

9. Freedom of Belief and Religious Discrimination

9.1 SPDC control over Buddhism

The SPDC monitors and exerts control over all religions. Thus, as Buddhism is the majority religion in Burma, with 85% of the population claiming to adhere to its principles, and because of a history of Buddhist congregation members being politically active, the SPDC has ensured that they are in control of the religion. After the monk's boycott in 1990 in Mandalay, the SPDC banned all independent monks associations. The SPDC now prohibits any organizations of Buddhist clergy other than nine state-recognized monastic orders, which submit to the authority of a state-sponsored State Clergy Coordination Committee ("sangha maha nayaka committee"—SMNC) elected indirectly by monks. The SPDC provides guidance and enforcement for the Committee at the national level and for its subordinate bodies at regional, Township, and local levels. The SPDC funds two State Sangha Universities in Rangoon and Mandalay to train Buddhist clergy under the control of the SMNC. The State's relations with the Buddhist clergy and Buddhist schools are handled chiefly by the Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS—"sasana" means Buddhist doctrine) in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. All monks in the country are required to obey the orders of the organizations, whether or not they belong to them. Buddhist monks cannot do anything without the permission of the SPDC. For example, only the Township or district Sangha organization may authorize a monastery to build additions or renovate old buildings.

In October 1990, the military regime promulgated three orders, which ensured their control over monastic activity. The first order, Order 6/90, bans any organization of Buddhist clergy other than the nine orders constituting the SMNC. Order 7/90 authorizes military commanders to try Buddhist clergy before military tribunals for "activities inconsistent with and detrimental to Buddhism;" and Decree 20/90, the "Law Concerning Sangha Organizations," imposes on Buddhist clergy a code of conduct enforced by criminal penalties. These edicts remain in effect at the present in Burma. In 1995 the SPDC prohibited the ordination as clergy of any member of a political party. This measure, too, remains in effect. In April 1997, following widespread riots that involved Buddhist clergy, the Government effectively closed the two State Sangha Universities and banned for an indefinite period the administration of religious literature examinations required for advancement in the clergy. In 1996, Lt-Gen. Myo Nyunt, former 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 SPDC. Furthermore, SPDC issued Order No. 85 that prevented any NLD members from being ordained. The Sangha Mahanayaka Committees were instructed to contact all levels of SPDC offices if any NLD members sought ordination. The order also prevented members of other political parties and their families from being ordained.

Monks are under close watch by the Military Intelligence. The SPDC, which operates a pervasive internal security apparatus, generally infiltrates or monitors the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. The military officials

detain Buddhist monks for nonviolently expressing support for democracy and for demanding increased independence of the clergy from the State, and the SPDC continues to imprison monks for efforts to speak and associate freely. Throughout the country, there have been cases of monks who have been tortured and extra-judicially killed by the military. Military personnel often loot, damage, or destroy Buddhist monasteries in ethnic minority regions, evicting or arresting their monks. The SPDC has instructed Buddhist clergy that they must persuade Buddhist laymen to resign from leading opposition political parties.

In 1999 there continued to be credible reports from diverse regions of the country that military officials and security forces compel persons, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or uncompensated labor to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The SPDC calls these contributions “voluntary donations” and imposes them on both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. There were reports that in 1998 authorities required village households in Wuntho Township in Sagaing Division to pay money to renovate a local pagoda. Those who could not pay were required to contribute five days of labor. In Twantay Township in Rangoon Division, authorities forced villagers to guard the ancient Danoke Pagoda, which has been under renovation, and to gather wood, fetch water, and perform other tasks for soldiers involved in the project. Villagers were allowed to pay money to be exempted from pagoda guard duty. In Bogalay Township in Irrawaddy Division, authorities forced villagers to construct 32 miles of road between Pe-Chaung village and Kadone village, or else to hire substitutes at the price of about \$10 to \$20 (5,000 to 10,000 *kyat*) at market wages. The road is being built for the use of Buddhist pilgrims at the request of the Pe-Chaung monastery. In predominantly Islamic Maungdaw District in Arakan State, authorities required villagers to build a Buddhist pagoda in Dail Fara; residents of one village said they had to provide ten laborers per week. A foreign academic studying urban Burma reported in 1998 that she personally had interviewed more than 100 families from Rangoon and Mandalay who were forced to work during the mid-1990’s on the construction of Buddhist pagodas, including the Buddha’s Tooth Relic Pagoda, which was completed in 1996.

Through the 1990’s, the SPDC increasingly has made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of asserting its own popular legitimacy. It has tried to present itself as the preserver and protector of Burmese culture, including Buddhism. State-controlled news media frequently depict or describe SPDC officials paying homage to Buddhist monks, making donations at pagodas throughout the country, officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore or maintain pagodas, and organizing ostensibly voluntary “people’s donations” of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist religious shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers have routinely featured, as front-page banner slogans, quotations from the Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist doctrine is part of the state-mandated curriculum in all elementary schools; however, individual children may opt out of instruction in Buddhism. SPDC has published books of Buddhist religious instruction. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a SPDC-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is not entirely voluntary, has organized courses in Buddhist culture attended by millions of persons, according to state-owned media reports. In a further attempt to gain legitimacy and respect, SPDC organizes elaborate ceremonies to award titles to monks. In the past, these titles were granted only to very learned monks and carried great honor. Now, however, they are viewed as either a reward for submission or

bait with which to lure senior monk under the SPDC control. The regime's propaganda, laws and actions, however, make a cruel mockery of its pious facade.

During the mid-1990's, the SPDC funded the construction of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in December 1998. The ITBMU's stated purpose is "to share Myanmar's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world," and the main language of instruction is English.

Buddhist monks, including novices, number more than 300,000, roughly two percent of the male Buddhist population. For their material needs they depend entirely on alms donated by the laity, including daily donations of food. The clergy also includes a much smaller number of nuns. The monks and nuns, who normally eat only what they are given by devotees, are not getting enough from their own people under the economic hard time in Burma. Due to this reason, at least 320 monks and 30 nuns, from as many as 80 temples inside Burma, illegally sneaked into Thailand from Burma to seek offerings because of food shortages in October 1999.

At the same time, the Government, apparently in order to promote national unity and bolster its legitimacy among the Buddhist majority, discriminated against members of minority religions and restricted the educational, proselytizing, and building activities of minority religious groups. Christians and Muslims experienced difficulties in obtaining permission to build places of worship and in importing or printing indigenous-language translations of traditional sacred texts. Security forces destroyed or looted churches and mosques in ethnic minority areas.

9.2 SPDC disrespect for all Religions

At least one-third of Burma's population — about fifteen million people — belong to ethnic nationalities. In addition to the large ethnic groups — the Mon, Karen, Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karenni and Arakan, within which there are dozens of sub-groups— there is also a significant population of immigrants of Chinese and south Asian origins. The ethnic nationalities tend to have large Christian and Muslim minorities within them. The degree of integration among ethnic nationalities differs greatly, but in general depends on geographic location. Nationalities based in remote highland areas are least integrated and most Christian. The coincidence of ethnicity, religion, and armed opposition has meant that allegations of religious persecution and racial discrimination are often combined.

Many of these other religious groups have been persecuted under the military reign of the SPDC. Burma has been ruled since a 1962 coup d'etat by highly authoritarian military regimes, the most recent being the SPDC, which was organized in 1997. The military has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. The most recent constitution, promulgated in 1974, permitted both legislative and administrative restrictions on religious freedom, stating that "the national races shall enjoy the freedom to profess their religion ... provided that the enjoyment of any such freedom does not offend the laws or the public interest." However, people from Burma do not enjoy the freedoms guaranteed under the Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which clearly states the all people have the right to practice according to their own religious choice.

Since the 1960's, Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulties in printing or importing religious literature. Religious publications, like secular ones, remained subject to

control and censorship. Translations of the Bible and the Koran into indigenous languages can not be imported or printed legally, although this ban is not enforced in many areas. State censorship authorities reportedly object to existing translations of the Bible and the Koran, including some translations that became widely used and accepted by some of the country's Christian and Muslim groups during the colonial period. According to some reports, the censors have objected to the use in Christian or Islamic literature of certain indigenous-language terms long used in Buddhist religious literature; the censors reportedly have maintained that the use of these terms is appropriately limited to Buddhism. According to other reports, the censors have objected to passages of the Old Testament and the Koran that may appear to approve the use of violence against nonbelievers.

9.3 Religious discrimination against Christians

Christian persecution is on the rise in Burma. Christian activities in the Churches and the practices of their faith are being obstructed by any possible means despite Burma being a country that has claimed the right to freedom of religion. The SPDC reportedly has denied permission for churches to be built on main roads in cities such as Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. Also, in Than Tlang Township in Chin State, authorities denied a local church permission to make repairs and told the church leaders to replace a word commonly translated as "church" on its signboard with a term commonly translated as "religious center." Authorities in Rangoon have also instructed Chin and Kachin Christian worship facilities to use the term "religious center" rather than "church." In addition, there have been no Christians promoted to a rank higher than Major since 1990 in Burma's armed forces.

Persecution in Chin State

From January 1-3, 1999 Chin Christian in Thantlang celebrated their Christianity Centennial, which marks the beginning of Christianity in Chin State - the arrival of American missionaries Rev. Carson and his wife Laura Carson in 1899. On January 5, 1999 when the celebration in Thantlang was over, the citizens of the town posted a Centennial memorial cross at the top of Vuichip Hill near Thantlang. However, even though Buddhist pagodas are regularly allowed to be erected on hilltops, SPDC troops from Thantlang ordered the people to remove the cross. When the citizens refused to remove the cross, soldiers pulled it down and destroyed it. In addition, 6 Christian pastors from Thantlang, Rev. Thawng Kam, Rev. Biak Kam, Rev. Thantu, Rev. Tha Ceu, Rev. Cung Bik and Rev. Beauty Lily were then taken away from the town and interrogated. The following day, in protest, all the citizens of Thantlan staged a general strike and held prayer services and fasted at local churches or in their homes. In retaliation, the military cut all telephone lines to Thantlang and summoned 20 pastors and church leaders from various denominations for interrogation. On January 9, 1999 churches around Haka joined the protest by holding prayer services. SPDC officers from Haka then told church leaders that if they wanted to re-erect the memorial cross, they would have to apply to the Home Minister in Rangoon.

The SPDC also ordered the postponement of Centennial celebrations in Haka, giving the additional reason that they could not allow the celebrations due to the foreign guests that

had been invited. The Christian villagers in Haka were also told to contact the Ministry of Home and Internal Affairs. The celebrations were given approval to be held, but only after the church council had revised the worship program 4 or 5 times to align with the objectives of the military. The military also ordered that no more than 4,500 people would be allowed to attend the celebrations, which usually draw more than that.

The Centennial celebrations were also delayed for Chin Christians in Rangoon. They were held on March 13 & 14, but the permission to worship, which they had applied for 10 months earlier, came only 5 days before the worship service began.

Chin Christian missionaries have also been hassled. The military government forbade the CCOC (Chin for Christ in One Century) evangelists from preaching in Paletwa, and put 70 of them under "house arrest" in their headquarters in Paletwa for six months. The ZBC (Zomi/Chin Baptist Convention) later withdrew these evangelists since they were not allowed to preach in Paletwa. Also in 1999, 8 evangelists who had been sent by the Churches from Chin State to Magwe Division were ordered by the military government to return to Chin State. They were forbidden to preach anywhere in the district. (*Source: CHRO*)

Hindrance on Christian worship in Karen State

Christians in Karen State are generally able to worship freely, however, their worship services are subjected to the whims of the army as with many other aspects of their daily life. If soldiers are present in their village, they may prevent the villagers from gathering to attend church. In one instance, villagers from Sein Kyi, Kyar-ein, Kara Nee, Tagay, Shwe Doe, Thu Lay Gone, mee Laung Chaung and Mae Klaw villages in Kyar-ein-seik-kyi Township, Karen State were not allowed to celebrate the Christmas festival in their respective villages in 1999 as they usually do. They were told to gather at a church in Kyar-ein-seik-kyi town by SPDC military strategy commander Captain Min Thein from the Southeastern Military Command Headquarters. Their previous plan for Christmas celebrations in their villages had to be cancelled and moved to that specific place instead. While they were conducting a religious ceremony during the celebration, Captain Min Thein and chariman of the Township PDC came and ordered the revellers to provide them with alcohol. (*Source: HRDU*)

9.4 Religious Discrimination against Muslims

Muslims in Burma have been regularly denied the right to freedom of religion. They have also been subject to various forms of persecution and discrimination. There were credible reports that in early 1999 anti-Islamic booklets were widely distributed throughout the country through the USDA, a SPDC-sponsored mass organization. The All Burma Young Monks Association (ABYMU) denied military allegations that they had printed and distributed the booklets. The reports of these booklets followed other reports in recent years of SPDC's instigation or toleration of violence against Muslims. These booklets didn't indicate where they were printed or who wrote them, but they shared a basic message: Muslims are about to subvert all other religions. The anti-Muslim booklets explain how this had happened in Iraq and Indonesia, and how Muslims in Burma are about to turn the country into an Islamic state. During the widespread distribution of these pamphlets, communal riots were

in Myinggyan, Myinmu, Myanaung and Tarmwe(Rangoon). It has been noted by some in Burma that in the past, Muslim people have been made the scapegoats for the government's economic failures, and the resulting religious conflicts distracted people from these failures.

Persecution of Rohingya Muslims in northern Arakan State

Muslims in northern Arakan State cited religious persecution as one of the factors which drove them to seek refuge in Bangladesh in 1992 and in 1996. Mosques in the region were destroyed or otherwise closed down. SPDC has built Buddhist pagodas in the region and Muslim students are required to study Buddhism in the schools. Parents of students do not speak out against the program, as they fear their children's expulsion from school. The SPDC denies citizenship status to most Rohingyas on the grounds that their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as required by the country's highly restrictive citizenship law. There were also reports of resettlement programs in northern Arakan State. In these programs, reportedly supervised by top generals of the SPDC, Muslim villagers were uprooted to make room for the settlement of Buddhist villagers, and that the settlements were developed using the forced labour of the former Muslim landowners.

Many of the 21,000 Rohingya Muslims remaining in refugee camps in Bangladesh in 1999 have refused to return to Burma because they feared human rights abuses, including religious persecution, as well as other government restrictions. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees reported that authorities cooperated in investigating isolated incidents of renewed abuses of repatriated citizens. However, returnees complained of government restrictions on their ability to travel and to engage in economic activity. There were credible reports that Muslims in Rakhine State have been compelled to build Buddhist pagodas as part of the country's forced labor program.

On November 19, 1999, Mr. U Myint Tun, Director of Buddhist Religious Association of Arakan State accompanied by director and assistant director of Buddhist religious center of Maungdaw Township visited the village of lower Burma about 18 miles north of Maungdaw Township. They summoned village head and religious personalities and ordered them to demolish the main congregation mosque which is a very old and historic mosque in the area.