

# Myanmar Overview



**53 million**

*people live in Myanmar*



**1 quarter**

*of the population is living below the poverty line*



**135**

*different ethnic groups*

Myanmar is the largest country by area in mainland Southeast Asia and is bordered by China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand. It has a diverse population of around 53 million people with approximately 135 separate ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> Despite its size and location, Myanmar is also placed in the lower half of the region's economies, with around one quarter of its population estimated to be living below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> The main religion in Myanmar is Buddhism, with around 88% of the population identifying as such.<sup>3</sup> While the majority of Myanmar's seven states are inhabited mostly by the dominant Bamar ethnic group, there are also seven regions which consist mainly of particular ethnic minorities.



*Location: Asia*

Myanmar is faced with many challenges today. Much of Myanmar's modern history has been characterised by civil and ethnic conflict. Active conflict zones still exist in parts of the country, including the Rakhine, Shan, Kachin and Kayin states.<sup>4</sup> Ongoing ethnic and religious violence has intensified since 2012, culminating in the tragic displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees from the country in the past year,<sup>5</sup> and accusations of human rights impingements have drawn widespread condemnation from the international community.

The high incidence of poverty is exacerbated by barriers to education, and has contributed to adverse health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are limited, resulting in the imprisonment, attack and intimidation of human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists.<sup>7</sup>



1 The World Bank, *Myanmar: A Systematic Country Diagnostic*, November 2014, [http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/EAP/Myanmar/WBG\\_SCD\\_Full\\_Report\\_English.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/EAP/Myanmar/WBG_SCD_Full_Report_English.pdf)  
2 The World Bank, *Myanmar Poverty Assessment 2017: Part Two*, 12 December 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmar-poverty-assessment-2017-part-two>  
3 Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*, July 2016, [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Religion\\_-\\_Census\\_Report\\_V2-C\\_DOP\\_Jul2016\\_ENG.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Religion_-_Census_Report_V2-C_DOP_Jul2016_ENG.pdf)  
4 REDRESS, *Supplement to the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict: Myanmar, Myanmar-Specific Guidance for Practitioners*, March 2018, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5ac784b24.html> p. 4  
5 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2018 - Burma*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a61ee93a.html>  
6 The World Bank, *Myanmar Overview*, April 2018, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/overview>  
7 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2018 - Burma*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a61ee93a.html>

## History

After 800 years of dynastic rule, the British waged three wars on Myanmar, which became the British colony of Burma in 1886. The country remained occupied by Britain until 1948 when Burma became an independent republic. After Myanmar was again occupied – this time by Japan – General Nay Win led a military junta, taking control of Myanmar and expelling all foreign missionaries and nationalising the nation's education system. In 1990, supposedly democratic national elections were held, though the result, which had the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) claiming victory in a landslide, was ignored by the ruling military. It wasn't until 2011 that the military relinquished its hold on the government, beginning a transition to a nominally civilian government. In 2015, the first truly democratic elections were held and the result—the NLD again winning—was acknowledged. However, the leader of the NLD, Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, was constitutionally banned from becoming president. Instead, she assumed the role of State Counsellor, with significant restrictions imposed upon her by the military.

## The People

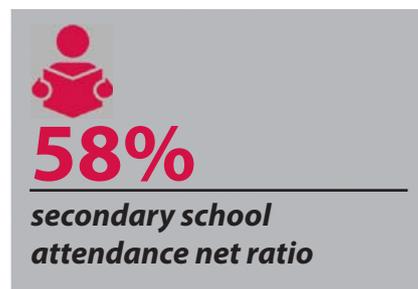


Myanmar is an ethnically diverse country. The Bamar people represent the majority (68%) of the population.<sup>8</sup> The Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chinese, Mon, Indian, Chin, and Rohingya make up around 28% of the population.<sup>9</sup> Myanmar is home to many language families,

including: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Austro-Asiatic Austronesian, Hmong-Mien and Indo-European.<sup>10</sup> The official language of Myanmar is Burmese, the major language of the Bamar people; but at least one hundred languages are spoken nationwide. Aside from Buddhism, Christianity (6%) and Islam (4%) are the next most followed religions.<sup>11</sup> Hinduism is present in Myanmar, but at around 0.5%, it is among the stark minorities, including Catholicism and other religions (1%).<sup>12</sup> Myanmar has a tendency towards a younger population, with around 50% under 25, and 25% being under 15 years of age.<sup>13</sup>

## Education

The literacy rate for youth aged 14-24 years is 96%, however, the secondary school net attendance ratio is approximately 58%.<sup>14</sup> Education has always been paramount to the people of Myanmar. Prior to the 1962 military coup, government and religious schools coexisted in Myanmar, offering a high standard of education which was among the best in Southeast Asia. However, after 1962 a number of changes to the schools system caused a severe decline in education, including the nationalisation of religious schools, cuts to funding, the expulsion of foreign missionaries, and the introduction of the rote learning system. This system requires children to learn by



8 Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook: Burma*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>

9 ACT Government Multicultural Health Policy Unit, *ACT Health Community Profile: Burma/Myanmar*, 2014 <https://health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/ACT%20Health%20Community%20Profile%20-%20Burma%20%282014%29.pdf>

10 Myanmar Information Management Unit, *Main Spoken Languages of Myanmar*, 9 June 2016 [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ethnologue\\_Map\\_Main\\_Spoken\\_Languages\\_of\\_Myanmar\\_MIMU1300v02\\_09Jun2016\\_A1.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ethnologue_Map_Main_Spoken_Languages_of_Myanmar_MIMU1300v02_09Jun2016_A1.pdf)

11 Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*, July 2016, [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Religion\\_-\\_Census\\_Report\\_V2-C\\_DOP\\_Jul2016\\_ENG.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Religion_-_Census_Report_V2-C_DOP_Jul2016_ENG.pdf)

12 Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*, July 2016, [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Religion\\_-\\_Census\\_Report\\_V2-C\\_DOP\\_Jul2016\\_ENG.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Religion_-_Census_Report_V2-C_DOP_Jul2016_ENG.pdf)

13 Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Thematic Report on Children and Youth*, October 2017, [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Thematic\\_Report\\_on\\_Children\\_Youth\\_-\\_Census\\_Report\\_4-M\\_DOP\\_Oct2017\\_ENG.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Thematic_Report_on_Children_Youth_-_Census_Report_4-M_DOP_Oct2017_ENG.pdf)

14 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2016*, June 2016, [https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_SOWC\\_2016.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_SOWC_2016.pdf)

heart, without giving them the tools for critical analysis. When the nation's bishops came together to prepare an agenda for the coming years, education topped the list. The Church is now opening schools and training teachers—namely in the child-centered approach—in an effort to return to the lofty standards of education Myanmar once enjoyed.

## The Church



**326**

***catechists supported by  
Catholic Mission***



**142**

***seminarians supported by  
Catholic Mission***



**1,830**

***children supported through  
direct projects in 2017/18***

Today, there are a reported 700,000 Catholics in Myanmar. The Catholic Church is divided into 16 dioceses, including three archdioceses. Led by Cardinal Charles Maung Bo S.D.B., the Church has been a leader in educational and social reform, advocating strongly for the poor and marginalised in Myanmar. Cardinal Bo is a strong advocate for interreligious dialogue, human rights and peace in Myanmar in national and international forums.

Catholic Mission supports the Catholic Church in Myanmar in a number of ways, including through funding, missionary collaboration and providing expertise in sustainability, and in 2016 Catholic Mission entered a five-year partnership with the Archdiocese of Yangon, and the dioceses of Kalay and Hakha. In 2017, Catholic Mission provided funding to support 326 catechists, including 82 in Yangon and 239 in Hakha. The Church in Myanmar has a strong focus on education as the key to moving forward, and is engaged in a range of education specific projects. These include building and funding hostels which ensure access to education for children who are disadvantaged or live in remote areas, some of whom are orphaned due to HIV/AIDS. Catholic Mission has supported the construction of two churches and a clergy house in Myanmar in 2017/18.

In November 2017, Pope Francis made the first ever papal visit to Myanmar. During a public Mass in Yangon, he said,

*'...the Church in this country is helping great numbers of men, women and children, regardless of religion or ethnic background. I can see that the Church here is alive, that Christ is alive and here with you and with your brothers and sisters of other Christian communities. I encourage you to keep sharing with others the priceless wisdom that you have received, the love of God welling up in the heart of Jesus.'*



*Father Lucas Tha Ling Sum stands in front of the church in Chin Chung*