

Mind Mapping the Myanmar State-Owned Media Reform in the Post- Military Authoritarian Regime

Thurein Lwin (Research Fellow) and Phone Pyae Soe (Ph.D. Candidate)

2025

Executive Summary

Media plays a critical role in democracy particularly in states where democratization is going on or states in authoritarian regime such as Myanmar (Atkinson, 2020). Apart from executive, legislations, and jurisdictions which are the branches of democratic governance, media ranks fourth to check and balance between government and citizens (Peng & Kironka, 2021). In the case of Myanmar, media has been extremely oppressed by the military since 1988. As a result, lack of freedom of expression caused complex issues between government and citizens, government and military, and military and citizens even among citizens. In 2011, Myanmar introduced quasi-civilian government and carried out a series of reform processes including the media sector development (Matanock & Arriola, 2024). The Government of Myanmar (GoM) allowed licenses to encourage private media development. In the meantime, GoM deregulated the rigid media regulations which hinder freedom of expression and media development (Lee, 2016). Likewise, GoM introduced the Framework for Economic and Social Reform (GoM, 2013) which comprehend both public and private sector reform in line with the regional framework such as Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) and international framework such as United Nations development goals. The chapter 8 in FESR emphasized information access and transparency (GoM, 2013). In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) win landslide victory in general election. The NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a pro-democracy icon and daughter of independent leader General Aung San became the first ever elected government within 61 years since military coup in 1988. The NLD government took office from 2015 to 2020. Throughout its administration, NLD government made all out efforts for state building such as policy reform, public and private sector reform. In order to boost reform process systematically and speedy, NLD government introduced, Myanmar Sustainable Developed Plan (2018-2030) in accordance with the UN sustainable development goals. Under pillar 1 peace and stability, goal 1 peace, national reconciliation, security and good governance, and strategy 1.5, increase the ability of all people to engage with government, Ministry of Information is responsible for increase transparency, predictability, and accountability of government processes (GoM, 2018). However, Myanmar slide back into authoritarian state by 2021 military coup. This policy brief considers Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) reform in the future governance institution building to prevent military domination in freedom of expression (Momen, 2019). It aims to see Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) as a reliable state-owned broadcasting media which reflect freedom of expression in volatile political situation.

Introduction

“On 1st February 2021, Myanmar military has taken the country power due to electoral fraud in 2020 general election where opposition party NLD won over majority party Union Solidarity and Development



Association (USDP) which is a right-wing party of military. The logo on TV was shown as Myawadday Television (MWD) which is a military run broadcasting service although it is the MRTV channel. It means military media has intervened the government media to begin the propaganda (Drechsler, 2021). From 2021 to present, 27674 civilians have been arrested, 21120 are being detained and sentenced, 5945 were killed by junta according to the data of Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPPB, 2024). Reuters reported that 115 journalists had been detained, 44 remained in detention, and three had died. The military controlled over elected government has fueled the civilian armed resistance. The revolutionary struggles spread out across the country especially in ethnic states, and Sagaing, Magway Region in central Myanmar apart from urban guerilla resistance (Reuters, 2024). The concerns of regional and international community on Myanmar issues have been negated by the Junta. The MRTV news on TV addressed the civilian resistance groups as terrorist groups while tens of thousands of people including students, medical doctors, nurses, teachers, and civil servants who participated in Civil Disobedience Movement became internally displaced people due to air bomb strike of Myanmar air force (Egreteau, 2022). Likewise, MRTV news broadcast the statement of Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs that reject the resolutions of United Nation and statements of international governments measures to restore democracy in Myanmar (Lidauer, 2023). Thus, this policy brief argues that MRTV should be independent from administration change in volatile political situation to reflect reality. To do that, institutional reform should be carried out through good governance in MRTV in the future.

Problem Statement

Three primary issues are of significant significance in the context of Myanmar State-Owned Media Reform following the military authoritarian regime. Initially, the majority of departments are overseen by former military personnel. Subsequently, this results in corruption, which includes bribery and other illicit activities, as a consequence of inadequate salaries. Lastly, it is imperative that each employee receives additional training on media ethics, transparency, and responsibility, as Democratic Norms are not being implemented in any sector.

Methodology

The evidence that supports this policy brief is from both primary and secondary data. As a primary data, in-dept interviews were conducted through 5 key informants such as MRTV officials, private media journalist, international journalist, and CDM MRTV government employees to obtain the different views on MRTV reform through good governance. Each interview took about one hour to obtain the expert opinion on freedom of expression, state- owned media reform, and media in future democratic governance in post-military regime. Secondary data are gathered through Chiang Mai University library database, Myanmar ministry of information website, international reports, and official documents from archives. The interview data were translated and translated. The content analysis was done to identify the different themes/codes. The analysis offered an evidence that support final reports regarding the organizational development and institutional reforms of MRTV in post-military regime.

Finding and Analysis

MRTV leadership is dominated by the ex-military officers

Freedom of expression is promulgated in both 1974 state constitution and current 2008 constitution developed by the military. Moreover, access to information, media development, citizens' right to get government information is described in both FESR and MSDP which are the comprehensive national policies. Therefore, Ministry of Information is a focal ministry to implement the above policies. Likewise, MRTV leadership especially Director General, Deputy Director General, and Directors has been in status quo position to implement the policies throughout the different regimes such as quasi-civilian government (2011 to 2015) and democratic government (2015 to 2020). They tend to follow the union government instructions but there is lack of policy implementation. Therefore, MRTV leaderships are the military insiders (ex-military officers moved to civilian departments) who entrenched in organization as a cadre to support sustainable military domination in civilian ministries. Thus, MRTV leaderships are superficially implementing the freedom of expression policy in day-to-day operation. One of the interviewees addressed the issue of Moe Kya Shwe Ko (ex-military officers in civilian ministries in Myanmar slang).

Insufficient of control of corruption

Insufficient pay and compensation are one of the critical issues in Myanmar civil service. According to the World Bank report in collaboration with Myanmar ministry of planning and finance, the basis salary of Director General is MMK500000 which is equivalent with USD 250 (approximately). The lowest rank (peon/sweeper) gets MMK120000 (USD60 per month). Therefore, inadequate facility creates severe corruption within the organization. Civil Service Reform Strategic Action Plan for Myanmar (2017-2020) describe that Too frequently, secrecy, corruption, and a lack of receptivity to complaints and concerns characterize the present relationship between the civil service and the people of Myanmar. The general public frequently perceives processes and protocols as being challenging and unclear. Bribery is a common practice in the provision of fundamental services, and civil servants are not widely regarded. Unsure of how to file and track grievances, citizens are doubtful that action will be done even if they persist. The results of the perception survey show that government employees perceive high levels of bribes at their place of employment, that this is a method for them to augment their pay, and that small-scale bribery is "tolerated" or "justified" among survey participants. More than half of poll participants (56%) believe that "some" members of the civil service request extra funds, such as bribes, to perform their duties. All subgroups, including gender, location, public service employee classification, educational attainment, and race, share this viewpoint.

Inefficient compensation

Due to the low income, lack of social security system, health, and life insurance system in civil service apart from nepotism caused by oligarchy system, Myanmar civil servants have lack of motivation to day-to-day performance and organizational development which is critical to support public service delivery. There are many considered pervasive violations of the code of conduct, including frequent favouritism and corruption-driven, unfair, and opaque advancement and transfer decisions. There is a widespread belief that these violations mainly go unchecked. According to the majority of respondents in the Perception Survey, "some of the time" (44%) and "rarely" (18%) were the correct responses when questioned whether discipline is proportionate to corruption. More than half of poll participants claimed that their income (58%) and pension (59%) were not enough to pay for their families' needs. Some focus group members and poll participants saw this as the root of misconduct in the civil service. Many poll participants (81%) concur with the assertion that less misconduct would result from higher salaries (Civil Service Reform Strategic Action Plan for Myanmar, 2017-2020). Therefore, Capacity Building



measures for MRTV employees emphasize on top leadership is an imperative specifically to change their mindset.

Democratic characteristics/norms should be formulated in state-owned media policy

The evidence offered by interview data and the systematic review on research articles, government reports, international reports relevance to state owned media evolution throughout the different regimes such as 2011-2015 (quasi-civilian government), 2015-2020 (elected government), and 2020-present (military authoritarian) described that there are insufficient democratic characteristics/norms formulated in the state-owned media policy and media law and rules although those documents were revised in elected government regime. The evidence proved that there is lack of trainings which educate MRTV staff to understand the freedom of expression, independent media, journalism, media ethic in democratic regime.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To have an independent state-owned media which has no bias no matter how regime has changed, good governance within the organization should be encouraged. However, policy recommendation should reflect on logical and practical consideration based on the primary and secondary evidence. It is a reality that public agency cannot resist to implement the order of military administration to broadcast propaganda news since security forces can threaten the lives of civilian employees if they do not follow the command of soldiers. However, this policy brief focus on future broadcasting governance buildings based on recent experience. This strategy includes:

- To remove the MRTV leadership who are ex-military officers to sponsor potential military coups in the future. Instead, civilian technocrats take the critical roles. The remaining mid-level leadership such as director, deputy director, and assistant directors should be replaced with new generation who are highly motivated to develop their organization equipped with technical skills.
- Increase the pay and compensation of MRTV employees. In the case of Myanmar, not only MRTV but also the entire civil service should be considered for the wellbeing of human resources to eradicate the corruption.
- Capacity building measure is required not only to upgrade the expertise of employee but to change the way of thinking such as critical thinking, encourage leadership characteristics, understand democratic norms, understand merits of good governance, and quality service delivery.
- Strengthening democratic characteristics and norms in media policy, media law, and rules to reinforce organizational development and institutional reforms which can be done by addressing issue and setting agenda in parliament to promulgate/amendment the existing and new media law and policy in line with the international media standards.

Above recommendations should be considered as fundamental requirements to strengthening state owned media reform in post-military regime in the future. As state-owned media plays an important role regardless of democratic or non-democratic regime, media reform should be advocated in constitutional agenda setting of future state building in Myanmar.

References

- AAPPB (2024) Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma archive, retrieved from <https://aappb.org>

- Atkinson, C. L. (2020). Public Information and Ultrnationalism in Myanmar: A Thematic Analysis of Public and Private Newspaper Coverage. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 40(4), 597–613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1847780>
- Drechsler, W. (2021). New development: Myanmar's civil service—Responsible disobedience during the 2021 military coup. *Public Money & Management*, 41(7), 577–580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2021.1928948>
- Egreteau, R. (2022). Profile: Blending old and new repertoires of contention in Myanmar's anti-coup protests (2021). *Social Movement Studies*, 22(5–6), 822–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2022.2140650>
- Government of Myanmar (GoM) (2013). Framework for Economic and Social Reform. Nay Pyi Taw: Government of Myanmar, retrieved from https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ref%20Doc_FrameworkForEconomicAndSocialReform2012-15_Govt_2013%20.pdf
- Government of Myanmar (GoM) (2018). Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan. Ministry of Planning and Finance, www.mopf.gov.mm
- Government of Myanmar (GoM) (2017) Myanmar Civil Service Reform Action Plan (2017–2020) retrieved from https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/mm/UNDP_MM_Myanmar-Civil_Service_Reform_Strategic_Action_Plan.pdf
- Kirska, K., & Peng, N. N. (2021). How state-run media shape perceptions: an analysis of the projection of the Rohingya in the *Global New Light of Myanmar*. *South East Asia Research*, 29(1), 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2020.1850178>
- Lee, R. (2016). The Dark Side of Liberalization: How Myanmar's Political and Media Freedoms Are Being Used to Limit Muslim Rights. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 27(2), 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2016.1159045>
- Lidauer, M. (2023). Myanmar's Menu of Electoral Manipulation: Self- and External Legitimation after the 2021 Coup. *Critical Asian Studies*, 55(3), 397–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2023.2212366>
- Momen, M. N. (2019). Myth and reality of freedom of expression on the internet. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(3), 277–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2019.1628055>
- Myanmar Law Library (2024). Constitution of 1974, retrieved from <http://myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/constitutions/1974-constitution.html>
- Myanmar Law Library (2024). 2008 Myanmar Constitution, retrieved from <https://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/constitutions/2008-constitution.html>
- Reuters.com. (n.d.). reuters.com. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-military-extends-emergency-rule-another-6-months-2024-07-31/>
- Samet, O., Arriola, L. R., & Matanock, A. M. (2024). Facebook Usage and Outgroup Intolerance in Myanmar. *Political Communication*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2333408>
- World Bank (2015) Myanmar Pay, Compensation, and Human Resource Management Review (Ministry of Planning and Finance; World Bank Group) retrieved from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/167501522309579124/pdf/124697-WP-P162323-PUBLIC-Pay-review.pdf>