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Yemen urged to reject amnesty law for President Saleh and aides

Amnesty International has urged the Yemeni parliament to reject a draft law granting President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his aides immunity from prosecution, after Yemen's cabinet approved the controversial bill on Sunday.

The draft law, which the country's parliament is expected to ratify in the coming days, grants President Saleh and anyone who has worked under him amnesty for any crimes committed during his 33-year rule. An additional clause in the bill means it will be impossible to repeal the law once it is passed.

"This is even worse than we feared. Granting President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his allies immunity from prosecution rules out any form of accountability for gross human rights violations that have taken place in Yemen over decades," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"This is a smack in the face for justice, made all the more glaring by the fact that protesters have been calling for an end to impunity since mass protests began in early 2011. The Yemeni Parliament ought to reject this outright," he said.

"Instead, the parliament should endorse the recommendation made by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and by Amnesty International that an independent international investigation is conducted into continuing human rights violations."

The draft law, which grants President Saleh and anyone who has worked under him immunity in exchange for leaving office, has angered protesters, who have called for the leader and others to be put on trial.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay says the bill – if passed into law - would violate Yemen's international human rights obligations.

Since early 2011, more than 200 people have been killed and thousands injured as security forces and armed Saleh supporters attempted to quell mostly peaceful pro-reform protests in the capital Sana'a and elsewhere. Hundreds more have been killed in armed clashes.

Under international law, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Yemen is obliged to investigate and prosecute anyone suspected of such crimes where there is sufficient admissible evidence.

Under a power-transfer agreement signed in November, Ali Abdullah Saleh handed over some presidential powers to Vice-President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

A member of the opposition was appointed to head a government of national reconciliation, with ministerial posts divided up among political parties as per the agreement. The new government will

remain in power for an interim period of two years.

Ali Abdullah Saleh will retain the title of President until the elections, which are expected to take place in February.