

“ATHAN
312”



January to March 2026

UPDATE ON
JOURNALISM AND MEDIA
SAFETY IN MYANMAR

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Background History of Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization

Athan – a non-profit organization for the Freedom of Expression Movement in Myanmar, was founded by youth activists on 15th January 2018 and intends to ensure the right to freedom of expression to practice in society. Athan, a research-based organization, was established by combining two organizations, (RTTL) Research Team for Telecommunications Laws and (WSJ) We Support Journalists, to promote Freedom of Expression with three core approaches – research, advocacy, and awareness-raising. Our organization continuously researches and investigates laws, customs, regulations, and case studies that oppress freedom of expression and works on legal reform according to democracy standards, campaigns, and lobbying to achieve a broader level of freedom of expression in respective country categories based on our research and investigation.

Athan and its founder, Maung Saungkha, earned the Human Rights Tulip Award from the Netherlands in December 2018. Athan's ambition for Myanmar is to become a society with complete freedom of expression, which is one of the democratic standards.

HIGHLIGHTS

In the first quarter of 2026, seven journalists were released under amnesty in March which was marked as Peasant’s Day. While the military junta made no new arrests during this period, one journalist was arrested by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin state and released after a day of detention. There was no new conviction. By the end of March 2026, 19 journalists remain in jail (*As of April 17, after the release of documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe, the latest count of those still in prison is 18*). Overall, 216 journalists have been arrested since the coup, with 18 remaining in detention and 13 have died. Of these fatalities, the military junta is responsible for nine and unidentified armed groups are responsible for four. There have been four documented incidents of journalists being arrested by resistance forces.

The most striking trend in early 2026 is the apparent decline in arrests of journalists that came along with orchestrated political change by the junta. On the surface, this could be interpreted as an improvement in press freedom conditions. However, the reduction in arrests reflects not a decrease in repression, but a shift in its form. Years of arrests, prosecutions, and harsh sentencing have already established a climate of fear.

Imprisoned photojournalist Myat Thu Kyaw has reportedly suffered physical violence while serving an eight-and-a-half-year sentence in Insein Prison. The brief detention of editor Ta Lin Maung by the Kachin Independence Army underscores the recurring threats reporters face from non-state actors over their public commentary.



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The military junta is using a fake “openness” to hide its ongoing crackdown on the press. While they have released some high-profile detainees and allowed restricted access to state-vetted international outlets, the regime is effectively using the press as a prop for its own legitimacy rather than a watchdog for the public. In reality, the media is under heavy control in a new form; independent journalists face constant spying not just by military but also by pro-military journalists and civilian actors, the Myanmar Journalist Association (MJA) reinforces compliant journalist practices, and many reporters are quitting out of fear. This creates a dangerous situation where the truth is hidden, and the public can no longer access reliable information about what is actually happening in the country.

There was no new arrest by the military junta in the first quarter of 2026.

RELEASES

Those who released from prison in March's Amnesty



1 Hmu Yadanar Khet Moh Moh Tun, a photojournalist from Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, was arrested during a protest on Pan Pingyi Road, Kyimyindaing township, Yangon in December 2021 where she and her colleague, Kaung Sett Lin were both seriously injured from a military vehicle rammed by junta forces. She was sentenced a total of 13 years in prison; three under section 505(a) of the Penal Code and ten years under section 50 (j) of the Counter Terrorism Law.

2 Myat Kalay Aka Naing Win Tun, an editor from the Mandalay Free Press, was arrested in Mandalay in January 2023, and sentenced to seven years in prison under Section 52(c) of the Counter Terrorism Law.



3 Than Htike Myint, a journalist from the Myaelatt Athan, was arrested in Myanaung Township, Ayewaddy Region in February 2025 and he was convicted under section 52(a) of the Counter Terrorism Law.

4 Yan Naing Soe, a freelance journalist from DVB, was arrested in Monywa, Sagaing region in October 2023 and sentenced four years in prison under section 52(a) of the Counter Terrorism Law.





5 **Thura Aung**, a journalist from the People Voice, was arrested in Taunggyi, Shan state in November 2023 and sentenced three years in prison under section 52 (a) of the Counter Terrorism Law. According to a verified source, he was released on March 5 from Nyaungshwe prison.

6 **Than Myat Soe Aka Min Thiha**, a former journalist from the Myanmar Herald was arrested in December 2023 and sentenced under the Counter Terrorism Law.



7 **Maung Maung Myo**, a freelance journalist, arrested on May 10, 2022 on the express from Myawaddy to Mandalay, Karen state, then charged under 52 (a) of Counter Terrorism law. He was released in March according to a verified source.

SECOND TIME ARREST OF KACHIN JOURNALIST BY ETHNIC ARMED GROUP

Tar Lin Maung, an editor from Uru Daily News (former CDM journalist), was arrested in Saing Taung village, Hpakant Township by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). He was released the following day, though the reason for his arrest remains unclear; some speculate it may be linked to his social media posts about local taxation or resource collection. This was not his first arrest—he was previously detained by the same group and released after a month of detention.

A resistance group member in Hpakant commented *“Regarding the arrest of Ko Tar Lin Maung, he is someone working in the media sector. He has also stood with the resistance and collaborated with groups such as the KIO/KIA and KPDF. He has been actively contributing to the revolution. What I want to say is that, if any issue arises, whether it involves an armed group or any other organisation, it would be better to invite and question the person respectfully, rather than arresting and assaulting them. Such actions harm the image of everyone involved.”*

Moreover, U Toe Gyi, a local journalist from the Upper Burma News Agency (UBNA) who was arrested by people defence forces in Madaya township, still remains in detention. There have been four documented incidents of journalists being arrested by non-military forces: 1) Tar Lin Maung and Naung Yoe, journalists based in Hpakant, Kachin State, were arrested by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in September 2024, 2) Mudra, a Rakhine-based journalist, was arrested by Arakan Army (AA) in September 2025, 3) the case of U Toe Gyi and 4) Tar Lin Maung’s second arrest by the KIA.



These incidents highlight the persistent constraints on independent journalism in Myanmar, where fear and pressure stem not only from the military but also from revolutionary and ethnic armed actors. It also reflects a fragile media environment in which reporters must navigate competing power structures and risks, even within resistance-controlled areas.

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Table 1. Number in Monitoring Media Repression

	January to March 2026	2026	Since the 2021 coup as of March 2026)		
Journalists and news workers			Total	Women	Men
Arrested	-		216	28	188
In detention/serving jail sentences	-	-	18*	2	16
Released	7	8	193	27	166
Died	-	-	13	-	13
Convicted	-	-	86	14	72
News and other licences					
News licences cancelled	-	-	16		
Printing/publishing permits revoked	-	-	12		

Note - The total numbers of released and detained individuals are up to date as of 17 April, including the release of a documentary filmmaker Shin Dawe.

**The number of detained and released is up to date, including four individuals who were released last year but got notified this year.*

THE JUNTA'S SELECTIVE STRATEGY OF RELEASE

At the start of 2026, the military leadership appeared to be consolidating power while trying to gain regional and international legitimacy. This included moves toward staged elections held in phases across December and January, alongside efforts to convene a military-backed parliament. Within this broader narrative of a transition to civilian rule, the junta released thousands of detainees, including some journalists, framing it as a sign of change.

But on closer look, this is less about genuine reform and more about control taking a different shape. The releases have been selective. While some high-profile detainees were freed, many others remain behind bars under the same charges. Even those prosecuted under serious provisions like Sections 50(j) and 52(a) of the Counter-Terrorism Law were among those released, while others facing identical charges continue to be detained. This suggests that decisions are not being guided by legal consistency, but by political calculation.

There is also a clear pattern in who gets released. Journalists and public figures with greater visibility or international recognition appear more likely to be freed. This allows the junta to draw attention to these cases and present an image of progress, while keeping less visible detainees in prison without the same level of scrutiny. In this sense, the releases function more as a public relations strategy than a meaningful shift. Many journalists remain detained, and the broader system of repression remains firmly in place.



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VIOLENCE INSIDE THE PRISON

Myat Thu Kyaw who was arrested in January 2023 while covering news on Pansodan road in Yangon, was reportedly subjected to violence while detained in Insein Prison, one of Myanmar’s most notorious detention facilities. He is currently serving a total sentence of eight and a half years: three years in prison under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code and an additional five-and-a-half-year sentence under the Counter-Terrorism Law.

Along with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), fellow journalists called for the immediate release of photojournalist Myat Thu Kyaw. Shawn Crispin, CPJ’s Senior Southeast Asia Representative, said *“The physical abuse of Myat Thu Kyaw is yet another disturbing example of the dire conditions faced by imprisoned journalists in Myanmar. CPJ urges Myanmar authorities to ensure his safety and health, to end all forms of mistreatment during detention, and to unconditionally release him and all journalists detained in connection with their work.”*

Reports of abuse inside the prison raise serious concerns about the treatment of detained journalists, including the use of violence, lack of due process, and limited access to legal or medical support. His case reflects broader patterns in Myanmar, where journalists face not only arbitrary arrest and harsh sentencing but also physical risks.



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ELECTORAL REPORTING

At the same time, the junta had managed how its planned elections were seen from the outside. Reports said that around 225 journalists from 61 international media outlets were allowed to cover the process. But it's not entirely clear who these outlets are: some appear to be closely aligned with the regime or operating under rebranded identities. Even for those granted access, the conditions have been tightly controlled. Independent journalists have reportedly not been allowed to freely photograph polling stations, and there have been accounts of surveillance, including an international reporter being followed for long periods.

Independent journalists experienced a very contrast to the relatively open media environment during the 2020 elections, when independent domestic and international outlets were able to conduct more comprehensive reporting. Limited access is granted to create the appearance of openness, while substantive scrutiny is prevented. In effect, it enables the junta to point to international media presence as a sign of legitimacy, while still keeping a firm grip on what can actually be seen and reported.

Moreover, the election protection law that the military junta implemented last year July is a pre-set oppressive tool against dissent and independence electoral reporting. The Assistance Association for Myanmar-based Independent Journalists (AAMIJ) News has been sued for its investigative report on Facebook alleging that U Aung Soe, a candidate from the junta-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) involved in drug trafficking. The military arrested over 400 individuals and sued organisations including media outlets and armed forces, under the Law.

Ko Nay Aung, editor-in-chief of the Nation Voice Myanmar media outlet states that *"The SAC-organised election was, as everyone knows, largely staged. Independent media were completely not allowed to report. There were only regime-controlled media outlets and invited international media used for display purposes."* (Read more about electoral reporting in "voices" section)

NEW TACTICS IN MEDIA CONTROL

Media control has been taking in a new form which voluntary pro-military alliances and civilian actors have involved in scrutinising independent journalists. The Myanmar Journalist Association (MJA), the only journalist association inside the country that was re-registered under the new Organisation Registration Law enacted in October 2022, has been formed with pro-military journalists with branch organisations in regions and states across the country. Local voices reaffirm that pro-military domestic groups, those named as journalist association members, are actively monitoring and reporting on independent journalists, particularly those returning to work inside the country.

The Myanmar Journalist Association (MJA) also conducted parliamentary reporting training from March 10 to 12, 2026, with approval from the Ministry of Information. Moreover, in January 2026, both the Myanmar Press Council (MPC) and the Myanmar Journalists Association (MJA) released statement supporting the Myanmar delegation at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which was led by U Ko Ko Hlaing, a senior minister from the Myanmar junta.



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Moreover, the implementation of mandatory phone and SIM card registration digital surveillance threatens more to the already critical dangers faced by independent journalists. The military intends to build up the Central Equipment Identity Register (CEIR) system which will link specific mobile devices to individual users, and allow the regime's tracking mechanism to be more efficient. The military has already actively used mobile phone inspections at security checkpoints to identify, and detain journalists. For example, in October 2025, Ko Min Lwin a journalist from the People Spring news outlet, was arrested and abused after he was inspected his phone during a security check. Thus, being able to track an individual user's precise location through their SIM card would amplify the already existing risks of ground reporting because many independent news outlets and exiled journalists rely entirely on digital communications to coordinate reporting, safely transfer funds, and ensure their physical safety.

SHRINKING MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

No one can deny that Myanmar’s media and journalist industry and information access is the danger of shrinking or becoming totally authoritative. Journalists are abandoning the profession either transitioning to other sectors or fleeing the country, driven by the junta’s arrests, torture, and draconian sentencing. Compounding this is a severe funding crisis within the media and development sectors in recent years. Both exiled and local journalists face intense financial pressure and dwindling professional opportunities, which leads to a steady erosion of independent media capacity.

For the public, the shrinking space for independent journalism reduces access to reliable information on issues such as conflict, governance, and humanitarian conditions. This creates the risk of premature engagement or normalisation without meaningful improvements in media freedom or human rights.



Independent journalists had no access at all to election reporting.

This is an interview with

Nay Aung
 Editor-in-chief
 The Nation Voice Myanmar



Where did you do your reporting during the election period?

I covered the election in Magway and Sagaing regions. In Sagaing, around 70% of the work was done in areas under revolutionary control, and the remaining 30% was in areas under the SAC administration. In Magway, I also reported from areas under mixed control by both sides.

Why did you decide to do election reporting?

As journalists, our job is to document history in a rough sense—to record events as they happen. At the same time, we provide information that helps the public make decisions about the future. Even if it is a flawed or “fake” election, or any kind of election, it is still an issue that concerns citizens. So

our role is to provide information so that citizens can make informed decisions. In the areas we covered, some places could not hold elections while others did. Our work was mainly to report on these situations for the benefit of local communities.

When doing election reporting, what safety procedures did your newsroom put in place for journalists? And how did you prepare to protect both journalists and the news content?

Our newsroom has long been using safety procedures when working in these regions. These protocols were not only for the election period but were already in place before. At the same time, since the military council issued laws such as the death

penalty and life imprisonment related to election reporting, we had to be even more cautious than usual.

Safety procedures were necessary both in liberated areas and elsewhere. When we report on elections, different armed groups and other stakeholders may have different concerns or opposing views, which could create risks or misunderstandings. Therefore, journalists in liberated areas especially had to take extra care regarding safety.

The reality is that we had to work in a way where it was not always clear who was contributing to the Nation Voice, and we had to operate under that uncertainty. At the same time, journalists in SAC-controlled areas faced similar security risks. We prepared from different perspectives and approaches.

In terms of editorial processes, we were also careful to protect sources and prevent identification of where information came from, so that news reports would not expose individuals or trace back to specific contributors.

During election reporting, what difficulties and challenges did you face in the field? Did the safety procedures you prepared in advance prove necessary in practice?

Even before the election period, two journalists who were collecting information on the ground

were killed in an airstrike. This happened prior to the election. Rather than being a risk from reporting itself, it occurred in a border-like area that is not fully under control by either the SAC or resistance forces. These are areas where phone connectivity is available, and while they were working, an airstrike took place and both lost their lives.

In SAC-controlled areas, we did not experience direct harm. We had to prepare in great detail. During the election period itself, we did not face extremely severe incidents. We had already prepared in advance such as assigning responsibilities for election day coverage and planning how reporting would be done. So we were able to manage those challenges. But we must understand that journalists in general are exposed to risks such as airstrikes, and we unfortunately lost colleagues in such circumstances.

We also had field offices, and we had already prepared bomb shelters and other protective measures before the election. These safety procedures were systematically implemented in advance.

During election days, were you able to report freely, or did you have to report under surveillance? How was the reporting environment?

To be honest, we had to work in a way that was not openly visible. Our reporters and contributors observed the situation by passing near polling stations. Some people were also in

situations where they were required to vote, and they gathered information while going to vote with their families.

At the same time, we had a strong ground network, which allowed us to collect information and verify it effectively. So we were not simply reporting freely as independent journalists in the field, we had to operate carefully and discreetly.

Were there SAC-aligned media at polling stations? Were independent media allowed access? What was the situation for other media?

The SAC-organised election was, as everyone knows, largely staged. Independent media were completely not allowed to report. There were only regime-controlled media outlets and invited international media used for display purposes. That was all.

Independent journalists had no access at all to election reporting.

Given different viewpoints and risks, when you decided to go into the field yourselves, did you face threats or pressure from the SAC side or even from resistance groups?

There were many rounds of negotiation. Many journalists did not initially accept this assignment, so we had to negotiate internally in the newsroom first. On one hand, this was our job – we needed to do it. On the other hand, journalism carries a responsibility to provide accurate information

to the public, so we had to explain and reach an understanding among ourselves.

We also had to coordinate with nearby resistance groups and authorities in areas under their control. Since we were publishing news on the election, there were risks even in the dissemination stage. So we had to carefully explain and negotiate these issues. We also avoided using strongly loaded adjectives such as “fake” or “terrorist,” even though they are commonly used terms. Instead, we followed professional journalistic ethics strictly.

Fortunately, many resistance groups and local communities understood our work well and trusted us. They understood that we were not working for propaganda but to inform the public. We are grateful for that. It allowed us to continue our work. Journalists even had to relocate to Thailand to continue working safely. In reality, journalists need to stay close to the ground, and we had to constantly explain and negotiate these conditions until things became workable.

What changes do you expect in media freedom and journalist repression in the coming years?

Media freedom cannot be seen in the same way from all perspectives. For truly independent media, real media freedom is unlikely to be achieved in the near future. Because this is an armed conflict, there are competing interests, and reporting on those interests involves risks. Independent journalists

will continue to face danger not only from the SAC but potentially also from resistance-controlled areas. The challenges will continue.

On the other hand, the SAC also operates its own controlled media inside the country. These media outlets continue functioning normally and are used to show that “media exists” in Myanmar. They also invite international media selectively for appearances. So that system will likely continue. At the same time, journalists in resistance-controlled areas also face pressures. So, we estimate that the possibility of truly free journalism remains extremely limited.

Some journalists have been released, and some have left the profession. How does this affect newsroom operations on the ground?

Recently, one of our editors at National Voice was released from prison after more than three years under detention. However, even after release, he has not been able to return to work. This is due to trauma from imprisonment, personal circumstances, and family responsibilities. At the same time, the newsroom does not have enough resources to provide full support or relocation assistance.

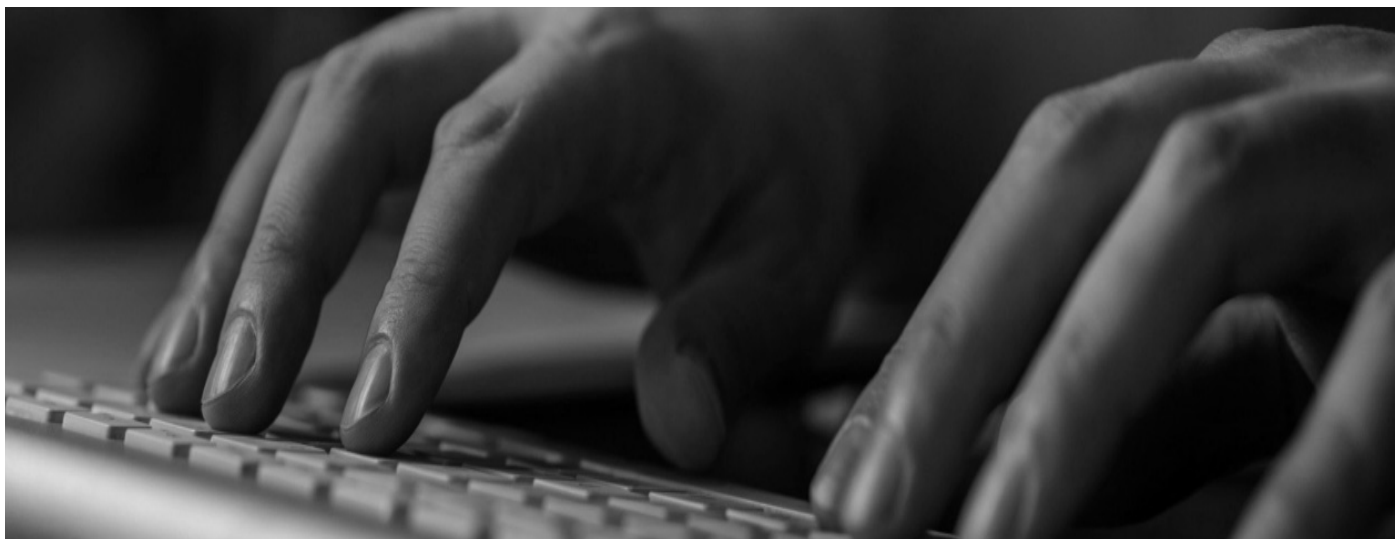
For released journalists, returning to work is extremely difficult. Even if they relocate to countries like Thailand, they still struggle—having to rebuild sources, understand the evolving political situation again, and re-establish their reporting

networks. Ideally, journalists should never be arrested in the first place. But once they are released, the possibility of returning to journalism is very limited due to multiple constraints.

Finally, as World Press Freedom Day is approaching, do you have any message?

Journalists are part of those who build democracy. Freedom of the press exists only where democracy exists. Journalists are like fish, and democracy is like water—without water, fish cannot survive. We are people who truly need and want democracy. Those fighting for democracy and those fighting for press freedom share the same goal.

However, there are misunderstandings, differences of opinion, and sometimes tensions between journalists and political actors or groups with different interests. Still, the fundamental goal is the same. I want everyone to understand that we are all working toward democracy and the right to free expression.



ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This is an update on the challenges and threats to press freedom and media independence in Myanmar, safety issues around journalists and individuals in the news profession, and relevant events and issues in the country's news and information environment since the military coup of 1 February 2021. This brief is produced using verified information, including the tracking of incidents and discussions with journalists and media professionals, to document and provide context for a better understanding of the country's news and information situation.

Some definitions

In the monitoring work for this series of updates, an incident is a verified event that involves action against a journalist due to his or her journalistic activities or background, such as arrest, detention, prosecution, death, torture and acts of violence, surveillance, harassment and/or threats.

Incidents include similar actions against other individuals working in independent newsrooms and news-related operations, such as news management and other administrative, creative and support personnel who are part of the production and distribution of journalistic products. They are called "media workers" in these monitoring updates.

Also included in incidents are actions taken against newsrooms, news organisations and their websites and online spaces, independent associations of professional journalists and press clubs. These include the cancellation of publishing licences, raids on news outlets' premises and their prosecution and the blocking of websites.

In this series of updates, a journalist is an individual who is engaged in gathering and reporting, taking photographs or video footage, editing or publishing and presenting news that has been produced using professional and independent journalistic standards and methods.

A journalist may be in news work as a livelihood, whether paid or not, in different types of media and platforms, and have different types of professional arrangements, such as being full-time staff, freelance, a stringer or occasional contributor.

Included in the journalists covered by the monitoring work are individuals who have been described as being former journalists or who have left their news organisations. This is for two reasons: first, being or having been a journalist in Myanmar by itself is a risk, and persons have been targeted or arrested because of a past affiliation with a news outlet; second, safety considerations can require an individual's description as a former journalist.

“Journalists” in this monitoring work likewise include citizen journalists, given that many news organisations in Myanmar work with them on a regular basis. In the Myanmar context, the term “citizen journalist” typically refers to a person who contributes news – whether in the form of raw content, including photographs or video, or full stories. He or she may or may not be paid for contributions and may or may not have had some news training.

After the 2021 coup, news outlets began using material sent voluntarily by citizen journalists after restrictions and arrests made news-related activities dangerous for professional journalists.

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