

News

Junta sentences Myanmar Now photojournalist to 20 years in prison

Detained in Rakhine State while covering the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha, Sai Zaw Thuikie was denied legal representation and family visits in the three months between his arrest and sentencing.

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Myanmar Now photojournalist Sai Zaw Thuikie (Photo courtesy of Ken Hsu)

A military tribunal in Yangon sentenced a photojournalist to 20 years in prison with hard labour on Wednesday after convicting him on various charges, including sedition.

Junta soldiers arrested Sai Zaw Thuikie of independent news outlet Myanmar Now in the Rakhine State coastal of Sitrore on May 23, just over a week after Cyclone Mocha made landfall.

The 40-year-old photojournalist was in the city to report on the aftermath of the storm, which killed over 140 people, many of whom were members of the persecuted Rohingya minority living in camps for internally displaced persons.

Following the arrest, authorities subjected Sai Zaw Thuikie to interrogation for about a week in Sitrore and Yangon. He was transferred to Yangon's notorious Insein Prison in mid-June on a remand issued by the township court in South Dagon, which has been under martial law since 2021.

His initial indictment included charges for misinformation, incitement, and sedition under various statutes—article 27 of the Natural Disaster Management Law, section 66(G) of the Telecommunications Law, and sections 505a and 124a of the colonial-era Penal Code—which carry sentences varying from one to 20 years.

However, the number of charges on which the junta court ultimately convicted him is unconfirmed.

Sai Zaw Thuikie was provided with an legal representation throughout his detention. There were no court hearings or other proceedings held inside the Insein Prison compound before his conviction on Wednesday.

He was not allowed family visits at any time after his arrest in late May, and prison authorities restricted mail and parcel deliveries addressed to him, as they have for other prisoners throughout the country.

"All of Sai Zaw Thuikie's colleagues at Myanmar Now and I are deeply saddened to hear of the lengthy sentence handed down to him," said Myanmar Now's editor-in-chief Swe Win.

"His sentencing is yet another indication that freedom of the press has been completely quashed under the military junta's rule, and shows the hefty price independent journalists in Myanmar must pay for their professional work," he said in a statement.

Sai Zaw Thuikie is the second Myanmar Now journalist who has been arrested by military authorities since the 2021 coup. Video journalist Kay Zon Nway was arrested while covering an anti-coup protest in Yangon in late February of that year, and was later released as part of a broader amnesty on June 30.

A week after Kay Zon Nway's arrest, junta soldiers raided Myanmar Now's office in downtown Yangon. No reporters or staff were present at the time of the raid.

The next day, the junta revoked the news outlet's publishing licence along with those of four other media organisations. Since then, Sai Zaw Thuikie continued to work covertly inside Myanmar, reporting on anti-coup activities in Yangon and beyond.

"We will not waver in our commitment to continue providing news and information to the people of Myanmar, despite the immense challenges we are facing," said Swe Win.

The junta has been targeting news outlets and journalists in an attempt to silence independent reporting on conditions in the country since the coup.

According to documentation by the media rights monitoring group Detained Journalists Information, at least 156 journalists were arrested after the military takeover, of whom at least 50 were still behind bars as of May of this year. The group said that the actual number of arrested journalists could be higher.

Myanmar Now is one of 13 news outlets whose publishing licences the junta revoked, and four media personnel have been killed.

Most of the journalists detained by the regime were charged with incitement under section 505a of the Penal Code, while others were charged under terrorism statutes.

Sithu Aung Myint, a columnist for Frontier Myanmar and contributor to Voice of America, was charged with sedition as well as incitement after being arrested along with fellow journalist Htet Htet Khine at a Yangon apartment on August 15, six months after the coup.

Sithu Aung Myint had been evading arrest since April 24, when the coup regime accused him of incitement and opened a legal case against him. The junta-controlled newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar claimed after his arrest that Sithu Aung Myint had supported "terrorist groups", encouraging people to join the Civil Disobedience Movement and spread "fake news" about a junta-controlled lottery scheme.

He was sentenced to a total of 12 years under incitement and sedition charges last year.

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