



## Freedom of the Press 2007

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### *Draft Country Report and Ratings*

May 1, 2007

#### **Burma (Myanmar)**

**Status: Not Free**

**Legal Environment: 30**

**Political Environment: 38**

**Economic Environment: 28**

**Total Score: 96**

The Burmese media environment remained among the most tightly restricted in the world in 2006. The ruling military junta zealously implements a 1996 decree banning speech or statements that “undermine national stability,” and those who publicly express or disseminate views that are critical of the regime are subject to strict penalties, including lengthy prison terms. A number of journalists and writers continued to serve lengthy sentences as a result of expressing dissident views. Other laws require private publications to apply for annual licenses and criminalize the use of unregistered telecommunications equipment, satellite dishes, computers, and software.

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, publications are sometimes forced to carry government-produced articles, and most publications are forced to appear as weeklies or monthlies. A new Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), under the control of the Ministry of Information, was established in April 2005, at which time all publications were required to reregister with the PSRD and provide detailed information about staff, ownership, and financial backing. Under new censorship rules that came into effect in July 2005, media are ostensibly allowed to offer criticism of government projects as long as it is deemed “constructive” and are allowed to report on natural disasters and poverty as long as it does not affect the national interest. Several favored publications were able to take advantage of this greater leniency during the year, although others that aroused the ire of censorship authorities were banned from distributing editions or carrying stories by certain writers.

Both local and foreign journalists’ ability to cover the news is restricted. Two Burmese photojournalists who photographed buildings in the new capital were arrested in March and sentenced to three year prison terms. A few foreign reporters are allowed to enter Burma only on special visas; they are generally subjected to intense scrutiny while in the country and in past years have occasionally been deported. However, some foreign

correspondents were invited to cover the October session of the National Convention. A number of Burmese journalists remain in exile; many work for Burma-focused media outlets based in the neighboring countries of India, Bangladesh, and Thailand. The Burma Media Association reported in February that the government had launched a campaign to track down and imprison people who gave information to international and exile-run media outlets. Several journalists, businessmen, and civil servants have reportedly been interrogated in relation to the program.

The government owns all broadcast media and daily newspapers and exercises tight control over a growing number of privately owned weekly and monthly publications. While official media outlets serve solely as mouthpieces of the state, private media generally avoid covering domestic political news, and the vast majority of journalists practice extensive self-censorship. Many nominally private outlets are owned either by government agents or supporters. A stagnant economy, increased prices for newsprint, and a limited market for advertising revenue (following a 2002 ban on advertising Thai products) continue to threaten the financial viability of the private press. Authorities restrict the importation of foreign news periodicals, and although some people have access to international shortwave radio or satellite television, those caught accessing foreign broadcasts can be arrested, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Nevertheless, as the only source of uncensored information, foreign radio programs produced by the Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and Democratic Voice of Burma services are very popular.

The internet, which operates in a limited fashion in the cities, is expensive, tightly regulated, and censored, with the government controlling all of the several dozen domestic internet service providers. Authorities have upgraded filtering and surveillance technologies, and actively engage in blocking access to websites run by Burmese exile groups and to international email services such as Yahoo, Hotmail, and Gmail.