

## Background

On 1 February 2021 Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized control of the government in a coup, declaring a nationwide state of emergency and martial law over 64 out of 330 townships. The coup abruptly ended Myanmar's fragile political reform, reversing a decade-long transition towards civilian governance. Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader, was arrested and sentenced to 33 years in prison, signalling a return to authoritarian military rule. The Tatmadaw's return has been accompanied by escalating violence and severe restrictions on democratic freedoms, including the suppression of civil society, media and dissenting voices. The situation for ethnic and religious minorities has worsened significantly, with the military conducting brutal campaigns of airstrikes and ground offensives targeting ethnic minority regions, particularly Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Rakhine states.

The current crisis has resulted in significant humanitarian challenges, including mass displacement, widespread repression, and severe human rights abuses, particularly affecting Myanmar's ethnic and religious minorities. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), over 31,000 people have been arrested in the five years since the coup, with over 14,000 verified and a further 7,000 unverified as still detained today.<sup>1</sup>

According to the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s Myanmar's Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026, an estimated 16.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance this year, with food among the top priorities.<sup>2</sup> The situation remains dire, with internet shutdowns affecting 13 out of Myanmar's 14 states.<sup>3</sup>

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) remains highly restricted, with arbitrary detention, discriminatory treatment against religious minorities in detention facilities, and the conversion of churches into military camps further highlighting the junta's discriminatory practices. In May 2024 the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that at least 32 religious leaders including monks, nuns, pastors, and imams had been killed throughout the country since the coup.

Religious minorities, especially Christian and Muslim communities, have grown more vulnerable following the April 2025 earthquake. For many years since the 1990s, discriminatory legal and extra-legal measures have prevented these groups from building or properly maintaining their places of worship, causing many religious

buildings to be structurally unsafe before the earthquake. The earthquake resulted in avoidable deaths particularly among the Muslim community as it struck some mosques during Friday prayers. These deaths could have been avoided if appropriate maintenance or upgrades had been permitted. Though military officials' initial post-disaster assessments omitted the destruction of mosques, the earthquake caused significant damage to mosques, churches, and Buddhist religious structures. The military also continues to carry out airstrikes in regions populated by ethnic and religious minorities which have been impacted by the earthquake, asserting that they are aiming at armed resistance. This action only heightens the risks to civilian communities.

The growing territorial influence of the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State has raised new concerns for the Rohingya community. The AA's seizure of Rohingya properties, evictions based on unproven assertions of 'terrorist links',<sup>4</sup> and ban on the use of the term 'Rohingya'<sup>5</sup> reflect troubling patterns of ethnic targeting and systematic displacement.

### ***December 2025-January 2026 illegitimate elections***

From December 2025 to January 2026 Myanmar held illegitimate elections against the backdrop of the introduction and amendment of a number of laws aimed at suppressing civic space. On 28 July the junta introduced the 'Military Secrets Preservation and Protection Law', which authorises life imprisonment or the death penalty for using 'military secrets' in the service of other organisation – a vaguely defined offence that provides expansive grounds to criminalise dissent. The following day it enacted the 'Law on the Prevention of Disruption and Sabotage of Multi-Party Democratic General Elections', again allowing for punishments up to the death penalty for disrupting or opposing the elections.

On 30 July a new Cybersecurity Law came into force, penalising the use of VPNs, granting the authorities sweeping powers to access user data, and even applying to Burmese nationals abroad. Finally, on 1 August, the junta re-suspended three key provisions (Articles 5, 7 and 8) of the 2017 'Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens', restoring powers for warrantless raids, detention for over 24 hours without court approval, and interception of private communications.

Collectively, the measures have established a legal framework for widespread surveillance and collective punishment, making online activities and even private communications grounds for immediate arrests and

1 Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), accessed 20 August 2026 <https://aappb.org/>

2 Humanitarian Action, Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026, 2 December 2025 <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1505/document/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026>

3 #KeepItON, 'Shrinking democracy, growing violence: Internet shutdowns in 2023', May 2024 <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf>

4 Rohingya Vision, 'AA Forcibly Evicts Rohingya from in Buthidaung', 12 February 2025 <https://rohingyavision.com/aa-forcibly-evicts-rohingya-from-in-buthidaung/>

5 Rohingya Khobor, 'Arakan Army (AA) Bans Rohingya Identity, Threatens Severe Punishment', 3 March 2025 <https://rohingyakhobor.com/arakan-army-aa-bans-rohingya-identity-threatens-severe-punishment/>

prosecution, and essentially granting the military the power to stifle criticism of the elections and their legitimacy.

The military also increased its campaign against civilians during the election period. In January the OHCHR reported that it had verified the killing of 170 civilians in over 400 military airstrikes during the period, while other sources place the death toll higher still.<sup>6</sup>

The Myanmar-focused advocacy organisation Progressive Voice documented at least 556 human rights violations during the first phase of the election, including airstrikes that resulted in the deaths of at least 198 civilians and injuries to 275 others. In one such attack on 5 December, a junta airstrike on civilians watching a football match in Ma Ra Kan Village in the Sagaing Region's Tabayin Township killed 18 people including a child.

In the second phase of the election period, ALTSEAN-Burma documented 102 airstrikes across 112 townships nationwide, including 60 bombs dropped across just two townships in the Sagaing Region in a single day alone. On 22 January the junta bombed a funeral in Kaung Jar Village, Bhamo Township, Kachin State, killing 22 people and injuring 28 others, mere hours after another military airstrike on a crowd preparing for a wedding in Tat Kone Village in the Magwe Region had killed at least five people including a child.

The election was won, as expected, by the military-controlled Union Solidarity and Development Party, and paved the way for Myanmar's military ruler, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, to step down as army chief and assume the presidency in April 2026.

## Legal framework

Myanmar's legal framework provides a culture of impunity for the military's human rights abuses while systematically discriminating against ethnic and religious minorities. The 2008 constitution grants Buddhism a 'special status' and fails to effectively prevent and protect the policies and practices that discriminate against religious minorities under the guise of protecting Buddhism. The 1982 Citizenship Law further compounds this discrimination by categorising citizenship based on ethnic lineage, leading to the gradual exclusion of Rohingya and other minorities who are not recognised as a part of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities, through restrictive verification processes favouring certain ethnicities.

Moreover, a set of restrictive laws, passed in 2015 under the guise of 'protecting race and religion', impose strict restrictions on religious conversions and interfaith marriages, further reinforcing systemic discrimination, particularly against women and religious or ethnic minorities. Additionally, Myanmar's military regime is exploiting vague 'blasphemy' provisions in the country's penal code to target and prosecute individuals, particularly from minority religious groups, under accusations of 'insulting' Buddhism. Such practice creates an atmosphere of fear, discrimination, and restricted freedoms of expression and religion or belief.

Article 28 of the 2011 by-laws on Military Conscription, enacted by Order No. 27/2011 of the Ministry of Defence, outlines exemptions depending on religious status under the 2010 People's Military Service Law and the 2011 by-laws: 'Members of the Sangha (Buddhist monks and novices), members of Christian clergy (priests), and members of Hindu clergy (Brahmins and ascetics) shall be exempted from military service.'

Notably missing from this list are Muslim religious leaders, which effectively allows the military to conscript them. The law and by-laws establish an explicit form of religious discrimination by excluding any process for appeal, religious registration, or discretionary review. This exclusion is considered de jure discrimination since it explicitly denies Muslim religious leaders the same exemptions given to their counterparts in other religions.

## Targeting of Christians and churches

Religious intolerance in Myanmar is closely linked to the rise of militant Buddhist nationalism, a movement that primarily targets Muslims but has also extended its reach to Christians and other non-Buddhists, especially following the military coup.<sup>7</sup> Christian communities in Myanmar, particularly in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni states, have faced severe persecution following the coup, with a marked increase in airstrikes and military offensives against these regions. Civilian homes, churches, and community buildings have been targeted, with the UN reporting a 141% increase in airstrikes against civilian locations and a 380% rise in the destruction of structures.<sup>8</sup> Churches have been bombed, pastors murdered, and entire villages set ablaze. In 2023 the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) reported that the military regime has destroyed over 132 religious buildings, including numerous churches, and established military bases on at least 110 religious properties across the country.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Myanmar Witness recorded at least 312 separate airstrike incidents targeting religious buildings across the

6 OHCHR, 'Myanmar: Turk says military controlled ballot exacerbates violence and social division', 30 January 2026 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/myanmar-turk-says-military-controlled-ballot-exacerbates-violence-and-social>

7 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 'Statement by Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, and Ms. Mò Bleeker, Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, on the escalation of violence in Myanmar', 29 July 2024 <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/statement-on-the-escalation-of-violence-in-myanmar/>

8 OHCHR, 'Myanmar: High Commissioner details severe violations amid shocking violence' 6 March 2023 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/03/myanmar-high-commissioner-details-severe-violations-amid-shocking>

9 International Commission of Jurists, 'Myanmar: ICJ publishes an update to its October 2022 report on the violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief since coup d'état in Myanmar', 29 June 2023 <https://www.icj.org/resource/myanmar-icj-publishes-an-update-to-its-october-2022-report-on-the-violations-of-the-right-to-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-since-coup-detat-in-myanmar/>

country in 2024 and 2025.<sup>10</sup> In some states and regions, religious buildings have been converted into military camps used for interrogation and detention. According to a recent report by the Burma Research Institute (BRI), the military destroyed or damaged at least 343 Christian churches and religious buildings between the February 2021 coup and December 2025. During the same period, at least 149 Christians were killed due to targeted military violence.<sup>11</sup>

The State Administration Council (SAC)'s 2026 ground re-occupation offensives in Chin State and Sagaing Region have forced high-level clergy into physical displacement. In June 2026 church officials confirmed that five Catholic bishops from the Pekhon, Loikaw, Bhamo, Mindat and Lashio dioceses were forced to abandon their cathedrals and minister to internally displaced persons (IDPs) from remote conflict zones.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, non-state armed groups and junta affiliated militias have exploited the ongoing breakdown of law and order to systematically target Christian leadership and religious infrastructure across minority ethnic areas. For instance, in mid-August 2026 authorities in the autonomous Wa Region (UWSA) issued directives ordering the forcible closure of over 40 Christian churches across Panghkam, Mongpauk and Narwee districts,<sup>13</sup> echoing pre-coup mass church destruction and detention of clergy in Wa State.<sup>14</sup>

### Denial of religious practices in detention

In June 2024 the OHCHR reported that it had documented the arrest of 147 religious figures across Myanmar, including 125 monks and nine pastors, with 124 remaining in detention, primarily for participating in anti-coup protests.<sup>15</sup> In addition, BRI documented that at least 218 Christians were imprisoned between 2022 and December 2025 as part of the military regime's systematic targeting of non-Buddhist and anti-junta communities.<sup>16</sup> Detainees, including religious leaders, have been denied the right to practice their faith, exemplified by a Rohingya Muslim woman forced to sleep next to a toilet,<sup>17</sup> despite her religious need for a clean environment to pray in every day, while other Muslim detainees have been punished for fasting during Ramadan.<sup>18</sup>

Christian clergy are reportedly often denied group prayers or spiritual observances, while Buddhist monks are forced to disrobe and wear prison uniforms, violating their religious identity. In addition, monks are also prevented from undertaking fundamental practices, such as shaving their heads, which holds significant religious meaning. This denial of religious observances constitutes a form of psychological torture and reflects the junta's broader strategy to diminish religious identity among detainees.

### Violence against Muslims

The Tatmadaw's anti-Muslim stance, which predates the coup, has continued with sporadic violence, including the closure of mosques, destruction of property and increased targeted arrests. Persecution is exacerbated by an extremist nationalist ideology, which has fuelled violence and systemic discrimination against Muslims throughout the country. Persecution of Muslim communities by both state and non-state armed actors has expanded. In August 2025 junta authorities confiscated a 200-year-old Muslim cemetery in Dawei township, Thanintharyi Region, and bulldozed historic graves.<sup>19</sup> Concurrently, in August 2025 returning junta forces in Nawnghkio, Shan State, sealed a mosque and Hindu temple, marking the buildings with red crosses.<sup>20</sup> However, the most severe abuses have been directed at the Rohingya community.

### The Rohingya crisis

The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group, faced a brutal military clearance operation in 2017, which was widely recognized as genocide. Following the crackdown in 2017 over 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to Bangladesh amid mass killings, widespread sexual violence and village burnings. Since the coup, their situation has further deteriorated.

In November 2023 the breakdown of a ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine Armed Resistance Group, worsened pre-existing problems such as severe movement restrictions, mass detentions and the denial of essential services including food, education

10 Centre for Information Resilience, 'Myanmar's protected religious sites devastated by airstrikes', 2 April 2026 <https://www.info-res.org/myanmar-witness/articles/myanmars-protected-religious-sites-devastated-by-airstrikes/>

11 Burma Research Institute, 'Burma Research Institute Releases New Report Documenting Severe Violations of Religious Freedom Against Christians in Burma', 1 February 2026 <https://burmari.org/2026/02/01/burma-research-institute-releases-new-report-documenting-severe-violations-of-religious-freedom-against-christians-in-burma/>

12 Agenzia Fides, 'Five bishops forced to leave the cathedral. Bishop of Pekhon: "People, tired and traumatized by the violence, pray with tears in their eyes"', 5 June 2026 <https://rb.gy/cej19>

13 Burma News International, 'Christian Churches Temporarily Closed in Myanmar's Wa Region Over Extremist Cult Concerns', 17 August 2026 <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/christian-churches-temporarily-closed-myanmars-wa-region-over-extremist-cult-concerns>

14 CSW, 'United Wa State Army Continues Crackdown on Christians', 18 October 2018 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/10/18/press/4124/article.htm>

15 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar', 18 June 2024 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/084/78/pdf/g2408478.pdf>

16 Op. cit. fn 11

17 International Commission of Jurists, 'Unseen and Unheard: Violations of the Human Rights of Women Deprived of Liberty in Myanmar Briefing Paper', June 2024 [https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Briefing-Paper\\_Violations-of-the-Human-Rights-of-Women-Deprived-of-Liberty-in-Myanmar-1.pdf](https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Briefing-Paper_Violations-of-the-Human-Rights-of-Women-Deprived-of-Liberty-in-Myanmar-1.pdf)

18 Myanmar Now, 'Jailed Myanmar Now reporter put in solitary confinement after starting fast for Ramadan', 6 May 2021 <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/jailed-myanmar-now-reporter-put-in-solitary-confinement-after-starting-fast-for-ramadan/>

19 CSW interview with Myanmar FoRB Network, September 2025

20 Shan News, 'The Naung Cho city center mosque and the Nepali Gorkha Dharmasala have been sealed by the military council, and the preacher has reportedly been arrested.' 11 August 2025 (Burmese) <https://burmese.shannews.org/archives/49465>

and healthcare, with increased violence, while adding new layers of suffering, including forced recruitment of Rohingya men and boys,<sup>21</sup> often with the promise of citizenship, and heightened hate speech. In May 2026 ward administrators accompanied by nationalist Ma Ba Tha monks raided a building in Dawbon township, Yangon Region, arresting 40 displaced Rohingya students and 10 teachers for illegal entry.<sup>22</sup>

The humanitarian crisis has spiralled, with over 327,000 Rohingya newly displaced since the conflict's resurgence in 2023.<sup>23</sup> As of 2026 the UN OCHA estimates that over 3.6 million people are internally displaced nationwide, while over 600,000 civilians in Rakhine State face critical food insecurity due to the military junta's ongoing cross-border aid blockage and intensifying armed conflict.<sup>24</sup> The regime has also restricted aid and movement in Rakhine State.

### Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

Following a pattern similar to the 2017 atrocities against the Rohingya, the military has systematically weaponised rape and sexual violence as tools of collective punishment. These abuses are prevalent in both conflict zones and detention facilities. Gender-based violence (GBV) in detention further complicates the relationship between freedom of religion and torture. Women and LGBTQ+ people are more vulnerable to abuse, including sexual violence committed by prison personnel. Women from religious and ethnic minorities are often made to undertake forced labour under threats of sexual assault. Women prisoners, for instance, are reportedly forced into humiliating work, with allegations of sexual harassment and violence, therefore reflecting the systematic impunity that obstructs redress channels. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) observed a disturbing pattern of torture and sexual assault in detention facilities in Rakhine State in particular.<sup>25</sup>

### Ongoing international accountability mechanisms

As Myanmar continues to face severe FoRB violations amid the ongoing military coup, various international accountability mechanisms have emerged. The International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating allegations of forced deportation and persecution from the 2016-2017 military operations against the Rohingya, utilising its jurisdiction through Bangladesh, despite Myanmar not being party to the Rome Statute.

In November 2024 the ICC prosecutor applied for a warrant to arrest Min Aung Hlaing for the crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution of the Rohingya, committed in Myanmar, and in part in Bangladesh between 25 August 2017 and 31 December 2017. However, over 18 months since the application was filed, the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber has yet to make a determination on whether to issue one.

Concurrently, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is examining a case filed by the Gambia alleging genocide against the Rohingya, with provisional measures already in place to prevent further atrocities. In February 2025 an Argentine court issued historic arrest warrants for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing of the military junta and 24 other senior military officials for their participation in the genocide against the Rohingya.<sup>26</sup>

In January 2026 a group of survivors of war crimes and crimes against humanity, led by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) and supported by the Myanmar Accountability Project (MAP), presented a landmark criminal complaint to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Dili, Timor-Leste, seeking to pursue accountability under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows state authorities to take action regardless of where offences took place, or the nationality of the victims and perpetrators.

### Recommendations

#### *To the government of the United States:*

- The State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should maintain Myanmar as a Country of Particular Concern in regard to FoRB.
- The State Department should consider designating the Arakan Army (AA) as an Entity of Particular Concern in regard to FoRB, with careful consideration of the UN Secretary-General's encouragement of engagement with the AA, especially in relation to humanitarian situation in Rakhine State and potential dialogue with the Bangladeshi government on the dignified repatriation and resettlement of Rohingya refugees in the future.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and USCIRF commissioners should request an invitation to visit Myanmar with unhindered access to all parts of the country, ensuring direct observation and engagement

21 Op. cit. fn 15

22 Democratic Voice of Burma, 'In Dop, about 50 Rohingya who fled the war were arrested by the administration and Mabatha monks and sent to the police station', 3 May 2026 (Burmese) <https://burmese.dvb.no/post/680026>

23 ReliefWeb, 'Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 40', 16 August 2024 <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-40-16-august-2024>

24 ReliefWeb, 'Myanmar Crisis Situation Analysis (Period: 25/05/26 - 31/05/26)', 9 June 2026 <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-crisis-situation-analysis-period-250526-310526>

25 Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, Statement at the 57th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council, 9 September 2024 <https://iimm.un.org/en/statement-57th-regular-session-human-rights-council>

26 Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, 'Argentina court issues international arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlaing – A historic step towards justice for Rohingya genocide', 14 February 2025 <https://brouk.org.uk/argentina-court-issues-international-arrest-warrant-for-min-aung-hlaing-a-historic-step-towards-justice-for-rohingya-genocide-2/>

with impacted communities, civil society organisations and religious actors, especially in conflict-affected areas.

- Deny US travel visas to individuals responsible for serious FoRB violations, starting with President Min Aung Hlaing and other senior military officials named in the arrest warrant issued by Argentina in February 2025.
- The US Embassy in Rangoon should engage with civil society organisations documenting FoRB violations in prisons and detention facilities and areas controlled by ethnic resistance armed groups and the National Unity Government (NUG) to inform the State Department's annual report on Myanmar. The embassy should also engage regularly with displaced religious minorities, especially the Rohingya and other affected groups in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to identify trends and patterns of identity-based transnational repression and hate speech.

#### **To the United Nations and Member States:**

- Urge the OHCHR, and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures, to include a robust analysis of the situation of FoRB in their reporting on Myanmar, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by minority ethnic and religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Ensure the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and other relevant mechanisms are fully resourced and equipped to fulfil their mandates.
- Urge Member States to strengthen their cooperation with the ICC and ICJ, and explore universal jurisdiction and other accountability mechanisms to hold Myanmar's military accountable for crimes against humanity, including religious persecution.
- Call for a global arms embargo and continue to impose robust, targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military and military-owned enterprises.
- Take a coordinated approach with other UN member states, agencies, international institutions including the EU, and Special Envoys to ensure that in all dialogues and exchanges human rights are raised.
- Increase international pressure on the Myanmar military to remove blocks to humanitarian access in the ethnic states and areas affected by the earthquakes and increase cross-border humanitarian aid to those in most need in the ethnic conflict areas.
- Urge the Indian government to allow humanitarian actors to deliver aid along the Myanmar/Indian border,

including to the Myanmar refugees in makeshift camps along the Indian border.

- Support efforts to strengthen and better resource the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to accelerate applications for Myanmar nationals in countries where they are at risk of deportation to Myanmar.
- Support initiatives by civil society organisations and legal experts seeking to analyse evidence indicating crimes against humanity.

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free to believe**