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## **Myanmar: Government attacks on freedoms compromises elections**

The Myanmar government's attacks on the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association compromises the country's first elections in 20 years, Amnesty International said today.

The Myanmar authorities have introduced several new laws and directives in the run up to the 7 November elections, restricting free speech and criticism of the government, prohibiting political parties from boycotting the elections, and cracking down on internal calls for the release of the estimated 2,200 political prisoners in the country.

"These elections presented an opportunity for Myanmar to make meaningful human rights changes on its own terms—and with the world watching," said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International's Secretary General. "Instead, throughout the run up to the polls, the government has attacked the rights necessary for holding meaningful elections."

Since March this year, when the government enacted restrictive and repressive Electoral Laws, it has routinely violated the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. Recent violations include:

- On 14 September, the Election Commission issued a notice outlining strict restrictions on campaign speeches to be broadcast on state media, including vaguely worded provisions that effectively ban criticism of the government or any mention of the country's problems, particularly ethnic issues.
- On 18 September, the government warned Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party—winners of the 1990 elections—of penalties for encouraging an election boycott.
- On 27 September, authorities sentenced Ashin Okkanta, an ethnic Mon monk, to 15 years' imprisonment for possessing leaflets calling for the release all political prisoners in Myanmar.
- In the final two weeks of September, the authorities arrested 11 students, at least nine of whom remain in detention, in Yangon for handing out leaflets urging people not to vote.

"That Myanmar continues to hold more than 2,200 political prisoners exposes the government's contempt for human rights in these elections," said Salil Shetty. "Their self-described 'Roadmap to Democracy', of which these elections are meant to be a significant part, seems to lead only to continuing political repression."

The Myanmar government maintains that it is not holding any political prisoners, despite the highly critical report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar released on 15 September 2010.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party won Myanmar's last polls in 1990 has spent nearly 15 of the past 21 years in detention.

The Myanmar government has also recently denied allegations of serious human rights violations in the country's ethnic minority regions in the run-up to the polls, including attacks targeting civilians in the army's ongoing counter-insurgency efforts. In 2008 Amnesty International found that such attacks amounted to crimes against humanity. Amnesty International has called on the UN to establish a Commission of Inquiry into the serious human rights violations in Myanmar.

“Myanmar's record of human rights violations has threatened the stability of the country and the region, and it's time for the UN, as well as Myanmar's neighbours in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to say enough is enough,” said Salil Shetty. “The sham nature of these elections should convince even China and India—which have been supportive of Myanmar's military government—to side with the people of the country instead.”

The elections are being held against a backdrop of political repression and systematic violence that has continued since 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, resulting in at least 31 (and possibly more than a hundred) people killed and many more injured, and at least 74 people disappeared and thousands detained.

“Denying the existence of political prisoners and the occurrence of serious international crimes will not make them disappear,” said Salil Shetty. “Only by releasing the prisoners and holding perpetrators of such crimes accountable can the government begin to adequately address these persistent human rights challenges. Holding elections is not enough.”

Regardless of the election results, Amnesty International calls on ASEAN, and Myanmar's other Asian neighbours, to demand the release of political prisoners and to make a Commission of Inquiry a reality in Myanmar.