

Analyzing Media Freedom

in Myanmar Three Years After the
Military Coup

Introduction

Press Freedom is a cornerstone for the development of a democratic society. But following the military coup on February 1, 2021, the Military Council deliberately initiated a crackdown on independent media.

The coup Military Council, led by Min Aung Hlaing, began extrajudicially arresting opposition politicians, and political activists including journalists while attempting to suppress freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom from the early days following the coup.

As an initial attempt to impose media blackouts, the Military Council restricted public access to social media services while severing communication lines and internet networks. Additionally, state-owned media like Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) and Myawaddy TV began broadcasting news as mouthpieces for the Military Council, spreading misinformation and propaganda. Pro-junta groups and so-called (sham) news outlets are also disseminating propaganda through online social media platforms.

Despite the Military Council's suppression of independent media, journalists continued to report on nationwide protests, human rights violations committed by the Military Council, and violent killings, maintaining impartiality and adhering to journalistic standards.

Since the coup was staged until today, seven journalists working in the media industry have been slain for various reasons while performing their duties.¹ The Military Council has revoked the licenses of 15 media

¹ CPJ | 2021-2024 | "5 Journalists Killed in Myanmar"
https://cpj.org/data/killed/2024/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=BM&start_year=2021&end_year=2024&group_by=location

outlets² and unlawfully raided news organizations, arrested 170 journalists and media workers during this three-year period. Currently, at least 52 journalists and media personnel remain detained in prisons.

According to the 2024 World Press Freedom Index³ released by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Myanmar ranks 171st out of 180 countries and is classified in the red level, indicating countries with the worst press freedom.⁴

Arrests and sentences of journalists

According to a report released by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on January 18, 2024, Myanmar has the second highest number of journalists imprisoned.⁵

Although China leads in the number of journalists imprisoned, the difference between the numbers in China and Myanmar is not significant.⁶

Since the 2021 coup, there have been over 200 incidents involving arrests, arrest warrants, beatings, and prosecutions, with more than 170 journalists arrested and detained. Some of these journalists have died while in custody.

² RFA Burmese | 30 Dec 2023 | "Military Council Revokes License of Mekong News Agency"
<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/mekong-news-licensing-12302023005757.html>

³ RSF | 2024 Press Freedom Index |
<https://rsf.org/en/index>

⁴ RFA Burmese | 3 May 2024 | "Myanmar Among Countries with Worst Press Freedom"
<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/freedom-press-05032024045834.html>

⁵ CPJ | 18 Jan 2024 | 2023 prison census: "Jailed journalist numbers near record high; Israel imprisonments spike"
<https://cpj.org/reports/2024/01/2023-prison-census-jailed-journalist-numbers-near-record-high-israel-imprisonments-spike/>

⁶ VOA Burmese | 19 Jan 2024 | "State of Press Freedom in Myanmar Under the Military Council"
<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/7446863.htm>

Approximately 52 of the arrested media personnel remain imprisoned across Myanmar. The following table lists journalists detained by the Military Council from February 2021 to August 2024.

No	Category	Total	Men	Women
1.	Journalists encountered arrests	172	144	28
2.	Journalists still in detention	52	45	7

The Military Council commonly uses Penal Code Sections 505(A), 505(B), 124(A), the Unlawful Associations Act Section 17(A), Telecommunications Law Section 66(D), the Immigration Act, the Export-Import Act, Section 5 of the Explosive Substances Act, Section 27 of the Natural Disaster Management Law, and provisions under the Counter-Terrorism Law to prosecute journalists. Among these, Sections 505(A), 505(B), and the Counter-Terrorism Law are the most frequently applied.

In addition to these prosecutions, the Military Council has imposed the harshest penalties on journalists. The table below lists those who received the maximum sentences.

No.	Name	Filed Charges	Sentences
1.	Shin Daewe	Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	Life imprisonment
2.	Sai Zaw Thaik (aka) Sai Zaw	Section 124, 505(A), 66(D), Section 27 of the Natural Disaster Management Law	20 years in prison
3.	Aung San Oo	Section 50(A) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	20 years in prison
4.	Myo Myint Oo	Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law, 52(A)(B)	Life imprisonment
5.	Ko Myo San Soe	Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	15 years in prison
6.	Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun	Section 505(A), 50(J)	13 years in prison
7.	Si Thu Aung Myint	Section 505(A), 124(A)	12 years in prison
8.	Nyein Chan Wai	Section 505(A), 124(C)	11 years 3 months in prison
9.	Ma Wai Wai Lwin	Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	10 years in prison
10.	Ko Thurein Kyaw	Section 49(A) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	10 years in prison
11.	Ko Khaing Myint Tun (aka) Shwe Lin Thit	Section 51(D) of the Counter-Terrorism Law	10 years in prison

When the Military Council prosecuted journalists on various charges, there were cases where defendants were not allowed to hire a lawyer, were prevented from giving defense testimonies, and were tried by military courts. Additionally, some individuals were arrested, criminally charged, and sentenced to the harshest penalties simply because they were working in the news media industry or performing their duties as media personnel.

(1) DMG journalist Ko Htet Aung and office worker Ko Soe Win Aung, (2) documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe, (3) photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaik, and (4) video journalist Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun are among those who received the harshest sentences and are currently imprisoned. Below is a summary of the events they experienced.

(1) DMG journalist Ko Htet Aung and office worker Ko Soe Win Aung

Ko Htet Aung, a journalist with the Development Media Group (DMG), and Ko Soe Win Aung, an office worker, were unjustly convicted under Section 52(A) of the Counter-Terrorism Law by the Sittwe Township Court under the Military Council and sentenced to hard labor and five years in prison on June 28, 2024. On October 29, 2023, Ko Htet Aung was covering a donation ceremony at Winkabar Field in Sittwe when Military Council soldiers arrested him and confiscated his camera, bank books, and other items. Subsequently, the DMG office was sealed off, and Ko Soe Win Aung, an office worker there, was also arrested.⁷

⁷ Development Media Group | 28 June 2024 | "Condemnation of Military Council's Five-Year Prison Sentences for DMG Reporter Ko Htet Aung and Office Worker Ko Soe Win Aung"
<https://www.dmgburmese.com/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84%E1%80%BA%E1%80%B8/dmg-reporter-security-guard.html>

(2) Documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe

Shin Daewe, a prominent documentary filmmaker and freelance journalist, was unjustly charged under two sections of the Counter-Terrorism Law and sentenced to life in prison on January 10, 2024, by a military tribunal for North Okkalapa Township, set up by the Military Council at Insein Prison. During her trial, she was denied the right to hire a lawyer, prevented from presenting defense testimonies, and was not permitted to see her family. Shin Daewe was arrested on October 15, 2023, while picking up a filming drone she had ordered online in North Okkalapa Township, Yangon. The 50-year-old filmmaker was also physically beaten while held at the interrogation center.⁸

(3) Photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaik

Myanmar Now photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaik was arrested by the Military Council in Sittwe Township on May 23, 2023, while covering the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha in Rakhine State. He was charged with four counts and, on September 6, 2023, sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment and hard labor by a military court. After enduring more than a week of interrogation at centers in Sittwe and Yangon, Sai Zaw Thaik faced this severe sentence. He was denied fundamental legal rights, including access to a lawyer and the opportunity to present a defense. He received the harsh sentence during the first hearing held at Insein Prison.⁹

⁸ VOA Burmese | 11 Jan 2024 | “Documentary Filmmaker Shin Daewe Sentenced to Life in Prison” <https://burmese.voanews.com/a/shin-daewe-shin-daewe-documantary-director-and-journalist-sentenced-for-life/7434688.html>

⁹ Myanmar Now | 6 Sep 2023 | Myanmar Now “Military Council Sentences Photojournalist to 20 Years in Prison” <https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/41606/>

(4) Video journalist Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun

Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun, a video journalist, was among the victims who were rammed and eventually arrested by Military Council troops while covering an anti-coup protest on Pann Pin Gyi Street in Kyimyindaing Township, Yangon, on December 5, 2021. She was struck by a car and sustained serious, life-threatening injuries. The Military Council charged her under Section 505(A) of the Penal Code and sentenced her to 3 years in prison in December 2022. On May 26, 2023, she was additionally charged under Section 50(J) of the Counter-Terrorism Law and received an additional 10-year sentence from the Thingangyun District Court, bringing her total imprisonment to 13 years. Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun is a video journalist with the Myanmar Pressphoto Agency (MPA).¹⁰

Military Council's crimes against journalists worsen, impunity becomes norm

Media personnel were among those who lost their lives due to the Military Council's actions following the 2021 coup. According to compiled information, seven journalists died while carrying out their duties. Though the circumstances of their deaths varied, they were not accidental; all were victims of deliberate crimes committed with the intent to kill. The perpetrators of such acts have consistently evaded justice and enjoyed impunity, turning it into a trend. The incidents involving the seven journalists who died as a result of the Military Council's actions are summarized below.

¹⁰ MPA | 26 May 2023 | "MPA Journalist Ma Hum Yadana Khet Moh Mho Tun Sentenced to 10 Years in Prison Under Section 50(J)" <https://mpapress.com/၁၁၁၆/21897/>

(1) Photojournalist Ko Soe Naing

On December 10, 2021, freelance photojournalist Ko Soe Naing was documenting a nationwide silent strike in Latha Township, Yangon, when he was arrested by security forces of the Military Council. He was taken to an interrogation center, where he was tortured and interrogated, ultimately leading to his death.

At the time of his death, Ko Soe Naing is survived by his wife and their nearly 5-year-old son. The Military Council not only killed him but also sealed off his family home on Shin Saw Pu Street in Sanchaung Township, Yangon, on March 3, 2023. Additionally, his family has faced further threats.¹¹

(2) Chin news editor Pu Tuidim

Pu Tuidim participated in founding Burma News International (BNI) and worked as a news editor at Khonumthung Media Group. He was arrested and executed by the Military Council on January 8, 2022. He was abducted while travelling with 11 civilians on the Matupi-Hakha Road between Kihlung and Langle villages in Matupi Township, Chin State on January 6 and 7, 2022. After his arrest, he was taken to the frontline as a human shield and ultimately killed.¹² According to Progressive Voice, Military Council troops cut off Pu Tuidim's tongue and chin before slashing his throat to brutally kill him.¹³

¹¹ BBC Burmese | 30 Aug 2023 | "Ko Soe Naing, Who Killed for Taking Photos"
<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/cp3r614eln5o>

¹² BNI | 13 Jan 2022 | "Pu Tuidim, Veteran News Editor and One of the Founders of BNI, Killed by Military Council"
<https://www.bnionline.net/mm/news-87770>

¹³ Progressive Voice | 19 Jan 2022 | "Military Council Kills Editor Pu Tuidim by Slashing His Throat After Cutting Tongue and Fingers"
<https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/01/19/စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်က-သတင်းထောက်/>

(3) Photographer Aye Kyaw

Photographer Aye Kyaw, a resident of Aung Chan Thar Ward in Sagaing Town, Sagaing Region, earned his living by taking photos and videos. During the Spring Revolution, he documented protest rallies, which led to his arrest. On July 30, 2022, at 2:00 a.m., he was detained by Military Council troops. After his arrest, the soldiers killed Aye Kyaw and dumped his body by the roadside.¹⁴

(4) Reporter Sai Win Aung (aka) A Sai K

Sai Win Aung, also known as A Sai K, was an editor for the Federal News Journal. On December 25, 2021, he was killed by an artillery shell fired by the Military Council while covering the plight of the war-displaced people in the Lay Kay Kaw area of Karen State.¹⁵

(5) Reporter Myat Thu Tun (aka) Pho Thiha

Myat Thu Tun, also known as Pho Thiha, was a journalist based in Sittwe Township, Rakhine State. He worked for DVB, The Voice, 7Day News, and various Rakhine State-based news outlets. In September 2022, Myat Thu Tun was arrested by the Military Council under Section 505(A) in Mrauk-U Town, Rakhine State. On February 5, 2024, his body was discovered by the Arakan Army (AA) alongside the bodies of other detainees in a trench at the Military Council's No. 378 Light Infantry Battalion base.¹⁶ His body bore signs of gunshot wounds and clear evidence of torture.

¹⁴ People's Spring | 31 July 2022 | "Military Council Arrests and Kills Photographer in Sagaing"
<https://www.ludunwayoo.com/news-mm/2022/07/31/46171/>

¹⁵ VOA Burmese | 6 Jan 2022 | "UNESCO Condemns Reporter Sai Win Aung's Killing in Lay Kay Kaw"
<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/journalist-sai-win-aung-killed-military-coup-whatishappening-inmyanmar-voa-/6385091.html>

¹⁶ Narinjara News | 24 Feb 2024 | "UNESCO, RSF, CPJ, and IMJA Strongly Condemn Military Council's Arrest, Killing, and Disposal of Former Reporter Ko Myat Thu Tun (aka) Pho Thiha"
<https://burmese.narinjara.com/local-news/detail/65d9c7f83d3b8f5273acaf0d>

(6) Freelance journalist Ko Htet Myat Thu

Ko Htet Myat Thu was a freelance journalist. He was shot and captured by Military Council troops on August 21, 2024, at 9:00 a.m., in his family yard adjacent to Dhammaduta Monastery in Letpya Village, Kyaikto Township, Mon State. He was then taken away by the Military Council troops with his hands tied behind his back and escorted to the Military Council's 44th Division headquarters, where he later died in their custody that same day.¹⁷

(7) Freelance journalist Ko Win Htut Oo (aka) Faizal

Ko Win Htut Oo (aka) Faizal was a freelance journalist who also worked for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). He was shot by Military Council troops on August 21, 2024, during a raid on a house on Dhammaduta Monastery Road in Letpya Village, Kyaikto Township, Mon State. The raid aimed to capture him and another journalist, Ko Htet Myat Thu. Ko Win Htut Oo succumbed to his bullet wounds.¹⁸

¹⁷ RFA Burmese | 22 August 2024 | *Four, Including Two Journalists, Killed in Kyaikto* | <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/junta-shooting-journalists-died-08222024090525.html>

¹⁸ VOA Burmese | 30 August 2024 | *UNESCO Condemns Murder of Two Journalists* | <https://burmese.voanews.com/a/unesco-myanmar-journalist/7765275.html>

Internet outages and impacts on news production

Since the coup in 2021, the Military Council has deliberately disrupted the Internet nearly 300 times across Myanmar, including six nationwide outages.¹⁹ According to the Myanmar Internet Project, Sagaing Region experienced 86 outages, while Kachin State faced 33. Despite having the fewest interruptions, Yangon Region and Ayeyarwady Region each saw six outages while other regions experienced more than ten outages on average.²⁰ These disruptions are particularly severe in areas with escalating military conflict, suggesting that the Military Council's actions are aimed at obstructing the flow of information and keeping it concealed. Such frequent communication network interruptions have directly affected news production and flow, making it challenging for the public to access reliable and timely news.

Emergence of disagreements over press freedom in liberated areas

In April 2024, developments in certain liberated areas sparked concerns about potential threats to press freedom. On April 16, the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC) issued Directive No. 08/2024, requiring media outlets to 'request permission' and 'adhere to the media code of conduct' when gathering information in Karenni State. Similarly, on April 21, the Karen National Union (KNU) released policies governing news and information operations, along with guidelines specifying the

¹⁹ Myanmar Internet Project | 2 July 2024 | "Analyzing Internet Outages and Their Impact on Communication Infrastructure"
https://www.myanmarinternet.info/my/post/blog_17_internet_infrastructure_shutdown

²⁰ Myanmar Internet Project | 2021 - 2024 | "Internet Shutdown"
<https://www.myanmarinternet.info/my/internet-shutdown>

procedures and code of conduct that external media agencies must follow.

These directives might undermine and damage the operational integrity and press freedom, and were seen as indicative of the attitudes of some ethnic forces toward the press.

Additionally, it is likely that restrictions on the safety and freedom of media workers could arise, heightening concerns among media outlets and journalists.

In response to the situation, the Independent Press Council Myanmar (IPCM) and the Independent Myanmar Journalists Association (IMJA) issued statements and open letters.²¹

On August 6, 2024, the IPCM and KNU met and reached an agreement on several issues, including compliance with the news media code of conduct, facilitation of information access, adherence to press freedom standards, emphasis on the safety of media workers, cooperation in resolving media-related disputes, and enhancing the understanding of news media, as outlined in a statement released on August 7, 2024.

Conclusion

Following the coup in 2021, Myanmar's news media landscape deteriorated rapidly due to the Military Council's repression. Press freedom has been left in a highly vulnerable and unprotected state. Independent media agencies could no longer operate within Myanmar, forcing them to continue their work in liberated areas, border regions, neighboring countries, and abroad. Some journalists persist in working

²¹ VOA Burmese | 27 April 2024 | "IPCM Responds to Attitudes of Certain Ethnic Forces Toward Media" <https://burmese.voanews.com/a/7586960.html>

covertly within Myanmar despite ongoing insecurity and danger, while those based in border and neighboring countries face both mental and physical threats. They also encounter challenges such as communication disruptions and restricted information flow.

Moreover, in areas liberated from the Military Council's oppression, there is a lack of understanding regarding the operational integrity and freedom of the news media, along with a tendency to impose limits and control over media activities.

Given the facts and information mentioned above, Myanmar's news media are facing increasing challenges to their long-term survival. This could also impact the course of the revolution and the future path toward federal democracy. If the news media – often considered the eyes and ears of the people – were to disappear, it would be as if the people themselves were rendered blind and deaf. The importance of press freedom, which encompasses the right to freedom of expression, should never be overlooked, as it is a cornerstone of democracy.

Recommendations of Burma News Agency (BNI)

As an organization that consistently advocates for press freedom, the development of ethnic and local media, their long-term sustainability, and the enhancement of their ability to produce quality news for the public, BNI recommends the following measures:

- (a) To immediately cease the arrest of media personnel and expedite the release of those currently detained or sentenced to long-term prison terms.

- (b) To prevent mental, physical, and sexual violence and abuse against all detained media personnel in prisons and interrogation centers.
- (c) To revoke unjust charges and verdicts against media personnel, as well as any orders or laws aimed at oppressing them.
- (d) To halt the suppression of press freedom, freedom of expression, and access to information through violent methods.
- (e) To call on neighboring countries such as Thailand, India, China, and Bangladesh to refrain from arresting media personnel fleeing Myanmar, and to allow their media operations to continue, upholding the principles of press freedom.
- (f) To recognize the role of independent media, and for organizations that support the media to find new ways to prioritize press freedom and ensure long-term survival, while acknowledging the critical importance of the media.
- (g) To strongly condemn and oppose the Military Council's actions of disrupting internet and phone lines and causing electricity outages with the intent of enforcing media blackouts.
- (h) To urge the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed organizations (EOs), and resistance forces to respect and uphold press freedom, fostering an open and transparent media sector both now and in the future when the federal democratic union is established, and to promote the values and roles of ethnic and local media.

