

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

The Media Landscape in Myanmar: A Post-Coup Analysis

Om Prakash Das

July 14, 2023

S*ummary*

The initiation of the democratic process in 2011 marked a pivotal moment for the media in Myanmar. However, the 2021 coup led to increased polarisation. Constitutional amendments and legal frameworks have been used by the military junta to exert control over the media. While many journalists have been detained, some have been punished with long prison sentences also.

The media landscape in Myanmar has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly following the 2021 military coup, leading to increased polarisation. New phenomena have emerged in Myanmar's media extending beyond the state-owned and ‘independent’ media. The new category of media outlets are predominantly pro-military and often are controlled and managed by former military personnel or ultranationalist individuals and organisations. The military regime in Myanmar has employed the route of constitutional amendments and legal frameworks to exert control and monitor the media. The Brief examines the significant transformations within the media ecosystem in Myanmar.

Military and Media

The characteristics and role of media in Myanmar are deeply intertwined with the country's historical context of military rule. In 1988, when the country was under military rule for 26 years, the military regime of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) faced an unexpected wave of peaceful protests.¹ The military took stringent measures, resulting in a surge of human rights infringements and tragic loss of lives.²

In 2011, the military junta disbanded itself and initiated a democratic process. This marked a pivotal moment, as it heralded a new beginning for the media in Myanmar. Numerous media outlets, including few news agencies that fled the country subsequent to the crackdown as a result of the pro-democracy uprising in 1988, returned to Myanmar under the administration of U Thein Sein in 2012. After the 2012 reforms, the government undertook several significant measures, including abolishing aspects like pre-publication censorship, removed restrictions on the content of newspapers before their release and granted licenses to diverse media outlets.³

In February 2021, however, military leaders staged a coup. In the general elections held in 2020, the pro-military political party ‘Union Solidarity and Development Party’ (USDP) faced defeat.⁴ Subsequently, the junta—officially called the State Administration Council—detained leading opposition political party leader and pro-democracy Aung San Suu Kyi and key party members and activists on charges of election rigging and other corruption charges. Many of them have been kept under house arrest since then.

¹ Jonathan Head, “**Myanmar Coup: What Protesters Can Learn from the ‘88 generation’**”, *BBC News*, 1 February 2021.

² “**Burma: Justice for 1988 Massacres**”, *Human Rights Watch*, 6 August 2013.

³ “**Burma Abolishes Media Censorship**”, *BBC News*, 20 August 2012.

⁴ Lindsay Maizland, “**Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict**”, Council on Foreign Relations, 31 January 2022.

While media restrictions in Myanmar are not unusual, they have been formalised and integrated into the legal system through numerous amendments to the criminal laws. BBC for instance expressed concerns due to the newly amended ‘Electronic Transactions Law (Law No. 7/2021),’⁵ which deemed negative comments about the military government as criminal offenses. In April 2023, BBC news received its first visa since the military coup in February 2021. The visa authorisation letter included a warning that prohibited speaking to any proscribed groups, which now encompassed a significant category of individuals.⁶

Myanmar's State Administration Council (SAC), established by the military after February 2021, has approved a series of legal changes that criminalise peaceful demonstrations. The Junta has also made amendments to the ‘Cybersecurity Law’ by modifying the ‘Electronic Transactions Law’. The revised ‘Electronic Transactions Law’ 27(C) grants government agencies, investigators, or law enforcement authorities the right to access personal data concerning ‘cyber-crimes’, ‘cyber misuse’, or any criminal investigation.⁷

In particular, Articles 38(d) and (e) impose criminal penalties for unauthorised or “without permission” access to online material.⁸ This provision creates a situation that enables the targeting and “prosecution of whistle blowers, investigative journalists, or activists who utilize leaked material in their work”.⁹ Section 38C of the ‘Electronic Transactions Law’ criminalises the dissemination of “misinformation or disinformation with the intent of causing public panic, loss of trust, or social division in cyberspace”.¹⁰ The most significant aspect of these provisions is their direct impact on the exercise of online expression. It is noteworthy that these amendments were enacted subsequent to the occurrence of the 2021 coup.

In June 2021, the Ministry of Information issued directives to foreign news agencies, instructing them to refrain from using the terms ‘military council’ or ‘military junta’ and to desist from spreading inaccurate information to the international community.¹¹ The ministry's directive contained a warning that any incorrect usage,

⁵ Myanmar Laws 2021, “[State Administration Council Law No. 07/2021 - Law Amending the Electronic Transaction Law](#)”, Military Law Library, 15 February 2021.

⁶ Jonathan Head, “[Myanmar Civil War: 'We Wish We Could Go Back'](#)”, *BBC News*, 17 April 2023.

⁷ “[State Administration Council Law No. 07/2021 - Law Amending the Electronic Transaction Law](#)”, no. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “[Myanmar: Post-Coup Legal Changes Erode Human Rights](#)”, Human Rights Watch, 2 March 2021.

¹⁰ “[State Administration Council Law No. 07/2021 - Law Amending the Electronic Transaction Law](#)”, no. 5.

¹¹ “[Announcement](#)”, Ministry of Information, Government of Myanmar, 30 June 2021.

misquotation, or dissemination of false news and information would result in legal repercussions in accordance with existing laws.”¹²

After February 2021, the military regime in Myanmar made amendments to the law pertaining to accessing user internet/broadband data and issued directives to mobile service operators. Furthermore, internet service providers have begun to restrict access to specific websites and virtual private networks (VPNs) that can bypass internet filtering.¹³ The military has requested that internet providers block platforms like Facebook in order to maintain stability.¹⁴

Journalists under Threat

The Global Investigative Journalism Network states that approximately four journalists have been killed, as of February 2023, in the two years after the coup, with 145 journalists having been arrested and approximately 60 remaining in detention.¹⁵ The Committee to Protect Journalists has described the situation of Myanmar as the third worst country worldwide for jailing journalists.¹⁶ Statistics from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Myanmar) as of 30 June 2023, the number of political prisoners has reached 23,651. Since February 2021, 3,736 political prisoners have died, while 19,295 are still in detention or have been sentenced.¹⁷

As for journalists, more than 180 have been detained.¹⁸ These include freelancers, editors, photographers, citizen journalists, and social media reporters, as well as correspondents employed by various media outlets. About 41 of these journalists have been punished so far, with sentences as long as 15 years. About 38 news professionals are still under trial, the rest have been released after months of arrest (as on 30 June 2023).¹⁹

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Asia Report N°314, **“Myanmar’s Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield”**, International Crisis Group, 18 May 2021.

¹⁴ **“Whitelisted Internet Takes Myanmar Back to a ‘Dark Age’”**, *Frontier Myanmar*, 30 June 2021.

¹⁵ Laure Siegel, **“Independent Media Rebuilds Inside and Outside Myanmar after Violent Coup”**, Global Investigative Journalism Network, 14 March 2023.

¹⁶ **“On 2-year Anniversary of Military Coup, Myanmar’s Junta Must Stop Persecuting Journalists”**, Committee to Protect Journalists, 31 January 2023.

¹⁷ **“Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)”**, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 30 June 2023.

¹⁸ **“Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup”**, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 30 June 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The Burmese service of ‘Voice of America’ notes that there are “still about 40 journalists locked up in prisons across Myanmar (till February 2023)”.²⁰ According to the International Press Institute's (IPI) Database of Killed Journalists, four journalists have been killed in Myanmar since February 2021.²¹ As per the official ‘information sheet’ of the military regime, a total of 1,563 individuals (from 27 January 2022 to 27 June 2023) are currently facing legal action for “making incitements and propagating disruptive content on social media, with the intent to disturb the peace and stability of the state”.²²

Split Media: State, Friendly and ‘Independent’ Media

Media outlets have become sharply divided following the coup in Myanmar.²³ There are those which supports the regime. These include state-run media such as newspapers, digital platforms, and television channels. Those that previously identified as mainstream media but are now in exile oppose military rule. Additionally, according to reports, there is a third group of media outlets with military backgrounds²⁴ or supported by those ideologically-aligned with military regime.

The following section examines news coverage by media segments as against official version of news events. It seeks to show the imposition of selective perception to shape the understanding of domestic and global audiences. On 11 April 2023, for instance, the Myanmar Air Force carried out a bombing in the village of Pazigy, located 148 km west of Mandalay.²⁵ The attack targeted a large crowd of people who had gathered for the opening of a local office belonging to an opposition movement. The military's spokesperson, Maj Gen Zaw Min Tun, acknowledged in a statement phoned to state television MRTV that ‘the Office of NUG of PDF Terrorist Groups’ had been attacked. He said “the People's Defense Forces—the armed wing of the National Unity Government—had terrorized residents into supporting them, killing Buddhist monks, teachers and other people, while the military sought peace and stability”.²⁶

The Global New Light of Myanmar, one of the most popular state-backed newspapers, did not report on this airstrike in its editions on 11 April or 12 April. The incident

²⁰ Ingyin Naing, “[VOA: 40 Journalists Still in Myanmar Prisons After Junta Amnesty](#)”, *Voice of America*, 6 May 2023.

²¹ “[Deaths in Myanmar due to Journalistic Duty](#)”, International Press Institute, 2022.

²² “[Information Sheet](#)”, Myanmar National Portal, Vol. III, Issue 44, 28 June 2023, p. 25.

²³ Hpone Myat and David Aung, “[How the Coup Split Myanmar’s Media Landscape](#)”, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 December 2022.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Helen Regan, Sandi Sidhu, TZ Salai and Anna Coren, “[Screaming People and Bodies Everywhere: The Horrific Aftermath of Myanmar Junta Airstrike that killed 165](#)”, *CNN*, 12 April 2023.

²⁶ “[Responses of Maj-Gen Zaw Min Tun to Queries about Attack on Office of Nug Of Pdf Terrorist Groups Near Pazigy Village in Kantbalu Township](#)”, Information Sheet, 13 April 2023.

received extensive coverage from various non-state media outlets. *The Irrawaddy* stated that “the jet fighter dropped two bombs on a house in Pazi Gyi where a housewarming ceremony was being held by local residents and village defence members tasked with protecting residents’ properties and safeguarding the village”.²⁷

In another example, there was a news items about a violent attack in the Mon state of Myanmar on 12 October 2022. This attack was reported by one of the state’s print media outlets *The Global New Light of Myanmar*²⁸ as ‘In a brutal attack, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Brigade-1 and a group ‘so called PDF terrorists’, associated with the ‘National Unity Government (NUG)’ and the ‘Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)’, killed three pilgrims and injured 19 others at the Kinmunchaung bus terminal in Kyaikto Township, Mon State. The People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs) were involved in the incident. According to *Myanmar Now* report, “three women from Yangon were shot and killed at the foot of Kyaiktiyo Hill in Mon State after a clash broke out nearby between the Myanmar army and resistance forces on Wednesday morning (12 October 2022)”.²⁹

An official statement³⁰ in state media described the coverage of this incident by non-state media as ‘fabricated information’. The government’s press release charged news organisation like *The Irrawaddy* and *BBC News* of turning turn a blind eye to the ‘correct information’. It further threatened action against ‘these new agencies under the communications law, news media law and under the existing laws for the accusation of security forces’.

In March 2021, Myanmar’s military regime revoked the licenses of at least five media outlets, namely *Myanmar Now*, *7 Day*, *Mizzima*, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and *Khit Thit*.³¹ DVB, *Mizzima* and *7 Day* are VOA affiliates.³² In addition to these, several local media outlets such as the *Myitkyina News Journal* in Kachin State, the *Delta News Agency* in Ayeyarwady Region, the *Tachilek News Agency* in Shan State, the *Zayar Times News Agency* in Sagaing Region, the *Kantarawaddy News Agency* in Kayah State, and the *Independent Mon News Agency* were also banned.³³ Several

²⁷ **“At Least 50 Civilians Including Children Massacred in Myanmar Regime Air Strike in Sagaing”**, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 April 2023.

²⁸ **“Action to be taken against media on fake information to misunderstand incident of attack on Kinmunchaung bus terminal to Kyaiktiyo Pagoda”**, *The Global New Light of Myanmar* (Myanmar News Agency), 15 October 2022.

²⁹ J Esther, **“Three Women Killed in Mon State Shooting Near Buddhist Pilgrimage Site”**, *Myanmar Now*, 13 October 2022.

³⁰ **“KNLA Brigade (1) and PDF Terrorists Brutally Attacked the Pilgrimage”**, Information Sheet, 13 October 2022.

³¹ **“Myanmar Military Raids Newsrooms, Revokes 5 Media Outlets’ Licenses”**, Committee to Protect Journalists, 9 March 2021.

³² **“Myanmar Military Strips Five Media Companies of Licenses”**, *Voice of America*, 8 March 2021.

³³ Hpone Myat and David Aung, **“How the Coup Split Myanmar’s Media Landscape”**, no. 23.

media outlets such as *The Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima*, *DVB*, and *Myanmar Now*, have relocated to other countries. However, the Burmese services of Voice of America (VOA), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and ‘Radio Free Asia’ (RFA) still operate from Myanmar.

According to *The Irrawaddy*, there are “more than two-dozen pro-junta media outlets run by former military officials, members of regime-friendly political parties and ultra-nationalists”.³⁴ *Thuriya Nay Won* (The Sun Rays) is one of the major media outlets of Myanmar, which publishes magazines, journals and other periodicals. Moe Hein, the proprietor of this media organisation, has made frequent appearances on television channels such as Myawaddy TV (owned by the military) and MRTV (the state broadcaster).

Myanmar Hard Talk is another prominent media outlet of Myanmar and it has close ties to the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party.³⁵ The chief editor of *Myanmar Hard Talk* is Aung Min, a former military officer who defected to the opposition during the 2021 Myanmar coup d’état. News outlets like *Neo Politics News Agency* are headed by Kyaw Myo Min, seen as a military regime-friendly face.³⁶ The news agency *Myanmar National Post* has been pro-junta in its projection of narrative and ideological stance. *The Irrawaddy* has reported that this news agency is backed by ultranationalist group ‘Ma Ba Tha’.³⁷ These examples highlight media outlets that either align themselves with the military junta or have affiliations with the military, including connections with former lawmakers from the military’s proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party, former military personnel, and ultranationalists.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, the media landscape in Myanmar has witnessed major changes, including the presence of pro-military media, alongside state-owned media, citizen or local journalists, and the use of social media as a tool for content dissemination. Consequently, the boundaries between truth, fake news, and half-truths have become increasingly blurred. These phenomena have created a significant disruption and reversed the significant freedoms given to the media after the 2012 reforms.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Phone Htet Naung, Banyar Kyaw, Alex Beatson and Andrew Nachemson, “**Hard Talk or Hate Speech? Outlet Spreads Disinformation and Bigotry Under Guise of Political Commentary**”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 October 2020.

³⁶ Hpone Myat and David Aung, “**How the Coup Split Myanmar’s Media Landscape**”, no. 23.

³⁷ Hpone Myat and David Aung, “**How the Coup Split Myanmar’s Media Landscape**”, no. 23; Poppy McPherson, “**Ultra-nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha has been spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric across Myanmar for years**”, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2017.

About the Author



Mr. Om Prakash Das is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2023