



## First preliminary report on media coverage of contestants during the election campaign period

Yangon, 16 October 2015 - Myanmar Institute for Democracy (MID), an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, has been monitoring the media coverage of the November elections. MID seeks to evaluate the monitored media's performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of the contestants and their platforms so the citizens of Myanmar can make well-informed choices at the ballot box. The main objective of the project is to inform the public about the conduct of media during election campaign and beyond and to initiate a discussion about the objectivity and quality of media reporting. The project is supported by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) in the framework of the EU-funded project STEP Democracy as well as by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

The monitoring is intended to offer professional, comprehensive, and objective assessment of political diversity, accuracy, and balance in news and current affairs coverage on five television channels, six radio stations, ten newspapers, and three online media outlets.<sup>1</sup> The project's findings are not intended to support any one candidate or political party, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season. The findings will be compiled in three monitoring reports about the media's behavior during the election campaign 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 51 countries in the last 16 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. The outcome of the monitoring is not just a set of data, but a detailed analysis and evaluation of the current level of political diversity in media reporting, examined in the proper context, and incorporating concrete comparisons and analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Following is the summary of the main monitoring findings covering three weeks of the official campaign period (8 – 28 September 2015):

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<sup>1</sup> Television: *MRTV, MRTV4, Myawaddy TV, Up to date, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)*  
Radio: *Radio Myanmar, Cherry FM, Mandalay FM, Shwe FM, City FM, and BBC Radio Myanmar.*  
Newspapers: *Kyaymon, Myanmar Ahlin, Eleven, 7 Days, Voice, Democracy Today, Messenger, Myanmar Times, Tomorrow, People's Cause*  
Web portals: *Irrawaddy, Mizzima, News Eleven*

<sup>2</sup> [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 subjects are portrayed: positive, neutral or negative. 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 important to presenting the quality of reporting. This data is reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Most of broadcast media have so far allocated very little time to activities of political parties but instead devoted the bulk of their coverage to the activities of the state authorities, outside the campaign context.**
- **Print and online media have covered the campaign more intensively, focusing primarily on the two main frontrunners – the NLD and the USDP.**
- **Contestants have been able to utilize free airtime on both state-funded and some private broadcasters and radio channels as well as the free space in the state-controlled newspapers. Their ability to freely express their views, including criticism of the incumbents, has been restricted due to strict regulations on the free airtime allocation.**
- **State-controlled media have so far focused their political and election news coverage on the activities of state officials who are also candidates in the elections. There has been a notable tendency to cover the activities of state officials positively, often pointing out achievements and successes. Critical and independent opinions on the performance of the authorities, as well as more comprehensive analysis of contestants' platforms have so far been generally absent from the news programs of the state-funded media.**
- **Of the monitored broadcast media, only DVB and BBC Radio Myanmar have so far provided voters with a plurality of views and diverse information about different contestants and other political subjects.**
- **Newspapers have so far provided a diverse range of views with the state-controlled ones supporting the ruling powers and the private ones the NLD party.**
- **Internet media also covered a wide range of political parties and devoted the bulk of their coverage to the NLD party.**
- **In general, voters would benefit from a more analytical and in-depth coverage that could help them to better analyze and assess the qualities and programs of electoral contestants.**

The preliminary media monitoring results for the period of 8 – 28 September 2015 indicate that there have been discernable differences in how the media have so far portrayed candidates, parties and other relevant subjects. Contestants have been able to utilize free airtime on both state-funded and some private broadcasters and radio channels as well as the free space in the state-controlled newspapers. Their ability to freely express their views, including criticism of the incumbents, has been restricted due to strict regulations on the free airtime allocation.<sup>4</sup>

Most of broadcast media have so far allocated very little time to activities of political parties but instead devoted the bulk of their coverage to the activities of the state authorities, outside the campaign context. Many of them are also candidates in the elections. Only a few broadcast media have so far provided voters with a diverse range of information about different contestants and other political subjects. By contrast, print media and internet have so far offered a diverse range of views, some supporting the ruling powers while others showing their clear preferences toward the NLD.

The most significant events and topics drawing media attention during this monitoring period included the national ceasefire process as well as the current stage of the voter list. Since the official start of the

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<sup>4</sup> The free airtime and free space allocation is regulated by the Announcement No.(52/2015) of 27 August issued by the Union Election Commission. According to Article 2 of the Announcement, political parties wishing to utilize the free airtime have to submit the script of their “speeches on party policies” to UEC seven days before the speech is to be shown for approval. Article 6 establishes wide ranging limitations and prohibitions on what parties may say during their speeches.

campaign on 8 September, the state-controlled and some private media have been allocating a free-of-charge airtime and space to all registered political parties. Moreover, one of the monitored TV channels - DVB - have been airing debates between contestants, providing them a good opportunity to convey their messages directly to voters.

## Television

Between 8 September and 28 September, *MRTV* devoted almost half of its political and election-related news coverage to the activities of the state authorities, with the government receiving 38.1 per cent, the president 36 per cent, the vice-president 13.6 per cent and the military (the *Tatmadaw*) 9.8 per cent of the coverage. This coverage was overwhelmingly positive. By contrast, the main opposition party NLD received only 0.1 per cent of such coverage which was also mainly positive. There has been a notable tendency to cover the activities of state officials positively, often pointing out achievements and successes. Critical and independent opinions on the performance of the authorities, as well as comprehensive analysis of contestants' platforms have so far been generally absent from the news programs of MRTV.

*Myawaddy TV* is a military-owned television network which was launched on 27 March 1995, in commemoration of the Burmese Armed Forces Day. It adopted a similar approach to that of MRTV devoted extensive and favourable coverage to the state authorities. The channel devoted more than half of its coverage to the activities of the *Tatmadaw* (59.9 per cent) which was exclusively positive. Similar to the other two state-funded channels, Myawaddy featured a number of songs in support of the top representatives of the *Tatmadaw* as well as other state officials and did not offer any platform for the government opponents.

As recipients of public resources, state-funded media have an enhanced duty to ensure balanced and fair treatment of politicians. While MRTV and Myawaddy TV are funded with taxpayers' money, only activities of state authorities were covered on these channels during the first monitoring period. The channels largely ignored any views independent of or critical of the current establishment. There is no discussion on social, economic and political problems of the country, with no information to the citizens about consequences of bad governance.

The private *Up to Date* channel has also demonstrated its open support to the incumbent state authorities by allocating a combined total of 89.1 per cent to them, including the president (41.7 per cent), the government (19.8 per cent), the local government (9.8 per cent), the vice-president (5.4 per cent), and the *Tatmadaw* (12.4 per cent). Ninety nine per cent of the president's coverage was positive and one per cent was neutral. At the same time, the government received more neutral than positive coverage. The USDP received 0.2 per cent of mostly neutral coverage. The main opposition party NLD obtained some 8.3 per cent of the coverage which was also overwhelmingly positive. Similar to the state-funded channels, Up to Date also broadcast a number of songs praising the president as well as the *Tatmadaw*.

Unlike other monitored TV channels, the private *DVB* has so far offered its viewers a balanced coverage of the political and election-related information so far. Between 8 – 28 September 2015, DVB allocated 28.8 per cent of the coverage to the authorities, including 5.6 per cent to the president, 0.1 per cent to the vice-president, 12.4 per cent to the government, 1 per cent to the local government, and 9.7 per cent to the *Tatmadaw*. The USDP received 16.1 per cent of the coverage. It should be mentioned that DVB was among a few monitored broadcasters to offer some critical coverage of the state officials. By comparison, the NLD received 31.5 per cent of the coverage. The tone of the coverage for the two main competing parties was also comparable. While twenty eight per cent of the USDP's coverage was positive and eighteen per cent was negative, as much as thirty two per cent of NLD's coverage was positive and fourteen per cent was negative. DVB has also provided some time to cover activities of other political parties contesting the elections.

In a positive development, DVB has so far been the only channel to offer its viewers debates between the contestants. These debates have enabled candidates to convey their messages to the electorate and allowed voters to form opinions of the candidates.

## Radio

Similar to other state funded and some private broadcaster, the *Myanmar state-funded radio* has been allocating the free-of-charge airtime, allocating 15 minutes to three parties per day. As for the political and election-related news coverage, it adopted a similar approach to that of the state-funded TV channels and devoted the bulk of its news coverage to the activities of state officials.

The coverage of other monitored radio channels can be divided into two main groups. The first group consists of those channels which, similar to the state-funded radio, devoted the bulk of their coverage to the activities of state officials – *Cherry FM, City FM, Mandalay FM* and *Shwe FM*. *BBC Myanmar* belongs to the second group – it has provided its listeners with a balanced coverage of the campaign so far.<sup>5</sup>

## Newspapers

There are currently numerous print publications available in the country, ranging from daily newspapers to weekly journals and magazines. While there are speculations in terms of real ownership of some of the private publications, newspapers have so far provided a diverse range of views.

### State-funded publications

The manner in which the two state-funded publications, *Myanmar Ahlin* and *Kyaymon*, informed about political and election-related events during the first monitoring period was similar, from both qualitative and quantitative perspective. Both newspapers clearly prioritized coverage of state authorities, including the president (and the vice-president), the government, the local government and the *Tatmadaw*. Outside of the free space allocation, the space allocated to political parties was very limited (no party received more than 2.6 per cent of the coverage).

Similar to the state-funded broadcasters, *Myanmar Ahlin* (New Light of Myanmar) has been allocating free space to all registered parties. Outside of the free space, however, the paper devoted most of its political and election-related coverage to the president (29.3 per cent), the *Tatmadaw* (20.2 per cent), the government (19.4 per cent), the vice-president (13 per cent) and the local government (1.1 per cent) – which was altogether more than three quarters of the coverage. This coverage was exclusively positive or neutral.

Another state-controlled daily, *Kyaymon* (The Mirror) demonstrated similar approach – it devoted 81.9 per cent to the coverage of the authorities. The tone of the coverage was again overwhelmingly positive or neutral.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, the coverage of the NLD was very marginal. As for the coverage of other political parties, the most covered parties were the KPP and the NUP which received respectively 3.7 per cent of mainly positive coverage.

### Private publications

The preliminary monitoring results indicate that monitored private publications have covered the political and election-related events from a different perspective than the state-controlled newspapers. Unlike the state papers, the private ones focused less on the activities of state authorities and were not afraid to

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<sup>5</sup> MID has monitored also political and election-related coverage on Voice of America (VoA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) – the results of this monitoring will be available in the second monitoring report.

<sup>6</sup> As much as 96 per cent of the government's coverage was positive, 3 per cent was neutral and only 1 per cent was negative.

criticise them. While private papers covered a range of political parties (between 14 to 29 parties), the bulk of their coverage went to the biggest opposition party, the National League for Democracy, which was portrayed mostly in a positive and neutral way. While NLD also received some criticism, it was much less than other covered parties.

### ***Dailies***

Of the five monitored dailies, *Eleven News*, *7 Days* and *Voice* devoted the biggest portion of their coverage to election campaign, with *Eleven* daily devoting as much as 56 per cent to the NLD. By comparison, the ruling USDP received 11.2 per cent of the coverage. While the coverage of the NLD was overwhelmingly positive and neutral, the USDP coverage was mainly neutral or negative. The next most covered entities were the government and the *Tatmadaw* receiving respectively 10.5 and 9.1 per cent. The tone of the government's coverage was mainly negative. *Messenger* and *7 days* adopted a similar approach.

*Voice* allocated two times more coverage to the NLD than to the USDP (33.9 against 16 per cent). The paper was critical towards authorities, mainly to the *Tatmadaw* and the government. *Democracy Today* also gave more space to the NLD than the USDP and generally portrayed the subjects in a neutral manner.

### ***Weeklies***

Of the three monitored weeklies, *People Call* devoted 72.8 per cent of its political and election-related coverage to the NLD. This coverage was almost exclusive positive. By comparison, the USDP received only 1.2 per cent of such coverage. In general, the two other weeklies also devoted more coverage to the NLD but portrayed them in a more balanced way.

### **Online media**

Given the growing important of Internet, three online web portals – *Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima* and *Eleven News Group* - were included into the monitoring. In general, all three monitored online portals devoted the bulk of their coverage to the NLD which was portrayed in a positive or neutral way.

*Eleven News Group* gave as much as 56 per cent of the coverage to the NLD which was overwhelmingly exclusively neutral and positive. By contrast, USDP received only 11.2 per cent of such coverage which was mainly negative and neutral.

In a positive development, both *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima* devoted more space to different parties, including the ANP, the DPNS, the MNP, the SNLD, and the DHRP. As for the coverage of the two main frontrunners, they both gave more space to the NLD than the USDP.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Data from the first monitoring period reveals wide differences in the way political subjects are portrayed and in the amount of coverage provided to different political subjects. Three weeks of monitoring indicated that state-controlled media have so far not followed the standards of balance and fairness and devoted the bulk of their coverage to the activities of state authorities, outside of the campaign context. At the same time, print media and internet have so far offered a diverse range of views, with private papers and online media showing their preferences toward the NLD and state-funded papers supporting the authorities. The qualitative analysis also indicates that a number of media neglect to offer voters opposing views on particular stories. MID will continue to analyse the media throughout the pre-election period

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<sup>7</sup> *Irrawaddy.org* also offered some video materials devoted to the election campaign. While only 4 parties were covered - ANP, DPNS, NLD, USDP - only first three received significant, exclusively neutral and positive coverage.

and beyond to determine if this is a consistent trend. News reports on most media were almost exclusively driven by activities of the state authorities - journalists themselves usually did not try to dwell on problems, single them out. There was a general lack of investigative approach, and conversely reports were sometimes limited to superficial coverage.

Voters would benefit from a more analytical and in-depth coverage that could help them to better analyze and assess the qualities and platforms of electoral contestants. The media need to be more proactive in setting the formats of their election-related reporting and their general coverage of elections 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 elected office. The next report will be issued in two weeks from today and will contain cumulative data for a full seven weeks of monitoring.

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