The Unfreedom Monitor

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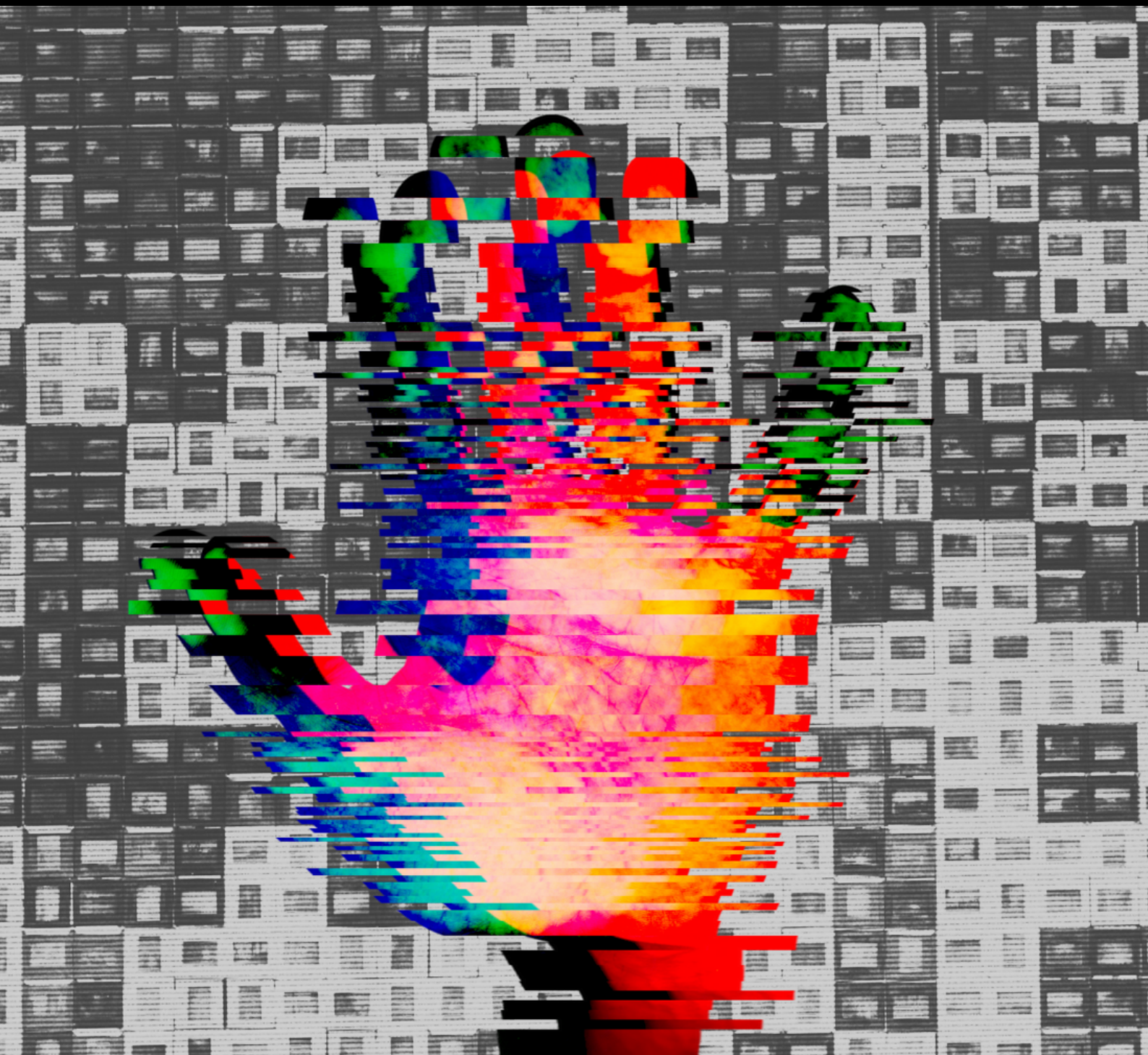
A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

MYANMAR

COUNTRY REPORT



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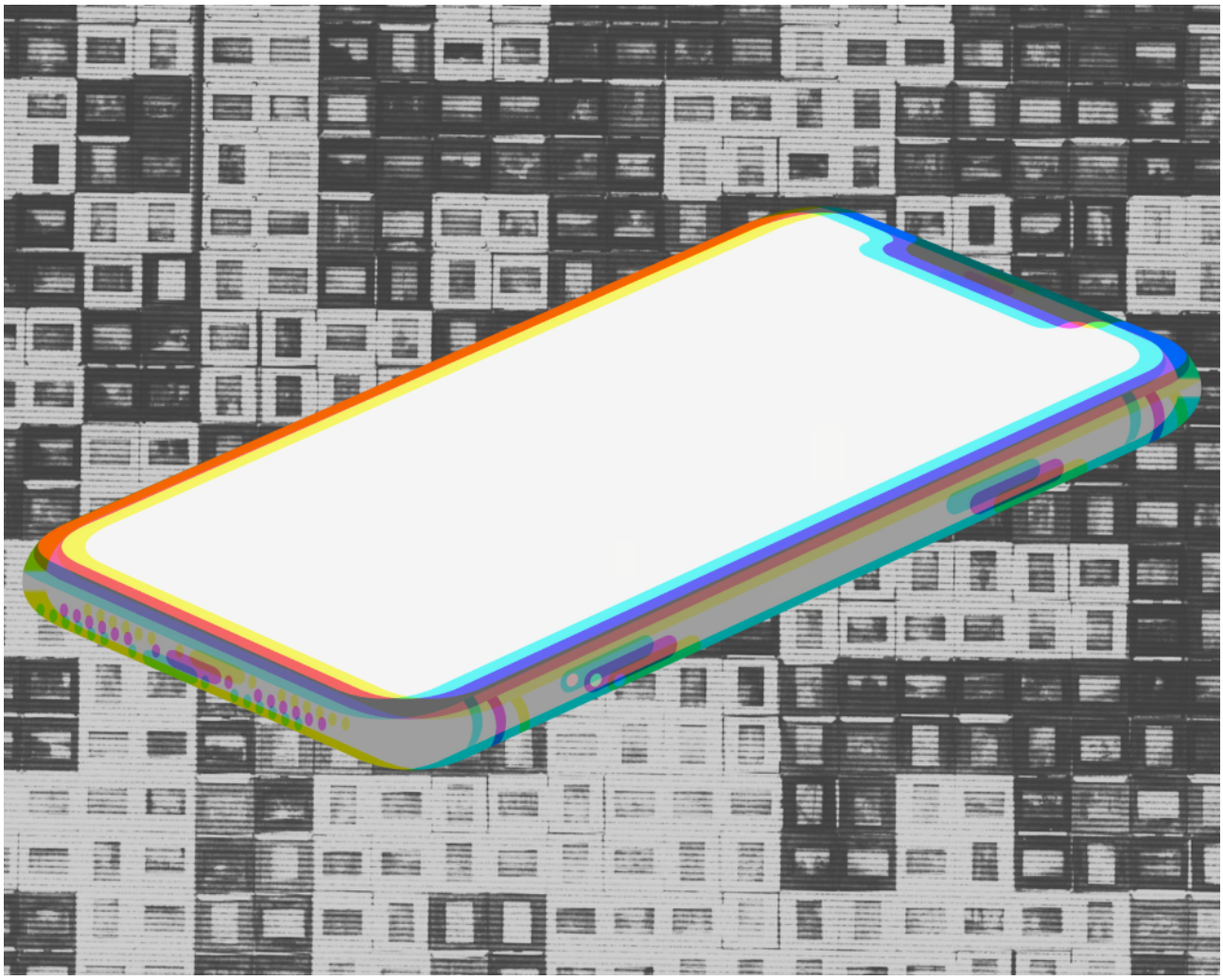
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The classic debate about whether technology is neutral or not has continued to be widely discussed in the 21st century (Deibert). Alongside the rise of authoritarianism in general, digital authoritarianism has become a phenomenon of note throughout the world. This report is going to explore characteristics of digital authoritarianism in Myanmar. First, in order to provide the political context of Myanmar, a brief history of democratisation of the country is discussed. After that, the political aggressions that came along with the military coup in 2021 are explained in detail.

Then, the report analyses the situation of digital authoritarianism in Myanmar, discussing the oppressive behaviour of the government in cyberspace at length. There are five categories of digital repression of the Myanmar military: internet shutdowns, online censorship, surveillance, targeted persecution of online users, and social media manipulation and disinformation. Against this backdrop comes the digital resistance to the dictatorship by the people of Myanmar through circumvention, migration to and from platforms, and innovative crowdfunding initiatives by the resistance, among others.

The intent of this report is to provide a general understanding of digital authoritarianism in Myanmar amid the political unrest as well as a sense of technology's role in repression by and resistance to a dictatorship.



INTRODUCTION

Myanmar was long considered a pariah state while under the rule of an oppressive military junta from 1962 to 2011 (BBC News, "Myanmar Country Profile"). The country was opened for its democratisation in 2011, followed by the multi-party democratic elections in 2015, which was a turning point. Led by the civilian government, the country's poverty fell from 48 percent to 25 percent between 2005 and 2017, according to the World Bank. The de-facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, led the democratisation of the country from 2015 to 2020, the first term of her cabinet. However, the optimism of democratisation was destroyed by the military coup on Feb 1, 2021, right after Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2020 election by landslide. Before starting their second term, most of the leaders of NLD including the President U Win Myint and the State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were thrown into jail by the power grabbing military (BBC News, "Myanmar: What Has Been Happening since the 2021 Coup?").

The military declared a state of emergency and Min Aung Hlaing, the military chief, took over the power of the government for a year, which was later extended. The public has demonstrated their condemnation of the coup by staging massive protests with millions of people on the streets. The opposition forces formed the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), where civil servants refuse to go to their offices in order to weaken the bureaucratic mechanism of the military (Walker). A group of elected lawmakers and parliament members formed a government in exile called the National Unity Government (NUG). The public in every corner of the country formed local militias under the name of People's Defence Forces (PDF) to fight against the military forces.

"Myanmar has faced surveillance and censorship in its digital spaces since it opened the internet to the public in the early 2000s"

Following the power grabbing, the military killed and arrested hundreds of protesters, local resistance forces, human rights activists, journalists, politicians, and students. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), the junta sentenced or arrested 9206 citizens, charged 1973 with a warrant and killed 1557 people as of February 18, 2022. The military who committed what the United Nations called a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" of Rohingya people in 2017, continued to employ massacres and burning as their weapon of atrocities against other people of other ethnicities ("UN Human Rights Chief Points to 'textbook' Example of Ethnic"). In December 2021, the military burned 11 civilians alive in Kayah State (Guardian Staff). In Thantlang, Chin State, about 600 of the town's 2,000 buildings were burned down (Kelly). The country is now in a state of civil war, resisting the terrorist military.

Although the escalated democratisation of the country had a positive effect on the economy and political situation to a certain extent, the internet has always been oppressed in different ways no matter which government rules. Myanmar has faced surveillance and censorship in its digital spaces since it opened the internet to the public in the early 2000s. In 2007, after the saffron revolution, the publicly accessible internet was restricted through internet shutdowns, website censorship and phone tapping. Before the coup in February 2021, the

NLD-led government had imposed a 20-month-long internet shutdown in the states of Rakhine and Chin, one of the longest internet shutdowns imposed in the world ("Myanmar: End World's Longest Internet Shutdown").

Social media, with a population of approximately 30 million users, was also politicised and weaponized by the state actors. The most popular social media platform, Facebook, was weaponized systematically in the case of the Rohingya crisis (Rio, 2020). Experts referred to the event as Facebook's corporate criminal liability (Yue, 2020). A coordinated network bombarded people's Facebook timeline with contents demoting Rohingya as non-ethnic refugees fled from Bangladesh causing violent intercommunal conflicts between different religious societies. Facebook has investigated the case and responded by taking off contents which demonstrate "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior" (Reuters, 2020). Although the platforms took action, social media weaponization still survives as the state -sponsored networks of hate speech and propaganda distribution channels are also still in operation after the Feb 1 Coup.

In 2017, the ministry of transport and telecommunication sneakily spent USD 6 million from the President's Office's special fund to set up the Social Media Monitoring Team to monitor the use of social media in Myanmar ("Information Controls In An Unprotected Legal Landscape"). However, the government has never released any information about the 6-million-dollar project, and it remains a mystery to the public.

DIGITAL REPRESSIONS AFTER THE COUP

Myanmar is one of the fastest growing internet populations in the world. According to DataReportal's Global 2022 Country Headlines Report, Myanmar's internet population increased by 1.7 million (+7.1 percent) between 2021 and 2022. In total, there were 25.28 million internet users in Myanmar as of January 2022. The overall number of social media users is estimated to be 20.75 million and the most popular social media platform, Facebook, had 19.25 million users in January 2022. According to Freedom House's "Freedom on the Net" report, social media has served as a platform for the people of Myanmar to express their political and social voices since the beginning of the country's opening up of the telecom sector in 2012. However, the status of the free and open internet has always faced critical challenges because of oppressive governments.

After the coup, the military has employed every possible form of digital repression to oppress freedom of expression, freedom of association, and access to information to weaken the activities of digitally mobilised resistance forces and to cover up the military's own inhuman atrocities. It is employing tools ranging from internet shutdowns, dual-use surveillance technologies, and AI powered CCTV systems to drones donated by China (Beech).

Recently, the military formed the State Administration Council (SAC) is trying to enact the cybersecurity bill, which is full of punitive clauses, and also to amend the privacy law, the electronic transaction law, and the broadcasting law, to legally oppress the digital space ("Myanmar: Post-Coup Legal Changes Erode Human Rights"). A group of military backed cronies are trying to acquire Telenor Myanmar, an operator who wrote off their operation because of the pressure of the military to install surveillance equipment (Chanayuth).

On the ground, digital security has become a survival skill. Military checkpoints are everywhere, and if they find something offensive to them, people might be subjected to torture, arrest, harrassment or even extrajudical execution. Mainstream social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) are banned (Sandler). Using VPNs is criminalised with a sentence of 3 years imprisonment according to the newly drafted cybersecurity law (Writer). Public mobilisation on the internet mainly goes through apps like Telegram and Signal. Public information operations to map out and avoid the military forces have taken place on public Telegram channels.

In a broader perspective, the military's strategy of digital repression tries to employ the concept of the electronic panopticon (McMullan). The panopticon is a prison that Jeremy Bentham designed, with a watchtower in the centre of the circular prison from which guards can always observe inmates in their cells, but inmates do not know when they are being watched. This implants in the inmate's minds the fear that they could be being watched at any time, or all the time. The electronic panopticon is a digital version, where states use various surveillance tools to create the fear of being watched in public. According to Steven Feldstein, digital repression can be categorised into five types: internet shutdowns, online censorships, surveillance, targeted persecution of online users and social media manipulation and disinformation . The military is employing all five types, imposing an omnidirectional sense of surveillance on the public to inject fear into society.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

Internet shutdowns have always been a favourite tool of repression of the Myanmar military junta ("From Myanmar to Ethiopia, Internet Shutdowns Become Favored Tool of Regimes"). After the coup, the military started to practice total internet blackouts. Immediately after the coup announcement on February 1, 2021, from 1 a.m. till 1 p.m., there was a near-total internet blackout. Afterwards, the military's strategy of internet shutdowns has shifted from total internet blackouts to periodic internet shutdowns and nightly internet shutdowns (from midnight till 9 a.m.) from February 15, 2021 (Euronews).

On April 1, 2021, the SAC shut down all modes of internet except Fibre to The Home (FTTH) services in most places, leaving people without access to mobile internet or any other mode of connectivity in places with no access to fibre internet.

Most recently, the military used location-based blackouts in places with high battle intensity. Among 14 states and regions, the military geographically chose Rakhine and Chin states to impose one year of intensive practices of shutting down the internet that seem to have given the military an articulated knowledge and practice of internet shutdowns that has made recent shutdowns more precise and accurate.

According to Net Blocks, the war-torn economy is paying a price for internet shutdowns equivalent to USD 24 million per day. Banking systems were disrupted because of the internet shutdowns. The evolution of internet shutdown strategies of the junta is manifesting what Stephen Feldstein called the "Dictator's Digital Dilemma": the choice between interfering with the internet and coping with the economic sacrifices caused by it.

ONLINE CENSORSHIP

Censorship of online services is also a repressive tool of choice for Myanmar's military. Before the 2012 telecommunication revolution, Myanmar's internet was heavily censored so that only whitelisted websites could be visited. The military is nostalgically reestablishing the similar heavily guarded internet atmosphere after the coup. In May 2021, the military sent out a list of 1200 websites to the telecoms to whitelist, excluding Facebook and Twitter (The Diplomat, "Internet 'Whitelist' Highlights Myanmar Military's Wishful Economic Thinking"). Those social media platforms had already been banned since February 2021. The military-controlled Ministry of Transportation and Communication (MoTC) directed the International Gateways and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to censor Facebook on February 3, and Twitter and Instagram on February 5. Amid the pandemic, the military also directed telcos to censor certain IP addresses and websites, including human rights related websites and COVID-19 information portals. The country was facing the third wave of the pandemic, and censoring those portals greatly challenged public ability to access pandemic-related information.

In order to make the censorship legitimate, the junta also pursued a series of legal activities. First, it tried to resurrect the previously unapproved cybersecurity law to criminalise online mobilisation, to penalise the usage of VPNs and to control user data (The Diplomat, "Myanmar Junta Set to Pass Draconian Cyber Security Law"). The broadcasting law was also amended

to oppress democratic online media outlets ("Myanmar: Junta Further Constricts Media with Amendment to Broadcasting Law"). The infamous electronic transaction law, which has been used to arrest human rights activists, was also amended to to legally criminalise activities such as posting and sharing any content that criticises the military and the SAC on social media (Myanmar Now). Myanmar's digital space is becoming more and more censored. The score for limits of content of Freedom on the Net report dropped down to 7/35 in 2021 from 13/35 in 2020.

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance technologies provided by other countries in the name of democratisation put the military's surveillance capability on steroids (Campbell and Chandler) . Justice for Myanmar reported a list of companies that provide surveillance equipment and services to the military ("Tools of Digital Surveillance and Repression | Justice For Myanmar"). For social media surveillance and device forensics, the military uses technology from MSAB (Sweden), Open Text (Canada), BlackBag/Cellebrite (USA/Israel). Technologies from Lumex Instruments (Canada), Midian Electronics (USA), Hytera (China) and Icom (Japan) are for police communications. Software from DataWalk (USA) and VMware (USA) enables big data and police IT systems.

> *"The military has the capacity to conduct spectrum monitoring, which can surveil over not only the internet but also other wireless communications, allowing it to track people who are attempting to mask themselves to resist digital repression"*

On the other hand, the military and its affiliates are trying to monopolise the telecom market. On January 21, 2022, Reuters reported that the SAC approved the joint acquisition of Telenor Myanmar by the military-backed Shwe Byain Phyu company and the Lebanon based M1 Group (Mcpherson and Potkin). There are four major telecom operators in Myanmar: Myanmar Post and Telecommunication (MPT), MyTel, Telenor and Ooredoo. MPT is jointly government-owned and MyTel is solely military-owned; now they are also trying to acquire Telenor, so only Ooredoo will remain standing as a non-military/non-governmental operator in the country. The people of Myanmar filed a data protection complaint against the Norwegian company Telenor where 694 civil society organisations signed a petition asking for transparency on how Telenor will handle the transfer of the data of 18 million users (Justice For Myanmar). However, if the acquisition is made, 75 percent of the telecom sector will be controlled by the military and its affiliates.

Justice for Myanmar's "Nodes of Corruption, Lines of Abuse'' report said that the military has the capacity to conduct spectrum monitoring, which can surveil over not only the internet but also other wireless communications, allowing it to track people who are attempting to mask themselves to resist digital repression. Combining control of 75 percent of the telecom sector with spectrum monitoring capacity will boost the military's surveillance capability sky high. The military also made internet prices rise, erecting barriers to accessibility. On January 6, 2022, the SAC amended the Union Tax Law and came up with the "Law Amending the

Union Tax Law 2021" which imposed a tax of MMK 20000 per SIM card activation — 13 times higher than the original SIM price. The law also imposed a 15 percent tax on the revenue of Internet Services Providers (ISPs), causing enormous price hikes (Yuth).

After the shadow NUG government's lottery and other crowdfunding campaigns, the military has been surveilling and arresting anti-junta groups by tracking phone numbers from mobile money accounts such Wave Money, K Pay, and CB Pay ("Myanmar Junta Targets Mobile Banking in Bid to Cut Off Opposition Funding"). Suspected account holders were arrested and tortured. Overall, the military is employing various surveillance technologies as well as legal tools to increase their surveillance capability.

TARGETED PERSECUTION OF ONLINE USERS

The military's oppression does not stop at the technical level when it comes to surveillance. On the ground, they have established checkpoints where people's electronic devices are randomly checked. They check for photos in the gallery, Facebook posts, SMSes, etc., and, if they found any content related to anti-junta movements, the person can be arrested and tortured. The Diplomat described this phenomenon as "Regression from smartphones to keypad," since fear pushed people to go back to the keypad phone era, since their smartphones could put them in grave danger (Sato, "Under Military Rule, Myanmar Has Retreated to the Keypad Phone Age").

As the digitally mediated anti-coup demonstrations become more powerful, the military's tactics of random phone checks ultimately aim to further threaten social media users. According to the experiences of the people whose phones were checked, some of the checkpoints systematically conduct procedural mobile forensics but some just randomly check without any procedure. Overall, the military's targeted persecution of online users has become a source of terror, a manifestation of oppression curtailing the most basic human rights including freedom of expression and freedom of movement.

SOCIAL MEDIA MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION

Myanmar has been known for social media weaponisation since the Rohingya crisis. Facebook recognized Myanmar's case as coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), which is when a network of social media actors are manipulating information in a coordinated and systematic way. In 2018, the military's clearance operation forced more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh. The UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar claimed that Facebook substantively contributed to the inhuman atrocity. Due to pressure from United Nations and local human rights groups, Facebook banned about 20 military affiliated accounts and pages including Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing for severe crimes against humanity ("EXPLAINER: Why Is Facebook Banning Myanmar Military Pages?"). Again, in 2021, after the coup, Facebook banned military-linked pages because it was too dangerous to allow the military to be on Facebook and Instagram (BBC News, "Myanmar Coup: Facebook, Instagram Place Immediate Ban on Military"). The ban covers the air force, the navy, and the ministries of defence, home affairs and border affairs.

Military affiliated accounts were constantly banned from Facebook, causing a huge platform shortage for them, but the military is now trying to keep their propaganda mechanism alive by expanding their channels to other platforms such as Telegram. Since Telegram was immediately populated after the censorship of Facebook in Myanmar, it was an easy choice for the military. Military lobbyist Han Nyein Oo, who gained a significant fan base in 2019 writing about celebrity gossip on Facebook, has now migrated to Telegram. His infamous Telegram channel Han Nyein Oo recently did a campaign called "*Hpa Ye Thee Hnane Hnin Yayy*" which Frontier Myanmar translated as "Watermelon Suppression" (Freeman). Watermelon is slang for security personnel who joined the civil disobedience movement (CDM), whether they are ex-military or ex-police. They are seen to be green (the colour of military uniforms) on the outside, and red (the pro-democracy colour in Myanmar) on the inside, like watermelons. The Telegram channel collects addresses of CDM officers, journalists and other anti-junta activists and then the military raids their houses and arrests their families (Aung). Han Nyein Oo's main channel seems to be banned by the platform, but there are still multiple backup channels of them with thousands of subscribers. There are also similar Telegram channels such as Thazin Oo, Kyaw Swar, and Myanmar Hard Talk, who are constantly lobbying for the military. Mizzima's article revealed that these channels are run by systematically established networks supported by the military and causing terrible real world harm. Myanmar digital rights activists have been trying to reach out to Telegram for content moderation; however, the company still has not responded to any of the cases till date.

DIGITAL RESISTANCE AFTER THE COUP

Despite the terrible digital repression, internet-mediated public mobilisation is getting stronger. Pro-democracy forces are constantly circumventing internet access and access to social media platforms to organise public anti-coup movements. Crowdsourced financing programs have become a popular way to support the parallel National Unity Government (NUG). While the SAC is trying to use Telegram for propaganda, Telegram has also become one of the major platforms for public mobilisation and scouting. Public information operations to map out and avoid military forces have taken place on public Telegram channels, which are working quite effectively. Strikes, flash mobs and township-level protests are being organised through those public channels.

The first digitally mediated resistance movement on February 2, 2021 right after the coup was the "Banging pots and pans" movement. People all across the country pounded pots and pans at 8 p.m., the time when the military's propaganda news broadcasts on the television (Phyu Oo). Along with banging pots and pans, people shouted slogans "Free Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," "Free President U Win Myint," "We don't want military dictatorship," etc. As this is a type of protest that people at every age and every gender could participate in, it is recognized internationally as a creative people's protest mobilised online.

As the repression escalated, resistance from the people against the repression has also become more innovative. Public mobilisations become more creative, like, for example, the Silent Strike marked the one year anniversary of the military coup by emptying the streets, leaving shops abandoned in major cities across the country (Ratcliffe). The cities were like ghost towns — it really demonstrated the people's will against the dictatorship and it scared the junta. The military struggled to control the widespread opposition to its rule, and it menaced the public not to take part in such protests. It even announced charges of terrorism for anyone who participated in the stay-at-home protest. The people's response to get around this was creative: some shop owners opened their shops but left them unattended. One shop owner mockingly displayed empty bowls with the labels of "Tofu," "Kale," "Beans," etc. and a notice "All items are available."

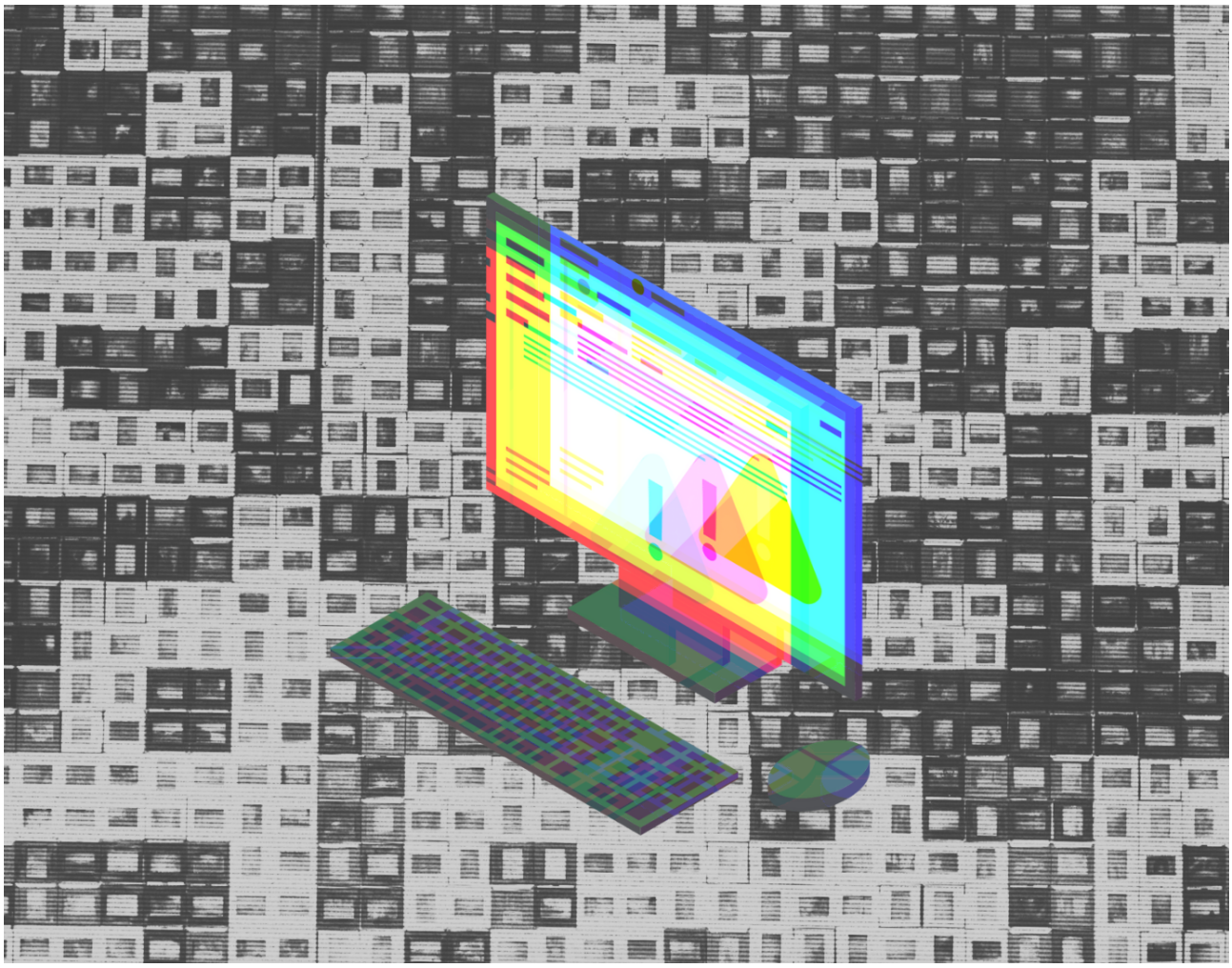
Starting from August 8, 2021, the anniversary of the 1988 revolution, the people of Myanmar all over the world started a campaign called "Blood Money Campaign," which aims to advocate for corporations to stop their collaborations with military affiliated companies, especially corporations from energy sector who are collaborating with military controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) (Action Network). There were photo campaigns on major social media platforms where people uploaded their photos holding papers with the slogans such as "Freeze the Terrorist Junta Income," " Cut off the junta's access to international business," and " Stop paying to crime against humanity." There were also mass Twitter campaigns to reach out to the international audience using the hashtags #BloodMoneyMyanmar | #FreezePaymentsToJunta | #Total_StopSponsoringSAC | #Chevron_StopSponsoringSAC | #SanctionMOGE | #StopFundingCrimesAgainstHumanity | #ဖက်ဆစ်စစ်တပ်အမြစ်ဖြတ်ဖို့ _သွေးစွန်းငွေဖြတ်တောက်စို့". Millions of pro-democracy people also participated in Facebook profile change campaigns where they changed their profile with the frame "Sanction MOGE, Freeze payment to Junta."

> *As the repression escalated, resistance from the people against the repression has also become more innovative*

The NUG government, with the objective of raising USD 1 billion in funds, is organising creative online crowdfunding campaigns. In August 2021, NUG's "Aung Lan Lwint Chi Spring Lottery," a lottery that aims to support CDM staff was sold out and hit the target within a few hours ("NUG's 'Aung Lan Lwint Chi Spring Lottery' Sold out within Hours"). It is stated that 70 percent of the lottery would go to CDM staff and 30 percent would be awarded as prizes. Moreover, in "[m]ore innovative ways to secure funds," as the shadow government's Foreign Minister, Zin Mar Aung mentioned, the NUG government also looked into cryptocurrency. In December 2021, the NUG announced Tether (USDT), a stable cryptocurrency whose value is pegged to the dollar, to officially replace the Myanmar kyat ("NUG to Replace Kyat with Cryptocurrency"). The NUG's minister of planning, finance and investment, U Tin Tun Naing said, "When the time is right and if it's needed for our revolution, we will definitely expand the list of our approved cryptocurrencies." The anti-junta groups' hope and eagerness to empower cryptocurrency is significant by referring to these initiatives.

CONCLUSION

By learning about both the repression and resistance sides of Myanmar's Spring Revolution, it is evident that digital technology is playing a critical role in this revolution. The military is using every possible technology to repress people, inject fear into society and manipulate it. The revolutionists are also employing digital technology to circumvent the restrictions of the military and to employ innovative ways to build the state. The digital resilience of its society will be one of the determining factors of the revolution of Myanmar. This scenario of digital repression is one of the many manifestations that indicate that cyberspace has become a new sovereign territory different from land, sea and air. Information freedom, internet freedom, digital literacy, and media literacy cannot be taken for granted anymore as they now have an impact on people's physical and digital survival. Therefore, Myanmar's ongoing revolution to fight against the military's dictatorship is not just physical anymore — the fact is that whoever harnesses the power of technology in the right way will become the game changer of the revolution.



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