Christian strategies in response to repression

The example of the Chin people in Myanmar

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Abstract

Despite the political reforms in Burma/Myanmar since 2010, there is still a growing threat to religious minorities. The paper focuses on different strategies of the Chin people, a religious and ethnic minority in Myanmar, to respond to the threat to their religious freedom. Interviews with key informants were conducted shortly after the 2015 general election. In response to repression, the Chin people developed various coping strategies, including relatively subtle resistance methods such as civil disobedience and non-cooperation as well as direct confrontation with local and higher authorities. Despite such suppression, the Chin people continue to preserve their faith, culture, and language under the guidance of religious institutions.

Keywords Religious freedom, repression, responses, Myanmar, Chin.

> *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.* – Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. Introduction

Religion is an important factor in the creation and consolidation of people's identity and a key element of sub-cultural integration, but one that may be considered problematic by politicians in emerging states (Dobbelaere 2008:xi). The nation now known as Myanmar[2] is in a period of democratic transition, during which

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[2] In 1989, the military government changed the name of Burma to Myanmar. However, the renaming remains a contested issue to this date. This paper uses "Burma" when referring to events that happened before 1989 and "Myanmar" for more recent events. Founded by Chin, Kachin, Shan and Burma in 1947 Palong Conference, Union of Burma gained independence in 1948 from Britain. The population of Myanmar is 51.4 million (2014 census) and it is made up of 7 States, those are ethnic nationalities

religion has been seen as both an opportunity and a problem and the majority religion of Buddhism has been continually used for political interests. Politically, as an emerging state, the Myanmar government has started to end its harsh press censorship and reduced restrictions on freedom of expression, speech, assembly and religious freedom. As former U.S. President Barack Obama said, genuine democracy and political stability require freedom of religion, because when people are free to practice their faith as they choose, this freedom helps to hold diverse societies together (Thames 2015).

A country made up of multi-ethnics and diverse religious groups with different historical backgrounds,[3] Myanmar has undertaken a series of political and economic reforms in the last decade. There were great hopes that its human rights situation would improve under former President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government, which came to power in early 2011. Myanmar has surprised the world's expectations in some ways: by releasing political prisoners, reaching a cease-fire agreement with certain ethnic armed organizations (Nitta 2018) and suspending large dam projects. The country also entered into constructive engagement with Western powers, and it allowed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to return to mainstream politics as the main opposition figure after the 2012 by-election (Chalk 2013; Min Zin and Joseph 2012), which the National League for Democracy (NLD) had boycotted in 2010.

It initially appeared that the government was exhibiting increased recognition of human rights and civil liberties generally, as indicated by such factors as the increased international presence in the country and the opening up of domestic media (Burma Partnership 2015). The quasi-civilian government, under President Thein Sein, also officially claimed that it wanted to restore permanent peace and stability in the country (Mang 2012:169). However, things have not turned out to be as well as hoped. Religious intolerance and hate speech have increased, and the destruction of Christian churches and crosses and of Muslim mosques continues in many remote parts of the country. For example, in January 2015 the government of Chin State ordered the dismantling and removal of a 54-foot-high Christian cross (Zaw 2015; Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization 2015). Discriminatory practices are also common in Chin State, such as schoolteachers and civil servants being forced to attend meetings and do office work on Sundays in conflict with their worship time, Christian Chin government employees being ordered to prepare food for Buddhist offerings against their will, and Christian Chin children being recruited to attend state-run Buddhist schools and coerced to convert to Buddhism.

and 7 Regions where the Burmese majority are domiciled.

[3] Myanmar has 135 distinct ethnic groups, of which eight are officially recognized by the government. The majority Burmese comprise 68 percent of the population; the Chin represent roughly 2.5 percent.

2. The state's religious racism

While Myanmar was in the process of democratization under quasi-civilian government after decades of dictatorship, at the national level four laws known collectively as the "national race and religious protection bills" were submitted to the Hluttaw (Parliament) in December 2014. They were adopted by the Hluttaw in 2015 and signed into law by President Thein Sein (Lone 2015; Hnin 2015). One of the laws requires a Buddhist woman and a non-Buddhist man wanting to marry to apply for permission from local authorities (Walton, McKay and Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2015:70). The Religious Conversion Law mandates that someone seeking to convert must submit an application and be interviewed by a township registration board so that it can ascertain whether "the person truly believes in the said religion" (Kuok 2015).

This law thus restricts people's right to freely choose a religion, in explicit violation of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 16 (1) that "men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family" and stipulates religious freedom provisions in Article 18. In practice, the four laws have little impact on the people, as civil society organizations also opposed the measure and called for its repeal, declaring that it contravened domestic and international laws. Indeed, there have been no reports on the implementation of this package of four laws, although some religious leaders said they were used in some areas to threaten minority religious groups. In particular, the Religious Conversion Law has been used by Buddhist monks to threaten those who wanted to become Christians.

The biggest threat to religious freedom is religious extremism, which is sponsored by the state in Myanmar. There is a systematic and growing threat to the religious freedom of minorities, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, animists and other non-Buddhists. Section 34 of the country's constitution states that every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion; however, it also gives Buddhism a special position under section 361, whereas other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and animism are simply acknowledged as existing religions in the country.[4] Other laws, such as the national race and religious protection bills, and existing practices show clearly that religious minorities are viewed as threats to the Buddhists. Myanmar appears to have consciously adopted a socio-political strategy that aims to assimilate the country's ethnic and religious minorities, with the majority exerting its dominance over non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups.

[4] Constitution of the Republic of Myanmar, 2008 (the Constitution), Sections 34, 361 and 362.

Historically, Burma's minority relations have been amongst the most complex in Southeast Asia (Berlie 2008). Successive governments have seemed relentless in seeking to 'Burmanize' the country by systematically destroying significant and symbolic identities of non-Burman ethnic groups (Ling and Mang 2004:22; Berlie 2008). The threat to religious freedom of the Christian Chin, who live in the northwestern part of the country, dates back to the military takeover of Burma in the 1960s. In August 1961, Buddhism was made the state religion through a controversial constitutional amendment that alienated religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims. At that point, Christians were not actively threatened as their existence was recognized by Article 21 of the 1947 Constitution (Gutter, 2019:7; Mang 2016:155).

However, the government has applied more systematic methods since the late 1980s to expand both Buddhism and military establishments and thereby gain effective control over the Chin population, which had previously remained relatively free from direct Burmese control (Ling and Mang 2004:73; Sakhong 2010:53; Bagnall 2010). The justification for these actions was the presence of a Chin insurgent movement that began after 1988 with the formation of the Chin National Front/Army (CNF/A) by a few exiled politicians, students and youth who fled to India in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising. Organizations representing other ethnic groups, beginning in the mid- to late 1990s, documented human rights abuses by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar armed forces) in ethnic states (Fink 2008:456-57). In Chin State, which has the largest percentage of Christians, the regime brought in both a large military contingent and Buddhist religious forces.

Also, in the name of the "Hill Regions Buddhist Mission," the junta dispatched Buddhist monks as well as army members to various towns and villages across Chin State (Chin Human Rights Organization 2012:9). With military protection, the Buddhist monks have considerable power over the Chin population (Ling and Mang 2004:23; CHRO 2012:44). This practice has continued under the government of Aung San Suu Kyi as the State Counsellor, the de facto leader of the country paid an official visit to Chin State on Sunday – a practice maintained by several successive governments.

The reason why visiting Chin State on Sunday causes offence is that most Chin Christians are traditionally highly conservative about observing Sunday. All businesses are closed on Sunday and people attend worship services that usually run till mid-day. After that, many churches conduct additional worship programs for women's groups, or people spend the rest of the day visiting with relatives and friends. Under the military junta, official visits to Chin State happened mostly on Sundays, leading people to believe that they were deliberate attempts to disrupt Christians' worship practices. Local government employees would be busy prepar-

ing for the visits and entertaining dignitaries while ordinary people were required to participate in the welcoming ceremony and make long lines by the roadside to greet the visitors. These requirements prevented people from attending church on Sundays, as failure to give the dignitaries a proper welcome would often result in fines or other types of reprisals from the local authorities. Local Christians had hoped that such practices would end after the 2010 elections, but this has unfortunately not been the case.

The Chin, however, had practiced their faith with little interference until the 1990s. Since, the military regime has been involved in attempts to coerce some Chin to convert to Buddhism and to prevent proselytizing by Christians. It also destroyed churches and Christian crosses, harassing, arresting and even abusing pastors. The Chin appear to have been particularly targeted due to their resistance to the military government, as well as their beliefs and their ethnic identity, since the early 1990s.

According to the CHRO (2012:87), local authorities have recruited Chin children to receive formal education in cities, but have then sent them to monasteries where they received Buddhist instruction against their will, or to the government's Border Areas and National Races Youth Development Training Schools (known locally as Na Ta La[5] schools). In the name of development and helping the impoverished parents, their children got free schooling and boarding at Na Ta La Schools run by the Border Affairs Ministry, which is controlled by the military. Informants indicate that the democratic transition in Myanmar has not reached remote areas such as Chin State; as a result, there has not been much change in the schools' structure, teaching method and management under three different governments including the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Aggressive, state-funded propagation of Buddhism is still persistent, ongoing and arguably part of the regime's policy of forced assimilation, and it occurs in a context of widespread and systematic violations of religious freedom and threats against the Chin.

In these circumstances, a response to violations of religious freedom is needed because they could lead to the extinction of the Christian Chin ethnic group. Sangtinuk (2006:41) noted that despite such suppression and repression, the Chin people continue to preserve their faith, culture, language, literature and art. The present study examines why this threat to religious freedom is occurring in Chin State, how the situation is affecting people's lives, and how the existing institutions coordinate and support each other in the process. I also sought to understand how

[5] Na Ta La is the Burmese acronym for Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development Affairs Program.

Figure 1. Map of Chin State, Myanmar

the local stakeholders – community members, churches, youth groups, local NGOs, private firms and many others – were resisting these threats. Chin people face a threat to their ethnicity and identity simply because they are Chin and Christian, which is different from the majority in Myanmar.

My primary research question was how and why the Chin, especially those in the social and religious hierarchy, used different strategies to respond to the threat to their religious freedom. To answer this question, I interviewed Chin religious and community leaders as well as retired government staff, NGO workers and members of the media.

With regard to my research methodology, I must acknowledge the risk of bias since I am Chin and Christian myself. My intention in using an ethnographic method, as a Chin researcher studying my own people, is to attain what Esterberg (2012) calls "first-first experience." I have shared, as a Chin, the experience of being treated as inferior to the Burmese majority. However, I have attempted to maintain objectivity in carrying out my ethnographic research.

My interviews for this research took place in two areas of Chin state, shortly after the general election of November 2015 that brought the new NLD government into power. I visited Matupi, in the southern part of the state, in January and April 2016 and interviewed local stakeholders. I did the same in Hakha in January and February 2016 (see Figure 1). Some follow-up data collection from key informants occurred in March 2017. My interviews mainly covered the situation under previous governments, with little discussion of the situation under the present NLD government.

3. Public opposition and everyday resistance: the Christian Chin's responses to repression

The Christian Chin people have been facing threats to their religious freedom since the 1960s. In response, they have adopted various strategies. As Matthew Mullen (2016:38) stated, "Contentious politics scholars note that diverse types of repressive government are met with equally diverse displays of contentions." The responses by Christian Chin people have differed across individuals, churches, circumstances and times. There are also differences between the northern and southern parts of the state. In a study of Sri Lanka, Bauman and Ponniah (2018:284) stated that "these response strategies and methods differ from momentary survival systems to increasingly far-reaching and long-term comprehensive plans including commitment to engage with civil society for increasing and gaining equal rights, benefits and privileges for people of all faiths." In a similar way, the Chin's forms of organized public opposition and everyday activities in response to their oppressed situation have varied widely. As Mullen (2016:38) explained:

> The relationship between public and hidden response can be contextualized by analyzing a separation between two camps: one that focuses on open collective opposition, and the other that focuses on struggles that are rarely seen and heard. There are theoretical and practical useful partitions between these two camps: the former being contentious politics, the latter being everyday resistance.

3.1 The strategy of downplaying their Christian identity

One everyday response by the Chin has been to reduce their individual and collective visibility as Christians. In the face of legal barriers to their official existence, some Christian Chin organizations registered themselves as "foundations," "associations" or "community-based organizations" connected with an important local place, river or mountain or with individual names. For example, the Chin Association for Christian Communication (CACC) registered with the government as the

Bawinu Foundation for its social and development-related work in Chin State. Rev. Paul Tum Ceu stated that they registered both their land and the church in an individual's name to circumvent legal restrictions. Others have obscured their identity by applying for licenses as "community centers" or by constructing a building very quickly – even working through the night to finish in just a few days, before legal opposition could mount. A church deacon from Hakha who requested anonymity described such an instance:

> We started our church building construction though we did not receive permission from the government. A small building was secretly completed as a result of toiling day and night. We sometimes do the work at nighttime, as they were very strict and did not allow the construction. Likewise, a community center and memorial building [Carson Hall, described below] was also constructed without getting proper permission. (Interview, 26 January 2016)

The government's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has blocked construction and development of places of worship in numerous towns in Chin State since the late 1990s. Many church buildings were left partially completed due to the government's refusal to grant permission for their construction. According to CHRO, Carson Memorial Hall in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, was to be opened on the hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first American missionaries, Arthur and Laura Carson, in the late 1890s (Ling and Mang 2004:80). Nevertheless, the military halted construction in midstream, stating that the church had not obtained official approval from the regime, even though the hall was constructed on church land.

As a result of these restrictions, the Chin pursue creative ways to secure places for worship, prayer and study. Fleming (2016:11) explained:

> In order to have a place of worship, Christians have to circumvent the restrictions. With the backing of their church, individuals usually purchase property in their own names and apply for residential building permits, and in some cases pay bribes, so that they can have a place of worship. In ethnic regions like Chin State, Kachin State, and the Naga area – where traditional land use practice is as yet accepted somewhat –this practice is endured, yet the church and related places are effectively illegal. In 2014, all the churches in Hakha applied to have the ownership changed from private individuals to churches, but to date, none have received a response.

Similarly, the buildings at Chin Christian University (CCU) are also under various individual or private names rather than that of the institution. Explaining the situation, the school's academic dean said:

> We are not allowed by the laws but we still have to build a church, school, and other buildings. We have no other choice but to break the government rules, regulations or orders. We used an individual name, not the name of the institution. Consequently, in the face of authority, all the buildings here hold different individual names for official licensing and ownership of the properties. It is most often registered under the name of the principal and academic dean or pastor. (Interview in Hakha, 26 January 2016)

Most of the key informants did not think that they were challenging the government; rather, they saw themselves as avoiding the authority's laws or rules so that their basic needs could be fulfilled. This uncoordinated strategy of downplaying one's identity has been deployed for decades. The principal of United Theological College at Matupi in southern Chin State, Thawng Hnin Zam, said:

> I checked all our land ownership documents but all I saw was under a private [individual] name – principals and academic deans of the respective years. After I became the principal, I decided to change it into an organization name under the institution again, but I have not yet been successful.

In Chin State, no church denominations or religious institutions have been registered with the government. Instead, they use national-level organization names such as Myanmar Baptist Convention for legitimacy. The discriminatory restrictions on the Chin's uses of their land effectively make Christian infrastructure illegal. As a result, the Chin have no choice but to circumvent these limitations by downplaying their Christian identity. Some of these inventive strategies are obviously illegal, but their application demonstrates the strength and resilience of Chin State's Christian communities. One pastor even said in our interview, "I think I can say what we do is civil disobedience."

3.2 The strategy of institutional engagement

Christian Chin have also responded to state pressure and promotion of Buddhism through institutional channels, similar to the institutional engagement observed by Bauman and Ponniah (2018:285) in Sri Lanka. The Chin are institution builders. There exist numerous unregistered local umbrella organizations such as the Hakha Baptist Association (HBA), Matupi Baptist Association (MBA) and 26 others that belong to the Chin Baptist Convention (CBC), headquartered in Falam in northern Chin State. The creation of another umbrella organization, the Chin Association for Christian Communication (CACC) based in the Chin State capital of Hakha, was part of an innovative response to growing restrictions. These institutions have a clear

organizational structure and identified leaders who serve as grassroots educators and development practitioners, as environmental awareness promoters, and as the public face for Christian Chin, representing their interests to those in power. These institutions, likewise, give an extra layer of assurance and protection to Christian Chin. They represent the local Christian communities, for instance, when high-level official visitors from the central government come to Chin State.

However, the process of registering such organizations, whether large or small, is difficult if not impossible. Rev. Thuk Laeng, a pastor from Matupi in southern Chin State, said in an interview on 14 January 2016:

> We tried many possible different ways but it turns out that they did not work. For example, we cannot get permission to build a church in the township level office, or at the state level from Hakha either. We met with the ministers who came to Matupi and went to the central government, letting them know about the situation here. We make requests all the time, but we have not been successful.

Churches have had their applications repeatedly denied by administrators who refer them to the central government authority or simply refuse to register them. Or the applications have disappeared amidst administrative red tape. According to Rev. Victor Lai Lian, a leader of the organization of churches in Matupi, the application needs to go through different departments including "Forestry, Land Record, Immigration, Construction, Agriculture, Police, Religious Affairs and General Administration," most of which are controlled by the central military (interview in Matupi, 5 April 2016). Even after one has secured all signatures and approval stamps, one must submit all the application materials to the General Administrative Department (GAD) township officer for further processing. That's where, in the Matupi case, the application went missing and was never returned. Christian churches in many parts of Chin State have had similar experiences. As a result, Christian churches and organizations often affiliate with an established national institution and therefore fall under their legal designation.

In Myanmar, the government has not allowed any minority religious group to register officially since the 1960s. Therefore, state and local Christian institutions affiliate with national Christian organizations that were registered before the restrictions began. For instance, most Baptist churches in Myanmar use the official registration of the Myanmar Baptist Convention. Rev. Paul Tum Ceu described what the local churches in Hakha have done:

> We cannot have official registration locally, so we used the registration number of the Myanmar Baptist Convention which was given in 1950-1951 (Regd. no. 34/50-51).

> You can see that all the Baptist churches in Hakha have put that registration number on their signboards. (interview, 26 March 2016)

The registration challenge, then, is generally solved through coordination with a national organization. However, as one pastor said, "I still feel that we are unrecognized or systematically neglected." The Christian Chin communities still cannot engage freely in many types of activity, as they need to go through many different layers of formalities, which are very difficult to fulfil. Pastor Khen Chum Bik said, "We still need to be very careful in doing any religious-related activities and in finding ways to circumvent the law and orders." Since the Christian Chin cannot obtain proper official permission to build churches or use church-related land for construction or even to hold programmes, their only alternative is to circumvent the restrictions by connecting with a bigger institution.

After the general election in November 2015, the NLD government gave the ceremonial position of vice president to a Chin ethnic leader who is Christian. This move, however, created tension between the majority Buddhist Burmese and other ethnic minorities, which was expressed on various platforms including social media. Since the vice presidency is largely a symbolic position, Christians still struggle even to get official permissions or to register religious land and other properties.

3.3 Strategies of enduring, coping and accommodating

Christian Chin communities and their leaders choose to endure repression and threats to their religious freedom. They remain in areas where repression and threats are common, but they practice their religion quietly or secretly, outside the authority's gaze. An ordained pastor from southern Chin State who looks after churches of different villages in Matupi Township, Rev. Thuk Laeng, explained in a 14 January 2016 interview, "When you're Christian in Chin State, you are controlled completely and discriminated against by the authorities." In the view of many informants, Chin State has been systematically neglected in terms of development but has been targeted by Myanmar's systematic assimilation programme for many years. On many occasions, the government has imposed different types of restrictions.

In 2012, the ethnic armed group the Chin National Front (CNF) along with its armed wing, the Chin National Army (CNA), signed a comprehensive, bilateral ceasefire agreement with the government. Under this agreement, Chin people are guaranteed protection from human rights abuses by both CNF and the Myanmar army, freedom of religion and the ability to own land for religious purposes, to build churches and freely proselytize (Myanmar Peace Monitoring, 2012). However, community members have complained of severe restrictions on their freedom of religious assembly

as township orders from Matupi curtailed the ability to worship freely. Township-level orders stated that conducting any religious gathering or training would be allowed only after an application was approved. Many times in the past, such measures or the detention of locals has prevented churches from holding evening worship services. The restrictions are worst when somebody dies or there is a special programme or other emergency issues in town. Community members have often been taken to the government office for violating the limited hours permitted for evening services; local leaders have felt threatened when questioned by officials.

The Chin have sought to protect themselves in this difficult situation by a policy that Rev. Thuk Laeng described as "follow the orders and obey the rules," without any verbal or physical protest. As Reimer (2018:320) also stated, endurance is the most common response to persecution. At one end of the spectrum, endurance can mean reluctant and grudging acceptance. In most instances, endurance is not voluntary (Reimer 2018:320). It can be summarized concisely in these words, which I heard from many informants: "We have no choice but to follow the orders and obey. They have power. And after all, they have guns."

Sometimes, churches arrive at a mutual understanding with the government. Tadros, who studied Arab countries, confirmed that such agreements often preserve the interests of the church as an institution, but that they do not necessarily secure the rights of individual believers (Tadros 2018:122). A similar situation has developed in Chin State during the military regimes and has continued under the present government. For instance, the General Secretary of the Hakha Baptist Association (HBA), who was also a leader of the Hakha Christian Minister Fellowship (HCMF), commented:

> We had a meeting with President Thein Sein during his official visit to Hakha. We raised different issues, one of which was the issue of holding meetings with local officials on Sundays. We informed him that when officials from the central government came to Chin State, they often arrive on Sunday with helicopters and hold meetings on the same day, which disturbs participation in worship services for many civil servants, town elders, and others. When we raised this issue, the President responded that they don't intentionally do that and will not do so in the future. (interview with HBA/HCMF leader from Hakha, capital of Chin State, on 31 March 2016)

The chance to meet with the president was encouraging, but his promise has never materialized. Rather, the practice of visiting and holding meetings on Sundays continues even under the present government. This issue was raised again during a public meeting between State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Hakha residents

during her visit. Nevertheless, nothing changed as the State Counsellor replied to the question by saying that she had visited Chin State on Sunday as she is free only on Sundays.

Another understanding reached between the local government and the Chin people was shown to have failed when the Chin State government ordered removal of a cross erected on the west side of Hakha in 2015 and imposed other restrictions, including requiring permission for any meetings or training at local level authority. In some cases, both religious and other organizations still need state permission to operate. Despite these circumstances, Chin churches continue to try to manage the situation through strategic alliances and networks as described above.

After the military coup in 1988, as heavy militarization started and the establishment of the Buddhist Hills Mission took place in the 1990s, it became apparent to most Christian Chin that they had no other option than to figure out how to live under a military dictatorship, unless they could escape the country. As part of an attempt both to build legitimacy for direct military rule and to prepare for a potential transition away from it, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1993 established a mass-membership Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) to promote its political agenda and interests (David and Holliday 2018:4). When the military initially engineered the USDA, most Christian Chin leaders and citizens appeared reluctant to join. However, large numbers of Chin eventually signed on, whether voluntarily or under duress, after severe pressure and the offer of various incentives such as exemption from forced labour or favourable treatment by the government.

In March 2010, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was launched from within the USDA to participate in the upcoming general election, and in July 2010 the USDA was dissolved (David and Holliday 2018:4). In view of the USDP's authority, Christian Chin need to be in close contact with military officials or USDP leaders in any possible way, so as to find ways around any laws or restrictions while exhibiting politeness, courtesy and compassion. Sometimes, Christian Chin have to tell calculated untruths to the authority in order to accomplish things. For instance, one key informant from the north said, "We have enabled many of us [pastors] to go abroad by changing our job title, e.g. from 'pastor' to 'farmer,' when applying for travel documents. That's the only available way to attend meetings or study theology abroad."

3.4 Strategies of escaping and migrating

Because of all this discrimination and unequal treatment, one frequent and obvious option for Christian Chin living in areas with significant levels of militarization, anti-Christian harassment and violence is flight or migration. A pattern of Chin peo-

ple leaving and not returning to Chin State started after the 1988 coup. Traditionally, Chin people always returned from places such as Aizawl in Mizoram State or Hpakant in Kachin State, where they travelled as migrant workers. However, since the 1990s some have migrated out of Chin State permanently in search of greater peace, religious freedom and security. Some have sought refuge in such countries as India and Malaysia under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A far more common pattern is the internal migration of Christian Chin from areas where they are a threatened minority to places where they are not acutely threatened. According to *Life Under the Junta: Evidence of Crimes against Humanity in Burma's Chin State*, a systematic study done by the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) in 2010:

> The Burmese Army, Tatmadaw, was responsible for 94.2% of the reported instances of ethnic or religious persecution. Of the 86 households reporting instances of persecution, 51% experienced physical harm, which they ascribed to their Chin ethnicity or Christian faith. (Richards, Sollom and Parmar 2011)

Because of the systematic nature of human rights violations, threats to religious freedom, and lack of educational opportunities and physical security due to being Christians, a good number of Chin have migrated to other areas. The PHR (Richards, Sollom and Parmar 2011:10) reported that "since 1988, estimates place more than 75,000 displaced Chin in India, and another 50,000 in Malaysia." (According to the 2012 Myanmar National Census, the total population of Chin State was 478,801.) Although the exact amount of internal migration is not known, many people left the state entirely, moving to nearby urban centres such as Kalay or to regions like Yangon and Mandalay where they would be more invisible.

Many informants believed that, although there has been a continuous migration amongst youth searching for education opportunities and a better life, the number of Chin moving elsewhere is declining. The end of the military dictatorship in 2010, followed by the creation of quasi-civilian rule and the transitional government in 2012 and 2015, respectively, has brought some changes in the country. However, threats to religious freedom have not totally gone away. As Rev. Peng Thang summarized the situation, "We have learned that there are changes happening in big cities like the capital Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon or Mandalay, but it seems as if that kind of change has not reached us."

3.5 Strategies of resistance

Christian Chin leaders and members of the general public have responded to repression in many different ways. They endure, escape, migrate, reach out to indi-

viduals who share a religious identity with the oppressors, fight back or engage in peaceful protest to defend their communities. Or they may use some combination of these responses.

Chin State government authorities frequently select Sunday as the day to disseminate information, orders, rules, regulations and any other necessary announcements. In the past, the military government also targeted and disturbed Sunday church services for forcible recruitment of labour, as many people are gathered together in one place at that time. In some cases, to avoid being recruited, all the men in a village would run and hide in the forest without attending church, Rev. Thuk Laeng said (interview, 14 January 2016).

Mullen describes this type of indirect reaction: "In some undemocratic societies, the absence of a social movement or resistance is replaced by another contentious performance, which reacts to specific type of oppression" (2013:38). For instance, Chinese believers are prepared for harassment, detention, jail and even torture in some cases. Their resistance to the authority can have many unintended consequences, but they nonetheless preserve their faith pure and whole without political compromise (Yang 2018:351). Also, there may be no overt popular social movement, but there are often sporadic micro-protests against particular policies and government behaviours (Mullen 2013). There are various kinds of repression and threats to religious freedom, and the ways in which Christian Chin respond to them also vary. Individual as well as collective-level factors can explain these differences.

During the military dictatorship, Christian pastors were not allowed to go abroad for meetings, mission work or study. The Christian community in rural areas also faced problems, particularly with regard to forced labour. A pastor who looks after churches in rural parts of Matupi Township mentioned that he sometimes needed to tell the military authorities a lie when they seemed frightened or furious:

> There was a time I was the only man in the whole village when the military came. I told the armies that I just got back from travel a day before and didn't know where all the men had gone. In fact, the hideout was very well planned as soon as we heard that the military troops were coming to the village. So we used to tell lies as necessary when dealing with the authority. (interview with Rev. Thuk Laeng from Matupi, Southern Chin State on 14 January 2016)

The ordinary people have engaged in behaviour similar to the Christian Chin leaders when needed. For instance, everyone in Matupi Township joined in closing their shops to show their objection to the removal of the town's cross, even though this action was not coordinated or organized by any leaders. A pastor who was also a

shop owner in Matupi said during an interview that the policemen came to their house and asked them to open the shop, but they refused, giving excuses such as that they were not feeling well or had an ill son. These behaviours can be described as passive resistance strategies designed to support the continuation of church programmes and other mission activities.

3.6 Petitions and mass prayer rallies in the church

The somewhat increased openness in Myanmar has provided greater access to and contact with different organizations, and the resulting sharing of information has led to more effective responses. "Before, it was not by any means conceivable to raise concerns or anything to the government," a pastor from Hakha stated. Since 2012, a large number of Christian petitions have been sent to government offices ranging from the state level to the president's office, appealing for an end to violations of religious freedom, ethnic-based discrimination and abuse, and the denial of official registration to Christian churches. When the government ordered removal of Matupi's cross, a female church leader said, "All the churches in Matupi town came together and argued against it by giving a letter of petition to the authority." The demand, however, was unsuccessful and the cross was demolished by the military, while the locals held a mass prayer rally at the church to emphasize their stance.

There has also been increased contact with international actors, whereas in the past the main source of information about the outside world came from the streams of fleeing refugees. When international visits to Chin State became possible in late 2012, contact with church communities abroad resumed. Not only religious-based organizations but also the Chin Human Rights Organization, formed of exiles, came into the country, and local Chin communities were trained to write accurate accounts of incidents of persecution and to submit petitions to officials. A youth leader from Hakha said of this human rights training:

> It gave us the strength to move forward on what to do about our freedom. It is very difficult to say whether it was fruitful. However, I think that different responses have their own impact depending on the particular time. For instance, a petition letter signed by the youth and community leaders was very successful in 2012. Moreover, that was the only thing we could do then. (interview with youth leader from Hakha on 25 January 2016)

Since the shift from military to USDP rule in early 2011 after the first general election in decades, it has been hard to take a stand against or criticize the government, although things were worse under the previous military government. Some signifi-

cant positive changes have occurred; for example, victims of ethnic and religious-based persecution could be interviewed directly by international organizations such as Physicians for Human Rights, whose detailed 2011 report made the situation of Christian Chin more widely known, and CHRO. These efforts have also unearthed previously unseen government orders and official documents that contained plans to eradicate or contain the Christian Chin movement. Strengthened by contacts amongst local organizations and international advocates and a growing knowledge of basic human rights through training, Christians in Myanmar have been more active in standing up for religious freedom. In recent years, with the support of NGOs, some Christian Chin community leaders have tried to use the existing laws and regulations to protect their civil and human rights. They have organized large protests over the destruction of Christian crosses or land confiscation, although since demonstrations were not allowed, they referred to these events as 'prayer days.' Perhaps the best-known such protest occurred in Matupi after the military destroyed large crosses in 2005. A woman who was among the organizers in Matupi explained:

> We organized a fasting and prayer programme after the military destroyed the 30-foot-high cross at Boltlang in order to show our sadness and response to what they did. As we could not do a demonstration, we just did a 'prayer day.' Many people came to the church for fasting and prayer on that day. (interview with woman leader from Matupi, southern Chin State on 15 January 2016)

The most recent demonstration of this type occurred when the government of Chin State ordered the dismantling of a cross at Hakha in 2015. It had been installed by locals without government permission, since they presumed that they would not receive official permission if they requested it. According to Pu Tial Cem, a 74-year-old man who has been hauled into court 14 times over issues related to crosses, "We did not apply for permission as none of the Christian churches have official status here in Chin State." After tensions between the government and the general public, the demonstrators achieved a victory as the cross is still standing in the same place. It can be argued that the erection of crosses was a response to what the Chin regarded as a state-sponsored importation of Buddhism into their state, with the construction of pagodas and temples in certain urban centres beginning in the 1990s.

3.7 Strategies of peaceful demonstration, non-cooperation and civil disobedience

Scott, author of *Weapons of the Weak*, describes regular obstruction strategies as a generally safe form of "self-help" (Scott 1985:1) or as weapons of "first resort"

(Scott 1989:34), used by individuals who seek to achieve oppositional ends without making themselves targets. The list of methods he provides includes "dissimulation, feigned ignorance, desertion and so on" (Scott 1989:5). The Chin have used these resistance methods in their own way, which has not been coordinated but has still had a noticeable impact. For instance, the authorities were infuriated when all shops closed in Matupi town immediately after a cross, planted in 1984 and replaced with a 30-foot-high solid concrete structure in 2001, was targeted for removal by the military in March 2005 (Ling and Mang 2004:33).

For many years, the State has attempted to use government-funded education as an influential tool to 'Burmanize' the country's ethnic people. The education programmes were set up in a manner designed to demoralize critical thinking skills. They were openly both pro-Burmese and pro-military. Ethnic groups were not allowed to teach their own language or about religion or history. However, many informants explained that the Christian churches continue to play an important role in promoting Christianity and in preserving local languages and histories. Mullen (2013:115) also found that private teachers, as well as some public teachers, throughout the country followed their own curricula, adopted their own teaching style, and taught in their own language. This strategy appears in contemporary Chin State as the main method of ensuring that local culture and literature are sustained. Local languages are used, historical accounts are taught, and students learn about their religion in Sunday school as well as at summer camp programmes.

Many informants stated that they avoid cooperating with the government, feign ignorance of the law or pay bribes to obtain help from the officials or get away with noncompliance. Most are reluctant to pay for favourable treatment. Sometimes, government staff directly request payments in exchange for completing paperwork. William Khen Chum Bik, a pastor and lecturer from Hakha, told officials that "we couldn't pay [a bribe] because the money we receive is for the church, including widows who contribute specifically towards its support."

To construct churches, Christian Chin have sometimes resorted to other more creative and non-cooperative tactics, registering their land in the name of a congregation member. This would allow them to erect a building, after which the individual would transfer ownership to the church upon the completion of construction. This practice has continued under the SPDC, USDP and the present NLD government. Rev. Paul Tum Ceu explained the process as follows:

> The government told us to apply for permission. We have followed the procedures exactly in accordance with what they said, and with our church name, but it's been more than two years and there is still no response. We did try to change our institution's legal status from a private individual to the church name, in order

> to have legal permission to build other buildings, but we got no response. So we have to practice our old strategy – using the name of a church member to request permission to build, and then having the church member surrender ownership to the church again. (interview in Hakha on 31 March 2016)

In the face of severe restrictions on the construction of churches and the lack of alternative avenues to have these sanctions lifted, non-compliance with bureaucratic requirements is often employed as a means of non-cooperation, which essentially amounts to active defiance. The change in government since 2010 has caused people to become emboldened to take such actions in a more open manner. This is in contrast to the widespread climate of fear enabled by the tight stranglehold on fundamental human rights and civil liberties under the previous military regime. However, this does not necessarily mean any loosening of restrictions. Rather, people have become somewhat less afraid of repercussions and thus have felt more willing to engage in visible civil actions, such as street demonstrations to protest violations of religious freedom and other fundamental human rights, which would have been unimaginable under the previous military regimes. As one community leader explained, "Now, even when the authority asked the local people to destroy [the cross] in 2015, we strongly stand against the order unlike before. … We were not alone; we were supported by all the community and the churches."

Many of the restrictive policies and practices as well as other bureaucratic red tape used to limit religious freedom under the previous military regimes remain unchanged. The mere fact that people are less afraid to openly challenge perceived injustices is indicative of how they will respond to any future arbitrary measures so as to protect their fundamental freedoms. Since 2010, Myanmar has gone through two election cycles with a third one on the horizon. Although the pace of progress towards democratic transition has been rather slow and frustrating, some believe that more citizens will become accustomed to democratic practices through the transition period. At a minimum, the periodic electoral exercise enabled by the 2008 constitution can create greater responsiveness to civilian demands by political leaders, at least during an election season. Similarly, the people can take advantage of the limited opportunity to expand their democratic space and better protect their fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom.

4. Conclusion

It is hard to assess the effectiveness of the different responses by the Christian Chin to the restrictions and threats to religious freedom described in this paper. As we have seen, Christian Chin communities survived the military dictatorship period, and in a few cases, their beliefs seem to have been strengthened. However, many

people have left their communities, emigrating in search of a safe haven. On the other hand, the Chin's responses have constituted important advocacy for religious freedom. Many of the Chin leaders interviewed for this study agreed that if religious freedom is to be established and sustained, it must be grounded in a culture of tolerance and mutual respect. A pastor from Hakha said, "We don't want any special favours, just equal treatment under the law. We are not asking for special privileges, just our basic rights." Unfortunately, these requests have been only moderately successful.

Over time, the Christian Chin communities have developed various coping strategies and mechanisms in response to repression and persecution, including relatively subtle resistance methods such as civil disobedience and non-cooperation, as well as more pronounced approaches such as direct confrontation with local and other higher authorities, using formal channels of complaint and reporting specific incidents of abuse. However, the lack of substantive change in the system even after the semi-civilian government has emerged since 2010 remains a serious barrier to the enjoyment of religious freedom, not just for Chin Christians but for other minorities across the country. Similarly, in the early stages of NLD government, there were no changes in policies, laws and regulations. Therefore, with regard to religious freedom in Chin State, it could be argued that the situation has remained mostly the same even though there are some changes in practice.

If any meaningful lesson can be drawn from the experience of the past decades, it is that without serious political will to address the issue of religious freedom as a fundamental human right, the status quo will persist. Otherwise, the various forms of resistance to injustice will continue, with potentially serious complications for long-term peace or any efforts to build a pluralistic society that could sustain Myanmar in the long run. Although more research is necessary, the experience of the Christian Chin offers evidence that people who care about the status of religious freedom in the world can do something to produce positive change.

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