

Human rights violations experienced by exiled journalists

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The gross and systematic human rights violations perpetrated by the Myanmar military transcend the country's geographical and jurisdictional boundaries. Journalists have been a specific target in a widespread effort to suppress criticism and the grievances fuelling opposition to the coup. According to reliable data, the military has detained over 200 journalists, filed charges against 160, and sentenced 76 by the end of 2023, with nine journalists losing their lives.¹ Consequently, a considerable number, potentially exceeding a thousand, have sought refuge from persecution abroad. Despite moving, these journalists continue to grapple with significant human rights challenges. This report aims to outline these challenges.

The report is based on desk research, key informant interviews, and several datasets documenting specific forms of human rights violations. The content of the report is framed by international human rights standards. Each claim of a human rights violation included below is backed up by documented cases that have *not* been provided to protect the identities of individual journalists concerned, most of whom still face severe risks.

“Exile journalist”

One of the initial tactics employed by certain States, such as Myanmar, to infringe upon journalists' rights is the denial of their status. States often refuse to recognise individuals as journalists, or assert that they do not merit such recognition. The Myanmar military, for instance, commonly justifies rights violations by claiming that victims either work for a prohibited or unrecognised media outlet, deeming them non-journalists, or branding them as “unethical” journalists, while in extreme cases labelling them as “spies” or “terrorists.” This denial of status recognition is aggravated when a Myanmar journalist seeks protection from persecution by moving abroad. Neighbouring states, like Thailand, not only fall short in fully acknowledging the journalistic rights of their own citizens but are even less likely to recognise the journalistic status of individuals from Myanmar. Consequently, hundreds of Myanmar journalists based in Thailand since the coup are not officially recognised as journalists by the State, and are denied their associated rights.

Moreover, asylum systems in developed states also prove inadequate in recognising journalistic status. These systems often appear geared towards swiftly and economically integrating

¹ International Center for Not-for-profit Law (2024), [“Journalist Detentions in Myanmar”](#).

individuals into the domestic workforce. While journalists may seek asylum to continue their work free from direct persecution, the system effectively compels them to cease their journalistic activities. Many of Myanmar's leading journalists and human rights defenders have been compelled to halt their work since the coup simply to comply with the demands of such systems.

Furthermore, the term "exile" journalist, though colloquially used to describe those who have gone abroad, can be misleading when establishing status. It implies expulsion or prohibition from the country, either legally or in practice. Additionally, the term "exile," much like "victim," inaccurately suggests that journalists lack agency. Most Myanmar journalists who have moved abroad did so intentionally as a proactive measure to mitigate risks associated with likely persecution under the military. While their choices may have been constrained, they still exercised varying degrees of personal agency. It is useful to note that the only journalists who have been exiled are foreign journalists whose visas have been revoked.

Violence abroad

Journalists who move abroad to escape persecution still face the risk of significant human rights violations. Despite leaving Myanmar, they remain under the shadow of constant threats of reprisals, particularly from the military. This apprehension is deeply rooted in experiences of harassment, threats, and violence from before and during the coup. It is particularly pronounced for the majority of Myanmar journalists abroad who are now based in Thailand and often do not feel safe or secure. Journalists face tangible threats to their physical safety while trying to leave Myanmar, after arriving in Thailand, and when shifting from one place to another within the country. There are consistent reports that the Myanmar military has deployed agents and proxies in Thailand to intimidate, harm, disappear and unlawfully refool journalists to Myanmar.

The threat of military retaliation also extends beyond the journalists themselves to their associates still in Myanmar, including families and friends. The military has persecuted many journalists' associates, including detaining their parents, spouses, and even their young children. Detained associates often report torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Several journalists' associates have been charged with aiding and abetting terrorism or treason, and sentenced to long prison terms. The military has also violently seized journalists' personal and family assets, including evicting their families and confiscating their homes.

The severe risk necessitates journalists adopting heightened security measures for themselves and their associates, impacting daily life and the ability to move freely. Journalists abroad need to adopt discreet lifestyles and change residences frequently, affecting their professional conduct and permeating their personal lives. The threat of military retaliation also adds an emotional and ethical dimension to their work. This fear can significantly impact the journalist's ability to report freely, leading to self-censorship and caution in addressing sensitive topics. Journalists must balance their job's inherent pursuit of truth with concerns for their personal safety and security, as well as that of their associates.

The constant awareness of potential danger to themselves and their associates creates a psychological toll that is substantial, stemming from the trauma of persecution, forced displacement, and ongoing uncertainty. The abrupt separation from Myanmar, often involving

leaving behind friends, family, and familiar surroundings, contributes to a sense of loss and dislocation. The fear of retribution and the challenges of starting anew in a foreign environment amplify stress levels. The psychological strain manifests in various ways, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “Survivor guilt” is also extremely common among journalists. Coping with the emotional burden while maintaining professional integrity adds an additional layer of complexity. Recognition of threats to mental health is low and support systems are limited, compounding the challenges journalists face as they navigate the psychological impact of being abroad.

Legal threats

Journalists abroad encounter a myriad of legal challenges, often related to their immigration status and the conditions under which they sought refuge. The processes involved in obtaining work visas or refugee status are often prolonged and complex, leaving journalists exposed to potential legal vulnerabilities. In the case of Thailand, the country’s failure to ratify the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) means inadequate recognition and protection of the legal rights of Myanmar refugees. This situation has led to regular threats of refoulement made by Thai authorities against Myanmar journalists, with reports indicating instances of actual refoulement.

The challenging environment for journalists abroad is further exacerbated by unsympathetic attitudes, weak rule of law, and prevalent impunity, fostering corruption. Thai police, for instance, frequently demand bribes from Myanmar journalists to avoid arrest, contributing to an atmosphere of coercion. Regular police raids on journalists’ workplaces prompt journalists to take elaborate measures to conceal their activities, hide offices, and frequently change locations. The risk of equipment and device confiscation by Thai authorities looms over journalists.

Legal threats also stem directly from journalists’ work, requiring them to navigate unfamiliar legal systems, understand their rights and protections, and secure legal representation. These obstacles pose significant hindrances to their effective work, forcing a delicate balance between exercising their right to freedom of expression and adhering to host countries’ legal frameworks. In Thailand, Myanmar journalists must cautiously avoid topics implicating Thai authorities or Thai businesses in the Myanmar military’s human rights violations. Journalists must also take care when covering human rights violations against migrant workers in Thailand. Such stories may lead to charges under Thailand’s own draconian laws limiting freedom of expression, including *lèse-majesté*, defamation, and digital offenses.

Myanmar journalists are extremely unlikely to seek legal support when in Thailand, despite some civil society organisations offering it. Journalists focus on personal daily survival and fear retaliation, have limited resources, do not trust legal systems, and have complex immigration status. Journalists prefer to avoid attention and instead use informal resolutions. Corruption is rampant and there are many allegations that police target people from Myanmar in order to seek bribes.

Work barriers

Journalists grapple with significant professional challenges once abroad heightened by the looming threats of retaliatory violence and legal risks. Establishing and financing journalistic operations proves daunting. Post-coup, some journalists resigned and moved to Thailand without clear plans, while others joined colleagues and media outlets leaving. The displacement process incurs substantial expenses, plunging many into severe financial difficulties. The lack of stable employment opportunities in Thailand exacerbates these strains. Donor support, mainly confined to emergency relocation aid, has decreased over the coup period, compromising journalistic independence due to financial insecurity.

Myanmar journalists also face obstacles with the military actively censoring and hindering information flow. Threatened sources and restricted communications technologies make reporting and building networks challenging, especially for journalists abroad. Identifying sources, seeking information, and verifying accuracy remotely pose difficulties. Building trusted networks is crucial, but building trust through face-to-face interaction becomes impractical from abroad. Direct access, vital for photojournalism and videojournalism, is hindered.

Distance limits the diversity of subjects that journalists can realistically cover. While technology aids predominantly urban reporting, it falters in marginalised areas due to slow or absent infrastructure and a lack of digital skills, all made worse by the military's internet shutdowns. Consequently, media focus tends to centralise on mainstream political subjects where sources are easily reached. Reporting on education, health, environment, local economy, women, development, rural affairs, and human rights violations becomes notably more challenging.

Women journalists

Women journalists encounter heightened social and cultural barriers when seeking refuge from persecution abroad, often contending with familial and employer pressures that reinforce traditional gender roles, responsibilities, and expectations. The influence of these norms can be particularly pronounced, leading to greater familial and professional scrutiny. In Myanmar, many women journalists have been coerced into abandoning their work rather than pursuing opportunities abroad due to societal expectations.

The already formidable challenges faced by journalists moving abroad are exacerbated for women, who contend with an increased risk of gender-based violence both within and outside the workplace. Reports indicate a disturbing surge in incidents such as sexual harassment, threats, and assault experienced by women journalists. Regrettably, instances of sexual violence, such as a journalist being raped by a colleague while working in Thailand, underscore the severity of the threats they face. Seeking support or remedies in a foreign context becomes a more daunting task for women journalists, amplifying their vulnerability.

The prevalence of gender-based online harassment adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by women journalists abroad. This includes harassment orchestrated by the military's allies and proxies, contributing to a hostile online environment. The digital landscape, often a vital platform for journalistic expression, becomes a source of distress as women

journalists confront online attacks that can range from sexist comments to threats, impacting their mental well-being and professional confidence.

Moreover, cultural and language disparities, coupled with gender biases, create additional hurdles for women journalists abroad. Navigating a foreign context becomes more intricate as they grapple with societal expectations, language barriers, and the need to assert themselves in a predominantly male-dominated profession. Recognising and addressing these gender-related challenges is imperative to ensure the safety, well-being, and professional success of women journalists abroad.

Media outlet challenges

Over a hundred media outlets, comprising international, national, and sub-national titles, were dedicated to Myanmar before the coup. Since then, at least half have relocated to Thailand, some to India, and others further abroad.² Around 20% of media outlets were banned – effectively exiled – after the military revoked their publishing licenses. The rest moved abroad to avoid military persecution. Notably, about 30% of these outlets had prior experience operating from abroad during earlier military regimes in Myanmar.

Media outlets were unprepared for the crisis, lacking contingency plans and operating on modest budgets. Severe financial constraints, exacerbated by the relocation, prompted many outlets to abandon attempts at mixed-income models, reverting to 100% donor funding. Advertisers are not placing ads and subscribers do not have the means or methods to pay for print, broadcast, or web services. At the same time, donor funding for media operations disappeared after the coup, much of it refocused on emergency relocation support, and has taken time to grow back. Many outlets operating abroad have drastically reduced in size since the coup, while larger outlets have capitalised on their easier access to donors.

Following the coup, there was a significant surge in audience numbers for many media outlets. However, numerous outlets encountered challenges in capitalising on this growth, as most of the benefit is absorbed by Facebook and Google YouTube monopolies. Some outlets lack the requisite experience and skills to effectively monetize through these platforms. Additionally, certain outlets face barriers to monetization as Facebook and Google decline collaboration with Myanmar-based businesses, even those operating abroad. Monetization efforts are further hindered by the suspension of revenue streams when media outlets receive content warnings, frequently issued in response to their conflict-related posts. Moreover, outlets based abroad find themselves unable to leverage certain platform services due to their geolocation outside the target country.

Media outlets face significant legal obstacles to operating abroad. For instance, in Thailand the majority are required to register as businesses, yet the Foreign Business Act (1999, List One) prohibits foreigners from owning a media business or holding a majority of board director positions. Furthermore, Thailand's regulatory framework requires media outlets to invest significant resources in obtaining special licenses under various laws, including the Broadcasting and Television Business Act (2008), Publishing Act (2007), and Film and Video Act (2008).

² International Center for Not-for-profit Law (2024), "[Journalist Detentions in Myanmar](#)".

Consequently, many outlets operated clandestinely, exposing them to significant legal risks due to their unofficial status.

Conclusion

The plight of Myanmar journalists abroad underscores the global nature of gross and systematic human rights violations perpetrated by the military. As documented in this report, Myanmar journalists operating abroad and particularly in Thailand face challenges to exercising their right to freedom of expression that include denial of journalistic status, violence, legal threats, pervasive fear of reprisals, and professional obstacles, with implications extending beyond their individual experiences.

Of particular concern is the impact on information flows, both within Myanmar and globally. The systematic suppression of dissenting voices by the military hampers the free exchange of ideas, hindering public awareness and understanding of the true extent of the crisis. This censorship not only perpetuates a climate of fear within Myanmar but also limits the diversity of perspectives available to the international community.

Recommendations

- Advocate for stronger international mechanisms and protections to ensure the safety and well-being of journalists abroad, including robust legal frameworks, expedited asylum processes, and measures to prevent refoulement.
- Encourage the United Nations and foreign governments to recognise the journalistic status of journalists abroad, irrespective of their country of origin, ensuring their rights to freedom of expression, protection from persecution, and access to legal support.
- Collaborate with host countries to address legal challenges faced by journalists abroad, including issues related to work visas, refugee status, and the ratification of international conventions. Ensure that asylum systems do not contribute to undermining journalism and promoting censorship.
- Call for improved international efforts to combat impunity and corruption in host countries that affect journalists abroad. This includes advocating for fair treatment by local authorities, preventing bribery demands, and ensuring transparent legal processes.
- Establish and fund mental health support programs tailored to the unique needs of journalists abroad, recognising the psychological toll of trauma, displacement, and ongoing uncertainty. Collaborate with civil society and mental health professionals to provide accessible resources.
- Advocate for gender-sensitive policies that address the specific challenges faced by women journalists abroad, including increased protection from gender-based violence, online harassment, and targeted support for their unique needs.
- Rally donors and media development organisations to provide sustained financial support to media outlets abroad, enabling them to operate independently, maintain diverse content, and resist pressures from dominant social media businesses. Ensure that

support is also provided to civil society trying to support media freedom.

- Encourage collaboration between international media development organisations and media outlets abroad to foster partnerships, share resources, and provide mentorship, contributing to the sustainability and growth of independent journalism.
- Invest in comprehensive digital security training programmes for journalists abroad to equip them with the skills needed to navigate the challenges of the digital landscape and protect themselves from online threats.