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Myanmar: Country Dossier

December 2020



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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Myanmar

Brief country details

Myanmar: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
54,808,000	4,362,000	8.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Myanmar: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	74	18
WWL 2020	73	19
WWL 2019	71	18
WWL 2018	65	24
WWL 2017	62	28

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Myanmar: Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Religious nationalism	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Political parties
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, Organized crime cartels or networks, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

In predominantly Christian states like Kachin State, Karen State or in northern Shan State, even well-established historical churches are being attacked. More than 100,000 Christians in the north live in IDP camps and are deprived of access to food and healthcare. Fighting increased in 2018, adding thousands more to the camps; they have not been able to return to their homes yet. In 2020, fighting with the Buddhist insurgency "Arakan Army" escalated, affecting thousands of predominantly Christian citizens in Rakhine and Southern Chin State. In some instances, Buddhist monks have invaded church compounds and built Buddhist shrines inside. Converts are persecuted by their Buddhist, Muslim or tribal families and communities because they have left their former belief and have thereby removed themselves from community life. Communities who aim to stay "Buddhist only" make life for Christian families impossible by not allowing them to use community water resources. Non-traditional church groups experience opposition too, especially when they are located in the rural areas of Myanmar and/or are known for proselytizing. The government tried to act against radical Buddhist monks, but sends mixed signals, since it became even clearer in the WWL 2021 reporting period that radical monks enjoy the support of the army. They continued to influence local authorities and spread their ideology that being Myanmarese is being a Buddhist.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Myanmar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
2. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
3. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Myanmar is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are denied access to communal resources because of their faith (ICESCR Art. 2)
- Christian homes and shops are attacked and destroyed, in violation of the right to an adequate standard of living and to a continuous improvement of living conditions (ICESCR Art. 11)
- Christian female converts are forcibly married to Buddhist men and pressured to renounce their new faith (CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Kachin Christian women and girls are trafficked into sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and CEDAW Art. 6)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

March 2020: Air attacks on 12 March 2020 carried out by the Myanmar armed forces on Paletwa township, Chin State, killed 21 civilians and wounded at least 24. More than 6,000 people left their homes and became internally displaced. Local sources indicate that all of them were Christian.

April 2020: On 21 and 22 April 2020, government forces clashed with Buddhist insurgency group, Arakan Army, in Paletwa township. Four people were killed, among them two Christians.

Both cases above have not been added to the score of Myanmar in WWL 2021 as they lacked a clear persecution link.

Specific examples of positive developments

After almost a year of proceedings, in March 2020 the Myanmar army [dropped charges](#) against The Irrawaddy and Reuters over the coverage of the conflict in Rakhine State (The Irrawaddy, 18 March 2020).

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
 - Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
 - Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: dropped charges - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-military-ditches-irrawaddy-reuters-lawsuits.html>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Myanmar

Link for general background information

- [Myanmar country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

In 1948 Burma became independent from Britain. From 1962 to 2011 the country was ruled by an oppressive military junta. A gradual process of democratization then began, most notably visible in the elections won by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2015. She is now in office for a second term after elections took place on 8 November 2020. Apart from the fact that more than one million members from ethnic minorities were not able to vote due to security considerations, the elections have been called free and fair. But as long as the Myanmar army (also referred to as the Tatmadaw) retains its current level of power, no major changes can be expected. The army not only has a powerful constitutional position and remains a strong political factor, it is also deeply involved in legal and illicit trade, which strongly affects predominantly Christian areas like Kachin State.

Aung San Suu Kyi has initiated a series of peace conferences, the so-called "Panglong Conferences", but these still do not include all ethnic minority militant groups, especially the most powerful ones, and so there has been no real progress. It still seems that things can only change if the army could extract some sort of [benefit](#) from reducing its political influence (International Crisis Group, 26 July 2016). So far, the Myanmar army has [extended](#) its unilateral ceasefire several times (Irrawaddy, 1 July 2019), but continued to exclude Rakhine State. The ceasefires have increasingly been perceived as [meaningless](#) (The Diplomat, 29 May 2020). The peace process stalled in 2019 and fighting increased in 2020, spreading also into parts of Chin State. The government ordered an [Internet blackout](#) for northern Rakhine State, causing both national and international concern (ASEAN Today, 28 June 2019). UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, whose term ended in 2020, [warned](#) in June 2019 that such measures may have grave consequences for human rights and humanitarian monitoring (OHCHR, 24 June 2019). A report published by Amnesty International in May 2019 and entitled "[No one can protect us](#)" has highlighted some of the war crimes committed against religious minorities by the Myanmar army. On 8 July 2020, Amnesty published another [report](#) detailing war crimes in Rakhine and Chin State.

The Rohingya refugee crisis continues to be unresolved. It has been decried worldwide and heavily affects neighboring Bangladesh. So far, no repatriation from Bangladesh has taken place as the Rohingya refugees did not receive any guarantees of safety and fighting in Rakhine State continues and even increased. (The fighting this time is not against a "Muslim insurgency", but against the ethnic minority Arakan Army, which is a Buddhist insurgency group and challenged the Tatmadaw by targeting its officers and infrastructure.) Although the original repatriation program was aiming to repatriate 150 Rohingya per day - which is what both sides had initially agreed upon - at that pace it would take 13 years for everyone to return who had fled to Bangladesh in 2017. And this does not include those who had fled earlier. For the time being, the refugees are stranded in Bangladesh, which announced it would like to relocate parts of them to a remote and flood-prone island.

Demonstrations erupted over the erection of statues depicting General Aung San in Mon, Kachin, Chin and Kayah states. This was made worse by the government security forces reacting too heavy-handedly, which has shown ethnic minorities that the whole peace process may well end up being smothered by Bamar (or Burmese) nationalism. The General election on 8 November 2020 did not go as well as expected for ethnic minority parties. They may soon discover that the NLD is not very interested in minority questions and that the veto player, the army, is not moving towards any solution for peace or a reduction in fighting.

Army staff and some ethnic insurgents are involved in drug trafficking and in the exploitation of resources like jade and timber.

Unruly nationalist monks continue to fight for a radical Buddhism and for what they see as the much needed protection of the country by influencing mainly local authorities. Trust-building remains key, but will be impossible as long as the army offensives against the largely Christian Kachin minority and the fighting in Kachin and northern Shan states continue, displacing tens of thousands. By these offensives in Chin State against the Arakan Army, many Christians are strongly affected as well.

Political and legal landscape

The outcome of the November 2015 elections raised many hopes in the country and abroad that the [longest lasting civil war](#) in the world might finally be brought to an end (Time, 12 December 2016). But these hopes have been disappointed and many ethnic parties decided to merge in order to win a stronger margin in the 2020 elections, some announcing they would [not form a coalition](#) with the NLD of Aung San Suu Kyi (Irrawaddy, 3 July 2019). The NLD has not reached out to those ethnic parties effectively and the peace process has not made any tangible process. The General Election on 8 November 2020 did [not go too well](#) for the ethnic parties, except in Rakhine and Shan State, and the question is how ethnic minorities will be represented at all (Crisis Group, 12 November 2020)

The ethnic minorities consist of several dozen groups making up more than 30% of the country's population, many of them being Christian or containing large Christian groups. The government needs to build up trust with them, which is a major challenge after decades of war. Aung San Suu Kyi, despite all her personal achievements, is basically regarded as a member of the Burmese ("Bamar") nobility who is not seriously interested in the plight of ethnic and religious minorities, even more so now since she [defended](#) Myanmar in person in the proceedings before the International Court of Justice in The Hague in January 2020 against war crime claims (Irrawaddy, 23 January 2020). As it stands, the fighting in Kachin and northern Shan states continues and even increases and the world does not know what is going on in Rakhine State. The fact that an ethnic Chin Christian had been appointed as vice-president and a Christian led the Upper House of parliament is more a matter of cosmetics and does not change anything on the ground, confirmed by continued fighting in Chin State, the only Christian majority state in Myanmar.

According to the Constitution, the army enjoys a reserved allocation of 25% of all available seats in the national Assembly and holds three of the most important ministries, including the Interior Ministry and the Ministry for Border Affairs. In a surprise move, in February 2019, the NLD set up a 45-member-committee charged with evaluating possible [changes to the army-drafted Constitution of 2008](#) (Radio Free Asia, 19 February 2019). The army responded by warning of a [potential "battleground"](#), if changes to the Constitution were to be based purely on party politics (Irrawaddy, 20 February 2019). As was to be expected, all efforts for constitutional reforms and for curbing the army's political power [failed](#) in March 2020, when the army voted against all changes, executing its veto (Irrawaddy, 10 March 2020). On the other hand, the ruling NLD voted down a proposal which would have allowed chief ministers in ethnic minority regions to be [elected directly](#), rather than be appointed by the country's president, throwing into question how serious the NLD really is about allowing ethnic minority representation (Radio Free Asia, 17 March 2020).

Radical Buddhists have been surprisingly quiet in the WWL 2021 reporting period, especially given that it was the campaigning period for the November 2020 elections. Cynics could say that radical Buddhist monks do not need to stir up sentiments against minorities anymore, since the army is doing that for them. It is no wonder that radical monks and the army are increasingly aligning; there is mutual endorsement and backing, as both sides share the over-arching goal of keeping Myanmar's Buddhism pure and free from all perceived threats. Shortly before the

November 2020 elections, but after the reporting period of WWL 2021, fugitive firebrand monk Wirathu [surrendered](#) himself to the authorities, in an apparent attempt to boost votes against the NLD (Reuters, 2 November 2020).

Christians are in the midst of the ongoing fighting, not so much in Rakhine State, but in Kachin State, in Chin State and - to a lesser extent - in Shan and Karen State as well. More than 100,000 Christians continue to languish in IDP camps in Kachin State alone with additional numbers in Chin and Shan State. Any quick relief or change of their situation seems unlikely; in May 2020, the army even explicitly [excluded](#) the Rakhine and Chin State region from a unilaterally announced ceasefire, effectively blocking any coordination of measures against COVID-19, which can spread much more easily in IDP camp set-ups (Irrawaddy, 11 May 2020).

Religious landscape

Myanmar: Religious context	Number adherents	of %
Christians	4,362,000	8.0
Muslim	1,980,000	3.6
Hindu	900,000	1.6
Buddhist	41,789,000	76.2
Ethno-religionist	4,500,000	8.2
Jewish	30	0.0
Bahai	85,000	0.2
Atheist	21,000	0.0
Agnostic	250,000	0.5
Other	920,900	1.7
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

According to WCD 2020 estimates, Christians make up 8% of the population, Buddhists 76.2% and Muslims 3.6%. The 2014 government census (published in August 2016) puts Christians at 6.2%. Christians in Myanmar consider this figure far too low, as counting was not carried out in war-torn, Christian-majority Kachin State. Most Christians belong to the ethnic minorities and not to the Burmese (“Bamar”) majority. According to the contested government census,

Buddhists make up 87.9% and Muslims 4.3% (around one million Rohingya had not been counted and it is estimated that up to 400,000 are still living in Rakhine State).

The adoption of the so called "Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion" in August 2015 was celebrated by nationalist Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha countrywide. Whereas these laws are aimed chiefly at the Muslim minority in Rakhine State, Christians are affected by these laws as well: Conversions from one religion to another have to follow an administrative process including notification to different authorities. Any mixed marriages require in practice a conversion to Buddhism, thus protecting Buddhist women from Muslim men. However, there are few such cases.

Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist and Buddhists played a role in opposing the military regime in 2007. Before that, radical Buddhist groups had not been very political, but when the movement "969" emerged (later called "Ma Ba Tha"), this quickly changed. This group has a nationalist agenda and calls fellow religionists to defend the country against any perceived threats. In August 2015, shortly before the first free and fair elections, Ma Ba Tha managed to introduce the "Laws for the Protection of Race and Religion". Those are first and foremost targeted against the Muslim minority, especially the Rohingya of Rakhine State, living in the borderlands with Bangladesh. Ma Ba Tha was banned, but re-emerged under a different name, and was banned in 2018 again. However, it is very much alive and some local branches do not just simply ignore the ban, they also still use its old name.

Most in the Muslim minority do not have citizenship and most of them have left the country due to ongoing persecution. A deadly attack against a border post in October 2016, leaving nine guards dead and claimed by a radical Islamic group, led the authorities to become even more active against Muslims, pushing an estimated 700,000 across the border into refugee camps in Bangladesh in August 2017.

Radical Buddhism has been targeting Muslims more than Christians, but reports say that Buddhist monks continue to convert children of Christian minorities to Buddhism by luring them into temples. Stronger pressure and even violence come from the army, however, where even killings of Christians are reported. Until now, persecution by monks and radical Buddhist groups has not increased - however, now that most Muslims are out of the country or sufficiently intimidated, radical Buddhists may start targeting other minorities more intensively.

The Myanmar army had issued a court case against the President of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Dr Hkalam Samson, as in a meeting with US President Trump he had spoken about the lack of freedom of religion in Myanmar. The court summons was withdrawn in September 2019; Dr Samson met with the Tatmadaw leader and reminded everyone in an interview that [real peace always means sacrifice](#) (Irrawaddy, 18 September 2019). As long as all conflict parties profit from the fighting, solutions involving sacrifice will be hard to come by. In a rather pessimistic commentary, another analyst said that under the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar, the [peace process will go nowhere](#) (Irrawaddy, 27 September 2019).

The continued fighting with the Arakan Army in Rakhine and Chin State is a reminder that the country's nationalism is not purely motivated by religious reasons, but has strong ethnic overtones as well. The fighters of the Arakan Army are Buddhists but oppose what they see as

the Bamar ("Burmese") dominance. Christians in Chin State are strongly affected by this conflict as well.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 5,764 USD (2011 PPP)
- **Poverty:** The proportion of population in severe multidimensional poverty is 13.8%. The percentage of the population considered vulnerable to poverty is 21.9%. 32.1% of the population is living below the national poverty level.
- **Remittances:** Remittances make up 3.87% of the GDP.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- **GDP per capita (current USD):** 1.407.
- **Poverty:** Poverty almost halved, falling from 48% in 2005 to 25% in 2017. The poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP) is 19.4%.
- In its country categorization, the World Bank rated Myanmar as being a lower-middle income country.

Myanmar is potentially a rich country as it holds vast natural resources, for example in oil and gas, but even more in timber, gold and jade, which is all worth billions of dollars. It also has a huge potential in exporting renewable energy in providing water power to neighboring countries. However, the country faces many environmental problems and the government angered their big neighbor China by stopping the building of a large dam in Kachin State, which China really wants to see built. The increasing influence of China could be seen very clearly in [thinly veiled threats](#) uttered by the Chinese ambassador on a visit to predominantly Christian Kachin State in January 2019 (Irrawaddy, 9 January 2019). This trend has been visible for several years now and has increased greatly ever since the West put Myanmar under pressure in response to the Rohingya crisis. A high-point has now been reached as can be seen by China's public interpretations of meetings with politicians and civil society in Myanmar. Catholic and Protestant (Baptist) leaders [contradicted](#) an official statement from the Chinese embassy that only outsiders would oppose the Chinese-built Myitsone dam in Kachin State (La Croix International, 19 January 2019). In response, China threatened to halt all further investment in Myanmar.

The military authorities still dominate some industrial sectors such as energy production. The timber industry is also managed by the army through private partnerships and illicit channels. Timber is mostly located in ethnic territories and as the logging is not being carried out in a sustainable way, supplies are decreasing. But it is still an important source of income for both the army and ethnic insurgents. Jade is another commodity the army exploits; it is a multi-billion dollar business and is in high demand, especially in China. If Christian settlements are in the way, since they belong to the ethnic minorities, the inhabitants will simply be chased away without anyone caring. The dangers of jade mining came back to public memory when [more than 200 jade "scavengers"](#) were killed by a landslide in July 2020 (Radio Free Asia, 13 July 2020).

Another illicit and allegedly growing source of income is drug production and trading. Myanmar is the second-largest producer of opium after Afghanistan and the Myanmar army (as well as ethnic insurgency armies) are involved in this business. The country's northern region is part of the famous so-called "Golden Triangle". Opium is not the only drug produced in Myanmar; although its cultivation is strongly increasing, reports also highlight that [Shan State](#) is turning into a hub for methamphetamine, which is even more lucrative (International Crisis Group, 8 January 2019). The amount of drugs and precursors [seized](#) by the authorities in Shan State between February and April 2020 gives a good indication of the vast scale of this industry (ASEAN Today, 20 May 2020). A regional UN report has also indicated how the market is [growing and diversifying](#); estimating the worth of methamphetamine trade in the Asia-Pacific at 61.4 billion USD (UNODC, 15 May 2020).

Underlining how difficult it is to draw the frontlines, in June 2019 the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) disputed a UN report (published in [2018](#)) which stated that [opium cultivation](#) had been reduced by government action (Irrawaddy, 27 June 2019); the KIO insists that the opium business is thriving under the auspices of government-allied militia. There are reports providing circumstantial evidence that the army is deliberately driving ethnic minorities like the Kachin into drug addiction, especially the youth, in order to prevent them joining the ethnic militant groups, which many tend to do due to a lack of any other meaningful future perspective.

Most Christians live in rural areas which have not seen any fast economic development and often struggle to make ends meet, especially when they are living as IDPs. The arrival of the COVID-19 crisis has gravely affected the livelihood of most Christians, as they are often working in the agricultural sector. It also brought the thriving development of Myanmar to a grinding halt and even reversed it, as according to the World Bank update from April 2020 cited above, the estimated growth rate for the GDP of 6.3% was revised to a decline between 2 and 3% in 2019/20. For 2020/21, a return to growth is expected, but as a consequence of the crisis, this growth may only be half of the formerly expected rate. If the Myanmar army's policy of excluding some regions from the ceasefire continues, the consequences of the pandemic may even be worse. The news that a [WHO driver was killed](#) in Rakhine State in April 2020, despite travelling in a well-marked UN vehicle, does not bode well for the overall situation (BBC News, 21 April 2020). Reports show that even though the virus may not be spread widely in some ethnic minority areas, the [border closures](#) will have far-reaching economic consequences (Asia Foundation, 2 September 2020).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [Word Fact Book](#) (April 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Burman (Bamar) 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%
- **Main languages:** Burmese (official). [This language](#) is spoken by two thirds of the population, minority languages - most of which are using the Burmese script are Shan, Karen, Kachin, Thamizh, Chin and Mon languages and dialects.
- **Urbanization rate:** 30.6%
- **Education:** The mean years of schooling are 5.0 years. The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 23:1.

- **Literacy rate:** 75.6% (adults of 15 and above).
- **Health:** The number of physicians per 10,000 people is 8.6, the number of hospital beds is 9.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#) overview/data:

- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 95.4%.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.58% (ILO estimate), the rate of vulnerable employment 59.1%
- **Population ratios:** Under age 14 - 25.9%; above age 65 - 6%.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** As the UN [OCHA](#) estimates, Myanmar has 241,000 IDPs.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Human Development Index:** With a score of 0.584, Myanmar ranks 145th out of 189 countries and is in the range of "medium human development". The country saw a constant improvement of indicators, although in the war-affected areas the situation is different.
- **Life expectancy:** 66.9 years; the median age is 29.0 years
- **Gender Inequality Index:** Myanmar ranks 106th, with a score of 0.458.
- **Unemployment:** While the unemployment rate is very low at 1.6%, 59.5% of all people in the workforce are in vulnerable employment and half of the workforce is in agriculture. The percentage of youth between 15 and 24 neither in school nor in employment is 17.4%.

Myanmar's patchwork of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups has already been described above, as well as the challenges of continued fighting and the politics of "Burmanization", strongly backed by the Myanmar army and only half-heartedly opposed by the government. If a new (coalition?) government, which is still in the making at the time of finalizing this dossier (December 2020) can make steps in solving this puzzle and bring reconciliation and maybe even peace, remains to be seen. The NLD already called for a government of national unity with ethnic parties, which seems a tall order. It should be repeated here, however, that the conflicts with the minority population groups are not exclusively religious. An example is the most recent and violent conflict with the Arakan Army in Rakhine State. The Arakan are Buddhist but this is an ethnic conflict, not religious.

As the data shown above makes clear, neither the economy nor the question of minorities are the only challenges, although many problems are inter-linked. For example, whereas the school enrolment rate is high, many students in the ethnic minority areas are facing difficulties in attending school or it is even made impossible if they are living in one of the IDP camps and higher education remains a far-off dream. Many people are forced to work in subsistence farming and are therefore very dependent on weather conditions and also on such factors as where battles are taking place. The comparably low unemployment rate has to be read against this background.

There is little chance of improving the life of the general population as long as the peace process makes no tangible progress. First, there may be [sanctions](#) imposed due to the Rohingya crisis (in addition to those brought against specific military leaders), and these may increase since Myanmar has been called into the international spotlight and stands accused before the Interna-

tional Court of Justice (Reuters, 3 October 2018); and secondly, economic development driven by China comes with a price-tag as well, as the saga around the [Myitsone dam](#) already shows (Irrawaddy, 15 January 2019). The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor faces [several security and other challenges](#) (Belt and Road News, 23 October 2019), not least from the fighting with the Arakan Army. However, the more isolated Myanmar becomes, the more it may rely on China. Thirdly, drug addiction is increasingly becoming a problem, also among Christians, and neither the authorities nor the churches seem to know how to handle this.

As the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020 [country report](#) states on page 21: "In September 2018, the government passed an amendment to the Virgin, Fallow and Vacant Land Management Law (VFV), which might further accelerate the expropriation of communal lands for large-scale private business purposes. Specifically, the law requires everyone farming or living on VFV land to apply for an official permit, a prerequisite that many uneducated local farmers are bound to be unable to fulfill. Approximately one-third of all land is considered VFV land and 75% of this land is located in ethnic states, where private businesses, such as Chinese plantation enterprises, are currently seeking to acquire huge areas of land for business purposes. Thus, the amendment to the VFV law bears the potential to aggravate existing ethnic conflicts."

COVID-19 has the potential to cause a real setback in Myanmar's development. Some ethnic and religious minorities, which are [already struggling](#) (The Diplomat 15 July 2020), may find themselves left further behind, and not just in the way they are being discriminated against in the distribution of relief aid and medical help. As Christians are living in areas particularly affected by the civil war and fighting (in Kachin, Chin and Shan State), they will feel the effects of these challenges, and even more so if the Myanmar army does not revise its policy of excluding certain areas from being accessed for aid distribution. Those living in IDP camps feel the consequences severely, too.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 33.1% penetration - survey date: December 2018
- **Facebook usage:** 29.4% penetration – survey date: December 2018

According to [World Bank's country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 113.8 per 100 people

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2020](#):

- In 2019, the Internet penetration rate still was just over 40% but the speed and quality is very different in rural areas compared to major cities. In 2019, the number of mobile connections was around 68 million, however, those connections were held by around 50% of the population, where many people have multiple SIM cards. As Freedom House reported: "Since 2017, subscribers must provide their name, citizenship ID, birth date, address, nationality, and gender to register for a SIM card; non-citizens must provide their passports." Freedom House qualified the country again as "Not free" and did not see improvements (its score decreased by five points).

Existing protective laws on media freedom and online activities enable authorities to deny licenses to outlets whose reporting is deemed insulting to religion or a threat to national security. The 2019 Internet blackout imposed on the northern part of Rakhine State and several townships of Chin State, apparently aimed at protecting army operations, entered a second year in [June 2020](#) and continues at the time of writing (Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2020). It shows that communication is controlled by the authorities and blockages can be activated anywhere anytime. Targeted internet pages have been blocked countrywide. Lawsuits and arrests against activists and journalists have led to an intimidating environment and self-censorship. Even when cases get a very high profile, this does not change the authorities' course. Two Reuters journalists spent more than 500 days in prison and were among the 6,520 Myanmar prisoners released in a presidential [New Year amnesty](#) on 7 May 2019. Both journalists had uncovered war-crimes against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State and had been awarded the highly renowned Pulitzer Prize for their investigative reporting. Despite such international attention, Myanmar's rulers did not even attempt to stage a fair trial. In March 2020, a journalist was [arrested on terrorism charges](#) because he published an interview with the spokesman of the Arakan Army. He was released after a few days and not prosecuted, so the policy seems more to be about intimidation and self-censorship.

Social media is widely used for communication and opinion-making, but it is also used by radical monks for slandering Christians and warning against the Christian faith. Social media users and those quoted in the media have faced prosecution for expressing their views on particular topics, particularly when they entail criticism of the authorities. They faced accusations of defamation and incitement filed by the army and politicians and were charged under Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law, which includes bans on online activity deemed threatening or defamatory.

Security situation

The "Patriotic Association of Myanmar", better known under its acronym "Ma Ba Tha", was founded in January 2014 with the goal of defending Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar against alleged threats. First and foremost this meant against the Muslim minority, especially the Rohingya, but Christians have been put under pressure by Ma Ba Tha monks too. Ma Ba Tha was banned in May 2017, re-emerged under a different name, and was banned again in 2018. Although it has remained rather quiet in the WWL 2021 reporting period, it is still active and has switched its focus to fight against the government; it enjoys the support of at least part of the army.

As already stated above, Myanmar is enduring the longest civil war in the world with several ethnic insurgent armies fighting for independence (or more autonomy). Besides the "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" (Muslim) and the "Arakan Army" (Buddhist), the "Kachin Independence Army" (Christian) should also be mentioned, the latter together with the "United Wa State Army" (USWA) being the largest and best-equipped groups in Myanmar. The USWA enjoys a de facto autonomy and is notorious for its involvement in the drug trade. From September 2018 onwards, it has acted against the Christian minority in its territory in Shan State, bordering China, whose Communist government allegedly supports it. The most active insurgent group at the moment is, however, the Arakan Army, which on 15 August 2019 - operating in

combination with two other groups in the so-called "Brotherhood Alliance" - attacked a [military training academy](#), other Myanmar army targets and economically important roads and bridges connecting Shan State to China (Reuters, 15 August 2019).

The influence of Myanmar's army - as well as China's political pressure - cannot be underestimated. China is allegedly providing groups like the UWSA and KIA with weapons and equipment. The security situation in certain regions of Myanmar remains dire and has even deteriorated and it cannot be excluded that more crimes against humanity will be committed in the future.

Apart from the situation in Kachin State and the UWSA, referred to above, Christians are also affected by the increased fighting with the Arakan Army in Chin State. As the Tatmadaw answered by conducting air attacks in March and April 2020, at least 23 Christians (25 people in total) were killed and several others wounded in Paletwa township. These attacks did not influence the score of the country on the WWL 2021.

Trends analysis

1) International interest is fixed on the Rohingya crisis

International interest has been completely focused on the situation of the Rohingya, especially the refugees in neighboring Bangladesh. The country has been branded very negatively, especially after the then UN Human Rights chief spoke in September 2017 of a ["textbook example of ethnic cleansing"](#) concerning the Rohingya (UN News, 11 September 2017). According to Myanmar's National Security Adviser, his country is [willing to take back](#) all 700,000 Rohingya refugees, provided they return voluntarily (Reuters, 2 June 2018). This however, is unlikely if there are no security guarantees. So far, no refugee has been repatriated and Myanmar does not look willing to create the necessary conditions for a return, especially as its first priority is to sort out domestic politics after the General election. The government is also using the COVID-19 crisis to [stall talks](#) with neighboring Bangladesh (Benar News, 20 November 2020).

An even brighter and more embarrassing light shone on the Rohingya plight, after the State of Gambia in West Africa brought Myanmar before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which, on 23 January 2020, surprisingly ordered Myanmar to take [provisional urgent measures](#) for protecting the Rohingya minority and demanded regular updates every six months about the measures taken (New York Times, 23 January 2020). Although it is unlikely that the case will result in changes on the ground, Myanmar lies exposed and Aung San Suu Kyi's international image as Noble Peace Prize-bearer was dealt another blow. Although as one result, a wave of nationalist fervor swept Myanmar in support of her - which may also have helped in her surprisingly wide margin of re-election - the country decided to comply and submitted its first [report on preliminary protection](#) measures to the ICJ on time, in May 2020 (Irrawaddy, 26 May 2020).

It is high time that the international community widens its view beyond the devastating situation of the Rohingya and finds ways to talk to the government and to other political actors exercising influence in the capital city, Naypyidaw. The fact that the government seems to be retreating

more and more into the arms of China, does not bode well for Myanmar's Christian minority, which is also strongly affected by the widening civil war, since China is rarely worried about human rights issues.

2) The situation of non-Rohingya ethnic and religious minorities (including Christians) continues to be ignored

The number of positive headlines for Myanmar in the WWL 2021 reporting period has been close to zero. Although Covid-19 dominates international headlines, the Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are a clear witness of what is happening in Myanmar. Meanwhile, the intense and even increasing fighting in predominantly Christian areas like Kachin and northern Shan states and most recently, Chin State, is being overlooked, simply because these areas are harder to access, one reason being the Internet blackout. Christians are being killed, detained and forced to flee to live with tens of thousands others in IDP camps in dire circumstances. Help from the international community is frequently reaching only few people as government and army tightly control access. In May 2019, a commentator named [four possible future scenarios](#) – secession, confederation, federalism and decentralization (Irrawaddy, 16 May 2019). For nationalists and the army, all of these scenarios are anathema. This was made clear once more when the military voted against any meaningful and politically important amendments to the Constitution to bring it in line with democratic principles (Irrawaddy, 20 March 2020). One encouraging sign was that for the first time ever, the NLD-led parliament has denied a military request for additional funding in May 2020 (Irrawaddy, 28 May 2020), another might be that there seems to be a growing political unity between the ethnic minorities (Irrawaddy, 19 June 2020), although they are not in a position to govern.

A very detailed report has not only highlighted the [shaky basis](#) on which ethnicities have been distinguished throughout history, it also shows that the whole peace process is setting false incentives – i.e. ethnic groups need to have powerful armed groups before they can get a place at the conference table (International Crisis Group, 28 August 2020). Against this background, it can only be considered a very small step when - for the first time - the Myanmar army accepted the [principle of federalism](#) in the latest round of "Panglong" peace talks (Radio Free Asia, 21 August 2020). The recent landslide win of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD of more than 80% diminishes hopes of a more participative democracy and has even the potential to [tear the country apart](#) (Washington Post, 18 November 2020). Thus, Christians cannot and do not put any hope in the political process.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Myanmar country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563>
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WWL 2021: Church information / Myanmar

Christian origins

Catholic missionaries first entered Burma in 1554. Not until 1613, however, was there a permanent presence with churches in Ava, Sirian, and about three hundred Roman Catholic believers in Rangoon. But growth was so disrupted by the wars between Burma and Siam in the next two centuries that a total membership of five thousand in 1800 had fallen to about three thousand in 1832. As British control widened in the first half of the nineteenth century, Protestant growth, chiefly Baptist, made great advances. In 1813, the famous American missionary, Adoniram Judson, arrived in the country to serve there for nearly 40 years. He translated the Bible into Burmese in 1834. (Source: Moffett S.H., *Burma / 1813-1850 in: A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 2, 2005, pp. 330-331.)

In 1966, the Burmese government expelled all foreign missionaries, but by then the churches had become self-supporting. As many Christians belong to the ethnic minorities such as Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen, Christianity is viewed by many with some suspicion. This suspicion could increase now that the latest figures on religious affiliation (the 2014 census) have been published, which showed a strong growth in the number of Christians.

Church spectrum today

Myanmar: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	660,000	15.1
Protestant	2,700,000	61.9
Independent	680,000	15.6
Unaffiliated	322,000	7.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	4,362,000	100.0

Evangelical movement	1,600,000	36.7
Renewalist movement	1,160,000	26.6

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC, established 1865), a member of the larger protestant Myanmar Council of Churches, estimates its congregation at about 1.6 million people, many of whom are among the Kachin and Chin people. Protestants comprise almost two-thirds of all Christians. Of these two-thirds, an estimated 50% are Baptist members in almost 5,000 churches. The MBC works with 16 regional language conventions around the country with its vision “to organize and engage all Baptists in Myanmar in proclaiming and witnessing.” The number of Catholics is smaller, but there are estimations of up to a million. Most Christians are from the minority ethnic groups such as the Chin, Karen, Lisu, Kachin, and Lahu. However, there is no strong inter-denominational association among them; in controversial issues and concerning the (persecution) situation in the country, their reactions are not unified.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Myanmar

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Myanmar: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	74	18
WWL 2020	73	19
WWL 2019	71	18
WWL 2018	65	24
WWL 2017	62	28

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

The increase in score in WWL 2021 by 1.4 points is almost exclusively related to an increase in reported violence. The pressure on Christians across all *spheres of life* has either continued to slowly increase (*Private, Family and National life*) or has stabilized at a high level. Converts (from a Buddhist, Muslim or tribal background) continue to face strong pressure especially from their family and community; the situation in Wa State remains tense and many Christians are facing

high levels of discrimination there and some churches continue to be closed (despite the fact that the Myanmar authorities have no influence in this part of the country).

It should be kept in mind how difficult it is to obtain reports from war-torn Christian minority areas, which is acknowledged by other international organizations and shown in the detention and sentencing of reporters.

Persecution engines

Myanmar: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Medium
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Weak
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Very strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Medium):

Buddhism is embedded in the nation's culture; this is commonly emphasized by radical Buddhists and tolerated - and to some extent supported - by the national government and the army. The majority of Myanmar's population (an estimated 60%) are of Burmese ethnicity, also called *Bamar*. Being *Bamar* is equated with being Buddhist. Everyone deviating from this heritage is labelled as being outside the community and therefore potentially dangerous. Consequently, there are Buddhist communities which would like to remain purely Buddhist. Pressure on Christians comes from two sides: One side is society, which includes the radical Buddhist movement *Ma Ba Tha*. The fact that this movement was officially banned in 2017 and again in 2018 did not have real consequences.

In July 2019, the Ministry for Religious Affairs announced that it would [take over regulating radical Buddhist groups](#) from the Buddhist leadership (the "Sangha") (The Irrawaddy, 31 July 2019). Although Ma Ba Tha has been more quiet during the WWL 2021 reporting period, the government's control does not seem to be particularly strict. The other factor causing pressure is the government which is attempting to establish a peace agreement with a plethora of ethnic groups, many of them Christian. The implementation of the "Laws for the Protection of Race and Religion" is a sign of the continued influence of radical Buddhist groups.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and while the 2015 elected government could not be called paranoid (neither can the 2020 one), Myanmar is one of the very few countries where it is the army holding almost dictatorial powers. According to the country's Constitution, written by the Myanmar army itself in 2008, one quarter of parliament's seats are reserved for military staff. Moreover, the army holds the most important government offices, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministries of Interior and Border Affairs. Despite all hopes for democracy, the army has intensified its fight against insurgent groups as well as ethnic minorities (which include Christians). The fact that the war has continued despite all Peace Conference meetings shows where the true power lies.

The Myanmar army will do everything to stay in control, calling upon Buddhist nationalism or ethnic heritage, if needed. The state continues to run so-called "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (or *Na Ta La* - schools), which are attractive for minority people as they are boarding schools run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and to introduce them to Buddhism. The army has continued with its practice of weakening ethnic insurgencies by encouraging ethnic youth to become drug-addicted, a practice that is affecting Christian Kachin as well. Parts of the country are largely run by the Myanmar army. There is no desire to share the country's wealth with its people. Hence, *Dictatorial paranoia* is here to stay.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

In some of the states where most Christians live, like Kachin or Shan states, some of Myanmar's most precious goods are to be found - such as jade and timber. According to a [UN report](#) published in August 2019, this and other businesses the army is involved in, yields enormous sums - an income which is sometimes shared with ethnic insurgency groups in exchange for ceasefires or other agreements (see Paragraph 99 of the UN report). One of Asia's two largest opium-producing hubs covers large parts of that region, especially Kachin State (together with parts of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand), the famous "Golden Triangle". Allegedly, government officials, the Myanmar army and insurgent armies benefit from the drug producing and trafficking at different levels and stages. Anyone who opposes this or is simply in the way of traders, exploiters and traffickers is in serious danger. This is true for the Christians in these regions as well. Since many commodities like jade, timber and various ores can be found in predominantly Christian territories like Chin and Kachin State, or in states with a sizeable Christian minority, like Shan State, these Christians face heavy pressure from the army (and not only out of economic interest). This takes the form of being harassed, attacked and being used as porters or guides.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Weak):

Beginning at the end of 2018, the largest insurgency group, the Communist United Wa State Army became violently active against Christians. Hundreds of churches were closed, and hundreds of Christians were abducted or expelled from the territory. Allegedly backed by China, the targeted Christian groups were perceived as "missionaries" - mostly Baptist groups like the Lahu Baptist Convention or the Kachin Baptist Convention. Although the pressure against Christians continues and reportedly only about half of the church buildings closed were allowed to be re-opened, the persecution engine is still mentioned here, as it helps understand the complex situation Christians find themselves in on the ground. This Communist crackdown resembles the one Chinese authorities have been instigating against Christianity in China for some years now. Since the Myanmar authorities do not have control in the de facto semi-autonomous Wa region with its 450,000 inhabitants, the persecution engine here is not Religious nationalism.

Drivers of persecution

Myanmar: Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	WEAK	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	WEAK	WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	Medium

Myanmar: Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	WEAK	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	WEAK	WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Buddhist monk leaders stir up the local population to act against Christians in predominantly Buddhist communities. The radical Buddhist movement behind the Ma Ba Tha groups continues to “protect” Buddhism as the country’s national religion at all costs. This is intertwined with the protection of the ethnic "Burmese race" as well. The two bans on Ma Ba Tha activities have not changed anything as they have always found other ways to continue their influence.
- **Government officials (Very strong):** Local government officials, especially from rural areas, are often influenced by and biased towards Buddhist leaders, so minorities like Christians, who in many cases happen to be a religious and an ethnic minority, are disadvantaged and have no way of seeking justice. Last not least, the Myanmar army continues to fight against Christian insurgents and minorities as well.
- **Ethnic leaders (Strong):** Ethnic community leaders can stir up communities to stop Christians from using resources and aid meant for everyone living in the community. Especially among ethnic minorities, each conversion to another faith is seen as weakening the group and threatening the struggle many ethnic groups find themselves in. Leaders will therefore put strong pressure against conversion and on converts.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Groups such as the already mentioned Ma Ba Tha not only call to protect and preserve Buddhist dominance, they also instigate violence. Whereas the main target has been the Muslim minority, Christians were affected by their call to take action as well. Insurgents sometimes also become drivers of persecution if they feel Christian churches are not supporting them strongly enough or when pastors are found advising young people not to join in the fighting. Lastly, fighting groups like the already mentioned ARSA act violently against all converts among the Muslim minority.
- **Extended family (Strong):** Buddhist, Muslim and Ethnic-animist families actively persecute family members who convert to Christianity, as conversion is seen as betrayal.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** If someone in a village converts to Christian faith, this is seen as a disturbance of the harmony and is strongly opposed. Communities will put pressure on converts to give up their Christian faith. Mobs are easily stirred up and villagers often exclude Christians from support or any help they may get.

- **Political parties (Medium):** All non-minority political parties stand for Buddhist supremacy in one way or another and the ruling NLD turned out to be a disappointment for the Christian minority. The opposition USDP is closely connected to the Myanmar army and enacted the 2015 Law on the Protection of Race and Religion.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** The army is the main force behind this persecution engine. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, the army stepped up the levels of fighting and enjoyed public and strong support from Buddhist religious leaders, who are demanding "protection" for the Constitution and country.
- **Government officials (Strong):** The Myanmar army will continue to defend its privileged position according to the Constitution which it drafted in 2008 before passing on (partial) power to a civilian government. Despite the international outcry over the atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingya minority, Aung San Suu Kyi and the government she is leading are clinging to power and have shown signs of *Dictatorial paranoia* in simply ignoring all criticism.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Groups such as Ma Ba Tha are at the forefront of supporting the constitutional status of the army and the predominance of the Burmese. They want this equilibrium retained at all costs.
- **Political parties (Medium):** What was said above for *Religious nationalism*, applies here as well.
- **Ethnic leaders (Medium):** Where they are in power, leaders of ethnic minority groups and insurgencies tend to do everything to stay in power. Whoever is seen as a threat to this power will be fought against, even if it is a fellow Christian.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Most of Myanmar's landbound resources can be found in states which have a mainly Christian population or where Christians are a significant minority. The Myanmar army colludes with local strongmen, politicians and insurgents to take control of this wealth at the expense of the local population. Fighting continues and if Christians and minorities are in the way, they are simply driven away. If they dare to speak out against the prevailing injustice (or try to give young people a hope for the future), they may be actively targeted, particularly by those benefitting from the illicit drug trade.
- **Government officials (Strong):** As indicated above, certain branches of the army are involved in various forms of illicit trade; this is sometimes carried out by proxies such as the Border Guard Forces. If Christian settlements are in the way or they speak up against drugs and illegal trade, they are driven away to become IDPs. As the army dominates, the level of force is higher.
- **Organized crime and cartels (Medium):** Illegal trade is often organized by well-connected local strongmen, who can become drivers of persecution, too, if they see their profit threatened.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Some political leaders are likewise involved in illegal trade, especially those at the local level.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression:

- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Revolutionary and paramilitary groups became very visible drivers of persecution in September 2018, when the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest insurgency group (estimated to have around 40,000 fighters) closed dozens of churches and detained almost a hundred Christians in a crackdown against "new churches".
- **Multilateral organizations and embassies (Medium):** Shan State borders with China, who is allegedly backing the UWSA. The crackdown in 2018 was apparently inspired by Chinese efforts to curb Christianity.
- **Organized crime and cartels (Medium):** Reportedly, the UWSA is heavily involved in drug trafficking as well, so the 2018 crackdown may have had mixed motives.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Myanmar is arguably the nation suffering from the world's longest civil conflict, which began immediately after the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. The core of the conflict is that the central government has tried to impose its control over regions, which had been promised a certain measure of autonomy. When it comes to difficulties for Christians, Kachin State in the north of the country has to be named. Fighting there continues, more than 100,000 people - mostly Christian - are living in IDP camps, most of them have been there for years, and humanitarian access to them is blocked. Fighting continues as well in neighboring Shan State, which has a large minority of Christians, especially in the north, and also in Chin State, where Christians are affected by fighting between the Myanmar army and the Arakan Army. Although the conflict with the Karen and Karenni is not in the focus of international attention, it is still smouldering and many have become IDPs (or refugees in Thailand). A not-so-different story could be told about the Chin, who are predominantly Christian, only that their choice of refuge is India.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: This category consists of groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, but also traditional churches among the Christian minorities like the Kachin Baptist Church. These Christians are facing everyday pressure and occasional violent attacks from the Myanmar army or from radical Buddhist monks (who have even been building Buddhist structures within church compounds in some areas) or sometimes also from insurgent groups.

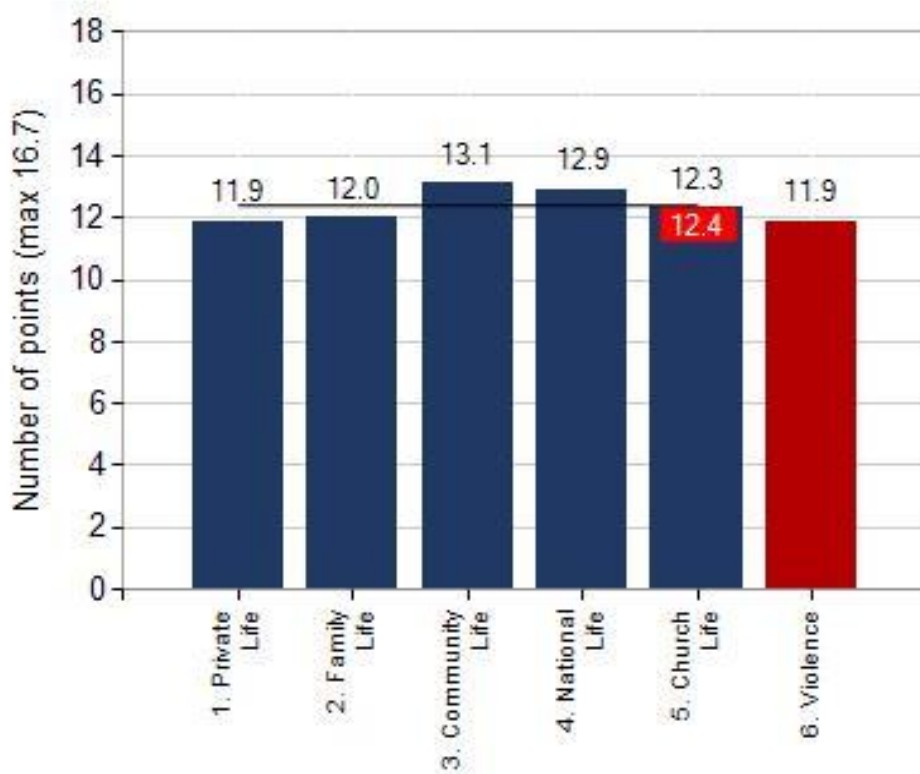
Converts to Christianity: Converts from a Buddhist, Muslim or Ethnic-animist background are facing the strongest violation of rights both from the authorities and from families, friends and neighbors as well. Leaving Buddhism is not accepted for someone of Bamar ethnicity. In all the publicity about Rohingya refugees being forced to flee to Bangladesh, it is less well-known that there is a small number of Christian converts from a Muslim background among the Rohingya who stayed behind. The converts who fled to Bangladesh are scored under this country. Both groups of those Christians not only face persecution because of their ethnic affiliation, but also because their Muslim families and communities put them under enormous pressure to return

to Islam.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are facing persecution from the community they live in, especially in rural areas. They are not just monitored, but are sometimes also hindered from gathering or holding Sunday school classes. Because of the prevailing perception that being a Burmese means being a Buddhist, outreach is especially challenging.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Myanmar



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Myanmar shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Myanmar remained at the same very high level as in the last reporting period, 12.4 points.
- Converts are particularly affected by very high levels of pressure in the *Community, Family* and *Private spheres of life*. All Christians face very high pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fuelled i) by an increasing emphasis on Buddhism, excluding all other minorities and ii) by the continuing and even increasing war against insurgencies, affecting - among others - predominantly Christian Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen states. This war goes widely unnoticed, eclipsed by the widely publicized situation of the Rohingya.

- The score for violence against Christians increased from 10.7 points in WWL 2020 to 12.4 in WWL 2021 and is now categorized as 'extreme'. There have been more incidents reported involving detentions, attacks against houses where Christians live and rape/sexual abuses. However, due to ongoing fighting, especially in Kachin, Chin and Shan States, it is very difficult to obtain accurate reports on faith-based attacks against Christians and on churches attacked, even though the levels of fighting in Kachin State have seen a reduction in 2020. The real number may therefore be higher.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Myanmar's current laws make it hard for an individual to convert. The Religious Conversion Law, part of the "Law for Protection of Race and Religion", requires that Myanmar citizens who wish to change their religion must obtain approval from a newly established Registration Board for religious conversion, set up in all townships. The potential convert must also undergo an interview and engage in religious studies for a period not exceeding 90 days from the date of application, but extendable to 180 days at the applicant's request. If after that period the applicant still wishes to convert, the Registration Board will issue a certificate of religious conversion. During this period the application would be posted on a community board and converts are likely to be put under severe pressure by everyone around them to retract their application. Because of this, conversion is usually done in secret without the application process. Converts also face pressure from their family and community and are sometimes disowned and expelled from the family home or produced before the religious authorities.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

As soon as it is suspected that a discussion could be an attempt at proselytizing, it is risky. This is true for members of the Christian minorities discussing faith questions with members of the Buddhist majority and they also risk being reported to Buddhist extremist groups and/or (local) authorities. A risk also exists for converts from a Muslim background, who are sharing in their communities about their new-found faith. They need to be particularly cautious.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)

Depending on where a Christian is living and - for converts - depending on the family he or she is living with, it can be risky to display Christian images or symbols. Whereas this of course does not apply to the predominantly Christian regions like Kachin, in other places, it is dangerous for a convert to be discovered. Therefore, they would rarely have Christian images at home or wear jewelry displaying a cross, for instance. The latter could also be perceived as mocking Buddhist symbols, so Christians usually refrain from doing so.

Block 1.2: It has been risky for Christians to conduct acts of Christian worship by themselves (e.g. prayer, Bible reading, etc.). (2.75 points)

In some Buddhist villages, especially in Rakhine State and the central part of Myanmar, Christians are not allowed to be part of the community. In such places, Christian converts have to be very careful not to be discovered, especially when they are the only ones in the family. On being discovered, they are usually forced to leave the village. But even in other places, converts prefer to be cautious as conversion to Christianity is seen as bringing shame and any visible act of Christian worship would be met with harsh opposition from families and local communities.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)

In most schools, cultural and religious practice dictates that pupils recite some of Buddha's teachings prior to the beginning of the class. Dhama schools are operated by Buddhist monks in order to teach children about Buddhist doctrines and are spreading across the country. Children are required to participate and contribute financially to the Buddhist festivals of water and light. In Na Ta La schools, children are taught Buddhist prayers, their heads are shaven, and they have to beg for food every morning from homes in the local community. In those schools, all employees, from the teaching staff to the administration and the sweepers are Buddhist.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

Because of the anti-conversion laws, it can be dangerous to conduct baptisms publicly. Hence churches usually carry out baptisms discreetly. For converts from a Buddhist or Muslim background, there is no other choice, it has to be done secretly. Baptist certificates cannot be issued and only few fellow Christians would be able and allowed to witness it. In regions where Christians are the majority, baptism is less problematic, however, only of non-Buddhists.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

Christian children are regularly bullied by Buddhist children at school. In village schools it is normal to blame Christian children for anything bad happening. Christian schoolchildren also receive fewer opportunities and are unlikely to be chosen for further education or special honors. They are also often not given the opportunity to correct mere administrative errors like

the misspelling of a name or - as in the WWL 2021 reporting period happened - writing a wrong birthdate. As a consequence, they have been blocked from taking exams.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

Parents face difficulties in raising their children according to Christian values as they face pressure from neighbors in Buddhist majority areas. Parents are constantly told that if they remain Christian their child will have a harder future; by belonging to a religious minority they will be offered fewer opportunities. In convert families (from Buddhist and also from Muslim background), it is often the grandparents who wield a great influence and make sure that the grandchildren are brought up in their original religion.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.50 points)

Christians, especially those gathering in house churches, are monitored, pressured into renouncing their faith and are excluded from communal decisions and resources. This pressure is also felt in everyday life when they are refused help in gathering bamboo for repairing houses or denied access to water. Converts are often excluded to such a degree that villagers even refrain from talking to them. There have been cases where Buddhist monks have instructed communities to do this.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 points)

It is very common for Christians to be put under this sort of pressure, as the *raison d'être* of many government and community events is to display Buddhist supremacy. This pressure involves daily prayers, contributing to and participating in Buddhist ceremonies and cleaning Buddhist altars. It is hard to escape the pressure as it is deeply ingrained in the culture and is ubiquitous at school, workplaces and in the government. If Christians stop giving alms to Buddhist monks, refuse to contribute to the renovation or building of Buddhist temples, or desist from participating in Buddhist festivals, they are likely to experience harassment, be forced to make donations and be threatened with expulsion from the village, as they are acting against the community.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christians have less chance of being hired by firms if there are Buddhist applicants. Christians are also regularly by-passed for promotion, even more so in civil service. On Sundays, Christians are not given leave to attend church services. In the parliamentary arena, there has been an improvement as under the outgoing government, one of the vice-presidents is an ethnic Chin Christian and the Speaker of the Lower House is a Christian as well. However, Christians in the

government, civil service and army are rarely found and will not usually be promoted beyond a certain level.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.25 points)

Converts are facing the strongest pressure in this respect. Out of fear of persecution, they do not normally announce their conversion. If converts are discovered, pressure usually starts subtly, e.g. villagers will be prevented from giving help, but there have also been cases reported, where converts have been given extra help in order to lure them back to their old faith. Ultimately, converts can be expelled from the village, when such efforts remain fruitless. But there is even pressure on Christians who are not converts to convert to Buddhism. In an attempt to spread Buddhism, community resources are used to build pagodas in Christian areas and Buddhist monks are sent into Christian villages. Education - run by Buddhist monks - is sometimes offered free of charge to families of religious minorities.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution reads: "The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union" while also recognizing the presence of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism in section 362. This "special position of Buddhism" has been abused by Buddhist radicals. In order to gain additional support from such groups and the *Bamar* majority in August 2015, the previous government adopted four religious conversion bills which aim to protect Buddhism by controlling conversion to other faiths, banning interfaith marriages and polygamy, and introducing birth controls. Buddhist women wishing to marry non-Buddhist men must first receive permission from their parents and local government officials and the non-Buddhist men would first need to convert to the Buddhist faith.

Concerning conversion, the law states that anyone seeking to change their faith needs to get permission from the Religious Conversion Registration body, which is comprised of local religion and immigration officials, a local administrator, the women's affairs chairman and a local education officer. Thus, the community knows if a person wants to convert and they are given 3-6 months to try to convince him or her to withdraw their papers. The law's first target is the Muslim minority, but all other minorities are affected likewise and it discourages both citizens considering conversion and converts from testifying about their new faith. In Myanmar, some tribes have their own additional laws which are used by some communities to drive out Christians from their villages.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (4.00 points)

The army and the Buddhist nationalist movement have been entirely unpunished and operate in a culture of impunity. The clearest example for this is the strict denial of all genocide claims

against Rohingya and the Christian minority Kachin (where the situation may amount to [crimes against humanity](#)) (Fortify Rights, 30 August 2018). It likewise illustrates that Christians can neither expect fair treatment before courts nor an international monitoring of their dire situation. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, there has been a case where villagers bombarded a house with stones where Christians gathered. The authorities brought the perpetrators before a court, but the case has been delayed so often that finally, the Christians could not afford being summoned to court so frequently. As a result, the villagers have been left unpunished.

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

The Myanmar army and pro-military government officials are very influenced by Buddhist nationalist sentiment and would often regard a Christian as a second-class citizen. Christians face harder requirements when applying for government services. They would, for example, be required to file additional documents or their application would be delayed, sometimes indefinitely. Complaints referred to the police by Christians are ignored in most of the cases. Christians also have less access to loans and state benefits than non-Christian business partners or customers. Even in Christian majority regions, authority officials are frequently Buddhist.

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christians are usually only hired by firms when there are no Buddhists available. If they are hired, they are frequently by-passed for promotion. There are a few Christians in public service, but they rarely get promoted to senior positions. There are also a few Christian politicians, even in quite high positions, as mentioned above; however, this is an exception to the rule and has not helped Christians in their job-applications elsewhere.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

Dissent, especially any criticism about the situation of the ethnic and religious minorities, is dealt with harshly. Complaining is futile and can lead to charges being made as was seen in the following two cases: i) two church leaders were sent to prison in October 2017 for [helping journalists](#) gather information on the destruction of a church in Kachin State (World Watch Monitor, 27 October 2017); ii) two Reuters journalists covering [crimes against humanity](#) against Rohingya Muslims received prison sentences in September 2018 (The Guardian, 3 September 2018). They were later amnestied (see above). Whenever the army is involved, speaking out bears an even greater risk. The same is true when actions by radical Buddhist groups are addressed.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 points)

Local communities and authorities regularly monitor church activities and also intervene and hinder them, if they are seen as being too daring. In border areas, churches are monitored by

the government and army particularly closely. Buddhist monks connected with Ma Ba Tha also monitor Christian activities. For converts, this kind of pressure is even higher, as detection may have more serious consequences, not just from the community, but from their own family too.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.50 points)

Obtaining permission for building or renovating church buildings is very difficult and is often made impossible. While church buildings exist in various parts of Myanmar, especially in predominantly Christian regions, restrictions are in place to make it difficult to obtain permission for building new churches. There are up to eight different levels of permission required to build a church, and applications must pass through various military-run departments and district and township-level administrative offices (often led by former army officers). As a result, permission for land ownership for churches almost never materializes. Applications are often filed away and not acted upon by officials entrusted with the task. "Grease money" is sometimes asked of Christians to expedite the process, without any guarantee that a permission will be issued in the end. In Christian majority areas like Kachin State, Chin State and the Naga area in Sagaing Region, the documents necessary are even harder to obtain and not giving them is seen as a good means to weaken the Christian minorities, as it will discourage them from trying to build new churches. Consequently, all over the country, many Christians are either meeting in private houses or in rented offices or shops (mainly in the cities).

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.50 points)

Churches need approval from the village head, whenever they want to do something outside their standard place of worship. Since Christians are known to carry out outreach activities even when told not to, whatever they do is watched with suspicion. More often than not, approval is denied on the grounds that such activities may run in violation of the anti-conversion law. At least in the main cities it is, however, not a problem to rent a hall or hotel in order to conduct training sessions.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Myanmar: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	3	3
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	9	204
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	12	6
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	13	5
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	12	27
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	25	2
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	4	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	78	86
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	12	1
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	5	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	120000	120000
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10000	10000

For the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Three Christians were killed by their family, who did not accept their conversion. For security reasons, no details can be published. There have been aerial attacks in Paletwa township in March and April 2020 against the Arakan Army, which reportedly killed 25 people, among them 23 Christians. However, as there is no clarity that

these 23 Christians were deliberately attacked for their faith, these killings have not been taken into account for WWL 2021 scoring purposes.

- **Christians attacked:** There have been dozens of Christians attacked for their faith, in many instances converts from a Buddhist or a Muslim background. The attacks were sometimes carried out by family members, but also by ethnic insurgent armies. The Myanmar army is fighting indiscriminately in some predominantly Christian states.
- **Christians arrested:** Again and again, Christians are arrested by the Myanmar army or by ethnic insurgent groups, like the Wa State Army. In February 2020, two Kachin pastors who had been accused of unlawful association were set [free](#) (The Irrawaddy, 21 February 2020).
- **Churches attacked:** More than 50 church and school buildings remain closed in UWSA-controlled territory in Shan State, including [all Catholic](#) churches and schools (Asia News, 18 December 2019). But as these were already scored for the WWL 2020 re[porting period, they have not been included in the score of WWL 2021. However, there have been reports on attacks against nine other churches across the country. For security reasons, no details can be published.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There have been several reports about attacks, in which houses and shops were destroyed. Solar panels, batteries and bikes have been destroyed in these attacks, too. The attackers were villagers forming a mob, instigated by a Buddhist monk. For security reasons, no details can be given.

5 Year trends

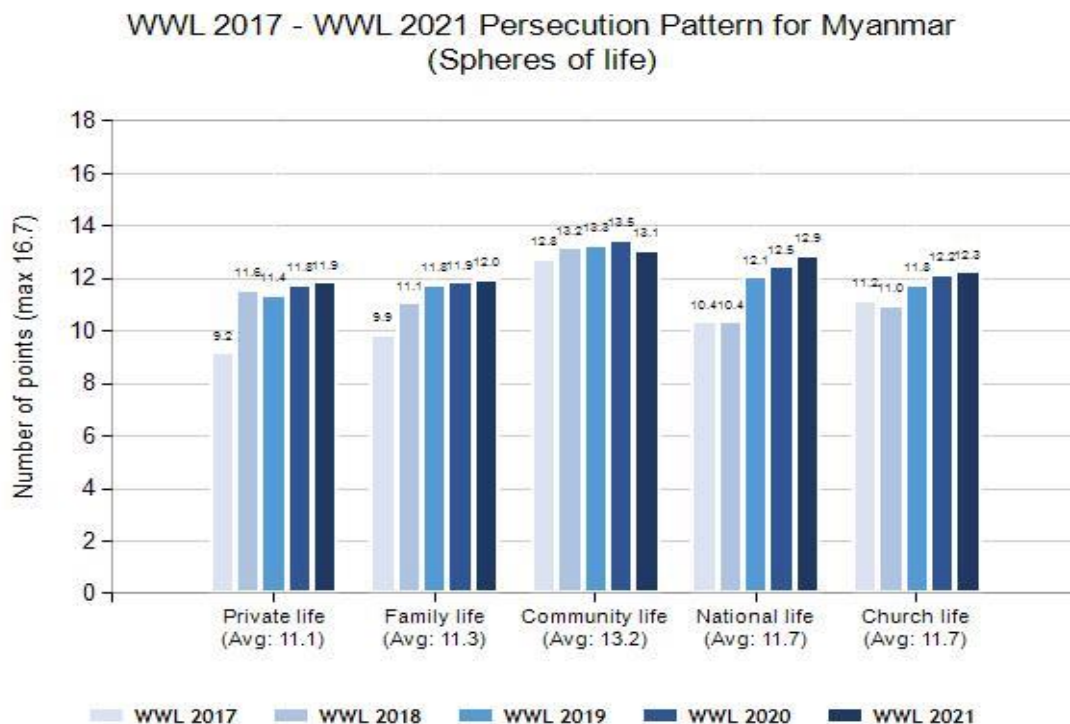
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Myanmar: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	12.4
2020	12.4
2019	12.1
2018	11.4
2017	10.7

The table above shows how the average level of pressure on Christians increased steadily over the first four reporting periods and has now levelled off at the very high score of 12.4 points. The civilian government has not alleviated the situation for religious minorities in Myanmar, including Christians. As the fighting in the country increased, this not only affect ed violence levels, but also the levels of pressure over all *spheres of life*.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

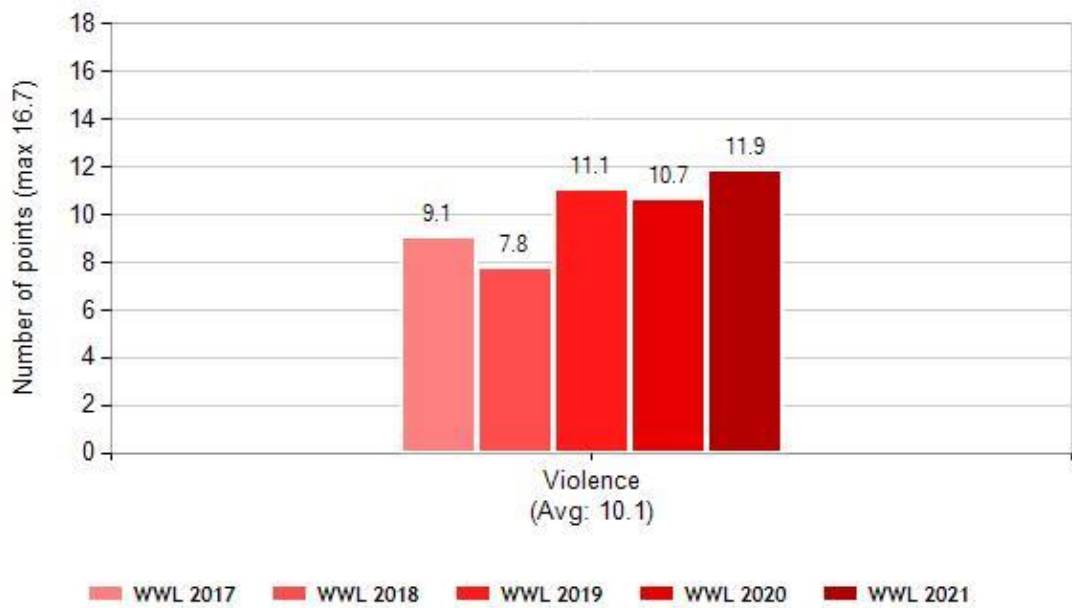


The chart above shows that the pressure in *Community life* has been highest throughout the five reporting periods. The level of pressure for *Family life* increased every year and plateaued in WWL 2021, showing that it is getting more difficult for converts to live their new-found Christian faith. The strong emphasis on Buddhism (and the nationalism connected with it) made the scores for *National* and *Church life* steadily increase. The sharp increase in pressure in WWL 2019 and WWL 2020 for those spheres was influenced by the increased fighting in northern Shan State and by the actions of the UWSA. As the latter slightly relaxed, the increase of scores slowed slightly but remain at a very high level.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

In the chart below, it can be seen that the violence level had levelled off at the very high point range of 10.7 - 11.1 until WWL 2020. In WWL 2021, this level increased to an extreme level as there were more reports about sexual violence against women and also cases of forced marriage. It should, however, be kept in mind that it is very difficult to get detailed information from the war-torn region of predominantly Christian Kachin State, but also from Shan and Chin State, so the real level of violence and pressure may be even higher. The Myanmar army has been very successful in keeping these regions isolated.

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Myanmar (Violence)



Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Denied access to social community/networks
Denied custody of children
Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Forced out of home – expulsion
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Targeted Seduction
Trafficking
Violence – physical

Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual

Christians feel they are viewed as second-class citizens across Myanmar, without the same legal protection and rights as the Buddhist majority. Women in Myanmar are also subordinate: Reflecting this, a traditional Burmese saying says: “Husband is god, son is master” (Burma Library, “Social Roles and Gender Stereotypes”).

According to the Buddhist Women Special Marriage Law introduced in 2015, a non-Buddhist husband must respect his wife’s practice of Buddhism. No such protection applies for Christians, however. Consequently, Christian women married to non-Christian men are pressured into following the husband’s religion. Such threats hinder the growth of the Church in Myanmar. The law, which was mainly aimed at the Muslim minority, also acts as a hindrance to women converts to Christianity from a Buddhist background (especially secret converts) as they are still counted as Buddhists and treated as such. Within mixed-religion marriages, if the daughter decides to be a Christian, the non-Christian father often arranges for her to be married to a Buddhist. The mother has no power to prevent this, nor does her daughter.

Among the Muslim Rohingya minority, non-family members also utilize marriage as a means of promoting Islam among Christian girls. Rohingya extremist groups reportedly abduct Rohingya Christian women, forcibly marry them to Muslim men and attempt to convert them to Islam. Additionally, there are instances when men have pretended to be a Christian - even getting baptized - in order to find a Christian girl. After getting married, they then apply pressure on their wife to convert to Islam. Armed forces pose a further threat to Christian women, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities. They are often at their mercy, vulnerable to rape and physical assault. Instances of rape show little sign of decline.

Youth and female converts are also vulnerable to house arrest, as they are seen to be the least powerful within the family context. This restricts their access to community life, including Christian fellowship. If married, they may also be divorced by their husband, expelled from the family home and lose custody over their children.

Reports also indicate that Christian women in the predominately Christian Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China to become ‘brides’, where they are raped with the aim of impregnating them to produce male heirs (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2019). China has recently come under criticism for propaganda that depicts these unions as ‘happy marriages’ (Radio Free Asia, 5 Oct 2020). Kachin Christians have been exposed to these atrocities for many years - they are even targeted within IDP camps where the Myanmar army inflicts further torturous acts.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Forced out of home – expulsion
Forced to flee town/country
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Trafficking
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

In Myanmar, men are culturally encouraged to find work as the [primary breadwinners](#) within the family unit; if they lose their job or are driven from their village or town because they are Christians, the whole family suffers and it causes emotional distress (Care International, “Rapid Gender Analysis, Myanmar – Rakhine State”). Such persecution is real and tangible for male converts, who have fewer job opportunities available to them. Others find themselves in cycles of forced labor. Converts also face threats, ridicule and physical beatings.

It is especially difficult for Christian men to practice their faith within the context of the armed forces. The Myanmar army has been known to impose forced labor on Christians as a means of preventing them from attending Sunday services and accessing Christian community. Several men have consequently lost their faith. Men are also targeted for recruitment into militias, such as the Kachin Independence Army. As a country expert explained, those who refuse are subjected to “tremendous intimidation, threats and torture...Pastors and leaders who discourage young men from joining the rebels are also targeted by the insurgents.” Targeting church leaders also serves to harm the wider Christian community, much like a family is made vulnerable without their husband or father figure.

Na Ta La schools aim to convert Christian children, which is an effective way of stopping Christianity from spreading to the next generation. The boys at these schools are raised to become Buddhist monks; when they start at the Na Ta La schools, their heads are shaved, they are given monks clothes and they also go around the local community begging for food.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#) (page 8):

- "Investigations of ethnic cleansing in northern Rakhine State released during the year, including the UN Fact-Finding Mission's detailed findings released on September 16, corroborated earlier accounts of systematic abuses and a campaign against Rohingya civilians that involved extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture. The UN Fact-Finding Mission, established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2017 with a mandate ending in September, stated in its report that 'the situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine State has remained largely unchanged since last year', and, 'The laws, policies, and practices that formed the basis of the government's persecution against the Rohingya have been maintained.' The report described atrocities committed by the military in Rakhine, Kachin, Chin and Shan States, as well as other areas, stating further investigations had strengthened its findings that the circumstances and context of the 'clearance operations' against the Rohingya, beginning on August 25, 2017, gave rise to an inference of genocidal intent and that those attacks were pre-planned and reflected a well-developed and state-endorsed policy aimed at the Rohingya. The government denied the Fact-Finding Mission permission to enter the country and publicly disavowed the report. The report also found military actions in both Kachin (mostly Christian) and Shan States (mostly Buddhist) since 2011 included war crimes and crimes against humanity."

The persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority has been referred to in this country dossier several times. Their plight is now discussed in front of an international audience in a court room in The Hague, but this will neither bring immediate relief to the refugees stuck in camps in Bangladesh nor to the Muslim minority left behind in Myanmar, mainly in Rakhine State. At the time of finalizing this dossier, it seems very unlikely that they will return willingly to Myanmar from Bangladesh, where they fled to save their lives. Driven by the Myanmar army and Buddhist religious leaders - and widely backed by many citizens - this policy fits the country's increasing Religious nationalism. Non-Rohingya Muslims in other parts of the country are also facing persecution and discrimination. Apart from that, no other religious groups are known to be persecuted.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Religious nationalism - Buddhist:

Hidden in the shadow of the Rohingya crisis is the plight of Christian minorities, against which the Myanmar army is increasing its attacks, [displacing](#) thousands (Radio Free Asia, 27 April 2018). There are well over 100,000 IDPs displaced from conflict in previous months and years. More have been displaced in the 2020 fighting in Chin State. Meanwhile, the government continues with its divide-and-rule strategy. Thein Swe, Union Minister of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, said the government was unable to release the findings of the census 2014 due to confusion over who belonged to which ethnic group: "Taking the case of the Kachin, he said there could be between six and 12 sub-ethnicities depending on who you listen to. Others dispute claims the Chin have 53 sub-ethnic groups."

The announcement in September 2019 that [court-martial](#) proceedings against a group of Myanmar soldiers would begin should be seen as an effort to counter international accusations of genocide and of lacking effective domestic remedies, in preparation for the country to stand trial before the International Court of Justice (The Irrawaddy, 3 September 2019). It helped Aung San Suu Kyi in defending the actions of the Myanmar government and its army, as can be read in her [defense transcript](#) (Al-Jazeera, 12 December 2019).

Radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha are being watched carefully by fellow Buddhist groups and politicians, but their influence and rhetoric against non-Buddhist minorities is unbroken, even though they may be less visible for the time being. Their radical stance is possibly best reflected by a report which [quoted Ashin Wirathu](#), one of the most outspoken and radical Buddhist monks, as saying: "I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog that would bark at strangers coming to your house – it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark." (The Conversation, 7 November 2017). That Wirathu surrendered himself to the authorities in November 2020, a few days before the elections took place, shows that Religious nationalism will continue unabated and could even increase against Christians, now that most Rohingya Muslims have been driven out of the country.

Dictatorial paranoia and Organized corruption and crime:

The army's role is likely to further increase both in politics and in fighting against insurgents. Another incentive for the army to retain its strong position is that it is deeply involved in both legal and illicit trade, which mainly affects predominantly Christian areas like Kachin State. Violence has increased despite all progress in democratization and the non-inclusive ceasefire agreements, especially with the new challenger Arakan Army emerging. There are many problems complicating peaceful solutions: For instance, army staff and some ethnic insurgents are involved in drug trafficking and the exploitation of resources like [jade](#) and timber (Asean Today, 10 September 2020). Trust-building will be impossible as long as the army offensives continue to target the largely Christian Kachin minority, fighting in Karen State persists and Christians in Chin State are seen as mere "collateral damage" in fighting against other insurgents. The reconciliation process has reached a position of stalemate; progress will prove to be an uphill battle for the new government, especially as resources are currently being focused on the [COVID-19 crisis](#), but also militarily on the Rohingya minority and combatting the Arakan Army (The Irrawaddy, 18 August 2020). The fact that, for the first time, two [Muslim minority MPs](#) have been elected is an encouraging sign (Yahoo News, 9 November 2020), but will not be enough to push through for bringing peace or even a stronger representation of minorities in Myanmar.

Communist and post-Communist oppression:

Although the situation for Christians in self-governed Wa State partly relaxed, the damage is done, dozens of churches and Bible schools have been closed, Christian leaders and students have been detained or expelled. It seems safe to say that Wa State - at least in religious terms - will be changed forever.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: take over regulating radical Buddhist groups - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/religion-ministry-done-leaving-sangha-govern-ma-ba-tha.html>

- Persecution engines description: UN report - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/EconomicInterestsMyanmarMilitary.aspx>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: crimes against humanity - <http://www.fortifyrights.org/publication-20180830.html>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: helping journalists - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/myanmar-kachin-baptists-jailed-helping-photograph-bombed-church/>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: crimes against humanity - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/myanmar-reuters-journalists-sentenced-to-seven-years-in-prison-rohingya>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: free - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/two-kachin-pastors-freed-myanmar-army-drops-unlawful-association-case.html>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: all Catholic - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Shan-State:-Wa-rebels-allow-Baptist-churches-to-reopen,-not-Catholic-churches-48851.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 'brides', - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/21/give-us-baby-and-well-let-you-go/trafficking-kachin-brides-myanmar-china>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 'happy marriages' - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/cross-border-marriage-10052020213023.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: primary breadwinners - https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE_Learning_RGA_Myanmar-Rakhine-State_COVID-19_August2020.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Future outlook: displacing - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/kachin-fighting-04272018160936.html>
- Future outlook: court-martial - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/court-martial-not-related-ap-mass-graves-report-myanmar-military-says.html>
- Future outlook: defense transcript - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/12/transcript-aung-san-su-kyi-speech-at-the-icj-in-full/>
- Future outlook: quoted Ashin Wirathu - <https://theconversation.com/militant-buddhism-is-on-the-march-in-south-east-asia-where-did-it-come-from-86632>
- Future outlook: jade - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/09/kachin-womens-group-speaks-out-on-how-the-myanmar-military-profits-from-deadly-jade-mines/>
- Future outlook: COVID-19 crisis - <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/myanmar-peace-conference-grapples-mistrust-covid-19.html>
- Future outlook: Muslim minority MPs - <https://news.yahoo.com/myanmar-muslim-mp-elect-vows-054413848.html>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Myanmar>
- [MYANMAR – An overview of the conflict in Kachin – May 2018](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Myanmar)
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Myanmar>