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BURMA | By-elections results “a step forward, but there is still a long way to go”

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomed the results of yesterday’s parliamentary by-elections in Burma, as preliminary reports indicated that Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, have won as many as 43 of the 45 parliamentary seats. However, CSW also warned that Burma still has a long way to go, and urged the Burmese government to proceed with further reforms as part of the process towards genuine democratization, peace and national reconciliation in the country.

After winning a landslide victory in her constituency, Kawhmu, outside Rangoon, Aung San Suu Kyi has hailed the results as a “triumph of the people”. She has expressed the “hope that this is the beginning of a new era”.

CSW’s East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, “This is clearly a very significant and very welcome result, and it shows the true feeling of the Burmese people. Their clearly expressed desire is for freedom, justice and democracy, values represented by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD whom voters have overwhelmingly supported. This is, however, just the beginning, and there is still a very long way to go.”

Although Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD appear to have won almost all of the 45 seats up for election this time, there are 664 seats in Parliament altogether. The ruling party, combined with the military, still hold 80 per cent of the seats, and the military alone continues to hold 25 per cent of the seats. CSW urges the government to show its genuine commitment to reform by deepening this process, reforming the institutions, legislation and the constitution, releasing all remaining political prisoners, and ending severe violations of human rights in the ethnic states.

Benedict Rogers added, “We urge the Government of Burma to initiate a political dialogue with the ethnic nationalities, to secure a political agreement and a peace process that will end more than sixty years of civil war and stop the military’s crimes against humanity. Until these steps are taken, the international community should be careful about how it responds to the by-election results. The reforms so far should be recognized, welcomed and encouraged, but pressure should be maintained for more. While some sanctions should be lifted in order to recognize the changes so far, the European Union, the United States, Canada and Australia should not lift all their sanctions in one go, and should ensure that some measures are retained until there is significant further progress, particularly an end to crimes against humanity and war crimes in the ethnic states and a genuine peace process. Until all the people of Burma can live in peace and freedom, we cannot say that Burma is free. Today Burma has taken a welcome step forward towards change, but it has not yet changed.”

Notes to Editors:

1. Benedict Rogers’ forthcoming book, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads*, will be published by Random House in July.