

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

## **Myanmar: New government must break vicious cycle of repression and political arrests**

Myanmar's new government will take office with a historic opportunity to change course on human rights but must break away from the deeply repressive legal framework that for years has fuelled arbitrary arrests and repression, Amnesty International said in a new report today.

*New expression meets old repression* urges Aung San Suu Kyi and the upcoming National League for Democracy (NLD) government to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience still behind bars when it takes office in early April.

"Myanmar's legal framework reads like a textbook of repression, and authorities have in recent years increasingly used it to silence dissent," said Champa Patel, Amnesty International's South East Asia Director.

"To break the vicious cycle of political arrests, the new government must prioritize reforming the legal code to ensure that speaking out is no longer a crime, and it must release all those imprisoned simply for doing so.

"This could be the start of a new dawn for human rights in Myanmar, but the task facing Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy is huge – they have to ensure that their actions are not controlled by the repressive laws they will inherit. Despite their landslide election win, Myanmar's flawed constitution will also ensure that the military still wields considerable power."

## **Two years of growing repression**

The report - based on scores of interviews with human rights defenders, activists, lawyers, and prisoners of conscience and their families - documents how authorities in Myanmar have engaged in a far-reaching crackdown on opponents in the past two years. They have relied on a range of tactics and draconian laws to silence dissent, some new and some dating back to the years of outright military rule before 2011.

A wide range of people – including journalists, human rights defenders, students, and labour and land activists – have been threatened, harassed and jailed for nothing but peacefully speaking their minds. The repression and arrests of activists have continued even since the November 2015 elections.

Amnesty International knows of almost 100 prisoners of conscience behind bars in Myanmar today, while hundreds of other peaceful activists are in detention or waiting for their trials to end.

"The sheer number of prisoners of conscience in jail is an ongoing dark stain on Myanmar's record, and belies the authorities' claims to have turned a corner on human rights. The ramping up of repression and arrests of people who have done nothing but peacefully express their views has been deeply disturbing," said Champa Patel.

## **Using laws to silence dissent**

Legal loopholes are used to hand out lengthy jail sentences to activists and ensure that they are kept off the streets. Htin Kyaw is currently serving a prison sentence of 13 years and 10 months – his "crime" was to distribute leaflets criticizing the government. But Htin Kyaw was charged with the same offence separately in all 11 townships where he handed out the leaflets, resulting in his lengthy sentence.

Authorities have also been using the law to bring charges against groups of people participating in a protest, in ways which amount to collective punishment. They have also used politically motivated detention and imprisonment to significantly weaken dissident movements, targeting leaders in particular.

Following the nationwide student protests which started in 2014 and ended with the brutal beating of students by police in Letpadan in March 2015, scores of students and their supporters have been arrested and detained throughout the country. With at least 45 of them still languishing in detention waiting for trials, more arrests happened as recently as February 2016.

## **An opportunity for change?**

Members of the NLD party have made encouraging and welcome promises to make human rights a priority when they take office, and the party has a historic opportunity to do so. But the task it is facing is huge.

There are serious questions about the NLD's ability to change course on human rights, given that Myanmar's constitution still puts the military in charge of several key institutions. These include the Ministry of Home Affairs, which oversees the Police and the general administration of the country.

Amnesty International calls on the new government to immediately release all prisoners of conscience, to establish a functioning prisoners of conscience committee to review all cases and ensure no peaceful activists are imprisoned, and to amend or repeal all laws used to crack down on human rights.

"The NLD-led government has a golden opportunity to effect human rights change. It is one they must seize with both hands – but to do it they will need the backing of the international community," said Champa Patel.

## **Note to editors**

The report *New expression meets old repression* will be launched in Yangon with a press conference on Thursday 24 March at 11am local time at the Park Royal Hotel.

To RSVP to the event or to request an advance copy of the report, please contact:

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