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# The Christianity of the Chin: Persecution of Myanmar's Forgotten People

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The Christianity of the Chin: Persecution of Myanmar's Forgotten People

By

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REL 432 World Mission Area Studies

Prof. Jenny Collins

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## **I. Introduction**

Chin State, located in the northwest corner of the southeastern Asian country Myanmar, is home to the cluster of 50 ethnic groups known as the Chin. The Chin and several other minority groups are primarily Christian, unlike the majority of Myanmar, which is almost entirely Buddhist. In fact, nearly 89% of the population identifies as Buddhist (Rogers 61). As a minority in both ethnic and religious aspects in Myanmar, the Chin have suffered persecution and human rights violations at the hands of the military's regime, especially in recent history due to the 2021 coup. An understanding of Chin Christianity is vital to understanding their cultural values and the effect that this recent coup has had on them.

## **II. Global Partner**

This paper has been written in partnership with the Spencer Centre for Global Engagement at Taylor University. The Spencer Centre promotes global engagement among the students at Taylor University. Future students will benefit from this report in two ways. First, there is the possibility of study abroad trips in Myanmar in the future, in which case students will need to know about the history and culture of the country. More pertinently, there are a number of Chin students currently attending Taylor as well as a large Chin population in Indianapolis, which is only an hour away from Taylor. This paper could serve as helpful context to the situation of these people so that those at Taylor can better love their Chin neighbors.

## **III. Relevant History of Myanmar**

Myanmar was a British colony from 1824 to 1948. It then had a parliamentary government from 1948 to 1962, when the military took over the country with a coup (CountryWatch, "Country Detail"). During the period of colonization, the British fought a war with the Chin people, then forced them to sign the Chin Hill Regulation Act in 1896 (Sakhong

130). In this act, the British agreed “to govern the Chin separately from Burma proper,” which allowed them some freedom. However, ever since the beginning of military rule in 1962, the military has brutalized ethnic minority groups like the Chin and taken away the freedom that they had under the old British act (Alexander). The people of Myanmar have protested the military’s rule many times, including in 1988, when protesting led to massacres of civilians (CountryWatch, “Political Conditions”). A year later, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), or the military’s government, changed the name of the country from Burma to the Union of Myanmar, which is why both names are used. Although this change was made by the military without the consent of the people, the use of “Myanmar” has become increasingly common and the country’s democratically elected president Aung San Suu Kyi has stated that it does not matter which name is used (BBC). In 1990, SLORC allowed an election to take place, but upon the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) candidate Aung San Suu Kyi’s landslide victory, they declared the election invalid and placed Suu Kyi under house arrest for several years (CountryWatch, “History”). This once again led to protests, unrest, deaths, and human rights violations, including forced labor, rape, executions, and torture committed by SLORC.

Within the past decade, it appeared that SLORC, which has been renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), was once again loosening up and allowing more democracy. In 2015, the country held an election, and officials of the NLD, including Aung San Suu Kyi, were able to take office. However, when the NLD won a majority of government seats again in 2020, the military initiated another coup and rounded up hundreds of NLD officials in early 2021, including Suu Kyi (Human Rights Watch). Instead, Min Aung Hlaing, the military commander-in-chief, has taken control of the country (BBC). In response, the country has once again erupted into protests and unrest, with the National Unity Government (NUG) forming in

opposition to the military. During the unrest in 2021, the military killed at least 1,200 protestors and arrested another 8,000 (Human Rights Watch). A UN report about the coup details “numerous atrocities by the military, including the bombardment of populated areas with airstrikes and heavy weapons, and a series of mass killings of civilians. It cites cases where civilians have been shot in the head, burned to death, arbitrarily arrested, tortured, or used as human shields” (Ratcliffe). In particular, women are in danger of torture and sexual violence at the hands of the regime (“Myanmar”). Due to the conflict in Myanmar, more than a quarter of its population lives in poverty despite an abundance of natural resources (Sollom 2).

#### **IV. Background of the Chin (Location, Language, Religion, and Cultural Values)**

The Chin people are located primarily in the northwest of Myanmar in what is aptly known as Chin State. The word “Chin” comes from “Chinlung,” which is the name of the cave from which the Chin people emerged in their origin myth (Sakhong 2). Around 500,000 Chin people from more than 50 different subgroups live in Chin State (Human Rights Watch). The total population of Myanmar is about 55 million, which makes the Chin people about 1% of the population (Mandryk). These groups speak at least 19 distinct languages and more than 40 dialects (Joshua Project, “Acho Chin”). The literacy rate throughout Myanmar is 89% (Mandryk). Although the Chin people are located primarily in Myanmar, the historical area in which they have lived includes Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar and was split into three parts by Britain during colonialism (Ling, “Religious Persecutions” 14).

Unlike the majority of the population of Myanmar, the Chin are largely Christian. Some estimates place the number at around 90% (Ling, “Religious Persecution” 11). According to the Joshua Project, nearly all of the subgroups of the Chin are “partially reached” (greater than 2% evangelical) or “significantly reached” (greater than 10% evangelical), although a few groups

practice traditional animism (Joshua Project, “Myanmar”). After the war with the English in the 1800s, the Chin turned to Christianity from their ethnic religions due to facing “profound social and religious crises” that primed them to accept the message of Christianity (Sakhong 131). This had a major impact on Chin culture, to the point that Benedict Rogers writes that Chin culture is “inseparably intertwined” with Christianity (61). Thus, it is impossible to discuss the cultural values of the Chin without also discussing their religion.

Before the Chin became a primarily Christian group, their cultural values included collectivism, hierarchy, and exclusivism. When practicing their traditional religion, it was very important to the Chin that religious ceremonies were “a means to bind the community or congregation together” and not just an individual’s communion with the divine (Sakhong 22). In an individualistic culture, the act of worship may be seen as a personal time to connect with God, but traditional Chin culture emphasized that their religious practices were “not just a communion between God and men, but also between men: the chief, who offered the prayer, and the community of people, who followed and shared the meal of the sacrificial ceremony with him” (Sakhong 22). Sakhong also documents that the traditional Chin culture was very hierarchical, with several layers of classes and subclasses into which every person in their society would fall (35-36). Finally, exclusivism and isolationism were hallmark traits of traditional Chin culture. For example, their religious ceremonies were separated by tribes and the presence of outsiders or foreigners was not tolerated (Sakhong 119). Thus, although the Chin emphasized collectivism, they did so mostly within their clans and did not express as much kinship with larger communities.

Several of these cultural values are still present among the Chin today. For example, they still tend to be more collectivist than individualist, emphasizing the “Christian teaching” of

“good relationships and strong ties among people” (Sakhong 237). Thus, the idea of worshipping God with a community, even if it was a different God, is still important in Chin culture.

However, when Christianity was introduced, the cultural value of isolationism was replaced by tolerance. As the Chin converted, they began welcoming strangers from other tribes to join them in the new religious ceremonies, which would have been taboo before (Sakhong 141). This was “very significant in Chin history” as it “transformed Chin society gradually from a ‘tribal and clan-oriented’ society to a ‘community of faith’ in Jesus Christ” (Sakhong 141). The Christian faith served as a “uniting force for different Chin communities who had been deeply divided and antagonistic to one another due to differences in traditional clan systems and isolated from one another by geographical barriers” (Ling, “Role of Christianity”). Thus, a more unified “Chin” identity began to emerge, rather than just individual clan identities.

#### **V. Major Social Needs and Challenges for the Chin**

With the context of the recent history and Myanmar and the religion of the Chin in mind, the effects of this history on the Chin can now be discussed and better understood. As a minority group, the Chin have always experienced discrimination. British colonial rule only exacerbated the existing divide between the Burman majority and ethnic minorities, as the Burmans accused the British of giving minorities like the Chin special treatment (Mang 196). Since the Chin embraced Christianity, the colonial religion, it became easy to associate them with the colonialists who had waged war on them, causing even more distrust between the Chin and the Burman majority population (Rogers 62). This distrust has become the foundation for the current severe persecution of the Chin people.

Thus, once the Burmese had full military control of the government in the 1960s, they “thoroughly enforced various restrictions on Chin culture, literature and language while fostering

Burman culture, history and language,” including prohibiting the use of Chin language in schools and restrictions on the publication of Chin literature (Mang 200). Language discrimination even extends to areas like healthcare, where a hospital told a woman who could speak a Chin language but not Burmese, “This hospital is not for those who can’t speak” while she was in painful labor (Rigby 2). In public schools in Chin State, children “learn only about the Burman kings” (Slow), and other people groups were discussed as though they are “backward people,” according to Chin activist Cheery Zahau (Rigby 3). This demonstrates that to a certain extent, bias against the Chin has become embedded within the mainstream Burmese culture.

With the 2021 coup, as well as military rule for most of the last 50 years, discrimination against the Chin has worsened. They face human rights abuses, religious persecution, and the prospect of becoming refugees in order to stay safe. In terms of human rights abuses, nine out of ten households in Chin State reported experiencing forced labor in the past year and almost half met the definition of moderate or severe household hunger, according to one 2011 study (Sollom 1). This study was able to demonstrate a link between human rights violations such as forced labor and amplified poor health outcomes such as hunger, with the researchers going so far as to say that the results “suggest that the indirect health outcomes of human rights violations probably dwarf the mortality from direct killings” (Sollom 11). The abuses committed by the military, then, have had a far-reaching effect on the Chin people even beyond the reported instances of torture, murders, and sexual assault.

In addition to these abuses, the Chin experience persecution due to their Christian faith. In 2006, a document titled “Program to Destroy the Christian Religion in Myanmar,” which was allegedly connected to Myanmar’s Ministry of Religious Affairs, was leaked and began to circulate in the country. This document contained points such as “There shall be no home where



the Christian religion is practiced.” That same year, a pastor of an evangelical church was arrested and imprisoned for writing to an official and pleading for the persecution to stop (Rogers 63-64). This pastor is just one of many examples of those who have been wrongfully detained by the military, especially since the 2021 coup. The Human Rights Watch reports that in Chin State, the list of oppressive actions taken by the military includes “threats and inducements, restrict[ing] proselytizing and conversion to Christianity, interfer[ing] with worship services, restrict[ing] the printing and importing of Christian Bibles and literature, [and] destroy[ing] churches, crosses, and other religious symbols” (“Myanmar”).

Due to human rights abuses and persecution, many of the Chin people have felt they have had no choice but to flee the country as refugees. Nearly 100,000 Chin have fled to Mizoram, India as of 2008 (Alexander). An additional 70,000 Chin have fled to the United States, with around 20,000 of them having settled in Indianapolis (Price). Peter Thawngmung, a Chin resident of Indiana, estimates that “more than 90 percent of the Chin and Burmese population in Indianapolis ... came here as refugees. ... Instead of protecting us they were suppressing us, killing us, limiting us, discriminating against us. ... That’s how a lot of us became refugees” (Salaz). Another resident, ZaBik Bualteng, recalled the persecution of a pastor he knew, claiming that the government “targeted pastors” and that is why he came to the United States (Price). This diaspora has led to a thriving Chin community within Indianapolis.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The Chin people have faced extreme difficulties, especially since the coup of 2021. Due to their status as a minority ethnic group and as a minority religion within Myanmar, they have historically been viewed with suspicion by the majority population. This has only been made worse by the military regime, which has been committing numerous human rights violations

against the Chin and other minority groups, such as Rohingya Muslims (“Myanmar”). These human rights violations include everything from forced labor to extrajudicial executions. One final note that is important to remember is that “it is the regime, not Buddhism, that is abusing the religious freedom of Chin Christians” (Ling, “Religious Persecutions” 12). This paper has not been written to vilify the majority religion in Myanmar, but rather to condemn and raise awareness of the abuses committed by the government.

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