

BURMA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees every citizen “the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution.” The law prohibits speech or acts insulting or defaming any religion or religious beliefs; authorities used these laws to limit freedom of expression and press. Local and international experts said deeply woven prejudices led to abuses and discrimination against religious minorities by government and societal actors. It was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents as based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity in the country. Violence, discrimination, and harassment against ethnic Rohingya in Rakhine State, who are nearly all Muslim, and other minority populations continued. Following the ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya that took place in 2017 and resulted in the displacement of more than 700,000 refugees to Bangladesh, Rohingya who remained in Burma continued to face an environment of particularly severe repression and restrictions on freedom of movement and access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods based on their ethnicity, religion, and citizenship status, according to the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In March the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar reported that the government appeared to be using starvation tactics against remaining Rohingya. On September 17, the UN Fact-Finding Mission, established by the UN Human Rights Council, published its final report on the country, which detailed atrocities committed by the military in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan States, as well as other areas, and characterized the “genocidal intent” of the military’s 2017 operations in Rakhine State. The government denied the Fact-Finding Mission permission to enter the country and publicly disavowed the report. Some government and military officials used anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim rumors and hate speech circulating on social media in formal meetings, public speeches, and other official settings. Public remarks by the minister of religious affairs in November were widely understood to denigrate Muslims. Christians in Kachin State, according to media and NGO reports, stated the military was carrying out a campaign to eliminate them similar to the situation in Rakhine State. In other areas, non-Buddhist minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, reported incidents in which authorities unduly restricted religious practice, denied freedom of movement to members of religious minorities, closed places of worship, denied or failed to approve permits for religious buildings and repairs, and discriminated in employment and housing. The military’s selective denial of humanitarian access in some conflict areas,

including Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine States, led to severe hardship on religious minorities and others and intercommunal tensions, according to NGOs. Among Rohingya who fled the country during the year, some cited ongoing abuses in Rakhine State, while others reportedly fled due to government pressure to participate in a citizenship verification campaign, which they stated they did not trust. NGOs and religious groups said local authorities in some cases worked to reduce religious tension and improve relations between communities.

In the Wa Self-Administered Division, where the government has no administrative control, United Wa State Army (UWSA) authorities detained Christian leaders, destroyed churches, and otherwise interfered with Christian religious practice, according to media reports and the UWSA spokesperson.

Some leaders and members of Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation, better known by its former name Ma Ba Tha, continued to issue pejorative statements against Muslims. In May the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC), an independent but government-supported body that oversees Buddhist affairs, reiterated its 2017 order that no group or individual was allowed to operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha. In spite of the order, many local Ma Ba Tha branches continued to operate with that name. The SSMNC's 2017 ban on public speaking by the monk Wirathu, a self-described nationalist, expired in March. He appeared at a large promilitary rally in Rangoon in October, at which he made anti-Muslim statements. Other Ma Ba Tha leaders continued propagating anti-Muslim sentiment in sermons and through social media. Anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya hate speech was prevalent on social media. Facebook removed pages belonging to Wirathu and a number of senior military leaders and military-affiliated groups for propagating hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. Religious and civil society leaders continued to organize intrafaith and interfaith events and developed mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech.

Senior U.S. government officials, including the Vice President, Secretary of State, Ambassador to the United Nations, USAID Administrator, Ambassador to Burma, and Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom advocated for religious freedom and tolerance and consistently raised concerns about discrimination against religious minorities, the treatment of Rohingya and conditions in Rakhine State, and the prevalence of anti-Muslim hate speech and religious tension. In November the Vice President said, "The violence and persecution by military and vigilantes that resulted in driving 700,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh is without excuse" and asked State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi about the country's progress in holding accountable those who were responsible.

In July at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, the USAID Administrator stated, “The Rohingya were victimized by nothing less than ethnic cleansing: extrajudicial killings, rapes, tortures, beatings, arbitrary arrests, displacement, destruction of property – all driven by intolerance and sectarian hatred.” The United States has sanctioned five generals and two military units for human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, frequently met with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, to highlight concerns about religiously based discrimination and abuses and called for respect for religious freedom and the values of diversity and tolerance in statements and other public messaging.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 55.6 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the most recently available estimates, approximately 88 percent are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 6 percent are Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations). Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. The 2014 Census reportedly excluded the Rohingya from its count, but NGOs and the government estimated the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population at 1.1 million prior to the outbreak of violence and initial exodus of Rohingya into Bangladesh in October 2016. According to current estimates from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh beginning in August 2017, and an estimated 520,000 to 600,000 remain in Rakhine State. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. There is a very small Jewish community in Rangoon.

There is significant demographic correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and numerous other ethnic groups. Various forms of Christianity are dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga

ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim. People of South Asian ancestry, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some are Christian. Ethnic Rohingya and Kaman in Rakhine State, as well as some Bamar and ethnic Indians in Rangoon, Ayeyarwaddy, Magway, and Mandalay Divisions, practice Islam. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Some smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions observe traditional indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice his or her religious beliefs. The constitution limits those rights if they threaten public order, health, morality, or other provisions of the constitution. It further provides to every citizen the right to profess and practice his or her religion if not contrary to laws on security, law and order, community peace, or public order and morality.

The law prohibits deliberate and malicious speech or acts intended to outrage or wound the religious feelings of any class by insulting or defaming its religion or religious beliefs. The law also prohibits injuring, defiling, or trespassing on any place of worship or burial grounds with the intent to insult religion.

All organizations, whether secular or religious, must register with the government to obtain official status. This official status is required for organizations to gain title to land, obtain construction permits, and conduct religious activities.

The law bars members of “religious orders” (such as priests, monks, and nuns of any religious group) from running for public office, and the constitution bars members of religious orders from voting. The government restricts by law the political activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*). The constitution forbids “the abuse of religion for political purposes.”

Although there is no official state religion, the constitution notes that the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The constitution “also recognizes

Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this Constitution.”

The government bans any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the SSMNC, the members of which are elected by monks.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversees the government’s relations with Buddhist monks and schools.

Four laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion” remain in effect. The Buddhist Women Special Marriage law stipulates notification and registration requirements for marriages between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women, obligations that non-Buddhist husbands must observe, and penalties for noncompliance. The Religious Conversion law regulates conversion through an extensive application and approval process. The Population Control Law allows for the designation of special zones where population control measures may be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing. The Monogamy Law bans polygamous practices, which the country’s penal code already criminalized.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Investigations of the 2017 ethnic cleansing in northern Rakhine State released during the year, including the UN Fact-Finding Mission’s final report, corroborated earlier accounts of a systematic abuses and a campaign against Rohingya civilians that involved extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture. On September 17, the UN Fact-Finding Mission, established by the UN Human Rights Council, published its final report on the country, which detailed atrocities committed by the military in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan States, as well as other areas, and characterized the “genocidal intent” of the military’s 2017 operations in Rakhine State. The government denied the Fact-Finding Mission permission to enter the country and publicly disavowed the report. The report also found the

actions of the military in both Kachin (mostly Christian) and Shan States (mostly Buddhist) since 2011 amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The government established an independent Commission of Enquiry to investigate the 2017 violence in Rakhine State. It is comprised of two international and two Burmese members, and chaired by Rosario Manalo, a former diplomat from the Philippines. The commission did not make public any findings by year's end. Multiple government-led investigations into earlier reported abuses by security forces culminated in denials that abuses occurred and did not result in accountability.

In January Amnesty International (AI) reported three incidents of the military abducting Rohingya girls or young women. One such instance occurred in January in Hpoe Khaung Chaung village, Buthidaung Township: soldiers searched a house, held a man at gunpoint, and abducted a 15-year-old girl; the family has not seen the girl since. AI also reported that security forces strip-searched Rohingya women fleeing the country and robbed both women and men.

Two Reuters reporters, detained by the government in December 2017 and charged under the Official Secrets Act related to their investigation of security forces' activities in northern Rakhine State, remained incarcerated throughout their trial and were sentenced on September 3 to seven years in prison. Independent observers said the trial lacked due process.

UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee told the Human Rights Council in March that the government appeared to be using a policy of starvation in Rakhine State to force out the remaining Rohingya. The country's envoy to the council denied the charge and called for Lee's dismissal.

In March AI reported increased "land grabs" and razing of formerly Rohingya villages by authorities in Rakhine State. AI stated that the military and police built roads and structures over burned Rohingya villages and land, making it even less likely for refugees to return to their homes and "erasing evidence of crimes against humanity." According to satellite imagery, the military and police built at least three new security bases in northern Rakhine State. Reportedly, some Rohingya who were living near the new construction fled to Bangladesh in fear.

In February AI reported military forces in Rakhine had denied Rohingya access to their rice fields in November and December 2017, a denial that amounted to forced starvation, and that many Rohingya fled to Bangladesh on account of the food

shortages. The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) reported that military forces imposed limits on how much rice displaced villagers in Rakhine could purchase per month, causing shortages.

An additional 13,764 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh between January and September. The government prepared facilities to begin receiving some 2,000 of the 700,000 Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh in 2017. In November amid efforts by the governments of Burma and Bangladesh to initiate returns, Rohingya refused to return, often saying they would be subject to human rights abuses if they returned without a guarantee of citizenship. Bangladesh authorities said they would not force them to go back, and no one chose to return.

Several NGOs reported approximately 120,000 Rohingya remained confined to camps since violence in 2012.

In May Hla Phyu was arrested and convicted of false representation after attempting to leave an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Rakhine State, where she had been living since her displacement during violence in 2012, and travel to Rangoon. The 23-year-old teacher, who is Muslim, had previously applied for official permission to travel without success, and eventually traveled without receiving permission. A court sentenced her to a year in prison with hard labor.

The government continued to tightly restrict outside access, including UN and NGO humanitarian aid and media, to northern Rakhine State and portions of Kachin State during the year. Reportedly, the military selectively permitted humanitarian access to IDPs in some conflict areas – granting access to local relief organizations associated with certain religious denominations while denying access to organizations associated with other religious denominations, which created intercommunal tension. In August the human rights group Fortify Rights reported that the government’s travel-authorization process for aid groups in Burma effectively acted as a restriction on aid and humanitarian access to displaced populations in violation of international humanitarian law. Authorities suspended humanitarian access to northern Rakhine State entirely in August 2017; during 2018, the Red Cross Movement, World Food Program, and several other organizations regained some degree of access. According to Fortify Rights, from June 2017 to June 2018, authorities unconditionally approved only approximately 5 percent of 562 applications submitted by international humanitarian agencies seeking “travel authorization” to assist displaced communities in government-controlled areas of Kachin State. On May 21, the government’s minister of

security and border affairs for Kachin State sent a letter to the Kachin Baptist Convention – one of the largest providers of aid to displaced communities in Kachin Independence Army (KIA)-controlled areas – saying the group would be prosecuted for illegally delivering aid in areas under KIA control.

Sources stated that authorities singled out Rohingya in northern Rakhine State to perform forced labor and arbitrarily arrested them. Authorities imposed restrictions that impeded the ability of Rohingya to construct houses or religious buildings.

Authorities in northern Rakhine reportedly prohibited Rohingya from gathering publicly in groups of more than five persons.

Fighting between the government and ethnic armed groups that restarted in Kachin and northern Shan States in 2011 continued. UN Special Rapporteur Lee reported that in March the military started new ground offensives in Kachin State using heavy artillery. The UN estimated that 107,000 persons remained displaced by conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States, where there are many Christians as well as other religious groups. Christians in Kachin State, according to media and NGO reports, stated the military was carrying out a campaign to eliminate them similar to the situation in Rakhine State. It was often difficult to categorize specific incidents as based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity in the country.

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) reported that thousands of Kachin fled the military, including residents of more than 50 villages as of June. The KIO stated the military destroyed or damaged more than 400 villages, 300 churches, and 100 schools in Kachin State since 2011. In August, at the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, several NGOs reported that government security forces encouraged the construction of Buddhist monasteries and temples in areas where they built new bases. Minority religious communities said they perceived this effort to be part of a process of “Burmanization.”

According to a CHRO September report, the Chin people continued to face “institutionalized barriers to religious freedom.” According to the report, the barriers usually involved local authorities blocking the ownership of land for Christian worship. Christians have also faced mob violence by local communities, often “supported and even organized by local authorities and Buddhist-monks.”

The CHRO report said there were cases where police failed to investigate or hold perpetrators to account.

In Rakhine State, according to the UN and media reports, the government and security forces continued to restrict the movement of various ethnic and religious groups, particularly members of the Rohingya community. Restrictions governing the travel of persons whom the government considers foreigners, including both Muslim and Hindu Rohingya, some other Hindus living in Rakhine State, and others between townships in northern Rakhine State, varied depending on the township, usually requiring submission of an immigration form. The traveler could obtain this form only from the township of origin's Immigration and National Registration Department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and two guarantors. The form typically authorized travel for two to four weeks. Authorities granted Muslims located outside of Rakhine State more freedom to travel, but they still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State, and reportedly feared authorities would not allow them to leave Rakhine if they were to visit the state. Such restrictions seriously impeded the ability of Rohingya to pursue livelihoods, access markets, hospitals, and other services, and engage other communities. Sources stated that individuals stereotyped by security forces as appearing to be Muslim received additional scrutiny on movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion. Obtaining these travel permits often involved extortion and bribes.

According to various religious organizations and NGOs, the process to register an NGO, whether religious in nature or not, remained lengthy and often went uncompleted due largely to bureaucratic inefficiency in local governments. Organizations noted that lack of registration did not generally hinder the ability of groups and individuals to conduct religious activities, except in a few cases, although being unregistered left organizations vulnerable to harassment or closure by the government.

Religious groups throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and especially Muslims, reported difficulties and delays that could last for years in getting permits to allow construction of and repairs to religious buildings. Buddhists, however, said getting such permission was harder for other groups. Religious groups said the multiple permissions, unclear authority among government agencies, and interminable delays in responses to requests for permits led them to construct places of worship without the required permissions, leaving them vulnerable to future government action or to pressure by members of other

religious groups. Others said it was necessary to bribe authorities to obtain permits.

In areas with few or no mosques, Muslims often conducted prayer services and other religious practices, such as teaching, in private homes. The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs issued an order in June that restricted non-Buddhist religious teachings to government-approved religious buildings and prohibited prayer services and religious teaching in private homes. The order also required that teaching materials, with an implicit focus on Islamic materials printed in Arabic, be in the Burmese language and submitted to the ministry in advance. The General Administration Department, which has a significant leading role in all subnational administration aspects of daily life, issued notices in Yangon and Sagaing Divisions requiring compliance with the ministry's order. Authorities in Mandalay Division continued to enforce similar restrictions.

Local authorities closed 12 mosques and religious schools in Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, and Sagaing Divisions as well as in Shan State during the year, according to the Burman Human Rights Network (BHRN). A 2017 ban on prayers in eight Islamic schools in Thakayta Township in Yangon Division and the closure of two remained in force. Authorities prevented 14 mosques and religious schools in Yangon and Mandalay Divisions from operating in 2017 and they remained shuttered. Human rights and Muslim groups reported that historic mosques in Meiktila in Mandalay Division, Hpa-An in Karen State, and other areas continued to deteriorate in part because authorities denied permits to perform routine maintenance.

Muslims in Mandalay Division reported continued obstacles to rebuilding mosques after anti-Muslim violence in 2014. Authorities ordered that mosques be shut down after the 2013 anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila, and they remained closed, in addition to mosques in Bago and Mandalay Divisions.

According to a CHRO September report, Christian communities in Chin State reported applications to local authorities for property registration, construction, and renovation encountered delays spanning several years, or the applications were lost altogether.

The CHRO reported local authorities in Chin State continued to delay applications from Christian groups and churches to buy land in the name of their religious organizations. Local authorities in Chin State also blocked Christian groups and churches from buying land in the name of their religious organizations for the

purpose of worship. Religious groups said individual members circumvented this requirement by purchasing land in their own names on behalf of the group, a practice the government tolerated.

In January, according to the CHRO, township administrators banned Christians from building a house for the local pastor in Magway Division and from worshipping in a residential house. As of September local authorities had not responded to a March request to use the house as a church, according to the CHRO. Christian and Muslim groups seeking to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations continued to be able to do so only with approval from local authorities, according to religious groups.

Sources stated that the government increased restrictions on both secular and religious civil society organizations holding public events in hotels and other venues, imposing new requirements for advance notice of events and participants, and civil society organizations sometimes turned to churches and other religious institutions in light of restrictions on the use of other venues. Many religious and civil society organizations said they preferred to receive written authorization from ward, township, and other local authorities before holding events to avoid last-minute cancellations.

The government continued to give financial support to Buddhist seminaries and Buddhist missionary activities. The government continued to fund two state *sangha* universities in Yangon and Mandalay that trained Buddhist monks under the purview of the SSMNC, as well as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon. According to religious organizations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs financially supported the SSMNC and religious ceremonies.

Teachers at many government schools reportedly continued to require students to recite Buddhist prayers, although such practices were no longer a mandated part of the curriculum. Many classrooms displayed Buddhist altars or other Buddhist iconography.

Several Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several madrassahs, in Rangoon, Sagaing, and elsewhere.

Due to movement restrictions, many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools, although observers reported some increased access during the year. Authorities generally did not permit Rohingya high school graduates from Rakhine

State and others living in IDP camps to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar any university students who did not possess citizenship cards from graduating, which disproportionately affected students from religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. These students were allowed to attend classes and take examinations, but could not receive diplomas unless they had a citizenship card, the application for which required some religious minorities to identify as a “foreign” ethnic minority.

According to one human rights organization, schools sometimes submitted citizenship applications on behalf of non-Muslim students while denying the same privilege to Muslim students. Muslim students, after submitting the applications, sometimes had to pay bribes to immigration officials to obtain documentation. According to BHRN, instructors reportedly made anti-Muslim comments in university classrooms and Muslim students typically were not permitted to join institutes for professional studies. One human rights group documented the teaching of racist and anti-Muslim tenets in schools throughout the country.

Muslims said government authorities denied them permission to slaughter cows during the Eid al-Adha festival that marks the end of Ramadan. Media and religious sources said local authorities in some villages restricted the licensing of and butchering of cattle by slaughterhouses, the vast majority owned by Muslims. These restrictions negatively affected business operations and the ability of Muslim communities to celebrate Islamic holidays.

Sources stated that authorities generally did not enforce four laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion.”

A 2005 local order in Maungdaw Township in northern Rakhine State continued in effect, requiring residents, predominately Rohingya, to obtain local authorization to marry. In addition, some Rohingya sources expressed concern about the two-child policy for Rohingya families, referring to a 2005 local order promulgated in northern Rakhine State and sporadically enforced.

Rohingya remained unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions.

Buddhists continued to make up nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service. Applications for civil service and military positions required the applicant to list his or her religion. According to one human rights organization, applications by Muslims for government jobs were largely rejected.

Buddhists continued to make up the vast majority of parliamentarians. There were no Muslim members of parliament, and neither the ruling NLD nor the main opposition party ran any Muslim candidates during nationwide elections in 2015 or by-elections in 2017 and 2018. Second Vice President Henry Van Thio, a Chin Christian, continued to serve in his position, and the speakers of the upper and lower houses of parliament were Christian.

Authorities required citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards usually indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. The government also required citizens to indicate their religion on certain official applications for documents such as passports, although passports themselves do not indicate the bearer's religion. Members of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, faced problems obtaining identification and citizenship cards. According to Fox News, a local official said Christians in Karen State applied to the central government for identification cards identifying them as "Christians" but received cards identifying them as "Buddhist," and officials refused to change the cards. Some Muslims reported that they were required to indicate a "foreign" ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on applications for citizenship cards.

BHRN published a case study of Muslim migrant workers in Thailand who applied to Burmese immigration officials for a formal verification of their nationality, known as a Certificate of Identity (CI). Respondents consistently reported that they had to provide more documentation than did other groups, or that authorities said, "We are not giving CIs to Muslims." BHRN's case study found that twice as many Muslims were rejected as were accepted.

The government continued to call for Rohingya to participate in the government's citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs, the first step in the citizenship verification process). Many Rohingya objected to the exercise, citing a fear of being identified as "Bengali," fear of being designated a "naturalized" rather than "full citizen," a lack of requisite change in their rights if they obtained the NVCs, and a general distrust towards the government. The government said it no longer required all participants to identify as "Bengali" as a condition of participating in the process, although implementing officials reportedly continued to require participants to identify as "Bengali," and those verified as a citizen reportedly had "Bengali" listed as their race on their citizenship scrutiny card. Recipients of naturalized citizenship were ineligible to participate in some political activities and professions, although all citizens had the right to vote. The government also pressured Rohingya to apply for NVCs,

including by continuing a requirement to have an NVC in order to have a fishing permit. Many Rohingya entering Bangladesh during the year cited the pressure campaign as a primary reason for leaving Burma.

State-controlled media frequently depicted military and government officials and their family members paying respect to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing “people’s donations” of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines nationwide. The government published and distributed books on Buddhist religious instruction.

In November Minister of Religious and Cultural Affairs Aung Ko, speaking in nationally televised remarks at the funeral of a prominent Buddhist monk in Karen State, criticized “the followers of an extreme religion [who] take three of four wives and have families with 15 or 20 children.” He added, “Devotees of other [non-Buddhist] religions will become the majority and we will be in danger of being taken over.” His remarks were widely understood to refer to Muslims.

Sources stated that government officials circulated or advanced rumors and false information concerning Rohingya and other Muslims, including claims of a demographic takeover of Rakhine State by Muslims. According to media reports, the military conducted a coordinated effort to spread anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment through dummy Facebook accounts and other social media. The military in August published a book purporting to give a historic account of the Rohingya in northern Rakhine that included images from other areas and conflicts and falsely claiming to show a Rohingya influx into the country from Bangladesh before and after World War II. Government officials distributed the book at formal meetings. Also in August, government officials circulated anti-Rohingya videos to UN and other officials, and a military-linked think tank publicized such material at an event in Rangoon in October.

In November the Yangon Division Rakhine Ethnic Affairs Ministry organized a speaker event in Rangoon called “Hidden Truths of the Western Frontier in Rakhine State,” at which the Rakhine ethnic affairs minister gave remarks in which he blamed the Rakhine crisis on “Bengalis,” a term used to refer to Rohingya that is considered pejorative.

The government officially recognized a number of interfaith groups, including the Interfaith Dialogue Group of Myanmar, which organized monthly meetings and sponsored several religious activities promoting peace and religious tolerance

around the country throughout the year. The group's leadership included Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders, as well as leaders from other religious groups.

The government generally permitted foreign religious groups to operate in a manner similar to nonreligious foreign aid groups. Local religious organizations were also able to send official invitations for visa purposes to clergy from faith-based groups overseas, and foreign religious visitors acquired either a tourist or business visa for entry. Authorities generally permitted Rangoon-based groups to host international students and experts.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

In September the UWSA, which controls the Wa Self-Administered Division in Shan State, detained approximately 200 Christian leaders, destroyed churches, and imposed severe limits on Christian worship, teaching, and proselytizing, according to media reports and the UWSA spokesperson. The UWSA later released most of those it detained. The government exerts no authority inside the Wa territory, which has been under UWSA control since 1988.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May AI reported that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army was likely responsible for the killing of 45 Hindu villagers in Maungdaw Township on August 25, 2017, which the government previously had reported, but some civil society organizations had questioned.

The Chin Human Rights Organization reported the Arakan Army beat villagers and looted property in a village in Paletwa Township, Chin State, in May.

Local and international experts said deeply woven prejudices led to instances of abuse or discrimination against members of religious minorities by societal actors. Many prominent military, civilian, and religious leaders continued to promote the idea that Burmese Buddhist culture was under assault by Islam and Muslims, who would come through the mountains of western Burma – northern Rakhine State where the Rohingya live – and overwhelm Buddhist areas of the country.

CHRO reported that in July a mob that included Buddhist monks attacked two Chin nursery school teachers in the house of a Christian pastor in Pade Kyaw Village, Ann District, Rakhine State. Village monks previously said there would

be a 50,000 kyat (\$33) penalty per household if each household did not send a member to a meeting at which the monks urged participants to harass Christians attending a church service. In August, according to CHRO, a mob attacked Pastor Tin Shwe of Good News Church in the same area of Rakhine State, and he was hospitalized. In January the village tract administrator in Gangaw Township, Magway Division, along with two police officers and some local Buddhist monks, tried to expel a family who had converted to Christianity from the village. Authorities reportedly failed to investigate or hold perpetrators accountable in these cases.

Despite the renewal during the year of the 2017 order by the SSMNC that no group or individual could operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha, some branches of the group continued to use the name Ma Ba Tha, while others used the new name, Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. Many of the group's leaders and members continued to make pejorative and hateful statements against Muslims in sermons and through social media. In August Reuters found more than 1,000 examples of anti-Muslim hate speech on Burmese-language Facebook pages, including calls for "genocide," comparisons to "pigs" and "dogs," and widespread use of pejoratives to refer to Muslims.

In March the SSMNC's ban expired on the influential self-defined nationalist Wirathu, a monk and the chairperson of the Ma Ba Tha branch in Mandalay, from delivering sermons across the country for one year. The SSMNC imposed the ban due to what the SSMNC called religious hate speech against Muslims, which inflamed communal tensions. In October Wirathu, who reportedly maintained strong ties to military and government officials, spoke at a large promilitary rally in Rangoon, mocking foreign sympathy for the Rohingya and making other anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim remarks. There were numerous previous reports of Wirathu making anti-Muslim remarks, such as praising the killers of the prominent Muslim lawyer Ko Ni in 2017. In September Facebook removed pages belonging to Wirathu and a number of senior military leaders and military-affiliated groups for propagating hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Some observers said Ma Ba Tha received financial support from and otherwise coordinated with the military.

In March prominent writer Maung Thway Chuun gave a speech in Sagaing Division in which he criticized the speakers of the upper and lower houses of parliament for being Christian and said the country's religious and ethnic identity was under threat. Authorities arrested him in June on charges of inciting conflict

between ethnic and religious groups, and in October a court sentenced him to two years in prison. Some observers criticized his case as an infringement of freedom of expression.

There were continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for the Rohingya community. Some civil society leaders said that even among otherwise tolerant individuals, anti-Rohingya sentiment remained prevalent. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice, including social pressure not to rent housing to Muslims in some areas.

Some Buddhist and Muslim community leaders in Mandalay continued to collaborate to quell rumors and prevent violence through formal and informal community-centered mechanisms.

Religious and community leaders and civil society activists organized intrafaith and interfaith events, and some worked jointly to develop mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech and to promote religious tolerance and diversity. A coalition of interfaith civil society groups continued advocating for and consulting on draft legislation to counter hate speech, although parliament did not take up the legislation by year's end.

In Mandalay Division, civil society and interfaith leaders held meetings and public events to promote peace and religious tolerance for community leaders and youth, as in previous years. For example, an event in August drew dozens of community members to a day of activities around the theme of diversity and tolerance. A number of interfaith groups continued mobilizing civil society around the country to promote religious tolerance.

On November 21-23, the Religions for Peace Advisory Forum on National Reconciliation and the Advancement of Peace in Myanmar convened in Nay Pyi Taw, bringing together voices from all major religions to advance an agenda of tolerance and respect. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the deputy commander-in-chief, and other senior government officials participated in the event.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior U.S. officials – including the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Ambassador to the United Nations, the Ambassador to Burma, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and senior Department of State

officials for East Asia and human rights – consistently raised ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom in the country with senior government and military leaders. They specifically raised the plight of the mostly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, hardships facing minority religious communities in Kachin and northern Shan States in the midst of ongoing military conflicts, and advocacy on social media of violence against religious minorities on social media.

On November 14, the Vice President stated, “The violence and persecution by military and vigilantes that resulted in driving 700,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh is without excuse” and asked State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi about the country’s progress in holding those accountable who were responsible.

In July at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the USAID Administrator said, “As our State Department and other sources have judged, the Rohingya were victimized by nothing less than ethnic cleansing: extrajudicial killings, rapes, tortures, beatings, arbitrary arrests, displacement, destruction of property – all driven by intolerance and sectarian hatred.”

After his visit to Bangladesh in April, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom stated that the Rohingya situation “is a humanitarian crisis perpetrated by the Burmese security forces, and by vigilantes often acting in concert with security forces The Burmese military and others responsible must be held accountable for these horrific acts.”

Senior officials, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, reiterated during the year the determination of former Secretary of State Tillerson that the military had committed ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. In December the Ambassador at Large said the Kachin and Karen were also being persecuted. He noted that the United States had sanctioned five generals and two military units.

The U.S. government severely curtailed bilateral military-to-military relations, restricted visas for current and former military leaders, imposed additional targeted financial sanctions against military leaders and units involved in the 2017 ethnic cleansing in Rakhine State and human rights abuses in Kachin and Shan States, and pressed for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations. The Department of State published a report documenting atrocities perpetrated against Rohingya since 2016, drawing on over a thousand interviews with refugees in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.

U.S. government officials consistently called for sustainable solutions to the root causes of discrimination and violence in Rakhine State, including a voluntary and transparent path to provision of citizenship, freedom of movement and access to services for IDPs, and unhindered access for humanitarian actors and media in Rakhine and Kachin States. Embassy officials also urged government and interfaith leaders to improve efforts to mitigate religiously motivated violence in Mandalay, Kachin, and elsewhere.

Embassy officials at all levels discussed the importance of addressing the effects of ethnoreligious violence and hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. Embassy officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance in meetings with high-level government officials, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the deputy commander-in-chief, the national security advisor, and the ministers of foreign affairs, religious affairs, home affairs, ethnic affairs, immigration, population, and labor affairs, and social welfare, relief, and resettlement affairs. Embassy officials also met with officials in the president's office, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, parliamentarians, members of civil society, scholars, and representatives of other governments.

A Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration led a delegation in November that engaged government officials, civil society groups, and international organizations on the importance of enacting durable solutions that will allow the Rohingya and other minority populations to live in safety and dignity, with freedom of movement and worship.

Embassy officials traveled to ethnic minority-predominant areas to discuss religious freedom and tolerance with state and local government officials, NGOs, and members of community-based organizations and religious communities. The Ambassador visited Rakhine, Kachin, Shan, Mon, and Karen States, areas where conflict or violence have affected religious minorities in recent years, as well as other areas that had suffered from and were identified as at risk of ethnoreligious conflict. The multiple visits to Rakhine State by the Ambassador and other officials to assess the situation informed the embassy's efforts and strategies in engaging the government and advocating for the rights of all communities in the state.

The embassy continued to call for respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and unity in its interactions with all sectors of society, and in its social media accounts. At high-profile events, embassy representatives spoke out for religious freedom and against intercommunal conflict and hate speech. Embassy representatives,

including the Ambassador, repeatedly met with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations – such as Ma Ba Tha and its successor organization – and NGOs to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance. To advance religious tolerance, the embassy hosted celebrations of Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, and in each case invited members of various faiths to join. The embassy also shared multiple posts on Facebook about religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in the United States.

The Ambassador gave feature interviews to local media and international media in which he discussed the need for accountability for the 2017 ethnic cleansing and improved conditions for the Rohingya and other minority groups. The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns about religiously based tensions and anti-Muslim discrimination, as well as calling for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance.

Public programs at embassy facilities in Rangoon and Mandalay offered a platform for community leaders, media, students, and others to discuss intercommunal tolerance, often featuring individuals from minority ethnic and religious communities. The embassy hosted programs on digital and media literacy as a way to empower participants to reject online hate speech and the spread of rumors and other misinformation. It also sponsored travel to the United States to receive media literacy training in methods of combating disinformation on social media, including combating the spread of hate speech. As in prior years, the embassy worked with and supported numerous faith-based and civil society organizations working on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, 2018, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.