



# BURMESE MEDIA COMBATING CENSORSHIP



**D**ESPITE MANY DIFFICULTIES, Burmese journalists inside Burma and abroad have in recent weeks covered two events of great importance for the country: the 7 November general elections and Aung San Suu Kyi's release six days later. The military authorities sent contradictory signals about their intentions as regards media freedom. The undemocratic elections were marked by censorship, arrests of journalists and other obstacles, but Burmese newspapers were able to interview the various candidates during the campaign. The privately-owned media and foreign correspondents were initially allowed to talk about Suu Kyi's release, until more than 10 publications were disciplined by the Press Scrutiny Board and the surveillance of foreign reporters was stepped up.

The military junta and the members of the newly-elected parliament can now choose either to pursue the repressive policies or to initiate a process in which more space is given to basic freedoms. We urge the Burmese authorities to seize the opportunity to respond to the

various calls from neighbouring countries and ASEAN's secretary general for more freedom of expression. The international community must also press the authorities to show more tolerance and must support the media inside and outside the country that are trying to push back censorship.

With the help of its partner organization, the Burma Media Association, Reporters Without Borders followed the work of the Burmese press and foreign reporters during this historic month of November. A Reporters Without Borders representative went to Burma before the elections to evaluate the situation. Despite the censorship, surveillance and obstruction, the Burmese media managed to offer their readers, listeners and viewers a variety of reports and analyses that has been without precedent since the 1990 elections. Reporters Without Borders also wanted to learn more about the impact in Burma of the so-called exile media such as Democratic Voice of Burma. A poll and a survey recently carried out in Burma confirm the popularity of the radio and TV stations that broadcast in

Burmese from abroad. In the poll, 2,950 people in eight provinces were questioned about how they get their news.

■ *The poll's main lessons are encouraging. They show how important it is for the international community to continue supporting Burmese media based abroad.*



# OVERVIEW



Than Shwe

Burma has more than 150 privately-owned newspapers and magazines but they are all subject to pre-publication censorship by the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, commonly known as the Press Scrutiny Board, which is run by a military officer. This kind of censorship is virtually unique in the world and prevents the emergence of any editorial independence. The international media that broadcast in Burmese – BBC, RFA, VOA and DVB – have never been allowed to work freely inside the country and have repeatedly been attacked by the military government. Very few visas are issued to foreign reporters.

The special police in charge of monitoring cover journalists, is working under the authority of Gen. Than Shwe. They target the owners of video cameras, in particular, who are accused of sending images abroad of the crackdown on the protests by Buddhist monks in 2007, and government neglect during Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The work of DVB’s clandestine reporters, highlighted in the documentary film *Burma VJ*, and other exiled Burmese media, remains very dangerous.

The exile media play a vital role in informing the Burmese people as the state TV and radio stations and the daily newspapers are under the military junta’s direct control. A privately-owned magazine sees sometimes one third of its content removed in this way. The military censorship bureau said in a 2008 message to the Burmese media that the “the publication of any photo, sketch, painting, article, novel or poem without being sent [in advance to the censor] will be punished”. Infringements can lead to sanctions such as seizures of publications or prison sentences for the guilty editors.

## ELECTIONS : DEBATE AND CONTROL

The 7 November elections were not democratic. The result was decided in advance and the laws governing the elections were repressive. Although closely controlled, the Burmese press did its best to inform the public about the candidates’ programmes and what was at stake. But the red lines were not relaxed. The privately-owned magazine *Favorite News* was suspended for two weeks for publishing a mildly ironic cartoon about the elections.

The tone was set well before the elections. The magazine *The Voice* was suspended for two weeks in July because of an article by Nay Win Maung, a political analyst who writes under the name of Aung Htut. It upset senior officials by describing the powers and prerogatives that the constitution will give the next president. The same month, Nay Myo Wei, the leader of an opposition party, complained that an interview he gave to the weekly *Pyithu Khit* was suppressed by the censors. Much use was made of the government media to relay the messages of senior junta members including Prime Minister Thein Sein, a candidate of the ruling USDP, who urged Burmese to choose “patriots,” to eliminate the “destructive elements” and to elect USDP representatives. Several members of the government-backed Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association ran as candidates for pro-junta parties, in some cases against their will.

The privately-owned weeklies were able to offer coverage of the campaign even if the military tried to suppress all media debate. The exile magazine *Irrawaddy* quoted the editor of a publication as saying: “Three officials normally check our newspaper at the Press Scrutiny Board but, with the elections coming up, each line is now read and re-read by a dozen officials.” He added that additional staff began being assigned to the Press Scrutiny Board in May. ➤

☛ Taking advantage of a decision, announced in July, that the publication of propaganda articles prepared by government journalists would be optional, some privately-owned newspapers began opening their pages to candidates who were members of the legal opposition or independent. In so doing, they strayed from the line taken by government newspapers such as The New Light of Myanmar (<http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html>), which published pages and pages of information about the preparations being made by the military for the elections.

stations. Several Burmese and foreign journalists were arrested for trying to take photos or interview people inside or outside voting stations.

A European diplomat put it this way: “These elections were decided in advance but they served as a big trial run for everyone, not only civil society organizations but also domestic and international media. Everyone did their very best.”

The media based abroad pulled out all the stops in their election coverage. Every effort, including special broadcasts and dedicated websites, was employed in order to use the election to broaden the political debate. DVB TV even staged debates between candidates under the noses of the authorities, who tried to identify who was daring to organize what is a standard procedure in a democratic election. These direct debates between candidates contravened the very restrictive rules imposed by the Election Commission in September. The regulations gave each party 15 minutes to present their programmes on the state TV channel, but forbade any comment that might damage the reputation of the government or armed forces. Broadcasting political programmes live was strictly prohibited and statements had to be submitted to the commission a week in advance. Any party that contravened the rules could be disbanded. The Press Scrutiny Board subsequently forced newspapers to report that the penalty for calling for a boycott of the elections was 5 to 30 years in prison. The local press were as a result effectively banned from quoting any spokesman of the National League for Democracy, the main opposition party, which boycotted the election. And to be sure of a victory for the ruling USDP, any press report about the use of state resources to support its campaign was also censored.

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The security climate dashed any chances of unrestricted media coverage of the polling. The tone was set by the Election Commission’s ban on any journalists or cameras in voting



## AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S RELEASE : FIRST EUPHORIA THEN SANCTIONS

National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi voiced surprise at the dozens of flashing mobile phone cameras and other cameras that greeted her when she emerged from house arrest on 13 November. Her release after more than seven years of isolation was a planetary event that was covered virtually live despite the constraints that the junta imposed on the foreign media.

Covering it was a major challenge for the domestic media. The Press Scrutiny Board initially gave the privately-owned print media permission to publish her photo and an article as long as it was short and was just about her release. Despite these limitations, all the publications that reported her release sold out very quickly. Others tried to circumvent the censorship. The sports weekly First Eleven Journal, for example, published the message “SU FREE UNITE & ADVANCE TO GRAB HOPE” hidden in a front-page headline about British Premier League football results. It was suspended for two weeks.

The privately-owned media's enthusiasm was quickly checked by the Press Scrutiny Board, on the orders of certain generals in Naypyidaw. Editors were summoned to a meeting in Rangoon with the officer in charge of censorship, Maj. Tint Swe, and were either notified that their publications were

being suspended or were given warnings. At least 10 publications were suspended for periods of one to three weeks for according “too much importance” to Suu Kyi's release. They included Seven Days Journal, Venus Journal, Open News Journal, Messenger, Myanmar Newsweek, Voice Journal, People Age and Snap Shot. They also included Hot News Journal, although it is owned by the daughter of a general, Khin Maung Than. It was an important financial blow for these privately-owned publications.

Since this meeting in Rangoon, most of the media have refrained from publishing anything about Suu Kyi. ➞



➤ Only a handful of weeklies printed a photo and short report about her reunion with her son. This ban, ordered by senior officers in Naypyidaw, has again served to enhance the importance of media based abroad. The Press Scrutiny Board subsequently forced the privately-owned publications to resume publishing articles written by the government’s propagandists.

In another disturbing sign, journalists employed by Burma’s privately-owned media were denied access to the news conference that United Nations special envoy Vijay Nambiar gave when he visited the country at the end of November. Only members of the Foreign Press Correspondents Club were allowed to attend. Although they play a crucial role in disseminating news about Burma, they do not directly address a Burmese public.

# A never-ending headache for the foreign press

The Burmese security forces were surprised by the large number of foreign journalists that turned up for the elections and, even more so, for Aung San Suu Kyi’s release. Although scores or even hundreds of tourist visa requests were refused by Burmese embassies around the world, foreign journalists, both staff reporters and freelancers, entered the country. The foreign media’s success in circumventing the junta’s visa restrictions was a positive development. The military authorities had clearly wanted to seal off the country for the elections. This was evident when Thein Soe, the president of the Election Commission, announced on 18 October: “We do not need any foreign journalists or observers. We already have a lot of experience in holding elections.” Twenty-five Burmese journalists who work for foreign media and two Chinese correspondents were the only foreign media reporters officially allowed to cover the elections.



A dozen or so foreign reporters were present on the day of Suu Kyi’s release. The next day, when the Nobel peace laureate addressed an enthusiastic crowd outside NLD headquarters, foreign journalists even went on to the podium to interview her. Nothing like this had been seen since 1990. Correspondents from the BBC, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, ABC, Canberra Times, RFI and Washington Post all got interviews

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with the Lady of Rangoon under the noses of plain-clothes intelligence officers. “They filmed us a great length, from this side and that, but no one took the decision to arrest us for covering Suu Kyi’s activities,” said one of the reporters who was there. “Why? Perhaps to make us forget the elections or perhaps simply because of the absence of a political decision.”

The intelligence services are capable of being inflexible towards foreign journalists caught in the act of “working without a press visa.” At least seven foreign reporters, including Toru Yamaji of the Japanese news agency APF, were arrested and deported during the elections.

# Influence of media based abroad

Anyone who visits Rangoon will quickly notice people with a radio set glued to their ear walking up and down in the parks or avenues in the morning and evening. This strange ballet testifies to the influence of the radio stations that broadcast in Burmese from abroad: BBC, VOA, RFA and DVB. The poll carried out by Reporters Without Borders confirmed their extraordinary influence. Sixty-six per cent of the people polled listen “nearly every day” or “often” to international radio stations. Only 12% never listen to them. In order of popularity, the BBC and VOA are neck and neck, with around 80% of those polled saying they have listened to them, followed by RFA and DVB. DVB’s shortwave radio signal is not very good because its transmitters are located far from Burma but it still has significant number of listeners inside the country. More than 28% have listened to its programmes. Of the 808 DVB listeners who were polled, 509 said they preferred its news programmes. There was a similar result with those who watch DVB’s satellite TV programmes: 925 out of the 1,730 DVB viewers polled (more than half) prefer it news programmes.

This is what a Rangoon blogger said: “I listen to these radio stations. Thanks to them, we get real information which we would not otherwise have obtained. I prefer VOA because it is focused on Burma. I don’t listen to DVB radio because of the poor reception quality. I like DVB TV because it shows you the lives of ordinary people.”

This poll breaks new ground in its reflection of the major impact of satellite TV. Of the 2,950 people polled, 1,730 watch DVB TV “every day” or “often”. DVB TV was launched at a time when Burmese were beginning to be able to use satellite dishes to receive international TV stations. The authorities controlled the arrival of satellite TV, imposing strict rules. Despite the rigidity of the laws surrounding their acquisition, sales of satellite dishes exploded in the middle of the past decade. The authorities banned the sale of satellite dishes after the unrest in 2007, but they are still available on the black market. It is estimated that around 10 per cent of the TV owners now has a dish.

A clandestine vendor of satellite dishes in Rangoon said: “Before the 2007 uprising, the sale of dishes was allowed. People had to pay 1,000 dollars to get a licence for a dish from the authorities. That was fairly prohibitive. So many people did not bother about a licence and in most cases the government turned a blind eye. Since the events of 2007, buying and selling dishes has been forbidden, but many electronic

accessory stores continue to sell them under the counter and again the government is turning a blind eye. People buy dishes firstly to watch sport, especially football, and secondly to watch CNN, Al Jazeera and DVB TV (especially those who do not speak English) and also Korean films. The public expects the international TV stations to show more sport and good films.”

The success of the foreign-based media is all the more remarkable for their having limited room for manoeuvre on the ground in Burma. They are the bugbear of the military junta, which consequently demonizes them. The government press accuses them of serving “imperialist” forces and trying to destabilize the country. Before the elections, The New Light of Myanmar ran almost every day the same advertisement: “VOA and BBC sow hate in the population. RFA and DVB arouse the public’s ire. We won’t be swayed by these killer radios that try to stir up trouble.”

This is what a Rangoon-based journalist said: “I listen to RFA, VOA and the BBC, and less often to DVB because its signal is bad. But I watch DVB TV. I think the four radio stations are fairly similar. I don’t think there is any competition with Burma’s FM radio stations, especially as it is not at the same time. How much people listen to these stations depends on news events. If something important is happening nationally or internationally, everyone listens.”

This view was shared by an Irrawaddy magazine journalist based in the Thai city of Chiang Mai: “The international radio stations are very useful and powerful. The BBC and VOA are very popular due to the quality of their programming ➤

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A Burmese woman watching DVB TV



## CONCLUSION

The past few weeks have shown that the privately-owned Burmese media are capable of covering major events such as the elections and Aung San Suu Kyi's release with professionalism and creativity. It is regrettable that Naypyidaw is ordering more censorship. The junta and the newly-elected parliament do not seem to be ready to relax their tight grip on the media. The latest evidence is the upcoming launch of a new official daily called Naypyidaw Newspaper, which is to be supervised by the Directorate of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare, the propaganda wing of Gen. Than Shwe's army.

While everything indicates that the 7 November elections were marred by fraud, they did at least allow the media to talk about politics. The framework established by the not very independent Election Commission was entirely inconsistent with the rules of a democratic election, but Burmese journalists in Burma and abroad rose to the challenge.

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Reporters Without Borders is an international press freedom organization. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Consisting of a team of 12 journalists and a network of 140 correspondents worldwide, Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

Secretary-general : **Jean-Francois Julliard** | Director of publications : **Gilles Lordet**

## REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS AND THE BURMA MEDIA ASSOCIATION URGE THE BURMESE AUTHORITIES TO:

- End the system of sanctions, especially those defined in the 10-point code regulating the activities of the privately-owned media.
- Abolish the system of prior censorship.
- Completely overhaul the laws governing freedom of expression, especially the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act, the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act, article 505/B of the criminal code, the 1996 Television and Video Act, the 1996 Computer Science Development Act, the 1923 Officials Secrets Act and the 1933 Burma Wireless Telegraphy Act.
- Grant press visas to foreign journalists who request them.

## REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS AND THE BURMA MEDIA ASSOCIATION URGE THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO:

- Intercede with the Burmese authorities in order to obtain the release of imprisoned journalists and bloggers.
- Press for the abolition of the prior censorship system.
- Increase support for privately-owned Burmese news media and maintain a continuous support for Burmese media based abroad, which are the main sources of news and information in Burma.
- Establish training programmes for Burmese journalists.