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The state of human rights in Burma remained dire in 2010. The major story centred on the country's first general elections in two decades and the eventual release of opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi from long-term house arrest. Few observers expected the election would be a catalyst for immediate change and, in its aftermath, there was little difference in behaviour from Burma's military regime. Instead, renewed fighting between the Burmese Army and armed groups from the country's numerous ethnic communities put hopes of peace in doubt.

Burma is an ethnically diverse country with at least 135 ethnic groups and seven ethnic minority states. Armed factions from the various groups have waged decades-long warfare against the repressive regime, and the conflict has resulted in large-scale displacement. It is estimated that at least half a million people have been displaced within Burma as a result of the fighting in eastern states; a further 140,000 refugees live in refugee camps along the border in Thailand.

Military abuses against civilians in conflict areas are believed to be 'widespread and systematic', according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). These abuses include extra-judicial killings, forced labour, torture and confiscation of land. In what constitutes a clear pattern of repression, women from ethnic minorities are singled out for particularly egregious treatment, including sexual violence, forced labour and being used as human shields. In testimony before the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women of Burma held in Tokyo in June, Kanae Doi, HRW's Japan director and David Mathieson, a Burma researcher, said:

'Women and girls living in Shan and Kachin states in eastern Burma, and in parts of Chin and Arakan [now Rakhine] states in western Burma, are frequent targets of rape and other ill-treatment. Impunity for such abuses is widespread and Burmese government soldiers are rarely brought to justice for sexual violence.'

K'nyaw Paw, education programme coordinator for the Karen Women Organization (KWO), said in an interview:

'The Burmese military arrest women and force them to be porters ... they worry and are frightened for themselves that they will be raped, tortured and killed.'

In western Burma's Christian-dominated Chin state, researchers acting on behalf of the group Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) documented evidence to suggest that civilians

have suffered a high rate of abuse at the hands of the military. Researchers found that 92 per cent of people interviewed for the study reported at least one instance in the past year where a member of the household was forced into hard labour. Other abuses, PHR said when it released its report in January 2011, may well constitute crimes against humanity and should be investigated.

Burma continued to view minority religions with suspicion, as ethnic identity among several of the minority communities is closely intertwined with religious identity. The ruling junta claims that Buddhists represent almost 90 per cent of the population, though minority religious groups are almost certainly undercounted. Religious minorities, including Muslim Rohingya, and Chin, Kachin and Karen communities that identify as Christian, continued to face rights abuses.

Rohingya, in particular, are subject to very severe forms of discrimination. The regime continued to deny citizenship to Rohingya or grant them Foreigner Registration Cards. This deprives them of access to secondary education in state-run schools.

Before the election, human rights advocates warned that a renewed campaign by the regime to bring ethnic-based armed groups under the umbrella of a joint border guard force could send the country spiralling into conflict. The regime had demanded that the various armed groups that had signed ceasefire agreements should disarm and join the border force. Instead, observers say the move has fuelled a new level of unrest. While Burma's rulers say 17 armed groups have signed on to 'arms for peace' deals over the last two decades, HRW and others say only five militias had agreed to join the border force by the end of the year.

The warnings of increased violence due to the regime's border guard plan seemed to be becoming reality at year's end. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) had employed a ceasefire with the Burmese regime following its split from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in the mid 1990s. However, on 7 November, election day, a DKBA faction occupied the town of Myawaddy. The fighters were unhappy with the regime's demands that they be incorporated into the border guard. A counter-attack from the Burmese Army caused thousands of civilians to flee into neighbouring Thailand. The television network Al Jazeera reported in late November that the DKBA faction and the KNLA had agreed to cooperate against the Burmese Army. In the meantime, reports from media and rights groups say the fighting is ongoing in Karen state, with civilians continuing to be affected. Rights groups have criticized Thailand for repeatedly forcing fleeing refugees to return to their homes before their safety can be guaranteed.

The November election was widely viewed as illegitimate, with the regime doing everything in its power to ensure victory. As the Burma Campaign UK noted, the number of political prisoners doubled in the years leading up to the poll, all media outlets continued to be censored, international media and election observers were barred and voting was cancelled in several regions where ethnic minorities predominate. The main opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), did not register for the election in protest at its strict rules, and was later disbanded. In the end, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the newly formed political entity headed by incumbent Prime Minister Thein Sein, took almost 80 per cent of the elected seats in the national parliament. Thein Sein was later named president. Political analyst Richard Horsey noted that parties from six of the states where ethnic minorities dominate fared relatively well. While the USDP and the military together occupy enough seats in the national legislature to allow them to amend the Constitution or to impeach, they do not enjoy such dominance in all ethnic minority state legislatures. In Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan states, the USDP is the leading party but lacks a majority on its own. Horsey said this development 'at least gives ethnic parties some influence over their affairs'.

A week after the election, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest. While the move was welcomed, there were no indications her release would be accompanied by additional freedoms for Burma's citizens. As one supporter told *The Irrawaddy* newspaper, 'The moment they feel Daw Suu is getting too powerful again, I am sure they will just place restrictions on her and lock up her supporters.'

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