Surveillance of media and Internet stepped up under new civilian president

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Press freedom and online freedom of information are still being flouted in Burma, three months after Thein Sein’s election as a civilian president. He promised to “respect the role of the media” but heavy jail sentences for journalists, suspension of newspapers and police raids on Internet cafés show that there has been no let-up in controls and intimidation. And now a string of new measures have just tightened control over Internet use.

“Thein Sein announced a general amnesty on 16 April for prisoners sentenced to death but there has been no pardon for Burma’s 2,000 political prisoners,” Reporters Without Borders said. “The regime’s professions of good intentions aim to deflect attention from recent measures designed to reinforce restrictions on news and information.

“The authorities clearly fear that the Arab Spring could spread. The new regulations are intended to intimidate Burmese Internet users and cut them off from the outside world. It is unacceptable that Burma is reacting in this way while chairing ASEAN, whose charter mentions respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice.”

The press freedom organization added: “We urge ASEAN’s members including Indonesia, which takes over its presidency this year, to put pressure on Burma to adhere to this regional organization’s principles.”

Reporters Without Borders learned last week that the Burmese government’s censorship bureau, called the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), has suspended the Rangoon-based weekly True News for two weeks – supposedly for misreporting a mobile phone offer by the Ministry of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs (MCPT).

According to the exile news outlet Irrawaddy, the MCPT objected to a report quoting its chief telecommunications engineer, Zaw Min Oo, as saying anyone who owned a GSM mobile phone, which retail for 1.5 million kyat (US $1,830), would be able to get a second one for just 50,000 kyat ($60). But a True News reporter who requested anonymity said other articles published by weekly were the real reason for the suspension.
At the same time, the MCPT has just sent a new set of rules to Internet cafés, which were already subject to draconian regulations imposed by the ministry, including a requirement to keep the personal data of all their clients along with a record of all the websites they visit, and make it available to the authorities.

The new set of directives includes a ban on the use of portable hard disks, USB flash drives and CDs in Internet cafés, and a ban on the use of Internet telephony (VoIP) services to call abroad. The grounds given by the ministry is the need to protect the state’s income from international phone calls but it will isolate dissidents more and discourage Internet users from expressing themselves freely. Above all, it will affect users of services such as Skype, Gtalk, Pfingo and VZO, which are hard to monitor for the authorities.

Reporters Without Borders has obtained a copy of the directives, which were emailed to Internet cafés earlier this month. How they will be implemented is not always clear:
Rules for Owners of Public Access Centres
1. Personal information of PAC users such as name, National Registration Card number, passport number (if the user is a foreigner), contact address, telephone number etc. must be registered.

2. Service Records of all PAC users (date, time, screen shot, URLs) must be submitted once a month to the Directorate of Communication.

3. Utilizing Internet for international phone calls is prohibited as it is illegal and not permitted by the Department of Communication.

4. PACs are not allowed to use software, programs and technologies banned by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, Directorate of Communication and Department of Communication. PACs must also make sure that such software, programs and technologies are not utilized by their customers.

5. PAC users must be informed by means of written notice that cyber crimes (hacking, virus distribution, port scanning etc.) and viewing, copying and distributing of media that is not in line with Myanmar culture are prohibited.

6. Computers at the PACs are not allowed to have floppy drive, CD drive, USB port and other external drives.

7. PAC license holders are obliged to permit inspections by PAC service providers, and officials from the ministry and the directorate, and local authorities.

8. Leasing or transferring of PAC license is prohibited. Owners can apply permission from the directorate if they wish to change the location of PAC or technologies used.

9. Owners may submit application to renew PAC license 30 days prior to the expiry date. Renewal fee / annual fee has to be prepaid. Owners who failed to pay in time will be fined 30,000 kyats per every delayed month. License will be revoked if required payment is not made within 90 days.

10. In case of lost or damage of the original document (license), a copy of it may be issued against payment.

11. Computer Development Law must be observed and restrictions stipulated by Ministry of Post and Telecommunication’s WAN-order no. 3/2002 must be followed. Orders and instructions made by the government, ministries, Department of Communication and Directorate of Communication must be observed. Perpetrators will not only have their PAC license revoked but also be punished according to the existing laws.

12. Information that could harm State’s security and interest must not be leaked. Perpetrators who leak such information will be punished with State Secret Act.

At the end of 2010, the authorities gave themselves the means to cut off the public’s Internet access during any social or political crisis without having to disconnect
themselves at the same time. A reorganization of Internet Service Providers, billed as major step forward, has enabled the authorities to increase online surveillance and repression while improving the quality of their own Internet connections.


Burma’s Internet legislation is long been one of the most repressive in the world. Under the 1996 Electronic Act, which covers the Internet, TV and radio, importing, owning or using a modem without an official permit is punishable by up to 15 years in prison as a "violation of state security, national unity, culture, the national economy, law and order."

Three netizens – Zarganar, Nay Phone Latt and Kaung Myat Hlaing (also known as "Nat Soe") – are still serving long jail sentences for expressing their views freely online.

Burma is on the Reporters Without Borders list of “Enemies of the Internet.” Amnesty International puts the number of Burmese political prisoners at more than 2,200. They include 17 video journalists (VJ) employed by the exile TV and radio station Democratic Voice of Burma, which recently launched a campaign for their release with support from Reporters Without Borders.