



### Civil Wars with Ethnic Minorities

There are 135 ethnic groups in Burma, and 68% of people are Bamar. In the 1960s, Burma's ruling elite began a process of "Burmanization" in which minority cultures were forcefully assimilated into the majority Bamar culture. Minority groups remain subject to a lack of government representation and Burma has experienced recurrent ethnic conflicts as a result. Burma's army, the Tatmadaw, has been accused of war crimes and acts of ethnic cleansing, specifically against religious and ethnic minority groups from the northeast and western regions, including the Kachin, Shan, Chin, and Karen groups.

### Ongoing Democratic Reforms

In 2015, Burma held its first contested general election in nearly 50 years, and Aung San Suu Kyi, former political prisoner and Nobel Laureate became the de facto leader of the country. Many countries, including the U.S., have applauded the transition and normalized ties with Burma, seemingly ignoring that the transition has been rife with violence and corruption. During the election, a new police force was established to prevent civil disorder, unsurprisingly resulting in increased military control. Additionally, concerns of electoral corruption, vote-buying, and threats to political opponents continue. A constitutional amendment also bolsters the influence of Tatmadaw, the Burmese army, by allocating 25% of parliamentary seats to the junta. In this way, the Tatmadaw holds veto power over constitutional change, safeguarding their grip on power. The Tatmadaw has been accused of war crimes and ethnic cleansing against minority groups from the northwest and western regions, including the Rohingya.

Despite promises made during the 2010 elections regarding governmental reforms, human rights abuses and crimes against humanity remain rampant in minority areas. Despite these issues, including warning signs of genocide and ethnic cleansing, in 2016, the Obama administration lifted remaining economic sanctions on Burma, effectively abdicating any leverage they may have had to address continuing human rights abuses.

### Timeline

**1948:** Burma gains independence, establishes constitutional democracy

**1962:** Military coup overthrows democratic government; military dictatorship established

**1982:** Law passed denying Rohingya Burmese citizenship

**1988:** Pro-democracy marches initiated by students, violently suppressed and thousands killed

**1990:** National League for Democracy (NLD) wins elections, results ignored by ruling junta

**2007:** Peaceful anti-government protests initiated by Buddhist monks and violently suppressed

**2008:** Constitutional referendum overwhelmingly passes, mixed civilian-military government is established

**2010:** Elections held, Thein Sein becomes President

**2012:** Parliamentary elections held, NLD participates, winning 43 of 45 available seats

**2015:** First contested general election in 25 years with NLD winning majority

**2016:** Htin Kyaw elected President and Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi appointed as State Counsellor

Note: "Burma" was the name given to the country by the British; it was renamed "Myanmar" in 1989 by the military junta. Many Burmese diaspora and human rights organizations choose to use "Burma" in solidarity with the Burmese still suffering at the hands of the government.



### Ethnic Cleansing of the Rohingya

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group living in Burma's western Rakhine State. They are effectively stateless, being denied citizenship in both Burma and Bangladesh, and the United Nations describes them as one of the world's most persecuted groups. The Rohingya face persecution both at the hands of government militias and by the Buddhist majority.

Violence broke out in 2012 between Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists. Buddhist fundamentalist and Islamophobic sentiments have intensified in Burmese politics, particularly in Mon and Rakhine States, exacerbating ethnic tensions. In 2015, Fortify Rights and Yale Law School released a report finding strong evidence that genocide may be taking place against the Rohingya, and recommending that the UN Human Rights Council establish an inquiry into the human rights situation in Rakhine State. Aung San Suu Kyi, once the darling of the west, continues to insist there is no ethnic cleansing taking place.

In October 2016, coordinated attacks by a small group of Rohingya insurgents led to the deaths of nine officials. This was the trigger the Burmese military needed to begin a formal ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya, blaming all Rohingya for the attack. At least 1,500 buildings have been destroyed, including homes and mosques. 400,000 have fled to Bangladesh since August leaving approximately one million Rohingya living in Bangladesh refugee camps. Many Rohingya who have stayed are living in internally displaced camps, which have existed since 2012 been described by many as "modern day concentration camps." The camps lack food and have no health care, and aid organizations are prevented from entering them. There are roughly 150,000 internally displaced. Over the past year, both government and non-state groups have used anti-personnel landmines and forced military recruitment, including of children. Government forces have been found responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and destruction of property.

The UN decided in March 2017 to send a group to investigate atrocities against the Rohingya, but the Burmese government has declared that they will not give visas to this group.

### International Response

To date, the European Union has contributed €51 million towards the Rohingya crisis. €30 million of this has been allocated to specifically aid Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the UK opted to halt all training programs for the Burmese military. The United Nations has also condemned the violence occurring, but further action has been blocked by China. A strong international response is needed to alleviate the suffering that the Rohingya are currently exposed to, and the United States should be dedicating substantial resources towards a solution.

