

9. Freedom of Belief and Religious Discrimination

9.1 Background

During the 1988 demonstrations for democracy and human rights, many monks took an active role and were arrested for their prominent participation. An estimated 200 Buddhist monks are imprisoned at Insein Prison alone. Many others are believed to be held captive in prison labor camps.

On August 8, 1990, in commemoration of the second anniversary of the democracy uprising, more than 7,000 monks and novices walked through the streets of Mandalay, solemnly and peacefully accepting alms from the people. Soldiers confronted the monks and opened fire, killing two monks and two students and wounding seventeen others. One novice monk disappeared. Following the massacre, the Monks Union (Sangha Sammagi) of Mandalay, led by the Ven. U Yewata, announced “pattam nikkujjina kamma” (overturning the bowl) against the military and their families. This refusal to accept alms is used as a rebuke to lay people. According to the Vinaya, the rules of conduct for Theravada Buddhist monks, a lay person who has committed any of eight offenses should be ostracized. These eight offenses are: striving for that which is not gained, striving for that which is not a benefit, acting against a monastery, vilifying and making insidious comparisons about monks, inciting dissension among monks, defaming the Buddha, defaming the Dhamma, and defaming the Sangha (the order of monks). If a layman acts in any of these ways, the Sangha believes it should refuse all contact with him.

This powerful religious boycott, which began in Mandalay, spread like wildfire across Burma, causing alarm and trauma to the military regime. By October 1990, the religious sanctions against the military and their families had reached Rangoon. The regime retaliated against the monks’ boycott by staging a massive clampdown on the Sangha. Monasteries were surrounded by armed troops trapping monks inside. Electricity, water, and communication lines were cut and monks were prevented from going on their daily alms round. After maintaining the blockade for one week, armed troops entered monasteries and arrested leaders. People living near some of the monasteries were also forced to move out and their homes were destroyed. More than 35 monasteries were raided and more than 3,000 monks and novices were arrested. Twenty monasteries were seized and expropriated. Most monks were accused of possessing antimilitary literature, including articles by the NLD. Three monks were arrested for allegedly having written inflammatory poems in their diaries and notebooks. In a crude attempt to smear the Sangha Sammagi movement, some monks were charged with gambling, illegal possession of jade or heroin, and rape. When General Khin Nyunt, the head of Military Intelligence, explained these arrests on state radio, however, he only accused the Mandalay monks of working with the defunct Communist Party of Burma.

All independent Sangha organizations have been banned since 1990. Monks are under close watch by the Military Intelligence. Many monks have been arrested and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for their support to the NLD and other democracy

activities nationwide since 1990.

Many other religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, have also been persecuted under the military regime of the SPDC. Burmese people cannot enjoy the freedoms guaranteed under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which clearly states that all people have the right to their beliefs to their own religious choice. There are many cases of Christians being forced to convert to Buddhism by the regime. In 1994-95, the military lured Chin children from their Christian parents with promises of education in Rangoon. When the parents tried to communicate with their children or to learn of their whereabouts and well-being, they were denied all access. Later they discovered that instead of having been placed in schools, their children were being converted to Buddhism in Buddhist monasteries, with their heads shaven and dressed in novices' robes.

92 SPDC's control over Buddhism

The SPDC monitors the activities of members of all religious faiths, including Buddhism, in part because congregation members have in the past been politically active. After the monks' boycott in 1990 in Mandalay, the SPDC banned all independent monks associations. The only Sangha organizations recognized now are the Sangha Mahanayaka Committees. The senior monks are given the task of establishing rules to maintain discipline and generally oversee all Sangha affairs. In addition to the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee, there are local Sangha Mahanayaka Committees. The SPDC has formed Sangha organizations in the villages, townships, and districts. All monks are required to obey the orders of the organizations, whether or not they belong. Buddhist monks cannot do anything without the permission of the SPDC. For example, only the township or district Sangha organization may authorize a monastery to build additions or renovate old buildings.

The members of the Sangha Mahanayaka Committees are all elderly and learned monks who should be highly respected and venerated. Since it is well known that the SPDC controls the committees, the people no longer esteem these monks. The regime wishes to include as many senior monks as possible within the ranks of committees. As a result, monks are pressured to join, despite being reluctant to do so. As an added coercion, monasteries are kept under strict surveillance until a monk agrees to join. In the process, monks are vilified by SPDC propaganda. Once a monk relents and joins the committee, the pressure eases. The SPDC then showers the monastery with lavish gifts, while the monk loses his independence and the respect of the people. The regime has made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of asserting its popular legitimacy. Photos of SPDC officials paying homage or making donations to pagodas throughout the country appear regularly in the official newspapers.

In a further attempt to gain legitimacy and respect, The SPDC organizes elaborate ceremonies to award titles to monks. In the past, these titles were granted only to very learned monks and carried great honor. Now, however, they are viewed as either a reward for submission or a bait with which to lure senior monks to come under SPDC control.

In 1996, Lt-Gen. Myo Nyunt, former SPDC Minister of Religion, sent a letter to the senior monks' committee demanding that all those who wished to be ordained receive approval from the SPDC. Furthermore, in September 1996, SPDC accused the NLD of trying to divide the "loyalty of the Sangha" by sending members to various monasteries to

befriend monks. The SPDC also issued Order No. 85 that prevent any NLD members from being ordained. The Sangha Mahanayaka Committees were instructed to contact all levels of SPDC offices if any NLD member sought ordination. The order also prevented members of other political parties and their families from being ordained.

The SPDC has been accused by the monks inside Burma of having stolen many precious objects from the temples across Burma in the name of renovating Buddhist religious statues. Buddhist monks in Mandalay accused the SPDC of trying to find and steal sacred rubies from Maha Myatmuni pagoda in Mandalay which are believed to give the owner the power to defeat any enemy.

9.3 Arrest of Buddhist monks in 1998

Dozens of Buddhist monks were arrested in 1998 for their peaceful demonstrations and support for the NLD. The SPDC has escalated its suppression on the Buddhist monks in the country since the NLD's call on May 27, 1998 for convening a People's Parliament.

As a consequence of the suppression, demonstrations by Buddhist monks across the country broke out in 1998. On July 14, 1998, around 300 Buddhist monks held a demonstration in Sittwe, Arakan State. On September 4 and 5, 1998, about 200 Buddhist monks joined a demonstration with 60 students in Mandalay. Similarly on September 4, 1998, a demonstration took place by 260 Buddhist monks in Monywa, Sagaing Division, and another demonstration was held in Tavoy, Tenassarim Division, on September 9, 1998, by 170 Buddhist monks. A further demonstration took place on November 23, 1998, in Mandalay by Buddhist monks.

The SPDC detained the monks who took part in the demonstrations. On July 14, two monks from Sittwe, Arakan State; on August 18, one monk from Belin, Mon State; on September 4-5, five monks from Mandalay; on September 14, three monks from Rangoon; on September 14, two monks from Pakkoku and on the same day three monks from Mandalay were arrested by SPDC troops. According to the All Burma Young Monks' Union, seven Buddhist monks from Mandalay are missing or went into hiding after the demonstration on November 23, in Mandalay. They are Ashin Wilartha (Mya Taung monastery), Ashin Za Ninda (Khin Makan monastery), Ashin May Gida (Gwe Cho monastery), Ashin Wilartha (A Kauk monastery), Ashin Teza (Moe Kaung monastery), Ashin Zawti Parla (Moe Kaung monastery), and Shin Sandima (Moe Kaung monastery). The MI agents demanded the abbots of the monasteries in Mandalay hand over these monks for their participation in the demonstrations. No further information of their whereabouts is known.

Unknown numbers of monks were arrested across the country in 1998 including the following:

U Thumingla	30 years old	Teza Sakki monastery, Rangoon
U Nyanika	40 years old	Kyeikkasan monastery, Rangoon
U Tilawka	20 years old	Along Aung Mingla Teikthit monastery, Rangoon
U Ywathawa	28 years old	Phayagyi monastery, Mandalay
U Oaktama	20 years old	Masoeyein monastery, Mandalay
U Pathehta	23 years old	Shwekyin Withudayon monastery, Mandalay
U Zawtika	44 years old	Moulmein

U Authahta	Withudayon monastery, Kaba Aye, Rangoon
U Arsitna	Bangla monastery, Sanchaung, Rangoon
U Pyinya Dipa	Theinbyu monastery, Rangoon
U Panitta	28 years old Thayettaw monastery, Rangoon

At least 12 Buddhist monks were rounded up and three others sustained injuries after riot police broke up a demonstration on September 4, 1998 in Mandalay. They were from Pyayagyi, Mya Daung and Withudayon monasteries in Mandalay. (*Source: ABMYU*)

9.3.1 Treatment of Buddhist Monks in Detention

The persecution of monks and the desecration of monasteries and pagodas have continued unabated throughout Burma. There have been reliable reports of the torture of monks in prisons, and those released from prisons have reported seeing stacks of hundreds of monks' robes in the prisons, clear evidence that many monks are not only being detained, but also disrobed – an affront to any Buddhist monk.

The monks have asked that they be permitted to wear robes in prison, but prison authorities have taken them anyway and forced the monks to wear white prison uniforms. In addition, the monks are denied the use of their ordained names. They may only use their ordinary names.

9.3.2 Monks tortured and killed

On April 4, 1998, three soldiers at Taungzun village or Win Yay township, Karen State defected to the KNU. In connection with the defection of these three soldiers, the commander of LIB 357, Lt-Col. Aike Mon, acting in accordance with the directive of the commander of the No.1 Tactical Operation Colonel Ye Htut, issued an order for the arrest of two monks from a monastery in Taungzun village on the suspicion that they might have helped the soldiers escape. The two monks were arrested and taken to the Tactical Operation Command base in Taungzun. Back at the base, they were severely beaten, tortured and interrogated. One monk, Ashin U Kuthala, 31 years old, who had been a monk for eleven years, died of injuries caused by torture. The fate of the other monk remains unknown. (*Source: Yoma 3*)

94. SPDC's Disrespect for all Religions

At least one-third of Burma's population – about fifteen million people – is formed by ethnic minorities. In addition to the largest ethnic groups – the Mon, Karen, Shan, Kachin, Chin and Arakanese, within which there are dozens of sub-groups – there is also a significant population of immigrants of Chinese and South Asian origin. The ethnic minorities tend to have large Christian or Muslim minorities among them. The degree of integration among ethnic minorities differs greatly, but in general depends on geographic location: those minorities living in remote highland areas are least integrated and mostly Christian. The coincidence of ethnicity, religion, and armed opposition has meant that allegations of religious persecution and racial discrimination are often combined. Not only the Christians

but also Muslims have been denied the right to freedom of worship. Muslims in northern Arakan State cited religious persecution as one of the factors which drove them to seek refuge in Bangladesh in 1992 and in 1996. Mosques in the region were destroyed or otherwise closed down. Muslims children are not permitted to attend Madrasahs (Koranic schools). The SPDC has often tried to stir up religious and racial tensions in Burma in order to divide the population and divert attention away from other more pressing political and economic concerns.

95. Religious Discrimination against Christianity

Religious persecution is a major concern in Chin State, Karenni State, Kachin State and some parts of Karen State and Sagaing Division, where the majority of people are Christian. In Chin State particularly, over the past few years, the military has been forcing Christian villagers to build Buddhist pagodas in their villages. Soldiers have been desecrating churches and graveyards by turning them into army camps, disturbing religious ceremonies, and preventing evangelists from preaching.

95.1 Restrictions on Catholic Prayer Meetings

The SPDC's No.7 Tactical Command ordered the Roman Catholic community in Pe Khon, Shan State, not to organize any activities involving more than 10 people at a sacred religious site. On December 1, 1998, about 30 youths from Jayraw Blo village near Pe Khon village were prevented by Major Kyaw Soe from praying and cleaning at the Mother Mary sacred site on the hill. The soldiers stationed at the sacred site and the major told the youths that no praying or cleaning the site was allowed. On the next day, the SPDC authorities in Pe Khon called the religious leaders who were organizing a religious festival and told them that not more than 10 persons would be allowed to go up to the sacred site and conduct the prayer session or clear the site. They also ordered the religious leaders to submit the list of Christians from other areas who would come to the site and celebrate the festival. One leader requested to be allowed to bring more than 10 persons to pray at one time, but the authorities warned him that action would be taken if the leaders do not comply. When the festival started on December 3, 200 Christians who came from other areas to pray and celebrate the festival were only allowed to take part in the religious service at a ground in the village instead of at the sacred site. (*Source: ABSDF*)

95.2 Blocking centennial celebrations in Chin State

The SPDC harassed and blocked the centennial of Christianity in Chin State. Chin pastors were interrogated and the centennial celebrations in Haka, the capital of Chin State, have been postponed by the regime at least until April, 1999.

Chin Christians sought to celebrate their centennial of Christianity from January 1-3, 1999, at Thantlang, another town in Chin State. The centennial marks the arrivals of American missionaries Rev. Carson and his wife Laura Carson in 1899. On January 5, 1999, when the celebration in Thantlang was over, citizens of the town placed a centennial

memorial cross on the top of Vuichip Hill neat Thantlang. The SPDC authorities ordered the citizens of Thantlang to remove the cross they erected. After the citizens refused to remove the cross, soldiers pulled it down and destroyed it.

Six pastors from Thantlang, Rev. Thawng Kam, Rev. Biak Kam, Rev. Thatu, Rev. Tha Ceu, Rev. Cung Bik and Rev. Beauth Lily, were then taken away from the town and interrogated. In protest, all the citizens in Thantlang staged a general strike prayer service and fast at local churches or in their homes the following day, January 6, 1999. In retaliation, the military cut all telephone lines to Thantlang and summoned twenty pastors and church leaders for interrogation. On January 9, churches around Haka joined the protest by holding prayer services. Military officers from Haka told the leaders that if they wanted to put the memorial cross again, they would have to apply to the Home Ministry in Rangoon. The military has also ordered the postponement of centennial celebrations in Haka until April 1999.

9.6. Lists of incidents

◆ On January 20, 1998, Saw Leh Wah, a DKBA officer press-ganged 80 villagers of Tee Wa Plaw village in Pa-an district, Karen State, to build a pagoda on Hsweh Necho mountain top. (*Source: KIC*)

◆ On January 24, 1998, Saw Htee Klo from No. 2 Battalion of DKBA Division 999, accused Par Kat villagers in Pa-an district, Karen State of having connections with the KNU. The DKBA troops burnt down the Christian church in the village later. (*Source: KIC*)

◆ On March 5, 1998, a Christian villager from Ta Kae village, which is about two hours walk away from Seikkyi, Karen State, was taken to Kyon Sein village and killed. He was told to wear Buddhist saffron robes of a monk telling him that his life would be spared if he wore it. The villager refused and later he was shot in the chest and beheaded while still alive. (*Source: Yoma 3*)

◆ On March 7, 1998, military troops from LIB 284 came to Kasa village in Kya-inn-seik-kyi township, Karen State, and ordered the Christian pastor to destroy or burn the church outside the village. When the pastor did not obey the order, they threatened him with death. They warned the pastor that he would be killed if they found the church still existing when they came back on March 9, 1998. With no choice left, the villagers had to burn the church. (*Source: Yoma 3*)

◆ In May 1998, a Christian church and all the best looking houses in Hsaw Wah Der village, Taungoo district, Karen State, were burnt down by an SPDC column. This village had been ordered to move to Kler Lah several years ago, but had never obeyed. (*Source: KHRG*)