

Myanmar is Experiencing a Digital-Age Coup – Tech Companies Must Push Back

Service providers and other tech companies have a duty to resist the Myanmar military's desperate attempt to monopolize control over information.

by [Allie Funk](#)

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On Feb. 1, Myanmar's military seized control of the government, detained political leaders, issued a one-year state of emergency, and announced that its commander in chief, Min Aung Hlaing, would lead the country. What followed was a page pulled directly from the censorship playbook. Citing all-too-familiar concerns over national security, unrest, and rumors, the military has now [ordered several temporary](#) internet shutdowns and has blocked news websites and major social media platforms, including [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Myanmar's is a [coup](#) for the digital age, where military officials can draw on a new arsenal of tools to control the information landscape. In a country where over [22 million people](#)—or about 40 percent of the population—rely on Facebook alone to communicate with loved ones, access daily news, and mobilize politically, the military's blocking order amounted to a draconian shutdown to essential communication tools and evinced to a desperate need to control the free flow of information.

The Escalating Use of Online Censorship

The state has spent years intensifying its assault on [internet freedom](#), effectively weaponizing connectivity to create a dangerous information space dominated by progovernment and promilitary disinformation and propaganda. Activists, rights defenders, and ordinary people have become entangled in the country's sophisticated surveillance apparatus, and have risked targeted arrests and detention if perceived as crossing red lines. Members of the most marginalized communities, notably the Rohingya population, have endured the brunt of this system of repression.

Up until June 2019, public officials had generally avoided wholesale censorship, such as blocking news outlets or throttling internet services. That pattern changed when authorities cited “stability and law and order” to [cut off](#) mobile internet service for over a million people living in villages in Rakhine and Chin States – areas where the military has committed atrocities against the members of the Rohingya Muslim minority and other groups. The government [claimed](#) that access would not be restored until the security situation improved, with a presidential spokesperson confirming that authorities would “fulfil every request made” by the military regarding the shutdown. Officials then [blocked](#) regional and ethnic news sites in March 2020, further marginalizing and endangering populations that have long been targets of the regime’s most egregious human rights abuses.

Now, during a moment of immense fear, uncertainty, and danger for people in Myanmar, the military has extended its digital repression nationwide and escalated its chokehold over the flow of information. In practice, connectivity disruptions and social media blocks constitute an especially cruel form of collective punishment: people in Myanmar are being denied access to communication tools at a time when they need them the most. Such draconian censorship also effectively squashes the sharing of independent information within the country and abroad, undermines people’s ability to mobilize against the military’s actions, and provides cover for human rights abuses.

Tech Companies Must Push Back

Service providers and tech companies [operating](#) in Myanmar have a responsibility to resist demands that they shut down internet connectivity, ban digital services, or otherwise censor information. Such calls will likely fall flat on the country’s state-owned provider, Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications, which has some 24 million subscribers. But foreign mobile providers Telenor and Ooredoo, with their approximately 21 and 10 million subscribers respectively, are in a better position to push back against Myanmar authorities’ egregious censorship.

Companies should first use all available legal channels, official and informal, to refuse censorship requests from the military or other government bodies. Resisting orders in full may prove challenging; authorities [reportedly](#) threatened to strip companies of their operating licenses if they did not comply with demands to block websites in the

spring of 2020. The situation is further complicated by a new leaked [draft cybersecurity law](#) that would impose punitive censorship and surveillance requirements. Yet companies are not completely powerless. At a minimum, they can and should ensure that any restrictions or disruptions are the least intrusive and as limited as possible in duration, geographic scope, and the type of content affected. In doing so, they should also appeal any requests through appropriate legal avenues.

Companies should also create a paper trail by thoroughly documenting all government demands, and notifying the public as to why connectivity or content may be restricted. Notably, Telenor has shown willingness to be transparent with its users. After complying with the order from the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the provider [announced](#) that it viewed the demand as being lawful under the country's broad Telecommunications Law, but in violation of [international human rights standards](#) that lay out how and under what circumstances free expression rights can be legitimately restricted.

Finally, service providers and tech companies, including Facebook and Twitter, should be in direct communication with civil society organizations in Myanmar and the broader region. After years of warnings about the spread of propaganda and violent content against the Rohingya [on Facebook](#), major platforms have increased their efforts to engage with domestic civil society, improve capacity in local language content analysis, and [tailor company policies](#) to the political context. It is now more important than ever to increase these efforts.

Routine civil society consultations should guide tech companies' approaches to any content moderation changes, countering disinformation and state propaganda, legal appeals against censorship demands, and ensuring any government requests for content restrictions and user data are in line with human rights standards. On Thursday, Facebook [announced](#) that it was significantly reducing the distribution of information posted by the military, limiting government agencies' ability to order the removal of content, and enhancing digital security protections for civil society and journalists, among other policy changes.

As protests continue to erupt across the country, draconian censorship will be combined with preexisting abusive practices. The military's heavily fortified digital propaganda apparatus will be in overdrive during the next few weeks and months.

Activists, journalists, and ordinary users will likely confront intensifying surveillance, and operate at greater risk of targeted harassment from progovernment trolls and even arrest for online political speech.

While the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi has been a disappointment in many respects to the country's progress toward democracy, the military coup and its aftermath leave the population even more vulnerable to abuse and [exacerbate](#) long-term problems like corruption, inequality, and economic mismanagement. Now, tech companies must take every possible step to protect the rights of people in Myanmar by ensuring that they remain in contact with one another and the world at large, and by preserving the free flow of independent information.

Image: This photo taken on February 7, 2021, shows Myanmar migrants sharing their activities on social media before going to a local protest against the military coup in their home country, at a house in the outskirts of Bangkok. – Organising protests, gathering supporters and distributing posters of their beloved leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar workers in Thailand are adding to a chorus of dissent against a coup that has upended their home country. (Photo by LILLIAN SUWANRUMPHA/AFP via Getty Images)

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