



Monitoring of Political Diversity in Myanmar Media Reporting May 2016

Yangon, 7 October 2016 – 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 a discussion about the objectivity and quality of media reporting. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has supported the one-year project.

The monitoring is intended to offer 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.¹ 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 first of three monitoring reports concerning media performance and are to be 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.² 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.³

¹ 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*
Online media: *Irrawaddy and Mizzima*

² For previous projects conducted in 2010-2011 and 2015 see www.memo98.sk

³ 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 subjects 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.

Background

Following the 2015 general elections where the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide, the most covered issues included the transformation of the elections result and of the political clout of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi into strong institutional power and forming a new Government under her leadership. Also, other covered topics included the continued effort of the peace process (such as the Panglong Conference) and the new administration's engagement with some small but vociferous segment of the Buddhist community. Also, the new Government launched a *100-day plan* to do a visible change from the past⁴, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi undertook diplomatic visits to countries like China and the US to secure international assistance for a smooth transition to a democratic system - all of which was also widely reported. Finally, Government's efforts to strike an agreement with ethnic majorities were also covered intensively in the news.

Following is the summary of the main monitoring findings covering May 2016:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The division between the state and private media is less visible than in the past, although the state TV channels MRTV and MWD continued to offer biased and uncritical coverage, promoting the incumbent NLD government and its representatives (MRTV) or the Tatmadaw (MWD).**
- **Compared to state media, the private media offered a more pluralistic coverage attempting to provide citizens with a rather diverse picture of political actors and key developments, yet critical and analytical reporting remained rare.**
- **Overall, the media focused primarily on the authorities, particularly the Government. While the President was not presented so prominently, a relatively large share of the coverage was dedicated to activities of the local governments.**
- **From among political parties, the NLD received the largest shares of coverage overall. With only a few exceptions, political parties, including the former ruling the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), received only a limited attention of the media.**
- **Except for MRTV and MWD, overall, the media coverage, including that offered by the state radio and newspaper, of political actors was primarily neutral.**

MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS

Television

MRTV devoted a significant share of its airtime – 63.1 per cent of its political news coverage to the Government, while the NLD received 14.1 per cent. The President's coverage amounted to 5.3 percent, the military (the *Tatmadaw*) was given 3.7 percent, and the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi received 2.8 per cent of the coverage. This authorities-related coverage was overwhelmingly positive. The activities of state officials (President,

⁴ The 100-day plan set out the government's priorities in the first few months after taking office.

state counselor, vice-presidents, ministers and chief ministers of local governments') were covered in details. The 100 days of new government received a significant amount of coverage. The activities of the former and current cabinets in the framework of the National Peace Process (NPP) were frequently aired in the news items and promoted in the songs. The coverage lacked diverse viewpoints, even within the complex issues like NPP.

Similar to **MRTV**, **Myawaddy TV** also offered an extensive and favorable coverage of the state authorities. The channel devoted almost 68.2 per cent of the coverage to the *Tatmadaw*. At the same time, the Government was allocated 14.1 per cent, the Speakers of Parliament received combined 6.1 per cent, and the President received 3.3 per cent of the coverage. From among the political parties, the NLD received most coverage amounting only to 2.1 per cent. The style of news reporting remained virtually unchanged in comparison with monitoring periods during election year 2015 - the channel continued to present the authorities (primarily the *Tatmadaw*) in an uncritically positive manner, while other viewpoints were omitted. Some specific armed groups, such as Kachin Independence Army or Shan State Army were presented negatively.

The privately-owned television **Up to Date** also devoted most of its coverage to the authorities, but in comparison with state TV channels, the tone of the coverage was mainly neutral. The Government was given 49.4 per cent of channel's relevant coverage, followed by local governments (18.9 per cent) and the *Tatmadaw* (13.2 per cent). From among the parties, the NLD was given 10.6 per cent of coverage. All the subjects were portrayed primarily in a neutral manner, at times positively. The critical views were almost absent.

Unlike other monitored TV channels, **DVB** offered a more diverse coverage and presented different views but at the same time allocated significant coverage to the incumbent government and the NLD. The channel allocated 32.3 per cent of its relevant coverage to the Government, while the NLD was given almost 19 per cent. The next most covered subjects were the local governments (11.5 per cent), the *Tatmadaw* (10.3 per cent) and the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (8.8 per cent). By contrast, the former ruling party USDP received only 2.4 per cent of the coverage. From among other parties receiving some share of the coverage were the Arkan National Party (ANP) and the Shan National League for Democracy Party (SNLD) received somewhat significant coverage (4.5 and 2.3 per cent, respectively). The political subjects were presented predominantly in a neutral way with only the *Tatmadaw* receiving also more significant negative coverage.

Radio

The state-funded **Myanmar Radio** allocated the bulk of its political news coverage to the activities of state authorities. The Government was given over 60.8 per cent of the coverage, while the local governments received 15.7 per cent, the *Tatmadaw* 6.7 percent, and the President 6.4 per cent. The NLD received the largest share of the coverage among all parties - 5.6 per cent - followed by the USDP with 2.4 per cent of the coverage. The tone of the coverage of political subjects was neutral or positive, with the exception of the USDP which was portrayed negatively.

Foreign service of **BBC** also allocated most of its coverage to authorities. The Government received 43.5 per cent of coverage, the *Tatmadaw* almost 24 per cent, the local governments 7.6 and the President over 5 per cent. The portrayal of the *Tatmadaw* was negative, while the Government was portrayed mainly in a neutral light (there was a more significant share of positive and negative coverage as well). The local governments were presented mostly positively. From among the political parties, the largest proportion of the coverage was allocated to the NLD (almost 9 per cent), followed by the ANP with 3.6 per cent, and the

SNLD with 3.3 per cent. While these parties were portrayed in a positive or neutral light, the USDP (3.2 per cent of coverage) was presented with a more critical manner.

Newspapers

Similarly as the state-owned broadcast media, also *Myanmar Ahlin*, as state-funded daily allocated majority of its coverage to the authorities. The Government received 58.6 per cent, the President 9 per cent, the *Tatmadaw* 7.6 per cent and the State Counsellor 6.4 per cent. The NLD was given 6.2 per cent of the coverage - much more than any other political party. By comparison, the USDP received only 1 per cent and the ANP less than one 1 per cent. All these subjects were portrayed in a predominantly neutral light, except the Government which was given a significant portion of positive coverage.

The privately owned newspaper *Eleven* focused on the Government which received some 37.8 per cent of the coverage, followed by the NLD (17.3 per cent), the State Counsellor (10.8 per cent) the local governments (9.7 per cent) and the *Tatmadaw* (9 per cent). Other parties that received notable coverage were the ANP (3.9 per cent), the USDP (3 per cent) and the SNLD (1.3 per cent). The presented subjects were portrayed predominantly in a neutral and positive light.

Voice offered 26.3 per cent of its coverage to the Government, 18.8 per cent to the local governments and 15.6 per cent to the State Counsellor. The NLD followed with over 15.1 per cent of coverage, and the *Tatmadaw* received 10.3 per cent of the coverage. By comparison, the USDP and the SNLD were given 3.7 and 3.4 per cent of coverage, respectively. The presented subjects were portrayed mainly in a neutral and positive light.

Online media

The coverage of subjects in online media was similar to the one offered by the broadcast and print media. *Irrawaddy* allocated 35.2 per cent of the coverage to the *Tatmadaw*, followed by the Government (21 per cent) and the local governments (11.5 per cent). Three parties received significant shares of coverage - the ANP (5.8 per cent), the USDP (5.7 per cent) and the NLD (5.6 per cent). All subjects were presented mainly positively, although the *Tatmadaw* was also portrayed at times negatively.

Mizzima gave the largest share of its coverage to the NLD (25.8 per cent), followed by the Government (24.5 per cent) and the local governments (17.1 per cent). They were portrayed predominantly in a positive light, with some sporadic negative coverage. The *Tatmadaw* (11.1 per cent), the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (8.5 per cent) and the USDP (5.4 per cent). President also received notable shares of the coverage (3.3 per cent). In the case of the *Tatmadaw*, the portrayal was more negative in comparison with all other subjects.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the pre-election period in 2015, the media reporting appeared to be less divided into a pro-governmental and opposition-leaning media outlets. At the same time, it should be noted that MTRV switched to the other side and started reporting on the NLD-led government in a similar manner to the way it reported on the former ruling powers. The reporting on other state media of the incumbent government was more neutral than when they were reporting on the USDP-led state administration. MWD did not change its previous reporting, providing its open support to *Tatmadaw*. The private media appeared to have given the new government

members certain time to establish themselves in their new positions – so-called *honeymoon period* when media cut the new administration a lot of slack in its first months of their tenure.

It remains to be seen for how long this uncritical approach will last as, during this monitoring period, critical or probing approach *vis-à-vis* the incumbents was rare. It should also be said that the lack of critical views and analytical reporting in the media is a long lasting problem of the Myanmar media scene and only a few media outlets are an exception to this trend. MID and MEMO 98 will continue their media monitoring to provide regular feedback on the quality of Myanmar media reporting.

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