

Elite Continuity and Media Transformations

An Asymmetrical Comparison of Elite Continuity in Albania and Myanmar

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Abstract

This study investigates the intricate dynamics of post-authoritarian media systems in Albania and Myanmar¹, utilizing Sparks' (2008) concept of "elite continuity." Our research employs an asymmetrical comparative approach to explore critical junctures – pivotal moments that significantly shape the evolution of media landscapes. We have two primary objectives: first, to unravel the historical pathways leading to the liberalization of media markets in both nations, and second, to demonstrate using Sparks' framework how elite continuity evolves in these specific contexts.

Our study incorporates historical contextualization and qualitative analysis to examine the complex interplay between political transitions, economic interests, and evolving media systems. We explore how elite continuity manifests during these critical junctures, shedding light on the enduring influence of entrenched power structures.

Our findings reveal persistent patterns of elite continuity, emphasizing the shift from political to economic power. Despite differing historical and cultural contexts, both countries exhibit parallels in media transformations. This study enhances our understanding of the enduring impact of established elites and path dependencies within media context transformations.

Keywords: *Elite Continuity; Transition; Media Transformation; Commercialization; Albania; Myanmar*

Comparative research in political communication has predominantly focused on most-similar systems comparisons within Western contexts and theories (Hafez & Priyadharma, 2019, p. 19; Richter et al., 2023). Usually, we find publications of comparisons of well-researched countries like the UK, Germany, the USA, France etc. using well-established Western theories. We want to break this ongoing cycle of reproduced knowledge and a cycle of Eurocentric knowledge production processes that perpetuate colonial trajectories. Although it initially may seem unusual comparing Southeast Asian and Eastern European media contexts, asymmetrical comparisons offer significant advantages, especially in an era where postcolonial perspectives challenge Western-centric knowledge production. By comparing Albania and Myanmar, this study moves beyond isolated country studies to explore new forms of comparative research (Grüne, Hafez, Priyadharma & Schmidt, 2019). Following a quasi-experimental design, similar to "Most Different Systems – Similar Outcome" designs (...) we seek to identify common features among otherwise different communication systems to understand similarities in a particular outcome (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 6). In examining media transformations in Albania and Myanmar, this approach becomes particularly valuable when considering critical junctures, such as political transitions.

The study of transitology after the collapse of the Soviet Union has primarily addressed transformations in former communist systems, often presenting liberal

democracy as the ultimate outcome. However, differing pathways after political transitions, as shown by Voltmer (2012), can yield varying or even similar outcomes for politics, society, and media. This study aims to explore how Albania and Myanmar, despite differing historical, political, and cultural contexts, exhibit similar patterns of elite continuity after their political systems opened up. Sparks' (2008) concept of elite continuity provides a structured model to analyze how these cases compare with observations from Poland, Russia, and China.

We adopt asymmetrical comparison as a central method for "systemization through analogies" to understand the conditional contexts leading to elite continuity in Albania and Myanmar (Hafez & Priyadharma, 2019, p. 18; Thomaß, 2016, p. 51). Analyzing these two countries – each with distinct historical, political, and cultural trajectories – provides valuable insights into how media systems evolve under varying conditions of political change and elite persistence. This method enriches our understanding of global media dynamics and informing policy approaches during transition periods.

Both Albania and Myanmar underwent profound political transitions post-1990. Albania emerged from decades of isolation under a communist dictatorship, while Myanmar transitioned from nearly half a century of military rule to quasi-democratic governance between 2011 and 2021. Myanmar's transition process started with a top-down democratization through the "roadmap to democracy" initiated by the *Tatmadaw* (the military)

¹ For Myanmar the period of transition between 2011 and 2021 is considered. The time after the coup the état on February 1, 2021 is not relevant for our study.

in 2003. In contrast, Albania's transition started after 45 years of dictatorship as a bottom-up process after the fall of the Soviet Union after 1990.

Despite their similarities in emerging from closed political systems, they differ significantly. Myanmar is a multilingual, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic country with persistent armed conflicts and a Buddhist supremacy policy, whereas Albania, influenced by its communist past, is a multi-religious but less religiously active society. The two countries also differ greatly in terms of population size: Myanmar with its 55 million inhabitants is one of the biggest countries in Southeast Asia, whereas Albania with 2.8 million is the smallest country in the Balkans region. If you look at the economic situation of the two countries, you can recognize similar structures of a gap between the extremely rich and the poor, which is caused by the mismanagement of each countries' sources of income by corrupt elites. As a result, both countries are comparable to the poorest in their region in terms of economic power and income.

Although, the two countries present a wide range of social, cultural, and political formations, they both resemble each other regarding the outcome of their transitions following an elite continuity. Our study especially identifies essential commonalities in the transformation processes of Albania's and Myanmar's media systems, which can be conceptualized within Sparks' (2008) framework of elite continuity. Similar to Sparks (2008), our analysis takes the ending of the dictatorial regimes as the point of departure in both countries. Differing from Sparks (2008) we do not only investigate former communist contexts, because while Albania was one of the strictest and secretive of communist regimes, Myanmar was for many decades one of the strictest and secretive military regimes worldwide. Sparks' (2008) concept of elite continuity defines our objects of comparison within its seven major components for understanding elite continuity in the context of political transformation. The main components are: i) genuine revolution; ii) the shift to a market economy; iii) considerable continuity; iv) political parallelism; v) social order; vi) the transformation of political power into economic power; and vii) the degree of democratization. By applying these components to the media contexts of Albania and Myanmar, we aim to elucidate the interplay between elite continuity and media development in these critical junctures.

In summary, this research seeks to unravel the complex interplay between elite continuity and media dynamics in Albania and Myanmar, offering insights into their unique political landscapes and the challenges they face during transformative phases. After explaining the relevance of examining path dependencies while analyzing media context transformations using the elite continuity concept by Sparks (2008), the paper gives insights into the historical developments of the two countries' media transformations as a background to understand the contexts of the elites' entanglements. Following this, we apply Sparks (2008) framework with its seven components to analyze elite continuity in Albania and Myanmar following their political transitions and discuss the outcomes.

Political Transformations and the Media

Political transformations that involve system changes often display distinctive characteristics, particularly in the scope and dynamics of societal upheaval (Jarolimek, 2009, p. 415). Research on these transformations has mainly focused on political systems, especially following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, emphasizing transitions towards idealized forms of democracy. This approach often categorizes transition processes as "defective" or "illiberal" democracies. The field of "transitology" and its associated transition paradigm gained prominence during the third wave of democratization in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s.

Scholars often frame the traditional view of "transition" as a linear passage from authoritarian rule to democracy (Merkel, 2010; O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead, 1986). Jakubowicz (2007) considers "transition" as the phase immediately after dismantling the old system, leading to the development of a new one. However, this paradigm assumes a progression towards a liberal democratic model and overlooks the complexities and non-linear paths that many countries do experience. As Carothers (2002) argues, the idea of a straightforward path to democracy – which he terms "the end of the transition paradigm" – is misleading. The reality in many countries has been more complex, with political transformations often influenced by the interests and actions of the dominant elites (O'Donnell & Schmitter, cited in Tzankoff, 2001, p. 20, see also Schmitter, 2017). The persistence of dominant elite structures, even in nominally democratic states, suggests that transformational processes do not necessarily result in substantial shifts in political power dynamics (Giraudy, 2015). While there may be significant public engagement at the start of a transition (Merkel 2010, p. 84), the consolidation of democratic systems often depends heavily on the actions and interests of political elites.

While much of the political science literature has focused on regime changes, the role of the media within these transformations is often overlooked. Media systems can either mirror societal changes or actively participate in them, serving as a crucial component of the broader transformation process. Understanding the path dependencies in media systems is essential for comprehending the unique characteristics of political transformations (Pierson, 2004). As Voltmer (2012) notes, media institutions are not newly created after regime changes but are instead transformations of existing structures that retain the norms and power dynamics of the previous regime. This insight underscores the importance of considering media dynamics as an integral aspect of political transformations, shedding light on the complex interplay between continuity and change within evolving systems. Sparks and Reading (1994) further emphasize that in post-communist Europe, media system transformations exhibited significant continuities in structures and personnel, revealing a slower shift towards market-driven models than initially anticipated.

In the contexts of Albania and Myanmar, understanding

media system transformations requires a focus on ‘critical junctures.’ These are events that trigger significant institutional or policy changes, often involving crises, shifts in ideas, and major policy shifts (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012, p. 324; Peruško, 2020). For Albania, the critical juncture was the transition from a communist regime to a democratic system. In Myanmar, it was the shift from a military dictatorship to a period of quasi-democratic governance. These junctures are crucial for understanding the evolution of media contexts in both countries.

Sparks’ conception of media pathways after political overhauls offers a framework for understanding how different types of authoritarian regimes – such as those in Albania and Myanmar—can lead to varied media transformations. By examining these pathways, we can gain insights into how media systems evolve in response to political changes and how elite continuity is maintained or altered through these transitions.

Comparing Albania’s and Myanmar’s Media Transformations using Sparks’ Conception of Elite Continuity

Our qualitative analysis and comparison are guided by Sparks (2008; 2010) theoretical framework of “elite continuity”, which offers an alternative explanation for the dynamics observed in post-authoritarian media systems. Sparks’ approach challenges the conventional expectation that transition from communist to post-communist media systems would naturally lead to the development of independent and objective media outlets. Instead, Sparks suggests that these media landscapes often remain closely aligned with the pre-existing elite structure. By applying Sparks’ framework to the media transformations in Albania and Myanmar, we aim to uncover the persistence of elite influence within these evolving environments.

The application of Sparks’ framework is informed by previous data collections and analyses, including interviews with various stakeholders in Albania and Myanmar (Radue, 2017; 2019; 2022; Radue & Bullerdieck, 2015; Godole, 2014). This method allows us to cross-reference insights from multiple perspectives, providing a comprehensive assessment of the complex processes influencing media transformation in these contexts. In our previous studies, we conducted extensive interviews and on-the-ground research to understand the specific contexts of Albania and Myanmar after transition (Godole, 2014; 2021; Radue, 2017; 2019, 2022). For instance, one of the authors has academically tracked the democratization process in Myanmar, spending considerable time in the country, leading media development projects, and conducting interviews in local and exiled newsrooms. Similarly, the co-author brings practical experience from Albania, offering a deep understanding of the media landscape shaped by firsthand observations as both a former journalist in the early 1990s and a media scholar. This direct engagement has provided us with unique insights and access to information that is

not readily available from other sources.

By examining the seven components of Sparks’ (2008) framework we aim to provide a detailed account of the historical evolution and transformative processes that have shaped the liberalization of media markets in Albania and Myanmar. Using Sparks’ concept, we compare the pathways leading to elite continuity and employ historical contextualization to understand the key issues that have shaped the media environments in both countries. We focus on pivotal moments to comprehend how they have influenced the current configurations of the media landscape, setting the stage for subsequent changes and developments.

Our analysis is guided by the following research questions, which explore the dynamics of elite continuity and media system transformation during critical junctures:

RQ 1: How does elite continuity, as conceptualized within Sparks’ framework, manifest throughout the transformative phases of media systems during critical junctures in Albania and Myanmar?

Thesis 1: We assume that elite continuity persists in both Albania and Myanmar despite their distinct political transitions. The entrenched power structures and elite influence remain dominant, preventing the full emergence of independent media systems.

RQ 2: To what extent do factors like media commercialization, crony ownership, and politicization hinder the democratic potential of the media landscape in Albania and Myanmar?

Thesis 2: We assume that media commercialization, crony ownership, and political influence severely restrict the democratic potential of media landscapes in both countries. These factors contribute to a media environment that lacks diversity and independence, ultimately affecting the quality of democratic discourse and the flow of accurate information.

To test these theses, we combine historical contextualization with qualitative analysis, focusing on key dimensions of media transformations in Albania and Myanmar. This approach allows us to explore how elite continuity and media system transformation interact within political and cultural contexts and encompasses the following steps:

1. **Historical Contextualization:** We provide a detailed backdrop for the transformation processes in Albania and Myanmar, highlighting critical junctures that have significantly influenced their respective paths.
2. **Application of Sparks’ Framework:** We systematically apply Sparks’ (2008) framework to analyze the media landscapes in both countries, which involves examining each of Sparks’ seven components.

By clearly stating these theses, we aim to provide a thorough comparative examination of media market transformations in Albania and Myanmar and their intricate relationship with elite continuity. This aligns with Sparks’ (2008) assertion that democratization should

be viewed as a contingent feature of the new order, rather than its inherent essence.

Historical Contextualization of Albania's and Myanmar's Media Transformation

In the case of Albania, the term "transition" has been persistently used to describe the evolving political and media landscape since the fall of communism in the 1990s. However, there is an ongoing debate about whether this term adequately captures the complexities of Albania's democratic process. Kajsiu (2006) argues that the concept of "transition" oversimplifies the nuanced relationship between democracy and integration in Albania. He contends that the traditional transition paradigm fails to account for the recurring challenges and setbacks faced by Albanian democracy, such as issues with free and fair elections and the persistence of power structures. Instead of merely focusing on the consolidation of democratic institutions, Kajsiu highlights the importance of understanding the underlying political dynamics and historical processes that precede these institutional changes. This critique points to the dynamic and evolving nature of Albania's political and media landscape since 1990, suggesting that a more nuanced approach is needed to fully understand its transformation.

In contrast, Myanmar's political opening up between 2011 and 2021 represents a relatively brief period of liberalization rather than a complete political overhaul. During this decade, Myanmar experienced an overt effort to implement democratic structures and introduce new political actors. Our analysis focuses on the interplay between old and new elites, which shaped a media landscape that included both military-aligned entities and opposition forces. This dynamic was notably influenced by the emergence of exile media organizations, often supported by foreign aid, which promoted democratic values and sought to challenge the military-dominated society. Despite this opening, Myanmar's media landscape remained fragile, as demonstrated by the coup d'état on February 1, 2021, which underscored the resilience of military-backed elite structures and highlighted the limitations of Myanmar's democratic developments.

Overall, our analysis using Sparks' framework allows us to discuss and compare the structural factors that contribute to elite continuity in different contexts of transformation. By focusing on broad structural dependencies and processes, we aim to illustrate the mechanisms through which elite continuity is maintained, rather than delving into the specific struggles of opposition actors against entrenched power elites. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how various political and media systems evolve and the ways in which power structures persist through periods of apparent change.

Albania's Media System Transformation

The political transition in Albania, marked by a shift from

communism to a more democratic system, significantly influenced the developing media landscape. This development mirrored the broader political and economic transitions of the country. Like other Eastern European nations, Albania's media initially mimicked foreign models, particularly Italian television (Godole, 2014). Unlike in countries with pre-existing alternative media that facilitated a smoother transition, such as Poland and Hungary, Albania lacked such structures due to stringent state control during communism. The rapid shift left the media struggling to adapt to new democratic realities without a robust foundation for independence. In 1991, the number of national daily newspapers doubled to four, and by 1994, this number had grown to eight. This rapid expansion in media outlets was accompanied by a drastic transformation within the journalistic workforce. Many journalists from the former regime were either dismissed or relegated to roles within the state broadcaster or local media outlets.

During the early years of transition, Albanian media attempted to move away from overt partisanship yet struggled to establish themselves as truly independent institutions. As Jakubowicz (2007) observes, media in former socialist countries, while becoming more pluralistic, remained deeply intertwined with political interests. This entanglement was particularly evident in Albania, where a significant number of media outlets received state subsidies. Key state-supported entities included TVSH (the state public television), district public televisions, ATSH (the national news agency), Radio Tirana, and various local radio stations in major cities. Additionally, several partisan publications were financially supported by their respective political parties. Despite initial optimism about the emergence of a free press, this environment led to audience disillusionment. Many Albanians sought news sources independent of ideological and political biases, resulting in a decline in the circulation of partisan newspapers and, in some cases, their eventual closure (Godole, 2014, p. 69).

To understand the evolution of Albania's media landscape, an examination of its development across four distinct periods based on media ownership is useful (Godole, 2014; Fuga 2008; Neza 2010; Kajsiu 2012).

1. The Free press of the New Plurastic Parties (1991-1994): This phase marked a transition from strict state control to a period of relative anarchy in the media sector. The press established by the newly formed political parties began to rise. These publications were mostly led by journalists and directors of party organs who had been in place during the communist period: They changed the titles or the cities where the newspapers were originally founded. The most evident case is that of the first independent newspaper, *Koha Jonë*, which was initially established in Lezhë as the organ of the Party of Labor of the district, and later moved to Tirana, where it made history during the transition period (Godole, 2014). In general, journalists were young and untrained. During this period, there was a lack of clear journalistic standards, employment criteria, contractual obligations,

and defined rights for journalists. As the former journalist, Aleksandër Furxhi, said in an interview, “after the fall of the regime, journalism was perceived more as an improvised profession, while journalists [were seen] as improvising working men” (Godole, 2014). Although the media landscape experienced significant growth, the influence of former communist elites persisted. Sparks and Reading (1994) note, there were substantial continuities in the structures and personnel of broadcasting even after political transitions. In many cases, the old state broadcasting systems were not fully privatized or replaced by free-market mechanisms but instead underwent gradual, controlled reforms that were heavily influenced by political interests (Sparks & Reading, 1994, p. 227). Consequently, the expansion and diversification of the Albanian media market during this period illustrate the complexities of elite continuity. Established elites adapted to the evolving media landscape, often using their positions to establish or control new media outlets.

2. The Political Press (1994-1998): During this phase, journalists often owned the newspapers they worked for, resulting in media that mirrored the chaotic nature of the political system at the time. The media landscape lacked a comprehensive legal framework to regulate journalistic activities effectively. The first press law, No. 7756 (1993), was adopted with minimal changes from Germany’s Westphalia region and without meaningful input from media stakeholders. This law, which was revised in 1997, was encapsulated in just two sentences: “The press is free. Freedom of the press is protected by law.” This period saw a proliferation of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, largely due to low production costs associated with outdated printing technology. However, private radio and television broadcasts had yet to emerge; state broadcasters continued to dominate the airwaves but struggled with outdated training, technology, content, and journalistic techniques. From the perspective of the relationship between politics and the media, this phase is marked by a relatively strong media presence that often positioned itself in opposition to political power. However, the political authorities, who rose to power following the first pluralistic elections in 1992, gradually reverted to old tactics of press control, aiming to mold the media and its journalists into submissive entities that aligned with the ruling power. Some researchers argue that the independent media of this period played a crucial role in promoting popular movements, particularly the newspaper *Koha Jonë*, which acted almost as a separate opposition party during the 1997 unrest (Lani 2012, cited in Godole, 2014). By the end of this period, there was widespread disillusionment with democracy, and the relationship between the public, the media, and journalists had significantly deteriorated. The image of journalists, who were once seen as heroes, advocates, missionaries, and watchdogs between 1993-1996, had declined to that of “shams” and “liars”—terms also used for politicians. This shift in perception was largely due to the media’s failure to provide adequate information and warnings about the impending

collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1997 (Godole, 2014).

3. The Clientelist Media (1998-2011): This third phase marked a shift in the media landscape as it became heavily influenced by private capital. Following the creation and consolidation of capital and capitalists in Albania after 1998, market forces began to play a significant role in the media sector. Influential businessmen, particularly those from the construction industry, entered the media ownership arena. During this period, media outlets were often established not to serve the public interest but to fulfill market demand and advance the economic and political interests of their owners. This era is characterized as the period of “clientelist media” by various researchers (Baka, 2011) because investments in media became a strategy for businessmen to create protective shields to safeguard and strengthen their interests. The media market during this period experienced significant growth, which was more quantitative than qualitative. According to Mark Marku (2012), powerful private interests led to a “reconfiguration of the media landscape.” This shift occurred periodically as prominent businessmen from the construction industry, such as Koço Kokëdhima, Irfan Hysenbelliu, and Genc Dulaku, as well as coffee mogul Dritan Hoxha, entered the media market, quickly establishing new media outlets that became some of the most influential in the country. Due to substantial investments, the newspapers owned by Kokëdhima and Hysenbelliu achieved the highest circulation in the market, while Dulaku and Hoxha came to own two of the most important private television stations in Albania (Marku 2012, cited in Zguri, 2017, p. 13). Most of these new businessmen held privileged positions during the communist era. They played crucial roles in shaping media policies and ownership structures, ensuring their continued dominance in the media landscape to this day.

4. The Mediatization of Politics (from 2013 onwards): Referring to the Press Freedom Index over the last 10 years, there have been fluctuations and slight improvements in media freedom, but the country continues to be categorized as having a partially free media. The most recent report states: “In Albania, press freedom and media independence are threatened by conflicts of interest between the business and political worlds, a flawed legal framework, and partisan regulation. Journalists are victims of acts of intimidation by politicians and organized crime” (<https://rsf.org/en/country/albania>).

A significant factor here is the mediatization of politics by political leaders, particularly the current Prime Minister, who launched his first social television media outlet, ERTV, in 2017, where he showcases all his public activities. The connection between politics and the media reached a peak in this phase, especially with the impact of social media and various online platforms. The Freedom House report on Albania highlights that since the 2015 local elections, monitoring conducted by the OSCE revealed that all major media outlets, including public media, favored one of the main political parties, specifically the Socialist Party (Zguri, 2017).

Myanmar's Media System Transformation

Colonial legacies have significantly influenced the trajectory of media markets in Southeast Asian nations. While many post-colonial states in the region have embarked on journeys toward democratic governance and media liberalization, Myanmar stands out as an exceptional case. For over half a century, Myanmar was governed by a military dictatorship (1962-2011), which left no room for free and pluralistic reporting. In February 2011, Myanmar experienced a unique transition, unlike the revolutions or uprisings seen in Eastern Europe. Instead, it initiated a top-down "Roadmap to a Disciplined-Flourishing Democracy" led by the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar's military) in 2003.

With Myanmar's first general elections in 25 years the NLD (National League of Democracy) won a landslide, and a first democratically elected government was formed in 2015. Although Myanmar's 2008 constitution still guaranteed 25% of seats in parliament for military personnel, a change towards a democratic governance formally took place. In 2020, with the NLD's strengthened popularity the party won 83% of the parliamentary seats – 346 seats in the lower and upper house – in the third general elections following the 2010 political reforms. The military-backed opposition USPD party won just 25 seats. As the power of the NLD was widening the military aligned party USDP did not acknowledge the outcome of the elections due to alleged irregularities and demanded new elections through the elections commission. This request has not been addressed. On February 02, 2021, when the newly elected parliament intended to meet for the first time in Naypyidaw, the military took power. A new cabinet was appointed, the separation of powers was abolished, and the legislative, judicial, and executive power was transferred to General Min Aung Hlaing and a state of emergency was imposed. All senior MPs, including de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and president Win Myint, were arrested. Since the military coup 5,592 people have been killed and 27,294 arrested by the junta or pro-military groups (AAPP, 2024, Sept. 02).

In this paper, we will analyze Myanmar's media development across four distinct phases: Myanmar's Media Spring (2011-2014), Institutionalization of the 'battle for free speech' (2015-2017,) Backsliding in media freedom developments (2017-2021), and Demolition of institutionalization of the media market through the coup d'état (2021).

1. Myanmar's Media Spring (2011-2014): This phase marked a structural shift, manifested by the abolition of the censorship board in 2012 and the proliferation of privately-owned media outlets, including dailies, weeklies, and monthlies. State propaganda organs were restructured into "Public Service Media." Despite the optimism surrounding these developments, the persistence of old power structures, closely tied to former rulers, hindered the media's ability to operate independently. For example, new independent private daily newspapers struggled to compete against wealthy cronies who favored tabloid

journalism and were less critical of powerful elites. Like Albania, Myanmar rapidly transitioned from one extreme to another – from being one of the most closed media systems in the world to a relatively free battleground of free media reporting. Unlike Albania, Myanmar's media liberalization did not occur in a political vacuum but was influenced by its colonial heritage and tightly controlled by the military. As in Albania, Myanmar's newsrooms were filled with inexperienced and unskilled journalists due to the lack of institutionalized training for professional journalism during its media spring.

Moreover, the transformation of Myanmar's state-owned broadcaster, MRTV, into a public-service entity preserved a profound intertwinement between the government and the *Tatmadaw* with the media sector and did not balance the government's monopolistic advantages. The ideological imprint of the media outlets as transformed public-service broadcasting "remains extremely vulnerable to state interference" as also shown in analysis for other transitional contexts (Voltmer, 2012, p. 237).

During this time, international media aid organizations, such as DW Akademie and Internews came into the scene quickly e.g. to support the process of setting up public service media structures and train people for new tasks to support new emerging elites to build democratic media structures. One could question the expected impact of foreign aid for the establishment of new elites in Myanmar, as key players, like DW Akademie, worked together with the old powerholders and maybe even strengthened them through training and resources during the process of the transformation of the state media.

In this early stage, one prominent example shows how the entanglement of assorted money sources impacted the media (spring) development (see also Brooten, 2016). The *Myanmar Times* was the oldest privately owned media outlet in Myanmar, known for its moderate criticism of the government. It was the first publication financed by foreign capital. It began as a joint venture between Australian Ross Dunkley and U Sonny Swe, the son of a high-ranking military official, which granted the paper preferential treatment (Thu, 2012, p. 23) but limited its independence. In 2014 and 2015 prominent businessman U Thein Tun known as the "godfather" in the old world of crony business" (Asia Times, 2022), who was the local partner of Danish brewer Carlsberg and the Tun Commercial Bank, invested in the *Myanmar Times* and owned most of its shares (Myanmar Times, 2014). U Thein Tun's management of the newspaper had to follow the military's editorial line. The former editor-in-chief actively censored coverage, e.g., banning the word *Robingya* and censoring critical reports about the *Tatmadaw* or companies that bought adverts and other 'sensitive' institutions. Even at a time when most of the country's private press adhered to its editorial independence after the military coup in 2021. This made the newspaper one of the first victims of the coup after the entire staff quit in protest (Asia Times, 2022).

In addition to the influence of military, business and media connections, the former Press Scrutiny Board could easily control the content of independent

newspapers through censorship. Moreover, the expensive annual licenses were typically allocated to politically corrupt individuals with close ties to authorities and government ministries, who either published the papers themselves or leased the licenses to private publishers (Thu, 2012, p. 22; personal communication, anonymous, member of the Press Council, 07.03.2014).

2. Institutionalization of the ‘Battle for Free Speech’ (2015-2017): Myanmar took significant steps toward a freer media market by enacting new laws and institutions. In 2014, the introduction of the News Media Law and the Printing and Publishing Law replaced earlier draconian legislation, effectively ending pre-censorship. New bodies, such as the Press Council and the Myanmar Journalism Institute, were established to promote media freedom and journalists’ rights. The newly founded Press Council is an example of how small battles between new and old elites can lead to results that maintain power privileges. The Press Council was composed of members of the old (pro-government and pro-military) and new elites (activists, pro-opposition) who negotiated a new framework for the institutionalization of a new order for the media. This included the new media law, which did not fulfil the more progressive demands of the newly founded Press Council and continued to provide the government with instruments to punish undesirable reporting. Additionally, the transformation of state-owned broadcaster MRTV into a public-service entity did not lead to genuine liberalization.

3. Backsliding in Media Freedom Developments (2017-2021): Despite the formal transition to democratic governance following Myanmar’s 2015 general elections, media freedom faced challenges. Section 66D of the Telecommunications Act was frequently employed to charge critical reporting as defamation, a criminal offense. Since the NLD came to power, the cases of journalists sued under the 66D skyrocketed and experts have called the new government an elected dictatorship, which is establishing a “self-censorship regime” and ascribe a lack of democratic culture to the NLD (Y. Htut, personal communication, April 17, 2017; anonymous, personal communication, March 02, 2017).

Additionally, the escalation of human rights violations against the *Rohingya* minority in 2017, labeled as “ethnic cleansing” by the UN, worsened the situation. During this period, Facebook became a primary source of information, facilitating the spread of hate speech and disinformation. While international criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi’s government intensified, her support grew within Myanmar, especially among the Bamar majority.

4. Demolition of Media Market Institutionalization through a Coup d’État (Since 2021): On February 1, 2021, Myanmar experienced a coup d’état by the *Tatmadaw*, resulting in the destruction of nearly a decade’s worth of media freedom achievements. Independent media outlets had their licenses revoked, journalists were imprisoned, persecuted and killed. The space for free expression and criticism have been completely diminished.

Altogether, these developments reconstruct the complex journey of Myanmar’s media transformation, highlighting the interplay between political forces, media development, and democratic transitions in the country’s recent history (see also Stokke & Aung, 2019).

Sparks’ Framework Application for the Comparison of Elite Continuity in Albania and Myanmar

To compare the media system transformations in Albania and Myanmar, we apply Sparks’ (2008; 2010) framework of “elite continuity”. This framework helps us to understand how path dependencies in actor-structure relationships explain significant institutional or policy changes (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012; Pierson, 2004). Here, we provide insights into the transformation processes of Albania and Myanmar, focusing on critical junctures in their political landscapes that led to the liberalization of their respective media markets. This section contrasts the experiences of both countries under each of Sparks’ components, highlighting the nuances and deviations from theoretical expectations.

(1) The Genuine Revolutions

Sparks (2008) describes the events in Central and Eastern Europe as “genuine revolutions” that represented a clean break from communist regimes, with new political parties contesting power and dismantling the Communist Party’s monopoly. While some transitions were negotiated, they nonetheless resulted in significant changes in political life (Sparks, 2008, p. 10). According to Sparks, the post-communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe were true revolutions, breaking the Communist Party’s grip on power and creating new political parties. Myanmar’s transformation does not qualify as a “genuine revolution” under Sparks’s definition. The transition failed to substantially or formally dismantle the political monopoly of the *Tatmadaw*. In Albania, the fall of communism was less of a ‘genuine revolution’ and more influenced by external political shifts (Voltmer, 2012; Godole, 2014). Unlike the clear break from communist regimes observed in Central and Eastern Europe, Albania’s transition involved a transfer of power (Sparks, 2010, p. 98) to new leaders of pluralistic parties, many of whom were former party secretaries or closely associated with the communist regime, indicating a continuity of elite influence rather than a complete systemic overhaul.

(2) Elite Continuity

Sparks (2008, p. 10) notes considerable continuity in institutions and personnel between old and new regimes, particularly in broadcasting and the civil service, where old state broadcasters were neither dismantled nor privatized. This continuity is evident in Myanmar’s

transition, where the transformation of the state-owned broadcaster maintained deep ties between the government and the *Tatmadaw*, fostering an environment susceptible to state interference (Voltmer, 2012, p. 237).

This pattern of continuity in institutions and personnel, as highlighted by Sparks, underscores their persistence in maintaining their established social roles and internal structures. A similar phenomenon is observed in the context of Myanmar's transition. The transformation of the state-owned broadcaster in Myanmar has resulted in a deep entwinement between the government and the *Tatmadaw*, extending into the media sector. This has created an imbalance in favor of the government's monopolistic advantages. Furthermore, the ideological influence exerted on media outlets, now transformed into public-service broadcasters, remained highly vulnerable to state interference. This susceptibility is evidenced by analyses conducted in other transitional contexts (Voltmer, 2012, p. 237). In Albania, the regime change also raised questions about the replacement of lower-level elites, not just top leaders. Samuel Huntington, a prominent political scientist, posited in his 1991 book "The Third Wave" that the actions of new governments in dealing with the old leadership apparatuses play a pivotal role in shaping the type of transition in these societies. This concept underscores the unique role played by the elites at the pinnacle of these societies during regime changes.

The situation in Albania during the regime change in 1991/92 was characterized by a dearth of independent counter-elites. Over the course of 45 years, the Stalinist regime had effectively stifled the emergence of dissident groups, liberal networks, or religious communities, even informally. Most political opponents had been either eliminated or imprisoned. Albania's isolation from the outside world further hindered communication with like-minded individuals in other countries, and international relations and trade had developed at a sluggish pace in the years leading up to the transformation.

In these circumstances, the post-dictatorship era witnessed a shift of individuals but not a wholesale replacement of elites. Former political prisoners wielded minimal influence in shaping the transformation process, with most of them assuming symbolic roles. Conversely, officials from the former Communist Party, who had collaborated with Enver Hoxha's (and later Ramiz Alia's) regime for years, ascended to leadership positions within the new political parties.

Both Myanmar and Albania demonstrate significant continuity in institutions and personnel, maintaining pre-existing social structures and internal hierarchies (Sparks, 2008, p. 10). The transformation of state-owned broadcasters and their continued influence illustrates this continuity.

(3) Shift Towards a Market Economy

Sparks (2008) argues that the transition toward a market economy was closely linked to political power, with political connections being crucial for securing media

licenses (Sparks, 2008, p. 10). In Myanmar, while a market economy existed prior to the top-down democratization process, the military's economic influence, facilitated through cronies, persisted. Notably, the *Tatmadaw* retained ownership of a significant portion of the country's media infrastructure. Cronyism emerged as a dominant structure in Myanmar's political, economic, and social transformation. Key media enterprises came under the ownership of influential political and economic elites, including individuals with strong ties to former ministers, military leaders, or those entrenched in the political sphere. The example of the *Myanmar Times* shows how private capital in the media sector maintained strong ties between the old elites within the evolving media landscapes. A tight nexus between the *Tatmadaw* and private companies have effectively captured the media market and led to a media landscape characterized by market-driven freedom of expression that is largely dominated by cronies.

Although a new broadcasting law was enacted in 2015, and the licensing process began, the sector remained under government and *Tatmadaw* control. It took years for the NLD government to complete the licensing for the private sector. Finally, in April 2017, five companies were granted licenses after a prolonged process: DVB Multi Media, Fortune International, Kuang Myanmar Aung, Mizzima Media, and Young Investment Group. In contrast to Sparks' observations (2008), the issuance of new broadcasting licenses, termed "content providers," extended beyond cronies to include former exile media organizations. At this point, "new" actors from exile entered the local media sector and started to challenge the old elites from within the country. Although exile media organizations such as DVB were popular and had large market shares, the government continued to have tools at its disposal to restrict the freedom of these publishers. As a result, these exiles, for example DVB never fully returned to Myanmar and continued to have offices in Thailand, where its staff returned after the 2021 coup. Despite their unique 'communication power' that has emerged since 1988, when activists fled Myanmar, the exiled media have not been able to significantly influence the balance of power in Myanmar in recent decades (Radue & Bullerdieck, 2015). The strong ties between the *Tatmadaw* and monopoly-like private companies led to a market-driven freedom of expression. Non-state print publications, unlike e.g. the high-circulating state-owned *Global New Light of Myanmar Daily*, struggled to survive in this crony-dominated market. Myanmar's former Minister of Information, Ye Htut, anticipated this scenario, which was also criticized by other experts:

Whether we like it or not; when we are opening up the media market and we abolish the censorship, the media becoming a business. [...] In the future, that's my concern, more and more the big companies are coming into the media market, and they will monopolize the print media and the broadcast media, and the independence disappears.

(Y. Htut, personal communication,
April 17, 2017)

Wealthy elites increased their power by interfering with the public discourse in Myanmar with investment in the media market and ownership of media outlets: “[T]hey have a lot of money and they don’t need it. They don’t care about losing money, but they want to influence the people” (anonymous, personal communication, February 14, 2017). New independent newspaper outlets, which were licenced in April 2013, mostly ceased operations due to the dominance of the government and cronies in the market who also control technologies and distribution channels (e.g. Ma Thida, personal communication, January 25, 2017, Brooten, 2016).

In Albania, the shift toward a market economy followed a similar pattern, where former communist elites became media owners (Godole, 2014). The continued dominance of these elites in the media market reflects the significant influence of existing power structures, particularly in local media enterprises and the state broadcaster *RTSH*, which remained dominant even after the transition. Former editors who had worked under the communist regime extended their influence during the privatization phase, founding private media outlets. Former journalists from newspapers operating during the communist era transitioned into media owners post-1991. Up until the end of 1997, many newspapers were under the management of these journalists, who adapted their media platforms to the evolving political and market dynamics.

It was only after 1998 that businesses began to invest in the media sector, with notable examples such as the newspaper *Shekulli*, which received investment from a former party secretary who had benefited from the privatization of state-owned assets in the early 1990s.

Consequently, the existing power structures continued to exert significant influence within the media market, particularly within the realm of local media enterprises. Furthermore, the state broadcaster, *RTSH*, maintained dominance in the broadcasting sector even after the transition, highlighting the enduring impact of the prior regime’s structures on the media landscape.

(4) Influence of Political Elite

Sparks (2008, p. 10) observes that media institutions emerging from transitional processes were often influenced by political elites, with regulatory bodies reflecting the shifting outcomes of elections. Political parallelism is a prominent feature in both Myanmar and Albania, as media institutions stemming from the transitional period bear strong influence from economic, political, and military elites. Contrary to expectations of complete independence, Sparks and Reading (1994) observe that media systems continued to exhibit elements of political dependence post-transition (p. 235). This aligns with the situation in Albania and Myanmar, where media independence is still evolving amidst ongoing political influences. In Albania regulatory bodies were reshaped based on election results, and the media became a stake of political power (Godole, 2014; 2021).

In Myanmar, this phenomenon is particularly evident in

the dominance of a crony business-oriented media market. The media landscape is largely divided into government-aligned outlets and those that adopt an oppositional or activist stance. The pervasive influence of economic, political, and military elites is conspicuous and shapes the media environment.

In Albania, political parallelism is evident, with media outlets often reflecting government positions or functioning as government mouthpieces. The ownership of media outlets by political figures, such as Prime Minister Edi Rama’s ownership of *ERTV*, exemplifies the ongoing entwinement of media and politics. In both cases, the intertwining of media and political interests underscores the influence of elites in shaping media narratives and agendas, potentially impacting media pluralism, independence, and the overall quality of democratic discourse.

(5) Persisting Social Order

According to Sparks (2008, p.10), while political revolutions transformed governance structures, they did not constitute social revolutions that fundamentally challenged the social order in the economy or the state apparatus. While the transitions were political revolutions that transformed the governance of these countries, they did not constitute social revolutions challenging the fundamental social order.

The social order in Myanmar remained largely intact, primarily due to the top-down nature of the political transformation. This observation aligns with Sparks’ framework, emphasizing that these transitions did not give rise to social revolutions capable of fundamentally challenging the existing order within industry or the state apparatus. Similarly, in Albania, expectations of rapid economic prosperity following the fall of communism were not realized. Instead, the country experienced a semi-autocratic system (Altmann, 1999, p. 348) characterized by the informal economy, corruption, and slow economic development, illustrating the persistence of the pre-existing social order. This period witnessed the flourishing of the informal economy, the erosion of existing productive infrastructure, rampant corruption, and other challenges (Schönfelder, 1999, pp. 341-345).

These dynamics in Myanmar and Albania highlight the complex interplay between political transformations, social orders, and economic structures, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of post-authoritarian transitions.

(6) Transformation of the Elite

Sparks (2008) notes that post-revolution elites often transformed their political power into economic influence, maintaining continuity across systems. In both Myanmar and Albania, former elites used their political connections to acquire economic power, reinforcing their dominance in the new order. One of the prominent aspects that emerges in our cases is the transformation of the old elite’s

political influence into economic power, enabling them to maintain a significant hold on power. This phenomenon aligns closely with Sparks' conceptualization of "a high degree of elite continuity throughout societies," illustrating a transition from political authority to economic dominance (Sparks, 2008, p. 1).

In Albania, the former bureaucratic ruling class repositioned itself as private capital owners, maintaining significant control over the media and other sectors, as articulated by Sparks (2008, p. 18). This parallels the situation in Myanmar, where military elites and their cronies dominated the media market, underscoring the continuity of elite influence. The *Tatmadaw* never gave up its central position and upheld dependencies across social systems to safeguard its power.

(7) The Degree of Democratization

Sparks (2008) argues that democratization is often a contingent feature of post-revolution societies, not an inherent outcome. In Myanmar's closely managed democratization process, several mechanisms were upheld to preserve the influence of the *Tatmadaw*, primarily through constitutional provisions and economic connections. Notably, the military retained control over central ministries, and a quarter of parliamentary seats were designated for military personnel only. Myanmar's political change built up a hybrid (semi-authoritarian) regime which resonated with Sparks' observations regarding the development of former communist contexts, wherein democratization often emerged as a contingent feature of the new order rather than its defining essence (Sparks, 2008, p. 10; Stokke & Aung, 2019). Similarly, in Albania, democratic institutions emerged under the influence of old elites, demonstrating that democratization was secondary to the continuity of elite power.

In both countries, the media systems were shaped by the continuity of political elite influence (Sparks, 2008), rather than a complete transformation toward independent and democratic media.

While both countries experienced some democratization, it was not the essence of the new order. In summary the media systems in Albania and Myanmar were shaped by the continuity of the political elite's influence and interests, rather than a complete transformation towards independent and democratic media.

Conclusions

The study provides an understanding of the challenges facing media transformations in post-authoritarian societies like Albania and Myanmar. It highlights the resilience of elite structures and the limitations of conventional democratization efforts that do not adequately address the root causes of media capture and manipulation. Moving forward, it is essential to develop strategies that promote not just the legal and economic independence of media, but also the cultural

and institutional conditions necessary for a truly free and pluralistic media environment. Building on the theses and research questions posed at the beginning of this study, we conclude the following:

Reflection on Elite Continuity in Media Transformations

The study found that elite continuity persists in both Albania and Myanmar, as entrenched power structures and elites have maintained their influence over the media landscape throughout the political transitions. This finding aligns with Sparks' framework, demonstrating that media systems often remain closely tied to pre-existing elite structures, even after significant political change. This underpins the assertion made at the outset that, when examining media transformations, the path dependencies and historical interdependencies of the structure-actor relationships that have shaped the power relations in the context should be examined more closely. Here, Spark's perspective of elite continuity is of great value because it focuses on the challenges of state media transformation. In our case studies, the transformation of state broadcasters such as Myanmar's MRTV and Albania's RTSH into public service media did not break the strong links between governments and the old elites. This has led to the continuation of a power imbalance and susceptibility to state interference (Voltmer, 2012, p. 237). These developments illustrate what Sparks (2008, pp. 1, 18) refers to as 'elite continuity', in which the former bureaucratic ruling class attempts to restructure themselves as owners of private capital. Sparks' (2008) analytical framework helps to understand how elite continuities manifests itself during such transitions.

The conclusion that elite continuity remains dominant in Albania and Myanmar suggests that formal political transitions alone are insufficient to disrupt established power dynamics. The persistence of elite influence underscores the adaptability of these groups, who manage to maintain control by transitioning into new roles or leveraging historical connections. The implications of this finding are significant: it challenges the assumption that democratization processes naturally lead to more independent and pluralistic media environments. Instead, it reveals that old elites often retain power by reshaping their influence within the evolving political and media landscapes. These findings serve as reminders that political change does not automatically equate to a complete overhaul of elite structures or power dynamics.

This raises questions about the effectiveness of post-transition reforms aimed at promoting media independence. If entrenched elites can adapt and continue to wield influence, then strategies focused solely on legal or regulatory changes may not be enough. A more comprehensive approach is needed—one that addresses the underlying power structures and fosters a genuinely independent media culture that can resist co-optation by political or economic interests. The comparison of our two contexts by applying Sparks seven components (2008)

directs our perspective on such persisting power networks.

Reflection on the Impact of Media Commercialization, Crony Ownership, and Politicization on Democratization

The study concluded that media commercialization, crony ownership, and political influence significantly hinder the democratic potential of media landscapes in both Albania and Myanmar. These factors limit media pluralism and independence, compromising the media's role in supporting democratic processes.

The finding that commercialization and crony ownership undermine democratic media functions reflects a broader trend seen in many post-authoritarian contexts. In Albania and Myanmar, the media landscape has become a battleground for economic and political elites, who use their resources to shape media content and control narratives. The shift toward a market economy was highly political, with political connections playing a crucial role, for example in winning commercial broadcasting licenses (Sparks, 2008, p. 10). This dynamic is evident in Myanmar's media market, where cronyism plays a dominant role. In Albania, a shift toward a market economy followed a similar pattern, where former communist elites transitioned into media ownership (Sparks 2010, p 98). This concentration of ownership and influence leads to a lack of diverse perspectives and critical journalism, which are essential for a healthy democracy. Despite some new media outlets emerging during the transitions, many remained linked to existing elites, limiting true renewal in terms of independent journalism and diverse ownership.

This suggests that efforts to promote democratic media environments need to go beyond merely opening up

markets or reducing direct state control. Instead, there must be safeguards against the monopolization of media ownership and the intertwining of media businesses with political or economic agendas. Encouraging a diverse media ecosystem that includes a range of voices and perspectives is crucial to counterbalancing the power of dominant elites and ensuring that the media can fulfill its role as a democratic watchdog.

Overall, the study's findings confirm the importance of understanding media transformations within their specific political and cultural contexts. Despite experiencing some degree of democratization, both countries demonstrate that democratization in media systems often remains a contingent feature, heavily influenced by the enduring dominance of old elites and preserved power structures. They serve as reminders that political change does not automatically equate to a complete overhaul of elite structures or power dynamics, underscoring the need for tailored, context-specific media reforms that address both historical legacies and contemporary challenges.

Moreover, these reflections encourage further research into the mechanisms by which elites maintain their influence in changing political contexts and how media reforms can be designed to counteract these forces. The example of Myanmar's exile media provides assorted starting points to examine how such new elites can flourish but may need either support or more diversity to strengthen those new elites in a more sustainable transformation. Additionally, further research can raise the question how international media assistance may weaken new elites in their struggle to fully overhaul the overpowerful old elites. Such research could provide valuable insights for policymakers and media advocates working to build more democratic media systems in similar transitional societies.

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