Overview
Myanmar (formerly “Burma”) is a majority-Buddhist nation in Southeast Asia, and home to more than 135 different ethnic groups, each with its own history, culture and language. The majority Burmese ethnicity is the Burmans, making up approximately two-thirds of the population. The 2014 census, the first in three decades, put the population at 51.5 million, but accurate numbers are elusive; the government categorizes people into ethnic designations based on geography, not all of which were counted in the most recent census. The country is divided into seven regions, mostly inhabited by Burmans, and seven states, each named after one of the minority ethnic categories: Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. Approximately two million Rohingya people, living mostly in Rakhine and in neighboring countries, are not officially recognized by the Burmese government, and as a result, 1.2 million people in Rakhine were not counted in the census. Both recognized and unrecognized religions include Buddhism (approximately 89%), Islam (4%), Christianity (4%), and other religions (3%) including Hinduism, Bahai, and indigenous Nat worshippers. The number of Muslims in Myanmar is disputable; most recent figures have been withheld as of this writing due to the government’s concern that releasing the data would inflame existing ethno-religious tension.

Modern hostility between the Burmese state and their ethnic minorities is a direct legacy of British colonial policy. The British used indirect rule to empower minority leaders as a means of controlling peripheral states while majority Burmans suffered the collapse of traditional structures of power and authority. Burmese religious nationalism grew out of a reassertion of Burman Buddhist identity, a worldview that regards ethnic diversity as a threat to Burmese unity. As a result, ethnic minorities—particularly non-Buddhist ethnic minorities—have had a tenuous relationship with the state since independence. While conflicts are typically framed as “ethnic” or “religious,” they must be understood in the context of British colonialism and its impact on Burmese identity, which is experienced differently based on one’s ethnicity. Ethnic conflicts are frequently driven by a desire for greater autonomy, control over local natural

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resources, and issues around education, culture, religion, and language. Violence against the Rohingya, however, is almost uniformly depicted and experienced as a religious conflict between Buddhist nationalists and minority Muslims.

Historically, political authority and power have often been expressed through patronage of Theravada Buddhism, especially in relation to the monastic community known as the Sangha. This expression has remained a constant through pre-colonial kingdoms, Burmese nationalism and resistance to British colonialism, socialism, military rule, and, most recently, civilian democracy. Throughout these historical periods, the Sangha has sometimes legitimized and sometimes challenged state power. As such, successive Burmese governments have cultivated close relationships with the Sangha, while also seeking to contain it through reform.

Politically, Myanmar is emerging from five decades of military rule which began after a short-lived democracy following independence in 1948. Although it was the richest country in the region when it attained independence, it is now one of the poorest in the world. Poverty is disproportionally concentrated in rural areas and less than one-third of the country has access to electricity. Political isolationism, fears of foreign intervention, and economic mismanagement have contributed to diminished access to health care, low-quality education, and severely limited social mobility.

These challenges began to be addressed after elections in 2010, and in 2012 a new, partially democratic civilian government came into power. The new regime took steps toward full democracy, inspired national and global praise, relieved Myanmar of international sanctions, and prompted visits by Barack Obama, the first sitting American president to visit Myanmar; William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary; and regional leaders including Thailand’s former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Still, international human rights organizations and political leaders remained deeply concerned about the treatment of Burmese ethnic minorities, especially the Muslim Rohingya. Violence against Muslims, often with apparent and sometimes with explicit sanction of political leaders and members of the Sangha, has continued to this day, extending the country’s long legacy of ethnoreligious conflict.

In 2015, Myanmar elected its first civilian president after 50 years of military rule. The historic elections effectively put National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi—who is barred from the presidency by the constitution—in place as the unofficial voice behind her top aide and ally, newly elected President Htin Kyaw. In the spring of 2016, the government created a new position, “State Counsellor” for Suu Kyi. The position, similar to that of a prime minister, is widely believed to be designed to give the office holder even more power than the president. The new NLD administration has vowed to create a more ethnically inclusive government.

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Historical Legacies

Theravada Buddhism was a vital organizing force in pre-colonial Burmese society. Buddhist practice and public piety—generally in the form of offerings to the Sangha or large-scale construction projects of Buddhist monuments—have been wellsprings of political legitimacy both historically and in modern times. In pre-colonial times, a king’s claim to the throne was seen as both a cause and a result of his righteous conduct, his exceptional piety, and his religious patronage of the Sangha. However, members of the Sangha also occasionally pushed back against political leadership, and kings sought to control them by “reforming” and “purifying” the Sangha. These “reforms” could include attempting to define normative beliefs and practices, interfering with the Sangha’s wealth, regulating monastic behavior, and refashioning religious texts. Strong kings often imposed severe punishments on any members of the Sangha or their lay supporters who opposed their reforms.5

This pre-colonial legacy of the relationship between Burma’s political and religious leaders has continued to have a deep impact on modern Myanmar. For example, General Ne Win, who ruled Burma from 1962 to 1988 as head of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), raised the spire on the Mahawizaya Pagoda in Rangoon, an act that has historically symbolized a display of royal power. On the other hand, when confronted with a resistant Sangha, modern political leaders have also invoked the memory of kings who reformed the Sangha, calling it their “religious duty” to contain monks who opposed military rule. Such conflict between the Sangha and the government came to a head in 2007, when the Saffron Revolution pitted the monastic community against the military government in a protest that became the largest public demonstration by Buddhist monks in modern Burmese history. The monks’ protests and the subsequent unrest garnered global attention.

Not surprisingly, the Sangha is therefore regarded as a stronghold of anti-colonial sentiment that affirms and is affirmed by Burmese Buddhist nationalism. The deep associations between Buddhism and nationalism have sidelined non-Buddhist minorities and have been deeply influential in shaping the experiences of all of the citizens of Myanmar.

The Colonial Era (1885-1948)

The Early Years
Prior to the arrival of the British, education took place within the Sangha and most young men passed through monasteries as novice monks. In addition to providing an education and a religious vocation, the Sangha garnered respect for the monastic community. The arrival of

British colonial policy in Burma fundamentally undermined this system, and is at the heart of contemporary intercommunal and interreligious violence. By undercutting Burmese political and religious authority, the British marginalized the Burman community while granting ethnic minorities access to power. The British introduced a radically different educational system from the traditional Sangha, basing the new system on secular modernity. Most of the graduates of the new system joined the ranks of civil servants in the colonial administration. The Sangha resisted this Western education, maintaining that secular knowledge contradicted a Buddhist worldview.

The British did, on occasion, work with the Sangha when it suited their needs, and Buddhists responded to these encounters in various ways depending on their region and social class. However, the Sangha saw rapid decline and fragmentation during the colonial period, especially after 1895, when the British neglected the traditional duty of the ruler of Myanmar to appoint a new leader of the Sangha (*thathanabain*).  

On the other hand, ethnic minority communities benefited from British rule, and foreigners flooded the major cities in pursuit of opportunities under the Pax Britannica—a systematized, hegemonic international legal and maritime control system regulating trade across the empire. The British also oversaw the immigration of thousands of predominantly Muslim Bengali Indians as cheap labor to support the expansion of the colonial economic infrastructure. Nationalism therefore developed in keeping with specific ethnic (Burman vs. non-Burman), religious (Buddhist vs. non-Buddhist), and economic associations. The economic competition between Burmans and Indians lent a class dimension to anti-Muslim and anti-Bengali narratives that continue to resonate today.

Christian missionaries also came to Burma throughout the colonial period. While conversion to Christianity was rare among Burmans for whom Buddhism was an intrinsic aspect of their identity, ethnic minorities such as the Chin and Kachin were receptive to British and American missionary efforts. Among the Kachin, missionary education helped to create a sense of shared identity across its various tribes, laying the groundwork for solidarity and armed resistance following independence.

Aware of potential nationalist threats, the British banned political groups, but they tolerated religious organizations. As a result, Buddhist groups such as the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (1906) and the General Council of Buddhist (Burmese) Associations (1920) incubated nationalist thought. These organizations produced popular slogans that linked religion and ethnic identity, such as “to be Burmese is to be Buddhist.”

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Under British colonialism, lay Buddhist nationalists were inspired by the activism of Buddhist monks. In 1921 U Ottama was the first monk to be jailed for his political activities; he and others died in prison. Monastic resistance reflected the historical role that the Sangha played as a counterbalance to state power, and their imprisonment foreshadowed continued crackdowns on the monastic community under military governments in years to come.

Later Years
Burma was a major frontline between Britain and Japan during World War II, and the fighting devastated the country. Britain’s scorched earth policy destroyed much of the infrastructure built during the colonial period, and the majority of the Burmese welcomed the Japanese, supporting the invaders from 1942 to 1945. Future political leaders (and ethnic Burmans) Aung San and Ne Win were members of a small army backed by the Japanese, known as the Burma Independence Army. As it became clear that Japan would lose the war, General Aung San shifted the army’s loyalty to the British and fought alongside the Allies for the remainder of WWII. These shifting allegiances exacerbated ethnic tensions. The British had originally barred Burmans from the military and instead gave positions to the Karen, Kachin, and Chin in exchange for ambiguous promises of autonomy. Violence was therefore commonplace between the ethnic minorities who were allied with the British and the Burmans who were initially allied with the Japanese.

Following the end of the war, Burmese governments demanded independence from Britain and stressed the need to maintain “unity” in the face of fragmentation. As a result, Burmese leaders drafted the Panglong Agreement, a product of the 1947 Panglong Conference that brought General Aung San together with representatives of many of Burma’s ethnic groups in order to form the Union of Burma. The new constitution included protections for religious diversity, but it was completed without input from representatives of some ethnic minorities; most notably, the Rohingya were not recognized in the Panglong Agreement as a legitimate Burmese ethnicity. Plus, even with the protections that were in place, the new Burmese government failed to enact their promises, and power was rapidly consolidated in Buddhist Burman hands. While this break from Britain is commemorated annually on February 12th as Union Day, in reality, a centralized, coercive force over peripheral communities persists, leaving the country far from unified.

The colonial years are remembered with bitterness; in 1989, as part of an effort to roll back some of the influences of colonialism, the military government renamed the country “Myanmar” from “Burma,” along with hundreds of other place names.

Independence and Modern Political Rule
Independence & Civilian Government (1948-1962)

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General Aung San negotiated with the badly weakened post-WWII British government for independence, which was achieved in 1948. Aung San and other Burmese nationalists viewed Burmese identity as inherently Buddhist, a view he exhibited in 1946 during his famous anti-colonial speech on the steps of the Shwedagon Pagoda, an important Buddhist reliquary. However, Aung San maintained that an independent Burma should continue to separate religion and state, and had he not been assassinated in 1947, Buddhism’s role in government administration may have been minimized.

Instead, U Nu (d. 1995), leader of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), instituted Buddhist socialism in hopes of addressing the widespread poverty of the post-war years. For U Nu, individual property ownership was at the heart of samsara (the Buddhist concept of the cycles of life, death, and rebirth perpetuated by suffering) while state ownership of Burmese property was a way to establish Buddhist social egalitarianism. U Nu and the AFPFL also believed socialism to be the best way to reassert Burmese ownership over assets that had been controlled by foreigners.

The AFPFL brought together left-leaning political organizations ranging from labor associations to student and veteran groups. However, the AFPFL split in the 1950s over disagreements, and U Nu sanctioned a military “coup” in 1958 to maintain peace between the conflicting AFPFL factions. The brief period of “Caretaker Government” military rule, during which U Nu retired to a monastery for monastic seclusion, ended with a generally well regarded democratic election which returned U Nu to power. However, it also gave the military confidence in its own ability to govern.

U Nu received widespread popular support in the 1960 election, including among the Sangha. His leadership was seen as a return to the pre-colonial days in which Burma was a Buddhist empire whose political leaders were the guardians of the religion. In 1961 U Nu oversaw the passage of the State Religion Act (SRA), which reinforced the government’s role as religious patron. The SRA made Buddhism Burma’s official state religion, instituted the Buddhist religious calendar as the state calendar, and initiated construction of 60,000 new pagodas. The passage of the SRA triggered a wave of unrest among non-Buddhist ethnic minorities and reinvigorated minority demands for federalism and, in some cases, independent statehood.

Military Rule, 1962-2011
In an effort to defend Burma from ethnic unrest and to ensure the continuity of power for the Buddhist Burman majority, the military staged a second coup in 1962. The coup was fueled by a belief that the assertion of minority ethnic and religious identities threatened to undermine Burmese “unity.” The mobilization of non-Buddhist minority groups in response to the State Religion Act caused the military government to forcibly restore order in the country. Generals

instituted sometimes brutal control over ethnic minorities, which included forced conversions to Buddhism and the construction of pagodas in predominantly Muslim or Christian areas. In so doing, the Burmese government used Buddhist symbols to enact central government power over marginalized religious minorities.

Led by General Ne Win (d. 2002), the military backed Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) abolished the judiciary in 1962, nationalized thousands of businesses in 1963, and banned all political parties outside of the BSPP in 1964. Shortly after the coup, Ne Win released The Burmese Way to Socialism, an overview of government ideology, which combined socialism, Buddhism, and humanism, reiterating the links between social egalitarianism and Buddhism articulated under U Nu.

Ten years later, a new constitution cemented Burma as a socialist authoritarian state. Food shortages, poorly managed by the BSPP, triggered widespread popular unrest including among members of the Sangha. Invoking the duty of pre-colonial Buddhist kings to “purify” the Sangha, Ne Win introduced the State Sangha Council to regulate and monitor the monastic community, and “heretical” monks were put on trial.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) led by General Saw Maung assumed power following the failed “People’s Revolution” of 1988, again triggered by food and fuel shortages. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, quickly took on a leadership role in anti-government protests and became the secretary of the newly formed National League for Democracy (NLD). In 1988, she delivered a speech against the SLORC on the same steps of the Shwedagon Pagoda where her father had excoriated the colonial government four decades earlier. A year later she was placed under house arrest. The NLD had tremendous success in the 1990 elections—an unwelcome surprise to the ruling military government.

The military invalidated the election results, refused to hand over leadership to the NLD, and reframed the elections as an exercise in reform. In 1991 while still under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, transforming her into a global icon of nonviolent activism. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered in absentia by her son, she wrote: “Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood ... The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavor to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his nature.” In framing her appeal for democracy and human rights in Buddhist terms, Aung San Suu Kyi offered a persuasive counter-narrative to the military government; to rebut it, they would struggle to be seen as more Buddhist than she.

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Indeed, the SLORC faced significant, though not uniform, opposition among the Sangha. Though some members of the Sangha supported military power in return for its patronage, others vocally opposed the regime. To protest the 1990 election results, some monks and monasteries refused to accept alms or to perform services for military families, thereby denying them “merit.” In Buddhist cultures, merit is traditionally seen as a requirement for both material success and spiritual advancement, making offerings to the Sangha an essential method of gaining status in the community. The Sangha’s refusal to accept military patronage was a scathing and public critique of SLORC policy. In response, the government initiated a brutal crackdown on the monasteries, arresting “corrupt” monks and destroying monastery property. They again framed this response as a duty derived from their role as purifier of the Sangha. The SLORC henceforth issued a law requiring monks to avoid politics and to conform to the policies of the State Sangha Council.

The SLORC took great pains to affirm their religious legitimacy. They publicly celebrated Buddhist holidays; channeled state money for new pagodas, to Buddhist universities, and to supportive monasteries; sponsored a six-week procession of a major Buddhist relic around the country; and discussed implementing “Buddhist culture” courses in Burmese schools.  

Protests and Democratic Transitions, 2007-present

In 2007 the government removed fuel subsidies, prompting a wave of protests dubbed the “Saffron Revolution” due to the participation of thousands of Buddhist monks in marches across the country, though the protests were organized by opposition political activists and included a variety of participants. Nonetheless, it was the largest public demonstration by Buddhist monks in modern Burmese history and quickly garnered global attention, despite censorship efforts that ultimately shut down national internet service. As the protests intensified, a group of monks marched to the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, still under house arrest, tearfully pledging their allegiance. Images of military officers beating Buddhist monastics spread rapidly via social media, and undid much of the religious goodwill that the military government had cultivated through its patronage of Buddhist institutions since the 1990s.

In 2008, the military government was further undermined by their negligent humanitarian response in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Cyclones are common in Myanmar, but a number of factors combined to create a humanitarian and environmental disaster. The storm was particularly severe, and the people of Myanmar in the path of the storm received little to no warning from the government. In addition, large scale environmental degradation—particularly the wholesale destruction of Mangrove forests in the Irrawaddy delta which formed natural barriers to storms—significantly increased the devastation of the storm. The military government was slow to respond and internal corruption was rampant. International aid was flatly refused by the junta, partially due to fears of foreign

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invasion, and partially to prevent international poll watchers from observing the 2008 constitutional referendum.14

The referendum had been called by the military government to vote on a new constitution for the country on May 10, which fell eight days after the storm. Myanmar totally rejected calls for international observers, even from the UN, so when they delayed voting in storm affected areas by two weeks, they also refused to allow international aid workers to enter the country to assist with relief efforts until nearly a month after the storm hit the country. The referendum was widely disputed, though the government declared turnout of over 98 percent, with over 92 percent approval. Once the referendum was over, the government began to allow foreign aid to enter the country, but for many it was too late. While official figures are imprecise, the storm and its aftermath led to the death of around 138,000 people, and cost $2.4 billion (USD), around 27 percent of the country’s GDP. However, it also began a period of massive influxes of foreign aid and greater autonomy for NGOs and other aid organizations, while dramatically intensifying international condemnation of the military government.15

The unrest following the Saffron Revolution and aftermath of Cyclone Nargis was followed by general elections in 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD boycotted the election, allowing former General Thein Sein to win most of the parliament’s seats and election to Prime Minister, despite questions about the legitimacy of the election. However, in June 2012, the NLD participated in by-elections and won nearly all contested seats. Aung San Suu Kyi was welcomed into parliament. As sanctions were lifted, foreign investment and tourism began to flow into Myanmar. U.S. President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and British Foreign Secretary William Hague made highly publicized visits to Myanmar. In 2014, Myanmar was elected to hold the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which suggested an extraordinary regional vote of confidence in the government’s reforms.

The collective voice of Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party and the Rule of Law and Tranquility Committee—a parliamentary committee chaired by Suu Kyi—continued to intensify, and so did the challenges she and Speaker Shwe Mann posed to the president and the executive branch over military roles and budgets16. In November, 2015 Suu Kyi famously declared that if she won the election and formed a new government with the NLD party, she would be “above the president.” By the time the 2015 elections were held, Aung San Suu Kyi, the uncontested “icon of democracy,” had garnered the majority of the nation’s support and led her party to a landslide win. However, she was prevented from officially taking the seat of the presidency due to Clause 59F, a constitutional provision drawn up by the military in 2008 in anticipation of Suu Kyi’s growing popularity. The clause disqualifies anyone from becoming president whose

14 David Steinberg, Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70, 98, 139-42.
15 David Steinberg, Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 139-42.
spouse, children, or spouses of children have foreign passports. Suu Kyi’s late husband and children are British citizens. Her top aide, Htin Kyaw stepped into the role of president by proxy. Still, Clause 59F was unable to keep Suu Kyi out of power, as the government created a new position for her in the spring of 2016 which they named the “State Counsellor.” In many ways like a prime minister, the State Counsellor is generally believed to be significantly more powerful than the president.

Despite these democratic successes, recent elections have been tarnished by the fact that hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims were not permitted to vote. Ongoing conflicts with ethnic minorities and particularly discrimination and violence against the Rohingya cast a dark shadow over progress, and Suu Kyi has been criticized for her lack of response to their plight. Violence against the Rohingya, concentrated in internment camps along Myanmar’s western border, has been framed in explicitly religious terms, with some members of the Sangha claiming that Muslims present a threat to Burmese Buddhists.

The violence against Muslims—which has largely gone on with the complicity of state security forces—has been coded as “resistance” against Muslims, often framed as protection from Muslims who are rumored to desire a takeover of the country by means of rapid population growth and marriage of Buddhist women. Anti-Muslim sentiment has also been closely tied to the broader narratives of Islamophobia engendered by the “War on Terror.” In late 2012, Thein Sein is reported to have suggested to the United Nations that an estimated 800,000 Rohingya refugees should be removed from the country.

That same year, a self-formed group of Buddhist nationalist monks and laypeople called 969 began to exert influence on parliament. As a movement, 969 is decentralized and has only roughly defined goals. However, they have often been implicated in oppression of Muslim minority communities, and they have encouraged Burmans to buy only from Buddhist merchants who display their symbol. In 2014, dominant members of 969 formed Ma Ba Tha (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion), a more centralized organization which actively worked with politicians in the government to pass laws favorable to Buddhist nationalists. While the members of Ma Ba Tha are diverse and their policy positions are not all uniform, many in the group have pushed for codifying anti-Muslim legislation including laws regarding interreligious marriage, conversion, and population control. Together these Buddhist nationalist groups continue to significantly impact policy making.

In 2013, mobs of Buddhist men overtook Muslim neighborhoods, leading to hundreds of deaths. Over a hundred thousand people were displaced from their homes, many of which were burned to the ground; most were Rohingya, but other non-Rohingya Muslim minorities

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were also assaulted. In January 2014, tensions exploded again when local security forces and civilians associated with an extreme Buddhist Rakhine group attacked Rohingya Muslims; at least 48 were killed, but both the killings and the exact numbers are refuted by the government. Doctors Without Borders, which treated approximately 700,000 people in Du Char Yar Tan, Rakhine including 200,000 living in isolated camps and villages, was ordered by the government to shut down their clinics and leave the state after treating 22 wounded Rohingyas. Intercommunal tension and violence, and a half-century of deeply entrenched military rule have resulted in one of the worst refugee crises in the world. Attempts by international media to highlight institutionalized segregation and what some have called ethnic cleansing have done little to abate the strength of leaders such as Ashin Wirathu (a.k.a. U Wirathu), a Buddhist nationalist monk who has regularly stoked anti-Muslim violence.

While Buddhist nationalists have promoted violence and hate speech against minority communities, it should be noted that there are counter-narratives within the Buddhist tradition which have actively fought against the violence perpetrated by the more powerful nationalist groups. Individuals and groups of Buddhist monks have encouraged interfaith dialogue, provided humanitarian relief to Muslim victims of violence, and even risked their lives to save their Muslim neighbors during riots and attacks. Even a few members of Ma Ba Tha have supported interfaith activities and peacebuilding efforts. Still, most dissenters have challenged religious bigotry with extreme caution, due to the intense social and political pressure levied against them by the powerful Buddhist nationalists if they speak out.

In July 2016, after further riots of Buddhist nationalists destroyed two mosques and caused scores of Muslims to flee their homes, the NLD and the Sangha Council surprised the world with an active response, ending years of inaction or even tacit approval of anti-Muslim violence. President Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Suu Kyi announced the creation of a taskforce to hold both perpetrators and inciters of violence accountable, and asked the Sangha Council to help police hate speech. That same week, the Sangha Council denounced Ma Ba Tha, declaring that it never endorsed the group and that Ma Ba Tha is not a recognized Buddhist group in Myanmar. The NLD agreed saying that Ma Ba Tha, “was never recognized as a real Buddhist organization.” The end results of these moves are not yet clear, but they may indicate a growing authority of peaceful counter-narratives against the extreme Buddhist nationalism which has characterized much of Myanmar’s modern history.

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Economic Policies and Ideologies

Historically, Myanmar was an important nexus in the trade network that connected China with the Middle East and Europe, and coastal cities brimmed with religious and ethnic diversity. During the colonial period, the British administration did not interfere in the religious life of its subjects as long as they did not jeopardize British economic and political power, thereby encouraging this diversity. With the opening of the Suez Canal, Europe grew into a major market for Burmese rice and the Irrawaddy Delta region became the “world’s rice basket.” By WWII, Burma was the largest global exporter of rice.

Nonetheless, the global depression of the 1930s led to plummeting rice prices and shook Burma’s economy, triggering widespread protests with strong anti-colonial and anti-Indian overtones. Indigenous Burmese held the British responsible for their economic woes, and they resented the population of cheaper Indian laborers that was increasing under colonial rule. With the deepening associations connecting Burmese nationalism to Buddhism, this resentment took on religious overtones against the predominately Muslim Indian immigrants.

Under the British, Burma’s resources and trade were almost entirely controlled by foreigners, typically Europeans, but also some Chinese, Indians, Baghdadi Jews, and others. Post-independence, Prime Minister U Nu enacted socialism with the intention of reasserting state control over what nationalists perceived had been taken from them. U Nu articulated a specifically Buddhist vision of socialism to remedy the widespread poverty throughout the country. He invoked the legend of the Mahathammada, a prince who appeared to relieve social unrest when the advent of private property destroyed the mythical Padeytha tree—a tree that had provided people with all material means for survival. He advocated common ownership of property in an egalitarian society—a utopian nirvana. However, U Nu’s government failed to successfully stimulate economic development and the standard of living drastically deteriorated. As a result, skilled professionals left Myanmar and there was little investment in infrastructure. Non-Burman and non-Buddhist regions received the least amount of economic support from the government, which in turn fueled periods of armed resistance against the state.

Corruption became endemic in the years following independence and worsened during the military period when an extensive black market flourished. In a supposed effort to stem corruption, the government demonetized the kyat—Myanmar’s currency—three times. The third demonetization occurred in 1987 and the ensuing economic crisis helped spark the protests of 1988. That same year, the military government, which owned large shares in all major industries, enacted a foreign investment law intended to encourage investors by protecting their businesses from nationalization. Investors were drawn to Myanmar for its abundant natural resources and its strictly controlled, cheap labor force. In 1997 and again in 2003 the United States imposed sanctions in response to international outcry over labor conditions, including the targeting of Christian minority groups for forced labor. Though the

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current civilian-led, military-backed democratic government is improving labor conditions, Myanmar continues to be ranked among the world’s most corrupt countries, and labor laws are not uniformly enforced.23

Religion and Political and Legal Structures
The legislative branch is comprised of a National Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw), itself separated into a House of Representatives (Pyithy Hluttaw) and Senate (Amyotha Hluttaw). The House of Representatives has 440 seats, 330 of which are elected representatives and 110 of which are reserved for military personnel appointed by the Commander in Chief of the Defense Services. The Senate has 224 seats, including 168 elected representatives and 56 military appointees.24

Burmese law is derived from English common law, customary law, the Constitution of Myanmar, and enacted legislation. An additional sociocultural source of legalistic material is the pre-colonial dhammasata, a series of ethical and legal stories, rules, and lists compiled from various Sanskrit and Pali sources, which give information on aspects of life such as gender relations, economic transactions, and monastic inheritance. While the texts are not explicitly religious, they presume that Myanmar’s society is Buddhist, and the dhammasata are generally considered Buddhist law. References to the dhammasata are relatively rare compared to other sources of law in modern Myanmar, but it still undergirds many aspects of customary law.25

The Burmese constitution grants rights to freedom of religion, but these freedoms are restricted by other constitutional articles, as well as laws and government policies which have been directly enacted and enforced by the Burmese government. For example, anti-discrimination laws do not apply to ethnic minorities that aren’t recognized by the 1982 Citizenship Law. The government actively promotes Theravada Buddhism over other forms of religious expression and oversees restrictions on non-Buddhist religious practice, especially in ethnic minority communities. Adherence to Buddhism is an unwritten rule of advancement in government and military positions. The government also continues to monitor and limit expression among members of the Sangha—who are not permitted to vote—such that Buddhist and other religious groups face restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.26 More recently, in the spring of 2015, four laws known collectively as the Race and

Religion Protection Laws, were adopted by the Parliament and signed by then president Thein Sein, despite containing provisions that discriminated against religious minorities and women.\(^\text{27}\)

**Relationship with Other Nation States**

Tensions between Myanmar and **Bangladesh** center in large part upon the vast number of Muslim **Rohingya** who have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh since the 1970s. Some 300,000 **Rohingya** are presently living in Bangladesh, which has not granted them refugee status and objects to doing so on legalistic grounds, pointing out that they have signed no international agreements obligating them to accept refugees. More recently, **Buddhists** from Bangladesh have been allowed to settle in Myanmar, further destabilizing life for the **Rohingya** inside of Myanmar and increasing the threat of communal tension and violence.\(^\text{28}\)

**China** has provided substantial military and economic support for Myanmar over the past two decades, especially during the period when Myanmar faced economic sanctions by western nations. In recent years, China has provided billions of dollars (USD) in military aid and hundreds of millions of dollars (USD) in economic development annually. In addition, the Chinese have begun to push the central Burmese government to negotiate cease-fire agreements with ethnic minorities. In 2012, they hosted peace talks between the Burmese government and the Kachin Independence Army in an effort to bring hostilities near the Chinese border to a close.\(^\text{29}\) In addition to geographic proximity, China has a vested interest in a stable Myanmar; China is a major buyer of Burmese oil and natural gas.\(^\text{30}\)

However, China’s investments and negotiations are not always seen positively by the Burmese people, as was made clear during the nationwide protests against China’s Myitsone Dam project in northern Myanmar, a project which the Burmese government eventually cancelled. As international sanctions lift and Myanmar explores partnerships with India, Japan, the US, and ASEAN countries, the Burmese government has actively taken steps to become less reliant on China. In fact, despite their still significant economic influence, China’s investments in the country have rapidly declined, including a 90% drop in a single fiscal year from $8.27 billion


(USD) in 2011/2012 to $407 million (USD) in 2012/2013. Myanmar is considered to be one of the few major setbacks for Chinese foreign policy in recent years.\(^{31}\)

**India** has a long and complex relationship with Myanmar. Burma was once a part of British India, a colonial possession within a colonial possession. For the Burmese, then, independence meant freedom from both Britain and India. The British had brought in Indian laborers to perform many lower-level functions in the colonial government; they imported such large numbers of low-skilled workers that Rangoon was a majority Indian city in the 1920s and 1930s. Large numbers of Indians fled the country as Japan invaded in the early 1940s, and the Burmese army later expelled some 200,000 Indians after the 1962 military coup.\(^{32}\)

Recently, India has become concerned with the growing Chinese presence in Myanmar and its nearby bodies of water, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Seeking to stem China’s influence, in 2012 the Indian government announced a range of programs to benefit Myanmar, including a $500 million line of credit for the government, fellowships for Myanmar researchers to study in India, and investment in Burmese infrastructure. India’s investments in Myanmar serve them financially as well as politically, helping to facilitate trade between the nations as India seeks to access Myanmar’s natural resources and stem China’s influence in Southeast Asia.\(^{33}\)

For much of the twentieth century, **Japan** was Burma’s most important ally. Burmese nationalists looked to Japan—another Asian Buddhist nation—as a partner in resisting British colonialism. Beginning in the late 1930s, the Japanese military helped train a small group of soldiers (including Aung San and Ne Win) who comprised and later led the Burma Independence Army. During WWII, the invading Japanese forces were welcomed by many in Burma, especially from the majority Burman ethnic group. The Japanese controlled Burma from 1942-1945 and supported the nationalist aspirations of the people there. However, as Japanese power began to decline in 1945, Aung San shifted the Burma Independence Army’s allegiance to the British.\(^{34}\)

Even so, Burmese and Japanese relations remained close, especially during the rule of General Ne Win. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, Japanese aid comprised over half of all foreign assistance to Burma. Imports from Japan compromised about 40% of all imported goods, and during this period Myanmar received only modest imports from China. When the SLORC took over, those percentages largely reversed, with the majority of imports in Myanmar coming from China while Japan’s influence waned.\(^{35}\) However, in the years since the democratic

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reforms in 2011, Japanese economic ties with Myanmar have begun to increase again as sanctions have been lifted and China’s influence has been challenged by the people and government of Myanmar.

The relationship between Laos and Myanmar must be understood in relation to the vast—and growing—power of China in Southeast Asia. China has sought to build a rail network linking Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar in order to provide itself with another access point for oil from the Middle East. Myanmar and Laos have cooperated recently on infrastructure projects of their own in an effort to ease travel between the two countries, although the scale of this work pales in comparison to the Chinese projects.\textsuperscript{36} Myanmar and Laos also share a border that is part of the so-called Golden Triangle, one of the largest areas of heroin poppy cultivation in the world.\textsuperscript{37}

Historically, Myanmar has considered Thailand to be its rival. Expansionist and aggressive Burmese kingdoms invaded parts of Thailand, most famously in 1767 when they destroyed the Thai capital of Ayutthaya. This historical event is still symbolically significant in both Thailand and Myanmar. During WWII, the Japanese gave Thailand sections of Myanmar’s Shan State, though they were relinquished after the war. The military junta regards the annual Thai-American military exercise known as Cobra Gold with deep suspicion, and generally sees Thailand as an American proxy in the region. Though relations have improved overall, there remain instances of tension and violence, as was displayed in their heated border disputes in 2002 and again in 2016.\textsuperscript{38}

\section*{Myanmar Religions and Worldviews}

Close to 90\% of people in Myanmar today are Buddhist, and virtually all of them practice Theravada Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism adheres most closely to the oldest texts in the Buddhist tradition and generally emphasizes more rigorous observance of the monastic code than other schools of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhists ultimately aim to be released from the cycle of suffering, \textit{samsara}, and to achieve \textit{nirvana}. To achieve success in this world—and to advance to enlightenment in subsequent rebirths—they must build positive karma, or merit.

Lay people accumulate merit by making offerings to the Buddhist monastic community, or Sangha. This can be done when monks pass through neighborhoods each morning to collect alms or in the form of


\textsuperscript{37} David Steinberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 104.

donations to temples and monasteries. The Sangha is also capable of granting legitimacy to state power or sometimes of opposing state power. In particular, monks’ capacity to refuse donations—denying someone merit—grants them a powerful symbolic veto that they have exercised to express their displeasure with the Burmese government.

Buddhism had been the state religion of Burma beginning with the Kingdom of Pagan in 1044, and was briefly reinstated as the state religion under Prime Minister U Nu in 1961 until the military coup in 1962. With Buddhism closely affiliated with Burmese identity, particularly Burman identity, nationalism took on specific Buddhist associations. Buddhist Burmans rallied behind slogans such as “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.” Buddhist monks who opposed colonialism became powerful symbols for the nationalist movement, particularly after many died in prison. Though opposition has never been uniform among the Sangha, thousands of monks have engaged in political activism over the past century, most recently in the 2007 “Saffron Revolution.” Nationalist groups, such as Ma Ba Tha, have successfully influenced policy makers and Burmese Buddhists with claims that their actions are necessary for the defense of sasana, a word that encompasses the entirety of Buddhism including the community of monks, nuns, and laypeople as well as sacred texts, literature, and oral tradition. Sasana is believed to be critically important for the attainment of enlightenment.

Lastly, a unique aspect of Buddhism in Myanmar has been the growth of meditation movements among laypeople. Traditionally, meditation practice was reserved for monastic elites; lay religious practice consisted largely of making offerings to monks who went on alms-rounds. Under British colonialism, however, meditation was taught to laypeople in large numbers for the first time, a practice that continues into the present day. Prominent Burmese meditation teachers have also influenced the practice of Buddhism throughout America and Europe, particularly in the style of meditation known as vipassana, or insight meditation.

Sources:


Burmans (also known as Bamar) are the largest ethnic and linguistic group in present-day Myanmar, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the population. They live primarily in the Irrawaddy Basin and speak Burmese. Note that Burman and Burmese are not equivalent—the latter term refers to any citizen of Myanmar, not just those of the Burman ethnic group.

Almost without exception, Burmans are Buddhist, a fact that has influenced Burman relationships with other ethnic groups for centuries. Non-Buddhist ethnic groups such as the Karen were viewed as uncivilized, in part because of their religious beliefs. The intimate relationship between Burman identity
and Buddhism deeply influenced Burmese nationalism under colonialism, giving birth to such slogans as “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.”

Sources:


Precise estimates of the number of Chinese living in Myanmar are difficult to come by—most sources guess roughly 3% of the population, although such a figure does not necessarily take into account the large numbers of Chinese migrant workers living in Myanmar at any given time. The Chinese have been a presence in Myanmar for over a thousand years. After WWII, the Chinese took over many of the trading and retail jobs that were left when Indians departed the country and thus play a prominent role in Burmese business.

Sources:


Christians in Myanmar are estimated to make up around 4% of the population. Roughly two-thirds of Myanmar’s Christians are Protestant, about 16% are Roman Catholic, and the remainder are members of independent churches. Of these groups, about 30% identify as Evangelicals and about 25% as Pentecostals. Many of Myanmar’s Karen, Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Lahu, and Naga are Christian.

Many of these ethnic minorities had long been in conflict with Burmans. They benefited under colonialism and largely supported the British during WWII. Christian and Muslim militias sometimes cooperated during the war as well. Following independence, both rising literacy rates due to mission education and increasing Christian religious identity contributed to an unwillingness among minorities to accept Burman Buddhist rule—though different ethnic groups have responded to Buddhist rule in unique ways. For the Chin, who had long been treated as inferior for their animist beliefs, conversion to Christianity lent them a sense of being on equal footing with Burman Buddhists as inheritors of a global tradition. For the Kachin, armed rebellion against the state has been infused with Burmese Christian nationalism. Ethnoreligious antagonism has also meant that Christians were less represented in protest movements opposing the military government; Christian leaders did not participate in the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” protests alongside Buddhist monks.

Christian ethnic minorities have faced significant discrimination in Myanmar. Christians have reported campaigns of forcible conversion to Buddhism, restrictions on church-building and religious organizing, and forced labor conscription, as well as killings, torture, rape, abductions, and other acts of violence by the Burmese military.

Sources:

Elizabeth Goh, “India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar,” *Christianities in Asia*, ed. Peter Phan
Approximately 2% of Burmese people are Hindu. Burmese Hindus are a mix of Bengalis, Tamils, Telegus, and Uttar Pradeshis who arrived in Burma under British colonialism. With the military coup of 1962, about one million Indians, many of them Hindus, were forced out of Burma, but some remained, mostly in Yangon (Rangoon), Mandalay, and the Bago District. As India is a close neighbor, Hinduism has had a regional influence in Myanmar for centuries, and Hindu gods are sometimes included among the nats, or spirits, worshipped by some Burmese Buddhists. Due to historical ties between Hinduism and Buddhism, Hindus have faced far less discrimination than Muslim Indians such as the Rohingya.

Sources:


Burma was once home to a thriving Jewish diaspora community, which at one point numbered over two thousand, and was part of a much larger regional diasporic community stretching from India to China. The integration of Burma into the British Empire meant that it was governed by a common international law, the Pax Britannica, which facilitated regulated trade between members of the geographically disparate, yet tightly knit Jewish community linked by family, language, and faith.

The Musmeah Yeshua, Rangoon’s synagogue built in 1893, was the center of Jewish life in Myanmar until World War II. The community was primarily made up of Baghdadi Jews who had refined their mercantile skills in Baghdad, an important trading center for centuries. It also included Sephardic Jews who settled in the Ottoman Empire after fleeing the Spanish Inquisition in 1391, and ethnically Indian Jews: the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews. In 1839, a confluence of factors including persecution under the Ottoman ruler Daud Pasha caused some Jews to flee the Ottoman Empire for safety in South and Southeast Asia. While they may have stood out in the Ottoman Empire, Jews were one of a great many religious and ethnic groups in British India and this invisibility afforded them opportunities to develop strong social and economic ties throughout the region without pressure to conform to foreign norms. Myanmar’s Jews were not only successful businessmen. They were also prosperous civil servants, military police, and shipwrights in the Rangoon harbor. However, despite elite Jews’ commercial success and their enculturation into a British worldview through the English mission schools (which subsequently weakened their Baghdadi identity), the British never regarded them as peers.

WWII and the end of the colonial era effectively terminated Jewish social life in Myanmar. Most foreigners, including Jews, fled en masse to Calcutta in 1941 and 1942, many taking the brutal trek across the Indo-Burmese border. Roughly 1,500 Jews reached Calcutta from Myanmar, and were cared for by Baghdadi Jews there. Once recovered, the Burmese Jews found employment with the British or
American military. A small group of Jews remained behind in Myanmar, many of whom had intermarried with Burmese who were barred from fleeing on European ships. The Jews were regarded with suspicion by the Burmese nationalists, who associated them with the British. When the war had ended in 1945, around three to four hundred Jews returned to Myanmar. Despite the destruction of Rangoon, the Musmeah Yeshua had been unharmed. Still, several factors made life in Myanmar incredibly difficult for the returning Jews. They lost British citizenship following independence, communal religious life deteriorated, trade networks had broken down, many privately owned Jewish businesses were nationalized, their educational institutions eroded, and they suffered from the general chaos and lack of safety. Within a few years of their return, most emigrated away from Myanmar, leaving very few behind.

Burma and Israel developed markedly friendly relations; both declared independence in 1948. Burma recognized Israeli statehood in 1949, and both David Ben-Gurion and Prime Minister U Nu shared a belief in socialism. U Nu was the first foreign leader to visit the State of Israel in 1955, and Ben-Gurion spent two weeks in Burma in 1961, during which time he studied Buddhism and was warmly welcomed by Burma’s small Jewish community. This period of friendship ended with the 1962 military coup, which imposed a policy of international isolationism. General Ne Win oversaw the nationalization of stores that had provided funding for the Musmeah Yeshua, which was attacked by an anti-Zionist mob in 1967. Burma’s last rabbi left in 1969, and the remaining Jewish community was reduced to a few dozen Sephardic and Bene Israel families. The Musmeah Yeshua synagogue remains open and is cared for today by Baghdadi Burmese father and son, Moses and Sammy Samuels.

Sources:


The Kachin are a majority-Christian ethnic group made up of numerous tribes located in Upper Burma. In 1876, Protestant missionaries cultivated relationships with the Kachin and many converted to Christianity. Kachin leaders signed separate treaties with the British that granted them significant autonomy in the area known as the Kachin Hill Tracts. The Kachin also allied with the British during WWII, while the majority Burmans switched their allegiance to the Japanese. They were one of the ethnic minorities that comprised the Burmese military in the colonial period when Burmans were banned from such positions.

The Kachin received status as a semi-independent state as a result of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, but this agreement was abrogated following the military coup of 1962, leading to a several-year civil war with the central government. Fighting resumed again in 2011, although China has sought to broker a peace deal to preserve security near its borders and ensure the safe passage of oil and natural gas over Kachin lands. The Kachin seek greater autonomy, as well as a say in how natural resources in their territory are used and how the wealth generated from them is directed.

In 2014, anti-drugs members of the Kachin Baptist Church formed a group called Pat Nasan, now comprised of 100 thousand activists who conduct raids on poppy fields and conduct public floggings of drug dealers. It is regarded as the largest civilian uprising in Myanmar, and their tactics have resulted in
bloody clashes with police and growers, as well as forced imprisonment of addicts into primitive rehab camps. Myanmar is the second largest producer of opium in the world.

Sources:


The Karen are an internally diverse group of ethnic minorities who live primarily in southern and southeastern Burma. They are the second-largest non-Burman ethnic group in Myanmar comprising some 6% of the population and are mostly Christian. During WWII, roughly 28% of the Karen served in the Burmese army, which by British policy deliberately excluded ethnic Burmans. During the war, the Karen continued to support the British even as Burmans, led by Aung San, sided with the Japanese.

Representatives for the Karen attended the 1947 Panglong Conference as observers but did not formally participate in the negotiations. Beginning in 1949, a rebellion broke out among the Karen people and was quickly followed by the wholesale defection of Karen units in the newly-formed Burmese army. The Karen National Union (KNU) has been at war with the central Burmese government since these defections, making this rebellion the longest in contemporary world history. They seek greater autonomy, political rights (including the right to bear arms), and social freedoms in the realms of religion, culture, education, and language.

Sources:


Myanmar has had a Muslim presence as early as the ninth century. Muslim sailors intermarried with local Burmese woman and settled permanently in port cities along the Burmese Coast, especially in the Arakan region. Arab and Persian sources mention Burma in the 9th and 10th centuries in the context of trade; historically, Burma was a node in the vast trade network spanning China, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and North Africa. Other Muslims in Burma included Indians captured in war and resettled in the interior and Muslim mercenaries in service of Burmese kings. European accounts of life in Burma in the 15th to 17th centuries included descriptions of Persian and Indian Muslim settlements. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Muslims served in the Burmese army, again intermarrying with Burmese women.

There are a variety of Burmese Muslim ethnic minorities, including the Chinese-Muslim Panthay in northern Myanmar, Shan Muslims, and Rakhine Muslims in Rakhine. Since the British colonial period, relations between the Rohingya Muslim community and the Buddhist Burman community have been uneasy, and in the past few years these tensions have exploded into violence, predominantly instigated by Buddhist mobs attacking the Rohingya. Violence has spread to target other Muslim communities as well, raising concerns over the civilian government’s capacity to negotiate sensitive ethnic and religious differences and to place controls over Buddhist monks who foment anger towards Muslim minorities.

Sources:
Most of Myanmar’s Christians are Protestant. The American Baptist missionaries Adinoram and Ann Judson arrived in Rangoon in 1813 after being turned out of India by the British East India Company, and they established church headquarters in Moulmein in 1826 during the First Anglo-Burmese War. British colonialism subsequently opened a doorway for robust missionary activity. American Methodist missionaries came to Myanmar from India in 1879, and were followed shortly thereafter by British Methodists. The early 20th century through the 1950’s saw the arrival of the Salvation Army, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Assemblies of God, and the Church of Christ.

Christian proselytization was ineffective among the majority ethnic Burmans, for whom Buddhism was a strongly engrained aspect of their identities and not merely a court religion, as it was in some other areas of Southeast Asia. Minority groups, many of which had been in protracted conflict with the ethnic Burmans under pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms, were far more receptive to Christianity. The American Baptists initially focused on the Karen (1827), the Chin (1845), and the Kachin (1876), and to this day these three ethnic groups make up the bulk of both Burmese Protestants and Roman Catholics. Estimates suggest that around 90% of the Chin and Kachin are Christian. Protestant missions strongly condemned indigenous ethnoreligious practices, including spirit worship and animal sacrifice. However, Pentecostal missionaries were more open to incorporating spirit communication as a middle ground between the indigenous ethnoreligion and Christianity.

Adherence to Christianity among some ethnic minorities and adherence to Buddhism among the Burmans has added a religious dimension to their ongoing struggles. In a state where Buddhism was closely linked to identity, conversion to Christianity marked someone as an outsider and Christian converts were referred to as kālas, “foreigners.” In 1966, four years after the military coup, the new Burmese government denied visa renewals to any foreign missionaries who had not been in Myanmar prior to independence, about 375 total. However, even during the colonial period, foreign missionaries had worked closely with indigenous Christians to perform missionary work, so evangelizing has continued despite the absence of Western missionaries.

Sources:

The **Rohingya** are a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic minority, many of whom follow Sufism. Roughly 800,000 to 1 million of the world’s 3.5 million Rohingya live in Myanmar, mainly in the state of Rakhine (formerly known as Arakan), where they face severe institutionalized discrimination and violence in what is framed as a religious conflict between Buddhists and Muslims. Many have settled elsewhere in Southeast Asia, or in Australia, Europe, New Zealand, North America, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Large refugee communities exist in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand.

**British Colonialism & WWII**

British colonialism shifted power balances and generated deep tensions between Burmese Buddhists and Muslims. The British took Arakan in their first campaign against Myanmar in 1824-1826, and encouraged a massive influx of Bengali Indian migrants. By the early 20th century, the immigrant population was twice the size of the local Muslim population. As the Muslim Rohingya community absorbed the new migrants and its religious networks expanded, the Rohingya began to look, dress, and act differently from their Buddhist neighbors. Their growing population pushed into the south, displacing some Buddhist villages.

These demographic changes led to competition over resources with Buddhists. Furthermore, the Rohingya sided with the British against the Japanese in WWII while the dominant Burman ethnicity was barred from joining the military. The Rohingya engaged in armed combat with Burmese Buddhists who supported the Japanese against the British, which degenerated into cycles of retributive violence on the village level. The British then appointed Rohingya to positions of power in the post-war government, and some used these positions to retaliate against Buddhists who had harmed them during the war. Additionally, some Muslims believed that the British would grant them an autonomous area following the war, and some of those hoped to secede from Myanmar and join with India or Pakistan. In 1946, a few Muslim political leaders announced their intentions to form an independent Muslim state, and the following year they met with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who would go on to found Pakistan.

**The Rise of Buddhist Nationalism**

Opposition to Muslim migration became a key point in the mid-century Burmese National Movement, which coincided with a Buddhist religious revival. This would have a profound impact on the experience of the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities in Burma. Following independence in 1948, Burmese Muslims began to steadily lose citizenship status.

Some of the Rohingya in Arakan took part in an armed rebellion against the post-independence Burmese government, though most Rohingya did not and some Muslim leaders condemned the religious justifications used by the rebels. However, the rebels issued demands that were shared by many, including both a desire to be recognized as indigenous Burmese peoples and a rejection of Buddhist claims that Burmese Muslims were outsiders. Rebels—while seeking an autonomous state—also demanded that Muslims be integrated into the Burmese government and army, and that the government work to improve the economy and educational systems in Arakan. Additionally, they insisted that the government lift restrictions on Muslim travel and permit Muslim refugees to return to their villages. When talks with the Burmese government failed, rebels intensified guerilla combat and
drove Buddhists out of villages in Arakan. The Burmese army responded by razing Muslim villages and mosques, which deepened divisions.

The Muslim rebellion ended with surrender in 1961, but Muslims and Buddhists remained deeply distrustful of each other. The military coup in 1962 effectively ended formal Muslim (and all other minority) political activity, which was seen as a threat to Burmese national identity. The military government nationalized all “foreign”-owned businesses, triggering massive emigration from Myanmar into neighboring countries and economically crippling the local Muslim community that remained.

A Refugee Crisis
Numerous waves of flight from Myanmar into Bangladesh have taken place over the last half-century, and the persecution of Rohingya Muslims has proved a constant point of tensions in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. In 1978, Rohingya protests against extreme anti-immigration measures were put down with violence, sending hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing for safety. Under international pressure, the Burmese government agreed to repatriate roughly 200,000 refugees to Arakan. Many of the refugees were prevented from returning to their home villages upon re-entry.

In 1982, the government passed the Burma Citizenship Law, which granted citizenship to most ethnic minority groups but still denied citizenship to the Rohingya. By 1989, the government began settling Buddhists in Muslim-majority areas in Rakhine, displacing Muslim families. Reports of soldiers raping Rohingya women, destroying or confiscating property, conscripting forced labor, and murdering men and women triggered another major refugee crisis. At one point 7,000 refugees were entering Bangladesh daily. The United Nations General Assembly and UN Human Rights commission issued condemnations of the Burmese government, pointing to both the repression of pro-democracy activists and violence against Muslims.

Today, the Rohingya face discrimination in areas of education, employment, public health, housing, religious activity, movement, and family life. In May 2013, the Burmese government reaffirmed support for a 2005 two-child policy applied only to Rohingya families, and in 2015, four additional propositions targeting Rohingya were signed into law. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, estimated at 300,000 in early 2016, (a census is expected to be conducted in April 2016) continue to present a challenge for the Bangladesh government, which seeks a repatriation solution even as refugees continue to enter the country. Numerous outbursts of violence since 2012 have claimed the lives of hundreds, including both Muslims and Buddhists, and have fed the refugee crisis.

Ironically, speech and censorship reforms since the 2011 democratic elections have only worsened the situation, as public opinion is loudly swayed against the Rohingya. Prejudice is also commonplace among the Sangha. Buddhist monks such as Ashin Wirathu (a powerful voice in the anti-Muslim 969 Movement) have been accused of blocking aid to Muslims, delivering anti-Muslim sermons, and encouraging Buddhists to purchase goods only from Buddhist owned businesses marked with a 969 sticker. These monks claim that Burmese and Buddhist culture is under attack by outsiders, specifically foreign “Bengali” Muslims, who threaten to demographically overtake the nation due to their supposed high fertility rates. The government has failed to take any real action against hate speech, and the relationship between anti-Muslim monks and some government figures has raised questions about collusion between the Sangha and the government in the attacks.

Anti-Rohingya monks and others also claim that radical Islamists among the Rohingya are a danger to the Burmese state, and that they are responsible for planning the violent outbursts of 2013. While
militant Islamist groups in Indonesia and Pakistan have threatened violence and have targeted Burmese sites outside of Myanmar in response to the treatment of the Rohingya, international observers have not seen significant levels of radicalization among Myanmar’s Muslims. That said, organizations such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization have had ties with Pakistan’s Jamaat-e Islami and militant Islamist organizations.

Vitriol against the Rohingya is popular, but far from uniform. Monks and lay Buddhists alike have spoken out against the violence. Buddhists outside of Myanmar have decried violence against the Rohingya, and have suggested that the isolation of Burmese Buddhist monks from the international Buddhist community is contributing to the problem. Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the ascendant National Democratic Party, has found herself caught between international condemnation of Myanmar’s policy towards the Rohingya and the widespread unpopularity of any statements in support of the Rohingya in Myanmar itself.

In April 2013, the international rights group Human Rights Watch called the violence against the Rohingya a case of “ethnic cleansing” in which monks and some government officials were complicit. In September 2013, the Toronto-based Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention issued a chilling report warning that with escalating violence there is a high risk of genocide against Myanmar’s Rohingya. An investigation by Al Jazeera and Fortify Rights, a Yale Law School NGO, revealed evidence of government-backed genocide. While violence continues to target the Rohingya, there is evidence showing that it has spread to target other Muslim minorities as well, including the Muslim Kaman, who are recognized as legal Burmese citizens.

Sources:


Roman Catholicism arrived in Myanmar with the Portuguese in the 16th century. Burmese descendants of the Portuguese, known as Bayingyi (derived from the Persian farenji, “foreigner” a term used widely throughout the Indian Ocean region and a legacy of the Crusades), make up the oldest Catholic community. Roman Catholics make up about 1.3% of the Burmese population, 90% of whom come from the Karen, Chin, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and Kaw ethnic minorities, and they are a legacy of Catholic proselytization under colonialism. In January 2015, Pope Francis named Charles Maung Bo the first cardinal of the country.

Sources:


Myanmar
Figures and Organizations

Ashin Wirathu (b. 1968) is a Burmese Buddhist monk, a powerful voice in the 969 nationalist Buddhist movement, and key figure in Ma Ba Tha, a more organized nationalist group that has successfully used its religious power to exert political pressure and influence legislation. He has received international notoriety for his anti-Muslim rhetoric and was described on the cover of Time in July 2013 as “The Face of Buddhist Terror.” He was jailed for eight years by the military government in the early 2000s and has repeatedly stoked Burmese fears of the Muslim minority since his release. Although Wirathu asserts that his speeches do not explicitly advocate violence, his followers are seen as responsible for anti-Muslims
riots and the violence that broke out in Myanmar in 2013. He also promotes the boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, and calls for Buddhist business owners to use a 969 Movement sticker to identify themselves to Buddhist customers.

Sources:


The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a political association founded in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand. It was originally comprised of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, but grew to include Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). Its declared aims are the support of economic growth, cultural development, and “social progress” in its member states; the promotion of regional security and rule of law; the promotion of interstate economic, technical, and scientific collaboration; and other goals which are outlined in its charter. The ASEAN chair rotates annually, with Myanmar holding the chair in 2014.

The unprecedented selection of Myanmar for chair of ASEAN represented a vote of confidence on the part of other member states that reflected positively on Burmese political reforms, but also heightened tensions over the Rohingya crisis. While ASEAN has not taken a clear position on the situation, individual member states including Indonesia and Malaysia—both of which have Muslim majority populations—have expressed deep concern over human rights abuses. Other member state representatives fear that the stateless Rohingya will be pushed into radicalization, thus weakening the security of all the ASEAN nations.

Sources:


Aung San (1915-1947) was a Burmese nationalist and general who is considered the founder of modern Burma. He is the father of Aung San Suu Kyi. At the beginning of WWII, in 1939, he began secret conversations with the Japanese and ultimately collaborated with them in their invasion of Burma. By 1945, however, he turned against the Japanese and helped liberate Burma with the British. Although many in the British government viewed him as a traitor, they ultimately negotiated with him about the future of Myanmar. He led the 1947 Panglong Conference, in which Burmans and other ethnic groups came together to oppose British colonialism and drafted a Constitution for the Union of Burma.

He was assassinated in 1947 by a fellow Burmese politician, transforming him into a national martyr. His portrait was featured on currency in Burma for some 40 years until the political ascent of his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, following the 1988 coup. At that time, his image was removed from the public eye on a grand scale in an attempt by the military junta to minimize connections between Aung San and his daughter.

Sources:


Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1942) is a Burmese political opposition leader affiliated with the National League for Democracy (NLD). She is the daughter of Burmese independence hero Aung San and Daw Khin Kyi, later Myanmar’s ambassador to India. She was the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.

After schooling in India and England, she moved to New York to work for the UN. She married a British scholar of Himalayan studies, Michael Aris, and raised two sons with him in England. In 1988, her mother fell ill and Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar. A few months later, popular unrest seized the country and Aung San Suu Kyi began to address the nation as a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), an opposition party she helped found with two former generals. In 1989, when the military government banned gatherings of more than four people, she defied the ban and toured the country, giving speeches outlining her vision of a democratic Myanmar.

After enduring months of harassment and confrontations with the military government, Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in 1989. In 1990, the NLD won 82% of the seats in the Parliament, but the military government refused to recognize the results. She remained under house arrest from 1989-1995 and again from 2000-2010. In April 2012 she won a seat in Parliament, and garnered a majority of the votes in the presidential elections of 2015, although she was prevented from taking the seat of the presidency due to a constitutional clause drawn up in 2008 by the military. Still, in 2016 she was named Myanmar’s first State Counsellor, a new position created for her which grants her powers even greater than the president.

Sources:

The **Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) / National Unity Party** took over the government of Myanmar in a military coup in 1962 and held power until 1988. During this time, it was led by General Ne Win and called for government ownership of all forms of production. Under the BSPP, the government largely cut itself off from the rest of the world, discouraging tourism and foreign investment. After civilian uprisings in 1987 and 1988, power was transferred from the BSPP to a new military-led government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The **National League for Democracy** was formed during the popular revolutions of 1988 and emerged as the major opposition party in the 1990 elections. Although its leader Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest at the time of the elections, the party won 392 of the 447 seats in parliament that were contested. Their victory stunned Myanmar’s military leaders, who promptly invalidated the election results and refused to hand over power.

More recently, Aung San Suu Kyi herself won a seat in parliament and in 2015 was elected president. However, the title was short-lived as her attempts at getting constitutional amendment Clause 59F overturned were unsuccessful. She governed through her top aide and newly elected President Htin Kyaw, until being named Myanmar’s first State Counsellor in the spring of 2016.

**Sources:**


**General Ne Win** (1910-2002) was the supreme commander of the Burma Socialist Programme Party and a figurehead in the 1958 and 1962 coup d’états. He repealed many of the Buddhist laws that had been put in place by his predecessor, U Nu, and instituted controls of the Sangha as a means of curtailing opposition to the military government.

**SLORC/SPDC** The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and later, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is the military government that has ruled Myanmar since 1988. From 1988-1997, the government used the acronym SLORC; since then, their preferred term has been SPDC.

**U Nu** (1907-1995) was a Burmese nationalist and the first Prime Minister of Burma, ruling from 1948 to 1962. He was a devout Buddhist who sought to make Buddhism the state religion. He was deposed by General Ne Win in a 1962 coup d’etat.

**U Ottama** (1879-1939) was a Buddhist monk who was active in the Burmese independence movement. He traveled and taught throughout Asia, ultimately returning to colonial Burma to seek independence.
He wrote articles for The Suriya, a nationalist newspaper, including an open letter of protest to Reginald Craddock, the then-British governor, entitled, “Craddock Get Out!” He was eventually imprisoned for his political activity and died in jail, becoming a martyr for the cause of independence.

Sources:


Myanmar Terms

The Burma Citizenship Act of 1982 granted citizenship to individuals residing in Burma who could trace their family residency to prior to 1823, that is, the year of the first British military campaign on Burma and with it, a wave of immigration from India and China. The law was deeply problematic, as for many families of various ethnic groups, transnational ties were common and there was rarely documentation to prove whether a person had deep roots in Burma.

The law was part of a series of actions taken by the nationalist Burmese government meant to shore up Burmese ethnic power. The law created three categories of citizenship: the first category applied to ethnic Burmans and members of the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Arakan Buddhists, Shan, and any other ethnic group present in Burma prior to 1823 (though they did not include Rohingya Muslims, rendering them stateless). The law granted this group full citizenship.

The second category granted partial “associate” citizenship to the children of mixed marriages where one parent fell into the first category. It also applied to individuals who had lived in Burma for five consecutive years, or to individuals who lived in Burma for eight out of the ten years prior to independence. Associate citizens could earn an income, but could not serve in political office. The third category applied to the offspring of immigrants who arrived in Burma during the period of British colonial rule.

Sources:

Moshe Yegar, Between Integration and Secession (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002).

Is it called Burma or Myanmar? In 1989, the SLORC government mandated that their country should henceforth be known in English as Myanmar instead of Burma. (In all, several hundred place names were changed; another prominent example was the renaming of Rangoon to Yangon). This name change has not been accepted by all members of the international community. Some, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, did not recognize the legitimacy of the military government, and therefore continued to refer to the country as Burma, a decision that provoked resentment in the Burmese government. Others, such as the UN and the ASEAN, avoided taking this step, and instead referred to the country as Myanmar.
This country profile endeavors to use the preferred term of the government, and therefore refers to the country as Burma before 1989 and as Myanmar from 1989 to the present day.

Sources:


The 1947 Panglong Agreement was the outcome of the Panglong Conference, a meeting on the eve of independence between Burmese nationalist hero Aung San and representatives of several of the largest minority groups in Burma, namely the Chin, Shan, and Kachin. These groups agreed in principle to the formation of the Union of Burma, which became the first post-colonial government. However, other ethnic groups, most prominently the Karen and Rohingya, did not participate in this conference. The Karen began their civil war against the central government in 1949, the year after Burma attained independence. The Rohingya were not recognized by the Panglong agreement and even to this day are not seen as a legitimate minority group by the government.

Contemporary politicians seeking ethnic reconciliation sometimes appeal to the “spirit of Panglong,” though this conference is remembered differently by the various groups in Myanmar today. A “Panglong 21st Century Conference” has been called for late August 2016 in order to negotiate peace and greater autonomy for minority ethnic groups. Representatives from over 20 minority groups are expected to attend, though spokespeople from minority groups are already voicing their concerns about the conference.

Sources:


The military government’s decision to raise oil and gas prices in 2007 led to widespread discontent, ultimately culminating in the short-lived Saffron Revolution. Though organized by political opposition groups, Buddhist monks were centrally involved in these protests; “saffron” alludes to the traditional color of monks’ robes. Higher oil prices placed a greater burden on an already impoverished Burmese populace, and such hardships were transferred to the Sangha, which depended on food offerings from lay Buddhists for their sustenance.

Initially, the government showed surprising latitude in their muted response to the protests, a response attributed to the heavy participation of the Sangha. However, the tenor of the protests shifted as they became more political in nature. Monks stopped at the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League for Democracy who was under house arrest, and called for a democratic government. In response to this challenge to their authority, the military responded brutally, attacking the monastic protestors.
These actions were recorded by onlookers who used cell phones and portable video cameras to document the crackdown. Despite the government’s effort to censor these images by shutting down the internet in Myanmar, the footage found its way into households across the nation that had gained access to satellite televisions in recent years. Burmese people witnessed the government’s violence for themselves and this attack on the Sangha caused the government to lose legitimacy in the eyes of many. In addition, these images were broadcast around the world, leading to an international outcry.

Sources:


The Sangha is the Buddhist monastic community. Although Buddhist monks traditionally renounce the responsibilities of family life, they do not remove themselves completely from society. Rather, they exist as part of an economy with lay Buddhists, who offer the monks material support in exchange for religious teachings and positive karma, or merit. As such, the Sangha can serve as a tremendous legitimizing force by providing merit for individuals who make offerings to them. On the other hand, as in the case in the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the monks’ unwillingness to accept offerings from the government can enable them to stand with the opposition.

The Sangha thus can confer political legitimacy to Burmese leadership, but also can serve as a powerful counterbalance to government authority. Burmese leaders throughout the ages have sought to “purify” the Sangha citing monastic corruption, but in modern times this purification has served to rein in monastic opposition to the military government. In 1980, the Burma Socialist Programme Party placed the Sangha under government control and created the Supreme Sangha Council. This allowed the government to oversee all religious and educational functions performed by the Sangha and monitor any dissent.

The State Religion Act was passed in 1961 after Prime Minister U Nu resumed leadership of Burma following a brief period of military rule. Unlike the 1947 constitution, which did not establish a national religion, this act made Buddhism the official state religion of Burma and formalized the government’s role as a religious patron. Passage of this act led to unrest among non-Buddhist minorities, which was used by General Ne Win to justify the 1962 military coup. Ne Win undid many of the provisions of this act in the years immediately following the coup.