

In Others' Words

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Violence against Buddhists

The Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism

On November 12, 2021, the Chinese Communist Party completed its Sixth Plenum. A Tibetan scholar writing in “[Xi Jinping’s War on Tibetan Buddhism](#),” in *The Wall Street Journal* claimed that:

The party’s communiqué mentions “national rejuvenation” eight times. The phrase may sound harmless if a bit nationalistic. Yet a key component of national rejuvenation is unification, which in Beijing’s view requires the destruction of minority cultures.

He also refers to a conference in Tibet in September 2021 that drew over 500 religious and government officials from Tibetan and Chinese universities. Thirty-five academic papers examined the “Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.” One area of focus was the translation of Tibetan Buddhist texts into Mandarin: “The ultimate goal is for future lamas and monks to learn Buddhism only in Mandarin—paving the way for the erasure of the Tibetan language.” He concludes with the following alarming prediction:

Beijing’s assault on Tibetan Buddhism has three goals: to control Tibetan teaching directly by translating sacred texts into Chinese, to transform Tibetan Buddhism into Chinese Buddhism, and to compete with the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. In the absence of a unified resistance to China’s most recent efforts, the world puts at risk the vitality of the Tibetan language as a medium of cultural memory and contemporary scholarship, as well as the very existence of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. (“[Xi Jinping’s War on Tibetan Buddhism](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2021)

New Chinese Communist Party Boss in Tibet Has Xinjiang Genocide Resume

In October 2021, a new Chinese Communist Party leader, Wang JunZheng, was named for Tibet. Writing for *Radio Free Asia*, Paul Eckert comments:

Wang Junzheng, deputy CCP boss and security chief in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), has overseen atrocities against the Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in the XUAR that have been labeled genocide in Western capitals.

He goes on to quote from a statement by the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT):

“ICT expects Wang to bring his experience to Tibet as part of the party’s Tibet-Xinjiang feedback loop. Chen Quanguo, his boss in Xinjiang, took his Tibet experience as the party secretary from 2011 to 2016 to Xinjiang, where he has led the Chinese government’s ongoing, horrifying genocide of the Uyghurs,” the group said in a statement. Chen moved to the XUAR capital Urumqi in August 2016 after five years as party boss in Tibet, where he built up security measures and surveillance, suppressed support for the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s spiritual leader whom Beijing accuses of being a separatist, and criminalized many ordinary religious and cultural activities. (“[Dread Among Tibetans as ‘Butcher of Xinjiang’ Named New Tibet Party Boss](#),” *Radio Free Asia*, October 21, 2021)

Buddhist Violence against Others

Where Did Buddhism Get Its Reputation for Peace?

For centuries, religion has been blamed for fomenting political violence, but Buddhism has generally gotten a pass with its popular image of peaceful withdrawal from society. Last April, an article in *The Conversation* raised a provocative question: “[Where Did Buddhism Get Its Reputation for Peace?](#)” Written by a British academic, it highlights the conflict between the first moral precept of Buddhism (avoiding “onslaught on living beings”) and the ethnic tensions erupting in Buddhist-majority countries. The author claims, contrary to popular conceptions,

Buddhists have been involved in violent conflicts pretty much since the religion first emerged. Justifications for such actions have typically been based on defending [the Dharma](#) (the Buddhist teachings), occasionally demonising or dehumanising the enemy to make it less karmically wrong to kill them. A particularly uncomfortable example of this is found in the fifth century Sri Lankan quasi-mythological [Mahavamsa chronicle](#), in which monks reassure a king that out of the millions he’d just slaughtered only two were Buddhists and the others were more like animals than humans. When it comes to “Buddhist violence,” as with any perceived religious conflicts, religion is only one factor in a complex situation. Often ethnic identity is the real issue—it just happens that one of the ethnic groups in question has historical Buddhist affiliations, the others do not. At one point the [Sri Lankan conflict](#) of 1983-2009 saw three different civil wars playing out at once, as much as anything along ethnic and political lines: Sinhalese vs Tamils, Sinhalese extremists vs the Sinhalese government, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam vs other Tamil militant groups. (“[Where Did Buddhism Get Its Reputation for Peace?](#)” *The Conversation*, April 2021).

Religious Freedom Threatened along Ethnic Lines

For a more recent account of religious freedom in Sri Lanka—and the role that both Islamic terrorism and Buddhist nationalism have played in its continuing weakening—don't miss "[Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities in Sri Lanka](#)," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2021. The author, Knox Thames, covers two significant reports, one from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in the UK (a human rights watch group):

But in addition to ethnic friction, religious divisions persist. Sri Lanka is majority Buddhist, with significant Hindu, Muslim, and Catholic and Protestant Christian populations. It is along religious lines with ethnic overlays that both reports highlight concerns. CSW, based in the United Kingdom, issued "[A Nation Divided: The State of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Sri Lanka](#)."

The second report was from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom,

an independent U.S. government advisory body separate from the State Department that makes recommendations on U.S. policy relating to religious freedom promotion. The fact that USCIRF chose to report on Sri Lanka for the first time in six years demonstrates concern about the country's trajectory. The USCIRF report, "[Religious Freedom Conditions in Sri Lanka](#)," warned about the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to target Muslims and jail them for lengthy periods on trumped-up charges. . . . USCIRF also highlighted Sri Lanka's use of criminal blasphemy laws against minorities and free thinkers. International pressure is needed to encourage Sri Lanka's government to reform. However, it will not be simple due to the orientation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa toward policies that favor Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism. They won the election on a political platform of division and will not quickly walk away from it. Thus, exacerbating interfaith tensions that lead to human rights abuses could be fulfilling campaign promises.

The "Buddhist Bin Laden" Released

An extremist Buddhist monk in Myanmar was abruptly released from prison September 7, 2021. According to *DW*, Ashin Wirathu is known internationally as "[the Buddhist Bin Laden](#)" for whipping up savage violence against Myanmar's Muslim minority people, the Rohingyas ("Myanmar: Junta frees monk dubbed 'Buddhist Bin Laden'"). See also, "[Wirathu: Myanmar Releases Firebrand Buddhist Monk](#)," *BBC*, September 7, 2021. Wirathu was originally incarcerated on charges of sedition by the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the country's independence hero. But that government was [deposed in a military coup](#) February 2021, triggering street protests by millions ("[Myanmar's Coup, Explained](#)," the *New York Times*, October 26, 2021). Speculation is rampant that Wirathu, weak from COVID and long a hardliner ally of the military generals, was released because he is no longer a threat but rather an asset to the new totalitarian regime. For an update on the status of the

Rohingya (both in country and outside in refugee camps), see "[Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar](#)" on the [Global Conflict Tracker](#) website of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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thing we can do.
Matters shift in the heavenly realms
when his people pray.**

Genocide and Coup in Myanmar: Why It Happened and How to Pray

Don't miss the article about Myanmar in the latest issue of *Christianity Today*. Entitled "[Why I Pray for Myanmar with Hope](#)," (*Christianity Today*, November 18, 2021), British author Chris Mabey (whose Myanmar-born wife still has immediate family ties back to the country) recounts reasons for the despair in Myanmar as well as signs of hope for the future:

Unexpectedly, hope dawned in the form of inspiring and energetic young millennials who were dedicated to restoring devastated lives and communities. Drawing on this experience and research, I ask two questions. What factors have led to the current and long-standing malaise in Myanmar? And what signs of hope exist today for a radical shift in fortunes?

We briefly highlight the first and the fourth factors:

First is the multiethnic nature of Myanmar. Within the national borders, there are at least 130 ethnic groups each with their own dialect or language, indigenous culture, and vested interests. Many, like the Karen, the Chin, the Kachin, and the Shan, have long maintained their own militias, fighting for basic human rights. The conflict between them and the dominant ethnic group, the Barmars, has continued unabated for 60 years. . . . A fourth factor is benign Buddhist beliefs have infused the Burmese mindset for centuries. Characteristics like tolerance, conservatism, pacifism, and profound respect for others do not readily lend themselves to armed revolt against the political status quo. It would seem that a combination of Bamar socio-ethnic superiority and Buddhist deference to one's leaders, lend multi-layered support to the continuing elitism of the generals in Myanmar. . . .

This article is one of the most informative we've seen about the religious and ethnic complexities in Myanmar. It is also one of the most practical in terms of suggestions that could make a real difference. Mabey concludes with a call to concerted prayer:

Finally, petitioning Father God in prayer is perhaps the most precious and influential thing we can do. Matters shift in the heavenly realms when his people pray. Bring to him your heartfelt hopes and use the information in this article to bring your specific requests for people and events in Myanmar. **IJFM**