

Photo Credit (Top: AFP/Getty Images; Bottom: EPA in Myanmar Now)

Political Prisoners Must Be Free

A Statement on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 81st Birthday

“Please use your liberty to promote ours.”

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

This 19th June, 2026, marks the 81st birthday of Burma's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She has spent around 20 years in detention or under house arrest since 1989 for her participation in politics and her longstanding commitment to democracy in Burma.

As she turns 81, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remains imprisoned at an undisclosed location by a military junta responsible for widespread and systematic human rights violations, mass arbitrary detentions, torture, and ongoing airstrikes, ground-based attacks using heavy weaponry and small arms against civilian populations and forced recruitment of young people to the military. She is being held within a detention system notorious for torture, medical neglect, and inhumane conditions.

After years without meaningful contact and amid the junta's continued refusal to provide credible information about her well-being, AAPP echoes calls for international cooperation on the demands of the *Proof of Life* campaign to provide verifiable evidence that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is alive, to grant her family immediate access, and to permit independent observers to assess her health, safety, and conditions of detention without delay.

The continued detention of political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, stands as evidence of the junta's ongoing efforts to overturn democratic outcomes, nullify the will of the electorate, and deny the people of Burma their fundamental right to choose their own government.

On her 81st birthday, we reiterate calls for key stakeholders, including ASEAN Members, governments, UN mandates and domestic actors to,

- Demand Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's immediate and unconditional release along with all other political prisoners, not merely in words but through concrete, coordinated pressure on the junta to act;
- Support the *Proof of Life* campaign, ensure her family is granted immediate access and independent observers are permitted to verify her condition without delay; and
- Reaffirm that any political process excluding Burma's democratically elected representatives lacks legitimacy and must not be recognized by key stakeholders.

Democracy Denied: From Electoral Mandate to Junta Control

People in Burma have expressed their democratic aspirations through the 2015 and 2020 elections. Despite the junta's claims of fraud in the 2020 election, international observers have found no evidence of such and that overall, "voters were enthusiastic and able to freely express their will at the polls and choose their elected representatives."^[1]

Following the 2015 election, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government, while imperfect, derived its legitimacy from the electorate, allowing the country to emerge from decades of isolation.^[2] Aung San Suu Kyi's legitimacy with Burma's population also shaped foreign policy choices and she was respected and received by the international community.^[3] No other leader in Burma has been able to receive such credibility.

The 2021 military coup abruptly ended this trajectory, replacing electoral legitimacy with rule through force and coercion, systematically dismantling democratic institutions and reversing political gains made over previous years.

[1] The Carter Center, Preliminary Statement: Election Observation Mission Myanmar, General Election, November 8, 2020.

[2] Sean Turnell, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of Reform in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar* (Penguin/Lowy Institute, 2024).

[3] See for example US Department of State, Remarks with Aung San Suu Kyi.; BBC, Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi to Visit Europe.



According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), as of the time of writing,[4] at least 31,162 political prisoners have since been arrested, at least 14,306 political prisoners are currently detained, with over 7,877 additional cases awaiting verification. These detainees include democracy activists, journalists, elected officials, and civil society leaders.

While the number of political prisoners may currently be fluctuating through prison amnesties, the underlying system of arbitrary arrest, politically motivated prosecution, and custodial abuse remains firmly in place. Across the country, individuals continue to be arrested simply for exercising their fundamental rights and opposing junta rule.

Meanwhile, the junta's current "100-Day Plan" is not a peace initiative. Instead, the junta continue carrying out aerial attacks against innocent children, women, schools, and religious facilities while trying to maintain control over the population through fear and oppression.

The scale of ongoing political repression, crimes against humanity and war crimes underscore the junta's lack of popular legitimacy, which it now seeks to compensate for through efforts to secure international recognition. In a desperate attempt to achieve this, the junta conducted a sham election.

In contrast to the 2015 and 2020 elections, the junta's recent election was widely condemned as a sham, designed to manufacture legitimacy rather than reflect the genuine will of the people. Various groups concluded that the process failed to meet even the most basic international standards for free and fair elections.[5] Political parties opposed to junta rule were excluded, tens of thousands of political prisoners remained imprisoned, and civil society space was closed to criticism. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) has recorded at least 72 individuals arrested for criticising the election, while threats and intimidation were reportedly used to compel participation in voting.[6] This sham election was characterised by widespread public apathy and fear. Across much of the country, many people viewed the process not as an opportunity to shape their future, but as an attempt by the junta to legitimise its seizure of power. As a result, many chose not to participate despite the risk of reprisal, reflecting the absence of genuine public confidence in the process.[7]

Against this backdrop, the current junta leadership has struggled to achieve legitimacy and recognition. Diplomatically, Min Aung Hlaing remains internationally isolated. A junta who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against the population cannot reasonably claim legitimacy among the people or credibility in the international community.

[4] 12 June 2026

[5] ANFREL, [The 2020 Myanmar General Elections: Democracy Under Attack](#); ["UN expert urges rejection of Myanmar junta's sham poll results"](#) (23 January 2026)

[6] ["Mandalay Residents 'Pressured to Vote' in Myanmar Junta's Election"](#) (27 January 2026); ["Voter intimidation escalates in Yangon ahead of final election phase"](#) (17 January 2026)

[7] The Guardian, ["This is a fake election": Polls close in Myanmar but voters have little doubt junta proxy will prevail](#). (26 January 2026).



Conclusion

Normalizing the imprisonment of elected individuals risks setting a dangerous precedent that democratic mandates can be overturned by force. Governments and international institutions should reject any effort to confer legitimacy on the junta and instead support a return to democratic governance. Legitimacy is not derived solely from holding power. It depends on how that power is acquired and exercised, and whether it enjoys the support of the population.

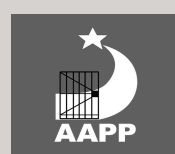
Junta control has made Burma a source of regional and international instability. The collapse of the rule of law has enabled the growth of transnational criminal networks, including drug production and trafficking and a lack of environmental protection from resource extraction.

The release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi alone would not bring immediate resolve to Burma's political crisis, nor would it end violence or bring national reconciliation. However, lasting peace and regional stability will remain out of reach while the junta continues to rule through force.

Hence, meaningful reconciliation and inclusive dialogue between all parties cannot occur while political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic leaders, remain detained and excluded from the political process. Political prisoners must be free to participate fully in public life if national reconciliation is to have any credibility, and any future political settlement must ensure that all armed actors remain outside politics and subject to democratic civilian authority.

The junta's conditional release of political prisoners is not enough. The unconditional release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners and a return to civilian leadership is non-negotiable for creating the conditions for a stable and federal democratic future. Lasting peace cannot be achieved while elected leaders and political opponents remain imprisoned, nor while political power is determined by force rather than the will of the people.

“Now, all revolutionary forces must unite to secure the release of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners.”



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners
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