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Myanmar elections will test ASEAN's credibility

Southeast Asian nations should press the Myanmar government to protect the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association throughout the elections period and beyond, Amnesty International said today on the eve of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Ha Noi.

ASEAN has repeatedly emphasized that the elections should be held in a “free, fair and inclusive manner”. Yet those calls do not go far enough to highlight the human rights that are most at risk in the elections context. Indeed, the Myanmar government has not taken any steps to improve its poor human rights record as the polls approach.

More than 2,200 political prisoners continue to languish behind bars in Myanmar. This is double the number since the start of the mass peaceful anti-government protests of August – September 2007—a huge indictment of the grim human rights situation there.

Under Electoral Laws enacted in March, no political prisoner can take part in the elections, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The same laws also prohibit them from membership in any political party.

ASEAN should unequivocally call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience at the Ministerial Meeting, something they conspicuously failed to do at the organisation's summit in Ha Noi in April.

The Electoral Laws also list a number of offences and penalties, among them—a blatant violation of freedom of expression—a vaguely worded provision against “exhorting” persons to vote or not to vote in the elections.

Moreover, in a 21 June directive issued by the Union Election Commission, political parties are prohibited from campaigning activities that “harm security, the rule of law and community peace”. These regulations allow for an excessively broad interpretation of what constitutes a threat to “security”. For decades the authorities have routinely used vaguely worded laws to arbitrarily criminalize peaceful political dissent.

New censorship rules introduced in June also serve to undermine any remaining scope for independent journalism around the elections process.

The “three freedoms”—of expression, peaceful assembly, and association—must be safeguarded for all, whether people choose to participate in the elections or not. It is not enough for ASEAN to adopt a “wait and see” attitude.

ASEAN states must also be prepared to speak out forcefully if individuals are harassed and detained for their peaceful political views and activities in the run-up to the elections.

Failure to address these urgent challenges will damage ASEAN's international credibility. It is crucial that ASEAN seizes this opportunity to work towards the realisation of long overdue human rights improvements in Myanmar.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises 10 member states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting takes place from 19 – 23 July this year.

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