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**Systemic Threat to the Religious Freedoms of Christian Chins  
In Burma/Myanmar**

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**Abstract**

*As the biggest threat to religious freedom is religious extremism, which is sponsored by the State, in Burma, there is a growing threat to religious minorities including the Christians, Muslims and other non-Buddhists. The threat to religious freedom of the Christian Chins in Burma particularly dates back to the military takeover of the country in the 1960s. Along with methods to Burmanize the Chins as well as other ethnic and religious minorities, Burmese governments used different strategies and they have been, therefore, systematically converted into Buddhist through coercion or any other possible means. Not only that, the Chin state government, for instance, had ordered to remove a 54-foot-high Christian cross in January 2015. It seems the democratic transition in Burma does not reach to the remote areas of Chin State. This research tries to identify the threat that impacts their life and the struggle of Christian Chin's resistance against the threat to religious freedom. Despite such suppression, the Chin people continue to preserve and conserve their belief or religion, culture, language, literature and art. This has an immense significance for the Chin people in their struggle against threats to religious freedoms.*

**Keywords; Religious, Freedom, Christian, Chin, Burma/Myanmar**

## **Introduction; background of the study area**

Chin people, one of ethnic groups in Burma/Myanmar with currently estimated population of around 478,801 (UNFPA, 2014) and located in the remote mountain ranges of northwestern Burma bordering with Arakan State in the south, Bangladesh in the south-west, Sagaing and Magway Region in the east, Manipur State of India in the north and Mizoram States of India in the west. Another less than a million Chins are scattered throughout Burma and abroad. Since the introduction of Christianity to the Chin people by the American Baptist Missionaries in 1899, the Chin community and cultural identity has been largely characterized by religion (Thang, 2011; CHRO, 2006) where the majority of the country population are Buddhist. As the majorities are embrace in Buddhism, it then becomes a tool of dictators to demolish ethnic minorities and it has been used as a form of legitimacy to maintain their power. This research will find the threat experienced by ethnic minority particularly by the Chin, which makes up about only one percent of the country's population. And, how the Chin people resisted against the threat imposed by the State? The research will identify and analyze the situation in regard to the ethnic Christian Chins in Burma and focus upon the pain and suffering inflicted by successive different governments.

## **Research method**

The overall design of this research takes a qualitative approach, meaning that the author uses a formal, objective, systematic process where data are utilized to test the below research questions. To answer those, the type of qualitative investigation that the author pursues is ethnographic research design and case study method is applied. In regards to this research methodology, the author, as a researcher, has to justify the ethnographic research method, which is used in this study. The intention to utilize ethnography method, for a Chin researcher to a similar people, to attain as what Esterberg (2002) calls "first-first experience" which the author knowledge and understanding about Chin was primarily constructed by Christian Chins. Since the study adopts a case study method and applies qualitative investigation to construct knowledge about the threat to religious freedom of Chins and their resistance, key informant in-depth interviews from influential religious and community leaders, NGOs, media persons are employed. The primary sources of data collected from fields are supported by an assessment of secondary sources. The physical research area is north and south of Chin State in northwest Burma. The specific scope of the research is the

impact of threat to religious freedom of Christian Chins and their struggle against. The units of analysis will mainly focus on the imposition of Buddhist norms into the lives of Christian Chin's impacts on livelihood, education and physical security of people based on the real experiences facing.

### **Research questions**

Aiming to understand, and see how and what this threat affects their belief or religion, and identities Chin people in their struggle beside threat against religious freedom; the following research question will be addressed.

How the Chins face and resistance against the threat to religious freedom that impacts their livelihood, education, and physical security? And Why?

### **Research findings; case study**

Religion is an important factor in the creation and consolidation of people's identity and an element of sub-cultural integration (Dobbelaere, 2008). It may be considered as problematic for the integration of emerging State in the period of democratic transition for the country like Burma. President Obama also said, genuine democracy and political stability require "freedom of religion—because when people are free to practice their faith as they choose, it helps hold diverse societies together" (Thames, 2015). In the same way, Burma gives a series of political and economic reforms; it has given many hopes that human rights situation would improve as soon as President Thein Sein's government came to power in 2011. Burma truly continues to surprise the world as expected in some areas, namely, the release of political prisoners, a ceasefire agreement with certain ethnic armed organizations, a suspension of mega-dam projects, constructive engagement with Western powers, and Aung San Suu Kyi's return to mainstream politics (Chalk, 2013; Min Zin and Joseph, 2012).

### **Religious freedom in transitioning Burma/Myanmar under the USDP**

The USDP government officially claimed that they really want to restore permanent peace and stability in the country (Mang, 2012). However, things have not turned out to be as good as they seem since the religious intolerance and hate speech has increased, the destruction and not allowing to build or renovate Christian churches, crosses and Muslim temples in many remote parts of the country still continue. The Chin State government, for

instance, ordered to dismantle a 54-foot-high Christian cross at the capital in January 2015 (Zaw, 2015; UNPO, 2015). There are also discriminatory practices like schoolteachers are being forced to attend a meeting on Sunday, which is the worship service time for Christian Chins. The other practices include the Christian Chin government employees are being ordered to prepare food for Buddhist offerings without their will (Thang, 2013).

At the national level, on the one hand, the laws collectively known as the 'National Race and Religious Protection' package, which was submitted to the Parliament of Burma (Myanmar) in December 2014, were adopted last year and signed by President Thein Sein (Lone, 2015; Hnin, 2015). In which, the law requires a Buddhist woman and a non-Buddhist man wanting to marry to apply for permission from local authorities. The Religious Conversion Bill mandates that someone seeking to convert submits an application and be interviewed by a township registration board to allow it to ascertain whether 'the person truly believes in the said religion' (Kuok, 2015). Simply, this law restricts the right of a person to freely choose a religion. It is, therefore, explicit that this law violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states (in Article 18) everyone has the right to freedom of religion or belief (UDHR, 1948).

### **Human rights violations and Buddhism as the de facto state religion**

In 2012 the Chin National Front (CNF) and the government signed ceasefire agreements – the most comprehensive of all the bilateral agreements, detailing 51 points – which included specific protections for religious freedom, such as the right to own land for religious purposes and the right to proselytize. However, different types of human rights violations are ongoing in Chin State. In response to that, it was in February 2015 when Mr. Thein Sein, president of Burma/Myanmar, visited the Chin capital Hakha, the representatives of the local people brought the issue of the civil servants being forced to work on Sunday. At that time, the president orally agreed and guaranteed to cease such practice. Nevertheless, not too long from the president's visit, the same thing repeated in the following month, May when the newly appointed teachers training, obliged from the Union authority, was organized on Sundays, which is the violation of the right to gather for religious worship and raises the prospect of labor rights.

The November 2013 Chin National Conference, which brought altogether representatives from the Chin State Government, the Chin National Front, the Chin Civil

Society Organizations, Youth and Student Groups and others, put forward the 12 recommendations in relation to religious freedom. Referring to the ceasefire agreements and to make it stronger, one of the recommendations sought for the authorities to grant the ownership rights of land and building for religious, and to restore the Christian crosses, which were destructed by the authority during the last two decades. Most of the Christian churches and lands in Chin State are registered in the private name and the churches are effectively illegal that make the community people concerns. In regards to this and order from the government during the USDP era, all the churches based in Hakha formally applied changing the ownership from private to churches or association, however, the applications have been disregarded so far. “None of the churches or religious institutions has got official registration,” said Pastor Joel, one of the leaders from Hakha Baptist Association (Interview-8, 2 April 2016).

In January 2015, then Chief Minister of Chin State Hung Ngai, a former Brigadier-General from the Burma Military, ordered that a newly-planted cross in Hakha be dismantled, on the basis that it had been planted without permission. One of the elders involved in planting the cross explained, “None of the churches have permission, and many crosses have been destroyed, so we knew we would never get permission” (Interview-7, 01 April 2016). The large cross came to Chief Minister Hung Ngai’s attention after the Chin elder arranged to clear pine trees around the site of the cross, and it became visible from the town. Hung Ngai personally ordered that charges be brought against the elder under the Forestry Act. He appeared in court fourteen times, and was convicted and ordered to pay a fine or face three months in jail.

The order to dismantle the cross provoked a public outcry in Hakha and the threat of large-scale public protests. Hakha Christian Ministers’ Fellowship (HCMF) leaders also discussed the issue with President Thein Sein during his visit in February 2015. Following significant public pressure, Hung Ngai told the HCMF that they could apply to own 3 acres of land surrounding the cross. However, he insisted that the same size of land would be allocated for Buddhist, on a higher peak on the same mountain range. This was met with strong resistance from the Chin Christian community, due to the fact that five state-sponsored Buddhist pagodas had already been built to the east of the town.

For now, the situation is at a stalemate. The cross is still standing and the pagoda has not been built, but this is due to significant public pressure rather than any substantive

change in policy or practice. Although they applied more than a year ago, the HCMF doesn't yet have official land ownership of the area surrounding the cross. In the same way, an umbrella organization of churches in Matupi, in southern Chin State, applied for permission around four years ago to plant a new cross on a mountain peak to replace one previously destroyed by the military to clear the area for their camp. But they have never received a response from the authority. So, in 2013, locals decided to plant a cross at a nearby waterfall to replace a cross previously planted there which had been destroyed by the military. However, according to the response from the pastor in Matupi, they did not ask prior permission based on their past experience and as the authority never give permission or even response to the people in this regard.

### **Discussion and analysis**

It can be argued that this is a socio-political strategy aiming to assimilate the country's ethnic and religious minorities, in which the majority to exert its dominance over non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups. Until 1990, the Chin could generally practice their non-Buddhist beliefs with little interference; since then the military regime appears to be involved in attempts to coerce some Chin to convert to Buddhism and to prevent proselytizing by Christians, destroying churches and crosses, harassing, arresting and even abusing pastors. Some churches have been closed and religious symbols such as crosses removed from the top of mountains; soldiers have disrupted church services and there have been physical attacks on pastors. Moreover, local authorities have also recruited Chin children to receive formal education in cities, but these (Christian) Chins would be sent to monasteries where they received Buddhist teachings against their will (Thang, 2015 cited CHRO, 2012). This is all still repeatedly happening even in newly NLD government. The democratic transition in Burma does not reach to the remote areas like Chin State.

Today, by looking at what is happening to the Christian Chins, it is very clear that they have been facing a threat to the religious freedom that has an acute impact on their life in its totality. Resistance to this threat has to be launched lest it should lead to the extinction of the Christian Chins, for which a model has to be sought. As mentioned, Sangtinuk (2006) stated despite such suppression, the Chin people continue to preserve and conserve their belief or religion, culture, language, literature and art. This has an immense significance for the Chin people in their struggle against threats to religious freedoms.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the interviewees consistently expressed their sense of suffering at ongoing violations, including of religious freedom. In the words of one pastor, “We still have a lot of pain in our hearts, our feeling is so strong” (Interview-4, 15 January 2016). When asked about the situation, a typical response was, “We don't want any special favors, just equal treatment under the law. We are not asking for special privileges, just our basic rights” (Interview- 1, 14 January 2016). To conclude, therefore the Chin Christian populations are subjected to the systemic threat which is a socio-political strategy aiming at the assimilation by not granting their religious freedom. This kind of problems, particularly threat to religious freedom not only happens in the previous military and USDP led government until 2015 but it also continues under the present NLD led government. As mentioned earlier, although most of the churches in the capital have applied for official registration, which will guarantee the proper ownership of land, building, cemeteries, and other Christian related institutions and compounds but the successive different governments have not approved them yet. This kind of practices clearly show that the government treatment toward the minority religions is still different from the majority religion-Buddhist, which is supported by the State with its mechanism. In this kind of situation, the Chin Christians, therefore, faces threat to their rights, particularly freedom of religion and belief.



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