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From Yangon to the Borderlands: Independent Media on Myanmar's Post-coup Front Line

Independent media outlets exiled from Myanmar play a vital role in reporting on the civil war to destruction wrought by natural disasters, while influencing the political culture of the resistance. But, as Crisis Group expert Margarite Clarey explains, mounting challenges jeopardise these organisations' work.

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Since the Myanmar military overthrew the country's democratically elected government in a coup in February 2021, northern Thailand has become an uneasy base for journalists seeking to operate beyond the junta's reach. The military regime's violent [crackdown](#) on independent media began immediately after the coup, with amendments to the country's penal code criminalising reporting that "causes fear" or "spreads false news". Soldiers went door to door searching for prominent reporters, while state broadcasters aired the names of those on the junta's arrest list. More than 100 journalists were detained within the first three months of the coup. Some journalists chose to remain and report undercover, while those on the junta's arrest list were forced into hiding, before fleeing into self-imposed exile across the Thai border. Many crossed into Mae Sot, a Thai border town that sits some 500km from Bangkok, 400km from Myanmar's largest city, Yangon. Mae Sot is so close to the battlefield that gunshots, explosions and airstrikes can be heard during periods of heavy fighting.

Despite the immense challenges Myanmar's independent media have faced since the coup, private news outlets have grown and diversified in exile, along with their audiences. Around [60 media](#) organisations are now

operating outside the country, with more than 1,500 journalists in their ranks. As Crisis Group's media relations lead in Asia, I travelled to northern Thailand to meet with dozens of exiled editors and journalists. I wanted to better understand the evolving independent media landscape and to gauge how these professionals see their role and coverage evolving in the coup's aftermath.

Rebuilding in Exile

"We used to have a huge studio with hundreds of staff. Now, we broadcast from our living room", Nyein Nyein Naing, editor of digital outlet *People's Spring* and previous head of Myanmar's largest private pre-coup media organisation, told me during one of our first meetings in 2023. That publication was one of the first to have its licence revoked by the junta, forcing its closure just days after the coup. Unable to work and living in fear of arrest, Nyein Nyein Naing fled overland to Thailand, where a number of Myanmar's independent newsrooms had already sought refuge. There, she set up *People's Spring* underground. *People's Spring* has quickly gained more than one million followers on Facebook, which remains the primary platform for news consumption in Myanmar, despite regime efforts to restrict access. "The conflict and [humanitarian] crisis are worse than ever, and so is the military's propaganda war", she told me. "People in conflict areas need accurate information to make decisions, and for that, they need independent news sources".

That need became especially clear after the earthquake that hit central Myanmar in March 2025. Since then, Nyein Nyein Naing and her team have worked to report updates from the epicentre. "All our journalists are undercover", she told me by phone. "On the first day, the streets were crowded. People were out taking pictures and videos, so our team could blend in. But a few days later, our reporters noticed plainclothes police checking for journalists, so they had to be much more careful. Even during a disaster, the military's approach to independent media hasn't changed". The organisation persists in its reporting, despite the risks its employees face; as Nyein Nyein Naing puts it, the public relies on independent media for accurate reporting on aftershock risks and damaged infrastructure. "In this moment of hardship, we believe journalism is not only about news, but about connection [with] and responsibility to our people", she told me via phone.

Doing this work is a struggle. A one-off grant from an international donor allows Nyein Nyein Naing to rent a modest studio space that doubles as housing for her team, but the newsroom continues to face other difficulties. "I always need to remind my team: don't make noise, don't attract attention. We have to stay quiet and keep a low profile", she explained.

Thailand is not a party to the UN Refugee Convention or Protocol, and it provides no formal protection for refugees or asylum seekers. I witnessed just how vulnerable Myanmar journalists are in this environment when I travelled with them on Thai roads punctuated by checkpoints. The level of scrutiny visitors are subjected to differs widely: while my passport was briefly glanced at, the Burmese journalists I was sharing a ride with were pulled out of the car and questioned, despite holding valid visas. These moments served as a reminder that while the border is open, the welcome for those fleeing Myanmar is not without limits. This precarious legal status has forced many exiled newsrooms to operate below the radar.

Like other media organisations navigating this legal limbo, [Than Lwin Khet](#) operates from a non-descript building in downtown Mae Sot, offering little indication of the thriving newsroom inside. The road leading up to it was partially flooded the day I arrived – to avoid wading through waist-deep water, I hitched a ride on the back of a passing pick-up truck. On the ground floor, young trainees huddled over bowls of *mohinga* fish soup as the editor-in-chief, Zay Yar Minn, talked about challenges the digital media platform had faced and overcome. He founded it in Yangon in 2016, hoping to report on the newly signed Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement between the government and various ethnic armed groups. “The voices of people in ethnic-majority areas rarely appeared in national media despite the struggles people were going through there”, he explained. When operating in Myanmar ceased to be an option after the coup, his team smuggled their newsroom laptops, cameras and accessories out of Yangon in seafood trucks. Subsequently, they relied on priests and cattle traders to get them across the border to safety. They now have around ten reporters in Thailand and five who continue to report covertly from inside the country, [despite the risks](#).

Attention Shifts to the Borderlands

The 2021 coup changed the conflict map of Myanmar, with ethnic armed groups emerging as the junta’s most formidable opponents on the battlefield. As urban youth began fleeing to areas controlled by these groups for combat training to fight back against the regime, national attention shifted with them. Media outlets with a more regional focus – including those known as “ethnic media” that primarily cover ethnic-majority areas – saw their audience grow dramatically. [Than Lwin Khet’s](#) following on Facebook, for example, jumped from 280,000 to over 1.1 million.

As the evolving conflict reshaped audience interests, national media outlets began rethinking how they operated. “Before the coup, the news was focused on central Myanmar”, said Sein Win, an editor at [Mizzima Media](#), a large national news organisation founded in New Delhi by exiled

democracy activists from Myanmar's Burman ethnic majority nearly three decades ago. The coverage, he added, reflected the cultural mindset of the Burman majority. The burgeoning importance of Myanmar regions required a different approach: "We need Karen and Shan editors, for example – people with ... connections to these regions. Newsroom politics and decision-making need to reflect the new political landscape".

In keeping with this shift, in December 2023, a group of senior editors set up the Independent Press Council for Myanmar (IPCM) in northern Thailand to provide an alternative to the military-controlled Myanmar Press Council, and elected Nan Paw Gay – the editor-in-chief of one of Myanmar's longest-running ethnic media outlets, the [Karen Information Center](#) (KIC) – as the press council's chair. Nan Paw Gay now represents more than 30 independent national, regional and ethnic outlets. She spoke to me from her home, with a Karen flag prominently poised on the wall behind her. Founded in 1997, KIC registered in Myanmar in 2013 after the Ministry of Information under then President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government lifted harsh censorship restrictions that had been in effect for nearly two decades. In 2012, exiled Burman democracy activists who had established outlets including Mizzima and [The Irrawaddy](#) also seized on Myanmar's democratisation to move their newsrooms into the country for the first time. By 2021, both had grown to be among Myanmar's most prominent independent outlets.

But even with registration, ethnic media like KIC had a hard time reaching a broad audience. "There is a long-held perception among Burmese people that ethnic media are controlled by ethnic armed groups. It has long been used by the central government to discredit us", said Nan Pay Gay, pointing to Myanmar's Unlawful Association Act of 1908, which, well before the coup, was used to intimidate or detain journalists working in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups, as well as their audiences. Despite the junta resorting to it again since the coup, audience engagement in KIC publications swelled: their followers on Facebook doubled to more than 1.3 million.

Like other media outlets operating from exile, KIC's reach oscillates, depending on internet shutdowns, VPN restrictions and other junta measures – including seizing satellite TV dishes – to silence them. Still, Nan Pay Gay tells me they continue to attract large audiences, including in Burman-majority areas of the country. "Many Burman people now understand the nationalist thinking and politics that influenced [the country] for so long and empathise more with ethnic minorities", she said, adding that this shift has also helped bridge divides and increase collaboration between Burman and ethnic media houses.

Providing Checks and Balances – Despite Backlash

Myanmar's border regions have seen fierce fighting in the last eighteen months, resulting in the [regime losing large swathes of territory](#) to ethnic armed groups in Rakhine State, Chin State, northern Shan State, Kachin State, Kayah State and Karen State. Having consolidated territorial control, many of these groups are now running de facto administrations and determining how they work with the press. As ethnic administrations develop their media policies, independent outlets are trying to create room for manoeuvre so that they can serve as a check and balance on the emerging ethnic authorities. "As a media organisation, our role is to communicate the public's concerns to the government; and now that new structures and authorities are being formed, it is our responsibility to keep doing so", explained *Than Lwin Khet's* editor, Zay Yar Minn.

But as independent media push to hold resistance forces accountable, they also face pressure for doing so, as any perceived criticism of the anti-regime forces tends to be considered as undermining the revolutionary cause. Unfettered press freedom is certainly not the norm, at least not yet. In early 2024, for example, the Karen National Union (KNU), which governs large parts of Karen State, and the Karenni Interim Executive Council, the administrative body which has recently emerged in neighbouring Kayah State, introduced codes of conduct for journalists visiting their territories. These included rules such as avoiding reporting that might affect the KNU's "security, dignity and image". "We need to learn together as the ethnic administrations develop their media policies", observed Gay, in her capacity as chair of the press council. "Part of our role is now to educate the ethnic armed groups that may form state governments in the future to ensure that their governance structures understand civil liberties and freedom of expression".

In late 2022, Kyaw Zayar Htun – founding editor of [Myay Latt Athan](#), a regional news outlet covering central Myanmar – grappled with the tradeoffs implicit in publishing news that casts anti-regime forces in a negative light. Reporters at his outlet learned that fighters from an armed group nominally aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG) – which was formed by ousted lawmakers after the coup – had raped and executed civilians in their custody, including three minors. "It took us a month to decide whether or not to publish the article", recounted Kyaw Zayar Htun. "We had to weigh the consequences of moving forward with it". The decision generated immediate backlash. "We faced a lot of heat, particularly from the revolutionary camp", he explained, referring to the anti-military forces born after the coup. "They questioned why we would run a story they believed could 'prolong the revolution by creating division' among resistance groups". It wasn't until several NUG ministries released [a joint statement](#) on the incident – which in turn prompted [coverage](#) from larger outlets – that criticism of *Myay Latt Athan* began to wane.

Nonetheless, Kyaw Zayar Htun and his team haven't been able to shake fears of violent retaliation. "I freeze when motorcycles pass by our office in Mae Sot. I can't help but worry that someone could throw a hand grenade into our building or open fire on us. Maybe it's unlikely, but it's hard to get past this state of mind", he told me.

For independent media in exile, fears of backlash also extend to the Myanmar military's reach in neighbouring countries. In mid-2024, Thai police raided a space used by independent media in Mae Sot. No one was arrested, but journalists there were shaken, believing the raid was driven by pressure from the Myanmar military.

"There are pro-military and pro-resistance media, but independent media are at risk of attack from both sides as we try to maintain our journalism standards", said Nyein Nyein, an executive editor at the Irrawaddy.

Maintaining Media Standards

Editors in exile readily shared the challenges they face in maintaining reporting quality, not least due to their distance from the ground. Although some have underground reporters in Myanmar, few are able to send in experienced journalists, who remain at risk of being arrested and [detained](#) by the military. Given these gaps, tip-off photos and footage provided by "citizen journalists" – including villagers, activists and even resistance fighters – tend to drive reporting efforts. Such materials, however, demand rigorous scrutiny, an especially difficult task in regions where phone and internet networks have been severed by the junta.

The need for careful verification stands at odds with a news community that relies heavily on Facebook to distribute its product, and in which those that are first to break the news are rewarded with higher engagement. "There are two groups within the exiled media cohort: those that are the mouthpiece of the revolution and a second, larger group that maintain objectivity, despite being against the coup", explained Sein Win from Mizzima. "Am I satisfied with the quality of our newsrooms? Of course not. We need more resources for more in-depth, investigative pieces, but it's in process". Even in a best-case scenario – where organisations were well funded and could report safely from the ground – visibility into the government would be limited. "Even if we try to aim for balance, we cannot interview the SAC [military authorities] as they have already declared most independent media illegal", noted Su Myat, an editor at *Than Lwin Khet* and co-secretary of the IPCM.

Keeping the Lights On

Perhaps the biggest challenge for exiled media outlets is a mounting financial crunch. With the traditional funding model of advertising revenues and subscriptions having collapsed as a result of the coup, they rely almost entirely on international donors. But funding is dwindling, leaving their operations – and the security of their staff – at risk. Short-term grants provide a much-needed lifeline for exiled newsrooms, but the situation remains precarious for most, and recent [cuts in U.S. international aid](#) have made things worse.

Editors are finding creative ways to stay afloat, from launching new products aimed at donor audiences to running side businesses. At *Than Lwin Khet*, even the bowls of *mohinga* soup serve a purpose: they come from a canteen run by editor-in-chief Zay Yar Minn to help cover staff salaries and living costs. The outlet, which received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development via the non-profit organisation Internews, lost their only donor grant as a result of the Trump administration's draconian budget cuts. "We had to sell personal property just to pay our journalists", said editor-in-charge Su Myat, whose team members now face a 50 per cent reduction in their salary. *Than Lwin Khet* is compensating for salary cuts by providing housing and meals to reporters and their families.

For outlets like *The Irrawaddy* and Mizzima, arriving in Thailand after the coup marked a return to exile. Except that, this time, all of Myanmar's independent media came with them, leading to a much more crowded environment. "The funding sources have not changed over the years", *The Irrawaddy's* executive editor Nyein Nyein explained. "Before, there were four or five outlets in exile, and now there are dozens – basically one hand and many mouths". "But we keep going", she added with a note of optimism. "We need money for our survival and families, but even with little income, we will continue".

"In Myanmar, we see so much resilience", noted Annie Zaman, an independent journalist who has worked with media in a number of conflict-affected countries in Asia. Zaman also co-founded the [Exile Hub](#), which has supported hundreds of exiled journalists from Myanmar with emergency funds since the coup. "Not only did the media not stop working, we have seen the creation of many new media houses that didn't exist before the coup. People from Myanmar are used to standing on their own feet. But the needs are immense", she said. Despite the problems, she, too, remains optimistic. "The coup has really changed the face of the media. If we look at it as a glass half-full: the media is in transition, it is in conflict, but it's flourishing".

For all the difficulties they face, none of the exiled editors or journalists I spoke with see laying down their pens as an option. For many of them, the objective is not just to keep their newsrooms running to document the current conflict; it is also about ensuring that independent journalism

remains a pillar of Myanmar's future. "It is our duty to keep working to hand over a real, independent news media to the next generation", said *Myay Latt Athan's* Kyaw Zayar Htun.

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