

ONLINE-PUBLIKATION

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**The Repression and
Erosion of Independent
Media in Myanmar Since
the Military Coup**

**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**

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IMPRINT

ONLINE-Publikation 14/2021

is published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

Responsible: Loren Balhorn

Straße der Pariser Kommune 8A · 10243 Berlin, Germany · www.rosalux.de

ISSN 2567-1235 · Editorial deadline: November 2021

Editing/Proofreading: Gegensatz Translation Collective

Layout/Production: MediaService GmbH Druck und Kommunikation

Produced with the financial support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. This publication is the sole responsibility of the publisher. The positions expressed herein do not reflect the views of the funding agency. The publication is distributed free of charge and may not be used for electoral campaigning purposes.

THE REPRESSION AND EROSION OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN MYANMAR SINCE THE MILITARY COUP

ABSTRACT

The resilience of Myanmar's military regime since 1962 has largely been attributable to its institutional capacity to maintain control over repressive and ideological state apparatus (ISA). Since the coup of 1 February 2021, military leaders have been employing the usual tactics of fusing repressive and ideological state apparatus to suppress the social movement. Authoritarian survival in Myanmar has always been possible through the inherited legal and policy tools — tools which have never guaranteed an independent check on power nor the defence of human rights. This paper argues that an insufficient willingness for media

reform under the two previous governments has led to the institutional defect that undermines media resilience in the post-coup political crisis. Despite the people of Myanmar being able to enjoy advancements in communication technology that have provided an enabling environment for the flow of revolutionary ideas, the existing hegemony of the State in the media sector has almost eliminated independent and free media organizations.

Key words: media freedom, military regime, Myanmar, repression

THE MILITARY'S DOMINANCE IN SOCIETY AND THE RECENT BIRTH OF REVOLUTIONARIES

Since Myanmar's military took over on 1 February 2021, not only journalists but also even outspoken ordinary citizens have faced the dangers of detention, imprisonment, death, and torture for voicing concerns over human rights abuse or simply speaking the truth. As the military have extended their control over state-owned media outlets as well as international and domestic TV channels, the information provided by independent private media should be vital for the people to be kept informed about the changes happening in the country, especially about the outcome of the coup and possibility of political crisis amidst a global pandemic. However, it should be noted that most of Myanmar's media outlets had been struggling to survive even before the coup was staged, while their resilience had been weakened by the political parallelism of successive ruling parties. Although online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram have expanded space for independent journalism and induced user-generated con-

tent, social media has been prone to exploitation by different interest groups, especially by military-sponsored accounts and extremist Buddhist networks. International Media Support commented that:

Those in power are well versed in using social media to their full advantage. When barring people's access to information via the internet or mobile networks, propaganda thrives and can add to further destabilizing the country.¹

Similar warnings from media organizations have been raised in the last ten years about the shortcomings of the newly-invented legal and policy frameworks for consolidating democracy and building a genuinely pluralistic society. Even international donors who generously invested in improving Myanmar's media democracy have found that Myanmar governments failed to keep their promises to make legal and policy changes to encourage

1 L. H. Bestle and E. Lehmann-Jacobsen, "Myanmar's civil society needs support now more than ever", *International Media Support*, 5 February 2021, available at <https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/myanmars-civil-society-needs-support-now-more-than-ever/>.

the checks and balances function of the media. As Gayathry Venkiteswaran stated, “the legislators and bureaucrats of the older regime continue to shape policies, influence agendas, and fill in key positions in oversight mechanisms”.² Thein Sein’s government did not totally abolish the old authoritarian media model practiced by Than Shwe’s regime. Although Thein Sein’s government should be given credit for lifting pre-printing censorship and being welcoming of the return of exiled media, institutionally the military-backed government also designed the evolution of the new media ecosystem in a way that benefi-

ted the process of continuing military supremacy in society. When the National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power, its reformist position was not rigorous enough to reverse the authoritarian legacy. There had been a high degree of ignorance as to the demands of civil society, and little effort was put into media reforms to encourage the democratic participation of the people under the government led by the NLD. All these circumstances helped the military achieve a comfortable takeover of media institutions and make use of existing abusive regulations when they staged a coup in 2021.

RESURRECTING OLD FORMS OF THE IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS AFTER THE COUP

The resilience of dictatorship in Myanmar has always predominantly been sustained by repression. Although the repressive state apparatus is central in building the ruling class’s domination, control of the ISA also helps the military strengthen its capacity to rule the country with tyranny. Louis Althusser stresses that “no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses”.³ The differences between the repressive state apparatus and the ISA can also be distinguished: the repressive state apparatus constitutes a cluster of law enforcement bodies including state bodies such as the Ministry of Home Affairs, the army, the police, the courts, the prisons, and so on, while the ISA is embedded in religion, education, family, media, culture, etc. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to the ISA.

In order to influence a society’s ideology, the ruling class makes use of the press as the most dynamic part of the ideological apparatus. Huseyin Sevgi and Serhat Ozgokceler argue that “the media has qualification as significant and leader characteristics in relation to notably political choices, cultures, perceptions, life-styles and economical behaviors”.⁴ The authoritarian ideological apparatus also enables the state to use the media to expand its powers and reproduce the system that defends its hegemony. As

hegemony is gained by force and consent, “manufacturing consent” is the core function of the ideological state apparatus.⁵ Unfortunately, in authoritarian contexts, the process of manufacturing consent has a lot to do with aiming to achieve hegemony of the ruling class. Marx and Engels argue that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force”.⁶ Meanwhile, Stuart Hall, discussing Gramsci, explains that by using ISA, ruling classes lay down the rules about how “subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them”.⁷ When transmitting the ideas to the people through ISA such as school and media, the repressive state apparatus make sure ISA work in tandem with the interests of the ruling class.

When the NLD took power in 2015, the leadership which inherited the unfinished media reform plan from the previous government came to realize that the effectiveness of ISA is key to staying in power longer. The major changes needed in society, and which might not favour the interests of the ruling class, were those such as: (1) restructuring the state-owned media by transforming it into public service media; (2) reforming the broadcasting sector by creating a level playing field for all media owners; (3) providing space

2 G. Venkiteswaran, “Re-thinking media reform in Southeast Asia: promoting a participatory approach”, *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 14 February 2018, available at <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/02/08/re-thinking-media-reform-southeast-asia-promoting-participatory-approach-more-democratic>.

3 L. Althusser, “Ideology and the State”, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 146.

4 H. Sevgi and S. Ozgokceler, “Media And Cerattepe in Turkey: Althusser’s Communications Ideological State Apparatus [ISA]-Oriented Assessment”, *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 14.

5 E. S. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York: Pantheon, 2010.

6 K. Marx and F. Engels, “Ruling class and ruling ideas”, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th ed., edited by J. Storey, Harlow: Pearson, 2009, p. 68.

7 S. Hall, “Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’”, *Mass Communication and Society*, edited by J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Wollacott, London: Edward Arnold, 1977, p. 333.

for community media; (4) strengthening media regulatory bodies such as the Myanmar Press Council; and (5) promoting ethnic/provincial media to encourage pluralism and diversity in the media landscape. During the NLD's five years in power, the media landscape did not see much progress, following as it was in the

military government's footsteps. This negligence led to favouring the current coup council which does not intend to loosen its grip on power easily, and is taking all possible steps to maintain the authoritarian forms of media, as it can protect the council's long-held political and economic interests.

TIGHTENED CONTROL OF THE IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS: THE FALL OF THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

Throughout Myanmar's post-colonial history, all successive governments were steering the ISA towards reproducing a system that would benefit the ruling elites. On 1 February 2021, as soon as the military overthrew the NLD government, it strengthened its ISA through assuming control of all state-run media outlets. As soon as the NLD leaders were arrested, the entire information infrastructure fell into the hands of the military and was placed under the newly-announced leadership of the Ministry of Information (MOI). The continuing existence of the MOI has itself been a topic of debate in recent years. Most of the journalists and media analysts were critical about the pace of reform inside the governmental structure, not only because of its connection to the wartime authoritarian information management of the British in the colonial days, but also because of its association with many historic corruption charges, and the continuing kleptocracy.⁸ Since the coup, Chit Naing, a former senior military official and Director General of the Information and Public Relations Department (1997–2009) has taken charge of the MOI, while the two former ministers for information are being detained at Naypyidaw Military Headquarters. Later, for unknown reasons, Chit Naing was transferred to the post of second Minister of Union Government Office, and Maung Maung Ohn, who was Deputy Minister of Home Affairs under Thein Sein's government, became his replacement. In his role in shaping the agenda of the ISA, the Minister is not only using his power to influence the media sector, but also culture, as many vocalists, musicians, and film stars are taking part in the resistance movement.

Even beforehand, when the MOI attracted the praise of international donors for its reforms, it was not ready to embrace a full liberalization of the press.⁹ Instead, it deliberately introduced the 2014 Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law with the intention to control the ownership of the media, and a new broadcasting media law in 2016 that favoured a monopoly of government ownership in radio and television platforms.¹⁰ Under the NLD, it became clearer that the new media system was still operating in the shadow of the authoritarian legacy.

A mix of legal changes under the governments of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the NLD demonstrated a new authoritarian strategy, as stressed by Christopher Walker and Robert Ortung:

Today's authoritarian regimes do not seek total domination of all the means of mass communication. What they want instead is what we might call "effective media control" — enough for them to convey their strength and puff up their claims to legitimacy while undermining potential alternatives.¹¹

While the new media strategy partly allowed the commercial expansion of the media, keeping the restrictive laws was necessary for both of the previous governments. Positioning the MOI as the core of the ideological apparatus of the military, the junta quickly returned with revitalized authoritarianism. The MOI is now trying to eliminate the free voices of the media, just as it was pre-2011 before the democratic transition, when it was running the country's media platforms.

8 K. H. Mon and M. Myint, "Media Experts Support Shuttering of Info Ministry", *The Irrawaddy*, 3 February 2016, available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/media-experts-support-shuttering-of-info-ministry.html>.

9 UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar*, Bangkok-Copenhagen: UNESCO-IMS, 2016, available at <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/assessment-media-development-myanmar-based-unescos-media-development-indicators-assessment>.

10 G. Venkiteswaran, Y. Y. Thein, and M. Kyaw, "Legal Changes for Media and Expression: New Reforms, Old Controls", *Myanmar Media in Transition*, edited by L. Brooten, J. M. McElhone, and G. Venkiteswaran, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019, p. 62.

11 C. Walker and R. W. Ortung, "Breaking the news: The role of state-run media", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 72.

THE PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE AMID A CRACKDOWN ON THE MEDIA

When the army turned to its old method of repression, people took part in various forms of resistance including street protests, labour strikes, withholding taxes, banging pots and pans, non-participation in social and religious gatherings arranged by the law enforcement bodies, and so on. As a pre-emptive action to suppress possible resistance, the newly-formed State Administrative Council led by the military leaders arrested famous writers, activists, musicians, and social influencers who were deemed to be the leading voices for democracy or supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi.¹² At the beginning, the elected members of the NLD seemed not to know how to respond to the emergency hijacking of power, but later formulated a counter-strategy by forming the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) with a few elected parliamentarians from other parties. Then a new cabinet emerged under the name National Unity Government (NUG), rejecting the military takeover, and which was in collaboration with ethnic representatives from different regions. While Myanmar's neighbours in Asia had a serious battle with the third wave of COVID-19, Myanmar fell into a double crisis, intertwining the twin problems of the virus and the violent acts of the military forces. Although the international community repeatedly denounced the regime, the coup leaders turned a deaf ear, and even increased their acts of repression.

In the first nine months, the country saw the arrest of nearly 9000, and killing of over 1,000 people by the military. In the name of the people's security, the law enforcement bodies keep issuing arrest warrants for dissidents, with the number of open warrants having reached 1989 by 13 October 2021.¹³ Although know-

ing the high price they would pay, many Myanmar citizens have chosen armed struggle to put an end to these atrocities. Within a few months, many towns built their own self-defence systems and prepared for guerrilla warfare against the army. These calls for self-defence were also supported by the new parallel government, the NUG, by laying down the principles for founding the People's Defence Force (PDF). Being prevented from openly building a chain of command among the scattered revolutionaries in Central Myanmar,¹⁴ self-initiated local PDF are picking their own battles against the *Tatmadaw*.¹⁵

To hide these real situations from the public eye, the MOI and other branches of the coup council used two counter-strategies: (1) restricting independent media; and (2) setting up alternative channels to spread state-sponsored content, which mainly consisted of messages denouncing the opposition groups and promoting ultra-nationalistic views. The MOI sent a warning to all media in early February, demanding that they be recognized as a legitimate governing body and not to address them as the "coup council", in an attempt to convince citizens that the military's intention was not to enact a coup, but was rather intervening in State affairs because of alleged election irregularities. Despite denying that a coup had taken place, the military and MOI still acted in ways that implied otherwise. The MOI warned the media that any content deemed to be destabilizing social order and provoking riots would make them liable to have their broadcasting license revoked. Since then, telling the truth has become more difficult, and fewer and fewer journalists can openly take the risk of reporting when journalism has become a crime.

12 By 28 May 2021, around 20 celebrities had been arrested, with roughly 100 in hiding, according to Radio Free Asia. See J. Lipes, "Some 120 Celebrities Arrested, in Hiding Face Charges of 'Defamation' Against Myanmar Junta", *Radio Free Asia*, 28 May 2021, available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/celebrities-05282021181217.html>.

13 "Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup", *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)*, 13 October 2021, available at <https://aappb.org/?p=18170>.

14 There are 14 provinces in Myanmar. In Central Myanmar, seven provinces — known as regions — are populated by Bamar, which is the biggest ethnic group of the country, and the other seven provinces — known as states — belong to seven major ethnic groups including Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan.

15 The official term for Myanmar's armed forces.

THE EXISTING MEDIA STRUCTURE: READILY AVAILABLE TOOLS FOR THE DICTATORS

As Joseph Wright and Abel Escribà-Folch argue, “while authoritarian legislatures increase the stability of dictators, political parties — even when devised to quell internal threats — can destabilize dictators”.¹⁶ Myanmar journalists were eager to get rid of the authoritarian legislature before the coup and repeatedly asked to proceed with reforms.¹⁷ UNESCO and international donors had been suggesting that media reform be sped up, as recommended by a comprehensive 2016 report, the *Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar*,¹⁸ however such entreaties were largely ignored by the NLD government. With respect to a set of 56 recommendations to guide media development in Myanmar, the NLD government which succeeded the USDP saw many ongoing reforms as the legacy of the previous administration and did not take any action on 65 percent of them. Among them, the following are notable recommendations:

- (1) to turn state-owned broadcasters into public service or private broadcasters;
- (2) to recognize the role of community broadcasters and introduce interim licenses to give the civil society and non-profit sector more space in broadcasting media;
- (3) to implement the formation of the National Broadcasting Council and the drafting of broadcasting bylaws by allowing broader consultation with civil society and media practitioners;
- (4) to amend the Broadcasting Law to introduce a media regulatory body with greater autonomy by

allowing the nomination of council members by civil society and parliament;

- (5) to implement the amendment of the 2014 Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law to protect the confidentiality of journalists’ sources;
- (6) to remove the restrictions on freedom of expression stipulated in the Electronic Transaction Law and the Telecommunications Law, especially the defamation ruling in Section 66(d), and to prevent the imposition of general suspensions.

Although these specific recommendations did not intend to create a perfect media ecosystem in Myanmar’s transitional democracy, implementation of these steps will help Myanmar eliminate the heavy presence of the state in the media landscape and create a more diverse ethnic media, whose voices are a prerequisite for turning Myanmar into a federal democracy. Although the NLD realized the flaws of the media system left behind by the previous government, it was far from making the radical changes necessary to reverse course away from authoritarianism. The MOI under the NLD did not favour radical change, and its failure to take action eventually led to its finding favour with the coup leaders. Perhaps, had the state-owned media been drastically transformed in the last five years, the military’s ISA might not be as strong as it is, or the people might have had a more reliable and independent media which could fight back against the military’s misinformation and disinformation system.

IMPACT OF THE COUP ON THE BROADCASTING SECTOR

After the military’s return to power, one of the first things they implemented was the seizure of the state-owned media. As soon as the military coup had been staged in Nay Pyi Taw, the broadcasting media outlets under the MOI and its joint ventures came under the control of the military. As 90 percent of Myanmar’s broadcasting sector was occupied by the state-run media and their joint ventures, the military considered that control of broadcasters should

be their first course of action. The soldiers had been heavily deployed in the main broadcasting stations in Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon since the early hours of the day of the coup. In Yangon station, which is attached to a residential compound of the staff of MRTV (Myanmar Radio and Television), the area was shut down by the army and no one from the residences was allowed to enter the offices of the broadcasting stations.

16 J. Wright and A. Escribà-Folch, “Authoritarian institutions and regime survival: Transitions to democracy and subsequent autocracy”, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 283–309.

17 R. Gerin, “Myanmar Press Freedom Decline Dashes High Hopes For ‘Lady of Yangon’”, *Radio Free Asia*, 30 April 2020, available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/press-freedom-04302020213703.html>.

18 UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar*.

Similarly in Nay Pyi Taw, the broadcasting services stopped on the first day, while the staff were in shock and locked out of the building. Within a few days, the stations were back on-air with a skeleton staff, but guarded with security forces. The newly-appointed Minister for Information — who has a military background — gave the instruction to all newsrooms to collaborate with the new administration. To silence parallel voices, the junta decided to shut down other TV channels. All these earliest actions lent weight to the army's textbook strategy in making the coup effective. To shape public opinion around the coup in the following weeks, the MOI shrank MRTV's editorial space and allowed it to broadcast only the content that aligned with the promotion of the regime's agenda, while many of the usual broadcasts were suspended. For prime-time news, MRTV could no longer produce its own news content as the military-owned station, Myawaddy TV, intervened in its editorial decisions and came to dictate all the announcements to be presented in line with the coup leaders' plan. Operation of the state-run media was considerably weakened when the journalists and non-journalist staff there joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) to show their solidarity with staff from other ministries. According to Mizzima News, nearly 350 staff from the MOI were participating in the CDM in March and February 2021.¹⁹ In response, the military have been using multiple 'carrot and stick' methods to try to bring those

involved in the CDM back to work. As 20 percent of the total staff from the state-run TV stations were participating in the CDM, it was a significant blow to the normal operations of the major broadcasters.²⁰ The viewers noticed that even the quality of weather reports declined due to lack of competent staff. Yet, the labour strike does not stamp out the authoritarian elements of the media ecosystem, and the state-run channels remain the dominant presence, with the highest coverage all over the country. Meanwhile, the junta increased restrictions to block people's access to information. It was announced that satellite television used by private media such as Mizzima and Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) lacked a legal operating license. The MOI announced that whoever violated the television and video law, especially people using satellite dishes, shall be punished with one year's imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 kyat (320 USD). It targeted DVB and Mizzima directly, as they had kept streaming the news from outside of the country by using a foreign satellite. Residents in towns and villages were instructed by local authorities to stop using these satellite dishes, as news from abroad supposedly threatened national security. However, it did not stop viewers across the country. The forbidden dishes were re-installed as soon as the law enforcement bodies went away, but the locals have to live in constant fear if they wish to gain access to such information.

IMPACT OF THE COUP ON PRINT MEDIA AND THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS

As media practitioners predicted, the neglect to reform has been weakening the sustainability of independent media. While more resources have been channelled to the state-owned media sector over the past ten years, the private media outlets, including print and digital outlets, were already very weak when COVID-19 hit. The independent media outlets even accused the MOI of monopolizing the advertising market, instead of encouraging the expansion of the media's financial resilience. Since such policies have weakened the profitability of private media, the number of private newspapers in the market has shrunk from 16 to only five within the last eight years. The media's capacity to operate even reached a new low

and no newspaper could run as a daily as of mid-February 2021. For two weeks in February, Myanmar became a nation without newspapers until the *Standard* came back to the newsstands in March 2021.²¹ After the coup leaders gave a warning that they would take legal action against journalists who presented views that did not meet the military's approval, a career as a journalist became more precarious, requiring safety equipment, safe places, and security training in order to be able to continue their work in a time of crisis. In the case of arrest, they would also need legal advice and financial support. It also marked the end of domestic news production for many media outlets when the MOI revoked

19 Some stories have been taken offline, but Mizzima has continued to report throughout via its Facebook page, available here: <https://www.facebook.com/MizzimaDaily/>.

20 "We do not hate our office. We just want to end the dictatorship", *BBC Burmese*, 13 February 2021, available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=750759972221431>.

21 To use its full title, the *Standard Time Daily* has been published in Myanmar since 2013. See: <http://sdtimedaily.com/>.

the licenses of exile media such as the Democratic Voice of Burma and Mizzima TV channels in February. Licenses for the other three digital media outlets, namely Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now, and 7Day News were also removed in March. All these media outlets showed defiance and continued publishing and broadcasting, except for 7Day News.²² Other semi-private and entertainment channels, such as Channel K, Sky Net, Channel 7, and 5-plus were allowed to continue, but content that was deemed to be detrimental to the coup council was no longer permitted. In April and May, three media outlets based in Kachin and Shan states, The 74 Media, Myitkyina News Journal, and Tachileik News were added to the blacklist by the authorities. In a few other cases, the junta did not revoke licenses, but arrested those holding senior newsroom posts. For instance, Kanbawza Tai News, based in Shan State, had to cease operating after two of their journalists were detained in May. Since March, the military forces have been chasing journalists from media outlets which continue to broadcast as clandestine units or from the border area. Having difficulty in collecting information and seeing a decline in safety, the number of working journalists

gradually shrank in the first four months following the coup. The journalistic career became more precarious given that the law enforcement bodies keep harassing journalists for doing their jobs. In the official broadcasting sector, the army-run media now hold a monopoly and are building an image of the army as righteous rulers while threatening the critical voices of independent journalists and social influencers by charging them under penal code sections 505(a) and (b). Under a newly revised section 505(a) of Myanmar's penal code, any attempt to "hinder, disturb, damage the motivation, discipline, health and conduct"²³ of the military personnel and government employees and cause hatred, disobedience to them, or disloyalty toward the military and the government is punishable by up to three years in prison. Between February and October, 102 journalists were detained and 48 of them are still in prison, according to a representative from an online monitoring group called Detained Journalists Information Myanmar.²⁴ Daily disappearances and raids of journalists' homes and offices in broad daylight have been common since February.

DISAPPEARING QUALITY NEWS AND DIMINISHING JOURNALISTIC CAREERS

The military is using all the parts of its ISA and waging psychological warfare on the people with fabricated news from all available platforms — at which the people laugh and make jokes on social media. Still, this content is as dangerous as it has always been. Meanwhile, it is harder for journalists to get updates from the people while most parts of the country are turning into literal battlegrounds. As US Senator Hiram Johnson is said to have stated, "the first casualty when war comes is truth".²⁵ Media professionals could not afford to be activists while conforming to professional journalistic codes regarding ethics and objectivity. Nevertheless, some of the media outlets saw their reputations damaged when readers criticized them for being inaccurate and sensationalist rather than taking the time and effort to verify information. In many cases, the financial capacity of the media is also a determining factor in producing quality news reports, while travelling becomes almost impossible

in some areas and human resources are more limited than ever. As a consequence, approximately 70 percent of journalists have been working in a clandestine manner and many media outlets have increasingly been relying on the content generated by citizen journalists.²⁶

The capacity of both national and local news media has been shrinking and it is too costly for them to cover all the possible implications of the forceful measures imposed around the country. Even before the coup, around one quarter of the country's population were living in conflict-affected areas which host one or more ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) resisting the central government's authority. Now due to the cancelling of ceasefire agreements in various border areas, and the recent clashes in new battle zones between the People's Defence Force and the military, it has become unfeasible to carry out reporting in many parts of the country. Heavy fighting in new or old con-

22 7Day News cancelled its digital presence and has been offline since March 2021.

23 "Analysis: Amendments to the Penal Code by the State Administration Council", *Centre for Law and Democracy*, May 2021, available at https://www.law-democracy.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Myanmar.Penal-Code-Analysis.FINAL_.pdf, p. 6.

24 See their Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/953399941862726/>.

25 This quote is attributed to Johnson, from a speech made around 1917–18.

26 Author's interview from 27 July 2021 with a journalist who fled the country in April 2021 and is now in exile.

tested areas continues to put civilian lives in jeopardy and local populations are already exposed to risk of injury, displacement, or death at a time when COVID-19 has become a health emergency for the rest of the world. Barriers to receiving information on healthcare have also included an internet shutdown in more than twenty conflict-affected townships in Central Myanmar and Karenni and Chin states since September

2021. The reduced labour forces in the media sector have led to a heavy reliance on content provided by citizen journalists. While news stories are hard to verify in both rural and urban settings, the capacity of the media to observe authoritarian tendencies — that undermine human rights and dignity — has been weakening. When the ethical media fades, misinformation and disinformation find more fertile ground to grow.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNET BLACKOUTS ON DIGITAL MEDIA

To silence opposition voices, the junta has intermittently cut internet access since day one of the coup. This “information gap” was caused by the junta’s countrywide mobile internet blackout, imposed over more than 50 days in April and May. According to NetBlocks, a global internet monitor, different types of restrictions have been imposed by the authorities, from a total or partial shutdown, to blocking certain online platforms, and limiting public Wi-Fi. Fibre to the Home (FTTH) internet services were shut down between 01:00–9:00 a.m. daily for more than 70 nights from 15 February to 27 April. Mobile data was cut for the whole country for 45 days during March–April. The longest ban was imposed on public Wi-Fi, lasting more than two months from 17 March. Moreover, China-style “whitelisting”, internet censorship, and mobile phone surveillance, which recently resumed under the NLD, have been accelerated by the junta.²⁷ Popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been blocked and are only accessible via VPN (virtual private networks). Since February, mobile phone service providers have been forced by the military government to use equipment which intercepts communications. As activating such mechanisms is subject to Norwegian and

European sanctions due to its use by the authorities in Myanmar, the European company Telenor decided to leave the country.

Notwithstanding people finding various means to overcome the cut to the flow of information, Myanmar had to bear the economic cost of the crisis. According to NetBlocks estimates, the cost to Myanmar’s economy exceeds USD 24 million per day. The long internet cut also caused a banking crisis as the banks were no longer able to run a full service without digital transactions, while a cash shortage paralysed the economy. The military’s control had already driven half of the country’s population into poverty, according to UN estimates. Economic decline also poses a serious dilemma for the coup leaders — whether they should continue the internet ban that has undermined online digital payments, or continue to seek absolute control of public opinion. The evidence later indicated that nothing is possible in absolute terms. The military’s step-by-step approach to achieving control of information indicates that they will stubbornly defend their interests. New surveillance systems established through the acquisition of new information technology is linked to both the repressive and ideological state apparatus of the military.

IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES: IMBALANCED INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Althusser argues that ISA cannot block the resistance of the exploited classes forever. There are also times that an exploited class tries to reproduce resistance, and may seize “occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by

conquering combat positions in them in struggle”.²⁸ Despite the media restrictions in various forms, the people are acting to balance the information flow by boycotting the government-run media and have staged various campaigns, both online and offline, to

27 “Myanmar’s Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield”, *International Crisis Group*, 18 May 2021, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/314-myanmars-military-struggles-control-virtual-battlefield>.

28 Althusser, “Ideology and the State”, p. 140.

denounce its hegemonic media agenda. However, institutionally all the key elements of ISA are in the hands of the coup leaders. Machines of propaganda are spreading the speeches made by the new head of state and cabinet members, and are trying to convince the people that the military leaders are visionary harbingers of change. The objectives of the coup are announced in the press every day as follows:

- (a) To build a Union based on democracy and federalism, through a disciplined and genuine multiparty democratic system that is fair and just.
- (b) To emphasize the achievement of enduring peace for the entire nation in line with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).
- (c) To continue implementing the principle of peaceful co-existence among countries through an independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy.²⁹

It also declared that an election would be held as soon as the country is stable, and promised that it was likely to happen within two years. In order to hide the chaos in the social and economic sphere, the state-run TV channels are painting a rosy picture of economic growth, normalization of international corporation, improvement in the healthcare sector, restoration of tourism, and the potential for a peaceful reconciliatory future. The real picture is almost the exact inverse: killing and arresting protesters, facing diplomatic failure on the international stage, and dashed hopes for economic recovery in the global post-COVID-19 era. However, the military is far from being able to contain the outbursts of anger on social media and the consumer boycott by users.

The military, which tries to block outside news from reaching its military compound by restricting soldiers' mobile phone use as well as the use of social media and satellite dishes in their residential compound, distorted the information flow by creating fake news and propaganda pages on social media.³⁰ Since the beginning of the coup, military families were forced to be disconnected from the outside world and were kept in the dark about public grievances and the cries from the bloodbaths happening outside of their residential compounds. According to Burma Monitor,³¹ new information channels are created for the army's supporters, in which the admins can regularly feed hate speech and fake news in order to disrupt the voices of

citizen journalists and hide the atrocities of the army from different areas.³² Moreover, it is also common to see that military-sponsored content generators take advantage by using Facebook's "share and comment" functions to strategically distort the facts presented by journalists. With abusive comments, they simply induce the audience's distraction under the pages of critical media.

Sharpening the teeth of the ISA, the coup council's press conferences have also invited staff from racist media organizations, which have reportedly been spreading hate speech against Muslims in recent years. Parts of the audience who are now acknowledged as reporters were never previously part of the popular news media, and they were rather known as key organizers or participants in various *Tatmadaw* supporters' rallies of previous years.³³ While the spokesperson of the coup council, General Zaw Min Tun, has been accusing independent media outlets of being troublemakers, the press conferences are a venue for staged interviews between himself and these military-friendly reporters. The state-owned media are portraying the coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, as something similar to what Lintner described as "feudal". The state-run media platforms are manoeuvring around designations that signify "traditional authoritarian values where the king was God".³⁴

Media professionals, who were already suffering in the pre-coup days, now face various kinds of threat and are seeing their careers being diminished. Many of them are being threatened with legal action under penal code section 505(a). Covering news of the civil war — that involves communication with the People's Defence Force across the country — is too dangerous for them as they could be charged under penal code 17(a) for contacting unlawful associations. Moreover, they are prone to being accused by both sides of being traitors, i.e. by both the army and the resistance movements, when their neutral view is seen by the viewers as disagreeable.

Under these circumstances, there is no institution left for the journalists that can defend their rights against all odds. The absence of institutions that can defend the rights of journalists is not a very new trend as the whole last decade missed the opportunity to nurture media regulatory bodies that could safeguard the

29 "The Global New Light of Myanmar", *Ministry of Information*, 4 November 2021, available at <https://www.gnfm.com.mm/4-november-2021/>, p. 16.

30 This was conveyed to me in personal communications with a regular columnist from leading Myanmar newspapers, and who is now under arrest. See also "မွန်ဘွတ်ခ်ပေါ်သတင်းမှားများနှင့် ဝါဒဖြန့်ချိရေးပို့စ်များတင်ရန် တပ်တွင်း လုပ်ငန်းစဉ်အဖြစ် လုပ်ကိုင်နေ", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 15 October 2021, available at <http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/494036>.

31 The Burma Monitor was established in 2017 as a hate-speech monitoring group. Now the group, which comprises media experts and researchers, gives a monthly Burmese-language report to a civil society network working across Myanmar as well as to donor agencies that are funding Myanmar independent media. It also publishes occasional reports and give presentations to civil society in response to emergency needs in the media sector.

32 "Changes of media since the coup", *Burma Monitor*, October 2021, pp. 3–20.

33 *Ibid.*

34 B. Lintner, "Neither Sanctions Nor Engagement Will Influence Myanmar's Military", *The Irrawaddy*, 20 August 2021, available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/ neither-sanctions-nor-engagement-will-influence-myanmars-military.html>.

interests of both journalists and viewers. After the coup, the military unsurprisingly started to influence decision-making at the Myanmar Press Council, when over 90 percent of the former members of the Council boycotted the coup and criticized the new MOI minister. When the new list of Council members was announced, the journalistic community objected outright to the replacements, as many of the newly-appointed members were not known in media circles as being reputable professional journalists, and some were reportedly working as agents for the special branch of the police.³⁵ For the junta, the new media council remains an institution that would lend legitimacy to its leaders. Since the opening up of the country in 2011, governments kept disrupting media growth and favoured the state monopoly in both print

and broadcasting media. Contrary to its promise upon taking power, the NLD government managed to remain not only as a media regulator but also as a player with a lion's share of the media sector. Even before the NLD came to power, Myanmar had already suffered from media decline as the military had failed to enrich pluralistic values in society. The past mistakes were not corrected under the NLD; rather they neglected to learn any lessons. The NLD, which was known as a pro-democracy party, even showed hostility to journalists when difficult truths were uncovered, especially regarding cases of human rights abuses for the Rohingyas.³⁶ Now Myanmar is seeing the consequences of previous media system errors. The past policies paved the way for an easy return to military control over the media.

CONCLUSION

In 2019, Ben Dunant, a columnist from the *Frontier*, wrote: "Government-media relations are locked in a vicious cycle. To break it, the government must stop treating journalists as threats to be managed and instead consider them partners in deepening democracy".³⁷ Yet, nothing had stopped the downward spiral of government-media relations prior to the coup. Far from making radical changes to move the system away from authoritarianism, the previous leaders decided to maintain the status quo. The government retains its power to license, regulate, prosecute, and imprison its media competitors while ignoring three media laws that badly need amendments. Even before the coup, Myanmar had seen a dramatic media decline in terms of circulation, capacity, and quality of media content. Although there is an undoubtable trend for "liking" and sharing content on social media, journalism is often regarded as neither financially viable nor physically safe.

Since media development has been stunted in the last five years, there has also been, in many aspects, a weakened capability to face the new challenges posed by circumstances under the coup. As the army play the role of media owners, they are free to self-promote without limit. The state-run media, a key structure of the military's ISA, remain intact to serve the voice of the ruling junta while the coup leaders are using what the NLD left behind: a more efficiently-equipped surveillance system. The media contribution to the people's access to information could have been stronger if the reforms had continued with a stronger political will from previous leaders to remove the inherited authoritarian structure. Perhaps, had the institutional reforms in the last five years been strong enough, the people's resistance could have been better — positioned with a stronger media presence in both rural and urban areas.

³⁵ "Changes of media since the coup", *Burma Monitor*.

³⁶ S. Lewis, „Key facts about Reuters reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo“, *Reuters*, 7 May 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-journalists-profiles-factbox-idUSKCN1SD05W>.

³⁷ B. Dunant, "The downward spiral of government-media relations", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 December 2019, available at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-downward-spiral-of-government-media-relations/>.

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