

Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/17/burma-growing-political-prisoner-population>

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(Bangkok) [Burmese](#) authorities should immediately drop all politically motivated charges against hundreds of detainees and unconditionally release them, Human Rights Watch said today. President Thein Sein should fulfill pledges he made over three years ago to free all of the countrys political prisoners.

Burmas growing number of political prisoners is the most glaring indictment of President Thein Seins human rights record, said [Phil Robertson](#), deputy Asia director. In the waning days of his administration, the president could leave a positive legacy by immediately and unconditionally freeing all of those unjustly held.

Organizations of former political prisoners in Burma estimate that there are [128 people](#) who have been convicted and are serving time for political offenses. Another 472 are currently facing apparently politically motivated charges, including 23 arrested since the November 8 election. Many are students, land rights activists, journalists, and an increasing number of people charged with criminal defamation for social media posts or allegedly insulting religion.

Many activists have been charged and convicted for violating section 18 of the seriously flawed [Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law](#), which requires prior police approval for public assemblies.

Several prominent cases of current political prisoners include:

The rising number of activists wrongfully detained shows the urgent need to revoke the numerous rights-abusing laws used to target them, Robertson said. That such a wide cross-section of Burmese civil society voices have been locked up for exercising the freedoms the government touts as progress demonstrates the continued intensity of intimidation and repression in Burma.

Prior to United States President Barack Obamas visit to Burma in November 2012, President Thein Sein had pledged to free the remaining political prisoners throughout Burma. Soon thereafter, he formed a Remaining Political Prisoner Scrutiny Committee, which included government officials, parliamentarians, and former political prisoner advocates. The committee made considerable progress, and by early 2014 there were only approximately 25 political prisoners remaining behind bars. But that number soon grew again as the government arrested and jailed people protesting on land rights, education, and other government policies and actions. In early 2015, the government formed a new [political prisoner review committee](#) and appointed as its leader a hardline deputy minister for home affairs, an army general. The committee excluded former political prisoners working as rights activists.

In January 2016, a senior official of the incoming NLD government, which won a landslide victory in the November 8 [nationwide elections](#), pledged that their government would ensure there are no political prisoners during their term. The party also issued a [definition](#) of a political prisoner in order to guide decisions on releasing individuals from prison: a political prisoner is anyone arrested, detained or imprisoned for their direct or indirect activities to promote freedom, equality, and human and civil rights, including ethnic minorities, as well as for involvement in anti-government protests. The NLD has large numbers of former political prisoners among its members following decades of repression by the former military government.

The party will come under intense domestic pressure to release all remaining political prisoners and rein in local officials who still target activists.

Thein Sein shouldnt wait for the new government to take office in late March to free those who should never have been imprisoned in the first place, Robertson said. Their charges should be dropped and they should be released now.

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