

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/burma-police-investigations-and-10-07-2014,46614.html>

Asia - Burma

Persecution

Police investigations and prosecutions used to harass news media

10 July 2014

Interrogation by intelligence officials and hostile comments by the president

Until recently, the media freedom situation in Burma was very promising but this is no longer the case. Reporters Without Borders is alarmed by the interrogation of many newspaper editors since 20 June and by the president's recent expressions of hostility to freedom of information.

In a threatening comment on 7 July, President Thein Sein said: "If there is any media that exploits media freedom and causes harm to national security rather than reporting for the sake of the country, effective legal action will be taken against that media."

The latest senior journalists to be detained for questioning were three of the daily *Bi Mon Te Nay's* editors – **Ko Ye Min Aung**, **Ko Win Tin** and **Ko Naing Sai Aung**.

They were taken from their homes on the night of 7 July for interrogation by the Special Intelligence Department, also known as Special Branch, about the previous day's front page, which said Aung San Suu Kyi and community leaders had been elected by the people to be part of an interim government.

Claiming that this front page could "cause misunderstanding among the readers and defamation of the government, undermine the stability of the state, and damage public interest," the authorities announced that *Bi Mon Te Nay* will be prosecuted. Three computers were seized during a raid on the newspaper's offices.

"Amid continuing political, ethnic and religious tension, the actions of the Burmese authorities have betrayed a certain desperation," said Benjamin Ismaïl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk. *"By adopting an authoritarian and repressive attitude with the media, the government is neither protecting national security nor solving problems related to news coverage."*

The editors of at least six publications – *Unity Journal*, *The Irrawaddy*, *Myanmar Post Weekly*, *People Era Weekly*, *The Voice* and *People Era Daily* – were interrogated from 20 to 23 June about their newspapers' income, expenses and circulation.

Journalists' associations have publicly questioned the motives for these systematic investigations, while the Interim Press Council has asked parliament to take a position on their legality.

Deputy interior minister Kyaw Kyaw Htun has tried to be reassuring about the government's intentions, claiming that the authorities are only talking to editors, not interrogating them. "We want to know basic information such as which journals are successful and why. Which journals are not successful and why."

Initial progress followed by decline

Burma saw major progress in freedom of information when the transition to democracy got under way. By 2012, no journalists were in prison and newspapers were no longer subject to prior censorship.

But since [Ma Khine's conviction in December 2013](#), journalists and media have been the target of a growing number of prosecutions. In April, DVB reporter **Zaw Phay** was given a [one-year jail sentence – reduced to three months on appeal](#) – on charges of trespassing on government property and disturbing a civil servant.

The CEO of *Unity Weekly* and four of his journalists were given 10-year jail sentences today on [charges of violating state secrets](#) for reporting the existence of a chemical weapons factory (see separate press release).

After [violence erupted in the eastern state of Arakan in June 2012](#) and again after an [exploratory visit in 2013](#), Reporters Without Borders tried to explain to the Burmese authorities that media freedom should be seen not as the outcome of a transition to democracy but as one of its prerequisites.

Today more than ever, Reporters Without Borders calls on the government to encourage the media to play a vital role by promoting understanding between ethnic groups and a peaceful public discussion of political, ethnic and religious differences. Only the promotion of these values will effectively rein in the extreme polarization and the political manipulation of certain media.

Burma is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#).
