Country Profile: Myanmar

Religious Literacy Project
Harvard Divinity School
October 1, 2017
“Monks Protesting in Burma”
by Robert Coles
Wikimedia Commons:
http://bit.ly/2eCW0ow
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 Rahkine and in neighboring countries, are not officially recognized by the Burmese government, and as a result, 1.2 million people in Rahkine 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 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.³

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.4 The new NLD administration has vowed to create a more ethnically inclusive government, but a resurgence of military violence against the Rohingya in 2017 has provoked international condemnation.

**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.  

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).⁶

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.”⁷

---


Country Profile: Myanmar 2017

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)

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.\footnote{See Aung San Suu Kyi, “Speech to a Mass Rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda.” Freedom from Fear and Other Writings. Edited by Michael Aris (London: Viking, 1991).} 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.”\footnote{"Aung San Suu Kyi - Acceptance Speech," Nobelprize.org. Nobel Media AB 2013, accessed July 10, 2013, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laurates/1991/kyi-acceptance_en.html.} 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.

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.
Country Profile: Myanmar

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.13

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

invasion, and partially to prevent international poll watchers from observing the 2008 constitutional referendum.\(^\text{14}\)

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 effected 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.\(^\text{15}\)

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 budgets.\(^\text{16}\) 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 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 were also assaulted. In January 2014, tensions exploded again when local security forces and civilians associated with an extreme Buddhist Rahkine 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, Rhakine 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.20


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.”21 The impact of these moves is not yet clear, but it indicates a growing authority of peaceful counter-narratives against the extreme Buddhist nationalism which has characterized much of Myanmar’s modern history.

Unfortunately, tensions escalated again in 2017 when a resistance group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for attacks on police and military posts where more than 100 people died. In response, Myanmar military forces cracked down in what a UN official called “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” that forced approximately 400,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.22 In a televised speech to the nation, in mid-September 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi did not condemn the actions of the military as many in the international community had urged her to do.23

**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 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.25

**Religion and Political and Legal Structures**

The legislative branch is comprised of a National Parliament (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*), itself separated into a House of Representatives (*Pyithu 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.26

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.27

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.28 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 discrimination against religious minorities and women.29

**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.30

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.31 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.32

---


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.33

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.34

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.35

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.\textsuperscript{36}

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 comprised 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.\textsuperscript{37} However, in the years since the democratic 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 \textbf{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{38} 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{39}

Historically, Myanmar has considered \textbf{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{40}

\textsuperscript{37} David Steinberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124-125, 121.
\textsuperscript{39} David Steinberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 104.