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BURMA No real change as Burma swaps military rule for civilian parliament

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has warned that although Burma's State Peace and Development Council has been officially disbanded, there is no prospect of true democratic reform for the country.

As part of the changes that followed the sham elections of November 2010, a new civilian parliament was sworn in yesterday, ostensibly completing the transition from a military dictatorship to a civilian administration. In addition, Burma's dictator Than Shwe has been replaced by General Min Aung Hlaing as head of the armed forces, and former Prime Minister Thein Sein was sworn in as President of Burma.

Despite being touted as the first step on the road to democracy, Burma's first elections in over 20 years were marred by reports of harassment, intimidation, violence and arrests in several of Burma's ethnic states, both on polling day and in the days afterwards. New electoral rules excluded pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from participating, and resulted in her party, the National League for Democracy, being banned. Shortly after polling began, fighting between the Burma Army and a faction of the pro-junta Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) resulted in tens of thousands of refugees fleeing across the border into Thailand.

Political parties affiliated with the military regime won the majority of seats. Under the new constitution, the military is guaranteed 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats and immunity for past, present and future crimes. It also offers no meaningful autonomy for ethnic nationalities and no genuine protection for human rights.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "There is no real change in Burma at all. The process which the regime has completed is a cosmetic change, but the brutal military dictatorship remains in power. A few changes of personnel and clothing, from military uniform to civilian suits, does not represent real reform. The international community must unite in sending the regime a strong message, that if it wants the legitimacy and credibility it desires, it must make meaningful changes: release all political prisoners, end attacks on ethnic civilians, and enter into dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, the democracy movement, and the ethnic nationalities. Sanctions must be maintained until there are meaningful signs of genuine progress, and the UN should investigate crimes against humanity and war crimes through a commission of inquiry. Only then can there be true accountability and an end to impunity."