

BURMA 2019 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. As during previous years, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents as based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. Violence, discrimination, and harassment targeting ethnic Rohingya in Rakhine State, who are nearly all Muslim, and other minority populations, including Christians in Kachin State and Hindus, continued. Following the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in August 2017 that displaced more than 700,000 refugees to Bangladesh, Rohingya remaining in Burma continued to face an environment of severe repression and restrictions on freedom of movement and access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods based on their ethnicity, religion, and citizenship status, according to the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Among Rohingya fleeing the country during the year, some cited ongoing abuses in Rakhine State; others reported continuing government pressure to participate in a residency verification campaign, which they stated they did not trust. In November the International Criminal Court (ICC) approved a request from prosecutors to investigate allegations of certain crimes committed against the Rohingya. In addition, that same month, The Gambia filed a case at the International Court of Justice stating Burma’s actions against the Rohingya violated the country’s obligations as a signatory to the 1948 UN genocide convention. During the year, several UN entities commented or released reports on the Rohingya crisis. In September the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar said the country had “done nothing to dismantle the system of violence and persecution against the Rohingya,” and the Rohingya who remained in Rakhine lived in the “same dire circumstances as prior to the events of August 2017.” On September 16, the UN Fact-Finding Mission published its final report in a series of reports, detailing what it stated were atrocities committed by the military in Rakhine, Kachin, Chin, and Shan States, concluding, “The threat of genocide continues for the remaining Rohingya.” The government denied the Fact-Finding Mission permission to enter the country and publicly disavowed the report. Religious leaders and civil society activists reported that some government and military officials continued to deploy anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim rumors and hate speech in official events. Facebook removed hundreds of accounts, pages, and groups linked to military leadership for propagating hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. In August, amid a

second attempt by the governments of Burma and Bangladesh to initiate returns, Rohingya refused to return, saying they would be subject to human rights abuses if they returned without a guarantee of citizenship. Various other groups continued to face persecution. During a public meeting with the U.S. President in July, a Christian leader from Kachin State said the military “oppressed and tortured” Christians; the military filed and subsequently dropped a criminal complaint regarding these remarks. Non-Buddhist minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, said authorities restricted religious practice, denied freedom of movement to members of religious minorities, closed places of worship, denied or failed to approve permits for religious buildings and repairs, and discriminated in employment and housing. NGOs said the military’s selective denial of humanitarian access in some conflict areas, including Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine States, led to severe hardship for religious minorities. NGOs and religious groups said some local authorities continued to work to reduce religious tension and improve relations between communities.

Ethnic armed groups (EAGs) in the country continued to pose a threat. In February individuals thought to be affiliated with the Arakan Army abducted and killed Pastor U Thar Tun of the Mara Evangelical Church in Rakhine State, according to Christian NGOs and media. In the Wa Self-Administered Division, where the government has no administrative control, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) prevented Christian leaders from preaching, shut down churches and a Bible school, and otherwise interfered with Christian religious practice, according to media reports and Baptist leaders.

While local and international experts said deeply woven prejudices led to abuses and discrimination against religious minorities, some civil society groups worked to improve interreligious tolerance. According to media reports, civil society activists spearheaded efforts to improve interreligious tolerance and respect for religious practices, and deepen interfaith dialogue. Press reported that when what they described as an ultranationalist mob forced the shutdown of temporary Ramadan prayer sites in Yangon, a monk named U Seintita inspired a national “White Rose” campaign in which non-Muslims gave Muslims white roses in a show of solidarity. According to interfaith activists, under pressure from the White Rose campaign in Yangon, the township government reopened the mosques and sentenced the leaders of the mob to one year in prison. Some leaders and members of Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, also known by its former moniker Ma Ba Tha, continued to issue pejorative statements against Muslims. In July the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC), an independent but government-supported body that oversees Buddhist affairs, reiterated its 2018 order that no

group or individual be allowed to operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha and declared it an “illegal organization.” Despite the order, many local Ma Ba Tha branches continued to operate with that name. Other Ma Ba Tha leaders continued propagating anti-Muslim speech in sermons and through social media. Religious and civil society leaders continued to organize intrafaith and interfaith events and developed mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech.

Senior U.S. government officials, including the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Ambassador to the United Nations, Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Ambassador to Burma, and Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, advocated for religious freedom and tolerance and consistently raised concerns about discrimination against religious minorities, the treatment of Rohingya and conditions in Rakhine State, and the prevalence of anti-Muslim hate speech and religious tensions. In July, at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, the U.S. government hosted survivors of human rights abuses from the Rohingya Muslim and Kachin Christian communities. In reference to the 2017 ethnic cleansing and displacement of Rohingya, the Vice President stated, “A brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya has forced more than 700,000 to flee across the border to Bangladesh. [...] Our words of admonition have seemed to fall on deaf ears.” In September the USAID Administrator noted the continued denial of basic rights to Rohingya and others. In December the United States imposed financial sanctions on the Burmese military commander-in-chief, his deputy, and two brigadier generals for human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities. During the year, U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, frequently met with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, to highlight concerns about religiously based discrimination and abuses, and called for respect for religious freedom and the values of diversity and tolerance in statements and other public messaging.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated 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. On December 18, 2019, 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 56.1 million (midyear 2019 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. The 2014 Census reportedly excluded the Rohingya from its count, but NGOs and the government estimated the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population at 1.1 million prior to the outbreak of violence and initial exodus of Rohingya into Bangladesh in October 2016. According to current estimates from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh beginning in August 2017, and an estimated 520,000 to 600,000 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. Various forms of Christianity are 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. Individuals 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. Ethnic Rohingya and Kaman in Rakhine State, as well as some Bamar and ethnic Indians in Rangoon, Ayeyarwaddy, Magway, and Mandalay Regions, practice Islam. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Some smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions observe traditional indigenous beliefs.

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 to every citizen 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.

The Official Secrets Act provides for severe criminal penalties against any person who takes any action that is calculated to be or might be or is intended to be, directly or indirectly, useful to an enemy.” Those found guilty may receive up to 14 years’ imprisonment in cases involving military information.

All organizations, whether secular or religious, must register with the government 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 the 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. Religious education is not included in public schools; however, some schools with Buddhist-majority student bodies may start the school day with a Buddhist prayer.

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, obligations that non-Buddhist husbands must observe, 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 where population control measures may be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing. The Monogamy Law bans polygamous practices, which the country’s penal code already criminalized.

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

Government Practices

On November 11, The Gambia filed a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging that Burma’s actions against the Rohingya violated the country’s obligations as a signatory to the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi represented Burma at the ICJ in the preliminary hearings on December 10-12. Following characterization of the military’s actions as a “clearance operation” and claims that hundreds of ARSA members were killed, Aung San Suu Kyi stated, “It cannot be ruled out that disproportionate force was used...” [or that] “they did not distinguish clearly enough between ARSA fighters and civilians.” She also stated, “Genocidal intent cannot be the only hypothesis.” The ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) supported her appearance with a series of public demonstrations and prominent billboards in Yangon and elsewhere. One of the billboards, which was later removed, featured Aung San Suu Kyi in front of three leading generals above the caption, “We stand with you.”

On November 14, the ICC approved a request from prosecutors to open an investigation of allegations of certain crimes committed against the Rohingya minority in Burma, according to a statement from the ICC. Although the country is not a party to the ICC, the court said it had jurisdiction over crimes if elements of the crime were committed in Bangladesh, which is a State Party, and where most displaced Rohingya fled.

Investigations of ethnic cleansing in northern Rakhine State released during the year, including the UN Fact-Finding Mission’s detailed findings released on

September 16, corroborated earlier accounts of systematic abuses and a campaign against Rohingya civilians that involved extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture. The UN Fact-Finding Mission, established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2017 with a mandate ending in September, stated in its report that “the situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine State has remained largely unchanged since last year,” and, “The laws, policies, and practices that formed the basis of the government’s persecution against the Rohingya have been maintained.” The report described atrocities committed by the military in Rakhine, Kachin, Chin and Shan States, as well as other areas, stating further investigations had strengthened its findings that the circumstances and context of the “clearance operations” against the Rohingya, beginning on August 25, 2017, gave rise to an inference of genocidal intent and that those attacks were preplanned and reflected a well-developed and state-endorsed policy aimed at the Rohingya. The government denied the Fact-Finding Mission permission to enter the country and publicly disavowed the report. The report also found military actions in both Kachin (mostly Christian) and Shan States (mostly Buddhist) since 2011 included war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Independent Commission of Enquiry established by the government in 2018 to investigate the 2017 violence in Rakhine State did not release any findings by year’s end. According to international and domestic human rights activists, previous government-led investigations of reports of widespread abuses by security services against the Rohingya in northern Rakhine State in 2016 yielded no findings of responsibility by security forces and were criticized by international observers as deeply flawed.

On May 7, the government granted presidential amnesty and freed two Reuters reporters detained by the government in December 2017 and sentenced in September 2018 to seven years in prison under the Official Secrets Act related to their investigation of security forces’ alleged massacre of 10 Rohingya men and boys in Inn Din, located in northern Rakhine State. According to a Reuters report released in May, the soldiers sentenced in 2018 to 10 years in prison for the killings in Inn Din village were freed in November 2018, the only individuals to have been convicted for the 2017 mass atrocities against Rohingya in Rakhine State.

UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee told the Human Rights Council in September, “[Rohingya] are denied citizenship and recognition, face regular violence (including in the context of the ongoing conflict

between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw), [and] are unable to move freely and have little access to food, healthcare, education, livelihoods and services.”

According to UNHCR, an additional 1,132 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh between January and September, compared with 13,764 during the same period in 2018. The government prepared facilities to begin receiving approximately 3,450 of the 700,000 Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh in 2017. In August, amid a second attempt by the governments of Burma and Bangladesh to initiate returns, Rohingya refused to return, often saying they would be subject to human rights abuses if they returned without a guarantee of citizenship. Bangladesh authorities said they would not force them to go back, and no one chose to return.

Several NGOs reported approximately 120,000 Rohingya remained confined to camps within the country since an earlier round of violence in 2012. Restrictions on in-country movement of Rohingya were extensive. Authorities required the largely stateless Rohingya to carry special documents and travel permits for internal movement in areas in Rakhine State where most Rohingya reside.

In September police arrested 30 Rohingya men, women, and children attempting to travel from Rakhine to Yangon. According to media reports, 21 of the individuals faced up to two years in jail under legislation that stipulates that citizens must be in possession of registration cards to prove their identity. Authorities told Radio Free Asia the Rohingya were fleeing villages in Rakhine State, where rights activists reported violence and ethnic cleansing.

In September the military dropped a criminal complaint it had filed in August against Reverend Hkalam Samson of the Kachin Baptist Convention for comments he made to the U.S. President during a July 17 meeting at the White House in Washington. In those remarks, Samson praised U.S. visa restrictions imposed in July and said Christians in Myanmar have been “oppressed and tortured.”

In May the government issued an arrest warrant for sedition for self-defined nationalist Wirathu, a monk and chairperson of the Ma Ba Tha branch in Mandalay, for criticism of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The charge carried a potential prison sentence of three years. At year’s end, Wirathu remained at large.

The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) reported in May that local officials in Ann Township in southern Rakhine State forced three ethnic Chin Christians, including a pastor, to convert to Buddhism or face expulsion from the village and a

fine of 100,000 kyat (\$68) for Christian activities. Some local Christians were verbally harassed and physically assaulted by local authorities because of their faith and moved to nearby villages, according to the CHRO.

The government continued to tightly restrict outside access, including UN and NGO humanitarian aid and media, to northern Rakhine State, northern Shan, and Kachin States during the year. According to the Danish Refugee Council, the government's travel authorization process for aid groups in the country effectively acted as a restriction on aid and humanitarian access to displaced populations in violation of international humanitarian law. During the year, the Red Cross Movement and World Food Program maintained generally predictable access to meet life-saving emergency needs. The government threatened to prosecute officials from the Kachin Baptist Convention for visiting camps near China controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) to provide relief supplies, according to La Croix International.

Multiple sources stated authorities continued to single out Rohingya in northern Rakhine State to perform forced labor, including requiring them transport soldiers, weapons and ammunition, and food supplies, and arbitrarily arrested them and imposed restrictions impeding their ability construct houses or religious buildings.

Authorities in northern Rakhine reportedly continued to prohibit Rohingya from gathering publicly in groups of more than five persons. Rohingya refugees reported that exceptions to the five-person regulation applied only to marketplaces and schools.

Fighting between the government and ethnic armed groups that restarted in Kachin and northern Shan States in 2011 continued. The UN estimated that 107,000 persons remained displaced by conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States, where many Christians and individuals from other religious groups live. Christians in Kachin State, according to media and NGO reports, stated the military was carrying out a campaign to eliminate them similar to the situation in Rakhine State. It was often difficult to categorize specific incidents as based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity.

The KIO stated the military destroyed or damaged more than 400 villages, 300 churches, and 100 schools in Kachin State since 2011. According to the United Nations, 100,000 persons remained displaced in Kachin State. According to NGOs, both the government and nationalist monks used their influence and resources to build Buddhist infrastructure in majority Christian areas, including in Kachin and Chin, against the wishes of the local population. Minority religious

communities said they perceived these efforts to be part of a process of “Burmanization.”

According to a CHRO September report, authorities continued “openly practicing discriminatory policies against religious minorities in Burma.” The report said that Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region faced destruction of homes and places of worship, suffered physical violence, and were prevented from legally owning land and constructing religious buildings. The CHRO report also said there were cases where police failed to investigate or hold perpetrators to account.

In Rakhine State, according to the United Nations and media reports, the government and security forces continued to restrict the movement of members of various ethnic and religious groups, particularly Rohingya. Restrictions governing the travel of persons whom the government considers foreigners, including both Muslim and Hindu Rohingya, some other Hindus living in Rakhine State, 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 of origin’s Immigration and National Registration Department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and letters from two guarantors. The form typically authorized travel for two to four weeks, but was given almost exclusively for medical emergencies, according to human rights activists. Muslims throughout the country still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State, and reportedly feared authorities would not allow them to leave Rakhine if they were to visit the state.

According to NGOs, such restrictions continued to impede the ability of Rohingya to pursue livelihoods and education, access markets, hospitals, and other services, and engage other communities. Sources stated that individuals stereotyped by security forces as appearing to be Muslim continued to receive additional scrutiny on movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion; obtaining these travel permits often involved extortion and bribes.

According to various religious organizations and NGOs, the process to register an NGO, whether religious in nature or not, remained lengthy and often went uncompleted due largely to bureaucratic inefficiency in local governments. 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, although being unregistered left organizations vulnerable to harassment or closure by the government.

According to Amnesty International, the military took positions within ancient temple complexes of Mrauk-U and fired “recklessly” in the area. Satellite imagery confirmed the presence of artillery close to the temples, and photographs showed destruction of temple sites. It was unclear who was responsible for the attacks. According to the director of Sittwe’s Department of Cultural Affairs, the department repaired historic sites damaged by conflicts, including those in Mrauk-U.

Religious groups throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and especially Muslims, continued to report difficulties and delays that could last for years in getting permits to allow construction of and repairs to religious buildings. Buddhists leaders said obtaining such permission was more difficult for non-Buddhist groups. Religious groups said the need for multiple permissions, 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 areas with few or no mosques, Muslims often conducted prayer services and other religious practices, such as teaching, in private homes. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture continued to restrict non-Buddhist religious teachings to government-approved religious buildings and prohibited prayer services and religious teaching in private homes. Reportedly, the ministry no longer required that teaching materials, including Islamic materials printed in Arabic, be in the Burmese language and submitted to the ministry in advance.

In September Muslim leaders formed a committee to press the government to reopen shuttered mosques across the country, most of which were closed by the government in the wake of 2012 communal Buddhist-Muslim violence in Rakhine State. The committee maintained a list of more than 40 shuttered mosques across the country. A list from the General Administration Department reported there were more than 800 mosques in northern Rakhine’s Maungdaw Township, more than 400 in Buthidaung Township, and 10 in Rathedaung Township of northern Rakhine State. It was unknown how many of them had been shut down or destroyed. Twelve mosques and religious schools remained closed in Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, and Sagaing Regions, as well as in Shan State during the year, according to the Burman Human Rights Network (BHRN). A 2017 ban on prayers in eight Islamic schools in Thaketa Township in Yangon Region and the

closure of two remained in force. Thirty-two mosques and religious schools in Yangon and Mandalay Regions remained closed. Human rights and Muslim groups reported that historic mosques in Meiktila in Mandalay Region, Hpa-An in Karen State, and other areas continued to deteriorate in part because authorities denied permits to perform routine maintenance. In September two mosques in Chauk Township, Magway Region, reopened 10 years after closing following violent clashes between Buddhist and Muslim communities in 2009.

Muslims in Mandalay Region reported continued obstacles to rebuilding mosques after anti-Muslim violence in 2014 but noted some openness among local and regional authorities to reopening mosques in less visible areas. Authorities ordered mosques shut down after the 2013 anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila, and they remained closed, in addition to mosques in Bago and Mandalay Regions. Some Hindu leaders also reported authorities limiting access to religious sites.

According to a CHRO September report, Christian communities in Chin State were still unable to own land registered for religious purposes; instead they used private or individual names to register the land and build houses of worship. A local official said high-ranking government officials in Chin State chose to conduct official visits on Sundays to disrupt church services.

A Chin-based NGO reported local authorities in Chin State and Sagaing Region continued to delay applications from Christian groups and churches to buy land in the name of their religious organizations. Religious groups said individual members continued to circumvent this requirement by purchasing land in their own names on behalf of the group, a practice the government tolerated.

In January, according to the CHRO, the General Administration Department from Mindat, Chin State, ordered organizers of religious events and activities involving domestic and international NGOs, such as workshops, meetings and training sessions, to seek permission at least two weeks in advance from the Chin State government in Hakha. 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 approval from local authorities, according to religious groups.

Sources said the government continued to increase restrictions on both secular and religious civil society organizations holding public events in hotels and other venues, imposing new requirements for advance notice of events and participants, and civil society organizations sometimes turned to churches and other religious institutions in light of restrictions on the use of other venues. Many religious and

civil society organizations said they preferred to receive written authorization from ward, township, and other local authorities before holding events to avoid last-minute cancellations.

The government continued to financially support Buddhist seminaries and Buddhist missionary activities. The government continued to fund two state *sangha* universities in Yangon and Mandalay that trained Buddhist monks under the purview of the SSMNC, as well as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon. According to religious organizations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture financially supported the SSMNC and religious ceremonies.

Teachers at many government schools reportedly continued to require students to recite Buddhist prayers. Many classrooms displayed Buddhist altars or other Buddhist iconography. According to the Chin State Academic Research Network and the NGO Fortify Rights, Christian students were required to convert to Buddhism to access so-called “Na Ta La” schools in Chin State, which were better funded than public schools. The CHRO described Na Ta La schools as a “state-sponsored religious and cultural assimilation program.” The national elementary school curriculum included lessons and textbooks containing “discriminatory and incendiary material,” according to UN and NGO reports. In her March report, the UN Special Rapporteur noted a specific lesson, “We loathe those of mixed blood, for they prohibit the progression of a race.” After more than 100 civil society groups objected to the lesson, the Ministry of Education ordered its removal, according to a report in *The Irrawaddy*.

Several Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several Muslim madrassahs, in Yangon, Sagaing, and elsewhere.

Due to movement restrictions, many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools. Rohingya and Kaman children in central Rakhine had physical access to only one high school in Thet Kae Pyin, Sittwe Township, according to international observers. Authorities generally did not permit Rohingya high school graduates from Rakhine State and others living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar any university students who did not possess citizenship cards from graduating, which disproportionately affected students from religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. These students could attend classes and take examinations but could not receive diplomas unless they had a citizenship card, the

application for which required some religious minorities to identify as a “foreign” ethnic minority.

A human rights organization again reported that schools sometimes submitted citizenship applications on behalf of non-Muslim students while denying the same privilege to Muslim students. Muslim students, after submitting the applications, sometimes had to pay bribes to immigration officials to obtain documentation. According to BHRN, instructors reportedly made anti-Muslim comments in university classrooms, and Muslim students typically were not permitted to join institutes for professional studies. One human rights group documented the teaching of racist and anti-Muslim tenets in schools throughout the country.

According to a United Nations report, the government continued to prevent Rohingya and other Muslims from holding congregational prayers on Friday or during religious festivities. Rohingya refugees reported having been unable to freely celebrate Eid al-Fitr or other religious holidays for the past six years.

According to media reports, Yangon authorities denied Muslims permission to open mosques during Ramadan. In May local officials approved applications to open three temporary Ramadan prayer sites in South Dagon Township, Yangon, but an armed group, including Buddhist monks led by Michael Kyaw Myint and Thiha Myo Naing, arrived at the sites, and the group’s leader threatened to demolish them. Reportedly intimidated by the crowd, the township government canceled prayers and required Muslims to obtain permits from additional departments. The next morning, U Seintita, a pro-tolerance Buddhist monk from Pyin Oo Lwin who was visiting Yangon, handed out white roses to Muslims after prayers, sparking an eponymous movement that spread nationwide. In the face of rising public pressure, the township government reopened the prayer sites. Wunna Shwe, joint secretary of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council Myanmar, said the White Rose campaign was a glimmer of hope amid rising anti-Muslim sentiment. In September Michael Kyaw Myint and Thiha Myo Naing, were sentenced to one year in prison for causing “fear or alarm” to the public under the penal code.

Muslims said government authorities granted limited permission to slaughter cows during Eid al-Adha, consistent with prior years. Media and religious sources said local authorities in some villages restricted the licensing of and butchering of cattle by slaughterhouses, the vast majority owned by Muslims. These restrictions negatively affected business operations and the ability of Muslim communities to celebrate Islamic holidays.

Sources continued to state that authorities generally did not enforce four laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion.”

The Yangon Region military commander publicly donated 30 million kyat (\$20,300) to the Ma Ba Tha in June. A military spokesman later said the donation was “necessary for our religion.” The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture issued a statement that denounced the donation as contravening the SSMNC ban on the Ma Ba Tha.

The military charged prominent monk Myawaddy Sayadaw with defaming the military for his public criticism of its donation to Ma Ba Tha. He stated that Ma Ba Tha broke religious rules by taking money from the military; he said the military was blocking democratic reforms and was full of “thieves.” The case was ongoing at year’s end.

A 2005 local order in Maungdaw Township in northern Rakhine State continued in effect, requiring 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.

According to civil society activists, Rohingya remained unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions.

Buddhists continued to make up nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service. Applications for civil service and military positions required the applicant to list his or her religion. According to one human rights organization, applications by Muslims for government jobs were largely rejected.

Buddhists continued to make up the vast majority of parliamentarians. There were no Muslim members of parliament, and neither the ruling NLD nor the main opposition party ran any Muslim candidates during nationwide elections in 2015 or by-elections in 2017 and 2018. Second Vice President Henry Van Thio, a Chin Christian, continued to serve in his position, and the speakers of the upper and lower houses of parliament were Christian.

Authorities required citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards usually indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. 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.

In May the Foundation for Education Development in Thailand reported Burmese migrant workers who are not members of Burma's officially recognized indigenous groups – including Muslims – continued to be subjected to a troublesome verification processes, hampering their efforts to obtain the necessary official documents. BHRN published a case study of Muslim migrant workers in Thailand who applied to Burmese immigration officials for a formal verification of their nationality, known as a Certificate of Identity (CI). Respondents consistently reported that they had to provide more documentation than non-Muslims, or that authorities said, "We are not giving CIs to Muslims." BHRN's case study found that twice as many Muslims were rejected as were accepted and news reports indicated the issue continued through year's end.

The government continued to call for Rohingya to participate in the government's citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs). The government said these cards were necessary to apply for citizenship under the 1982 citizenship law. NGOs reported that Rohingya were pressured or coerced to accept NVCs. There were reports that government officials required Rohingya to have an NVC to fish or access banking services. Many Rohingya expressed distrust of the process; they said they were already citizens and that they feared the government would either not affirm their citizenship or would grant naturalized rather than full citizenship, which carried fewer rights. Some townships in Rakhine State continued to require Rohingya to identify as "Bengali" to apply for NVCs and listed "Bengali" as their race on their citizenship scrutiny card. At least one NGO stated that NVCs were a method used by authorities to diminish the citizenship standing and future rights of Rohingya by indicating they are foreigners. The few Rohingya who received citizenship through this process said they did not receive significant rights or benefits and consideration of their citizenship applications usually required significant bribes at different levels of government.

State-controlled media continued to frequently depict military and government officials and their 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.

Hate speech against Muslims continued to be widespread on social media. On August 22, Facebook removed 89 Facebook accounts, 107 pages, and 15 groups, as well as five Instagram accounts, for “engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior.” An investigation found that some of this activity was linked to individuals associated with the military.

Sources stated that government officials circulated or advanced rumors and false information concerning Rohingya and other Muslims, including claims of a demographic takeover of Rakhine State by Muslims. According to media reports, the military conducted a coordinated effort to spread anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment through dummy Facebook accounts and other social media.

In August and September the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, Min Aung Hlaing, made several well-publicized visits to Muslim, Christian, and Hindu – as well as Buddhist – houses of worship in Nay Pyi Taw, Mandalay, and Yangon. He also made donations of cash and food. A military spokesperson characterized the visits as a gesture at “political, social, and religious unity.” Some observers said Min Aung Hlaing’s visits were likely to advance his political ambitions.

The government hosted conferences and attended events with a number of interfaith groups, including Religions for Peace, to promote reconciliation, peace, and development through national initiatives and locally in its interfaith councils, the Interfaith Youth Network, and Women of Faith Network. The group’s leadership included Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders.

In May State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the president, and other senior government officials participated in a conference organized by Religions for Peace. During the event, Suu Kyi urged respect for the country’s different faiths.

According to NGOs, the government generally permitted foreign religious groups to operate in a manner similar to nonreligious foreign aid groups. 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 Yangon-based groups to host international students and experts.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

EAGs operating in the country continued to pose a threat. In February assailants thought to be affiliated with the Arakan Army, an armed ethnic group that controls territory in Rakhine and Chin States, abducted and killed Pastor U Thar Tun of the Mara Evangelical Church in Rakhine State, according to Christian media. The UWSA, which controls the Wa Self-Administered Division in Shan State, in December allowed at least some of the Baptist churches it forced to close in September 2018 to reopen, according to a local bishop. The UWSA continued to impose severe limits on Christian worship, teaching, and proselytizing, according to local and national Baptist leaders. The national government exerted no authority inside the Wa territory, which has been under UWSA control since 1988.

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 continued to promote the idea that Burmese Buddhist culture was under assault by Islam and Muslims, who would come through the mountains of western Burma – northern Rakhine State where the Rohingya live – and overwhelm Buddhist areas of the country.

According to civil society activists, opposition from Buddhist monks in a village outside Kalay, Sagaing Region, prevented the building of a church and Christian burials, despite government approval. Reportedly, monks exercised influence over local officials to prevent construction despite higher-level approvals of the construction.

Despite the renewal during the year of a 2017 order by the SSMNC that no group or individual could operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha, some branches of the group continued to use the name Ma Ba Tha, while others used the new name, Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. Many of the group's leaders and members continued to make pejorative and hateful statements against Muslims in sermons and through social media. In a report published in March, the UN Special Rapporteur stated, "The pervasive nature of hate speech [in the country] is alarming." One organization identified more than a dozen prominent Facebook accounts that regularly posted hateful and discriminatory content. In a speech in August, Bullet Hla Shwe, a former lawmaker from the Union Solidarity and Development Party and former military officer, said that the Prophet Mohammad would bomb the U.S. embassy if it posted "insulting images" of him. Authorities

issued an arrest warrant in August on charges of sedition; at year's end he remained at large.

According to local and international experts, Rohingya Muslims were perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of citizenship status, and belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for the Rohingya community. Some civil society leaders said that even among otherwise tolerant individuals, anti-Rohingya sentiment remained prevalent. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice, including social pressure not to rent housing to Muslims in some areas.

Some Buddhist and Muslim community leaders in Mandalay continued to collaborate to quell rumors and prevent violence through formal and informal community-centered activities, such as informational exchanges.

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, including Article 19 and Free Expression Myanmar, continued advocating and consulting on draft legislation to counter hate speech, although parliament did not take up the legislation by year's end.

In Mandalay Region, civil society and interfaith leaders continued to hold meetings and public events to promote peace and religious tolerance for community leaders and youth, as in previous years. According to advocates for tolerance and religious pluralism, events such as trash cleaning and tree-planting were controversy-free ways to initiate intercommunal dialogue and encourage tolerance. A number of interfaith groups continued mobilizing civil society around the country to promote religious tolerance.

In September a court sentenced two individuals who led anti-Muslim protests during Ramadan worship services in South Dagon Township in Yangon to one year in prison for causing "fear or alarm" to the public. In May a group of 100-200 armed protestors, including monks, forced the closure of three temporary Islamic places of prayer established with local government permission after Yangon State authorities denied permission to open mosques during Ramadan. According to media, the crowd pressured local officials to close the worship sites. The township government reopened the prayer sites on May 18 following a campaign of public

support led by U Seintita, a monk advocating tolerance, who distributed white roses to Muslims to show support. Joint-Secretary of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council Wunna Shwe said the White Rose Campaign was a “glimmer of hope amid rising anti-Muslim sentiment.”

In May and November the Religions for Peace Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and Peace in Myanmar convened in Nay Pyi Taw. Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian religious leaders called for religious tolerance and mutual respect.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior U.S. officials – including the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador to Burma, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and human rights – consistently raised ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom in the country with senior government and military leaders. They specifically raised the plight of the mostly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, hardships facing minority religious communities in Kachin and northern Shan States amid ongoing military conflicts, and the advocacy on social media of violence against religious minorities.

The U.S. government hosted survivors of human rights abuses from the Rohingya Muslim and Kachin Christian communities at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in July. At the ministerial, the Vice President stated, “We’re also standing up for the persecuted Rohingya people in Burma. While that conflict has fallen along ethnic lines, we cannot ignore the rise of militant Buddhism against Muslim and Christian minorities that’s taken place.” Referring to the 2017 ethnic cleansing and displacement of Rohingya, he also stated, “A brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya has forced more than 700,000 to flee across the border to Bangladesh. [...] Our words of admonition have seemed to fall on deaf ears.” The United States placed visa restrictions in July on the commander in chief, his deputy, and two brigadier generals for human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities. In December the United States issued Global Magnitsky financial sanctions on these same individuals for serious human rights abuses.

In October the USAID Administrator said, “I visited with Muslim Rohingya who were brutally victimized through extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture,

displacement and destruction. Nothing short of an ethnic cleansing campaign, all driven by intolerance and sectarian hatred.”

In June the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom stated more must be done to allow Rohingya to return safely.

In October the Secretary of State called for nations to join an alliance to promote global religious freedom and respect human dignity and noted the repression of religious freedom in Burma.

The U.S. government further curtailed bilateral military-to-military relations, restricted visas for current and former military leaders in July, imposed additional targeted financial sanctions in December against military leaders and units involved in the 2017 ethnic cleansing in Rakhine State and human rights abuses in Kachin and Shan States, and pressed for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations.

The U.S. government advocated with senior Burmese government officials, in coordination with like-minded diplomatic missions, for the military to drop its legal action against Reverend Samson following his remarks during a meeting with the President.

U.S. government officials continued to call for sustainable solutions to the root causes of discrimination and violence in Rakhine State, including a voluntary and transparent path to provision of citizenship, freedom of movement and access to services for IDPs, and unhindered access for humanitarian actors and media in Rakhine and Kachin States. Embassy officials also urged government and interfaith leaders to improve efforts to mitigate religiously motivated violence in Mandalay, Kachin, and elsewhere. Since August 2017, the U.S. government has provided more than \$729 million in humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh and Burma, of which more than \$116 million is for programs in Burma and more than \$613 million is for programs in Bangladesh.

Embassy officials at all levels emphasized the importance of addressing the effects of intercommunal (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 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.

In May the Department of State Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs led a delegation that engaged government officials, civil society groups, and international organizations on the importance of enacting durable solutions that would allow the Rohingya and other minority populations to live in safety and dignity, with freedom of movement and worship.

Embassy officials traveled to ethnic and religious 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 and Kachin States, areas where conflict or violence have affected religious minorities in recent years, as well as other areas that had suffered from and were identified as at risk of intercommunal/ethnoreligious violence. The multiple visits to Rakhine State by the Ambassador and other officials to assess the situation informed the embassy's efforts and strategies in engaging the government and advocating for the rights of all communities in the state, including religious freedom.

The embassy continued to call for respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and unity in its interactions with all sectors of society, and in its social media accounts. 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, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs, to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance. To advance religious tolerance, the embassy hosted celebrations of Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, and in each case invited members of various faiths to join. The embassy also shared multiple posts on Facebook about religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in the United States.

The Ambassador gave interviews to local media and international media in which he discussed the need for accountability for the 2017 ethnic cleansing and improved conditions for the Rohingya and other minority groups. The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns about religiously based tensions and anti-Muslim discrimination, as well as calling for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance.

Public programs at embassy facilities in Rangoon and Mandalay offered a platform for community leaders, media, students, and others to discuss intercommunal tolerance and respect, often featuring individuals from minority ethnic and religious communities. The embassy hosted programs on digital and media literacy as a way to empower participants to reject online hate speech and the spread of rumors and other misinformation. It also sponsored travel to the United States for training on methods of combating disinformation on social media, including combating the spread of hate speech. As in prior years, the embassy worked 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 18, 2019, 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.