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**Thailand: From free speech to refugee protection, next government must undertake deep reforms**

Thailand’s next government will need to lift undue restrictions on freedom of expression and limit arbitrary executive powers, Amnesty International said ahead of polling day on 24 March.

“The new administration should end the criminalization of peaceful dissent and other severe limitations on freedom of expression. Over the last ten years of political instability, the Thai authorities have often invoked national security to silence perceived critics and peaceful political opponents,” said Katherine Gerson, Amnesty International’s Thailand campaigner.

“The Thai authorities have also arbitrarily employed emergency powers to violate human rights,” said Katherine Gerson. “The next government must respect human rights even in emergencies. It will need to strengthen legal protections to prevent the grave human rights violations that have flourished under military rule and in the absence of accountability.”

After the Royal Thai Army took power in a May 2014 coup and declared martial law, the military authorities heavily restricted the exercise of basic human rights. They pledged that the sweeping rights restrictions they had enacted were temporary measures to preserve peace and order, and that democratic elections were on the horizon. But they repeatedly delayed both the lifting of rights restrictions and the holding of elections.

The current election date of 24 March 2019 has been validated by the Election Commission and appears likely to go ahead.

Amnesty International has published a Human Rights Agenda which outlines nine key human rights issues that parliamentary candidates, and those elected to the next government, must prioritize. These include the rights to freedom from torture and enforced disappearance, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and the right to privacy in the design of cybersecurity measures.

“This election takes place after more than four years in which freedom of expression has been systematically repressed,” said Katherine Gerson. “From recent attempts to take Voice TV off the air to criminal proceedings against the Future Forward Party, the authorities are showing no sign of ending abuse of judicial powers to silence dissent during the elections.”

Other areas covered in Amnesty’s Human Rights Agenda include establishing stronger protections for refugees and people seeking asylum, and abolishing the death penalty.

“The recent cases of Rahaf Mohammed and Hakeem Ali al-Araibi captivated millions of people around the world. Their ordeals starkly illustrate the risk to refugees of forcible return to places where they face huge danger,” said Katherine Gerson. “The Thai government should act on its past commitments to improve the protection of refugees. With this election, the government should commit to codifying its respect for refugees into law.”