



Hardship, Struggle, and Hope in Burma

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Located at a place where India, China, and Southeast Asia meet, modern Burma, defined by religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, is home to three to four million Christians, mostly from hill people—the Akha, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Lahu, Lisu, and Wa. Native to much of the borderlands between Burma and its neighboring countries, many of them became Christians as American Baptist missionaries evangelized the area between 1828 and 1965.¹ What is historically remarkable is that missionaries created written languages for these once-illiterate races and subsequently translated the Bible into their respective languages, which has, in turn, reinforced their

¹ Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, Board of Publications, 1963), 304–338, 345–350, 367–397, 407–419.

Living in the midst of oppression and suffering, the Christian peoples of Burma have maintained their hope in the promises of God, and have kept faith with their Lord and each other. Hope in these promises has been the key to continued faithfulness to God and the maintenance of their communities, whether in Burma or in their world-wide diaspora.

distinct ethnic identities. It has been said that it was the practice of Christianity that, on the one hand, undercut elements of their traditional lifestyle, but, on the other, has effectively preserved their distance from their far more powerful neighbors.² The role of religious divide in revitalizing ethnic identities of these minorities has been so profound and pervasive that Buddhist nationalists have pathologically accused missionaries of creating the ethnic problem between the Burman and minorities.³ It is true that Christianity has helped minorities to shield themselves from their powerful lowland neighbors seeking the ultimate creation of a homogenous nation.

What is, nevertheless, also true is that Christians have paid a heavy price for practicing a religion different from that of the Burman, who structurally controlled successive governments and adopted a polarizing state policy of Burman privilege and hegemony.⁴ Everyone acquainted enough with Burma knows that minority Christians endured exclusion, restriction, and persecution, because of their separate ethnicity and faith. Burma specialists widely documented why and how ethnic and religious minorities undergo a cycle of repression since independence.⁵ In 2011, the military regime, however, started a limited democratization, marking a new era of considerable liberalization and freedom for the long-oppressed Burmese, including Christians. I returned to Burma in 2017 and witnessed the magnitude of positive changes across the country. People thought they left the dark age of suffering and repression behind, but, with the latest coup in February of 2021, a decade of democracy and freedom evaporated like the morning mist, accordingly altering the dynamics and destroying everything overnight.

² Angelene Naw, *The History of the Karen People of Burma* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2023), 321; Bertil Lintner, *The Kachin: Lords of Burma's Northern Frontier* (Chiang Mai: Asia Film House, 1997), 73–76; Xi Lian, “Fulfilling Prophecies on China’s Ethnic Frontiers in Southeast Asia: Peripheral Peoples’ Encounter with Christianity in the Twentieth Century,” *Church History* 92, no. 1 (2023): 99–121.

³ Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 313.

⁴ Matthew J. Walton, “The ‘Wage of Burman-ness’: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Burma,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1–2.

⁵ Layang Seng Ja, “Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar,” *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 175–179; Richard Cockett, *Blood, Dreams, and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 75–78; Charmaine Craig, “Burma’s Fault Lines,” *Dissent* 61, no. 4 (2014): 93–101.

Three years after the coup, Burma is now a very different place; political violence has left the country devastated, 2.6 million people are displaced from their homes, more than 80,000 homes are destroyed, nearly every part of the country experiences political violence, tens of thousands of people enter our neighboring countries, and millions of children are literarily deprived of education. What is more, 4,526 innocent civilians have been killed and more than 26,113 people arrested as of February 16, 2024, according to a local human rights organization.⁶ Especially appalling is the sheer number of deaths from brutal civil war; within a period of less than three years, fierce fighting between the military and resistance fighters killed 50,000 people.⁷ This unprecedented political crisis decimated economics so much that 18.6 million people (one-third of the population) need humanitarian aid, according to a United Nations report in December of 2023.⁸ Overall, escalating brutality, rising poverty levels, and worsening living conditions devastate families, churches, and societies.

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What must not be left unstated is that Christians are at the forefront of the dogged fight against the military seeking to remain in power at every cost; the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni have played a fundamental role in the course of resisting this new tyranny. For instance, their existing ethnic armed organizations persistently fight the military and give training and weapons to tens of thousands of young resistance fighters from cities, towns, and villages across

⁶ AAPP Report (February 16, 2024). AAPP stands for the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

⁷ Matthew Tostevin, "Far from Ukraine and Gaza, Another War Just Killed 50,000 People," *Newsweek* (New York City), January 31, 2024.

⁸ Marcoluigi Corsi, *Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (December 2023)*, OCHA (December 18, 2023), 1, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-december-2023-enmy>.

the nation.⁹ Driven by determination and dedication to return to democracy and freedom, they steadfastly stand with the general public against the banality of dictatorship. Since most Christians come from these four minority races, they also surely bear the full brunt of extreme violence and widespread displacement, ranging from Thantlang, a romantic Chin town, on the Indian border to Kutkai, a rolling Kachin town, on the Chinese border, and Loikaw, the once-bustling state capital of the Karenni, on the Thai border.

To be more specific, in Chin State alone, at least 120,000 people—about 20 percent of the state population—are displaced and around 56 churches were destroyed as of March 2023, according to Chin Human Rights Organization. CHRO continues, “Since the coup took place, figures collected from CHRO have recorded the deaths of over 400 civilians with the overwhelming majority of those as a result of summary executions.”¹⁰ A humanitarian disaster in Karenni State is even worse than that in Chin State and other parts of Burma; a recent local news outlet reported that more than 500 civilians are killed and forty-six churches were destroyed, adding, “About 350,000 of the 420,000 people who live in Karenni State and an adjacent township in southern Shan State, Pekon, are now internally displaced persons.”¹¹ The kind of violence caused by relentless airstrikes and artilleries in Chin and Karenni areas results in a surge in killing, displacement, and destruction in Kachin and Karen states.

Every single Burmese who died since February 2021 died because of the new rulers, who have never cared about Burma, its citizens, its future, or anything but themselves. Remember Burma was once one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia, but it became one of the poorest nations in Asia owing to successive military regimes. The dire ramifications of this latest crisis shatter the lives and dreams of the Burmese, especially young people, who just wanted to live in a democratic and free country. Christians, like other Burmese, profoundly feel the depths of pain. They, despite this, hope to survive and overcome any uphill challenges before them and surely flourish again after

⁹ Elijah Young, “The Role of Ethnic Minorities in the Resistance Movement,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 17, no. 2 (2023): 169–189.

¹⁰ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Legal Analysis Related to Sanction Designations on Members of Northwestern Command of the State Administrative Council* (March 2023).

¹¹ Brain Wei, “More Than 80 % of the Population of Myanmar’s Karenni State Has Been Displaced by War,” *Irrawaddy* (Chiang Mai), January 17, 2024.

the end of this long nightmare. There is a glimmer of hope. With this radiant hope—a bright light in the darkness—they move forward. In what follows, I present why they are still hopeful in the face of daunting uncertainty, desolation, and suffering.

History matters; historically Burmese Christians have incredible strength and resilience. Aung San (1915–1947), the founder of modern Burma and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, was assassinated five months before independence, and U Nu (1907–1995) became prime minister of the young nation from 1948 to 1958 and from 1960 to 1962. A political leader who loved religion more than politics, he became busy promoting Buddhism; his government partly hosted the Sixth World Buddhist Council, founded clerical courts, a ministry of religion, and a Buddhist university, built new pagodas, and repaired old pagodas, among other things, embodying bygone Burman monarchs. U Nu injected Burma with an unapologetic dose of religious nationalism, with enormous implications. Fred Von Der Mehden, writing in 1961, correctly noted, “Under U Nu, Burma has also tended to work for the propagation of Buddhism through the rebuilding of temples and monasteries, encouragement of international Buddhist exchanges, the use of Buddhism to regenerate criminals, and efforts to proselytize among Burma’s hill peoples.”¹² Seeking solace in religion, he stopped at nothing to make Buddhism the official religion despite the constitution that stated, “The abuse of the church or of religion for political purposes is forbidden.”¹³ Christians strongly, but peacefully, opposed his intention and policy, but without success. Aung San must be rolling in his grave, for he vehemently rejected the idea of such a state religion.¹⁴

When he eventually declared Buddhism the state religion, U Nu ignited another avoidable war with Christian minorities—the Chin and Kachin now started their respective armed uprisings against the state—exacerbating existing political crisis and thereby giving General Ne Win a perfect pretext to seize power. In the name of protecting the union, Ne Win took control of the country in March of 1962 and

¹² Fred Von Der Mehden, “Buddhism and Politics in Burma,” *The Antioch Review* 22, no. 2 (1961): 171.

¹³ Maung Maung, *Burma’s Constitution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 247.

¹⁴ Maung, *Burma’s Constitution*, 96.

arrested everyone, including U Nu, who dared question his authority.¹⁵ In retrospect, U Nu was in part responsible for the first military coup, which led to more than half a century of catastrophic military rule. Ne Win wasted no time in expelling missionaries, including American Baptist missionaries, placing stringent restrictions on church activities, nationalizing all mission schools and hospitals, and banned native church leaders from leaving the country for studies and meetings.¹⁶

This disruption caused deep suffering for native Christians, on the one hand, but it also gave birth to indigenous Christianity, on the other; they turned their suffering into strength. Native Christians knew how to move on and contextualize Christianity without missionaries, as evidenced by the fact that most Chin and Kachin became Christians after their missionaries left.

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¹⁵ David I. Stenberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60.

¹⁶ Hermon G. Tegenfeldt, *Through Deep Waters* (Valley Forge, PA: American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1968), 11.

¹⁷ Herman G. Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth: The Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), 245.

¹⁸ Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 382.

90 percent of the Chin population.¹⁹ It must be noted that Christians represented 3 percent of the national population in the 1960s. With strong missionary zeal, passion, and dedication, native Christians evangelized their own people with remarkable success; today they seemingly constitute 8 percent of the population.²⁰ Looking back, it has been observed that Christians survive and flourish, not because of, but despite everything.

What has to be categorically stated, after all, is that Christianity took deep root on Burmese soil after the forced exit of missionaries in 1966. It is important to note that Christians hardly earned the confidence of the Burmese, primarily because of their deepening ties to the British and Americans. John S. Furnivall, writing in 1948, therefore, rightly argued that the Burmese never fully trusted Christians.²¹ Furthermore, Burmese nationalists, after independence, classically accused Christians of practicing a religion of the West and, for that reason, depicted them as strangers with ties to the West. For instance, Hla Bu, a Burmese Christian scholar, writing in 1960, precisely stated that Christians were regarded “as an alien community.”²² Less than six years later, Western missionaries returned home, however, and Burmese Christians—in beliefs, words, and actions—made Christianity their own religion; it has become a vital manifestation of their distinct ethnic culture and identity. By practicing Christianity without foreign missionaries, the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and more have displayed to Burmese nationalists and the state alike that Christianity is actually their own religion. The single most important difference between the Burman and ethnic minorities, especially the Chin and Kachin, is religion.

Burmese Christians cherished education so much that after Ne Win nationalized mission schools, they invested much of their resources in theological education, with long-term implications for them. Karen Christians, for instance, hungered for education, and

¹⁹ Pum Za Mang, “Buddhist Nationalism and Burmese Christianity,” *Studies in World Christianity* 22, no. 2 (2016): 163.

²⁰ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 555.

²¹ John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 546.

²² Hla Bu, “The Luncheon Address,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 15, no. 2 (1960): 121.

missionaries provided them with education, which, in turn, uplifted the status of the Karen, especially Christians. When underscoring the historical importance of mission education for them, Furnivall accurately observed, “Missionary work has made great progress among the Karens, and among Christian Karens there is a high standard of literacy, and a far higher standard of female literacy than among the Burmese.”²³ It is helpful to recall that whereas the colonialists amassed their fortunes, missionaries spent their assets in educating the native Burmese—the Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Lahu. Furnivall was, thus, right when he stated, “Education in Burma was left almost entirely to private agency; western education to the missionaries, and Burmese education to the monks.”²⁴ Finding a brighter future in mission education, most Burmese leaders, including Buddhists, sent their children to mission schools. Chao Tzang Yawng hwe, the son of Sao Shwe Thaik, the first president of independence Burma, was, for instance, educated at mission schools.²⁵ Khin Kyi, widow of Aung San, the founding father of Burma, likewise, sent her daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, to the Methodist English High School (MEHS) in Rangoon.²⁶ It must be noted that mission schools were the best schools in Burma before they became nationalized. Rena Pederson writes, “Most Burmese elites sent their children to schools operated by churches, such as the Anglican St. John’s Boy’s School or the Roman Catholic St. Paul’s High School, or the Methodist English High School. MEHS was considered the best school in Burma—even dictator Ne Win sent his six children there.”²⁷

The sudden loss of mission schools adversely affected Christians, yet churches moved ahead and sought any other viable ways and means to continue offering education instead of dwelling on the past in nostalgia. Underlining urgency in making education more accessible to students seeking higher education, they devoted more resources to support seminaries to provide liberal arts degree programs,

²³ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 398–399.

²⁴ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 55.

²⁵ Chao Tzang Yawng hwe, *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), back cover.

²⁶ U Kyaw Win, *My Conscience: An Exile’s Memoir of Burma* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 58.

²⁷ Rena Pederson, *The Burma Spring: Aung San Suu Kyi and the New Struggle for the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), 132.

attracting students from all religions, races, and languages. Founded by American missionaries in 1927, Myanmar Institute of Theology is, for instance, one of the most sought-after higher learning centers in Burma. MIT students include the ethnic Akha, Burman, Chin, Chinese, Indians, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and more, and the more than 1,000 students enrolled annually in our liberal arts programs contain Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus. Stressing an important role MIT has played in history of national education, Benedict Rogers, a renowned British journalist, writes, “The Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), which today welcomes people of all faiths and offers social science and liberal arts degrees as well as theology, is one of the most prestigious and respected higher educational institutions in the country.”²⁸

What must not be overlooked meanwhile is that missionaries founded renowned hospitals in some key cities and towns, exposing the Burmese, including hill people, to modern Western medicine. While numerous medical missionaries served in Burma, Gordon S. Seagrave has been the most beloved, respected, and remembered missionary doctor. Known as the “Burma Surgeon,” he spent his entire life serving the Burmese in eastern Burma and wrote a moving memoir before he died in the town of Namkham in 1965.²⁹ Furnivall stated that medical missionaries served in Burma to save the lives of missionaries, adding, “But they have also recognized in western medicine an instrument for extending their influence among the people. To deliver their message they must find some method of attracting listeners.”³⁰ It was sorely painful for Christians when they lost their cherished mission hospitals in the 1960s, but the Chin, Kachin, and Karen Baptists established their own new hospitals and clinics to serve their respective communities. Located next to MIT, the K.B.C. hospital, operated by the Karen Baptists, has, for instance, served patients from all religions, races, and languages in Yangon. The Chin and Kachin Baptists have their own hospitals in Hakha and Myikyina respectively. Overall, exchanging their suffering for strength after the departure of missionaries has proved the remarkable resilience of native Christians.

²⁸ Benedict Rogers, “The Contribution of Christianity to Myanmar’s Social and Political Development,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 68.

²⁹ Gordon S. Seagrave, *Burma Surgeon* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1943).

³⁰ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 357–358.

Moreover, let it be noted that unprecedented solidarity among different races, faiths, and languages makes the Burmese, including Christians, optimistic in the midst of hardship and suffering. After more than half a century of being systematically and roundly despoiled, impoverished, oppressed, and enslaved, the Burmese, without regard to ethnicity, religion, and language, are exceptionally united in resisting the ruling generals and fighting for a better future.³¹

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Resistance by youths for democracy and freedom has become a symbol of valor and self-sacrifice. Every single day since 2022, they sacrifice their lives, their limbs, and their future, absolutely demonstrating the fact that democracy is something worth fighting and dying for if necessary. This crisis allows the majority Buddhist Burman, especially youths, to better understand the long plight of ethnic and religious minorities, since they now experience the same atrocities, a sea change redemptive and indispensable to lasting peace. In all, youths from all nationalities, religions, and languages, united by the will, determination, and aspiration for a future free from fear and tyranny, are fighting together and dying together for the soul and future destiny of the country they cherish to the fullest. The presence of such solidarity across ethnic and religious lines is surely vital to any viable possibility of enduring peace, prosperity, and freedom in the future.

³¹ Angela Lu Fulton, "Amid Myanmar's Civil War, Unity Emerges," *Christianity Today*, September 20, 2022.

When we discuss the intriguing accounts of the Burmese audaciously resisting tyranny for freedom and democracy, we need to mention the important role of the diasporic Burmese joining the resistance movement, underscoring strong ties between the Burmese at home and the oversea Burmese. Driven by the horrors of previous military rule (1962–2011), millions of the Burmese left their country and now live in Thailand, Malaysia, China, Singapore, India, and more. In 2012, the number of oversea Burmese were estimated to be about 3 million.³² Whereas most of the diaspora Burmese reside in Asian countries, more than 300,000 of them resettled in the United States, with more than half of them the Chin and the Karen.³³ Kachin church leaders told me the number of the Kachin Americans are about 10,000, and while virtually all the Chin and Kachin Americans are Christians, Christians represent two-third of the Karen Americans. When most Burmese Americans have sent funds and technology (drones) to internally displaced people and resistance fighters, some of them return home and join the fight. To be sure, the diaspora Burmese in other Western countries and Asian nations also actively support this continuing national struggle. There are two key influencing factors compelling them to back the ongoing resistance movement; the sheer magnitude of extreme brutality against absolutely innocent civilians, including small children, has angered them and suffering after suffering they once painfully endured under military rule still remains fresh in their memories.³⁴

With the resolve, the courage, and the spirit to withstand and eventually overcome all arduous challenges to thrive again in the future, Christians, together with other Burmese, transcend ethnic and religious boundaries by caring for one another, helping each other, and sharing their modest resources. It is difficult to overstate their heart, their strength, and their resilience. Taken together, if history is any indication, contemporary Christians would overcome the current national crisis and embody resilience, like their bygone generations,

³² Renaud Egreteau, "Burma in Diaspora: A Preliminary Research Note on the Politics of Burmese Diasporic Communities in Asia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012), 116.

³³ Pum Za Mang, "Chin Diaspora Christianity in the United States," *Theology Today* 80, no. 2 (2023), 181; Naw, *The History of the Karen People of Burma*, 317, 321.

³⁴ The United States has provided humanitarian aids to those displaced from their homes and non-lethal assistance to the numerous opposition groups.

who survived all daunting challenges and even turned their suffering into a source of vitality during and after the first coup in 1962. It must be added that the emerging existence of historically unparalleled unity across ethnic and religious lines will possibly bolster hope for future peace, prosperity, and freedom in the country. ⊕

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