

LILY HAY NEWMAN SECURITY APR 2, 2021 6:56 PM

Myanmar's Internet Shutdown Is an Act of 'Vast Self-Harm'

On Friday the military junta shut off connectivity across the country. There's no sign of when it will return.



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

FROM JUNE 2019 until this February, 1.4 million people in Myanmar's Rakhine state dealt with the longest government-mandated internet shutdown in history, targeted at the Rohingya ethnic minority that makes up most of Rakhine's population. The connectivity blackout finally ended at the beginning of February, days after Myanmar's military deposed democratically elected officials and seized control of the country. But the reprieve was short-lived.

Over the past two months the military junta has continued to use the mechanisms for digital control put in place by Myanmar's previous regimes, escalating platform-blocking and digital censorship across Myanmar and initiating different combinations of mobile data and wireless broadband outages, including various overnight connectivity blackouts for 46 consecutive days. On the 47th night, this Friday at 1 am local time, the

government mandated that all telecoms cut wireless and mobile internet access across the entire country. More than 24 hours later, it has not returned.

"What authorities are doing in the online environment is a reflection of their crackdown in the offline environment," says Oliver Spencer, adviser to Free Expression Myanmar, a domestic human rights group. "They're destroying businesses, conducting raids, arbitrarily rounding people up, and shooting people. Their objective is to spread so much fear that the unrest, the opposition, just dies, because people's fear overtakes their anger. Shutting down the internet is meant to be just one demonstration of their absolute power. But it's a vast self-harm."

Authorities have left hardwired internet access available so banks, large corporations, and the junta's own operations can retain some connectivity. But the overwhelming majority of Myanmar's 54 million citizens, as well as its small and medium-sized businesses and gig economy, rely on mobile data and wireless broadband access for their internet. Physical phone, coaxial cable, or fiber optic hookups are rare in the country.

In addition to stifling speech, communication, and digital rights, the indiscriminate internet blackouts are destroying Myanmar's economy, halting pandemic-related remote schooling, and disrupting health care.

"Internet shutdowns are a blunt way to control information and there's an incredibly broad, devastating impact that comes from that," says Isabel Linzer, a research analyst at the US-based digital rights and democracy group Freedom House.

No one knows how long the internet shutdown will last. The law that allows authorities to direct telecoms to cut service is written only to mandate temporary outages with a set end date. But the military simply said service would be "temporarily suspended from today until further notice" to shirk this requirement.

In recent weeks, as they have for several years, people in Myanmar have spread awareness about workarounds to government censorship and site-blocking efforts, relying on tools like VPNs, the Tor browser, and end-to-end encrypted communication platforms like Signal. Even before the internet blackout, sites like Facebook, Instagram Twitter, and Wikipedia all have been blocked along with an array of news sites.

In preparation for the possibility of a total, nationwide internet shutdown, Free Expression Myanmar's Spencer says that some activists scrambled to install as many physical internet hookups as possible, so communities could retain some small amount of shared connectivity. And some individuals or businesses that already had one of these rare physical hookups have been opening their doors to share the resource. People have also been teaching each other about apps like Bridgefy and FireChat, famously used during protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, that use proximity-based Bluetooth mesh networks, rather than the internet, to send messages.

"The people of Myanmar are resourceful," says Amira Harb, a former United States intelligence agent and threat researcher who has researched internet use in Myanmar for the firm IntSights. "They are not afraid, or I should say many are rightly fearful, but they're brave. They're just pushing against everything and finding ways to call for solidarity and international help."

Governments around the world, including in Russia, Iran, Belarus, and China, use content filtering, digital censorship, platform blocking, and internet shutdowns as mechanisms to stifle unrest and silence dissent. But the evidence that such crackdowns are effective is uneven. Freedom House's Linzer points out that Sudan, for example, imposed severe restrictions on connectivity across the country early in 2019, yet ultimately longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir was successfully overthrown.

"People really reverted to traditional organizing tactics in Sudan," says Freedom House's Linzer. "And certainly in Myanmar we have seen there is continued mobilization—we continue to see protests. People are still

finding ways to organize and push back.”

Though nationwide internet outages are still fairly new to Myanmar, the country's inhabitants have faced years of propaganda and weaponized disinformation distributed by previous regimes on social media platforms like Facebook to stoke division and violence, and justify Rohingya genocide. Through it all, though, authorities' drastic and unconscionable initiatives to seize digital control haven't stopped citizens from fighting back.

"I promise I'll work double if they cut off the internet," a law student in Myanmar told University of Pittsburgh's Jurist news network before the total blackout. "They make a huge mistake if they think people are motivated by the online communications. The passion is engraved in people's heart."

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