Religious Freedom in Burma:
A divisive and suppressive practice of the military regime

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Introduction

Burma, which gained its independence from Britain on 4 January 1948, has a population of 45 million people with a high degree of ethnic diversity. While at least 50 percent of the total population is ethnic Burman, the remainder belongs to dozens of ethnic groups. While more than 85 percent of the population, mainly Burmans, practice Buddhism, the rest of the population practice other religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Animism.

Following the country's first military coup, which overthrew a democratically elected government in 1962, there have been three periods of military rule in Burma. The first was from 1962 to 1974, the second from 1974 to 1988 and the third from 1988 to the present. The present military regime, the third phase of military rule, is known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). It came to power in September 1988 under the name the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). So in the 51 years since Burma’s independence, the Burmese people have enjoyed freedom under a democratic government for only 14 years, from 1948 to 1962. Military rule since 1962 has regularly threatened religious and other freedoms. Any study of religious practices in Burma must focus to a large extent on the situation under the military rule.

The present military regime, SLORC/SPDC, rules the country without a constitution. Martial law and decrees issued by the military regime are put forward as the basis for law. According to Khin Nyunt, a prominent general in the present military regime, martial law means no law at all. This statement by a leading member of the junta serves to confirm that all freedoms in Burma, including religious freedom, are subject to the military rule.

This article primarily focuses on the practices of division between Buddhists and non-
Buddhists and suppression of non-Buddhist religions by the military regime. This suppression appears to be an attempt to utilize religious issues for political advantage. The article also includes some background to Burma's religious situation before the military seized power.

Religious freedom before 1962

During the period of parliamentary democratic rule, from 1948 to 1962, Burma enjoyed the most democratic system of government in the region. The right to religious freedom was not questioned, nor were religious issues abused for political purposes. 

During debate over the 1947 constitution, Burma's first post-independence constitution, some Buddhist monks pressured the leaders of the independence movement to include in the constitution provisions recognizing Buddhism as the state religion. These demands were, however, rejected. Several members of the British government urged the Burmese independence leaders to study the experience of Ireland, where multiple religions are recognized and respected, despite the fact that Catholicism is practiced by the majority of the people. Ultimately the 1947 constitution included the following article:

"Article 21
(1) The State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.
(2) The state also recognizes Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Animism as some of the religions existing in the Union at the date of coming into operation of this constitution.
(3) The state shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious faith or belief.
(4) The abuse of religion for political purpose is forbidden; and any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this constitution and may be made punishable by law."

Despite continual pressure from Buddhist monks to promote the status of Buddhism, U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the independent Burma, and a Buddhist himself, managed to maintain Burma's official status as a secular state. He allocated a budget for all religions existing in the country, to allow them to be promoted. In this way, all religions were respected and promoted equally. The government arranged visits of Burmese Christian leaders to the Vatican and Burmese Muslim leaders to Saudi Arabia. The government not only encouraged the translation of Buddha's Tripitaka from Pali into Burmese, but also the translation of the Koran from Arabic into Burmese. The Bible had been translated into Burmese in earlier days.

While many Buddhists teachers taught Buddhism in the schools, other religions were also given the same opportunities. However, some Buddhist monks protested against the teaching of the Bible and Koran in schools. The government made it known publicly that if other religions were not allowed to be taught, the teaching of Buddhism
would also not be allowed.10

Nevertheless, a separate law was passed by the parliament in October 1961 that established Buddhism as the state religion. When this Bill was introduced in parliament, protests against it took place in some parts of the country. Leaders of other religions met U Nu and discussed the Bill. In his autobiography, U Nu wrote that as no limitations were placed on other religions, the Bill establishing Buddhism as the state religion was adopted by the parliament.11 Some Buddhists argued that, although Buddhism was declared to be the state religion, other religions were not threatened, as their existence was guaranteed in Article 21 of the constitution12 under which no person was allowed to utilize religious issues for the purpose of politics. They argued that the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion was not contrary to the 1947 constitution. The government continued its support for other religions, as it had before Buddhism was established as the state religion.

At the same time, leaders of other religions demanded the amendment of Article 20 of the 1947 constitution13, by adding freedom of expression to it in terms of religious practices. When the amendment was made, religious leaders who had previously protested expressed their appreciation of the amendment and the efforts of Prime Minister U Nu.14

In general, despite attempts to entrench the dominant role of Buddhism within Burmese society, misuse of religion for political purposes was avoided during this period. Religious freedom prior to 1962 was not threatened. Furthermore, no division of the Burmese people was made along religious lines. The most notable aspect of religious freedom before 1962 is that repression against non-Buddhist religions did not occur, despite the fact that Buddhism was promoted as the state religion.

Religious freedom in the aftermath of 1962: Buddhism as state ideology

The first phase of military rule in 1962 began with the abolition of the 1947 constitution, thus threatening Burma’s religious freedom. In 1965 and 1966, the government sharply limited the religious freedom of Christians, especially missionaries.15

Such restrictions against non-Buddhist religions coincided with the political ideology adopted by the military regime. This was a state ideology known as Burmese Socialism, or "The Burmese Way to Socialism", developed in the aftermath of the 1962 military coup to fill an ideological vacuum. In fact, Burmese Socialism was, as Professor Josef Silverstein has pointed out, a combination of Marxism and Buddhism. A major portion of Burmese Socialist ideology was adapted from Buddhism and made specific reference to Buddhism but not to other religions.16

A totalitarian constitution was promulgated in 1974 which declared that the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was the sole political party in Burma, responsible for governing the country.17 The 1974 constitution included several provisions relating to religious freedom. However, the realization of religious freedom, like other freedoms, was subject to limitations and even punishable if the State considered that it was not in
line with the "socialist social order", a pre-condition for the exercise of any freedoms. Under these circumstances, religious freedom was not respected, as claimed in the constitution. Article 153 of the 1974 constitution, for example, illustrates how religious freedom, along with other freedoms, are subject to the socialist order, as defined by the State.

"Article 153

(a) ...
(b) Every citizen shall have the right to freely use his language and literature, follow his customs, culture and traditions and profess the religion of his choice. The exercise of this right shall not, however, be to the detriment of national solidarity and the socialist social order, which are the basic requirements of the entire Union. Any particular action in this respect which adversely affects the interest of one or several other national races shall be taken only after consulting with and obtaining the consent of those affected.
(c) Notwithstanding the rights enjoyed under clauses (a) and (b), acts which undermine the unity and solidarity of the national races, national security or the socialist social order are prohibited. Persons who violate this provision shall be punished according to law."

Throughout the period of the 1974 constitution, under the totalitarian government in power until 1988, the Burmese Way to Socialism was taught in all training courses organized by the government. Furthermore, the Burmese Way to Socialism was compulsory study for many university studies.

Implementation of the Burmese Way to Socialism in Burmese society, where many other religions also exist, was blatant exploitation by the regime of Buddhism for political purposes. This introduction of Buddhism into Burmese politics heralded the divisions between Buddhism and other religions in Burma.

Buddhism as Burmese nationalism

Since the great majority of Burmese people are Buddhists, Buddhism is the most suitable tool for Burmese generals who wish to build up nationalism based on religion. Consequently nationalism, as promoted by the present military regime, is strongly linked with Buddhism. Many booklets and leaflets in the country believed to be published by the junta urge Buddhist Burmese to promote Burmese nationalism based on Buddhism.

For example, a booklet entitled "Be aware of losing national identity", strongly denounces Islam and Muslims, in an attempt to promote Burmese nationalism. The aim of the publication, as the booklet states, is to awaken Burmese nationalism. All articles appearing in the 100-page booklet are anti-Islam. Stories about how Muslim men exploit and sexually abuse young Burmese young women are powerfully presented. There are many other similar publications demanding Buddhist Burmese to unite and to resist the influence of Islam. The objective of such material appears to be to en-
dorse Burmese nationalism based on Buddhism.

At the same time, the generals of the ruling junta are systematically issuing propaganda claiming that they uphold Buddhism and the interests of Buddhists. A saying among Burmese clearly explains how the military regime has been squandering Buddhism for political purposes: “Burmese television has only two colors - green and yellow”. The green refers to the generals, who wear green uniforms, whereas the yellow refers to Buddhist monks in yellow robes. Most of the reports on Burmese television, which is completely controlled by the military regime, are about Buddhist religious ceremonies organized by the ruling generals. Observers believe that such propaganda may convince some Buddhists that the military regime is representing their interests. Ceremonies for other religions are very rarely presented in the state media.

Concurrently, soldiers from the Burmese army, who are mostly ethnic Burmans, are, by internal army orders, asked to marry non-Burman and non-Buddhist ethnic women. These practices have occurred widely since 1996, mostly in Chin State, where the majority of the population are Christian ethnic Chin. When a non-Burman and non-Buddhist ethnic woman marries a soldier, she must convert to Buddhism, a condition set by each army commander. Soldiers who marry non-Buddhist and non-Burman ethnic women are also honored by their commanders.  

Harassment of Buddhist monks

Even though the military regime uses Buddhism as a tool in its control, it does not hesitate to suppress Buddhist monks who participate in demonstrations against it. Buddhist monks have played an important role in all political change in Burma since British colonial rule. Nowadays, the monks are among the most active of Burma’s people in the struggle for the restoration of democracy and human rights. Accordingly they are under close scrutiny by military intelligence personnel and their agents.

There are several methods that the military regime uses to watch or monitor the activities of Buddhist monks. Controlling activities of the monks through Sangha (monks) organizations is the most common method. The military regime formed Sangha organizations at various administrative levels, such as the villages, townships, districts and State/Division levels. All monks are required to obey the orders of the Sangha organization, whether they belong to the organization or not.

The military regime issued an order in mid-July 1999, instructing all its subordinate authorities to approach Buddhist monks and monitor their activities. One of the orders was that the government authorities should use all means to influence Buddhist monks so that the monks will side with the government when anti-government demonstrations take place.

There have been reports that military intelligent agents pretend to be monks and stay with other monks in the monasteries to monitor the monks’ activities and report them to military intelligence.

Buddhist monks at one time imposed sanctions against the military rulers by refusing to participate in any ceremony sponsored by the members of the military government, and
refusing alms from military personnel and their family members. The military regime carried out a program of massive retaliation against these monks.  

Raiding monasteries and arresting monks is also a common practice of the military regime. Within the last ten years, it is believed that more than 350 monasteries have been raided and more than 3,000 monks arrested. Many Buddhist monks have been killed while hundreds have been detained and tortured. Such harassment by the military regime has led observers to conclude that, while the regime claims to be the preserver and protector of Buddhism, its actions actually demonstrate an opposite intention. However, although it suppresses Buddhist monks and Buddhist people, the military regime has no intention of eradicating Buddhism: this is simply its response to any opposition towards it.

The military regime has never shown any sign that it will not uphold Buddhism and the interest of the Buddhists, since it needs their support. Whenever there is a crackdown on Buddhist monks, the regime refers to the monks in question as "men in monks' dress". This usage reflects the regime's reluctance to confront the people by undermining Buddhism. Therefore, it is incorrect to interpret harassment of Buddhist monks as suppression of Buddhism. Such an interpretation may lead to misunderstandings about how the regime is trying to divide Buddhism and other religions.

Authoritie's repression of other religions

In most cases, if the military regime faces a political crisis, it attempts to overcome it by distracting people from the political issue to another issue. The method that Military Intelligence, known as the brains of the military regime, often uses is to create riots among the people. Racial and religious riots often emerge in the midst of political crises. With precedents for communal violence, the military regime has found it expedient on numerous occasions to exploit religious and racial riots, especially when these can be directed towards Muslims, to divide the public and distract attention from other social issues.

Anti-Muslim agitation

In May 1996, anti-Muslim literature appeared in several publications widely distributed in Shan State. Many believed that conflict between Buddhists and Muslims was a direct result of this anti-Muslim literature. The literature agitated Buddhists into taking action against Muslims. In October 1996, anti-Muslim leaflets distributed in Rangoon and other cities urged Buddhist women not to marry Muslims, and to boycott shops run or owned by Muslims.

During 1997 many attacks against Muslims took place throughout Burma, including in Mandalay, the second capital of Burma. An anti-Muslim campaign was run during February and March 1997 in Karen State. Several Mosques were destroyed, the Koran was ripped up or burned, and Muslims were driven out of the areas they had been living in. Muslim religious leaders suspected that Military Intelligence personnel were behind the attacks, as the military regime did not take decisive action to stop the violence, leaving Muslim communities to defend themselves. After those riots, Muslims suffered bit-
terly because their Mosques were destroyed. By March 1997, not less than 33 Mosques nationwide had been destroyed or looted.

Rohingyas, Burmese Muslims mainly living in Arakan State, are among those who suffer most from military suppression. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas were driven out of their homes in 1991-1992 by the Burmese army and sought refuge in Bangladesh. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees intervened with repatriation support, the Rohingyas upon their arrival back in Burma were faced with further harassment by the soldiers.

Christianity in Burma: subject to suppression

Christians in Burma are also not free from suppression, simply because they are Christian. Most of the Christians make up the ethnic groups living in the mountainous states such as Chin State, Kachin State, Karen State and Karenni State, where the Burmese army has run offensives against the ethnic armed groups fighting for greater autonomy. The military operations are carried out along with religious suppression against non-Burman ethnic Christians. The military regime believes that Christians in such states are supporters of the ethnic insurgency movements. This belief fuels their suppression.

There have been reports that the Burmese army attacked the ethnic Chins, who are almost all Christians, driving them out of their villages in Chin State gradually in 1993-1994. Later, the churches were removed and Buddhist temples or pagodas were built in their place. The local authorities of the military regime put restrictions on Christian religious ceremonies, limiting them to 3,500 people.\textsuperscript{25}

In October 1994, Burmese soldiers arrived in Lashi township, Sagaing Division in western Burma, where the Christian ethnic Naga people are living. The army commander told the Nagas that Burma is a Buddhist country, and that Christian Nagas were asked to convert to Buddhism. The Burmese soldiers also persecuted most of the members of the Naga Baptist Council (NBC). In March 1995, when the NBC called a meeting of its members, the local army commander detained NBC members for two days. Moreover, all staff members of the NBC were forced to convert to Buddhism. If they refused, they were forced to resign from the NBC.\textsuperscript{26}

Tension in 1993-1994 within the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed ethnic organization fighting for greater autonomy, was exploited by the military regime to create divisions within the leadership of this major ethnic resistance group. The military regime successfully turned a Karen army leadership problem into an "internal religious conflict", by setting up the so-called Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which sided with the military regime immediately after its formation and carried out anti-KNU military operations.

Most of the Karenni people are also Christians. Military authorities, through intimidation and threats, forced the Karenni people to construct Buddhist temples all over Karenni State, despite the low number of Buddhists in the region. Many of the Christian crosses erected in towns and villages have been destroyed. Some pastors have been arrested and tortured. Many churches and bibles were destroyed or burned during massive regime-sponsored relocations of thousands of Karenni villagers in 1996-
The regime added a Christian Non-Governmental Organization, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), to its blacklist and barred members from entering the country. The regime accused the CCA of being involved in political activities under the banner of religious activities. According to a report from the S.H.A.N, an independent information group run by ethnic Shans, an anti-Christian plan has been established by the Sangha Council, formed under the sponsorship of the regime.

Observers may point out that the military regime represses not only Christians but also Buddhists. The point is correct, but the intention behind the repression is different. Suppression of Buddhism, as earlier examined in this paper, is not intended to eliminate Buddhism, but just to eliminate those Buddhists who oppose the military regime.

The suppression of non-Buddhist ethnic groups coincides with the putting down of ethnic armed revolts. Elimination of non-Buddhist religions, mainly practiced by non-Burman ethnic groups, will assist in undermining armed revolts by those ethnic groups. Encouraging Burmese soldiers to marry non-Buddhist ethnic women appears intended to undermine the identity of non-Burman ethnic groups who practice non-Buddhist religions. Children born to Burman and non-Burman ethnic parents are automatically considered Burman. Therefore the strategy of the military regime in suppressing non-Buddhist ethnic groups includes eliminating the religious identity and the ethnic identity of the group concerned.

Censorship of religious publications

The military regime strictly censors not only political publications, but also religious publications, including changing some words in the Bible. The Censorship Board, formed in accordance with the Printers and Publishers Registration Act (1962), even censored the translation of some words into Burmese. Since British colonial rule, the Chapter "Proverbs" in the Bible was translated into Burmese as "Thoke-tan-kyan". But the Censorship Board altered this translation, as the Board refused to allow Christians to use some words used in Buddhist religious language.

Report of United Nations' Special Rapporteur

The United Nations' Commission on Human Rights (CHR) is the largest regular intergovernmental meeting on human rights and its recommendations on human rights issues are passed, through another body, to the United Nations' General Assembly. In 1986, the CHR created a special rapporteur on "intolerance or discrimination based on religion or belief". The rapporteur provides reports to the annual CHR meetings on these matters, and his report to the 1999 CHR, contained some matters relating to Burma.

The rapporteur explained he is endeavoring to compile a basic reference source on national laws on freedom of religion and belief. The rapporteur has requested information from governments about their country's constitution or laws relating to freedom of religion and belief. The report noted replies had been received from 48 governments,
including a number from the Asia-Pacific region, however no reply has been provided from the military regime in Burma.33

The rapporteur noted that in 1998, he had sent communications to many governments, with reports of religious discrimination or intolerance in their country. The communication with Burma34 noted reports of the government’s religious intolerance and discrimination against Muslim and Christian minorities. The reports described destruction of places of worship and schools, revocation of citizenship, coerced conversions to Buddhism, and refusal of access to various public services and facilities. The rapporteur noted the military junta’s blanket denial was not useful, and suggested it may be disbelieved:

"Without providing any explanation, Myanmar has declared the allegations of intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities to be unfounded and entirely false. It would help if Myanmar’s reply were supported by suitable evidence, especially since the allegations are founded on concordant and persistent information from a number of reliable sources"35.

Conclusion

No official proclamation has been made that Burma is a theocracy based on Buddhism. Yet religious riots and religious suppression can be seen to be a direct result of divisions between Buddhist and non-Buddhist religions. It has become clear that the ruling military regime is using religious issues for its political interests. Burmese peoples who practice other religions have suffered from repression simply because of their religion.

While there are frequent reports by international human rights organizations about human rights violations in Burma, reports about religious abuses and the question of religious freedom are rarely seen. The military regime’s use of religion as a major tool in prolonging its hold on power is not well understood.

All religions in Burma are subject to the political interests of the military regime. However the difference between suppression of Buddhists on the one hand and Christians and Muslims on the other, is that there is no intention to eliminate Buddhism, whereas suppression against Christians and Muslims is so intended. Suppression of Buddhist monks and Buddhist Burmese occurs simply because of their involvement in politics. In contrast, the suppression of Muslims and Christians is carried out to undermine their religions, so that Buddhism will remain as the dominant, and perhaps become the exclusive, religion.

The promotion of Buddhism by the military regime at the expense of other religions is undertaken to increase Burmese nationalism based on Buddhism. Religions in Burma have been divided into Buddhist and non-Buddhist. There is enough evidence to conclude that as long as the military regime is in power, religion in Burma will be divisive and oppressive.
Post script

In early September 1999, the State Department of the United States of America issued a report about religious freedom in Burma, as part of State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. The report specifically mentioned that Burmese military government uses force to propagate Buddhism. The State Department took particular note of allegations of abuses against the Christian Chin ethnic minority. The U.S State Department report said that, "government security forces continued efforts to induce members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism and prevent Christian Chin from proselytizing by highly coercive means, including religiously selective exemptions from forced labor, and by arresting, detaining, interrogating, and physically abusing Christian clergy". It also claimed that members of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Arakan State, on the country's western coast, "continued to experience severe legal, economic, and social discrimination."

The State Department's report reflects how the military rulers in Burma abuse religious issues for political purposes. Moreover, Buddhism and other religions in Burma have been divided intentionally by the military regime and the regime's repressive practices have been used for a decade.

Notes

1. The country's official name now is Myanmar, as the military regime changed it from Burma in 1989 without any consultation with the people. Many Burmese people have pointed out that such a change should only be taken with the consent of the people, not by order of those who illegitimately control the power.
2. Government statistics show that there are 135 ethnic groups in Burma. But independent observers and opposition groups disagree with this figure, saying that the government figures are intended to create the impression that Burma's political system cannot have multi-ethnic governance based on ethnic equality because of the large number of groups. However, everyone agrees that there are dozens of ethnic groups in Burma. For details, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, Zed Book, London 1991.
3. The 1995 figures show 89.28 percent Buddhist, 5.06 percent Christian, 3.78 percent Muslim, 0.51 percent Hindu and 1.37 percent other. It cannot be assumed that these data are correct, however, as many areas in Burma were left out of the any census, ie where armed ethnic groups are operating.
4. Categorizing such periods is just done to examine the nature of military rule in each period. What can be easily said here is that Burma has been under military rule since 1962. For further information about these phases, see Josef Silverstein's *Burma: Historical Introduction* in Marc Weller (ed.), *Democracy and Politics in Burma*, National Coalition Government of Union of Burma, 1993.
5. For more detailed information about martial law and the military regime, see Amnesty

6. However, some debates over recognition of Buddhism as state religion in the constitution took place even during the pre-independence movement.

7. This constitution was approved on 24 September 1947, but came into force when Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948. The constitution was suspended in 1962 when the military staged a coup.

8. The sacred canon of Theravada Buddhism, written in the *Pali* language, the three baskets or collections.

9. *Pali* is the literary Indo-Aryan language of Buddhist canonical books and the language of the later Theravada Buddhist chronicles, commentaries, and other literature.

10. For more detail about this amendment and the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion, see, Tartay Sanay Thar (Saturday Son), an autobiography of U Nu.

11. Ibid

12. See article 21 of the 1947 constitution above.

13. Article 20 of original text stated "All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provision of this chapter."


17. Article 11 of the 1974 constitution

18. The booklet, no author name and date of publication, was widely distributed in the country in early 1999. Facts and statistics used in the booklet are of the type that ordinary citizens cannot know, for example, the statistics of Mosques in the whole county and Islamic religious schools are listed. Under the strict controls over freedom of expression/publication, no independent agency or individual could gather such statistics.


20. A report issued by the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF) in August 1999.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid


26. The information were provided by Federation of Trade Unions of Burma, 1995-1997

27. Information was provided by the victims and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) workers


30. The Burmese version of the Bible is printed in India for distribution in Burma.

31. Information was provided by the ABSDF


33. Report of UN Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance (ibid), para 5

34. Report of UN Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance (ibid), para 81

35. Report of UN Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance (ibid), para 82