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Myanmar: Political prisoners must be freed

On the third anniversary of the violent crackdown on the “Saffron Revolution”, Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar government to immediately and unconditionally free all political prisoners arrested for their peaceful activism.

The Myanmar authorities continue to imprison over 2,200 political prisoners—more than double the number held before the August 2007 protests against sharp fuel and commodity price rises.

“While the international community, including Myanmar’s ASEAN neighbours, has been calling for free, fair and inclusive elections there, the plight of thousands of political prisoners has been overlooked,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International’s Myanmar Researcher.

Amnesty International believes the vast majority of those held are prisoners of conscience who are being punished merely for peacefully exercising their rights to free expression, assembly and association.

The Myanmar government will hold its first elections in 20 years on 7 November 2010 against a backdrop of political repression and systematic violence. Under Electoral Laws enacted in March 2010, no political prisoner can take part in the elections or hold membership in any political party.

International attention in recent months has focused on the power-play between the military and the government’s proxy parties on the one hand; and the armed ethnic minority groups, the National League for Democracy, and a small number of new opposition parties on the other.

“The long-standing problem of political imprisonment in Myanmar remains very much at the heart of the political impasse in the country”, said Benjamin Zawacki. “These prisoners constitute a significant part of the political opposition”.

In the largest show of public discontent against the military government in Myanmar since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, tens of thousands of protesters—led by Buddhist monks—took to the streets in August and September 2007, demanding economic and political reforms.

The peaceful country-wide demonstrations were violently put down by the authorities in late September 2007. At least 31 (and possibly more than a hundred) people were killed—with many more injured and at least 74 disappeared—and thousands detained.

The brutal crackdown provoked international condemnation, including an unprecedented expression of revulsion and demands for change from the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Yet even as Myanmar prepares for its first elections in two decades, as part of what it calls a “Roadmap to Democracy”, it continues to repress political opposition.

“It beggars belief that the government can attempt to burnish its democratic credentials by holding elections, while it also holds more than 2,200 political prisoners behind bars and out of sight of the campaigns and polls”, said Benjamin Zawacki . “The international community should point out to Myanmar that these practices cannot be reconciled under any genuine Roadmap to Democracy”.

Political prisoners in Myanmar are held in deplorable conditions.

Many of those who took part in the Saffron Revolution, such as labour rights campaigner Su Su Nway, monk leader and activist U Gambira, and 88 Generation Student group members Min Ko Naing, Htay Kywe, Mie Mie, Ko Mya Aye and Zaw Htet Ko Ko, are in poor health. In the past two years, at least 238 political prisoners have been moved to extremely remote prisons, restricting their access to relatives, lawyers and medical care. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment are rife. The International Committee of the Red Cross has been denied access to prisons in Myanmar since late 2005.

“On this third anniversary of the Saffron Revolution, Amnesty International calls on world leaders to demand that the Myanmar government free all political prisoners at once, and ensure human rights protection throughout the elections period and beyond”, said Benjamin Zawacki.