

Challenges of Christian Organizations in Peacebuilding Activities after 2021 in Myanmar: **JoRIE** Implications for Religious Education

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Saw Than Htut Lynn

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Payap University, Thailand

ORCID Number: 0009-0004-4621-3543

ABSTRACT

Although Christianity is a minority religion in Myanmar, Christians throughout Myanmar's history have played a critical role in promoting peace amidst continuing conflict. This is a challenge promoting peace especially today when the country is in turmoil. Myanmar people are discontent about the country's current political situation. This paper addresses the practices of Christian organizations in peacebuilding activities in Myanmar. It also investigates the challenges of Christian organizations after the political changes in Myanmar in 2021. Research **methods** in this study are interview, literature review, document analysis, and monitoring news coverage. The data sources in this study included books, journals, dissertations, news from mainstream media, and social media. The **findings** revealed the practices and challenges of Christian organizations in Myanmar in their peacebuilding activities, to **contribute** with real-case reference for future Christian endeavors and religious education in Myanmar.

Key Terms: Myanmar Christian Organizations, Myanmar Military, Peacebuilding, Religion, Religious Education

INTRODUCTION

Research Problem

After the political change in Myanmar in February 2021, many Myanmar people were against the military coup including Christian organizations that normally avoided participating in social and political movements. In the early stage of the uprising, many Christian organizations released strong statements against the military coup and show that they were standing with the Myanmar people and supporting as well as demanding to release of the political detainees. Later there is no or less information about the participation of Christian organizations and a lack of detail and proper study about the challenges for Christian organizations to participate in the peacebuilding activities in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup. This paper will fill the literature gap by investigating the practices of Christian organizations in peacebuilding activities and the challenges to participating after February 2021.

Research Questions

This paper answered the following two questions.

1. What peacebuilding activities have Myanmar Christian Organizations participated in?
2. What are the challenges for Christian Organizations in Myanmar to participate in peacebuilding activities after February 2021?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to understand the activities of Myanmar Christian Organizations in peacebuilding and their challenges to participate in peace works after the military coup in February 2021.

Contributions

This paper contributed to strengthening awareness of the situations of Myanmar Christian organizations in country peace activities and difficulties in the standing points of them in the country when relating to political issues. It also contributed to religious education in Myanmar in terms of acknowledging the position of Christianity and Christian organizations in Myanmar.

Limitations of the Study

The overall scope of the study is the challenges of Christian organizations (Baptist organizations which recognized by the government of Myanmar) in Myanmar to participate in the country's nonviolent peacebuilding activities after February 2021. This study also addresses the peacebuilding activities of Christian organizations in Myanmar before February 2021. This study is limited by the scarcity of literature and insufficiency of important references for the relationship between Christian Organizations and peacebuilding activities in Myanmar, after February 2021. The term "Christian organizations" is majorly focused on the Baptist organizations or institutions which recognized by the government of Myanmar; however, the paper also highlighted some significant works of prominent leaders from the Catholic Church of Myanmar.

Definitions of the Term

Peacebuilding: Peacebuilding encompasses efforts to foster sustainable peace through measures that address conflict non-violently and tackle its root causes. It involves but goes far beyond conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacemaking, and reconciliation. And it seeks a peace that is more than the absence of violence-one in which human security is engendered through equal

and sufficient opportunity, fair distribution of power and resources, inclusive decision-making, and protection under the law. (Shannahan & Payne, 2016)

Non-violence: Nonviolence can be defined as a methodology, an ethical-political doctrine, a way to build a peace that is oriented towards a coherent philosophy, seeking a love of knowledge, experimentation, and life. (Martinez, 2015)

Christians Organizations (in Myanmar): Christian Organizations in this study included mainly Baptist Organizations and Catholic Church in Myanmar. The first Christian mission to arrive in present-day Myanmar was the Roman Catholic Barnabite Mission in 1722. In 1807 the English Baptists opened a mission, but the first permanent Baptist Evangelists and mission came in 1813 from America, under Adoniram Judson. During his lifetime, only the Burman, Mon, and Karen ethnic groups responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ. At his death in 1850, there were 74 churches and 7904 baptized members. Gradually the Baptist mission spread out to all the people in Myanmar. In 1865, the Baptist churches in Burma organized themselves under the name “Burma Baptist Missionary Convention”. In 1954, the name was changed to Burma Baptist Convention. Today, the Myanmar Baptist Convention represents all Baptists in the country (World Council of Churches, 2022).

The coup (in Myanmar): The coup by the Myanmar military pre-empted the swearing-in of a new parliament led by the previously ruling, now overwhelmingly confirmed, National League for Democracy (NLD) (Drechsler, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature related to Christianity and peacebuilding. Bartoli (2004) argues that relationship between the Christianity and peacebuilding is dauntingly rich, complex, and yet

somehow elusive. There are many examples of Christian organizations contributing to peace which are highly significant and recognized, for example, Mennonite and Quakers. Christianity focuses on the relationship between human family and the one and only God in the historical time. In Christianity, the relationship is important, and being a good example is crucial too. Jesus refused to use violence against the adversaries and shared messages of forgiveness and reconciliation. Bartoli highlighted the line between religious and secular by Jesus' words as "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Bartoli, 2004, p. 148) which is a clear interpretation that led eventually to a distinction between religious and secular powers, when human need distinctions and develop tolerant practices. Likewise, Jesus' command to love the enemies and pray for them who were persecuted and his word of the "Blessed are the peacemakers" had very different resonance throughout the history, and to response to the world. It is hard to claim a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between Christianity and peacebuilding based on the assumption of a uniformity shared and agreed on by all Christian communities. Diversity, unity, loving kindness, and agreement motivates those committed to peacebuilding. The Scripture, shared and recognized by the great majority of Christians today, strongly encourages a radical commitment to peace. On the other hand, two major tendencies have contributed to the aspects of Christianity into an obstacle to peacebuilding. The first is the intolerant and at times violent treatment of differences both internally (heretics) and externally (nonbelievers). Another one is forced conversions. In the countries colonized by "Christian" nations were pressured to convert the colonized peoples to Christianity. Both tendencies involve the use of political and military power to resolve differences perceived as threats to truth. Christianity becomes an obstacle to peacebuilding when it aligns itself too closely with secular power, while at the same time developing in intolerant attitude toward others. As the Christianity for peacebuilding, peace has

been central to the understanding of God's plan for the whole creation and Jesus brought his peace, "reconcile all things in him", said Paul later (Bartoli, 2004, p. 154). In the modern world when Christian act as caretakers during the conflict periods, and if unjust conditions exist, peace can be achieved through war under particular conditions. However, the final aim is always to restore peace. In today's crises, Christian helps the victims, defends human rights, educates children and adults, defends the space of civil society from the oppression of violence. Christianity contributes the today's peacebuilding by offering a remarkable network of people across the world, which is transnational and constantly moves people, goods, services, information, and ideas making. Christianity is basically engaged in a search for a sustainable and just peace for all and may still contribute significantly to the peacemaking as well as the nonviolent resolution of conflicts arising from an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Interconnection between Christianity and peacemaking is emerging, Bartoli concluded. (Bartoli, 2004).

Appleby (2000) also addresses the role of Christian organizations in the peace works by highlighting the works of Mennonite as a peace church. This group is a pioneer in faith-based conflict transformation and has played a constructive peacebuilding role since the mid-1980s. They contributed to international relief works and humanitarian missions. Nonviolence is their priority and rejects all forms of violence as their principle. The concept of the organization moved to believe that conflict transformation and peacebuilding should be integrated with their relief and development work. Their religious and moral commitments could help the lives of people affected by war and poverty (Appleby, 2000).

Schirch (2005) wrote in her book of the strategic peacebuilding as the field of peacebuilding is complex and wider and contains actors in many different arenas such as the community members, nonviolent activist, peacekeeper, religious leaders, relief workers, mediators

and so on. Building a just and sustainable peace requires that the various actors and actions are coordinated into an overarching framework (Schirch, 2005).

Mang (2022) argues that political, ethnic, and religious conflict have gravely rocked the modern state of Myanmar since 1948 when Myanmar became independent. Racial hatred and religious intolerance have been seen as the negative impacts of unchecked ethno-religious bigotry. The Christians in Myanmar are carefully considered to contribute to the political and sensitive situations. To go back to history, remarkable success of Christian missionaries among the hill tribal groups and the people in the highlands mostly embraced Christianity such as Kachin, Chin and Karen. That situation distanced them from the other lowland people. Mang pointed out that the Myanmar politicians deliberately started the ethnically narrow policy as Myanmar people as majority led other ethnic groups to protect, promote and cherish their own ethnic identity, since then. Christians had more restrictions and persecution in the later decades that followed with the authorities expelling missionaries, nationalizing church properties, restricting church activities, preventing church leaders from leaving the country, and oppressing the Christians. In short, Myanmar under military rule has been a getting worse for minorities. He explored how Christians embody their public faith in the particularly turbulent context of Myanmar, by connecting with the historical condition. Many church leaders are condemning the suffering of people due to the political oppression, religious persecution and massive human rights violation, by military, but privately, and prefer to remain silent in public more because they are really afraid of reprisal from the military than because they necessarily stand with the regime (Mang, 2022).

Kadoe (2016) also argues that Christianity is unfavored by the Myanmar government and the Buddhist Myanmar is the favoritism given to the Christians under the British colonial rule. Christianity is associated with colonialism and considered as a colonial religion in many Asian

countries. The success of Christian mission among the minorities became an issue for the Buddhist dominant government after the Myanmar's independence in 1948. She also argues that the government after the independence-called Ne Win's government- the situation of the Christian became worse because the government at that time are xenophobic, like all Myanmar politicians, regard Christianity as an alien religion, and spirit of Myanmar nationalism in Myanmar. She also mentioned similarly with other Myanmar scholars that Myanmar Christians are conservative in tradition and mission-minded. They see politics as a worldly affair and their goal is to go to heaven, the other world. She quotes the Gary North as the Christian should take an action which promises to bring peace, or justice, or righteousness, or economic equality, or any other goals which are not against the basic biblical principles (Kadoe, 2016).

Likewise, Tun (2020) argues that the Christian in Myanmar to exist for others is to respond to the suffering in their society. The pro-military government and successors have brutalized minority-populated areas for more than half of a century. In his dissertation, he highlighted the militarization and Christian's reluctance to become involved in society in the context the suffering of the people under militarization (Tun, 2020).

Mang (2011) argues that the church in Myanmar must daringly resist the state when the state denies social justice, political liberty, religious freedom, human rights, and democratic principle, and that its silence in the face of social evils simply means betraying Christ who was unfairly accused, trialed, tortured, and condemned to death for the liberation of those oppressed, persecuted, and dehumanized (Mang, 2011).

Mang, Kadoe, and Tun concluded in their research as there are the reasons Christian in Myanmar are mostly silent in crisis times due to some reasons, such as Baptist doctrine of separation of church and state, many of Myanmar Christian are under the strong influence of

world-denying theology, and their minority status in Myanmar, in general. However, their literature and findings could not cover exploring the situation such as responses and challenges of Christian organizations after the political changes due to the military coup in February 2021.

This paper fills the gap of literature by focusing on the activities of Christian organizations in peace process before, and the responses and challenges of Christian organizations to participate in peacebuilding after the political changes in February 2021.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative case study research to explore a real-life cases since the research focus is to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases as well as the research problem is also to provide an in-depth understanding of a case or cases (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In a qualitative case study research, the unit of analysis is studying an event, a program, and activity, or more than one individual and, the unit of analysis in this paper is the Christian organizations especially focus on Baptist organizations in Myanmar which are officially recognized by the government of Myanmar, such as Myanmar Councils of Churches (MCC), Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), however, highlight some of the significant acts by Catholic leader. The forms of data collection in this study are using multiple resources such as interview, literature review, documents analysis, monitoring news coverage. The data are collected from sources such as books, journals, dissertations, news from mainstream media and social media which are writing about politics, religion, conflict, violence and peace and statement and press releases from the religious organization such as MBC and MCC. Online interview was conducted with one professor from a theological institute in Myanmar to obtain the views and opinions from the interviewee about the nature and challenges of Christians

in the political movements. Member checking was conducted after the interview and the drafting of the paper for the purpose of accuracy of the findings and maintain the validity since validity is one of the important factors of qualitative research by taking the specific descriptions back to the interviewee to determine whether the understanding and writing of author are reflected to the interviewee's views and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After member check, the paper was revised for the more appropriate wording and approved.

FINDINGS

The findings of this paper answer (1) What peacebuilding activities have Myanmar Christian organizations participate in? and (2) What are the challenges for Christian Organizations in Myanmar to participate in peacebuilding activities after February 2021?

Peacebuilding Activities of Myanmar Christian Organizations

This section covered a brief background history of conflict in Myanmar and followed by the peacebuilding activities of the Christian organizations involved in previous peace processes.

A brief background of a conflict

Thang (2019) argues that the rise of Buddhist nationalism among Burmese (Myanmar) majority, and the rise of ethnic's minorities who embraced Christianity, have challenged for the peaceful coexistence and vision of a secular state as aspirated by Myanmar founding fathers in post-colonial time. The author argues that the failure to adopt the principles of secularism which the Myanmar founding fathers agreed to adopt, was the root cause of ethnic conflict that has raged the country for over a half of century. The word "secularism" has different interpretations from one country to another. It does not mean secularization of human life or belief, nor does it mean denying the importance of religious teachings for morality. The idea is that the Church should not

exploit the state for its own good; likewise, the state should not exploit the church for its own political means. Secularism in Myanmar as envisioned by its founding fathers was not a stance against religion. It was neutrality of the state regarding religious matters. However, some Burman (Myanmar) politicians went as far as to think that independence would be meaningless if Buddhism could not be made a state religion. Fortunately, the founding fathers of Independent Myanmar recognized that secularism was the only way to respond to the diversity of the new Union and accommodate all ethno-religious groups. However, in 1950s, some Myanmar nationalists sought to create a homogenous society. They wanted to create Buddhist country and they tried to reverse the secular principle that the late leaders agreed, and replace it with a more confessional religious principle, which provisioned Buddhism to a special position over other religions (Thang, 2019). Later, some ethnic groups who embraced the Christianity had chosen to against the government.

Peacebuilding activities of Christian Organizations in Myanmar in the previous peace process

It is necessary to see how Myanmar Christians participated in peacebuilding activities within their minority role. Concerning Myanmar Christian peacebuilding activities in the past, this study is indebted to Si Thu Tun's doctoral dissertation and his findings (Tun, 2020). By using Schirch's framework of peacebuilding, he provides significant insight into the four areas of Christian peacebuilding in Myanmar. Some of the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are the tribal groups of Kachin, Chin and Karen, and they embraced the Christianity and led by the Christian leadership. Christian organizations play the important roles in negotiations of peace talks and cease fires agreements. They have been able to be mediators between conflicting parties to some degree, since some ethnic areas have substantial Christian populations.

Some Christian leaders have practiced *monitoring and advocacy*. Tun (2020) revealed that well known Cardinal Charles Maung Bo encouraged the people to participate in peace and urged them to stay away from hatred, injustice, and ethnic conflict. In addition, he proposed to adopt attributes of peace, such as compassion, tolerance, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, and respect for human dignity and rights. He appealed to the government and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to cease the fires and try to stop the prolong conflict between them and highlighted the peace as the only way forward for Myanmar. He also argued that the church is the instrument of peace, and the church needs to work with all stakeholders to build peace on justice in Myanmar (Tun, 2020). Cardinal Bo continued that the Roman Catholic Church would use her all efforts for a durable peace in Myanmar (Vatican News, 2018).

World Council of Churches also appreciated about Myanmar Christian organizations in their central committee meeting from 28 August to 5 September 2012 as Christian in Myanmar have often accused as the agents of waging war against the government. The new political landscape and prospects for changes are paving the way for Christians to participate in the peace process, reconciliation, and nation-building for Myanmar. Christian leaders from the different organizations are widely recognized their active role in peace talks and negotiation processes. Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) had engaged in a process to reflect on the pathway to reconciliation, sustainable peace and security in Myanmar and role of the churches in serving justice and peace (World Council of Churches, 2012).

To reduce the direct violence, representatives of Christian organizations involved in the *ceasefire agreements* between Myanmar army and ethnic armed groups, in both biliteral ceasefire agreements (between two groups) and nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA, for the whole country). The Christian organizations involved by their efforts in peace talks, negotiation and

mediation process as well as the signing the nationwide ceasefire agreements. Due to the armed conflicts in some ethnic areas, the number of displaced persons increased as a by-product of conflicts. Some Baptist and Catholic churches were working together with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to support the aid for conflict-affected people. Their efforts also extended to provide education for the children from the displaced families. They also extended their support to help the victims of war with several programs such as mine-risk education and victim assistance for landmine survivors, agriculture and livelihood, and peacebuilding. Many churches open their doors to accommodate displaced people.

Transforming and having the right relationship is important in peacebuilding. Some respective Christian leaders including Baptist leaders played important role in the mediation and negotiation processes between military government and Christian dominant ethnic armed organizations around 1990s. Their efforts contributed to signing the ceasefire agreement between opposition parties. Without their efforts, there would be no right *relationship* between the parties, and they would not reach the trusted level to move forward. They are the trusted representatives of both sides, states governments and ethnic groups and became the designated mediators later. During the mediation process, these Christians leaders help by carrying information between two sides, facilitating contacts, clarifying and interpreting messages, helping tension to be eased, providing their opinions to both sides, and organizing the meeting places. Myanmar Institute of Theology, a well-known theological institution in Myanmar, also offers the *Trauma healing* programs and Trauma awareness trainings (Tun, 2020).

Capacity building that included education, training, development, military conversion, and research and evaluation, is also important to create the culture of just peace. Sustainability is a key principle of this category of peacebuilding. Some Christian organizations were founded after

the ceasefire agreement between states owned troops and respective ethnic armed groups for social development work. They supported *sustainable community projects and humanitarian emergencies, facilitated skills training*, and connected with other similar organizations. Their goal is to build the sustainable peace in Myanmar with justice. Apart from the social development work, the Peace Study Center at Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) offered peace education. It offered the high-quality theological *education* and academic *research* to interfaith relations for peace. They also work with other organizations. Interfaith Dialogue Studies, Peace Journalism, Peace Studies, Trauma Awareness and Trauma Healing trainings are well known programs of them.

Challenges for Christian Organizations in Myanmar to Participate in Peacebuilding Activities after February 2021

When Christians populations were involved in anti-coup movements actively, there is no additional movements or activities of Christian organizations apart from the statements they issued right after the coup. It is necessary to explore the challenges or the reasons why Christian organizations reluctant to join actively and continuously in political and societal movements in the country.

Since before the military coup in February 2021, Christian's response to the authorities has been for most of the silence, when compare with its Buddhists country-part Christian organizations and their churches have been silencing them in the face of inhumane social-political evil. Christian organizations and leaders in Myanmar have been accused of non-involvement in politics by Buddhist and other religious leaders and even by some young Christians. Scholars argue that there would be many reasons for Christians to be silent and decided not to try to seek changes in country in the sufferings that militarization brings about. First, the Baptist doctrine of separation of church

and state discourages them not to involve in political situations. Second, many of Myanmar Christians are under a strong influence of the world-denying theology, and that theology makes them away from societal issues. Third, the minority status of these Christians keeps them from becoming the change agents. Fourth, Christianity as an unfavorable religion in Myanmar. Fifth, the government's persecution towards minority religions. Sixth, the Myanmar Christians' mentality in politics (Kadoe, 2016; Mang, 2022; Tun, 2020), and lastly, the position being held between two opposing parties.

The findings have been divided into two groups. Religious standards and secular pressures of Christian organizations. The following presentations are indebted to the findings of the Myanmar scholars, *Mang, Kadoe, and Tun*, and professor from theological institute in Myanmar who response the online interview, and the below findings are presented as combinations of their existing literatures and ground findings of the author of this paper.

Religious Standards

Doctrine of separation of church and state

Many Christians in Myanmar are reluctant to be players in the change process when they face militarization and its evil spirit and acts. Christians believe that they should not become involved in government related matters. The government refers to rulers of a society, but the states mean the unit that includes both the rulers and ruled, Tun (2020) refers the Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The author argues that the distinction between government and state or society is necessary for the further clarification because the doctrine of separation of church and state is not about separation of church and society, but separation between church and government.

Christians and society: the world-denying theology

Tun (2020) argues that many Christians in Myanmar not only reluctant to get involved in government related issues, but they are also reluctant to become involved in broader societal related issues. The world-denying theology, which has less regard for this world, influences many Christians in Myanmar. This theology leads to the desire to separate Christians from the larger society. To seek the Kingdom of God first (Matthew 6:33 in the Bible) and some of the Christian songs like “*This World Is Not My Home*” could be related with those Christians who believe and follow this mindset. The world-denying theology may wrongly suggest that the Christian church is sacred while society outside the church is evil. Actually, many of them believe that society is broken or evil beyond repair. Since society is broken beyond repair, these Christians also have to try to improve their society. Long militarization in Myanmar in some ways reflected to confirm that broken society. As this militarization seems to be going for long term in this society, it is hard to see the Christians in Myanmar to do something for something good (Tun, 2020). Thang (2019) also argues that the people who adopted Christianity see themselves as a people chosen by God to spread light throughout the world and even see the others who do not embrace Christianity are those who left in the dark (Thang, 2019).

Secular Pressures

Minority Status

In Myanmar, the total population is about 52 million and majority is the Buddhism, almost about 87.9%, and Christian population is about 6.2% (Evason, 2017). Christians are a minority and less powerful and influential than Buddhists in Myanmar. This minority status Christian in Myanmar discourages their involvement in both government related matters and societal matters.

Christians in Myanmar face discriminations, and even persecution that come from the government. Christians in some parts of Myanmar have suffered persecution that came from government troops since a long time before. Many Christian villages in minority ethnics areas happened to be in the conflict zones, and they were ethnically affiliated to ethnic armed groups. Christians in these areas have suffered different forms of human rights violations, especially at the hands of government troops. Christians also faced the restrictions and discriminations under the military government, while the government gave a more favorable treatment to Buddhism. In some Christian majority areas, the government sent Buddhist monks as missionaries and forcible conversions to Buddhism. The seizing and burning of thousands of Bibles happened along with the destruction and burning of churches and Christian symbols. For instance, building Buddhist pagoda in Church compound in Karen state, shelling bomb to the Christian church in Shan state, burning churches in Kachin state (BNI, 2011; Kachinland News, 2013; Karen News, 2015). To get permission to build new churches or even to repair existing churches from authorities was very challenging. Christians also faced restrictions on holding meetings and some Christians pastors faced harassments, arrests, and torture simply because they practiced their religion. Even in some outskirts areas of big cities, the permission is needed to perform Christian gathering and devotion. Thus, many Christians in Myanmar fear the government as they are a small minority that faces such harassments, restrictions, and persecution at the hands of government authorities and military. Decades-long acts of terror from governments have created fear in the hearts of not only Christians, but also the majority of the people of Myanmar. Some scholars observe that fear is the most common emotion constructed by the regime. Christians in Myanmar do not escape this fear, which almost everyone in Myanmar exhibits. Myanmar Christians have a good reason to fear the government more than the majority of the population. In addition to the government's military general mistreatment of

the whole population, they suffer extra mistreatment from the government because they are a religious minority. When this fear is combined with the world-denying theology, it is not surprising that Christians in Myanmar simply refrain from the engaging in society.

Unfavorable Religion in Myanmar

The reason of Christian as an unfavorable religion in Myanmar by the Myanmar government and Myanmar Buddhist is the favoritism given to the Christian under the British colonial rule. Christianity is associated with colonialism and considered as a colonial religion. The success of Christian mission among the minorities became an issue for the Buddhist dominant government in Myanmar. The Myanmar Christians who had been favored by the British were feeling threatened to be the target of persecution by the Buddhist majority. Christianity is no longer a favorable religion after the independence, but Buddhism has been favored by the successive Myanmar Buddhist dominant governments. Another factor that caused Christianity as an unfavorable religion in Myanmar is the Myanmar nationalism spirit. To be a Myanmar, one should be a Buddhist, is the mentality of Myanmar nationalism.

The Government's Persecution

Religious minorities have been discriminated against, restricted and persecuted since long time ago in Myanmar after independence. In 1960 and 1961, Buddhism had been attempted to be recognized as the state religion made the religious minorities to feel insecure, and the religious minority groups resisted against that attempt. Although proposal was failed, due to wide protests by religious minorities, the government limited the religious freedom of Christian in the later years. In 1965, the government began to take over Christian mission schools and hospitals. The churches lost most of their prosperity. A year later, all foreign missionaries, except some aged foreign Catholic fathers, were expelled from the country. The press and publications of Christians were

restricted and subjected to strict control. Minority languages, which used to be taught in schools, were prohibited and no more teaching. Promotions within the military and the civil service are the candidates who follow the Buddhism. The government discouraged Christians and Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired for promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism.

The role of Middleman between two opposing groups

In addition to all of above, and after the military coup in February 2021, inhumane acts of military force to the people and places to crack down the resistance made more worrisome for Christian organizations and avoiding head-to-head with powerful opponents may also one strategy they used. Due to the political chaos, the Christians' involvements in peace process are also blurred that the current progress of peace process is very much uncertain. Many Myanmar people including Christians do not accepted the military regime, therefore, there is a big challenge for Christian organizations when they need to deal with state authority. For instance, The Myanmar Council of Christian Churches (MCC) issued the statement on 14 February 2022 apologizing for calling for organizations to attend and pre-peace meeting and Union Day celebrations that were held by the Military regime on 12 February 2022. The statement apologizes for inconveniencing member churches and affiliated organizations, many Christian brothers and sisters were disturbed and saddened by the petition for lasting peace in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar issued on 11 February. Criticism from Christian societies has risen sharply since the statement was made calling for participation in the pre-peace meeting and Union Day celebrations organized by the military council (Mizzima, 2022). Table 1 shows the summary of the challenges of Christian organization in Myanmar to participate in peacebuilding activities especially after political changes in 2021 February. See Table 1 below:

Table 1: Challenges of Christian Organization in Myanmar

Religious Standards	Secular Pressures
Doctrine of separation of church and state	Minority Status
	Unfavorable Religion in Myanmar
Christians and society: the world-denying theology	The Government's Persecution
	The Role of Middleman between two opposing groups

The quotes of online interview with the professor from the theological institute show in the Table

2. See Table 2 below:

Table 2: Quotes from the Interviewee

Interview	Professor from a Theological Institute
1. On religion	"Christians are a minority and less powerful/influential than Buddhists."
2. On violence	"The armed resistance organizations such as Karen National Liberation Army, Karenni National Defense Force and Kachin Independence Army are led by the Christian leadership."
3. On peace	"The military leaders do not have trust and respect in the Christian religious leaders (even in the Buddhist monks)."
4. On challenges	"Peace making or negotiation between the armed groups needs mutual trust and respect. Christian leaders are willing to go between the two opposing groups, but their congregations may misunderstand that they are siding with the military or traitors/betrayers. (e.g., MCC). Now the situation is getting worse, and no one would like to negotiate with the military (there is no negotiation in blood debt)."

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATION, CONCLUSION

Summary

Responses to Research Question 1. Christian's representatives of their respective organizations contributed a lot in the country peacebuilding process. In both bilateral ceasefire agreements and nationwide ceasefire agreements (NCA), Christian leaders were participated. They are well respected mediators from both conflicted parties. Although the agreements have broken due to some reasons later, the contributions of Christian leaders were historically recognized.

Responses to Research Question 2. Long history of Christianity in Myanmar can reflect what challenges Myanmar Christians organizations face today. For the leaders of particular Christian organization, and as the top leaders of each organization, the consequences of their decision can hugely impact on their whole organization. The theological aspect and being of Christianity in Myanmar are playing in crucial roles in the Christians in Myanmar to participate in sensitive political and societal conflicts.

Recommendations

Christian organizations should find some ways to support in the unjust situations. Their status about not actively participating in political and societal movements is already known. But they should try to support removing the bad things and strengthening the good things in the country instead of enjoying the status quo. There are many Words and Examples of what Jesus did and taught in the Bible which built up the relationship with the world. They should promote the way of thinking that Christian organizations should not be separated from the society where they existed. Christians organizations should cooperate each other not only with the same denomination but also between different groups, such as Baptist and Catholic, and find out what will be the best response, and they should listen and open the doors for women and youths. In

addition, peace education should be expanded. There are existing Christian organizations which provide the peace education, but not covered for the whole country. Psychological support programs are also necessary such as Trauma Healing, to the conflict affected people and communities. That would be helpful for those people to reintegrate into society. Mostly, Myanmar people are known as the ones who love peace. There are many rituals of peace in Myanmar. Those practices should be re-explored by doing research and promotion. The Christian organizations should expand their horizons.

Conclusion

“Wise as Serpents and Harmless as Doves” (Matthew 10:16) reflected the today Christians in Myanmar followed in many cases. Christians organizations have been accused by their Buddhist counterparts and the young Christians generations for not being active in the anti-coup movements. However, the long history of oppression and discrimination may not obviously be seen by today’s young and urban generations. Building the relationship is important in the peacebuilding process after the post-conflict era, and it should also be sustained. So far, there is no harm to the society due to the acts of Christians organizations after the February 2021. Historical oppressions and experienced could not be a catalyst for the Christians to highly take risk to involve the political issues, as an organization. Individually participating in the anti-coup movements by Christians should not be ignored. Every organization has a different way. As a minority status in the country, keeping the status is more important when silently participating the political issues for the Christian organization. They have more opportunities to contribute the peace under the elected civilian government but more difficulties under the military dictatorship. The overall findings will also contribute to the religious education in both formal and informal ways in terms of understanding the activities and challenges of Christian organizations in

participating in country peacebuilding processes as well as the position of Christian organizations as a minority status in the country.

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