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Myanmar: Two days after historic polls, authorities reject key human rights recommendations

Two days after general elections in Myanmar, the current government rejected key recommendations made during its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the UN Human Rights Council. This position is revealing of their limited commitment to human rights.

On 10 November, the UPR Working Group adopted the outcome of Myanmar's UPR during its 23rd session in Geneva. The adoption came after Myanmar's human rights record was assessed on 6 November, during which Member States made a total of 281 recommendations to Myanmar to strengthen its protection of human rights and address human rights challenges. Of these recommendations, Myanmar accepted 122, rejected outright 69, and stated it would "consider" a further 90 recommendations between now and the formal adoption of the review outcome in March 2016. The statistics, however, may be misleading, as the government rejected key recommendations to address Myanmar's most pressing human rights issues.

Among the recommendations rejected outright were calls relating to the human rights and humanitarian situation of the persecuted Rohingya minority. This mass rejection is not surprising, as the authorities continue to deny the Rohingya's very existence. Myanmar's blatant refusal to even acknowledge the very serious and entrenched human rights situation facing this Muslim community should ring alarm bells with the international community.

Myanmar also rejected recommendations to repeal or amend four laws aimed at "protecting race and religion" despite these laws having been identified by UN experts and human rights organizations as discriminatory on multiple grounds, including particularly gender, religion and marital status. The refusal to even consider amending these laws speaks volumes about the wider context in Myanmar, where hard-line Buddhist nationalist groups have risen in power and influence, and where advocacy of hatred and incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims remains unchallenged.

Amnesty International notes that Myanmar will consider recommendations to release prisoners of conscience and report back to the Human Rights Council about this issue in March. Given that there are currently at least 110 prisoners of conscience in the country – with hundreds of others on trial facing imprisonment solely for peacefully exercising their rights; the commitment to "consider" releasing them does not go far enough. All prisoners of conscience should be released immediately and without conditions.

The government's further rejection of multiple recommendations to amend laws which restrict the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, demonstrate its unwillingness to address the policies and practices that fuel arbitrary arrests.

While Myanmar accepted 122 recommendations, Amnesty International considers that most of these recommendations merely call for general measures instead of concrete steps to improve the human rights situation and are therefore unlikely to result in significant improvements for the human rights situation in the country – which is the very objective of the UPR.

Amnesty International calls on Myanmar to reconsider its decision to reject key human rights

recommendations before the final adoption of the UPR report at the 31st session of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2016. The current Myanmar government will have the opportunity to leave a positive legacy of commitment to address human rights issues. They must seize this opportunity.

Amnesty International calls on the next government of Myanmar to prioritize much needed human rights reforms and crucially implement all UPR recommendations aimed at strengthening respect for and protection of human rights, regardless of whether or not they were rejected by the current administration.

Background:

The Universal Periodic Review Working Group adopted the outcome of the UPR of Myanmar on 10 November 2015 during the 23rd session of the UPR review. In March 2016, the final report of the UPR will be adopted by the UN Human Rights Council. Prior to the adoption of the review outcome, Amnesty International had submitted information on the situation of human rights in Myanmar: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/2276/2015/en/>