

# Catholic Church Must Cooperate with State & Other Religions to Win Peace in Myanmar

[New Era World News and Global Intelligence](#)

POPE FRANCIS IS INVOLVED in a high profile pastoral visit to Myanmar (also known as Burma), a country of 52,000,000 people of whom 700,000 are Catholics (less than 2%) coexisting in a Sea of 46,000,00 Buddhists (almost 90%) and an increasingly distraught Muslim population of 2.2 million people all engaged in a difficult process of transitioning from military rule to democracy. During his visit, the pope met with **Gen. Min Aung Hlaing**, head of the country's military, **Htin Kyaw**, Myanmar's recently elected president, and with Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner, **Aung San Suu Kyi**, who is also Chairperson of the National League for Democracy, the ruling party that brought Htin Kyaw to power in the 2015 elections.

Suu Kyi has a long history among the ruling elite of her country. In 1947 her father, General Aung San Suu Kyi, fought to promote a federalist system but was assassinated as the country worked to gain independence from Britain, a goal it attained in 1948. Thereafter, the government groped here and there as a secular democracy until 1961 when the Prime Minister declared Buddhism to be the state religion thereby provoking civic unrest among the nation's many ethnic minorities in the north and west, which led to a military coup in 1962 and the establishment of a socialist regime; during which Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. She was released and re-detained several times prior to her final release in 2010, the same year that a hard fought for democratic election brought a "*nominally*" civilian government to power followed by

the dissolution of the military junta in 2011.

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), then won a remarkable 80% of the parliamentary seats in the 2015 election with the nation's military leaders retaining about a fifth of the seats. The new president, Htin Kyaw also rode to power on the coattails of the NLD. Although Htin Kyaw was elected president, some say that real power is in the hands of Suu Kyi. Kyaw in fact functioned for many years as the chief advisor to Kyi even as she rose from house arrest to national prominence as leader of their party.

Although Suu Kyi is extremely popular, she was constitutionally barred from being president due to her marriage to a British foreigner contrary to the nation's constitution. Most insiders agree that the constitution was purposefully amended to include this disqualifying provision by the previous military regime to keep Kyi from being president and to help it retain power. Kyi, nonetheless, has abided by the provision and although appointed by the president as "State Counsellor" (Prime Minister), she considers herself the head of state. Certainly, she remains among the most powerful and influential voices in the newly elected government. Thus, it is understandable why the pope would meet with military leaders and both the new president and state counsellor.

The pope's visit with military generals, democratically elected political and party leaders appears to be a politically motivated, the pope, however, is in Myanmar primarily as a pastor.

*According to Francis, the reason for his visit to Myanmar is "above all," to pray with the troubled country's "small but fervent Catholic community, to confirm them in their faith, and to encourage them in their efforts to contribute to the good of the nation."*

According to [Benedict Rogers](#), representing *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, the Pope's visit is a historic event to confirm the nation's Catholic population and to highlight its contribution to Myanmar:

*"This is a truly historic visit—the first ever papal visit to Myanmar, coming not long after the appointment of Myanmar's first-ever cardinal, Myanmar's first ever beatification and the celebration of 500 years of Catholicism in Myanmar. For such a tiny Catholic population, this is a profoundly significant time."*

Racked by terrorism, political dissent, and sectarian religious division, the pope is there "above all" to strengthen the little Catholic flock and to encourage them to contribute to the good of the nation. **The pastoral nature of his visit is understandable in the broader context of the persecution of Christian minorities in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East.** Unfortunately, the situation in Myanmar shares some of the attributes associated with the persecution of small Christian communities elsewhere.

### **Why are Christians Threatened in Myanmar?**

Although Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country, it has been marred by ongoing civil conflict most recently associated with Sunni Muslims residing in its western provinces, primarily in one of its states named Rakhine a roughly 200 mile swath of land running north-south along the Bay of Bengal. The Muslim population in Myanmar is approximately 2.2 million people; they are referred to as the "Rohingya" by the native population.

Given what has happened to Christian minorities in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, given that persecution of Christians has been exacerbated by foreign interference, disrespect for, and

limiting the ability of, sovereign nations to solve their own internal problems; given that persecution of Christians has been exacerbated by colonialism, foreign economic interests, political tensions fanned by terrorism, fake news reports and the arming of Islamic terrorists disguised as rebels, given all these things, Pope Francis is concerned about the security of his flock, concerned that the international process that racked the Middle East does not extend into Southeast Asia.

He has therefore become involved early, trying to nip the problem in the proverbial bud before it fatally mushrooms thereby drawing too much international attention and foreign interference, *esp* interference from foreign jihadists such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, Daesh and other Sunni terrorist organizations supported by unwelcome foreign governments and multinational corporate-business interests. The pope has clearly thrown his support behind the new and fragile Myanmar government; he understands that the best bet for the safety of Catholics is to continue cooperation with the legitimate government and by calling on Catholics to contribute to the country's ongoing economic, moral and political development.

The Vicar of Christ is there to remind his flock to seek peace and to ask the nation's leaders to establish justice and promote reconciliation among the nation's many ethnic groups, specifically its Muslim minority, the "Rohingya" whom he has been careful not to mention by name.

*"The future of Myanmar must be peace, a peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity, respect for the rule of law, and respect for a democratic order that enables each individual and every group – none excluded – to offer its legitimate contribution to the common good."*

On this topic, the Holy Father also met with **Cardinal Charles Muang Bo of Yangon**, who cautioned him against using the

inflammatory term “Rohingya” during his visit. Consequently, the pope has avoided using the taboo term to refer to the country’s persecuted Muslim ethnic minority. The government has exacerbated relations with the Muslim minority by failing to accord them full citizenship. These people are treated by the majority population as “interlopers” from nearby Bengal. Recognizing their marginalization, [Cardinal Bo has publicly stated](#) that the Rohingya are the:

*“...most marginalized, dehumanized, and persecuted people in the world ... They are treated worse than animals. Stripped of their citizenship, rejected by neighboring countries, they are rendered stateless. No human being deserves to be treated this way.”*



**Cardinal Archbishop Charles Muang Bo of Yangon Member of the Salesian order and First Cardinal of Myanmar**

According to [Cardinal Bo](#),

*“There is opposition from many in the Buddhist community to the idea of Rohingya citizenship. Even the use of the term Rohingya is a source of national tension. It is the name Rakhine Muslims use to describe themselves, apparently derived from Rohang, a Muslim term for what is now Arakan state in western Myanmar. Rakhine Buddhists object that the term confers historical legitimacy on the Muslim community.”*

The situation is purportedly so egregious that the United Nations (UN) has referred to the The Rohingya as a “persecuted ethnic minority”, victims of a systematic pogrom identified by the UN as “ethnic cleansing.” Although, it is true that the Myanmar government has *not* extended them citizenship, it is probably a stretch to claim that the Rohingya are victims of “ethnic cleansing”.

*“There is no genocide here; ethnic cleansing is not happening”* ([Cardinal Bo](#))

It might be more appropriate to understand the Buddhist majority government acting in defense of the common good against threats from radical Muslims. On this note, [the Rohingya are not welcome in India](#) which has been [systematically avoiding trouble by deporting them](#). Islamic extremists are becoming more vocal and threatening. According to ABC News

*“Al Qaeda has disseminated a statement urging Muslims around the world to send aid, weapons and military support to Rohingya Muslims in the majority Buddhist Rakhine state... Al Qaeda has warned Myanmar will face punishment for its “crimes against the Rohingyas”.*

*“The savage treatment meted out to our Muslim brothers ...*

*shall not pass without punishment," Al Qaeda said in a statement, according to the SITE monitoring group...The Government of Myanmar shall be made to taste what our Muslim brothers have tasted" ([ABC News](#)).*

Supposed genocide in Myanmar *might* be prompting Islamic terrorism or acts of terrorism *might* be prompting severe counter-measures; either way, **the pope's first concern is the safety and security of the Catholic population and, of course, peace among the broader population.**

As noted, Francis, comes to Myanmar as a peacemaker having full cognizance that the people of Myanmar have "*suffered greatly, and continue to suffer, from civil conflict and hostilities that have lasted all too long and created deep divisions.*" The pope realizes that in spite of the radicalization of many Muslims, grievances are rooted in poor economic opportunities and and political disregard culminating in the denial of justice and fair treatment. Despite their radicalization which is used to legitimize countermeasures taken against them, there are also reasons to believe that if the Muslim minority is treated more equitably and justly, they might be integrated into the broader national community.

Thus, the healing of the nation's ethnic wounds

*"...must be a paramount political and spiritual priority... Indeed, the arduous process of peacebuilding and national reconciliation can only advance through a commitment to justice and respect for human rights," he added.*

The situation is exceedingly fragile. Myanmar has been under military rule and is only now undergoing a transition to civil rule *albeit* still heavily dependent on the military to maintain peace. Myanmar's State Counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi, seems to appreciate the pope's command of the complexities embroiling her divided country. Like Francis, she too refrains

from referring to the Muslim minority as “Rohingya,” but rather referred to the current crisis as the “*situation in the (state of) Rakhine,*” that has “*captured the attention of the world.*”

Speaking to the pope, she said

*“As we address long standing issues, social, economic and political, that have eroded trust and understanding, harmony and cooperation, between different communities in Rakhine, the support of our people and of good friends who only wish to see us succeed in our endeavors, has been invaluable.”*

Aung San recognizes the threat of militant Islam, but also understands that it might be ameliorated by acts of social justice with support from the international community.

In other words, both she and the pope realize that any involvement by foreign elements intent on covert operations, or of supporting the Muslim minority by unwelcome political or economic activities is anathema. **Myanmar needs to solve its own problems and it can do best if it is assisted to work toward justice in a spirit of charity, healing wounds rather than exacerbating them** or having them exacerbated by unwanted outside interference such as US and EU involvement, which have caused significant unrest and devastation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Francis is helping lead a chorus of voices beginning to resound globally: **Sovereign nations have a right to determine their own futures.** The age of imperialism and colonialism seems to be waning. Likewise, the dignity of human beings and corollary recognition of the sovereign rights of nations to determine their own destinies as well as settle internal conflicts free of unsolicited political interference is an increasingly salient issue.

Myanmar needs to put its own house in order; in this process



its religious communities can be of great assistance. Thus, **Francis also held a private meeting with the Myanmar's religious leaders: Buddhists, Muslims, Protestants, Catholics and Hindus.** According to the pope,

*Myanmar's religious communities have a "privileged role to play" in the process of national reconciliation. Religious differences, he argued, don't need to be a source of "division and distrust," but a "force for unity, forgiveness, tolerance and wise nation building."*

The nation's religions, he said, "drawing on deeply-held values," can "help to uproot the causes of conflict, build bridges of dialogue, seek justice and be a prophetic voice for all who suffer."

In this regard, **[Archbishop Bo's elevation to Cardinal is instrumental for reconciliation in Myanmar](#)**: On November, 2014, the pope made him the first Myanmar bishop ever raised to the rank of cardinal, **an elevation that has positively affected his ability to facilitate peace in his own country.** Cardinal Bo stated that his elevation has been

*"... important in front of the government, and in front of the Buddhist community, and in front of the Muslims and the Hindus. They acknowledge my personal role in the country and especially for the uniting the different religious people."*

Consequently,

*"The Catholic Church in Myanmar is trying to help address the civil war and the plight of the Rohingya. The bishops' conference organized a two-day religious peace conference, from April 26 to 27, attended by 200 people from all religions, including Buddhist monks, Muslim and Hindu religious leaders, many ambassadors and various international non-governmental organizations...The conference established*

*working groups for nation building in five areas: education, peacebuilding, religious harmony, special care for children and women and development”*

The cardinal also stated that

*“Practically every month, we have meetings on peacebuilding, which include the Buddhist monks, the Hindus, Muslims and the other Christians. We work together.”*

[The Holy See](#), he says, “hopes that Myanmar will continue on the direction of democracy that it has taken in recent years.”

*“That is our hope, to..., “but how the church will promote the democracy is left also to us.” Right now, his main concern “is how we can help in building peace with the different ethnic groups, with the government, with the military, and how can we come up with a new constitution since there cannot be any amendment to the present one because of how the military framed it.”*

The pope lauded this mutual cooperation as a “great sign of hope.”

*“In seeking to build a culture of encounter and solidarity, they contribute to the common good and to laying the indispensable moral foundations for a future of hope and prosperity for coming generations.”*

On Wednesday, the pope will meet with the country’s Catholic bishops, say Mass at the Kyaikkasan Ground, and imaging Cardinal Bo, he will also meet the Buddhist Sangha Supreme Council. It is hoped the Myanmar can avoid the terrorism that has devastated the Middle East and be helped by *disinterested* foreign nations to establish democracy, economic viability, establish social justice and work for human development in pursuit of peace.