



Still too many swords of Damocles to be free

Burma's first newspapers came into existence more than 170 years ago. From its beginnings as an independent institution, however, the status of Burma's media ironically declined after the country achieved independence from colonial rule. Freedom of expression was gradually curtailed by laws, decrees and rules issued by successive governments.

During the era of the Revolutionary Council and later the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), long before the 1988 mass uprising, restrictions had become more blatant. The situation went from bad to worse after 1988, following the rise of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and its successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

In the wake of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, when information technology played a major role in disseminating information, the SPDC enacted the notorious Electronics Act. With this draconian law, it imposed harsh prison sentences on those who used electronic media to expose the regime's ruthless crackdown on protesters.

We take note of the fact that the present government is making efforts for the emergence of a new media law and that there has been a conditional relaxation of some restrictive laws. However, it should not be forgotten that our country still ranks among the worst in the world when it comes to press freedom.

It is important that the media law in Burma/Myanmar should not only focus on freedom of the press and freedom of expression, but also constitute a safeguard for the security and rights of members of the media community.

As such, experienced Burmese media figures, both at home and abroad, as well as specialists from the international community who advocate press freedom, media ethics and the protection of journalists, should be invited for consultation before any new law is enacted.

It is also imperative that the role of both national and ethnic media be taken into consideration, given the paramount need to resolve the issues of civil war and the Right of Self Determination, in order to forge national reconciliation and peaceful co-existence among the diverse peoples of the country.

However, at present, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (PSRD) is still very much alive. Additionally, restrictions on reporting of events taking place in the ethnic areas are still in effect.

We therefore earnestly urge all our Burmese media brethren, both at home and abroad, to join hands in working toward the emergence of a transparent and free society.

As for the freedom of the media, we believe the following factors should be seriously considered and implemented:

In drafting a new media law, the participation of Burmese and ethnic journalists as well as those from the foreign media is necessary.

1. The above-mentioned laws and restrictions on the media, imposed by various state organs, should be totally repealed.
2. The Burmese media, both at home and abroad, should work in unity and determination for press freedom.
3. The role of ethnic media is especially important in the pursuit of national reconciliation and peaceful co-existence.
4. The role of the diaspora media that has been publishing independent, honest and incisive reports will remain indispensable in the ongoing endeavor to create an open, free and democratic society. As such, support for the diaspora media should be maintained.

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