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Democracy and digital rights derailed in Myanmar

📌 EngageMedia Editorial 📅 February 10, 2021 ⌚ 8:56 pm 💬 11 Comments

Update as of March 5, 2021: Amid escalating violence that has led to mounting injuries and deaths, digital rights violations in Myanmar have only gotten more blatant. Not only is the *internet being blocked daily from 1AM to 9AM*, but telecommunications companies can no longer publicly disclose directives related to internet bans. (Telenor Myanmar, once transparent about the directives, *stopped their updates on February 14.*)

On the legal front, the *recently amended Electronic Transactions Law* has adopted some of the problematic provisions from the draft *cybersecurity law*. For instance, *spreading "fake news or disinformation" online* is now punishable by up to three years in prison. The amendment is yet another tool that can be used to silence critics of the coup, much like Section 505(a) of the Myanmar Penal Code, which "*criminalises incitement against the military*"; and *Section 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law*. Activists have also raised concerns about the *increase in state surveillance*.

State-sanctioned violence has also escalated. United Nations envoy to Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener counted "*more than 50 people [dead] since the coup started and many are wounded*"; 38 of whom were killed on March 3 alone. As of writing, *almost 1,500 people have been arrested and detained*, with several already charged for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement calling for a restoration of democracy to the country.

Threats of physical violence against protesters by the military and its supporters can also be found online. As a result, *Facebook and Instagram* have banned the accounts of the Myanmar military. *Tiktok* has also just banned videos of Myanmar soldiers threatening to shoot protesters.

EngageMedia continues to monitor the situation and provide support to Myanmar changemakers through digital security training and the *provision of free VPN vouchers*.



In Myanmar, protesters have adapted as a symbol of protest the three-finger salute made popular by The Hunger Games series. Artwork by Ae Chan Aung, Sai Laung Linn, Fedo Lay Kwarr, Thuta Aye, Kevin Thet, Kaung Min Kha, Ath Cartoonist, and Zwe Htet Draws. [Check out the original post on Facebook here.](#)

With protests in Myanmar showing no signs of stopping, both *on the streets* and *on the internet*, the country's people and the international community continue to demand action and accountability for increasing human and digital rights violations by the military.

As of this writing, it has been over a week since the Myanmar military *staged a coup* against the country's democratically elected government, arrested leaders, media

workers, and activists, as well as imposed a year-long state of emergency in the country, citing **irregularities in the November 2020 elections**. Following the coup on February 1, the military (also called the Tatmadaw) has imposed a number of restrictions that violate human and digital rights.

Notably, internet and mobile network accesses were **intermittently blocked** in the days after the coup. On February 4, the country's internet service providers were ordered to **block Facebook**. A similar directive to **block Twitter and Instagram** came barely a day after. The internet has **since been restored** as of February 8, according to the internet monitoring body **NetBlocks**. Social media platforms, however, remain blocked. Five days earlier, internet access was also **seemingly restored** in Rakhine and Chin states, which previously was subject to the world's longest internet shutdown.

On February 10, the military also sought to consult telecommunications companies on a **cyber security bill** that could add further legal weight to internet shutdowns and content takedowns in the country.

Myanmar remains in a state of emergency, and as protests continue to swell, and more dissidents are arrested and threatened, it's **likely for the military** to again order internet shutdowns or hinder access to social media platforms and other communications networks. It is a tactic we have seen – and continue to see – being deployed by governments in the Asia-Pacific, such as in **Thailand** last year and in **India** just a few weeks ago.

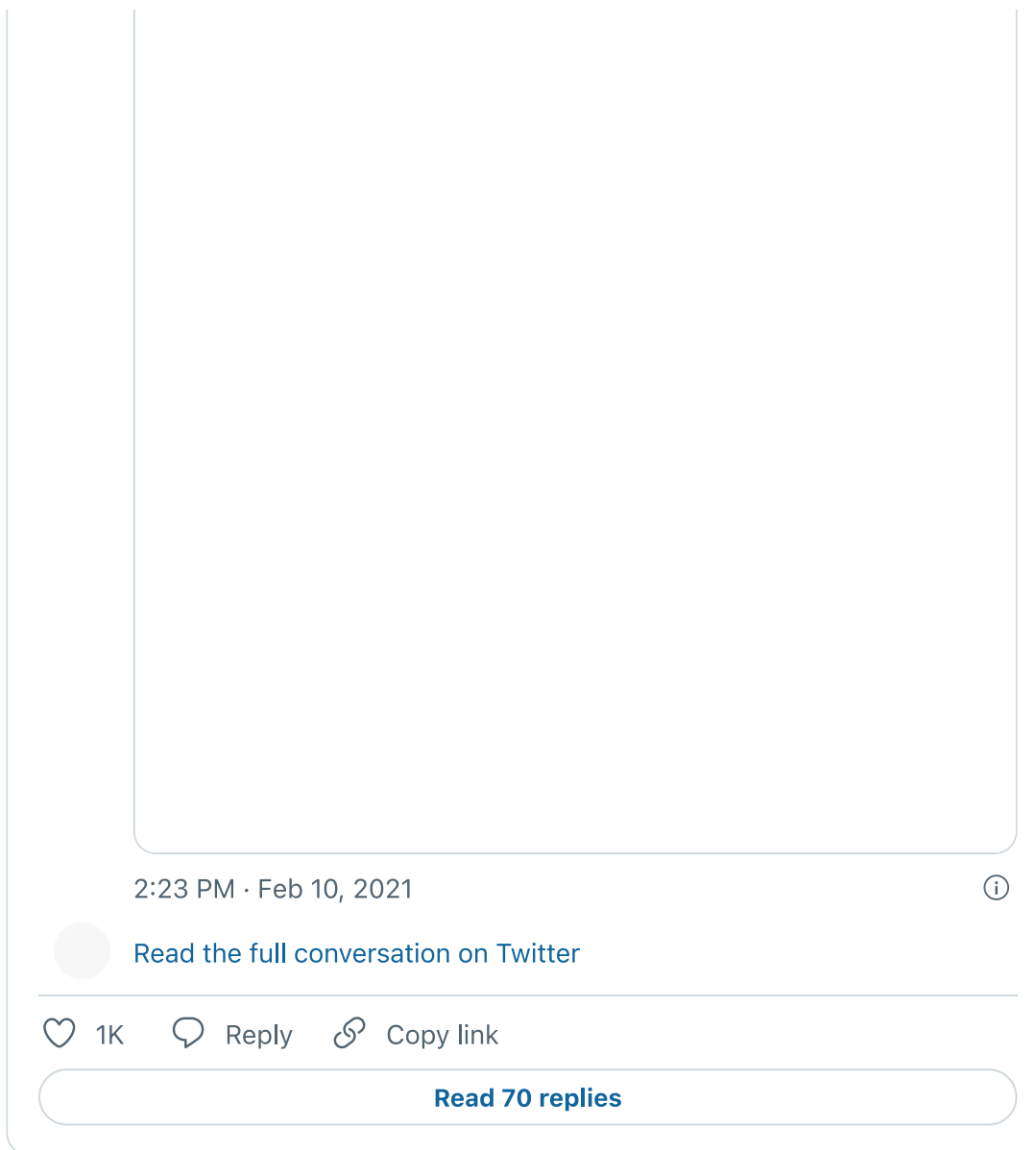
This coup and subsequent protests are **not the first** in Myanmar's history, only the latest in a series of roadblocks that have derailed the country's journey towards democracy. But regardless of how many times history may repeat itself, this much should be clear: Shutting down the internet and cracking down on dissent are part of a broader restriction of democratic participation, and **a clear violation of the Myanmar people's right to freedom of expression and information**.

**MIDO**

@myanmarido



The military gov had sent out a request for consultation to the "cyber security bill" dated yesterday to the telcos with many clauses which will legalise them to order shutdowns, website bans, content take downs and interceptions. [#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#) [#myanmarcoup](#) [#KeepItOn](#)



What digital rights have been violated in Myanmar?

1. Internet shutdowns and throttling, and communications blackouts

As previously reported, this is not the first time in Myanmar's history that the internet has been shut down, or that access to social media platforms and mobile networks have been restricted. Aside from the internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states, the Myanmar government in the past had also **blocked access to local news channels and websites** in Rakhine, where many of the Rohingya Muslims reside.

This continued crackdown on social media platforms is also alarming, particularly when **about 40 per cent of Myanmar's population** is on Facebook (despite the platform's **admission** in its role in perpetuating misinformation that contributed to genocide

against the Rohingya). Additionally, there were reports of a military order allegedly blocking **virtual private networks (VPNs)**, which would allow for the download of applications and software unavailable to those in Myanmar. These have made it more difficult for people in Myanmar to share information and communicate beyond SMS and calls.

Telecommunications providers have complied with the military's directives on these restrictions. But not all have followed immediately. **Telenor Myanmar**, for example, challenged the military's order on the basis of international human rights law, but ultimately had to comply. Civil society in Myanmar, however, continues to call on these companies to **resist the military's directives**.

Beyond the coup, such shutdowns severely restrict people's human and digital rights to access to information and freedom of expression online. These freedoms are especially important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, where **lack of information** can only worsen the situation. As expressed by **Felicia Anthonio**, Access Now campaigner and lead of the #KeepItOn coalition: "It was incredibly troubling to know there's a full-scale military coup taking place behind an internet blackout ... There are chaos and confusion, and the people of Myanmar — and the world — have a right to document events, access information, and communicate with each other".

2. Crackdown on, and detention for, dissenting voices

In the days after the coup, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights has expressed “deep fears of a violent crackdown on dissenting voices”. The Myanmar Press Council has issued a statement condemning attacks on journalists covering the coup and protests. For speaking out against the military, the Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma anticipates that “civil society organisations and human rights defenders are at risk of illegal detention and arbitrary arrest”.

As of February 4, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that at least 147 people have been detained. Among those arrested are filmmaker Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi and 88 generation activist Mya Aye. A number of dissenters have been detained since the nationwide protests began, on top of the police's blatant use of force to quell the demonstrations.

The restrictions on internet access also hamper dissenting movements both online and offline. One example is the civil disobedience campaign by the Yangon Youth Network, which is especially active online.

As emphasised by ARTICLE 19, international law maintains that the rights to freedom of expression and information may only be restricted if the restrictions are prescribed by law, in pursuit of a legitimate aim, and necessary and proportionate to that aim.

Widespread condemnation of the coup: Who have spoken up?

Despite attempts to restrict freedom of speech, organisations and civil society in and outside Myanmar have widely condemned the military coup and further actions to restrict not only internet and mobile access, but also any and all attacks on the media's and people's freedoms of expression and access to information.

- Human Rights Watch has documented the military's move to **block the internet** and calls on them to end the **crackdown against the media**.
- Access Now, which has been at the forefront of the #KeepItOn movement against internet shutdowns, has also **condemned** the recent shutdowns.
- Amnesty International has called the internet blackout "**heinous and reckless**".
- ARTICLE 19 has documented how the recent coup "**crushed**" **freedom of expression** and access to information, particularly in regards to the **military's targetting of Facebook**.

Beyond these statements, regional and international bodies have also heavily emphasised how the military coup and subsequent actions violated not only Myanmar's democratic reforms but also international human rights laws.

- Human rights organisations in Myanmar have released a joint statement calling on the military to restore and maintain full internet connectivity. The 23 signatory organisations also asked help from the international community to support all those at risk due to the coup. Read the [full statement here](#).
- In separate statements, the spokesperson of the United Nations Secretary-General called the recent events “[a serious blow to democratic reforms in Myanmar](#)”. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Myanmar: “There are also [disturbing reports](#) of journalists being harassed or attacked, and restrictions on the Internet and social media – which will restrict access to information and freedom of expression at this critical and frightening time for the people of Myanmar”. The UN Security Council also expressed similar concerns regarding “[restrictions on civil society, journalists, and media workers](#)”.
- An ASEAN Regional Coalition has called on the Tatmadaw to [#stopdigitaldictatorship](#) and “end all present as well as future attempts to violate democratic rights and freedoms, according to the international human rights obligations and commitments of Myanmar”. Members of this coalition include the ALTSEAN-Burma, Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), the Institute of Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM), Manushya Foundation, PEN Myanmar, and Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet).
- Forum Asia has called on the Myanmar military to “[end its use of violence and respect democracy](#)”.
- The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) has issued a statement condemning the [military's seizure of power](#). Similar condemnations have also been made by the [International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs](#) and the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.

What can we do about #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar?

The situation continues to develop daily, and vigilance is still sorely needed to support the people of Myanmar amid internet shutdowns and attacks on freedom of speech. On these issues, here's how we in the Asia-Pacific can help:

- Support the Myanmar people's fight for access to the internet. For example, EngageMedia has partnered with TunnelBear to provide free VPN vouchers to digital rights defenders in the region, with a particular emphasis on Myanmar. Should you know of individuals in need of VPN, you can share with them the page [EngageMedia.org/TunnelBear](https://engagemedia.org/TunnelBear). You can also find more resources related to this on [this anonymous server](#).
- Stay informed on what is happening on the news and on social media. Among the popular hashtags online are [#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#), [#HearTheVoiceOfMyanmar](#), and [#CivilDisobedienceMovement](#).
 - Do your research about the context and Myanmar's history. As part of this endeavour, EngageMedia has also curated a playlist of ten films about the situation in Myanmar. [Watch it here](#). We've also produced two podcast episodes

on Pretty Good Podcast: one on [Myanmar's history](#) and the other on [the challenges in documenting the latests protests](#).

- Ensure that people from Myanmar are included in your sources of information, to support and highlight further the stories on the ground.
- You can also subscribe to local news organisations in the country like [Frontier Myanmar](#) to express support for journalists who continue to report on what is happening despite intimidation from the military.
- Share resources on digital rights and how to stay safe while protesting. Various organisations like MIDO and Free Expression Myanmar have developed guides on digital safety and more in the Burmese language.
 - If you have access to more resources in non-Burmese languages, you can volunteer, or instead join or coordinate efforts to localise these guides.
- Join campaigns (both online and on the ground) that support the Myanmar people, wherever you may be. In support of the people of Myanmar, protests have popped up in front of [Myanmar embassies](#) across the region. The [#MilkTeaAlliance](#) has also [welcomed Myanmar](#) to the collective.

11 thoughts on “Democracy and digital rights derailed in Myanmar”

1. Pingback: [Myanmar introduces 'draconian' cyber security bill amid growing anti-coup protests](#) · [Global Voices Advox](#)
2. Pingback: [Pretty Good Podcast Episode 10: Boosting Asia-Pacific voices in West-dominated tech discourse](#) - [EngageMedia](#)
3. Pingback: [Pretty Good Podcast Episode 11: A Conversation with a Pro-Democracy Activist in Myanmar](#) - [EngageMedia](#)



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4. As a Myanmar international student who's studying in Australia, I really appreciate all the human rights groups' efforts to protect and help the Myanmar civilians . Also please inform me if there's any event and actionto support Myanmar

5. Pingback: [Surveillance Self-Defense Guides Now Available in Burmese | Libertarian Hub](#)
6. Pingback: [A Call for Action and Renewal: Reflections on 2021 - EngageMedia](#)
7. Pingback: [Tech Tales films inspire, energise youth at Myanmar human rights film festival - EngageMedia](#)
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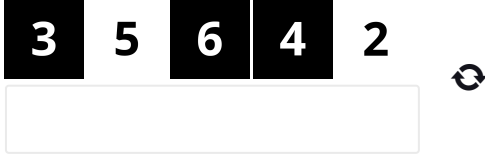
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