

BURMA

INTERNET ENEMY

Domain name: .mm

Population: 53 414 374

Internet-users: 300 000

Average charge for one hour's connection at a cybercafé: about 0,55 US\$

Average monthly salary: about 27,32 US\$

Number of imprisoned netizens: 2

Burma took drastic measures in 2010 to reorganise the country's Internet and to arm itself with the means, at the next sign of a crisis, to cut off its population's Web access without affecting official connections. Prior to the November 2010 elections – the first in twenty years – censors resorted to massive crackdowns, intimidation and cyberattacks to reduce the risk of any negative coverage. Tampering is now at its height.

WIDESPREAD NET CENSORSHIP IN BURMA

The regime is enforcing harsh and widespread Internet censorship. The Burmese firewall restricts users to an intranet purged of any anti-government content. Blocked websites include exiled Burmese media, proxies and other censorship circumvention tools, certain international media, and blogs and sites offering scholarships abroad.

In an interview granted to Rolling Stone magazine, American hacker and WikiLeaks member Jacob Applebaum, exposed the scope of the censorship by showing that only 118 of the country's 12,284 IP addresses are not blocked by the regime and have access to the World Wide Web. He also showed how vulnerable the network is the event of attacks.

Censors may also be counting on the complicity of Western companies. Some Burmese Internet service provi-

ders acquired censorship equipment and hardware from the Chinese subsidiary of the Franco-American company Alcatel-Lucent. On March 24, 2010, Reporters Without Borders and the Sherpa Association sent a letter to Alcatel-Lucent's management to ask for explanations, notably about the sale in Burma Lawful Interception Integrated hardware. The company denied this claim, insisting that it merely supplied telecom infrastructures within the framework of a Chinese-funded project.

Yet in an article appearing in the May 19-25, 2008 issue of the newspaper Myanmar Times, a spokesman for the state-controlled ISP Hanthawaddy confirmed that the Alcatel's Chinese subsidiary did indeed provide a website filtering and surveillance system.

OUTSTANDING BLOGGERS

Despite the regime's iron grip on the Internet, the number of bloggers keeps rising: there are now 1,500 of them, 500 of whom blog regularly. When Burmese bloggers based

abroad are included, this number totals 3,000. Every year, Reporters Without Borders and the Burma Media Association reward Burma's best bloggers. Thousands of Burmese netizens voted for their favourite blogs, and in late February 2010 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, a dozen of them received a prize for the best Burmese blogs. Myanmar E-Books (<http://burmesebooks.wordpress.com>) was voted the best general category blog. The prize for the best news blog went to The Power of Fraternity: (<http://photayo-keking.org>).

In the months prior to the November 2010 elections, some bloggers stepped up to the plate by keeping their compatriots informed about the elections and the issues at stake. They occasionally disseminated news about the candidate contenders and the electoral laws – critical information rarely relayed by the traditional press, which is subject to stringent pre-run censorship.

Despite the slow connections and risks incurred, Burmese Internet users are still circumventing censorship, reading the foreign press, networking on Facebook or simply enjoying themselves online.

THREE NETIZENS ARE STILL LANGUISHING IN PRISON

Journalists who collaborate with the exiled Burmese media and bloggers are in the authorities' line of fire, particularly since the 2007 Saffron Revolution and the international outcry which followed the mass circulation of images of the ensuing crackdown. The authorities are making unabashed use of a particularly repressive law adopted in 1996, the Electronics Act, to regulate the Internet, TV and radio. This law notably prohibits the import, possession, and use of a modem without official permission, under penalty of a 15-year prison sentence for "undermining state security, national unity, culture, the national economy and law and order."

The Burmese military junta considers netizens enemies of the state. Three of them are in prison for having expressed themselves freely on the Web.

Zarganar, a blogger and comedian known as the "Burmese Chaplin," was arrested on 4 June 2008 after having testified to foreign media outlets – and notably to the BBC World Service – about the Burmese government's poor management practices and guilty silence over the loss of

human lives and property caused by hurricane Nargis. He is serving a 35-year prison sentence for violating the Electronics Act.

On 10 November 2008, blogger Nay Phone Latt (<http://www.nayphonelatt.net/>), who owns three cybercafés in Rangoon, was given a jail sentence of 20 years and six months for having described on his blog how difficult it is for young Burmese people to express themselves freely, especially since the autumn 2007 demonstrations. According to Reporters Without Borders' sources, Nay Phone Latt was allowed to see his parents on 7 October 2010. The young blogger is said to have been deprived of his walking privileges for five months, and to have been confined to his cell. He is allegedly being held in a prison in south-eastern Burma, along with 10 other political prisoners.

From his prison, Nay Phone Latt – who has been denied the care his health problems require – has nonetheless managed to continue his fight for freedom of expression. Blogger Kaung Myat Hlaing ("Nat Soe"), who has already been given a two-year prison sentence, and is wrongfully accused of having participated in the April 2010 Water Festival bombings, was handed an additional 10-year sentence under the Electronics Act. This young man of 22 was interrogated for 10 days and deprived of food, water and sleep. He admitted being a member of the dissident group "Best Fertilizer." He is charged with having taken part in poster campaigns calling for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and of other political prisoners.

RECONFIGURING THE BURMESE INTERNET BEHIND A SMOKE SCREEN

In October 2010, the Burmese junta-controlled Yatanarpon Teleport Company announced the launching of the country's "first national Web portal," a would-be Silicon Valley to be called "Yadanabon Cyber City."

In an exclusive report compiled by local sources entitled "National Web portal – Development or repression?" Reporters Without Borders and the Burma Media Association express concerns that the new Burmese Internet, billed by the government as a huge step forward, may actually be used to bolster the surveillance and repression already imposed on Burmese netizens, while reserving the benefits of faster and improved access for members of the regime.

The deployment of fibre-optic cables will not only allow Internet access but also Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) services because it will increase available bandwidth.

Burmese Internet users will be allocated to three Internet service providers, instead of the two they now have. One will be reserved for the Burmese defence ministry, one for the government and one for the public. Under this system, the government will be able to totally or partially block the population's access without affecting government or military connections. During the 2007 Safran Revolution, since all three "categories" were using the same providers, when the authorities disconnected the Internet to prevent civilians from sharing photos of the ensuing crackdown, members of the military and government were also cut off. What is more, the new architecture will allow the defence ministry to directly control Internet traffic at the point of entry into Burma.

The government and military will be likely to enjoy faster and better Internet performance than the average user, since ISPs will get an "equal share" of bandwidth in each of the three categories, even though the number of users will vary greatly from one ISP to the next. The cost of the new service, which will be passed on to the public, may also curb any growth in the Internet penetration rate, currently at about 2% in a country in which the average salary is 27 U.S. dollars and Internet cafés charge 54 cents per connection hour.

This national portal will supposedly offer an email service (Ymail) and a chat service (Ytalk) as alternatives to Gmail and Gtalk, making it even easier for the authorities to monitor users' online communications.

Lastly, undetectable Internet "sniffers" will be placed on the server reserved for the public to retrieve diverse confidential data. The military junta's ability to spy on netizens and dissidents, thereby restricting freedom of speech even further, will be greatly enhanced.

The Internet access difficulties experienced by local Internet users during recent key events attest to the new portal's timely arrival.

UNRELIABLE INTERNET CONNECTIONS IN THE RUN UP TO THE 7 NOVEMBER 2010: SLOWDOWNS, CYBERATTACKS AND TAMPERING

The elections initiated by the military junta had no credibility, mainly because of the Burmese and foreign media's lack of freedom. Despite the constraints, the Burmese media did their best and managed to offer the public a variety of news and analyses unmatched since the last elections in 1990. However, with all the preceding censorship, intimidations, detentions and expulsions of foreign journalists, stricter liberticidal laws and unreliable Internet connections, the conditions for a free election were far from present.

The military junta made it a requirement for political parties wishing to publish information or their programmes to first have them approved by the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board within 90 days after registering with the Election Commission. The regime announced on 17 March 2010 that the publishing of pamphlets, newspapers, books or other election-related printed material, now falls under the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act, which provides for sentences of up to seven years in prison for disseminating information which is critical of the government or disturbs public "tranquillity."

A drastic slowdown in Internet connections was noted in early October, more than a month after the elections, indicating the authorities' resolve to tighten their control over information. "I can no longer connect to my Gmail account using proxies. Access to all websites based abroad has become terribly slow," a Rangoon-based journalist told Reporters Without Borders. According to Irrawaddy magazine, the capital's cybercafés had closed in advance of the elections.

This slowdown began after cyberattacks in the form of distributed denial of service (DDoS) affected several exiled Burmese media websites such as Irrawaddy and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB).

Just a few days prior to the legislative elections, the Burmese Internet network experienced a massive cyberattack. The attacks began around 25 October 2010 and gradually increased in number and severity, causing the country to be regularly disconnected from the Web for se-

veral days. They continued to occur until the elections were over, which made it extremely difficult for journalists and netizens to transmit videos and photos and to do their jobs.

The government shifted the blame to hackers whom they claimed launched the DDoS attacks on the country, but according to Burmese sources contacted by Reporters Without Borders, most of the attacks were allegedly launched by government agents to justify cutting off the Internet. The DDoS's were aimed at Internet service provider Myanmar Post and Telecommunications and constituted – according to the American IT security firm Arbor Networks – an onslaught “several hundred times” more than enough to overwhelm the country’s terrestrial and satellite network. They reportedly reached 10 to 15 GB of data per second, a magnitude much greater than in the highly publicised 2007 attacks against Georgia and Estonia.

During the 2007 Safran Revolution, Burmese netizens had circulated news and videos on the authorities’ bloody crackdown on monks and demonstrators. The regime subsequently cut off Internet access for several days. Connections are also slowed on key dates such as 8 August – the anniversary of the 1988 political uprising – and during the 2009 trial of dissident Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. After being released on 13 November 2010, the latter announced that she intends to set up a website to showcase her views and those of her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD)

DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI: FREE AND CONNECTED?

The well-known Burmese dissident and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, who was cut off from all means of communication during her years under house arrest, now has an Internet connection in her home via the state-run ISP, Yatanarpon Teleport. She has declared that she intends to make full use of the Internet and social networks, particularly the Twitter micro-blogging site, in order to more effectively reach Burmese youths in the country and abroad and to hold online discussions. This latter initiative may prove challenging to achieve right now due to the poor quality of the Internet infrastructure. As for the dissident’s collaborators, they remain discreet about their role in developing the NLD’s online network, as they are subject to a severe penalty under the Electronics Act.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is aware that her communications will be closely monitored and that the regime may decide at any time to suspend her Internet access. She has allegedly stated that she has nothing to hide.