

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

BURMA

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MEMO 98

I. Introduction

II. The Political Context of Burma

For the past 50 years, Burma, once known as the “rice bowl of Asia”, has gone from being one of the most politically and economically promising states in Southeast Asia to one of the poorest, most backward and misgoverned. Disastrous macro and microeconomic policies have severely damaged the country and in combination with the political regression have created the present deeply dysfunctional state in which Burma finds itself.¹ This was mainly due to a military regime which ruled the country since 1962 and was characterized by a total control over executive, legislative and judicial powers and by severe suppression of human rights (including the 1988 crackdown on the opposition as well as during the 2007 Saffron Revolution).

A new constitution drafted by the military junta (represented from 1988 until 2011 by the State Peace and Development Council – SPDC), was approved in 2008 by an implausibly high margin in a referendum denounced by the international community and Burma’s opposition groups as fraudulent. The constitution establishes a bicameral parliament, with both houses of the parliament acting together as an electoral college to select a civilian president, who appoints government ministers and the attorney general. However, the constitution also ensures military leadership in the state, in fact allowing the military to exercise nearly unlimited authority whenever it deems that to be necessary in the interest of national security.

A quarter of the seats in both houses are reserved for serving soldiers and filled by the military commander in chief. In addition, the constitution can only be amended with over 75 per cent parliamentary approval which means that it will be impossible to change the constitution without military approval. A system in which the military can be the swing vote in determining the majority in the legislature runs contrary to the principle of civilian control over the military, establishing military control over the civilian government. Moreover, the constitution sets up a framework in which the military is granted immunity for past actions, full control over its own affairs, control over several key nominally civilian ministries and institutions.

The constitution also bars from voting members of religious orders, persons serving prison terms, persons determined to be of unsound mind, persons who remain insolvent and persons disqualified by the election law. Contrary to international standards, Burma’s 400,000 Buddhist monks and more than 2,100 political prisoners were not allowed to vote in the 2010 elections.²

b. Current political snapshot

¹ Estimated 2011 per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$1,300 placed Burma in the bottom globally, with Nepal, Rwanda and Uganda, Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook*, 2011 Estimated GDP Rank Order Table, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html?countryName=Burma&countryCode=bm®ionCode=eas&rank=200#bm>.

² International standards related to universal suffrage limit deprivation of voting rights to two grounds: determination by a court of law that a person is not mentally competent or conviction of a serious crime.

General elections under the new constitution were held in November 2010 as the fifth step in the so-called “Seven Step Roadmap to Democracy” announced by the SPDC in 2003. The first four steps related to the development and adoption of the 2008 constitution. These were the first elections since 1990 when the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide but the military rulers refused to allow the NLD to take office and detained Suu Kyi, who spent most of the time since then until 2010 imprisoned or under house arrest.

In the run-up to the 2010 elections, the SPDC released five laws to regulate the process, sharply criticised both domestically and overseas as clearly favouring the junta. For example, the new Political Parties Registration Law resulted in preventing from participation in the elections of the most prominent opposition members, including the NLD.³ Thirty seven parties participated in the elections, including the National Democratic Force (NDF), a breakaway faction of the NLD whose members disagreed with the NLD’s decision to boycott the elections.

The elections resulted in a victory for the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (which won 77 per cent of the vote), but the international community and opposition parties condemned the elections as broadly failing to meet international standards. In the aftermath of the elections, the government ended Suu Kyi’s house arrest allowing her to move freely around the country. On 30 March 2011, Burma experienced a shift to civilian rule when the military junta was officially disbanded and the power was handed over to a civilian government. This move was reportedly ordered by the former head of state Than Shwe.⁴ However, a number of military officers continue to wield authority at each level of the government.⁵

The nominally civilian government headed by President Thein Sein, who was the prime minister of the outgoing military government, has taken a series of political and economic moves, including the release of political prisoners, the adoption of a law allowing peaceful demonstrations, the release of imprisoned journalists⁶ and abolishing of pre-publishing censorship. The decision of the NLD to participate in the April 2012 by-elections⁷ and Suu Kyi’s candidacy for parliament have been broadly read as a signal to the international community that a process of political normalization has started.⁸ At the end of August 2012, the government cut a third of names from the travel blacklist, thus restoring travel privileges to more than 2000 people who were officially barred from entering or leaving the country.⁹

³ It required political parties to register or reregister in order to remain in existence and compete in the elections. However, they could do so only if none of the members were currently imprisoned based on a court conviction. This requirement presented parties with a choice of either expelling prominent imprisoned leaders or declining to reregister. Under those circumstances, leading opposition groups, including the NLD, chose not to reregister and were required to shut down and disband as of May 7, 2010.

⁴ While Than Shwe officially stepped down, many observers believe that he still calls the shots from behind the scenes, with most of the people in the new government being his protégés.

⁵ Burma Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2011, US State Department, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>

⁶ According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, some 14 journalists were still behind bars by September 2011. The Burma Media Association estimated the number to be 7 at the beginning of 2012. While not officially confirmed, both sources at these organizations opined that all journalists had been released by August 2012.

⁷ The NLD was allowed to re-register in December 2011.

⁸ The NLD won 43 of the 44 seats contested which represents some six percent of the seats in the parliament.

⁹ For more information, see the “Burmese government cuts a third of names from travel blacklist” at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/28/burma-government-travel-blacklist?CMP=twf_fd

In the course of 2012, a number of international governments, including the United States and the European Union, have decided to ease the previous economic and political sanctions imposed on Burma for more than a decade and a half.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the concern of different international experts as well as domestic and exile activists that the undergoing changes are more cosmetic, primarily intended to improve country's image, remain.¹¹ On August 2, 2012, the US congress extended a ban on imports from Burma, along with White House authority to waive the restrictions if the country continues to make political and economic reforms.¹²

III. The State of Media In Burma

a. Media Access

While television is the main source of information about politics, only the state media have significant coverage of the country's territory. People are allowed to register satellite television receivers for a fee, although it remains far too expensive for most of them. Internet penetration, even though on increase, is not more than a few per cents and remains to be expensive and regulated, with the government controlling all of the domestic internet service providers.

Restrictions and pre-publication censorship that was introduced based on the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law have over half of a century hindered the development of independent and free media inside the country and led to foundation of exiled media outside of Burma. As the only source of uncensored information, foreign radio programs produced by the BBC, Radio Free Asia (RFA), Voice of America (VoA), online news-oriented media *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima* as well as multi-media Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) are very popular.

b. Media Analysis

A total of 5 television stations, 16 radio stations, and some 350-400 print publications operate in Burma. Despite these numbers, there is a general lack of independent and objective reporting, as all the TV channels and daily newspapers are state-owned. The state directly or indirectly controls all in-country based media outlets which do not pursue an editorial line independent of or critical of the government. The scarcity of alternative information sources significantly reduced the possibility for voters to make an informed choice during the previous elections.

There are new positive developments on the economic front with three new international telecommunication companies which entered the Burmese market in April 2011. This could be a major boom in the broad telecommunication and IT industry. Despite some positive changes, a number of analysts remain skeptical about the substance of media reform pointing out that abolishing of the pre-publication censorship will simply lead to a higher degree of self-censorship.

¹⁰ For more, see the statements by the US government and the Council of the European Union at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194868.htm>, <http://www.dvb.no/news/obama-removes-visa-restrictions-ahead-of-thein-sein's-us-trip/23525> and <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/12/st09/st09626.en12.pdf>

¹¹ Among others Burma to date belongs to a few countries that neither signed nor ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

¹² For more information, see also <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/02/usa-myanmar-sanctions-idUSL2E8J27VP20120802>

State media

The state-funded media comprise of five state-owned TV channels: Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV); Myanmar Radio and Television 3 (MRTV 3), an international channel broadcasting in English; Myanmar Radio and Television 4 (MRTV4), an all news channel; Myawaddy, a channel launched in 1995 in commemoration of the Burmese Armed Forces Day; Channel 5 (Movie 5), a paid channel which offers foreign movies and soap operas.¹³ In addition, there is one state-funded radio (MRTV), and seven daily state newspapers: *Kyaymon* (The Mirror) / The Mirror (in English), *Myanmar Ahlin* (The Light of Myanmar) / New Light of Myanmar (in English), *Myawaddy*, *Yadanabon* and *Mandalay News*. All state media are fully under the control of the Ministry of Information and Security headed until recently by General Kyaw San.¹⁴

To date, all state-controlled media, including the Myanmar Radio, have been largely engaged as a propaganda tool for the ruling regime which is unlikely to change significantly in the near future.

Private media

Despite a relatively high number of media outlets operating in the country, all the major non-state media are through various links politically affiliated with the current establishment.

There are 16 radio channels in Burma,¹⁵ with the state-owned Myanmar Radio being the most popular thanks to its wide-range AM coverage. The others are local FM operations based in major cities. The owners of these radio stations are private businessmen close to the regime who focus on low-cost, non-controversial content and a high volume of advertising.

Radio plays an important role given its access to the rural population. In some aspects, the radio saturates public demand for independent information that biased state-owned television fails to provide. The ban on VoA and BBC was lifted and foreign journalists have now been allowed to report from Burma. Additionally, two exile-based media already established their offices in the country. At the same time, the paying capacity of the population in many rural areas remains to be low, with many people not being able to purchase a radio set to access information.

Media do not inform citizens about consequences of bad governance, not reporting on sensitive economic or political topics or local tragedies if they might give a poor impression of the government. There are no probing or investigative reports on the personalities or business interests of prominent politicians or military members as well as on the socially controversial topics, corruption, transparency or ethnic conflicts. For example, while the continuous violent clashes between the Burmese army and ethnic insurgent groups made global headlines, in-country publications ignored them. On the other hand, the government has started organizing press conferences allowing journalists to ask a few questions.

¹³ Myanmar Marketing Research and Development Company, available at <http://www.mmrdcs.com/television.aspx#mrtv>

¹⁴ On 27 August 2012, the President announced the first reshuffle of his 29-member cabinet which included the demotion of the minister for information and culture Kyaw San, who was regarded as an opponent of greater media freedom.

¹⁵ International Media Support, *Change is in the air*, available at <http://www.i-m-s.dk/content/burma>

In August 2012, the Eleven Media Group (chaired by Dr. Than Htut Aung) which publishes the country's most widely read journals – First Eleven and Weekly Eleven News – presented plans to seek governmental approval to launch first private news TV channel as well as daily newspaper.

Print media

There are approximately 350 – 400 publications, with about a half of them focusing on political and economic news. At the same time, there are only seven daily newspapers, all of them state-owned. Due to the previous time-consuming censorship procedures, all privately run news publications were forced not to publish on a daily basis.¹⁶ There is no one single dominant player, with perhaps 5 to 10 large and a number of smaller companies. The private sector's reach is limited mostly to urban areas, particularly Yangon and Mandalay.¹⁷ In addition, the publishers are still not able to distribute their publications directly to readers and have to outsource other companies to do so.

Nearly seven million people use this type of media for news and information purposes and the demand is growing – according to surveys, readership has been growing gradually (from 11 per cent in 2004 to 14 per cent in 2008 and to 16 per cent in 2010). There are also signs that people are switching from family-oriented monthlies and government propaganda-heavy dailies to street-focused weeklies.¹⁸

The government relaxed the previous draconian pre-publication checks in June and December 2011 respectively. The publications covering health, children, technology, art, sport, lottery announcements, cartoon strips, story books and novels (in June) and the publications covering business and crime (in December) were all exempted from the requirement to submit their materials for advance approval. This exemption however did not refer to the periodicals covering politics and religion.¹⁹

Following regular street protests organized by several new journalists' unions in Yangon, the Ministry of Information eventually abolished the pre-publication censorship.²⁰ At the same time,

¹⁶ Until recently, the print media were not allowed to publish freely but were subject to pre-publication censorship by the Ministry of Information's Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD). Under the Printers and Publishers Registration Law, all printers and publishers were required to register and submit copies of books, magazines and periodicals to the PSRD.

¹⁷ UNESCO, International Programme for the Development of Communication available at <http://www.unesco-ci.org/ipdcprojects/content/building-capacity-young-journalists-myanmar-print-media-industry>

¹⁸ International Media Support, *Change is in the air*, available at <http://www.i-m-s.dk/content/burma>

¹⁹ The Minister of Information stated (during a media workshop) that his ministry had been implementing a three-step reform process focusing on less prominent print media. In the first step, the government relaxed restrictions on the press, allowing domestic publications “to practice press freedom with responsibility and accountability.” The second step should involve the new print media law that intends to ensure press freedom replacing the existing Registration of Printers and Publishers Law (1962). In the third step of the reform process, the Ministry will support the private media sector to “harmoniously exercise freedom and accountability” under the new print media law.

²⁰ The Ministry issued a statement on its web site saying that: “Censorship for all local publications is lifted from August 20, 2012. For more information, see the statement at <http://www.ministryofinformation.gov.mm/index.php> and also the statement by Article 19 at <http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3414/en/burma:-pre-publication-censorship-ended-for-all-newspapers>.

however, DVB reported that the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division circulated a set of guidelines to local news journals warning editors that “the state shall not be criticised.”²¹

Exile media

For some 20 years, the Burmese exile media, including the DVB, the *Mizzima* news agency and the *Irrawaddy* news website, have played important role in filling the domestic news gap caused by state censorship. In the past, many in-country reporters working with private publications also cooperated with exile media (as a way to publish their stories which were refused by the censors). Each of the exile media developed a secret network of in-country sources and contributors.

The most complex DVB news service (based in Oslo) in particular produced a number of video reports unveiling truths about the military regime, such as, the exclusive footage of a 2007 military crackdown on Buddhist monk-led demonstrations²² or the 2008 Cyclone Nargis disaster which exposed the regime’s mismanagement of a human crisis that left more than 100.000 dead; or a 2010 preparation of report aired by Al-Jazeera on junta’s alleged nuclear ambitions.

Exile media have recently faced significant funding cuts from donors, including by Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, forcing them to reduce their news operations. A number of analysts believe that foreign donors are making a mistake by reallocating their funds from outside to inside the country in expectation of rapid changes. The experience and professionalism of exile media can serve as inspiration for in-country media to turn them into functional media businesses. In addition, DVB recently provided communication training for 32 people from the Ministry of Information.

c. Media Freedom

While the 2008 constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, these are not respected in practice. Keeping Burmese people uninformed was one of the main tools of the military junta in the course of its long rule. The combination of strict censorship regulation and the inability of media to operate as normal business even at its minimum capacity helped the regime in achieving this task.

Moreover, the media environment is still governed by restrictive legislation,²³ including the Printers and Publishers Registration Act (1962) that provided a basis for the pre-publication censorship; the Penal Code (1860) which under the Section 505(b) stipulates that people can be charged for any statement, rumour, report made “*with an intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public*”; as well as the Electronic Transaction Law (2004) that imposes punishments for use of electronic devices (including cameras and computers) for receiving or creating and distributing any information related to state secrets or threats to community peace and tranquillity.

²¹ For more information, see the report “Burma abolishes pre-censorship, but forbids criticism of state at <http://www.dvb.no/news/burma-abolishes-pre-censorship-but-forbids-criticism-of-state/23383>.

²² A footage by DVB undercover reporters served as a basis for the 2008 Danish documentary *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country*, in 2009, the Academy Awards Nominee for Best Documentary Feature.

²³ The legal framework also includes the Emergency Provisions Act (1950), the Television and Video Law (1985), the Motion Picture Law (1996), the Computer Science and Development Law (1996).

The Ministry of Information announced its plans to prepare a new press law and requested technical assistance in developing it based on good international and regional practices from the UNESCO.²⁴ Other international media and donor organizations were also invited to participate in workshops to discuss initiatives aimed at improving the media environment.²⁵ However, the draft press law was introduced only generally and to date, there has been no public debate (it is apparently being discussed only internally between the Ministry and Attorney General's office).²⁶

In addition, the government was criticized when it formed the Myanmar Core Press Council (MCPC) which is supposed to replace the Press Scrutiny Board.²⁷ Dr. Agnes Callamard of ARTICLE 19 opined that *“by replacing the censorship board by a body similarly composed and appointed, the Burmese authorities are working on the same old autocratic assumption that the press must be controlled by the government. Press councils should be established by journalists and other media actors as part of a self-regulatory system, independent from the government.”*²⁸

In 2010, Freedom House not only classified Burma in its Freedom of the Press report as “not free,” but gave it the lowest rating for both political rights and civil liberties. Its 2012 report lists Burma among three countries with major gains (along with Libya and Tunisia).²⁹ While the Reporters Without Borders also noticed a few conciliatory gestures by the government and slightly improved Burma's ranking in their annual Press Freedom Index, the assessment noted a lack of any significant concessions on media freedom. According to a report by CPJ, local journalists remain subjects to harassment and intimidation.³⁰

By the end of 2011, the government lifted blocks on various web sites (including the popular social media services YouTube, Google, Facebook, and Skype). However, the state-owned providers continue using other methods, such as excessive costs, to limit entirely free flow of information on internet.

In his March 2012 report on the situation of human rights in Burma, the UN Special Rapporteur has stated that positive developments should not be based on the mere discretion of the authorities but rather on a democratic institutional approach that allows transparency, predictability and continuity of the reforms. The report listed continues restrictions on the media, including reports and

²⁴ For more information, see the UNESCO press release available at

http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/all-news/news/unesco_media_conference_sets_foundation_for_media_development_in_myanmar/

²⁵ The Ministry of Information co-hosted two media workshops, in cooperation with the Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association and the Singapore-based Asia Media Information and Communication Centre (in January 2012); and another one in cooperation with the UNESCO, the Denmark-based International Media Support (IMS) and the Canal France International (in March 2012).

²⁶ The draft law has not been published on the Ministry's web site.

²⁷ Among the Council's key tasks belong: to safeguard freedom of the press: to compile journalistic code of ethics; to settle disputes and supervise the media in a way that they are not detrimental to people, the dignity of state and national sovereignty.

²⁸ See the statement of Article 19 available at

<http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3407/en/burma:-government-creates-press-council-but->

²⁹ See the Freedom of the Press 2012 at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2012>.

³⁰ See the report by the Committee to Protect Journalists “In Burma transition neglects press freedom” available at <http://cpj.org/reports/2011/09/in-burma-transition-neglects-press-freedom.php>.

statements which were not published.³¹ In addition, there were reports that news editors were prevented from publishing issues deemed sensitive to the stability of the state, including allegations of abuses committed by the military in ethnic conflict areas.³²

IV. Media and Most Recent Elections

No international observers were invited to observe the 2010 elections. In his statement on the elections, US President Obama considered them as “neither free nor fair” and failing “to meet any of the internationally accepted standards associated with legitimate elections.”³³ Most other statements and reports noted that the fundamental freedoms of assembly and expression were seriously limited and a vibrant political discourse facilitated by free and independent media was impossible. Detentions of opposition members, a deficient candidate registration process, a restrictive political environment, disparity in access to resources to mount an effective campaign, misuse of administrative resources as well as interference by authorities in favor of candidates from the ruling party created an uneven playing field for candidates. In addition, there was a lack of independence and impartiality of the election administration, as well as a continuous lack of transparency at key stages of the electoral process.

For the media’s part, analysts noted that there was a general lack of independent and objective reporting in the print and electronic media despite the existence of a number of media outlets. A scarcity of alternative sources of information significantly reduced the possibility for voters to make an informed choice.

In a positive development, the government for the first time officially invited international observers to observe the 2012 by-elections. The EU, IRI, NDI, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), foreign diplomats and local pro-democracy groups were given free access to polling stations on election day. However, neither the EU nor the US issued statements on elections stating that they would need to deploy their observation missions well ahead of election day to conduct a long-term observation to be able to provide a comprehensive assessment of elections.

Media Balance/Objectivity

While parties could utilize free airtime on both state TV and radio as well as the free space in state-controlled newspapers in the run-up to the 2010, their ability to freely express their views, including criticism of state authorities, was impossible due to strict regulations on the content of their campaign messages.

According to a monitoring of media coverage conducted by MEMO 98, a Slovakia-based media monitoring organization, state-controlled media demonstrated clear bias in favor of state authorities reflected both in the substantial amount of coverage dedicated to their activities as well as in the

³¹ These included some statements by Suu Kyi, the reports of protests by monks in Mandalay, and the farmers protesting in Yangon.

³² Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Progress report, 7 March 2012, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/asiaregion/pages/mmindex.aspx>

³³ See the Statement by President Obama on Burma’s November 7 Elections at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/07/statement-president-obama-burmas-november-7-elections>.

very positive manner of their presentation. Appearances of the authorities in the media coverage of numerous ceremonial events benefitted the USDP campaign. While the activities of Thein Sein and his two vice-presidents accounted for nearly 96 per cent of MRTV's news coverage, the opposition leader Suu Kyi received less than a half per cent (see also the monitoring results in the annex).

In general, independent and critical opinions on their performance as well as alternative views and opinions were completely absent. The complete lack by the media of any independent and objective reporting limited the voters' access to a broad range of information which would enable them to make an informed choice at the ballot box. These negative trends were to some extent meliorated by exile media which offered a more diverse range of views, including of the opposition.³⁴

An exceptionally limited range of political diversity in the three state-controlled channels MRTV, MRTV4 and Myawaddy TV continued also after the 2010 elections. The information presented in the state channels was primarily focused on the issue of recognition of the elections by the international community. Almost no information about the election results was available until two days after the elections. In contrast with the period prior to the elections, the state channels presented also information about opposition parties; however, the coverage of the NLD leader release was extremely limited and insignificant in comparison with the presentation of the activities of state authorities.

V. International Support to Media

While some international media organizations were able to conduct media trainings inside Burma even under the previous regime, the situation has changed significantly after 2011, with the authorities now gradually willing to accept donor's assistance.

UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) is the only multilateral forum in the UN system designed to mobilize the international community to discuss and promote media development in developing countries.³⁵ The IPDC's supports a project called Myanmar Consolidated Media,³⁶ a private joint venture media company which publishes four publications, including *The Myanmar Times* (a weekly newspaper published in both English and Burmese). The main goal of the project is to improve skills and knowledge of the beginner and mid-level print media journalists through a three four-week long training courses focusing on subjects such as media law, journalism ethics and the role of the media in democracy.³⁷

The Canal France International (CFI) and UNESCO agreed to cooperate in the media development

³⁴ For more information, see MEMO 98's reports on monitoring media coverage prior to 7 November elections in Burma at <http://www.memo98.sk/en/index.php?base=data/foreign/bur/1287350921.txt>.

³⁵ For more information on the UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/intergovernmental-programmes/ipdc/about-ipdc>

³⁶ The Myanmar Consolidated Media (MCM) was established in 2000 and is based in Yangon. It operates the only private English-language newspaper in the country and has about 350 employees, including about 60 journalists and editors. Its main source of income is advertising, followed by publication sales. From 2003 till 2007, it also conducted journalism training with the funding from the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan.

³⁷ For more information on the MCM's project "*Building the capacity of young journalists in the Myanmar print media industry*", see <http://www.unesco-ci.org/ipdcprojects/content/building-capacity-young-journalists-myanmar-print-media-industry>

programmes in Burma. CFI will provide 312,000 Euros to fund a wide range of projects that are to be implemented by UNESCO in cooperation with the national authorities and local partners. Within the project, UNESCO will offer technical advice on establishing regulatory and legal framework for the media that meets international standards and best practices, as requested by the government; and organize a national seminar (the role of media / freedom of expression and information in the democratic setting).³⁸

The EU has been supporting small projects aimed at reinforcing a democratic civil society. Its latest call for proposals, issued in June 2012, refers to “strengthening the involvement of organized civil society in the shaping of local and/or national policies regarding good governance and democratic reform, enhancing the inclusiveness and pluralism of civil society, and empowering underrepresented groups for active citizenship.” Through its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, a budget line that serves to fund democratic groups in authoritarian countries, the European Commission has backed groups acting for human rights. Reflecting the change of atmosphere, the EU is considering opening a EuropeAid office in Yangon. A delegation of European companies went for a fact-finding trip to Burma in April 2012.

At a media conference hosted in March 2012 by the Ministry of Information (along with UNESCO, IMS and CFI), stakeholders presented views on possible donors’ role and assistance models in the media environment. The model of community media, which exists throughout Asia and builds on a mix of professional journalists and volunteers who together produce programmes for their community, was also discussed as a possible option. In this mode most of the media are non-profit as the experience from other countries shows that the market alone does not guarantee media freedom. Many of the private media in the former Soviet Union that started up as independent media with external donor funding morphed into commercial business interested less in the quality journalism than in profits and good relations with the authorities. As such, donors should promote a comprehensive, cohesive and long-term approach to media development.³⁹

Various approaches for the effective capacity building were also discussed, including the fact that any media-related training is likely to have the greatest impact when it is driven by local information needs and involves local media, non-media partners and government officials; the training should not only cover journalism, production and management, but also media law, media policy, regulation and ethics. On the other hand, training journalists in reporting skills is a worthy enterprise, but of little impact if the journalists are not empowered to practice their trade and the enabling environment conducive to the free exercise of their profession. In addition, external media assistance runs the risk of artificially inflating the market for news and driving training by what they have to offer – not what the needs are. Promotion of public-oriented journalism was also discussed.⁴⁰

While the IMS was previously engaged primarily with supporting media to ensure a regular flow of

³⁸ For more information see http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco_partners_with_canal_france_international_to_support_medias_role_in_democratic_transition

³⁹ Bettina Peters, Global Forum for Media Development, Conference on Media Development in Myanmar, Yangon, 19-20 March 2012, available at http://i-m-s.dk/files/upload/myanmarconference2012/openingsession_bettinapeters.pdf

⁴⁰ Compilation of the presentations of the Conference on media development in Myanmar, Professionalism and capacity building, available at <http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/myanmar-conf-report-2012-final.pdf>

objective and independent information to Burmese people from the outside, the recent developments show signs of progress. Currently, the IMS implements a comprehensive media development programme supported by Denmark, Norway and Sweden focusing on a legal reform, capacity development and professionalization of the media, outreach and access to information, and the peace process.⁴¹

The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) provided a number of media trainings to the Burmese communication and technology investor Forever Group and the state-controlled TV channel MRTV 4. Along with other international partners, the AIBD has worked with the Forever Group on various media trainings and capacity building initiatives and also formed a Myanmar Media Development Center (MMDC) which was officially opened in July 2012. The MMDC has launched a one-month course for broadcast media journalists.⁴² In addition, there are plans to set up a Myanmar Media Training College (MMTC) which is aimed to serve as an in-house training center for MRTV 4 staff and in the long run as a full-fledged broadcast training college that will bring up first class talent for radio and television in the country and ASEAN at large.⁴³

IMS and the US-based Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) in April 2012 organized two one-day workshops in Burma on legal environment for a free media, one focused on broadcast regulation in the new capital, Naypyidaw, and the other one on print media regulation in Yangon. In August, both organizations issued a joint legal analysis of guarantees on freedom of expression in the 2008 Constitution.⁴⁴

The Open Society Foundation (OSF) established “The Burma Project” in 1994 to increase international awareness of conditions in Burma and to help the country to make transition from a closed to an open society. The Burma Project/Southeast Asia Initiative engages with regional organizations and occasionally supports local projects in other countries in the region. It supports civil society efforts to advance free expression, ensure government accountability and justice, and empower marginalized groups to exercise their rights.

Recent activities in Burma have included support for grantees that provide uncensored images and news about the country to people living inside and outside of Burma. However, to this end, the Burma Project prioritizes projects targeting different areas than media, such as marginalized communities including ethnic minorities, women and youth.⁴⁵

VI. Conclusions

- Immediately implement reforms to bring the nation’s laws and practices in line with international standards for press freedom and freedom of expression. Put an end to all state censorship procedures, including post-publication censorship of news publications.

⁴¹ International Media Support, for more information on its activities in Burma see <http://www.i-m-s.dk/content/burma>

⁴² Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, AIBD-MRTV4 Training Workshops, more information available at <http://www.aibd.org.my/node/2186>

⁴³ For more information on the Myanmar Media Training College see <http://www.aibd.org.my/node/1397>

⁴⁴ For more information, see

<http://www.law-democracy.org/live/myanmar-analysis-of-constitutional-guarantees/>

⁴⁵ For more information on Burma Project/Southeast Asia Initiative see <http://www.soros.org/about/programs/burma-project-southeast-asia-initiative>.

- Maintain funding commitments to exile media groups until press freedom has taken genuine root in Burma and exile editors and journalists are safe to return home without fear of reprisal.
- 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 regular training programs and schemes in complex media-related areas, including programming, news coverage, business planning, new technologies for Burmese journalists & media outlets.