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Burma's Political Prisoners and U.S. Policy

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Summary

Despite a campaign pledge that they "would not arrest anyone as political prisoners," Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) have failed to fulfil this promise since they took control of Burma's Union Parliament and the government's executive branch in April 2016. While presidential pardons have been granted for some political prisoners, people continue to be arrested, detained, tried, and imprisoned for political reasons. According to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (Burma), or AAPP(B), a Thailand-based, nonprofit human rights organization formed in 2000 by former Burmese political prisoners, there were 587 political prisoners as of the end of April 2020, 256 more than a year ago.

During its four years in power, the NLD government has provided pardons for Burma's political prisoners on seven occasions. The latest was on April 17, 2020, when President Win Myint pardoned nearly 25,000 prisoners, of which 10 were considered political prisoners by AAPP(B).

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government, as well as the Burmese military, however, also have demonstrated a willingness to use Burma's laws to suppress the opinions of their political opponents and restrict press freedoms. In April 2020, several reporters were charged under Article 50 (a) and Article 52 (a) of the 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law for publishing interviews with representatives of the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organization that the NLD government has officially declared a terrorist group.

The Union Parliament has repealed or amended a few of the various laws that authorities use to arrest and prosecute people for political reasons, but has also passed new laws that some observers see as limiting political expression and protection of human rights. In addition, the Tatmadaw, which either directly or indirectly controls all of the nation's security forces (including the Myanmar Police Force), has not demonstrated an interest in ending Burma's history of political imprisonment. Tatmadaw leaders have brought multiple defamation cases against journalists who publish stories critical of Burma's military.

The Burma Political Prisoners Assistance Act (H.R. 2327, S. 2069) would make it U.S. policy to support the immediate and unconditional release of "all prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in Burma," and require the Secretary of State to "provide assistance to civil society organizations in Burma that work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in Burma."

Congress may consider if and how to integrate concerns regarding political imprisonment into overall U.S. policy in Burma. Congress may also choose to assess how other important issues in Burma should influence U.S. policy, including efforts to end the nation's ongoing low-grade civil war, the forced deportation of more than 700,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State in 2017, and prospects for constitutional and legal reform designed to establish a democratically elected civilian government that respects the human rights and civil liberties of all Burmese people.

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Overview

The existence and treatment of political prisoners in Burma (Myanmar)[1] has been a central issue in the formulation of U.S. policy toward Burma for more than 25 years. The arrest, detention, prosecution, and imprisonment of Burmese political prisoners—including Aung San Suu Kyi[2]—frequently were cited as reasons for imposing political and economic sanctions on Burma and the leaders of its ruling military junta. The release of political prisoners was often listed as a necessary condition for the repeal of those sanctions.[3] When announcing waivers of existing sanctions, the Obama Administration often cited progress on the release of political prisoners as evidence for why the waiver was warranted.[4]

During a discussion of the human rights situation in Burma during the 34th session of the U.N. Human Rights Council in March 2017, William J. Mozdzierz, Director of the Office of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs within the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs, stated that the U.S. government was "concerned by new political arrests under the current [Burmese] government," and urged "the [Burmese] government to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, and to drop charges against individuals for taking part in protected political activities."[5] In January 2020, the State Department listed the release of the "remaining political prisoners" as one the five "major institutional and political challenges" in Burma.[6] What actions, if any, the 116th Congress or the Trump Administration may take with respect to U.S. policy toward Burma may hinge, in part, on the issue of political prisoners in Burma.

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[1] According to the country's 2008 constitution, its official name is "the Republic of the Union of Myanmar," or "Myanmar." The U.S. government continues to officially refer to the nation as "the Union of Burma," or "Burma," but uses "Myanmar" inside the country and at multilateral fora where the host refers to the nation as "Myanmar."

[2] Between 1989 and 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest or in prison for 15 of the 21 years, including a short stay in Insein Prison following an assassination attempt in the town of Depayin. For more about her years as a political prisoner, see Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Chronology of Aung San Suu Kyi's Detention*, November 13, 2010.

[3] Section 138 of the Customs and Trade Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-382) requires the President to "impose such economic sanctions upon Burma as the President determines to be appropriate until certain conditions are met, including "Prisoners held for political reasons in Burma have been released." The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-61) stipulates as one condition for the termination of the act's sanctions, "The SPDC has made measurable and substantial progress toward implementing a democratic government, including—(i) releasing all political prisoners; …" The Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008 (JADE Act; P.L. 110-286) sets as one of the conditions for the termination of its sanctions that "the President determines and certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that the SPDC has—(1) Unconditionally released all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy; …"

[4] For example, in Executive Order 13742 issued on October 7, 2016, which waived the economic sanctions imposed by Section 5(b) of the JADE Act and terminated and revoked Executive Orders 13047, 13310, 13448, 13464, 13619, and 13651, President Obama mentioned "the release of many political prisoners" among the evidence of "Burma's substantial advances to promote democracy." Similarly, Presidential Determination No. 2017-04, which terminated restrictions on bilateral assistance to Burma contained in Section 570(1) of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1997 (P.L. 104-208), President Obama citied "the new civilian [sic] government released 63 political prisoners and dropped charges against almost 200 individuals facing trial on political grounds" as evidence of "measurable and substantial progress in improving human rights practices and implementing democratic government," as required by that act.

[5] U.S. Mission in Geneva, "Statement by the Delegation of the United States of America as Delivered by William J. Mozdzierz," press release, March 13, 2017, https://geneva.usmission.gov/2017/03/13/interactive-dialogue-with-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-myanmar/.

[6] Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Burma*, January 21, 2020.

Nine years have passed since Burma's ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), transferred power over to a newly reconstituted Union Parliament and former President Thein Sein, a retired general and the SPDC's last Prime Minister. In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) assumed control over the Union Parliament after NLD's landslide victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections.[7] Barred from serving as President under the 2008 constitution, Aung San Suu Kyi became the new government's de facto leader after her appointment to the newly-created position as State Counsellor.[8] Although both the Thein Sein and NLD-led governments periodically pardoned political prisoners, authorities continue to arrest, detain, prosecute, and imprison people for peacefully expressing their political opinions.

One reason that controversy over political imprisonment persists in Burma is the lack of agreement on the definition of "political prisoner." Some in Burma would restrict the definition to "prisoners of conscience"; others prefer a broader definition that would include persons who took up arms against the SPDC and the Burmese military (see "Definition of Political Prisoners"). Efforts by the Political Prisoners Review Committee (PPRC, also known as the Political Prisoner Scrutiny Committee), set up by former Burmese President Thein Sein to forge an official definition for political prisoners, were unsuccessful. So far, the NLD-led government has refused to reconstitute the PPRC.

A second reason the issue of political imprisonment persists in Burma is the existence of many laws—some dating back to the time of British colonial rule—that restrict freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. Various human rights organizations have identified Burmese laws that violate international standards on these freedoms. Because these laws remain in force, Burmese security personnel can arrest, detain, and prosecute people for their political views. Burma's courts have also shown a willingness to convict people for their political views. During the Thein Sein government, the Union Parliament made some progress on legal reform, but also passed new laws that some observers maintain restrict political expression. Since the NLD took control of the Union Parliament, little progress has been made on repealing or revising Burma's questionable laws.

A third reason the issue of political imprisonment persists in Burma has to do with who holds administrative authority over Burma's criminal cases. All security forces in Burma—including the military (or Tatmadaw), the Myanmar Police Force (MPF), the Border Guard Police (BGP), and local militias—directly or indirectly report to the Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and not to President Win Myint or the Union Parliament. As a result, people will continue to be arrested for political expression, in accordance with existing Burmese laws, so long as Min Aung Hlaing supports such a policy. President Win Myint does have authority over the prosecution of criminal offenses and the power to grant amnesty to convicted criminals.

If addressing political imprisonment remains a priority in U.S. policy toward Burma, then the 116th Congress and the Administration could consider several options. Such options include re-imposing sanctions and restrictions that were previously waived, or providing assistance in repealing or revising problematic laws or provisions in the 2008 constitution. However, it may be

[7] For information about Burma's 2015 parliamentary elections and the NLD's landslide victory, see CRS Report R44436, *Burma's 2015 Parliamentary Elections: Issues for Congress*, by Michael F. Martin.

[8] Because her two children are British citizens, section 59(f) of the 2008 constitution prohibits her serving as President. On April 6, 2016, the Union Parliament established the position of State Counsellor, with power similar to a Prime Minister. Former President Htin Kyaw then appointed Aung San Suu Kyi to serve as State Counsellor. The term of office for the State Counsellor is five years.

useful for such options to be evaluated in the context of and with consideration of the possible impact on other priorities in U.S. relations with Burma, including:

- ending the nation's longstanding civil war;
- creating a democratically elected civilian government in Burma;
- protecting the human rights of the people of Burma;
- promoting greater economic prosperity for the people of Burma; and
- establishing direct civilian control over the Tatmadaw and the rest of Burma's security forces.

Current Status of Political Prisoners in Burma

The number of political prisoners in Burma fluctuates over time, depending on the termination of prison sentences, the status of pending trials, and the arrest and detention of new alleged political prisoners by Burma's security forces. The number also varies depending on which definition of "political prisoner" is used when categorizing cases.

The figures released by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (Burma), or AAPP(B), in its monthly report on political prisoners are widely used by the Burmese media, the international press, and the State Department as a comparatively reliable estimate of the number of political prisoners in Burma. The AAPP(B) is a nonprofit human rights organization formed in 2000 by former Burmese political prisoners.

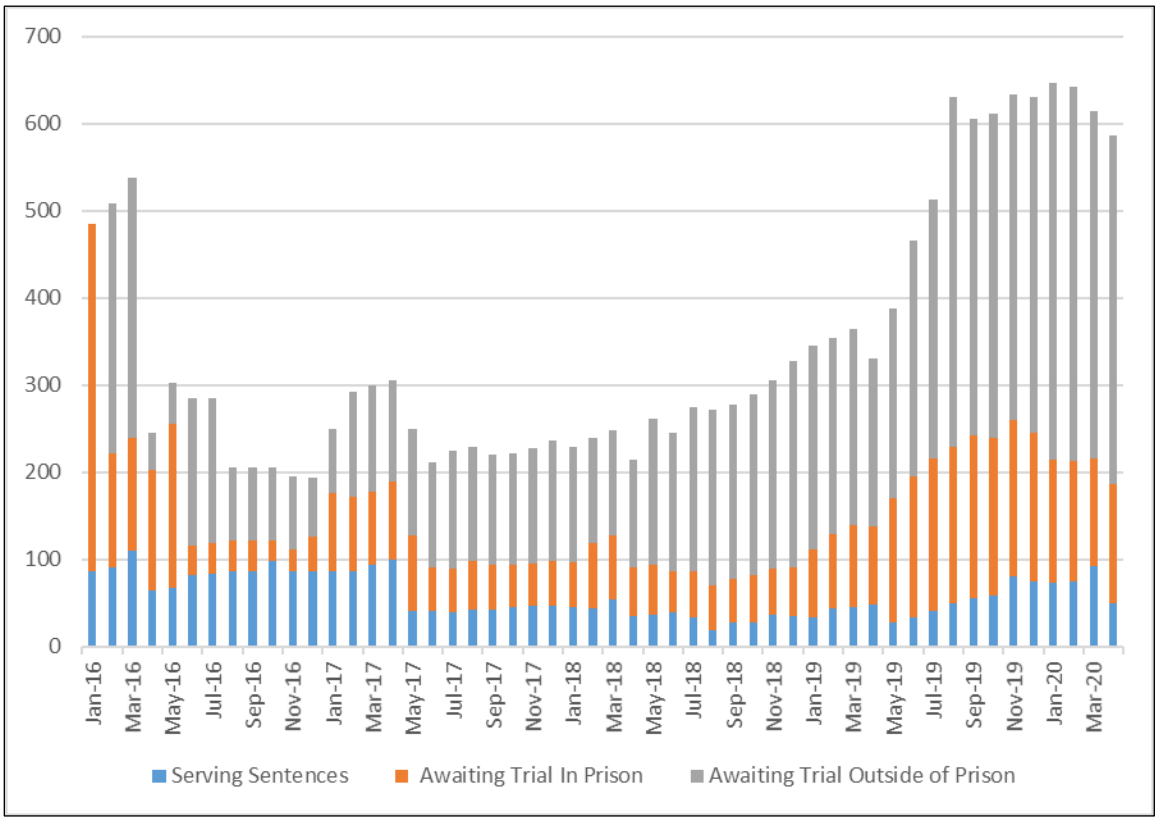
For over a decade, the AAPP(B) has released a monthly report on the number of political prisoners in Burma, based on its definition of political prisoner (see "Definition of Political Prisoners" below) and its network of researchers who monitor Burma's security system for information on alleged political prisoner arrests, detentions, trials, and incarceration. The monthly reports include a description of related events of the past month and a detailed list containing the names, alleged violation, prison (where applicable), sentence (where applicable), and political affiliation (if any) of each political prisoner.

According to the AAPP(B), there were 587 political prisoners in Burma as of the end of April 2020.[9] Of those, 50 were serving prison sentences, 137 were being held in detention awaiting trial, and 400 were awaiting trial outside of prison (see **Figure 1**). The number of political prisoners in Burma declined sharply after the NLD-led government took power in April 2016, but has been gradually increasing since June 2017, setting aside the anticipated downturn following the annual Myanmar New Year's presidential pardons (see "Prisoner Releases"). In addition, the number of political prisoners serving sentences or being detained while awaiting trial gradually increased in 2019.

[9] Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (Burma), *April Chronology 2020*, May 11, 2020.

Figure 1. Political Prisoners in Burma

By Status; Since March 2016



Source: AAPP(B) data.

Political Prisoners and the NLD-Led Government

The success of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) in Burma's 2015 parliamentary elections raised the hopes of many in Burma that the arrest and detention of political prisoners would soon come to an end. During his term in office (2011-2016), former President Thein Sein promised to release all "prisoners of conscience" and at one point pledged that there would be no more "prisoners of conscience" in Burmese prisons by the end of 2014. According to most observers, he failed to fulfill his pledge.

In January 2016, an NLD spokesperson told the press that the new government once in power would adopt an official definition of "political prisoner" and "would not arrest anyone as political prisoners."[10] The spokesperson also stated that the NLD-led government "can control the arresting of political prisoners in accordance with existing laws," but did not elaborate on how that would be accomplished.[11]

Burma's New Year—Thingyan—is a traditional day for pardoning prisoners, dating back to pre-colonial times.[12] Burma's military juntas (1962-2011) would sometimes follow the tradition, but

[10] Ye Mon, "NLD Pledges No More Political Prisoners," *Myanmar Times*, January 6, 2016.

[11] Ibid.

[12] The granting of pardons to prisoners is related to the form of Theravada Buddhism practiced in Burma. As part of the

in some years, prohibited the celebration of Thingyan. Since 2011, presidential pardons have been issued around Thingyan in some years, but not in others.

Prisoner Releases Since 2016

Soon after assuming office in April 2016, former President Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi took steps to secure the release of political prisoners.[13] On April 7, 2016, the Office of the State Counsellor announced that "releasing prisoners of conscience who are behind bars for their involvement in peaceful political activities is one of the priorities of the new government."[14] According to the BBC, Aung San Suu Kyi indicated that new government's goal was to release all political prisoners within two weeks.[15]

Table 1. Presidential Prisoner Pardons

Date	Total Number of Prisoners Pardoned	Total Number of Political Prisoners Pardoned
April 8, 2016	115	115
April 16, 2016	83	83
April 12, 2017	1,883	0
May 24, 2017	259	89
April 17, 2018	8,451	36
April 17, 2019	9,535	2
April 26, 2019	6,948	3
May 7, 2019	6,520	20
April 17, 2020	24,896	10

Source: AAPP(B).

The following day, Aung San Suu Kyi ordered that charges be dropped for 115 people facing prosecution for their participation in a peaceful protest against a proposed National Education Bill. On April 16, 2016—Burma's traditional New Year—President Htin Kyaw issued Order 33/2016 granting amnesty to 83 political prisoners. The amnesty was reportedly granted to "make people feel happy and peaceful, and (promote) national reconciliation during the New Year."[16]

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, between April and mid-August 2016, the NLD-led government released 457 people facing trial for political activity, and 274 political cases were closed.[17]

Thingyan festivities, people release fish into lakes and rivers, while reciting the prayer, "I release you once, you release me ten times," to ask forgiveness for their sins.

[13] The newly elected members of the Union Parliament took office in January 2016; President Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were appointed to their offices by the Union Parliament in March 2016, and were sworn into office in April 2016.

[14] President Office, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to strive for the granting of presidential pardon to political prisoners, activists, students," press release, April 11, 2016.

[15] "Myanmar Political Prisoners to Be Freed—Aung San Suu Kyi," *BBC*, April 7, 2017.

[16] "Myanmar President Pardons 83 Political Prisoners; Official," *AFP*, April 18, 2016.

[17] "NLD Government has Released 457 Political Prisoners," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 18, 2016.

On April 12, 2017, 1,883 prisoners were released as part of the traditional New Year prisoner pardon, but according to AAPP(B), none were political prisoners. On May 23, 2017, former President Htin Kyaw granted amnesty to 259 prisoners in recognition of the second 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference, held on May 24-29, 2017, including 89 political prisoners.

Current President Win Myint pardoned 8,541 prisoners on April 17, 2018, including 36 political prisoners.[18] In its comments on the April 2018 pardons, AAPP(B) stated the following:

> In light of the Presidential pardons, persecuting journalists for seeking the truth and others for speaking leaves a bitter taste in the mouth, particularly considering NLD's broken promise, made in 2016, that it would release all political prisoners when it came to power.[19]

President Win Myint issued three separate prisoner pardons in 2019. On April 17, 2019, he granted amnesty to 9,551 prisoners, of which 2 were considered political prisoners by AAPP(B). On April 26, 2019, 6,948 additional prisoners received a presidential pardon. On May 7, 2019, President Win Myint pardoned 6,520 prisoners, bringing the total for the year to 23,019. According to AAPP(B), the three releases in 2019 included a total of 25 political prisoners.[20]

The most prominent among those released in 2019 were the journalists Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone (see text box, "The Case of Kyaw Soe Oo, Wa Lone, and the Massacre at Inn Din"). The released political prisoners also included six individuals imprisoned under the Unlawful Associations Act for their alleged association with one of Burma's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), five people sentenced for violations of the Telecommunications Law, and four persons convicted of violating Penal Code 505(b). These three laws are among a number of Burmese laws that have been identified as unduly restricting human rights and civil liberties (see "Problematic Laws").

The Case of Kyaw Soe Oo, Wa Lone, and the Massacre at Inn Din

Reuters reporters Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone conducted an extensive investigation into allegations that Tatmadaw soldiers had murdered 10 Rohingya from Inn Din village on September 2, 2017, during the "clearance operation" in Rakhine State. On February 8, 2018, their story (coauthored with Simon Lewis and Antoni Slodkowski) was published under the headline, "Massacre in Myanmar." The story recounted how Tatmadaw soldiers, local paramilitary police, and local Rakhine villagers killed 10 Rohingya men and buried their bodies in a mass grave outside the village of Inn Din. The reporters also obtained photos of the 10 men when they were under custody and tied up, and their 10 bodies in the mass grave.

According to the Reuters story, members of the 33rd Light Infantry Battalion and the 8th Security Police Battalion, under orders, attacked and burned down Rohingya villages near Inn Din. The accounts describe indiscriminate shooting and killing of Rohingya, as well as the rape and sexual assault of Rohingya women and girls.

On December 17, 2017—two months before their story was published—Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone were arrested for allegedly violating the Official Secrets Act of 1923. The next day, Acting President Myint Swe granted Lieutenant Colonel Yu Naing the authority to press charges under the Official Secrets Act. Burma's Information Ministry subsequently announced their arrest for "possessing important and secret government documents related to Rakhine State and security forces (with the intent) to send them to a foreign news agency."[21]

On January 20, 2018, the Tatmadaw issued a statement, confirming portions of what Kyaw Soe Oo, Wa Lone, and their colleagues were preparing to report, and acknowledging that 10 Rohingya men were killed in the village. The statement also confirmed that Buddhist villagers attacked some of the men with swords. On April 10, 2018, the Tatmadaw convicted seven soldiers for their participation in the murders in Inn Din, sentencing them to seven years in prison. Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reportedly granted the convicted soldiers a

[18] "President Grants General Amnesty for 8541 Prisoners," *Eleven Myanmar*, April 18, 2018.

[19] Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (Burma), April Chronology 2018, May 15, 2018.

[20] CRS correspondence with AAPP(B), May 12, 2020.

[21] Ministry of Information, "Two Reporters, Two Policemen Arrested in Yangon," press release, December 17, 2017.

pardon in November 2018, seven months after their conviction. The Tatmadaw refused to provide details on the precise day or circumstances of the pardon.

The trial of Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone lasted over eight months and was full of conflicting and unusual testimony.[22] On February 6, 2018, a police lieutenant informed the court that he burned all his notes pertaining to the case. On April 20, 2018, prosecution witness Captain Moe Yan Naing testified that police Brigadier General Tin Ko Ko ordered him and other police officers to entrap the two reporters by giving them "secret documents" as part of a sting operation. After his testimony, Captain Moe Yan Naing was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison for violating the Police Disciplinary Act.[23]

On September 3, 2018, Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone were convicted of violating the Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years in prison—the same amount of time as the soldiers convicted of committing the murders. On April 23, 2019, Burma's Supreme Court upheld the convictions and sentences imposed on Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone. Kyaw Soe Oo and Wa Lone were among the 6,520 prisoners granted a pardon on May 7, 2019.

On April 17, 2020, President Win Myint pardoned 24,896 prisoners, of which 10 were considered political prisoners by AAPP(B). On the day of the pardon, the AAPP(B) issued a statement, welcoming the release of the prisoners, but also noting that after the release, "58 political prisoners remain behind bars."[24] In its press statement, AAPP(B) called for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, and urged the government to release more prisoners amidst health risks in prisons due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Continuing Arrests and Trials of Political Prisoners

In between the episodic presidential pardons, the NLD-led government has continued to arrest, detain, try, and convict individuals for political reasons using various laws, some of which date back to British colonial rule, as well as laws passed after the SPDC transferred power to the hybrid civilian/military government in 2011 (see "Problematic Laws"). The State Department has noted this pattern with some concern:

> Despite the transition to a civilian-led government, we continue to see a troubling use of colonial and military-era government laws to restrict freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, religion or belief, and association. While some of these cases have been brought by the military, others have been brought by civilian leaders. This includes cases of the government or military prosecuting journalists for doing their jobs, including recent charges against journalists for covering violence in Rakhine State and/or interviewing the Arakan Army.[25]

According to the State Department, the U.S. Embassy in Burma and other State Department officials "regularly elevate troubling cases to the highest levels of the Burmese government, outreach that has in some cases led to the release of such individuals."[26]

Three political prisoners' cases have garnered strong international responses. The first case involves a former child soldier, Aung Ko Htwe, who was arrested and convicted in March 2018 for violation of Section 505(b) of the Penal Code. The second concerns the arrest and conviction of members of the Peacock Generation Thangyat troupe for their satirical performances about government officials and the Tatmadaw. The third case pertains to the arrest of several journalists

[22] "Reuters Case Timeline," *Irrawaddy*, September 3, 2018.

[23] Naw Betty Han, "Whistle-Blower Police Officer Gets One-Year Jail Sentence," *Myanmar Times*, May 1, 2018.

[24] AAPP(B), "Statement on 2020 Presidential Pardon," press release, April 17, 2020.

[25] CRS communication with State Department, May 15, 2020.

[26] CRS communication with State Department, May 15, 2020.

who published news accounts of the war between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw in Chin and Rakhine State that included interviews with Arakan Army representatives.

The Case of Aung Ko Htwe

Aung Ko Htwe claims he was kidnapped and enlisted in the Burmese Army in 2005 at the age of 10.[27] In 2008, he deserted, but was soon arrested and charged with murder; he was convicted and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to 10 years by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.[28] Following an August 10, 2017, interview with Radio Free Asia (RFA) in which he recounted his alleged kidnapping and enlistment, he was arrested and charged with violating Section 505(b) of the Penal Code that makes it illegal to "cause fear or alarm to the public." On March 28, 2018, Aung Ko Htwe was convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor. In addition, he was sentenced to six months in prison in February 2018 for criticizing the judge presiding over his trial. On October 30, 2018, he was acquitted of subsequent charges arising from his trial. Aung Ko Htwe was granted a pardon on September 6, 2019.

The Case of the Peacock Generation Thangyat Troupe

The Peacock Generation Thangyat Troupe is a group of artists who give satirical performances in the traditional Burmese Thangyat style.[29] Seven members of the troupe—Kay Khine Tun, Nyein Chan Soe, Paing Phyo Min, Paing Ye Thu, Su Yadanar Myint, Zaw Lin Htut, and Zayar Lwin—were arrested in April and May 2019 for allegedly violating Penal Code 505(a) and the Telecommunications Law of 2013 (Section 66(d)). Kay Khine Tun, Paing Phyo Min, Paing Ye Thu, Zaw Lin Htut, and Zayar Lwin were convicted in October 2019 in a court in Yangon's Mayangone Township, and sentenced to two years in prison. Su Yadanar Myint was also convicted, and sentenced to one year in prison. In November 2019, the six were convicted in a court in Yangon's Botataung Township, and sentenced to an additional one year in prison. Nyein Cha Soe was acquitted of the Penal Code 505(a) charges, but is awaiting trial, along with the other six, for the alleged Telecommunications Law violation. If convicted for violating the Telecommunications Law, they could face an additional two years in prison.

The Case of Khaing Mrat Kyaw, Nay Myo Lin, and Tha Lun Zaung Htet

Khaing Mrat Kyaw is editor in chief of Narinjara, a news agency first established in Dhaka, Bangladesh, by Arakanese democratic activists in exile, but now located in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State. Nay Myo Lin is the editor in chief of Voice of Myanmar, and Tha Lun Zaung Htet is editor in chief of Khit Thit Media. All three were arrested in March 2020 for alleged violations of Burma's Counter-Terrorism Law of 2014.

The charges stem from the publication of interviews with leaders of the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organization (EAO) that is fighting the Tatmadaw in Chin and Rakhine States. On March 23, 2020, President Win Myint issued a notice that the Arakan Army, and its affiliated political party, the United League of Arakan, were unlawful associations, and Minister of Home Affairs

[27] "Burma: Ex-Child Soldier Sentenced to Jail, Hard Labour for Talking to Press," *Asian Correspondent*, March 29, 2018.

[28] Aung Kyaw Min, "Former Child Soldier Faces Court for Talking to Media," *Myanmar Times*, September 4, 2017.

[29] Thangyat is a performance art that combines traditional folk songs with dances and poetry, often performed at major festivals. The Peacock Generation Thangyat Troupe's performances are known for the satirical and political content, often poking fun at the political leaders and the Tatmadaw.

Lieutenant General Soe Htut, legally declared both organizations as "terrorist groups."[30] By publishing the interview, the three editors allegedly violated Article 50(a) and Article 52(a) of the 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law. They each face up to 10 years in prison, if convicted.

The arrest of the editors came after months of harassment of news agencies that provide coverage of the fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw, particularly stories featuring interviews with Arakan Army representatives. According to AAPP(B), eight other journalists are awaiting trial for political reasons.[31] Burmese authorities have blocked access to the websites of Narinjara and Development Media Group (DMG), another Sittwe-based news agency, following the arrest of the three editors. In January 2020, an officer in the Myanmar Police Force filed a defamation suit against Reuters after it ran a story alleging Tatmadaw artillery had killed two Rohingya women.[32] In May 2019, an arrest warrant was issued under the Unlawful Associations Act for DMG founder Aung Marm Oo for his alleged ties to the Arakan Army. He has gone into hiding since the warrant was issued; he faces up to five years in prison if convicted.

Definition of Political Prisoners

One factor complicating the end of political prisoners in Burma is a lack of agreement on the definition of a political prisoner. While the concept of political prisoner has a long history, there is no single international standard for defining political prisoners. Prisoners detained for political reasons are afforded some protection by international agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor considers someone a political prisoner if

1. the person is incarcerated in accordance with a law that is, on its face, illegitimate; the law may be illegitimate if the defined offense either impermissibly restricts the exercise of a human right; or is based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular group;
2. the person is incarcerated pursuant to a law that is on its face legitimate, where the incarceration is based on false charges where the underlying motivation is based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular group; or
3. the person is incarcerated for politically motivated acts, pursuant to a law that is on its face legitimate, but who receives unduly harsh and disproportionate treatment or punishment because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular group; this definition generally does not include those who, regardless of their motivation, have gone beyond advocacy and dissent to commit acts of violence.[33]

[30] Nyein Nyein, "Myanmar Govt Declares Arakan Army a Terrorist Group," *Irrawaddy* , March 24, 2020.

[31] The other eight are: Aung Thu, Myat Thit, Naw Norin, Naw Khine Khine Aye Cho, Nay Tun Naing, Than Htut Aung, Thein Myint, and Wai Phyo. Five of them have been charged with defaming the Ministry of Information, and three were arrested for covering a farmers' protest in Kayah State.

[32] "Myanmar Army Files Criminal Defamation Complaint Against Reuters over Rohingya Killing Report," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, March 10, 2020.

[33] Definition originally provided to CRS by the State Department in July 2016, and reconfirmed by State Department in May 2020.

In applying this definition, the State Department recognizes that being accused of violent acts and committing violent acts are two different matters, and considers the circumstances pertaining to a particular person when determining whether she or he is to be considered a political prisoner. Following a human rights dialogue with the Thein Sein government in January 2015, the State Department issued a press release that included the statement, "The United States [government] expressed the need to adopt consensus definitions of 'prisoner of conscience' and 'political prisoner' as a basis to review cases."[34]

In Burma, one of the more critical issues in defining political prisoners is whether or not to include individuals who have been detained for their alleged association with Burma's ethnic-based militias or their associated political parties. Because these militias periodically have been involved in armed conflict with the Burmese military, some analysts exclude detainees allegedly associated with the militias from their estimates of Burma's political prisoners.

Ex-President Thein Sein consistently confined his definition to include only "prisoners of conscience," and generally used that phrase when discussing the issue. He repeatedly stated that individuals who have committed criminal acts are not considered "prisoners of conscience," and are expected to serve out their prison sentences. Similarly, Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's military leaders prefer to restrict the definition of political prisoner to only include "prisoners of conscience." Some international groups, such as Amnesty International (AI), also use a narrower definition that emphasizes so-called "prisoners of conscience."[35]

The AAPP(B) uses a broader definition of political prisoner. The AAPP(B) defines a political prisoner as "anyone who is arrested because of his or her perceived or real involvement in or supporting role in opposition movements with peaceful or resistance means."[36] The AAPP(B) rejects the limitation of political prisoners to "prisoners of conscience" for several reasons. First, the AAPP(B) maintains that Burmese security forces frequently detain political dissidents with false allegations that they committed violent or nonpolitical crimes. Restricting the definition to "prisoners of conscience" would exclude many political prisoners. Second, the AAPP(B) maintains that the decision to participate in armed resistance against the government in Naypyidaw should be "viewed with the backdrop of violent crimes committed by the state, particularly against ethnic minorities."[37] In short, the AAPP(B) views armed struggle as a reasonable form of political opposition given the severity of the violence perpetrated by the Burmese military and police.

The Political Prisoners Review Committee (PPRC, also known as the Political Prisoner Scrutiny Committee), set up by former Burmese President Thein Sein, reportedly attempted to develop a consensus definition of political prisoners. Bo Kyi, the committee's AAPP(B) representative, told

[34] State Department, "Myanmar and United States Conclude Successful Second Human Rights Dialogue," press release, January 16, 2015.

[35] Amnesty International's definition is "people who have been jailed because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, color, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other status, provided that they have neither used nor advocated violence." (http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/prisoners-and-people-at-risk/prisoners-of-conscience).

[36] AAPP(B), "The Recognition of Political Prisoners: Essential to Democratic and National Reconciliation Process," press release, November 9, 2011.

[37] AAPP(B), "The Recognition of Political Prisoners: Essential to Democratic and National Reconciliation Process," press release, November 9, 2011.

the press in May 2013 that the 19 members had agreed to a definition, but that the Thein Sein government did not formally adopt the definition.[38]

On August 17 and 18, 2014, AAPP(B) and the FPPS held a workshop in Rangoon to discuss a common definition of political prisoners and to open a discussion with the Thein Sein government and Burma's Union Parliament on the topic.[39] Representatives of various Burmese organizations and political parties, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, attended the workshop. The attendees at the conference agreed to the following definition of political prisoner:

> Anyone who is arrested, detained, or imprisoned for political reasons under political charges or wrongfully under criminal and civil charges because of his or her perceived or known active role, perceived or known supporting role, or in association with activities promoting freedom, justice, equality, human rights, and civil and political rights, including ethnic rights, is defined as a political prisoner.[40]

The adopted statement of the conferees further explained:

> The above definition relates to anyone who is arrested, detained, or imprisoned because of his or her perceived or known active role, perceived or known supporting role, or in association with political activities (including armed resistance but excluding terrorist activities), in forming organizations, both individually and collectively, making public speeches, expressing beliefs, organizing or initiating movements through writing, publishing, or distributing documents, or participating in peaceful demonstrations to express dissent and denunciation against the stature and activities of both the Union and state level executive, legislative, judicial, or other administrative bodies established under the constitution or under any previously existing law.

Following the workshop, a Member of Parliament from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) reportedly said that the NLD would submit a proposed definition of political prisoner to the Union Parliament.[41]

After the NLD assumed power, different voices called for establishment of a legal definition of political prisoners. In their May 2016 report cited above, the AAPP(B) and FPPS recommended that the NLD-led government adopt an internationally recognized definition of political prisoners.[42] On June 2, 2016, Pe Than, an Arakan National Party (ANP) member of the Union Parliament's lower house, spoke on the chamber's floor in support of adopting legal definitions of "political prisoners" and "political offenses" to protect political activists.[43] Then-Deputy Minister of Home Affairs General Aung Soe voiced his ministry's opposition to Pe Than's proposal, stating that providing special treatment to political prisoners would discriminate against other people arrested for alleged violations of the law.[44]

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[38] "Burma Releases Political Prisoners Ahead of US State Visit," *Irrawaddy*, May 17, 2013.

[39] "Myanmar Still Seeks Definition of Political Prisoner," *Eleven Myanmar*, August 18, 2014.

[40] Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), *AAPP & FPPS Press Release About the Definition of a Political Prisoner*, September 2, 2014, http://aappb.org/2014/09/aapp-fpps-press-release-about-the-definition-of-a-political-prisoner/.

[41] "NLD Moving to Recognise Myanmar's 'Political Prisoners,'" *Eleven Myanmar*, August 20, 2014.

[42] AAPP(B) and FPPS, "After Release I Had to Restart My Life from the Beginning," May 25, 2016, http://aappb.org/2016/05/after-release-i-had-to-restart-my-life-from-the-beginning-the-experiences-of-ex-political-prisoners-in-burma-and-challenges-to-reintegration/.

[43] "Union Government Urged to Adopt Political Prisoner Definition," *Global New Light of Myanmar*, June 3, 2016.

[44] Tin Htet Paing, "Calls to Legally Define Political Prisoners Rebutted in Parliament," *Irrawaddy*, June 2, 2016;

In addition, human rights abuses by the government against two segments of Burmese society also have been raised in association with the issue of political prisoners. First, allegations of corruption among local Burmese officials are fairly common, with officials reportedly frequently using their official power to detain people on falsified charges in order to confiscate property (particularly land) or otherwise exact revenge on their opponents. In addition, officials have reportedly used provisions in old and new laws to arrest and detain people protesting alleged violations of their legal rights by those very same officials. These reported abuses of power by officials have been portrayed as creating a special group of "political prisoners."

Second, past governments in Burma singled out the Rohingya, a predominately Muslim ethnic minority residing in northern Rakhine State along the border with Bangladesh, and allegedly subjected them to more extensive and invasive political repression, including restrictions on movement, employment, education, and marriage. The NLD-led government has done little to reverse the previous practice of discrimination against the Rohinyga. Tens of thousands of Rohingya who remain in northern Rakhine State after the forced exodus of more than 700,000 Rohingya in 2017 continue to face oppressive measures by the Burmese government and military, as well as danger from the ongoing fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw.

Problematic Laws

Burma's 2008 Constitution provides for the continued authority of any laws promulgated prior to the adoption of the Constitution, unless they contravene provisions in the Constitution or are superseded by laws passed by the Union Parliament. As a result, many comparatively repressive laws, including some dating back to British colonial rule, remain in force in Burma. Over the last six years, the Union Parliament has repealed or amended some of the more problematic laws, but has also passed new laws that some observers view as being similarly repressive of human rights. Burma's security forces, and in particular, the Myanmar Police Force, have used these laws to suppress the voices of political opposition in Burma.

According to the State Department, "U.S. foreign assistance [to Burma] through USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] and DRL [State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor] works with civil society to support efforts to repeal, amend, or decriminalize laws used to stifle freedom of expression, religion, and press, as well as provide psychosocial and rehabilitation support to current and former political prisoners."[45]

In its monthly report on political prisoners, the AAPP(B) includes information on which laws were allegedly violated. The following laws are those most frequently cited in the AAPP(B) monthly reports:

- **The Unlawful Associations Act of 1908**—Section 17(1) states that association with any organization that the President declares illegal is punishable by two to three years' imprisonment, along with a possible fine. Under Section 17(2), managing an unlawful association or promoting its meetings is subject to three to five years of imprisonment, and a possible fine. This law has been frequently used to declare ethnic armed organizations and their militias "unlawful associations." According to the AAPP(B), as of April 30, 2020, 19 of the 50 political prisoners serving sentences were convicted for violations of the Unlawful Associations Act.

[45] CRS communication with State Department, May 15, 2020.

- **The Telecommunications Law of 2013 (as amended)**—Section 66(d) subjects anyone found "[e]xtorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening to any person by using any Telecommunications Network" to up to two years in prison and/or a fine. This law is being used to arrest and try political commentators and journalists who criticize government policy, government officials, or the Tatmadaw on social media. According to the AAPP(B), 6 of the 50 political prisoners serving sentences as of April 30, 2020, were convicted for violations of the Telecommunications Law.
- **The Right to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act of 2011 (as amended in 2016)**—The law places restrictions on the freedom of assembly and expression that experts argue are inconsistent with international human rights laws and standards.[46] Violators of the law are subject to up to two years in prison and/or a fine. This law has reportedly been used to arrest and try people protesting against alleged illegal land confiscations by local officials and the Tatmadaw, as well as individuals rallying in opposition to other actions by the Burmese government and the military. As of April 30, 2020, none of the 50 political prisoners in jail were convicted for violating this law, according to AAPP(B).
- **Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens**—Enacted in March 2017, section 9(f) states that "no one shall unlawfully interfere with a citizen's personal or family matters or act in any way to slander or harm their reputation." Violation of the law carries a penalty of up to three years in prison and a fine of up to 1.5 million kyat (US$1,100). This law has been used to bring charges against journalists who publish articles critical of government or military officials.[47] Of the 50 political prisoners serving sentences as of April 30, 2020, 1 was convicted for violating this law.
- **The Farmland Law of 2012**—Under the 2008 constitution, all land in Burma belongs to the government, but people can have use rights to the land. This law, passed along with the *Virgin, Fallow, Vacant Management Law*, provides the legal basis under which the government can confiscate land from those who have use rights.[48] Burmese officials have charged some farmers of illegally cultivating land to which they previously had use rights. According to the AAPP(B), as of April 30, 2020, 8 of the 50 convicted political prisoners are serving time for violating the Farmland Law.
- **Sections 505(a) and 505(b) of the Penal Code**—These sections make it illegal to publish or circulate statements that either cause or is likely to cause "any officer, soldier, sailor, or airman, in the Army, Navy or Airforce to mutiny or otherwise disregard or fail in his duty" [Section 505(a)] or "fear or alarm to the public or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquility" [Section 505(b)]. This law is frequently used against journalists who publish stories that contradict or question official accounts of events in Burma, particularly those

[46] For more information on how the law violates international human rights laws and standards, see Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Proposed Assembly Law Falls Short*, May 27, 2016.

[47] Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Privacy Law Used to Prosecute Critics*, January 12, 2018.

[48] For more about the issue of land confiscation in Burma, see Human Rights Watch, *Nothing for Our Land*, July 17, 2018.

> associated with the nation's ongoing low-grade civil war. As of April 30, 2020, 8 of the 50 convicted political prisoners identified by AAPP(B) were serving sentences for violating one or both of these sections of the Penal Code.

In April 2016, Burma's Legal Affairs and Special Cases Assessment Commission, a governmental body established by Burma's Union Parliament, recommended that 142 laws be repealed or amended, including some that have been used to suppress political opposition and expression.[49] The commission recommended abolishing the Emergency Provisions Act of 1950 (which made it illegal to engage in activities that hindered the ability of the government or the military to perform their duties) and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code (which makes it illegal to circulate, make, or publish any statement, rumor, or report "with intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquility"), as well as amend Article 18 of the Peace Assembly and Processions Act.

In January 2016, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), a federation of over 180 international human rights organizations, called on the incoming Union Parliament to repeal or amend several laws enacted by the outgoing Union Parliament. The laws identified by FIDH included the Right to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act of 2011; the Telecommunications Law of 2013; the Printing and Publications Act of 2014; the Media Act of 2014; and the four so-called "Race and Religion Protection Laws" of 2015 (the Interfaith Marriage Law, the Monogamy Law, the Population Control Law, and the Religious Conversion Law), which are seen as discriminating against Burma's Muslim population. Human Rights Watch issued a report in 2016, entitled "They Can Arrest You at Any Time: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Burma," that also cited these laws as tools of political oppression, as well as several others, including the Electronic Transactions Act of 2004; the Official Secrets Act of 1923; and various sections of the Penal Code (Sections 124A, 130B, 141-147, 153A, 295A, 298, 503, 405, 505(b), 505(c), and 509).[50]

Since taking office in January 2016, the NLD-led Union Parliament has made some efforts to repeal or amend a few of the problematic laws. In May 2016, the Union Parliament revoked the State Protection Act of 1975, which allowed the government to declare a State of Emergency and to suspend citizens' basic rights.[51] In October 2016, it repealed the Emergency Provisions Act of 1950, which effectively prohibited criticism of the Tatmadaw or the government.[52] In August 2017, the Union Parliament passed some minor amendments to the Telecommunications Law, reducing the maximum sentence from three to two years.[53]

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[49] San Yamin Aung, "Legal Commission Recommends Scrapping 142 Laws," *Irrawaddy*, April 8, 2016.

[50] Human Rights Watch, *They Can Arrest You at Any Time: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Burma*, June 2016.

[51] Htoo Thant, "Hluttaws Revoke Oppressive State Protection Law," *Myanmar Times*, May 26, 2016.

[52] For example, Section 5(b) made it illegal "to depreciate, pervert, hinder, restrain, or vandalise the loyalty, enthusiasm, acquiescence, health, training, or performance of duties of the army organisations of the Union or of civil servants in a way that would induce their respect of the government to be diminished, or to disobey rules, or to be disloyal to the government." Wai Moe, "Myanmar Repeals 1950 Law Long Used to Silence Dissidents," *New York Times*, October 5, 2016.

[53] For more about the 2017 amendments, see Wendy Zeldin, *Burma: Telecom Law Amended but Key Defamation Provision Remains Unchanged*, Library of Congress Law Library, September 6, 2017.

Civilian Government Authority over Criminal Cases

Under Burma's 2008 constitution, the President has limited authority over the arrest and detention of people for alleged criminal activity; the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services controls the security forces that make arrests. In part as a result, people in Burma continue to be arrested and convicted for their political activities. The President, however, can direct that pending cases be dropped, as well as grant pardons and amnesties once people have been convicted.

Burma's 2008 constitution stipulates: "All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services" (Article 338) and "The Defence Services shall lead in safeguarding the Union against all internal and external dangers" (Article 339). The Commander-in-Chief is to be appointed by the President, "with the proposal and approval of the National Defence and Security Council" (Article 342).[54] Article 20(c) states, "The Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services is the Supreme Commander of all armed forces."

Burma's Defence Services includes the Myanmar Armed Forces (or Tatmadaw), the Border Guard Forces, and the Myanmar Police Force.[55] The Myanmar Armed Forces and the Border Guard Forces are part of the Ministry for Defence; the Myanmar Police Force are part of the Ministry for Home Affairs. Article 232(b)(ii) of the 2008 constitution requires the President "obtain a list of suitable Defence Services personnel nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services for Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs," thereby requiring that those Ministers be active military personnel and giving the Commander-in-Chief authority over who is selected as Minister of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. As a result, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services has authority over Burma's security forces and, by extension, over the arrest and detention of persons who allegedly have violated the law.

Once arrests have been made, the cases are directed to Burma's Attorney General, who is appointed by the President (subject to the approval of the Union Parliament) and reports directly to the President. Public prosecutors, appointed at the local level and under the attorney general's authority, are responsible for prosecuting criminal cases. As such, the President does have the authority to direct the Attorney General and the public prosecutors to drop charges considered political in nature. In April 2016, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi exercised such authority to secure the release of over 100 people being detained for participation in peaceful protests.

Article 204 of the constitution gives the President the power to grant pardons and amnesties (in accord with the recommendation of the National Defence and Security Council). In addition, Section 401(1) of Burma's Code of Criminal Procedures states the following:

> When any person has been sentenced to punishment for an offence, the President of the Union may at any time, without conditions or upon any conditions which the person sentenced accepts, suspend the execution of his sentence or remit the whole or any part of the punishment to which he has been sentenced.

The authority to grant pardons and amnesties was used several times by former Presidents Thein Sein and Htin Kyaw, and has been used by current President Win Myint.

[54] The National Defence and Security Council includes the President, two Vice Presidents, the Speakers of each chamber of the Union Parliament, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, and the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Border Affairs, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Minister for Home Affairs.

[55] In addition, there are various local militias organized and supported by the Tatmadaw. For more about the militias of Burma, see John Buchanan, *Militias in Myanmar*, Asia Foundation, Policy Dialogue Brief #13, July 2016.

Pending Legislation

The Burma Political Prisoners Assistance Act (BPPAA, H.R. 2327, S. 2069) calls for immediate release of Kyaw Soe Oo, Lum Zawng, Nang Pu, Wa Lone, and Zau Jet (all five have been released or granted pardons since the bill's introduction). The legislation would also state that it is U.S. policy that (1) all prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in Burma be "unconditionally and immediately released"; (2) the Administration and the Department of State "should use all their diplomatic tools" to ensure such a release occurs; and (3) the NLD-led government should "repeal or amend all laws that violate the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, or association."

In addition, the BPPAA would require that the Secretary of State provide assistance to civil society organizations in Burma that "work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in Burma," as well as assistance to current and former prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in Burma. That assistance shall include:

- Support for documentation of human rights violations with respect to prisoners of conscience and political prisoners;
- Support for awareness and advocacy in Burma on the issue of political prisoners;
- Support for efforts to repeal or amend laws that "are used to imprison individuals as either prisoners of conscience or political prisoners";
- travel costs and legal fees for families of prisoners of conscience or political prisoners;
- post-incarceration assistance—including mental health and other health care, access to education and employment assistance, and other forms of reparation—for former prisoners of conscience or political prisoners; and
- the creation of an independent prisoner review mechanism in Burma.

The BPPAA would also include definitions for prisoners of conscience and political prisoners. The legislation's definition of prisoners of conscience is similar to that used by Amnesty International. It would define political prisoners as any person:

> who is arrested, detained, or imprisoned for political reasons under political charges or wrongfully under criminal and civil charges because of his or her perceived or known active role in, perceived or known supporting role in, or perceived or known association with activities promoting freedom, justice, equality, human rights, or civil and political rights, including ethnic rights.

Issues for U.S. Policy

Some of the options that Congress may consider to address issues of political imprisonment in Burma include the following:

- Providing technical and other forms of assistance to the Union Parliament and the Ministry of Justice in identifying and revising those laws that have been or could be used to arrest and prosecute people for political reasons;
- Pressuring the NLD-led government to reevaluate and consider repealing laws or regulations that declare any of the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) illegal under the Unlawful Associations Act of 1908;

- Supporting the reestablishment of a Political Prisoners Review Committee or a similar body to identify alleged political prisoners and develop an official definition of political prisoners;
- Imposing suitable restrictions on relations with Burma until all political prisoners have been unconditionally released;
- Conditioning the provision of certain types of assistance to the NLD-led government and/or the Tatmadaw contingent on the adoption of an official definition of political prisoner, and on the release of political prisoners;
- Imposing suitable restrictions on relations with Burma until sufficient reforms of Burma's security forces, including the Myanmar Police Force, have been undertaken to preclude or reduce the likelihood people will be arrested or prosecuted as political prisoners; and
- Including the absence of political prisoners in Burma as a criteria for determining that a democratic civilian government that respects human rights and civil liberties has been established in Burma, and that certain restrictions on bilateral relations can be removed.

The presence of political prisoners in Burma is only one of several possible issues that Congress may consider when examining U.S. policy toward Burma. Other key issues may be as follows:

- **The Low-Grade Civil War:** Burma has endured a low-grade civil war between the Tatmadaw and up to 20 ethnic armed organizations for over 50 years.[56] Aung San Suu Kyi has made the peace process a high priority for the NLD-led government, but the three "21st Century Panglong Peace Conferences" (held on August 31-September 3, 2016; May 24-29, 2017; and July 11-16, 2018, respectively) have made little progress toward ending the long-standing conflict. Fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw in Chin and Rakhine States escalated in 2019, resulting in more than 160,000 internally displaced persons, and an unknown number of civilian casualties. Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing announced a unilateral ceasefire in eastern Burma for most of 2019, but periodic skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and several EAOs continued to be reported.
- **Violence in Rakhine State and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis:** On August 25, 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked 30 security outposts along Burma's border with Bangladesh. The Tatmadaw responded with a "clearance operation" that resulted in the flight of over 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.[57] The Burmese government and military are facing genocide charges in the International Court of Justice, and are being investigated by the International Criminal Court for possible charges of forced deportation of the Rohingya. In December 2018, the Arakan Army began a campaign to establish bases in northern Rakhine State. The Tatmadaw responded by deploying heavily-armed troops into the region. Frequent fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw continues to occur, complicating any plans for the safe and voluntary return of the Rohingya. Relations between the two major ethnic minorities

[56] For more about Burma's civil war and its current peace process, see CRS In Focus IF11081, *Burma's Prospects for Peace in 2019*, by Michael F. Martin.

[57] For more information, see CRS Report R45016, *The Rohingya Crises in Bangladesh and Burma*, coordinated by Michael F. Martin.

residing in Rakhine State—the Rakhine (also known as Arakan) and the Rohingya—have been problematic for decades. In 1982, Burma's military junta stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship, and began portraying the vast majority of them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and India.[58] Violent unrest broke out in Rakhine State in 2012, resulting in the deaths of at least 57 Rohingya and 31 Rakhine, and the displacement of an estimated 90,000 people, mostly Rohingya.[59] In October 2016, after a group of assailants attacked three police outposts, the Tatmadaw began a "clearance operation" in northern Rakhine State that, according to the U.N. Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), resulted in the murder, enforced disappearance, torture, rape, arbitrary detention, and forced deportation of hundreds of Rohingya.[60]

- **Constitutional and Legal Reform:** During the parliamentary campaign, the NLD stated that it would seek to implement both constitutional and legal reforms aimed at establishing a more democratic government and protecting the human rights of the people of Burma. Some analysts note that, since taking office in April 2016, the NLD has made little progress on either campaign pledge. Attempts to amend the 2008 constitution in the Union Parliament in March 2020 were blocked when the military members unanimously voted against the amendments proposed by the NLD.[61]

[58] As part of the effort to delegitimize the Rohingya, the military junta began referring to them as "Bengalis," a reference to their alleged origin from Bangladesh and India.

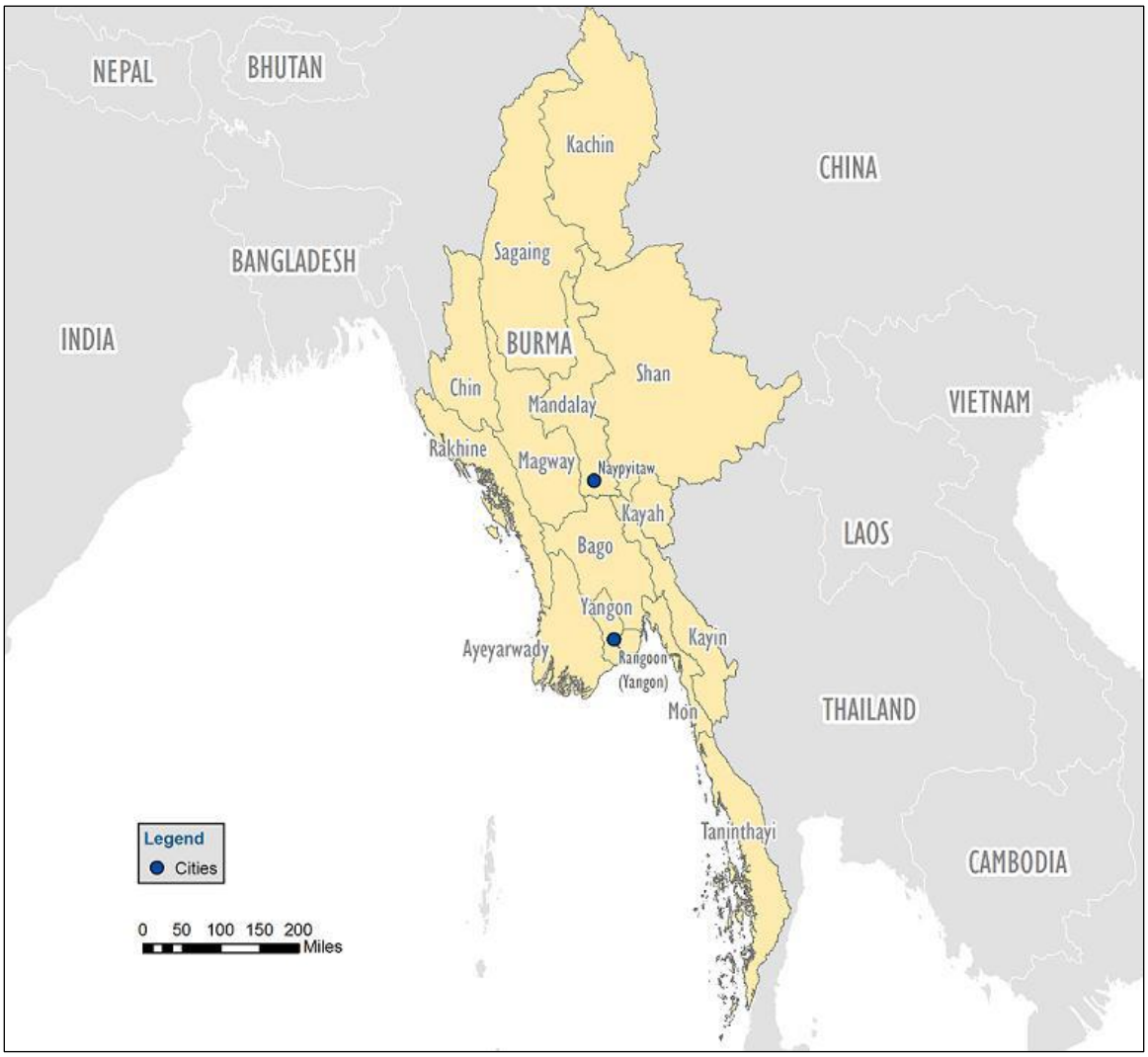
[59] For a study of the 2012 Rakhine riots and their aftermath, see Human Rights Watch, *All You Can Do Is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State*, April 22, 2013.

[60] U.N. High Commissioner of Human Rights, *Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar Since 9 October 2016*, Report of the OHCHR Mission to Bangladesh, February 3, 2017.

[61] For more about the failed attempt to amend the 2008 constitution, see CRS In Focus IF11481, *Burma's Military Blocks Constitutional Amendments*, by Michael F. Martin and Kirt Smith.

Figure 2. Map of Burma

Showing States and Regions



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Author Information

Michael F. Martin
Specialist in Asian Affairs

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