

The criticism of Myanmar issued by the Secretary of State of the United States of America in the International Religious Freedom Report (2005) is entirely false. Myanmar has a good record in religious freedom. The Union Solidarity and Development Association totally objects to the wrong and misleading accusations concerning Myanmar in the International Religious Freedom Report (2005).

A History of Religions in Myanmar

Myanmar has been resided by many indigenous people since time immemorial and they have the right to profess the religions of their choice. Beginning from the reign of King Anawrahta in the First Myanmar Kingdom of the Bagan Era, the Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism existed side by side and with the colonialist invasion in the latter part of the Konbaung Dynasty there was an addition of Christianity and Islam to the existing forms of worship. After gaining independence, people were allowed to practice their own religious beliefs. However, during the administration of the Union Government, U Nu, the Prime Minister used to designate Buddhism as the State Religion in 1961-62. With the emergence of the Revolutionary Council, the status of Buddhism as the State Religion was annulled and a law ensuring the freedom of worship for everyone was enacted on 26, March 1962.

Myanmar has a population of 55 million comprising 89.37% of Buddhists, 5.60% of Christians, 3.75% of Muslims, 0.70% of Hindus, 0.52% of animists and 0.06% belonging to other forms of worship. Permissions have been given to build religious buildings in accordance with the existing laws. As Myanmar is a country with a flourishing Theravada Buddhism, it has 16198 pagodas and 58079 monasteries. There are also 5989 churches, 2752 mosques and 793 Hindu temples. However, considering the proportion of Myanmar's population, there is a church for every 475 Christians, a mosque for every 692 Muslims, a temple for every 452 Hindus and a monastery for every 782 Buddhists which underscores the fact that the number of monasteries for Buddhists is far lower than those of people professing other religions.

What is Buddhism?

Buddhists mingle with Christians, Muslims and Hindus in many nations of the world. Despite differences in beliefs, people need to live with mutual love and respect for the sake of peace. It is dangerous to assume dogmatically "My religion is the only Truth". Every religion claims teaching civility and politeness.

Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar are countries where Theravada Buddhism flourishes. Here are some of the basic tenets of Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion with the most freedom in the world. It is not an organization where registration is necessary. Neither membership nor a list of names is required. Visits to pagodas and stupas are not compulsory and people who do not profess beliefs in Buddhism are not reviled. Believers of all religions are respected.

There is no one who owns Buddhism. All sentient beings on this earth as well as the infinite universe will inevitably meet old age, decay and death. Awareness of such phenomena as old age and decay can make one a Buddhist. Buddhists believe in the phenomena of *Anicca* - impermanence, *Dukkha* - suffering and *Anatta* - egolessness. They believe in *Karma*. They believe that good deeds will lead to good results and bad deeds will lead to bad results.

There is no discrimination by caste, race or religion in Buddhism; it is a refuge for all sentient beings. It is not related to politics, nor economics nor to social aspects but rather it is sanctified and harmless.

Buddhism is not a vague teaching which solves the issue of Death only after it occurs. It is a science which provides solutions during the lifetime of a person. By revelation of truths in the world, it solves all the existing problems. It is preferred by practical people.

Buddhism is similar to science in that it cannot be learnt just by being taught but only by practising oneself, thus a very sophisticated *Abhidhamma* (philosophy) ensues. Buddha's teaching of *Dukkha Sacca*, *Samudaya Sacca*, *Magga Sacca* and *Nirodha Sacca* is a reflection of the Absolute Truth.

Just as all religions in the world are significant in their own ways, Buddhism is significant in that it stresses patience, forgiveness, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity while professing a firm belief in *Anatta Vada* which states that everything has its end in destruction. During the 2500 years of Buddhist history, there has not been a single war which stems from religious causes. There is ample evidence of Buddhists having been killed by forces of other religions. Many religions exist in Myanmar. In fact, from having only Buddhists and traditional animists before the entry of missionaries who accompanied warships which came on account of trade, the pervasive efforts of missionaries decreased the number of Buddhists and animists at the turn of the century.

Beliefs and freedom

Religious Freedom

There is not an element of truth in the accusation that Myanmar lacks religious freedom. A comparison of religious freedom would reveal that Myanmar provides even more religious freedom than some developed countries. As presented in the VOA broadcast at 6:00 hrs Myanmar Standard Time on 6.9.2004, Venerable Dr. Ashin Nyanissra (D.litt) experienced discrimination in some developing and developed countries where visas are not issued for the purpose of teaching Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. Compared to those countries, visits by religious organizations to Myanmar and loud prayers on public address systems of mosques and churches even in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay are signs of religious freedom. Venerable Dr. Ashin Nyanissara replied that Myanmar is one of the countries with optimum religious freedom.

Myanmar exercises magnanimity even more than other countries. In such projects as rural development, when religious buildings (whether they are Buddhist monasteries or mosques or churches) are in the way of the work plans, they are relocated to a new site. This is not destruction of religious edifices.

Rights are given to believers of all religions to freely hold their religious festivals; endorsements are given according to existing policies for publishing religious books and calendars, for construction and renovation of religious buildings and for issuing passports to attend religious ceremonies held abroad; grants are made and coordination provided after occasional meetings of authorities concerned with the leaders of respective faiths. Beginning from 1985, hajj pilgrims have been sent to Mecca and in 2006 up to 300 have been allowed to go on pilgrimage. Moreover, representatives of various religions have been allowed to participate in the meeting for world peace and inter-religious friendship held in Indonesia in 2005. Outstanding personalities in the social sphere of the State are awarded medals regardless of their religious or racial backgrounds.

The holy days of Christians, Muslims and Hindus are designated official holidays. This is not the case in the West or the Middle East where holy days of Buddhists are not holidays. Enormous religious festivals are held in various towns and provinces by Hindus who engage in their religious rites floating in water, stepping on embers or going in processions. Understanding has been given to the celebrations of Muslims at the end of Ramadan after fasting for one month or Aid il Fitri where sacrifices are made in commemoration of the Prophet Day. Thus, religious freedom in Myanmar is remarkable as priority is given to resident followers of minority religions, assisting in their religious affairs as far as possible.

The State takes appropriate actions against any person from any religious background in accordance with the existing rules and regulations for the sake of security and prevalence of law and order. Due to the non-discriminatory approach employed by the State in assisting people of different religions as well as the cooperation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs with the leaders of such different faiths as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, there has been no major conflict and, thus, peaceful coexistence is possible.

The State entrusts high-ranking posts to people irrespective of their religions. Annual provisions have been made to religious organizations since the time of Pha-Sa-Pa-la government. Financial assistance of 100,000 kyats for the Islamic Society, 36350 kyats and 15600 kyats respectively for the two major

branches of the Christian faith, namely, Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches, 38500 kyats for Hindus, 17310 kyats for animists in the five states of Kachin, Kayin, Shan, Kayah and Chin is made every year. The Buddhist associations of the four states namely Kachin, Kayah, Kayin and Shan are provided 27650 kyats, 16000 kyats, 16800 kyats and 54550 kyats respectively. Apart from this, the families of the Armed Forces (land, sea and air) make material provisions such as rice, oil and salt as well as financial assistance to Homes for the Aged operated by Muslims, Christians and Mary Chapman School for children with disabilities. Religious leaders are also given free passage on local trips.

Religious Principles

Out of the 104 principles laid down at the National Convention, for religious affairs, it is stated that if the religious activities are not contrary to the prevalence of law and order nor to other principles in the constitution, all citizens have equal rights to profess beliefs, conduct worships and carry out construction in different religions.

It is not allowed to use religious beliefs to conduct worldly affairs such as economy, finance and politics. There must not be any mingling between politics and religious beliefs. Religions should not be used for political profits. Lessons should be learnt from the experience of the administration of U Nu's Union Party, whose declaration of Buddhism as the State Religion resulted in armed resistance and religious conflicts. This should be understood by religious organizations in Myanmar and cooperate in preservation of religious harmony. As 90% of Myanmar citizens are Buddhists, it is a majority religion. The State will protect and provide assistance to all religions on the day the constitution come into force.

Religions must not be abused for political purposes. Racial and religious acts with intent to cause hatred, animosities and misunderstandings among different religious sects are against the provisions of the constitution. The State has the legislative powers to mete out punishments for such acts.

The Role of the Union Solidarity and Development Association

One of the accusations is that members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association arrested Christians and destroyed churches. With a membership of 22.8 million, USDA encompasses many races and religions. Out of the principles concerning national, indigenous, religious, social and financial affairs laid down by the association, the religious principle states that a member can profess belief in one's own religion. The association assists to the best of its ability in religious affairs. It is participating actively in social and religious affairs of people both in urban and rural areas. One instance is, in Chin State USDA, out of the 168 executive committee members, 135 are Christians and only 33 are Buddhists. Also in Kayah State USDA, out of the 80,000 members, there are 40,000 Buddhists, 30,000 Christians and 145 Muslims who cooperate and participate in the parallel development of the social, religious and education sectors. Taking this situation into consideration, it is clear that the accusation is totally groundless.

Understanding worship in schools

In deed, the Buddhist philosophy encompasses all sentient beings, not just Buddhists. In Myanmar where Buddhism flourishes, group prayers are conducted at the basic education level for children to be in touch with the basic principles that there are consequences to one's actions, one should pay respect to where it is due including elders and that one should mind his or her physical, verbal and mental actions. It is intended for the children to be cultured. The majority of the children, being Buddhists, participate in prayers in unison. Children of other religions can stay at ease without participating in praying. There is no action such as punishment, forced prayers or sending out of the classroom taken against students for non-participation. There is a prior religious understanding among teachers.

The true aim of teaching Buddhist literature

In the teaching of Myanmar literature, the preceding writings cannot be ignored. Taking a look at ancient Myanmar writings, it can be seen that the inscriptions, poetry and prose of such eras as Bagan and Innwa were based on the 550 stories depicting the lives of Buddha. The literature of the past millennium

was based on the lives of Buddha so the subject matter of the present day Myanmar writing classes is about Buddha. Even among the scholars at the tertiary level who have to study pure Buddhist scriptures, there are devout Christians and Muslims who are having enjoyable pursuits of their studies. There is already an understanding that the subject matter is educational - not religious.

The question of forcible profession of the Buddhist faith in the hilly regions

In different parts of Myanmar, there has been no case of Buddhist monks forcing people of other religions to profess Buddhism. The Sayadaw responsible for Buddhist Missionary in the hilly regions preached his sermon to the end that atheists came to have interest in Buddhism. It is not out of the ordinary for people professing belief in other religions to express interest in Buddhism. In fact, religion is purely an individual belief and not something that can be forced. No Buddhist organizes people of other religions by force. No Buddhist ever disturbs people of other religions.

A non-discriminatory racial and religious outlook

People of various racial and religious backgrounds live in different parts of Myanmar. They can work and pursue education. Even the highest positions of leadership have been occupied by Christians and Muslims. Throughout the course of history, the governments of Myanmar have never used religious issues for political ends. If a representative of a constituency gets votes due to religious organization works, he is not regarded to be qualified. Politics never mingled with religion in the religious Myanmar.

In a nutshell

Every citizen of Myanmar has full religious freedom. There is no discrimination based on religion. Peaceful coexistence of Myanmar citizens can be seen in downtown Yangon where such religious icons as Sule Pagoda of Buddhists, Sunni Mosque and Shiite Mosque of the Islamic faith, a Protestant Church beside Maha Bandoola Park facing the City Hall and Hindu temples encircling the entire perimeter are standing side by side.

In the International Religious Freedom Act, Chapter 18, religious freedom is expressed thus:

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

In Myanmar, even far more conclusive provisions are made for the Act. In the drawing of the constitution in the National Convention which is underway, 7 religious principles are also included to provide freedom of belief and freedom of religious worship.

When the question of accusing Myanmar is taken into consideration, equal religious freedom is ensured for Buddhists as well as the other religions in Myanmar and it becomes clear that disturbing the Myanmar Government in a variety of ways is the main reason. Such interference has its end only in using the religious issues to bring about disenchantment and agitation to upset the internal peace.

The people of Myanmar, who understand the Buddha's teaching that nothing is permanent and that everyone has to bear the consequence of his own action, see people from different national and racial backgrounds as sentient beings, with the concurrent obligation of saving, helping and caring for them. Once the inevitable action of punishment is sometimes taken, fabrications and allegations are made against the kind-hearted Myanmar people who cannot help but feel distressed. However, this reply is made in order that the truth is known.

Every nation has to protect its people and religion. In Myanmar also, the Government never goes beyond its responsibility of protecting its own people and religion and disturbs or interferes with other races or religions. Myanmar Buddhists join Christian friends in their religious celebrations at Christmas

and, on Dipavali Day and Aid di Fitri, they join people of other religions in their feasts, manifesting their lack of religious prejudices. Accusations and denunciation should not be made, turning a blind eye to these situations. While Myanmar has to be self-reliant, the said force and pressure should not be used. According to the Buddhist teaching, a person is followed by his own physical, verbal and mental actions in the form of dark shadows to be realised as consequences which people all over the world should bear in mind.

In conclusion, the International Religious Freedom Report (2005) is based on the human right reports and other news. It is not relevant to the present state of the Union of Myanmar. Therefore, the Union Solidarity and Development Association completely objects to the International Religious Freedom Report (2005) which, based on groundless and exaggerated allegations, places Myanmar wrongfully on the list of Countries of Particular Concern, assuming that it is committing serious religious violations.