

9. Freedom of Belief and Religious Discrimination

9.1. Background

Since its inception in 1988, the military regime in Burma has tried to present itself as the preserver and protector of Burmese culture, including Buddhism. The regime's propaganda, laws, and actions, however, make this pious façade a cruel mockery.

During the 1988 demonstration for democracy and human rights, many monks took active roles and were arrested for their prominent participation. An estimated 200 Buddhist monks are imprisoned at Insein alone. Many others are supposed to be held captive in prison labor camps.

On August 8, 1990, to commemorate the second anniversary of the democratic uprising, more than 7,000 monks and novices walked through the streets of Mandalay, solemnly and peacefully accepting alms from the people. Soldiers confronted them and opened fire, killing two monks, two students, and wounding seventeen others. Following this massacre, the Monk's Union, Sangha Sammagi of Mandalay, led by Ven. U Yewata, declared "pattam nikkujjana kamma" (overturning the bowl) against the military. This refusal to accept alms was used as a rebuke to lay-people.

This powerful religious boycott, which began in Mandalay, spread like wildfire across Burma, causing the SLORC/SPDC to panic. By October 1990, the religious sanctions against military families had reached Rangoon. Throughout the country, monks refused alms from military personnel and their families and would not attend religious services organized by the SLORC/SPDC. Although the purpose of the boycott was compassionate -- to help the evil doers repent for their deeds and give them an opportunity to forsake their ways and return to the true path -- military leaders felt reproached.

The SLORC/SPDC retaliated against the monks' boycott by massively clamping down on the Sangha. Monasteries were surrounded by armed troops with monks trapped inside. Electricity, water, and communication lines were cut. The monks were prevented from going on their daily alms rounds. After maintaining the blockade

for one week, armed troops entered monasteries and arrested the leaders. More than 350 monasteries were raided and more than 3,000 monks and novices were arrested. Twenty monasteries were seized and expropriated.

After the monk's boycott in 1990 in Mandalay, the SLORC/SPDC banned all independent monks' associations. The only Sangha organizations recognized now are the Sangha Mahanayaka Committees. The senior monks are given the task of establishing rules to maintain discipline and generally oversee all Sangha affairs. In addition to the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee, there are local Sangha Mahanaraka Committees. The members of the Sangha Mahanaraka Committees are all elderly and learned monks who should be highly respected and venerated. Since it is well known that the SLORC/SPDC controls the committees, the people no longer esteem these monks. The regime wishes to include as many senior monks as possible within the ranks of the committees. As a result, monks are pressured to join, despite being reluctant to do so. As an added coercion, monasteries are kept under strict surveillance until a monk agrees to join. In the process, monks are vilified by SLORC/SPDC propaganda that ostracizes them. Once a monk relents and joins the committee, the pressure eases. SLORC/SPDC showers the monastery with lavish gifts, while the monk loses his independence and the respect of the people. The regime has made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of asserting its own popular legitimacy. Photos of SLORC/SPDC officials paying homage or making donations at pagodas throughout the country appear regularly in the official newspapers.

SLORC has also infiltrated many monasteries in an attempt to monitor those that continue to dissent or resist. A monk from Masoyein, a famous monastery in Mandalay, reported that another monk had confessed to being a SLORC/SPDC agent. After graduating from the university, this monk agreed to become a monk in order to spy for the SLORC/SPDC. After the army massacred monks in 1990, however, he regretted his role and confessed to the other monk how he had collaborated with the SLORC/SPDC.

SLORC/SPDC has formed Sangha organizations in the villages, townships, and districts. All monks are required to obey the orders of the organization, whether or not they belong. Buddhist monks cannot do anything without the permission of the SLORC/SPDC. For example, only the township or district Sangha organization may authorize a monastery to build additions or renovate old buildings.

In September 1996, Lt. Gen. Myo Nyunt, former SLORC/SPDC Minister of Religion, sent a letter to the senior monks' committee demanding that all those who wished to be ordained receive approval from the SLORC/SPDC. Furthermore, in

September 1996, official Myanmar reported that SLORC/SPDC was accusing the NLD of trying to divide the “loyalty of the Sangha” by sending its members to various monasteries to befriend the monks. The SLORC/SPDC also issued Order No. 85 that prevented any NLD member from becoming ordained. The Sangha Mahanaraka Committees were instructed to contact all levels of SLORC/SPDC offices if any NLD member sought ordination. The Order also restricted members of other political parties and their families from being ordained. (*Source: BRC*)

9.2. Buddhist monks in detention

Reliable sources report that monks have been tortured in prison for their political activities, and those who have been released report seeing hundreds of monk’s robes stacked in the prison. Clearly monks are not only being detained, but also disrobed -- a serious affront to any Buddhist monk.

The monks have asked that they be permitted to wear robes in prison, but prison authorities have taken them anyway and forced the monks to wear white prison uniforms. In addition, the monks are not referred to by their ordained names. They may only use ordinary names.

In spite of being treated inhumanely, the monks remain patient. While in prison they maintain and follow all the traditional principles of being a Buddhist monk. They do not eat dinner (Buddhist monks are not allowed to eat after noon) and early morning meals are not provided. This means that they eat only one meal a day (lunch). The authorities forbid monks to preach the Buddhist Dhamma and other prisoners are not allowed to pay obeisance (palms raised together on the forehead) to them.

9.3. Death of Buddhist Monks in Detention

Since 1988, the following Burmese monks have died in custody, most of them as a result of the hard labor they performed while in the concentration camps:

- Ven. U Sandawara, Weyanbonthar Monastery, Secretary of the Sangha Samaggi, died in Swunpayabom concentration camp. (*Source: SAIN*)
- Ven. U Vimala, Masoeyein Monastery, Northern Mandalay, Member of the Sangha Samaggi, died in Sunpayabo concentration camp. (*Source: SAIN*)

- Ven. U Weyawdana, Hti Lin Monastery, Mandalay, died near Myittkyina in Kachin State. (*Source: SAIN*)
- Ven. U Okktama, Mandalay, Vice President of the Sangha Samaggi, died in Swunpayabom concentration camp. (*Source: SAIN*)
- Ven. U Teza from Saku Monastery, died in Mo KOUNG jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Arthapa from Payagyi, Maha Myatmuni Monastery, Mandalay, died in Mandalay jail. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Pyin Nyaingda from Payagyi, Maha Myatmuni Monastery, Mandalay, died in Mandalay jail. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Tiloka from Masoeyein Monastery, Northern Mandalay, died in Par Kant Camp, Mokoung, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Zawana from Eindawya monastery, Mandalay, died in Myitkyina jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Pyinya Thiri, Myadaung Monastery, died in Katha jail, Mokaung, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Zawtika from Anauk Htilin Monastery died in Katha jail, Mokoung, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ven. U Dhamma Wara Thiri from an unknown monastery, died in Par Kant, Mokoung, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Sayadaw U Tiloka (Abbot) from Shwephonepwint Monastery, Rangoon, died in Insein prison. (*Source: IA*)
- Ashin Pyinnya Nanda from Maha Nandi The Na Monastery, Payagyi, Maha Myatmuni, died in Myitkyina labor camp. (*Source: IA*)
- Ashin Zawana Nanda from Maha Nandi The Na Monastery Payagyi, Maha

Myatmuni, died in Myitkyina labor camp. (*Source: IA*)

- Ashin Teza from Eindawya Monastery, Mandalay, died in Mokaung jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ashin Teza from Pagan Monastery, died in Myitkyina jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ashin Rewata from Pagan Monastery, died in Myintkyina jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)
- Ashin Kaw Wida from Pagan Monastery, died in Myitkyina jail, Kachin State. (*Source: IA*)

The following monks have been sentenced to life in prison:

- Ven. U Kawiya, Phayahyi Monastery, Mandalay -- member of Galonni (Galonne was originally an active Buddhist association opposed to British imperialism, which was reestablished in 1988 in Mandalay as an organization of monks and laypersons). Ven. U Kawiya is an extremely effective speaker and during the Democracy summer of 1988 he spoke almost every day at Maha Muni Pagoda. (*Source: SAIN*)
- Ven. U Kalyana, Mandalay, Member of Aung San Kyei Ni (Aung San Red Star) Association. (*Source: SAIN*)

9.3.1. Monks arrested and disrobed in Henzada

Eight Buddhist monks were forcibly disrobed and subsequently imprisoned in November in Henzada, a town located south-west of Rangoon, following a scuffle with local authorities. The incident occurred after local police arrested, questioned, and then released two Buddhist monks. The two monks were questioned by a police sergeant, San Nyunt at about 10 p.m. on November 14, 1997, and were interrogated for about an hour. Following their release, a group of monks, from the Boe Thein Tan Monastery, and students numbering about 20 approached the local Township Law and Order Restoration Council office demanding that they explain why the two monks had been detained. When the authorities failed to provide a proper explanation, a fight broke out between the group and local authorities.

Following the incident, eight monks -- U Teikka, U Seitta, U Sandaw, U Pandita, U Nyanidawbatha, U Panya, U Zanila and U Nandamala -- were forcibly disrobed and detained by the authorities. Three high school students were also arrested: Zaw Myo Aung, Maung Kyaw Thet, and Maung Thet Naint Oo. (*Source: ABSDF*)

9.3.2. Killing of Buddhist monks in Shan State

In late March 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops from LIB. 524 arrested a monk named Ven. Eindaka, 32, at Kyawng Long monastery in Kho Lam, Namzang Township, Shan State. They took him to the abbot of Kyawng Kawng Moo monastery to disrobe him. However, the abbot there refused to do it because Ven. Eindaka was a senior monk. The SLORC/SPDC took Ven. Eindaka out of the monastery, tore off his robe, tied his hands, and dragged him to their Kho Lam military base. During their interrogation of him, they tortured and beat him until he died. (*Source: S.H.A.N*)

In late March 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops from LIB. 246 arrested Ven. Yanna, abbot of Kaeng Kham village temple, Kunhing Township, Shan State. The abbot was forcibly disrobed and taken from the monastery to the military base. While interrogating him about whether or not he had supported the armed ethnic group in the region, the soldiers bound his hands and legs. Then the abbot was put in a sack. The soldiers tied the mouth of the sack and submerged it in a stream. After a few minutes, they pulled him out and continued asking questions. They did this several times until he died. At this point, no one dared to intervene because initially when the monk was arrested, some relatives, other monks, and community leaders attempted to testify on behalf of his innocence and were beaten. (*Source: S.H.A.N*)

On March 20, 1997, Major Aung Kyaw Tun and 60 of his soldiers from IB. 44, based in Kunhing Township, went to Jong Saai Khao temple, at Saai Khao village, south of Kunhing, Shan State. When they searched the temple, they found a short-wave radio. Believing the radio belonged to SURA, they beat Vi Seng Tar, a 30-year-old monk, in the temple. Although the monk explained that he was in no way connected with the SURA, he was disrobed anyway and severely beaten unconscious. Then the troops took him to the south of Jong Saai Khao temple, which was about one mile away. As the soldiers prepared to kill the monk, he begged them to untie his hands so that he could grant them forgiveness before he was killed. When the soldiers untied him, he ran away. The soldiers shot after him but missed. The monk went back to Keng Tong village before fleeing to Thailand. (*Source: S.H.A.N*)

9.3.3. Destroying Buddhist monasteries

In early February 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops from LIB. 273 in Kanbauk, came

to Mae Taw village, Kywe Thon Nyima tract, Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Division. They searched the entire monastery and stole 140,000 kyats, money that the monks had saved to buy wood and building materials to renovate their monastery. (Source: *KHRG*)

On March 19, 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops robbed “Srimigala” monastery at Nawng Khoo village, Murng Khun tract, Murngkerng Township, Shan State. Despite repeated protests from the abbot, the SLORC/SPDC took 48 visses of cooking oil, three baskets of rice, 12 baskets of paddy to feed their horses and 60 visses of groundnut. (Source: *SHRF*)

On June 4, 1997, 40 SLORC/SPDC troops from IB. 265, led by Captain Ohn Ngwe and accompanied by five militiamen led by U Than Myint from Yekan Or village, came to the monastery at Maing Thway village in Kyunsu Township, Tenasserim Division. The troops confiscated all monastery property, ranging from furniture to kitchen utensils, amounting to approximately 200,000 kyats. The troops also took a small generator from the monastery and threw it into a nearby river. (Source: *MIS*)

On June 9, 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops from IB. 64 and LIB. 515 burned down the monastery at Wan Pung village, Murng Yai tract, Kaesee Township, Shan State, and continued to search Kubg Pek and Nam Mawng villages. The troops shot Sai Pan Ta, a 17-year-old villager from Nam Mawng village in the stomach. (Source: *SHRF*)

9.4. SLORC/SPDC - Instigated Unrest between Buddhist Monks and the Muslim Community

The military regime in Burma has often tried to stir up religious and racial tensions in Burma in order to divide the population and divert attention away from other more pressing political and economic concerns. In 1988, the former government, BSPP, provoked anti-Muslim riots in Taunggyi and Prome during the spring democracy movement aimed to swift the people’s will for political change. In May 1996, anti-Muslim literature, probably issued by the SLORC/SPDC, was widely distributed among four towns in Shan State. This material eventually led to violent incidents. In October 1996, anti-Muslim leaflets distributed in Rangoon and other cities urged Buddhists not to marry Muslims and to boycott Muslim shops. The leaflets accused Muslims of wanting to expand their territory, postulating that Burma would soon become like other Southeast Asian countries where Buddhism has been forsaken for Islam.

Buddhist monks in Mandalay accused the SLORC/SPDC of trying to find and steal sacred rubies believed to give the owner power to defeat any enemy. The rubies are rumored to be hidden in one of six monasteries, among them Maha Myatmuni, possibly inside the Maha Myatmuni Buddha statue itself. Because the exact location of the rubies is unknown, all of the six monasteries were broken into by the SLORC/SPDC. An investigation into the situation was ordered and the Maha Myatmuni Sayadaw (abbot), U Pyinnya Wuntham, was interrogated. As a result, monks took to the streets in Mandalay on March 16, 1997, burning mosques and harassing Muslims of Bengali origin. The SLORC/SPDC has been accused of instigating attacks against Muslims and exacerbating existing tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in central Burma. Within a week, the trouble had spread to other cities, including Rangoon, Mandalay, Monywa, Moulmein, Kyaukpyu and Magwe division. Security increased around key Buddhist and Muslim sites in five cities. Curfews were imposed in Mandalay, Moulmein, and other cities. Three Buddhist monks in Mandalay died of gunshot wounds and about 100 others were arrested during this latest wave of communal violence, according to the All Burma Young Monks Union. Exiled Burmese monks and political groups accused SLORC/SPDC of instigating the mid-March incidents as a pretext to crack down on dissidents and monks who have played an active role in Burmese politics. (*Source: ABYMU*)

9.5. List of Mosques Destroyed, Damaged, or Looted in Burma (February-March 1997)

Mandalay Area

1. Kaindan Mosque
2. Waukhan Mosque
3. Thanlan Mosque
4. Kyungyan Hlwa Daung
5. Jame Mosque, Amarapura
6. Another Mosque, name unknown, in Amarapura
7. Payagi Mosque
8. Panset Mosque
9. Aledaung Mosque
10. Ashechore Mosque
11. Anauk Choke Mosque
12. Dunan Mosque
13. Seinpan Mosque
14. Panlathan Mosque

Pakokhu Area

1. Surti Mosque
2. Kharkahr Mosque
3. Shwekyarbin Mosque
4. Three Mosques damaged in Pegu, no name given

Rangoon Area

1. Yankin (Kanbe) Mosque
2. Pazungdaung Mosque
3. Eidgah Mosque
4. 48th Street Mosque & School
5. Myinigone Mosque
6. Sanchaung Mosque
7. Two Mosques in Kyimindaing
8. Ayethakar quarter Mosque in Ahlone Township
9. Wartan Street Mosque
10. Bangarlisu Mosque, Thein Pyu Road
11. No.7 Quarter Mosque, South Okkalapa Township
12. Muslim school at Tharketa Township (*Source: IA*)

9.6. Muslims targeted during the SLORC/SPDC's offensive against the KNU 6th Brigade

Muslims have lived in Karen State for over a century. The Muslim population in Karen State especially in KNU's 6th Brigade area, numbers in the thousands, with Muslims engaging in a range of professions from farming to shop-keeping. In February 1997, SLORC/SPDC offensive against the KNU in its 6th Brigade area, they targeted the Muslim community by burning Muslim schools, destroying Korans, and forcibly evicting Muslims from their villages. About 4,000 Muslims in Kyaikdon, Pa Klaw Nee, Mae Ha Htee Hta, and Sakhanthit villages in the KNU 6th Brigade, were forcibly relocated by SLORC troops to Patein in Kya-ein-seik-kyi district where they have virtually no access to utilities, including water. On March 3, 1997, SLORC/SPDC troops removed corrugated iron roofing from the mosque in Kyaik Don. Soldiers proceeded to scatter religious books on the ground, ripping them to pieces, and then burning them. Reports that SLORC/SPDC troops have killed Muslims have been confirmed. In Kyo Ta village, the SLORC/SPDC blindfolded two male Muslim villagers and then slit their throats. In To Dah Blu village, two Muslim villagers were also killed.

Burmese Muslim refugees encamped in Thailand are not permitted to return to Burma unless they convert to Buddhism. Burmese Muslims living in Karen refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border are also not welcome to return unless they convert. Only Muslims are effected by this action. Other religious faiths are not so restricted. According to the Muslim refugees from a refugee camp in Umphang district, Thailand, two Muslim families who returned to Burma in mid-1997 were forced by the regime to abandon their Islamic faith. The children were also forced to become Buddhist monks. (*Source: HRDU*)

9.6.1. List of Muslim Mosques destroyed during the offensive

- Kyaikdon, Dooplaya district: Inside of mosque and Muslim school destroyed
- Gaw Bay, Dooplaya district: Mosque destroyed
- Naw Bu, Dooplaya district: Mosque destroyed
- Day Nga Yin, Dooplaya district: Mosque destroyed
- Kyaung Don, Dooplaya district: Mosque destroyed
- Kaninbu, Dooplaya district: Mosque and Muslim school destroyed
- Pa Glaw Ni, Dooplaya district: Mosque valuables looted and placed in Buddhist temple; wooden mosque dismantled (*Source: IA*).

9.7. Religious discrimination against Christians

At least one-third of Burma's population -- about fifteen million people -- belong to ethnic minorities. The ethnic minorities tend to have large Christian or Muslim minorities within them. The degree of integration among ethnic minorities differs greatly, but in general depends on geographic location; those minorities based in remote highland areas are least integrated and mostly Christian. All of these differences, ethnicity, religion, and armed opposition, result in combined allegations of religious persecution and racial discrimination.

Religious persecution is a major concern in Chin State, Karenni State, Kachin State and some parts of Karen State and Sagaing Division, where the majority of people are Christian. In Chin State particularly, over the past few years, the military has been forcing Christian villagers to build Buddhist pagodas in their villages. An example of such a pagoda is the one located on the hill above Rih Lake near the Tiau River border-crossing. Soldiers have been desecrating churches and graveyards by turning

them into army camps, disturbing religious ceremonies, and preventing evangelists from preaching.

At the beginning of 1997, three laymen and a column of SLORC/SPDC soldiers arrived in Zaung, the village in Htan Tlang Township, Chin State. The three laymen forced all the civilians in the village, mostly Christians, to participate in their Buddhist religious ceremony. The troops also forced them to practice meditation. Some Christian boys were forced to become monks to spare their families from conscription as porters in the region. (*Source: FTUB*)

The military has coerced people into converting to Buddhism by engaging in discriminatory practices against non-Buddhists. For example, Christians are used more frequently for forced labor. As a result, in Than Tlang Township, Chin State, as many as ten percent of villagers have converted to Buddhism to avoid portage or labor duties. People are also lured by certain economic incentives to convert: Buddhists can buy rice at a cheaper price.

The following examples further illustrate how people are threatened or enticed by certain economic advantages into converting to Buddhism. Some “Buddhist monks” are taken to local villages by military troops. They receive rice and curry from the army camp and are guarded in turns. The Christians are ordered to go to the Buddhist religious ceremony where these “monks” insult and blaspheme Christianity. Then the Christians are persuaded to convert to Buddhism with promises that they will be given 800 *kyats* for individuals and 1,200 *kyats* for whole families that convert.

Three Buddhist monks came to preach Buddhism in Te village, Than Tlang Township, Chin State, in January 1997. They were accompanied by a section of soldiers. The village LORC ordered everyone to attend. The monks requested that villagers become novices and follow Buddhist rules, threatening that they would be taken as porters if they refused. Similarly in Tiddim Township, Chin State, people from Long Si village who refused to convert were forced to carry rocks, while those who converted received extra supplies of sugar and milk, distributed on Sundays when Christians are attending church services. (*Source: FTUB*)

In Sagaing Division, religious discrimination against the Nagas as well as the Kukis and the Chin are reportedly taking place. Non-Buddhists in the Lahai Township of Naga Hills, Sagaing Division, are restricted in attending religious services and have had their churches and religious symbols destroyed. Christian pastors must obtain permission before performing religious rites. As in Chin State, the SLORC/SPDC is said to have provided benefits to those who convert to Buddhism, including free food and exemption from forced labor.

After escaping to India in 1997, Pu Van Bik, a Chin evangelist in his 30s from Kalaymyo Township, Sagaing Division, explained how the SLORC/SPDC increasingly restricted his ability to practice his religion:

My village has 300 houses and we are all Chin and all Christians. Being an evangelist, I want to do my religious work. Now I cannot conduct home crusades, camps, or counseling, as they (SLORC) don't allow me to preach. They didn't send a written order but they said, "If you do it, you will be shot." Since 1996, they announced it more strictly. The soldiers gave the order through the Village LORC. Usually, every church gets a permit from the Village LORC and recognition by the church is enough. But since the Village LORC members don't dare disobey their orders, they don't give the permit. They didn't allow me to preach but I used to do it secretly. (Source: IA)

9.7.1. Partial lists of the churches destroyed

- On July 17, 1997, a military column led by Captain Myint Shwe from SLORC LIB. 208 came to Pa-nweh-po-klo village in Tavoy-Mergui District, and burned down the village Christian church. (Source: KIC)
- On July 25, 1997, SLORC troops came to Ga-zer-der village in Tavoy-Mergui District and burned down the village's Christian church and house. (Source: KIC)
- On July 26, 1997, a military column led by Captain Myint Shwe, burned down five houses and the church in Pyicha village, Mergui-Tavoy district, Tenasserim Division. (Source: KIC)
- On August 20, 1997, SLORC troops, under the command of Win Htwe, burned down 25 buildings in Lwe Po village, Mawchee Township, Karenni State, including churches. (Source: KNPP)
- On August 25, 1997, SLORC troops of LIB. 261, under the command of Lt. Col. Khin Maung Htay, burned down 25 houses including the church of Hu Muu Ka Lah village, Karenni State. (Source: KNPP)
- On August 26, 1997, SLORC troops of LIB. 102, under the command of Major

Win Htwe, burned down the church of Kwa Kee village and 54 houses of Htee Sar Beh Htee village, Karenni State. (*Source: KNPP*)

- On August 27, 1997, SLORC troops burned down 28 buildings in Bwe Lay Kho village, Mawchee Township, Karenni State, including the church. (*Source: KNPP*)

(Also see under “personal Accounts,” interviews 22, 23, 24, 27, 32, 34, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 and 43)