



**Covering Fragile Days**

**The Role of the Media in Post-Authoritarian Regimes: A Case Study of Myanmar**

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## Chapter 1: Watching the watchdogs

The world is watching the final closed countries as they move to democracy. These countries have opened up gradually around 2010, after changing their key holders, the autocrats. The political movements in Arab countries in recent years show that major transformations have occurred since the fall of Soviet communism.<sup>2</sup> Like these countries, there is another country that has also started to open up. Once the Association of South East Asian Nations' (ASEAN) black sheep, Myanmar<sup>3</sup> held a multiparty election in late 2010.

After Myanmar gained independence from British Colonization in 1948, it appointed a new, civilian government, but the political instability led to two military coups (in 1962 and 1988).<sup>4</sup> Since then, Myanmar has been ruled by authoritarian regimes<sup>5</sup> led by military generals up until the 2011 quasi-civilian government came to power.<sup>6</sup> There are several reasons why the military had ruled the country for nearly half a century. Since it gained independence in 1948, Myanmar's elite groups and certain ethnic leaders have held differing political views. An insurgency by a major political group, the communist party and the civil war in ethnic areas weakened the civilian government and led to the military being invited to maintain national stability.<sup>7</sup> The first military coup in 1962 was intended to fulfill the following four goals: not to split the country, to replace the incompetent, corrupt civilian government, to develop the country along socialist lines, and to offer a military foundation to the national institutions. However, these goals were not accomplished by the government, the Burma Socialist Program Party. The number of ethnic conflicts and rebellions increased and the 1988 countrywide uprising occurred, leading to conditions that set the scene for another military coup (Steinberg, 2010).<sup>8</sup>

The new regime following the election in Myanmar in 2010 did not arise due to revolution or state-collapse. Rather, the previous military government, the State Peace and Development

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<sup>2</sup> A. Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2012: The Arab Uprisings and Their Global Percussions" pg.3 Freedom House.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Burma. The current official name is Myanmar.

<sup>4</sup> See: David I Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Burma Socialist Program Party (1962-1988), State Law and Order Restoration Council (1988-1997), State Peace and Development Council (1997-2011).

<sup>6</sup> Military seats took up 25 percent of the parliament according to the 2008 constitution.

<sup>7</sup> ICG: *Burma/Myanmar How Strong is the Military?*, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See: David I Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Council, designed a seven-step Road Map for the move towards democracy,<sup>9</sup> and the election was the fifth step in this process.<sup>10</sup>

Ever since the Road Map was introduced in August 2003, the military regime was looking at ways to change the country. Domestic and international political pressure led the military regime to consider holding an election. The government faced a series of challenges: large street demonstration in 2007 led by monks, the severe Cyclone Nargis in 2008, UN special envoy occasional visits, little progress in the discussions with the main opposition party, and an extension of the sanctions imposed by western countries. In 2004, it held a national assembly to draft a constitution and then in 2008, this new constitution was ratified by a referendum (the multiparty election finally being held in 2010). (Shengda, 2010)

There were five reasons why the military regime was able to reform the political situation of the country:

- the capacity of the military regime;
- the considerable domestic support for the regime (with 20 million members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, National Unity Party, and other pro-government parties);
- the reconciliation and relatively stable relations achieved with the major ethnic forces;
- the progress in the agriculture-dominant economy, with access to rich resources;
- the sound relations with neighbouring countries (Shengda, 2010).

The country's political sphere and private sectors were controlled by the military generals for 50 years. During these five decades, after the 1988 coup, the military modernized itself, and won success in the conflicts with ethnic armed groups. This was one of the reasons why the authoritarian regime was able to rule the country for so long. Moreover, in order to sustain the military itself as an elite institution, in 1994 the regime set up a compact, influential political body, the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), which was a semi-academic think-tank. Not only did it modernise the military, but the government also started to apply a market

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<sup>9</sup> New Light of Myanmar, 4 January, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The next steps after the election are: (6) Convening of Hluttaws, Parliament, attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution; and (7) Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw.

economy and entered the international arena in the early 1990s, leading to subsequent GDP growth.

Another reason why the regime held power for decades was that the military government was concerned about national peace and security if a civilian government proved incapable of quelling insurgencies.<sup>11</sup> Tatmadaw<sup>12</sup> believed itself to be a prestigious, powerful institution, since it had led the battle for independence from the British and helped to solve the ensuing instability, so the government introduced the term ‘disciplined democracy’ to build a peaceful, modern, developed nation. The military government sealed its relationship with international and regional organizations. Among them, China became a close partner of the military government, ensuring the latter’s survival. China maintained their political and economic relationship, which helped to strengthen the military power as well.<sup>13</sup>

During the political reforms in the Arab world, certain countries rushed to see tangible changes to both the leadership and the regime. The Egyptian media played a role in the transformation in Egypt but, after a year, the demonstrations and violence resurfaced as Egyptians again fought for their freedom of expression, rights and civil liberties because these were uncertain according to the new government’s newly-drafted constitution. At that time, several media sources, including the print and broadcast media, expressed disagreement with this draft constitution. They boycotted news coverage of one of the country’s political movements, and the situation became critical. In this way the Egyptian media tried to participate in the regime change, while demanding press freedom at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Myanmar has over 135 ethnic groups, some of which have armed elements to them. The new government has a cease fire agreement with 10 ethnic groups, and is currently in negotiations about an agreement with the final group, the Kachin Ethnic group.

<sup>12</sup> Tatmadaw means ‘the Myanmar Military’, so the government refers to itself as the dignified military.

<sup>13</sup> See ICG: Burma/Myanmar How Strong is the Military?, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> The Christian Science Monitor : “Egypt freedoms in balance during constitutional showdown,” December 6, 2012 <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1204/Egypt-freedoms-in-balance-during-constitutional-showdown>

BBC : “Egypt crisis: Clashes in Cairo amid constitution row,” December 6, 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20605134>

Al-Jazeera: “The logic behind Egypt's new authoritarianism,” December 6, 2012 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/12/2012124111437225259.html>

Fox News: “Clashes erupt outside Egypt's presidential palace,” December 6, 2012 <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/12/05/morsi-reportedly-returns-to-presidential-palace-after-protests-against-his/>

According to political theorists, for world security, freedom of speech and expression is a vital first step, everywhere in the world.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the argument in favour of a competitive, multiparty democracy is that the voters choose the parties and leaders, and kick out incompetent rulers. Their decisions are usually influenced by information fed to them by the media.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the role of the media in political transitions is important in helping people to move towards a more democratic society. Nowadays, in some countries, the media have the opportunity to provide the required information to the people and can furnish the prerequisites for the exercise of democracy, although the amount of information that they provide might be limited since they can lack human resources. Thus, it becomes important to measure the role of the media in political change.

One of the recipes for democracy is that, to harmonize the practicalities of freedom with the ideals of those demanding it, the rule of law and the rights of civil society cannot be achieved through protests alone.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the media need to create space for society, acting as a watchdog, civic-forum and agenda-setter.<sup>18</sup>

Since every country has its own customs, the story of regime change in different countries varies. Asian and Arab world scenarios are different from the previous waves of democratization in Europe due to the different times and places.

In the case of Myanmar, the 2010 election became a turning point in the political sphere. After the election, the new quasi-civil government allowed more public debate, tolerated wider media coverage, abolished the harsh media censorship, freed political prisoners, and allowed the long-term opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to take part in a by-election.<sup>19</sup> While practising this political pluralism, Myanmar's media also became an active player.

However, local and international analysts cautioned that this change may only possibly lead to a more democratic society. This means that the highly authoritarian military regime in

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<sup>15</sup> United States of America President Roosevelt to Congress January 6, 1941, M.L. Earnest, (1946): "The First Freedom".

<sup>16</sup> P. Norris, "The role of the free press in promoting, democratization, good governance, and human development(\*)", pg.3.

<sup>17</sup> A. Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2012: The Arab Uprisings and Their Global Percussions" pg.3 Freedom House.

<sup>18</sup> P. Norris, "The role of the free press in promoting, democratization, good governance, and human development(\*)", pg.3.

<sup>19</sup> A. Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2012: The Arab Uprisings and Their Global Percussions" pg.3 Freedom House.

Myanmar is changing into something else, but this does not necessarily mean a transition to genuine democracy.<sup>20</sup>

In order to bring about change, many important issues need to be sorted out in Myanmar, such as defining clearly the role of the military in nation-building and solving the ethnic conflicts, and many urgent matters continuously arose during the transition. Since their legalization, public protests for rights and other rights' movements have occurred almost daily.

As a consequence, the coverage of protests has been listed on the daily press schedules. Among them, the most recent is the Moneywa Copper Mine rights movement, which has presented a major challenge to Myanmar's media. In reporting this issue, the media has tried to reveal the truth and respect the new government's power, while also being careful not to ignite revolution, since many other complicated clashes and protests are also taking place in various cities. Most of these issues could easily spark countrywide riots at any time. At the same time although the new government has frequently mentioned that the journey to democracy is irreversible, people still worry that new government could be overthrown by a military coup if the government becomes incompetent. Thus, the times are fragile and most media stories are sensitive.

To understand the role of the media in the above situation, this paper explores the correlation between the media and political transition, focusing particularly on the question of the extent to which the media participated in a 21<sup>st</sup> century country's political transformation, as Myanmar changes from an authoritarian regime into a more liberal one.

Since the regime change itself has been chaotic, and the country has been deeply affected by the long-term repression of its citizens, most issues became like unclear radio channels, as if they were on a distorted frequency. Each sector had had many problems to solve by alternative measures; for example, during the peacemaking process, the establishment of a third party peace broker group instead of using a former military general led to discussions between this peacebuilding group and the ethnic armed groups; and the replacing of the elected interim press council instead of appointing a newly-founded press council led to moderate media-related issues between the private sector and the government.

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<sup>20</sup> L. Diamond, "The Opening in Burma: The Need for the Political Pact," pg.2 Journal of Democracy, October 2012 (Volume 23, Number 4).

Like other sectors, Myanmar's media looked as if they were playing with a new gadget in a complex way. All sectors needed to practise democracy, after waiting for decades.

How the media prepared the democracy meal which its people were starving to taste needs to be identified. Thus, the following three key questions are raised to work out the role of the media. First, what role does Myanmar's media play in the democratization process? Second, to what extent did the media advocate democratic awareness to the rest of society? And, finally, which are the challenges the media and journalists face during the transitional period?

The following five sections explore these questions in detail. The next chapter discusses the global political transitions in certain parts of the world after authoritarian governments had to relinquish their superiority. It also describes the relationship between the media and the political evolution in each country.

Then, the third chapter assesses the current state of Myanmar's media, and its role during the previous transitions, providing a brief history of Myanmar's media landscape and its performance.

After this, the fourth chapter outlines the research methodology of this paper, and it also presents the related results of the analysis. It presents a detailed explanation of the findings and role of Myanmar's media during the regime change. It explores the performance of Myanmar's media and media figures. Moreover, it discusses the impact the media had on the shaping of the newly-formed institutions and on the quasi-civilian government that is trying to introduce democracy. Finally, the last chapter summarizes the above, and defines the trends within Myanmar's media in the future.

## **Chapter 2: The road to somewhere else**

In the current global democratization movement, analyzing these changes has become a central issue for political communication studies. While a variety of definitions of the political changes have been suggested by scholars, this chapter will discuss briefly their definitions and characteristics. Furthermore, this chapter will focus on the media's participation in the political transformation.

The term 'transition' is employed to describe the period between one political regime and another by O'Donnell and Schmitter (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1991). They argue that the period of transition has no time frame. This paper will define an authoritarian regime as a government which rules its people strictly and does not allow anyone to oppose its decisions (Collin, 2004).

To assess clearly whether a country is setting up genuine democracy or another form of regime, this paper will follow O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1991) suggestion that the terms 'liberalization' and 'democratization' are not interchangeable. During transitions, these two things cannot happen simultaneously. Hence, liberalization means that institutions and individuals gain rights such as freedom from punishment for expression and freedom from censorship for communication. It means relaxing the strict rules for social groups and individuals, and can exist even without democratization. Democratization, on the other hand, means not only providing equal rights but also expanding the citizens' participation in political choices.

Norris (2006) comments on the role of the media in a transition period as follows:

"The positive relationship between the growth of the free press and the process of democratization is thought to be reciprocal. The core claim is that, in the first stage, the initial transition from autocracy opens up the state control of the media to private ownership, diffuses access, and reduces official censorship and government control of information. The public thereby receives greater exposure to a wider variety of cultural products and ideas through access to multiple radio and TV channels, as well as the diffusion of new technologies such as the Internet and mobile telephones....More liberal media landscapes are therefore widely regarded as strengthening democratization and good governance directly, as well as human development indirectly (p.6)."

Norris goes on to discuss the role of the press as a watchdog, civic forum and agenda-setter. As a watchdog, the press can monitor the performance of government organizations and public sector institutions. Therefore, on the other hand, suppressing the press means strengthening the power of the regime. The second role of the media is to create a public

space in which the government and citizens can communicate, to moderate the debate about the public interest, and to update the public about government information. Thus, in contrast, if the media cannot provide the space for a civic forum, it will become difficult to implement democracy. The final role of the media in the democratization process is as an agenda-setter, combatting social problems in a timely manner, and delivering messages to both the government and the people.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the Middle Eastern and North African democratization process, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the role and functions of new media. “If your government shuts down your Internet, it’s time to shut down your government.” This was the message (Sabadello), p.1) from social networks during the 2011 revolution in Egypt, when governments tried to suppress the media.

In fact, the first social media post relating to the Arab Spring appeared in Tunisia in December 2010. A YouTube user posted an emotional video clip of a man committing self-immolation in a Tunisian town. The post and ensuing protest posts spread to other cities (Cottle, 2011). During this political movement, the residents of the region demanded democracy and human rights, the end of corruption, and the development of social welfare (Cottle, 2011).

The democratization concept of Euro-Americans may not be directly applicable or suitable in other societies with different social backgrounds. However, Arab Middle Eastern countries can learn how the country is moving towards a more open society by allowing its citizens greater participation (Sadiki, 2009).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Sadiki argued, Eurocentric democratization is not easily applicable in the Arab world. The words ‘Arab’ and ‘Democracy’ are contradictory, and it is assumed that the terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Democratic practices’ are incompatible. However, there is a counter argument that this is a biased view of Islam and Arabism from an Euro-American perception. There is an overlapping basic concept between Islamic and Western-style democracy that includes equality, justice, etc., while generalizing Islam and putting aside the Islamists’ so-called hostility to democracy (Sadiki, 2009).

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<sup>21</sup>Pippa Norris, *The role of the free press in promoting democratization, good governance, and human development*, 2006.

<sup>22</sup>Larbi Sadiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy*, Oxford University Press.

As the Arab Spring brought an end to authoritarian regimes, the impact of the new media on this event was considerable. During the Tunisian uprising and Iranian post-election protests, Facebook played a major role. During the Egyptian revolution, twitter proved important, and during the Syrian uprising, YouTube was initially a vital channel for news. One of the reasons why the social media played such a key role in the uprising is that it allowed people to exchange opinions about the political movements.<sup>23</sup>

In Egypt, even though the social media played a key role in the 25<sup>th</sup> January uprising, developing the new media institutions in the Middle East was still difficult. Even two years after the uprising, the Egyptian media landscape remained the same. This was because the media industry needed to develop first. In addition, for some observers, the fundamental concepts and political awareness of the citizens also proved a barrier, such as the Egyptian belief in the army as an important institution for maintaining national stability, and the country's socio-economic imbalances.<sup>24</sup>

In Tunisia, the media industry was still fighting for press freedom and the expansion of the media industry after the 2011 revolution. The legalization of the media relaxation was an ongoing process. The 'old media' regulatory bodies were reformed. A major change was that the journalists now had a chance to engage in political journalism. Since their experience was fresh, the Tunisian media industry needed resources and training. Moreover, professional journalism was also needed to develop the media and check and balance the power of the government. In addition, the working conditions of journalists required a reasonable degree of stability and salary.<sup>25</sup>

During the Arab World's democratization, the local and international media played a vital role in the transition process. In Egypt, they reflected the reality of the Egyptians' needs and demands. They also pointed out the regime's wrongdoings and the opposition's activities, which helped the Egyptians to understand their rights and be aware of how to participate in rights movements for the next generation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Tim Markham, Media and Political Subjectivity in the Arab Spring Projection, Experience, Deliberation.

<sup>24</sup>Dr. Wail Abdel Barry, Media Deregulation in the Post Arab Spring: structural changes in the Egyptian media.

<sup>25</sup>See: Fatima el-Issawi, Tunisian Media in Transition, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

<sup>26</sup>See: Nagwa Abdallah, The Role of Media in the Democratic Transition in Egypt: a case study of the January 2011 Revolution (Abdallah, 2010-2011).

The more sensitive the cases, the more complex the transitions appeared. During every transition, struggles over issues such as policy and interests, the economic structure, and armed conflicts are inevitable. In Myanmar, all these issues still have to be solved. That means that a transition will be more difficult than those that occurred in Southern Europe and Latin America in previous decades, and more recently in South Africa, but it is likely to be easier than in Iraq, where the transition remains uncertain. However, Myanmar has a functioning state that has experience of handling insurgencies (Diamond, 2012). Thus, Myanmar's media also have to cover these issues during the transition process. In addition, Diamond argues that Myanmar lacks some of the elements necessary in order to transform into democracy, such as a sizeable middle class, a strong civil society, a unified political opposition, and modern information and technology penetration. According to this argument, it is difficult to predict the type of media audience and how Myanmar's media will operate on which platform.

### Chapter 3: Myanmar's path to democracy and its media

In Myanmar, the 2010 election and the founding of a new, quasi-civilian government are the final steps in the previous regime's so-called 'guided democracy process', and most of the implementation of these steps are also pre-designed. This chapter will outline a brief history of Myanmar's media, and the extent to which they participate in this pre-tailored, current democratization process.

The first newspaper appeared on March 3, 1836, when it was still a British colony: the Morlamain Chronicle, published in English (Lwin Lu Htu). In 1936, before gaining independence from Britain, radio broadcasting was tested and was introduced in 1937 in Yangon, the capital. Myanmar gained independence in 1948 and, nearly five decades after the launch of radio broadcasting, television broadcasting started, in 1980.<sup>27</sup> Though the first newspaper was privately-owned, radio and television broadcasting was founded and administrated by the government. Finally, the internet was also introduced by the government in 1999.<sup>28</sup>

As we have already mentioned, although Myanmar was freed from British colonization in 1948, it underwent two military coups, in 1962 and 1988. Thus, from 1962 to the 2010 election, Myanmar's media was under the control of the authoritarian government, led by military generals.

In 1962, the censorship: Printers' and Publishers' Registration Act was passed and later, the leading newspapers were nationalized and controlled by the government.<sup>29</sup> "We didn't arrest or torture anyone, but we had to torture their writing", Chief of the Censor Board, U Tint Swe informed the New York Times, in September 2012, after censorship was abolished in Myanmar.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ministryofinformation.gov.mm>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.mpt.net.mm>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.ministryofinformation.gov.mm>

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Fuller, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/22/world/asia/myanmars-chief-censor-is-closing-his-office.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/22/world/asia/myanmars-chief-censor-is-closing-his-office.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0), 21 September, 2012

From 2000, private weekly newspapers were allowed to be published, although the publishers had to submit copies in advance to the censorship bureau - The Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD) - until media censorship was abolished, in 2012.<sup>31</sup>

Actually, the press had already been controlled by the government after the 1962 military coup, because since 16<sup>th</sup> March 1969, 17 private publication houses had been nationalized. After that, all publications had to obtain a licence from the press security board to publish locally or regionally. The Chairman of the Bama Socialist Program Party, General Ne Win, granted licences to certain veteran politicians and journalists in 1970.<sup>32</sup> In 1990, the military government, the successor to the BSPP, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, stated to a UN team of independent experts that anybody could apply for a press license under the 1962 Printers and Publisher's Registration Law, although no one did so (Smith, 1991). Since then, writers and journalists have been imprisoned and harassed by this law, publications have been banned and censorship has tightened. The international media were banned and occasionally attacked by the SLORC (Smith, 1991). Censorship was applied to all media types, even the state-owned media, and involved manuscripts being completely edited by the editors, after which the media had to submit their work to the censorship board before it was sent to the printers. Thus, the short story style was popular as it made it easier to shuffle articles around if the story was banned from being published.<sup>33</sup>

As the 2010 election drew near, according to an interview with Myanmar's journalists and a former censorship official, Myanmar's media enjoyed greater freedom with regard to writing about political issues, and was almost uncensored by the time of the 2012 by-election.

However, allowing political issues to be discussed in newspapers was a case by case matter and nine private weeklies were banned for breaching the censorship regulations (seven for a week and one for a fortnight) for covering the ending of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's long-term house arrest on 13 November, 2010. Moreover, two weeklies were warned to follow the regulations of the PSRD in 2012: one was banned for a fortnight in July, 2012, when it showed a photo of the corpse of the girl which sparked a wave of sectarian violence, the Rohingya conflict, in the Western part of the country; and two other

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<sup>31</sup>Censorship ended on 20 August, 2012.

<sup>32</sup>Kyaw Thu, *The Impact of Censorship on the Development of the Private Press Industry in Myanmar/Burma*.

<sup>33</sup>See: Martin Smith: *State of Fear: Censorship in Burma (Myanmar)*.

weeklies were banned indefinitely from publishing uncensored news in July, 2012, for predicting the reshuffling of five government ministers and publishing a satirical cartoon.<sup>34</sup>

Before censorship ended, Myanmar was ranked the seventh most censored country, ahead of Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Belarus, in May 2012, by the Committee to Protect Journalists.<sup>35</sup> In the Freedom House press index, Myanmar was ranked 187 out of 197 in the world and 38 out of 40 in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>36</sup>

As a consequence, on August 1, 2012, when two weeklies were banned indefinitely (although the PSRD usually suspended the weekly periodicals for two to four weeks<sup>37</sup>) 92 journalists from the Myanmar Journalists' Association (MJA), the Myanmar Journalists' Network (MJN) and the Myanmar Journalists' Union (MJU) initiated and founded the Press Freedom Committee ad-hoc, demanding that these newspapers resume their work by releasing a seven-point statement, which they sent to President U Thein Sein.<sup>38</sup> After this development, on 20 August 2012 the censorship board ceased functioning.<sup>39</sup>

Five months later, in January 2013, the cabinet announced that the PSRD was to be dissolved, to pave the way for freedom of the press, and that a Copyright and Registration Division would be formed within the Information and Public Relations Department.<sup>40</sup>

Before this press relaxation, in September 2011, the government allowed access to banned websites. International media and exile media were included on the unblocked list, such as the Voice of America, the Democratic Voice of Burma, Radio Free Asia and YouTube.<sup>41</sup> However, the government did not officially announce that relaxation. Though journalists had to fight for press freedom, after the new government took power, at least 12 journalists were freed from prison and 2012 proved a remarkable year for Myanmar, as there were no

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<sup>34</sup><http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-burma.php#more>

<sup>35</sup><http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-burma.php#more>

<sup>36</sup><http://www.freedomhouse.org/reports>

<sup>37</sup>Zin Linn, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/87074/burmese-journalists-launch-movements-for-press-freedom/> , Aug 05, 2012

<sup>38</sup>Zin Linn, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/87074/burmese-journalists-launch-movements-for-press-freedom/> , Aug 05, 2012

<sup>39</sup><http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-burma.php#more>

<sup>39</sup><http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-burma.php#more>

<sup>40</sup>New Light of Myanmar, 25 January, 2013.

<sup>41</sup><http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmayanmar/8768423/Burma-allows-access-to-banned-news-websites.html>

journalists in prison.<sup>42</sup> Before their release, in 2011, according to the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), about 25 journalists were detained, including 17 DVB staff.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the recent changes, the Myanmar media are still demanding press freedom. Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn, Chairperson of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, (SEAPA) stated, on March 2012, that the ratings of Freedom House are too strict and should reflect the reality (Media development in Myanmar, 2012).<sup>44</sup>

Another important change that occurred in Myanmar's private press industry was that it was allowed to publish private daily newspapers in any language from 1 April, 2013.<sup>45</sup>

Not only was their greater freedom in the private sector but also the government attempted to turn the state-owned media into public service media (PSM). Notification No. 72/2012 of the Union Government, dated 18 October, 2012, states that the newspapers would be transformed into PSM,<sup>46</sup> and the Ministry of information announced, on 14 March that, since the ministry had served the people for 67 years, and was trying to follow the country's political system reform, it would soon serve as Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) from 1 April, 2013. Thus, two radio departments, Naypidaw Myanmar Radio and PaduakMyay, merged, and extended their broadcasting period to 18 hours a day, from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. Television broadcasting also operated for 17 hours a day, from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. The announcement added that it would present credible news, knowledgeable programs, and entertainment programs.<sup>47</sup>

Expanding radio broadcasting will probably affect people in rural areas the most, because radio is their primary source of news. 67 percent of rural dwellers listen to the radio news at least once a week. Expanding television broadcasting will probably affect city-dwellers the most, as 67.5 percent of them watch television news at least once a week.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> <http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-burma.php#more>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmayanmar/8768423/Burma-allows-access-to-banned-news-websites.html>

<sup>44</sup> The Conference on Media Development in Myanmar was organised by the Myanmar government's Ministry of Information and Culture and UNESCO in partnership with International Media Support (IMS) and Canal France International (CFI) from 19 to 20 March, 2012, in Yangon, Myanmar.  
see: <http://i-m-s.dk/page/myanmarconference2012presentations>

<sup>45</sup> Aye Aye Win, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/28/myanmar-private-newspapers\\_n\\_2375543.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/28/myanmar-private-newspapers_n_2375543.html)  
12 August, 2012

<sup>46</sup> New Light of Myanmar, 20 December, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.ministryofinformation.gov.mm/index.php/news/ministry-news/2349-2013-03-14-13-13-24.html>

<sup>48</sup> Broadcasting Board of Governor, Burma Media Usage 2012. This is a survey of 3,000 Myanmar respondents aged 15 and over, alleged to represent nearly 40 million people.

For this reform, the government worked with international and non-government organizations,<sup>49</sup> and even with exiled media, which once opposed the previous government. Among the exiled media were the Democratic Voice of Burma and Mizzima. The Minister for Information, U Aung Kyi , at a conference on public service broadcasting held in Yangon, on 25-26 September, 2012, commented:

Public broadcasting performs a crucial role in ensuring the public's right to receive a wide diversity of independent and non-partisan information and ideas. It also serves as a meeting place where all citizens are welcomed and considered equals and where social issues are discussed. It has probably been the greatest of the instruments of social democracy to be accessible to all and meant for all.<sup>50</sup>

This conference was attended by representatives of parliaments and political parties, DVB, the Swedish Radio Media Development Office, International Media Support (IMS), MJA and the Ministry of Information.<sup>51</sup>

Since Myanmar gradually opened and introduced press relaxation step by step, the exiled media also started to return to the country.

DVB, inspired by the Scandinavian models of public service broadcasting, was now seeing itself as a public broadcaster in Myanmar (Pidduck, 2012). DVB was launched in 1992 by the National Coalition Government of Burma ((NCGUB), the Norwegian World View International Foundation, and the Norwegian Burma Committee. They established a short wave radio station in Oslo, Norway, with four activists. (Pidduck, 2012).

Although the state-owned media are not yet public institutions, they may become so, step by step. Thus, as Herman and Chomsky (1988) note, a propaganda system makes it difficult to see when the media are free from censorship and privatized. This can be seen more clearly when the media compete with each other, acting as representatives of the freedom of expression and discussing the concerns of society.

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<sup>49</sup>The Ministry of Information meets Mr. George Soros, the founder of the Open Society on 9 January, in Naypyidaw, <http://www.ministryofinformation.gov.mm/index.php/news/ministry-news.html?start=36>

<sup>50</sup> New Light of Myanmar, 26 September, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> New Light of Myanmar, 26 September 2012.

## **Chapter 4: Struggling in fragile days**

This paper now explores how the media participated in the democratization process, especially during the fragile, early days. It analyzes the role of, and changes to, the media in Myanmar after the 2010 election, which has been the biggest political change in 50 years.

The results are mainly based on in-depth qualitative interviews with pre-set questions and observations. Twenty-seven interviewees participated in the in-depth interviews, including journalists, newsmakers, scholars and politicians. Creating the best possible sample for the media industry, journalists were selected with different levels of responsibility and from different types of media. The journalists represent the influential papers, leading journals, newly-founded media, newcomers and journalists from outside the country, who support a free and independent media environment. The findings from the pilot-interviews and pilot-surveys with journalists, readers, and news sources will also be included.

Due to their close understanding of the subject, the journalists were asked how they see their media landscape and themselves, and how they work during the transition. The other interviewees were asked about their relationship with the media, and how they use them.

The in-depth interviews were conducted from June to September 2012. They took place mostly in their workplaces and some in more relaxed places, such as restaurants. Follow up interviews were conducted from October 2012 to March 2013, via email.

After nearly two years under the new government, significant changes have occurred in the media industry, as chapter 3 outlined, although media personnel still face difficulties. So this chapter will discuss the most important challenges faced in recent days. Moreover, it will also discuss the impact of the media on the administrative bodies, legislation, judiciary and the people. In addition, according to the findings of this research the print media play a key role in covering critical issues during the transition period, this role will also be explored here.

When the new quasi-civilian government took power in March 2011, nearly five decades of strict rules needed to be replaced with the new 2008 constitution. Thus, this became a challenge for every institution. For the whole country, everything became new and thus became news as well. To cover this, the news media also were faced with new subjects, not only the newly-founded parliaments and government, but also breaking news, such as war news, protests news, local conflicts between different religious groups, and the rights

movements of the labourers and farmers. Thus, as more sensitive issues arose, the more complex the transition became, and the mood became fragile.

During transitions, one of the problems that a country might face is defining the rules and regulations that basically come from having a new constitution (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1991). Myanmar has had its new government for nearly two years now, and has to define the right to information and which law will protect journalists.

According to the 2008 constitution's article 354, freedom of expression is a fundamental right of all citizens. It states:

354. Every citizen shall be at liberty in the exercise of the following rights, if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality:

- (a) to express and publish freely their convictions and opinions;
- (b) to assemble peacefully without arms and holding procession;
- (c) to form associations and organizations;
- (d) to develop their language, literature, culture they cherish, religion they profess, and customs without prejudice to the relations between one national race and another or among national races and to other faiths (Constitution of the Republic of Union of Myanmar, 2008).

However, some outdated laws prevent this right, and thus, at the application level, journalists need a detailed definition of how to apply this right in their day to day dealings. In this case, the interim press council at the time of writing is drafting the media law.<sup>52 53</sup> The Ministry of Information has also drafted another publishing bill, but this was opposed by the MJA because it said the bill opposes the fundamental right laid down in the constitution, it is a revitalization of the old censorship act, and it is also against the law for it to be drafted by the interim press council.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interim Press Council Press Release, 13 November, 2012. The Interim press council was founded on 17 September, 2012. It has 29 members.

<sup>53</sup> MJA Press Release, March 1, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

Nevertheless, U Ye Htut,<sup>55</sup> Director General of the Information and Public Relations Department, Ministry of Information, stated at a media conference that preparing the new media law involves a two-track strategy: preparing for the new print media law, and a gradual relaxation of the new media environment. He added that the media must take care not to be radical, or too open as it was under the previous parliamentary government (1948-1962) or too tight as it was under previous military governments (1962-2005) (Media development in Myanmar, 2012).<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, it has proved difficult to define the rights laid down by the constitution at an application level. For example, rights such as access to information were lacking and a functioning media ombudsman was not active, at a time when two private weekly papers were sued by a government institution. In the first case, The Voice Weekly was sued by the mining ministry for defamation, in March 2012, as it published news based on a report by the Auditor General's office that six ministries had allegedly stolen billions of kyats in public funds. In this case, the editor could have been sentenced for up to two years' imprisonment and an undisclosed fine, but it was dropped by the ministry in January 2013, after the interim press council liaised between the mining ministry and the newspaper.<sup>57</sup> Another weekly, Snapshot News Journal, was sued for publishing a photo of a girl who was raped and murdered in Western Myanmar, whose case sparked the Rohingya conflict.<sup>58</sup>

Another law which needs to be applied is protection for journalistic work undertaken in cyberspace. At the time the government forces and the Kachin armed groups resumed the war in January 2013, three local media and one exile media web pages were hacked into.<sup>59</sup> Among them, the Voice Weekly's Facebook page was hacked for 10 days, from 4 to 13 February, and abused by the anonymous hackers, who uploaded news that was shaming to other local media, news about the war, and news about the opposition to the government. Most of the news that they posted was copied from the Facebook page, Myanmar Express, which is used to attack the opposition.

In this case, since all of the television stations (one state-owned, three semi-state-owned and one military-run station) and radio channels (two state-owned and eight semi-state-owned)

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<sup>55</sup> He later becomes a spokesperson of the president and deputy minister for the Ministry of Information.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> KoHtwe, <http://dvh.no.news/mining-drops-defamation-suit/25724>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Interviews.

are not private, the private weekly print journals<sup>60</sup> needed to provide critical reportage. However, even though they covered the critical issues, their readers demanded more detailed investigations. The Deputy Chief Editor of the Voice Weekly, U Zeya Thu, commented that, “most media cover the popular issues on a day to day basis and only some leading papers explored the issues that interested them”.<sup>61</sup> Also, Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn, Chairman of SEAPA, stated that journalists need to change their mindsets in order to see the regional context and to understand the transitional issues (Media development in Myanmar, 2012).<sup>62</sup>

Although the print media still need to develop their capacity, they remain the most credible type of media for the readers. U Saw Myint Maung, a trainer at the Myanmar Egress Capacity Center and former university lecturer, stated that he only believes the news after seeing it in print.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, since the restrictions on the print media have been relaxed, because they cover the critical issues that the readers demand, their circulation has also risen. The circulation of the Voice Weekly Journal, that mainly covers political and economic issues, and the 7 Day News Journal, a leading weekly journal, nearly doubled after 2010, from 60,000 to 100,000 and from 80,000 to 150,000, respectively, according to their staff.

Since Myanmar’s internet penetration rate is about 9 percent of the total population, and the government allows the publication of private daily newspapers,<sup>64</sup> 17 publishers have applied for licenses from the Ministry of Information; currently 8 newspapers have a licence. However, most leading local weeklies that have attempted to establish daily newspapers are not included on this list and one was even forced to reapply due to submitting an incomplete application.

Another challenge related to covering news is accessing information from the government bodies. Although it is the case that after the regime change, almost all the media-unfriendly officials still barely gave any information at all to the media, and only the media-friendly officials provided information, official confirmation is still often lacking; some urgent news

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<sup>60</sup> Myanmar has 6 state-own daily newspapers, and private print media are still only allowed to publish as weekly journal. Private daily newspapers will be allowed to publish from 1 April, 2013

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview

<sup>62</sup>The conference on media development in Myanmar was organized by the Myanmar government’s Ministry of Information and Culture and UNESCO in partnership with International Media Support (IMS) and Canal France International (CFI) 19 to 20 March, 2012 in Yangon, Myanmar.

see: <http://i-m-s.dk/page/myanmarconference2012presentations>

<sup>63</sup> Personal Interview

<sup>64</sup> Currently 310 journals and 220 magazines are running, New Light of Myanmar, 14 January, 2013

remains unconfirmed, and unofficial rumours that later prove to be untrue harm the credibility of the media.

The counter-media groups use this kind of case to make jokes and mock the media as unreliable. For example, during the Kachin Ethnic armed conflict, from December 2012 to February 2013, the media could not access the official contacts in the early days, even though their readers demanded day to day reporting of events. At that time, most media posts about the progress of the war relied on a spokesperson from the Kachin ethnic groups. As a consequence, the media were accused of supporting the rebel groups, and labeled as biased by the anti-media groups.

In addition, when covering critical issues, during the Bengali/Rohingya<sup>65</sup> conflict in the western part of the country, sparked in May 2012, local journalists had difficulty in accessing information from Rohingya's side, because of the communication barriers and security concerns. Most of the reporters covering these events were accused of bias by both sides.

Moreover, journalists were warned by the Chief Minister for Yangon, Myint Swe, that they faced nine years' imprisonment if they wrote anything that inflamed violence and instability (Reuters, 2012).

Another important point here is capacity building in the media industry. The media relaxation has encouraged more people to want to join this profession than ever before. Currently, in Myanmar, only one journalism degree course is offered by the government, which accepts around 50 students per year. Thus, the media have mainly relied on international non-government organizations, local institutions, and activist groups, which offer media courses occasionally on specific topics to meet the international standard for journalism. Almost all of the journalists who participated in the in-depth interviews had trained abroad. For example, when DVB received US\$1 million from international donors for election reporting training, it was training journalists who had never experienced this phenomenon (Pidduck, 2012). On the other hand, senior journalists had been offered jobs by the newly-founded media outlets and other media, with higher salaries. Some types of media have been replaced with newcomers, who have provided in-house training to fill the gap. Moreover, to offer new training, sufficient skilled trainers are required.

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<sup>65</sup>The use of the term 'Rohingya' is now controversial, and it is still debated whether it is appropriate to use it to refer to local immigrants from Bangladesh in Rakhine State among scholars and concerned citizens.

To develop the media industry, U Kyaw Min Swe, Chief editor of the *Voice Weekly* and head of the ethics committee of the interim press council, has commented, “Journalists are less keen on practising ethics...some blur the line between activism and journalism, especially during by-elections, by over highlighting the National League for Democracy Party”.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, he also had concerns not only about rights but also about accountability.<sup>67</sup> Some reporters acknowledged this. Conversely, another leading weekly paper, the *7 Day Journal*, was very cautious. An executive editor of this Journal, Ahr Mann, commented, “When the by-election was coming up, we tried not to cover Daw Aung San Suu Kyi too much and only put her on the cover three times during that time”.<sup>68</sup> However, the pilot survey and interview results show that the NLD is already well-known. In this by-election, the NLD won a landslide victory, winning every seat they contested.

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<sup>66</sup>The by-election was held in 1 April, 2012.

<sup>67</sup>Personal Interview.

<sup>68</sup>Personal Interview.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study has found that, generally, although the country is in transition and aiming towards democracy, the approach of the government and media differs. The government is trying to hand over freedom gradually to the media industry like well-organized troops retreating from the battle field strategically, while the media wish to enjoy genuine free press without government intervention.

Thus, even though several positive changes have already occurred, a clash of values between the administration and media remains, and the media will continue to face many challenges during this transition. There is not only the issue of government involvement; the media themselves need to develop their human capacity, and to practice taking responsibility and being accountable. The second challenge is expected to prove more difficult than the first. Thus, the media will need a greater ability to stand as the Fourth Estate of the country, and must make more effort to win the trust of their audience. This is quite a high demand and the media will need time to achieve it.

Now that press censorship has been abolished, the independent media will play a vital role in developing a functioning democracy. Hopefully, they will act as the watchdogs. The media will provide more civic forums for bridging the gap between authorities and citizens. The agenda-setting work will have to be faster than before. Thus, the government bodies and the citizens need to get feedback from each other in urgent cases. However, the more sensitive the issues they handle, the more critical demands will be made. Therefore, their work will be more sensitive, and controversial in some cases. Thus, the press council should be an independent media regulatory body, essential for the press industry. If the press council's media ombudsman's work is unsuccessful and unacceptable, the number of lawsuits, such as suing for defamation, will increase.

The results of this study indicate that information will flow faster than before due to the publication of private daily newspapers and an increasing mobile user rate. Since the government has already planned up to 75-80 percent mobile phone penetration by 2015-2016,<sup>69</sup> the role of the new media will become more important in future years. Thus, the way people consume news will change in future. To operate in a faster, digital media world,

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<sup>69</sup> New Light of Myanmar, 15 January, 2013

journalists also need to educate themselves. The local print media should examine the business model of other developing countries to see how they combine print and multimedia skills to survive in the media industry.

Although new media played a key role in the Arab transition, this was not the case in Myanmar. However, after mobile penetration increases, the new media's role will be vital. As a consequence, the media should prepare to create a balance between speed and accuracy when presenting stories. Moreover, as currently the largest group of Myanmar's social media users is aged from 25 to 34, thus in future, the online media consuming age will be older than before and the number of online consumers will increase.

Therefore, if the government is unwilling to adopt an open policy and as the media still lack capacity, the media will face difficulties in fulfilling consumers' demands in the age of new technology.

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