



REPORTING UNDER THREAT:  
**JOURNALISM  
& MEDIA  
IN MYANMAR**

BI-ANNUAL REPORT 2024

# REPORTING UNDER THREAT: JOURNALISM & MEDIA IN MYANMAR | 2024 BI ANNUAL REPORT

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**Cover Photo Credit :** A journalist films as riot police fire tear gas at demonstrators during a protest against the military coup, near Myaynigone in Yangon, Myanmar, 27 February 2021.  
Photo: EPA

# SUMMARY & TRENDS

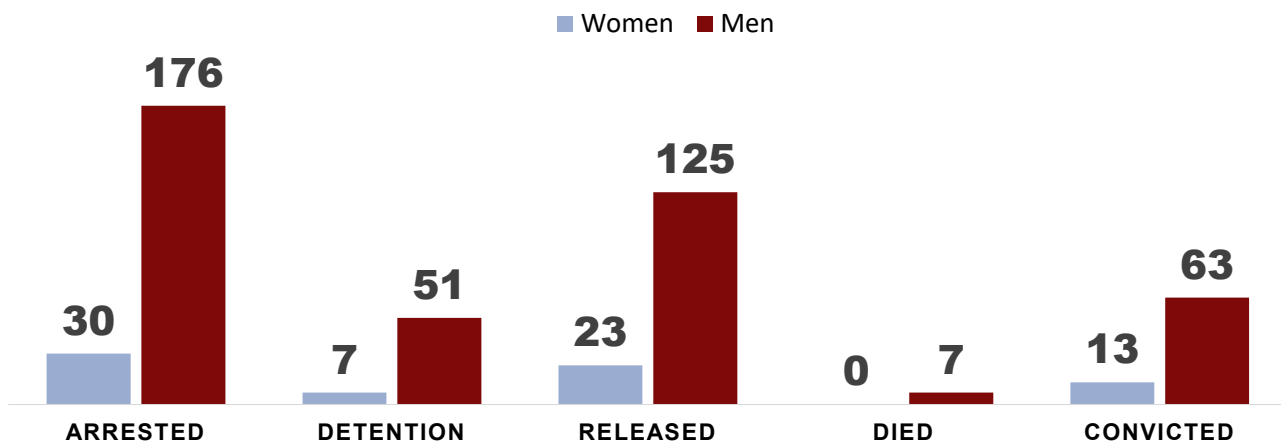
As Myanmar enters the fourth year after the 2021 military coup, independent media continues to struggle to effectively cover the bitter civil war and economic crisis in the country. This report covers the first two quarters of 2024. It examines the main developments, trends, and highlights relating to the safety of Myanmar journalists and the challenging reporting environment they operate in under the military regime.

Over three years after the 1 February 2021 coup, Myanmar's military junta, referred to as the State Administration Council (SAC), and its security apparatus, continue to repress independent media and other forms of open public discussion, including crackdowns on social media. Journalists inside Myanmar, including citizen journalists, operate in an environment where independent news work has become a difficult, dangerous, and life-threatening profession – a situation recently worsened when the SAC brought in military conscription beginning in February 2024.

Since February 2021, the SAC has set up a system of restrictions, including judicial persecution, on media, speech, and expression, through the use of the “law”<sup>1</sup>, closure of media outlets and other publishing houses, and various forms of harassment, including online by its proxies and supporters. At the same time, it allows pro-junta media outfits to operate in the country. As part of its efforts to restrict and control spaces for news, information and public discussion and to promote its agenda, the SAC uses [internet restrictions and shutdowns](#), including bans on VPNs, which often take place in regions of active conflict with anti-junta resistance forces.

Throughout 2023 and into the second quarter of 2024, arrests, prosecutions, and convictions continued, though at a reduced frequency compared to the previous three years. In the second quarter of 2024, one journalist from Dawei Watch received a combined prison sentence of 20 years, matching the longest sentence handed down during this period. Additionally, two other journalists were sentenced

## TOTAL NUMBERS OF ARRESTED, DETENTION, RELEASED, CONVICTED AND DIED SINCE 2021 COUP TO 2024 JUNE



<sup>1</sup> The Order No. (246/2023) (the Order) regarding the “Formation of the committee taking action against posting pornographic materials, fake news and criticising politically on the internet” was issued on 15 December 2023. Comprising representatives from various ministries, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications, Ministry of Law Affairs, Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Committee is tasked with, among others: <https://ifex.org/myanmar-crackdown-on-freedom-of-expression-with-24-hour-monitoring/>

to life imprisonment. Eight journalists, including one female, were sentenced under security-related laws in the first two quarters of 2024. Meanwhile, nine were released. As of end-June 2024, 58 journalists and news professionals remained behind bars. The majority, comprising 88%, are males and are reporters or photojournalists. The breakdown is seven women and 51 men.

Within the first two quarters of 2024, one journalist was killed by junta troops while under detention in the junta base No. (378) LIB in Mrauk-U in Rakhine State on 31 January 2024. Since the 2021 coup, 206 journalists and news workers, including 30 females, have been arrested, 78 convicted, and 148 released by the junta, according to media monitoring data.

A major trend during 2023, and into the first semester of 2024, was the escalation and expansion of armed conflict in Myanmar, including in northern Shan State, Rakhine State, Chin State and Sagaing Region, which has affected the space for independent news work at a time when world media attention has tended to focus on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Conflicts affecting large areas of the country have added to the huge safety risks for journalists and news sources, and the collapse of internet services and communication, are the main factors shaping how news desks manage how they obtain and report news from within Myanmar.

Fact-checking and verification have become more challenging, due to news sources' fear of repercussions, journalists' limited mobility, and lack of access to responses from official sources, including the inability to obtain responses from the junta.

**Myanmar ranked 171** out of 180 countries in the 2024 Report. It ranked 173 in the 2023 index. It also has a score of 10 out of 100 or not free in [the Freedom House's Freedom of the Net Index](#).

All the major independent news outlets, and many smaller ones, have relocated to third countries, mainly Thailand, while working with contributors and citizen journalists inside Myanmar. While they are physically safer outside Myanmar, news professionals worry about being able to continue journalism as a source of livelihood. Many face challenges with the documentation needed to stay in Thailand, for instance.

Their future prospects are related as well to the survival of their news organisations, which are dependent on development aid and grants at a time of competing government and NGO aid priorities stemming from other conflicts in the world.

## 2024 WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX

### INDEX 2024

**171** / 180  
Score : 24.41

#### Political indicator

158 22.17

#### Economic indicator

157 31.67

#### Legislative indicator

177 18.75

#### Social indicator

164 30.00

#### Security indicator

177 19.48

### INDEX 2023

**173** / 180  
Score : 28.26

#### Political indicator

164 35.75

#### Economic indicator

120 40.98

#### Legislative indicator

175 20.19

#### Social indicator

174 24.77

#### Security indicator

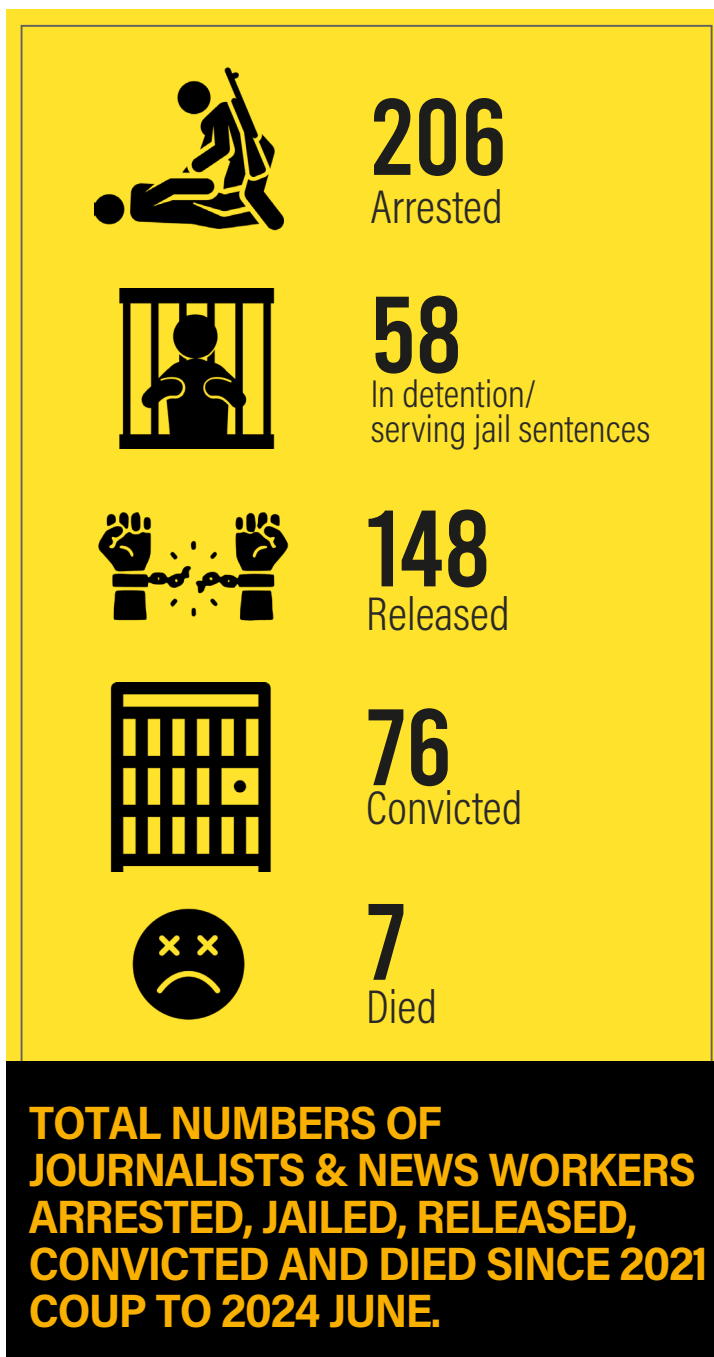
180 19.60

A Chiang Mai-based editor said: "In the last three years, we have seen independent media outlets operating with one foot in and one foot out. Many of them are working in liberated areas within the country as well as outside, particularly in neighbouring countries."

Although a number of independent media houses compete against each other for readers, viewers and funding, there have been efforts to join forces and collaborate on occasions, aware of improved strength in numbers.

Collaboration, including running media conferences, helps, but an underlying challenge remains in that independent media organizations are largely reliant on donor funding, and what is clear is that donors have less funds available in 2024.

With Western governments' focus on conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, Myanmar-related projects receive limited funding – with an apparent reduction in 2024 compared to 2023.



*"In the last three years, we have seen independent media outlets operating with one foot in and one foot out. Many of them are working in liberated areas within the country as well as outside, particularly in neighboring countries."*





FIRST TWO QUARTERS OF 2024:

# ARRESTS, SENTENCING & DEATHS

Police arrest Myanmar Now journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon on February 27, 2021, as protesters were taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. / AFP / Ye Aung THU

## Monitoring media repression in Myanmar

JOURNALISTS & NEWS WORKERS	2021 - 2024 JUNE TOTAL	JAN-MAR 2024	APR-JUN 2024
Arrested	206*	1	1
In detention/serving jail sentences	58	-	-
Released	148	4	5
Died	7	1	-
Convicted	76**	4	4

\* This count includes two journalists who were arrested during the 4th quarter of 2023. Information about them was updated to the total number of arrests.

\*\* This count includes one journalist who was sentenced at the end of 2023. Information about his sentence case was obtained only in June 2024, so this case has now been added to the total of those in convictions for 2024.

### RELEASED

**Toe Aung**, a reporter from Mekong News Agency, was released on 4 January 2024 from Kung Tung Prison. He was arrested on 4 March 2022. He received amnesty with his colleague, Tun Than Aung, on Myanmar Independence Day when the junta released prisoners, most of them criminals, though some were political prisoners including three journalists.

**Tun Than Aung**, the founder of the Mekong News Agency, was released on 4 January 2024 from Kung Tung Prison. He was arrested on the same day as Toe Aung. He also received amnesty like Toe Aung on the same day. Therefore, both of them spent one year and ten months in the prison. The release of these two journalists did not appear in the media.

**Kaung Sat Lin**, a photojournalist of the Myanmar Pressphoto Agency (MPA) was released on 4 January 2024 from Insein Prison. He was sentenced to three years with hard labour for violating Section 505 (a) which prohibits “causing fear, spreading false news and agitating crimes against a government employee” on 21 December 2022. His case was heard by a secret military court in Insein Prison. He was arrested while he was taking photos of a youth demonstration in Kyimyindaine Township in Yangon on 5 December 2021. A military truck hit several protesters and Kaung Sat Lin was one of those who were hit by the truck and sustained severe injury to his back.

All of the above three journalists were released on 4 January 2024, the 76th Myanmar Independent Day. The junta releases some prisoners on this special day every year.

**Kyaw Soe Oo**, a pro-regime media person, was released on 22 March 2024. He was arrested on 19 March 2024 and was sued under Section 505 (a) on 21 March. Although he is a very strong lobbyist for the junta, he severely criticized the Home Affairs high-rank officials who were absent from expressing sympathy to the family of the police officer who died in the Sumprabum battle in Kachin State. However, some so-called nationalists and pro-junta supporters demonstrated in front of the police station where Kyaw Soe Oo was detained on 25 March. As a result, he was released due, it was said, to this pro-junta demonstration.

**Zaw Zaw**, also known as Zaw Zaw Aung, a photojournalist from The Irrawaddy was released from Mandalay Prison on 1 April 2024. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code.

An unnamed journalist from Yangon who works for an international media organization, not named, was released after being detained less than a week in May. His release did not appear in the media though strong sources confirm his release.

**Htet Aung Shine**, a fact checker from Red Hat, **Myat Ko Oo**, a journalist from Myanmar Now, and **Pyae Phyo Thu**, a journalist from The Irrawaddy, were released on 17 April 2024. The day they were released was Myanmar New Year under a junta amnesty.

## SENTENCING

**Shin Daewe** was arrested on 15 October 2023 for buying a video drone online in North Okkalapa township, Yangon, placed under custody when she went to pick up the drone. She was [convicted](#) under terrorism charge 50 (j) and 54 (d) with a life sentence on 10 January 2024. Her case was heard by a secret military tribunal and she was refused the right to legal representation. She is the first female journalist to be sentenced to life after the 2021 military coup.

**Aung San Oo** was [convicted](#) to 20 years in prison under Section 50 (a) of the Counter-terrorism Law on 16 February 2024. He was arrested on 11 December, 2023 at midnight from his house in Dawei, Tanintharyi region. His conviction did not show up in the media though the related organization confirm the incident.

**Soe Min Naing**, a former local journalist from northern Shan State (Northern Shan State), was arrested on the 27 December 2023. He was convicted under Sections 505 (a) and 505 (b) and was sentenced to three years on 24 February 2024.

**Yan Naing Soe**, a former journalist from the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) was sentenced to four years under section 52 (a) of the Counter-Terrorism Law on 25 March 2023. He [was arrested](#) near the Tharzi market in Monywa on 22 October 2023.

**Myo Myint Oo**, who was arrested together with Aung San Oo on the same day, [was sentenced](#) to lifetime imprisonment charged under three Counter-Terrorism Laws (section 50(j), 52(a), and (b)). His case came later after that of his colleague, Aung San Oo, as he was charged under more sections. Although his case did not appear in the media, the related organizations confirmed the case.

**Thura Aung**, a journalist from The People's Voice was sentenced to three years under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code in May. He was arrested in November 2023 in Taunggyi, Shan State (south).

**Htet Aung**, a journalist from the Development Media Group (DMG) media outlet in Rakhine State, [was sentenced](#) to five years with hard labour under Section 52 (a) of the Counter-Terrorism Law. He was arrested while he was taking photos at a traditional festival in Sittway on 29 October 2024. The junta authorities also seized cameras, computers, related materials, and sealed the DMG media office in Rakhine State. The junta authorities arrested a member of DMG's security staff Soe Win Aung as well.

**Soe Win Aung**, a media company security guard, was [also sentenced](#) to five years on the same day under the same Section 52 (a) of the Counter-Terrorism Law as Htet Aung.

#### BREAKDOWN OF CONVICTIONS OF JOURNALISTS BY LAW, 2024

Laws used in convictions	Number of convictions
Counter-Terrorism Law 50 (j)	2
Counter-Terrorism Law 54 (d)	1
Counter-Terrorism Law 52 (a)	4
Counter-Terrorism Law 50 (a)	1
Counter-Terrorism Law 52 (b)	1
Telecommunication Law 65(d)	1
Panel Code 505 (a)	2
Panel Code 505 (b)	1
<b>Total Convictions</b>	<b>13</b>

*Note: Total 13 convictions are handed down to 8 journalists.*

## ARREST

**Kyaw Soe Oo** who is a pro-regime editor from People News Media was arrested on 19 March 2024. He made hard criticism of the Ministry of Home Affairs, pointing out the lack of sympathy for the family of a fallen police official who died during the Sumprabum battle in Kachin State.

A Yangon-based journalist working for an international news agency was arrested in May. Although news of his detention did not appear in the media, sources confirmed that it lasted less than a week, and the junta authorities released him later. Due to the risk to the individual and related persons, the identity, background, and other details about the journalist are being kept confidential.



## DEATHS

**Myat Thu Tun**, also known as Phoe Thiha, a journalist who used to work for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), [was shot](#) and died on 31 January 2024 while he was detained in the Myanmar junta's No. (378) Light Infantry Battalion in Mrauk-U in Rakhine State.

Before he was transferred to No. (378) Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) he was detained at Mrauk-U district police station and as an Arakan Army (AA) offensive approached Mrauk-U, Myat Thu Tun and other detainees were moved to No. (378) LIB.

When the AA offensive approached No. (378) LIB again, Myat Thu Tun and six other detainees were shot allegedly by Lance Corporal Than Aung, having received the order from the company commander Major Thein Hteik Soe.

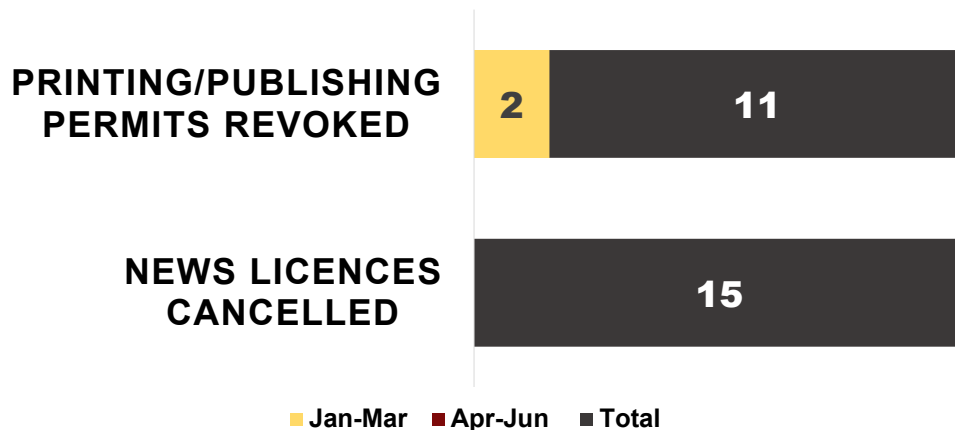
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## CLOSURE OF PUBLISHING HOUSES

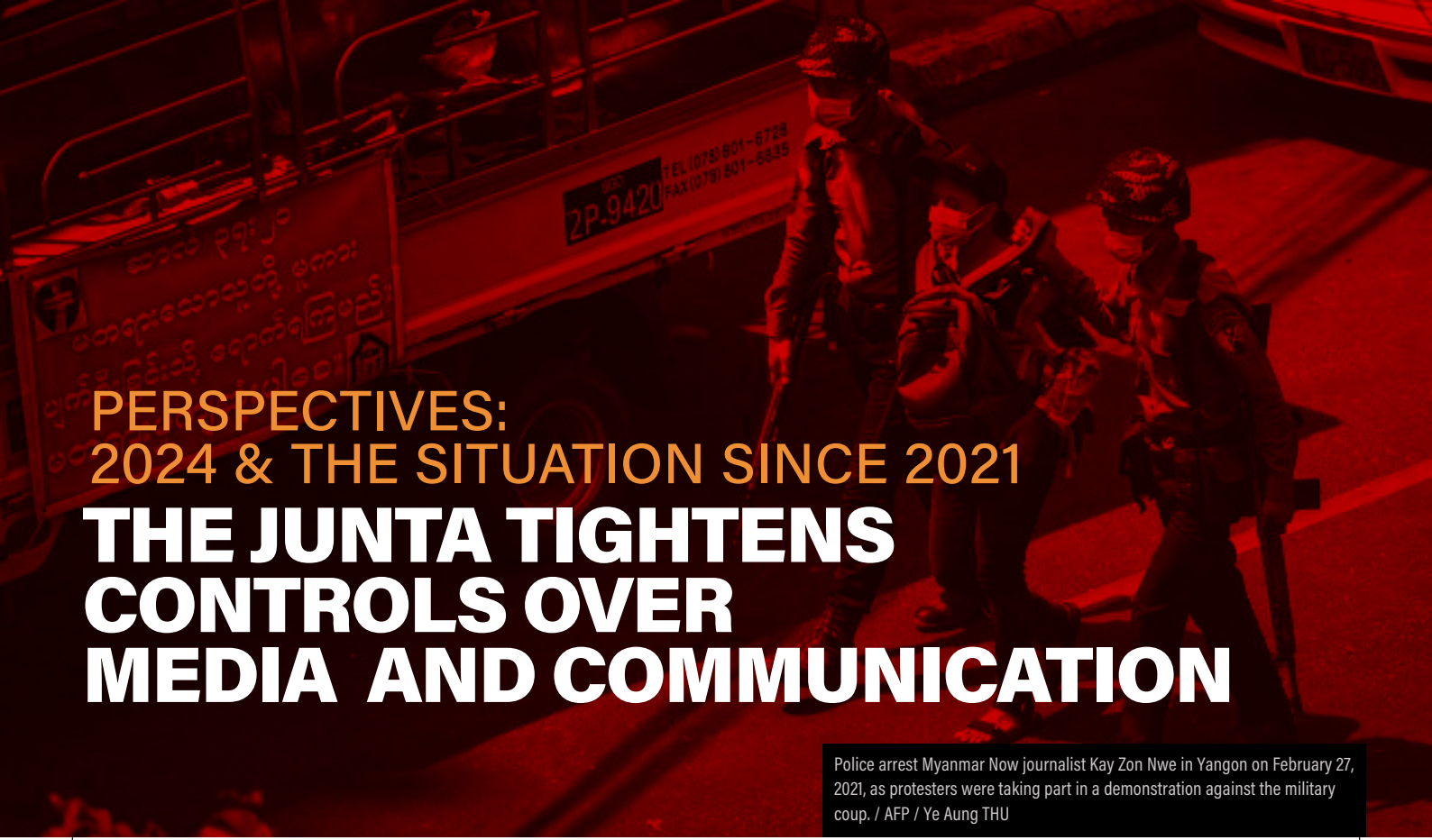
Most of the closures by the junta of independent media and publishing houses took place in the early aftermath of the February 2021 coup. However, further action was recently taken.

The junta revoked the licenses of two publishing and printing houses on 27 January 2024 claiming they violated Section 8 (b) of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law. Toemyit is a publishing house and La Pyae Lin was a printing house for the Toemyit. Although the junta did not mention a specific book title produced by Toemyit that broke the rules, it is believed its latest publication, - "Mindset Revolution," - was the trigger. The book written by Dr. Aung Khin criticizes the military regimes in Myanmar and encourages Myanmar society to adopt a mindset conducive to a democratic society.

## NEWS AND OTHER LICENCES REVOKED



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# PERSPECTIVES: 2024 & THE SITUATION SINCE 2021 THE JUNTA TIGHTENS CONTROLS OVER MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Police arrest Myanmar Now journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon on February 27, 2021, as protesters were taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. / AFP / Ye Aung THU

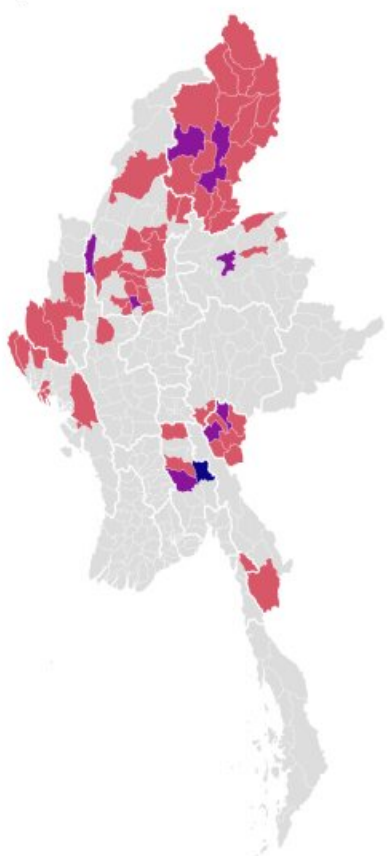
As Myanmar approaches its fourth year under draconian military rule, the challenges for independent journalists and media workers are arguably worsening as the authorities tighten media restrictions and imposing military conscription, starting in February 2024.

Society as a whole is under tightened supervision. A female journalist from a Rakhine State-based media outlet said that civilians from in the state cannot commute for their daily needs. For journalists, they need to be alert all the time, she says.

At night time, she worries about local authorities checking guest lists, which is one of the tools the SAC is using to oppress civilians, claiming they are trying to crack down on the insurgent movement. Whenever journalists go outside, they have to clear their phone of any links that may prove suspicious to the junta authorities. She feels insecure whenever she hears dogs barking around her house, fearing junta forces may be out to arrest her.

## Internet and Mobile Shutdown In Myanmar 2023

Mobile Phone and Internet Outages Plague Myanmar in 2023



*The present report focuses specifically on the internet outages that have taken place in Myanmar throughout the year 2023. Information has been sourced exclusively from reputable news agencies. Any prior occurrences of internet disruptions in previous years are not covered within this data analysis.*

Map data: USAID - Created with Datawrapper

[Map for townships experiencing internet outages in 2023](#)

On the other hand, family members also feel bad for her and insist she stop working as a journalist as the junta is sentencing women journalists. When her name was listed in a warrant, she had to move another township and family members now express concern about living alone.

The junta banned the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPN) since the [end of May 2024](#). The VPN application is necessary for social media such as Facebook users in Myanmar. Facebook is the most popular social media in Myanmar.

Since 2021 the junta restricted direct access to Facebook and online users try to access it through a VPN. Myanmar Internet users started facing difficulties in using VPN on 30 May. As the VPN works like a private network, it is hard to be intercepted by others, particularly by the authorities. However, if a VPN is used by many users, it can be traced by the authorities or technology companies and they can shut it down.

Reportedly, the Ministry of Transport and Communications instructed Internet services companies to shut down the VPN direction on 30 May.

One responsible person from the Internet companies confessed that they already had an instruction to stop the VPN though, on 30 May it needed to be shut down completely. Myanmar has over 20 million Facebook users who find it hard to access information through social media due to this junta's latest restrictions.

In addition, the junta cut off telecom networks. The junta will shut down the telephone line whenever they want to lock down information in their target state or region. For example, when the war became intense in Rakhine State at the end of 2023, phone lines in the northern cities became [hard to use](#).

Because of the weakness of communication, locals are facing many challenges regarding information on basic needs, prices, weather information, health, and transportation.

## CONSCRIPTION PROMPTS

### FEAR AMONGST JOURNALISTS

A Myanmar junta announcement in February 2024 struck fear into the journalism community in Myanmar, which is already beset by security and safety concerns.

Three years into the war, the resurrection of a mandatory military conscription law, dormant since 2010, has prompted concern amongst millions of young people – primarily men – as the junta is seeking tens of thousands of recruits, many to be sent to the frontlines of conflicts.

For journalists and media people working undercover in Myanmar, particularly in junta-held or administered areas, this drive for recruits has added to the difficulties. Soldiers, police and local government officials raid houses or stop people on the street seeking to scoop up recruits and media people fear they could be next.

The regime's mandatory conscription requirement underscores the glaring reality of a severe and growing shortage of military personnel in Myanmar. Despite widely varied estimations of the military's

size, ranging from 300,000 to 400,000, an analysis carried out by USIP in early 2023 revealed that the junta military forces had shrunk to approximately 150,000 by early 2021.

By late 2023, after the launch of the resistance forces' Operation 1027, that number was down to no more than 130,000. Other analysis indicates actual fighting forces may number under 100,000. <https://ispmyanmar.com/op-20/>

As of mid-2024, reports indicate a significant number of recent recruits have only been given rudimentary training and then sent to the frontlines, resulting in a large number of deaths and injuries.

With women now, as of mid-2024, reportedly being caught up in the conscription drive, a number of journalists and editors operating from home or undercover fear a knock on the door. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-to-jail-draft-dodgers.html>

## **MEDIA HOUSE FUNDING ISSUES**

Many if not all of the independent media organizations that escaped Myanmar in the wake of the 2021 coup have been facing serious funding issues. There are several reasons for this. The core reason is that a significant number of media houses have had to switch from a commercial business model, where a large percentage of income comes from advertisements and commercial partnerships to international donor funding and a small amount of public funding support.

Most of the media houses struggled to survive in the period from 2010 to the military coup in February 2021.

Now, mid-2024, and over three years into the war and crisis, international donors have been cutting back their funding, resulting in some serious downsizing of media operations and staff and freelance employment. Most have been affected.

International donors understand the importance of their financial support, and a number of organizations have had a long relationship with Myanmar's independent media, going back a decade or two. But foreign governments have been struggling financially and have therefore been cutting back on foreign aid – or changing their priorities. Of immediate concern, Ukraine and Israel and the Middle East garner heavy attention.

Myanmar matters as it is an important country in South East Asia. But there appears to be less interest in Western circles than there was about a decade ago when US President Barack Obama embraced "democracy icon" Aung San Suu Kyi and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made visits. The West is currently stretched when it comes to foreign policy, despite the fact that China appears to be strengthening its "hold" over Myanmar – talking to the junta and some opposition ethnic armed groups.

Myanmar independent media houses say they seek to keep the Myanmar crisis in the news, but need the financial funding to allow them to work effectively. International funding has fallen in the first two quarters of 2024, compared the same period in 2023.

## ETHNIC REBEL GROUP OFFERS JOURNALISM GUIDELINES

In war-time Myanmar, there are typically no mandatory guidelines or checks on what reporters file. However, one ethnic armed group, the Karen National Union (KNU) has issued procedures that external news agencies must follow while operating within KNU-controlled areas on April 21, according to the Karen Information Center.

The Public Relations and Information Committee - KNU stated that news agencies permitted by KNU headquarters must proceed in accordance with permissions regarding content, location, and duration, and are responsible for showing recorded videos and photographs to the person in charge if deemed necessary. It is unclear why the KNU have brought in restrictions, including limits on areas that can be filmed.

KNU cautioned that news agencies are not permitted to record videos in locations restricted by every level (village, township, district, and central) of KNU due to security concerns, designated video-prohibited zones, and the content out of permission.

Fears have been voiced over the dangers posed by too many restrictions.

***"We appreciate the development of procedures to improve communication between the media and news sources, particularly ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and newly established entities. However, we caution against allowing it to morph into unwarranted self-censorship"***, Toe Zaw Latt, secretary of the Independent Press Council Myanmar (IPCM) told the Karen Information Center, as published by BNI.

He added that IPCM aims to foster discussions aimed at bolstering media coverage rights in alignment with media ethics and addressing issues regarding access restrictions on information.

KNU cautioned that media outlets disregarding these procedures will face blacklisting and reporting to the Press Council, adding that in case of false information publication, the concerned outlets must take responsibility, issue apologies, and announce corrections.

Meanwhile, the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC) released a 'Directive on the Media Code of Conduct,' mandating local and foreign journalists, including freelancers, to obtain prior permission from IEC for reporting and to abstain from disseminating news that may harm operations and administration in Karenni State, urging adherence to "ethical standards".

Typically, journalists – both local and foreign – will seek the permission and help of local ethnic armed organizations when visiting and reporting on their territory.

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# VIEWPOINTS

## JOURNALIST

### IMPRISONED AND RELEASED

The following is an interview with a Myanmar journalist who was arrested shortly after the February 2021 military coup, imprisoned and eventually released.

A journalist films as riot police fire tear gas at demonstrators during a protest against the military coup, near Myaynigone in Yangon, Myanmar, 27 February 2021. Photo: EPA

#### **Why were you arrested and when?**

On 19 March 2021, I was arrested while I was conducting news reporting. I got arrested while gathering news data and sources for a news report.

#### **How long did you serve in prison? What were conditions like?**

I was in prison for almost 20 months. One year in Naypyidaw Prison and eight months in Mandalay Prison.

#### **Were you mistreated while in prison?**

I would say yes. Since the COVID-19 pandemic period, we did not receive enough medical coverage and many had died. We were subject to misused power by the prison staff such as being cursed and threatened harshly.

I witnessed some inmates being tortured.

#### **Why were you released? Was it due to an amnesty?**

I was sentenced for two years and I had already served 20 months when the regime provided amnesty on the National Day in November.

I was released on 17 November 2022, just two months early. So, you can say I was on the amnesty list. However, I would have been released in early January of 2023 anyway.

#### **Are you back working for your media company?**

After release from the jail, I worked with (the media company) for six months and in April 2023 I stopped working with (them).

#### **Did you get any threats, or were you monitored, after your release?**

Yes, I did. Policemen from No (1) Naypyidaw Police Station often inquired to my friends and colleagues about me: what I was doing, where did I live, call again to the police station, etc.

In the village, my family was asked about me by the authorities. They insisted for me not to continue as a journalist and do other businesses through my close friends. I endured for about seven months in the country though, then I fled to Thailand.

#### **What's the security risk you face at the moment?**

Currently, there is a security issue, as Mae Sot is a border town and there are many unknown groups. At the beginning, I did not have any documents and was concerned all the time.

I have got some documents now, though I cannot stay freely as the respective authorities are checking Myanmar people all the time in Mae Sot.

**How dangerous is it to report inside Myanmar these days?**

It is too dangerous to be a journalist in the country now. Because you can get arrested anytime and you face the risk of being tortured to death in interrogation centres.

**How is your media company doing? What are the challenges the company faces?**

Our media company is facing financial issues similar to other media outlets. However, we are working together and collaborating to tackle the challenge.

**How do you view the state of independent media in Myanmar today?**

All independent media groups are struggling now. Independent media outlets are unable to do commercials or gain income from advertisements. They rely on donors and digital income and try to keep going.

On the other hand, since there are many media outlets, donor organizations are unable to provide enough funds to all the media outlets. I think there will be many challenges for independent media in the future. Individual news organizations might emerge more rather than big media companies.

**How does the conscription law impact the media landscape?**

It doesn't impact the media landscape directly. However, it impacts significantly on the whole country. It is really hard for people.

Families are being split up (due to young men seeking to avoid the draft) and it costs a lot of money due to the need to bribe the authorities to avoid military conscription.



# VIEWPOINTS

## INTERVIEW WITH AN INDEPENDENT MEDIA MANAGING EDITOR

Photo: Mizzima

To an independent media founder and managing editor, there are major challenges for media in the wake of the 2021 coup. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the international community's support for Myanmar's independent media has gone down gradually, he notes, pointing out that they rely 98 per cent on the aid which is decreasing, and may continue to decrease. Many of them used to rely on income from advertisements but this has dried up. He says it is sad that drops in funding have led to more people losing their jobs, media activities are constrained, and the situation could get worse.

Here is our discussion with the editor.

### **What are the main challenges for Myanmar independent news organizations today, three years after the military coup?**

Despite the intense oppression of the junta such as arresting, torturing, revoking media licenses, threatening, and seizing properties and bank accounts of those who want to continue in the independent media industry, both national-level and local independent media outlets still survive and continue their work.

Once they decide to continue, independent media need to think about how to operate alternatively. In the last three years, we have seen independent media outlets operating with one foot in and one foot out. Many of them are

working in liberated areas within the country as well as outside, particularly in neighbouring countries. They need to find ways to continue their work by managing different locations of newsrooms, this being one of the main challenges. It is tricky to handle and they have to find ways to solve the problems.

### **What are the challenges of managing reporters who are operating on the ground in Myanmar amidst conflicts and security threats?**

There are two different areas, the military junta-controlled and the resistance forces-controlled areas. According to the reports and my assessment, more than half of the Myanmar territory is not controlled by the junta anymore. The specific challenges are different for journalists who are working in junta-controlled area and for those in resistance forces-controlled areas. In junta-controlled areas, security or safety is the main challenge. They cannot identify themselves as journalists or media-related staff. They have to do their career very secretly at the risk of getting arrested at any time. They have to make sure that their mobile phones are clear on social media or VPN, not to be traced working for the independent media industry.

On the other hand, journalists from the resistance forces-controlled areas are facing different security challenges, airstrikes, and shelling from the junta's troops. These challenges are threatening

journalists wherever they are in Karen, Chin, Shan, and Kachin states. The physical security challenge is a big issue for them. As the Internet connection is cut off, communication is another challenge. Another one is transportation due to the road conditions. Facts and information verification for news is a common challenge for journalists from both areas. There are many problems with disinformation and misinformation. For example, there are rumours of a coup spreading around and the reporters cannot verify the information. Verification is a big challenge for everyone, especially journalists, since the coup happened.

It limits professionalism and the quality of journalism. Another one is financial vulnerability. The independent media depend on international donors and support and this has been gradually reducing since the coup. Uncertainty about their job as a media house and media person is a common challenge, now. Either individually or collectively as a media house.

**What are the difficulties of operating a Myanmar news organization in exile? How does the situation vary between Thailand and India?**

For those who are operating outside the country, one foot out, particularly neighbouring countries, there are also challenges. They can operate safer than those who are operating inside the country, in terms of immediate arrest or danger of bombing or shelling (artillery) from the junta. But they are also facing other sets of challenges. For example, many of them do not have legal status and face the risk of getting arrested anytime.

Even those who have legal status, their passport might not be renewed by the junta embassy. Some of those stay with visas but it is also very expensive. Media houses and donors cannot pay for that. Another challenge is they do not have permission from the authorities (both Thailand and India) to operate media and work as a media person. If they stay with student visas, they are not supposed to work as journalists or any staff in

media outlets. It also limits their opportunities to grow and increase capability and capacity. Between Thailand and India, India is worse than Thailand. In India, the government does not give media or refugees official status. They can arrest anyone who crosses the border illegally at any time. Plus, international support and attention to those people and organizations in India receive less than those from Thailand.

They do not receive the necessary attention from the international community. There are thousands of people in the Indian border area who just survive with minimum support from their friends and relatives, not from institutions, international organizations, or governments.

These are the differences between Thailand and India. People from the Thailand border are receiving more capacity building, training, and opportunities compared with people from the India border.

**Many independent media organizations reporting on Myanmar depend largely on donor funding. What are the current difficulties these media organizations are facing in terms of income? How is your organization coping?**

After Russia invaded Ukraine, the international community's support for Myanmar's independent media has gone down gradually. These independent media rely more than 98 per cent on the aid which is decreasing. It will decrease in the future as well. It is the main challenge right now. In terms of safety and security issues, many of media houses are coping in their own way.

However, for the financial issue, they can't as they do not receive advertisements as an income. As a result of the less and less funding, we are seeing many people (from the media) become jobless, and therefore media activities will be constrained. It is very sad. Unfortunately, the situation will be worse in the future as international support and attention to Myanmar is less and less.



**Can you take us back to 1 February 2021 and the coup. What happened to your news organization and your personnel?**

Some of independent media, including mine, prepared for the risk of a coup but many others did not. However, they survived and continued their work. Many individuals doing media got arrested including seven persons from our media house and one is still in the junta's jail.

More than 20 persons from our media house had been charged with various "offenses" that can lead to a more than 10 years' sentence. However, most of them continue their job. It shows Myanmar's independent media including our house will continue to survive. For us, this is not the first time, we have faced challenges over the last two decades. Therefore, we believe that we can pass the challenges as we did in the past. When challenges come, we have to do innovations in programmes, ideas, etc. For example, when the junta shut down the internet, our house launched FM radio and short-wave radio apart from social media platform. Therefore, people are still able to access news and information. When the junta stopped our channel, we used satellite broadcasting technology to keep broadcasting our programmes. With the past experiences, Myanmar's independent media including our house have been able to innovate new ways of doing things to continue our work.

**How about the personnel impact on you when the coup happened?**

I am one of those being charged by the junta, and it did not surprise me. Like others, I keep doing my work.

**What was it like for you personally, escaping into exile?**

We prepared and decided to continue our job after the coup. We continued to broadcast our TV channel although the junta tried to shut it down. We scattered ourselves and set up our offices and operations in areas out of the junta control.

For example, we have a journalism training institute in Karen State where we continue to train young journalists. We also have a newsroom lab at the training centre. We also have one foot out in India, Thailand and other countries. So that in terms of support, we can provide support, salaries, providing training, and sending equipment, to our colleagues from across the country. This is how our house has carried on over the last three years with the lack of enough financial support. I think most of Myanmar's media outlets have to really work hard on how they can survive for a few more years.

**Can you briefly explain the arrests and sentencing of some members of your staff and their eventual release? Is anybody still in prison?**

As I mentioned, seven persons in our house including the co-founder were arrested and tortured either during the interrogation or serving their sentences. One is still in jail. Of the six who were released, some continued their profession in different locations, while others stopped working in the media.

**Why is it important that your media organization have the freedom to operate and the funds to continue your work?**

I think it is about commitment; without it, none of this would have happened, and independent media would not have survived. There is nothing else, only commitment to do journalism and independent media. When we say journalist, it also means staff who are working in various capacities for the independent media. For us, everyone is the same - either he or she is a reporter or manager who is working for the independent media. Without this commitment, they would not be here and would not reach this achievement. The support from external parties, particularly from the international community, is very important. In terms of finances and materials, all this is very important to continue as an independent media with their commitment.



## About this brief

This is a further update up until the end of the second quarter of 2024 on the challenges and threats to press freedom and media independence in Myanmar, safety issues around journalists and individuals in the news profession, and relevant events and issues in the country's news and information environment since the military coup of 1 February 2021.

This brief is produced using verified information, including the tracking of incidents and discussions with journalists and media professionals, to document and provide context for a better understanding of the country's news and information situation.

## Some definitions

In the monitoring work for this series of updates, an incident is a verified event that involves action against a journalist due to his or her journalistic activities or background, such as arrest, detention, prosecution, death, torture and acts of violence, surveillance, harassment and/or threats.

Incidents include similar actions against other individuals working in independent newsrooms and news-related operations, such as news management and other administrative, creative and support personnel who are part of the production and distribution of journalistic products. They are called "news workers" in these monitoring updates.

Also included in incidents are actions taken against newsrooms, news organisations and their websites and online spaces, independent associations of professional journalists and press clubs. These include the cancellation of publishing licences, raids on news outlets' premises and their prosecution and the blocking of websites.

In this series of updates, a journalist is an individual who is engaged in gathering and reporting, taking photographs or video footage, editing or publishing and presenting news that has been produced using professional and independent journalistic standards and methods.

A journalist may be in news work as a livelihood, whether paid or not, in different types of media and platforms, and have different types of professional arrangements, such as being full-time staff, freelance, a stringer or occasional contributor.

Included in the journalists covered by the monitoring work are individuals who have been described as being former journalists, or who have left their news organisations. This is for two reasons: first, being or having been a journalist in Myanmar by itself is a risk, and persons have been targeted or arrested because of a past affiliation with a news outlet; second, safety considerations can require an individual's description as a former journalist.

"Journalist" in this monitoring work likewise includes citizen journalists, given that many news organisations in Myanmar work with them on a regular basis. In the Myanmar context, the term "citizen journalist" typically refers to a person who contributes news – whether in the form of raw content, including photographs or video, or full stories. He or she may or may not be paid for contributions and may or may not have had some news training – although there are a number of journalism and safety training initiatives being provided by independent media houses.

After the 2021 coup, news outlets began using materials sent voluntarily by citizen journalists after restrictions and arrests made news-related activities dangerous for professional journalists.

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