

# **BURMA 2016 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. Discrimination, harassment and violence against the Rohingya Muslim group continued. In particular, in response to deadly attacks against security forces in October and November in northern Rakhine State, security forces undertook action about which there were numerous allegations of abuses, including extrajudicial killings, rapes, beatings, mass arrests, and destruction of buildings. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Approximately 70,000 people reportedly fled to Bangladesh as a result of the conflict, and approximately 23,000 were displaced internally. The government denounced the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) for its propagation of hate speech and the State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee (SSMNC) said no previous Sangha convention endorsed MaBaTha, reportedly effectively delegitimizing the organization. Local administrators shut down a mosque in June in Kachin State following complaints from villagers about construction at the mosque, and a crowd subsequently burned the mosque to the ground. In June disputes over the legality of a mosque construction in Bago Division led a mob to attack and injure the leader of the mosque, destroying his home and the mosque itself. Police did not arrest anyone following the attack, saying any arrests would only worsen local tensions and that the size of the mob prevented them from intervening. The government reportedly imposed restrictions on the religious practice of minority populations, including Muslims, Christians, and others, including years-long delays in building permits for houses of worship, restricted access to social services, and various forms of discrimination, including in employment. The government continued its citizenship verification program in Rakhine State, which NGOs reported had been rejected by parts of the Rohingya Muslim community because of mistrust of the government, to identify individuals eligible for citizenship and issue identity documents. NGOs and religious groups said local authorities in some cases moved quickly to investigate and debunk rumors that could inflame religious tensions and spark violence.

MaBaTha’s influence reportedly waned significantly following the government’s public denunciation of the group in July, although members of the organization

continued circulating anti-Muslim materials in some villages and continued fanning religious tensions using social media. There were mass protests in Rakhine State and Rangoon in July opposing the government's use of the term "Muslim community in Rakhine State" to refer to Rohingya, instead calling for the use of the pejorative term "Bengali." The latter denotes what the protesters believed is the Rohingya's status as undocumented immigrants as well as their cultural and ethnic roots in Bangladesh. Followers of a Buddhist monk in Karen State constructed a Buddhist structure and planted a Buddhist flag inside an Anglican church, and constructed a pagoda near a mosque in the Muslim-majority village of Hlaingbwe in April. Buddhists also reportedly prevented Muslim residents from buying or renting land or conducting business and threatened madrassah leaders to stop teaching. Religious and civil society leaders increasingly organized intrafaith and interfaith events and developed mechanisms to monitor and counter hate speech.

The U.S. government, including the Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and the Ambassador, advocated for religious freedom and tolerance and consistently raised concerns about the violence in Bago Division and Kachin State, conditions in Rakhine State, including those facing Muslim communities and ethnic Rakhine, and the rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and tension. The embassy regularly highlighted concerns about religious-based tension and anti-Muslim discrimination and called for respect for religious diversity and tolerance. The embassy advocated for religious freedom and tolerance with all sectors of society.

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 October 31, 2016, 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 56.9 million (July 2016 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 Rohingya population, which is predominantly

Sunni Muslim, is estimated at approximately 1 million by NGOs, with more than 800,000 stateless individuals in Rakhine State, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 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 correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and also among the Shan, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups. Christianity is 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. Islam is practiced widely in Rakhine State and in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, and Mandalay Divisions by some Bamar and ethnic Indians as well as ethnic Kaman Muslims and Rohingya. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions.

## **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 that every citizen has 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, are required to register 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) 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 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 State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee (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.

The package of four laws passed in 2015 for the “protection of race and religion,” remains in effect. The Buddhist Women Special Marriage law stipulates notification and registration requirements for marriages between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women and introduces new obligations to be observed by non-Buddhist husbands 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 for which population control measures could be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing. The Monogamy Law bans polygamous practices, which were already criminalized under the country’s penal code.

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

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of killings, sexual abuse, arbitrary arrest, burning of structures, continued detention of Rohingya Muslims, restrictions on religious practice and

travel, forced displacement, discrimination in employment, granting of building permits, and access to citizenship. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Following October and November attacks on security forces that killed dozens, Burmese military and police forces conducted “security operations” that suspended access to humanitarian aid, independent media, and human rights monitors over a broad area. The government reported that during these operations in northern Rakhine State there were approximately 100 civilian deaths, 200 arrests, as well as 900 homes burned down. According to UNHCR, the operations displaced approximately 93,000 civilians, of which approximately 70,000 fled to Bangladesh. While close linkages between religion and ethnicity made it difficult to categorize alleged incidents of abuse as solely based on religion or ethnicity, some refugees in Bangladesh reported to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights instances in which security forces forcibly shaved the beards of imams and burned or desecrated Qurans. Human Rights Watch released satellite imagery showing at least 1,500 structures had been burned down during the “security operations” and said the Burmese military was responsible; the government said the buildings were burned down by “extremists.”

On December 30, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it would take back in 2017 2,415 Rohingya Muslims from the larger population of long-term refugees who were living in Bangladesh over the years that it had recognized as citizens of Burma.

On December 3, during conflict with ethnic armed groups, media reports indicated the Burmese military took refuge and stored weapons in the Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Mong Ko, northern Shan State. According to reports, the military left the area following the battle and subsequently bombed the church to prevent armed groups from obtaining the weapons there. The government said that the church was damaged by ethnic armed groups during fighting. On December 24, Kachin State Baptist Pastors Dom Dawng Nawng and La Jaw Gam Hseng were reported missing after they helped journalists report on the bombed church, according media reports. Civil society groups reported that the military had arrested the pastors and held both incommunicado. The pastors’ whereabouts remained unknown at year’s end.

On October 6, a Maha Aungmye Township, Mandalay Division court sentenced Dutch tourist Klaas Haytema to three months of hard labor in prison for

“disturbing religious assembly.” Haytema had originally been charged with a more serious charge of “defiling a place of worship” after he unplugged an amplifier sound system broadcasting a Buddhist sermon in September, but the court changed the charge upon conviction. Haytema said he had no intention of insulting religion and had unplugged the amplifier after it woke him up at night. He was released December 27.

In October three Muslim men stood trial for illegally importing over 90 cows intended for ritual slaughter during Eid al-Fitr after MaBaTha monks reportedly pressured local authorities to ban the practice. According to a news report, the police were looking for 30 other people in the case and a local Muslim leader said the case amounted to religious persecution. The cows were confiscated and kept in police custody, drawing criticism from social media users that the monks’ complaints led to a waste of public resources. The cows were subsequently released to a local market and the three men were released on bail. The trial remained unresolved at the end of the year.

On February 26, a court convicted interfaith activists Zaw Zaw Latt, Pwint Phyu Latt, and Zaw Win Bo of entering the country illegally and sentenced each to two years in prison and hard labor. On April 8, Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt were additionally convicted of unlawful association with banned organizations and each sentenced to an additional two years in prison. Zaw Win Bo was released April 17 through a presidential pardon while Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt remained in detention through the end of the year and continued to appeal the ruling.

Unlike in previous years, the government did not take action against individuals whose actions were construed to be insulting to religion. In January and April the president released and pardoned approximately 400 political prisoners and political detainees including Htin Lin Oo, an information officer of the National League for Democracy (NLD) who was detained in 2015 and charged with religious defamation for a public speech deemed as insulting Buddhism.

New Zealander Philip Blackwood was released from prison in January. Blackwood and two Burmese colleagues, Htut Ko Ko Lwin and Tun Thurein, were sentenced in 2015 to two and a half years of hard labor for posting an image to Facebook of the Buddha wearing headphones to promote their bar in Rangoon, and had been charged with insulting religion. Htut Ko Ko Lwin and Tun Thurein were not pardoned and remained in detention at the end of the year.

The government also released Shin Nyana, a monk sentenced in 2010 to 20 years in prison for teaching a religious doctrine that did not comport with Theravada Buddhism as part of the January presidential pardons.

Religious organizations said that an estimated 100 people of predominantly Buddhist faith had been arrested in violation of the Monogamy Law due to extramarital affairs, but that the 2015 laws adopted for the “protection of race and religion” remained largely unenforced around the country and the government did not draft any implementation guidelines. In July, however, the government defended the package of laws at the UN following criticism that it was discriminatory towards women. The Population Control Law drew local and international condemnation for providing the government the ability to designate geographic areas where a waiting period between births could be enforced, which some press and civil society groups said could disproportionately impact Muslim communities. The UN panel at the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women raised concerns that the law could be used to target ethnic minorities, such as Rohingya Muslims, and could allow state officials to enter into homes and perform spot checks. In response, the government delegation said there was no such thing in the country as targeting or marginalizing of minority groups, and that the law would be voluntary. As of the end of the year, the government said it had not used the law to designate any geographic area where a waiting period between births applied.

During the year, the number of Rohingya who left the country by boat to countries such as Thailand or Malaysia declined to its lowest level since 2011, with only a few hundred leaving the country by boat, and unlike in previous years, there were no reports of associated human rights abuses.

The government said it completed resettlement of all 3,700 internally displaced persons (IDPs) displaced by intercommunal violence in 2013 in Meiktila Township, Mandalay Division, completely closing the IDP camps at the beginning of the year. According to civil society and the government, the estimated 200 displaced persons who remained during the year resettled with family in Mandalay. The media reported some remaining IDPs were unable to return to their original homes and encountered barriers to resettling in neighboring communities. Some Muslim IDPs said they faced conflict from the residents of villages where they were resettled, who said they were trespassers. The Muslim IDPs said some of them were evicted by the villagers, and the township government and police said they could not guarantee their security. Interfaith leaders encouraged local

governments to resolve these issues peacefully and indicated that by the end of the year all IDPs had resettled with family in other communities.

According to various religious organizations and NGOs, the registration process remained lengthy and, due largely to what they say is bureaucratic inefficiency in local administrative governments, was often not completed. Except in a few cases, however, organizations noted the lack of registration did not hinder the majority of religious practices.

There were reports of local authorities preventing Muslims from conducting prayer services at religious facilities in some villages.

There were approximately 3,900 Hajj pilgrims. The government expedited passport issuance for 280 of the pilgrims and simplified procedures for all Hajj travelers.

The government continued to subject all public events, including religious ceremonies and festivals, to security regulations and other controls. There were reports that any public religious event (i.e., outside a house of worship) required prior written permission from ward, township, police, district, and division-level authorities. All public religious celebrations also required prior written permission from religious affairs authorities and applications needed to be submitted approximately three weeks in advance. Some religious minority groups, primarily Christians and Muslims, reported longer delays in approving some of their applications.

Some Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several madrassahs.

The government continued to fund two state *sangha* universities in Rangoon and Mandalay, respectively, which trained Buddhist monks under the purview of the SSMNC, as well as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Rangoon.

The government continued to financially support Buddhist seminaries and Buddhist missionary activities. Religious organizations said Buddhist groups generally did not experience difficulty obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls, in contrast with minority religious groups. According to religious organizations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs financially supported the SSMNC and religious ceremonies.

Some teachers at 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.

Due to movement restrictions, reportedly many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools. Authorities 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 Muslim university students who did not possess citizenship scrutiny cards from graduating. These students were permitted to attend classes and take examinations, but they could not receive diplomas unless they claimed a “foreign” ethnic minority affiliation.

On June 30, in Lone Khin Village, Hpakant Township, Kachin State, following months of complaints by Buddhist villagers over reported illegal construction at a mosque, village administrators ordered the mosque to be dismantled despite the Muslim leaders reportedly providing the administrators with the requisite construction permits. The religious leaders of the mosque appealed to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the State Counsellor’s Office, but on July 1, a crowd estimated between 400 and 1,000 people marched to the mosque and burned it to the ground. There were no reports of injury from the attack. Nearly 30 Muslim families fled the village after the riot, according to media reports. On July 5, authorities in Kachin arrested five people in connection to the incident. No formal charges were filed and the five individuals were reportedly released on July 6. Police reportedly responded to prevent the mob violence but stated they were unable to intervene due to the size of the crowds.

On June 23, in Thaye Thamain Village, Waw Township, Bago Division, local leaders and media reported that an argument over the legality of new construction near a local mosque following a Facebook post led to a group of approximately 200 villagers to attack and injure the man building the new structure, destroying his home and the mosque itself. The structure was reportedly slated to be a storehouse with no religious purpose. No one was arrested following the attack; the local government said any arrests would only worsen local tensions and police reportedly did not further intervene due to the size of the mob. All 44 villagers who fled the violence returned home within two weeks of the incident.

Religious leaders continued to note delays by local authorities in issuing permits for repairs of non-Buddhist religious buildings, as well as on permits authorizing construction of new facilities around the country. Christian communities in Chin and Kachin States reported that while applications to local authorities for property registration, construction, and renovation were not denied, the applications encountered delays spanning several years or were lost altogether. These included continued reports that local government officials delayed permits to restore crosses previously destroyed, or to renovate and build Christian churches in Chin State. Local authorities in Chin State also continued to delay applications from Christian groups and churches from buying land in the name of their religious organizations. Religious groups said individual members circumvented this requirement by purchasing land on behalf of the group, a practice the government tolerated.

Christian and Muslim groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations continued to be able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities, according to religious groups.

Muslim groups reported official building requests encountered significant delays, and even when approved could subsequently be reversed. They also reported it remained extremely difficult for them to acquire permission to repair existing mosques, although authorities permitted internal maintenance in some cases. Historic mosques in Meiktila in Mandalay Division, Mawlamyine in Mon State, and Sittwe in Rakhine State, as well as in Rangoon and other areas continued to deteriorate because authorities did not allow routine maintenance.

Rohingya were unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. Rohingya couples needed to obtain government permission 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.

In Rakhine State, the government and security forces imposed restrictions on the movement of various ethnic groups, particularly Rohingya Muslims, including IDPs, both before and during the violence beginning in October. The government stated it imposed these restrictions because of reported threats of violence received from members of Rakhine communities. These restrictions impeded the ability of Rohingya and some non-Rohingya Muslims to pursue livelihoods, gain access to markets and other basic services, and engage other communities. According to civil society groups, government officials denied this population access to basic services, including hospitals. Additionally, as the vast majority of the restricted

groups in the area were Muslim, individuals stereotyped by security forces as appearing to be Muslim received additional scrutiny on movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion.

Restrictions governing the travel of foreigners, Rohingya, 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 Immigration and National Registration Department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and two guarantors. Travel was authorized under the form for 14 days. Authorities granted Muslims outside of Rakhine State more freedom to travel, but they still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State.

Muslim community representatives reported that in some cases Muslim-owned businesses encountered significant delays to procure government contracts without a Buddhist “front” person. Media and religious sources said local authorities in some villages restricted the licensing and butchering of cattle by slaughterhouses, the vast majority of which are owned by Muslims, which negatively affected business operations and the ability of Muslim communities to celebrate Islamic holidays.

While the military and civil service continued outreach to various ethnic groups, including by inviting various ethnic groups to attend the Defense Services Academy in an effort to support a more ethnically and religiously diverse workforce; nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service remained Buddhist. Applications for civil service and military positions required the applicant to list his or her religion. Unlike in past years, there were no reports of officers being encouraged to convert to Buddhism in order to be promoted.

In June the government relaunched its citizenship verification exercise to address the status of the Rohingya in Rakhine State. As of the end of the year, more than 2,000 Rohingya and Kaman Muslims had gained either full or naturalized citizenship since the program began in 2015, primarily from Myebon and Kyaukpyu Townships. Recipients of naturalized citizenship were ineligible to participate in some political activities and professions, although all citizens had the right to vote. Although recognized by law as one of the 135 ethnic groups that automatically qualifies for citizenship, religious groups said some Kaman Muslims in Rakhine State chose to participate in the citizenship verification pilot as a quick means to gain status after being displaced by the 2012 violence and living in IDP camps alongside Rohingya. The government no longer required participants to

identify as “Bengali” if they wished to be verified for citizenship, and did not permit race or religion on any of the forms at the earliest phases of the process. The government continued to call for Rohingya to participate but communities expressed a variety of objections to the exercise and the need for more assurances about the results of the process before taking part. Reportedly, the program initially received significant numbers of participants in Kyaukpyu and Myebon Townships, but was met with strong resistance in other townships of Rakhine State, with local Muslims rejecting the verification and identification forms, in some cases because individuals wanted to clearly state their ethnicity as “Rohingya” on their documentation. Reportedly, residents said they would not participate or accept the new cards until “Rohingya Muslim” was available as the identifying ethnicity and religion. Officials said they would not allow individuals to identify as such; government policy since May was to avoid using either terms of “Bengali” or “Rohingya,” saying both are emotive terms that could hinder progress between communities in Rakhine State.

Authorities required citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. These identification cards often indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity, but there appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person’s religion was indicated on the card. 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. Some Muslims reported that they were required to indicate a “foreign” ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on applications for citizenship cards.

The SSMNC and the government denounced what they said was MaBaTha’s “propagation of conflict” and the government began drafting legislation to prohibit hate speech. On July 3, during a trip to Singapore following intercommunal violence against Muslims in Bago Division and Kachin State, Chief Minister of Rangoon Phyo Min Thein responded to questions about MaBaTha by stating the group was unnecessary. Despite criticism from MaBaTha, he clarified his statement on July 6 in Rangoon stating that MaBaTha was duplicative of the SSMNC and was an unnecessary, unofficial governing council of Buddhism in the country. MaBaTha said it would hold national protests absent an official apology. On July 8, MaBaTha said the government would be held responsible if it did not address the chief minister’s comments by July 14 – which the government refused to do. On July 13, during a plenary meeting, the SSMNC leaked a statement

stating that no Sangha convention had endorsed MaBaTha's legitimacy. This statement reportedly distanced the SSMNC from MaBaTha, delegitimized the organization in the eyes of many Buddhists around the country, and signaled that the group would be subject to state regulation. The Ministry of Religious Affairs continued to draft a law prohibiting hate speech through the end of the year and publicly warned MaBaTha that its existence would be uncertain if it continued using religion to spread conflict. MaBaTha subsequently reportedly called itself a religious missionary group committed to the peaceful resolution of religious conflict.

State-controlled media frequently depicted government officials and 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.

Although the law prohibits mixing of religion and politics, some local political parties developed campaign slogans and platforms to protect Buddhism. According to civil society organizations, anti-Muslim campaign slogans leading into the 2015 elections declined following the elections. The Arakan National Party convened a meeting in June with Arakanese (ethnic Rakhine) "nationalists," monks, and civil society organizations in Sittwe, Rakhine State, to launch a poster campaign protesting the government's use of the term "the Muslim community in Rakhine State" to refer to Rohingya Muslims, calling for the government to instead refer to Rohingya as "Bengali," reportedly to imply that they are undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh and not legal citizens of Burma. Earlier in June, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi had said the government would avoid using the term "Rohingya" when referring the group and instead use "'the Muslim community in Rakhine State' for the sake of harmony and trust between two communities."

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 other religious groups.

The government permitted foreign religious groups to operate. 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 permitted Rangoon-based groups to host international students and experts.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

During clashes between government security forces and a militant group the government called Aqa Mul Mujahideen following the October attacks in northern Rakhine State, there were reports of reprisal killings inside the Rohingya community, with Rohingya killing other Rohingya for being informants or “collaborators” with the government.

MaBaTha published and spread what the government considered to be anti-Muslim hate speech in print and social media, although Buddhist religious leaders said its influence waned following the government and SSMNC denunciation in July. Wirathu, a MaBaTha monk, continued using social media to inflame religious tensions by using terms widely considered racially and religiously derogatory and divisive towards Muslims as well as calling for violence against Muslims, including following the October 9 attack in Rakhine State. There were reports anti-Muslim literature continued circulating in some communities and included incitement to violence.

On July 3, thousands of Buddhists in Rakhine State, including monks, participated in protests against the government’s announced use of the term “Muslim community in Rakhine State” to refer to Rohingya, and demanded that Rohingya be referred to as “Bengali.” The Buddhists also protested the government’s announced change in nomenclature from “ethnic Rakhine” to “the Buddhist community in Rakhine State,” saying ethnic Rakhine Buddhists originated from Rakhine State and that their identity should not be attenuated. The government withdrew use of “the Buddhist community in Rakhine State” the day following the protest.

There were reports of some local Buddhist-majority village leaders preemptively placing sign posts deterring Muslims from buying land or moving into the villages. In October ethnic Rakhine groups in Minbya Township distributed pamphlets encouraging residents to avoid trading, employing, or interacting socially with Muslims in villages in central Rakhine State. In Karen and Mon States there were anti-Muslim sermons and campaigns to prohibit business dealings between Buddhists and Muslims. In other areas, Buddhists reportedly would not sell or rent property to Muslims.

In April in Karen State, followers of monk Myaing Gyi Ngu constructed a stupa (a mound-like structure that contains relics and is used as a place of meditation) and planted a Buddhist flag in the St. Mark Anglican Church. His supporters said the land had previously held a Buddhist structure. They subsequently built a pagoda in Hlaingbwe, a Muslim-majority village, near a mosque. This was the third religious building commissioned by Myaing Gyi Ngu, following similar construction in Hpa-An in September 2015. According to media reports, Buddhist authorities, local government authorities, the Myanmar Baptist Convention, and ethnic armed groups in the area asked the monks to stop to prevent religious tensions, but construction continued unabated. According to news reports, to avoid further conflict, Bishop Saw Stylo of the Anglican Church and other Christian leaders allotted tracts of the land for the Buddhists and said they would not pursue actions against them.

In October a small group of Buddhist monks gathered at a longstanding madrassah in Thaketa Township, Rangoon Division, demanding the owners to show authorized permits for the building and its religious activities. The monks reportedly threatened those in the madrassah unless they stopped teaching. After the monks left, the madrassah owners reported the incident to local police who reportedly did not respond.

Buddhist and Muslim communities continued collaborating to quell rumors and prevent violence through formal and informal community-centered mechanisms. For example, in June in northern Shan State, stories reporting Muslim children had spray-painted images of the Buddha in a monastery began spreading through social media. Administrators of a local social media platform prevented photos of the vandalism from spreading further and worked with religious and community leaders to quell rumors and calm voices that were advocating violence. Subsequently, local police disciplined the children for vandalism and there were no reports of communal violence.

Religious and community leaders and civil society activists organized intrafaith and interfaith events and 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 worked throughout the year to draft legislation to counter hate speech and promote interfaith harmony. In Mandalay Division, various NGOs and interfaith leaders continued to hold meetings and public events to promote peace and religious tolerance for community leaders and youth. A number of interfaith groups continued mobilizing civil society around the country

to promote religious tolerance. A leader active in the Interfaith Dialogue Group, Catholic Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, was honored for his work by the Parliament of the United Kingdom in May where his speech, widely covered in Burmese press, called on the international community to encourage the country's new government to take action against hate speech, reinstate and allow humanitarian access to displaced communities, address citizenship issues for Rohingya Muslims, and establish a credible independent investigation with international experts into the crisis in Rakhine State. He also focused on the importance of truly democratic societies celebrating religious diversity and protecting the basic human rights of every person.

In June the Rangoon Heritage Trust NGO recognized the country's only synagogue as a site of historical significance and heritage. Only 11 other buildings in the city have received similar recognition.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Senior U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, the Deputy National Security Advisor, the Deputy Secretary of State, the Counselor of the State Department, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stability Operations, consistently raised ongoing U.S. concerns about religious freedom, the plight of the Rohingya in Rakhine State, hardships facing religious minority communities in Kachin and northern Shan states in the midst of ongoing military conflicts, and hate speech on social media. They and other U.S. government officials consistently called for long-term and durable solutions to the root causes of longstanding issues in Rakhine State and the lack of citizenship status for Rohingya Muslims, including a voluntary and transparent path to restoration and provision of citizenship, and the reinstatement of access to humanitarian aid for the Muslim-majority region. Embassy officials also urged government and interfaith leaders to improve efforts to mitigate religiously motivated violence such as that in Kachin State and Bago Division.

Embassy officials at all levels discussed the importance of addressing the lingering effects of past ethnoreligious-based violence and hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric, and promoting religious freedom and tolerance in meetings with high-level government officials, including then-President Thein Sein, civilian Vice President Henry Van Thio, State Counsellor Suu Kyi, the ministers of foreign

affairs, home affairs, and the president's office, the deputy minister of religious affairs, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, parliamentarians, members of civil society, scholars, and representatives of other governments.

Embassy officials traveled to states containing ethnic minorities 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 and Kachin states, areas affected by ethnoreligious-based violence since 2012, and other areas that had suffered from and were identified as at risk of ethnoreligious conflict. An embassy-based conflict advisor traveled to nine states and divisions over the course of six months to analyze the root causes and effective prevention mechanisms of interreligious conflict. The Ambassador and embassy officials used this analysis to guide their public and official engagements with various religious leaders and organizations to promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador's multiple visits to Rakhine State to assess the situation helped inform 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 on its widely viewed Facebook page. Embassy representatives spoke out against intercommunal conflict and hate speech, and for religious freedom at high-profile events. Interfaith breakfasts hosted by the Ambassador, and publicized on Facebook, emphasized the value of bringing representatives together from diverse religious backgrounds. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, met repeatedly with Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations – including MaBaTha – and NGOs to promote religious freedom, diversity, and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted a breakfast on July 15 to bring civil society leaders and various faith communities together to discuss issues pertaining to religious freedom and communal relations in celebration of Eid al-Fitr. The embassy also shared multiple posts with its audience on Facebook about religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in the United States.

The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns about religious-based tension and anti-Muslim discrimination as well as called for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance. On April 20, the embassy released a statement on Rakhine State, welcoming the new government's commitment to protect all communities. After the violent incident on October 9, the embassy issued a statement in support of the government's stated efforts to resolve the

underlying causing of conflict in Rakhine. U.S. Embassy facilities in Rangoon and Mandalay respectively also hosted numerous discussions for youth and civil society on religious tolerance. A U.S. government-sponsored program on supporting political and civic engagement provided several courses to civil society representatives on pluralism, as well as hosted a well-attended youth forum on interfaith advocacy in June. As in prior years, the embassy partnered 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 CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On October 31, 2016, 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.