

MYANMAR

Though there has been significant progress in the past year, Myanmar [Burma] isolated itself from the rest of the world for many years. The church in Myanmar, however, has continued to grow and flourish.

Population

- Population: 55 million
- Density: 75 per square km

Nearly two-thirds of the people are Bamar [also called Burmese or Burman]. In addition there are many indigenous minorities with their own languages and cultures, including the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Mon. Influential Chinese and Indian communities live in the major cities.

The majority of the population lives in rural areas, but there is slow urbanization. Yangon's population is now around 4.3 million and Mandalay's around 1 million.

Religions

- Buddhist 80.0%
- Christian 9.0%
- Muslim 7.2%
- Chinese religions 2.3%
- Animist 0.6%
- Hindu 0.5%
- Non-religious/other 0.4%

Buddhism is no longer the state religion, but it still has great influence in government affairs and the life of the country. Although there is freedom of religion, converts to Christianity often face difficulties in their own communities and restrictions imposed by the authorities.

Language

Burmese, the official and most commonly used language, is monosyllabic and polytonal. The Burmese alphabet is based on Sanskrit and Pali, the sacred tongue of Buddhism. More than 150 other languages and many more dialects are spoken by the different ethnic groups.

Geography

Wedge between China and India, Myanmar is dominated by mountains in the north [reaching 5,800m], and by the plains of the Irrawaddy River in the central lowlands. The long rocky coastline in the

west provides many natural harbors. Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand also border the country. Myanmar covers 421,000 square miles.

Climate

Most of Myanmar lies within the tropic zone. In the central plain, the hot season lasts from March to June, the rainy season from July to October and the cool season from November to February. Temperatures range from 59°-100°F [15°-38°C] in most parts of the country, but are generally lower in mountainous regions. The country receives practically all its rainfall between mid-May and October. Flooding and landslides are common during the rainy seasons. In 2008, a powerful cyclone, Nargis, claimed the lives of approximately 140,000 people and caused \$10 billion (U.S.) in damage.

History

Myanmar's history has been sculpted by a succession of peoples who migrated along the Irrawaddy River from Tibet and China. The Burmans entered the Irrawaddy River valley in the mid-9th century AD, absorbing the nearby Pyu and Mon communities. Later waves brought in the Shan, Kachin and other groups.

The first unified Burmese state was founded by King Anawrahta (ruled 1044-1077) at Bagan in Upper Burma. During 250 years of relative peace, the devout rulers built the many pagodas for which Bagan is known today. The fall of Bagan to the Mongols under Kublai Khan in 1287 was the beginning of a turbulent period. A succession of dynasties struggled for supremacy.

Portuguese traders arrived in the 16th century and since then Western powers have had strong influence in the country's political and commercial affairs. British rule from 1824 brought a boom in the production of rice and timber, but it also increased resentment against colonial

powers.

In the 1930s a nationalist movement emerged, which pushed for immediate reforms, including separation from India, and later for full independence. Following Japanese occupation during World War II, Aung San and other student leaders led the country to independence in 1948. But the transition was not smooth. Political and ethnic insurrections followed over the next 30 years.

In the late 1950s General Ne Win's government tightened administrative discipline to promote modernization and curbed separatist tendencies in the eastern Shan states. During the 1960s and 1970s Ne Win attempted to build an effective totalitarian government and maintain autonomy on the world scene. But he led the country into economic ruin and increasing isolation from the outside world.

Anti-government riots in March and June 1988 led Ne Win to resign as party chairman in July, ushering in a period of political instability. However, Ne Win did not lose total control. The new governing body, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) now the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), headed up by Saw Maung, remained ultimately answerable to him.

In June 1989 the country's name was officially changed in English to the Union of Myanmar and the name of the capital from Rangoon to Yangon. Aung San Suu



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Kyi, the daughter of independence fighter Aung San, emerged as the new opposition leader. Elections in May 1990 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the opposition, but the SLORC refused to allow the People's Assembly to convene.

In October 1991 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Aung San Suu Kyi. She was intermittently held under house arrest for 15 of the past 21 years (1989-2010). Many of her supporters were also harassed or jailed. However, since elections in 2010, the government has made several moves towards a more open democracy in lieu of the military junta that had ruled in previous decades. Aung San Suu Kyi was even elected to office in the lower house of Myanmar's parliament in April 2012.

Myanmar remains one of the world's poorest nations, despite considerable natural resources.

Myanmar has one of the world's fastest growing rates of HIV/AIDS. Around seven percent of children die before their fifth birthday.

Christianity

The Protestant church in Myanmar is built on the foundations laid in the early 19th century by Adoniram Judson, an American Baptist missionary. Since then, Christianity has been deeply rooted and has grown stronger through adversity.

All missionaries were expelled in 1966, but the Burmese church has learned to stand

on its own feet, despite financial limitations and isolation. Baptists, Assemblies of God, Methodists and Anglicans form the strongest denominations in Myanmar. There is also a significant Roman Catholic minority. Many Christians are well-educated, but they cannot rise to positions of responsibility.

Most Christians are from the minority ethnic groups (Karen, Lisu, Kachin, Chin, Lahu). Less than one percent of the majority Bamar population is Christian. Ethnic and denominational ties are very strong. Unity among the believers has yet to overcome some of these ties and build bridges between the groups.

Strategic Priorities

- Church planting among Bamar and other Buddhist people groups.
- Establishing and strengthening links with various churches and Christian organizations.
- Placing personnel with professional skills.

Opportunities

- Short- and long-term openings for teachers of English and computer skills, medical and social professions, agriculture, etc.
- Ministry opportunities include discipleship, mentoring, youth work, church-planting internships, etc., although in each case a work

visa will be needed.

- Missional business entrepreneurs are needed to work alongside more ministry-focused workers.



HOW TO PRAY

- The country has gone through much political instability. Pray for a just and righteous government. There is much political oppression. Myanmar's human rights record has been rated one of the worst in the world.
- Pray for unity among the different church groupings and for a united voice towards the government and the other religious groups.
- Praise God for ongoing growth in most denominations in Myanmar. Pray for more people to come to know God.
- There are very few Christians among the ethnic Burmese. Pray for a real breakthrough.
- The Rohingya in Western Myanmar are a devout Muslim people group. There is almost no known Christian witness among them.
- Pray for the urban poor and Christians working among them.
- Pray for the rural poor, who are in need of health care and schools.
- Many people are dispossessed and made refugees as a result of the many ethnic conflicts, notably the Karen, Shan, Karenni and Kachin on the Thailand/Myanmar border. Pray for them and Christian organizations ministering to them.
- Pray for openings for foreign workers and that Christians would take up these openings.
- Pray for the work of the Bible Society. The Bible has been translated into 12 languages; 10 more have the New Testament and another 16 have portions of the Bible, but there are still more than 100 people groups with no portions of the Bible in their own language (Wycliffe).