting or defaming its religion or

religious beliefs. The law also prohibits injuring, defiling, or trespassing on any place of worship or burial grounds with the intent to insult religion.

All organizations, whether secular or religious, are required to register to obtain official status. This official status is required for organizations to gain title to land, obtain construction permits, and conduct religious activities.

The law bars members of “religious orders” (such as priests, monks, and nuns of any religious group) from running for public office, and the constitution bars members of religious orders from voting. The government restricts by law the political activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*). The constitution forbids “the abuse of religion for political purposes.”

Although there is no official state religion, the constitution notes that the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The constitution “also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this Constitution.”

The government bans any organization of Buddhist monks other than nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the SSMNC, the members of which are elected by monks.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversees the government’s relations with Buddhist monks and schools.

Four laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion” remain in effect. The Buddhist Women Special Marriage law stipulates notification and registration requirements for marriages between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women and stipulates obligations to be observed by non-Buddhist husbands and penalties for noncompliance. The Religious Conversion law regulates conversion through an extensive application and approval process. The Population Control Law allows for the designation of special zones for which population control measures could be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing. The Monogamy Law bans polygamous practices, which were already criminalized under the country’s penal code.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: There were reports of large-scale abuses by the military and others against ethnic Rohingya, who are nearly all Muslim, and other minority populations – including extrajudicial killings, rapes, torture, beatings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, mass displacement, burning of structures, restrictions on religious practice and freedom of movement, and discrimination in employment, granting of building permits, and access to citizenship. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Elsewhere in the country, non-Buddhist minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, reported incidents in which authorities unduly restricted religious practice and travel, destroyed religious property and texts, denied or failed to approve permits for religious buildings and renovations, and discriminated in employment.

According to the government, ongoing attacks on and threats against civilians by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) prompted the government to deploy security forces to northern Rakhine State in early August. According to NGO and media reports, security forces, in their search for ARSA members, committed enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests of various persons, the majority of whom were Muslim Rohingya. According to the government, security forces later acted in response to coordinated ARSA attacks on August 25 against 30 border guard police and military outposts in northern Rakhine State that resulted in the deaths of 12 soldiers. Media sources and NGOs said some Rohingya villagers joined ARSA to attack security units. The military and Border Guard Police subsequently launched so-called “clearance operations,” which they said were to search for the perpetrators of the ARSA attacks.

From August through November, there were numerous reports by media, the UN, NGOs, and others of mass atrocities in northern Rakhine State, including killings, rapes, beatings, arrests, and the burning of 354 villages by security forces and local vigilante groups. NGOs and UN observers assessed that the security forces’ operations were preplanned, pointing to the movement of units, the spike in arrests of Rohingya before the ARSA attacks, and the common tactics used by many different units in many different villages. Other NGOs, think tanks, and UN observers said the security forces’ response appeared opportunistic and disproportionate, but not pre-planned, given the ongoing security threats in

northern Rakhine State against Rohingya, Rakhine, and other civilians between January and August.

The government said its “clearance operations” ended September 5, but satellite imagery corroborated claims by witnesses that security forces or local vigilante groups continued to raze villages for weeks afterward. According to the government, as of September, there were reports of approximately 400 “insurgent” deaths, 30 civilian deaths, as well as 6,842 homes burned in 59 villages during security forces’ operations. The government restricted UN, NGO, and media access to Rakhine State through the end of the year.

As of December, international organizations reported that approximately 688,000 civilians, overwhelmingly Rohingya, arrived in Bangladesh after being displaced from Rakhine State. An additional unknown number were internally displaced. The Government of Bangladesh estimated 500 of the Rohingya refugees from Burma in Bangladesh are Hindu and the remainder Muslim. Human rights organizations and media reported security forces and vigilante groups carried out mass killings and rapes of Rohingya civilians, as well as arson, in multiple locations in northern Rakhine State, citing far higher numbers of burned homes and villages than the government. International NGOs documented through satellite imagery many instances where homes belonging to villagers from other ethnic groups were not burned in areas that were otherwise destroyed. For example, over 90 percent of the Rohingya homes in Maungdaw District, one of three districts in northern Rakhine, were reportedly burned. Reports indicated children, elderly, or infirm persons were burned alive in houses. Places of worship and religious texts were destroyed. In September the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) released a report that included an interview with a Rohingya Muslim refugee from Burma in Cox’s Bazar, who reported that Burmese security forces attacked a mosque and burned a Quran in Buthidaung Township a few days before the ARSA attacks on August 25. Based on victim and witness interviews, NGOs and media reported that security forces employed similar tactics in different villages. According to eyewitness accounts collected by *The New York Times*, Human Rights Watch, and others in Cox’s Bazar, villagers who fled to Bangladesh described the military’s use of small arms, mortars, and armed helicopters in the attacks. Rohingya refugees also said they witnessed children and elderly family members being thrown into burning homes and experienced or witnessed gang rapes of women by uniformed security forces. Some media reports and some NGOs stated that some of the serious allegations from Rohingya victims were not completely accurate and the result of collective trauma due to forced displacement. NGOs and media also reported on allegations of several mass

casualty massacres in Tula Toli (aka Min Gyi), Inn Din, and other Rohingya villages across northern Rakhine State, with total deaths among them reported in the thousands. According to a report by NGOs Fortify Rights and the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, on August 27, in Chut Pyin Village, Rathedaung Township, soldiers shot rocket-propelled grenades to burn houses and opened fire on Rohingya individuals, while armed civilians slashed and stabbed Rohingya with knives and long swords.

According to NGO and media reports, victims reported that soldiers told some Rohingya Muslim villagers they needed to leave because they were Bengali or because Burma was not a place for Muslims. After some instances of abuse, including killings and physical abuse, soldiers reportedly mocked or denigrated villagers' religious beliefs.

UN experts and other observers expressed serious concern regarding the role of religious intolerance in abuses against the Rohingya Muslim community and other minorities throughout Rakhine State. The military denied any discrimination on its part. Some Rakhine State leaders said they feared Rohingya would demographically overtake the Rakhine community in Rakhine State and would consequently take over the land of ethnic Rakhine. On September 1 in Nay Pyi Taw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said insurgents used religion as a tool for violent attacks, and said the "Bengali problem" was a holdover from previous governments that the current government had to solve. Denying allegations of widespread rape, Colonel Phone Tint, the Rakhine State border security minister, stated, "look at those women who are making these claims – would anyone want to rape them?" In November the military replaced the army general responsible for Rakhine State, Major General Maung Maung Soe, for undisclosed reasons.

The UN, media, human rights groups, and Bangladesh border authorities reported security forces planted landmines along the border of Bangladesh in northern Rakhine State in September, with some saying the security forces planted the mines to prevent Rohingya refugees from returning. Sources said at least nine internally displaced persons (IDPs) died from wounds characteristic of landmine injuries while fleeing northern Rakhine State to Bangladesh.

On September 11, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said the situation in northern Rakhine State "appears to be a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." On December 5, the High Commissioner noted security forces had committed "acts of appalling barbarity ... against the Rohingya, including deliberately burning people to death inside their homes, murders of children and adults;

indiscriminate shooting of fleeing civilians; widespread rapes of women and girls, and the burning and destruction of houses, schools, markets and mosques;” and that “elements of genocide may be present.”

At the end of September a commissioner from the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission visited northern Rakhine State and declared security forces had not used disproportionate force or committed any human rights abuses.

According to news reports, some of the small number of Rohingya Hindus who fled to Bangladesh described witnessing killings and arson in their communities, like their Muslim neighbors.

Multiple government-led investigations into earlier reported abuses by security forces did not result in prosecutions or accountability. Following widespread disturbances in northern Rakhine State in October 2016 and reports of abuses by security forces, on February 16, the military declared an end to security operations there, stating that 106 individuals had died, including 76 “attackers,” and that security forces had detained over 600 individuals. On January 3, the government-led Investigation Commission on Maungdaw, headed by military-appointed Vice President Myint Swe, released an interim report stating there was “insufficient evidence to take legal action” regarding allegations of rape, and that the unrest was due to foreign-funded “extremists.” In February the UNOHCHR mission in Bangladesh released a report based on interviews with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh detailing widespread allegations of extrajudicial killings, rape, and other abuses occurring in 2016. In August the Investigation Commission on Maungdaw released its final report, informed by separate military and police investigations into 2016 abuses in northern Rakhine State. In the report, the government-led commission stated there was no credible basis for allegations of human rights abuses by security forces in northern Rakhine State during operations in October and November 2016. International experts pointed to serious flaws in the commission’s methodology, including interrupting alleged victims of abuses to assert that their testimony was false and then broadcasting the exchange on national television. At the end of September, a commissioner from the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission visited northern Rakhine State and declared security forces had not used disproportionate force or committed any other human rights abuses during their August 2017 clearance operations.

On August 25, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, established by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in 2016 and led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, released its final report with recommendations. The report noted,

“protracted statelessness and profound discrimination have made the Muslim community particularly vulnerable to human rights violations.” The commission’s recommendations included: accelerating the citizenship verification process for stateless individuals; ending restrictions on freedom of movement; ensuring minority representation in local governance; closing IDP camps; and ensuring the safe and voluntary return of IDPs to their homes. The government committed to implementing these recommendations but had not taken steps to do so by year’s end.

On December 24, 2016, the military detained two affiliates of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Dumdaw Nawng Latt and his nephew, Langjaw Gam Seng, in Mong Ko, in northern Shan State. Civil society groups said the military did not disclose until the end of January that they were holding the men. The two were detained after speaking to journalists about a church in Mong Ko allegedly damaged by the military. In January the military charged both men under the Unlawful Association Act for supporting the Kachin Independence Army and for having unlicensed motorbikes. In March the military announced an additional charge of defamation based on an interview the men gave to *Voice of America* saying the Burmese military bombed civilians during the 2016 conflict. A court convicted the two men on October 27. It sentenced Nawng Latt to four years and three months for criminal defamation and violating the Unlawful Association Act and the Export Import Act, and sentenced Gam Seng to two years, three months under the same latter two charges. The two had been in detention for 10 months at the time of convictions, which were deducted from their sentences.

International observers reported abuses by authorities during late 2016 operations and against alleged participants in those attacks in the year following. Police and security forces reportedly arrested and detained hundreds of Rohingya males at random following the October 2016 violence. Some of these individuals reportedly stood trial with hundreds of codefendants after being held in prison for over a year.

On May 24, President Htin Kyaw pardoned and the government released 259 prisoners, including Muslim interfaith activists Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt. The released also included seven of the 12 alleged Muslim Myanmar Army prisoners whom authorities had arrested in 2014 under the subsequently repealed Emergency Provisions Act; they had been accused of receiving training from an armed group, among other charges.

According to various religious organizations and NGOs, the process to register an NGO, including a religiously affiliated NGO, remained lengthy and, due largely to what they say is bureaucratic inefficiency in local governments, was often not completed. Organizations noted that lack of registration did not generally hinder the ability of groups and individuals to conduct religious activities, except in a few cases.

Fighting between the government and rebels that restarted in Kachin State in 2011 continued; and fighting in Shan State reportedly increased as new groupings of rebels confronted the army. According to UN figures, almost 100,000 civilians remained displaced by conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States, where there are many Christians and Buddhists as well as other religious groups.

There were reports of local authorities preventing Muslims from conducting prayer services at religious facilities in some villages. Rohingya in northern Rakhine were reportedly prohibited from gathering publicly in groups of more than five persons.

On December 9, local government authorities in Kan Thar Village Tract in Magwe Division, which has an ethnic Chin Christian population, issued a letter barring a planned pre-Christmas prayer in a private home from proceeding. The letter said Buddhist neighbors had suggested to the local government officials that the celebration could cause religious conflict.

The government relaxed its requirements to receive prior written authorization for public events, including religious ceremonies outside of houses of worship and festivals, although in practice religious organizations still operated under the former regulations. While the law, as amended in 2016, only requires written notification to the local government for public events, in practice many religious and civil society organizations stated they preferred to receive written authorization from ward, township, and other local authorities before holding events. There were reports that some religious and nonreligious events received written authorization with restrictive security regulations or other controls.

Several Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several madrassahs.

The government continued to support financially Buddhist seminaries and Buddhist missionary activities. The government continued to fund two state *sangha* universities in Rangoon and Mandalay, respectively, which trained

Buddhist monks under the purview of the SSMNC, as well as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Rangoon.

Religious organizations said Buddhist groups generally did not experience difficulty obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls, in contrast with minority religious groups. According to religious organizations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs financially supported the SSMNC and religious ceremonies.

Some teachers at government schools reportedly continued to require students to recite Buddhist prayers, although such practices were no longer a mandated part of the curriculum. Many classrooms displayed Buddhist altars or other Buddhist iconography.

Due to movement restrictions, many Rohingya reportedly could not access education in state-run schools. Authorities did not permit Rohingya high school graduates from Rakhine State and others living in IDP camps to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar any university students who did not possess citizenship scrutiny cards from graduating, which disproportionately impacted students from religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. These students were permitted to attend classes and take examinations, but they could not receive diplomas unless they had a national identification card, the application for which required some religious minorities to identify as a “foreign” ethnic minority.

Faith communities throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, all reported difficulties and delays that could last for years in getting permits to allow construction of new and rehabilitation of existing religious buildings. Buddhists, however, said getting such permission was harder for other groups. Religious groups said the multiple permissions required, unclear authority among government agencies, and interminable delays in responses to requests for permits led them to construct places of worship without the required permissions, leaving them vulnerable to future government action or to pressure by members of other religious groups. Others said it was necessary to bribe authorities to obtain permits.

In Mandalay, Christians said the local General Administrative Department (GAD), which has a significant role in issuing permits, required them to attest prayer activities would not take place in a requested new house of worship. Christians also said the local GAD office in July told them the permit process for new

religious buildings was suspended due to May incidents in Rangoon related to “illegal mosques and prayer activities leading to social unrest.” A Hindu group seeking similar authorization in Mandalay said the GAD had not granted it by year’s end. In Meiktila in Mandalay Division, Muslims said authorities strictly prohibited cleaning, renovating, or entering eight mosques shut down after interreligious conflict in 2014; five others remained authorized. In Rangoon and Mandalay, Buddhist leaders said local GAD authorities denied some requests to build or renovate some monasteries, while other monasteries were shut down due to insufficient information provided to the GAD.

Christian communities in Chin and Kachin States reported that while applications to local authorities for property registration, construction, and renovation were not formally denied, the applications encountered delays spanning several years or were lost altogether. These included continued reports that local government officials delayed permits to restore crosses previously destroyed, or to renovate and build Christian churches in Chin State. Local authorities in Chin State also continued to delay applications from Christian groups and churches to buy land in the name of their religious organizations. Religious groups said individual members circumvented this requirement by purchasing land on behalf of the group, a practice the government tolerated.

Christian and Muslim groups seeking to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations continued to be able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities, according to religious groups.

Muslim groups reported official building requests encountered significant delays, and even when approved could subsequently be reversed. They also reported it remained extremely difficult to acquire permission to repair existing mosques, although authorities permitted internal maintenance in some cases. Historic mosques in Meiktila in Mandalay Division, Mawlamyine in Mon State, and Sittwe in Rakhine State, as well as in Rangoon and other areas continued to deteriorate because authorities did not allow routine maintenance.

Rohingya remained unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. A 2005 local order in Maungdaw Township in northern Rakhine State requires residents, predominately Rohingya, to obtain local authorization to marry. In addition, some Rohingya sources expressed concern about the two-child policy for Rohingya families, referring to a 2005 local order promulgated in northern Rakhine State and sporadically enforced.

On September 18, local government authorities in Hpa-An Township in Karen State issued a letter requiring Muslims from Hpa-An to inform and receive authorization from local administrators to travel. Enforcement of the order reportedly was haphazard, however, and the chief minister of Karen State later rescinded it. In September airport officials at Thandwe Airport in southern Rakhine State requested some organizations traveling to Ngapali Beach to identify Muslim travelers and note where they would be staying.

In November Amnesty International released a two-year study on conditions in Rohingya IDP camps in place since intercommunal violence in 2012. The report noted that the camps segregate Rohingya men and women in what some called an “open air prison,” with little access to food and basic services and increasing restrictions on their freedom of movement.

In Rakhine State, the government and security forces imposed restrictions on the movement of various ethnic groups, particularly members of the nearly all Muslim Rohingya community and including IDPs, both before and after the violence beginning in August. According to NGOs and the Annan report, such restrictions seriously impeded the ability of Rohingya to pursue livelihoods, gain access to markets and other basic services, and engage other communities. According to civil society groups, government officials denied the Rohingya normal access to basic services, including hospitals, which Rohingya could only access through an arduous and unclear approval process. Additionally, as the vast majority of the restricted groups in the area were Muslim, individuals stereotyped by security forces as appearing to be Muslim received additional scrutiny on movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion.

Restrictions governing the travel of persons whom the government considers as foreigners, including both Muslim and Hindu Rohingya, and others between townships in northern Rakhine State, varied depending on the township, usually requiring submission of an immigration form. The traveler could obtain this form only from the township Immigration and National Registration Department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and two guarantors. The form authorized travel for 14 days. Authorities granted Muslims located outside of Rakhine State more freedom to travel, but they still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State.

Muslim community representatives reported that in some cases Muslim-owned businesses encountered significant delays to procure government contracts without a Buddhist “front” person. Media and religious sources said local authorities in

some villages restricted the licensing and butchering of cattle by slaughterhouses, the vast majority owned by Muslims, which negatively affected business operations and the ability of Muslim communities to celebrate Islamic holidays.

Nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service remained Buddhist, in spite of military and civil service outreach to various ethnic groups, including by inviting various ethnic groups to attend the Defense Services Academy. Applications for civil service and military positions required the applicant to list his or her religion.

Authorities required citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards often indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity, but there appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person's religion was indicated on the card. The government also required citizens to indicate their religion on certain official applications for documents such as passports, although passports themselves do not indicate the bearer's religion. Members of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, faced problems obtaining identification and citizenship cards. Some Muslims reported that they were required to indicate a "foreign" ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on applications for citizenship cards.

According to the Annan commission, "Muslims in Rakhine constitute the single biggest stateless community in the world. ...Efforts by the government to verify citizenship claims have failed to win the confidence of either Muslim or Rakhine communities." The government continued to call for Rohingya to participate in the government's citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs), but Rohingya communities objected to the exercise, citing a lack of requisite change in their rights after obtaining the NVCs and a general distrust towards the government. In September and October, the government reported issuing more than 2,600 NVCs (the first step in the citizenship verification process) to Rohingya in Maungdaw Township, and, as of the end of the year, a small number of Rohingya had gained either full or naturalized citizenship. Recipients of naturalized citizenship were ineligible to participate in some political activities and professions, although all citizens had the right to vote. The national government no longer required participants to identify as "Bengali" to receive NVCs and did not include race or religion on the document, but local implementers reportedly made applicants identify as "Bengali," and all were required to identify as "Bengali" on their ensuing citizenship card. In October the government reportedly attempted to force

Rohingya in Sittwe to apply for NVCs by making renewal of fishing licenses contingent on applying and by refusing to release Rohingya prisoners from Sittwe prison until they applied. According to a news report, Rohingya Hindus had accepted documents that recognized them as naturalized citizens.

According to a Refugees International report published in December, “decreased international aid, decreased accessibility due to government policies, and waning global attention are creating a desperate and unsustainable situation for the displaced people” in northern Burma – in particular, an estimated 100,000 displaced persons still living in camps in Kachin State, mostly Christian with some Buddhists also impacted, and northern Shan State, mostly Buddhist. According to the report, nearly half of this displaced population lived in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups to which the government blocked nearly all access by the UN and other international groups.

On April 28, authorities sealed off two madrassahs in Thaketa Township near downtown Rangoon in response to protests by a group of 50 to 100 Buddhist nationalists, who believed that the schools were unlawfully operating as mosques. According to local residents and media, Buddhist nationalists and police locked the buildings and barricaded the entrances. Several weeks later, when Muslim leaders arranged a large community prayer on a nearby street, authorities reportedly banned the event and threatened participants with jail. Police charged the Muslim community member who led the prayers, Moe Zaw, and two other community members with failure to obtain a permit to organize prayers, punishable by a fine or up to six months in prison. The two madrassahs remained closed as of year’s end. Several hundred students had attended the madrasahs’ primary schools prior to their closure.

On June 1, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture ordered the closure of Mya Taung Saung Monastic Education School in the town of Mrauk-U in Rakhine State after the military charged the head Buddhist monk at the school with having connections to the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group deemed an illegal association by the government. The monk reportedly held a soccer match on school grounds on April 8 to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the Arakan Army. The Burmese military based in Mrauk-U found out about the match and filed charges against the monk and Khine Min Ni, another organizer of the match. The school reportedly later received a letter from the ministry removing authorization for the school to operate. According to officials, the monastic school had approximately 180 students, of which 50 lived on the school grounds.

Second Vice President Henry Van Thio, a Chin Christian, continued to serve in his position. There were no Muslim members of parliament. While some political parties fielded religious minority candidates in the 2015 elections and 2017 by-elections, including Muslims, the vast majority of parliamentarians were Buddhist. High-profile Buddhist monks remained informally involved in controversial political issues.

State-controlled media frequently depicted government officials and family members paying respect to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing “people’s donations” of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines nationwide. The government published and distributed books on Buddhist religious instruction.

The government officially recognized a number of interfaith groups, including the Interfaith Dialogue Group of Myanmar, which organized monthly meetings and sponsored several religious activities promoting peace and religious tolerance around the country throughout the year. The group’s leadership included Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders as well as from other religious groups. The government also organized interfaith prayer meetings across the country in October.

The government generally permitted foreign religious groups to operate. Local religious organizations were also able to send official invitations for visa purposes to clergy from faith-based groups overseas, and foreign religious visitors acquired either a tourist or business visa for entry. Authorities generally permitted Rangoon-based groups to host international students and experts.

The government facilitated the visit of Pope Francis to Rangoon and Nay Pyi Taw November 28 to 30. The pope’s visit, the first by any pope, included meetings with government leaders, religious leaders, and a public Mass attended by approximately 150,000 participants from various religious faiths.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local and international experts said deeply woven prejudices led to instances of abuse or discrimination against members of religious minorities by societal actors. Many prominent military, civilian and religious leaders spoke about the challenge of the “Western Gate” – the idea that only Burmese society and Buddhism stood in the way of “hordes” of Muslims who would come through the mountains of

western Burma (i.e., northern Rakhine State where the Rohingya lived) and overwhelm Buddhist areas of Burma and Thailand.

In September the government organized a trip for journalists to see the alleged mass graves of 45 Hindus whom the government said ARSA had killed in northern Maungdaw Township on August 25. Civil society organizations and some local villagers, however, suggested that security forces or vigilante groups not associated with Rohingya had killed the individuals. ARSA denied responsibility for the killings.

Despite the May 23 order by the SSMNC that no group or individual could operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha, some of the group's leaders and members continued to issue pejorative and hateful statements against Muslims in sermons and through social media through its new Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. The group continued to operate, but its influence reportedly waned following the SSMNC order.

On March 9, the SSMNC banned the self-defined ultranationalist Wirathu, a monk and the chairperson of the Ma Ba Tha branch in Mandalay, from delivering sermons across the country for one year due to what the SSMNC called religious hate speeches against Muslims, which inflamed communal tensions. For example, in January he publicly thanked the suspected killers of Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim constitutional lawyer, and stated that it would be better for women to marry dogs than Muslims. On March 11, in response to the banning order, Wirathu livestreamed a video to his Facebook page of him with tape over his mouth, while a recording of one of his older sermons played for a crowd of some 500 persons. On August 30, Wirathu headlined a rally at which he spoke about the attacks in northern Rakhine State and stated international NGOs were "supporting the terrorists in Rakhine." The SSMNC did not take action against him following the public speeches.

On May 10, nationalist monks stated that Rohingya were hiding illegally in Mingala Taungnyunt Township in Rangoon and, according to media reports, the monks informed local police about their suspicions. The reports stated that when local police investigated and found no one to be living illegally in the neighborhood, monks and Buddhist laypeople instigated acts of violence against the Muslim community there, injuring at least two individuals. Police arrested eight individuals for their involvement in the violence.

On May 20, more than 700 individuals who identified themselves as nationalists protested against Minister of Religious Affairs and Culture Aung Ko and demanded his resignation, a week after the SSMNC ordered that no group or individual would be allowed to operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha. After the protest, the Nay Pyi Taw Council Administrative Department instructed regional police to file a case against the protesters on charges that they broke an agreement to use only approved slogans during the protest.

According to media reports, on July 6, 150 Buddhists and monks attacked newly converted Christians in This Taw village in the Sagaing Region in the northwest area of the country, injuring seven and destroying their homes and property. According to the media, the neighbors grew frustrated at the Christian household's loud celebration lasting through the night for three days; on the third day, the neighbors attacked. The report also noted that local police and some other monks and neighborhood laypeople tried to stop the mob.

On September 10, in Taungdwingyi near Magwe, approximately 50 young men wearing masks threw stones at a house reportedly belonging to a Muslim man. The attackers then proceeded to a mosque in Shwe Kyar Inn, Ward 1, loudly singing the national anthem and throwing stones. The crowd grew in size to approximately 400 individuals before police intervened. Police detained at least four persons. According to police, the four suspects and the Muslim homeowner had an existing personal dispute, and the riot leaders had attempted to build support for the four suspects' cause by inflaming existing religious tensions in the community.

In March police arrested Swe Win after Ma Ba Tha supporter Kyaw Myo Shwe claimed that Swe Win shared a Facebook post suggesting Wirathu violated the monastic code of conduct by making statements commending the January 28 assassination of Muslim constitutional lawyer Ko Ni. Authorities subsequently released Swe Win on bail, but the charges remained pending at year's end.

There were reports of some local villages in Rakhine State deterring individuals from assisting the Rohingya community. In September in central Rakhine State, a local Rakhine woman who offered food to Rohingya in a neighboring village was forced to shave her head and march around the village with a sign around her neck that said "traitor."

On October 30, Buddhist leader Sitagu Sayadaw gave a sermon to soldiers at a military training school in Kayin State, live-streamed on Facebook to more than

250,000 persons, that was widely interpreted to suggest that in the course of battle, it is less of a sin for soldiers to kill non-Buddhists than to kill Buddhists. He quoted a parable from Sri Lanka in which a king who killed millions of the Hindu Tamil community is told by his council of advisors, including monks, that it was only a minor sin because those millions of deaths only added up to one and a half real human beings since the Hindus did not obey the five precepts of Buddhism. In his sermon, Sitagu Sayadaw noted the need for Buddhist leaders and the Burmese military to work together for national unity. Commentators generally interpreted these remarks as condoning the military's abuses against members of religious minority groups.

During the year, there were multiple reports of possible ARSA members killing civilians in northern Rakhine State for collaborating with the government; however, others said these reports were not credible. On August 1, the government reported "extremists" killed six ethnic Mro Buddhist villagers in northern Rakhine State.

Some Buddhist and Muslim community leaders continued to collaborate to quell rumors and prevent violence through formal and informal community-centered mechanisms. For example, during the violence in Magway in September, local religious and community groups worked to calm community tensions and dispel rumors, preventing the mob from growing larger and more violent. Similarly, during the incident in Mingala Taungnyunt in Rangoon, interfaith networks cautioned Muslims to stay indoors to avoid encountering the violent mob.

Religious and community leaders and civil society activists organized intrafaith and interfaith events, and some worked jointly to develop mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech and to promote religious tolerance and diversity. A coalition of interfaith civil society groups continued developing draft legislation, which they said they planned to bring to parliament in 2018, to counter hate speech and promote interfaith harmony. In Mandalay Division, various NGOs and interfaith leaders continued to hold meetings and public events to promote peace and religious tolerance for community leaders and youth. A number of interfaith groups continued mobilizing civil society around the country to promote religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior U.S. officials – including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, the Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration,

the Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific Affairs, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Conflict and Stabilization Operations, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor – consistently raised with senior leaders ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom in the country. They specifically raised the plight of the mostly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, hardships facing religious minority communities in Kachin and northern Shan States in the midst of ongoing military conflicts, and advocacy on social media of violence against religious minorities. On November 22, the Secretary of State announced that the situation in northern Rakhine State constituted ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. After August 25, the U.S. government severely curtailed bilateral military-to-military relations, prevented current and former military leaders from obtaining visas to the U.S., imposed financial sanctions against a general who commanded forces in northern Rakhine, and took other steps towards accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations. U.S. government officials consistently called for long-term and durable solutions to the root causes of longstanding issues in Rakhine State and the lack of citizenship status for most Rohingya, including a voluntary and transparent path to restoration and provision of citizenship, and full access to humanitarian aid for Rohingya and other affected communities in the region. Embassy officials also urged government and interfaith leaders to improve efforts to mitigate religiously motivated violence such as in Rangoon and Magwe.

Embassy officials at all levels discussed the importance of addressing the effects of ethnoreligious violence and hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. Embassy officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance in meetings with high-level government officials, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the commander in chief, the national security advisor, and the ministers of foreign affairs; religious affairs; home affairs; ethnic affairs; immigration, population, and labor affairs; and social welfare, relief, and resettlement affairs. Embassy officials also met with officials in the president's office, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, parliamentarians, members of civil society, scholars, and representatives of other governments.

The Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration led a delegation to Burma and Bangladesh in October. In central Rakhine State, the delegation met with Rohingya confined to IDP camps since 2012, and in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the delegation met with Rohingya refugees who had recently fled the ethnic cleansing in northern Rakhine State. The delegation also engaged government officials, civil society groups, and international organizations.

Embassy officials traveled to ethnic minority-predominant areas to discuss religious freedom and tolerance with state and local government officials, NGOs, and members of community-based organizations and religious communities. The Ambassador visited Rakhine, Kachin, and Chin States, areas where religious minorities were affected by conflict or violence, as well as other areas that had suffered from and were identified as at risk of ethnoreligious conflict. Embassy officials visited northern Rakhine State in January to assess the impact the October 2016 violence had on humanitarian assistance and the various communities living there. The Ambassador's multiple visits to Rakhine State to assess the situation helped inform the embassy's efforts and strategies in engaging the government and advocating for the rights of all communities in the state.

The embassy continued to call for respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and unity in its interactions with all sectors of society, and on its Facebook page. At high-profile events, embassy representatives spoke out for religious freedom and against intercommunal conflict and hate speech. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, repeatedly met with Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations – such as Ma Ba Tha and its successor organization – and NGOs to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy also shared multiple posts on Facebook about religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in the U.S.

The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns about religiously based tension and anti-Muslim discrimination, as well as calling for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance. For example, on August 25, the embassy released a statement welcoming the release of the Annan Commission Report and the Burmese government's declared commitment to implement the recommendations. The same day the embassy released a statement condemning the ARSA attacks on August 25 in northern Rakhine State – recognizing government and security force responsibility to apprehend perpetrators and urging them to do so in a way that protects all civilians. On November 22, the Secretary of State stated, "No provocation can justify the horrendous atrocities that have ensued. These abuses by some among the Burmese military, security forces, and local vigilantes have caused tremendous suffering and forced hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to flee their homes in Burma to seek refuge in Bangladesh. After a careful and thorough analysis of available facts, it is clear that the situation in northern Rakhine state constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya."

Embassy facilities in Rangoon and Mandalay hosted numerous discussions for youth and civil society on religious tolerance. A U.S. government-sponsored program on supporting political and civic engagement provided several courses to civil society representatives on pluralism and social respect as the basis of a free and democratic civil society that is more robust than authoritarian societies, economies, and militaries. As in prior years, the embassy partnered with and supported numerous faith-based and civil society organizations working on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 22, 2017, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.