

Amnesty International denounces Australia's "foreign interference" laws

By Richard Phillips
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Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have condemned the new espionage and "foreign interference" laws that were rushed through the Australian parliament with bi-partisan support late last month.

Under bogus claims of defending national security and preventing "foreign interference," the repressive and wide-ranging laws could be used to shut down publications, arrest journalists, ban political parties, charities and human rights organisations on allegations of illegally collaborating with "foreign organisations."

The measures threaten the legal right of Amnesty International and other non-government bodies to expose Australian government attacks on refugees, asylum seekers and other violations of international laws. Amnesty has consistently reported Australian government mistreatment of indigenous Australians, and the cruel and illegal incarceration of refugees and asylum seekers, which it has described as torture.

The Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor opposition "have thrown our rights and freedoms under the bus," external affairs director at Amnesty International Australia, Claire O'Rourke, told the media on June 28.

She spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday about the new legislation and its impact on Amnesty International.

"The core message from Amnesty International on these laws is that we will not be changing the way we operate here, or in any other part of the world where we stand up against and expose unjust laws. Amnesty International is not a political organisation but we report human rights abuses wherever they occur.

"The position of the charities and other organisations which opposed these laws was that the espionage and foreign interference laws would have a chilling effect

on civil society. It might mean that some organisations have to operate in different ways because of risks to the organisations and the individuals that performed their work. But I can tell you very clearly that Amnesty International, and the way it operates in Australia, will not change.

"The biggest concern we had about espionage and foreign interference law is that the definition of national security is very broad and legal defence is very narrow. There is a defence within the laws about 'prior publication' but that isn't terribly useful to Amnesty International. Our organisation is usually the first to expose the human rights abuses here and overseas.

"And if we communicate these exposures to the UN, which we have done many times in the past, we are technically, potentially, breaching the new laws if they allegedly affect Australia's relations with other countries. This could mean being charged with espionage, which is punishable with 25 years' imprisonment.

"I think it would be a serious error of judgement, however, for any government to bring Amnesty International's day-to-day work into question with regard to these laws."

Richard Phillips: Could you comment on the "foreign agent registration and transparency scheme?"

Claire O'Rourke: "We worked in conjunction with the 'Hands off our Charities' coalition regarding that issue. We raised concerns with the minister and the shadow minister about this scheme and there has now been an amendment made so that registered charities will not be obliged to register as a foreign agent.

"But what about not-for-profit organisations that are not registered charities? They can still be prosecuted under the espionage and foreign interference laws, which is very alarming. What we face is an

unnecessary level of clampdown and authoritarianism and it's a case of absolute political over-reach.

“At the moment we're focussed on monitoring the impact of the new laws. We're not just assessing how it affects us, but other organisations and individuals. Amnesty will always stand up for people and organisations where we see clear breaches of human rights and international standards.”

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