More a Red Herring Than a Harbinger of Democracy: Myanmar's Experiment With Media Freedom and Domestic Media Coverage of the Rohingya

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Fostering media freedom has long been considered a means of spreading democracy. Yet, we know little about what happens to journalists and news coverage when governments ease media restrictions. How do journalists adjust when the rules surrounding journalism shift from clear and restrictive to unclear and seemingly less restrictive? Myanmar offers an opportunity to investigate these questions. Its initial steps toward democratization included the abolishment of overt censorship that coincided with an increase in violence toward the Rohingya. We focus on the efforts of a domestic, privately owned newspaper to cover this violence critically. Our comparison of a privately owned newspaper and a state-run newspaper shows that the private paper initially pushed for government accountability but eventually changed course and became more similar to the state-run paper. This study provides a snapshot of how media liberalization during political transition can be undercut if media freedom is not guaranteed and censorship lingers.

Keywords: media freedom, censorship, Myanmar, Rohingya, democratization, Facebook

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Since World War II, fostering media freedom in nondemocratic countries has been considered a means for spreading democracy around the world (Blanchard, 1986). The assumption is that free and independent news media will hold governments accountable and provide people with the information they need to select their leaders (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Indeed, just as they hold rigged elections, some authoritarian leaders will permit some press freedom to gain legitimacy on the world stage.[2] Although the push to export media freedom to developing and nondemocratic countries continues, we know very little about what happens to journalists and news coverage when governments ease media restrictions. How do journalists adjust when the rules surrounding journalism shift from clear and restrictive to unclear and seemingly less restrictive? The case of Myanmar offers a unique opportunity to investigate these questions.

From 1962, when the military seized control of the country, to 2012, Myanmar's media were among the most restricted in the world. Most media were government owned or government controlled. Then in 2010, the military held elections for the first time in two decades, and in 2012 the government ceased prepublication censorship and began permitting privately owned newspapers. In 2014, the people of Myanmar gained access to domestic and international news media through the Internet. Access to the Internet—especially through Facebook on smartphones—increased dramatically during that time. The diffusion of the Internet and Facebook in Myanmar coincided with increased violence against the Rohingya (Brooten, McElhone, & Venkiteswaran, 2019; Fink, 2018; Whitten-Woodring, Kleinberg, Thawnghmung, & Thitsar, 2020). The plight of the Rohingya provided both an opportunity and a challenge for Myanmar's emerging independent news media to hold their government accountable for the Rohingya crisis.

In this article, we examine private and state-run print media coverage of the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar to better understand how journalists working for independent media handled this challenge compared with those working for state-run media. We conduct a framing analysis to assess how the content and tone of news coverage of the Rohingya in the *Myanmar Times*, a major privately owned daily newspaper, changed from January 2016 to September 2017, and compare this coverage with that of the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, a major state-run daily newspaper, during the same period.

Our analysis of how these two newspapers framed the Rohingya serves as a case study of media during democratic transition. Our data stem from a period of democratization when the government shifted from direct control to indirect control of domestic media in Myanmar (Freedomhouse, 2018). In this article, we examine what happens when media censorship is relaxed in a country with a history of colonialism, military rule, and ethnic conflict. We examine whether the press can provide the kind of information that citizens need to hold their government and the military accountable during a time of democratic transition. Furthermore, we examine what happens to journalists and their coverage when they provide this information. The Rohingya crisis is a good test case for these research questions because the conflict received significant international media attention, human rights organizations monitored the situation closely, and members of the Rohingya were able to document the conflict using new media technologies. Thus, a clear alternative to the government-issued narrative existed at the time, and with that, the opportunity for meaningful dissent.

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[2] An example is Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, who has consistently held elections and tolerated some media freedom since he became president in 1986.

We find that the *Myanmar Times* initially covered the Rohingya in a more empathetic and favorable way than the *Global New Light*. However, after the firing of a *Myanmar Times* journalist who reported evidence of Rohingya women having been raped by Myanmar's military (Holmes, 2016), we find that coverage at the private paper changed—it became less supportive of the Rohingya and more similar to the coverage of the state-run paper. We conclude that the media never transitioned to full independence and that government pressure caused the media to refrain from critiquing the military in a meaningful way. Our study offers three takeaways: First, we provide a snapshot of how media independence can be undermined. Second, the chilling effect of the firing of a journalist illustrates the effectiveness of covert censorship once overt censorship has ceased. And third, the inability of private media to report truthfully on the persecution of the Rohingya likely contributed to an atmosphere in which violence and discrimination against the Rohingya were tolerated. Taken together, our research contributes to (1) literature on the relationship between media freedom, democratization, and democratic backsliding in the Global South, (2) media studies scholarship on journalism in nondemocracies, and (3) human rights studies on the role of media in repression and dissent.

Media Freedom, Political Transition in Myanmar, and the Rohingya

The introduction of media freedom has been heralded as an essential first step to democracy (Blanchard, 1986; Cooper, 1956; Siebert, Peterson, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). Exporting press freedom as a mechanism to spread democracy gained momentum following World War II. There was a push to include provisions for international press freedom in the treaties ending the war (Blanchard, 1986); however, these efforts were unsuccessful. Even so, the media assistance programs sponsored by the United States and Western Europe aimed at promoting media freedom in the Global South provide evidence of the continued effort to export media freedom.

Myanmar's military government's cessation of prepublication censorship in 2012 and the reemergence of privately owned daily newspapers were viewed as harbingers of democracy (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2012). After all, for five decades, Myanmar's government had upheld one of the world's most restricted media systems (Whitten-Woodring & Van Belle, 2014). But starting in November 2010, when a military-backed civilian government replaced direct military rule, important changes pointing toward increasing media freedom ensued. Political prisoners were released, including journalists and online writers, and the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, which was responsible for censoring the media, was closed (Brooten, 2016). Thus, journalists seemed to experience more freedom to cover controversial topics, but the extent to which they were able and willing to do so remained untested.

Given the 2021 military coup, it is important to note that the Tatmadaw (the military's official name) controlled every step in this seemingly democratic transition such that it was imposed rather than negotiated (Stokke & Aung, 2020). The Tatmadaw-crafted 2008 Constitution created a "military-state" (Crouch, 2019, p. 11) in which the military retained tutelary powers and continued to rule indirectly (Bünte, 2021). In short, with the Tatmadaw "caretaking" democratization (Egreteau, 2016, p. 14), Myanmar's transition to what the military characterized as a "discipline-flourishing democracy" (Egreteau, 2016, p. 4) resulted in the election of a civilian government that was substantially constrained by the military. At the beginning of this transition, the degree to which civil liberties would be institutionalized was uncertain.

Though Myanmar did not have full media freedom, the rules appeared to have changed. Yet, the extent of these changes was unclear. Previously, journalists who criticized the government had faced harsh punishment, but in 2012 and 2013 there were no reports of journalists being imprisoned or killed in connection to their work (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). In 2014, however, 10 journalists were arrested on anti-state charges, and one freelance journalist was killed in custody following critical reporting. But in 2015, as opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won control of the parliament, there were no new arrests or killings (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). Thus in 2016, as Suu Kyi became the de facto leader of the country, Myanmar's media freedom remained relatively untested. While overt censorship had ceased, there were no clear rules for engagement for journalists.

Certainly, the media in Myanmar faced significant obstacles during the political transition. Though it ceased prepublication censorship, the military retained control over the state media (Brooten, 2016). Past censorship remained relevant as journalists and news organizations attempted to test and expand press freedom while avoiding punishment. It is clear that reporters had access to information and data about the violence against the Rohingya—even in the face of information withholding (see Lynn, 2020), but it is not clear whether the private media offered or tried to offer a critical account of the events in Northern Rakhine state. Were the privately owned media just as anti-Rohingya as the state media (see Lee, 2016; Thu, 2019)? Or did the private media try to change how people viewed the Rohingya? To what extent did journalists working for the private newspapers exercise their freedom? In this study, we examine how two papers—a state-run paper and a privately owned paper—covered the Rohingya. While we expected that the state-run paper would serve as the government mouthpiece, we wanted to compare this coverage with that of the private newspaper. We investigated the following research questions to assess whether the privately owned paper pushed the boundaries of press freedom in Myanmar:

RQ1:   *Did the reporting of the Rohingya conflict differ in framing and tone between the privately owned paper and the state-run paper?*

RQ2:   *How did the coverage of the repression of the Rohingya change over time?*

RQ3:   *Did the firing of a journalist at the* Myanmar Times *affect coverage of the conflict?*

Case Selection:
What We Learned from Myanmar's Media Coverage of the Rohingya

Coverage of the Rohingya conflict offers an important window into Myanmar's incomplete transition to democracy, which was cut short in early 2021 when the military resumed control through a coup. The Rohingya, who are Muslim and primarily reside in Rakhine State, trace their roots to the colonial era in Myanmar and have citizenship documents dating to Myanmar's independence from the British in 1948 (Fink, 2018). As an ethnic and religious minority, the Rohingya have been repressed in Myanmar for decades. In the late 1970s, more than 200,000 Rohingya fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh when the government launched Operation Naga Min (Dragon King) to screen out illegal immigrants. "Refugees reported that the Burmese army had forcibly evicted them and alleged widespread army brutality, rape and murder" (Human

Rights Watch, 2000, Section II, para. 9). In the early 1990s, the military drove out more than 250,000 Rohingya using similar repressive tactics in Operation Pyi Thaya (Clean and Beautiful Nation).

In addition to these brutal campaigns, both the military and quasi-civilian governments employed a series of laws and administrative actions that eroded the rights of the Rohingya. The 1982 Citizenship Law established different levels of citizenship, with full citizenship constrained to descendants of people who lived in the territory that became Myanmar before 1823. Even lower levels of citizenship were limited to members of what the government identified as "taingyintha" (meaning "national races"), a list of ethnic groups that excluded the Rohingya (Cheesman, 2017a).[3] This "erasure" of their citizenship, in combination with repressive laws like the 2015 "Religious Conversion Bill" that furthered discrimination based on religion, rendered the Rohingya stateless and, over time, facilitated the government's dispossession and segregation of the Rohingya, effectively driving out and "erasing Rohingya from the physical landscape" (Maclean, 2019, p. 91).

In 2012, as tensions grew between the Buddhists and Muslims, violence erupted in Rakhine State. The government began labeling the Rohingya as "Bengalis," thereby reframing them as illegal residents (Fink, 2018). During the 2014 census, the Rohingya were unable to participate unless they used the term "Bengali" (Brooten et al., 2019). Thus, the name "Rohingya" has political significance in Myanmar. It implies recognition of this group as a valid ethnic group within Myanmar. Accordingly, the military, the state, and the state media referred to the Rohingya as "Bengalis" or used slurs like "Kalar" (meaning "Indian"; Lee, 2019). In short, as Myanmar seemed to move toward democracy, the Rohingya no longer had citizenship or legal rights in Myanmar, and the group became increasingly vulnerable to persecution, violence, and displacement (Thawnghmung, 2014; Wade, 2017).

In 2016, as violence in Rakhine State intensified, the military began what it termed a "clearance operation," demolishing Rohingya villages, killing people, and raping women (Human Rights Council, 2018). In 2017, in response to attacks by a Rohingya armed group known as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on military posts, the military attacked the Rohingya, destroying hundreds of villages, killing thousands, and forcing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee (Human Rights Council, 2018).

Although the Rohingya have faced violence for decades, their recent repression is distinct in its intensity and has been characterized as genocide by human rights organizations and several states, including the United States. Zin (2015) argued that the move toward democratization amplified polarization in the country, especially among Buddhist groups, the government, and various ethnic groups, causing numerous factions to defend their interests, and left the Rohingya without a political ally. Similarly, Lee (2016) noted that the steps toward democratization opened a window for ultranationalist Buddhists, who are often anti-Rohingya, to try and assert their influence over the government and military.

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[3] Cheesman (2017a) traces the genealogy of the taingyintha and finds that though it emerged during the British colonial period, it did not develop its current meaning and political salience until it was reinterpreted in a 1964 speech by General Ne Win, in which he called for the need to unite the taingyintha "inhabiting the Union of Burma" to work for "the good of the Union and the good of all its inhabitant races" (Ne Win, 1965, as cited in Cheesman, 2017a, p. 465).

Coverage of the Rohingya crisis was an important test for Myanmar's media because holding the government accountable, especially regarding human rights, is viewed by advocates of media freedom and human rights as one of the most important roles of independent news media.[4] Would the privately owned media provide a voice for the voiceless and report critically about the government's repression of this vulnerable group? Little is known regarding the ability and willingness of Myanmar's privately owned news outlets to critically cover the repression of the Rohingya. We do know that following the violence in 2012, some mainstream news outlets initially adopted the practice, if not the tone, of the Buddhist extremist organization, MaBaTha (Cheesman, 2017b). Banki and Ing (2019) found that while the risks faced by journalists and news organizations diminished after the removal of prepublication censorship and the 2015 election of a civilian government, it was "too early to declare that reforms in Myanmar have eliminated individual or institutional precarity for media in Myanmar" (p. 192). They also pointed to the need for research on coverage of ethnic minority issues because these would likely pose more challenges than coverage of more neutral natural disaster issues. Brooten and Verbruggen (2017) analyzed how the limitations confronted by international and domestic journalists influenced their coverage of the Rohingya crisis and identified important and different challenges faced by domestic journalists compared with foreign correspondents. "The dangers local reporters and producers face influence their willingness to take risks in their reporting, and perhaps to challenge their invisibility in the reporting process as well as the dominant news narratives produced" (Brooten & Verbruggen, 2017, p. 458). Our study focuses on domestic media rather than international media.

To assess if and how privately owned news media pushed the boundaries of their newfound freedom and criticized the government when it came to their coverage of the Rohingya, we compared the coverage of a privately owned paper with that of a government-controlled paper. Borrowing from the logic of an experiment, we use data from the state-run newspaper as a control group, to establish a baseline of government-approved news coverage. We compare data from the independent paper against this baseline. Thus, we treat differences in news coverage as indicative of attempts to challenge the government's portrayal of these events.

Although Brooten and colleagues (2019) noted that it is often difficult to draw clear distinctions between private and state-run media (because many private media are owned or operated by former military or government officials), we chose two well-known papers for our analysis, where the distinction between state and private is warranted. We analyze the news coverage of the *Myanmar Times*, which debuted in 2000 as a private newspaper written in English (a year later the first Burmese edition was published). The *Myanmar Times* was[5] a popular private newspaper in Myanmar. It was established with foreign and local investors and strong ties to officials. According to Brooten and colleagues (2019), the paper was prominent despite criticism that it was able to operate due to its close ties with the military. It established itself as one of the "standard-bearers

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[4] The media have been theorized to serve as a fourth estate in a democracy, an unelected fourth branch of government, which can hold accountable the three official branches (the executive, legislative, and judiciary). Certainly, domestic media were not the only potential accountability mechanism in Myanmar. There were hopes that the new civilian government and its de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi would hold the military accountable and that cases in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court would pressure both the government and the military to end the repression. But these hopes were dashed by Aung San Suu Kyi's defense of the Tatmadaw in the ICJ genocide case (Simpson & Farrelly, 2020).

[5] The paper was suspended after the 2021 military coup.

of journalism" in the country (Brooten et al., 2019, p. 25). In sum, the *Myanmar Times* had a history of pushing boundaries in Myanmar. Coverage differed somewhat between the Burmese and English versions, with the English version being more oriented toward an international audience.

We also analyze the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, which is a government-owned semi-independent newspaper, with a history of extreme speech (Lee, 2019). While the *Global New Light* is one of the top daily state-run newspapers in Myanmar, it (like the *Myanmar Times*) is aimed more toward foreign and international audiences. The *Global New Light* is published for and sanctioned by the government. Hence it is representative of the message the Myanmar government wishes to portray. Kironska and Peng (2021) found that the *Global New Light* took a weaker stance in its portrayal of the Rohingya than another state-run paper, the *Myanmar Alinn*, which refused to refer to the Rohingya by name entirely. The *Myanmar Alinn* is generally thought to be the mouthpiece of the government. The *Global New Light* is considered slightly more moderate. As noted above, we use the *Global New Light* as a baseline—to better understand if and how the *Myanmar Times* was different from this state-run newspaper.

We rely on daily domestic English-language newspapers because they were accessible and available throughout the country (and beyond) online when we conducted our research before the 2021 military coup after which the *Myanmar Times* was suspended. It was not possible to use Burmese language newspapers in our study because we do not speak the language and because the Burmese script is difficult to translate and incompatible with our content analysis software. Also, if there was any potential for domestic, privately owned media to criticize the government and/or the military, we would expect to see it in the English-language newspapers because they cater to a more international audience. Similarly, we would expect to see more sympathetic coverage of the Rohingya in the English-language newspapers than in the Burmese-language newspapers. In short, if there was any criticism of the government's and/or the military's treatment of the Rohingya in any of the domestic, privately owned media, we would expect to find it in the English-language media. Just as studies in the United States have relied on national newspapers (usually *The New York Times*) to study agenda setting and framing of issues in the United States (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2008; Entman, 2012), we use national newspapers to analyze how the Rohingya were framed.

Our research covers the time before a major attack on the Rohingya in Rakhine (January and February 2016), the period during the attack (September and October 2016), and during another attack one year later (September and October 2017). We also compare the news coverage of the *Myanmar Times* and the *Global New Light* to examine differences in news coverage between the two papers both before and after the firing of a reporter in early November 2016. British journalist Fiona MacGregor was working for the English version of the *Myanmar Times* when she wrote an article about the alleged rape of dozens of Rohingya women by soldiers. She was fired days later for a "breach" of company policy (Holmes, 2016; Perlez & Moe, 2016; Reporters Without Borders, 2016).[6] MacGregor's dismissal was seen as a signal that such coverage would not be tolerated. The firing of MacGregor occurred following a change in the newspaper's editorial management that was imposed by Myanmar Consolidated Media, the company that owned the paper (Gleeson, 2017). In early 2016, without any

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[6] It is also important to note that MacGregor, like a number of the editors and reporters at the *Myanmar Times*, was an expatriate. As a foreign journalist, she was arguably less vulnerable than domestic journalists. Had she been a citizen she may well have been imprisoned for her reporting.

notice to the paper's editors, Bill Tegjeu was hired as editor-in-chief of the *Myanmar Times* despite a lack of relevant experience (Gleeson, 2017). It was clear to the editors that Tegjeu "was acting under instructions from the owner of the *Myanmar Times*" (Gleeson, 2017, para. 15). MacGregor's article clearly displeased the government and was "denounced in a Facebook post by President's Office spokesman U Zaw Htay" (Gleeson, 2016, para. 3). Tegjeu reportedly received a call from Myanmar's Ministry of Information before the firing (Gleeson, 2016). Thus, we are not suggesting that MacGregor's firing alone was responsible for any shifts in the paper's coverage. Though it likely had a chilling effect on the journalists' working at the paper, the firing was also indicative of a submission to political pressures by the ownership and editorial management, which led them to discourage critical reporting, especially regarding the Rohingya.

Method

To systematically analyze how the *Myanmar Times* and the *Global New Light* covered the Rohingya, we conducted a content analysis. Because human coding continues to be more accurate than machine coding (Van Atteveldt, Van der Velden, & Boukes, 2021), we hand-coded news articles to (1) examine the most common news frames used and (2) to determine the latent sentiment (e.g., level of empathy toward the Rohingya, the military, and the government) of each news article. We focus on media frames and sentiment because framing and tone can affect how people understand the news and what they conclude based on the news.

Different frames are used in public debates and controversies to communicate particular perspectives about an issue and ultimately to establish dominant interpretations of the issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Thus, framing and tone not only affect news content but also how audiences interpret what the content means. Because frames are multidimensional, they influence every aspect of the process of communication, from communicators to the text, the receiver's thinking and conclusions regarding the content, and the "culture," that is, the common frames within the context of a social grouping (Entman, 1993). Frames also affect the decisions of the news audience. Subtle alterations in the presentation of judgment and choice problems cause framing effects like different attributions of responsibility for a social issue or different solutions to a problem (Iyengar, 1991). In the context of the Rohingya crisis, framing effects could mean the difference between viewing the Rohingya as victims who deserve to be helped versus seeing them as threats to the security of Myanmar who ought to be removed.

We gathered 384 articles in total from the *Myanmar Times* and the *Global New Light*. As mentioned above, because the term Rohingya is controversial and political in Myanmar, many people do not use it (see Kironska & Peng, 2021). Instead, reporters and people alike often use terms like "Bengalis" or "Muslims residing in Rakhine," and some use slurs. Thus, the word "Rohingya" is, in some sense, a frame itself, so we did not search for this term. Instead, to select articles, we searched for the conflict area (Rakhine State). Both news sources at the time of our initial study (pre-coup) offered easily accessible online archives. First, we used the archive of the *Myanmar Times* and searched for the term "Rakhine." We downloaded 146 articles from this news source. Next, we searched for articles about Rakhine State during the same timeframe in the *Global New Light* (*N* = 238).

Each article was assigned a case number and coded for date of publication, news source, frame, and tone. The articles were randomly assigned to one of two coders to make sure each coder worked on roughly half of the *Myanmar Times* and half of the *Global New Light* articles. We used an inductive coding strategy. During the initial stages of the project, the coders performed several sampling rounds to make

sure they were thinking similarly about the codes and had identified the most prominent frames. Once more than 84% inter-coder agreement was achieved, the coders moved on to the next phase. Disagreements were resolved via discussions among the coders. Throughout the process, the coding instructions were updated to reflect any changes or clarifications. Any adjustments triggered a re-coding of all articles. A final inter-coder reliability check showed more than 84% agreement.

Each article was coded for (1) frame and (2) latent sentiment, which we call "tone." The coders read the entire article and then determined which of the seven frames (identified in the coding process) best described the dominant frame:

1. *Communal conflict frame*: The conflict in Rakhine State was described as primarily a conflict between non-state actors in which the military may or may not intervene.
2. *Citizenship frame*: The conflict in Rakhine State was depicted as a conflict over citizenship.
3. *Human rights addressed by government frame*: The conflict is depicted as a human rights issue that was being taken care of (e.g., food was being handed out), with general mention of international aid or general talk of displaced persons.
4. *Human rights violation frame*: The conflict is depicted as a human rights problem that was not acknowledged or addressed.
5. *Security threat frame*: The conflict is depicted as primarily a national security threat (e.g., border issue and national security).
6. *Information access frame*: The conflict is depicted primarily as a problem of information access, or misinformation, etc.
7. *Administrative issue frame*: The conflict is depicted as an administrative issue (e.g., a committee met to talk about the issue).

Next, the coders read each article for tone toward the Rohingya, the military, and the government. They coded whether the latent sentiment expressed in the article was positive, negative, or neutral toward each of these three groups. If an article was sympathetic toward the group (e.g., it emphasized the victimization of the Rohingya), it was considered positive coverage for the Rohingya. Similarly, if an article praised the government for sending aid, it was coded positive in its tone toward the government. If an article was critical of the Rohingya or the government (e.g., depicted them as aggressors), it was deemed negative, and so on. Articles that reported facts without bias or presented balanced views by using both negative and positive descriptions of the Rohingya, for example, were coded as neutral in tone. If an article was not about the Rohingya, it was coded N/A (recall that our sample included articles not about the Rohingya since we searched by conflict area to avoid biasing our sample).

Findings

We hand-coded 384 articles that mention Rakhine State where the Rohingya conflict was situated ($N_{MYANMAR\ TIMES}$ = 146, $N_{GLOBAL\ NEW\ LIGHT}$ = 238). Because there are multiple conflicts in Rakhine State, our sample included articles that were not focused on the Rohingya conflict. Nevertheless, we coded all 384 articles first, to test if and how coverage about the Rohingya differed from overall conflict coverage in Rakhine State. Only about half of the 384 articles covered the Rohingya. We found statistically significant differences in the types of frames used in articles that did and did not mention the Rohingya (see Table 1).

The most prominent frame used to discuss the conflict in Rakhine State was the *national security threat frame*. About one-quarter of all articles used this frame, and this frame was just as likely to apply to the Rohingya conflict as it was to apply to other ethnic group conflicts. Rohingya and non-Rohingya conflicts were also equally likely to be framed as an administrative problem—to be solved in committee meetings and as part of miscellaneous government affairs. But the remaining frames all differed significantly. Whereas the Rohingya were discussed in terms of people whose human rights were met/addressed (24%) or violated (15%), articles that were not about the Rohingya were discussed in different terms, notably in terms of local or communal violence. Less than 3% of all articles about the Rohingya conflict were described as such. This makes sense and helps establish the internal consistency of our coding.

This finding also shows, however, that the news coverage (when we do not distinguish between the *Myanmar Times* and the *Global New Light*) generally frames the issue similarly to how the international community has talked about it—as a human rights problem—which may be indicative of the international orientation of both publications. It is important to note, however, that more articles frame the Rohingya human rights problem as *taken care of by the government* than as a human rights problem *yet to be addressed* (see Table 1). So, overall, the news coverage of the Rohingya conflict acknowledges the problem of human rights but also suggests that human rights are being considered or addressed by the government. It is also worth pointing out that our coding picked up on the citizenship debate. The Rohingya conflict is more often framed as a conflict about citizenship rather than another ethnic conflict in the area.

Table 1. Dominant Frame by Conflict.

	Conflict Does Not Involve Rohingya	Conflict Involves Rohingya	Total Articles on Rakhine State
Communal violence	**47**	**5**	**52**
	25%	**3%**	**14%**
Citizenship	**1**	**12**	**13**
	<1%	**6%**	**3%**
Human rights (addressed by gov)	**23**	**46**	**69**
	12%	**24%**	**18%**
Human rights violated (not addressed)	**3**	**28**	**31**
	2%	**15%**	**8%**
Misc. government affairs	33	32	65
	17%	17%	17%
National security threat	49	47	96
	26%	25%	25%
No information	**28**	**20**	**48**
	15%	**10%**	**13%**
Other	8	2	10
	4%	1%	3%
Total N =	192	192	384
	100%	100%	100%

Note. Cells in boldface mark differences in frames used to cover the Rohingya vs. other conflicts. Chi-square *p* < .000. Percentage may add up to more than 100 due to rounding.

Next, we examine the association between article frame and article tone. We find that some frames were used more often when the papers talked about the Rohingya in a positive way. Articles that were sympathetic to the Rohingya relied heavily on the *human rights violation* frame, which described the Rohingya as a victimized group. Thirty percent of all the articles that reported on the Rohingya in a sympathetic way relied on this frame (see Figure 1). Articles that were coded as neutral, primarily used the *human rights (addressed by government)* frame to not only acknowledge that there was a problem but also to suggest that the military or government had already addressed the problem. This frame suggests that the government was responding to a need and therefore, the article was not critical of the government or military. Use of these frames contrasts starkly with the *national security threat* frame that was used in 42% of all articles framing the Rohingya negatively. Depicting the Rohingya as terrorists and illegal migrants that threaten national security was the most common negative way to frame the Rohingya (see Figure 1).
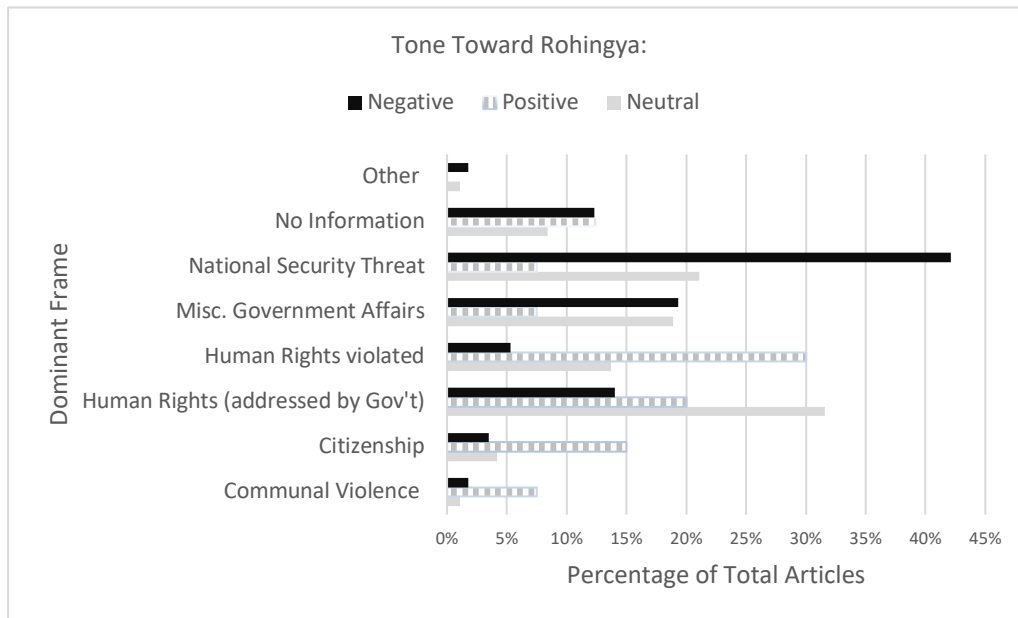
Figure 1. Dominant frame by tone toward Rohingya.

A Harbinger of Democracy?

Next, we compared the coverage of the *Myanmar Times* and the *Global New Light* to find out if there was a meaningful difference between the privately owned and the state-run papers. A meaningful difference would suggest that the privately owned *Myanmar Times* tried to provide a check on the government and the military. First, we found that the *Myanmar Times* covered the Rohingya more often than the *Global New Light* did. Sixty-three percent (n = 92) of all *Myanmar Times* articles about Rakhine State were about the Rohingya compared with only 42% (n = 100) of all articles about Rakhine State in the *Global New Light*. Thus, the *Myanmar Times* paid more attention to the Rohingya as a percentage of its total coverage of Rakhine State. The *Myanmar Times* was also significantly less likely to use the security threat frame than the *Global New Light* (12% and 33%, respectively). The *Myanmar Times* was more likely to use the *human rights violation* frame (15% vs. 4%) and to mention the Rohingya more often in the context of the citizenship debate (7% vs. 1%; see Figure 2).
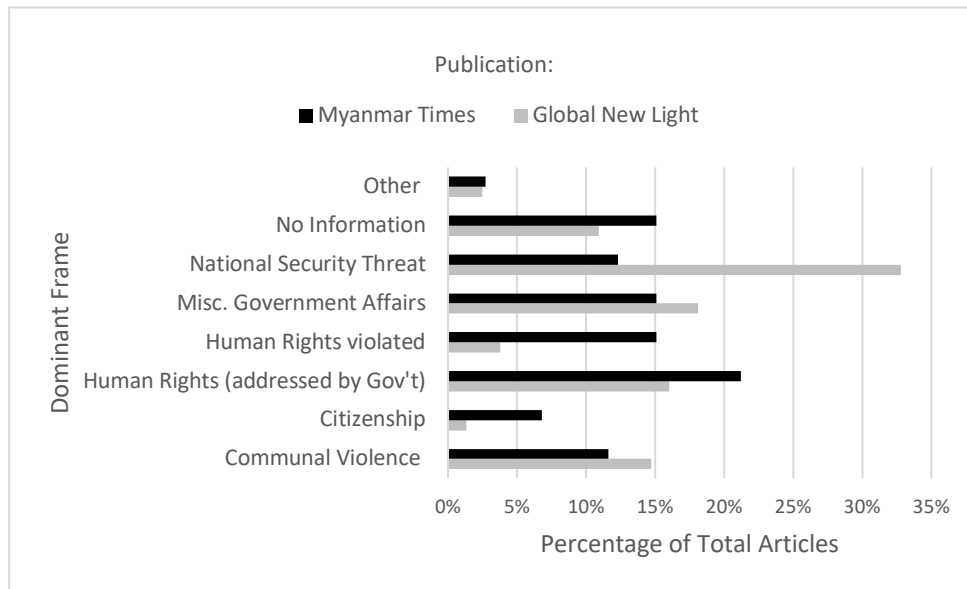
Figure 2. Dominant frame by publication.

Lastly, the *Myanmar Times* was far more sympathetic toward the Rohingya than the *Global New Light*. While about half of all articles in both papers were neutral, only 5% in the *Myanmar Times* was negative toward the Rohingya compared with 52% in the *Global New Light* (see Figure 3).
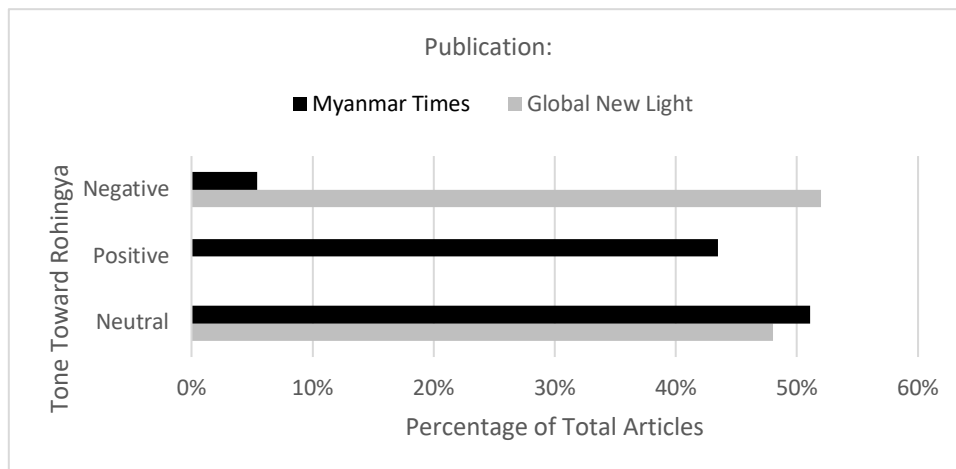

Figure 3. Tone by publication.

Thus, overall, our data show that the privately owned paper reported in a more sympathetic way about the Rohingya than the state-run paper. This is consistent with our expectation and supports the notion that media freedom and dissent were emerging in privately owned papers in Myanmar. But what happened after the reporter who published an article critical of the military and alleging multiple rapes by state forces

was fired? Did it change the *Myanmar Times*' coverage? We use our tone coding to examine this question. Recall that we coded whether the article was positive, negative, or neutral in its tone toward the Rohingya. If an article was sympathetic toward the group, it was considered positive, and if an article was critical of the Rohingya, it was deemed negative. Balanced or impartial articles were coded as neutral.

After the Firing

As Figures 4 and 5 show, there was a difference after the firing. Figure 4 shows that coverage taking a neutral tone in the *Myanmar Times* doubled after the firing, while positive coverage was cut in half.
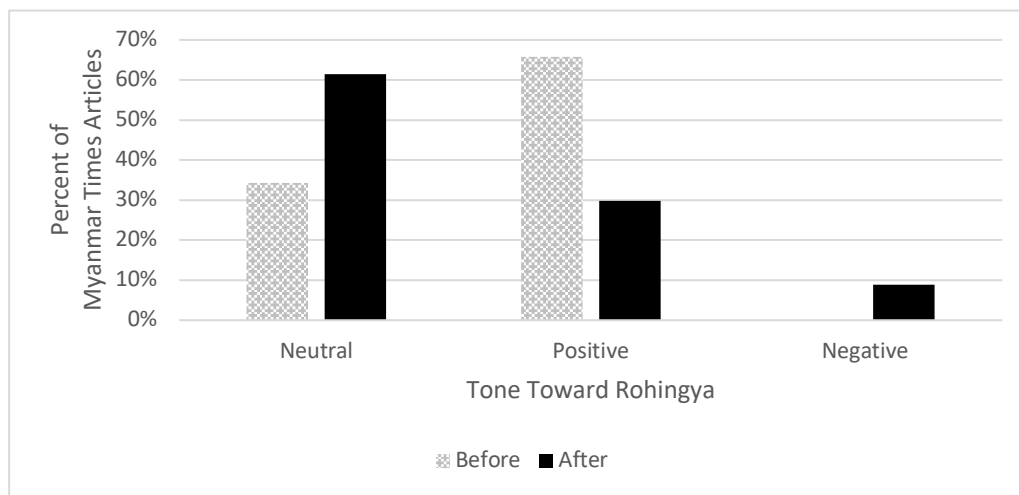

Figure 4. Tone before and after the firing of the reporter in the Myanmar Times.

Figure 5 depicts the percentage of stories about the Rohingya with negative, neutral, and positive tones over time. Before the firing, the *Myanmar Times* had initially covered the Rohingya with a positive or neutral tone and never covered the Rohingya with a negative tone. But after the firing, the *Myanmar Times* tended to cover the Rohingya with a neutral tone rather than a positive tone and at one point covered the Rohingya with a negative tone. Moreover, even the *Global New Light* changed its coverage. The paper had initially covered the Rohingya with a neutral tone, but over time tended to employ a more negative tone, especially after the firing, and *never* covered the Rohingya with a sympathetic view. Thus, we find strong evidence for a change in tone after the firing, which resulted in a decrease in support for the Rohingya.
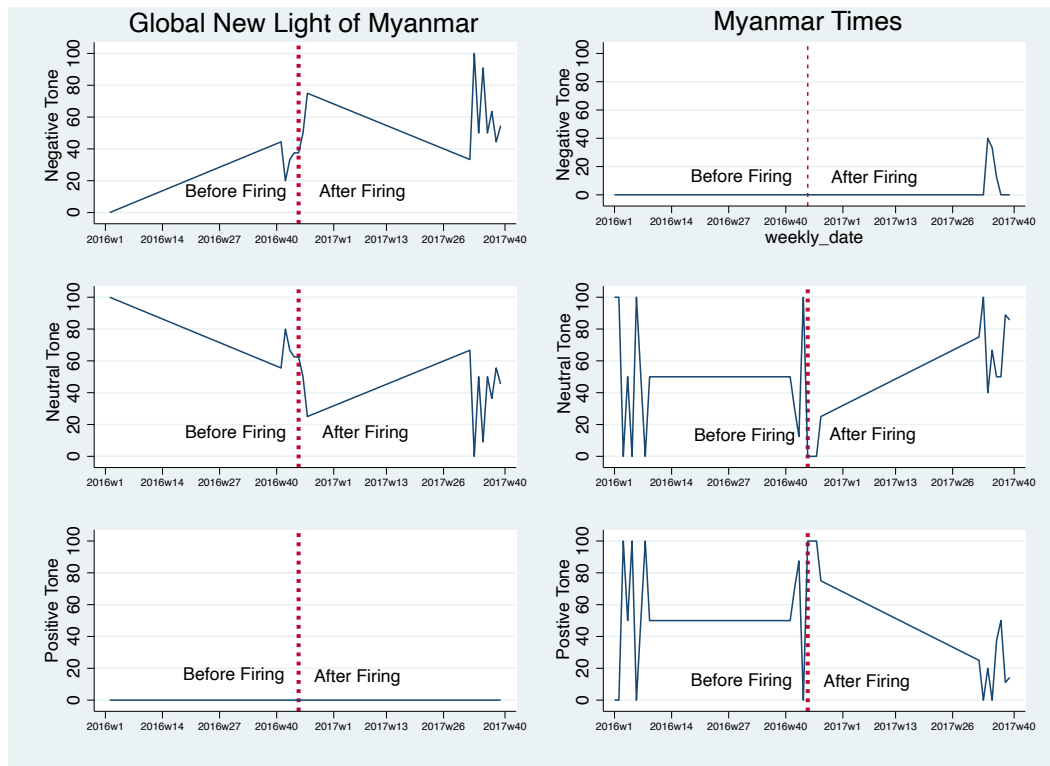
Figure 5. Chilling effect: Percentage of news stories about the Rohingya with negative, neutral, and positive tones before and after the firing of the journalist.

Evidence of a Chilling Effect

In this section, we provide some examples of how news coverage changed after the firing of the journalist at the *Myanmar Times*. Before MacGregor was fired, articles had often been critical of the government and documented human rights abuses. As we show below, MacGregor in particular did not shy away from connecting the military to the abuses. For example, in early October 2016, under the headline, "Oppression's Spawn Plagues Rakhine State With Death and Dread," MacGregor (2016a) wrote, "With conflicts in other parts of the country now proving ongoing military impunity for war crimes and human rights abuses, the potential for death and destruction in Rakhine is manifold" (para. 6).

MacGregor (2016b) also documented the rapes of Rohingya women. Quoting Phil Robertson, director of Human Rights Watch Asia, who tied the rapes to the military, MacGregor (2016b) wrote:

> The Tatmadaw have a long and well-documented history of sexually abusing women in areas where they operate [. . .] The question is what is State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyie and the government of Burma prepared to do about it because this is a real test of their political commitment to respect rights. (MacGregor, 2016b, para. 13)

Within days of the article's publication, MacGregor was fired.

MacGregor's writing represented the *Myanmar Times*' critical stance. It demonstrated a lack of support for the actions by the military and called on the elected government to stop the violence. *Myanmar Times* writers also frequently used quotation marks to distance themselves from certain language and to suggest disagreement with the military's terms and discourse. In the article "No Choice but to Shoot Them," *Myanmar Times* reporters Htoo Thant and Nyan Lynn Aung (2016) placed quotation marks around the word "attackers," clarifying that this was the language used by Major General Aung So, and not that of the *Myanmar Times*, to describe people killed by security forces in retaliation for an alleged attack on the police. Other terms put in quotation marks, were "fairly" to describe how the government was dealing with the conflict, signifying that while Aung Suu Kyi argued that the conflict was handled "fairly," the *Myanmar Times* did not endorse this description of the events.

The *Myanmar Times* also extended its critique to other countries collaborating with or supporting the military. In the article "Senior General Meets Senior General" MacGregor (2016c) wrote,

> One of the principal concerns about UK military links with Myanmar is the fact that such official ties confer a legitimacy on an organisation which many inside and outside the country believe should be held accountable for numerous historic and ongoing rights abuses. Of course those involved in UK military support here recognise this, but say they believe they have to work with the situation as it exists. That is open to debate. Certainly such reasoning can only carry you so far when it comes to providing training for an army involved in ongoing civil war. (para. 13)

There are other examples of critical watchdog reporting in the *Myanmar Times*. Before MacGregor's firing, the *Myanmar Times* used election results reporting as an opportunity to shed light on the segregation of Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine State and to discuss the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya (e.g., see Mathieson, 2016). The *Myanmar Times* also revealed that the military blocked press and outside observer access to Rakhine. It also accused other media of ignoring allegations of human rights abuses and called out misinformation and government propaganda:

> Allegations that Muslim civilians have faced extra-judicial killings and seen their villages burned by security forces have also gone entirely unmentioned in the missives coming out of the President's Office, and have been widely ignored by the local media. Yesterday it was reported that two people arrested in relation to the attacks had died in custody, with authorities blaming asthma-related complications. (MacGregor, 2016d, para. 6)

After MacGregor was fired, the *Myanmar Times* still covered the conflict area but began to adopt the terms and narratives of military and government officials. For example, as the headline of an August 2017 article "Hluttaw Oks Action Against Terrorists, Help for Displaced Villagers," suggests, the story underneath is a succinct retelling of the "facts" delivered via direct quotes from a deputy minister and a major general (Phyo, 2017). It reads like a reprint of government propaganda rather than news. Unlike

reporting before MacGregor's firing, there are no quotations around "terrorist" or questioning of the officials' use of the term to describe Rohingya militants.

Generally, after the firing, news and commentary about the Rohingya and the conflict in Rakhine State became more neutral and based on information from military and government officials rather than people living in the conflict zone or human rights workers. For example, a story published in August 2017, on the findings of a government-appointed commission investigating the situation in Rakhine, reiterated the finding of the commission that it, "found no evidence of genocide or ethnic cleansing as alleged by the OHCHR [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights]" (Aung, 2017, para. 5).

While the newspaper continued to cover the conflict in Rakhine State, the coverage focused on the problem of misinformation, international pressure, and the government's efforts to mitigate the situation:

> At the moment, the government is providing aid to displaced persons without discrimination within its borders. A lot more aid is needed, especially for those who have fled their homes and crossed the border. The UN estimates there are at least 400,000 displaced people along the Bangladeshi border. (*Myanmar Times*, 2017a, para. 9)

These examples illustrate the shift we found in our quantitative analysis when we coded the tone of the articles: As Figures 4 and 5 show, much of the sympathetic reporting turned into neutral reporting after the *Myanmar Times* fired MacGregor. News articles also changed in more subtle ways. For example, in the September 2017 article, "Rakhine State and the Raging Information War," the words "Rohingya," "Muslim," and "Bengali" were completely omitted (*Myanmar Times*, 2017b). Instead, the Rohingya were referred to as "Extremist and terrorist organizations [. . .] well-versed in exploiting the unlimited potential of cyberspace to their advantage" (*Myanmar Times*, 2017b). Here, the reference to *terrorist* or *extremist* became shorthand for the *Rohingya*.

This article fits squarely into the disinformation campaign circulating in the media and especially on Facebook suggesting that the Rohingya had ties to extremist jihadist groups or are such a group themselves. This narrative was strategically planted on social media by the military (Mozur, 2018; Stevenson, 2018). Thus, in this instance, the *Myanmar Times* helped legitimize the military's anti-Rohingya campaign and helped push misinformation via social media, which ultimately was tied to violence against the Rohingya (Mozur, 2018; Stevenson, 2018).

Our data also show that the *Myanmar Times* in general became more friendly toward the military and the government after the firing of the journalist. Recall that we also coded how the newspapers described the military and government. As with the Rohingya, we coded articles as either being sympathetic to the military, hostile, or neutral. As Table 2 shows, of all the articles written in the *Myanmar Times* about Rakhine State, there was a significant increase in positive and neutral coverage of the military, coupled with a decrease in critical coverage. This pattern repeats with regard to how the *Myanmar Times* covered the government (Table 3). Thus, our data also provide evidence of self-censorship as a result of government pressure.

Table 2. Before/After Firing by Tone Toward
Military (Myanmar Times Only).

	Before Firing	After Firing	Total
Neutral	10	32	42
	17%	37%	29%
Positive	0	7	7
	0%	8%	5%
Negative	27	15	42
	46%	17%	29%
N/A	22	32	54
	37%	37%	37%
Total	59	86	145
	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi-square *p* < .000. Percentage may add up to more than 100 due to rounding off. N/A refers to articles that did not mention the military.

Table 3. Before/After Firing by Tone Toward
Government (Myanmar Times Only).

	Before Firing	After Firing	Total
Neutral	15	40	55
	25%	47%	38%
Positive	3	22	25
	5%	26%	17%
Negative	22	15	37
	37%	17%	26%
N/A	19	9	28
	32%	11%	19%
Total	59	86	145
	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi-square *p* < .000. Percentage may add up to more than 100 due to rounding off. N/A refers to articles that did not mention the government.

Conclusion

As our study shows, the abolishment of censorship and the introduction of some media independence was not a harbinger of democracy. Instead, it was a red herring that led some journalists to believe they were working for a free press when, in fact, they were not. Over time, and especially after the firing of Fiona MacGregor, the *Myanmar Times*' coverage and framing of the Rohingya became more like that of the *Global New Light*.

The coverage of the Rohingya conflict offers an important window into Myanmar's incomplete transition to democracy. Our comparison of the privately owned *Myanmar Times* and the state-run *Global New Light* shows that the privately owned paper did initially push for more government accountability but changed course after a reporter who published critical accounts of the military's actions in northern Rakhine State was fired. After the termination of the journalist, the paper increased its neutral coverage and decreased its critical coverage. Additionally, the coverage of the private paper became more pro-military and pro-government—thus supporting the official narrative—and incorporated an anti-Rohingya discourse that complemented the military's misinformation campaign and hate speech circulating on Facebook.

The Rohingya coverage also illustrates the long shadow of military rule and censorship and path dependency. When media are liberalized but are not fully liberated, as was the case in Myanmar, where democratization was a "top-down" process (Brooten et al., 2019, p. 12), the media are subject to retaliation and censorship and are thus unable to perform their idealized role (i.e., to foster a more educated public, cultivate empathy and tolerance, and elevate political discourse). And while we cannot make causal claims based on our data, we believe that the inability to cover the Rohingya crisis critically was indicative of Myanmar's failure to transition to democracy. What happened at the *Myanmar Times* revealed the grip of Myanmar's repressive past and foreshadowed its repressive future. A free press and democracy are intimately connected. Our finding that media censorship in Myanmar continued should have given pause to those believing Myanmar's emerging democracy was in good health before the coup.

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