

Christians, Muslims persecuted in Myanmar

by [Mang Suan Kim](#) in the [April 1, 2015](#) issue

Despite democratic reforms and international pressure that have pushed Myanmar to improve its human rights record in recent years, religious freedom remains heavily constrained across the country.

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in this majority Buddhist country has attracted international media and foreign policy attention. But in Chin State, along Myanmar's northwest border, a predominantly Christian population faces its own challenges and restrictions.

"There is no improvement with regard to religious freedom in Chin State," said Pu Zoe Ram, chairman of the Chin National Democratic Party. "Authorities destroyed crosses during the military regime and continue to do so."

Teak and steel crosses atop clock towers, hillsides, and Chin State's nearly 2,000 churches have long identified the local majority religion. Area Christians consider the destruction of those crosses at the behest of government agencies a direct attack on their faith community.

The Chin Human Rights Organization documented 13 incidents of large crosses being destroyed by order of the Ministry of Religious Affairs during the country's half-century-long military regime, which formally ended in 2011. Since then and under nominally democratic rule, at least four more large crosses have been destroyed.

"The previous regime repressed the Christian religion," said Daw Zar Tlem, a member of Myanmar's House of Representatives who represents the township of Thang Tlang in Chin. "The army pulled down crosses, which are sacred. The new government is doing the same and is refusing permission to build new churches."

In July 2011, shortly after Myanmar's military junta was officially dissolved, two crosses were burned in the townships of Kyin Dawe and Kan Pat Lat. Local Christians in Hakha and Falam were ordered to replace crosses with Buddhist shrines, and a cross in Tiddim Township was removed to make way for a new road, officials from

Myanmar's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party told villagers.

According to data from Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are 108 Buddha images and shrines in Chin State, compared with 1,958 churches—a reflection of the state's Christian majority.

Pu Zozam, a member of parliament from Chin State, said that although army and local authorities have tried to block the replacement crosses, "it is our belief and our responsibility" to continue to replace them.

"There are 13 crosses that still need to be replaced," he said. "We put up the crosses on our land originally, so we do not think it necessary to ask permission to replace them."

Cross destruction isn't the only problem plaguing Chin State's Christians.

Salai Ling, program director of Chin Human Rights Organization, said that schools in border ethnic regions have been set up to convert Christians to Buddhism.

There are 29 border development schools around the country, established under President U Thein Sein's current 30-year plan. One-third of these schools are in Chin State.

"Thirty years is a generation," Salai Ling said. "This project is targeting us. The government's plan is to intentionally change our beliefs and mind-sets."

Some say the discrimination goes both ways. Although Buddhists do not face official discrimination in Chin State, Saya Mya, a Chin Buddhist teacher, said they feel it indirectly.

"When Christians hold youth gatherings or public forums, they start or close the ceremonies with prayers, which makes non-Christians uncomfortable," he said.
—Religion News Service

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