

World Watch Research

Myanmar: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Since 2006, Yangon (formerly Rangoon) is no longer the country's capital city.

Myanmar: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
54,965,000	4,760,000	8.7

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

In 1948 Burma became independent from Britain. From 1962 to 2011 the country was ruled by an oppressive military junta. A gradual process of democratization then began, most notably visible in the elections won by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2015. She had been re-elected for a second term on 8 November 2020 in elections which she won with a landslide majority of 80%. Apart from the fact that more than one million members from ethnic minorities were not able to vote due to security considerations, the elections were deemed free and fair. However, the Myanmar army (also referred to as the Tatmadaw) opposed the election results, although these had already been confirmed by the country's electoral commission. On 1 February 2021, a [military coup](#) took place and the country has been in turmoil ever since (BBC News, 1 March 2021).

All talks and discussions with ethnic minority groups about their place in the country and a meaningful peace have been derailed by this coup; justice for atrocities committed and human rights violations (including crimes against humanity and even genocide) will remain elusive for the time-being. One of the largest refugee crises in modern times, concerning the Rohingya, continues to be unresolved and even sidelined by the deepening civil war in Myanmar. The refugee crisis has been decried worldwide and heavily affects neighboring Bangladesh. Repatriation from Bangladesh cannot take place as the Rohingya refugees have not received any guarantees of safety on return, and fighting in Rakhine state continues. For the time being, the refugees are stranded in Bangladesh. [Endorsed](#) by UN officials, the Bangladeshi government relocated some of the Rohingya refugees to a remote and flood-prone island called Bhashan Char (Benar News, 2 June 2021), where now around 30,000 refugees live. The [re-emergence](#) of violent Muslim groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), capitalizing on the growing despair and hopelessness in the camps, will further complicate any solution (Benar News, 18 January 2022). Prospects for repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar in the near future [remain low](#) (International Crisis Group - ICG, 22 August 2022).

An immediate reaction to the coup in February 2021 was the formation of a Civil Disobedience Movement ([CDM](#)) with thousands of people, an estimated 40% of all civil servants, announcing they would not work for the military regime (New Mandala, 19 October 2021). This involved normal civil servants as well as teachers and medical staff, who were badly needed when the COVID-19 situation seemed to be deteriorating. The author of the New Mandala report cited above also stated (page 14): "There is little or no room for dialogue, or neutrality, in post-coup Myanmar. The military, which sees the CDM as a major obstacle to maintaining its political power and coercive and centralized rule, will continue to take the strongest possible measures against the movement and its supporters. The targeting of healthcare workers and medical facilities associated with the CDM, even during the pandemic, is evident." The CDM's influence diminished over time as more robust forms of resistance were seen as necessary to counter an increasingly violent regime.

Following the February 2021 coup, Aung San Suu Kyi was once more put under house arrest and charged with a variety of political and non-political crimes, she has been sentenced [multiple times](#) and

faces a possible total of 190 years in prison (Reuters, 27 April 2022). The more violent form of resistance, as can be seen in the creation of the [People's Defence Force](#) (The Guardian, 1 June 2021), still did not lead to a centralized opposition force. The various [groups](#) within the PDF are not as organized or coordinated as one might expect, but they have nevertheless caused the Tatmadaw significant casualties (ICG, 30 June 2021). According to reports, these forces have [matured](#) over time (Jamestown, 30 July 2021). In a dangerous twist of events, the beleaguered Tatmadaw has resorted to equipping and training [pro-government militias](#), especially in the Burman Buddhist heartland (ICG, 6 April 2022). While this strategy has largely failed, it illustrates how much the Tatmadaw is stretched, clarifies that the resistance is by no means limited to ethnic minorities and adds another violent actor to an already crowded field.

In March 2023, the Tatmadaw decided to dissolve Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, underlining that any moves towards elections either later in 2023 or 2024 can only be described as a "[road to nowhere](#)" (ICG, 28 March 2023). Any hopes for a quick end to the war [remain elusive](#), even though the regime has indicated its wish to revive the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (RFA, 17 May 2023). Three powerful ethnic armed groups launched "Operation 1027" in October 2023 which stretched government forces even thinner and forced it to focus on the [Burmese heartland](#) (IISS, 31 March 2024). As the recent battles around the city of Myawaddy (near the Thai border) have shown, it is neither easy for the Tatmadaw, where soldiers and whole battalions are being [captured](#) or fleeing (Benar News, 11 April 2024) nor for the various ethnic rebel groups who have to overcome differences and [coordinate](#) action (Reuters, 18 April 2024). While Myawaddy was eventually recaptured by government forces, at least for the time-being, the episode shows that the ongoing civil war is an increasing headache for Myanmar's neighbors, especially for [China](#), which values peace at its borders particularly highly (USIP, 11 April 2024).

The elected parliament, which was suspended by the coup leaders, created an interim government in exile - the "National Unity Government" (NUG) - and called for a "[people's defensive war](#)" (CNN, 7 September 2021). Malaysia was the first country to [make contact](#) with the NUG in exile and called upon other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to follow suit (Benar News, 25 April 2022); however, ASEAN did not make any progress in this respect. But even beyond ASEAN, contacts with the NUG are rather sporadic and the NUG has no control over the traditional ethnic insurgent armies nor the PDFs.

Both army personnel and some ethnic insurgents are involved in producing and transporting [synthetic drugs](#) and there is too much money involved to let a civil war disturb such good business. The United Nations has found that [opium production](#) in Myanmar almost doubled since the military coup on 1 February 2021 (RFA, 26 January 2023). At the same time, lawless zones are also [hotspots for human trafficking](#) and organized crime (USIP, 9 November 2022). This has wider consequences, not only for other Asian countries, but also worldwide. As these zones are mainly found in the remote and border regions of Myanmar, Christian minorities living in these regions are affected by them as well. Due to the lawless situation, Christians are not only hard-pressed by a government relentlessly attacking everyone it assumes to be connected to the opposition, but also by groups benefitting from organized crime. The exploitation of resources like jade and timber are lucrative, too; hence the fighting to gain control of towns like Hpakant in Kachin state.

Political and legal landscape

Before the February 2021 coup, the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) had been focused on the Bamar people and did not reach out to ethnic political parties effectively. The peace process had also made no tangible progress. Despite this, the General Election on 8 November 2020 did [not go too well](#) for the ethnic parties, except in Rakhine and Shan states (ICG, 12 November 2020) and the NLD won some 82% of all votes. However, in the wake of the military coup, issues like these have now taken a backseat, although the regime initially promised that the suspension of the government would only last for one year, after which new elections would be called. The regime backpedaled on this and a second promise for elections in 2024 is dependent upon whether the state is peaceful and stable - and even then, elections might only be held [in some parts](#) of the country (Reuters, 25 March 2024). One prerequisite for a nationwide election is a [census](#) and consequently, the regime declared in June 2023 that it had almost completed a new census, a task that neutral observers say is impossible to achieve in a civil war situation where the regime is probably in control of less than 50% of the country's territory (RFA, 28 June 2023).

The ethnic minorities consist of several dozen groups making up more than 30% of the country's population, many of them being Christian or containing large Christian groups. No matter which government or regime is in power, building up trust with the ethnic minorities is a necessity, but has become a major challenge after decades of war. Aung San Suu Kyi, despite all her personal achievements, is basically regarded as being a member of the Burmese ("Bamar") nobility who is not seriously interested in the plight of ethnic and religious minorities, even more so since January 2020, when she [defended](#) Myanmar in person against the war crime accusations before the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Irrawaddy, 23 January 2020). Meanwhile, in March 2022, the US government declared the atrocities against the Rohingya as [genocide](#) (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2022) and the World Court (the new name for the ICJ) has confirmed that it does have [jurisdiction](#) in the case bringing genocide claims against Myanmar (Reuters, 23 July 2022).

As mentioned above, opponents of the coup regime have formed a [National Unity Government](#) - NUG (Reuters, 16 April 2021), which includes several ministers who are Christian, and aims to form a federal democracy by [uniting](#) ethnic Burmese with many ethnic minorities (The Irrawaddy, 16 April 2021). However, actual power on the ground arguably lies with the numerous PDFs and especially with the "Three Brotherhood Alliance". Regional efforts by neighboring ASEAN states to negotiate with the regime led to a ["Five points consensus"](#) in April 2021 (Al-Jazeera, 24 April 2021), but this consensus has been widely ignored by the coup leaders in Myanmar. Indonesia, which had the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023, [tried to push](#) for a solution, but has also met with no success (Reuters, 10 May 2023). A solution is desperately needed since the ongoing conflict has serious consequences for the [regional stability](#), not least of which are the lawless zones which have developed fast and which China, in particular, has a keen interest to eradicate (USIP 1 February 2023) - see also above: *Recent history*.

The Myanmar Buddhist Association indicated that it was choosing to [distance](#) itself from the military coup, seeing similarities between the Buddhist understanding of compassion (*metta*) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (The Diplomat, 18 March 2021). Although it called for an immediate end to all acts of violence, Myanmar's [Buddhist clergy](#) has largely remained silent in the face of the unfolding civil war (ICG, 10 March 2023). The ICG report states (on page 12): "Even those monks who might otherwise lean toward supporting the revolution may worry that doing so contributes to a decline in

monastic authority in the country. They are keenly aware that the parallel authority, the National Unity Government (NUG), relies for its armed resistance on the support and sanctuary provided by predominantly Christian ethnic armed groups, which many monks expect will push any future democratic government to adopt a more explicitly secular approach.” Meanwhile, it is clear that [religion](#) is already playing a significant role in the conflict (Jamestown Foundation, 17 March 2023). While the Buddhist clergy’s neutral stance has deeply religious and doctrinal reasons, the ICG report shows that there are also pragmatic considerations playing out. At the same time, war parties and clergy likewise are already preparing for an after-conflict future, however elusive it may currently appear. The ICG report quotes a member of an armed resistance group as saying (page 17): ‘Our leaders are pressuring the NUG not to work with the Sangha because of the bad image MaBaTha has given it. If you want to move to a federal union, you cannot leverage religion.’” On the other hand, some monks are fiercely resisting the coup, even taking up arms.

The [killing of two Buddhist monks](#) (one being a highly influential abbot) earlier in June 2024 escalated fears of religious conflict adding a new dimension to the ongoing civil war. It appears that the military regime carried out the targeted killing hoping to pit Buddhist clergy against anti-regime forces, by blaming opposition forces for the assassination. However, the [regime had to backtrack](#) and apologize after video footage and a surviving monk’s report became public (AP News, 28 June 2024). The army’s public apology illustrates the regime’s attempt at putting on a show of piety to stay in the good graces of Buddhist religious leaders. The fact that the army first tried to squarely blame the assassination on opposition forces, shows that the military regime will do anything it deems necessary to stay in power. It only backtracked, when it realized the smokescreen had failed.

Another development to watch is the question of international relations and which countries will be prepared to recognize the new leadership, even if only de facto. So far, no nation has publicly recognized the military leaders and fellow states in ASEAN even excluded the regime from participating in their meetings. Myanmar’s [isolation strategy](#), already known from the Cold War era, is termed ‘learning to walk with only a few friends’ (New Mandala, 7 March 2022). In the current geopolitical situation it means that the regime’s main friends are China and Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine has consequently not been condemned by Myanmar. Arguably, the most important question is how the country’s big neighbor China will position itself. While it will definitely not be happy with a prolonged time of unrest (and even less happy about protestors succeeding in their goals), it is likely that China will follow ‘realpolitik’ in extending a de facto recognition. In a sign of growing unhappiness, while [Beijing’s support](#) for the military regime in Nyapidaw is still continuing, there have been changes. For the first time since China was seated at the UN Security Council in 1971, it opted to water down rather than veto the resolution on Myanmar (USIP, 24 February 2023).

In another strong, yet underreported, signal, the new Chinese Asian affairs special envoy, first met with northern ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar before meeting with the country’s military leaders. China is possibly reacting to the increasing reputational cost of its former Myanmar policy, especially among ASEAN members. At the same time, the [visit of China’s Foreign Minister](#), Qin Gang, to Naypyidaw in May 2023 has been a clear sign that the Communist Party is betting on the military regime (Al-Jazeera, 3 May 2023). China is also widely believed to have at least tacitly approved “Operation 1027”, in a strong sign of its unhappiness with the regime’s unwillingness or inability to bring the country’s lawless zones under control. Russia continues to be the country’s biggest arms

supplier; diplomatic ties with the Kremlin became closer after Russia invaded Ukraine (ICG, 4 August 2022).

Neighboring countries like [India](#) and [Thailand](#) have tried to stay neutral in the conflict, but are increasingly affected by refugees crossing their borders, although they are trying to shield themselves from them, even sending them back in the case of Thailand (The Diplomat, 25 January 2022 and ABC News, 8 April 2022). Although the neighboring countries have positioned themselves quite clearly against the coup, this does nothing to change facts on the ground.

Christians are in the midst of the ongoing fighting throughout the country and increasingly in the cities as well. The Tatmadaw airstrikes and bombardments have caused scores more to flee, adding to the more than 100,000 Christians already languishing in IDP camps in Kachin state alone. There are more in Chin and Shan states and displacement camps have also been set up in Karen and Kayah states as well as abroad. Any quick solutions to their plight seem unlikely. Also, with the difficult COVID-19 situation throughout the country, conditions threatened to become almost unbearable in IDP camp set-ups.

As the USCIRF stated in a November 2021 [country update](#), Christian religious leaders and church buildings have been targeted by the Tatmadaw, an assessment which has been confirmed by other observers to be the case almost a year later. The 2019 investigation focusing on the Rohingya, which was carried out by the [International Fact-Finding Mission](#) of the UN, had already found hints of systematic attacks being carried out against Christians. However, the current conflict is far broader and is [disproportionately affecting Christian communities](#) in Chin, Kachin, Karen and Kayah states as well as in the Sagaing region (UCA News, 24 March 2022). In an [update](#) to its previous report, the International Commission of Jurists also found that religious sites are used for military purposes and that since 2022, there has been an increasing trend of targeted attacks and arrest of Christian church leaders based on their ethnicity (ICJ, 29 June 2023).

Kachin state and Northern Shan state (NSS) - the region where "Operation 1027" started and succeeded - are in a state of protracted crisis, characterized by ongoing and sporadic conflict, unresolved political grievances and an array of competing interests over resources ranging from logging and minerals to illicit drugs. With the escalation in fighting between regime forces and the Kachin rebels, Christians are being killed, detained and forced to flee in Kachin. New refugee camps have been created in the majority-Christian Kachin state in order to handle the influx. The government forbids any international aid delivery and denies virtually all access for the United Nations and international humanitarian groups. These restrictions heighten the risk of abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.

A country expert summed up the situation in Myanmar as follows: "Myanmar is no longer a safe place for the people especially for the ethnic minorities as we have witnessed the collapse of civilian rule, arbitrary arrests and indiscriminate attacks against civilians by the military. ... The military carries out violence against civilians and the communities are being uprooted as thousands flee violence and become refugees in neighboring countries." At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the coup triggered resistance coming not just from ethnic minorities, but also from the Burman Buddhist heartland, as explained above.

Gender perspective

Myanmar has a pluri-legal system, comprised of customary, religious and civil laws. Georgetown’s [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) 2019/20 identified 35 laws that were discriminatory towards women. Current legislation fails to protect victims from domestic violence and marital rape. Positive developments include the passing of the Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Bill in 2019, although this has been criticized for falling short of international standards ([IDEA, 7 July 2022, p. 6](#)).

The military’s forceful takeover of the civilian government in February 2021 has significantly negatively impacted the rights of women and girls ([ICG, 16 February 2023](#)). Despite the country’s former leader being female, the exclusion of women from government positions has been cited as a factor that contributed to the coup, as the democratic party struggled to implement deep institutional change. Whilst female participation rate in parliament grew from 5% to 11.3% between 2015 and 2020, there has long been exclusion of women from many significant military and civil roles ([The Conversation, 21 February, 2021](#)). Furthermore, [female representation in parliament](#) dropped from 16.8% in 2020 to 15.3% in 2021 (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). In a [CEDAW periodic review](#), it was also observed that military and security officials have long been granted impunity from human rights abuses (CEDAW, 18 March 2019).

Religious landscape

Myanmar: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	4,760,000	8.7
Muslim	2,123,000	3.9
Hindu	962,000	1.8
Buddhist	40,603,000	73.9
Ethnic religionist	5,159,000	9.4
Jewish	34	0.0
Bahai	96,700	0.2
Atheist	21,700	0.0
Agnostic	251,000	0.5
Other	988,130	1.8
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD 2024 estimates, Christians make up 8.7% of the population, Buddhists 75.6% and Muslims 3.7%. The 2014 government census (published in August 2016) puts Christians at 6.2%.

Christians in Myanmar consider this figure far too low, as counting was not carried out in war-torn, Christian-majority Kachin state. Most Christians belong to the ethnic minorities and not to the Burmese (“Bamar”) majority. According to the contested government census, Buddhists make up 87.9% and Muslims 4.3% (around one million Rohingya had not been counted and it is estimated that up to 400,000 are still living in Rakhine state).

The adoption of the so called "Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion" in August 2015 was celebrated by nationalist Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha countrywide. Those laws were first and foremost targeted against the Muslim minority, especially the Rohingya of Rakhine state, living in the borderlands with Bangladesh. However, Christians are affected as well: Conversion from one religion to another involves having to follow an administrative process including notification to different authorities. Any mixed marriages require in practice a conversion to Buddhism, thus protecting Buddhist women from Muslim men. However, there are few such cases.

Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist and Buddhists played a role in opposing the military regime in 2007. Before that, radical Buddhist groups had not been politically active. However, in 2012 when the movement “969” emerged (later called “Ma Ba Tha”), this quickly changed. This group has a nationalist agenda and calls fellow religionists to defend the country against any perceived threats. Ma Ba Tha was banned, but re-emerged under a different name, and was banned in 2018 again. However, it is very much alive and some local branches do not just simply ignore the ban, they also still use its old name.

Most people belonging to the Muslim minority do not have citizenship and the majority of them have left the country due to ongoing persecution. A deadly attack against a border post in October 2016, leaving nine guards dead and claimed by a radical Islamic group, led the authorities to become even more active against Muslims, pushing an estimated 700,000 across the border into refugee camps in Bangladesh in August 2017.

Radical Buddhism has been targeting Muslims more than Christians, but reports say that Buddhist monks continue to convert children of Christian minorities to Buddhism by luring them into temples. Stronger pressure and violence come from the army, however, where even the killing of Christians has been reported. The regime is stirring up [religious sentiment](#) and encourages people to rally along religious lines, this may even go as far as killing Buddhist monks in false flag attacks, as some observers state (UCA News, 16 March 2023). Until now, persecution by monks and radical Buddhist groups has not increased - however, now that the majority of Muslims are out of the country or are sufficiently intimidated, radical Buddhists may start targeting other minorities more intensively.

The continued fighting with the Arakan army in Rakhine and Chin states is a reminder that the country's nationalism is not purely motivated by religious reasons, but has strong ethnic overtones as well. The fighters of the Arakan army are Buddhists but oppose what they see as the Bamar ("Burmese") dominance. Christians in Chin state were strongly affected by this conflict as well, but all this has been eclipsed by the Tatmadaw's battles with units of the Peoples Defence Force (PDF) in ethnic and religious minority regions.

Economic landscape

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Myanmar](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income:** 4,038 (constant 2017 USD PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 38.3%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 21.9%. 24.8% of the people are living below the national poverty line
- **Remittances:** 2% of the GDP (2022)

According to [World Bank Myanmar data](#) (accessed 7 August 2024):

- Myanmar is classified as a lower-middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 4,250
- **GDP per capita growth rate: 3.3% (2022):** -12.6% in 2021
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** Poverty almost halved, falling from 48% in 2005 to 25% in 2017. The poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP) is 24%.

Myanmar is potentially a rich country as it holds vast natural resources, for example in oil and gas, but even more in timber, gold and jade, which is all worth billions of dollars. It also has a huge potential in exporting renewable energy in providing water power to neighboring countries. However, the February 2021 military coup and the slowly unfolding civil war have jeopardized any economic development and sent it into turmoil and decline.

The World Bank summarized in its [Myanmar country overview](#) (last updated: 3 April 2024):

- "In 2011, a political and economic transition process began under a transitional military government, with the first democratic elections held in 2015. From 2011 to 2019, Myanmar experienced high economic growth, averaging 6 percent per year, coupled with significant reduction in poverty. This was bolstered by economic reforms, lifting of sanctions, and optimism for greater stability. At the same time, the underlying political economy remained fragile. In 2017, there was massive violence in Rakhine State leading to one of the largest waves of refugees fleeing their homes. In February 2021, a military coup set back the country's democratic transition and development and resulting in a sharp increase in internal conflict and displacement. According to the UN, approximately one-third of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, including six million children. Like other countries in the region, Myanmar has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine and has been facing rising food and energy prices. These recent crises have eroded many of the development gains achieved over the past decade. In addition, Cyclone Mocha, a Category 5 storm struck in May 2023, with approximately 1.2 million people affected."
- "Myanmar's economy is expected to have grown by just 1 percent over the year to March 2024, with businesses continuing to face a very difficult operating environment. Conflict has escalated across much of Myanmar since October 2023, driving significant internal displacement, disrupting key overland trade routes and increasing logistics costs. Even if conflict does not escalate further, growth is expected to remain subdued over the rest of 2024 and into 2025 given broad-based constraints across productive sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, and trade. The size of Myanmar's economy remains around 10 percent lower than it was in 2019, indicative of the per-

sistent impacts of recent shocks to both the supply and the demand side of the economy."

Any modest growth or recovery are hindered by low household incomes and by the uncertainty of a prolonged and entrenched civil war. At the beginning of the conflict, activists called for and implemented a [boycott](#) against Chinese products (RFA, 10 March 2021) and some Chinese-owned factories were attacked and destroyed. In the long-term, the [withdrawal](#) of foreign investors like Telenor, which sold its operations in telecommunications in July 2021, might prove to be more damaging (Channel News Asia, 8 July 2021). Even some of the most faithful investors (e.g. from Japan and South Korea) are rethinking their commitment. However, the meeting of foreign ministers at the 7th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation conference held in Bagan/Myanmar in July 2022 showed that while China is pushing for the security of its investments, it is willing to [continue developing](#) the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 11 July 2022). Consequently, China continues to develop the [CMEC](#) (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor), where this is possible from a security point of view (The Diplomat, 1 February 2023).

Most Christians in Myanmar live in rural areas which have not seen high levels of economic development and often struggle to make ends meet, especially when they are living as IDPs. The livelihood of most Christians has been affected by the economic downturn since they most often work in the agricultural sector. A country expert explained: "Since commodity prices are going up, it affects the income of Christians and churches. Some churches cannot support their pastors. Churches are accommodating many displaced believers, but due to economic hardship, they cannot support Christian IDPs. Money transactions are restricted, controlled and monitored by the military. In some areas, groceries and medicines are limited for buying."

Additionally, Myanmar faces many environmental problems and the government angered China by stopping the building of the large Myitsone dam in Kachin state, which China really wants to see built. It would seem that Myanmar's military rulers are simply not powerful enough to push the project through. The military regime has made sure that the dire economic situation of Myanmar will [stay manageable](#) by approving heavy Chinese investment in the construction of a 2.5 billion USD gas-powered power plant (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 31 May 2021). Economic reasons seem to trump fears and reservations on both sides.

The military authorities still dominate some industrial sectors such as energy production. The timber industry is also managed by the army through private partnerships and illicit channels. Timber is mostly located in ethnic territories and as the logging is not being carried out in a sustainable way, supplies are decreasing. But it is still an important source of income for both the army and ethnic insurgents and the former already allegedly sold illegally logged timber to China after the coup. Jade is another commodity the army exploits; it is a multi-billion dollar business and is in high demand, especially in China. If Christian settlements are in the way, since they belong to the ethnic minorities, the inhabitants will simply be chased away without anyone caring. The dangers of jade mining came back to public memory when [more than 200 jade "scavengers"](#) were killed by a landslide in July 2020 (RFA, 13 July 2020). Fighting [increased](#) in the jade mining areas after the military coup, showing how lucrative the mineral is for both the army and other armed groups (Global Witness, 29 June 2021).

Another illicit and allegedly growing source of income is drug production and trading. Myanmar is the second-largest producer of opium after Afghanistan and the Myanmar army (as well as ethnic

insurgency armies) are involved in this business. The country's northern region is part of the famous so-called "Golden Triangle". Opium is not the only drug produced in Myanmar, although its cultivation is strongly increasing; methamphetamine is even more lucrative and its production is increasing even in the midst of the developing civil war (see above: Recent history). Army generals and their family members are also [directly benefitting from the war](#), e.g., by running companies procuring weapon systems, often channeled through Singapore (Reuters, 7 September 2021).

Gender perspective

Women and girls are more economically vulnerable than men. Whilst both genders have equal rights of inheritance under law, in practice it is difficult for women to access inheritance following a divorce or the death of her husband. This is due to religious customary laws that attribute greater economic power to men (particularly in the Chin and Shan states), as well as the ongoing practice of widow inheritance, a custom whereby the brother-in-law of a widow is expected to care for a widow following his brother's death. This latter custom has [been heavily criticized](#) for objectifying women as property to be inherited, rather than individuals capable of inheriting and managing their husband's estate (Asian Development Bank, Situation Analysis 2016). Although Myanmar has succeeded in achieving gender parity in regard to enrolment rates in primary and secondary education, female participation in the labor market lags behind men, in part due to the widespread conflict, with just 44.7% of women in the labor force, compared to 74% of men ([UNDP Human Development Report Myanmar](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). Such economic pressure restricts the freedom of Christians, especially female converts. Christian men, too, face challenges within the workplace such as forced labor or the denial of job opportunities.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [CIA World Factbook Burma](#) (accessed 7 August 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Myanmar](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Burman (Bamar) 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%
- **Main languages:** Burmese (official). [This language](#) is spoken by two thirds of the population, minority languages - most of which are using the Burmese script are Shan, Karen, Kachin, Thamizh, Chin and Mon languages and dialects.
- **Urbanization rate:** 32.1% (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 89.1% of population of 15 years and above (2019).
- **Mean years of schooling:** 6.5 years.
- **Health and education indicators:** The number of physicians per 10,000 people is 7.4, the number of hospital beds is 10. The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 24:1.

According to [World Bank Myanmar data](#) (accessed 7 August 2024):

- **Population/Age distribution:** Under age 14 - 24.9%; above age 65 - 6.8%
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 104%, the enrollment rate was 119 (2018)
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 2.9%, the rate of vulnerable employment 62% (modeled ILO estimate)

IDPs/Refugees

The UNHCR published the following [Regional Update](#) estimates concerning IDPs and refugees (Myanmar Humanitarian Update, 5 April 2024):

- 2,800,000 people internally displaced as of 25 March 2024 (this means an increase of more than one million since October 2023).
- 2,500,000 people newly displaced IDPs since February 2021.
- 1,327,064 refugees and asylum-seekers in neighboring countries as of [21 June 2024 \(UNHCR, Operational Data Portal\)](#).

However, it should be kept in mind that these numbers are fluid and can be added to by the fighting throughout the country as well as by political decisions such as the [policy of closing IDP camps down](#), as has happened in Kachin state (Myanmar now, 11 October 2023).

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Myanmar](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.608, Myanmar ranks 144th out of 193 countries and is in the range of "medium human development". The country saw a constant improvement of indicators, although in the war-affected areas the situation is different.
- **Life expectancy:** 67.3 years
- **Median age:** 30.4 years
- **GINI coefficient:** 30.7
- **Gender Inequality Index:** Myanmar ranks 119th, with a score of 0.479.
- **Unemployment:** While the unemployment rate is very low at 1.6%, 59.1% of all people in the workforce are in vulnerable employment and 48.9% of the workforce is in agriculture. The percentage of youth between 15 and 24 neither in school nor in employment is 19.6%.

Myanmar's patchwork of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups has already been described above, as well as the challenges caused by the continued fighting and the politics of "Burmanization", which is strongly backed by the Myanmar army. Before being ousted from government by the February 2021 coup, the NLD had been calling for a government of national unity with ethnic parties, which seemed back then a tall order and may have contributed to the army's decision to stage a coup. It should be repeated, however, that the armed conflict against the various minority population groups is not exclusively religious. An example is the violent conflict with the Arakan army in Rakhine State. The Arakan are Buddhist but this is an ethnic conflict, not a religious one.

As the data shown above makes clear, neither the economy nor the question of minorities are the only challenges, although many problems are inter-linked. For example, whereas the school enrolment rate is high, many students in the ethnic minority areas are facing difficulties in attending school or it is even made impossible if they are living in one of the IDP camps and higher education remains a far-off dream. This is all the more true as the number of IDPs dramatically rose due to increased fighting. Many of these facilitators also participated in the CDM.

Many people are forced to work in subsistence farming and are therefore very dependent on weather conditions and also on such factors as where battles are taking place. The comparably low unemployment rate has to be read against this background. There is little chance of improving the life

of the general population as long as the peace process makes no tangible progress. The World Bank stated in its [Economic Monitor](#) published in December 2023:

- "Consumer prices rose by almost 29% in the 12 months ending in June this year, and the more recent drop in the value of the kyat and escalation in conflict have led to further price rises in the months since. Household incomes continue to be severely strained. In surveys conducted by IFPRI in mid-2023, 40% of households reported earning less than in the previous year, with median real incomes declining by around 10 percent. Measures of food insecurity have also worsened."

When, as is likely, Myanmar becomes increasingly isolated internationally, it will rely more on China, even though this may be a relationship filled with mistrust. Finally, drug addiction is increasingly becoming a problem, also among Christians, and neither the authorities nor the churches seem to know how to handle this.

The country report of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI Country Report Myanmar 2024](#)) states:

- "Property rights are not properly enforced. There are common land disputes (some involving foreign investments). Ownership of land is often contested, owing to the historical legacy of military expropriations. About one-third of the country's land – 50 million acres – is classified under the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law. A 2018 amendment to the law recognized customary land ownership by rural ethnic minorities. However, ethnic communities are often not aware of these rights. With an opaque practice of land titling and unclear ownership structures, squatters are, de facto, permitted to use unoccupied land. In addition, land grabbing by the military and powerful businessmen (often with links to the military) continues in many rural areas. Owing to the persistent lack of civilian oversight over the military, such acts have usually been met with impunity, even during the reform period. Since the coup, Myanmar's authorities have started to seize the properties of regime opponents and their families to intimidate them."

The cyclone Mocha, hitting Myanmar in May 2023, impacted more than [3.4 million people](#) living in its high impact zone (World Food Program, Situation Report Myanmar, 12 June 2023). Organizations like the World Food Program estimate that the [number of food insecure people](#) is about 13.2 million people (WFP, Country Emergency Page Myanmar, accessed 3 July 2023). Meanwhile, large numbers of people (especially from ethnic minorities) have been fleeing both internally and abroad.

Gender perspective

Whilst Myanmar once had a matrilineal system, it is now a deeply patrilineal society, in part due to the influence of the Myanmar army as a [male-dominant political actor](#) (Foreign Policy, 23 March 2021). Social norms expect men to assume the position of heads of the household and financial providers, whilst women are expected to bear greater domestic responsibility, often in addition to paid work. Gender-based violence – which [worsened](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNDP, Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar, March 2022) – is broadly accepted in Myanmar culture; according to a state-funded [2015/16 Demographic and Health Survey \(p.245\)](#), 51% of women and 49% of men believed that a husband was justified in beating his wife in set circumstances. This broad acceptance of gender-

based violence and related impunity for perpetrators provides an avenue that can be exploited for the means of religiously motivated persecution.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Myanmar](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 44.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 33.8% of total population. According to [NapoleonCat](#) (July 2024), male Facebook users numbered 52.8% and female 47.2%.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 117.4% of total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Myanmar](#), the country dropped a further two points in the index and is "Not free":

- "The military, which seized control of the state in a February 2021 coup, continued to repress internet freedom in the face of ongoing civil disobedience, political opposition, and armed resistance during the coverage period. Localized internet shutdowns, data price hikes, online trolling, and arbitrary prosecutions that result in long prison terms have created a high-risk and hostile online space for the public at large. The military's direct and indirect control over all major service providers has enabled the enforcement of strict rules on user identity registration as well as mass censorship and surveillance. Despite these and other obstacles—including detentions, egregious physical violence, and the country's first executions in decades—people in Myanmar continue to use digital tools to share information and organize opposition to the military."

Freedom House sums up the major developments as follows:

- The military's broad attempts to make the internet a hostile space, combined with a faltering economy and attacks on infrastructure, resulted in a globally rare decline in internet penetration.
- Authorities frequently enforced short-term, localized internet shutdowns to prevent the opposition from organizing or sharing information about atrocities, effectively restricting internet access for millions of users.
- After the country's last two foreign-owned telecommunications service providers, Telenor and Ooredoo, sold their Myanmar operations, all providers were left under either direct or indirect military control, enabling mass interception without safeguards.
- Most internet users remained confined to a list of approximately 1,500 military-approved websites; only those with circumvention tools were able to bypass extensive blocking and reach other internet resources.
- Scores of internet users were imprisoned for their online activities during the coverage period; military courts issued multiyear prison sentences and carried out executions in some cases.

Social media is widely used for communication and opinion-making, but it is also used by radical monks and the government for slandering Christians and warning against the Christian faith. Social media users and those quoted in the media have faced prosecution for expressing their views on certain topics, particularly when they entail criticism of the authorities. They faced accusations of defamation and incitement filed by the army and politicians and were charged under Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law, which includes bans on online activity deemed threatening or defamatory.

Concerning surveillance, it has been reported that the regime plans to install surveillance cameras with [facial recognition](#) capabilities in all 14 states and regions of Myanmar, bought from Chinese companies (Reuters, 11 July 2022). While cameras have been installed in big cities like Yangon before under the democratically elected government, these plans are a significant extension to that.

Security situation

The security situation in Myanmar changed in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup and has become much more volatile. Except for the coup itself, the situation is complex and multi-layered as a multitude of actors are engaged in the war. Apart from the People's Defense Force (PDF), there are also Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs), all in different ways [aligned with or independent from](#) the NUG in exile (USIP, 3 November 2022). Fighting is becoming more entrenched and it seems unlikely that any one side will gain the upper hand in the short-term, even though the opposition forces gained so much territory in its "Operation 1027" in Shan state that regime leader Min Aung Hlaing publicly admitted that significant [losses](#) had been suffered by regime forces (RFA, 30 November 2023). It would still seem premature to call it a [defeat](#) through "death by a thousand cuts" (War on the Rocks, 17 November 2023). Rather than accept defeat and a role in a new political arrangement with considerably less power, the regime leaders may decide to follow an aggressive scorched earth policy.

The admission by the military leader was a first and it relates to territory as well as to manpower, equipment and income, as border stations were captured as well. Regime forces do appear to have lost momentum. Allegedly, this is also due to a growing number of so-called [watermelons](#), who are green (soldier) on the outside, but red (the color of the democratically elected NLD, thus 'rebel') on the inside, supplying intelligence to rebel forces (Reuters, 2 January 2024). And while the victories of opposition forces in Myanmar's borderlands continue and lead to [low morale](#) among regime troops (Benar News, 15 April 2024), the fighting continues and the Tatmadaw is far from defeated.

China's political pressure and influence cannot be underestimated and it is virtually impossible that the Three Brotherhood Alliance could have staged such a large offensive in Northern Shan state (bordering China) without having at least the tacit approval from its neighbor. China is allegedly providing groups like the UWSA and KIA with weapons and equipment. This explains why neither the Tatmadaw nor China will be particularly happy to have to get along with each other now. The security situation in certain regions of Myanmar remains dire and has even deteriorated and it cannot be excluded that more crimes against humanity will be committed in the future. Apart from the situation in Kachin state and the UWSA, referred to above, Christians are also affected by the increased fighting with the Arakan army in Chin state.

Gender perspective

Forced recruitment into militias or the government armed forces remains an ongoing threat, and the fact that the Tatmadaw is creating and training militias to support their fight does not bode well for the country's security situation. Young men are the primary target, but children are also vulnerable to enlistment, with the increasing losses, defections and desertions since the coup putting growing pressure on military recruitment, although the extent to which this affects one side more than the other is unclear ([Frontier Myanmar, August 2022](#)). Trafficking also remains an issue of concern in Northern Shan and Kachin states where, driven by conflict and economic fragility, women and girls are

lured to China under false pretenses, then sold as ‘brides’ into sexual slavery ([HRW 2022 country chapter Myanmar](#)). Sex-trafficking continued in 2023 ([HRW 2024 country chapter Myanmar](#)). Law enforcement bodies in Myanmar and China have reportedly made little effort to recover trafficked girls ([HRW, 21 March 2019](#)).

The Myanmar army has an infamous record for systematically [targeting](#) and sexually abusing women and girls from ethnic minority groups, including women in IDP camps and female political prisoners (VOA, 2 April 2023). Since the military coup in 2021, reports of sexual and gender-based violence at the hands of the military have flowed in, and the defections within regime forces make the use of sexual violence to build group loyalty among soldiers increasingly likely, according to scholarship on sexual and gender-based violence ([Foreign Policy, March 23, 2021](#); [US Institute of Peace, November 2021](#)). The National Unity Government (NUG) Ministry of Women, Youth and Children’s Affairs and the National Unity Consultative Council Joint Coordination Committee on Gender Policy estimated that, as of March 2023, at least 122 women had been sexually assaulted by the junta troops since the 2021 military takeover (VOA, 2 April 2023).

Christian origins

Catholic missionaries first entered Burma in 1554. Not until 1613, however, was there a permanent presence with churches in Ava, Sirian, and about three hundred Roman Catholic believers in Rangoon. But growth was so disrupted by the wars between Burma and Siam in the next two centuries that a total membership of five thousand in 1800 had fallen to about three thousand in 1832. As British control widened in the first half of the nineteenth century, Protestant growth, chiefly Baptist, made great advances. In 1813, the famous American missionary, Adoniram Judson, arrived in the country to serve there for nearly 40 years. He translated the Bible into Burmese in 1834. (Source: Moffett S.H., Burma / 1813-1850 in: A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 2, 2005, pp. 330-331.)

In 1966, the Burmese government expelled all foreign missionaries, but by then the churches had become self-supporting. As many Christians belong to the ethnic minorities such as Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen, Christianity is viewed by many with some suspicion. This suspicion could increase now that the latest figures on religious affiliation (the 2014 census) have been published, which showed a strong growth in the number of Christians.

Church spectrum today

Myanmar: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	683,000	14.3
Protestant	2,911,000	61.2
Independent	732,000	15.4
Unaffiliated	434,000	9.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	4,760,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,743,000	36.6
Pentecostal-Charismatic	1,264,000	26.6

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC, established 1865), a member of the larger protestant Myanmar Council of Churches, estimates its membership at about 1.6 million Christians, many of whom are among the Kachin and Chin people. Protestants comprise almost two-thirds of all Christians. Of these two-thirds, an estimated 50% are Baptist members in almost 5,000 churches. The MBC works with 16 regional language conventions around the country with its vision “to organize and engage all Baptists in Myanmar in proclaiming and witnessing.” The number of Catholics is smaller, but there are estimates of up to a million. Most Christians are from the minority ethnic groups such as the Chin, Karen, Lisu, Kachin and Lahu. However, there is no strong inter-denominational association among them; in controversial issues and concerning the (persecution) situation in the country, their reactions are not unified.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

<https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Myanmar> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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