

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/15/dispatches-political-prisoner-endgame-burma>

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The release of 69 political prisoners in Burma today is cause for optimism that the drawn-out persecution of peaceful activists, which reached its apex just a few years ago when up to [2,000 people](#) were locked up, is drawing to a close. Today's amnesty includes the prominent rights activist Naw Ohn Hla, sentenced recently to two years in prison for her role in protests over the controversial Letpadaung copper mine. Authorities also freed 12 ethnic Arakanese activists sentenced for organizing a peaceful protest against a Chinese energy pipeline, as well as nine people sentenced for staging a protest without a permit in violation of the [flawed public assembly law](#), and ethnic Shan and Kachin alleged to have contacts with rebel groups.

Several other people released probably stretched the everyday definition of political prisoner, including two grandsons of the former dictator Ne Win, as well as ethnic Arakanese who opposed the provision of international humanitarian assistance to the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority.

Earlier this year, President Thein Sein [pledged to release](#) all remaining political prisoners by year's end. But an estimated 64 [remain](#) and another 256 people are on trial for various alleged offenses related to land disputes, holding public assemblies and political organizing.

The latest amnesty demonstrates the governments prevailing tactic to stage public releases ahead of important events, such as the several high-level diplomatic visits in recent days. But it also indicates the central governments willingness to intervene to rectify blatantly egregious abuses of the legal system by local authorities by showing clemency to peaceful protesters.

Now the government needs to take its reform efforts to another level. President Thein Sein and his government should be pressing for genuine reform of the Burmese legal system, starting with the repeal of the raft of abusive laws still on the books. They also should ensure that planned new laws such as the one on [freedom of association](#) are in line with international human rights standards.

Only when the government puts away the legal tools developed by successive Burmese military governments to underpin repression will it be possible to see an end to the cycle of political arrests, prolonged detention, and surprise releases, a phenomenon that has no place in a genuinely democratic and rights-respecting Burma.

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