**KEY FACTS**

Source: UN

- **54 million** estimated population
- **150,000** internally displaced in Rakhine State
- **100,000** internally displaced in Shan and Kachin States
- **600,000 +** have fled the country to Bangladesh

**TIMELINE**

- **1962**: Democratic government overthrown; military dictatorship established
- **1988**: Pro-democracy marches initiated by students violently suppressed with thousands killed
- **1990**: Elections held, National League for Democracy (NLD) wins, results ignored by ruling junta
- **2007**: Peaceful anti-government protests initiated by Buddhist monks are violently suppressed
- **2008**: Constitutional referendum held and overwhelmingly passes, mixed civilian-military government established
- **2010**: Democratic elections are held
- **2012**: Parliamentary elections held, NLD participates and wins 43 of 45 available seats
- **2015**: First contested general election in 25 years held; NLD wins majority
- **2016**: Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is appointed as State Counsellor, an equivalent to Prime Minister
- **2017**: Thousands of Rohingya flee to Bangladesh due to violence the United Nations describes as ethnic cleansing.
BACKGROUND

CIVIL WARS WITH ETHNIC MINORITIES

Of the 135 ethnic groups in Burma, 68% 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 ethnic minority groups from the northeast and western regions.

ONGOING DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

Burma’s transition from a military dictatorship to a mixed civilian-military government has been rife with corruption. During the 2015 election, a new police force was established to prevent civil disorder, but ultimately resulted in increased military control. Concerns of electoral corruption, vote-buying, and threats to political opponents continue. A constitutional amendment bolstered the Tatmadaw’s influence by allocating 25% of parliamentary seats to the junta, regardless of who wins the majority vote. In this way, the Tatmadaw holds veto power over constitutional change, safeguarding their grip on power.

Despite promises made during the 2010 elections regarding governmental reforms, human rights abuses and crimes against humanity remain rampant in minority areas. As a reward for moves made towards democratization, many countries, including the US, have normalized ties with Burma. In 2016, the Obama administration lifted the remaining economic sanctions on Burma despite its continuation of human rights abuses.

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.

Since 2012, when violent attacks by unknown insurgents led to the deaths of nine officials, the Myanmar military* has been conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya. 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 that found strong evidence that genocide may already be being committed against the Rohingya, and recommended that the UN Human Rights Council establish an inquiry into the human rights situation in Rakhine state.

More than 600,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh since Aug. 25, 2017, when Myanmar security forces began a scorched-earth campaign against Rohingya villages. Myanmar’s government has said it was responding to attacks by Muslim insurgents, but the United Nations and others have said the response was disproportionate. Myanmar leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has faced international criticism for not doing more to stop the violence, although she has no power over the security forces under a military-drafted constitution.

*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. It is official U.S. policy to call it Burma. JWW uses “Burma” when referring to the country and “Myanmar” when referring to the government.