

Framing Reality and Information Control in Authoritarian Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Myanmar's Military-Sponsored Media and International Reporting on the 2021 Massacre

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 28 Dec 2024	<p>After a brief experiment with democratic governance, Myanmar experienced a sharp return to authoritarian rule when the military staged a coup in February 2021. Since then, the country has descended into widespread unrest and systemic human rights abuses. One particularly violent episode occurred in December 2021, when thirty civilians were killed by military forces. Official military accounts claimed the victims were terrorists, justifying the killings as part of counterterrorism efforts. However, investigative reporting by international media revealed that the massacre was politically motivated, targeting individuals associated with opposition movements.</p> <p>This research paper critically examines how media is used as a tool of power and narrative control by comparing coverage of the incident in two contrasting publications: The Global New Light of Myanmar, a military-controlled newspaper, and Al Jazeera, an independent international news outlet. Using methods from media studies and critical discourse analysis, the study explores how the military uses state media to frame dissent as terrorism, reshape public perception, and justify human rights violations. At the same time, it highlights the role of international journalism in challenging authoritarian narratives and amplifying marginalized voices. The findings reveal how propaganda and censorship serve as mechanisms for legitimizing state violence, while independent reporting plays a vital role in documenting abuses and defending democratic values.</p> <p>Keywords: Agenda Setting, Coup, Framing, Myanmar, Media, Tatmadaw</p>
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INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) staged a coup d'état, abruptly ending the country's brief experiment with democratic governance. The coup occurred just one day before the newly elected parliament was set to convene following the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victory in the November 2020 general election, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The military detained key government officials, declared a state of emergency, and installed Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as the de facto leader of the country (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021). For many Burmese citizens, the coup evoked a painful sense of déjà vu, recalling the events of 1988, when the military similarly suppressed democratic transition after elections were held, denying power to democratically elected leaders (Steinberg, 2013).

In the wake of the 2021 coup, the Tatmadaw initiated a violent crackdown on peaceful protests and civil disobedience movements. Thousands of civilians, including journalists, students, and elected representatives, were arrested or killed. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), over 9,500 people have been detained and more than 1,600 killed since the military takeover (AAPP, 2022). While the repression is largely physical, it is also psychological and ideological, implemented through state propaganda and systematic media manipulation. The military regime has weaponized media to criminalize dissent and reshape public perception of the conflict.

Propaganda plays a central role in the Tatmadaw's consolidation of power. As Gomez (2022) outlines, hate speech—particularly in authoritarian settings—can be categorized into four key types: speech targeting religious and ethnic groups, migrants and foreigners, women and LGBTQI individuals, and critics of the regime. In Myanmar, state-controlled media regularly produce hate speech and disinformation campaigns against pro-democracy demonstrators, labeling them as terrorists or foreign agents (Cheesman, 2021). These narratives are disseminated across traditional print media, television, and social media platforms, reinforcing the military's narrative while silencing dissent.

A prime example of this can be seen in coverage of the December 2021 massacre in which thirty civilians were killed by military forces. While international outlets such as *Al Jazeera* framed the massacre as a politically motivated attack on unarmed civilians, the military-backed newspaper *The Global New Light of Myanmar* portrayed the victims as armed terrorists and presented the military as defenders of national stability. This study uses framing theory (Entman, 1993) to analyze these two contrasting reports. Framing theory helps identify how selective language and narrative structures influence how audiences interpret events. This paper argues that military-sponsored media in Myanmar is not simply biased, but functions as an apparatus of state violence—one that constructs reality in service of authoritarian control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of research explores how media frames shape public perception, particularly in contexts of conflict, authoritarian governance, and human rights violations. Scholars have shown that both traditional and digital media can act as powerful tools of narrative construction, legitimizing violence or dissent depending on who controls the message.

In the specific context of Myanmar, Kironksa and Ni-Ni Peng (2021) offer an in-depth analysis of how *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, the country's primary state-run English-language newspaper, misrepresented the Rohingya community during the 2017 humanitarian crisis. Their article, "How state-run media shape perceptions," demonstrates how the state employed traditional media to construct the Rohingya as threats to national unity, thus justifying mass violence and displacement. The authors argue that in countries like Myanmar, where internet penetration remains low, traditional state-controlled media continues to serve as the dominant channel of mass communication, allowing authoritarian regimes to control narratives and incite hate with relative ease.

Building on the theoretical foundation of Entman's framing theory (1993), Rayekeh Alitavoli (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of editorial coverage of the Syrian war by *antiwar.com* and *CNN.com*. Her study identified twenty dominant frames and revealed substantial discrepancies in coverage based on ideological leanings and target audiences. The findings affirm the role of framing in shaping how conflict is understood, highlighting how both alternative and mainstream media contribute to the politicization of war reporting.

Similarly, Yousuf (2015) examines media representations of Pakistan during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, comparing coverage in U.S. and Chinese outlets. His framing analysis revealed five dominant themes—terrorism, economic consequences, domestic politics, social impact, and international relations—demonstrating how the same event can be strategically reframed to align with national interests and foreign policy agendas.

Herman and Chomsky's *Propaganda Model* (1988) remains foundational in understanding how state and corporate interests influence media framing, especially in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. According to their model, media outlets serve elite agendas by filtering information through mechanisms such as ownership, advertising, sourcing, and anti-communism (or, in more contemporary terms, "anti-terrorism").

Expanding on the role of hate speech and media manipulation, Gomez (2022) classifies state-sponsored hate speech into four categories: targeting religious and ethnic minorities, women and LGBTQI individuals, foreigners, and political dissidents. He emphasizes how authoritarian regimes rely on hate-based narratives not only to marginalize specific groups but also to distract from systemic governance failures. In Myanmar, these dynamics are clearly reflected in both official media discourse and government-backed online campaigns.

Recent studies also investigate the intersection of social media and disinformation. Freelon and Wells (2020) explore how social media platforms can serve both democratic and authoritarian purposes. While these platforms allow

grassroots mobilization, they are equally susceptible to manipulation by states deploying bots, trolls, and coordinated disinformation networks—a strategy used extensively by the Tatmadaw before and after the 2021 coup.

In authoritarian contexts, traditional media continues to play a particularly potent role. Voltmer (2013) argues that in transitional or repressive societies, the control of legacy media is central to political power, as it not only disseminates regime narratives but also actively constructs the public's understanding of legitimacy, resistance, and citizenship.

Collectively, these studies underscore the centrality of framing in media discourse and its implications for human rights and democratic participation. Whether through traditional state-run outlets or more modern digital platforms, the manipulation of language and imagery becomes a mechanism of control—one that can incite violence, legitimize repression, and rewrite the terms of political discourse. In the case of Myanmar, this research provides a crucial lens through which to understand how the military regime frames pro-democracy protesters as terrorists, reframing political dissent as existential threat in order to justify ongoing violence.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two interrelated communication theories: framing theory and agenda-setting theory. These frameworks are particularly relevant in examining how state-run media in Myanmar, such as *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, constructs public perception around political events, dissent, and human rights violations.

Framing is a communicative process through which certain aspects of a perceived reality are emphasized, while others are de-emphasized or omitted, thereby promoting a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007). According to Entman (2004), substantive framing can significantly alter the audience's cognitive processes, shaping how individuals evaluate problems, assign causality, make moral judgments, and propose solutions. At both individual and societal levels, frames influence not only attitudes toward a given issue but also decision-making and potential courses of action.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) describe frames as "interpretative packages" that imbue issues with meaning. These packages define what is at stake, identify the causes of problems, evaluate the involved parties, and propose remedies. Framing thus plays a central role in constructing the social reality within which media consumers operate. It determines not only what is reported but also how it is reported, shaping public understanding through emphasis and omission. As Fiske and Taylor (1991) explain, the salience of information—how prominent or memorable it is—increases the likelihood that an audience will recognize, process, and retain that information.

Framing often intersects with agenda-setting, a theory that explores how the media influence what issues the public perceives as important. According to Entman's cascading activation model (2004), political elites and government actors typically set the agenda by emphasizing specific narratives or concerns. Media organizations, in turn, adopt frames that align with these elite-driven agendas, reinforcing particular viewpoints. These frames are then transmitted to the public, who internalize the narratives and relay them back into the political system via public opinion and discourse. The agenda-setting process also inherently involves exclusion: as Rank (1984) notes, elevating certain topics necessitates the downplaying or omission of others, thereby controlling not just what people think about, but what they are prevented from thinking about.

Together, these theories provide a robust lens through which to analyze how the Myanmar military uses state-sponsored media to frame democratic dissent as terrorism and legitimize its authoritarian control. Through selective reporting, moral framing, and agenda alignment, the regime systematically shapes public consciousness to support its political objectives.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which *The Global New Light of Myanmar* framed the December 2021 massacre in a manner that aligns with and supports the military's political agenda. This is explored through the following central research question:

Main Research Question (MRQ):

Did The Global New Light of Myanmar frame the December 2021 incident in support of the military agenda?

To address this broader inquiry, the study is guided by two sub-questions:

- **RQ1:** How do *The Global New Light of Myanmar* and *Al Jazeera* report and present the December 2021 massacre?
- **RQ2:** What types of frames are employed in the articles published by both outlets?

In order to answer these questions, the study employs a comparative content analysis methodology, grounded in framing theory and agenda-setting theory. The analysis aims to identify and classify the dominant frames utilized by each media outlet, as well as to assess how these frames reflect or challenge the ideological narratives promoted by the Myanmar military. By examining both the structure and substance of the coverage, this research seeks to reveal how media can be instrumentalized for propaganda and political legitimization in authoritarian contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis methodology to examine how *The Global New Light of Myanmar* and *Al Jazeera* reported on the December 2021 massacre in Myanmar. A comparative design is used to analyze and contrast the framing strategies employed by each outlet, with a specific focus on identifying patterns that reveal alignment or opposition to the Myanmar military's agenda.

Data Collection

Two articles were selected for analysis:

- An article published by *The Global New Light of Myanmar* on December 29, 2021, representing the state-run military perspective.
- A corresponding article published by *Al Jazeera* on December 24, 2021, offering an international and independent viewpoint.

These sources were chosen for their coverage of the same event and their starkly different institutional affiliations—one being a state-sponsored outlet and the other a foreign, independent news organization.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis involved the following four steps:

1. **Data Collection** – Retrieving the two news articles directly from the official websites of both media houses.
2. **Coding** – Identifying and labeling the presence or absence of specific frames using a binary system: "Yes" (1) for presence and "No" (0) for absence.
3. **Data Organization** – Coding was conducted in Microsoft Excel, allowing for structured data input and tabulation.
4. **Data Analysis** – Frequency of frame occurrence was calculated, and charts were generated to visualize the dominant frames in each publication.

Framing Categories

The researcher identified four dominant frames, based on previous literature and emergent patterns from the texts. These frames serve as operational categories for the coding process:

- **Identity Frame:** This frame refers to how individuals or groups involved in the conflict are characterized. It captures both internal self-identification and external labeling by the media. In this study, two identity labels—"terrorists" (used by military-affiliated media) and "rebels" (used by independent media)—are examined as subcategories of this frame. Identity frames are often rooted in ethnic, religious, or ideological group affiliations and influence how actors are morally evaluated.
- **Support Frame:** This frame identifies attempts to garner or deny support for specific individuals, groups, ideologies, or actions. It often involves portraying one side positively while delegitimizing the other. In the

context of this study, the support frame is used by military-sponsored media to generate public backing for the military and erode sympathy for pro-democracy demonstrators.

- *Humanitarian Frame*: This frame includes references to human rights violations, civilian suffering, and calls for international or humanitarian intervention. It focuses on the human cost of military action and the ethical dimensions of conflict.
- *Power Frame*: This frame highlights acts of force, military superiority, and state control, including references to strikes, arrests, raids, and public executions. The power frame emphasizes the dominance and control exerted by the military over the civilian population.

By analyzing the frequency and context of these frames in both articles, this research aims to uncover the narrative techniques and political motives underlying each outlet's coverage of the massacre.

Findings

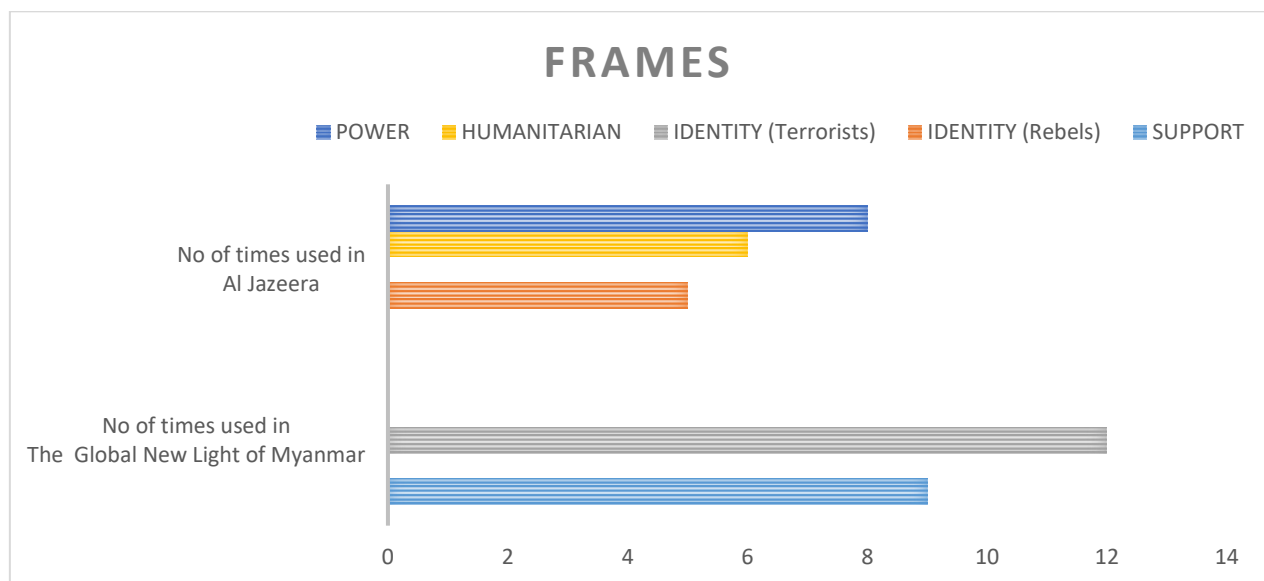
The content analysis of the two news articles—The Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM) and Al Jazeera—covering the December 2021 massacre in Myanmar reveals a striking divergence in the framing strategies employed by each outlet.

The coding results are as follows:

Frame Type	No of times used in <i>The Global New Light of Myanmar</i> (State-run)	No of times used in <i>Al Jazeera</i> (Independent)
Support	9	0
Identity (Terrorists)	12	0
Identity (Rebels)	0	5
Humanitarian	0	6
Power	0	8

- *Support Frame*: *The Global New Light of Myanmar* used the support frame 9 times, clearly working to reinforce public backing for the military's actions. *Al Jazeera* did not use this frame at all.
- *Identity Frame*: GNLM labeled the victims as "terrorists" (12 instances), while *Al Jazeera* referred to them as "rebels" (5 instances), showing contrasting identity framings.
- *Humanitarian Frame*: This frame was absent in GNLM but appeared 6 times in *Al Jazeera*, which emphasized human suffering, civilian casualties, and human rights concerns.
- *Power Frame*: Again, GNLM did not utilize this frame, while *Al Jazeera* employed it 8 times, highlighting the military's aggressive and violent role.

Below is a textual bar chart representation of frame frequencies:



The stark contrast in the use of frames between the two outlets strongly supports the hypothesis that *The Global New Light of Myanmar* framed the massacre in support of the military agenda.

- The support and terrorist identity frames used extensively by GNLM serve to legitimize state violence and delegitimize dissenting voices. This aligns with Entman's (1993) assertion that frames define problems and attribute responsibility, ultimately shaping public opinion in line with the dominant political power.
- The absence of humanitarian and power frames in GNLM indicates a deliberate omission strategy—suppressing narratives that would portray the military negatively or evoke sympathy for the victims.
- On the other hand, *Al Jazeera*'s use of humanitarian and power frames aligns with framing strategies identified in studies by Alitavoli (2020) and Yousuf (2015), where independent or international media emphasized civilian suffering and state aggression in conflict reporting.
- The identity frame, a key tool in shaping social divisions, is used very differently by both outlets. GNLM uses dehumanizing labels like “terrorists,” whereas *Al Jazeera* uses more neutral or contextually grounded terms like “rebels,” which may still carry political weight but are less demonizing.

This evidence illustrates how state-run media in authoritarian regimes employ specific narrative strategies to influence public perception and maintain political control, whereas independent media tend to offer counternarratives focused on accountability and human rights.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine how *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, a state-run publication, framed the December 2021 massacre in comparison to *Al Jazeera*, an independent international news outlet. Using framing theory and agenda-setting theory as foundational frameworks, a quantitative content analysis revealed significant disparities in narrative construction.

The findings demonstrate that *The Global New Light of Myanmar* overwhelmingly employed support and terrorist identity frames, aiming to justify military actions and delegitimize opposition. In stark contrast, *Al Jazeera* utilized humanitarian, power, and rebel identity frames to highlight state violence and the suffering of civilians.

These results support existing literature (Kironska & Peng, 2021; Alitavoli, 2020; Yousuf, 2015) that show how state media often functions as a tool of propaganda, while independent media offers more balanced or critical perspectives. The GNLM's framing strategy contributes to a larger state-driven agenda that normalizes violence, suppresses dissent, and undermines democratic movements.

This research reinforces the importance of framing in shaping public opinion and political narratives, particularly in conflict or authoritarian contexts. It also underscores the urgent need for media literacy and access to diverse, independent news sources in Myanmar and similar environments.

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