

# Christianity and the state of religious freedom in Burma/Myanmar's Chin State

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## Abstract

Repression and threats to religious and ethnic minorities in Myanmar have continued to increase since the country's formation. This paper focuses on the different phases of repression of the religious rights and freedoms of the Chin people, a religious and ethnic minority in the northwest part of the country. Interviews with key informants, conducted shortly after the 2015 general election, ascertained that the Chin people along with other ethnic and religious minorities had experienced different types of repression under successive governments. Despite such acts by the governing authorities, the Chin Christians have continued to preserve their faith, culture, and language under the guidance of their religious institutions.

**Keywords** religious freedom, repression, Christian, Myanmar, Chin.

## 1. Introduction

The ethnic Chin people in Burma/Myanmar are one of the most diverse groups in the country. The six main Chin tribes – namely Asho, Cho (K'cho), Khumi (M'ro), Laimi, Mizo (Lushai), and Zomi (Kuki) – can be further distinguished into additional sub-tribal categories living in Burma/Myanmar and in neighboring countries including India and Bangladesh.

Most of the Chin people were originally animists or followers of indigenous beliefs. However, a new realization and political consciousness among the Chin, expressed through cultural homogeneity, developed with a framework for Chin nationalism following the conversion to Christianity of many Chin in the late 1890s. Today, more than a century after the first arrival of missionaries in the Chin Hills, most Chin espouse Christianity in a country where the majority of the population is Buddhist and Burmese. In this context, the intersection between ethnicity (Chin) and religion (Christian) has become an important factor in understanding modern Chin identity. However, it has also negatively impacted the socio-economic life of the

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ethnic Chin under successive different governments in Burma/Myanmar. Therefore, this paper explores the different phases of repression and threats that the Chin people have been facing.

This study applies ethnographic methodology and a qualitative case-study method to investigate the systemic threats to the Chins' freedom of religion and their resistance. It draws on in-depth interviews with influential religious and community leaders, government department officials, civil society organizations, and media personnel from Myanmar's Chin State. The sample for this study consists of a dozen Chin people from the southern part of Chin State and a comparable number from the northern part, so as to obtain a balanced perspective on their experience. Those in the south face greater physical insecurity and threats, due to the lesser number of Christians in the area. In the north, nearly the whole population is Christian, and anti-government protests have occurred in response to an order to remove the Christian cross during the period of quasi-civilian or semi-democratic government in early 2015. The interviews include people from different types of livelihoods and backgrounds to ensure representation of all the diverse views and perspectives considered significant to freedom of religion.

## 2. Christianity in Chin State

Nearly 90 percent of the residents of Chin State are Christian. The Chin people were co-founders of the Union of Burma in 1948.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the formation of modern Burma, Christianity was introduced into the territory of what would become Chin State in the late nineteenth century by the American Baptist Mission.<sup>3</sup> The population of Chin State was reported as 478,801 in 2014, representing only 0.93 percent of the total population (52.28 million) of Burma/Myanmar (UNFPA 2014; Department of Population 2015). It is the only state in Myanmar without a Buddhist majority (World Watch Monitor, 2016). However, Christianity is also dominant among the Kachin and Naga peoples in Sagaing Region, and it is practiced widely within Karen and Karenni (Kayah) States.

Burma/Myanmar's religious identity is reinforced at the highest levels of the state, as the Burmese majority openly professes their faith and positions Buddhism as a "special religion" in the country (Constitution 2008:151). According to UNFPA (2015), approximately 80 percent of the total population of Myanmar is Buddhist,

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<sup>2</sup> Burma/Myanmar gained independence from the British on 4 January 1948 after the signing of the Panglong Agreement to establish the Union of Burma between Proper Burma and the Chin, Kachin and Shan frontier areas on 12 February 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur E. Carson was the first Baptist missionary to the Chin people. He and Mrs. Laura Carson arrived in Hakha on 1 March 1899. See Chin Human Rights Organization, *Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Ethnocide against Chin Christians in Burma* (2004). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KX4aUj>.

and Christianity is a repressed religious group (World Watch Monitor 2016; Human Rights Watch 2018). Burma/Myanmar and Laos have some of the highest government restrictions on religious minority communities, comparable to those of other deeply divided societies such as India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka (Pew Research Center 2018). This paper focuses on the state of religious freedom from 1990 and 2010, followed by developments during the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) era of 2011-2015 and then under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK).

### **3. Motivators and drivers of the repression and restrictions**

Buddhism has been the dominant religion for at least a millennium in Burma, dating back to the reign of King Anawrahta (1044-1077), who converted and brought Buddhism in Bagan (Stadtner 2008:206). The history of the Burma dynasty shows that the royal court emphasized elite control of manpower as well as the monarch's role as patron of Buddhism (Myint-U 2001:247). Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2018:42) noted, "Buddhism has been remarkably invoked three times as a potent social and political force: during the British colonization (1885-1948); the parliamentary period (1948-62); and post-transition Myanmar (2011-present).

In modern Burma/Myanmar, the politicization of Buddhism gradually began after the founding of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1906 (Walton 2012), modeled after the Western and missionary-led Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) during colonial times (Lintner 1989:28). The Burmese YMBA strived to preserve the country's Buddhist heritage in the modern world (Human Rights Watch 2009) and transformed itself into the openly nationalist General Council of Burmese (Buddhist) Associations (GCBA) in 1920 (Ramstedt 2014:350). According to Lintner (1989:28), the YMBA primarily drew its support from the educated urban middle class, as can be seen by the fact that one of the early leaders of the YMBA was Chit Hlaing, the son of a barrister educated in England.

After Aung San's death, U Nu, the first and three-time Prime Minister of Burma, promoted a democratic government that was "devoted to the advancement of Buddhism as the State religion" (Leach 1973:33) and emphasized a "programmatic Buddhist revival," utilizing "Buddhist missionary efforts to implement the politics of the nation-state" in independent Burma (Meister 2012:462). U Nu also established a Ministry for Religious Affairs that enabled his government to comprehensively regulate the religious practice of laypeople, monastics, and the adherents of minority religions (Ramstedt 2014:351). Eventually, Buddhism became the state religion in August 1961 through a controversial constitutional amendment that alienated Christians, Muslims, and others. These religious minorities were not threatened yet, however, as their existence was guaranteed by Article 21 of the 1947 Constitu-

tion (Gutter 2019:7; Mang 2016:155). However, the state promoted Buddhism and allocated a budget for Buddhist activities to influence and assimilate religious and non-Burman ethnic minorities in the country.

With the overthrow of U Nu by General Ne Win and the Revolutionary Council (RC) in 1962 (Biver 2014:16) came the “Burmese Way to Socialism” (Rogers 2010:41). The 1947 constitution was abolished (Gutter 2011:7) and the bicameral parliament was dissolved (Lintner 1989:25). This was all done in the name of nationalism and unity, and although it was carried out very differently in practice, their foundations were similar, based on the notion of “one race, one language, and one religion” – that is to say, the Burman (Myanmar) race, the Burmese language, and Buddhism. After this point, Christianity began to be seen as a religion with obscure and alien roots in the country whereas Buddhism was viewed as very much a part of national identity and as widespread (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2018:32). Although their approaches to national integration were different, U Nu and Ne Win both had the same goal of creating a homogeneous people in the country.

There were violent, centralized campaigns during Ne Win’s era, designed to eradicate non-Buddhist religion. Following the military coup in 1962, successive military regimes viewed Christianity as a foreign religion, a political and cultural invasion from the West (Zam Khat Kham 2016:57), and therefore a threat to creating a homogeneous national identity among the citizens of the Union of Burma. This concept arguably resulted in Burmese nationalism and engulfed other minority religions, particularly targeting Christians in Chin State under the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) regime, with a distorted version of Buddhism as a tool for this purpose. Pum Za Mang (2016:149) stated:

The government, since then, nationalized all mission schools, mission hospitals, and other mission assets, expelled all foreign missionaries from Burma, banned national church leaders from leaving the country for further studies, meetings and conferences, and started a campaign of religious restriction against the church, marking not merely the virtual end of the presence of Christian mission in Burma, but also the complete isolation of Christians in Burma/Myanmar from the world church.

Successive military leaders, including the former heads of state Than Shwe and Thein Sein, as well as the NLD-led government, have continued this consistent policy of discrimination, restriction, repression, and threats against the church up to the present day. For instance, the authorities have consistently prohibited the Christians and other minority religions from renovating or building churches. Other religious minority communities, especially Muslims, have also been subjected to various

forms of harassment and discrimination. As Selth (2015:9) has stated, since 1962 Muslims have effectively been forbidden from building additional mosques, just as Christians have been restricted.

As history has shown, the Chin along with the Kachin and Shan were not a part of the administration of Proper Burma under British colonial times. The Chin were living as an independent nation located within the distinct border demarcations until the British annexed their sovereign land. The British officially promulgated a constitution, called the "Chin Hills Regulation," in 1896 and ruled until 1947/1948 (Lian Uk 2008:261). A prominent Chin scholar, Sakhong (2003:139), noted that a Burman police surgeon appointed by the British government at Haka was surprised to see the Chin pupils being required to learn the Burmese language under the instruction of a Karen teacher at the mission school. However, the Chin joined Burma's independence movement with the Kachin and Shan under the leadership of Aung San, in what Scott (2009) described as risking everything so that they may achieve some form of independence and recognition. In 1947, frontier areas including the Chin, Kachin, and Shan signed the Panglong Agreement to establish a federal union based on democratic principles and ethnic equality (Sakhong 2006:21). But the course of Burma's modern history was completely changed, and Aung San's federal, secular vision died along with him on 19 July 1947 when he was assassinated before Burma achieved independence (Rogers 2010:24).

The regime promoted Buddhism with military backup in some non-Burman ethnic nationality areas, such as Chin State where the majority is Christian. In fact, it is hardly possible to point out any particular law that explicitly prohibits minority religious practice or promotes Buddhism. However, successive governments promoted Buddhism using state mechanisms, including budgets allocated under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, later known as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture (MORAC) under the NLD's Suu Kyi government after 2016. For instance, the first of the government's "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (known locally as Na Ta La schools)<sup>4</sup> was opened under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (CHRO 2012:12). The government also gives priority to those who are studying in the program they run under Na Ta La. Students who graduate from Na Ta La colleges are guaranteed an official position in one of the government's departments at the state level. This comment by an interviewee was typical:

In the past, during the military dictatorship, all the leaders or officers in government were Burmese and Buddhist. We sometimes needed to give some money to

<sup>4</sup> Na Ta La is the Burmese acronym for Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development Program, run by the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS) through the state budget mechanism for Buddhism promotion in non-Burman ethnic areas.

officials for no specific reasons in the past. It could be for just to get a favor or for Buddhist activities, and we still continue to give in order to get government jobs here. (Interview 2016)

Many other scholars have claimed that Buddhism also suffered, or that the military government has tried in several ways to control it as well (Matthews 1993:414). The assertion is somewhat factual, but there is no comparison to what has occurred in non-Burman ethnic areas. Since the 1900s, the military government had a “Hills Regions Buddhist Mission” with a state-sponsored budget in Chin State and heavy militarization (Matthews 1993:412; Ministry of Religious Affairs 2005; Crouch 2015:8). The Chin and their ethnic state suffered from religious and political discrimination under the rule of Burma/Myanmar’s Buddhist military regime. Violations of human rights continue to run rampant in Chin State (Hrang Tiam 2010:211). One respondent said that being Chin and Christian can keep people from getting government jobs. Furthermore, it is difficult for Chin Christians to gain promotions even after they are employed in the government sector. This practice of discrimination continues today, particularly in the form of requiring bribes or favoring Buddhists for civil service jobs in the government. Therefore, the relationship between successive military regimes, the quasi-civilian government, and Buddhism has been complex. It has been even more difficult to understand under the NLD-led government, as most of the formerly planned programs were in the process of implementation. This has resulted in a discriminatory practice toward other non-Burman ethnics and non-Buddhists in the country.

#### **4. Phases, characteristics, and illustrations of repression and restriction**

There is no doubt that the restrictions are mostly ordered from the top levels of government, since local authorities have no power to make decisions. Burma/Myanmar has had a long tradition of strong, centralized governance system since the country’s independence. This tradition has continued under successive governments including the USDP and NLD. It is undoubtedly reflected in the military-drafted 2008 constitution.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the repression in Chin State has been very systematic in its discriminatory approach, with little change. Unsurprisingly, one informant, referring to religious discrimination against Christian Chin by the authority, stated:

<sup>5</sup> According to Article 261 (b) of the 2008 Constitution, the Chief Minister is selected by the President from among elected or unelected state-level members of the legislature (the state hluttaw) and also confirmed by the hluttaw. The Chief Minister selects the civilian ministers from among hluttaw representatives or other candidates, and these are assigned portfolios by the country’s President. Moreover, the state or regional Minister for Border and Security Affairs is a military officer nominated by the Commander-in-Chief.

Different Burma leaders from U Nu and U Ne Win's eras have properly planned this [discriminatory] policy. It has been employed as if the policy is of the government. So this has been rooted in the mind of these people [government leaders] for many years. (Interview with a male journalist from Hakha, Chin State, 29 January 2016)

As mentioned, the relationship between state affairs and religion has always been tight, and ever since the country's independence, the regime has sought to combine political beliefs with Buddhist values. According to a religious leader turned NGO worker from Hakha:

The government's policy and practice on favoring Buddhism have not ended with the end of the dictatorship, Ne Win or Than Shwe or our former Chief Minister during USDP, but it is still a continuing process. I don't think this will end easily as it is not something relating only to an individual [leader]. It might have already ended a long time ago if this [discriminatory policy] was only one person's plan or project. (Interview in Hakha, Chin State, 26 January 2016)

Given the fact that religion plays a very important role in the national heritage, its practices, teachings, and symbols have often been used as an effective system of communication and of legitimizing government actions (Juergensmeyer 2010:269). During the military regime, non-Buddhist minorities were depicted as impediments to a homogeneous Burmese Buddhist culture and a common national identity. This contributed to the general internalization of the country's nationalistic xenophobia (Wai Yan Phone 2014).

Although it is tempting to generalize from the experience of Chin and other Christian ethnic nationalities regarding Burma/Myanmar's religious policy and practice, there are some significant differences. The different governments, including the NLD, have all targeted Chin State as it is the only state where Burmese Buddhists are not the majority. However, successive governments have applied different approaches and strategies at different times among other non-Burman ethnic nationalities. For instance, the military government divided the Karen community, especially the armed organization known as the Karen National Union (KNU), using Buddhism and intra-ethnic conflict as its tools (Harriden 2002:84). The division between Christian Karen and Buddhist Karen eventually led to the fall of Manerplaw (Manaplau) in 1994-1995.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This proved particularly damaging in 1994-1995 when a Buddhist faction, the Democratic Karen/Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA), broke away from the Christian-dominated Karen National Union (KNU) and subsequently helped the Burmese Army to capture Manerplaw, which was until then the impregnable base camp of the strongest nationalist group and also the physical and symbolic center of the democracy movement in the "liberated areas."

It is useful to divide the repression and restrictions that Chin State's Christians have experienced into three main phases. The first phase started with the country's popular uprising in 1988 and continued under the military's SLORC/SPDC government until the historic transition of 2010-2011, resulting from the controversial 2008 Constitution drafted by the military. The second phase extends from the transition in 2011 under President Thein Sein of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government until the introduction of the four packages of laws on "Race and Religion Protection" in 2015. The introduction of the NLD-led government, which came to power in early 2016, and the current situation of religious freedom constitute the third phase.

#### **4.1 The first phase (1990-2010): Military impact**

After being in power for more than two decades following a military coup in 1962, General Ne Win was forced to step down in 1988. A series of widespread, unprecedented pro-democracy movements took place as part of a popular uprising against military rule and the accompanying political oppression and economic mismanagement. The protests, inspired by student activists, became known as the 8-8-88 movement. The uprising was later brutally suppressed; the army opened fire on hundreds of thousands of unarmed students, civilians, and civil servants protesting military rule (Clapp 2007:6; Brooten 2016:185). Subsequently, the military managed to reconsolidate its power after it cracked down on the demonstrations. In response to these demonstrations, the military carried out another coup by a different name, SLORC, on 18 August 1988. It nullified the 1974 constitution and promised to hold a multiparty election in 1990 (Bünto 2014:745).

The reestablishment of direct military rule continued from the SLORC to the SPDC under the leadership of Than Shwe. As promised, the regime held multi-party elections in 1990, but it refused to transfer power to the NLD even after that party won a landslide victory. Instead, the military convened a decade-long National Convention (NC) to produce a military-friendly Constitution (Aung Naing Oo 2003). After that convention it failed, the country was ruled by General Than Shwe for another 21 years without a constitution until March 2011.

In terms of the treatment of religious minorities, Pi Oi Lim (age 74 as of her interview in Matupi, southern Chin State on 15 January 2016), whose husband's memorial stone was destroyed by the military in southern Chin State, recalled her own experience during the military regime in the 1990s:

The previous government was totally controlled by the military and the military did not want any symbols related to Christianity. They [military government] destroyed a lot of Christian crosses and imposed control on religious leaders, particularly targeting pastors, as they are the most influential in villages or towns.



The fact that Chin State has the largest percentage of Christians in all of Burma/Myanmar causes this state to remain a target. The regime sent both soldiers and monks to implement what Harrison Akins (2018) called “the institutionalization of the dominant group’s identity as the national identity” (Akins 2018:229-245). A women’s organization leader from Matupi in southern Chin State also noted:

Under the previous [military] regime with heavy militarization in Chin State, we could not build a church. We cannot build a church as we wish. Around 1990 and after 2000, there were many problems in relation to many Christian churches here. (Interview, 16 January 2016)

Direct military rule came to an end when the military government put an end to the ruling SPDC and transferred authority to the newly elected civilian government of Thein Sein in March 2011 (Schearf 2011). Formally, this transfer ended the Burmese military’s deep involvement in politics, which has dominated the country ever since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. However, the country remains effectively under military control, and the army is the arbiter of power in the country. In this sense, the military’s withdrawal from the apex of power after the 2010 general election did not signal a full retreat from politics.

#### **4.2** The second phase (2010-2015): Legalizing religious extremism

As discussed, Burma/Myanmar had undergone a decades-long civil war under successive governments in many forms, including a military dictatorship (Sang Hnin Lian 2015). The military planned a transition through writing its own 2008 Constitution after decades of dictatorship. Subsequently, the years 2008, 2010, and 2012 became key moments in the transition to the first quasi-civilian democratic government in Burma/Myanmar’s political history.

The military government held a referendum in 2008 and approved a new military-drafted constitution, also called the “Nargis Constitution” since it was adopted just eight days after Cyclone Nargis hit Burma/Myanmar, killing some 138,000 people (BBC 2008; Wei Yan Aung 2019). The first general election followed in 2010. However, it was widely condemned by both national and international actors including the United Nations (BBC 2010; Hara 2010:13).

In fact, the 2010 general election ultimately helped to contribute toward the creation of a new quasi-civilian parliament and the formal renunciation of military control of the presidency after more than six decades (UEC 2010; Wilson 2010). Therefore, Myanmar’s former Prime Minister and retired General Thein Sein became the country’s new president in March 2011 (Olarn 2011). Change came thick and fast in the months that followed Thein Sein assumption of this office, as ceasefires were called

with armed ethnic organizations. The by-election of April 2012 improved relations between the government and the opposition, and between the former pariah state and the international community (Lidauer 2012). During this time, many political prisoners were released (though many still remained behind bars or were rearrested) and some exiled dissidents were granted permission to return home without the fear of persecution (Eck 2013; Bangkok Post 2013, 2014). The transition also allowed the media and other civil societies to blossom by ending censorship (Pidd 2012).

During the tenure of the USDP government, however, the ultra-nationalist groups like 'Ma Ba Tha' came to an existence with official backup, support, and are emboldened by the elevation of Buddhism as the *de facto* official religion, combined with state-sanctioned systematic discrimination against religious minorities. In fact, the country's Buddhist majority, the USDP as well as military that has the *de facto* power supported with monetary donation to such ultranationalist group by saying that the group is necessary and should be supported in the name of Buddhism. Indeed, the Ma Ba Tha was born out of the 969 movement, a nationalist campaign that called for the boycott of Muslim-owned business in 2012 (Perera, 2015; Frontier Myanmar, 2015). As a result, they are frequently portrayed as an anti-Muslim organization with strong influence threatens all minority rights. Fleming (2016:10) stated Muslims – and Rohingya in particular – are the primary target of Ma Ba Tha's vitriol. Ma Ba Tha's hateful ideology in the guise of protecting "race and religion" is far-reaching and extremely dangerous – any minority group could become a target of its intolerance and incitement to hatred and violence. Ma Ba Tha, however, are not very active in Chin State as they have a smaller population. Hitherto, there are other Buddhism promotion programs under the government.

In 2012, the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO 2012:3) reported the destruction of 13 Christian crosses by the successive governments where the authorities built at least 15 Buddhist pagodas or monasteries. Moreover, the program director at CHRO also said that "they have documented 13 incidents relating to the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) only in 2013. The violations included an attack on a Chin pastor, threats and intimidation of the Christian community and orders to stop holding worship services." With regard to religious repression, government practice remained essentially the same, as the laws favor the majority and are used for their own purposes through the Department of Religious Affairs they created. Although Burma/Myanmar's 2008 Constitution guarantees religious freedom and equality among all religions, it notes the "special position" of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the majority while Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and animism merely "exist" (Constitution 2008:151; CHRO 2013:1). According to a former government employee, who was working as secretary to the Minister for Economic and Planning in the Chin State government (2011-2015):

There has been a lot of military influence in leadership during the USDP-led government. Many of the practices remained the same as under the military government. For example, in 2012, the Chin State government ordered the destruction of two crosses in Kanpelet, southern Chin State. During that time, all the Chin MPs, Chin political party members, and other civil society groups wrote a letter to Chief Minister Hung Ngai and President Thein Sein to point out that this was unlawful, unconstitutional, and shouldn't be happening in the democratic government. (Interview in Hakha, Chin State on 25 January 2016)

However, the Chin objectors to this treatment have received no official government response to their concerns from that time to the present. The Christian Chin face not just the problem of limits on their religious freedom, but also an ongoing struggle for peace and development. The International Crisis Group (ICG 2013) reported that other new domestic conflicts have emerged since the democratic reform began in 2011. In 2013, Buddhist nationalist activists began mobilizing for the passage of a law that would restrict interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and males of other religions and would require Buddhist women to get permission from their parents and authorities to do so (Hayward and Walton 2016:70). In 2015, the previous government enacted four laws in stages, passed individually by the parliament and signed into force shortly thereafter by President Thein Sein before he left office. These "Race and Religion Protection Laws" severely restrict the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief under international law and present a grave threat to the human rights of various groups, including the Chin. However, the practical implementation of the laws faced little objection as they were passed amidst strong moves to silence civil society organizations.

#### **4.3 Third phase (2016-present): A wave of hope but no promises**

Following the 8 November 2015 election another turning point arrived in the hoped-for transition from authoritarian to civilian rule. The landmark victory of ASSK's National League for Democracy (NLD) was a remarkable moment in the nation's history of Myanmar. People had great hope in ASSK after such a long period of military dictatorship. Recalling the manifesto of ASSK's led NLD campaign in 2015, Rev. Peng Thang from Matupi, Southern Chin State said during the interview on 15 January 2016:

This is our long-time prayer and I think it is coming true. As our Aunty (referring to ASSK, as many people refer her as Amay Suu or Aunty) and her party won the election and are in power, I and many people here think that our country will go positively further and change to a pure democratic country like many other coun-

tries around the world. We believe that she is going to change our country as she made promises to the people.

The people hoped that ASSK would not just change the country from military to civilian government but would enable Burma/Myanmar to stand proudly among other countries around the world. With the people's support and trust, the NLD won almost exactly the same percentage of contested seats in both 1990 and 2015. By securing the vast majority of popular support, the NLD gained control over the parliament (with 887 seats, or 77.1 percent of those contested) and the right to choose the president (BBC 2015; UEC 2015).

The military, however, maintains a strong presence with 25 percent of the seats in parliament, according to the military-drafted 2008 constitution. In other words, the USDP was a clear loser in 2015, but the military was the winner. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that the military had no concerns about the result. Indeed, the military continued to control the key levers of power, including three ministers and the country's economy through its companies and business holdings. Moreover, the military-drafted constitution also barred ASSK from officially becoming president.

During the election campaign, however, ASSK repeatedly said that she would be "above the president." ASSK chose her close confidant, Htin Kyaw, to become president, and after the NLD government was formed, legislation was passed to grant her the new position of "State Counselor," giving her far-reaching power like that of the prime minister and effectively placing her above the president. A government official, however, said, "It is very difficult to see changes in terms of the legal system yet some practices had changed and developed in a better way somehow."

Recognizing changes in the state, many informants also said that they were no longer afraid of the government and felt free to express their views. "We do not need to be afraid of the government. Even if they said they are doing something good for us, we can now question directly and express what we want to the authority," said a 58-year-old man community leader from Hakha (interview, 25 January 2016). In contrast, some people still have little hope unless the 2008 Constitution is changed. A pastor from Hakha expressed his desire for what he hoped to see in the future for Chin State and the country as a whole:

Our country is in transition, and the NLD is in power in the government. Many people no longer are in fear of expressing their views. Recently, people have started to think more about politics. I wish the NLD-led government could stop all the immoral and ruthless practices that we experienced in the past under the previous military government.

However, there has also been an increase in hate speech, protests, and attacks against minorities in some parts of Myanmar, particularly against the Muslim community. Many informants have noticed that, at least for the Chin, that there was a relaxation or the degree of repression; for example, building churches was no longer actively prohibited, though there was no official announcement or order saying that they were openly allowed. On the other hand, the restrictive laws regarding religious minorities were not abolished. In fact, with no legal and policy amendment, the government continues to strictly prohibit, in particular, the building of crosses in Chin State.

During this same period, on the other hand, looking at the situation and treatment that the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim group living in Myanmar's western Rakhine State bordering with Chin State, faced under ASSK's government had not been different from that of the successive governments. As Freedom House (2015) reports stated, "To speak out in support of the Rohingya within Myanmar is taboo." It continued to be the same and many local human rights activists, pro-democracy politicians, including the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi were silent, and as the United Nations reported (Ellis-Petersen and Hogan 2018) ASSK had failed to use her "position as head of government, or her moral authority," to stem or prevent the unfolding events in Rakhine State over the face of the majority Burmese Buddhists population and the military.

Aside from the plight of the Rohingya, further study is needed to determine whether the changes that have occurred in Myanmar to a quasi-civilian government have brought meaningful improvements in the state of religious freedom for minorities particularly for the Chin Christian.

## **5. Conclusion**

To summarize the state of religious freedom in Chin State under the successive governments of Burma/Myanmar, the first major issue was the designation of Buddhism as the state religion by the first Prime Minister, U Nu, in the 1960s. This recognition of Buddhism brought negative consequences for the country's minority religious groups. Some changes in the political system occurred from 1960 to 1988, as the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was adopted by the regime. However, the most significant and rapid changes with severe impact on religious freedom occurred after 1988 when a military coup ended Ne Win's socialist regime.

In the 1990s, heavy militarization came along with the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission, established in the 1950s, and the military initiated its destruction of crosses while not allowing Christians to renovate or build churches in Chin State. Even after the 2010 and 2015 general elections in Myanmar, Christian communities across the country continue to experience deep pain and suffering due to continuing violations

of religious freedom. Institutionalized discrimination against the Christian Chin and other minorities should have been addressed, although as of 2016, some respondents indicated that the NLD government had shown interest in doing so.

In both the northern and southern parts of Chin State, informants interviewed for this study and other stakeholders reported major impact on socio-economic conditions in Chin State because thousands of Chin people were forced to flee to neighboring countries due to the repression of Christian Chin. The moral nature of the Chin people has also been affected. The intentional division of Chin State into northern and southern sections by the government also divided the people's mindset.

The successive government changes in political systems in 1962, 1988, 2010, and 2015 have impacted the people as they have witnessed waves of destruction, socio-economic pressure, and political corruption. The impact of the three phases of repression could be summarized in the words of one town elder:

The very reason [for our struggles] is that the military has ruled our country for many years, which destroyed our mindset and moral character, and we were hopeless for many years. We could not possess a good heart and mind, and we became selfish and inconsiderate of others. We want everything for ourselves, which resulted in many people in this country wanting to become dictators. The citizens became used to ruling by force and power. To make it concise, generally, our mindset has been corrupted for so many years. So, it will be very difficult to make a good change in the mindset of all the people.

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