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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 - Burma

As the ruling military government prepared the ground for elections in 2010, it retained its grip on its citizens. Critics such as Mark Farmaner of the Burma Campaign UK, a pro-democracy NGO, predicted that the elections would be strictly controlled and/or fraudulent, as the military regime is unlikely to concede power. Indeed, while three state-run newspapers ran a commentary urging ethnic minorities to take part in elections, Burma's leader, Senior General Than Shwe, warned soon afterwards that voters should be sure to 'make correct choices', according to United Press International, the BBC and other news agencies. The last election took place in 1990, when the electorate overwhelmingly voted for the National League for Democracy, the opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The regime put her under house-arrest where she remains, one of more than 2,000 political prisoners. The US-based NGO Freedom House, in its May 2009 report on the world's most repressive societies, which measures political rights and civil liberties, judged Burma to be one of eight countries with the worst human rights records in the world.

Some interpreted the regime's decision to hold elections as a sign that it is willing to take incremental steps toward allowing more political freedom, although such reasoning may have been rooted in exasperation. Hillary Clinton said on 18 February 2009, during her first trip to the region as US Secretary of State, 'Clearly, the path we have taken in imposing sanctions hasn't influenced the Burmese *junta*,' adding that Burma's neighbours' strategy of 'reaching out and trying to engage them has not influenced them either'. The administration of US President Barack Obama, perhaps in the absence of any viable options, tentatively began to engage Burma's government in 2009. In November, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell travelled to Burma with his deputy Scot Marcel, the first diplomatic trip by US officials to the country in 14 years. The diplomats met with government officials as well as representatives from minority groups, including Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Mon and Shan. The United States urged Burma's government to bring into the political process ethnic minorities, who make up more than 40 per cent of the population and have been subjected to violence and discrimination. On 10 December 2009, more than 400 lawmakers from 29 countries signed a letter sent to the UN Security Council, asking it to investigate the Burmese government for perpetrating crimes against humanity. Some scholars have suggested that charges of genocide could be laid against Burma's military rulers, who have carried out campaigns of ethnic cleansing, religious persecution and crimes against humanity against minority groups.

Many ethnic minorities have their own armed resistance movements, and there are about 40 armed groups in Burma. The government claims to have negotiated ceasefire agreements with 17 armed groups, including the Kachin Independence Army, the United Wa State Army and the Shan State Army, according to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 2009, some of those agreements began to break down, possibly as a result of an attempt by the military leadership to consolidate power before the elections. During the autumn, the Burmese military clashed with the Kokang militia,

forcing more than 30,000 refugees to flee into China, according to UNHCR. Militia members who crossed the border reported that government soldiers attacked militias in an attempt to dislodge local leaders, according to a report by Radio Free Asia. Chatham House, a UK-based research organization, said that the Burmese military also tried to force ethnic militia groups, including Kachin and Wa, into becoming a border guard force, but they resisted such attempts. Across the border in Thailand, UNHCR reported 2,000 Karen arriving at refugee camps after fleeing a military build-up as government troops and their allies in the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army closed in on Karen National Union bases. In addition to the fighting, refugees told IRIN, the UN-funded news service, that they were afraid of being forced to work as labourers and porters for the army. The summer of 2009 also saw Burmese troops displace more than 10,000 Shan civilians, according to a 14 August report by Human Rights Watch (HRW). Quoting 'credible reports by Shan human rights groups', HRW said that seven army battalions were deployed to central Shan state and troops attacked 39 villages, burning down more than 500 houses between 27 July and 1 August. The HRW report accused the government of forcibly relocating civilians as part of an intensified counter-insurgency campaign against the Shan State Army-South, which was ambushing government troops regularly, including a 15 July attack that killed 11 soldiers. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime noted a 10 per cent increase in opium production in 2009 as ethnic militias, such as those connected to Wa and Kachin, reportedly used drug money to buy arms to resist the government.

In a country where 90 per cent of citizens are Buddhist, religious minorities also faced persecution during 2009. For example, Christians make up more than 80 per cent of those living in Chin state, where they have been subjected to discrimination that has forced thousands to flee to Malaysia and India, according to a 7 December report by IRIN. Chin is Burma's poorest state, with 70 per cent of its population living below the poverty line, compared with the national average of about 33 per cent, according to IRIN. Chin people, who belong to a number of distinct tribes, have been recruited as forced labour, arrested arbitrarily and tortured, according to HRW. The forced labour is particularly problematic as it takes farmers away from their fields. A May 2009 survey by the World Food Programme (WFP) found that most residents were unable to afford food, health care or education and had to take out loans, incurring personal debt to pay for basic services.

Christians, who comprise 4 per cent of Burma's population, were targeted in other areas of the country as well. In January 2009, officials closed down at least eight house churches in Rangoon, while other churches reported having to request permission to hold religious ceremonies at least two months in advance, according to the 2009 *International Religious Freedom Report* (IRFR 2009) issued by the US State Department.

About 4 per cent of Burma's citizens are Muslim and they continued to suffer repression at the hands of the state in 2009. For example, the Burmese government refuses to grant citizenship to Rohingya, rendering them a stateless Muslim ethnic minority who have also been subjected to forced labour and land confiscation, among other abuses. The Rohingya have long been fleeing Burma, but their plight burst into the headlines in early 2009 when photos (some taken by tourists) showed refugees being detained by Thai authorities on beaches after they were captured at sea, as documented in a May report by HRW. Given the harsh conditions they live under, it is not surprising that so many Rohingya attempt to escape Burma. The regime's attitude was summed up in a February 2009 letter, quoted by AFP on 11 February, from the Burmese Consul-General in Hong Kong to his fellow heads of mission, 'In reality, Rohingya are neither 'Myanmar People' nor Myanmar's ethnic group. You will see in the photos that their complexion is 'dark brown'. The complexion of Myanmar people is fair and soft, good-looking as well.... They are ugly as ogres.' In 2009, Burma began constructing a concrete and barbed-wire fence along its border with Bangladesh. It said the fence was to prevent smuggling, but human rights groups argued that its true purpose was to prevent more than 200,000 Rohingya refugees from returning.

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