



## **Media Coverage of 1 April 2017 by-elections Myanmar**

***18 February - 31 March 2017***

### **Myanmar Institute for Democracy**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Myanmar Institute for Democracy (MID), an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, in cooperation with the Slovak media watch-dog MEMO 98, has been systematically monitoring the level of political diversity in Myanmar media reporting. The overall objective of this initiative is to keep the public informed about the conduct of media, in particular through a comprehensive analysis of the trends and tendencies of media reporting and to facilitate discussion about the objectivity and quality of media reporting. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) provided support to this one-year project.

The monitoring is intended to offer a professional, comprehensive, and objective assessment of political diversity, accuracy, and balance in news and current affairs coverage on four television channels, two radio stations, three newspapers, and two online media outlets.<sup>1</sup> The project's findings are not intended to support any political actor, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole. This is the third and final monitoring report in the framework of this monitoring cycle which has started after the 2015 general elections and included two previous reports published in May and September 2016, respectively. The report is disseminated to the public, media, civil society, political parties and international community.

The methodology was developed by MEMO 98 which has carried out similar projects in more than 50 countries in the last 19 years, including in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> Given its comprehensive content-oriented approach, the methodology is specially designed to provide in-depth feedback on pluralism and diversity in media reporting, including coverage of chosen subjects and themes, examined in the proper context, and incorporating detailed comparisons and analysis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Television: *MRTV, Myawaddy TV (state-funded), Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and Up to date;*  
Radio: *Radio Myanmar (state-funded) and BBC Radio (foreign service);*  
Newspapers: *Myanmar Ahlin (state-funded), Eleven and Voice* daily and weekly editions;  
Online media: *Irrawaddy and Mizzima.*

<sup>2</sup> For previous projects conducted in 2010-2011 and 2015-2016 see [www.memo98.sk](http://www.memo98.sk)

<sup>3</sup> The media monitoring includes quantitative analysis of the coverage, which focussed on the amount of time allocated to each subject, as well as the tone of the coverage in which the relevant political per cent are portrayed: positive, neutral or negative. The qualitative analysis assesses the performance of the media against specific principles or benchmarks – such as ethical or professional standards – that cannot be easily quantified. Monitors report on lies, distortions, unbalanced coverage, unfairness, inaccuracy, bias, and anything else that is relevant to presenting the quality of reporting. This data is reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The monitoring focused on basic aspects of programming of monitored media outlets trying to assess to what extent are the Myanmar media moving towards a greater range of public interest programming. The monitoring also aimed to contribute to creating more room for cultural diversity in the media - creating the atmosphere of collaboration and solidarity, and of condemning intolerance.

### **News diversity - Political and topical diversity**

The media monitoring included quantitative analysis of the coverage focusing on the amount of time allocated to selected political subjects and the tone of the coverage in which these political subjects were portrayed - positive, neutral or negative.

The qualitative analysis assesses the performance of media against specific principles, such as ethical or professional standards - balance, accuracy, timely, choice of issues, the omission of information, the advantage of incumbency, the positioning of items, inflammatory language, that cannot be easily quantified. These data are reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports.

Additionally, the monitoring focused also on the structure of the news programmes - concerning the diversity of topics and issues covered in the news programmes of broadcast media.

### III. BACKGROUND

#### General

Under the decades of military regime country's legal framework for free expression was considered one of the most restrictive in the world. Its 2008 constitution does not explicitly protect press freedom or access to information. In addition, several provisions protecting free expression, including freedom of assembly and association, contain limitations. On the other side, over the last years, Myanmar became one of the fastest growing Internet countries in Asia with estimates that more than half the population have access to a smartphone.

The 2017 Freedom House edition of its annual Freedom of the Press index reports that while *“conditions for the media in Myanmar have improved significantly since the country began its transition...[...], the government maintains tight control over the media sector through the use of harsh defamation and other laws against its critics. In addition to prosecutions, media workers risk threats and physical violence in response to critical or investigative coverage, particularly when it focuses on the government, the military, rebel groups, or the status and treatment of the Rohingya ethnic minority”*.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, several other international organizations dealing with freedom of expressions as well as domestic journalists and civil society advocates voiced their reservations concerning country's press freedom situation.<sup>5</sup> *“Limited space for independent media due to restrictive laws, [media] market monopoly, no clear policy for access to information, and media-unfriendly establishments and authorities”*, were lamented among the most acute reasons by the Committee to Protect Journalists.<sup>6</sup>

The most problematic area is country's repressive legislation and its regular implementation, in particular Section 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law, a broad provision that carries potential three-year prison terms for cases of defamation over communications networks.<sup>7</sup> As noted at the regular UN Human Rights Council *“increasing use of the vaguely worded defamation provision in section 66 (d) of the Telecommunications Act is particularly worrying. It is especially notable that each case has to be approved by the Ministry of Communications and Transport in order to be charged, [...]. Discussing issues of public interest, satirising the military or the President should not risk criminal charges with a maximum three-year sentence”*.<sup>8</sup>

According to the Research Team on the Telecommunications Law, led by activist Maung Saung Kha – a poet who was himself sentenced and jailed in 2016 under the article – seven cases were filed during the former President Thein Sein's administration, since the adoption of the law in 2013. However, a total of 68 people have been charged since the NLD-led government took over, with around a dozen of accused have been journalists.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2017, [Myanmar](#)

<sup>5</sup> Myanmar was assessed as not free country (159<sup>th</sup> from 199 countries and territories) in the Freedom of the Press 2017, by the Freedom House; and ranked 131<sup>st</sup> from 180 countries in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, by the Reporters Without Borders.

<sup>6</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, 5 June 2017, [Myanmar: One year under Suu Kyi, press freedom lags behind democratic progress](#)

<sup>7</sup> The Section 66(d) penalizes *“extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening to any person by using any telecommunications network”*.

<sup>8</sup> The UN Human Rights Council, 15 June 2017, [Statement](#) by Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar

<sup>9</sup> Irrawaddy, 6 June 2017, [Journalists launch campaign, call for termination of Article 66\(d\)](#).

Positively, in April 2017, the government issued five television licenses for free-to-air digital programme service, as a result of the process initiated in October 2016.<sup>10</sup> Following 42 expressions of interest, 29 formal proposal submissions were received from which 10 companies were shortlisted in February 2017. The licenses were issued under the umbrella of the state broadcaster Myanmar Radio and Television (*MRTV*).

To avoid contradictions with the 2015 Broadcasting Law, the companies are classified as ‘content providers’ rather than broadcasters. Under the law, only the Broadcasting Council is entitled to grant broadcast licenses, however, the body has not been established during the six month period stipulated by the law (the deadline effectively passed in 2016).<sup>11</sup>

## **1 April by-elections**

The monitoring period prior the elections that were held to fill 19 vacant parliament seats coincided with first year anniversary of the start of the new government administration as it took power in a formal handover ceremony on 30 March 2016.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, almost all the Union ministers utilized this opportunity to present their activities and to promote their achievements. Given the fact that most of the media are still developing their steady editorial policy, and accompanied with the lack of expertise and knowledge concerning various ministerial portfolios, such occasions resulted in the lack of proper media reflection or critical analysis. It rather served as a ceremonial event to remember that 16 months ago the country underwent major power change with a focus on positive activities of the newly established authorities, represented by the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Additionally, comparably newsworthy was the opening of the Thanlwin River Bridge in Mon State. It appeared that the initial idea to name the bridge accordingly to the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s father (Bo Gyoke Aung San Bridge) resulted in profound objections within the local Mon community aiming to introduce a name representing the people and the State instead. While the protests did not materialize in a different name of the bridge, they stirred significant media attention.

Noteworthy, the monitoring team found out that while the incumbent president continued to receive smaller coverage in comparison with the 2015 election periods, the position of the State Counsellor held by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was presented less prominently compared to 2016 monitoring periods. The important factor was a delay in holding the second 21<sup>st</sup> century Panglong Union Peace Conference from initially scheduled early spring to May.

During the monitored period, both state-funded MRTV and Myanmar radio offered contestants free-of-charge airtime in accordance with the legislation.

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<sup>10</sup> DVB Multi Media, Fortune International, Kuang Myanmar Aung, Mizzima Media, and Young Investment Group.

<sup>11</sup> HIS Market, 25 April 2017, [Myanmar approves five new free TV licenses](#)

<sup>12</sup> Nine seats were to be filled in Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives, the lower chamber, consists of 440 members), three seats in Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities, the upper chamber, consists of 224 members) and seven seats in the regional parliaments.

#### **IV. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Following is the summary of the main monitoring findings covering the pre-election period (18 February - 31 March) before the 1 April 2017 by-elections:

- **Overall, the media provided only limited information about contestants and political parties contesting by-elections, mostly via free airtime on state media. As a result, it was rather difficult for the voters to form a more objective view of the campaign and to make an informed choice at the ballot box.**
- **In the first election process after the 2015 general election that recorded landslide victory for then oppositional National League for Democracy (NLD) most of the media remain visibly affiliated with new ruling powers. Regrettably, a more balanced (*Myanmar Radio*) or critical (*BBC, DVB, Mizzima*) coverage was rather exceptional.**
- **The NLD overwhelmingly dominated the political parties' coverage with the share up to 30 per cent (*Mizzima*), and was presented in a mostly positive manner. On the contrary, other parliamentary parties remained largely neglected by the monitored media, as their coverage amounted to around five per cent as the maximum in daily issued outlets.**
- **Positively, the media, in particular both state Myanmar Radio and Television, allocated significant coverage to non-parliamentary parties. At the same time, such coverage was also given to activities of local governments. It was often driven by official and process-oriented agenda, including the Union Election Commission activities.**
- **Most of the monitored media dedicated the bulk of their coverage to the activities of authorities, including the government, vice-presidents and the State Counsellor, outside the campaign context. The advantage of incumbency gave the ruling NLD apparent leverage over their opponents who did not hold any official positions.**
- **The government was the most presented subject in almost all media. The state broadcasters continued to offer biased coverage promoting the government (*MRTV*). While significant coverage was also dedicated to the State Counsellor, in particular in online media, it was less extensive than during the 2016 monitoring periods. Similarly, there was a discernable tendency to decrease coverage of *the Tatmadaw* (except on *MWD*).**
- **Private media offered slightly different and more diversified portrayal of the political events. Unlike in the 2015 and 2016 monitoring periods, in the current one they also included some criticism of authorities. Nevertheless, their parties-related coverage was to a large extent, both in space and tone, dominated by the NLD.**
- **All, but one (*Myawaddy TV*) monitored broadcast media prioritised political news over any other topics and manifested rather high diversity of issues covered in their the news programmes. The portion of political news amounted to some 19 per cent in television channels, while it was around 26 per cent in radio stations.**

- **Importantly, since Myanmar is a diverse country, including various religious, ethnic and social groups, most of the broadcast media reflected this plurality. If combined, including the portion devoted to the National Peace Process, the mentioned groups altogether received the highest share within the news coverage (some 22 per cent).<sup>13</sup>**
- **Overall, the broadcast media (without *MWD*) devoted to the four topics (religious, ethnic, social groups, NPP) significantly more coverage than other types of media. If calculating only politics and four mentioned topics, the share of politics was some 54 per cent in the broadcast media, 70 per cent in the online media and up to 79 per cent in the newspapers.**
- **The monitored broadcasters dedicated rather close attention to the foreign news (overall some 12 per cent). In all, but *MWD and MRTV*, such reports presented the second or third most covered topic - the highest level was seen at the *BBC* with some 24 per cent.**
- **State-funded broadcasters showed the higher interest in covering elections, however, partly due to legal requirements. The topic of *elections* was the second and third most presented. Conversely, other broadcast media covered the campaign mostly from the process-oriented perspective and largely ignored the campaign.**

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<sup>13</sup> The figure is influenced by the coverage presented by *Myawaddy TV*, where *the religious groups* was the most covered topic with almost 49 per cent of its news coverage.

## V. MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS

### V.I. Political Diversity

#### Television

The State-funded **MRTV** gave 23.5 per cent of its political news coverage to the government. The second most presented subject was a category of 'other political parties' (mostly regional, non-parliamentary contestants) which received 15.9 per cent. It was followed by the NLD with 13.2 per cent, and the vice-presidents with 10.3 per cent. Activities of local government were covered at 9.4 per cent of relevant news programmes, while the State Counsellor received 5.3 per cent. In comparison with the airtime allocated to the ruling NLD, the USDP, former ruling party, received 2 per cent of the coverage.

All political actors were portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive and neutral manner – this is a long-lasting trend in the way MRTV covers political subjects in its news programmes.

**Myawaddy TV** news broadcasts were dominated by the coverage of Army (hereinafter the *Tatmadaw*), its activities, visits and operations, which was aired in an entirely one-sided manner. This military-run channel gave almost 75 per cent of its prime-time news political coverage to the *Tatmadaw*. The government received 9.1 per cent of the coverage, and the vice-presidents around 4 per cent. As for the parties, the NLD obtained 2.9 per cent, while other parties did not account for more than 1 per cent. Similar to MRTV, the subjects were portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light. Traditionally, after the news programs, the national patriotic songs were regularly aired.

Similar to the state-funded TV channels, the privately-owned **Up to Date** devoted most of its coverage to the authorities. While subjects were portrayed primarily in a positive and neutral manner, the government's activities were also reflected in a negative tone. Still, the channel mostly covered stories based on the press conferences and official sources, rather than by acquiring the information. At the same time, such reports were regularly presented from a single-sourced perspective. The National Peace Process was by channel described similarly, mostly through the discussions with the government officials and the views of the ethnic armed organizations were not usually presented.

The latter received 32.6 per cent of the channel's news prime-time news political coverage, and the NLD was given 21.9 per cent. Similarly to the previous periods, the channel focused on activities of local governments, this time including within the election context, with 13.2 per cent. The ANP was another party that received rather significant portion of newscast's coverage with 5.1 per cent.

Satellite-aired **DVB** channel gave 26.5 per cent of its political prime-time news coverage to the government and 21.1 per cent to the local governments, respectively. The NLD received 14.9 per cent, the State Counsellor with 13.8 per cent and the *Tatmadaw* was allocated with 12.8 per cent of the prime-time news coverage. By comparison, the USDP received 2.5 per cent and other covered parties less than 2 per cent. The channel showed visibly different, more comprehensive and balanced approach to the coverage, where basically all the subjects, including the authorities received also significant portion of criticism. In addition, the channel airs a number of various programmes that cover different segments of society, produced both in-house, or as a result of external partnerships (with Burma Network International and Voice of America). The channel reported regularly on the National Peace Process, including also news on related on-going conflicts. Conversely, its coverage of the Rakhine State and Rohingya-related questions was rather limited.

## Radio

The state broadcaster adopted different approach to other monitored media, although, somewhat similar to that of the *MRTV*. The most presented subject was a category of 'other political parties', a joint block of all non-parliamentary parties. The second most covered subject was the government with 20.7 per cent. Interestingly, the ruling NLD that dominated in a many other media received 6.1 per cent, while the oppositional USDP received half of its space (2.8 per cent). On the other hand, *Myanmar Radio* presented most of the subjects in a rather one-sided, very positive manner.

Foreign service of **BBC** reported in a similar way as in 2016, yet, with a notable change. While previously it allocated a large share of coverage to authorities (some 80 and 70 per cent in May and September periods, respectively), this time the NLD itself received 49.1 per cent. Importantly, the manner in which ruling authorities were presented in the past (the government mostly in a neutral way, with some criticism, while the portrayal of the *Tatmadaw* being negative) remained unchanged – the NLD was presented mostly in a neutral manner, and additionally with more critical than positive remarks. Similarly, other subjects were regularly criticised too.

## Online media

Given the ever-growing importance of Internet, two online web portals – *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima* remained part of the monitoring sample. In general, both monitored portals devoted the bulk of their coverage to the NLD which was portrayed in a positive or neutral way.

Both online media presented news about the by-elections, campaigns of the political parties and facts of the candidates (in particular by *Mizzima*), however, there were also numerous reports that reflected the people's lack of electoral interest. Web portals rather regularly reported about the NPP, as well as other related developments and events, including the on-going conflict between the *Tatmadaw* and the ethnic armed organizations, IDP camps or opinions the ethnic armed organizations.

The coverage of subjects in online media was similar to the one offered by the broadcast and print media. *Irrawaddy* allocated 32.8 per cent of the coverage to the government, followed by the NLD (18.6 per cent), the *Tatmadaw* (16.6 per cent) and the local governments (16 per cent). As for the other parties, only the USDP received more somewhat bigger share of the coverage (with 3 per cent), all the rest received less than 1 per cent, respectively. All subjects were presented in an overwhelmingly neutral manner, the consequence of the portal's editorial stance prioritizing rather measured reporting, rather than critical or partisan positions.

*Mizzima* gave the largest share of its coverage to the NLD with 28.6 per cent (in May 2016 the ruling party was also the most presented subject with some 26 per cent) – it was the highest share that the NLD received from amongst all monitored media outlets. The central and local governments (21.1 and 20.6 per cent, respectively) and the State Counsellor (14.3 per cent), were the next most covered subjects. The tone of the coverage was mostly positive and neutral; yet, *Mizzima* also presented regular critical coverage of the ruling NLD and the government. In the comparison with the past monitored periods the online portal decreased level of positive coverage about the authorities, and conversely, presented more negative stories, including satire.

## Newspapers

In the campaign news, apart of the NLD coverage, the private newspapers also reported about ANP, SNLD and the UEC visibly presented. However most of the smaller parties or independent candidates were largely ignored.

Similarly as the state-owned broadcast media, also state-funded *Myanmar Ahlin*, as state-funded daily allocated majority of its coverage to the authorities, which amounted to almost 90 per cent. The most presented Government received 39 per cent, the State Counsellor 11.7 per cent, the local governments 10.1 per cent and the *Tatmadaw* 9.8 per cent. The presentation of the NLD and other parties remained almost unchanged in comparison with the 2016 monitoring periods – while the NLD was given 5.9 per cent of the coverage (previously some 6.2 and 8.7 per cent, respectively), USDP as other most reflected party received 0.8 per cent (previously 1 and 1.6 per cent). All these subjects were portrayed in a predominantly neutral light, a noteworthy change in comparison with the previous monitoring periods. It appears that the paper opted to use more neutral language, with reduced qualitative adjectives, the style known thus far from its English-version (*The Global New New Light of Myanmar*). Noteworthy, while the activities on the Rakhine State Development are excessively, some other issues, including protests of the Mon residents concerning the renaming of the Thanlwin Bridge were omitted.

The privately owned newspaper *Eleven* focused on the government which received 32.4 per cent of the coverage (in its weekly edition the government dominated the coverage with 38.8 per cent), followed by the NLD with 18.9 per cent and the local governments with 16.5 per cent. From amongst the parties the SNLD received 2.3 per cent, whereas other parties received less than 2 per cent, respectively. The subjects presented in the daily edition were portrayed in an overwhelmingly neutral light, while the weekly edition offered its readers a different approach, with news that are not covered by the state press, including protests, materials such the critical report of the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar concerning the Rohingya population. The numerous subjects were criticised, most notably the government.

*Voice* daily devoted most of its coverage to the local governments with 28.3 per cent, followed by the NLD with 24.6 per cent and with 23.4 per cent to the government. In the newspaper none of the parties received more than 1.5 per cent of the coverage. The presented subjects were portrayed overwhelmingly in a neutral light. The *Voice weekly* dedicated the highest portion of its political coverage to the government (25.8 per cent), and the State Counsellor (25.5 per cent), followed by the NLD (19.3 per cent). The paper presented the Counsellor's speech concerning the to the public about the government's year in the office; also the news about ethnic armed organizations signing the National Ceasefire Agreement. At the same time, the newspaper informed about the Mon residents protesting the Pyithu Hluttaw's proposal to rename the Thanlwin Bridge after General Aung San, as well as it published translation of critical [article](#) of the former US Ambassador to Myanmar.

## V.II. Topics and Structure

For the current period an additional aspect to regular monitoring was added, with an aim to assess diversity and comprehensiveness of the main news programmes in the broadcast media.<sup>14</sup> In addition, in regards to the content of the newspapers and online media, the monitoring also focused on the coverage of specific groups, namely religious, ethnic and social ones, as well as on the presentation of the National Peace Process.

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<sup>14</sup> When analysing political diversity, only politically-relevant information is scrutinised in the monitored media - it means those stories in which any of the monitored subject is presented. For the purpose of topical analysis, all stories within the news programme were analysed.

Noteworthy, all, but one (*Myawaddy TV*) monitored broadcasters prioritised **political news** over other topics. Yet, the broadcast media manifested rather diverse and balanced approach towards various issues covered in their news programmes – the portion of political news amounted to some 19 per cent in television channels combined and to some 26 per cent in both monitored radio stations, the *BBC* and *Myanmar Radio*. If comparing the respective media outlets, *the politics* was least covered at *MWD* channel with 10 per cent and at *Up to date* channel, with some 17 per cent. Conversely, the coverage of politics amounted to almost 28 per cent at *MRTV*.

Additionally, the broadcasters dedicated rather close attention also to the **foreign news** (overall, combined some 12 per cent). In all, but *MRTV* and *MWD*, such news presented the second or third most covered topic - the highest level was seen at *BBC* with some 24 per cent. On the other side, all state-funded broadcasters devoted only limited share of their coverage to foreign news – from 8 per cent on *MWD* and *MRTV*, respectively, to some 10 per cent at *Myanmar Radio*. Notably, *MRTV* dedicated to the foreign news less portion of its news programmes than to sport news or to a category *others* (16 and 9 per cent, respectively).

Positively, state-funded broadcasters showed - the higher interest in covering elections, which was, however, partly due to legal requirements. The topic of **elections** was the second and third most covered topic in *Myanmar Radio* and, *MRTV* news programmes, respectively, amounting to some 9-10 per cent, respectively. Other monitored channels did not feature the topic of election campaign prominently – while the *Up to date* channel devoted to it some 3 per cent, in other media it was less than 2 per cent, respectively).

Importantly, as Myanmar is a diverse country, including various **religious, ethnic and social groups**, most of the broadcast media reflected this plurality. If taken in total in the broadcast media, including the share of the National Peace Process (NPP), the mentioned groups altogether received the highest portion of the coverage (some 22 per cent).<sup>15</sup>

The broadcast media (without *MWD*) devoted to the four topics mentioned above (religious groups, ethnic groups, social groups, NPP) more attention than it was observed in newspapers or online media. If calculating only politics and four other topics, in the broadcast media the share of politics represented some 54 per cent, while the other four topics were presented almost equally with 13 per cent for the social groups to 10 per cent devoted to the NPP.

In the same comparison (5 topics) for the online media and newspapers, the findings revealed that these media offered its readers less diverse picture, with online media dedicating to the politics up to 70 per cent and the newspapers almost 79 per cent.

Newspapers covered ethnic and social groups only marginally, as both received less than 3 per cent, respectively. As for other topics, all newspapers combined devoted some 7.5 per cent to both religious groups and the NPP – *Eleven Daily* mostly covered the process with some 11 per cent. A different coverage was observed by online media, which devoted rather significant portion the NPP, with some 17 per cent combined, caused in particular by the *Mizzima*, which dedicated to this topic 21 per cent. Conversely, religious groups were rather omitted in these online media, in particular by *Irrawaddy*, which devoted to only 1.5 per cent of its relevant coverage to such groups.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Data from the overall monitoring period throughout years 2016 and 2017 revealed that there were no major differences in comparison with the previous periods in the way the political subjects were portrayed and in the amount of coverage provided to different political subjects.

Pre-election periods in 2015 as well as immediate post-election monitoring periods indicated that media did not follow standards of balance, fairness and impartiality, and some of them openly showed their sympathies towards different, in fact opposing political parties. In the current monitoring phases, however, the media coverage of political and social events appeared to offer lesser diversity in the presented viewpoints.

The way the state-funded media presented the political life, remain an acute problem. As recipients of public resources, state-funded media have an enhanced duty to ensure balanced and fair treatment of politicians as well as comprehensive reporting on politically relevant events. Yet, they often showed only the activities of state authorities and usually from a positive perspective; whereas largely ignore views independent or critical of the government. There was generally no profound discussion on social, economic and political problems of the country, or serious alternative viewpoints to the citizens on the country's governance.

In comparison with 2015 election year, the coverage of the private media was less divided along political lines, since the most of the outlets more or less explicitly showed their sympathies with the current establishment, represented by the NLD and personalized by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Still, some media outlets, such as *DVB*, *Mizzima* and *BBC* foreign service, tried to cover political reality in a more comprehensive, critical manner.

Nevertheless, the findings overall confirmed 'activist-like' trends in a number of media. While after the elections the media started to reflect political developments more intensively, they continued to show their preferences, in particular towards the ruling NLD. While there continues to be a general lack of investigative approach in the reporting, the number of critical and independent opinions on the performance of the authorities has been increasing. At the same time, however, such editorial policy still appears to be a rather occasional trend than a part of a more systemic editorial stance. As such, and as stated already previously, a number of important changes will be necessary in order for the media to offer their audience a more diverse and critical political reporting.

Similarly, as reflected in the past, voters would have benefited from a more analytical and in-depth coverage that could help them to better analyse and assess the qualities and platforms of contestants. It should be noted that such reporting is desirable also beyond the electoral campaign. The media need to be more proactive in setting the agenda and formats of their political coverage to better facilitate the exchange of opinions, public debate, investigation and commentary that would offer the public fully informed, analysed and assessed views of persons seeking public office.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the follow-up to the final report issued at the end of 2015 election cycle, we have to acknowledge that very few of the offered recommendations have been considered, let alone implemented.<sup>16</sup> Such cumbersome developments are certainly somewhat justified by the complexity of challenges that the country's political representation faces following the shift from military regime. Numerous areas of democratic governance are influenced and conditioned by the lack of experience, education and knowledge as well as country's historical traditions.

Nevertheless, it is of vital importance that civil society on a regular basis continues to foster democratic values, including respect for the rule of law and fundamental human rights. MID and MEMO 98 stand committed to support necessary changes of the existing media environment and its legal framework. Such efforts should be encouraged with an aim to bring the environment fully in line with international standards, other obligations and standards, including the freedom of expression.

We think that various stakeholders, *inter alia* the 2015 EU Election Observation Mission<sup>17</sup>, as well as professional domestic and international organisations aiming to improve the media framework, have already adopted several valuable documents, including generic and more specific recommendations. For example, in June 2016, the UNESCO and International Media Support (IMS) published their comprehensive assessment of country's media environment<sup>18</sup>, followed by the annual Media Development conference<sup>19</sup> and other activities<sup>20</sup>.

While fully supporting the mentioned assessment and with a view to further advocate for improved media environment, to enhance the media coverage of political affairs in Myanmar and to support democratic reforms, we offer set of recommendations, for what we consider as most acute and feasible to address.

### **Legal framework**

*Undue restrictions on freedom of expression should be eliminated from the legal framework, namely Section 66(d) of the Telecommunication Law. Consideration could be given to amending or abolishing other laws allowing the criminal prosecution of journalists so that free expression and journalism are not criminalized. Furthermore, measures should be taken to ensure that civil sanctions are designed to restore the reputation harmed, not to compensate the plaintiff or to punish the defendant.*

### **Access to information**

*The Freedom of Information Act should enact mechanisms to ensure proactive publication of information, including on the websites of all the public agencies. An accountability mechanism for the failure to provide public information or for not imparting public information in a timely manner should be established.*

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<sup>16</sup> MID and MEMO 98, 23 July 2016, [Assessment of political diversity in media reporting on general elections](#)

<sup>17</sup> [EU Election Observation Mission](#), Myanmar General Elections 2015, *Final report*

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO and IMS, 15 June 2016, [Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar](#)

<sup>19</sup> More on the [5<sup>th</sup> Myanmar Media Development Conference](#)

<sup>20</sup> Mizzima, 23 March 2017, [Media development in Myanmar – Planning for the future, A Comprehensive Media Policy for a Vibrant, Independent and Accountable Media](#)

## **Broadcasting Law**

*The Law, while subject of inclusive process of discussions, should be revised in an expeditious manner in order to provide legal basis for the media regulatory body to be established. The body should create conditions, including granting licences that would lead to more local-based media as well as a more diverse broadcast media environment, particularly in the television sector. The body should consider conducting its own media monitoring. Such activity could contribute to identification of partial and biased coverage and help to provide for a prompt and effective remedy.*

## **Public service broadcaster**

*The authorities should move ahead with the plans to transform State broadcasters into an independent public service media that will provide citizens with impartial and politically balanced information during as well as beyond the election period. The mandate of such public service media should reflect public interests and should be based on independence, editorial freedom, ethics and non-interference by political parties.*

## **Media professionalism**

*Media reporting should be fair, comprehensive and factual, including coverage of authorities. The media should be consistent in separating the activities of incumbents from the activities they pursue as the representatives of political parties. Media should be able to criticize their activities or inaction and other official bodies whose activities are financed from the public money, to investigate corruption and other mischiefs.*

*The media should refuse all open or furtive expressions of intolerance and will consider thoughtfully if publication of such expressions is not conducive to defamation and ridicule based on sex, race, colour, language, faith and religion, affiliation with national or ethnic minority or ethnic group, social difference, political or other opinion.*

*The media should follow professional standards as well reporting techniques and methods. They should ensure that every piece of news contains only facts corresponding to reality and whose veracity will be verified by independent sources quoted therein. The facts should be mediated without any distortions and in their respective contexts. If a flawed message is published it should be followed by an immediate apology.*

*Consideration could be given to creating new platforms for discussion, trainings, studies and self-reflection on the media, including in the regions, to enhance the current level of journalistic profession. This would help managers, journalists and students to increase their professional capacity and would also improve the current level of media literacy.*

## **International donors**

*International donors should continue supporting regular training programmes and schemes in complex media-related areas, including programming, news coverage, business and marketing planning, legal awareness, including use of legal protection mechanisms and new technologies for Myanmar journalists & media outlets. The training programmes should be as diverse, complex and inclusive as possible, including regional and ethnic-based media, gender and age-balanced. At the same time, certain level of strategic coordination could help appropriately facilitate needs and limit potential overlap of activities.*

*Access to various educational resources, such as books, databases, methodology, research magazines, as well as a chance to exchange experience through international media networks and journalistic associations would also help in achieving these efforts.*

## ANNEX A

### List of Acronyms

President	<b>PRES</b>
Vice President	<b>VPRES</b>
State Counsellor	<b>SC</b>
Government   <i>Ministers and Deputy Ministers</i>	<b>GOV</b>
Speakers of Parliament	<b>SPEAK</b>
Local Government	<b>LGOV</b>
Mayors (Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw, Mandalay)	<b>MAY</b>
Army   <i>Four top commanders</i>	<b>ARMY</b>
Arakan National Party	<b>ANP</b>
All Mon Regions Development Party	<b>AMRDP</b>
Democratic Party Myanmar	<b>DPM</b>
Kachin State Democracy Party	<b>KSDP</b>
Kokang Democracy and Unity Party	<b>KDUP</b>
Kayin People's Party	<b>KPP</b>
La Hu National Development Party	<b>LHNDP</b>
Lisu National Development Party	<b>LNDP</b>
Mon National Party	<b>MNP</b>
National League for Democracy	<b>NLD</b>
National Unity Party	<b>NUP</b>
Pa-O National Organization	<b>PNO</b>
Shan National Democratic Party	<b>SNDP</b>
Shan National League for Democracy	<b>SNLD</b>
Tai-Leng Nationalities Development Party	<b>TNDP</b>
Ta-ang (Palaung) National Party	<b>TNP</b>
Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State	<b>UDPKS</b>
Union Solidarity and Development Party	<b>USDP</b>
Wa Democratic Party	<b>WDP</b>
Wa National Unity Party	<b>WNUP</b>
Zomi Congress for Democracy	<b>ZCD</b>
Independent Candidates	<b>IC</b>
Other Political Parties	<b>OPP</b>

## **ANNEX B**

### **List of Monitored Topics and Subtopics**

Agriculture

Army (military)

Business, economy

Culture

Civil society organisations

Crime /Accidents

Elections

Education

Environment

Ethnic groups

Foreign news

Health care

Judiciary

Media

National Peace Process

.Negotiations, agreements, peace talks

.Ongoing fights and reservations

.Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) caused by the civil war

.Other developments

Politics

Religious groups

.Buddhist religion

.Christian religion

.Hindu religion

.Islam religion

.Other religions

Social groups

.Disabled

.Sexual minorities (LGBTI, ...)

.Women

.Youth

.Other Social Minorities

Sport

Others