

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

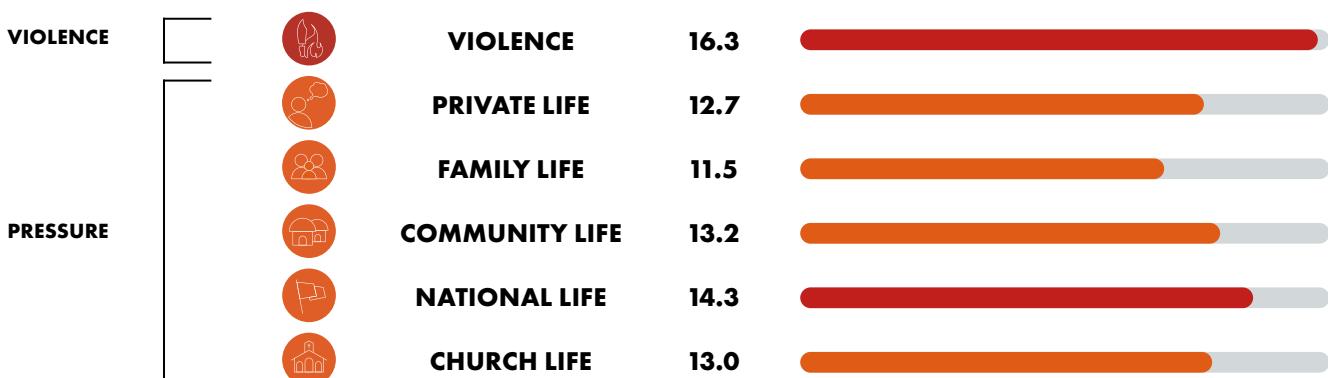
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
14

MYANMAR



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

Myanmar has a long history of religious persecution, rooted in the belief that to be Burmese is to be Buddhist. Other faiths are often seen as foreign and threatening to national unity. Christians face restrictions registering churches, having their religion recognized on ID cards, and are often forced to participate in Buddhist rituals, just some of the many forms of discrimination and pressure they regularly experience. The civil war and a devastating earthquake have worsened the situation. Now in its fifth year, the conflict has intensified, particularly in ethnic minority areas, many home to significant Christian populations, contributing to a growing humanitarian crisis, with over 3.5 million internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2024). The March 2025 M7.7 earthquake compounded the crisis, killing 3,745 and affecting over 500,000 people. Christian converts face additional persecution from their families and communities, who may view their faith as a betrayal. In "Buddhist-only" villages, Christians may be denied basic resources like water. Non-traditional and rural churches also face targeted opposition, especially when associated with evangelism.

Quick facts

LEADER

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing,
Acting President

POPULATION

55,337,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,632,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Military Regime



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	4,632,000	8.4
Buddhists	41,143,000	74.3
Ethnic religionists	5,119,000	9.3
Others	4,443,000	8.0
	Total	100%

Source²

Following independence in 1948, ethnic tensions and calls for autonomy led to decades of military rule in Myanmar. A brief democratic transition ended when Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government was overthrown after the 2020 elections. In February 2021, the military staged a coup and formed the State Administration Council (SAC). Since then, the junta has been accused of targeting civilians, carrying out extrajudicial killings, and making arbitrary arrests. In response, ousted lawmakers and pro-democracy forces formed the National Unity Government (NUG), aligning with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and local resistance groups.

Christians have come under attack in the conflict. Government forces have bombed churches and killed civilians in Christian-majority Chin, Kachin and Kayah states, as well as in Christian-minority areas in the Sagaing and Yangon regions and Karen, Rakhine and Shan states. Many Christians have fled to camps, churches, or remote jungle

areas, where they face severe shortages of food and limited access to healthcare.

In 2024, the junta introduced military conscription, requiring young men and women to serve. In recent months, reports of forced conscription of children have abounded (HRW, 2025). Some EAOs have introduced their own forms of forced recruitment, such as demanding one male per household—further disrupting already vulnerable communities and forcing more Christians to attempt to flee. Christian minorities also live in lawless border regions that have become hubs for opium production and human trafficking since the coup. These zones are largely untouched by the state, and criminal activity flourishes.

Christians faced persecution even before the coup. The 2015 'Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion' restricted religious conversion, interfaith marriage, and reproductive rights to preserve Buddhist-Bamar dominance. Though aimed largely at Muslims, these laws also burden Christian converts with strict bureaucratic requirements. Nationalist groups like Ma Ba Tha continue to operate under new names and monitor Christian activity, especially among converts from Buddhist backgrounds.

"Buddhist-only" communities (where nearly all residents practice Buddhism) often make life impossible for Christian families—blocking access to water or communal resources. Converts face pressure and rejection from their families and communities.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

Protestants make up most of Myanmar's Christians, with the Myanmar Baptist Convention estimating 1.8 million members (WCC, 2025), mostly among Chin, Kachin and Karen peoples. Both traditional and newer church groups face harassment, especially in rural areas or where evangelism occurs.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – BUDDHISM BLENDED WITH ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

Around 60% of Myanmar's population is Bamar, and being Bamar is closely tied to being Buddhist. Non-Buddhists are often seen as foreign and a threat to national unity. The government has supported radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha, with some members even appointed as local administrators under the junta.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Myanmar has a long history of military rule. Even during brief democratic periods, the army retained significant power, holding key ministries and 25% of parliamentary seats. Since the February 2021 coup, the junta has intensified its hold on power. One expert noted that the Burmese government's 'right to rule', akin to the Chinese Mandate of Heaven, is deeply tied to its ability to establish and expand a Buddhist-inhabited world. Thus, asserting control over ethnic minority regions, where governance has not traditionally extended, is essential to reinforce and spread Buddhism.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Myanmar's natural resources like jade, timber, and opium, are concentrated in ethnic minority areas. Additionally, Myanmar is part of the "Golden Triangle", one of Asia's largest opium-producing regions. Both the military and EAOs compete for control of these lucrative industries. Christians who resist corruption risk reprisals from both sides. Lawless zones, especially in Shan State and along borders with Laos and Thailand, fuel organized crime amid the ongoing civil war.

How the situation varies by region

In the past year, conflict has intensified across Myanmar, devastating civilians, including many Christians. Sagaing Region, already hit by a deadly March 2025 earthquake, saw Christian villages in Shwebo and Ye U targeted. In Chin State (85-92% Christian), airstrikes and church attacks persist. Kachin, one-third Christian, faced major offensives by the Kachin Independence Army, causing displacement. Shan State recorded a 300% surge in clashes, while fighting in Rakhine spilled into Chin's Paletwa. Overall, Christians face worsening violence, displacement, and systematic targeting across multiple conflict-affected regions.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not included in WWL scoring and analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Historical Christian communities, particularly in ethnic minority regions, face pressure and violence from the military, which views Christianity as aligned with foreign influence. Communities are frequently caught in conflict zones between the military and EAOs. The military has actively targeted Christian symbols and leaders.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts face persecution from authorities, families, and communities. Leaving Buddhism is unacceptable for someone of Bamar ethnicity. Converts are often expelled from their villages. Radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha monitor Christians, particularly those from Buddhist backgrounds. A small number of Christian Rohingya converts face persecution because of their ethnic and religious affiliations.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Many Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations face violations from their community, including harassment, threats and pressure to cease church activities, especially in rural areas.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women in Myanmar face intensified risks since the 2021 coup, with the military perpetrating sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minority women. Cultural stigma silences victims, leaving many without protection. Kachin Christian women remain vulnerable to trafficking into China for forced marriage and sexual exploitation, while Rohingya Christians have historically faced abduction and forced conversion. Female converts are often expelled, confined under house arrest, forced into marriage, or divorced, losing security and support. Legal pressures also compel Christian women married to non-Christians to adopt their husband's faith.

Female typical pressure points:

- Forced to flee town/country
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men in Myanmar are especially vulnerable to job loss, eviction, and forced labor, stripping families of income. Converts face ridicule, threats, beatings, and exclusion, while those in the military are harassed, denied worship, and subjected to forced labor. The 2024 conscription law has increased the risk of forced recruitment, with Christians sometimes used as guides in conflict zones. Arrest and torture remain threats. Na Ta La schools target Christian boys, coercing them into Buddhist practices and raising them as monks, undermining the Christian community's future.

Male typical pressure points:

- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	14	81
2025	13	81
2024	17	79
2023	14	80
2022	12	79

The overall score remained unchanged, despite a slight drop in the extremely high violence score from 16.5 to 16.3 points. There was an increase in killings and the number detained alongside a decrease in church attacks and the number sentenced to jail. In all other spheres of life, except Community Life, the pressure rose very slightly. Churches have been attacked in predominantly Christian states like Chin, Kachin and Kayah states, but also in states with a strong Christian minority, like Karen, Rakhine state and northern Shan state. Fighting has increased as the military junta have pushed to regain territory in a bid to give legitimacy to the planned December 2025 elections (which have been rejected as illegitimate by much of the population and many international observers). Thousands of Christians have been forced to become IDPs. In addition, converts to Christianity are persecuted by their Buddhist, Muslim or tribal families and communities.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- October 2024 - August 2025:** Five male pastors were arrested as suspected anti-military supporters, a common pattern for Christians often assumed to back the PDF, support democracy, and oppose the military.
- 14 February 2025:** Ten armed men stormed a parish in Kangyitaw, forcing Fr. Donald Martin, 44, to kneel. He refused, declaring he kneels only to God, and was fatally attacked. His funeral was held on 16 February 2025.
- 14 August 2025:** In Sagaing Region, 40 Christian youth were captured by the military on their way to Church. Their whereabouts were still unknown at the time of publication.



WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians forced to leave the country
2026	99	35	129	1,500
2025	60	80	60	1,000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

Myanmar's laws make conversion extremely difficult. Under the Religious Conversion Law, part of the "Protection of Race and Religion" legislation, those wishing to change religion must seek approval from a state Registration Board, undergo interviews, and complete religious studies. Applications are posted publicly, exposing converts to community pressure and threats. As a result, many convert in secret. Converts often face rejection from their families, including being expelled from the family home.

FAMILY LIFE

The government runs "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" (Na Ta La), which attract ethnic minorities through incentives like free education and food for the child and a monthly rice allowance for the family. However, these schools are used to indoctrinate youth into Buddhism ([UNHCR, 2017](#)). The military also targets Christian communities by fostering drug addiction among ethnic youth, including the Kachin, as a tactic to weaken ethnic armed resistance.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians face exclusion and hostility from local communities and authorities. House churches are monitored, and believers are pressured to renounce their faith. Christians are often excluded from communal decisions, denied access to basic services like clean water and building materials, and left vulnerable to harassment or violence ([Hansard, 2023](#)). In IDP camps, aid to Christians is minimal, blocked,

or unavailable. One country expert added: "Since the military coup in February 2021, the government has used surveillance technology such as facial recognition, phone tapping, internet censorship and social media monitoring to track and identify Christians...Christians are being shadowed, harassed or threatened by the military or armed groups, especially in conflict zones with majority Christians."

NATIONAL LIFE

Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution gives Buddhism a "special position," reinforcing religious inequality. While Christianity is officially acknowledged (Section 362), the state has supported restrictions on conversion, interfaith marriage, and childbirth among minorities. Christians are often overlooked for employment and promotions. Amid civil war, Christian aid workers and pastors are sometimes accused of aiding the resistance ([Agenzia Fides, 2024](#)). One expert noted that Christians risk persecution under vague laws prohibiting criticism of the country's "culture and religion."

CHURCH LIFE

The military responds harshly to dissent. Christian leaders are regularly accused of supporting the resistance, and some have been killed or imprisoned. Churches are heavily monitored, suspected of being opposition hubs. In some cases, this leads to attacks on church buildings or staff. Monks aligned with nationalist movements like Ma Ba Tha also monitor Christian activity. Converts face even greater danger, as they may be persecuted by the authorities and their own families.



International obligations & rights violated

Myanmar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#))
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))
3. Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#))

Myanmar is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are denied access to communal resources because of their faith (ICESCR Art. 2)
- Christian homes and shops are attacked and destroyed, in violation of the right to an adequate standard of living and to a continuous improvement of living conditions (ICESCR Art. 11)
- Christian female converts are forcibly married to Buddhist men and pressured to renounce their new faith (CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Kachin Christian women and girls are trafficked into the sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and CEDAW Art. 6)

Situation of other religious minorities

The Rohingya face ongoing persecution despite international legal efforts. In 2024–25, arrest warrants were issued for Myanmar officials, including Min Aung Hlaing, over crimes against humanity. Yet forced returns, killings, and military conscription of Rohingya continue ([HRW, 2024](#)). Over 1 million refugees in Bangladesh endure deteriorating conditions. Repatriation remains unlikely amid insecurity. Elsewhere, Muslims and some Hindus also face discrimination, such as mosque bans and exclusion from government jobs.



Open Doors in Myanmar

Working through local partners, Open Doors strengthens persecuted believers in Myanmar through:

- Literature distribution
- Discipleship programs
- Pastoral and leadership training
- Livelihood support
- Family and marriage enrichment
- Children and youth training
- Biblical training on persecution preparedness
- Presence ministry



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.