

Christians from Myanmar celebrate passage of US BURMA Act

by [Isabella Meibauer](#)

December 22, 2022



(Photo by Hakan Nural used under Creative Commons license)

Since Myanmar's [latest military coup](#) in February 2021, ethnic Chin, Kachin, and Karen Christians in the US have advocated for democracy in their home country of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

Last week those efforts paid off, with the historic passage of the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2022 (BURMA) Act, an American Congressional act that will authorize sanctions against senior officials in Myanmar's military and state-owned commercial enterprises, support democracy efforts, and provide humanitarian relief.

The military takeover is approaching its second year and has resulted in [1.1 million](#) internally displaced people according to the United Nations. Statistics on how many civilians have been killed vary but could be as high as [7,000](#) civilian deaths according to the Institute for Strategy and Policy - Myanmar. While many reports have focused on the systematic killings of Rohingya Muslims in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, reports indicate the military government's widespread [torture](#) and [abuse](#) of democracy supporters, journalists, civilians, and other religious minorities including Christians.

While the US had continued to place [sanctions](#) on a variety of military-linked individuals and entities, the US Senate had yet to pass a comprehensive bill fully addressing the coup. On December 15, Congress [passed](#) the BURMA Act as part of the \$858 billion [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA) of 2023.

For Zo Tum Hmung, the executive director of the [Chin Association of Maryland](#) (CAM), advocating for the BURMA Act meant more than putting pressure on the military.

"This is not only about promoting democracy and human rights for us. This is a religious freedom issue," he told [Religion Unplugged](#).

While CAM is not religious, almost all Chin in the US are Christian. In Myanmar, the Chin—an ethnic group from northeastern Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India—are [85 percent](#) Christian, while only [6 percent](#) of all people from Myanmar are Christian.

The Chin first [converted](#) to Christianity after encountering American Baptist missionaries. The Myanmar military expelled the last missionary from the Chin region in 1966, and the government has continued to [target](#) religious minorities ever since.

A [report](#) CAM released describes the burning, destruction, or occupation of 22 churches by the military across Chin and Sagaing States from February 2021 to June 2022. The report also highlights the killing and arrest of several pastors, one of whom has now been [sentenced](#) to 32 years in prison.

Given the military's targeted attacks against Chin Christians, Hmung is particularly encouraged by language included in the act that affirms US policy holding perpetrators of human rights violations against ethnic minorities accountable.

CAM is a member of the [Burma Advocacy Group](#) (BAG), a collection of 22 organizations, including multiple denominations, that united to advocate for the passage of the BURMA Act.

Henry Van Ceu Lyan is the secretary of the [Peace and Justice Committee](#) (PJC), an official political entity that his denomination, Chin Baptist Churches USA, formed to advocate for the people of Myanmar and Chin interests. He told Religion Unplugged the network of 100 churches in the US with more than 30,000 members has come together on PJC projects like advocacy campaigns for churches to call and write to their congressional representatives.

“We are Baptists, and Baptists believe in the liberty of freedom,” Lyan said. “Right now because of what's going on in Burma, . . . we are compelled . . . to be engaged, to get involved in all this advocacy work,” he said. “. . . we thought this is the time that we can be a voice for the voiceless people in our country.”

PJC also hosted a breakout session at the International Religious Freedom Summit in June 2022 to create awareness of the military’s atrocities against Chin Christians.

However, Lyan said that involving the older generation in advocacy has been a challenge.

“Many older generations do not understand the importance of advocacy. Moreover, they—this first generation—are not comfortable with reaching out to the US government. They think that as an immigrant something might happen to them as a result of this advocacy,” he told Religion Unplugged. “In my judgment, the fear that was infused in them—our people—while they were in Burma is still present even after they moved to the US”

Since its addition to the NDAA, the BURMA Act has fewer provisions than the original act, but Lyan says that the final version reflects 80 percent of what they were hoping for.

“We should celebrate that our year-long advocacy for the BURMA Act is now included in the NDAA,” he said. He called the act’s passage “tremendous” and “enormous.”

For Christian activist Jan Jan Maran, the co-founder of [Global Movement for Myanmar Democracy](#), the BURMA Act’s passage is also a welcome response to many months

of congressional advocacy.

“There's still always more to do though . . . the work never ends,” she said.

While the bill allows the president to sanction the military-owned gas company Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), those sanctions must still be signed into law. Maran said the next steps should then include releasing those billions of dollars of [frozen assets](#) to the people of Myanmar, who are in need during this time, and enacting global arms embargoes.

Lyan believes that the bill should include more humanitarian aid for the many internally displaced persons, many of them Christian or Rohingya Muslim, in Myanmar. Notably, the version of the BURMA Act included in the NDAA omitted any mention of the Rohingya, despite 27 [references](#) to the minority group in the original act. The original bill also authorized specific funding allocation, while the NDAA version did not.

The Chin are not the only Christian-majority ethnic group targeted by the military. The [Karen](#), a group of many sub-ethnicities, are 20-30 percent Christian and are predominantly from eastern Myanmar along the Thai-Myanmar border, where many [IDPs](#) have fled.

Saw Ler Htoo, the general secretary of the [Karen Baptist Churches USA](#) (KBCUSA), said that the Thai police works with the Myanmar military to send refugees back.

KBCUSA, a denomination of 102 member churches, has formed a special task force to support refugees and IDPs on the border. Each week, member churches hold collections to send humanitarian assistance, according to Htoo.

KBCUSA has also involved its member churches across the US in protests and encouraged young people in particular to contact their congressional representatives.

“Our major task is to lead our congregation[s] to promote our church members for spiritual nurturing, but due to our country's situation, . . . we can't only focus on the spiritual. We also need to . . . work more for our people suffering in Burma,” Htoo explained.

Like Lyan, Htoo said that the next step is supporting IDPs and refugees. Due to the ongoing violence, refugees cannot return home, so resettling them is a priority.

Children in [camps](#) have difficulty accessing education and frequently must hide from airstrikes.

Myanmar's military government changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. The US government [continues](#) to use the name Burma to show its support for Burmese people and pro-democracy activists.

However, Maran does not identify as Burmese. Her ethnicity is Kachin, a people group from the far north of Myanmar [estimated](#) to be 95 percent Christian. The military's systematic targeting of Kachin churches has occurred for decades. Early in December, Kachin pastor Hkalam Samson was [arrested](#) by the military while leaving for medical treatment in Thailand.

Maran's faith informs and motivates her activism in a deep way. "Everything I do comes from faith first . . . that is how I live my life," she said. "Jesus came for the broken and the oppressed."

Maran is a first-generation Kachin, though she grew up mainly in the US. As a result, she feels as if she does not fully belong to either world.

"My advocacy work is a way of making sense of the world and myself," Maran said. "It helps me to understand even better my place in the world and my sense of belonging. It also is a way of me reaching my purpose and performing . . . what is supposed to be the purpose that God designated for me." —Religion Unplugged