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Freedom Of The Press - Burma (Myanmar) (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 30
Political Environment: 37
Economic Environment: 27
Total Score: 94

The 2008 constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but the Burmese media environment remained among the most tightly restricted in the world in 2010. Private periodicals are subject to prepublication censorship under the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act, which requires that all content be approved by the authorities. As a result, coverage is limited to a small range of permissible topics, and publications are sometimes required to carry government-produced articles. For example, in January 2010, domestic journals were pressured by the military censor board to print pro-junta articles. Under censorship rules announced in 2005, media outlets are allowed to offer "constructive" criticism of government projects and report on natural disasters and poverty, provided the coverage does not affect the national interest. In practice, however, the government tolerates virtually no media independence. New legislation was passed in 2010 banning journals from misquoting the constitution, and in July, this provision was used to suspend the weekly newspaper the *Voice*. Several other journals were banned by the censor board during the year.

National elections held in November 2010 dominated legal and political press freedom issues in 2010. The country's Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (PSRB) banned any commentary on the electoral laws as early as March in preparation for the election. In October, the election commission announced that it would not allow foreign journalists to enter the country to cover the election. Additionally, several opposition parties were dissolved prior to the elections, including Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. Parties that did participate in the elections had challenges in campaigning because the government restricted opposition party access to the media, as well as requiring campaign materials and drafts of campaign speeches to gain approval from the censor board. In November 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from an extended period of house arrest; in total, she had been under house arrest for 15 of the past 21 years. She was allowed access to the media in the aftermath of her release, and several journals and weeklies were allowed to publish news of the release. However, several of these publications were then punished for giving the release too much attention.

More generally, both local and foreign journalists' ability to cover the news is restricted. Small numbers of foreign reporters are allowed to enter Burma on special visas, but they are generally subject to intense scrutiny while in the country, and in past years have occasionally been deported. A reporter from the U.S.'s Cable News Network (CNN) was arrested and expelled in March 2010 with no explanation

after entering the country with an approved visa to cover the Armed Forces Day celebration. Local journalists remain subject to harassment and imprisonment. At the end of 2010, at least 13 journalists were in prison, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Hla Hla Win, a video reporter for the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) media outlet, was arrested in 2009. In late 2009, she was sentenced to 20 years in prison for alleged violations of both the Electronic Act and the Export Import Act. Her assistant Myint Naing was also sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The government owns all broadcast media and daily newspapers, and exercises tight control over a growing number of privately owned weekly and monthly publications. The Ministry of Information only issues licenses to private publishers if they print government-approved material exclusively, and the Press Scrutiny Board can suspend licenses of publications that print objectionable material. Authorities also restrict the importation of foreign news periodicals. Although some people have access to international shortwave radio or satellite television, those caught accessing foreign broadcasts can be arrested. Nevertheless, as the only source of uncensored information, foreign radio programs produced by the Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and DVB are very popular. The monthly subscription fees to access satellite channels are high, so most Burmese viewers install the receivers illegally.

Access to the internet is expensive, tightly regulated, and censored, with the government controlling all of the several dozen domestic internet service providers. These factors, in addition to the poor infrastructure of the country, mean that only 0.2 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010. While there are no existing laws relating to monitoring internet communication, the government tracks internet activity and blocks websites, including foreign news sources and foreign-hosted e-mail services. Online chat records and e-mail messages have been used as evidence in court, such as in the trials of comedian and blogger Zarganar, and members of the 88 Generation Students group. The government further increased its control of the internet in the lead-up to the November elections. In September, the websites for *Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima News*, and DVB were either blocked or shut down due to cyberattacks. In an effort to further extend control over the internet, some internet cafes started to monitor their visitors in 2010. Blogger Win Zaw Naing was arrested in 2009 for posting pictures and reporting about a series of 2007 protests led by Buddhist monks. Naing faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted, but there was no news of his sentence at year's end. The Committee to Protect Journalists has designated Burma as the worst place in the world to become a blogger.