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BURMA: Why did military authorities close Protestant churches?

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Burma's military authorities have closed three Protestant Full Gospel churches in the capital Rangoon since early August, as well as a series of Protestant house churches elsewhere in the country, Burmese Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. One Rangoon-based pastor told Forum 18 the Full Gospel churches were closed because they make too much noise during services, but the crackdown reaches much further. "Church leaders were called in by the military authorities and told to close their churches," another Protestant told Forum 18. The military authorities retain tight control over all religious activity. "If a church is not registered it is illegal," one Protestant leader reported after being warned by police intelligence not to hold unapproved worship services. "I was also warned that working with foreigners or inviting foreigners to preach in the church is likewise illegal." Over the past three years, Protestant congregations without their own place of worship have been prevented from building churches.

Three Protestant Full Gospel churches have been closed down in the capital Rangoon since early August together with a series of Protestant house churches elsewhere in the country, particularly in areas where Protestants are only a small minority, Burmese Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Churches reported closed are in Shan, Chin and Karen states and in the divisions of Mandalay, Yangon (Rangoon) and Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy). "Church leaders were called in by the military authorities and told to close their churches," one Protestant told Forum 18. "The authorities are worried Christians are going out to the Buddhists, and that they are spreading western ideas." However, one Rangoon-based Protestant pastor told Forum 18 that the Full Gospel churches were closed because they used to make a lot of noise during services that disturbed neighbours. He said Catholic and other Protestant denominations had not been affected.

Until its closure, one of the Full Gospel churches in Rangoon operated several programmes, including Bible training courses, women's and youth meetings, weekly worship services, and monthly fasting and prayer. "At present we are not allowed to do any activities - even weekly worship service," a pastor from the church who did not want to be identified told The Irrawaddy, an exile Burmese news website based in Thailand, on 9 September.

However, the Rangoon-based Protestant pastor who spoke to Forum 18 believes the recent church closures were not the result of increased religious persecution, but rather a consequence of cultural insensitivity on the part of the Full Gospel Church and its network. "The problem over the past two or three years has been that the Full Gospel Church, which does not have its own buildings but rents buildings from other people, worships very loudly," he told Forum 18. "They play drums, jump and dance - and so many neighbours have complained. They have held all-night prayer meetings where they pray and worship loudly. Almost the whole city complained. When people complained, the authorities acted and closed these churches down. Other denominations which worship more quietly do not have these problems."

The pastor added that the churches closed down in Chin, Shan and Karen states were "new" churches with a similar worship style. None are registered.

However, although the closures appear to relate mainly to Full Gospel and other Pentecostal congregations, the crackdown seems to be wider. One Protestant leader in the north of the country from another denomination, whose church has not been closed down, told Forum 18 that he was summoned by a police intelligence officer in August and warned that worship can take place only in a church, which must be registered, and not in private homes. "If a church is not registered it is illegal," the leader reported. "I was also warned that working with foreigners or inviting foreigners to preach in the church is likewise illegal."

Several Protestant pastors told Forum 18 that in the last three years it has become impossible for Protestant congregations without their own building to build a church, or for ones that do have a church to enlarge it to accommodate new members. Six Baptist congregations across the country that have tried to build churches for themselves have been denied permission and have been forced to find other places to meet. The Irrawaddy reported that construction on a new Baptist church in Tachileik, a town in Shan state near Burma's eastern border with Thailand, was recently halted.

Although the Burmese government has a religious affairs ministry with a network of officials at local level, Protestant sources say it has little authority and that orders to close churches and warnings are delivered directly by the military.

The military authorities closed a range of Protestant churches in 2002-3, on occasion to end conflicts within individual congregations but mainly in an attempt to halt their growth, sources told Forum 18. Despite the halt imposed on new church building three years ago, this is the first major wave of Protestant church closures since then.

Conditions continue to vary from one place to another. In some regions, only those who are already Christians are allowed to attend Christian churches, one source reported.

Most of the population of the country is of Buddhist background, while Christians - both Catholic and Protestant - make up some six per cent. Among Protestants, the largest churches are the Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Assemblies of God. Most Christians are from the country's ethnic minorities, as are the four per cent of the population of Muslim background.

Military intelligence routinely conducts surveillance on religious meetings and services. "They need to report back to higher authority," one leading Protestant told Forum 18. "They secretly bring tape-recorders to services or write down what is said. This is a regular thing - it's no big deal here." Asked how this was known, the Protestant responded: "Our town is small, so we know all the spies." The source believes that the military authorities find such covert surveillance more difficult in mosques, where the community knows other members. Instead military intelligence relies on spies within the Muslim community.

Religious publications are all censored by the authorities, with permission required from the censorship board, then from the publications department of the central government in Rangoon, regardless of where the religious community is based in the country. "If I'm very far from Rangoon I need to go there to present the text of the proposed publication," one source told Forum 18. "If the work is in a minority language it must first be translated into Burmese, then presented to the censorship board. That takes three to six months. Then to the publications department. That takes between six months and a year. And this takes money. You have to pay bribes to each official."

A Protestant complained that "there is no freedom to publish religious literature". "If it is against the government it is refused," the source told Forum 18, "of if you use the term 'Eternal God' too often - they don't like that in books because of Buddhist teaching." The source estimates that about a third of proposed publications presented to the authorities are refused permission.

For background information, see Forum 18's Burma religious freedom survey at
<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=396>

For a more recent report of continuing restrictions, see

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=538>

A printer-friendly map of Burma, under the regime's name of Myanmar, is available at
<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=myanma>>

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