



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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Burma and professional journalism un-breakable though junta oppress

The enemy of the press Burma and professional journalism

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Mizzima News

Burma under military rule remains one of the most dangerous places for journalists. At least seven journalists remain imprisoned, including the renowned 76-year old U Win Tin, whose incarceration has now exceeded his sentence by more than 16 years.

The situation has only worsened following last month's Security Council vote in which China and Russia vetoed, while South Africa rejected, a U.S. endorsed draft resolution condemning Burmese government actions and policies as a threat to regional and international peace and security in January this year. Since this vote the military junta has stepped up its propaganda against "neo-colonialists" and "destructive elements", pursuing a strategy whereby domestic "media fights against Western media."

Escalating harassment and threats, compounded with increasingly vigilant censorship, has effectively tightened the space in which journalists can practice. For Burmese living inside the country, foreign based radio and TV stations such as BBC, VOA, RFA and Norway based Democratic Voice of Burma are the primary sources of information. Additionally, online websites such as Irrawaddy and Mizzima provide media windows to what is occurring both inside and outside of Burma. According to some estimates, many of the Burmese diaspora population of some two million rely on exile-based websites and publications for their information regarding Burma.

The origins of the systematic censorship and repression of the media can be traced back to 1962 the coup led by General Ne Win, in which the democratically elected government was replaced with a military dictatorship. From the start, initiatives such as the Printers and Publishers Registration Law and the State Protection Law were enacted, in addition to a more thorough enforcement of the Official Secret Act and Emergency Provision Act.

Following the 1988 people uprising, the new men in power, currently known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), further restricted the mobility of the independent media with the passing of several restrictive measures, including: the Television Act, the Motion Picture Law, the Computer Science Development Law, Responsibility and the Successful Performance of the Functions of the National Convention Against Disturbances and Opposition, as well as amending the Unlawful Association Act and the Burma Wireless Telegraphy Act.

Presently, the owning of a fax-machine or a computer modem is illegal without government registration. And anyone caught talking with a foreign journalist is at risk since such an action readily invites suspicion and can ultimately lead to questioning, interrogation and even possible jail time.

Many writers, journalists, opposition politicians, religious persons, students and unionists have been interrogated, and some imprisoned, as a strong handed technique in an attempt to silence or suppress discussions on matters related to governmental policies. Accordingly, the Burmese media in exile, with the support of the international community, is trying to fill the information gap and have assumed the responsibility of reporting on significant events within Burma.

Inside Burma, any piece of media must be submitted and subjected to the Press Scrutiny Board prior to publication. Examples of information censored by the Board include: the naming of opposition figures and political parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, when not part of an attack on the opposition itself; debating government policies; describing the poverty of the Burmese people; speaking on the merits of democracy; condemning the regime's friendly foreign relations; and, in general, any news that might cause the government unease.

Specific instances of government crackdown on the media are not difficult to come by.

An article concerning traffic police malpractice was banned in November of last year, and the author warned for allowing the article to appear on the Mizzima website.

A journalist who raised difficult questions in a government press conference last December was asked to submit his background and bio-data. Eventually, by

instruction of the Press Scrutiny, the journalist in question was banned from attending further press conferences.

Two journalists who took unauthorized pictures and film of the mysterious new capitol of Naypyitaw were sentenced to three years in prison. The new city itself exists without mobile phone connections, while the main roads are designed to land small aircraft.

Zar Ga Nar, a very popular comedian and political satirist who had previously been jailed several times was banned in May from all artistic activity in public by the Motion Picture and Video Censor Board. This action came after BBC aired an interview in which he joked about the ultra conservative culture in Burma - an issue which the government found too sensitive for public consumption.

Major Wanna, Chief of the military's Aviation Maintenance department and a writer under the pseudonym 'Mar j', was fired in January 2006 after contributing two satirical articles to a private journal. His crime was making fun of the government's moving of the nation's capital to Pyinmana and on its attempt to hold a National Convention for the drafting of a new constitution.

Ne Min, a former stringer and lawyer, was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in May 2004, allegedly being charged with the passing of "anti-government" information to organizations based outside Burma.

Lastly, Aung Htun, a student activist and a writer, was sentenced to 17 years imprisonment in February 1988 for writing a seven volume series detailing the history of Burma's politically activity and students movement.

However, I must also acknowledge the many "unsung heroes" who have been testing the limitations, taking risks and walking the tight rope, in spite of the draconian regulations imposed by the military government to overwhelm the population with "fear". Although people are denied, and many are even unaware of their basic "rights", many brave citizens are fighting for their "freedom" and "liberation". This in return is invoking "fear" itself within the government, knowing if they are overthrown this time, it might be violent and ugly. This courage of resistance by the people brings hope and optimism that not only is the military junta not invincible, but also that its days are numbered.

Political illegitimacy is the main weakness of the present military junta. Fearing this might be their Achilles' heel, the present generation of military rulers is trying to legitimize its rule by following the same footsteps taken by their former leader General Ne Win; namely, calling a National Convention to write a constitution. Such a document will undoubtedly be biased towards the role of the military, call for a fake election - possibly without any major opposition, and establish a civilian government which in actuality will be run by military officers who will then masquerade as civilians. One of the key goals in this process is to weaken the

opposition, especially DASSK and the NLD, along with 88 Generation Student leaders, ethnic leaders and seasoned politicians.

A component of this overall grand strategy is to step up the propaganda campaign against neo-colonialist interests, discrediting the Western media, and linking opposition forces with these foreign elements - thereby labeling them as destructive elements and raising nationalistic sentiments.

Articles attacking the U.S., U.K., liberal democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi and other prominent activists have appeared in state-owned daily newspapers. Private journals and magazines are ordered by the Ministry of Information to republish articles written by the agents of government.

There is, as well, a cunning twist in this highly sophisticated policy of the government regarding information and the media. To make sure elite, intellectual minds are not offended enough to turn them into opposition political leaders, the government has relaxed its position pertaining to the issuing of licenses for publication, as well as concerning the number of journalists allowed to attend government press conferences. However, the government has concurrently imposed tough restrictions on government officials in dealing with the press and increased the level of surveillance in the tapping of telephone conversations.

Also, only government-favored publications are permitted to publish statistics and data related to societal issues such as HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, poverty, public health issues and government arranged prison visits. Predictably however, such information reflects the government's own estimates and rarely reflect an accurate rendering of the situation.

Under the regime's "Friends or Foe" policy, a publication is frequently asked to desist in operations if it does not possess a healthy relationship with the authorities by following the government instructions.

To overcome these draconian restrictions imposed on local media, renegade Burmese journalists, residing on foreign soil, and without fear of suppression from host nations, have devised a way to call local contacts within Burma and by such a means extract and report actual news from within the country. This approach to information gathering is a new phenomenon known as: Phone Journalism.

It will come as no surprise that the government has also imposed strict limitations on Internet access and usage. They liberally use filtering software to limit access. Free email services such as Yahoo and Google mail are banned in Burma. Instead, users are forced to use authorized (mpt.mail) with a password given by the Local Internet Service, itself under the direct control of the government.

This attempt at restricting the Internet has resulted in a cat and mouse game. There is extensive blocking of websites, Internet telephony access and chat services. Thus, the intelligent and knowledgeable users use a proxy server to bypass the filters and restrictions. However, since June, the government has blocked the well known proxy servers, requiring users to search for and discover alternative servers.

While much of the whole world is excited about globalization in this age of information, the digital revolution has clearly bypassed Burma. While the average per capital income hovers around \$225, the cost of broadband Internet connection costs more than \$1300. So the possession of a computer with an Internet connection itself becomes a symbol of wealth in Burma.

According to Burmese officials, in a population of approximately 50 million as of 2006, there were 78 thousand Internet users.

External and internal Burmese communities have come to epitomize the "information rich, information poor" divide. I myself have can attest to the fact that while fifth grade school children in New Delhi have a working knowledge of tools such as Google Search Engine for educational purposes, college graduated youth from Rangoon do not have personal email accounts and require assistance for simply surfing the Internet. This backwardness in technology know-how is a big worry for the future development of Burma.

Even though the media is heavily censored and functioning with tight restrictions inside Burma, and the situation looks bleak and depressing, there is a ray of hope for future Burmese media enthusiasts. With the help of the international community, Burmese media outlets are spawning rapidly and learning fast, displaying impressive growth in professionalism and the collection of news - all the while reporting in a more focused, fair and balanced manner.

Let me give you one good example through my real life experience. Mizzima was formed in 1988 by three young activists who had an interest in journalism. They were equipped only with a single computer lacking any Internet connection. In fact they had not even a telephone line. All they possessed at the time was the will to fight for democracy and to deliver true and real news to the Burmese community. None of them had any professional training in journalism. They started to gather any news and events related to Burma, and wrote reports and opinions. They would then have to go to the public phone booth to deliver and distribute their reporting.

Now Mizzima employs more than 20 people, and has grown to print publication in Burmese, online publication in both English and Burmese and even expanded to Mizzima online TV. Mizzima has become one of the leading Burmese media outlets. Similarly Irrawady, New Era (Khit Pyaing), Shan Herald and many other smaller outlets have become major sources of information. These outlets greatly

supplement Burmese service radio stations such as VOA, BBC, RFA, and the Norway based Democratic Voice of Burma.

These young journalists, and others, who are flocking to these media outlets, will one day become important members of the journalistic community inside Burma. They will be poised and positioned to report on and help maintain democracy if and when Burma returns to a democratic society. In our struggle to do so, we appreciate and need help from the international media community in order to further build and entrench a productive Burmese media community.