

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing, 2-8-2023 Written Testimony by Kyaw Zeyar Win

Thank you, Chair Turkel and Vice-Chair Cooper, as well as the other commissioners, for the opportunity to speak at this important hearing. I am grateful to join my distinguished fellow panelists in this hearing.

I am Burmese, and I am a Rohingya Muslim. I have been advocating for democracy and human rights in Burma for more than 15 years and have conducted extensive research on religious and communal conflict. When I lived in Burma, I experienced the challenges of religiously based segregation, discrimination, and violence firsthand. I left my country in July 2017, one month before the military launched its brutal and indiscriminate operation against the Rohingya community that killed over 10,000 Rohingyas, devastated 400 villages, and forced as many as 800,000 Rohingya to take refuge in Bangladesh.¹ Although I'm now safe in the U.S., several members of my family remain in Burma and in Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camps. I currently work as a Burma Technical Specialist at the International Republican Institute (IRI), which promotes democratic institutions and values around the world.

At today's hearing, I would like to highlight THREE ways Burma's military coup in February 2021 has affected religious freedom.

First, the Burmese junta has politicized and weaponized religion. Since the coup, the junta has portrayed itself as the savior of Theravada Buddhism and a promoter of the Burmese race, culture, and traditions. The military and their political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party—or USDP—justify the coup as necessary to defend Buddhism. Moreover, the military has *securitized* the pro-democracy movement as an existential threat to Burma's national identity, namely Burmese culture and traditions that the military ostensibly protects. The junta allows online and printed media to increasingly disseminate hate speech towards Rohingyas, other Muslims, and Christians, in an effort to conflate religious “others” with the pro-democracy movement. This is part of a strategy to portray the pro-democracy movement as foreign-sponsored, and therefore an existential threat to the nation. This is more destructive than the outright restrictions on the rights and beliefs of religious minorities, as even though the military's use of Buddhism as a political tool is not a new phenomenon, this strategy has allowed Burma's junta to consolidate its inner circle, build public support, tarnish pro-democracy activists as national traitors, and legitimize their brutal campaign against civilians.

Second, the junta has allied itself with religious extremists and sought their support as leaders seek to defend Buddhist supremacy in Burma through whatever means necessary. The military generals and their allied USDP patronize and fund a Buddhist supremacist organization called the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, better known as the *Ma Ba Tha*.² Recently, the junta granted honorable awards to ultranationalist Buddhist monk ‘Wirathu,’ notoriously known as the “Buddhist bin Laden.”³ In addition, the junta has equipped and trained ultranationalist pro-junta

¹ Reuters. (2022, August 6). New evidence shows how Myanmar's military planned the Rohingya purge. VOA. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/new-evidence-shows-how-myanmar-s-military-planned-the-rohingya-purge/6688622.html>

² The Irrawaddy. (2022, December 28). *Leader of Myanmar military's proxy party visits Nationalist Monk for advice*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/leader-of-myanmar-militarys-proxy-party-visits-nationalist-monk-for-advice.html>

³ AFP. (2023, January 3). *'Buddhist bin Laden' monk feted by Myanmar Junta chief*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com>. Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2474469/buddhist-bin-laden-monk-feted-by-myanmar-junta-chief>

militias to counter local pro-democracy resistance forces.⁴ In order to successfully co-opt religion, military rulers have courted Buddhist chauvinists that threaten religious minorities.

Third, and finally, the junta's violence has deliberately targeted religious minorities. While the junta kills its opponents indiscriminately, they also deliberately target religious minorities and their houses of worship in ethnic minority areas. According to Radio Free Asia (Burmese), military forces destroyed at least 163 religious buildings across Burma in the last two years since the coup.⁵ According to local records from Muslim communities, at least 85 Muslims, including three maulvis/imams, were killed for their pro-democracy work since the coup. Ten were detained and beaten to death during interrogation or imprisonment. Locals perceive these incidents as an intentional attempt by the junta to oppress religious minorities and discourage support for local resistance movements.

So, how should we address this issue? I believe there are THREE particular steps that the U.S. and its partners should take:

1. **Recognize the unique role of religion in Burma and develop *de-securitization* policies to shape the discourse.** Religion is a private and individual matter in Western democratic societies, but in Burma, religion profoundly links with local cultural norms and politics. Many people in Burma have internalized the successive regimes' *securitized* anti-minority discourses; therefore, they perceive notions of inclusion or religious freedom as part of an Islamist or foreign agenda against Buddhism. As such, the U.S. and its policymakers should utilize policies and tools to address this particular context and to de-securitize the existential threat discourse while promoting integration and peaceful co-existence among Burma's diverse communities. The U.S. government should also empower progressive voices among youth and faith actors to engage in a battle of ideas against the entrenched inflammatory rhetoric about non-Buddhist communities. For instance, the U.S. government can increase public awareness on the junta's discriminatory religious policies, the monks' anti-minority ultranationalist tirades, and social responsibility.
2. **Invest in youth to foster inclusive citizenship that promotes civic nationalism rather than ethnocentrism.** Today, youth are drivers of change. Many young people in Burma explicitly criticize the famous monks for their support of the junta. This progressive attitude is a new development in Burmese society, and a driving force for the success of Burma's Spring Revolution since the 2021 coup. The U.S. should support this development by providing space for youth empowerment and effective leadership, strengthening youth advocacy groups, and helping them build resilience to sustain their efforts.
3. **Increase support to restore democracy and religious freedom in Burma.** As long as Burma is a fragile and undemocratic state, it cannot function well. Its citizens will be highly vulnerable to attacks on their fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of religion. The U.S. government should support documentation of the regime's religious suppression, expose these violations and continue to exert pressure on the Burmese junta to hold it accountable for their human rights abuses. The U.S. should work closely with regional allies and partners like Malaysia and Indonesia, who have spoken out about Burma's religious

⁴ Poppy McPherson & Thu Thu Aung. (2022, December 8). Monk militia: The Buddhist clergy backing Myanmar's junta. Reuters. Retrieved January 16, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/monk-militia-buddhist-clergy-backing-myanmars-junta-2022-12-08/>

⁵ 163 religious buildings were destroyed in almost two years: By RFA Burmese. Facebook. (n.d.). Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3394995077402012>

persecution in the past and since the coup. Additionally, the U.S Government should continue funding the pro-democracy movement and those working to bring a more inclusive, responsive democratic government to Burma. Leaders at the highest levels in Congress and the Administration should, simultaneously, focus on Burma and engage allies in the West and the region to put collective pressure on the junta to restore civilian rule through an all-inclusive political framework.

Thank you very much! I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing and share my testimony and recommendations. I would be happy to answer any questions that you have.