The Military Coup Destroyed Independent Media in Myanmar, but in Rakhine State, It Wasn't There to Begin With

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Kyaw Hsan Hlaing *and* ***Emily Fishbein*** *argue that Myanmar's media climate is dire under the junta butpress freedoms in Rakhine State had already unraveled.*

Since the February 1 military coup, independent media has faced a crisis in Myanmar. Yet, even before the coup, journalists and rights advocates had decried a diminishing space for independent media, especially media reporting on armed conflict and humanitarian crises in Rakhine State.

In early January, we interviewed seven journalists and editors about the risks and challenges they faced when reporting on conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw. Some quotes have been anonymized due to the repressive and unstable situation under the military regime.

Those interviewed shared numerous barriers the government created with regard to the media's coverage of the conflict, which began escalating in late 2018. Some of these barriers were an extension of those already in place since October 2016, when the Tatmadaw began committing "clearance operations" against Rohingya people in the state's northern townships.

At that time, the government refused independent media access to the area. By April 2017, journalists needed permission to visit anywhere in the state. The Ministry of Information organized reporting tours beginning that July but required that participants were accompanied by government "minders" and followed fixed itineraries.

One journalist we interviewed in January reflected on a time when they traveled to northern Rakhine without authorization, shortly after the Tatmadaw conducted its second and more sweeping wave of atrocities in August 2017, for which it is now facing genocide charges at the International Court of Justice. The journalist was detained by soldiers and forced to sign an agreement not to post or publish anything from their trip. *Radio Free Asia* also reported that journalists visiting northern Rakhine without authorization during the 2017 crisis faced threats, harassment, and confiscation of their cameras and laptops.

In January 2018, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Aung San Suu Kyi the world's biggest backslider in press freedoms, but the situation only worsened. That September, Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo received seven-year sentences for the possession of classified documents during their investigation of the massacre of ten Rohingya. Despite a police

officer's confession that he was ordered to entrap the journalists, they spent more than 500 days in prison before being released by presidential pardon.

The AA began escalating its fight for autonomy in late 2018, and the Tatmadaw cracked down with a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. Violence—including indiscriminate airstrikes, gunfire, arson, and enforced disappearances—claimed around 300 lives, while the Rakhine Ethnics Congress, a local civil society group, estimated approximately 230,000 people were displaced. In April 2020, U.N. human rights expert Yanghee Lee documented the Tatmadaw's targeting of civilians and called for an investigation into allegations of ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Rakhine and neighboring Chin State.

As the conflict worsened, journalists faced increasing obstacles to reporting safely, accurately, and freely on human rights abuses that occurred. The journalists we interviewed described numerous ways authorities limited access to information and sources and left them vulnerable to arrest.

In June 2019, the government ordered telecoms operators to shut down the internet in nine townships, impacting more than one million people. Although the restrictions were at times partially lifted, the internet remained effectively inaccessible across eight townships until, a day after the coup, the new military regime restored full access as it scrambled to earn the favor of marginalized ethnic groups.

"For media workers to access facts and information has been difficult since the internet was blocked," Myint Kyaw, former Secretary of the Myanmar Press Council, told us during a phone interview in early January, when the internet restrictions were still in place. Before the coup, the Myanmar Press Council had served as a semi-independent media adjudication body whose members were appointed by the National League for Democracy government, media associations, and civil society; now, most of its members have resigned due to military directives since the coup. "Media are just using photos of signboards with village names for news coming from Rakhine; the photo quality really decreased. Also, villagers cannot post things on social media, so they cannot share what is happening," said Myint Kyaw in early January.

Internet restrictions impacted the ability to cross-check information as well. "When someone from an internet-restricted area tells me something, it's very difficult to verify," said a reporter with the Rakhine State-based Development Media Group (DMG) in a phone interview in early January. "I try to verify it by calling four or five people, but sometimes updates happen in the meantime. I also have to consider each person's background and whether what they say is likely to be accurate."

Without internet access, journalists were also unable to use encrypted messaging applications or send or receive emails from internet-restricted areas, leading them to transport files by car and use phone calls and text messages to communicate with each other and with sources. "These challenges lead not only to delayed communication but also a massive risk for journalists, as they can be under surveillance," said a local media expert in an email on January 9. We have withheld their name due to security concerns since the coup,.

On March 23 of 2020, the government ordered telecoms operators to block 230 websites, including 67 websites it categorized as "fake news." Among the "fake news" sites were DMG and Narinjara, the only two Rakhine State-based media reporting in English. The local media expert said the block had both affected advertising revenue and hindered information access.

“Blocking the websites of these media takes away the rights of people to know the situation of conflicts and human rights violations in conflict regions,” she said.

Also on March 23, the government designated the AA a terrorist organization. In the ensuing weeks, authorities raided three media outlets and their journalists’ homes and charged their Editors-in-Chief under the Counter-Terrorism Law for publishing interviews with the AA’s spokesperson. Charges against Nay Myo Lin of the Mandalay-based Voice of Myanmar were later withdrawn, while cases against the Editors-in-Chief of Narinjara and Yangon-based Khit Thit Media remained ongoing as of the coup.

They are among 67 legal cases filed against the media during the first four years of the National League for Democracy’s term, of which the government filed 31, the military filed 11, and the rest were filed by religious institutions, political parties, armed groups, private claimants and others, according to a May 2020 report by the Yangon-based freedom of expression organization Athan.

“If we write true news, we can get arrested anytime,” said Thar Loon Zaung Htet, Khit Thit’s founder and Editor-in-Chief, in a phone interview in early January. “We can’t make balanced news about the conflict because we can’t interview the AA according to the law … It’s also difficult to follow media ethics if we don’t know the ground situation and can only get news from phone calls. It’s like the situation in Rakhine is in the dark. “

Two female journalists we interviewed in early January said they never went alone to conduct interviews in the field. “When I report on politics or human rights issues, I feel unsafe physically and psychologically,” said one local reporter in a phone interview. “I don’t feel safe being a woman journalist,” said another. “I try to encourage myself not to fear because I’m working for the truth.”

DMG, which has seventeen journalists focusing on each of the state’s townships and was often among the first to break the news on the conflict between the AA and Tatmadaw, was a particular target of harassment. In April 2019, DMG received an email from an unknown sender that threatened its journalists’ lives if they did not support the Tatmadaw in their reporting. DMG applied to renew its media license in March 2019, but the Ministry of Information never responded to the application. Nonetheless, DMG pushed forward in its reporting: a search for “IDP” [internally displaced person] on its website revealed 152 articles published from May 2019 to February 2021, while a search for “human rights” revealed 109 results.

As DMG continued to cover the conflict, however, it also came under increasing scrutiny. In May 2019, police charged Editor-in-Chief Aung Marm Oo with unspecified violations under the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Act, for which he faced up to five years in prison; the case was ongoing as of the coup. During the NLD’s administration, the Unlawful Associations Act had been repeatedly used to charge people who allegedly had contact with ethnic armed organizations, including for journalistic purposes.

In the days following the charges, police raided Aung Marm Oo’s office and house, questioning his family and two DMG staff. He went into hiding and, as of an interview in early January, had since been unable to see his wife or three-year-old son or receive medical care for a liver condition. He said that, fearing for his safety, he wouldn’t return home until police withdrew the case.

On January 22 of this year, the Tatmadaw charged one DMG editor and one reporter with defamation under the Telecommunications Law, which outlaws defamation over a telecommunications network, in relation to an article that alleged Tatmadaw personnel had looted rice and forced locals to mill it. Neither the Tatmadaw nor the government had responded to DMG's requests for comment.

A local media expert emphasized to us the importance of local ethnic media in documenting armed conflict and promoting accountability for human rights violations.. "Local ethnic media can be a bridge that conveys the news from isolated conflict regions to the whole country and the world. It can eventually lead to a demand to end human rights violations in those areas," she said.

DMG's deputy editor told us three weeks before the coup that Rakhine State-based media were facing increasing difficulties to survive and that some of DMG's editors and reporters had resigned due to low salary and security concerns. "Local media are gradually becoming weaker in technology, funding, and human resources," he said.

The people we interviewed were disappointed in the NLD government's stance toward media freedoms. While the party pledged to support independent media in its 2015 election manifesto, this pledge was absent in 2020. "Related to the law, things really got worse during the NLD administration…The NLD weakened independent media," said Myint Kyaw, former Myanmar Press Council Secretary. When we called him on February 2, the day after the coup, he told us that the space for media freedoms would "narrow drastically" under the new junta.

His prediction was accurate. On April 11, the junta submitted a letter to the Myanmar Press Council warning journalists and media organizations not to refer to it as a "coup government," saying it violated media ethics.

The junta has also ordered telecommunications operators to block all mobile data as of March 15 and wifi broadband networks as of April 1. A nightly internet blackout has been imposed since February 15.

On March 9, the junta revoked the press licenses of five local media outlets, including Khit Thit, which had been covering breaking news in the coup's aftermath, including livestream videos of protests. Editor-in-Chief Thar Loon Zaung Htet told *Radio Free Asia* on the day its license was revoked that all of Khit Thit's journalists had already resigned, but he would continue alone to produce news via social media channels.

The deputy editor of DMG told us that security concerns had dramatically increased for DMG staff since the coup. The entire team has gone into hiding, making it difficult for the media to collect information for its reports.

According to an April 1 article in the New York Times, at least 56 journalists had been arrested with half remaining in detention. Fifteen face charges under Penal Code Article 505(a), which criminalizes disseminating information that might cause members of the military to mutiny, disregard, or fail in their duties with up to two years in prison. Junta forces have beaten journalists on multiple occasions, and a least three have been shot and wounded.

When we started our reporting in January, the government's restrictions on journalists covering Rakhine State significantly hindered reporting on the human rights situation there. The military

coup caused a further downfall, while similar restrictions — including internet and website blocks, denial of licenses, and threats of arrest — now affect media coverage across the entire country, and physical insecurity has become pervasive as well. These changes are among many ways the junta has expanded oppressive tactics once practiced predominantly in ethnic states to encompass all of Myanmar, to the detriment of all.

(Featured image: Supplied)

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