

## **Religion: A Tool of Dictators to Cleanse Ethnic Minority in Myanmar?**

Mang Hre

Victorian Chin Baptist Church

153-157 Hull Road, Mooroolbark, VIC 3138

Email: manghre@gmail.com

Religion plays a vitally important role among the people of Myanmar. In this paper, I will use the name “Myanmar” as a country name and “Burma” for the ethnic Barma people. “Burma” was the country name before the military government changed “Burma” to “Myanmar.” The USA, the EU, and some ethnic groups in Myanmar as well as the opposition party, National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, do not recognize the name and still use the word “Burma” for the country name. I prefer to use Burma to denote the “Burma ethnic group” because it is traditionally the word used to denote the Burma ethnicity. Even from ancient times religion has been firmly rooted in the heart of the people. They worshipped and adored “nats” or “spirit” which displays a form of reverence for the spirit of nature.

Buddhism was first introduced around 241 BC but it was only in the time of King Anawrahta who unified the Burmese kingdom in 1044 AD that Buddhism in Myanmar began to influence political events (Guruge 2004:105-107). From this time Theravada Buddhism was considered the State religion. Today, the Theravada Buddhism is practiced by the Burman, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and some Karens, peoples. In 1962, General Ne Win, who ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, promised that the government would not involve itself in mixing religion and politics. Against his promise, his government had clamped down on all forms of organization, including many Buddhist organizations (Houtman 1999, p. 269). All of the foreign Christian missionaries were expelled from Myanmar and their properties and mission schools became the property of government. Religion for the Ne Win regime only means Buddhism. When the Ne Win regime was ousted in the 1988 uprising, General Than Shwe succeeded in power to control the country. Like Ne Win, Than Shwe declared that there would be no discrimination in regard to religion. In practice, however, the military government has increasingly taken to representing itself as both piously Buddhist and of the Burma ethnic group. General Than Shwe has said, 'As you know, I am a soldier, but at the same time, I am also a Buddhist. I faithfully try to follow the Buddhist teaching (cited in Houtman 1999, p.269).' Buddhism then becomes a tool of dictators to demolish ethnic minorities and it has been used as a form of legitimacy to maintain their power.

In this paper, I will try explore the situation in regard to the ethnic minorities in Myanmar and will focus upon the pain and suffering inflicted by the military government.

### **Who are the Ethnic Minorities?**

Myanmar is an ethnically diverse nation. The government officially recognized that there are 135 distinct races. These 135 races are grouped into eight: 1. Chin, 2. Kachin, 3. Kayah, 4. Kayin, 5. Mon, 6. Bamar or Burman, 7. Rakhine, and 8. Shan. Most of the ethnic minorities are grouped according to region rather than linguistic or ethnic affiliation. For example the Shan includes 33 tribal groups and the Chin includes more than 60 ethnic tribal groups. There is no clear census of ethnic population after 1988 since the dictators tried to minimize the minority population. According to the 1983 census records 69 percent of the population belongs to the majority Burman (Bama) group, while 8.5 percent is Shan (including sub-

nationalities), 6.2 percent is Karen, 4.5 percent is Rakhine, 2.4 percent is Mon, 2.2 percent is Chin, 1.4 percent is Kachin and 1 percent is Wa (South 2008).

Whenever we talk about Myanmar before the colonial period (1886-1948), we are excluding other ethnic groups such as Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Shan and others since they never had been part of the Burma kingdom but each had their own territory. Only after the British invaded and began ruling over the country in 1886 was it easy for them to unite all other ethnic groups under the administration of Rangoon (now Yangon). And from that time, the ethnic minority groups in Myanmar became part of Myanmar. Some of the ethnic groups were separated into two countries or more than one territory. For example, the North-Western part of the Chin territory became part of India, in Mizoram State, Manipur State, Assam State, and Nagaland state and some Chins known as Bawm are also living in Bangladesh. Some of the Chin people are also living in Chin State of Myanmar, Magwe division, and Sagaing division. After independence was gained from the British colonials, these ethnic groups have launched armed struggles against the army demanding self-determination, democracy, and they have even tried to regain their previous territories.

Each of these groups practiced their own cultures, languages and religions. Most of the non-Burman ethnic minorities are living along the country's mountainous frontiers. During the colonial period the British referred to the land of the ethnic minorities as "Frontier Burma" or "Excluded Area" (Safman 2007:54). Myanmar has experienced a long history of conflict among various ethnic groups along these fluid frontiers. The boundaries between their states were finally fixed only during British imperial rule between 1820-1948. Most of the non-Burman ethnic groups were not satisfied with the British policies under the administration of Yangon, who were mostly of the Burma ethnicity. As a result they had different interests during WWII. Many of the Burman peoples joined the Japanese forces during WWII while many minority ethnic groups remained loyal to Britain. This reflected a genuine desire for independence on the part of both groups; the Burmans were struggling to be free of the British colonialism and the ethnic minorities were wishing to escape Burman domination (Veen 2005, p. 7).

During the time of preparation for independence from Britain, General Aung San had tried hard negotiating with the ethnic minority groups to join the new union promising that after a decade they would consider their independence. With this promise, the Chin, Kachin and Shan leaders signed the Panglong Agreement on February 12, 1947. This date was called as the "Union Day." It was the date when the ethnic minorities-- Chin, Kachin and Shan-- joined the Union of Myanmar. The Karen ethnic group did not sign the Panglong agreement because they did not put their trust in the Burma leaders including General Aung San. In spite of the promise and the guarantees of the Panglong Agreement, successive Burman governments underestimated the size of the ethnic minorities and brutally started ethnic wars as soon as the declaration of independence from Britain.

### **Ethnic Cleansing and Burmanization**

Despite many ethnicities, cultures, religions and ethnics, the military dictators recognized only one - that which is male, Burman and Buddhist. The military government has sought to make the Burmese language, Buddhism and Burman culture the single cultural identity for the whole country. Non-Burman and non-Buddhists are excluded from government official positions, ranks, opportunities and all elections. The ethnic minorities in Myanmar are clearly

aware that Buddhism is a tool of the dictators to clean and demolish the ethnic minorities since the military rulers belong to the Burma ethnic group who are also Buddhists. The assimilation process of ethnic minorities even started before the independence period. This process has been known as ‘Burmanization.’ The word Burmanization means to make all ethnic people Burmans and Buddhists. Before the independence period, the national motto was, “Amyo, bartha, thatana” which meant ‘Burmese race, Burmese language, and Burmese religion (Buddhism) (Lynn).

Since the formation of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) and the Military Revolution Council in 1962, Myanmar was administered by the military in which there were no ethnic leaders in government administration. All of the authority rested in the Burma group. The Burmanization movements started as a variety of policies that led to the assimilation of peoples into a common culture, which is known as the Burma culture. The introduction of the 1974 Constitution, the coup of 1988, the replacement of the BSPP by the National Unity Party, and the 1990 elections have not reduced either the centralization or the Burman domination (Brown 1994: 50) All the enacted laws reveal the dominance of the Burman group in the state elites and the superiority of the Burman people and culture and this has led to the assimilation of ethnic minorities. After 1991, the military government started the most intensive war against ethnic minorities along the borders of China, Thailand, and Bangladesh. This military operation was not only aimed at ending the ethnic insurgencies but also at promoting the Burma culture and the Burma people (Thomas 1993: 10-11).

In Myanmar the largest Christian group are from the Chin ethnic group. They live in Chin State in the North-West of the country near the Indian border. According to Human rights activists, the Chin Christians are subject to “systematic persecution”. The military government has sent hundreds of Buddhist monks to the Chin state to convert Christians to Buddhism. Those who become Buddhists are promised special privileges and opportunities (Asia News 2004).

Publishing the Chin Bible is prohibited and it is considered illegal. According to Asia News, in 2000 alone, about 16,000 copies were seized and burnt. The government has also closed down more than 80 churches around the capital Yangon in 2001 and has denied Christians the right to meet in places built in the last one hundred years. Since 1994 all applications for new churches have been turned down. Gatherings that exceed five people other than for Sunday mass require a permit from the authorities (Asia News 2004).

David Mathieson from Human Rights Watch is reported to have said that the military rulers use Buddhism, the majority religion, to prop up their rule: "There are a lot of stories of people who - either in the military or in the public service or even in business -find that their career is coming to a halt at a certain level if they do not convert to Buddhism (Physicians for Human Right 2011).

Today, religious persecution and ethnic cleaning still go hand in hand. Human rights violation and ethnic wars against the Rohingyas, Chins, Kachin, Karen are still happening in Myanmar. Many of the ethnic minorities have fled to India, Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Malaysia. Most of the ethnic minorities were not allowed to vote in the 2010 election. According to the “Physicians for Human Rights” report, about three million from the ethnic minority groups are not allowed to vote in the November 7, 2010 general election (Physicians for Human Rights 2011).

## **Religion as a tool to cleanse minority ethnic**

In Myanmar, 85% of the population professes Theravada Buddhism (roughly 48 million), 6% Christianity (1.65 million Baptists and 550,000 Roman Catholics), 4% Islam (2.2 million), 1% Hinduism (550,000) and the remaining 1 % consists of Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism and Animism.

Converting to Buddhism meant losing their previous cultures and practicing the Burma group's culture. In other word it is becoming Burma. The wish of the Burma Buddhists is for other people to convert to Buddhism. In 1882, Shway Yoe wrote, "The Best thing a Burman can wish for a good Englishman is that in some future existence, as a reward for good works, he may be born a Buddhist and if possible a Burman"( Shway Yoe 1963: ix). The Shway Yoe's words reflect the real Burma's thoughts regarding other religions.

It is not only Buddhism, but also Christianity, that has been the destroyer of ethnic identities and cultures. The Chin people, for instance, felt this case more than other ethnics group in Myanmar. Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries to the Chin land, the Chin had their distinct cultures, and practices. But when the missionaries taught about Christianity, they taught them to abandon all of their cultures and practices, teaching them that all these pre-Christians elements in Chin cultures were evils. Instead, they were taught to practice the culture of western life. This kind of teaching meant that many of the Chin Christians abandoned their identity and that they lost their culture, and even their history. But now that the Church leaders, theological lecturers, and professors have realized the importance of preserving culture, the Chin Association of Christian Communication (CACC) has been formed by some of the Church leaders to rediscover the lost elements of the Chin culture and literature. Today, Christianity has become the religion that protects the Chin peoples from the danger of assimilation into the Burma Buddhists. The Christian organizations are working hard in promoting ethnic languages, literatures, and cultures and in preserving the ethnic identities of these peoples.

The ethnic minority languages and literatures were taught for five years in the primary schools before 1964. During the socialist period, they were taught for three years. But they were finally banned in public schools about the end of Ne Win's regime (Lynn). The promotion of ethnic languages and literatures plays an essential part in respecting ethnic cultural identity. But today, many young ethnic minorities cannot speak nor write in their own languages. Today, Burmese language has become the official common language of all ethnic groups and it is also the only medium of instruction for all education in Myanmar. A crucial problem for the minority ethnic groups is the dictators' attempts to eliminate the native languages of these minority ethnic groups.

## **Buddhism as A Tool of Legitimacy**

Religion has been used as a tool for legitimizing their power. The dictators clearly understand that more than two thirds of the population are Buddhist. In every state activity the military leaders are on the side of Buddhists. They publicly announced that Buddhism is the most suitable religion for Myanmar. Therefore, the government applies pressure on students and poor youths to convert to Buddhism. Adherence or conversion to Buddhism is generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks.

It was U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the Union of Myanmar, who pushed to make Buddhism the state religion in 1961. The idea of Buddhism as the State religion was continued by General Ne Win and again by General Than Shwe's regime. For instance, the official Ministry of Religious Affairs includes a department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching). State-controlled news media frequently depict or describe the government officials paying homage to Buddhist monks, making donations at pagodas throughout the country and officiating at ceremonies to open Buddhist shrines. Nearly all the popular books on Buddhist religious teaching have been published by the government. The two Buddhist universities in Yangon and Mandalay are running the state-sponsored program of "State Monk Coordination Committee" (Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee or SMNC). The state-sponsored International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Yangon was also opened in 1998.

While supporting the Buddhist religion, the military government has been trying to eliminate the other religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The government prohibited publishing the teaching of other religions since the 1960s. All publications of religious sermons and teachings in ethnic languages remain subject to control and censorship. It is illegal to import translations of the Bible in indigenous languages. The other religious organizations must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with the endorsement of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. The government never funded or supported non-Buddhist religions while they fully support Buddhism.

The military government has used different masks to gain its goal. Recently, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization which won over 80 percent of vote in 2010 election, has been actively involved in the Buddhist movements. They build Buddhist shrines and schools in the ethnic minority areas which are mostly inhabited by poor Christians. These peoples are taught the Buddhist cultures and doctrines so that they will convert to Buddhism.

In short, we can summarize that the military government has used Buddhism as a state religion and it fully supports that religion in order to legitimize its power to control the country where two thirds of the population is Buddhist.

### **Restrictions on minority ethnic religious freedom**

The Government has continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism while controlling the other organizations and restricting the activities and expressions of the Buddhist clergy (Sangha). Any organization that does not support the government is denounced as an illegal organization. Based on the 1990 Sangha Organization Law, the Government banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Authorities frequently refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Christian and Islamic holidays and restricted the number of Muslims that could gather in one place. For instance, in late 2006 a prominent Muslim religious organization planned to hold a golden jubilee in Mawlamyine, Mon State, to celebrate the founding of their organization. After they requested permission to hold the event, the local Division Commander, Brigadier General Thet Naing Win, called representatives of all non-Buddhist religious organizations in the area to a meeting. He informed them that permission would not be granted to hold any religious functions or ceremonies due to security reasons. None of the Buddhists ever faced such restrictions and difficulties in holding their religious events and feast.

On January 23, 2007, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) released a report that documented the Government's restrictions, discrimination, and persecution against Christians. Afterward, the Ministry of Religious Affairs pressured religious organizations in the country to publish statements in government-controlled media denying they had any connection with CSW or advising them to condemn the report and to reject the idea that religious discrimination existed in the country.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religious groups. Many house churches in Yangon are closed because they did not have proper authorization to hold religious meetings. On October 1, 2006, the Agape Zomi Baptist Church, with more than 1,000 members, had to stop its weekly services at Asia Plaza Hotel in Rangoon after the hotel management refused to continue renting them a conference room. The hotel managers claimed that the township authorities had ordered them to stop renting its facility to the group, which had worshipped at the hotel for approximately one year.

In November 2005 authorities in Insein Township, Rangoon, pressured evangelical Christians of the 20-year-old Phawkkan Evangelical Church to sign "no worship" agreements. Some signed the agreements out of fear, but others refused. In February 2006 the authorities issued an order banning worship at the church.

The Religious Affairs Ministry does not allow any building of churches. However, the Burma Buddhists are building a lot of pagodas in the Christian lands, where there is no Buddhist at all. The Catholic Church established new dioceses in Kachin and Shan states. The bishop of the new diocese in Pekon, Shan State, decided to build his residence on a plot of land owned by the church. Brigadier General Myo Lwin, commander of Military Operation Command Seven at Pekon, ordered the partially built structure demolished, confiscated the land, and extended his own compound fence to enclose the church property. Despite appeals to higher authorities, the Church has not recovered its property. In the past, pagodas or government buildings often have been built on confiscated Christian land. In Kachin State, authorities have constructed Buddhist shrines in Christian communities where few or no Buddhists reside and have tried to coerce Christians into forced labor to carry bricks and other supplies for the shrine's construction. In September 2006 government officials inaugurated a pagoda near the Kachin Independence Organization's headquarters at Laiza, Kachin State. Kachin sources reported there were no Buddhists living in the community. In northern Rakhine State, authorities frequently forced Rohingyas to help construct Buddhist shrines, even though Buddhists there account for approximately 2 percent of the population.

Some Christians in Chin State claimed that the authorities have not authorized the construction of any new churches since 1997. A Christian leader in Chin State stated that to obtain permission to repair or build a church he first had to obtain permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs (NaTaLa), the Immigration Department and the Township Peace and Development Committee. State censorship authorities continued to enforce special restrictions on local publication of the Bible, the Qur'an, and Christian and Islamic publications. Authorities also restricted the quantity of Bibles and Qur'ans brought into the country. In general, the Government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s. It expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized all private schools and hospitals, which were extensive and affiliated mostly with Christian religious organizations.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. Few have ever been promoted to the level of Director General or higher. There were no non-Buddhists who held flag rank in the armed forces, although a few Christians reportedly achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The Central Executive Committee of the largest opposition group—the National League for Democracy—also included no non-Buddhists, although individual members from most religious groups in the country supported the party. The Government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired for promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism. Some Muslims who wished to join the military reportedly had to list "Buddhist" as their religion on their application, though they were not required to convert.

In 2007, Burmese language document titled, "Program to Eliminate Christianity." The document suggested 17 points for countering Christianity in the country; however, the source of the documents was unreliable because of some grammatical errors. However, there are some elements that mention the government campaign for "Burmanization." For instance, the NaTaLa, the Buddhist movement in the Chin States, focuses on converting poor Christians to Buddhism with the aim of assimilating them to the Burma group.

### **Muslim minority not recognized as citizens**

The Muslim Rohingya minority in southwestern Myanmar is perhaps suffering the most among all ethnic groups in the country. The regime does not even recognize the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar. The government destroyed their houses, buildings and burnt their crops so thousands had to move to neighbouring Bangladesh (Asia News 2004). According to "International Religious Report 2007", there are approximately 25,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (International Religious Freedom Report 2007). The government does not give them citizenship. Instead, some of them were given 'Temporary Registration Cards (TRC).' According to UNHCR, there are 800,000 Rohingyas in Myanmar and only 650,000 possessed TRC. In order to apply for RTC, the Muslim men were asked to submit photos without beards. The authorities did not grant permission to Rohingya to travel for any purpose. They do not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education because there is no secondary school for TRC cards holders. They are not allowed to apply for any government office. Some Rohingya Muslims who wanted to be soldiers had to list 'Buddhist' as their religion on the application forms (International Religious Freedom Report 2007).

### **The Uncertain future for Ethnic Minorities**

The 2008 Constitution of the Union of Myanmar forbids discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds. But it also states that misusing religions for political purpose is forbidden. Some argue that this paragraph paves the way for persecuting religious minorities, as any public activity can easily be construed as being for political purposes (Lehman). However many people regard this as nothing new. It has been part of life here since 1962. In spite of the existing constitution, the government has systematically discriminated against ethnic minorities and it supports the policy of Burmanization. On November 7, 2010, the military government unveiled a new flag; it consists of a large, single white star replacing the fourteens stars on the old flag. Many of the ethnic minority groups are dissatisfied with the new flag; they see it as symbolising Burmanization - the policy of assimilating all ethnic minorities into the dominant ethnic Burman group - which will result in the loss of their

cultures and identities. Therefore, the future of ethnic minorities in Myanmar is uncertain and no one can predict what will happen during the period of the new government in Myanmar.



## References

Asia News. "Systematic religious persecution in Myanmar," (Online) available from URL: <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?art=1711&l=en>.

Brown, David. (1994). *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge: London.

Guruge, Ananda W.P. (2004), *What in Brief is Buddhism*, Buddha's Light Publishing, Hacienda Heights.

Houtman, Gustaaf. (1999), *Mental Culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, The Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo.

Lehman, Ana. 'Religious minorities face persecution in Myanmar,' (Online) available from URL: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,6112583,00.html>.

Lynn, Samuel N. "Voices of Minority Ethnic Christians in Myanmar." CTC Bulletin, (Online) available from URL: <http://www.cca.org.hk/resources/ctc/ctc02-02/ctc02-02e.htm>.

Physicians for Human Right. (2011). "Lie under the junta: Evidence of Crime against Humanity in Burma's Chin State" .

South, Ashley. (2008), *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. Routledge, London.

Safman, Rachel M. (2007), 'Minorities and State-building in Mainland Southeast Asia,' *Myanmar: state, society and ethnicity*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore.

Thomas, Dorothy Q. (1993), *A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand*, Human Right Watch, New York.

Veen, Rianne ten. (2005), *Myanmar Muslims: The Oppressed of the Oppressed*, IHRC, Wembley.

Yoe, Shway. (1963). *The Burman: His Life and Notion*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York.