

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

OCTOBER 2017 REPORT

Summary. This report reviews the October 2017 developments relating to human rights in Myanmar. Relatedly, it addresses the interchange between Myanmar’s reform efforts and the responses of the international community.

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I. Political Developments

A. Governance and the Rule of Law

According to a recent New York Times column, Myanmar is currently being governed by an “illiberal democracy” that diverges from the hopeful vision of government many citizens and observers had prior to general elections in two years ago.¹ According to the columnist, a number of factors have contributed to the “illiberal” nature of Myanmar’s nascent democracy, including weak democratic institutions and the concentration of decision-making within Aung San Suu Kyi’s close inner circle.² The author further claimed that to date, Myanmar’s transition from the previous, military-led regime has been colored by fear—both of a resurgence by the prior regime and of new political threats—which has resulted in the new National League for Democracy (“NLD”) administration taking measures to fortify itself against outspoken critics.³ To that end, the NLD has driven out members deemed too sympathetic to the formerly ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (“USDP”), resulting in vacancies in a number of administrative leadership positions. In addition, the controversial Section 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law, a tool used by the previous USDP regime to suppress journalists by imposing fines or prison terms on those who criticized the government, has been invoked by the NLD 89 times since the party’s transition to power. By comparison, former President Thein Sein’s regime invoked the law seven times from its passage in 2013 to the regime change in 2016.⁴ The NLD has even turned on its allies, removing individuals from its ranks when they have achieved independent or grass-roots support that the party views as potentially threatening.⁵

Meanwhile, the NLD has been hesitant to oppose majority opinion and institute protections for minority citizens, particularly citizens in the nation’s Muslim minority. Instead, while outspoken Buddhist nationalists have driven a large portion of the country into a frenzy of nationalism, the NLD has taken a largely permissive approach to such nationalist rhetoric, viewing the nationalism as not directly opposing state interests and targeting potentially troublesome opponents of the NLD.⁶

Based on the political developments seen so far in 2017, observers are placing a renewed emphasis on a more practical approach to educating citizens in democratic participation and bolstering protections against a “tyranny of the majority.”

B. Corruption and International Community / Sanctions

International Community / Sanctions

The US is considering new sanctions over violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, including potential action under the Magnitsky Act, originally designed to target Russians involved in human rights abuses.⁷ Under the so-called “Global Magnitsky” sanctions, the President of the United States can block or revoke visas for people or organizations and impose property sanctions on them.⁸ The United States has already rescinded invitations for senior Myanmar security officials to attend US-sponsored events and is also working with the UN on other options to hold Myanmar officials accountable for any Rohingya-related offenses they may have been involved in.⁹ The US State Department has also cut off travel waivers allowing current and former senior Myanmar military leaders into the US, and all military units and officers involved in operations in northern Rakhine state are ineligible to receive American assistance.¹⁰ However, the US State Department is still considering how to describe the violence against

Rohingya Muslims, while US lawmakers are pressing the administration to declare it as ethnic cleansing.¹¹

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed concern about the continuing humanitarian crisis and reported atrocities in Rakhine State in his call with General Min Aung Hlaing in late October.¹² According to a State Department spokeswoman, Secretary Tillerson urged Myanmar's security forces to support the government in ending the violence, to allow the safe return home of those displaced during the crisis, to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid for people in affected areas, to allow media access in affected areas, and to cooperate with the UN "to ensure a thorough, independent investigation into all allegations of human rights abuses and violations and to ensure accountability."¹³

Corruption

In October, Justice Base, a legal support group based in London, published a report showing rampant corruption and other issues in court administration of Myanmar.¹⁴ The report was the culmination of more than 150 trial observations across four years in Yangon Region's township and district courtrooms.¹⁵ Local legal professionals, employed by Justice Base as observers for the report, documented rampant corruption in court administration, a culture of deference to police witnesses and judges, intervention in proceedings by other officials, and routine procedural delays that kept cases running for months longer than necessary. According to the report, court clerks routinely charged ten times the official rate for providing copies of documents to defense lawyers. Observers were told that money changed hands "during every stage of the formal judicial process," including bail applications, adjournment requests and sentencing hearings.¹⁶ In nearly 90 percent of the cases surveyed by Justice Base, defendants did not have legal representation during bail hearings, and in nearly half of the cases defendants were still without a lawyer when the prosecution began presenting its case.

According to the Justice Base director, Myanmar's decades of military rule with no meaningful separation of powers had left the judiciary "unequipped to administer justice impartially and effectively."¹⁷

II. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

A draft bill prohibiting hate speech was sent to the Myanmar Parliament in early October following discussions with international and local civil society organizations.¹⁸ According to Zarni Win, deputy secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, the bill "aims to prevent the spread of hate speech based on race and religion."¹⁹ The Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs also claimed that adoption of the law will contribute to preventing incitement of religious violence through social media, newspapers, and radio and television.²⁰ While specific details regarding the bill have been scarce, Zarni Win stated that violations of the proposed law could be punishable by up to two years in prison.²¹

In addition to the proposed law prohibiting hate speech, Myanmar currently has other laws restricting freedom of speech, such as Section 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law. Despite these restrictions, many people are finding avenues around speech restrictions through

social media.²² Facebook, for example, is considered to be the main source of news and information for many Myanmar citizens.²³ Unfortunately, Facebook has also served as the primary venue for misinformation, as well as explicitly hostile language, which is seen as “widening longstanding ethnic divides and stoking the violence against the Rohingya ethnic group.”²⁴ For example, since the government crackdown against the Rohingya began, Zaw Htay, a spokesman for Aung San Suu Kyi, has shared dozens of posts on his Facebook page and Twitter account that include images said to show Rohingya burning their own homes.²⁵ Many of these images have been debunked, yet they remain on Zaw Htay profiles.²⁶

Facebook has no office in Myanmar, but the company has worked with local partners to introduce a Myanmar-language illustrated copy of its platform standards and will “continue to refine” its practices, according to a company spokeswoman.²⁷ Still, observers have called for additional action. Local leaders have called on local media and news outlets to help combat misinformation in a technology sector still in its infancy.²⁸ In addition, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Free Expression has said that Facebook should police the hate speech and disinformation that in his view constitutes “an online effort at ethnic cleansing, if not genocide.”²⁹

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

Myanmar authorities have charged two foreign journalists, as well as their local interpreter and driver, after the journalists flew a drone near Myanmar’s parliament building.³⁰ Lau Hon Meng of Singapore and Mok Choy Lin of Malaysia were working for the Turkish news organization TRT World when they were arrested and detained on October 26.³¹ Sein Win of the Myanmar Journalism Institute said it is unclear if there is an official ban on taking pictures of parliamentary buildings with drones, and that if there is no such ban, it would be difficult to state that the journalists violated any Myanmar law.³² TRT World released a statement claiming that the two foreign journalists had obtained official journalist visas before entering Myanmar and had informed the Myanmar Information Ministry about their filming activities and filming schedule.³³

The local interpreter, Aung Naing Soe, is well known in Myanmar for his photojournalism work and his coverage of the persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority.³⁴ Prior to his arrest, he had faced death threats due to his work, and after his arrest, false claims arose that he had ties with a Rohingya insurgency group.³⁵ The four will be held in custody until their first court hearings on November 9 over whether they breached import and export laws.³⁶ The families of the two foreign journalists and their lawyer, as well as the family of Aung Naing Soe, have not been able to visit them.³⁷

C. Land Seizures

Rohingya Muslims who plan to return to Myanmar after fleeing to Bangladesh to avoid ethnic violence may be unable to reclaim the land they left, and may find that their crops have been harvested and sold by the government.³⁸ The recent exodus of 589,000 Rohingya—and about 30,000 non-Muslims—from the conflict zone in northern Rakhine has left some 71,500 acres of planted rice paddy abandoned and in need of harvesting by January.³⁹ According to state government documents reviewed by Reuters, Myanmar officials have made plans to

harvest, and possibly sell, the crops left behind by the fleeing Rohingya.⁴⁰ Based on the market price of rice, the Myanmar government stands to gain millions of dollars' worth of rice as a result of this harvest.⁴¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW) deputy Asia director, Phil Robertson, said the government should at least guarantee that the rice would be used for humanitarian support and not sold for profit.⁴²

Myanmar also intends to settle most refugees who return to Rakhine state in new "model villages," rather than on the land they previously occupied, an approach criticized in the past by the United Nations as effectively creating permanent camps.⁴³ International donors, who have fed and cared for more than 120,000 mostly Rohingya "internally displaced persons" ("IDPs") in supposedly temporary camps in Rakhine State since violence in 2012, have told Myanmar that they will not support more camps according to aid workers and diplomats.⁴⁴ "The establishment of new temporary camps or camp-like settlements carries many risks, including that the returnees and IDPs could end up being confined to these camps for a long time," said UN spokesman Stanislav Saling.⁴⁵

Disputes over the Letpadaung mine continued into October. Approximately 7,000 acres of land were seized for the copper mine project, and affected farmers have yet to receive compensation for approximately 2,000 acres of the seized land.⁴⁶ Residents who had land seized for the mining project told regional officials that the farmland that they have been offered in exchange for the seized land is "too far from their villages and ... not good for cultivation."⁴⁷ Officials have responded by stating that there is no vacant farmland near the affected villages available to compensate the farmers.⁴⁸ In early October, protesters attempted to meet with representatives from the company that runs the mining project.⁴⁹ About 200 policemen and security guards blocked their access.⁵⁰ Residents have stated that they will continue to protest the mine.⁵¹

Farmers and vendors in Nay Pyi Taw have protested an alleged failure of authorities to return certain confiscated land.⁵² The land in question was seized by the military in 2000 for a prawn farming project, which was ultimately unsuccessful.⁵³ Instead of returning the land to the original owners, the protesters claim that officials sold the confiscated land to third parties.⁵⁴ The frustrated farmers report that they have waited over 9 months for a response to their complaints.⁵⁵

In Rangoon, ten regional parliament members have supported a proposal requiring the return of lands and buildings to the government that were leased to businesses but that have not in fact been used for their intended purposes.⁵⁶ The proposal was due to be voted on on October 19, 2017, but the results of that vote are not yet known.⁵⁷ A similar proposal was put forth in 2016, but was not ultimately acted on.⁵⁸

In Mandalay, the land dispute associated with the Myotha industrial park is coming to an end, as landowners of ninety percent of the land taken for the project have been compensated at the designated rate.⁵⁹ The Myotha industrial park project began in 2013, and required seizure of over 10,000 acres of land, of which about 8,500 acres were farmland.⁶⁰ Approximately 50 farmers have not taken payment at all, and some additional farmers have not accepted the offered payment for unused land, which is compensated at approximately 25% of the rate of farmland.⁶¹ Meanwhile in Kyaukse township in Mandalay, farmers continue to demand fair compensation

for 400 acres of land seized in 2004.⁶² Approximately 93 farmers had land seized.⁶³ In 2007, 81 farmers were forced to accept compensation for farmland at set rates.⁶⁴ The remaining twelve farmers received compensation at almost ten times the 2007 rate in September 2017.⁶⁵ The farmers complain that the land was seized without reason and that the farmland was ultimately allocated to three cement factories, which have further degraded the surrounding land.⁶⁶ Local officials have indicated that, if farmers are not happy, they should submit a request to the land investigation committee.⁶⁷

III. Economic Development

Several news outlets have reported that Myanmar's economy is expected to grow this year as a result of public and private investments in infrastructure. Investment has also come from foreign sources, although the country faces obstacles to investor confidence due to security concerns and the high risk of natural disasters. Realizing the country's projected growth will depend on risks such as regional volatility resulting from geopolitical tensions, as well as monetary and economic policies in Myanmar.⁶⁸

Reflecting some of these risks, the World Bank has cut its growth forecasts for Myanmar by 0.6% for 2018.⁶⁹ The World Bank stated in its report that Myanmar's macroeconomic environment remains stable, but noted that the Rakhine crisis and a lack of clarity in the country's economic agenda have slowed investment.⁷⁰ Still, the World Bank report projects recovery in the agricultural sector in the coming months, leading to an increase in rural incomes, declining poverty and lower inflation. Despite the World Bank's downward adjustment in its growth forecast for Myanmar, it noted that Myanmar remains one of the faster growing economies in Southeast Asia.

One of the more significant investments in recent months has come in the infrastructure sector, specifically related to waterway access.⁷¹ As part of its National Transport Master Plan, launched in 2014, the Myanmar government has announced that it will develop six new inland maritime port terminals on the Ayeyarwaddy and Chindwin rivers. The limited depth of the inland channels as currently constituted constrains the size of ships that are able to enter inland channels and ports. The investment in river transport will form part of the \$60 billion required to be invested in Myanmar's transportation sector over the next twenty years, as estimated by the Ministry of Transport and Communications.⁷²

A delegation of Myanmar civil servants recently visited Hong Kong to study the administration of public transportation.⁷³ The week-long trip involved meeting with former city officials and participating in on-site visits, and addressed topics such as mass transit administration and congestion management.⁷⁴ The trip was organized by Governance Partners Yangon, a Hong Kong-based non-profit organization formed "to facilitate business, exchanges and cooperation" between Hong Kong and Myanmar.⁷⁵

A Chinese bank has taken on the role of assisting Myanmar in the development of its banking and monetary fields.⁷⁶ The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China ("ICBC") will aid Myanmar in "nurturing skilled banking personnel." The assistance of the ICBC underscores the economic opportunities between China and Myanmar that Chinese Ambassador Hong Liang has highlighted in prior remarks.

IV. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

Earlier this month, the Myanmar government told the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that its top priority was to bring back Rohingya Muslims who had fled to Bangladesh, while cautioning that much work was needed to “consolidate stability” in its troubled northern region of Rakhine.⁷⁷ These statements came after Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed on October 2 to establish a working group to plan for the repatriation of more than 500,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees to Myanmar.⁷⁸ While Myanmar’s Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement stated that any Rohingya who satisfy the government’s identity verification process could be repatriated, many refugees have expressed skepticism about their prospects of returning to Myanmar due to a concern that they will not be able to furnish the documents they anticipate the government will demand.⁷⁹

As of October 17, more than 500,000 Rohingya Muslims had fled Myanmar, while thousands more continue to cross the border into Bangladesh.⁸⁰ The United Nations estimated that about 10,000 to 15,000 Rohingya had fled since October 15, raising the overall total number of refugees who have fled Myanmar since August 25 to 582,000.⁸¹ Many of the more recent refugees arriving in Bangladesh explained they had fled when their villages were set on fire, and that the Rohingya were being starved in a bid to make them leave.⁸²

Myanmar officials continue to deny any systematic violence against the Rohingya Muslims.⁸³ On October 16, Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar armed forces accused Rohingya Muslims of bullying Buddhists in Rakhine with the help of foreign organizations, including the United Nations.⁸⁴

B. Peace Talks

On October 23, Myanmar’s Peace Commission met with the Delegation for Political Negotiation (“DPN”) of the United Nationalities Federal Council (“UNFC”) at the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre in Yangon to discuss the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (“NCA”) and the outstanding issues regarding the ongoing peace process.⁸⁵ This was the seventh meeting between the groups on the UNFC’s proposals.⁸⁶

The outstanding issues that had not yet been agreed to between the UNFC and the Myanmar government relate to the revision of the political dialogue framework, the deployment of the army, the participation of international government members in the Joint Monitoring Committee on Ceasefire, the dispute resolution process, the implementation of resource development projects, and for the government to announce a nationwide ceasefire.⁸⁷ According to a DPN spokesperson, approximately two-thirds of the UNFC’s proposals were agreed at the meeting.⁸⁸ Other sources report that all points have been agreed “in principle,” with only “military-related affairs” left to discuss.⁸⁹ The hope is that the remaining points will be agreed in time to allow the UNFC to sign the NCA and attend the next Panglong Conference, which is expected to be held in December.

At the meeting, the vice chair of the Peace Commission, Thein Zaw, urged the UNFC and other non-signatory groups to sign the NCA.⁹⁰ However, according to DPN leader Khu Oo

Reh, amendments to the NCA are required before the UNFC would be willing to sign it.⁹¹ The active members of the UNFC include the Karenni National Progressive Party, the New Mon State Party, the Arakan National Council and the Lahu Democratic Union.⁹²

A ceremony was held on October 15 to mark the second anniversary of the signing of the NCA.⁹³ At that ceremony, Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated that the government intends to proceed with the NCA-based peace process and remains focused on bringing all ethnic armed groups into negotiations.⁹⁴ She added that the third Panglong Conference will continue discussions on the basic principles for a federal system and that two further peace conferences will be held in 2018.⁹⁵ In a separate speech, General Min Aung Hlaing vowed to fully cooperate with the civilian government's peace process and urged non-signatory groups to sign the NCA.⁹⁶ Former President Thein Sein, members of the UNFC and members of the Northern Alliance were invited to the ceremony but did not attend.⁹⁷ On the same day as the ceremony, the Karen National Union ("KNU") released a statement calling on the government and the Tatmadaw to compromise on their policies regarding ethnic equality and the right to self-determination, which it says would enable non-signatory groups to sign the NCA.⁹⁸

On October 25, the Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw and the eight ethnic armed groups that have signed the NCA began their first joint review of the implementation of the NCA.⁹⁹ The review focused on the progress of negotiations and the changes required in order to further implementation of the NCA.¹⁰⁰ The result of the joint review will be shared with the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee ("JMC").¹⁰¹ The joint review came after signatory group leaders had separate meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and General Min Aung Hlaing on October 16.¹⁰²

Clashes involving the Ta'ang Nationalities Liberation Army, the Arakan Army and Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance continued this month.¹⁰³ All three groups are allied with the United Wa State Army ("UWSA") and the Kachin Independence Army ("KIA") under the political alliance known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee ("FPNCC").¹⁰⁴ The UWSA-led bloc has called for an alternative approach to the NCA.¹⁰⁵ So far, the government has refused to negotiate with the FPNCC and insists on meeting each of its seven members separately.¹⁰⁶

According to reports, the KIA abducted more than 60 people, including banana farmers and villagers, from Sainglaw, Hongtaung and Kaungkha villages located in Sadone Sub-township of Waingmaw township on October 5.¹⁰⁷ It is still not clear why these villagers have been abducted, but some have speculated that the KIA aims to recruit them.¹⁰⁸ While some hostages have since been released, negotiations with the KIA for the release of the remaining hostages are ongoing.¹⁰⁹ The talks are being mediated by the Peace Talks Creation Group ("PCG").¹¹⁰ The situation has been reported to the Ministry of Home Affairs.¹¹¹ The KIA has not signed the NCA and has been engaged in military skirmishes with the Tatmadaw since 2011.¹¹²

According to sources close to the peace process, a mixed delegation of the government, the Tatmadaw and both NCA signatory and non-signatory groups will join a trip to Colombia to study the country's peace process organized by the peace NGO Inter Mediate.¹¹³

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